

WET WITH THE FATHER'S BLOOD

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Survival was not the only thing they wanted. Automobiles and peace, their churches and prayers, good bread, strong rakia. Those from the city wanted art and entertainment too, pre-war ballets and opera, exotic food, real tobacco.

But in a land where icons and statues were the fortresses and farmers and priests the soldiers, survival, not opera, reigned. When a Croat's prayer was whispered by Serb lips, and a Jewish man tanned hides behind the gallows, the mountains shielded the valley from the world's gaze, from the world's notice or care. The blood cried from the valley soil, but the world did not notice.

Because the valley was alone.

And the valley was named Jasenovac.

### **Isak**

Leaving Zagreb reminded Isak of his parting with Ana. The train, chuffing in the cold, the smell of bread, a station full of Jews, Serbs, and Croats, the shedding of reluctant tears— Ana needed to leave, and he did not. Ana left and now, only three months later, it was Isak's turn. Ana left for family; Isak was leaving with Ustaše. His neck ached from straining to the side and to the back in an attempt to glimpse Zagreb's face against the skyline -- perhaps for the last time -- before he boarded the train.

Isak half-hoped they all might be transformed into pillars of salt as they looked back at a city that no longer wanted them. The passersby would wonder what the large white Jewish statues in the middle of the train station was made of. They would gaze and whisper about what these people represented until some brave little girl stepped forward. He imagined she would brush her small and dirty finger against his white coat and squeal, in fear and surprise, at the resulting grainy avalanche, as small pieces of him fell to the

ground. If they were a pillars of salt he could not feel the butt of a gun shoved into the small of his back. If he were a pillar of salt he could not see what was happening to those on the outer rim of the crowd, nearest the Ustaše soldiers, or hear the shouts and sobs of his fellow Jews. To just stand still in this crowd, to crumble rather than scream at the inevitable touch of Ustaše cruelty would be better than this, as in Germany. Instead they had to move, move with the Serbs and the Gypsies and hope they would not collapse under the Poglavnik's zeal for purity.

Isak slowly absorbed this chaos as he stood, remembering Ana and wondering what his own parting from Zagreb signified. Was this the start of his death? Isak decided if he had the choice, he would elect to be a pillar of salt, he would suffer a welt from a rifle for a look back at his sinless city, perhaps a last look. He had heard where they were going – everyone did, except the small children.

Jasenovac.

Tales of Jasenovac atrocities invaded his flat early in the war. The synagogue grew empty and quiet as a forgotten graveyard in the hills as more and more jackets were disfigured by the damming “Ž” on butter-yellow metal discs, before the Jews wearing those jackets disappeared. Many Jews had fled Zagreb, packing their portable treasures in pigskin suitcases, in hidden suit pockets and voluptuous skirt folds. They sewed Grandfather's pocket watch into old jackets and Great-Grandmother's pearls into hat linings and prayed they would escape the Croats' narrowed eyes, those unforgiving stares beneath grey helmets and checkered insignia. They hung about Zagreb's street corners and lounged in the cafes, drinking coffee, playing cards, and shouting at passing Jews and Serbs. If the offending pedestrian was lucky, they might walk by with nothing more than

a, “*Vaša majka je kurva!*” or, “The Führer knows how to deal with the likes of you.” If the Serb or Jew were unfortunate, they would be robbed or bullied on the street by the guards. Isak himself had never been stopped. Most often the pretty Jewesses and the mangy Jews were the ones selected for Ustaša taunting. None in his family had been victimized yet, and as none of them were very attractive, successful-looking, or particularly beggarly Isak did not worry.

Escapes had also become less viable for many of Zagreb’s Jews. Only occasionally now did escapes with hidden valuables succeed. Isak had heard of Croatian and Bosnian Jews that made it to Venice, and were now sweating in the sun along the canals, opening shops and working as electricians, carpenters, and locksmiths amidst the sensuous Italian people and their full-bodied women, doused in new, sour wine and a language not their own. His own family was now there, and assured him that many of their suspicions of urban Italians were justified.

*“They welcomed us with hair full of pomade and big white smiles. A few tried to cheat us for rent and groceries, but have been, for the better part of our stay, an excellent and indulgent people. Marija is growing fat already with all the sweet things we are still able to find, and with the bread. It is not too late, brother – there is plenty of room for you here in the flat, which overlooks a little street full of Italian grandmothers and peddlers,”* wrote Isak’s brother, Josip, a week after moving. The letter was pushed under his door early one morning by his landlady, whom he bribed shamelessly every Wednesday with ration cards.

The landlady was an old woman from Sarajevo. She was unusually corpulent, with jowls for cheeks that shook loosely as she heaved up the stairs in her grey apron. Coarse,

wooly white curls covered her head and, in sparser quantities, her upper lip. Isak and his siblings nicknamed her Mrs. Mutton. Every week they repeated a similar routine. It would begin with Mrs. Mutton's making the Wednesday trip to the fourth floor.

"Mr. Erlih?" She would gasp when Isak opened the door. Isak saw her most days when he left for work. The small screw cap of a pewter flask could be seen peeking from her left apron pocket, which she never seemed to remove, though at that time in the morning she wore it over what appeared to be a nightgown with a faded floral pattern. It had occurred to Isak that she slept in the apron. Once, a few years ago, he and Marija even made a game of catching Mrs. Mutton unawares, in hopes of seeing her without the apron. It would have been like catching her naked in the bath. Neither Marija nor Isak succeeded, so they gave up and drank to the health of the grey flop of fabric. Now she showed up at his front door, her wrinkled lips curled beneath the white moustache. "Mr. Erlih, how are you today?"

"I am just fine. And you?" Isak would answer. He leaned against the door frame and picked lint from his sweater.

"Oh, you know. Wartime is rough for us older folks. When I was young, war was exciting, and I waved off plenty of men, my brothers and fathers too. But it's hard now, for people like me – no one pays us any mind. We're just extra mouths to feed." Mrs. Mutton whined. Beneath her drooping eyelids two bright, greedy eyes roved past his leaning body and examined the apartment through the cracked door, looking for anything suspicious. "How are the girls, and your brother...?" Her head bobbed slightly as she attempted to look through over his tall shoulder.

"Josip." Isak moved his body, blocking the doorway.

“Yes, Josip. How are they? They went to Spain, didn’t they?”

“Italy. They’re in Italy.” Isak craned his neck forward to catch her eye. She started, like a rabbit at a gunshot.

She continued, her voice suddenly bored. “Oh, well isn’t that nice. It must be pleasant to take a vacation in a warmer climate. They must be enjoying themselves. I haven’t visited Italy since I was a girl. I don’t have the money now. I can barely survive on my small income, and they are so stingy on ration cards one can hardly ward off a cold!”

“Well, if it would help, I have some extra ration cards...”

“Oh no, I couldn’t, Mr. Erlih.” She waved her hand, like a princess, but her fat fingers curled, as if waiting to crush the ration cards in her hand for protection.

“No, please, I insist. Your bodily health is...so important to me. Please, I am sure Marija and Andrija would never want you to suffer even the slightest inconvenience, or hunger, because it is war time. I insist.” Isak’s voice remained neutral, apathetic. He picked another piece of lint off his sweater before pulling a small handful of ration cards from his chest pocket inside his sweater. He offered them to Mrs. Mutton.

“Well, if you really feel the girls would want me to...” She reached for the cards as she spoke, her pudgy fingers grasping at the thin paper in Isak’s hands. He did not release them.

They both held the cards for a moment, and he looked her directly in the eye. “I am sure they would. In fact, I wrote to them recently about your welfare. Perhaps you would be so kind as to bring any of their letters up to me? It would be very much appreciated, considering how difficult the times are.”

“I think I could do that for you, Mr. Erlih. It wouldn’t be any sort of trouble.” She gave a small tug at the cards.

Isak released the papers, and smiled politely. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Mutton bobbed her head, and thudded unevenly back down the stairs.

“Vacationing in Italy.” He muttered to himself. As if Jews leaving for Venice was not an obvious escape from the Poglavnik’s increasingly harsh ethnic measures. The landlady was lucky he had not run off with his family. Instead, she was getting his rent and his ration cards.

Before leaving for Venice Josip and Isak’s sisters, Marija and Andrija, begged him repeatedly to leave Yugoslavia. They pleaded with him in the train station, too. “The Jews are not wanted in the new Republic,” Josip told Isak. “The Italians will harbor us. You think Pavelić is more merciful than Hitler towards the Jews? Better to be with merry Italian fascists than the Nazis.” After Josip finished his speech Marija’s eyes would spurt water like a Roman fountain as she whined, “Isak, we can’t go without you! You must come with us...look at the state of my nerves!”

It looked silly, her crying from eyes that were beginning to show just the slightest creases at the corners, though even at Marija’s age, her dramatic outpourings never failed to make Isak laugh. If Ana was unable to convince him to leave Zagreb the moment she did, his twenty-three year old sister’s whining and forced tears certainly would not. “No,” he told them in what he hoped was an indisputable tone. “You will go, and I will stay and look after the family holdings for another few weeks. Then I will move to Split, and stay with Ana’s family for a little while. I won’t be here long, but I need to ensure that we have money once the war is over. ”

“The Erlihs are not exactly holding Zagreb afloat, Isak. Forget looking after the family holdings, we have enough money. Come to Italy with us. Now.” Josip said. Isak continued as if he brother had not spoken.

“The Erlihs flourished under the Austrians and will survive under the NDH.” Isak turned to Marija. “So wipe up those tears, my dear actress, and make us some coffee.” Marija would hiccup, wail, and swat at his hand like a petulant child as Isak attempted to chuck her under her chin.

He missed, and hit her nose, which caused Andrija and Josip to collapse in laughter and poor Marija, her face blotchy and wet, stopped crying in surprise and blinked rapidly as she held her nose with her right hand, her left hand twitching as if she was experiencing hysterics. “You’re such a boor!” she would exclaim, before giving his chest a push and stalking to the kitchen.

Josip recovered from his fit first, and continued talking.

“Even, say, a Jew could survive with Pavelić heading this new government. And, let’s say, you don’t mind being banned from parks with Serbs, Gypsies, and dogs, you will not be left unmolested, Isak. How long do you think the neighbors will hide the darling politics of their Jewish neighbor? Am I right, Isak?”

Isak had moved to the other side of the room and stood silent against the mantelpiece, fiddling with the copper hands to the clock – it no longer worked, but Mr. Lituchy from the clock and watch shop down the street had been carted away as a partisan sympathizer, so the timepiece only read a time other than three o’clock when Isak moved the hands. Josip walked over to his brother and placed his face near Isak’s. The lenses of Josip’s glasses were covered in small particles of dust and scratches; though in his mid-twenties



an emerging pimple was visible near Josip's left nostril, to which Isak remained uncomfortably near. Josip continued wheedling.

"I said, am I right? Last I spoke to the Hubers they were not what I would call sympathetic. You know what they said? They told me the Živkovichs were summoned by Ustaše last week. Mrs. Huber acted as if she was telling me a secret. She said, 'Those Serbs are very bad for the state, you know, and most of the Jews aren't good, respectable people, like your family. The Poglavnik is, perhaps, a little hard, but after the things our people have suffered in the past we have a right to defend ourselves, don't you think?' She said that, as if Croats suffered more than Jews in the past. Can you believe it? That...that...woman thinks her people have a right to persecute us!"

"Don't be such an idiot, Josip." Andrija scolded, her words muffled by the unlit cigarette she had just placed in her mouth. Marija struck a match and held it still for her sister, whose cheeks puffed out and sunk in as she drew the flame into the end.

"Andrija I am just telling Isak the things people are saying about us. How can none of you see this? If Isak doesn't leave Zagreb with us, now, he could die. With his beliefs, do you truly think they will let him sit in his robe drinking coffee and reading the paper in the morning?"

"For the next three weeks they will."

"Don't put money on that horse, Isak. They are arresting and sending us out by the freight, so I am told. If you don't leave with us tomorrow, you may not live to travel to Split."

"None of us are going to die, Josip." Isak replied in a low, tired voice. He wondered how many times he had said this in the past few months. It was well known how fully the

Erlis supported the government, fiscally and emotionally – nothing in the NDH was going to alter so drastically in the next three weeks that he would die. After all some of Isak’s most important clientele were slotted for influential positions within the NDH. Unfortunately, Josip had grown into more of a pessimist than Father, and refused to see the value of the family’s connections.

Josip’s face bloomed red and his lips set firmly, like a pudding. It occurred to Isak that, with enough internal pressure, Josip’s pimple might burst.

The thought made Isak disentangle his fingers from the clock hands, replace the glass face, and take a half-step away from his brother. Marija called out from the kitchen,

“Coffee! Sorry we have no makovjnača. Maybe after the war we can start making Mama’s recipe again. I am near ready to sell my hat for a little sugar!” Marija brought a tray into the small parlor.

“Or Mama’s sufganiyot.” Andrija mused. She took an offered cup, sipped the coffee, and struggled not to look disappointed at the weak and bitter taste. Isak could see her embouchure tightening and loosening in an attempt to maintain a wistful smile.

Isak and Josip moved back to the sofa and sat. Josip’s pant seams strained at the thighs. He had grown more corpulent since the start of the war. Little meat, a few starchy vegetables, thin coffee, and bread, and Josip’s legs expanded, as did his stomach; his brother really ought never to eat bread and potatoes, Isak thought, else the neighbors would suspect them of possessing plentiful stores of food, though they had only a few ration coupons for the month.

“I cannot remember the last time we made baklava...” Isak added, looking at the ceiling as he imagined the layers of pastry and nuts soaked in light honey.

Marija's eyes brightened and grew animated as she chattered, "Oh, baklava! And chocolate, good chocolate, and babka with sweet coffee, or better still, cornuletes, oh Lord, for a cornulete..."

"Marija," Josip began. She immediately puffed her chest out like a small rooster preparing for a cock fight. Josip did not seem to notice, and continued, his voice lowered as if he was about to relay an adage of historical importance. "Too much sugar after the war will make you fat, and then who will want to marry you?" He removed his own cup of coffee from the table.

The cups were small, able to fit in a palm, and of old, thick porcelain. Painted on the surface were fully blossoming linden trees lining a street, their yellow flowers dangling among the emerald heart-shaped leaves like small clusters of unripe grapes.

"Thankfully, Josip, you're not the one responsible for finding a man to marry our dear Marija, so her sugar consumption need not be your worry. Don't worry, dear," Isak said as he lifted his own small cup of coffee to his lips, "I shall find a man who does not care how fat you are!"

"Isak!" The sisters exclaimed together. All the siblings laughed.

Their laughter echoed in Isak's ears as he stood in the train station, remembering how, when their parents lived and there was plenty of food for the midday meal, the flesh on either side of Marija's chin would jiggle happily as she chuckled. But as Marija, Andrija, and Josip boarded their own train -- from this very station -- Isak had noticed the new shape of Marija's jaw without its merry fat, which had given her a childish softness even into adulthood; the new slenderness of her waist and the hollow stretches of skin between

her neck and collarbone made her look old. He had given her a kiss on the cheek, and felt the bone beneath her chilly skin. Long afterwards his lips remained cold.

“Jews over here, Serbs over here!” An Ustaša officer, red-faced in the cool air, his hands clad in black leather gloves, stood on a crate and motioned to his left and right as he yelled. His voice cracked at the word ‘here’ like a pubescent boy. The officer’s ears grew red, and he yelled louder. Isak lowered his chin into his coat and smiled, wondering if the guard even had to shave.

