

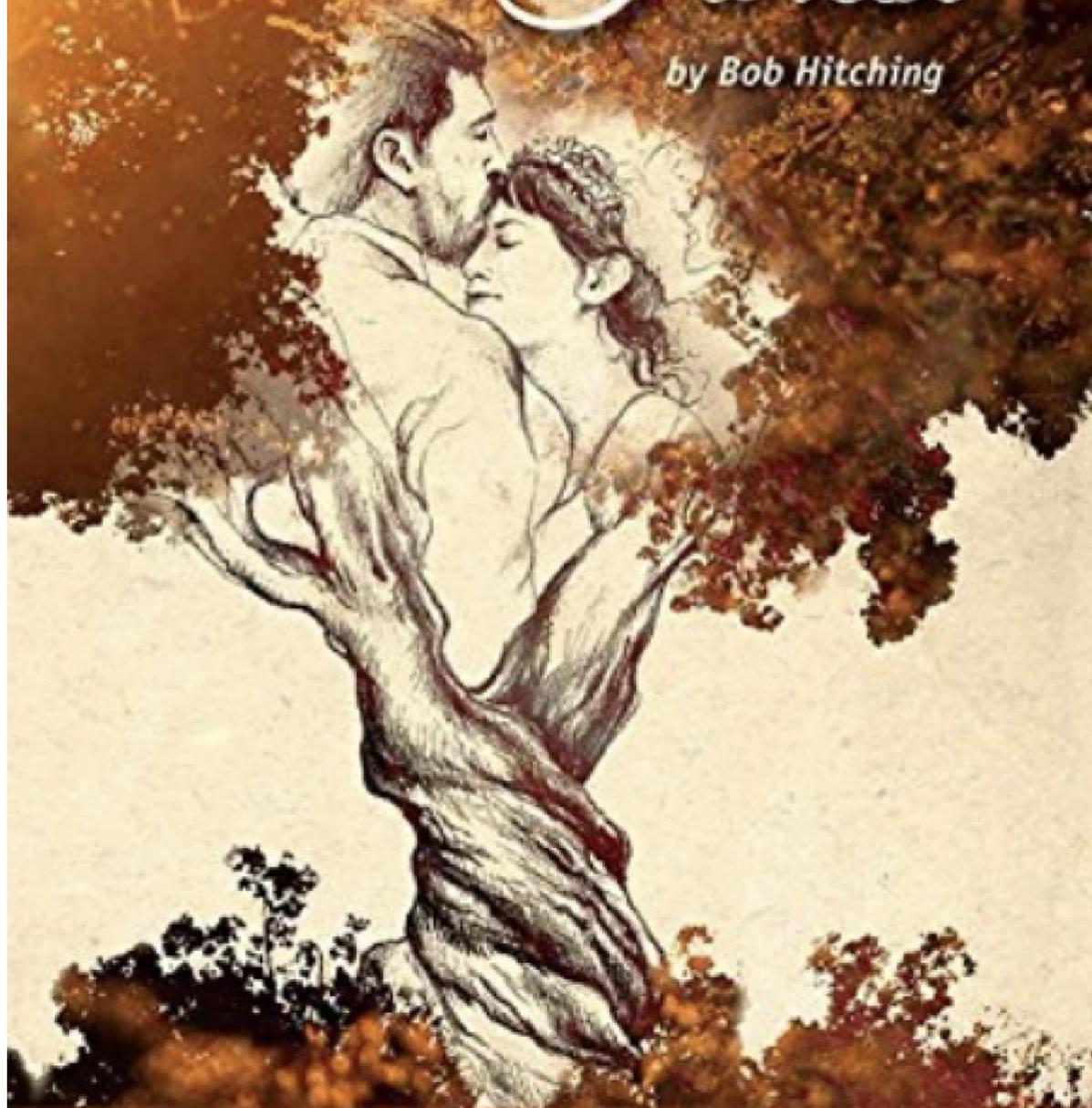
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DAUGHTER

of the

Forest

by Bob Hitching



The White Dove Series 

Daughter of the Forest

By
Bob Hitching

*Part Four of **The White Dove Series***

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Table of Contents

1. The News.....	7
2. The Meeting.....	14
3. 1941 – The Gathering Storm Clouds.....	18
4. Bathed In Holy Hatred	27
5. A Tender Love That Grows	33
6. A Wide and Deep Church.....	39
7. The Hiding Place.....	48
8. The Wooden Ring.....	51
9. The Killing Begins.....	54
10. Betrayal Unto Death.....	58
11. For Such a Time as This.....	66
12. A Very Sacred Hate	69
13. The Choice	74
14. The Dance	76
15. One Flesh	80 .. 80
16. The Son of God Standing.....	83
17. Afterword	91

Dedication

To my beloved wife, Dear Nancy, you are my best friend, my counselor, and soul mate. Only you know how real this story actually is.

1

The News

It would have been an unusual person who would say that Milena was not beautiful. Her soft childlike, yet confident, voice and her almost royal-looking features caused her to be loved and feared; loved for her innocence and beauty, and feared for the same reasons.

She sat close to her husband Stefan as the Number 4 tram lazily made its way past Zagreb's Maksimir Stadium. The description of the tram being lazy had more to do with its comparison to the aggressive city busses than to the moral condition of either the tram or its driver.

Milena wore a traditional Roma headscarf, which with her dark skin caused her to make no pretense of being anything other than what she was. Her brown eyes were large and childlike and the deep clear openness of her gaze seemed to speak beyond the present and touch somewhere else deep inside of her. Her blue silk blouse was buttoned up almost to her neckline. The long sleeves covering her arms ended with small cuffs covering each wrist. Her long red skirt, also traditional Roma, was what made her different from other Bayash Roma girls of her same age. In a world where a pair of jeans was as important as one's education or bank balance, a Roma skirt represented something to be shunned rather than embraced.

Her head rested, as it almost always did, upon her husband's shoulder. She loved to smell his presence as she sat close to him. Their closeness at all times never seemed inappropriate to onlookers. It was as if they were one to the watching world. Sometimes a couple that has little to boast of in clothes and jewelry, shines the more brightly by the unclouded nature of their love.

She raised herself up slightly, looked into Stefan's eyes, and smiled.

"I was just thinking: when we are together here in the city, I feel like God has given us a calling to love all these crowds even though we cannot reach out to everyone."

Stefan smiled. Milena continued.

"You know, I actually pray for everyone as we pass them by. When I do, I feel this wonderful sense of freshness inside."

Stefan kissed her forehead as she went back to the position of resting on his shoulder.

Stefan looked, or rather tried to look, out of a window that was covered with a thin layer of dust that was especially caked in the corners of the frame. Looking through it, he had a sense that he was watching something on a screen rather than observing reality. The hand belts, that hung limply from the steel bar that stretched the length of the carriage, swung very slightly as the great steel conveyance shuddered when crossing

from one iron track to another. To the sensitive modern pilgrim, they seemed to be a reminder of a past where death by hanging was both banal and casual. To the casual and banal passenger, they were simply pieces of plastic hanging from a rail.

Almost everyone on the tram looked uncomfortable. There was never enough air in the cramped compartments and even in summer there would be some sage blessed with great wisdom that would insist that an open window means impending sickness to those nearby.

The summer streets had that early evening melancholy that could be sensed but not measured. It was as if the streets themselves felt cheated that there was still so much light when they wanted to hide their fatigue in the covering of darkness.

For anyone looking to the left-hand side of the road, the stadium itself looked particularly old and rundown today. The concrete appeared to be breaking off in several places, especially - and most concerning, depending upon one's perspective - in the support columns. It felt old and tired, as if it should have been sent to retirement like those who had conceived and created it.

The few trees and bushes by the stadium looked as if they had survived a vaccination program that had left the participants crippled for life. Nature cried out in defiance to the concrete... but had lost the battle. Incredibly, and some would say mysteriously, looking through the window on the right-hand side was an exercise in opposites. One could see lush green trees that made their way through wooded parkland that eventually ended at the zoo. Here nature stood proud and happy to exhibit its victory over the plastic and cement wasteland out from which the stadium rose up. Rarely did such contrasts paint themselves onto the landscape of the modern city. In this case the new, in the form of post-Communist cement, was laid in contrast to the old, in the form of nature that was fresh and alive in the present. The new was dying, the old was living.

Then, without warning, the city which always had the capacity to move from quiet to chaos suddenly began to pulsate. Instinctively, people looked out of the dust-caked windows in anticipation. It was definitely sensed rather than seen or heard. The effect though, was as strong as the late point key change in Ravel's Bolero. The busy street burst into activity as pedestrians began to flow from the stadium like an oil slick after an environmental disaster. Thousands of young people poured out onto the streets after an extreme Nationalist rock concert. This though, was not the usual energy of youth that had their existence given meaning by their joining in corporate devotion to the icons of their culture. It was a place of deep stirring at a level of primal national consciousness.

At first, it would seem almost appropriate that the streaming hoard was trying to cross the road as if they knew instinctively that they belonged in the cages of the nearby zoo. It was not to the Zoo though, but to the streets they were proceeding. A group of about 200 young men had now moved into a position in front of the tram, causing it to stop. Everyone on the tram felt the same sense of unease. Milena found herself almost pressing into Stefan's body, as the fear she experienced seemed to take over her mind.

The mob then proceeded to surround the tram, looking through the windows as if to identify prey for their predator-like delight. The tram, which on first sight gave the impression of being a protective giant of industry and science, was in fact timid and silent as it came to an obedient halt in the midst of the throng. That in itself created a greater sense of vulnerability to those seated or standing inside.

Someone from the outside spotted Milena. The young men started making crude gestures to her and calling others to join them. The most dreadful words and the signs made with hands built into a torrent of abuse and hatred. The group, as if under the leadership of a conductor, began to chant.

“Burn the gypsies! Burn the gypsies!”

Stefan held his young wife tightly and whispered in her ear, “Close your eyes, darling. This is going to pass away in a few minutes. It is not far now until we get to my parent’s place. Everything is going to be okay. I will not let anyone near you.” He then prayed quietly, still whispering in her ear.

“Lord Jesus, may you bring peace into this wickedness.”

Inside he was raging and wanted to fight, but he also knew it was fruitless. He had said to his wife that he would not let anyone near her and yet he knew if they got on the tram, he could do little or nothing to stop them dragging her away. In his own mind, he knew that his delicate young wife’s greatest need was protection, and he knew that his own sense of significance as a man was connected to her need. Even in this crisis, he was aware of the irony of male and female roles and needs at work.

One young man had a large felt pen and started writing on the window close to where the couple was sitting. He scrawled the letters backward so that they would appear legible to those on the inside of the bus. He shouted the words as he wrote.

“Death to gypsies.”

Stefan was just a few inches away from him, separated by a thin membrane of dirty glass. He could see into his mouth as he hurled vile and violent insults at his wife. It was a strange sight, looking inside a mouth that had saliva foaming on the edges of a person’s lips, as hatred poured out like a stream of scum being expelled from a sewer.

The words were written and yet they seemed to shout through the glass at Milena. Stefan moved his body between her and the window to block her view of the writing. There was a large shout from a young man about 25 years of age. He had a shaved head and was wearing a black t-shirt. His large, muscular arms were covered in tattoos. One was an engraved memorial to his mother as a saint, another was a swastika, and yet another a love song to his nation.

He gave a command and the young men then gathered into two groups on either side of the tram. Then, like a Catholic liturgy, one group began to chant with the other side responding. Over and over again they chanted the same words.

First “Za Dom” (for the nation), with the response coming from the other side “Spremni” (ready). They thrust their right arms outward in a Nazi salute.

The earlier chaos was now given order. Their voices and arm movements became more and more synchronized. They were at union with each other, their history, their

message, and something deep in the unseen world. The wild eyes of the young men seemed to become glazed over as they chanted. Milena squeezed her eyes shut and tried to cover her ears.

A sense of being trapped with no escape had a terrifying effect on everyone on the tram. It was like claustrophobia, but with no means of escaping the walls pressing in. In this case, the walls were made of biodegradable hatred. The object of their hate was a fragile and gentle Roma girl who, if taken by this mob, would be torn to pieces like an animal in a hunt or a Christian thrown to the lions in the Roman arena.

The fact that she was female and the mob was male added even greater tension to the scene. The dark, hate-filled frenzy of the men had vile, ruthless sexual overtones of domination and degradation.

It seemed as if Stefan could take no more when from the stadium, the police came and began to move the young men along. At first, it was just one policeman who called out to the young men, then he was followed by others. Some of the policemen were laughing as they herded the future leaders of the nation away.

The hoards of black-shirted youths with the old World War 2 Fascist insignia on their chests moved off and simultaneously began to sing one of the old Nazi anthems that had been so popular in Croatia in the early 1940's.

Within minutes, the tram was pulling away and the sound of the madness began to fade into the background. Relief mingled with the aftermath of trauma began to sweep over the whole company in the tram.

Milena wept as Stefan covered her with his arms. He stroked her hair and whispered comfort to her. An elderly man moved over to the seat in front of them and turned towards them. He could see the pain in Milena's eyes and the sense of helpless frustration in Stefan's expression.

He spoke gently. "I am sorry they have upset you. They have no idea what kind of spirit they are connecting themselves to. I am sick and sorry that this is all starting again. This Nazi spirit was never broken, you know. It was like it was put on ice and preserved. Until this nation is humbled - perhaps even humiliated - and faces its past, this stuff will keep raising its head."

He stood and left, but as he moved, Stefan noticed a Jewish Star of David around his neck, revealed by the open collar of his shirt. He reached for the chain around his own neck and felt his Orthodox Cross. Would he be as bold as this Jewish man to allow a symbol to define him to those who would hate him on sight? He had no answer.

Darko poured a cup of coffee for both Milena and Stefan. They both looked shaken and disturbed. Maria was preparing something in the kitchen and in motherly nurture, kissed them both on their heads as they sat together, and she returned to the preparations.

They had lived in the flat for many years now and it was home to both Darko and Maria and also Stefan, before he was married. There was a picture of Slavica,

Darko's sister who had died recently, hanging over a shelf that had Bosnian porcelain cups and small print pictures in wooden frames. Standing alone was a photograph of Darko, Ivan, Jasmina, and a ten-year-old Stefan in the refugee camp close to Kostajnica. Stefan was holding a small flute like instrument.

There were several prints of great works of art hung meticulously, and with the Swedish color scheme of the walls, it gave the whole atmosphere a sense of the modern. Darko broke the silence with his usual irreverent humor.

"Actually, your mother was a nationalist in her young days. She was arrested for trying to demolish the Serbian Orthodox Church here in town."

Maria swatted Darko with a newspaper. "Stop it, you know that is not true. Well not like this. I hated the Serbs because of the war, but then God gave me you, Stefan, to love in our special way."

Stefan knew the story and was not concerned for himself, but the thought of Milena being afraid caused intense feelings of anger and sadness. He had seen so much death and destruction during the war that the noise of spoiled and bored city youth did not threaten him. Milena though, was different. Her spirit was sensitive and gentle and was easily wounded. Stefan recounted the meeting with the Jewish man on the tram and spoke to his parents.

"What do you think about what he said about the need for the nation to be humbled or humiliated for the spirit of the past to be broken?"

Darko smiled and looked down at the table. "I mean, in one sense, he is right. If you said that to most people in this city today they would say something like, 'Well the Serbs are worse' or 'they started it first' or 'the gypsies are all thieves and beggars,' but in another way, it is easy to create collective guilt. You cannot blame a nation for the sins of this group or that group. It is much more complicated than that."

Maria spoke, "I think though, it is much deeper than that. Everything around us today is pushed to conformity. Kids in school, even really small ones, are driven to be acceptable to the expectations of the group. Just walk down the street and everyone looks the same. Go into the park and see the way that boyfriends and girlfriends sit on the wooden benches. Always the same position designed to make the girl look like a sexual object. I think the problem is that this is a city where to be different is so frightening that people end up being part of something wicked just because everyone else is. Anything or anyone that is different is viewed with suspicion."

Darko looked at the picture from the refugee camp and nodded. "Well, I think the bigger question that I struggle with is: where is God in all this? It is like evil is winning on earth. Something inside of me cannot simply give in to that way of thinking, but it is hard."

Maria sighed. "But it has to be that Jesus is still King as much as when it seems like He is not, as when He is."

Darko's eyes widened. "I told you she was a radical." Milena, who had been silent, raised her hand as if asking for permission to speak.

“Today, I was afraid of those men but I am not sure it is the rock groups or the government that is to blame. I had this sense that underneath all the hatred today, was actually fear. I think those young men were afraid and that their anger was what helped them conquer their fear.” She looked at Stefan and smiled as she spoke.

“I remember when we talked about this once and you said to me that the Bible says that ‘Perfect love casts out fear.’ Well, if that is true, then my response is not to blame those boys but find some way of loving them so that they can be set free. I do not think we need to punish them; I think we need to love them.”

Darko, Maria, and Stefan all simultaneously had the sense that God was speaking to them through Milena and that they should listen to and submit to her spiritual insight. Before any of them could respond, their reflections were broken by the telephone. Darko answered and then listened. He put his hand over the receiver and mouthed the words to Milena, “It is your mother.”

Darko continued to listen, nodding, and then responding in one word answers. Finally, after offering for Irena to speak with her daughter, which she declined, he hung up. Milena looked as confused as Darko was pensive.

He then spoke, addressing Milena. “It is okay. Nothing is wrong, and she had to run out to the shop before it closed, but she just had something very important to share with me.” He paused and looked away.

Maria looked on slightly impatiently, “And...?”

Darko came back to the present and laughed and replied, “I am sorry, this is really strange. Your mother said she has found Stefan’s great-grandmother on his father’s side and she is still alive and living in Koprivnica.”

Milena reached out and squeezed Stefan’s hand. Stefan looked confused. He laughed nervously as he spoke. “My great-grandmother? How can that be and how would Irena have found her?”

Darko shook his head. “Well it looks like we are going to find out, because we are all going over there tomorrow and meet her.”

Later that night, Milena and Stefan lay together on the couch that had been made into a bed for them in the front room. The darkness seemed to be a comfort as neither of them could sleep and they held one another in the silence.

Stefan quietly spoke first. “What a day. Are you okay now after the tram event? Actually, what you said about fear and love really touched me. I just cannot ever seem to reach the end of all your wisdom. You are so incredibly deep and wise. The truth is, darling, I cannot love like you. I still feel a deep need for justice and to punish the people that did what they did to my parents and Jasmina’s family.”

“I understand. Of course, our Father in heaven understands. It was you who taught me that when we pray that we pray saying ‘let it be on earth as it is in heaven.’ I am going to pray that our bit of earth, yours and mine, can be like heaven which is filled with forgiveness and hope.”

Stefan reached over and kissed her. “Maybe you are being called to confront my struggle with hatred and fear with your wisdom and love.” Milena loved her husband. She propped herself up on her side and then gently stroked his face and then became serious as she spoke.

“But what about you? How do you feel about this story about finding your great-grandmother?”

Stefan reached over and kissed her on the head. “Something is not right with this story; there has to be a mistake. My whole family was Bosnian Serbs and there was never talk about my father’s grandmother. She would also have to be so old. It just does not make sense... Anyway, we will find out tomorrow.”

Milena smiled, kissed him again, and then curled up in his arms and was soon asleep. Stefan lay still, listening to her calm breathing. He looked up at the ceiling and watched the shadows as lights reflecting from the street below caused the sensation of movement above him. His mind went back to his village in Bosnia and his parent’s home. He remembered the day so vividly when he left never to return again. The sight of both his mother and father dead in the street never left him. He had often wondered about his family. Questions of where he had come from and who his real ancestors were often came to his mind, especially tonight.

2

The Meeting

Baka (grandmother) Jovanka stood tall and erect. She was eighty-five years old but had a mystical air of youthfulness that was confusing and refreshing to those she encountered. She lived in one room in a family house, but had no sense of being an old woman in need of help.

Some old people look forward to the time when people around them feel the duty or guilt to care for them. Baka Jovanka was the opposite. She still lived to find ways to bless others rather than to receive anything for herself. Her room was an interesting space of memories represented by photos and memorabilia carefully placed in a way that seemed to make sense to her history. There was a large wooden clock on the wall that looked very old and authentic. Everything seemed neat and tidy, unlike the spaces that older people often inhabit where the will to order gives way to resigned fatigue. There was a large vase of freshly-picked wild flowers that gave what seemed an astonishingly strong aroma. It was as if something unseen was changing the rules that govern the senses as a means of showing special concern for this woman's desires.