The crowd began to make a frantic buzzing noise as suitcases, children, and elderly parents were dragged to different sides of the station. Beside him a tired Serb woman stumbled and fell with a small cry. Her child, a small boy with full, drooping cheeks clung to her even as she tumbled to the ground. An old man with a nose as flaking and scaly as an artichoke attempted to help her up, but the ground, blanketed lightly with melting snow, caused him to falter as well. He fell in a heap beside her.

Isak swore quietly, and glanced at the Ustaša guards. They seemed preoccupied with shoving the Jews at the front of the crowd to one side of the station, yelling loudly and cursing the whole time.

Isak leaned down and grabbed the woman by the elbows, bringing her up and to her feet as if he were setting a sack of flour upright in a store by its corners. The child, attached to her leg, came up naturally, as if he were simply an extension of her body. Next he wrapped his arms around the old man’s chest, heaving and pulling him upward. The old Serb’s hands were cracked and peeling like his nose, with patches of red scabs between his fingers and framing the lower curves of his fingernails; he smelled of rotten vegetables. Isak groaned as he lifted, thrusting his hands into the man’s coat and

grappling with his thick ribcage to bring him upright. Stiff wool fibers rubbed against Isak's fingers, making them itch.

Once on his feet, the old Serb turned to Isak.

"Thank you, sir" he said.

Isak nodded, and began to turn away. The Serb man grabbed his hand. His eyes were blue, and slightly milky. There were tears of desperation and thankfulness.

"It is so good to know there are Christians here," He said with fervor. "God bless you." He crossed himself. Forehead, chest, right shoulder, left.

"I don't believe in God." Isak replied.

"What else is there to believe in?" The old Serb asked with frightened eyes.

"People, Comrade...people."

Isak wondered if the man would cross himself again. The Serb opened his mouth as if to speak. Before any sound could come out, an Ustaša guard appeared and grabbed the man's collar with strong, tentacle-like fingers.

"Serb! Over there! Get in the train with the others!" He screamed into the old man's ear. The officer was taller than the old man. His thin lips were unnaturally bright and wet, and beneath sandy eyebrows were two gigantic, frenzied eyes. A pistol bulged beneath the guard's coat.

The old man began shuffling towards the line, but not quickly enough for the guard. The Ustaša, walking behind him, kicked the back of the Serb's knee. The man cried and fell to the pavement for a second time. Isak took a step towards the two, preparing to intervene, until he saw the knife pulled from a leather boot. Isak turned his head as screams radiated from the Serb side of the train station.

Without looking back he walked towards the Jewish side.

## **Sava**

“Women and children to the left, men to the right. Women and children to the left, men to the right.” The Ustaša incanted as he walked through the crowd, a large rifle gripped like a runner’s baton in his hands. It looked like a model from the Great War, with small constellations of rust on the barrel and shaft.

Perhaps it was his grandfather’s, Sava thought. Many old weapons – bayonets from the poor and Enfields from the rich – were stowed in apartments throughout the city, held as a means of desperate preparation for the next war.

Her own father, Savo Đelibasić, kept a stash of weapons for emergencies when she was young. He stowed butcher knives in the cupboard with the rakia and rifles with the linens.

Once, when very drunk, he had pulled his daughter to his bony knee. She looked up into his face. Bread crumbs were caught in the thicket of whiskers on his chin from the meat-filled burek he had eaten for lunch. Savo’s eyes were bleary, but boisterous when drunk. His voice, though never quiet, gained a fuller resonance after rakia; its timbre deepened and its grandiosity hurt the inside of Sava’s ears, especially when he spoke near her face. Then not only would her ears ring, but her nose would tremble from the strength of garlic, meat, and alcohol on his breath, from which even her mother would recoil. Her

entire body tensed when he touched her – she never knew if she would be pinched, slapped, or caressed by his large, hairy hands. His mood shifted according to his level of drunkenness, the state of the crops, the weather, the quality of his breakfast, and his own unpredictable health. Today he seemed friendlier. Earlier she heard her mother say something sharp to him, and rather than the sound of his hand against her mother’s face follow, Sava heard him chuckle. His chuckle made her shiver – it was superficially mirthful and never reached into his belly for strength, but hung weakly in the air.

“You must learn to protect yourself, Sava. You will be a woman someday, and it is worse for you.” He would say. “Never forget two things: men are evil beasts at heart, and anyone can kill.”

“Even you?” Sava asked.

Her father nodded. “Even me.”

Sava’s eyes filled with tears.

“Savo don’t tell her such things!” Sava’s mother scolded her husband. She had stood at the table in the next room for the better part of the conversation, roughly chopping potatoes and turnips. The delicious, salty smell of bread wafted throughout the room, emanating from the small stove. The comfort of that smell contrasted unpleasantly with the sharp rakia on her father’s breath..

“I have to! There will be another war, and what will she do if her neighbors stand before her door with their guns, or a rope? Do you want her to be unprepared? We do not live in America, or Scotland. If another war comes, it will come to us, and no one comes to save us. No one!”

“That is what the Church is for, Savo. The Church will save us.” Sava’s mother pleaded. Her voice rose and fell in desperation, but her hands were steady as she rhythmically cut a large turnip. She had just dipped it in water to clean it, and the purplish-yellow skin shone wetly beneath the knife. “Christians are everywhere, we shall be safe.”

“Not those Catholics, they will be the first ones to hang us.”

“Savo!” The sound of the knife abruptly ceased. “Sava,” Her mother said, “Go outside. Your father doesn’t need you all over him. Go!”

At this an acrid laugh burst from between Savo’s lips.

“Perhaps you are right, for once. She needs time to play outside, time away from this old soldier.” He kissed Sava on the lips, forced her to take a small sip of rakia, “for health and strength,” and sent her outside to steal away the warm chicken eggs scattered throughout the straw in the coop.

The cacophony of clucking chickens, the delicate brown shells of the eggs, and the smell of animal overwhelmed Sava for a moment in the train station. Above it all the cry of the Ustaša rooster was heard,

“Women and children to the left, men to the right.”

The people gathered before the train. They mumbled, shouted, and shuffled like sheep. The guards encircling the crowd twitched, changing their grip on their guns and shifting their weight, alert and occasionally barking orders. A few smiled. The crowd quieted a little.

Sava shuddered, and turned to Stojan.

“I suppose we have to separate.”



Stojan grunted.

“Dušan will be safe with me...” Sava began. Stojan interrupted,

“You heard what the beasts did to the Mačiks’ little boy, didn’t you?” He said. Sava looked away from him as he spoke. A sour liquid rose in her throat, but she swallowed it down. “Didn’t you? Don’t lie to me, promising you’ll be alright. You can’t promise anything? Sava look at me!” Stojan grabbed his wife’s face firmly, but then rested his forehead against hers. He spoke again, but softly. “Let me take Dušan . I will protect him. You go with the women. They won’t notice one child in the car.” Pressing her into a hug, he placed a firm kiss on her lips before pushing her away. He grabbed the child’s hand.

Ignoring Stojan’s order Sava grasped her son, and pulled him back to herself, embracing him tightly. She wished her body might reabsorb the child into her belly, into her cells and blood even, so her skin could form a shield for this boy who looked, from every angle, a Serb. She wanted to feel his innocent skin and heart within herself, curled and suspended like an unborn infant in the space of her ribcage, protected from harm by her bones.

Sava cried as she held him, and Dušan cried too, but from pain; his mother’s small arms were powerful in their fear, and the child was not yet six.

“Don’t kill our son before they do!” Stojan barked. Sava sobbed harder. The salt from her tears stung her lips, which were dry in the biting cold. “Give him to me for God’s sake before they come take him away.” She did not release Dušan.

Stojan’s face hardened. Placing one hand on his wife’s shoulder and another hand on his son’s collar he yanked the boy from his mother. Without blinking Sava swung her arm and slapped her husband. The child cried out at the sound, but immediately

transplanted himself, winding his arms around his father's knee and smearing his damp face against the edge of Stojan's coat. Sava grabbed her son again and screamed.

"No Stojan! Dušan, here, come here! Stojan, they said for him to go with me. They will kill him if you take him." Sava reasoned.

"And they will certainly kill him if they can take him from you. That's why they want the children with the women, so they can take them. Don't you see?" Stojan grabbed Sava's coat collar and pushed her away, to the ground. She fell into a heap and put her forehead to the ground with a loud shout. He hissed at her, "Stop it, Sava! They will come over here!"

"Stojan, God just give me my son!" She cried, the words muffled by the saliva pooling in her mouth. Her face was smeared with cold mud.

"Get up!" Stojan barked at Sava. "Go, Sava!"

Stojan peeled the boy from his pants leg and lifted him into his arms before turning and walking away from his wife.

Sava watched her men leave. Dušan's face was red and chubby, his dark eyes confused as he peered over his father's shoulder towards her.

Her husband did not look back. Before he had walked far a guard stopped him. The men gestured, and began yelling. The Ustaša pulled a pistol from his belt and waved it near Stojan's eyes. Stojan slowly lowered Dušan to the ground. Dušan ran to Sava. She held out her arms, but just as Dušan reached her someone yelled in her ear. "Ustani, ti kurva!" She felt hands around her neck as she was lifted from the ground by her throat and pushed into the crowd moving towards the car farthest to the right. Momentum carried her briefly as she mixed with strangers, before darkness bloomed within her

vision and the stink of wet wool invaded her nostrils. She fell to the ground again. She could no longer see Stojan above the crowd. He had disappeared.

She pressed her hand to her stomach to prevent herself from vomiting. Her cheek pressed against the dirt and grime with the rumbling of feet around her head. Stomach churning, she covered her mouth with her hand. It was dirty, and left a strip of black grit on her lips. Her thoughts flitted from Dušan holding her skirted leg to a vague curiosity about an unknown soggy texture cushioning her left hand.

Sava felt movement above her. Someone pulled at her waist, and then fell, landing on her arm. It was painful – she heard a small crack near her elbow -- and she felt her skin and muscles compressed as if they had been caught between the pages of a book snapping shut. The weight lifted, and her feet were underneath her legs again as light assailed her open brown eyes with a harsh forcefulness.

As she stood and faltered away she wiped at her face, which was blackened and filthy from the pavement. She could sense Dušan beside her before she felt him pawing at her side, grasping at her legs. A wispy notion that she had forgotten to thank the man who helped her up floated in her head, but she shook it away and continued walking towards the trains, hiccupping and crying. The cars were already filling with her people, packed like bundled sticks into these wheeled prisons of iron and wood. The floors gained warmth from a bit of straw scattered on the bottom -- not warm enough to keep them alive, she thought, at least not for any real length of time. If they left right away, however, they would be at Jasenovac before dark. It was not far outside the city.

A Croat's angry voice broke over the quiet sea of voices in the train station. He was screaming at someone to move faster. Sava put her head down and moved away from the

noise, hoping not to be drawn into whatever was occurring at that end of the train station. She dragged Dušan by the hand. Perhaps if they were very quiet and very still and obeyed every Ustaše order without question they could be reunited with Stojan at the camp. She reached the car full of women. As she lifted her leg, prepared to jump in, loud gasping and protesting shouts swept the crowd. Sava turned her head timidly, half-hoping the masses of bodies might block her view of any violence was occurring. They did not.

The crowd undulated and scattered, like a sea of scared cockroaches. Why were they moving? Sava stood, still poised to enter the car, Dušan pasted to her leg like wet flour as the other Serbs pushed past her, glancing fearfully at her dirty face and bloodshot eyes. Red water surged towards her.

She blinked, opened her eyes, and then shut them again. It was not water. The train station's pavement was a torrent of blood, a deep sticky red that leaked from an old Serb's neck. An Ustaša officer stood above the corpse and wiped his blade on the coat of the dead man. A vertical streak of blood had splashed across the Croat's face, forming a cross with his thin, bright lips.

Sava shoved her fingers into her mouth to keep from screaming, or fainting. The guard with the cross on his face glanced up. Their eyes met. His were large and void, calm. Lowering her eyes to the ground she heaved Dušan into her arms, jumped into the car, and burrowed into the dark with the other sobbing women.

### **Sadik**

The cigarette was cheap and made Sadik nauseous.

At the beginning of the war the Ustaše had gotten the best cigarettes, packed with spicy tobacco harvested in Bosnia. Most of those cigarettes were filched from Jewish stores, or Serb country homes. Cigarettes, rakia, brandy, shoes, and dried ham were always the best finds. A pack of cards was like gold. After occupying the town the guards and officers would sit, like equals, in the town center or the church and play for the goods. Sadik often won – no one could break his concentration or stoic face, and receiving a bad hand did not matter for him. At the end of the night he would always stagger away, his pockets crammed with cigarettes, matches, and on a rich night, marzipan.

After all, a sweet tooth didn't disappear just because there was a war.

Now, of course, there was rarely marzipan or good tobacco and Sadik's mouth often felt numb from want, his teeth aching for sweetness. The guards still ate quite well, but most of the food they stole from Serb homes, and it seemed there was much less to pilfer now than a year ago. The war was wearing on their land.

Sadik puffed on his cigarette. His lips were so dry and cracked they made a faint rustling noise against the cigarette paper as he slid the tip into his mouth, like the sound of a twig broom against a wooden floor. At times this winter he felt the sounds of his own body would drive him mad, every time he smiled or put a cigarette in his mouth or ate. One time Sadik tried peeling the skin from his lips. Another time he rubbed cooking oil on them, but relief only lasted until the nighttime and the wind picked up and his body crackled and grumbled and creaked like a forest at night.

This train station did little to block the wind, either. He almost envied the masses of Jews and Serbs before him. They exuded warmth from the closeness of their bodies, like

dogs in a kennel. Squirming and yelping for no reason, eyes roving, nipping and shoving one another for space or food, the little ones whining and confused.

He passed his tongue over his lips. The old Serb's blood, which had splattered into his face and filled some of the cracks in his lips, had dried, or frozen, he wasn't sure which happened first. The warmth was good for a moment; Sadik felt tempted to place his hand in the sea of blood which flowed on the pavement, just to alleviate the perpetual cold of his hands. It reminded him of when he was ten, or perhaps eleven. It was near Christmas, cold, colder than the train station now. He and his little brother, Kristof, were wandering near the Orthodox church. It was a feast day – Sadik could not remember which one – and the heavy smell of incense floated from the front door. The glow of candles was visible from within the dark interior, where the Serbs chanted in an old language that sounded familiar, but could not be understood, and numerous small bells rang at intervals during the liturgy. Serbs wandered in and out of the service, some with their heads solemnly bowed, others gauging the weather with sharpened eyes, their penitent prayers already forgotten in the worry about dying goats. There were fewer now as the liturgy came to a close. Sadik's father told him that Serbs were not very bad, but to stay away from them – they were too aggressive, worshipped idols, and had harmful ideas of sin.

“You should know,” his father would say to the boys, as they stared at him with wide, believing eyes, “the church of the Serbs is not built on the Rock, and they believe we can be gods ourselves! Do not talk to Serbs, until you are older. They have left the faith, and until you can understand what that means, try not to play with the Serb children. Treat them as you do the Jews, until it is time for you to learn a trade.” And then, with a puff on

his cigarette and a shaking finger Sadik's father would intone, "Take only money from Serbs, never friendship."

Kristof shivered as they neared the church. "Let's look inside, Sadik!" His eyes looked so bright in his face, which had only just lost the fat flesh of a baby. He could not pronounce his words correctly – his small mouth struggled to conquer big sounds.

"No, Kristof, we are not going near them."

"Come, Sadik, just one look! They are all gone now, see?" Sadik shook his head. "I'm not scared of the Serbs!" Kristof ran towards the church. Snow crackled under his small leather boots, and the scarf wound around his tiny neck flapped behind him like linen hung to dry in the wind.

"Kristof, no!" Sadik hissed, but the small boy ignored him. Sadik jogged after him, half-hoping a priest might come out and give Kristof's ear a slap for the impertinence. He would be well-served with a red ear.

"Sadik, look at me! I'll show them!" Kristof whispered loudly. He stood by the side of the church, pulled up the hanging folds of his tunic shirt, turned, squatted, and shat near the wall, giggling. As he finished, a large Serb man emerged from the church with his son. Sadik had thought all the Serbs were in their homes now, eating and drinking, but these two must have been the last ones. The square was eerie and quiet, except for the wind and the sound of the two men walking. The man's black beard hung down to his chest. His dress was expensive and traditional, with an embroidered vest, heavy white tunic, leather belt, and thick, colorful wool leggings. The son was older than Sadik, and burly, with a flat face and masses of hair covering his forehead, also wearing colorful

clothes for the feast day. They both saw Sadik at the same time, and turned towards the wall church to follow Sadik's line of vision.

"Kristof stop that!" Sadik yelled, forgetting himself as he ran towards the building. He was too late. The Serb man had seen Kristof, who began to run towards Sadik, but the Serbs were blocking his path. The man grabbed the child. Kristof began to cry.

"Sadik!" He screamed, his voice high and childish in the wind. The Serb had Kristof by the arm and was carrying him effortlessly to the edge of the wood. Sadik had reached them, and pummeled the leg of the large Serb.

"Let him go, you fucker!" Sadik had never used that word near an adult. The Serb's son grabbed Sadik's arms, spun him around, and brought his knee sharply into Sadik's stomach. Sadik fell to the ground, wheezing and crying in pain.

"Sadik, help me! Sadik! Sadik!"

"Kristof!" Sadik tried to scream, but the son was kicking him, and all he could see was his brother struggling in the Serb's arms, sobbing and reaching out to Sadik, his face consumed by terror and contorted like the face of a hungry infant. "Kristof, Kristof!"

The son punched Sadik in the head and he fell unconscious, his little brother's screaming growing distant.

When he woke, Sadik looked around him. The Serbs were gone, but the sky was still light. He rolled over, and struggled to stand. Where was Kristof?

"Kristof!" Sadik yelled, his voice was hoarse and quiet. He stumbled towards the wood. The sound of water filled his ears; the stream was deafening in its rush. "Kristof!" Something small and pale lay in the mud of the bank. "Kristof!" Sadik screamed, running



to the bank. His brother was crumpled in the mud and reeds, his shirt torn. Sadik put his hand to his brother's chest, and listened for his breath. Kristof was a quiet as a stillborn goat, so Sadik slapped his chest and rubbed his arms and legs. He began to cry.

"Kristof, wake up. You little bastard, wake up!" He rubbed his brother's face and the unkempt tangles of the small boy's hair. The back of Kristof's head was covered in blood. It was still hot, and it warmed Sadik's stiff fingers.

Sadik rubbed his hands and stretched his lips into an "o", placing them gently around a new cigarette, nibbling at the tobacco roll like an alpaca.

"Sadik!"

He quickly ground the lit end of the cigarette into a pole, and shoved the remaining stub in his chest pocket.

"Why is there already a dead Serb in the station?" Ranko, the commanding Ustaša, demanded.

Ranko reminded Sadik of a rhinoceros; he was short and thickly built, with bulky legs that strained at the seams of his grey uniform. A single tawny eyebrow raced from temple to temple under his forehead, as if underlining the spacious whiteness of the skin above his eyes. No matter the state of weather Ranko always allowed the top button of his coat to come undone. From underneath the stiff grey fabric long, curly chest hairs sought the air, emerging into the sunlight under his neck and growing, spreading up his flesh like a disease.

Sadik found him revolting.

"There is a dead Serb because I killed him." Sadik paused. "Sir."

“Why the fuck did you kill a Serb in the train station, Sadik?”

“He ignored orders. He might have caused problems.” Sadik looked straight ahead as he spoke. All he really wanted was to end the conversation and finish his cigarette, but Ranko was in a fury and there would be no shutting him up quickly.

“You cannot just kill every prisoner that does not obey orders! There has to be orderliness, organization. You don’t know what that is, Sadik. You know why?”

Sadik nodded affirmatively. Ranko looked momentarily confused, but continued.

“It is because, Sadik, you are a brute.”

“Yes sir. A brute.” Sadik replied, staring into the crowds of people. Just one draw on his stub, that was all he needed.

“Do not interrupt me, Sadik!”

Sadik wondered if Ranko could speak a single sentence without a woman’s melodramatic voice. Ranko fancied himself a singer and tried to speak with the same feeling with which he injected his rough ditties. It was disgusting -- and annoying -- to all those required to listen to him because of his rank.

The skin on Ranko’s cheeks swung like the jowls of a fat dog. “The Serb did not obey. Have you noticed how quiet and orderly this train station became after I disciplined him? Have you? It was needed. It is done.” Ranko opened his mouth, but Sadik continued hurriedly. “Now, if you will excuse me, it looks as if Veljko needs a hand with the men.” Sadik bowed, saluted, turned on his heel, and hurried away before Ranko could begin whining again, muttering to himself, “we need a guard to watch Veljko more than we need Veljko to watch the Serbs.” He pulled his matches and the remainder of his cigarette

out of his pocket and lit up, wincing as his flaking lips stretched around the cylinder. The steady drizzle extinguished the flame twice before it worked.

“*Jebati!*” Sadik said loudly. “Need any help, my friend?” He asked.

“Not unless you can make these cars any bigger. I don’t figure we will fit them all in. They will not be able to breathe, let alone sit or lie down.” Veljko looked uneasy, and a little paler than normal. Sadik offered his cigarette butt, and Veljko took it with a small sigh of relief. He puffed on it like a schoolchild, his cheeks bloating with air, his lips puckered as if he had bit into a lemon on a dare. Sadik could not decide whether Veljko was too young to be an Ustaša or too old to still be wincing at a little Serb discomfort.

“They’ll fit” He nodded at the men and boys. “Luxury trains don’t travel to Jasenovac.”

Veljko blanched.

“But look at their faces, Sadik. Some of them were our neighbors. If we had just...”

“Are any of them your relatives, Veljko?”

Veljko hesitated. “I don’t know what you mean...”

“Veljko, do not play the virgin. You said, how long has it been...two years? Two years ago you said that your grandmother was a Serb. An icon-worshipping, Croat-hating Serb. Didn’t you, now, back when we signed up? So stop pretending you’re a humanitarian – you’re just worried about the filth you’re related to receiving the Poglavnik’s justice.”

Veljko looked sick. “No one told me I would be working here, watching this. Is this wrong, Sadik?” Veljko’s voice was tired and wistful. Veljko was always oblivious, the

dreamy breed of man that would cry in a trench while his brothers were shot, and write poetry about it after the battle. It made Sadik sick.

“Damn you, Veljko! You are an Ustaša! Do you know what that means?”

Veljko looked at Sadik blankly, like a child asked to explain the causes of war.

“It means you do the job you are given for the Poglavnik, for the Croat people! A third, a third, a third! This land is polluted by Serbs, Veljko, don’t forget it.” Sadik looked around, to see if their conversation was listened to by any of the other guards.

“My God, Veljko, I feel as if I am speaking to a gypsy, not a fellow Ustaša.”

Sadik’s face had crept closer to Veljko’s until they stood only inches apart. Shouting at his fellow guard had caused the blood to rush to Sadik’s face, and his customary sheet-white visage was as red as the dried blood on his lips.

Veljko reached into his pocket and pulled something tiny and stiff from its recesses. With downturned eyes, like a coy woman, he offered the item to the heavily-breathing Sadik.

“Marzipan, Sadik?”

## **Sava**

Sava stepped into the car with Dušan in her arms. It was dark, and stuffed with the breathing bodies of women, children, some men – the Ustaše were not very organized. An old man in the corner was weeping, crushed against the cold wooden boards that formed the car; he was surrounded by men that spoke kindly, trying to calm him, but the man continued to weep and pray, the words tumbling over his grey beard.

*“Incline thine ear unto my cry.”*

Sava could hear him gasping for air as he recited a Psalm, the words punctured by his erratic breathing.

*“For my soul is full of troubles --”*

Sava tried to turn to her left, but couldn't. There were too many other people.

*“and my life draweth nigh unto the grave.”*

One Roma near the door raised his arms above his head and began hitting the wood.

“Bastards! You bastards!” The man screamed. His fists pounded the wall with hollow thumps. He must have hit screws, or splinters, because his hands turned bright and left wet, red moons on the planks of the car, but he kept hitting the door, kept screaming “Bastards! You bastards!” The other occupants remained quiet as the man became hoarse and tired. He could not kick the wall, or he might have made his boots bloody as well, but he was tall, and his extensive arms reached up, as if in prayer; they were full of blood, with thick veins standing to attention beneath the worn skin of his hands.

Another Roma put a comforting hand on the man's shoulder, but received an elbow in his teeth for the gesture. There was a slight commotion and the attack on the door ceased. Nothing could be heard from the man but a slight whimpering for the remainder of the night.

Sava felt a movement by his side, where she held Dušan close to her own body; her arms were on fire from holding Dušan, but there was no safe place on the floor for him. Sava set her lips more firmly as her arms burned and her fingers, interlaced beneath her son, lost sensation.

Dušan's small hand crept into his own pocket, briefly brushing Sava's coat as he did so.

“Dušan, what are you doing?” Sava asked quietly.

“I’m hungry, and I have some bread.” Dušan whispered in return. His fingers wiggled in his pocket as they attempted to locate the crust of bread Sava had tucked into the folds before they left that morning. Stojan’s coat had had a piece too, but it was staler than what they gave to Dušan. He needed fresh bread more than they.

“Sssshhhh,” Sava placed her hand over her son’s to prevent him from pulling the small piece of bread from his pocket. “Leave it for later.”

“But I’m hungry now.”

“I know, but sometimes it is better to be hungry for a little while and less hungry later. Do you understand?” Sava looked into Dušan’s eyes. They were not frightened, only curious, and a little angry. Her son’s eyes did not look like hers, or Stojan’s. Sava wondered for a moment where they might have gained their color, that deep, near-black brown. Dušan nodded his head to say he understood about the bread. Sava doubted he did, but could not argue here in the car. She could barely hear herself think or talk. “That is a good boy, Dušan. Now we have to keep quiet for a while, while they fill the other cars.”

“Where’s Papa?” Dušan asked, almost absentmindedly. His short, delicate fingers rubbed at his coat pocket where the bread was hidden.

“Papa’s in another car, like this one, but with other people.” Sava remembered the Ustaša with the pistol and Stojan’s face, frightened, as Dušan ran to her and her husband’s broad frame could no longer be found in the crowd. Had he been shoved into a car? Had he been murdered there in the station?

“Can he be with us, in here?” Dušan yawned. He placed his hand near his small mouth, which stretched into a circle as he drew in a breath too large for his body, causing his small belly to shudder beneath its jacket.

“There’s no room for him here, Dušan. And besides, you know how Papa likes lots of room, and there are too many people in here. Papa would feel sick around so many people. Now be quiet, Dušan.” Sava jostled Dušan in her arms a little, as if he were an infant again, hoping he would remember his infancy and become calm and quiet.

“I want Papa here with us.”

“Dušan, we need to be quiet.”

“But I want Papa here with us!”

“Papa has to be in another car.”

“No he doesn’t, Papa must be here, with us. Where is Papa? Papa!” Dušan cried out. Two men glared at Sava. The tension in the car was heavy, and there were other cries, pleas, and prayers floating in the air, but they felt oppressive, like grease on water.

What could feel divine here, in this car? The desert fathers had wandered in wilderness, in hunger and thirst, in dignity. What could these Serbs claim? Or, what could these Jews and the filthy Roma claim? They would never even reach for divinity. Sava could – she had the true Serb faith -- but why would she? This world was filled with dirt and hunger. Roma begging, Ustaša screaming, Jews swindling; sometimes Sava wondered how the divine could come to this filth.

“Dušan, I am going to put you on the ground. Is that alright?” Sava slid her complaining child to the ground. There was hardly any room, and the father and son jostled other passengers rudely so that Dušan could place his small leather shoes on the

wooden floor, on the straw. Already a small pile of soiled straw had been shoved into the corner, where several of the men had relieved themselves. Every time someone needed to piss they slowly worked their way through the other desperate men. Embarrassedly they might glance to both sides before unbuttoning their pants, or lifting their skirt. For a moment silence would spread through the car, except for the sound of the stream of piss hitting the wall and running down the boards to the little pile of straw. The smell, acrid and heavy, hung in the air afterwards. One woman vomited after an hour. She did not vomit in the corner, but near the center of the car, and the sour smell grew until a several of the prisoners burrowed their noses in their coats and scarves. The old man weeping in the corner had grown still as the night wore on and the cold air soaked through the boards of the car and their layers of clothing.

Sava fell asleep standing with Dušan against her knee, glued like sap to a tree trunk. The small arms around her leg was comforting, but she worried. How would Dušan – just a child – live in Jasenovac? How were they to survive together without Stojan? She had been seventeen when they married, and their pride in being Serbs extended to their son. But he was too young to know what it meant to be a Serb, to die because others hated the church. She supposed that here, in this car of people, of bad smells and fear, this was where her son would learn what it meant to be a Serb in times of war.

At least, so Sava hoped, though an agonizing twisted cord of fear in her torso assured her there was worse to come. After all, the train had not yet moved.

**Isak**



Isak felt the train stop, and shook his head slowly, like a tired dog. He had become unconscious of it even moving. The only reality in his body was not motion, or sound, but hunger; he wondered if the cavity in his stomach had swallowed any of his vital organs in a search of muscular sustenance. He licked his lips, but they felt like raw wood, splintery and dry on his tongue, which itself was as stiff as a log. It had been thirty-seven hours since he drank any liquid, and longer than that before he had any clean water. Isak wondered what Ana would say if she saw him in this train, packed in like vegetables or cattle by the Croats.

Ana hated Croats. Isak had always defended them in the past.

“They are not too bad, Ana. How many Catholic customers do I have? Over fifty, all regulars. They are the reason we will be able to marry.” They were in the parlor, drinking coffee that tasted like water. The yellow metal disc shone garishly against her pink blouse sleeve, like a small sun with the black “Ž” in the middle. The stitches pulled at the rosy silk, causing them to wrinkle like the fine creases in her lips.

“We can marry without them. You’re so stubborn, Isak. Your society will not fix people, Isak, even if the partisans win this war. How can you be so involved and not have realized that? When it is time to decide where to go and who to follow, the Catholics and us Jews will not be on the same side.” Ana said. She was frustrated with him. They had never fought until now, until she had become obsessed with the concept of Croat conspiracies. She would sit for hours reading tales of Croat atrocities, most of which were utter exaggerations. The Croats were violent, like anyone, but they were not as brutal as the other groups. The Erlihs lived in Zagreb, not Warsaw. Isak was tired of fighting with her.

“Ana you are so clever.” Isak conceded before kissing her forehead. It was warm, and his lips pressed against a stray curl over her skin.

She frowned instead of pouting. A bad sign. “Do you have any cigarettes?” Isak silently pulled a pack from his pants pocket, removed one for her, and handed it over. “Matches?” He fished deeper into his pocket, pulled a book of matches out, struck one for her, and held it near the end of her cigarette. He looked at her as she held it to the match, examining her. There were light purple circles haloing her eyes, and a long wrinkle was forming prematurely on her forehead. Isak wondered what she would look like after the war.