Her hair was long and grey but had just a hint of copper tones. As soon as Stefan saw her, he thought of the copper tones on the sails of the Moorish boats crossing the seas from Morocco to Spain in the middle ages.

Before the group - made up of Maria, Darko, Milena and Stefan - could sit down, she spoke. "I am not saying I am your great-grandmother, but we need to talk in case I am." The business-like manner in which she spoke was almost stunning and off-putting, but this seemed to be a woman who had a lifetime of suffering in her portfolio and was not accustomed to sentimentality.

Everyone sat down and the kettle was put on to brew tea and coffee. There was an awkward atmosphere in the air. Baka Jovanka was not in a hurry. She spoke as she poured and passed the drinks around. "If you are my great-grandson, then I have a Last Will and Testament that belongs to you that has enormous value." She stopped and then looked at Stefan and Milena sitting together.

"You are beautiful, my dear." She reached out and stroked Milena's hair. Milena reached out stroked her hair and said, "You are beautiful, too."

Jovanka smiled and then spoke again in a business-like manner. "We can settle this very quickly. Can you tell me the names of your mother, father, and grandmother and grandfather?"

Stefan had a sudden burst of revelation that this was in fact his flesh and blood, and obeyed. Whereas the night before he had been suspicious, he sensed that now he was performing a mere formality. This woman was the real thing, he thought to himself.

“My father has the same name as me, Stefan, my mother's name was Neda. My grandfather, whom I never knew, was Djuro and his wife was Branka.”

There was silence as Jovanka paused, looked quietly out the window, and then began to softly cry. She sat silently sobbing and then placed her hand on Stefan's face. Between the tears, she whispered, “I am your great-grandmother.”

The quietness that before had seemed awkward now passed over into a corporate intimacy that could not easily be explained.

Milena stood up and kissed her on the forehead, then held her in her arms. The silence was only punctuated with tears and waves of emotion.

After drinking tea some more, Jovanka stood up and went to the mirror that was hanging on the wall. At the top of the frame was a picture of a young woman and a young man standing in the forest. The young woman was holding a bunch of wild flowers. The expressions on their faces were both joy and pain.

Baka Jovanka spoke as she pointed to the picture. “This is me and your great-grandfather on our wedding day in 1941. You can see we are both wearing crowns that we made from the forest. Our marriage was in the Orthodox tradition.”

Below that picture was a man standing in a dark grey suit next to a woman wearing a long green dress. “This is my son, your grandfather, and his wife. They died the year before you were born. But this is your daddy when he was a boy.”

As she said the word “daddy,” Stefan could bear no more and burst into tears. Milena held him as he reached out his hand and touched the picture.

Jovanka continued. “In 1962, after my son died and your Daddy moved to northern Bosnia, I moved to Romania to be with a priest and his family that I had known in the war. They were old and I looked after them until they died. I was stuck in the country and could not leave, and did not get out until 1990; I had lost contact with your father because of the war.”

Stefan was speechless. He looked at this woman and realized it was his only flesh and blood connection with his family. He spoke quietly.

“How did you find me and why are you here?”

Jovanka reached over poured another cup of tea into his cup. Milena smiled to herself as she realized that he was now becoming even more the object of her affection.

“I do not have long to live - well, who knows? - but I am old and I wanted to be near the forest where I was married, so I came back to be near it. It was also my family home, but it is all gone now; but not the forest.”

She looked up at the photo of her and her husband and then continued. “That is when I met your mother, Milena. I always seek out the Bayash Roma because I am at home among them.”

It was Darko's turn to speak now. "Yoy yoy yoy, what do you mean you are at home among them?"

She laughed. "Silly me! It's my age. I did not tell you, but Stefan's great-grandfather was a Bayash Roma."

Milena squealed with delight, Stefan gasped, and Darko stood up. "You are telling me this boy is one-eighth Bayash?"

She looked adoringly at him. "I think the blood of his great-grandfather runs very deeply through his veins. Your great-grandfather was Djuro and his grandfather had been a slave in Romania, and they left the country in the late 1800's."

Stefan was so moved he could hardly speak. He then gasped out a few words. "Baka, I want to know everything you can tell me... everything."

Jovanka smiled in a way that was so youthful, it made everyone shudder. "Well, here is my deal with you. Next Tuesday would have been our 70th wedding anniversary. I will take you to the forest where we were married. We will take food and sit on chairs; I am too old now to sit on the ground. Then I will tell you the whole story and at the end of the story, I will give you your great grandfather's Last Will and Testament and then something for your bride." She looked at Milena and winked.

Darko and Stefan sat alone in the kitchen in Darko and Maria's flat. Darko had soft jazz music playing in the background. Milena and Maria had gone to the shops together, leaving the men to process all that had been passing through their lives.

Darko spoke first. "I have wanted to say this to you for some time, but have not known exactly how to put it together. But, let me try. When you came to live here and Maria became your mother, it moved me deeply. I think I loved her more because she was willing to cross boundaries emotionally that I had never seen before. Then, when I realized that I was in love with her, it was very complex. I was driven to her, but knew I could not tell her that my background was in the Bayash Roma world, even though it had been years since I was in the villages. In some ways, I robbed us both of a level of intimacy that we could never fully enter into because I was afraid."

Stefan smiled. "I understand. I really do."

Darko continued. "The thing is that you and Milena have now got something in common that you did not know before. My advice to you is to take this knowledge and fully embrace it. Connect with who you are and from where you came."

Stefan smiled. "Lasa fia asha Tata amey" (Let it be so my Father).

Darko laughed. "If you can do that—I mean, learn our language and then bring that into your life and love of Milena—it will allow you to share something at a level that is very deep and very profound."

Darko paused and then spoke again. "There is something else. You know, what happened on the tram the other day... I have been thinking a lot about this. You can go through life very easily feeling like you are persecuted because of the madness of people's ignorance. You can blame them, complain about them, and so on. The truth is though, they are there and they are like they are. It is going to happen when people see

you and Milena together that they will give abuse. You cannot hide from it. It is just the way it is and is going to be.” Stefan nodded and looked out the window and said nothing.

Tuesday came very slowly for Stefan and Milena, and several times they had been tempted to go to Baka Jovanka and ask for the story immediately. There was a sense of respecting her wishes though, added to the realization that she may have needed time in her own emotions to prepare to share the story.

When the time came, they assembled with a level of anticipation and excitement that was almost childlike in the wonder it evoked. There was a blanket on the grass that was filled with baskets of food and bottles of juice and water.

The group sat on and around the blanket with Baka Jovanka seated on a chair with a cushion both for her to sit on and to support her back. She looked like a woman who was now at peace with herself in the knowledge that she had one last duty to perform before she could leave this world and go to a place of eternal rest—a place where at last she would be reunited with the only love of her life.

She smiled at the group seated beneath her. “Let us hold hands and I will say the prayer that we said on that wedding day.”

They obeyed and a stillness settled on the group. “God of all eternity, God and father, our Lord Jesus Christ, grant to us today a glimpse of your glory and may we hear the voice of your Spirit speaking to our hearts. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

Stefan and Milena both crossed themselves as they followed their elderly teacher. Jovanka smiled once more with that youthful grin and spoke. “This, my great-grandson, is your story.”

3

1941 The Gathering Storm Clouds

Father Alexander Corneliu looked out of the window. Everywhere was green. What God had made was good; what man was making was not. The trail of steam and smoke coming from the engine would periodically bring a veil down over his view.

The view of the hills became blurred. The view of small hamlets where people lived with no idea of what tomorrow was bringing drifted in and out of focus. The view of children playing in the streets hid itself behind the mist and fog created by the last gasp of a technology that was soon to be replaced.

The children themselves would also soon be replaced by a vaporous technology expunging their lives in the death camps in Germany, Poland, and southern Croatia. All that would remain would be their memories in the form of folklore that would be forgotten within a generation.

Alexander had dark, very dark, physical features. Dark hair that shone, a thick dark beard that was trimmed and manicured; deep brown, almost black eyes that had a gentle gaze to them that gave him an air of intensity with kindness; skin a dark olive hue that blended into his overall dark, yet kindly, presence. He gave off an aura that seemed to present itself as light, not seen but sensed.

As he watched the scenes passing him by, the most obvious change for him was to see that the landscape previously dominated by Orthodox churches was now becoming one where they were a minority.

It was Catholic Church spires that now punctuated the village scenes. It would be that way for some time as he would travel through southern Hungary, then change trains and travel by the new Croatian rail system down into the Croatian Baranya.

The train progressed slowly. It was the lazy slowness of the journey that gave a sense of uneasy rest to his travels. It was as if the specter of the apocalypse hung, Damocles sitting on the roof of the train, a balmy calm enveloping all that is around... It is hard to not give in to a false hope that the present madness would also soon pass. The giving in becomes the most rational response to the most irrational of realities. War is coming; everything seems to be peaceful... perhaps the war is not really coming.

As he thought on such things, he could see a small group outside a Catholic Church. They all wore Ustashi uniforms. A short, fat man was shouting to the others who seemed confused and yet seemed equally angry. Crouching in the corner of the group was a man tied with ropes.

For a moment, Alexander tried to drag himself back to thoughts of peace. He could not. The war was coming. He wanted to jump off the train and rescue the man. He wanted to shout to the group of men that they were evil. He wanted to give himself in return for the man if they would take him. His mind raced and pulsed with a deep,

inward frustration and contempt for the scene and the people he had just seen. He tried to put the images out of his mind, but the look of surrender and resignation on the man's face stayed with him. For a time, that seemed like hours he prayed and interceded before God for this man unknown to him. Slowly a calm began to once again settle upon him.

He had a brown, leather briefcase next to him. He opened it and took out a newspaper. *Luminor Satelor* (Light of the Villages) was the official organ of the new movement that was sweeping Romania. Hundreds of thousands of Orthodox believers were now meeting in small groups to study the Bible and the writings of Iosip Trifa who had just died three years before.

Revival—or more specifically, renewal—had come to the church, and it was now devotion to Christ and his cause that motivated the religious lives of so many. As he read over the pages, he was filled with that sense of belonging that so many search for their whole lives without fully grasping. These were truly troubled times, and that sense of belonging was an important part of his inward sense of peace and survival.

The new pro-Nazi Romanian government, like this new mad one in Croatia, was turning the people against the Jews and Gypsies and terrible things were taking place. The Romanians, like the Croats, were different from the Germans in style.

For the Germans, efficiency was the motivator in the method of killing those that they hated. Even their hardened Teutonic skins were shocked when they saw the barbarism of the Croats and Romanians.

For these Balkanites, killing was not designed to be efficient; it was an art form of terror designed to be up close and personal. The preferred method was clubs, knives, and bare hands, not the sanitary German style of gas.

Nazi Germany had invaded Russia from Romania and there was a new extremism flooding the land. In the midst of the ugly scenes of daily evil, it was this new spiritual community that was linked through this precious magazine that was seeking to bring hope in the midst of the darkness.

Alexander Corneliu had come to visit his cousin in Croatia for two reasons: to share with him what God was doing and pray with him that he would start a similar movement in the Serb Church; and to see if the Catholic Church would be open to something similar, as a means of finding common ground in love for Christ, rather than formalism and nationalism.

He read the words of Trifa in the paper. “Only if we find our spiritual life in Christ can we be truly called by his name. If we do find our life in Christ and he touches us, then our response is to witness to that touch to those around us.”

Corneliu paused as he thought about the words, crossed himself and then prayed, “Oh God of heaven, you are showing us a new way. I want to believe that we are able to follow this way, but I do know that if you start something, it will be fulfilled even if your timing is different than ours.”

Jovanka Petrovich took her violin and tucked it into position under her chin, holding the instrument's neck in her left hand. The bow was held firmly in her right hand. Her long, curly and ginger red hair danced as she played with abandon. It caused her to look older than she was. She was neither tall nor short, but had what would be thought of as a commanding presence. Jovanka Petrovich was sixteen years old. She wore almost always green, rust, and brown colors as if instinctively knowing that they caused her to look like a fresh autumn day filled with energy and strength. Her thick, brown skirt came down to just above her ankles, giving way to ankle-length white socks and heavy, brown shoes with thick bootlaces. She wore a white blouse that was covered by a thick olive green sweater. Her eyes were green and danced as she smiled with the sense of satisfaction that only a serious musician understands. There was an energy about her that was both innocent and sensual.

She would turn her head to one side and almost step back when she spoke, which had the effect of appearing engaged and yet deferential at the same time. She was not so much gentle as she was unselfish. There was a very intense curiosity about her that caused her to interrogate all who came into her path. In short, Jovanka Petrovic was someone who needed to know.

The music she created filled the house where she lived with her parents; she was an only child. Her parents loved and protected her and yet allowed her an unusual level of freedom. Their reasoning was that she spent so much time with her uncle, a priest and her father's brother, at the church that she could be trusted not to mix with, or be influenced by, those who would lead her astray.

Jovanka Petrovic was not someone who was easily led by anyone or anything.

As she played, she looked out of the window at the green fields that lay behind the house. The garden that acquiesced to several meadows of long, rich, green grass in turn opened up to the gentle rolling hills that were, for her, a symbol of home and also freedom. Nestled into the hills were small hamlets and villages that had been the troubled habitation for a very long time for Croats, Serbs, Jews, and also Roma.

It was a place of peasants and a new class of worker who toiled in small factories and offices. Just a kilometer away, a classmate would not wear the urban clothes that Jovanka knew as her only costume. Rather, she would wear an apron to her skirt and a woman's scarf that made her look little different than her grandmother had looked like at the same age, in a bygone age.

The hills and valleys created that which was an unlikely architectural alliance of Catholic and Orthodox Churches that gave the area both its visual charm and its explosive nature.

The storm clouds of war had been gathering for some time and as she played her violin, something inside of her knew instinctively that her world was about to become something very different than she had previously known.

Djuro Orsus sat at a small table. He held a pencil tightly in his hand. His hands were small for a person of his age. They were not musician's hands, rather they were more like a surgeon's.

He was muscular and of medium height. His face was strong and chiseled with warm brown eyes that were always seemingly active and observing the life around him. He wore a white shirt that was open at the neck. Suspenders were attached to baggy, dark gray trousers. He was clean shaven with thick but shiny dark brown hair that was swept back.

He looked like a proletarian intellectual. He was a Bayash Roma. His grandparents had been slaves in Romania and had come to Croatia in the late 1800's.

His father, like his father before him, worked on making wooden troughs for livestock feeding. Djuro was different. He was in essence fully Roma and had a soul, as all Roma, that was attached as much to the unseen as that which was evident by the senses. Although, he was sensitive to all that was new. This made him different and also caused his family to worry that he would cause them all trouble.

A candle sat just in front of the notebook. His handwriting caused a shadow to extend from the candlelight across the notebook and onto the table. The quivering image of the shadows added to the solemnity of the moment. Djuro was writing his will. He rewrote his will every Friday evening.

His family would go to bed. He would wait until the stillness could be felt then, with liturgical precision, he would light a candle and take his notebook and write down what possessions he had gained that week and then disburse them in his last will and testament. He made a list of what he had acquired over the last week.

He had seen a sunset from a high hill he had thought of climbing before but had not. He had sat by a small brook and listened to its sounds as water streamed over small polished rocks. He had knelt down by the same stream and smelt the moss.

He continued to write page after page of his experiences with nature. His will was made out to someone he did not know but who would one day come after him. Maybe it would be a daughter or a son or perhaps it would be a nephew or a granddaughter. He did not know.

He wrote of his experiences with an intimacy that gave the reader the distinct impression that he was close by and knew their circumstances. He also wrote as if he were bequeathing a fortune of inestimable value.

The silence of the night was intense and he could feel its power deep in the pit of his stomach. He loved this time. It was a time when the unseen world would call him to drink its deep wells of mystery.

He put his pencil down, walked across to the window, and looked out. The moon was full and bathed his garden with light.

The small group of little homes, that housed this community of four brothers and their offspring, was silent.

He breathed in slowly allowing his lungs to fill until it was almost too painful to continue. As he exhaled, he wept with joy. He did not know why he wept. He just knew

that to weep was the right thing to do when peace and beauty merged into these moments of sublime and intense feeling.

Father Franjo was a short man. He wore a long brown Priest's cassock that had a white cord belt. He was not only short but also thin, which gave him the appearance of insignificance in a culture that gave great estimation to masculine height and body mass.

His eyes were not those that fit his stature or his clothing. They were dark and intense, angry and piercing. Through their view into his soul, they seemed to reveal the existence of cruelty.

He was a cruel man. He was cruel in his thoughts and he was cruel in his words. It would be wrong to say he enjoyed being cruel. That would be too easy. He believed he was right in his assessment of right and wrong and how situations needed to be corrected. He felt deeply about how his place in history was to be lived out.

He hated the Serbs with a holy and sacred hatred. He sensed that history demanded he should hate the Jews as those who killed the Christ. He was disgusted by the Gypsies and simply wanted them to be out of the way.

Equal to his hatred was the pure love he felt for Croatia, "Our Beloved". Croatia was pure, true, and righteous. Perhaps it was the only place on earth that passionately protected the true faith of the true Church.

He would die for "Our Beloved" and he would kill for her as well. This was the will of God. Today, he stood before a mirror in his room, and as was his custom, he placed a small piece of cotton wool up into his left nostril. He had done this every day now for many years.

He had experienced a trauma as a young man on the day of his first, public communion as a Priest. He had a cold and his nose was running. He had not realized that, when he had broken the host in two, his nose had dripped onto the Altar tablecloth. Everyone had seen it, although no one had spoken of it. He had been so traumatized that from that day on he had decided to put cotton wool in his left nostril, partly as a reminder and partly as a precaution. The result was that often when he spoke there was a nasal sound to his voice, which if uncontrolled, tended to become increasingly high pitched the faster he spoke.

He gently sang to himself as he stood in front of his own reflection. "Our beautiful homeland, O dear and heroic land, our fathers' ancient glory, may you be blessed forever."

He stared at himself and practiced looking cold and cruel, forcing his eyes to represent the depth of his inner hatred. There was a sense that, for him, the exercise was purifying as it was God's way of preparing him for his destiny.

He turned and picked up a notebook and began to go through its pages. Name after name of Jews, Serbs, and Roma in his area were written in small, tidy handwriting. He could feel the excitement rising within himself. A third must die, a third must convert and be brought into the Church, and a third must be forced to flee.

The idea that the land would be free from pollution to embrace the beauty of its national destiny as a bastion of the Church caused a rush of excitement to take hold of his heart.

Later today the government would finally make the whole campaign legal. These foul heretics would learn they no longer existed legally in “Our Beloved”.

He looked back into the mirror, raised his arm in a Nazi salute, and with all the invective he could muster cried out the words, “Za Dom, Spremni. For the Country-Ready!” The nasal sounding cry bothered him, and so he practiced until he could bring the pitch of his voice down towards what he believed would match the strength of his eyes.

Milovan Horvat stood in the field, looking back towards his house. The green hills that surrounded him were a patchwork of small farms and vineyards. To his left, he could see the carefully manicured bushes and vines of his own land. To his right, his brother’s small farm was more on the flat land and he had planted his corn to raise his pigs. This year the harvest would be abundant.

He was a tall man with strong chiseled features. He was tanned and his sandy hair was receding. He had large, peasant hands and arms that were strong and thick. He wore an open-necked shirt with no collar. His tan trousers were held in place by a homemade leather belt.

The sun was now fully ascended and the damp, dark soil began to emit a soft, misty haze of steam. He loved the smell of the earth and even though he would not say it in these words, he loved the order of the earth. The way it rested and then produced food for man and animals.

Djuro loved the mystical elements of the soil and of nature. He could feel the presence of spirits hidden in the cracks and crevices of nature.

Milovan had a deep sense of ordered mystery. It was the well-ordered life of the earth that caused him to swell with love and gratitude towards God. He thought of these things when he would sing hymns with his little group of believers who met, week after week, in his home. He had been working long before the sun had risen and like most days he stopped to drink water from his well before going back to the house for breakfast.

As he walked back to his house, he could see Sinisa Petrovich, the local Serbian priest, riding his bike down the narrow and winding dirt pathway towards him.

“Good morning, Milovan” The priest called out as his bike slowed to a standstill.

Milovan raised his hand and replied. “Good morning, you are just in time for breakfast. You always manage to come just in time for something to eat”.

He laughed as he spoke. Father Sinisa laughed also. “Well, if you Protestants would pray more fervently for me to find a wife than maybe I would be inviting you to eat”.