Her cigarette lit, she leaned back into the chair, her right arm crossed over her bosom. She looked at the window, down at the floor, and finally raised her eyes to his. “I don’t want you to tell me I am clever, I want you to tell me I am right.”

“You sound just like Marija.” Isak laughed.

“Isak why are you fighting me? Why, with your education, can you not see where we are headed, where Jews are going to be taken?” Ana pulled on her cigarette furiously and bounced her foot, which hung in the air after it was slung over her leg. For a moment, in her carelessness, her skirt’s inner darkness could be seen, and he felt a tug in his stomach at the thought of what those crossed legs protected.

“Societies, Ana, are not built on the absence of Jews. If we all leave, if I leave, how many of us will be left in Zagreb? The city needs us now; it needs its citizens.”

“Damn the ‘citizens’!”

“Ana!” She had always valued politics and followed them closely. To hear her speak with so little care for his politics was shocking.

“I don’t care anymore! Are your beliefs more important than life? Is communism worth your life, Isak?”

He thought for a moment. She was seated on the Adriatic-blue divan, the cushions sinking in slightly around her lower curves. Ana’s mouth was firm and her delicately penciled eyebrows tilted in anger.

“Communism is worth waiting in the cities for, waiting and helping workers. I need to help. No other Jew has as many connections as I do here. We must have a presence...”

“You won’t if you’re dead! Please Isak. I am leaving. I am going to Split, to be with the other Jews there. It will be safe. Come be with my family...we will wait out the war there.” Ana was pleading, but there was a manipulative edge to her voice. Isak wondered what other tactics she had prepared for convincing him to leave.

“Your uncle is there, right?”

“Yes, and he would take us in, Isak, all of us, including Josip and your sisters. We could be safe.” Ana lowered her eyes. Her voice was soft. “Please, come with me.”

“Ana, do you love me?”

She rolled her eyes and tapped her cigarette on an ashtray on the table. “Isak, why do you always...”

“Ana, just answer my question. Do you love me?” Two could play this game, Isak thought. Ana folded both her arms across her chest and glared at him.

She cocked her chin and looked at the lampshade to her left. “Yes.”

“Do you love me as I am?”

Ana threw her hands up into the air. “Of course I do Isak, why do you have to be so obtuse?” She shook the hand holding the cigarette at him. Ash specks drifted onto her skirt, making it look like a dusty curtain.

“Then indulge me. I will stay another six weeks. In six weeks I will join you in Split. Josip, Marija, and Andrija will go to Italy. We have discussed it, and I think that would be best for them. I need to organize the family’s property until then.”

“You can organize the finances more quickly than that, can’t you? It cannot take another six weeks, Isak, or you will be living in a ghetto! Don’t think they won’t ghettoize Zagreb...it is only a matter of time.”

“I will not live in a ghetto. Ana, it has been five years. We have not changed much in the past five years, and we are both too stubborn to change now. I will stay another six weeks and join you in Split. You know this needs to happen. I cannot arrange everything properly in anything less than six weeks.” Ana shrugged, and looked out the window. Her eyes were glistening, but the set of her lips remained angry. Isak continued. “Just wait and see, Ana. And be patient with me. I will join you in Split in a short six weeks.”

He stepped over to the divan and crouched down, cupping her hands in his. Ana’s nails had lost their shine in the past few months, and she began biting them again. Isak avoided touching their rough edges. Before he would run his fingertips over the curves of her nails, enjoying how well she kept herself. The neatness of her nails matched her hands, they were so delicate and well-formed. She had stopped wearing lipstick too – Isak suspected she could no longer afford it. But her eyebrows remained perfectly penciled in with charcoal, which made her look bold and sophisticated even without lipstick. All her features were more bold than pleasing; she had a large nose and full lips

and eyes like gigantic black marbles. When he first met her Isak wondered how a face could comfortably wear such expansive features.

“Be patient with me.” He had said to her. Isak remembered these words, mouthing them as he stood in the halted cattle car. There was snow on the inside, small puddles of white and grey ice dotting the floor. They did not melt. Yesterday the dead had been pulled from the train. A young man had died. He looked fifteen, and the day his body lay in against the wall of the car at the corners of his mouth gathered small white mounds of ice, like white sugar.

One of the Roma had checked the boys’ pockets, and from them taken a small watch and a single cigarette. Another Roma snatched the shoes, and one of their children, a boy of about eight years took the young man’s coat and shirt. One of the Serbs protested, but weakly. The Roma were cold as well; they were just bolder.

When the Ustaša came to collect the dead Isak watched the boy’s half-naked body as it rose, reanimated, into the air by two Romas. The head flopped back and bobbed loosely between the corpse’s arms as the Roma silently brought the body outside. Isak looked outside, at the perfect white of the countryside. The trees were bare, and there was snow everywhere on the ground. Some of the men reached their hands out and attempted to scoop up some snow with their fingers. The Ustaša watching them laughed. One reached into the snow himself and swept a small amount of snow from the ground. His chapped hands rubbed the snow into a small ball, which he threw into the car. It hit a middle-aged Jew with a lumpy nose in the face. The Ustaša crowed, and several others began to sweep snow up, compress it, and after choosing a prisoner and laughingly wagering a cigarette with the fellow to his left, aim it viciously at his intended target.

The younger ones laughed like boys at a playground, running back and forth before the car door as the prisoners continued reaching for snow on the ground or fighting one another for a chance to suck on one of the icy missiles smashed onto the floor.

Isak hid in the back of the car, watching. The Roma who had carried the young man out were busy covering him with snow near the wood. A single Ustaša guarded them. His back was turned on the gypsies as he watched his companions play their games.

One of the Roma – a thin, reedy one with darting eyes and a wiry mustache – crept slowly backwards before turning, and running towards the woods. His bare feet kicked snow into the air. Without pausing the Ustaša overseeing the burial twisted his body to the side, pulled a gun from inside his jacket, took aim, and shot the Roma. Isak watched the gypsy's body convulse forward, flying as if someone had attached a string to the man's chest and yanked him forward unexpectedly. The drama of his fall was almost comical, a great contorted leap into the snow. The crack of the gun caused both officers and prisoners to pause. The momentary stillness of air was broken only by the echo of the bullet's journey.

The other Roma fell to the ground, crying. Perhaps he was related to the man just killed. The Ustaša officer who had just murdered the other Roma said something unintelligible before placing his gun at the man's head, pointing through the skull to the ground. The Roma yelped once, before the trigger was pulled and he fell to the snow. Isak only saw the man's head for a moment before he fell, where the bullet exited. What had been a smooth, brown surface became full of jagged red flesh; it looked like a large flower with petals of white and scarlet.

The Ustaša trudged back to his younger companions. He cast a disinterested glance back at the three bodies in the snow. The young man's burial was only half-finished, and the Roma, of course, were not worth the Ustaša's time to bury. Their bodies lay on the ground like discarded ribbons, discolored and twisted. The other, younger Ustaše lost all playfulness. Their hands dropped half-formed snowballs. Only one remained smiling, baring his teeth like a mad dog at the prisoners as if to say, "This can happen to any of you, any time. Ustaša are not to be played with."

Isak shuddered, and crossed his arms over his chest. The other men in the car were silent. A fat Roma had pressed himself into a corner, placing his nose near a crack in the boards as he sobbed silently, his back rising and falling without rhythm or restraint. Did all the Roma here know one another? Isak wondered. The Jews certainly did not. Isak thought he recognized a man from the synagogue on the outskirts of Zagreb, but he couldn't be sure. The man was old, and wrinkled faces were hard to tell apart sometimes. If Isak remembered correctly this was the man that slapped Marija in the synagogue for being too loud, when she was fourteen. As the door closed the old Jew shouted, "God help us!" It was feeble and desperate, but Isak was tempted to work his way through the crowd to the man the man, slap him, and tell him to be silent. Instead, Isak muttered "If God helped anyone, it wouldn't be us." The Serb standing beside Isak looked slightly shocked, but Isak ignored him. The wooden floorboards beneath them grumbled and cracked as the train started moving again, twisting and groaning like a man in his death throes as it approached Jasenovac.

**Vlatko**

They came into the camps in droves, a herd of dumb cattle with blinking eyes and vague fear. Vlatko watched them from his cleaning post. He was busy burning the straw mats from one of the barracks. The straw was full of fleas and lice and smelled like animals; dysentery was circulating in the camp. Vlatko had been ordered to burn the mattresses not because the Ustaša cared if the prisoners died from diseases, but one of their own had gotten sick and passed after going into that barracks. They had touched a corpse, thinking it was just a disobedient prisoner. When the guard began to beat the body, he realized his mistake. Served them, Vlatko thought.

These new prisoners were mostly Serbs and Jews, from the NDH by the look of them. Vlatko could detect a handful of Roma, but none of his close friends. He supposed they would be here soon. No gypsy's tongue was quick enough to keep him from the camps, and they rarely paid government activities any mind. Before coming here Vlatko knew that Ante Pavelić was shaking hands with lots of important people – discarded papers in trash bins told him that much – and he knew the Poglavnik hated Jews, but who didn't? What Vlatko didn't realize was that these beasts would come for poor gypsies. All the Roma did was cook and beg and shit and squabble, and what harm was that to anybody?

Not Vlatko, of course, he was superior to that lot. Yes, he lived with other Roma, crammed and close in quarters full of beautiful women with blackened teeth and old men who always smelled of alcohol. The young men were sullen-looking, drunk, and crafty. Good-looking gypsies could live better, though – that was why Vlatko terribly vain about his looks, though he realized they couldn't last forever. Very old men were never handsom. When he was about ten he made the mistake of begging from a nun. She looked very stern, grabbed his arm, and hauled him a few meters as he kicked and yelled.



No one paid them any attention – he was Roma. This nun dragged him up the stairs of the church, his bare feet slipping and scuffling on stone worn smooth by the slippers of modest women. Vlatko was screaming, but he didn't curse at her – he was Catholic too, after all. She opened a door and threw him into a hallway. He cowered, thinking she was going to beat him.

“Stop that, young man.” She said in his dialect, but with a small whistling noise. A tooth was missing, and the air pushed past her heavy lips turned into a mixture of words and a whistle. She twined her fingers around his arm again and pulled him to his feet. The hand holding him was calloused and wrinkled, white, and dotted with brown spots from the sun. Forming patterns beneath the skin were thick blue veins, and branching from them delicate red threads reaching in unexpected directions. He worried that if he scratched her he would cut a vein and she would die, and then he would have to pay the church money, he was sure of it.

This old nun easily subdued as he wriggled, though he was a solid ten-year old boy and she, Vlatko thought, looked as if she had survived Noah's flood. She too him to the back of the church, out the door past the altar to the grassy square behind the church, where a small building sat, its wooden walls bulging like a cow's stomach. To the side of the door was a vegetable patch, where a skinny chicken pecked and scratched at the insects in the parched dirt.

“Sister Barbara! Come open the door, please!” The old nun called out. Her voice was sharp, but polite, and the door opened immediately. Vlatko wondered what they were going to do to him. Perhaps they wanted him to clean something. Occasionally people asked Vlatko to do work while he begged. If he said “yes”, sometimes he was given a

coin, or something to eat. If he said “no,” he was sure to get nothing, and the likelihood of being spat at or kicked was greater. What would these nuns want him to do?

Sister Barbara was a young nun, and pretty. Vlatko winked at her. She slapped the back of his head, but smiled.

“What are we doing with this rascal, Sister?” Sister Barbara asked.

“We’re teaching him how to wash properly. Look at him. He’ll be full of diseases by the time he is twenty, and is already lousy as a dog. We’ll give him a comb and some soap, and see if that doesn’t improve him a little.”

Bewildered, Vlatko simply stared and listened. They pulled him into a small room with a fire and a basin on a small wooden stand. Sister Barbara heated water in silence. The old nun handed Vlatko a fat, fragrant roll and a dried fig and told him to sit in the corner while the water became hot. When it did, the torture began. They combed his thick, black hair, and pulled off most of his clothes. They scrubbed his skin, rubbing at patches of dirt, scabs, and creases with a holy vehemence, scolding him the entire time. A stick was used to scrape his teeth down, and Sister Barbara crinkled face and pursed her lips when he breathed near her nose.

“My God, you Roma are worse than the cats on the street. Look at his hair! Here, chew this, it will take away the smell in your mouth.” The old nun handed him a few small leaves. They smelled like the bundles of dried plants in Tomislav’s store, hanging above the sacks of flour and coffee. Vlatko always thought the plants looked like what the goats ate outside the city. Vlatko closed his mouth tightly – he was not about to eat goat food -- but the old nun slapped his cheek, so he opened up and she shoved the leaves onto his tongue. “Chew, but don’t swallow.” She ordered. Vlatko nodded, and glared

through slitted eyes as he chewed. The leaves tasted very strong and foreign, but their fragrance was good, so he kept chewing. When they were finished the old nun started talking to him. He wanted Sister Barbara to talk to him, but she was busy cleaning up the brushes and wiping water and soap from the floor.

“Now listen. You see what we have done? Look at your skin. See how clean it is? Here, take this.” The old nun handed him a small, soft sponge. “Use this. If you use soap and keep your skin and mouth tidy, you won’t get sick. Do you hear me? You won’t get sick. Use this too,” she handed him a comb. “If you stay like this, maybe someday you won’t have to beg so much.”

Vlatko nodded.

“Now go on out, child. We have other things to do.”

Vlatko glanced around the apartment. There was nothing to steal within sight, so he took the offered comb and sponge and withdrew; the roll and fig had tasted very good, and his skin burned with freshness and smelled like all the Serb and Croat children whose pockets he picked on the street. “If I stay like this, maybe someday I won’t have to beg so much. If I stay like this, maybe someday I won’t have to beg so much.” He paused in the street, contemplating the comb. For the first time in weeks his head did not itch madly.

“If I stay like this, maybe someday I won’t have to beg so much.”

Vlatko continued walking. What an idea! All he had to do was run this comb through his hair and scrub his skin once in a while, and he could have money! People, all people, would hand him lots of money on the street, because they would see he was different, because he would smell nice. He, Vlatko, would not have to beg so much.

Vlatko smiled, remembering this epiphany and the two nuns from whom nothing could be stolen except soap and combs, which they gave away.

The old nun had been right, in the end. A clean gypsy was given good jobs, an extra coin, an occasional glance of curiosity rather than contempt. Vlatko was already good-looking – his face and body were thin, solid, and symmetrical, except for his forehead, which was large and interrupted only by two well-shaped black brows. His teeth were all even and white, except for a gaping black space where his canine had been up until a few months ago; an Ustaša had hit him in the face with a shovel. The Ustaša had demanded he dig more quickly, and Vlatko had been foolish enough to insist he couldn't work faster. Vlatko still thought he was lucky not to have been murdered right then. Rather, he was given more time to push the bodies of those who had been murdered into the cavernous earth, where heaps of them, all ages and shapes, could decay and merge in death. Vlatko was not without luck, however – a beating was far preferable to death.

Vlatko was willing to do almost any job, no matter how dirty, for a little extra food. He hovered near Ustaše, though he never approached them directly. A Roma approaching an Ustaša of their own volition was dangerous. Roma did not ask to be noticed, unless begging.

Vlatko repressed a small laugh. The Serbs and Jews continued stumbling out of the cattle car like drunks, squinting into the sunlight and rubbing their hands together. He poked half-heartedly at the ashy heap of mattress and wondered if he should sneak down to the car – there was bound to be a well-dressed corpse or two in the car by this point. He desperately needed shoes. The scrappy pieces of leather on his feet were tied together by a thick string wound around the upper portion of his foot, and were stuffed with rags

and straw. Taking off his shoes required unwinding the rope and simply lifting the entire top of his shoe off before pulling his foot away from the detached sole. It was a pesky, smelly business and Vlatko was tired of it. Also, if this car was from Zagreb it was sure to carry a few wealthier Serbs. City Jews were mostly commies, and they wore cheaper clothing than the icon-worshippers – though Vlatko had, in times of duress, resorted to asking a non-Catholic saint for help and placing a coin or two at his icon. He smiled at this remembrance, crossed himself, and whispered a Hail Mary.

Vlatko bobbed his head to get a better view of the newcomers.

“You!” A guard’s voice shouted near his right. Vlatko nearly jumped and spun around to look at the guard speaking to him. An Ustaša stood only half a meter from him, holding an axe. “What are you doing?”

“Burning mattresses, Sir, from barracks two.”

“Get over to the tracks, the cars need cleaning.” The guard looked bored as he spoke. He spun his axe in a semi-circular movement. Vlatko tried not to stare at the axe. The handle was short and nearly black from use and the head was entirely rusted, except for the slightly rounded blade which glinted clean and sharp. He wondered how many hours this guard had spent at the sharpening wheel in his home village, working away the rust from that thin strip of blade so he might kill his neighbors with ease.

Vlatko took an eager step towards the car.

“Gypsy, your fire. Put it out.”

Vlatko grabbed two small boards near the fire and began to heap ashes onto the flame.

“With your coat, gypsy. Put it out with your coat.” The Ustaša guard was smirking. He stopped swinging his axe and instead held it in both hands, slowly rotating it and watching. Vlatko tried calculating the damage to his only coat if he smothered the remaining fire with it. It would, most likely, burn completely. Winter was here, and he might not get another coat.

What if he froze to death? An image of his own smooth, brown face in the cold appeared before him, skin cracked and flaking white, eyes hollow and closed in death. If he gave up his coat he would surely die, not from starvation or beating as the other Roma, but from cold. His naked, icy body would be tossed into a mass grave, where another Roma, wearing a coat, would shovel dirt and snow onto his face.

“I can put it out with these boards...” Vlatko began.

“Put it out with your coat. Now!”

The Ustaša’s smile became immovable, and Vlatko could detect a slight focusing of the guard’s eye, as if he had become more alert. The guard’s chest began to rise and fall a little faster underneath his grey wool coat.

That bastard is excited, Vlatko thought. The guard wanted the gypsy to refuse, to give him an excuse to use that axe. Asking Vlatko to put out the fire from these infested mattresses with his coat was as good as killing him this time of year.

Vlatko glanced up at the Ustaša. The guard looked like a peasant – his face was broad and there were fine lines in his forehead, which expanded over his large, dull eyes and thick eyebrows. The hands rotating the axe were wrapped in thick, yellowish callouses. He wanted to kill a gypsy, Vlatko thought.

With a self-confident shrug of his shoulders, Vlatko slipped out of his coat. The wind pushed through the thin fabric of his shirt. His skin prickled with the chill. Pretending not to notice the cold, Vlatko tossed his coat onto the flames and beat it with a board until the flaming straw stopped crackling. The coat was consumed like a martyr in the flame as the thick green fabric smoldered and burned. Raising his board above his head Vlatko beat it repeatedly, with energy, as if he enjoyed it. He laughed. What had a life come to, when burning one's coat could equal death from cold? He supposed he would rather die an icy corpse in a mass grave than a body bloodied by an Ustaša axe.

The peasant Ustaša looked disappointed. The axe had ceased its rotation and lay in his hands. Vlatko moved towards the entrance. He lifted his chin into the air triumphantly, and strode towards the entrance, carefully swinging his arms as if the loss of his coat did not matter.

“Roma!” The guard yelled from behind. There were loud footsteps as the guard approached. The guard was very near him, Vlatko could feel the dust shaking under the rhythm of the Ustaša's boots. As Vlatko turned his head to see what the guard wanted, a massive, clenched fist met Vlatko's jaw. He felt the teeth in the left side of his mouth loosen, and blood fill the cavity of his cheek as he fell to the ground. A crunching sound burst from Vlatko's body as the Ustaša kicked the gypsy in the ribs. A tooth loosened completely as the guard punched his face into the dirt; his red tongue juggled the independent tooth for a moment, before he spat it out onto the ground. “You are nothing, Roma.” The guard kicked Vlatko again. Through half-closed eyes Vlatko could detect his own blood on the guard's boots, which were old and badly mended near the toe. With a loud snort and cough, the Ustaša spat a glob of mucus that landed in the dirt by Vlatko's

face. A finger's-width closer, and it would have landed on the fallen man's mouth. "Now get up, you dog, and help clean the car."

Vlatko rolled to his side and suppressed a yelp. His side felt crushed, and his ears rang vehemently. His rag-swaddled feet scrabbled beneath him, pushing on the cold pebbles until he felt his body rise in response, his fingers curved and pressed against the dirt. He shivered as he stood and began hobbling over the yards between the barracks, towards the processing near the gate and barbed wire.

Once he arrived he joined the other Roma trudging towards the car and the dead bodies within. Some Roma carried shovels, others carried small, flat wooden boards. Most of their feet were naked and blue. The one to Vlatko's right had a mouth full of rotten teeth. He knew this because the man turned to him, and with a wide-open, reeking mouth asked, "What happened to your face, gypsy? An Ustaša? Well if he didn't kill you, it means you have some favor in the heavenly realm. Right? The Holy Mother, perhaps?" Vlatko suspected the man did not know exactly what the "heavenly realm" meant, because he mispronounced the words and slurred them together, as if they were one and he had only heard them the way one hears of vampyres and witches, that is, through old, toothless men and women sitting on wooden porches and smoking rough-hewn pipes and new tobacco. The man's breath reeked of decay. "Say a prayer for me!" He begged of Vlatko as he coughed, grabbing his arm.

"Say it yourself." Vlatko snapped, shaking the man from him.

The man swore, slowed his pace, and spat at Vlatko's feet. Vlatko ignored this, and continued walking, rubbing his chest as vigorously as possible without attracting attention from the Ustaša. He was gasping to pull air into his lungs, but the air was icy



and filled his chest and belly with daggers. His fingers were numb, and he held his head down towards his chest as he walked so that a pocket of warmth might be preserved within the fold of his thin neck. Ropes of thick red and black spittle fell from his mouth and congealed coldly on his chin. They were wiped away half-heartedly.

The assembly of Roma stopped walking. They had reached the train, and the Ustaša guard started yelling at them. There were three Ustaša guarding the group of gypsies. None of them had pistols – Vlatko could only see knives on two, and a mallet in the hand of the third, who was nearest the train. “Get in the car. Pull out the bodies, and take off their clothing. Then take them through there,” The guard with the hammer gestured to the tree line, where the rushing of the Sava River could be heard. “And dump them in the water. Then you will return to the camp. I don’t need to tell you what happens to any dog who steals clothing from the dead. Now go!”

Half the Roma rushed into the car, desperate to escape the wind. The other half stood by to receive the bodies lowered from the car. Two stood to the right to remove clothing, and one stood by them to remove rings and jewelry, and yet another waited to sort the clothing and check the items for hidden pockets and smuggled watches. This was the setup for the eight cars that had arrived today. Vlatko struggled to lift himself into the car. Another gypsy noticed him struggled and lifted him without a word, placing one, strong hand under Vlatko’s armpit, grasping him near the shoulder, and pulling him onto the floorboards. There were only a few bodies in this car, all Serb men. The gypsies grabbed feet and hands, lowering the stiffened bodies out the car. One man was still breathing, very lightly. He was nearly dead, so they handed him out with the other corpses.

After an hour three separate piles dotted the ground: bodies, clothes, and jewelry. Vlatko was shivering and sweating from effort. His thin shirt stuck to his torso with sweat, which quickly dried in the cold air.

“Each of you, take a body, over there. Drop it in the river. Tomislav here is going to ensure you don’t run.” The Ustaša yelling this patted the guard with the hammer on the back and laughed. Each Roma picked a body – the quick ones grabbed the smallest and lightest bodies, most of which had been elderly men. Those furthest from the car were left dragging portly corpses. Vlatko carried a short man, with a round belly and a harelip, whose head was smashed on the left side. It looked like a large red pepper that had been crushed. Perhaps he had been beaten before boarding the train. Many prisoners were. The gypsies formed a line, each struggling to drag the carcasses towards the river line. Once there, some rolled their burdens into the icy, rushing water. Others pulled them in, wading into the shallowest edge themselves. Vlatko avoided the water, preferring to roll the dead Serb over the sand, and giving him a hard shove near the edge. The water could finish his work. The Roma returned from the water and began trudging back to the camp. The two Ustaša with knives were smoking and poking through the clothes. They had set aside a few coats and watches for themselves. A large pile remained of ratty clothing, which the line of Roma passed as they walked. In front of him the man from the first march – the one with black teeth who asked Vlatko to pray for him – reached down and plucked a coat, a brown one of a rough material, thick and intact, from the pile.

“Dog! Put that back!” An Ustaša screamed. The gypsy threw the coat onto the ground, but not quickly enough. He was thrown to the ground. The three Ustaša pulled at his limbs until he was splayed on the ground. The man pleaded with them.

“I didn’t take anything! I left it! I didn’t take anything! Please, I’m a Catholic!”

“You are not a Catholic!”

“I swear, I am!” The man attempted to cross himself. The Ustaša with the hammer grabbed the man’s right wrist and pressed it to the ground. The other two shifted positions. One placed his boot on the man’s lower back, another on his cheek, pinning him to the ground like a preserved butterfly. Vlatko heard laughing, and the arc of the hammer above the men as it swung into the air before its descent. There was a scream, and the sound of choking. Vlatko looked down. The coat the man threw to the ground lay at Vlatko’s feet. Vlatko swiftly lifted it from the dirt and slid it onto his shaking body. He ducked back into the small crowd of Roma.

When the Ustaše finished with the man they rose from the ground. The one with the hammer glistened with sweat. The Roma did not rise. His face was hidden, but his mangled hands stretched out past his head towards the setting sun, as if begging to be allowed into his heavenly realm. Vlatko shivered, and buttoned his coat.

## **Sava**

Sava pressed her nose into Dušan’s greasy hair, and inhaled. The blisters on her feet seemed to disappear as she walked with him in her arms. The crying of a woman at the back of the procession sounded faint and unreal.

“Do you know where they are taking us?” A peasant woman in front of her asked of another prisoner. She wore a thick black dress, the sleeves of which looked tight against the strain of her muscular arms in the fabric. A thin wool kerchief covered her head and cast a shadow over her face, which was red and broad. On her hip was a sleeping baby,

whose face was ruddy and dirty. It had the smallest black eye. The other woman looked more delicate, but still sturdy. She had bold black eyebrows, hollow cheeks, and spoke with a lisp caused by the absence of her left front tooth. They were both middle-aged women with strong backs. Mountain Serbs.

“Stara Gradiška, the women’s camp. Where are you from?” The other lisped.

“Uštica. It’s nearby, a small village. They took us all out. I think they’ve put the damn gypsies in our homes now.” The peasant with the broad face spat onto the ground and wiped her chapped lips with her sleeve.

“Why do they need the gypsies?”

“I heard the Poglavnik wants to kill them all, but it’s easiest if they are gathered in one place. It’s hard to get gypsies all in one place, you know. They wander like stray cats and don’t pay the government any mind.”

“Did they kill any Serbs, or are they all here in Jasenovac?”

“Any man or woman that tried to run or hide, they killed. I saw a child killed, just a little one, beaten to death by one of these devils with a hammer. Five of our prettiest girls were raped. The Devil is in the Catholics. None but the Devil could do as they do in war.”

“And your family?”

“All alive, and healthy. We will survive this war. We are Serbs, all of us. I have six children, and every one of them made it past that selection back there. This one here,” she nodded at the sleeping baby in her arms. Sava wondered if the woman’s muscles were tiring. Her own arms felt like rods of hot lead. “Is my youngest. The others are a bit in

front of us, with my two sisters and my mother. That's right," The woman smiled, "my mother even made it in with us, and she is not young! We survive."

"What a miracle!" Sava interjected. The women glanced back at her, their faces troubled. "My son made it through too! See him? They took him away from his father, but that is alright, because they sent him to my line. Our Mother must be very concerned for our welfare, if she is sparing all our children at such a time as this..." Sava remembered the persecution of saints. She and these women could suffer for Christ, even if they could do little else in Jasenovac.

"Yes, she must." The small one lisped. They turned from her and continued their conversation in quieter tones.

Sava did not mind. She had Dušan, and could protect him better than Stojan. What a foolish man, to think brute strength and force of will could protect Dušan better than a mother's instinct. There were times she felt a stir in her, like when Stojan yelled at Dušan for breaking a pot or cup – as his voice rose and her son's face, so small and innocent, became troubled, and the tears formed in the child's eyes, it was as if a large fist tightened around the organs in her torso, squeezing and penetrating and poking holes into her stomach and liver and lungs, and she couldn't breathe – at times such as those, she wanted to kill her husband. But now Dušan was with her, in her arms, and there was nothing more important than keeping him safe.

She had not seen Stojan during selection, as she had hoped. The image of the guard and her husband yelling, a pistol waving in the air, came back to her. She wanted to ask a guard or yell to the group of men across the yard, but did not dare. Already a Jewish girl had been pulled from line and beaten for yelling to her husband and crying. They broke

one of her legs with a hammer, and spat on her. The girl's husband watched the scene from behind wire and sobbed, but he couldn't intervene. They dragged her into one of the buildings, her broken leg pulling loosely behind her like a wet shirt trailed across a yard in a dog's mouth.

The Jewish girl's husband screamed until the other prisoners silenced him with their hands, to save him a beating, or worse.

The guards began to divide the women into two lines. To the left elderly women, women heavy with babies in their belly, small girls, and those who looked ill were sent. To the right walked the rougher, solid women, those with fleshy curves, determined eyes, and upright postures.

Sava began to recite the names of the saints, searching desperately for one who had, through faith, triumphed over death and imprisonment. Paul, perhaps? But he was an educated man. She felt little connection with Paul. No, Mary. It had to be the Mother. Only for Dušan did she need to survive, and that instinct could only be understood by the God-bearer.

The guards had taken Stojan from them, but she hoped that meant little. Stojan could easily be in a section of the camp reserved for working men, in a special housing unit or some such thing.

And as for her son, the Mother would not allow Dušan to die, Sava could feel it. Every time she attended the liturgy she had asked a special blessing over her child. Solemnly the priest would place his hand on Dušan's head, and the boy would squirm in his mother's arm. As the priest intoned the blessing his lips would move, almost mechanically, but with the stern compassion and quiet reserve of all the priests and a

calm would descend over Dušan. The sound was loud and rose and fell like a bird in flight. Sometimes the priest was the unmarried one, and Sava always pitied him, and wondered if it was her imagination or did he stare at her lips when she asked him for a blessing? As he prayed Sava would look past his shoulder, to the royal doors on the iconostasis. On it was painted Mary, her hands demurely open, accepting with grace the angel's annunciation. Gold glowed on the doors, and the potent scent of incense would fill Sava's nose and sting her eyes, yet she would stare at that calm face of the Mother, one untroubled by a husband's fists and screams. Was the Mother ever disturbed by the hard fist of an angry man, a scant table, the rapid aging of her skin and hands, or a husband's eyes straying to the smoother faces or curves of the young girls at village dances? No, with hands poised in supplication Mary sat, accepting the suffering of motherhood with the grace of her Lord, with no embarrassed Joseph by her side to refuse the Christ-child. No, Joseph protected the Christ from Herod. Joseph saved his wife and child. Where was Stojan to save her and Dušan from Pavelić?