The two men walked into the house. Petra Horvat, Milovan's wife, was standing by a large, cast-iron, and wood-burning oven. She was cooking eggs and a pork scrapple in a large cast-iron skillet. She looked at the men and smiled.

"Welcome Sinisa," she smiled and then looked lovingly at her husband as she spoke. The two men sat at the table whilst Petra continued to cook. Milovan looked at his friend and then spoke.

"What are you going to do?"

Sinisa was in his late twenties. He was tall and dark and some would say he was a handsome young man. He had a moderate length beard for an Orthodox priest. He had recently become the priest for the small Serb population in several hamlets served by one church in the valley.

Sinisa replied to the question. "I am going to stay as long as the Church is here and the people need me. This is not the time to leave."

Milovan nodded. "I want to say that hopefully everything will work out well, but I can't say that because I sense we are going to live through very troubled times." Petra put two large plates of food on the table. Both men turned and smiled in thanks to her. Milovan bowed his head and prayed. "Father God, these are troubled times, may we have the grace and strength to do what is right and we thank you that you still have chosen to bless the soil to us so that we can eat".

Sinisa crossed himself and both men began to eat at the same time while continuing their conversation.

Sinisa spoke. "Well, I am optimistic. I do not sense that the majority of the Croats around here are getting swept up into the national. There are so many people, like you, who love the idea of a new Croatia, but can still find a place for us all to live together".

Milovan looked serious and put his knife and fork down. "The problem is not so much the majority as it is what will a minority be capable of doing? Let's be honest, this division runs very deep."

Sinisa continued to eat and then replied. "I know, but I cannot imagine farmers and town-people suddenly turning on their neighbors. There are also so many people, like my brother, who have Croat wives. What will they do? I just cannot see them getting involved in all this. Anyway, I have some good news. My cousin from Romania is coming. He is also a Romanian Orthodox priest, but he is from the same family as myself and so he speaks Serbian. Also, he is like you".

He laughed. "I mean, he believes like you. He is one of Trifa's followers. I told you about them before. He will be here later today; he is coming by train".

Maria Zrinyi sat close to the wood fire in the kitchen of her mother and father's small cottage. They lived walking distance from the town, but culturally it was far away and in a different world.

She sat on a wooden chair supported by two cushions that were covered with embroidered sleeves. In front of her, over the open fire, was a shelf with a clock and a

series of pictures of her family members. All of the women wore traditional peasant dress. Maria, the same age as Jovanka, also wore the same costume that had been unchanged for generations.

The room was spotlessly clean with a series of white, ceramic tiles placed in the design of a cross on each of the walls. Facing east on the wall, quite high up, was a crucifix. Maria was alone as her parents were visiting the town. The atmosphere was quiet and reflective.

Maria looked at the clock, put down the needlework she had been working on, and reached to a small table and took her prayer book.

She prayed out loud. "In the name of the Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be from ages to ages Amen." She crossed herself as she prayed.

She opened her prayer book, turned to the evening prayer, and then marked the Bible readings. Suddenly, she was gripped with an overwhelming sense of dread. To call it fear would be too simplistic. It was a sense of a presence of someone both wonderful and yet fearful. She felt drawn to the presence and repelled by it at the same time. She knew it was the Lord.

She fell to her knees and was almost inclined to recite the Lord's Prayer. She burst into a flow of worship that came from her heart, not that which was written on any of the pages of her prayer book. She moved from speaking to singing.

"You are the Lord my God, I worship you, I praise you I glorify your name. You are the Lord of hosts, you are my King. You are the Potter, I am the Clay, You are my Master, I am your slave. You are my Lord."

She continued in this state of worship for some time. She had no idea how long, and then she began to weep and mourn. She found herself speaking words that were her own and were fully formed in her own mind and yet it seemed as if they were being organized by the Holy Spirit within her.

"God of the ages, a time of testing and sorrow is coming upon us. We have sinned, and I confess the sins of my people, my family, and my Church. Have mercy upon us. Martyrdom is coming, but so is the Glory of your Son. Blood will be spilt, but blood that will cry out from the ground in future generations and turn the day of sorrow to a day of rejoicing."

Maria had long, dark brown hair that was tied in a bun at the back of her head. Her skin was a gentle and soft white colour that made her look younger than she was. She was small, thin, and fragile looking, which was not a true picture of the truth, as she was strong and healthy. She sat quietly and in stillness.

She was shaken back to the present with the door opening and her father, not looking as he entered, talking to his wife as he came. Maria's mother walked past him and looked at her daughter. She screamed, crossed herself, and stepped backwards.

"Mother of God, look at our daughter."

Maria's father turned and looked at his daughter. Her face shone with an almost iridescent glow. He, too crossed himself and stood still.

“Mama, Papa, it is Ok. I have just been praying deeply.”

As she spoke the words, it seemed as if she and they returned to normal. Her parents sat down quietly, still in a state of shock.

“My girl.” Her father spoke first. “Have you had a vision of the blessed Virgin?”

“No, Papa. God touched my heart just as I started my evening prayers. I think He has given me a task to do. Something that is very important.”

4

Bathed In Holy Hatred

Father Franjo stood in front of his congregation in the small Roman Catholic Church. The Church had been in the same place for generations. It was a holy place. The table, where the bread and wine stood, had been placed in its position after determination that two, strong spiritual cross currents dissected this place. In short, it meant that the spiritual efficacy of the elements would be enhanced for those who participated.

To add to this sacred sense, there was, in the basement, a relic of untold value. In a small, golden pot locked away in a chamber and built into the very foundations of the church was a tooth that had belonged to an unnamed Apostle of Jesus.

The fact it was unnamed added to its mystical power of healing and life-giving, spiritual force. In years gone by, it had been the object of reverence and awe, but someone from the Vatican had come and said it was not authentic. In this case, the Vatican was wrong, for everyone in the town knew that just to gaze upon the gold pot caused feelings of joy and mystery to envelop them. Father Franjo was deeply grateful he belonged to a religion that was rooted in history and nurtured by relics and spiritual cross currents.

He stood in front of his beloved congregation filled with a mixture of love and humility that he was alive at such a time as this.

Behind him was the altar and behind that was a large crucifix. He wore a white robe with colored vestments that caused him to radiate with a holiness and purity in the face of his people. The light of the candles gave warmth to the atmosphere. Their light was giving off just a hint of heat to a place that was already filled with a growing heat coming from the bodies of the beloved followers of Christ.

There were over 200 people in the Church. They had come to experience God's grace nourished by the sacraments. They had also come to hear an announcement that everyone was saying would be made.

Franjo looked out into the congregation. He slowly walked across the front of the Church without saying a word. He began to speak slowly and deliberately. There was a gentle and almost velvet tone to his voice.

“You, we, all of us know that great changes are taking place in our Country. Our country. The very words make us almost overcome with pride. Our Country, and let's call it for what it is, Our Beloved, has been reborn from the ashes of generations of oppression and servitude.”

He paused and walked across the front of the Church again. He raised his hands in the air and then elevated his voice to the next level.

“And let it be said, the day of servitude is over, our day has come, our day is here, it is we who were born to lead not to serve. Our beloved Ante Starčević (Croatian writer and Politician) made it clear. Jews and Serbs are a lesser breed. They have led us, when for generations, we should have led them.”

He looked down at the floor allowing his silence to be as powerful as his words. Then the atmosphere in the Church began to feel intense with pride and glory as he began to speak louder and faster.

“God has caused Independent Croatia to be born. God has given Independent Croatia a destiny. God has given us our leader. God has given us our mandate. God has spoken and He has spoken a word of truth and that word of truth is that this land is his land, a pure land, a land filled with Croat blood, and a land that must, and I say must, expel all alien blood from her midst.”

Excitement began to build in the Church as the feelings of religious fervor could not be distinguished from the spiritual feelings of awe that love for country, family, and God melded together created.

The Priest of Christ, the servant of the people, and the lover of the world now pitched his voice into a loud and powerful booming. Slow, loud, and deliberate his words brought joy and madness to the listeners.

“Yes, some will die. Yes, some will be forced from their homes. Yes, the wise ones will renounce their religion of devils and be embraced by the true church, but this is God’s will and this is God’s way”.

He then switched to a slow and loud, almost gasping, whisper as beads of sweat rose up ready to burst over the dam from his forehead onto the sacred table.

“These dogs must be killed, expelled, and brought to submission. In the name of God, I bless those of you here in this place hearing my voice who take this holy calling as your own. Bless those who make Our Beloved, our nation, and our home a place of purity where Croatian blood flows through the veins of her people and the Serbian, Jewish, and Gypsy blood flows from the streets into the sewers, back to where it came from and where it belongs.”

He stood silent, looking into the faces of those who had witnessed this cry for purity. His chest was heaving with emotion. His short frame seemed to expand and for a moment he had become a giant. His eyes glistened with passionate anger and passionate love, hatred for the Serbs and love for the Croats.

He knew at this moment that he had found what he had waited for all his life. His destiny. Then, without any prompting, the whole Church stood and burst into song. The melodious stream of the Croatian National Anthem filled the Church and spilled over into the streets. Something new was about to happen in the name of God and His true Church.

Djuro’s father, Milo, sat looking out of the window with a blank expression on his face. The small community had been their home now for some years, and they felt safe and unobstructed there. His three brothers and the older boys sat with him.

Djuro sat quietly thinking. Milo turned towards the men. He held a piece of paper in his hand while he spoke.

“We have been given a week to decide. This certificate allows us to convert to the Catholic religion. All the names of our families are on here.”

He passed the paper around. It was an official document that had each of the families represented and all the family members listed. There was a solemn mood as, one by one, each person who could read glanced at the official seal and the list of names on the paper. No one spoke.

Milo was the oldest brother and acted as the leader of the family. This small group of Roma were, in general, quiet and unassuming. They still had tales from grandparents echoing in their ears about the suffering that the family had experienced as slaves in Romania.

The unspoken creed of the group was to survive. If it meant changing ones religion, then so be it. He held a newspaper in his other hand.

He continued to speak, “Mile Budak, Minister of Education, has said this, a few days ago in Gospich...” He found the place and then read the quote,

“For the rest Serbs, Jews and Gypsies we have three million bullets. We shall kill one third of all Serbs. We shall deport another third, and the rest will be forcibly converted to Roman Catholicism.”

Everyone was silent. Milo continued.

“We do not have any option. We will have to do what they say and hope for the best”. He paused and then continued.

“I think that this Catholic Archbishop is a good man and he will not let anything bad happen. I heard he has already complained to the government about what happened in Glina. Let’s be honest, none of us has been to Church since our baptism as babies. What difference does it make? We just want to do our trade and keep to ourselves”.

Djuro motioned to his father that he wanted to speak. His father nodded his approval in return.

“I cannot do it. I just cannot.”

He was unable to continue as his father reached out and hit him on the side of the head. He raised his voice almost to a scream, “You don’t make the decisions. We do. If I say you sign their paper, you will do it.”

Silence immediately fell upon the room. Djuro sat still, looking down, still feeling the throbbing in his head. He did not speak again.

His father continued. “You and your reading and all this woman’s stuff. You will do exactly what I say and when I say it.” There was a long pause and then each of the men left the house and returned to their own dwellings.

The two cousins sat opposite each other in large armchairs in Sinisa Draskovich’s small house. They drank tea from glasses, and felt safe in each others company.

The large clock on the wall gave the only background noise as they sat together silently for much of the time.

Alexander Corneliu had a kind face. He spoke with urgency and warmth. “There are wonderful things happening right now in the Church. Hundreds of thousands of us have found something new and real in Jesus”.

Sinisa smiled. “New, that is a word I do not relate well to. Find something fresh in the old but also something new makes me nervous”.

Alexander laughed. “Let me put it another way. We are finding new ways at looking at old truths”.

Sinisa nodded. “Not quite so bad, but it still sounds shaky to me”.

Alexander stood up and walked across the room to the large clock. He looked at his pocket watch, opened the large glass face, and altered the hands by a fraction.

He faced his cousin again and smiled. “Jesus has become very real to me, Sinisa. I still kiss the icons but with new meaning. I carry on with the rituals, but they mean something completely new. It is new, I am sorry to say it like that, but it is the truth. I love Jesus. I am devoted to Him. It has changed everything about my life.”

Sinisa smiled with compassion. “Well, it seems wonderful for you but what does it have to do with your coming here.”

Alexander sat back down again. “This madness is not going to get better before it gets a lot worse. The killing is already beginning and it is not going to stop on its own accord. I want you to come with me and get out of here, or I want you to have a deeper spiritual reality in your life that will give you strength to endure suffering.”

Without warning, a brick came crashing through the window sending splinters of glass all over both of them. Instinctively, they both fell to the floor and covered their heads. Another brick came and smashed the upper pane of glass, which caused them both to cover themselves even further. After several seconds, they slowly started to rise and brush the glass off their clothing.

Alexander sighed, “I think you get my point”.

Jovanka sat on a log by the woods that was close to the side of the road. She needed the quietness to think. She could see in the distance the green hills that so often had comforted her with their unchanging stability. The warmth of the sun, the sound of the birds, and the gentle hum of nature caused her to think how impossible it seemed that disaster was waiting to pounce upon her life.

Earlier in the day, her father had called a family meeting to discuss the situation. The term “the situation” was what everyone was calling the rapidly changing political events.

The news that hundreds of Serbs had been locked in the Orthodox Church in Glina and then butchered like animals had shocked all the communities where Serbs were living.

Her father had told the family that he had spoken with some friends, who had arranged for him to convert to being a Roman Catholic and they would ensure that the family were kept safe.

His brother, Sinisa the Priest, of course would not convert and was being asked to leave the area and travel to either Romania or Southern Serbia.

Her father had made everything seem so simple and clinical. They had a certificate, which gave them permission to convert. They would go to the Catholic Church and then be baptized as Catholics and they would then have to say a few words about renouncing their Orthodox roots and pledge allegiance to the Church and to the Croatian state.

When she had tried to ask questions, he firmly but gently told her that it was something she did not understand and that she should trust him as he knew best. As she sat beside the road, she felt a heavy depression descend upon her. Suddenly and without warning, Djuro turned the corner and was standing in front of her.

They had known each other since they were small children attending the same school. Djuro spoke, "I am sorry, I did not mean to startle you".

Jovanka smiled. She liked Djuro he was so sensitive and so respectful of her in conversation. "Good day Djuro, how are you?"

Djuro stopped and sat down on another log on the side of the road. He was so uninhibited and open. He smiled and then spoke. "Well, as good as one can be with the situation being what it is".

Jovanka nodded in agreement. "Is the situation going to affect you and your family?"

Without any warning Djuro burst into tears. He stood up, apologized, and quickly walked away. Jovanka sat stunned watching him as he made his way down the dirt road. He climbed over a low fence and then into a field to make his way to the woods.

Milovan and Petra sat in their living room with a group of about ten other people from the district. The small group had been meeting for some years as a fellowship of believers who loved Jesus. They had originally all come from Catholic background although several of them would have described themselves as having no religion before they had come to find God in the Bible and were "Born Again" as they called it among themselves.

Milovan held a Bible in his hand and read aloud from it. "You have been chosen since before the world was made to be holy and blameless before Him".

Milovan looked down again into the open Bible and then around the group. His eyes caught his wife's and lingered there longer than when looking at the others.

"I believe we are going to be tested about this verse very soon".

Again, he looked down into the pages of the Bible. He smiled in a humble way as if he were going to reveal some weakness about himself in the form of a confession.

“You know the truth is, my feelings are getting caught up in all this national feeling. I love the idea of an independent Croatia. Let us face what Croatia would not, we should be independent. In many ways, we deserve to be.”

There was now a trace of agony on his face.

“But not like this. Before the world began, God chose us, each of us, you and I in this little group. What do they call us...Baptist, Brethren, and Protestant?”

He smiled and then looked seriously at each person. “God chose us to be holy and blameless before Him and that means loving our enemies and choosing the Kingdom of God not the Kingdom of this world”.

Petra looked over at him. “But what do we do?”

Milovan sighed and raised his Bible. “We follow this. We hide the hunted, we feed the hungry, and we give protection to those who are oppressed”.

Once more, he looked around the room at the faces of his friends. He could tell from their eyes that most of them were with him. They would serve those in need even if it cost them their lives to follow Jesus according to what the Bible teaches; it had so much joy, but it had its costs as well.

In the quietness of the room, they were choosing to embrace something that would put them at variance with the majority of their friends and relatives. This was no small thing they were doing.

Zoran Horvat sat looking at Milovan. He spoke. “The question we have to ask though, is should we obey the law? God has told us in the Bible, that we should show respect and submission to the government even when it is hard to do so”.

5

A Tender Love That Grows

Jovanka could see Djuro walking down the lane towards the distant woods. The way he walked was, in itself, interesting to observe. He seemed so comfortable with who he was. He was relaxed with his consciousness. In short, Djuro was a man at peace with himself. Despite this, he was also someone who felt things so deeply that he was capable of breaking down in tears when pain touched his soul.

Since their meeting a few days before, she had wanted to speak with him to find out what had caused his reaction. She could see him climb over the small hedge and walk the short distance across the field and into the wooded area. She chose to follow him from a distance. She too, climbed over the fence and made her way towards the wooded area.

Her mind brought back many memories of their childhood and the days at school. Djuro had always been so sensitive and gentle. He was so unlike both the Serbs and Croats and the few Jews in the same class.

She remembered when they were very small and the teacher had an insect in a match box and had gathered all the children together to inspect it. The teacher had said that he found it down by the small stream at the entrance to their small town.

Djuro seemed fascinated by it, but then became distraught when the teacher said that the little insect had a family and they were probably mourning the fact that it was gone never to return. Djuro kept crying and insisting that the teacher take it back. The other boys laughed and said they would crush the insect. Djuro continued to cry until the teacher promised that he would take the insect back to the small stream. Even then, Djuro was not satisfied and insisted that he be allowed to go with the teacher to make sure he kept his promise.

She remembered when they were older, and the boys became so crude towards the girls, how Djuro had threatened to fight Zlatko Radich unless he stopped saying crude words to the girls whenever they walked by.

Zlatko got three of his friends together and attacked Djuro on the way home from school. They dragged him behind an abandoned building and started to beat him. All the other boys came to watch because they were going to beat him badly. She remembered hearing the story the next day as it was told: Djuro had kicked Zlatko Radich between the legs, head butted one of the other boys and broken his nose, and then stabbed two fingers very quickly into the eyes of one of the other boys. All three were left on the ground crying.

Within days, all the boys spoke with respect to the girls. All the boys kept away from Djuro and made jokes about him being a Gypsy behind his back, but only behind his back.

No one had been able to understand Djuro. He was sensitive and yet masculine. He would never knowingly hurt anyone but was always willing to fight to protect anyone whom he considered weaker and in need of protection.

Sometimes in music class, he would cry when certain kinds of music were played and yet no one would mock him as he was so strong and willing to fight. The girls would talk about him saying things like, how they would love him if only he were not a Gypsy.

She slowly walked through the trees and down a small path that led deep into the wooded area. In the distance, she could see him. She carefully crouched behind a bush to watch him. Djuro was wearing a white shirt. It was tucked into his brown corduroy trousers that were held up by a strong, leather belt. His glasses always seemed to give him the look of a Russian intellectual. His hair was dark and long; it was swept back with olive oil. He bent down and smelled the fresh moss. It was warm as his cheek touched the ground. He then took off his brown boots, which revealed his bare feet. Neatly, he put his boots to one side as if he were on the stage at an audition. Then without any warning, Djuro began to dance. It was a dance like something from a modern dance group in Beograd. Slow, sensual, and with the swirling of arms and legs. It was almost ballet but tinged with a modern, almost folklore, feel. He danced and danced. She could see tears in his eyes as he was connecting with something that was very deep from a place she knew little about.

Then slowly, he stopped and knelt on the ground. He lifted his arms upwards and began to sing. At first she did not know what he was singing and then slowly it came to her mind that he was singing both parts in the responsive Orthodox liturgy. She was stunned, and then realizing that she had violated both his privacy and also this sacred space, she found herself stepping backwards and then turning to leave the wooded area altogether.

As she hurried back up the lane towards the town, she was confused and overwhelmed. Her heart was pounding and she found herself reliving the sights and sounds she had just come from.

She was a believer, but not like this. She had been baptized and she would pray the set prayers, but this was totally different.

She loved the Church, she loved to venerate the Icon, but this was devotion at a deeper level. She loved the feeling of completion when the liturgy was over as if she had climbed a mountain or fulfilled some obligation, but this was spiritual mystery unrolled before her eyes. It was not strange so much as it was deep.

She knew Djuro, she knew who he was and what he was like, and so his religion expressed in this extreme way was not so much unusual as it was a filling in the blanks of his complex and mysterious life. She had seen and felt something that she had never experienced before.

Father Franjo knocked on the door of Sinisa's house. The door opened and the Catholic priest entered the home of his Orthodox counter-part for the first time. Sinisa and Alexander were both there, and the three priests sat looking uncomfortably at each other.

The clock on the wall was the only constant source of normality with each of the men turning periodically towards its face for some kind of comfort in the midst of their otherwise nervous social interaction.

Franjo broke the deadlock and spoke without emotion and expression. "I just had a long phone conversation with a friend of your brothers. It seems you have influence in high places through your brother's wife's family. They are wisely going to convert to the true church and assume full Croatian citizenship. It is a great privilege for them. I am not sure it is such a privilege for us to assimilate them" Sinisa did not respond, but just nodded.

"Well, this is the situation. You are both free to leave here unharmed and get back to wherever you came from. But you have to be out of here by tomorrow night or even your powerful friends will not be able to help you."

Alexander smiled and spoke. "Thank you, thank you, but let's not talk about that for a minute. Let's meet as men of God and try and find something of Christ to help us in these awful times. One of the reasons for my coming was that I wanted to talk with priests such as yourself about some of the wonderful things going on in our Church and to see if we can reach out to each other."

Franjo's face began to twitch. First his eyes and then his mouth. The large vein protruding from the side of his neck seemed to expand to the point that it would burst in protest of the heresy he was hearing. He calmed himself down by breathing deeply and closing his eyes. There was a hint of white saliva to the right side of his mouth, which was pressed closed as if life itself depended upon it not opening.

He replied quietly. "You obviously misunderstand me. I despise you. You are of the devil. You are scum. You should be dead. In fact, if you are not out of here by tomorrow night you will be dead." Sinisa and Alexander looked at each other and were silent.

Father Franjo stood up, walked towards the door, and then turned and stood still. There was a picture of Serbian Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich in a frame sitting on the table. He smiled and then spat on it. In a moment, he was gone.

Alexander turned to his cousin and hurried over to the picture, wiped it with his handkerchief, and then threw the defiled cloth into the wood stove.

Sinisa spoke. "I do not think he is very interested in ecumenical dialogue, Alex."

Both men smiled then sat down to talk through what must be done.

Sinisa spoke again. "I am not going to leave; it is as simple as that. My people need me and I have to stay with them." Alexander looked on lovingly and then started to cry.

Milovan sat in the kitchen of his friend, which was in small dwelling similar to his own less than a kilometer away. Zoran Horvat was a man who was driven by the need to get things right. The way his house was kept, where everything was in its proper place, to the tidy and neat arrangement of his farm tools, all reflected his passion for order.

The men had grown up together. Both had been children when their fathers came out of the Catholic Church to align themselves with the small Protestant groups who had begun to spring up around Central Europe.

Zoran spoke. "You know Milovan, what you said the other day was good under some circumstances; however, I do not think it is right for us".

Milovan nodded carefully then replied. "Help me understand what you are thinking".

Zoran continued. "Well, the truth is all the stories about Croats killing Serbs and Jews and Gypsies are exaggerated. I do not know one Serb who has been killed. How many do you know, personally, who have been killed?" Milovan nodded. "None, personally."

Zoran continued. "Exactly, I think it is propaganda from the Serbs. Let's be honest, they cannot be trusted. I think if anything is the truth, it is them killing our people in Eastern Slavonja that is really what is going on. I have listened carefully to Pavelich (Croatian President), and I think he makes sense. They have stood on our necks long enough, and we just need to have our own space that we love where we are left alone to be who we are."

Milovan tried to be respectful but was clear in his response. "Well, let us say that is true, but if it comes to this area and people are in danger, would you agree that we must protect them?"

Zoran stood up, smiled, and tried to defuse the conversation.

"It is not going to come to that, and if it does then we will have to do something about it. I am just saying that we should not connect ourselves to people who are ultimately against everything we love and stand for, that is all".

Maria Zrinyi was working in her parents' garden. There was always so much to do and it was only the coming of darkness that would move people from outside work into the rich glow of candles and kerosene lamps within their small dwellings.

Today, as she looked out over the hills, she had the experience that only those close to the soil know about. She felt a deep love for the very earth itself.

She was a simple girl who had left school when she was 13 years old. She had no idea, scientifically, how crops grew and even why they did. For her, it was simply God giving to them by His love in the form of food from the land.

Suddenly, she felt seized in her heart by an overwhelming need to pray and dropped to her knees.

"In the name of the Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit, who was, who is, and who is to come, ages through ages. Amen. I lift before you this nation and pray for forgiveness for the sins of the people. We have sinned, and we continue to sin. Have

mercy upon us, and deliver us from the spirit of nationalism.” She then raised her voice in the anonymity of the fields.

“You are the God of ages and every piece of this land is under your authority, and yet you have allowed suffering to come upon this people and this land because they have bowed themselves to the idol of the nation rather than to serve your Kingdom wherever it is to be found. This people have religion filled with words and ritual, but the Fruit of Your Spirit is far away.”

Kneeling on the soil that would bring forth food, she burst into tears and cried for God to take the burden of the nation away from her.

The small Bayash Roma enclave was quite beautiful; it was surrounded by trees and for most of the time was a tranquil and peaceful place. Children always seemed to be playing outside. The playful noise acted as a backdrop to the rest of the community. Women would sit together in a circle, with large basins at their feet, as they would prepare vegetables and speak, some would say gossip, together.

Djuro’s mother sat with them, leaving her husband, Djuro, alone in their small dwelling.

Djuro’s father was a stern and yet warm-hearted man. He himself struggled enormously with how to deal with emotions. So often when he was angry it was more in reaction to his feelings being hurt than it was a deep or sinister anger. He turned to his son and spoke.

“You upset me the other day when you spoke against what I was saying about converting.”

Djuro looked at his father and thought to himself how he both loved and feared him. He loved him, but he was capable of changing in a moment and saying or doing things everyone regretted.

“I did not mean to upset you, Father.” His father smiled.

“Then all is forgiven and you are now willing to convert?” Djuro stiffened and then replied.

“I understand that for you religion is not important, but this is my life.” He could see his father beginning to become annoyed.

“So your religion is more important than your family’s safety?” Djuro stood up and tried to leave. His father grabbed him and pushed him against the wall.

“You do not leave when I am talking to you.” Djuro stopped and looked at his father.

“I do not want to stay here and have you say or do something you will regret.” His father reached out slapped him around the side of the head.

“You think you are so special because of your books and church. Well, you are not.”

Djuro tried to leave again, but his father pursued him and thrust him to the ground; he then began to punch him in the face as he shouted.

6

A Wide and Deep Church

Jovanka walked into her Uncle Sinisa's living room and sat down. She had come to this room so many times over her young life. Her uncle was also her spiritual mentor and someone she trusted fully. It had been he who had carefully taken her through the teachings of the Church and introduced her to the world of her cultural identity.

The large clock on the wall had been there for as long as she could remember and now, as she was becoming a woman in her own right, the symbols of the past gave stability in the chaos of the world, which was changing all around her.

Father Alex was there as well; he was seated, reading a book when she came. He stood, shook hands with her, and smiled. His smile had a contagious aspect to it that made one feel that perhaps all is not as bad as it seems.

“So Jovanka, I think we are second or third cousins”.

Jovanka smiled and sat down. Sinisia pulled up a chair and then smiled as he spoke.

“We have to make some very quick decisions about the future. I have not seen your mother and father yet, but I assume they are going to convert and then maybe leave the area.”

It was unusual for Sinisia to speak so frankly with her. It seemed to her that he also realized her childhood had now abruptly ended and she was, and should be, treated as a woman.

Jovanka looked at the floor, started to cry, and then brought her emotions under control. “They have insisted that I convert, and I do not have any say in the matter. I had to come and talk with you about it. What I should do?”

Father Alex smiled with warmth. “In your heart, you belong to the risen Christ. That is written on your heart, and not on a piece of paper that says you are a member of this tradition or that tradition.”

He stood up and walked across to the table upon which was his brief case. He took out a copy of *Light in The Village*. Inside, where some typed pages in Serbian.

He turned to a page and then read. “We love the Orthodox Church because it is all we have known. For many of us, our identity is to be found here. But the Church cannot save us. It is true that Salvation comes to us through the Church in her message and her life, but it is Christ who saves us. It is Christ who is the one we meet with when we pray, sing, take the bread and wine, and read from His word. It is all about Christ, and nothing else”.

Jovanka looked into his eyes with such a piercing gaze that it troubled the Priest. This was not an ordinary teenager, he thought to himself as she looked at him and spoke.

“The truth is, I saw something today that made me wonder if I do in fact have devotion to the risen Christ written on my heart”.

She recounted her story of how she had concealed herself and watched Djuro worship God at the deepest possible level. Sinisia breathed out, but before he could speak, Alex spoke.

“I think we should meet this young man, as he may have something to share with our community for when they go through what is going to happen. It will not be about rituals and priests, but rather about the living spiritual reality that will sustain people in the days ahead.”

Without saying anything further, Jovanka excused herself leaving both priests impressed and troubled as they talked through the decisions they must make in the coming hours.

She walked slowly back towards the edge of town to where she had originally met Djuro. The sun was strong but comforting. She knew winter would be coming and with it a whole new world she would inhabit where all the was familiar would be brushed away. For the first time in her life, she had thoughts of God, not religion but actual thoughts of God.

She stopped and part of her wondered if she could just concentrate hard enough and then pray that God would stop the bad things from happening so calm would return to her world.

As she turned the corner leading over to the field, she saw Djuro just a few meters standing and looking out towards the fields. She instinctively wanted to turn away, but and then found herself doing the very opposite.

She burst out, crying as she spoke. “Djuro, I am sorry! I cheated. I followed you to the woods, and I spied on you as you danced and worshipped God”.

Djuro did not speak, but gently smiled. It was only then that she could see his face was bruised and swollen and his shirt was torn.

“Djuro, what happened”. For a moment they looked into each others eyes s something very deep seemed to pass from each of their souls into the others. It seemed as though they drank from each other souls', through their eyes. His deep soul that had fermented like red, postup wine from the south along with her full and energetic spirit, overflowing with innocent turbulence, connected into a union of souls that was made rich by the beauty of their humanity.

It is impossible to say how long they looked into each other, but then the moment was broken as Djuro spoke.

“My father beat me very badly because I said I would not sign the paper saying that I would convert.”

Without responding, Jovanka reached out her hand and guided him across the road and into the field that led to the woods. There was a small stream that ran along the side of the road. She took her handkerchief, dipped it in the water, and then gently bathed his face. She spoke.

“What will you do?” He looked at her carefully and again something deep and non-verbal transpired. Then he replied.

“I am not going to convert, so I have decided to leave and live in the woods. I know how to live off the land so I will just wait in the woods for God to do something. What will you do?”

They found themselves walking across the field together and to the edge of the woods. It seemed ridiculous that they should be thinking about catastrophe when the air was so peaceful and calm.

Jovanka spoke. “The truth is, I only realized what to do after I watched you in the woods. I am so sorry Djuro.”

He smiled. “I have nothing to hide, I just choose to be private”.

She continued. “When I watched you, I started to realize that I have a religion or something, but you have some mystical experience that does not need Icons or the Liturgy or the Priest”.

Djuro reached into his leather bag. He pulled out his diary, which was his last will and testament, and then reached in and took out a small, leather bound Bible. Jovanka gasped. “You have your own Bible?”

He smiled and opened it up to a passage in the New Testament. It was the passage where Jesus was speaking; he said, “Come to me all those who are burdened and under great stress and I will give you rest”.

He pointed to the words then closed it up and put it back into his bag. He looked at Jovanka and he sensed this time that a relationship, that may take months to develop, was accelerating before him due to the intensity of the situation they were both in. He smiled. “And so I did.”

She looked puzzled. “And so you did what?” He laughed out loud. “I came to Jesus with my heavy burdens, and He gave me rest”. She smiled as he continued.

“Actually, you are only partly right when you said I do not need Icons and Priests and Liturgy. Everything in our faith is there for a purpose. All the symbols and signs and moments of mystery feed into my relationship with and to God. I do not need my family for me to be a human being, but I do need my family for my life to be rich and full.”

Jovanka gasped at the wisdom and maturity that came so simply from his words. She sat down and looked carefully at him, then standing up, she turned as if to leave.

“Let’s not be seen together. I will come back in the evenings and come to this place, always just as the sun disappears. I will bring you some food and we can talk.” Djuro tried to protest, but she stopped him.

“Please don’t argue with me Djuro, I am going to do it.” He smiled, and she was gone.

Father Franjo looked out from behind the curtains to see who was gently knocking at the door. He then opened the door and invited his guest in. As he guided his guest to a seat, he reached over to his gramophone and lifted the arm from the record. Franjo smiled as he then clicked the gramophone off.

“Wagner has it all there, not in text printed on a page but in musical notes annotated upon the score of an orchestra”.

Zoran Horvat sat down and looked nervously around the room. There was a picture of Ante Pavelich on the wall. Under the picture was a Bible text, Blessed are the Pure in Heart.

Franjo sat down, reached across to the brandy, and poured two small glasses. He passed one glass to Zoran, then raised his own, and quickly drank from it.

He then spoke. “I am surprised you are here. What are you called, Brethren or Baptists or something?” Zoran did not take the bait but spoke without smiling. “I am a Croat who is committed to “Our Beloved”, and that is all that matters.”

Franjo nodded. “So what does that mean to you right now?” Zoran looked confused.

“What do you mean?”

Franjo poured another glass of Brandy, drank it, put his glass down, and then looked quietly at his guest. He nodded towards the picture on the wall of the savior of the nation.

“It is all about purity. Purity of race, purity of religion, and purity of heart. There are three Great Plagues in this land. The Jews, who have turned our country into a market where only they benefit. The Serbs, who have oppressed us, maligned us, raped our women, and stolen our national birth right, and the Gypsies, who are all possessed by demons and drink pigs blood and worship Satan. The question is, do we want to carry on living in a country that has these plagues?”

Before Zoran could answer, Franjo continued.

“This is not a time for weak men. If you farmers want to play at your sect, frankly I do not care as long as you do not interfere. But do you want to be a man? A Croat man who can lift his head with pride and say: I want a different world for my children; a world where plagues are routed out and destroyed? Or do you simply want more of the same liberals, homosexuals, and demon worshippers to make your decisions for you?”

The room was silent and then the priest reached out and put the Wagner record back on the Gramophone. Zoran sat still, staring into the abyss, then drank his brandy.

Jovanka stood in the front room of her home looking out over the hills. She played the violin in deep melancholic tones that filled the house. As she played, she forced her mind to think about the words Djuro had spoken to her yesterday. She was still burdened just as he had been, but Djuro had now found release. She spoke to her own mind.

“What am I really burdened about? What are the things I carry that are so heavy on my heart?”

She answered herself. “I can never be good enough to get past God's checklist. I try to be perfect, but I cannot get there.”

She pushed the music to the limit as she played. “God is not my friend or my father, He is my judge. He is waiting for me to fail all the time so that He can withdraw Himself from me. That is what is heavy on my heart.”

Her thinking was interrupted as her uncle, Sinisa, came into the room. He smiled in a pastoral way as he beckoned for her to sit down.

“Your father asked me to talk with you about the situation.” She put the violin down and sat.

“Your father wants me to convince you to go along with everything so as not to cause trouble for the family. But I have told him you are an adult even though you are still young. You have to make this decision yourself.”

Jovanka was not defiant but rather reflective. “I need to talk with you as my priest not my Uncle, if that is acceptable.” Sinisa nodded in assent.

“Father Sinisa, to be honest, I am not sure now that I really have strong convictions that salvation is in my Baptism or my taking the sacraments. I want to know God like Djuro does. But you are my Priest, our Church is my Church, and last night I thought about the beauty of what things represent in our Church. What I want is our Church, but also to know God like Djuro does”.

Sinisa smiled in a kind and understanding way. “A week ago I would have tried to correct you, but Father Alex has been here and we have been talking about the same things. Well, I can only say, I agree with you and it is what I want. Because, well...because.”

Jovanka looked intensely. “Because what, Father Sinisa? Speak to me as an adult and as my Priest please, please.” He smiled at her intensity.

“Because, I have decided that I will not leave my people and it may mean that I am taken with them to the camps. If that does happen, I need a spiritual reality that is deeper than what I have in my own life”.

Jovanka stood up. “Camps, what camps? What are you talking about?”

He beckoned for her to sit down again. “It is hard to know exactly, but it seems that there is a camp near here just outside Koprivnica, which they are calling Danica. This is a place where people are kept before being sent to the other camps where we hear people are being killed.”

She stood again. “What people, what are you saying?” He once more beckoned for her to sit.

“Jews, Serbs, and Gypsies are being either converted, killed, or sent over the border into Serbia.”

Once more she stood to her feet and then found herself sitting without his request. “Well, then let's leave here and go to Serbia. We can take Djuro as well.”

“It is not as simple as that. Your parents are a mixed marriage and the extremists of our own people are doing equally bad things now over the border. I must stay because there are many who cannot leave, and they need me as their priest.”

Jovanka said no more, but had made a decision in her own heart. The only issue was timing.

Milovan and Petra sat on a seat outside their small house. They looked towards the hills, and Milovan found himself quoting the Bible verse about looking to hills to receive strength from God. He loved his wife dearly, and she him. They were a couple who found it easier to express their love in doing rather than feeling. As a result, their lives had been filled with service to one another and others as a means of expressing their love for God. Milovan spoke.

“I think we need to bring Sinisa here and let him stay out in the barn. He can then visit people by night. His cousin can stay here also, at least until he can leave without trouble.”

Petra was not used to disagreeing with her husband, but she was a woman of questions.

“Should we be helping a priest that believes so differently than we do?”
He loved his wife. She was always so practical.

“We need to care for him because it is the right thing to do.” They both sat silently looking at the sunset.

Father Franjo's face seemed to gleam in the light of the candles placed around the Church. There was a deep sense of peace that could be felt when he spoke of his love for “Our Beloved”.

The Church once more was filled with the faithful. As the days had gone by there was an ever increasing sense that the people of God were being rewarded for their faithfulness by a greater sense of national destiny gripping the land.

“Today we have heard the news from just south of here. Father Miroslav Filipovich led our brothers into a holy battle. I know this man. He is a good man. When he slaughtered the children just outside of Banja Luka, it was not a slaughter by forces of evil.”

He paused, turned, and looked towards the altar.

“Just as Joshua was told not to spare the Canaanites, and he was a Holy man, also today the slaughter of these Serb children is no different.”

He paused again and walked up and down the front of the Church. He lowered his voice and continued.

“It is different. Yes, it is different.”

He then raised his voice to a thunder.

“The Canaanites were a holy people compared to the Serbs! The Canaanites had an excuse because they knew no other way and yet God killed them. The Serbs have

held in their hands the Holy books and sacraments, they utter the name of the blessed son of God, and yet still they worship demons. The blood of Serbian children shed today, flowing into the sewers from whence it came, is an act of holy wrath from almighty God. For unless they die, they will consume your pure children and they will take your holy land and they will violate your innocent daughters. Let no one in this place show one ounce of mercy for that which God has cursed.”

The room was silent as the priest looked around, piercing his eyes into each person’s soul, searching for unholy compassion.

Djuro sat on the ground waiting near to where Jovanka would come. He read his Bible and then would pause to look into the stars. When he prayed, he did so in two distinct ways. He would use the words he had learned from the liturgy and would declare them to God, the unseen world of angels and demons and his own heart. The other way he would pray was simply in conversation, sometimes in silence inside his head and then at other times with his voice. Tonight, he spoke out loud in conversation with his God and his friend.

“I am so free that I am almost bursting with joy. I love my family, but it is wonderful to be here all the time where I can worship in song and dance and prayers.” He looked out from the forest towards the hills. He had no sense of a specific home but rather a deep abiding love of nature where ever it was to be found. He found himself excited at the thought of Jovanka coming back. Whatever had passed between them earlier had been a deep experience. He talked to God.

“I think I love her. No, I know I love her. I have loved her for a long time, but today it became unselfish, grown-up love. Probably because of the situation, everything is speeding up. Please watch over her and care for her. Please also can you help her to see that you are a God who is here?”

His thoughts were interrupted as Jovanka seemed to appear out of nowhere. She stood quietly in front of him, holding a basket of food.