Sava's hands twitched in a compulsive desire to stretch them out, to accept with grace this hardship and the pain of motherhood, of knowing her son would suffer pangs of hunger and the blows of angry Croats. But the Holy Mother understood, and would keep Dušan safe. When this was over, the war and this camp...if she survived, and with her, of course, Dušan, she would purchase a very large candle and light it in the church, as a thanksgiving. She should never again let Stojan begrudge her coins for the saints. After this, how could he?

“You, to the right. You, to the left.”

Sava, confused, tilted to the left. The guard put a hand out. It landed on her breast, and he gave a shove towards the right and growled,

“I said to the right!”

Many of the women to the right were larger than her. A few had good, thick leather shoes and the swollen breasts and sagging bellies of women who had recently given birth. Two held infants, the sight of which caused Sava to imagine an aching in her own dry breasts. For a moment her belly felt curiously empty, as if she had just given birth. Dušan was beside her, but she sometimes felt that this was another child, not the infant she gave birth to but someone else, a boy Stojan had begun to form and was now in her care. Where was the child whose body was emptied from her own? From her belly to the world, she had transferred Dušan, moved him from safety and fullness to danger and hunger, and now he was hers alone to protect.

One of the babies in the crowd of women mewed pathetically and contorted its face. It pawed at its mother's chest and banged its head against the scratchy wool covering, begging. The mother bumped it up and down, trying to quiet the child. She could not feed it here. The mother was very young, perhaps seventeen; she looked scared, and annoyed. She and all of the women avoided the Ustaša's eyes, hoping they were invisible, hoping for the first time in their lives that they were ugly and that their children made them unwanted by men. The child screamed. Its mother smothered its face in her clothing and stared into the dirt, her lips quivering with cold or fear, it was impossible to say. She turned from side to side rhythmically, rocking and shushing. The baby quieted, but gasped a little, as if it was choking. Sava wanted to rip the child from the mother's arms and run away with it, to feel its small, helpless head wedged in the crook of her neck, to



smell the new sourness of its skin. She wanted it to breathe normally. What if this mother suffocated the child? At least, Sava thought, to smother one's own child was better than how an Ustaša guard would silence a crying baby. The thought made her pull Dušan into the folds of her skirt. He coughed. Sava's skirts were foul after traveling.

To her left the group of women, the elderly and pregnant and very young and delicate, grew in number. Several were crying. Others looked dazed, their lips parted lightly, their eyes large and glassy and round. An old Jewess tried to comfort a little Serb girl, wiping her tears with the back of her wrinkled hand. The young girl, who was perhaps nine, spat at the Jewess.

“Don't touch me! I know what you are!”

The woman remained calm, but withdrew her hand and pulled it back into a fold of her coat in a single, smooth, and unhesitating motion, as if she had never reached for the child at all. Instead, she turned to another woman, a refined-looking Serb of about thirty-five whose white cheeks were streaked with tears. The two women held hands. The child who had spat earlier hugged herself, and glared at Sava's group of women. Sava turned away. She could not face the girl's confusion and wrath, and the feeling that the girl's glare would be eaten by flames or covered by dirt before nightfall.

The end of the line arrived. The women were divided and the men behind the gates had been driven away by Ustaša guards, who beat them and jeered. Sava assumed the men were being taken to the barracks.

“Don't look for your man” a woman beside her had whispered, catching the subtle movement of Sava's eyes toward the group of men. “If you don't want to end up like that

Jew girl, don't look for him! These Croats, they'll kill you for the fun of it. They are not to be trusted."

The group to the left was a ragged crew. There were small girls and frail, elderly women whose skin hung in swinging folds from their cheeks and jaws. Pregnant women and fat women, the sick, and one young woman with a large birthmark on her face all stood, awaiting a fate, looking around at their company and knowing they were meant for a worse fate than the women staring at them from the right. The air was fairly quiet, except for some quiet crying and praying. This was because there were no Roma women. If there had been Roma women, the wailing and screaming would have hurt Sava's ears – the gypsies did not restrain themselves. Every few years Stojan would take her to a festival in the nearest city. They would walk for hours, Sava wearing her cleanest, brightest clothing, Stojan smoking good tobacco and whistling. Entering the city they were always compelled to walk through a few streets the Roma claimed, though the same Roma hardly ever lived there from one year to the next. The sounds and smells of the Roma, the melodious fiddles and the screams of their rowdy, begging children, the acrid stink of rotten vegetables and sweaty skin – had there been Roma with them this would not be a quiet scene of despair, but a view of mourning and keening of which only the Roma were capable, of the strong smells of the Roma streets.

Sava looked up, without lifting her head, to examine the guards. Some of them loafed about, smiling and smoking, pointing at the prettier women, laughing with their fellow guards. The men dividing them into lines and standing by piles of personal belongings, waiting for the next step in processing, were as grim-faced and unreadable as bulls. One

by a small pile of jewelry reminded Sava of Saint John, barefaced and babyish, just a boy.

The Serbs were being stripped of themselves and their belongings, placed in groups and piles, divided by age and looks, the poor lumped with the rich, all the impurities of the NDH in the camp yard. Sava wondered which third were they? Pavelić would kill, convert, expel them by thirds – what was their fate?

A man in his sixties attempted to remove his wedding ring for the guard with the jewelry pile. The prisoner wore a gigantic black coat which swallowed his broad shoulders. Short white hair grew across his head from ear to ear, as if the barber placed a hood over the man's head and shaved along the edge of the fabric. Broad, saggy cheeks, a brief fleshy nose under round glasses, and deep lines on either side of his thin mouth suggested a lifetime of smiling. He grimaced now, squinting and breathing erratically as he pulled the thin band of gold from his finger. Sava wondered how long his ring had been one with his finger, if his wife was still living, and if she was where might she be? Would she cry watching her husband wrest his band from that fleshy finger, his kind face contorted in pain and his breath expelled in short, painful gasps which turned white and misty and then disappeared? With a small cry the ring came off. Sava imagined she could hear the clink of the small metal band falling onto the pile of similar tokens through the noise of the prisoners and the guards. One of the young guards placed a hand on the man's back, fingers half-splayed and gentle as he indicated with slight pressure which direction the man was to move. The old prisoner wiped his eyes and walked slowly to the indicated group of the elderly, pulling the lapels of his coat closer together over his broad chest against the cold.

Serbs. There were so many Serbs. Sava looked back towards the young guard who had gently moved the man. The same guard was screaming at a young and beautiful woman who was clutching a locket and shaking her head. Spittle flew from his mouth, and he was red in the face. He slapped her. Sava did not have to imagine that noise, though she could not hear it. She knew the sound of a slap too well. The locket joined the piled valuables with the briefest sound, causing the rings, necklaces, bracelets, and cuffs to slide in a small avalanche of dull gold, jingling. When it was Sava's turn she easily slipped her ring from Stojan off her finger and let it roll from her hand into the pile. The cool air on her outstretched, and now bare, fingers was refreshing.

“Come!” An Ustaša guard gestured at the group of old and delicate and pregnant people. The defiant little Serb girl crossed her arms over her chest and marched over. Her face grew tight as if concentrating on every muscle of the face would make her look less-scared to her companions, though she said nothing to them now. The girl walked alone, just a few steps behind the old Jewess she had insulted, whose arm now cradled around the shoulders of the elegant Serb. The two women and the group walked into the complex and turned right before disappearing from Sava's view.

The rest of them were gathered together and brought into the belly of the camp. Sava heard two guards talking by one of the barracks. They were to join another group of women and children to be taken to another part of the complex, a tower of some sort, where they would be given work. Inside the camp smelled of wood, and it was overpowering. Sava felt she might faint from the smell and the alien shapes of the camp, all sharp, rectangular barracks and brick buildings farther out, the smell of piss under lyme and wet straw and a prisoner sitting on a bucket in rags outside a building. Sava

could smell brine and shoe leather and hear the dull and halting clanking of the smithies. It was overwhelming. The sounds were loud, but fell heavily in still air and the stench of the camp seemed to coat a smell even stronger – human fear.

“Dragan, get the other women and children. We’re taking them to The Tower.” An old Ustaša called to another guard.

“Yes, sir.” This other Croat, Dragan, moved fluidly up from his seat on a wooden crate where he had been quietly sipping water from a canteen. He walked away from the group, moving towards the earth corridor formed by two of the barracks.

A few moments later a soft cacophony of wails and muttering, of curses and sobs floated above the barracks as it moved towards Sava’s group.

“Come on, come on.” The guard Dragan coaxed the women, his voice neither harsh nor soft, but simple and commanding. He was slender, with a large, curved nose, thick eyelashes, and a brief, wide dusting of hollow marks over his cheeks and jaw and forehead. His gait was unselfconscious, no posturing, but an easy, slow stride. His right arm swung by his side and his left rested on a pistol at his hip. “Here are the rest of them, sir.”

Sava looked into the group of women as they approached. A woman in the group fell to the ground. From her hand rolled a thick gold watch. Dušan ran from Sava to pick it up for the fallen woman.

“Dušan!” Sava yelled.

“Mama!” She heard Dušan cry. The shadow of a shovel fell over the woman on the ground. It was over the woman’s face, ready to smash down, and in its arc it would meet with Dušan’s body. The shovel was held by the old Ustaša, who was lifting it high for a

death blow. If Dušan were next, he would die. His skull could not withstand a blow from a shovel.

“Debilasic!” Dragan yelled. The shovel paused in the air. Dragan walked over to the old, panting guard and placed a gentle hand on the shovel’s length. “The crops and bricks require work. She looks young and strong. Why don’t we just let her go for today? Here, take the watch.” Dragan grabbed the gold timepiece from the ground and tossed it to the guard. “The boy too. I don’t think he was trying to steal it.”

The old Croat lowered his shovel, wiped his forehead, and muttered to Dragan, “Well then you get the bitch back in line and tell her to stop falling down and keeping what is ours.” He threw his shovel to the ground. The other woman began to rise from the ground. Sava rushed forward, grabbed Dušan, and retreated. The old guard grunted before walking over to a few gathered guards. Sava could hear him asking for a cigarette from a fellow Ustaša.

“Get up and get in line.” Dragan said, looking down at the woman. His voice was firm and he did not offer her his hand.

When they finally integrated the two groups of women and children, Sava wrapped Dušan in her arms and held him to her with a desperate strength. “You will not leave me again, Dušan. You must not leave me, for anything. If you do, we will die. We must pray never to be separated again. We must always pray, Dušan.” Dušan did not answer. He just sucked on his hand and looked around him with widened eyes, disinterested.

They both stayed quiet, Sava thoughtful, Dušan occupied with sucking his fist as they were lined up with the other women and children and marched out for physical labor in another camp in the complex.

## **Isak**

Isak was relieved when he was assigned the tannery at Brickworks. Work meant that death could be avoided, at least for a little while. During processing the guard had asked him about his profession. The Ustaša had sat at the table outside. It was cold, and the man's face was as red as the prisoners. The guard's nose was dripping and shiny on the inside rim of his long nostrils, but he did not seem to notice because he did not wipe at his nose. The guard had no gloves and a mouth as firmly set frowning as a line of bricks in mortar. He touched a finger to his nose, but it remained just as wet and shiny as before. He placed his pen to the paper. Isak wondered how long the ink could remain unfrozen out in the cold.

"Name." The guard asked. His mouth barely moved. He and Isak had the same accent. Zagreb.

"Isak Erlih."

"Profession."

"Tanning."

The guard looked up and glared at Isak. "You don't look like a tanner, Jew."

"I have tanned plenty." Isak had never spent more than a year at his uncle's tannery outside Split, and not since he was a teenager, but he remembered the steps and he was strong enough to lift the hides from their brine and stretch them on their thick wooden frames.

"Tannery at Brickworks. You will work under Andela." The guard touched his wet nose with his finger before tearing a piece of paper from his book, signing it, and handing

the paper to Isak. A damp dot the size of the guard's fingerprint was on the lower right hand corner. Isak did not touch it. "Next."

There was no food for the incoming prisoners that night, or all the next day. Isak wondered if he would be strong enough to work in the tannery. Lifting hides and scraping hair, remnant muscle, and fat from newly peeled skins was difficult work. The second day Isak was at Jasenovac he was brought to the tannery, with two other men, another communist and a Muslim. They didn't speak. The Muslim was a partisan. The communist was a big man, with thick black hair on his forearms, the backs of his hands, and fingers, but his skin was very pale.

On the side of the building could be seen remnant piles of animal skulls and decaying animal heads, hooves, ears, and snouts. Against the walls rested frames of various sizes with what would become rawhide and soft leather stretched and pulled to drum-taut straightness. The door to the tannery was blackened where one placed a hand to push it open. Isak wondered if it was black from all the dirt and dried blood on tanner hands.

The guards guided the prisoners inside. Isak choked as he walked in the door. The building was filled with the smell of animal dung and thick blood, of rancid fat, lye, and the heavy scent of matted animal hair. It was a cramped tannery. The vats of brine occupied the middle space, and the ceiling could barely be seen through all the hides hanging from the beams. Thick wooden tables in the back of the room were crowded by thin and dwindling men scudding the hair from the skins that had just finished soaking. Handfuls of animal fat studded the floor. The slick sound of a dull knife scraping hairs from wet hide, followed by the thick plop of wet fat on the floorboards, rose above the steady hum of the other tannery activities. The men at the back of the tannery did not



pause in their work even to observe the newcomers, though Isak was straining to look at them. Their faces were thin and sharp, their eyes focused beneath their shaved scalps. They seemed inhuman, moving quietly in their tanning aprons, without laughing, their skin as taut as the hides on frames surrounding them, grey and near-dead.

The foreman was not an Ustaša, but a Croat hired to run the tannery. He was a well-fed man whose pants were too short. The fabric of his trousers, stained with old blood and salt, pulled tightly over his thighs, which were thick and round. Isak thought he looked like a man who would delight in telling a person that their brother was embezzling them for money. When he spoke his voice was a high-pitched and thin.

“You’re scudding today. You know what to do?” Isak nodded. “Good. Now get to the back. Danijel there will get you a knife. You’ll also be cleaning up every afternoon. We finish here at six o’clock. You will stay until eight.”

Isak walked to the back. He let himself step on the drying fat and dried blood on the floor. He could feel it give beneath his shoes, the soft squash of animal and the sharp pebbles of grit, dirt, and splinters. There were several tables in the rear of the building. A man worked at each table, with a hide and a large knife. They were scraping the remaining hair from the hides, and the fat, methodically. Isak noticed that each man was sweating, though they moved liked sick men, slow, laborious. A man handed Isak an apron and a large knife, and pointed to a table.

“Work as fast as you can. I’ll explain later.”

Isak nodded. After slipping the apron over his head and tying it behind his waist, he walked over to the pile of wet hides and lifted one. It hung heavily and dripped onto Isak’s shoes. He slapped it onto the table and pulled a corner up towards his chest with

one hand, aiming the long edge of the knife along the skin as if it was a caress before pulling down, stripping the hide of all remaining softness.

By six Isak's shoulders felt as if they had been scudded, as if his own skin had been stretched and scraped and placed back on his body with nothing to support the human shape. The other men trudged from the tannery. They did not speak or look at Isak as they passed him. His hands burned from the salt-soaked skins and the wooden handle of his knife. Danijel waited until the other men had left. The foreman nodded his thick face in Danijel's direction before passing him a cigarette and a match and walking out. Danijel carefully rolled the bottom seam of his pants leg up once, placed the cigarette and match in the crease, and rolled the seam over on itself again. He stood up.