“I have quite a story to tell you. Shall we sit down and eat together?” Jovanka took a blanket out of the basket and laid it on the ground. She sat crossed legged and he sat in a kneeling position. She continued to share.

“I had a wonderful time talking with my uncle, Father Sinisa. We talked about you and how it is to know God in the way you do. He is going to stay here among the people and not run away, which he could do.”

She realized she was filling the air with conversation, partly because she was nervous. She paused again before she spoke.

“I am sorry, I am talking too much”. Djuro smiled.

“I wonder Djuro, if you would teach me how to know God like you do?” He smiled again and spoke softly.

“Do you mean that?” It was her turn to smile. He reached out his hand and took hers. They walked hand in hand to the corner of the field. She felt an excitement she

had never known before, she had never held hands in this way. They stopped, and he pointed to the hills.

“First of all, you have to be quiet. Then you need to hear what God says to everyone in his Bible, and you have to listen in the quietness to what God is saying to you personally from His Bible”.

She nodded and he continued. “There are four voices that speak to us all the time. Before you ask me what that means, I will explain. The first voice is our soul.”

He smiled.

“Our soul is very powerful. I think you and I felt our soul when we held hands just now”.

She blushed and he laughed.

“The soul is powerful, but not reliable. You can never find the truth inside yourself. I learned this as a little boy. The second voice is Satan and his demons. They are everywhere. They tell you things through your thoughts and it is always about what is wrong with you. Why you are not perfect and how you never keep God's laws.” Jovanka gasped and wanted to share that is exactly what she thought of today, but she decided to stay silent as she sat under his teaching.

“The third voice is nature.”

He whispered.

“Listen and look, and nature will tell you what God is like. The fourth voice is God's word, the Bible. It is God speaking to you. He has nothing more to say than what He has already said. The truth is always to be found here.”

Jovanka looked at Djuro and was overwhelmed.

“Where do I begin?” He smiled again.

“You already have. I can sense it. I am going to give you my Bible”

She protested, “Oh Djuro, no”.

He smiled and then placed it in her hands.

“It is now our Bible. I want you to read these places, which I have marked on this piece of paper. These are the page numbers. You must go now, but come to me tomorrow. For the moment, I do not want you to think about me. I think we are in love with each other, and it is going very quickly because of the situation. But it is now important for you to realize that God is pursuing your heart and that must come first”. She was overcome by his honesty and purity; she turned to leave. He reached out for her hand one more time.

“Come with me, there is something I must show you before you go.”

He led her to the little stream where she had bathed his wounds. He then knelt down beside her, took off her shoes and socks, and motioned for her to sit down. He gently poured water from the stream over her feet. He was very careful not to caress her feet and then, when he had washed her feet, he took large handfuls of grass and wiped her feet dry. Then as a parent would put socks and shoes on a child he did so to her without any sensuality in his touch. She shook as he stood beside her.

“It is all about cleansing, gentle and loving cleansing. Now go and God will speak to you through his word”.

Jovanka walked away, almost in a trance. She found herself inwardly wanting to go back to Djuro and say she wanted to give herself to him body and soul, to love him and serve him as he had served her. At the same time, her mind became full of voices, doubts, fears, and thoughts that were obviously not of God. She found herself speaking to God.

“Oh God, speak to me through Your word. Teach me about cleansing.”

7

The Hiding Place

Father Sinisa and Father Alex quietly walked through Milovan's barn into a small corner that Petra had arranged as a place for them to sleep. Milovan spoke in a whisper. "It is best that we whisper when we talk as sound travels here by night." Sinisa reached out his hand and shook Milovan's.

"Thank you Milovan, but I must find a way to be available to my people." Milovan replied as he motioned for the men to sit on the two made up beds.

"I understand, but for the next couple of nights I think it is important that you stay here. The Ustashe have come into town, and they may think that you have left the area."

Milovan made his way back to the house realizing that he himself was now at great risk as there would be little mercy for someone helping two Orthodox priests. He looked at his watch and realized the others would soon be here for their meeting. The two priests unpacked their bags and put their Bibles and prayer books along with an Icon onto the small table that Petra had left there for them.

Alex spoke first. "I need to tell you that I no longer need the Icon to assist me in prayers."

Sinisa sat down on the bed.

"Oh Alex, this is all going too fast for me. I am with you in that I now see it is devotion to Christ that is central to our lives, but these traditions are deeply comforting to me".

Alex felt a sense of pain that he was causing so much discomfort to his cousin.

"I understand, but we are now looking at losing our lives and ministering to people who may just have days to live. We have got to go past our comforts and ask very, very hard questions. The biggest question being what is the truth."

Sinisa was moved at his cousins words. "But you are not expecting us all to give up our traditions are you?"

Alex reached out his hand and touched his cousin on the shoulder. "I am asking us to find Jesus and to love him no matter what traditions we may have. If the traditions are symbols that lead us to greater devotion to Jesus then they are good. If they are a replacement for devotion to Jesus then they are not good. The truth is, these Protestant people are very close to the truth because they do not need anything to assist them in their devotion to Jesus. That is hard, but it is the truth." Sinisa nodded in gratitude.

"I am so glad you came. I do not know how I would have survived without you."

Father Alex knelt on the ground beside his cousin and prayed from his heart in words that warmed heaven and shook hell.

Zoran Horvat sat in Father Franjo's living room in the same chair that he had done a few nights before. Wagner was playing, but tonight instead of the brandy being a source of polite gesture it was the central part of their fellowship.

As each glass was drunk, both men found themselves free to talk in ways they had not before. Franjo leaned forward in his chair and spoke in a whisper as if unwanted ears were listening. His voice stumbled over the words as he spoke.

“I was going to be a policeman you know. You know when, I was young. Do you know what they told me? I will tell you what they told me. They told me I was too short. Too short, too short.”

He laughed as he tried to drink at the same time that he was talking.

“Not now. Not too short now. What I say happens because I am..... I speak for the Ustashe here.”

Zoran was also drunk. He spoke with a more deliberate tone. “You know, I have always been jealous of you people.”

“What people, the Ustashe?”

“No you people, the Catholics. Look at your parades at Easter. What do we do at Easter? I will tell you what we do at Easter, nothing. We just get up earlier. Our small Churches are like a family business. Everyone is related, everyone. That's all we are, a family business with no parades.” Franjo laughed.

“Well come home to the mother Church. In fact, come home and you can be the number one in the parade. I will let you hold something like a flag or a Cross. Come home and we can give you a parade that you will remember all your life.”

Franjo continued.

“The truth is, I love everyone. I am just misunderstood. I didn't mean to touch the boy anyway. Still that is another good thing about us. For you people, if you get into mischief you have nowhere else to go, but us they always find a place. Always have and always will.”

Franjo laughed as he spoke and continued to drink.

“You know, I like you. I think we can work together. Who cares if the Serbs and Gypsies and the Jews bring it on themselves. You wait, one day they will look back and say this was our finest hour. Finest hour, where have I heard that before? Anyway, it will be our finest hour and you should be with me right in the middle of it. I don't really like women anyway and the boy was not that young.”

Zoran poured himself a long drink and then raised his glass.

“Za Dom” and Father Franjo replied with gusto. “Spremni”. He then began to laugh and tried to control himself but gave into his laughter which in turn led to a deep sleep.

Later that night Zoran made it home still drunk but now in a foul mood as the alcohol paid back its client with a headache and a profound sense of irritability. He walked into his house to find that his wife Blazhenka was asleep in bed. She had been at the meeting earlier that night. She found herself shaken awake by her husband. The foul

smell of his breath and the urine on his clothes made her feel sick. She was a timid soul who lived her life in utter submission to his control.

She remembered her father telling her not to marry Zoran as he felt he was not really a true believer but just someone who had grown up in the Church. She had become his virtual slave.

“So did they pray for my soul tonight?” He did not give her a chance to answer.

“So what did you talk about?”

Despite his being drunk, he could see that she was unwilling to share something with him. He grabbed her by the hair and pushed his face into hers.

“Tell me woman or I will beat it out of you”. She now began to cry. He raised his hand to hit her and then spoke.

“They are hiding someone there aren't they?” She said nothing but cried more intensely. Her actions and responses were answers to his questions.

Jovanka had gone to sleep early and had slept well. She left the house early and took the Bible out to the field behind her house. The piece of paper that Djuro had written page numbers on was taken from her pocket and she began to slowly read through each of the verses.

Her mind was clear and in some ways she felt as if she had already crossed over some threshold of spiritually and was now following a direction that God had given her rather than her seeking after him from an empty space.

Then almost as if a series of lights had clicked on she saw everything clearly. All these years she had been hearing about the Cross and the Blood of Jesus but now it just simply slotted into place. Her sin was not a list of imperfections but rather a heart that simply wanted to go its own way. The cleansing was exactly as she had experienced in the form of a symbol the night before by the stream when Djuro had washed her feet. She had been washed with the love of Jesus. That love was his Blood. He had died in her place. He died instead of her. His death was God lovingly placing her punishment on Him. It simply fell into place. She cried out in joy.

“I see it, I see it. Now I see the reason. You washed me so that you could know me. That is it, I see it.”

The rest of the day was a blur as she could hardly wait until she told Djuro. Dear beloved, precious, and kind Djuro.

8

The Wooden Ring

The moon was full. The night had that late summer feel to it whereby the insects cried out in worship to God and yet the sense that they would soon find places to hide and die in the winter.

As Jovanka walked, the presence of God was so great that she could honestly say He was near, very near. She climbed over the fence and made her way to where she would meet Djuro. Tonight she had just some bread and salami wrapped in a cloth. Djuro was standing by the edge of the forest. He now had a few days of growth on his face which gave him and even more rugged look.

He reached out his hands and took both of hers.

“Tell me everything, I have been praying for you all last night and then some time in the early morning my heart was flooded with peace that you had been found by God”.

She held his hands as if they had been lovers for many years and told him the whole story. They sat together on the fresh moss, which had a fresh scent of the earth to it. A mist had begun to descend as the heat and the cold of the forest began to meet and express itself. He held her hands and would periodically kiss them gently. Then he stood, took her hands again in his, and led her to a clearing in the forest. He took his leather bag and opened it and took out a small wooden ring.

“I made this today.” He put the ring on her finger and then knelt down in front of her.

“We have no time and we may be killed very soon. But I want you to be my wife and I want to be your husband. But God has shown me that I must go back to my people and suffer with them. They have to know the truth and I must be the one to tell them. But I give myself to you, even if it is for a very short time.”

He stood up and held her in his arms. The love and gentleness that flowed between them was both sensual and innocent. He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “But we can not kiss each others' lips until we are married”. She cried in his arms.

“If I can be your wife for just one night it will be my treasure for a lifetime. If I can bear your child then you will live on through it and me. But my parents, they would never agree”.

He smiled at her gently.

“Then we will have to be married in our souls and not our bodies. I love you, I love you, I love you, and God will find a way to do what is both right and precious.” Milovan came into the barn where the priests were sitting and reading. He walked quickly and then spoke without giving any greeting.

“We have been discovered, we need to move you immediately before they come for you. We can close this down very quickly.”

Both priests stood up and began to pack their things. Petra came in and started to dismantle the beds. Milovan continued to speak in a rapid manner.

“This sounds strange, but your brother’s house has already been searched for you. I have spoken to him and he is willing to hide you for a night or two. He has strong connections and even if you were found he would probably be safe. We need to get you there very quickly.”

Jovanka was in her room when her mother came in to her to tell the news that the two priests would be staying there secretly. Even as she spoke, she could see through the window a cart with a large amount of hay upon it slowly coming up the pathway behind their house. Jovanka looked at her mother and then pointed at the wagon. Her mother nodded.

The Ustashe brigade knocked on the door of Milovan’s house. There were six men, all who looked as if they had been recently on the farm. Milovan invited them in and Petra welcomed them and offered them tea. The leader of the brigade was respectful when he spoke directly to Milovan.

“I am sorry to come like this, but we were told by the priest that you were hiding some people that should not be in this vicinity”. Milovan spoke equally with respect.

“You are just doing your job. I swear to you that only my wife and I are here and you can search anywhere you like to see for yourselves.”

The brigade leader sent three of the men to search whilst he and two other sat down and drank tea. The brigade leader spoke.

“What do you think about what is going on around here?” Milovan leaned forward towards the three men.

“I think it is terrible that neighbors are killing each other. It is not God's way and he does not want innocent people hurt because of politics and hatred.”

The brigade leader paused from drinking his tea. “You have very strong opinions”.

Milovan looked at Petra. “I do, but the truth is the truth and let the consequences be as they may”.

The door opened and the three men stood at the door. The brigade leader went outside and then returned. He shook Milovan's hand and nodded at Petra.

“You are a strong and honest man. I agree with you and your kind of Croatia is what we really need.” In a moment, Milovan and Petra were alone.

Bishop Anton held the letter in his hand. Father Pavich sat opposite him. The Bishop chose not to pass the letter to his colleague and attendant as he had an intuition of something foreboding.

“I have had this letter from a very spiritual young woman. In fact, so spiritual that she is probably one the special ones that we have been hearing about around the country that are hearing things from God.”

He stood up and walked across to an open fire. He threw the letter and the envelope into the flames to be consumed and no longer potential evidence.

She talks about herpPriest as preaching a Gospel of hate in her Church and is saying that God is causing her to pray that he would be corrected in his teaching. She has asked me to do something to help this priest get back on his correct pathway.”

Father Pavich did not respond, but felt a sense of frustration that the letter had been burned. The Bishop continued.

“I have asked some of my colleagues to find out more about this priest. If these things I am hearing are true I will remove him.”

He nodded at Father Pavich and then left. There was a cold atmosphere in the room. Father Pavich waited until he was sure the Bishop had left and then picked up the telephone.

9

The Killing Begins

A group fifteen men and women stood with their hands tied behind their backs. They stood in front of the outside wall of a small factory that made shoes. Despite the knowledge that all would soon die, they were silent.

Father Franjo stood in front of the group. He looked up and down the line. He knew them all. He took a piece of paper out of his jacket pocket. He looked at the names and then one by one made a mark against each of their names.

He turned to a man who stood before three other men each who held rifles. He nodded, then turned his back, and walked away.

Just as he turned the corner to walk out onto the street, he heard the sound of deliberate, single shots. He found himself counting. He paused as he had heard only fourteen shots. He turned as if to go back to investigate when the fifteenth shot was heard. He smiled contently and continued walking.

In the street, he found himself almost bumping into Zoran Horvat.

Zoran looked much more at peace with himself than the days previously. Father Franjo liked having Zoran as a person he could manipulate. Zoran was tall, strong, and masculine in his features. There was something so rewarding in having big men give deference to him.

“Zoran, from where do you come and with what news do you bring?”

Zoran smiled. “You sound like a prophet from the Bible.” Franjo, in turn smiled as well.

“I am, I am and you are my partner” Zoran stopped smiling and spoke.

“We need to speak, but not here, let's go into the Church.” Without speaking, they walked together to the nearby parish Church. As they entered the calm of the sanctuary both men were able to relax.

Father Franjo laughed as he spoke. “I know a very quiet place.” He pointed to the confessional.

The wooden, coffin-like cubicle had a strange smell to it. It was as if the years of confessions being made in the stress and heat of summer had caused the atmosphere of human sweat to cling to the wooden walls.

Zoran spoke. “Do you think we should be rewarded for protecting our dream of a new tomorrow?”

The small priest with a dark and callous heart could not be seen, but his wisdom of assessing the realities of life could almost be felt by Zoran as he sat in the darkness. The Mediator spoke to his confessee.

“You can be rewarded. Legitimately rewarded. What do you have and what do you want?”

Zoran spoke quietly. “I know where the priests are. I will tell you where they are anyway. The reward I will leave to you.”

Father Franjo was silent. Then spoke. “At least give me a sense of what or who you would like.”

The next words spoken were shocking even to the priest. He then replied.

“She is very young, but I do not see why not. She will not be yours willingly, you will have to force her. Her parents do have influence as well. You will have to wait until things become really chaotic.”

Jovanka was dressed in white. She wore a white blouse, a long white skirt, and white ankle socks. She sat by the window in her home looking out towards the forest where Djuro was.

Her emotions were a swirling mass of thoughts and feelings. She had found God or rather God had found her, she was in love, and yet her whole world was tumbling into a chaos of fear and darkness. The killings that had begun in the town were now spreading. Everyone was on edge and staying very close to those they believed they could trust. Even trust though was breaking down as stories had begun to surface of former friends killing each other.

A postman had been killed by his wife’s cousin because they were from a mixed marriage. Terrible things seemed be spreading throughout the area. People were now disappearing and rumors of special camps where people were tortured and killed were circulating everywhere.

She knew that below her in the basement were her Uncle Sinisa and his cousin Father Alex. Her mother and father told her she must not go down stairs to see them, and they must all try to pretend they were not there for a few days.

The door opened abruptly as the bishop was preceded by his assistant, Father Pavich. He walked up to Father Franjo and spoke without smiling.

“Sit down.” He spoke with authority, but neither anxiety nor anything bordering on hysteria. His assistant closed the door and then stood beside the Bishop.

Father Franjo tried to look calm, but his heart was pounding and he began to twitch in the same way that he did when he was angry. The Bishop was a tall man and powerfully built. He walked towards Father Franjo and stood in front of him.

“If the reports of what have come to us are true, then you will be removed from this Parish and you will removed from the Priesthood. You will, almost certainly, be excommunicated from the Church.”

There was a silence that was terrible in its capacity to create curiosity and tension in the room. The bishop spoke again.

“What have you to say for yourself?”

Franjo looked confused. He tried to muster up his inward strength by silently humming in his mind the words to the National Anthem. He breathed deeply then spoke as calmly as he could.

“Your Grace, may I humbly ask what are the allegations made against me?”

The bishop leaned forward. “The allegations are that you are working directly with the Ustashe. That you have been involved in people being executed, and that you have been inciting hatred among your people.”

Franjo continued to breathe deeply and slowly. He thought to himself how disgusting this man was and all he represented. He smiled meekly.

“Your Grace, I am a loyal son of the Church. I am submitted to you and will obey whatever you tell me to do.” He paused.

“Your Grace, whatever lies have been told about me I cannot answer for. I can only speak with a clear conscience that I have done nothing I am not ashamed to declare before any council or any group I must answer to.”

The bishop stood still without responding in his body language. “I have recently discovered that you were moved into my Diocese without my knowledge and that you had been immoral in your former position. If I had known then I would never have agreed for you to come here. You represent everything that I despise in a man in Holy Orders.”

Father Franjo nodded humbly. He thought to himself almost humorously that that they both despised each other with a passion.

“Your Grace, I am sure there has been a mistake. I have been accused falsely, but what should I do now?”

The bishop turned towards the door.

“I will be back tomorrow. Father Pavich will take Mass in your place. You are relieved of your position until I say otherwise. I will decide what to do with you between now and then.” Both men walked to the door and left as abruptly as they entered.

Sinisa sat quietly with his Bible open before him. He knew that he was going through a metamorphosis inwardly. The arrival of his cousin and then the speed at which events were happening had caused him to process ideas in days that some would take a life time to think and pray through.

Alex stood looking out of the small window from the basement. He looked towards his homeland. He turned and looked at his cousin. He was thrilled with what was going on in him spiritually, and yet sad and almost terrified about what was going to happen to him in the coming days. The sun was starting to sink and they had to make some tough decisions in the next few hours. Their lives were now measured in hours rather than years.

Djuro knelt on the soft, mossy earth close to the little stream that was now beginning to become a sacred place of memories. He was at peace. Something in him knew that his life was going to soon come to an end, but it did not seem to move him. He was ready.

He loved Jovanka and he would marry her in his heart and soul if not with his body. She would continue to live for both of them to bring goodness and kindness to both friend and enemy. He heard the crack of stick breaking as if someone had walked on it and he immediately turned around. He could sense someone walking towards him and he could see their shadow even though the light was fading fast. He called out. "Who is there?"

10

Betrayal Unto Death

Zoran sat in his small kitchen eating the food his wife had made him. She had left to go to one of the meetings. He had given up any pretense of being committed to them, but still allowed her to go as a means of potentially getting information from her.

There was a tapping on his back door. He felt afraid and then walked towards the door and called out. There was a whispered response.

“It is Franjo, don't open the door. Come to my place in about half an hour.”

Father Pavich stood in the front of the Church and looked out over the people. He would not, nor did he need to, give any explanation on why he was leading Mass tonight. The congregation sat in obedience and waited for the homily, which was now being used as a platform to present both news and strategy concerning the war. He raised his hands towards heaven and then closed his eyes.

“In these days, there need to be sacrifices. He paused, looked at the people, and continued.

“There are times when even those we love can be mistaken and unknowingly lead astray the Church of God. In the Gospel of John, the Savior says that those branches that do not bare fruit are to be taken from the tree and thrown into the fire. That fire, my beloved, acts not only as judgment but also as purification. That fire purifies the Church and that fire purifies those who are being purged.”

He walked across the front of the Church. He raised his hands again in the air.

“Sometimes purification is the only method that God can use to bring order to his vineyard.”

He stood still, looking around the church, and then stood in silence.

Zoran walked through the door into the room where he sat on previous occasions with his new mentor. Father Franjo looked confused. He pointed to the chair gesturing for Zoran to sit down. He took a bottle of brandy and poured two glasses.

“We cannot get the two priests right now, and you cannot have your little red-headed, treasure plaything.”

Zoran drank and said nothing. Franjo continued.

“Listen there is a problem. It may be a big problem. We may have to change our plans for a bit, and I may have to go away for a while.”

Zoran put his glass on the table. “Why don't you just tell me everything? You know all there is to know about me.”

Franjo smiled. "Well my bishop, may he be cursed, is coming back tomorrow. When he comes, he may remove me from here. If he does, I am going to live in the forest for a while and then join one of the Ustashe militias. I am not going to allow him to humiliate me."

Zoran could see he was losing control of his own plans for both power and lust. "What if the Bishop does not make it back tomorrow?"

Franjo leapt to his feet. "Are you crazy? You cannot kill a bishop!"

Zoran raised his hands in defense. They both drank from their glasses. Franjo reached over to a cushion, which he held to himself like a child in need of security.

Djuro rose to his feet and looked at the man standing in front of him. The man walked towards him and then spoke.

"I am Milovan Horvat. You do not know me, but I am a friend."

Djuro smiled. "Well, even if you were an enemy I would still welcome you."

Milovan smiled, walked forward, and reached out a hand that was taken in a handshake. The night was cool, but not uncomfortable. The sky was touched by the light of the moon, which in turn shed a silvery atmosphere of light in the forest.

Djuro beckoned for his new friend to sit down on a tree stump. "How did you find me?"

"Jovanka told me how to come here. She is well and safe, but cannot leave the house right now as the streets are crazy."

Djuro's heart leapt at the mention of Jovanka's name. Milovan continued. "I am going to bring two people here to stay with you, if you would agree. They are both Priests and need to leave the area. But I need a place to keep them for a few days. I will bring you food for them."

Djuro looked at Milovan and smiled. "Well, I will be leaving in a few days myself. My family is probably in trouble and I need to go to them and comfort them and give them the words of life."

Milovan stood up. "Ok, I will come in the middle of the night with these two men and some food for all of you..."

He turned to leave, just as Djuro spoke. "Why are you doing this?" Milovan looked into the face of this young man who seemed to be spiritually mature beyond his years.

"Because it is the right thing to do." He then walked off into the shadows.

Maria Zrinyi sat alone in her home. Her parents were visiting her auntie in the town. There was a strange sense in the room. It was as if someone was there, but she could not see them. It was an evil presence. She crossed herself and began to pray as her heart was beating.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who was, who is, and who is to come, ages through ages. Amen. I lift before you this nation and pray for

forgiveness for the sins of the people. We have sinned and we continue to sin. Have mercy upon us and deliver us from the spirit of nationalism.”

The sense of evil in the room intensified, and for a moment Maria Zrinyi thought she would run from the room.

She raised her voice. “Father in heaven, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

No sooner had she evoked the name of Jesus then her inner self seemed to translate from fear to anger.

“You spirit of Judas, you are being given freedom to work wickedness, but just as my beloved Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified as a result of evil, it was His death and resurrection that brought defeat to all you powers of evil and brought salvation to the world. So it will be now, as evil is free in the spirit of nationalism that is sweeping this land, it will bring about its own defeat because Jesus is the Lord. Satan may be the Prince in this land, but Jesus is the King.”

Almost in a flash, the sense of evil departed and a warm and gentle peace filled the room.

Suddenly, another sound caused her to jump. It was a knock on the door.

Standing in front of her was Bishop Anton. She reached forward, took his hand, and kissed his ring.

“Stop child, it is not necessary. Can I come in?”

Bishop Anton sat down close to the fire. Marija sat near, but held her head down and would not look at the bishop.

The bishop smiled and spoke gently to her.

“Listen my child, you need not be in awe of me. I am just a man with a big ring and a nice set of robes.”

Marija looked up and spoke very sensitively as she looked him in the eye.

“Your Grace, that is very kind of you to speak gently to me, but you are not just a man. You have been chosen for this very special place by God to serve the Church in ways that others cannot.”

The Bishop looked, smiled, and replied.

“You are a very special one also, and you have been chosen by God.”

“I know and sometimes it is too much for me, but I do sense His presence in my heart when He leads me to pray for our nation.”

The bishop smiled again as he could see that this child was now counselling him.

“And what is God telling you?”

She looked red and blushed; she did not speak. Very gently, he spoke to her again.

“If God has told you something, it would be good to tell your bishop.”

“I do not mind being in trouble myself, but I do not want anyone to hurt my parents because of me.”

“Well, then I promise you I will not tell anyone without your permission.”

Without responding directly to him, Marija spoke very clearly and prophetically.

“There are many who wear the robes of the ordained, and yet they are ordained by each other and not by God. There is corruption deep within the body, and it is a cancer that needs to be cut out. If it is not cut out then the Son of God will remove our candlestick completely. If he does remove the candlestick it will not be failure, but bringing something new and beautiful to birth.”

The room was silent.

The Bishop got off his chair and knelt on the floor close to Marija.

“Daughter, place your hands on my head and pray for me to be filled with the same Holy Spirit that is filling you.”

Zoran walked back into his house after being with Father Franjo. He hated his little cottage. He had inherited it from his father, like everything else he had. He had had his father's tools, his land, and even his religion. He had married a girl that his father had said was a fine, Christian woman. She could bear him no children. She was a modest person both in private as well as in public. The only satisfaction she gave him was when he could hurt her in pursuit of his own pleasure.

He noticed the room was cold. His wife had obviously not come back from the meeting, and yet it was late. He looked around the room and then was startled by a knock on the door. As he opened the door, he saw Milovan standing before him.

“Can I come in Zoran?” “Of course of course, come in and sit down.”

Milovan was a strong man with very powerful arms. He looked like he could have been a wrestler under other circumstances. “I have to talk with you Zoran.”

“I know you probably want to know why I have not been coming to the meetings recently. You know Milovan, I respect you. We grew up together. But I do think you are too extreme in your thinking. I just don't think we should go against what the new government is trying to do.”

Milovan sat through the short speech. “Actually, I am not here about that. You have to follow your own conscience. It is about Blazhenka.”

Zoran looked nervous and then laughed. “What has she been saying? I know probably it was last week when I had too much to drink, you know how it goes.”

Milovan interrupted him. “Zoran, your wife has left you. She cannot take any more of your cruelty and perversion.”

Zoran stood up. “What are you talking about? What has she been saying to you? She is my wife, she will do what I tell her to do.”

Milovan looked on patiently. “Zoran, you need help to get your life straight before God. I am willing to pray with you, work with you. I will do anything so that you two can be reconciled.”

Zoran stood up and walked to the door. He motioned for Milovan to leave. The door closed and Milovan walked away into the night. Zoran poured himself a drink and

thought even more about taking Jovanka even for a night and day as his toy. If it meant killing a Bishop to secure that joy, then so be it.

Two large trucks pulled into the clearing where Milo, Djuro's father, and his brothers and families lived. Bright lights were shone into the small houses as groups of Ustashe militia pushed their way into the homes and dragged out the families.

Children were crying and screaming and mothers wept and cried out loud as all the members of the family were dragged out and forced into the back of the trucks. The women whose wild eyes swirled almost in time to the tossing of their long hair in chaotic and uncontrolled pain, cried out for their husbands. The women and small children were forced into one truck and the men and boys were dragged and thrown into the other.

One of the militia was barking orders to move quickly. He was obviously the leader. He was tall, muscular and his hair was cut unusually short. His eyes were cold and unfeeling as gave directions.

Milo broke free from two men who were dragging him to the truck. He ran to the leader and then shouted.

“There is a mistake, we were given papers to say we could convert. They promised we would be left alone.”

The militia man smashed the butt of his rifle into Milo's face who fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes dropped from the back of wagon to the waiting earth. As he lay there on the ground, he could hear and see in his heart the hatred and prejudice of the centuries. His people had suffered endlessly for being nothing else other than Roma. He could almost hear the screams of Bayash women being raped by their slave masters. He could sense the shame and helplessness of their husbands who had no power to resist. In the seconds he lay on the ground, generations of a peoples pain washed over him.

From deep within came a cry of anger and undiluted fury. He rose to his feet and before the militiaman could react, he extended his knuckles, in what was no so much a fist but a tight wad of clenched fingers, and stabbed out to the militia man in his throat. It was now the militiaman who fell to the ground gasping for air as he clutched his throat.

Milo turned and shouted to his brothers to fight. Almost instantly the four brothers punched and kicked their attackers. The women screamed as they found themselves tumbling out of their truck and began biting and scratching the militiamen's faces.

Milo's wife ran towards her husband but was stopped by the first bullet to be fired. She fell instantly to the ground. For just a few seconds there was silence and then bursts of gunfire. Within a minute or so all the men, women, and children were dead.

The whole atmosphere now changed as the militiamen pulled all the dead and threw them into the largest house. They made jokes about the women as they dragged their bodies across the ground.

A large can of petrol was brought from one of the trucks and the house of the dead was then saturated with petrol. The leader, who had now recovered, walked to the open door and looked inside. He then threw his lighted cigarette onto one of the bodies covered with petrol. There was a pause and then an eruption of flames that spread in seconds and engulfed the whole house.

The men walked slowly back to their trucks, turned and looked one last time and then got back into their vehicles cursing the gypsies and drove away from the small clearing that had been Djuro's home but was now a crematorium.

Back to the Present

The group sat silently around Baka Jovanka. There was just a sense of stunned silence. Without realizing it, they had sat through to early twilight and it was getting cold. Milena looked deeply disturbed and was the first to speak.

“All this happened around here in this area, in these woods.” It was said as a statement rather than a question.

“It feels so safe and serene now, but it should be filled with the ghosts and memories of pain and suffering.”

Stefan was silent. He looked at his great Grandmother. He could not speak. He could though feel. All in a matter of hours he made sense as a person. His identity, which he had always struggled with, had come to a place of rest.

Darko spoke. He had been standing silently with his arm around Maria's shoulder trying to make sense of so much pain and complexity.

“It is getting late and also cold. I think we should stop for now.” Jovanka would have stayed but realized they had all tried to take in so much. Let's meet tomorrow and I will share some more.”

Stefan wanted to protest and almost demand that he know everything now. Before he could speak, something inside of him knew that it was right. He just nodded.

The group packed up the things and began to move away from the forest. Stefan paused as he stood next to his great grandmother. “Baka.” He paused.

Jovanka seemed to read his mind. “Yes, you do.”

He tried to speak but could not. She continued.

“You have his eyes and you have his gentle spirit.”

She walked slowly on with the others and left Stefan alone with Milena. She placed both her arms around him. He wept like a child.

Later that evening, Stefan and Milena sat at the kitchen table at Darko and Maria's flat. The evening had turned to night and they were all emotionally exhausted after the flood of information that had washed over and through them. Darko looked at his stepson and felt so deeply for him. He put his hand on his shoulder.

“What are you feeling?” Stefan smiled.

“It is incredible. She tells the story like it is a novel. I can see all the pictures in my mind. It's just that it also brings back all that we went through in Bosnia. You know, when Jasmina and I escaped.”

Milena held his hand. She wanted to pick up and hold him to herself.

“You know, I saw things that I have never told anyone. Things the Serbs did in the village.”

He began to feel nauseas.

“I never told Jasmina something I saw in her house when she was laying on the ground outside.”

He paused before stood up, went to the refrigerator, and took out a bottle of mineral water. He drank directly from the bottle. He leaned against the wall and looked upwards.

“I don't know if I should tell you. I do not think that Jasmina should know. But I have often wondered if I should tell you and also Ivan.”

Darko stood up and walked over to him and then placed his arms around him. Stefan began to groan. It was not weeping. Weeping would have had a healing quality to it. This was rather a gasping for air and groaning deep inside himself. He thought he would vomit. Milena and Maria both stood and reached out to him and all were locked in a strange embrace as Stefan remembered. He then started to choke as he tried to speak.

“I have got to tell someone.”

Again he made choking, groaning noises. “I saw my mother and father dead in the street. The Serbs killed them because they tried to stop them killing the Muslims. We are Serbs and yet the Serbs killed us. But then...”

He slumped forward into Darko's arms. “But, but I went into Jasmina's house to get a blanket or a shawl to cover her because she was laying with her clothes torn off her. And I saw her mother. Her mother had been crucified and nailed to the kitchen door.”

At this point he fell into Milena's arms and began to weep like a child, which in its turn brought some kind of healing. He then reached out to Maria. “Mama, I don't know who I am. I don't know who to hate and who to love. I want to love everyone, but I feel like I need someone to hate.”

Maria felt the deepest possible emotions of love, protection, and nurture as she held onto her adopted son. There was nothing to be said. The clinging to each other was a metaphor for all their lives at that moment.

The next day they met again in the forest. It was, as the day previous had been, warm yet not uncomfortable. They had brought no picnic, just some bottles of water, as food was the last thing on all their minds. Baka Jovanka looked tired. It was if she knew the time was coming soon when she had permission to die. She knew she had to tell the story before that rest would be granted to her. She looked around the group and smiled at Milena.

“The next part of the story is very hard to tell. I think about it often, but do not easily put those thoughts to words. But I must.”

11

For Such a Time as This

Milovan, Alex, Sinisa, and Blazhenka walked both quietly and carefully through the outer edge of the forest. It had been agreed that Milovan would tell Djuro about his family as soon as the group had been introduced and settled. Everyone felt sadness as well as anxiety and stress, death seemed to be crouching around every corner to steal from the living.

Blazhenka was in a state of what can only be described as terror. At the same time she was experiencing a profound sense of liberation and also guilt. She was in her mid-thirties. Young looking for her age, but with the marks of suffering in both her eyes and forehead. As a teenager, she had often been described as beautiful. The group came to the place where they knew to wait and

then Djuro appeared. He smiled and shook hands with each of the people. They gathered around, unpacked the food supplies and the blankets, and talked about where they would sleep and how they arrange going to the toilet. Milovan then took Djuro by the arm. "I need to talk with you alone."

Djuro's immediate fear was that something had happened to Jovanka. Milovan stopped and spoke very softly and gently.

"I have some terrible news. The homes where your family lived were attacked earlier on last night. Everyone was killed. Your parents, brothers and sisters, and all your relatives. No one was spared."

Djuro stood quietly. Just the sound of the night forest could be heard. He wanted to protest, to say it was a mistake, but quickly pulled his thoughts together.

"I need to be alone, can you please tell the others I will see them in the morning."

He turned and walked quietly down to the river.

Jovanka had heard the news about the village. She had wanted to go to Djuro but it was now too dangerous to leave the house. She lay on the floor silently. In her heart she cried out to God to make time go backwards so that the families could escape.

She thought of Djuro in the forest on his own. She asked God to take his pain and place it on her heart. She felt guilt that she was not more concerned about her parents, who were now in real danger as the papers for conversion were becoming more useless every day.

She realized that she was still a child. She wanted someone to look after her and to protect her. At the same time her mind would race into pictures of walking alone on

the seashore with Djuro and then sitting on the top of a mountain, looking below, and being held in his arms.

She could feel sexual feelings but they seemed to be more expressed in longing and yearning to be close and to be connected in their hearts. In the quietness, God spoke to her heart. It was a very powerful sense of awe that came over her. She could not describe nor did she ever feel the need to justify it. It simply was real.

She became aware that God was telling her that her love for Djuro and his love for her was deep and real, but they would not live a long and happy life together. That they, like many others in these days, were going to suffer loss, but it would not take away from the depth or the longevity of the deep and mysterious love that had grown between them.

Whereas earlier her prayer had been detached from the reality of the situation, she now connected with the full force of life in the present as it was. She whispered her response in prayer.

“Oh Lord, I hear Your voice in my heart. I receive whatever comes as coming from Your hand for a purpose I may never know on earth but will be shown to me when I am finally with you in the new heaven and the new earth.”

In the stillness, a contract was made, and sealed. In these sacred moments Jovanka became a woman.

Father Pavich sat in the small flat that was joined to the back of the Church. He held the telephone in his hand. He spoke without passion or visible feeling.

“I agree. He cannot be allowed to live. There is too much at stake. I understand, it needs to be done. Make it look like a burglary. We will proceed as planned.”

He got up, walked over to his small brown case, and opened it. Inside was a bottle of domestic brandy that he had brought from his father’s farm just a few days before. He loved the farm land, the people, their ways, and their history. There were times when being a priest was harder than he could ever have imagined.

He took the bottle and looked at it. It symbolized something to him. The innocence of the land. He poured its pure cleansing fluid into a glass. He sipped it very slowly, connecting to his childhood, his family, and to the memories that he cherished.

In the forest the two priests and Blazhenka sat quietly, aware that nearby was Djuro who was suffering in ways that they could only imagine.

Alex was tired and asked to be free to sleep. He went to his place, wrapped the blanket around him, and soon was asleep. Sinisa and Blazhenka sat on the ground in silence. Sinisa spoke first.

“I am sorry to hear that you have suffered so much. Milovan did not tell me much, but said it was important for you to be away from your husband for a while.”

Blazhenka blushed, but her embarrassment could not be seen in the darkness. She just uttered two words in answer. “Thank you.”

Sinisa continued to speak.

“You know, a few weeks ago and I would have said that your group and my church were very far apart. Now look at us. Fugitives in a forest under the same sky, looking to the same God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to protect and guide us.”

Blazhenka responded in a single word. “Yes.”

Sinisa realized that she was a broken soul and that his attempts at comfort would not help at this time.

He then had an idea. “Can I read to you something that I just translated from my cousin’s fellowship newspaper?”

Blazhenka nodded in an agreement. He reached into his satchel and brought out the notes that he and Alex had worked on together as the translation from the *Light in the Village* Newspaper.

Very quietly he read from his notes to her about the joy of knowing Jesus at the deepest possible level and being committed to serve Him in love no matter what it cost us. He finished the section and then put the notes away.

“Well, I think I will go and sleep now.”

He stood up and took his blanket over to where Alex was laying.

Just as he started to walk away Blazhenka spoke.

“Thank you, for being kind to me.”

He turned and looked at her. The vulnerability of her words had caught him off guard. In the moonlight her face glowed with a beauty that he had never seen before. The image of her grace and dignity was so strong that it took his breath away. She was utterly beautiful. Her eyes were like a frightened deer, and yet they were deep with feeling and depth. He smiled and slowly walked to where he would sleep.

Blazhenka wrapped her blanket around her and laid her head down, feeling safer in this madness than she had felt for many years.

12

A Very Sacred Hate

Father Franjo sat in his house waiting for the bishop to return. He had decided that he would hear the bishop out and then excuse himself and take just one case and leave. He had been collecting money from the weekly offerings of the Church for some years now and would take that with him. He would go to the forest, live in quietness for a few days, and then go south and west and join one of the Ustashe militias. He could be their chaplain, but he wanted to kill personally and this would give him the opportunity.

His thoughts were broken into as there was a violent knocking on the door. It was the man from the small post office next door.

“Father come quickly, there is an urgent telephone call for you.”

Franjo hurried the few steps out of his house and across the path to the post office where he was given the telephone. As he heard the news, he grew white with fear. He hung up the phone and looked around at the people who were in the post office. He quietly told them the news.

“Someone murdered the bishop, in his bed. They are saying it was the Chetniks.”

He slowly made his way back to his house. He could feel the whole world falling in around him. He would be blamed. Father Pavich knew all the details of his life, and he would give evidence against him. In his mind, he realized it must have been Zoran who would have gone to do this. His obsession with taking that young girl caused him to be possessed by demons and now they would both pay for it.

Zoran stood at the door of Jovanka's house. He knocked on the door. Jovanka's father opened the door carefully. Zoran spoke quietly.

“I need to come and talk with you. You are in danger. I am with the group that has helped the two priests.”

He was ushered into the kitchen where Jovanka and her mother were. Zoran brushed his eyes over Jovanka and for a split second indulged his mind on what would be his in a very short time. He spoke quietly and quickly.