"You might survive this job, you know." Danijel nodded his head at Isak once. "Then again, you're a Jew."

Isak was silent.

Danijel laughed. "No Jews are going to survive this war. No Roma, either. Have you heard about the roundup in Split?"

Isak shook his head, which was pounding with blood. Split. Ana. His hands began to shake. Isak felt an acidic liquid pool on his tongue. He swallowed it back. Danijel looked coldly at Isak's face before continuing.

"Split was a slaughterhouse. They had them in the center, all the Jews and the Serbs, all the commies. Everyone they could find, anyway. The Italians are going to take Split, everyone says, so the Ustaše tried to make sure there was no one for the Italians to protect. They killed the Roma on the street and left them there. But the rest --women,

children, the old ones – were put together and shot down. And then they ran out of bullets.”

Isak blanched. He scrubbed at a table with a rag and bit his tongue. Danijel continued.

“You know the Ustaše don’t need bullets. They made them lie down, on the pavement, forced them down, so they could slit their throats. Fuckers. Can you imagine? Some of them didn’t know what to do, so they just obeyed. They just lay down and allowed themselves to die without a squeal. That’s not like you Jews, generally,” Danijel smiled. Isak hung the rag with which he cleaned the table on his apron tie strings. “Usually, you Jews squeal and cry about everything you can. There was one woman I heard, like that.”

Isak began to check the barrels of brine for fullness. “They are telling stories about her, all of us are. The Serbs, even the Roma. She was an ugly woman – young, with big Jew features, too big for her face. And when it came to be her turn to lie down and die in Split she pulls out a blade – I heard it was a small one, just a little knife for bread and fruit, really – and she stabbed the Ustaša bastard in the face before he can get to her! She was very different, according to everyone. An ugly bitch, but one who sticks in the mind. Screamed like a banshee, about citizens and the people. They think she was a commie. They’re calling her ‘Split’s Mother’ now, and ‘The Saint of Split.’ Not everyone knew she was a Jew – the Serbs keep saying she was a Serb. Ignorant sons of bitches.”

“You’re not a Serb?” Isak asked, swallowing the thin vomit that had filled his mouth. Split. A Jewess with features too-large and the will to murder an Ustaša. Could that have been his Ana?

“Croat. But my people don’t seem to like partisans.”

“What happened to the woman? The one that killed the Ustaša?” Isak asked. He was cleaning the knives carefully, rubbing the hair and grease away from the blades. Danijel snorted.

“What would happen? Three of the guards raped her right in the street and they slit her throat anyway. But she killed the one guard when she stabbed him in the face, even if she couldn’t protect herself from the other three. And that has to count for something, when a woman kills like that. It has to count for something.”

Isak tried to hide his face as he cleaned the knives. He could feel the blush of anger and sorrow as his face contracted and his eyes watered. He wiped his eyes with his upper arm. It stung. He must have dirtied his sleeves earlier with the brine’s salt or hairs from the hides.

“Are you alright there, Abraham?” Danijel’s brow contracted.

“My name is Isak.”

“It does not matter to me.” Danijel shrugged.

“I will be alright. I always am alright in the end.”

“If you say so.” Danijel replied, shrugging again. “Do you know how to finish up here? I don’t believe that you were a tanner before coming to Jasenovac.” Isak shook his head. His back was against Danijel and his entire body was tightened, to prevent himself from shaking. “When you are finished, you know which barracks to go to. Don’t be too late, or they will beat you. And don’t take off your shoes tonight, or they will be stolen.”

Isak nodded without turning around. Danijel checked his rolled-up trouser leg for his cigarette and match. Once he assured himself they were still safe he left the tannery. The door clattered behind him and, for the first time in days, Isak experienced silence. He

steadied himself on the corner of a table and stuffed his fist, grimy with the tannery, fully into his mouth and bit into it. There was blood, but he did not scream.

Ana. It could only have been Ana. ‘Split’s Mother’? She would have laughed. Isak shook uncontrollably. His legs, already weak from the day, could barely remain under his torso. Isak had begged her patience for six weeks, never doubting she would accede, would give him the time he needed to sort affairs, to check bank accounts and track family goods, never doubting that in six weeks they would be together in Split.

Isak could not complain. She had been patient with him. Ana had left Zagreb for family, begging him to leave with her. In the end, they both left with the Ustaše anyway.

## **Dragan**

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.”

Dragan intoned as he knelt and his hands moved down over the rosary, the curves of the wooden beads whittling themselves into his fingertips. He shivered and reached for his coat, which hung from a wooden spike on the wall beside his cot. The other men’s raucous cheers bounced off the walls and escaped through the cracks of the boards, meeting the cold air that pushed its way into the guards’ barracks and chilled them while they slept. The other men were playing cards and drinking a homemade rakia. They did not have much to bet, and Dragan could never help smiling at the objects they wagered: shoelaces, coins, bits of soap, hard bread rolls, cigarettes, mallets, and – in what was one of the most passionate and hard-lost games he had ever witnessed – a young man’s rosary from his grandfather. The young man, thinking Dragan was too green to win at cards, bet

him the rosary after he heard him ask the camp commandant if there was a priest that visited to take confession. The NDH was, after all, a Catholic state.

The bet was accepted with little fuss, and Dragan watched the rosary on the table, its wooden beads worn and smelling of pine. The attached crucifix was so old that Jesus's feet were smoothed into the wood, giving him the streamlined appearance of a mummy as he became one with the cross, though his face and crown remained sharp with features. Dragan won the bet easily – the young man was a peasant, a child with scraps of paper and a bottle of rakia. Dragan did not feel sorry for the young man as he placed the loser's rosary around his own neck, kissed the figure of Jesus, and tucked it inside his shirt. If the man did not use his grandfather's rosary, it was better that someone who cared about the Church did.

Dragan put one hand on his cot and hoisted himself from his kneeling position on the floor to an upright posture. The rosary was kissed and carefully placed back under his shirt. He grabbed his cap from a hook on the wall, and tightened his black cravat. The grey hat, which looked as jaunty in '39, now fit loosely on his head and the white squares in the emblem had become a musty yellow color. He pushed the chamber of his pistol to the side and counted his remaining bullets. Three. After those bullets were gone he would have no ammunition. After they were gone he knew he would have to start carrying a hammer. At least that is what he was told by his fellow guards, the ones who had come here with pistols and would leave with bare hands. At this point in the war they couldn't always keep even simple tools around, even for the guards. He had seen a grave in the process of being dug by two recently-imprisoned Chetniks. Their faces had, until a few days ago, worn long, thick beards, which could be seen because the skin around their

eyes and nose were tanned and smooth, and their chins were pale and red from irritation. They were digging with their hands.

Dragan pulled his coat on before walking outside. The air was chilly, but warming with spring. He could still see his breath in the morning as white and thick as if he were smoking a cigarette. Today he was scheduled to work in processing, as an introduction to Jasenovac. It would be his responsibility to ensure that the NDH acquired all the valuables and personal possessions of the prisoners.

“The Poglavnik wants us to act as the Nazis do, with efficiency, like professionals. It is our duty to ensure that those threatening the NDH are immobilized and contained. Do your duty – protect the true Church.” The captain who told Dragan this was a very respectable man, with a large family, a deep faith, and an admirable ability to drink German beer without slurring his words.

Dragan walked towards the camp entrance, where the new arrivals would come in and their belongings would be collected. A priest was going to be present today. Dragan had made sure one would be there if any of the prisoners wished to convert before or during processing. He had been told that any wishing to convert would be set aside and given lighter work and better treatment in the camp than those remaining Orthodox. Jews, of course, were not allowed to convert – they couldn't be trusted, and a Jew could never be a non-Jew. It was impossible. This would be Dragan's first time handling prisoners outside of a village, however. Until now he had been placed in labor village outside of Karlovac. There he had supervised a small plantation-like setting with some Catholic priests. It was nearer the coast, which means they had several visits from Italian divisions. Dragan liked the Italians and the priests. The priests, Italians, and Dragan

would swap stories, saint emblems, and the occasional booze the craftier ones had pinched from Serb homes along their way. The priests told the best stories, about bishops snoring during homilies, baptizing infants while hung-over, and, of course, the miracles they had witnessed and the Lord's vision for the NDH as a refuge for Croats and a future center of their faith. "Every knee shall bow and tongue confess that you are Lord," murmured Dragan as he walked. That was the future of the NDH and the Poglavnik, odd as he could be, was "a true warrior for our Lord and the Church, a servant of God and protector of our faith who works tirelessly to return to us Croats our ancestral lands and faith." This was said by an old-time Ustaša over a summer fire, who had served beside Pavelić since the very beginning.

The night was warm and dark, and the men had unbuttoned their uniforms and taken their shoes from off their feet. The prisoners were asleep after a day in the fields. Dragan had a stiff neck, and was massaging it with his right hand. A small cup of fresh coffee, thick and dark and sweetened with a little bit of sugar taken from a Jewish store in the neighboring town, was balanced in Dragan's left hand. The man, whose name was Karadžić, had been with Pavelić in exile and had returned with him when Mussolini restored Pavelić's rights and installed him as the Croats' rightful leader.

"What is he like? Pavelić?" Dragan had asked. He sipped his coffee. It tasted like pre-war Yugoslavia, in the mountains.

Karadžić laughed. "Like a dog in a fight. Single-minded devotion. Fierce instincts. A killer. Not intelligent like the Fuhrer, and not as cunning as The Duce, but he hails from here. No one else had the guts – no one – to fight for us the way Pavelić does. Herr Hitler is pretty inspiring. I heard one of his speeches, a recording. It sent chills down my spine,



just to listen to it. My German is bad, but the man's voice..." Karadžić paused, sipped his own coffee, set it on the ground. He leaned back against a tree. They were sitting in the woods, and the flames were dulling to embers. "That man's voice made me want to fight for Germany. Pavelić doesn't have that voice, but he is a soldier to the core. He will kill for us Croats, he will die for us."

"Is he a religious man?" Dragan asked. Karadžić snorted.

"He's a Croat, isn't he?"

"Wasn't he born in Bosnia?" Another man, on the opposite side of the fire, interjected. Karadžić flicked his hand as he sipped his coffee, as if the man's words were pesky insects.

"He's not a Croat of the Islamic Faith, if that's what you're trying to say." Karadžić placed his hands behind his head and leaned back. "He's more of a Croat than you or I, be sure of that. The land bred him. That's why he can't stand to see it overrun by Serbs."

"Yes, but is he a church man?" Dragan asked, tilting his body forward.

"Pavelić is the man keeping the Chetniks and Jews from taking away your right to be a church man. He doesn't have time for it himself. If he wasn't so preoccupied defending Croats like us, I am sure he'd be chanting his "Hail Mary's" just like the rest of us superstitious sons-of-bitches."

Dragan sipped his coffee and remained silent. Unbelief in the Poglavnik did not mean, he supposed, that the NDH would be anything less than a Catholic state. He had already spoken to a priest about it, Father Jovanko. They sat in the monastery's kitchen, cleaning and cutting large cabbages as heavy as stones.

“Should I join the Ustaša, Father?” Dragan had asked him. “They are quite radical. Should I perhaps serve only in the army?”

“What do you wish to do?” Huge piles of shredded cabbage surrounded the father as he sat at the table. His hands were stained a light green and he was intent on pulling rotten or wilting leaves from the outside of the ripe cabbages.

“I wish to become a priest. I want to join the church.”

“Now is not the time for priests, Dragan. Now is the time for soldiers.” Father Jovanko picked up a few threads of cabbage between his fingers and placed them carefully on his tongue. He closed his mouth and crunched down on the strands with his yellowed teeth. Dragan thought it sounded like small bones cracking in the father’s mouth.

“But the Ustaša?”

“The Ustaša serve God with their wrath so that Croats who have been led astray by false teachings and idols may be returned to the true Church.” The priest did not stumble. Dragan wondered how many times the father had rehearsed that sentence in his mind.

“But I am not a wrathful man. I would rather stay here. I could help convert them, as you have done in the past.” Dragan began placing heaps of cabbage in a bucket. They would make a brine with salt and water and compress it for weeks to make their sour cabbage. Then the father and the monks would divide the cabbage and use it for soups or eat it with meat. The father chewed some more cabbage.

“Yes, but Dragan this is war and you are a man. The Poglavnik, as well as God, needs your prayers, your loyalty, and your pistol. God’s will is that this land be restored to Him. Obey God, Dragan. Join the Poglavnik’s Ustaša.”

Dragan was reminded of the German war posters. Perhaps the priest had heard too many slogans. “What if they demand I kill?” Killing was a sin.

“Then you must kill. The Ustaša will not ask you to murder. They will ask you to deliver justice on those who would prevent you from worshipping in the Church. The Serbs would have you kissing their painted idols. They are our misled brothers, and so we must treat them with love. But do not confuse love with softness, Dragan. Those who truly love will chastise with the rod. Those who do not love will never correct. Listen to your Father, Dragan. The Church needs Ustaša with your faith.”

Dragan had listened to the priest. The priest had died at the hands of the Chetniks, who had burned the father’s home and fellow priests before slitting his throat. They had carted away barrels of his cabbage in brine, to eat by their fires. The father had, with his last breaths, begged the Chetniks to return to the church, to repent, to abandon their heresies for the love of the faith. They ignored him and killed him, according to a letter Dragan received from his mother, who wrote in detail what she had heard from a prisoner in the town who had watched the entire scene firsthand.

“Their black beards were wet with the father’s blood,” his mother wrote, her script small and uneven. “They looked like bears after a kill, and their shoulders were draped in great belts of bullets. You couldn’t see their waists because their belts were so heavy with grenades.”

Now Dragan recited his prayers in the morning and at night. He also contacted the nearest priest by letter before his arrival to ensure there would always be one mass at least held nearby for any Ustaša to take Holy Communion and confess, and to aid any

Serbs wishing to convert. He was sure the hearts of his fellow Croats were heavy with the blood he knew spilled daily in the camp.

Dragan pulled his coat closer to him as he walked after his prayers. He passed the brick building that housed the tannery. Outside were stretched hides of various animals, and in front of the building were makeshift gallows. The gallows in the tannery yard creaked in the wind. Dragan tilted his head forward. He whispered to himself as he walked past the beams.

“Lamb of God. You take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on me.”

The top middle beam – which served as the central line for the hanging – had begun to splinter from the weight of the bodies. One of the ropes was very long. It might have been used for a boy, a boy just old enough to hang. “Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with me.”

### **Vlatko**

Vlatko’s arm was scaly, like the little lizards that wriggled on the hot stones in the summertime near the coast. The shanties he slept in outside of town provided little protection against the wind that blew over the snow in the winter and into the camp, swirling around the camp until it reeked of ashes and excrement. Now the spring was coming, and it could be hot in the fields. There was no soap for a Roma. He spoke to another Roma – Moša -- about there being no way to wash themselves as they sat in front of the shack they had been assigned outside the camp. Cockroaches scurried along the edges of the four bare walls, but there were no mice. The last one had been caught about a month ago.

“There is no soap, not a damn bit of it here. We touch the dead, we sleep in the wind, and we are given no food. How is a man supposed to survive? Even a gypsy needs more than air to live.”

Moša was busy scratching his teeth with a chipped fingernail. Semi-circles of black filth were embedded along his cuticles and underneath their slightly rounded tips. The creases in his fingers were a darker brown than his skin, and Moša’s face, which had been thin, but bold and smooth, when he first came to Jasenovac, now looked like a hollowed-out gourd. Many of the Roma looked similarly. It was as if the Ustaša had scooped the plump flesh from inside the solid gypsies and tossed it out, leaving nothing but thin, dry shells. Many had even stopped singing.