“My friend Milovan sent me here. You are all in danger. I have been told to come and collect Jovanka and take her back to my house to my wife. You must pack just one bag and then leave through the back door and a work horse and cart will come. You must hide in the back and then be taken to a village near here. When it is safe, I will bring Jovanka back to you.”

For a moment everyone in the room was stunned. Jovanka's father spoke first.

“But why can't Jovanka come with us so we can be together?”

Zoran wondered if he could pull off the deception. He used every ounce of energy he had to put his mind and words together in such a way that would deliver to him his reward, his prize.

“The truth is, that it will be dangerous for you and your wife. I cannot say it any other way. But we can at least keep your daughter with us until we know you are safe. My wife is a good woman.”

There was a hesitation and then Jovanka's mother spoke.

“I think we should trust him. Jovanka, go with this good man and do exactly what he tells you to do.”

The words actually caused enormous excitement in Zoran's heart as he heard them. He then spoke as one in authority.

“We must hurry, please.”

Maria Zrinyi walked towards the edge of the town after visiting what was left of the farmers market. Everyone was on edge and many farmers felt uneasy bringing their food into town. She was carrying a cloth bag with some meat and cheese. She loved to walk and look at all the sights of activity around her.

As she walked, she prayed repeatedly. “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.”

She was so different than those of her own age in the town. She wore her traditional costume, whereas girls her own age wore modern European fashions. Her joyful innocence though was something that transcended culture. It was not long after meeting Maria Zrinyi that people would say things like, “She is such a fine, young woman.”

Jovanka and Zoran left the house, through the front door, quietly. They walked out onto the street. Zoran had an overwhelming urge to hold Jovanka's hand. They walked towards the edge of the town, not speaking to each other as they walked.

Zoran knew if he could just get round this next corner and onto the small path that led out to his small farm then he would have succeeded.

As they walked, Maria Zrinyi turned the corner and passed them. As the two girls from different culture passed one another they instinctively smiled at each other. Their eyes met, they did not speak, but smiled and continued walking.

Suddenly, turning from that same corner was Milovan. The confrontation was like two powerful, spiritual forces smashing into each other. Milovan spoke first.

“Zoran, what are you doing?”

Zoran immediately swung his fist at Milovan as he shouted out.

“I will have her and no one will stop me.”

Milovan grabbed him around his neck and wrestled him to the ground. He shouted to Jovanka.

“Run to the special place where you know you will be safe.”

She ran off away from the town towards the forest area. As the two men wrestled, Zoran broke free and started to run towards his house.

Milovan quickly walked into the town and to Jovanka's house. He went around the back of the house and let himself in the back door by forcing it. He called out to Jovanka's parents. They rushed down the stairs and into the room.

“You must listen, that man who was just here is a traitor. You must leave immediately with me and cross the fields. It is the only way to escape. From my house, you will have to leave immediately because the Ustashe now will be all over looking for you.”

Father Franjo sat alone in his house. He would stand up from time to time and look at himself in the mirror. He would practice many times looking cold and powerful. He found himself trying to prepare for the interrogation. He could hear his words in his head.

“As I have told you a hundred times before, I had nothing to do with this. I am a man of God”

His self-audition was broken into by a knocking on the door. He panicked then got himself under control. He opened the door and it was Zoran.

Father Franjo let him in and motioned for him to be seated. Zoran was agitated. A sudden burst of thought came to Franjo's mind. He walked into his kitchen to bring two glasses. He poured the brandy into the glasses in the kitchen then reached to the top of the cupboard and took down a small bottle just the size of a man's little finger. He poured all of the contents into the drink. He walked into the room and handed the glass to Zoran who was seated. Franjo smiled.

He stood up and spoke to his friend. “Look, let us focus our thinking in these troubled days. Za Dom Spremni.”

He paused and drank the whole glass in one shot. Zoran also stood, drank the glass in the same manner, then sat down.

“I think I have done something stupid.” Franjo nodded.

“I know, but your motive was pure.”

“If my wife had given me what she was supposed to then none of this would have happened.”

Franjo looked on and then spoke.

“Did you use a knife or gun?”

Zoran looked confused. “I did not need a weapon.”

Franjo's eyes widened. “You mean you killed him with your hands?”

“Killed who?”

“The bishop of course.”

“I did not kill the Bishop, is he dead?”

At about the time that he finished his question, Zoran began to look sleepy and drowsy. Then he simply dropped to the floor.

Franjo walked to the kitchen and poured himself another drink. He then ran next door and managed to create within himself the sense of panic. He shouted into the room,

“Quick we need to get Zoran to the Hospital. He just suddenly clutched his chest and then fell to the ground.”

Father Franjo walked into his Church wearing his robes. Standing in the front of the Church was Father Pavich. The Church as usual was full. The candles gave their flickering as an offering to set the atmosphere for the service. Father Franjo sat in the front of the Church to one side, whilst Father Horvat stood to lead the mass. The time came for the homily. Father Pavich stood at the center of the Church. He looked silently at the congregation and then at Father Franjo.

“Our bishop was brutally murdered in the early hours of this morning. We think he was killed by Serb Chetniks. I say we think because in truth we do not actually know. I have been given the task of being the interim bishop until a full replacement is made. I will, in that position, share with you the reason why I am in this Church, in this parish, and with your priest and pastor. Our beloved bishop and I came here because your priest has been recognized as a holy man of God. He is a warrior for righteousness. His love of God, country, and family are seen in all his ways and in all his words. If my bishop were here today, he would have said to you, his congregation, that these are difficult times. Times that are very troubled and we need men in the Church who will rise to the challenge to lead communities such as yours against all that is perverted and all that is evil. Our beloved leader has spoken much in recent days about the beauty and greatness of the Croatian spirit. It is that spirit, in submission to the spirit of the God, who passed judgment on the Philistines that will prevail in this holy war. Do not, do not, become slack. Do not think that there are easy days ahead. We must stamp out every soul whose fathers murdered the savior; we must expunge ourselves of every soul who would worship Saint Sava, who was the very anti-Christ, and we must tread under foot like poisonous snakes the fortune telling scum who pollute our rivers, our towns, our villages, and our very souls. Beloved, the time has come to fight with holy weapons in this holy war.”

The Church was silent but the pulse of the faithful was beating as one. Then from where Father Franjo was seated came the soft, melodic sounds of the anthem of worship of the nation. It then spread like a wave of warmth over the Church until it filled every part of its sacred space.

After just a short while, the Church was empty with the exception of Pavich and Franjo. Pavich spoke quietly.

“Sometimes, the sacrifices we have to make involve our own souls.” He smiled, turned, and nodded at the altar and then left the building.

Franjo stood alone in the Church building. He began to speak out loud with the sound of his voice echoing in the Church.

“Who says you are not on our side? You are the God of judgment, and it is now coming with power and all hell is coming with it.”

13

The Choice

Jovanka sat next to Djuro on a fallen tree in the forest. They had both grown so much older in the last days. The peace of this sanctuary still caused both of them to think that it was impossible, just a few kilometers away, people were killing each other.

Jovanka rested her head on Djuro's shoulder. He gently rubbed his chin on her head and spoke.

“God spoke to me last night very deeply as I was mourning my family.”

She held his hand tightly as he continued.

“I must go the people who killed my family and then forgive them in the name of Jesus. I have to do it because it is right but I must do it bring the spiritual power of love into the midst of all this evil.”

Jovanka began to weep gently. “Djuro, I do not want to do anything that would stand in your way. But couldn't we just run away from all this and start a life together somewhere else and bring up a family and have love and joy invested into their lives?”

It was now Djuro's turn to cry. He spoke through his crying.

“I did not know it was even possible to love like I love you. I yearn for you from my soul in a way that I could never have dreamed possible. I want to love you and have children with you and build a better world. But God has shown me that I must do this.”

Jovanka remembered her own contract with God just that last night as she lay on the floor. She wanted to fight it but knew that she could not. She sat silently in his arms. The stillness was broken as Milovan appeared in the forest.

Everyone stood up and gathered around him. He lifted his hand towards Jovanka.

“Your parents are safe but we had to move them away immediately. They have gone into Hungary. It is troubled there but not like this.”

He paused then continued. “The problem is, the route we used has now been discovered. We will not be able to take you there for some time. I have a letter from your parents making your Uncle Sinisa your guardian until you are reunited.”

The group was, by now, so used to hearing shocking information that nothing seemed to affect them in the way that it would have done under normal circumstances. Milovan spoke again.

“Blazhenka can we walk and talk together for a little bit.”

As they walked away, Sinisa found himself wanting go with them. Something inside of him felt protective towards this beautiful and yet so vulnerable woman.

Milovan stopped as soon as he was away from the group and looked as kindly as he could at her.

“Blazhenka, Zoran had a heart attack today and died.”

She looked confused and just stared at him. She seemed vacant.

“Just like his father did at about this same age.”

“I know. I know it is hard for you now, all your feelings will be running around.”

She started to cry. “Maybe if I had stayed this would not have happened. Maybe if I had been a better wife, he would have loved me. Maybe it is because I am bad.”

Milovan felt lost. He wished his wife were here so she could comfort her. He did not know how to put his arm around her shoulder and speak words of grace. He just did whatever was needed in trying to make sense of all this madness.

He grabbed her arm a little too tightly then released his grip. “Sorry, I did not mean to frighten you. You and I both know that you are not bad. For whatever reason Blazhenka, Zoran was a bad man, please don't pretend otherwise. I am not going to let you become the bad person in all this. The truth is, and I hate to say this, God has delivered you from a very bad man.”

She looked stunned. He continued.

“I am sorry, I should not have said that. Look, come back with me and stay with us as long as you want. We do not know how long our home will be safe as I am now so involved with all these people who are hiding.”

They walked back together towards the group and Milovan told the others what had happened. Everyone felt uncomfortable. Milovan continued to speak.

“I will take Blazhenka back with me and...”

“Milovan, let me say something.” Blazhenka was assertive.

“Milovan, I want to stay here and be with this group. Jovanka will need another woman to be with her as well. I want to stay here.”

She faltered in her speech.

“Please, please let me stay here.” For some reason, Sinisa wanted to shout out that of course she could stay but restrained himself.

Milovan spoke gently.

“It is ok, you can stay here. I will come back tomorrow night with food and information.”

He looked at the group and smiled.

“Let me pray with you.” Just the words seemed to bring a sense of peace over the group.

14

The Dance

Father Franjo sat alone in his house. Tonight the music of Wagner seemed to have come from heaven itself. The sense of relief that filled his heart was only comparable to the sense of excitement he felt about the future. He had the news that the Serbs had mastered a whole village of Croats near Djakovo. It had caused him to experience a deep sense of justification for what he had done, was doing, and would soon do. He had also heard the news that now the Serbs and the Romanians were killing Jews.

The Judgment that these Christ killers deserved was coming upon them from all corners. Nothing could stop the final judgment coming upon them. He basked in the thought of a new Croatia where there were no Jews, no Serbs, and no Gypsies. He drank his brandy slowly with a deep sense of satisfaction.

The forest was dark and everyone was sleeping. Djuro crept out of the wooded area and into the large track of fields that surrounded the town. He moved very quietly and with great caution. He made his way through field after field until he came to the area behind Jovanka's house. The moon was covered by the clouds, which made everywhere seem darker than it actually was. He crouched down, looking towards the house. There was only stillness. He crept quietly and slowly and then quickly climbed over the wall that surrounded the property. There was not even the sound of dogs barking or growling. The back door to the house was closed but he pushed until, with a sudden jerk, the door released itself in his hands. He could physically feel the tension as he crept into the house. Obviously no one had realized all the pieces of the puzzle and there was no suspicion so far.

He crept around the house looking in each of the rooms. Almost instinctively, he knew he was in Jovanka's room when he entered. He saw what he had come for. Her violin sat on a small table close to the window. He took it carefully and was so focused that he did not look or try to bring anything else. Once again, he crossed the threshold of the back door but this time to leave.

He gently closed the door until it clicked, giving him both a nervous jolt and a sense of relief. He retraced his steps back through the fields. He was tempted to move quickly but resisted, and slowly with caution made his way back to the forest. As he entered behind the curtain of the trees, he had a real sense of coming home.

He mourned his family. He wanted to go back to the clearing where they lived, but in his heart he knew now what he must do and how he must leave the one he loved so dearly.

He crept back to his place of sleep, placed the violin next to him, wrapped his blanket around him, and very quickly was asleep.

Milovan lay in his bed. Petra was next to him with her head resting on his chest. Neither of them could sleep. Milovan looked up at the ceiling. He had so wanted to be a quiet man. They, like Zoran and Blazhenka, had been unable to have children and it caused an ache in both their hearts. He had dreamed of a small, but busy farm where his sons and daughters would grow up on the land, loving the land, and becoming a new generation of Christians. Now, it all seemed to be falling from his grasp. Petra spoke first.

“You are a good man. A man of honor, and I love you tonight as much as I have ever loved you in my life.”

He wrapped his arm around her and held her tightly.

“None of this is what I thought it would be. I just wanted to farm, have a family, and walk with God.”

Petra kissed the hand that held her.

“Well, you are walking with God and you are doing what is right. I feel so deeply for Blazhenka as she has no one to love and be loved by.”

Sinisa stirred before the sun had come up. He looked over to where Blazhenka and Jovanka slept and he could see Jovanka's red hair laying on a pillow made from clothes and a coat. He looked around and saw Blazhenka standing alone off in the distance. He quietly stood up and walked over to where she was.

“Good morning.” She turned and looked at him, smiling.

“I did not get a chance to talk with you last night, but I am so sorry to hear about your husband.”

She again smiled at him and nodded in gratitude.

“What will you do now?”

She turned towards him and seemed more confident than the day before.

“Well, I was wondering if you and I could talk about what we should do to help Jovanka until she finds her parents.”

Sinisa looked at this beautiful woman and wanted to propose to her right there and then. Forget about protocol, religion, ethnicity, or that fact her husband only died the day before. He saw in her what he had dreamed of since he was a young man. He spoke like men often do in these situation, partly from hypocrisy, partly fear, and partly not wanting to harm someone so tender who had gone through so much.

“I am her uncle and now guardian.”

He laughed in a strange way that people do when they live in the moment where death could come at any time.

“To be honest, I thought I was going to be a hero and go to my people in their time of need to minister to them. But now with and Jovanka and you...”

He caught himself and blushed.

“I mean. With Jovanka and your willingness to help, I am not sure what to do.” Blazhenka looked deep into his eyes.

“Would you pray for us, here and now, that we would know God's will.”

Sinisa smiled and answered. “Of course.”

It suddenly occurred to him that he had never prayed extemporarily in front of anyone in his life. Until recently he had only ever prayed set prayers in front of an icon. He realized that now his heart was full of prayer and it was the most natural thing to do.

“Holy Jesus, son of God we need you, we need your help, and we need your power to make the right decision. And, and...Father I pray for this dear woman, dear Blazhenka, may you shine your love in her heart? May you bring peace to her soul? May you bring joy where there has only been sorrow, may you give her love where there has only been fear.”

He had shocked himself. He had never called God, Father before in his life, addressing Him directly in that way. He was even more shocked to discover that both his arms were around Blazhenka, and she was nestled with her eyes closed in his arms.

Jovanka woke very slowly and gently and found Djuro sitting next to her. She became aware that he was stroking her hair very softly. She smiled at him, still laying still. He smiled at her and then spoke gently.

“I want you to come with me a little deeper into the forest.” It was then that she saw he had her violin.

“How did you? Where did it? I can't believe it.”

He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead.

“Come with me.” They walked quietly, hand in hand, deeper into the forest. It was as if Djuro knew exactly where he was taking her. There was gentle mist as the heat of the sun began to evaporate the dew that had fallen during the night.

They stopped and Djuro took off his boots. His bare feet looked so strong and handsome, she thought to herself as she looked.

“I must dance. As I do, I want you to play the violin. This is how we will become married in our souls.”

She looked on as he slowly began to move his arms and in slow motion moved his legs in time to what was going on inside his head.

Jovanka laughed and raised her hand.

“Stop, I am sorry, but I have to tune this first.”

Djuro laughed and stood in his bare feet, relaying the joy and humor of the moment not being as he had thought it would be.

Jovanka smiled and then began to play deeply in a minor key. Now Djuro began to move again. He waved his arms slowly like trees flowing in the wind and then turned very slowly with one leg swiveling around behind him. He cast his head back and closed his eyes. Jovanka's eyes were also closed and she found herself pouring her soul into music that she had never learned before this moment. She found herself swaying to the music and then would open her eyes to see Djuro dancing slowly but deliberately. How

long she played and he danced neither of them knew, but there came a point when almost together they simply stopped.

Both of them were crying. She lay her violin down on its case and walked towards him. Then in deep embrace, they held each other and wept with joy, pain, and love. They were living in the moment, nothing else, and God smiled upon them.

Father Alex asked everyone to come to him. They all sat down together and he spoke. "I have been deep in prayer over these last few days. In fact, the reason I have been so quiet is I have been wrestling in my own heart over some issues. At first I tried to fight it, but then God gave me peace. I am willing to follow where I believe He is leading me."

He turned to Sinisa. "Sinisa, I believe that it is God's will that you take Jovanka and Blazhenka away from here. Probably the best place to go is into Bosnia, but near to Serbia. There are some places where you can be safe. Djuro you have said that you must go to the people who killed your family to reach out to them in forgiveness. I want to ask you not to do this, but to go with Sinisa, Blazhenka, and Jovanka and start a new life together there."

Jovanka thought she was going to pass out, but then was swept back into the pain of the moment as Father Alex continued.

"But I have prayed, and I believe you must follow your calling and go to those who killed your family. I have made the decision that, as Sinisa cannot leave Jovanka as he is her guardian, I will take his place and go and search for our people. I will seek to bring comfort and trust to their lives. I know it will probably mean I will die, but I have made my decision."

In the quietness no one tried to argue. The authority with which he spoke was clear to all and even Jovanka found herself in agreement.

She suddenly spoke out as she turned to Sinisa. "Father, I want to be married to Djuro, even if it is for one night. I want to pray and believe that God will give us a child and if Djuro does not come back then I will at least have..."

She broke down and started to weep as Djuro placed his arms around her. Once more, stillness fell upon the group. How long all stood in silence is difficult to know.

Sinisa was the first to break the silence. "I think your parents would not have agreed under normal circumstances. But these are not normal circumstances. It is as if we are all living our life in days, which would normally take years. I have your parents' letter giving me authority and..."

He smiled as he spoke, "I have my priest's official marriage registration pad with me and I have a camera...."

15

One Flesh

Blazhenka and Jovanka walked through the forest area collecting wild flowers to make into a bouquet. They picked wild berries to make some lip stick and then collected large amounts of moss and pine needles to create a soft, wedding night bed. Blazhenka wove together some branches to make a small rack for them both to place their clothes. If the knowledge that they would be separated as soon as they were married was not a ubiquitous reality the preparations would have been like heaven itself.

Blazhenka was going through her own transformation as they worked together and she found herself talking rapidly and freely. The fact that they were surrounded by death and destruction intensified the state of innocence they were experiencing in the present. Blazhenka suddenly stopped and burst into tears. Jovanka turned towards her.

“What is wrong?”

“It is ok, I just thought of something.”

“Is it about your husband?”

“No, I just realized something wonderful and it made me cry. I just realized that that the past is covered by the forgiveness of Jesus, and the future as uncertain as it is, is in God's hands so we can experience wonder and joy now in the present.” The young women looked at each and smiled through their tears.

The three men stood together waiting as Blazhenka and Jovanka came towards them. Jovanka had a small coronet made of wild flowers on her head. She held in her hand a bouquet of delicate wild flowers. Her lips were a rich red color made possible by the wild berries they had picked. Her long red hair hung over shoulders. Her green sweater was open at the front and underneath she was wearing a white blouse. Her green eyes glistened as she looked at Djuro. Father Alex stood next to Djuro holding in his hand the two, small wooden rings that Djuro had carved from hard wood that he had found in the forest. Father Sinisa stood in front of them wearing his normal clothes and just a priestly scarf/shawl that he had brought with him. His small case lay beside him. On the case was a piece of bread left from the food Milovan had brought and a small metal drinking mug. In the mug was a mixture of water from the stream and some red berries. Jovanka stood next to Djuro and they looked deeply into each other's eyes.

Father Sinisa spoke as he looked around the group. “Friends, we are here today in the presence of God to be witnesses to the joining together in Holy union of Djuro and Jovanka. Today is a day of joy. The past has been cleansed through the Blood of Jesus Christ. The future is in the hands of God who rules heaven and earth. As a result, we are safe and secure in the mercy, love, and grace of God in the present.”

As he said the words both Jovanka and Blazhenka looked at each other and made an audible gasp.

He continued.

“Djuro say these words after me. I Djuro, take you, Jovanka, to be my wife before God, before God's Church, and before the laws of this land. To be committed to you from this day onward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to care for you, until we are separated at death, according to God's Holy Word.”

Djuro looked deeply into her eyes as he repeated the lines a phrase at a time. Jovanka, say these words after me.

“I Jovanka, take you, Djuro, to be my husband before God, before God's Church, and before the laws of this land. To be committed to you from this day onward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to care for you, until we are separated at death, according to God's Holy Word.” Sinisa smiled and could not stop himself from placing his hands on both their heads. Father Alex placed the two wooden rings on Djuro's Bible. One after the other. they said the words of commitment as they placed the rings on each of their fingers.

“With this ring, I commit myself to you. With my body, I will serve you in kindness and gentleness, and everything I own now belongs to you and I together: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

The sounds of the birds and other creatures of the forest gave the musical backdrop to the ceremony. The most hardened cynic would have to admit that what had just taken place was as authentic as anything that could have been created inside a formal church or civil building.

Father Sinisa then took the cup and dipped a piece of bread into the mixture and evoked the ancient words of mystery concerning the body and blood of Christ. He gave a piece to each of them there and then took a piece himself.

“This fruit of the vine represents the blood of Christ, our redeemer, who is the Lamb of God. This bread represents the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. His body and His blood are given as His way of bringing our hearts and minds through our bodies to a deep remembrance of what has been provided for us for our Salvation. As you Djuro, and you Jovanka, join your bodies together in the spirit of purity this day, the real presence of Jesus is here.”

The sense of the sacred was overwhelming. Djuro and Jovanka stood together as a photograph was taken. Then in silence with little emotion, Djuro and Jovanka left the small group and walked away to their bridal chamber that had been prepared in the soft moss and fragrant mists of the forest.

Father Alex, Sinisa, and Blazhenka sat alone together in the quiet of the day. Alex wanted to know as much as possible about the communities and the families he must now try and visit. They talked about the various spiritual needs of the people and then practical ones like making a set for giving communion in people's homes. Alex had

written a long letter to his parents back in Romania, which he passed to Sinisa. They all knew that this was going to be the last time they would see each other again. Sinisa paused and then spoke with hesitation.

“This is very hard to say this but....” He paused, stood up, and looked to the sky.

“Well, Blazhenka do you think we should be married, only on paper that is, not as physical man and wife, so that as we travel with Jovanka there would be more....”

Blazhenka, who could hardly be recognized as the inward confused woman of just a few days ago, looked at this man she had come to love in a strange rapid intensity. “I don’t think so.”

Sinisa stuttered and then stammered his response. “I understand, forgive me for bringing it up. It is just....”

Blazhenka smiled and then spoke softly.

“I disagree that it should be a marriage just on paper.”

Sinisa thought he would fall over.

“Oh dear, do you really mean that.”

She just smiled at him. He laughed, Alex laughed, and Sinisa embraced his bride-to-be. And so there in the forest another wedding took place between a Serbian Orthodox Priest and a Croatian Protestant peasant. Heaven smiled.

16

THE SON OF GOD STANDING

Maria Zrinyi had become used to her tears. She was a child and yet she bore the nation she barely knew upon her soul. Once more she was in the field behind her family home working in the soil. She had now entered into a new level of love with her heavenly Father. She stopped and looked toward the town.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who was and is to come, ages through ages. Amen. I lift before you this nation and pray for forgiveness for the sins of the people. We have sinned and we continue to sin. Have mercy upon us and deliver us from the spirit of nationalism.”

The tears came again and she began to prophecy once more.

“Beneath your throne Oh God, are the martyrs of history and as new martyrs enter your presence today may they know joy unspeakable. I pray my bishop will rest in joy in your presence.”

She had given up trying to understand what was happening when she prayed like this, but she knew instinctively and deeply within herself that something was happening in the heavenly places.

Father Alex and Djuro walked out from the forest onto the small path that led to the town. The sun was coming up now and the town and the farms in the area began to come alive with the activities of life that not even war and anarchy could interrupt. They came to the main path that led in one direction to the town and the other deep into the countryside made of small hamlets and scattered farms. They both knew it was time to go in their separate directions. They stood for a moment and shook hands. Alex spoke first.

“God will go with you and the name of Christ will always be close to you.”

“And to you Father, may the richness of the forest that we have just been in comfort you as a picture of heaven and may the abiding life of the son of God be your companion in these next hard days.”

Alex reached out and embraced Djuro. Djuro turned to leave then stopped.

“I need to share something with you before I go.”

Alex smiled. How he loved this spiritually deep and wise young man.

Djuro continued.

“I want to share you with something that has been growing in my heart for some time. In these times, I believe we should be leading each other and all those we love to seek more of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is the Fruit of the Spirit that cannot be argued against, controlled or destroyed: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, self-control and gentleness. If our people can know these fruits, nothing else matters.”

Alex smiled that such beauty should come from a heart so young. Djuro continued.

“I think this time spent in the woods has shown me that when we are in the midst of war the things that divide those who love the name of Christ are far less important than being joined in the Spirit to bring the Fruit of the Spirit to every corner of the world.”

Alex looked on at the deep wells that were wrapped up in this young man. He reached out and hugged him.

“I love you, Djuro.”

Then they left and walked on the two pathways leading away from each other. In reality, the paths were leading them to meet again very soon in a new place, under the throne with the martyrs of history, where all tears were gone and only love and peace endure.

The Ustashe headquarters was in a small building on the edge of town. Trucks and cars were parked haphazardly outside the building that seemed to be a chaotic meeting place of all kinds of people. Some were in uniform some were wearing peasant clothing.

Djuro walked up to a group of men who were standing together drinking from bottles of beer as their breakfast.

Djuro addressed the group. “I am looking for the men who were responsible for killing the Roma families the other night.”

The group of men were astonished and almost taken aback. Their first reaction was to look around to see if Djuro was alone. Before anyone could answer, a man walked from the building towards the group.

“What is going on? Who is this?”

Djuro replied before anyone could answer.

“I am the son of the Roma family that were killed the other night, and I want to meet those who were responsible.”

The man who had just come looked at Djuro with contempt and hatred. “I am the man that led the group. Your family did not die well. They squealed like pigs being slaughtered. And one of the women well, actually she looked just like you, must have been your mother.”

Djuro did not react but spoke softly. “There is no need to speak like that.”

The man reacted by pulling his pistol and pointing at Djuro's head. “You are scum and you are going to die, just like they did, screaming for mercy.”

Djuro was unmoved and showed no sign of fear or anger, which in return created both in those who looked on.

The sun shone down upon Djuro's olive oil, swept back hair. He was clean shaven and the strength of character that seemed to exude from him added to the power of his spoken words.

He crossed himself three times in the Orthodox manner and looked towards heaven as he spoke.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who was and is to come, ages through ages. Amen. I declare before you God of heaven, I declare before the on-looking world of angels and demons, and I declare before the communion, the saints, and I declare before these men that my heart is filled with pain but love, anger but forgiveness."

He turned towards the men who were stunned into silence.

"I came here to say something to you. I have come here to tell you in the name of Jesus Christ, I forgive you for what you have done, and I have asked God to not hold you accountable for my sake."

The man holding the gun did not know what to do. There was an almost radiant look on Djuro's face. He looked around at the men who were equally confused. Then he raised his hand and hit Djuro on the head with his pistol. Djuro fell to the ground holding his bleeding head. He tried to stand up but had no strength. Then from around the corner appeared Father Franjo.

He spoke. "What is going on here, who is this?"

"This Gypsy dog came here to forgive us of our sins." Father Franjo put his hand on the man's shoulder and they walked a few steps away, talking to each other. Then they turned and walked back to Djuro who was in a kneeling position.

Then in an action that touched heaven and hell simultaneously, Father Franjo took the pistol and fired once into the back of Djuro's head who fell immediately lifeless to the ground.

Back to the Present

Baka Jovanka did not cry. What they had experienced was beyond tears. She just sat still looking at her great grandson. It was as if her time on earth was now complete and her final duty had been accomplished. Stefan found himself shaking. He too, could not cry. Milena sat next to him, gently stroking his head. Darko and Maria held hands looking silently at the ground. Nobody wanted to speak and none of the group felt the necessity to talk. Milena was the first to speak.

"Baka, there is something more that you are not telling us."

She paused and looked deeply at the old woman.

"All through the time we have been here, you keeping turning and looking at these two trees that are intertwined with each other."

Everyone turned and looked at the two oak trees they were seated close to. They were about 10 metres high and were intertwined as if they had grown together over their total life span.

Baka Jovanka looked deeply into Milena's eyes. She did not smile nor cry, but looked at her with a deep love and compassion. She then spoke softly. Her voice was so softly spoken that it was difficult for her words to be heard.

“You are right, bless you for your sensitivity, there is more and yes it does relate to these precious, so precious, so very precious trees.”

Back to 1941

Jovanka, her Uncle Sinisa, and Blazhenka sat quietly in the forest. They sat in the small clearing that until tonight had been the meeting place of so much joy. They had decided that, after Alex and Djuro left, they would wait until the very early morning and then make their way south towards the Bosnian and Serbian borders and then head East to Romania.

The silence of their time was broken as Milovan and Petra appeared almost out of the darkness into their midst.

Petra came to Blazhenka and they both wept as they held each other in their arms. Milovan walked to Sinisa and whispered quietly in his ear. Sinisa nodded and looked towards Jovanka.

Milovan spoke.

“Jovanka, there is no easy way to say this, but your husband Djuro was killed today as he extended forgiveness to the men who killed his family.”

Jovanka looked at him and the others she spoke in a whisper.

“It is ok for you to tell me. I know that he was killed. I felt it in my spirit this morning. God has been with me.”

Her composure for one so young was deeply moving to all of them. Then, breaking through her calmness, she began to cry and the edge in her voice turned to a sense of pleading.

“But where is his body. I want him. I want my husband to be buried in a consecrated grave, and I want to wash his body in preparation.”

She then fell to her knees and wept uncontrollably. Instinctively, Petra moved towards her to nurture and comfort her, but Blazhenka held her hand to wait, as she herself went and knelt next to her and placed her arms around this broken woman who just a few months ago had been a child. For a few timeless moments all was still in the forest. It seemed as if even the birds and wildlife were silent in respect.

Milovan came and knelt down close to them both.

“We have brought Djuro's body here to you for you to prepare and bury.”

For some time, the atmosphere was filled with a strange intermingling of sorrow and joy.

Sinisa took a small, metal container from his bag in which his sacred robes and spiritual symbols were neatly packed. He opened the container and dipped his fingers into the

water. He then walked in a small square and sprinkled the water on the ground, speaking as he walked.

“When the incarnate Son Of God went down to the waters of the River Jordan to be baptized, he sanctified all water for all time. It is in His name that I sprinkle this water and claim in His name the authority to declare this small patch of earth a place of sacred burial. Here, the remains of our beloved brother, Djuro, are to be placed until the great day of resurrection when he with us shall rise again to live for all eternity in the new earth that his righteousness and sacrifice are helping to prepare.”

Milovan began to dig with a shovel he had brought with him. The moon seemed to bathe that whole plot in a silver, iridescent light.

Djuro's body had been wrapped in a white sheet and now lay by the stream that he had washed Jovanka's feet as a picture of God's cleansing. She opened the sheet and looked at her husband's body. The bullet had entered the top of neck and had come out through his chest. His head and face were unscathed. Firstly, she gently took his hand and removed the wooden wedding ring. She reached around her neck and unclasped the cross and chain she was wearing and gently slipped the ring on and then clasped them again around her neck.

She took off her green sweater that she had been married in just a few hours before and then removed her white blouse and put her green sweater back on. She then immersed the blouse in the stream. Then very gently she washed his body. Gently weeping as she washed him, her tears fell upon his face. Quietly, she spoke to him.

“My love, my love, my love. I know right now you are in a place of Glory. Just as we made love in this forest and we could not tell who was kissing who because we were one, then I know right now you are one with our heavenly Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I will never love another man. I can never love another man. No other man will hear the words of love and commitment that I have made to you. God has met me in a dream and has told me your seed is within me, and I am with your child.” She gently wiped his face as she spoke.

“You are my king, you are my priest, and you are my prophet. You have shown me God in showing me who Jesus is.”

She slowly undid his shirt that was stained with blood from the fatal wound. She tenderly removed the cloth as if he were alive as she washed the blood from his broken chest.

“I refuse, my love, I refuse to mourn your noble death as if it were a failure. It is Christ's victory of bringing forgiveness where hate and this wretched worship of the idol of the nation has ruled. But oh, how I mourn that your life will not touch others in the way it has touched me.”

Milovan and Petra carried Djuro's body to the burial spot as Jovanka walked slowly with them. Djuro was again covered in the sheet. They gently placed his body beside the grave that had been dug.

Jovanka asked that they wait just a little longer, she left them and went the short distance to where she and Djuro had joined their bodies and spirits in marriage.

She took off her beret and began to pick acorns that lay on the ground, when she returned her beret was full. She went over to the grave side and threw some of the acorns into the grave. Djuro's body was placed into the ground, and she placed the rest of the acorns upon his shrouded, covered body. Then silently she took off her shoes and socks and stood looking down into the grave.

Father Sinisa spoke the words of the committal of the body to the earth in the hope of the resurrection, and Milovan shoveled the earth into the grave. They covered the ground with stones that they brought from the stream. Jovanka looked around the group and then spoke through her gentle weeping.

“I thank you, all of you, so much, but now I want to be alone at my husband’s grave.”

Standing barefoot by the grave, Jovanka lifted her arms and reached towards the sky. Then very gently she moved her body in a slow and gentle dance. She turned her hands and her body in a flowing action so like how she had first seen Djuro dance. As she slowly moved, very gently she began to sing or rather chant.

“I believe, in one God, Father Almighty.” Her voice began to break, but she continued her slow, flowing movements.

“Maker of heaven and earth.”

She knelt on the ground and placed her hands in the earth that covered her husband’s body. “Maker of heaven and *earth* .” She emphasized the word earth as she sang.

Then standing and raising her hands towards heaven she lifted her voice.

“And in Jesus Christ, His only begotten son, our Lord.”

Once again, she knelt beside the grave.

“Oh God in heaven, this forest is my home, and I know I must leave it. I commend this grave to you and the seeds of the trees to care for this grave, as I cannot come though I otherwise would. I am, and always will be though, a daughter of this forest wherever I may go.”

Back to the Present.

Milena and Stefan stood holding hands together in front of the two intertwined trees. Slowly, and as Baka Jovanka was using the last of her energy on earth, she walked towards them and held both their hands. She brought them back to where they were sitting.

Baka Jovanka took the bag that was behind her. She spoke as she reached inside and pulled out a small, leather bound notebook.

“This, Stefan is your great grandfather’s last will and testament. It is a collection of all the joys he found and collected in nature. The forest, the mountains, the streams ... all of it.”

She handed it to him, and he held it as if it were both sacred and an object of inestimable value. She spoke again.

“If you turn to the last page, you will see something that was written for you. Maybe you could read it to us?”

Stefan very carefully turned to the end of the book and read the words written on the morning after Djuro’s wedding night.

“Today I walk into the unknown. I must go because I have been commanded to go and declare forgiveness to those who have destroyed my family. I write these final words to someone unknown to me but who is known to my heavenly father. I have left my seed in the womb of my beloved wife, and if God chooses, that seed will grow to bring new life. It is to that life I write these words. I write to you as my son or my daughter and to your offspring. I ask you to read these words to your children as well. Hatred only destroys it never builds. Love always brings freedom and life. In forgiveness there is strength; in hatred and un-forgiveness there is only pain and suffering. Learn to forgive your enemies and you will become what God intended you to be. Your people are not your family or your nation, they are everyone in the world. They are even your enemies. If love for your nation causes you to hate another nation, it is not of God. Love God and love your neighbor, whoever he is.”

By now Stefan was shaking all over.

“That is why my daddy was like he was. It is why he wanted to love and save the Muslims in our village and why the Serbs killed him even though he was a Serb. Oh Jesus, Oh Jesus. I want to be like that.”

He lifted up his head and cried out in anguish. Milena held him tightly.

He turned back to the precious book and read some more.

“I have also written a letter to my offspring not knowing who will receive it. It is sealed in an envelope in the back of this book. It is written in our language, and it will tell you of your story of where you came from through the line of my precious mother. I ask that it only be opened by a direct descendent of myself.”

Stefan looked at Baka Jovanka.

“It is a long story but the book was hidden for safe keeping and your grandfather and father never saw the sealed envelope. I have not opened it but trusted God that one day you would.”

Stefan held the sealed envelope as if it were gold. Baka Jovanka sat still with a radiant smile of knowing on her face and waited for the right moment. She reached into her bag again.

“Here are our wooden wedding rings. I want to give them to you, not to wear on your fingers if you do not mind, but I would like you to both wear them on a chain around your necks.”

She passed them to Milena who held them as if they were Faberge eggs.

“Here is our wedding photograph and then here is...”

She reached into the large bag and took out her violin and passed it to Milena.

“My dear, you have music in your soul. It just needs an instrument to bring it out.”

Milena took the violin and instinctively hugged it.

“And then finally, here are the dried flowers from my wedding bouquet. I also want you to place these two acorns with them. She turned and looked once more at the two, intertwined oak trees. I want you to put these in my coffin when I die, which I hope will not be too long from now; I have waited a life time to see your great grandfather again.”

Stefan stood up and walked across to his great grandmother and hugged her. She held him tightly.

“Baka, I want you to stay with us and see your own great, great grandchildren, but I understand. But I want you to give me one more thing.”

He paused and started to take off his shoes and socks. “Baka, teach me to dance”.

Afterword

Maria Zrinyi was now over 80 years of age. She sat in a chair by the window in what was now her granddaughter's house and looked out over the rolling hills. She had lived in this same house and village for the whole of her life. Her husband, a good man, had been killed in the war just months after they were married, and she had raised her daughter alone. She then stayed with her daughter after she had married a man, whilst not thought of as good, but rather was usually called a steady man.

She crossed herself as she had done over a life time.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who was, who is, and who is to come, ages through ages. Amen. I lift before you this nation and pray for forgiveness for the sins of the people. We have sinned and we continue to sin. Have mercy upon us and deliver us from the spirit of nationalism.”

She began to weep.

“I pray, dear father, that love would come where there is hatred, peace where there is war, kindness where there is cruelty.”

She then found herself raising her voice in a word of prophetic utterance like she had done on so many occasions.

“The valley is being filled with the songs of praise and the power of men is being replaced with the worship of children. People of every strand of faith who love the name of Christ are arising as an army of justice bringing hope to the world and order to the heavenly places.”

Maria Zrinyi sat quietly, smiled, and closed her eyes.

“Now I understand. It is coming now. The suffering was the breaking of the old to make way for the new.”

Then in a gentle wiisp, she left the world of men and awoke to Paradise.

Milovan and Petra were never actually suspected of any crimes and did live safely throughout the war. They had seven children. Four boys and three girls. They lost most of their farm when the communists took over but kept enough for them to live from. They and their children continued to meet in homes reading the Bible and taking communion together.

Sinisa and Blazhenka took Jovanka to Bosnia where little Djuro was born. Jovanka stayed in Bosnia, but Sinisa and Blazhenka went to the same Serbian speaking community in Romania where Alex had come from. They ministered in the Romanian Orthodox Church as part of the Evangelical *Oastea Domnului* (The Lord's Army). They had three sons, and Blazhenka was known for being an outgoing and confident woman who celebrated living always in the present.

Father Franjo stayed in the area working closely with the Ustashe, but as the war began to turn against the extremists he fled to Spain under the protection of the Catholic

Church, which was itself an organ of Franco's Fascism. There is no record of what happened to him.

Father Alex continued for several weeks helping the Serbian families by teaching and preaching in their homes. His message was always the same. The Church means nothing if those in it do not know the living Christ personally and do not live to love and serve Him in the way they live. He was caught by the Ustashe and sent to the Danica concentration camp near Koprivnica. He was there for several weeks and was on one of the last trains to leave Danica before it was closed in late 1941. He died on the train peacefully as it made its way to Auschwitz.

The sealed envelope was opened, and the secret of Stefan's family line was revealed; however, that story is told in Volume Three of The Roma Chronicles.