“You haven’t noticed, Vlatko? The gypsies aren’t supposed to live here.” Moša replied. A small, sharp noise sounded out. One of Moša’s black teeth had come loose, and he held it in his hand. It looked like a grey pebble. Moša’s face fell, but then he laughed. “Well, I suppose I won’t get a toothache in that one anymore.”

Vlatko spit at the ground. “A person doesn’t need their teeth here anyway. If there is nothing to eat and no women to fuck, we don’t need to care about our teeth falling out. We’re all turning ugly anyway. But soap...if I just had some soap, I could live longer than any of you bastards.”

Moša scratched his head and muttered. “Some powder for the lice is what I need. I don’t mind the dirt everywhere else – God knows I never was much for all the fussing about my looks – but the lice is killing me.”

“Do you know where I could find some soap?” Vlatko scratched at his pubic hair. Every time he walked into the sunlight he could feel the buggers crawling over him,

scurrying for the darker, more pungent recesses beneath his clothing. Occasionally he would take off his clothes and shake his trousers and shirt outside to rid himself of the extra louse eggs, but it never seemed to do a thing for more than fifteen minutes – after that he would start itching again, but by then he couldn't take his clothes off because he would be marching to dig a new grave or stuff the Sava River with corpses.

“I heard that one of the Ustaša bitches gave the boys soap yesterday.” Moša rubbed the back of his neck, which was leathery from the sun, before resuming care of his teeth with his fingernails.

“The boys? You mean the brats running around?”

“Da.”

“Why did she do that?” Vlatko asked.

Moša snorted. “Maybe she likes little boys.”

“I don't have anything to trade a boy for soap.” Vlatko scratched at his testicles. The lice were worse in the warmth.

“Don't trade with boys. Take it from a sick one. Soap won't help a sick child. They're in hell here anyway.” Moša was always one for practicality. Vlatko had known him outside the camp. Survival meant a blindness to all others needs, in Moša's mind.

“Boys need soap. They can't live without it. It's what kept me healthy all these years. The nuns told me so.”

“You're a Catholic?” Moša asked. Vlatko could hear the unspoken question. How could he be a Catholic when the Ustaše were Catholics?

“Yes.”

“And you still believe in God?” Moša stopped scraping his teeth for a moment.

“I think so.”

“I can’t believe in God here. I believed like the Serbs did, before I came here. I prayed to the Holy Mother every day for a year before they came for us. I wasn’t like the others. I saw the signs, and prayed that we would be spared. That my family would be spared if I was faithful.”

“Where is your family?” Vlatko was sure he knew the answer – it would be the same place every family in Jasenovac had gone.

“My wife and daughter were sent to the tower. I heard from a Roma that came with me here that they died. He said he saw them, and buried them outside the camp. He said they were covered in shit. Thin as skeletons. They don’t feed Roma here. Shitting killed a lot of them. My son caught typhus soon after coming in with me. They brought them to the Sava – the sick ones. Killed them there. Didn’t even bury them. Just left them to rot in the water on their way to Belgrade.” Moša picked his ear.

Vlatko remained silent. Every time he shoved a body into the Sava he thanked God it was not him. For all he knew he could have been there when Moša’s son was killed. Vlatko may have been the one to leave the son’s body to rot in the water. Moša knew this, but neither would mention it. They couldn’t help who discarded whose dead in Jasenovac, and a gypsy’s dead mattered the least of all to the rest of the world.

The next morning Vlatko woke coughing and sneezing. Early morning always brought with it new anxieties. Living through another day of hunger was a war itself, but Vlatko had other reasons to worry. A bad coughing fit could mean death in the camp, where a pale face or a sneeze could send a man to a field to be shot by the afternoon or to be burnt

alive across camp. He heard rumors of the sick being buried alive – the Ustaše figured that if they were almost dead, a burial would simply quicken the dying process. After what Vlatko had seen in the camp, there was little he doubted about Croat cruelty.

The morning was warm, a spring day. A few children scurried around the camp, but not children in the way he had always thought of children. These children were not simply mischievous, they were animals -- small, wild things always on the hunt for scraps of food and things to steal. Pieces of cloth to wrap around their feet, crumbs of bread or rotten vegetables, strings to tie their shirts closer to their browned skin. The older ones screamed curses at Ustaša and Roma alike. In a camp-child's eyes it was not color of skin or religion that determined the enemy, but their relationship to your food.

The camp was still this early in the morning, when the guards were groggy and the prisoners were hopeful for food. Vlatko walked a little around the houses, which were Serb homes before the Ustaše claimed Jasenovac for their own and killed the Serbs living in the surrounding villages. Killed them, or interned them. Vlatko walked towards the edge of the village, where it was dusty from foot traffic and the sun beat most heavily during the day. A small child of the camps squatted there, in the dust. He looked like a five-year old on the outside, but Vlatko guessed he was seven. He had large, accusing eyes and a head smooth and bulbous. His tunic opened at a V, revealing the geography of a chest covered in ridges and valleys of thin skin and bones. The sleeve of his shirt was torn at the shoulder and hung limply over his delicate upper arm. The cuffs were soiled and dark brown. Several little things were piled at his feet, as if he were a small bird collecting straw for a nest. Vlatko could distinguish a bit of blackened bread, as dark and hard as a pebble, a sharpened stick, half a turnip, string, and a piece of soap. The soap



was grey and knobby. The child clearly did not know how to use it – smudges of dirt on his face and legs gave the child a grotesque appearance, like a small black demon with large, suspicious eyes.

“Boy.” Vlatko called out. The child turned. His eyes burned in his face and his mouth --perhaps the smallest two lips Vlatko had ever seen -- were pulled together into a thin line, like an adult preparing to scold a misbehaving child. Vlatko wondered if he had underestimated the boy’s age. “Do you speak?” Vlatko asked. He changed to the Serb’s language. “What do you have in your pile, boy?” The boy continued to stare with his burning eyes, his head slightly bowed as he gazed up into the grown gypsy’s eyes. “Is that your soap?” the child gazed at him mutely as he squatted on the ground, his legs propped beneath him like a small frog ready to spring away.

Vlatko walked slowly closer to the boy’s pile. “I want to look at what you have there,” Vlatko assured him. The boy wrapped his arms around his ankles and began rocking slightly forwards and backwards. Vlatko stood a few inches from the boy. He reached a hand out to take the soap – the child was a survivor, Vlatko could tell. He didn’t know what to do with soap. Better for it to go to someone whose life was endangered by sickness, someone who knew what it meant to be clean. The warm, grainy texture of the soap was nearly in Vlatko’s fingers when he felt a sharp pressure on his hand and arm. Teeth, crooked, grey, and full of gaps, were clamped into Vlatko’s brown hand. The child’s tongue wriggled in its mouth and against Vlatko’s skin, leaving a filmy saliva on his fingers. The child’s arms pumped from side to side, hitting Vlatko at every point within reach. Growls, fierce and naïve, emanated from the child’s mouth and were muffled by the flesh trapped between his teeth.

The surprise and pain of the child's bite startled Vlatko, and his body wanted to retreat. He was not strong enough for violence. But the pile of small goods remained in the dust – bread, soap, the withered half of a turnip – within reach. Vlatko's belly was empty. They had not fed the Roma like the other prisoners, and anything he ate he took from someone else. A brief cracking sound came from the boy's mouth. One of his teeth must have broken. Vlatko yelped. The boy kept staring at him, even as he bit deeper into Vlatko's fingers and sucked at the thin blood welling up from the punctured skin as if it was milk from a breast.

Vlatko took a deep breath and kicked the child in the stomach.

The little gypsy flew like a bug flicked by a finger, rolling three times in the camp dust before his body slowed and stopped. Vlatko scooped up the bread, turnip, string, and soap and wrapped them to his chest as he ran back to the camp. He glanced backwards as he neared the barracks. The child was lying on the ground in the same place as Vlatko had left him, but his head had turned and he was staring at the camp, at Vlatko. The only thing left in the boy's pile was his stick, for which Vlatko had no need.

The soap Vlatko had stolen smelled terrible. It was full of ashes and grainy, and left a greasy film on his skin when he used it with a little water from a bowl he left out for rain. But his skin was lighter and brighter, and his cough subsided slightly that day. The turnip was chewy and rotten, and Vlatko soaked the bread in some water to soften it enough for eating, but his stomach felt heavy and full for the first time in weeks.

Near midday Moša approached Vlatko. They were working in a field. The soil was so dark and rich Vlatko wanted to lower himself to the ground and press his face into it, to soak up the health of the earth.

“Did you hear what happened this morning?” Moša asked him. It was their break for food. For those prisoners who had food, anyway. Moša and Vlatko just shared half a cigarette one of the Ustaša had thrown on the ground a few days ago. Moša had scooped it up and stored it by tying it into the waist of his trousers. Vlatko had promised Moša a favor in return for the shared cigarette. One never knew what the Ustaše would become angry about, and it was simply better to hide everything than to make them angry at a prisoner, for any reasons, because it might not be the prisoner at fault who was blamed or punished.

“No.” Vlatko inhaled on the end of the cigarette. The wind blew the smoke into his eyes. It stung.

“They caught a boy stealing some soap from one of the guard’s wash tables.” Moša scuffed the ground with his foot. The dirt sprayed into the air like spittle.

Vlatko squinted, and looked into the sky. “What did they do to him?”

“The sons-of-bitches tortured the little thing. Cut him up a little, and then hung him in front of the tannery. He didn’t make a sound, the whole time. They think he might have been a mute.”

Vlatko looked at his arms. They were dirty from the morning’s work in the soil. His cough had subsided, but the soap was already gone. “A mute.”

“*Da*. Poor little bastard.”

“Poor little bastard.” Vlatko repeated slowly, squinting into the sun.

## **Sava**

The smell of warm earth and new grass filled Sava and overcame the stink of sweat and filth clinging to the women around her, and probably to her as well. Sava was not ready to return to the Stara Gradiška camp. Hours in the field filled her fingernails with dirt and covered her fingertips with new callouses, but any change from the smell of rot and the quiet of starvation back at the camp was welcome. She wished the children were allowed to accompany the women to the fields. They were young, yes, and it was a very long walk, but fresh air might keep children like Dušan healthy. Sava thought of the rows of children in the tower. She had seen them once, carrying water up to a friend, and had stayed to speak to a few of them. She couldn't tell whether they were little girls or little boys. Their hair was all close-cropped and their faces equally dirty and thin. They were laying on blankets and rags as quiet as corpses. Many had rashes and were covered in their own excrement, despite the attempts of some generous souls to regularly clean them up. Thankfully her own Dušan still played outside, away from the very sick children. He hid skillfully as the slightest sign of a patrolling soldier, and Sava was proud of his ability to survive. He had learned to steal from the Muslim children. Sava hated to see it, but she wanted him to survive and so said nothing when he appeared with an extra piece of bread for his dinner.

Dušan would love this walk, Sava thought. The trees in the distance were budding green and the road was dusty and coated the women's feet in a dry, sandy powder. There were expanses of green on either side of the trail. Some of the women would talk. One time Sava overheard a conversation about how frequently one should scrub clothing in a

river to remove the disease. Her companion scoffed. “Disease? Those are demons in the body. A little bit of soap won’t heal the demons.” The other laughed lightly. “You are right, of course. Soap doesn’t heal demons.”

These were two of the women from Mount Kozara. They were alive because they took living seriously. These were not women with whom one could laugh about one’s husband or children. Sava had seen them come into the camp, the Serbs from Mount Kozara. They were ruddy and mean, like the Mountain Serbs, as Pavelić called the Bosnians. Few children had survived the march, and the ones remaining were toughened children, fighters. The adults had hollow faces and looked grim. The trek had been a long one. The head-covering of one woman had been stolen. She fought with another Serb woman who she thought might have taken it. One of the female guards hit her in the face with the butt of her gun – she had a black eye, but had recovered her head covering from the thief. Sava figured the guard’s pistol must have been empty, or else both women would have been shot for fighting.

The camp rose into view after an hour of walking. It was growing dusky, and the slight breeze had changed from refreshing to slightly bitter. It gnawed through their clothing and caused their arms and legs to be covered in gooseflesh. Sava’s teeth chattered.

“Do you have any children at the camp?” A woman to Sava’s left asked her quietly.

“Yes, a boy.” Sava did not want to talk. To risk being noticed by the guards was to risk being killed by the guards.

“What is his name?”

“Dušan.”

“That is a good name. My child’s name was Hrvoje. It is a good name.” The woman’s words were light and well-pronounced in a dreamy tone.

Sava felt her own back stiffen involuntarily. “That is a Croat name.”

“Yes, his father and I are Croats.”

Sava started. “Then what are you doing here, in Jasenovac? This isn’t your prison.”

“It is if you and your husband are partisans.”

“And what about your child?”

“Killed by a Roma when we came into the camps.”

Sava nodded. The Roma had no qualms about killing other prisoners. Sava had seen them, their swift, stealthy movements and cold glances. Every other prisoner seemed to them a threat to their survival.

“How are you here? How are you able to survive?”

The woman laughed quietly. “Well, they do give me food occasionally...”

“I mean how can you live, knowing that your child is dead?” Sava shuddered as she asked the question.

“I see the other women, the men, the children die every day, swinging from gallows or starving to death in the barracks. But I can’t seem to let go of myself. My husband died a few weeks ago.” The woman’s voice did not change as she said this. It remained calm, as if they were discussing the weather or a stranger’s death. “Is your husband alive?”

“I do not know.” Sava changed the subject. “Do you believe your child is in heaven?”

“Yes. He was baptized. That is why I do not worry. My husband and child were good Catholics. Not that you would be able to believe such a thing.”

“I know if Dušan were to die he would be in heaven, but I worry for my husband’s soul. He would never give me much money for the church. I wonder if he even believes in Christ and the Saints at times.”

“Who could believe in either here?”

Sava crossed herself as the woman said that.

“Don’t blaspheme!” Sava hissed. “Even a Catholic knows better.”

“Perhaps. I attend mass every week and I believe my son and husband are with God, but I don’t think the Muslims or you Serbs are wrong. The church is good for people like my husband. He is very ritualistic, and my son was also. They are,” she stopped, “were” she corrected herself, “Very concerned with doctrines and faith. I just liked to pray in the church. It was sometimes warmer than our house, and we didn’t have to pay for wood. My husband wouldn’t like to hear me say that, but it’s true.”

“You talk like an educated woman.”

“We came from Zagreb. Where do you and your husband come from?”

“Outside Topusko. We farm. It is not that far from Zagreb, though I had never been there until they took us. It is very loud. Very dirty.”

“It is life. The city is life.” The woman glanced around. No one would meet her eyes.

“I do not understand you. I could not live without Dušan. I do not understand how you can think a city is life, that Muslims are right. I do not know how you can live without your child.”

Sava felt bile in her mouth and her stomach knotted. That a mother could live after her only child had died seemed wrong, unnatural. A child was a mother’s flesh that could not be removed without bleeding to death, Sava thought.

The woman winced, as if Sava had hit her.

“I loved my child. Everything in me cried when they took him and when they killed him. But even you might surprise yourself. Life seems pointless when they take away your child, but I want to live. I will see my boy someday, again, but I am not going to give myself to the Ustaša to get my throat slit. I do not like pain.”

“You are in pain as it is. If it ended, you could be with your son. And your husband.” Sava grabbed the woman’s arm. She didn’t know why, but she wanted to hurt the woman, to make her understand the pain a mother should feel, the crush of death that could leave a woman in the dust without any desire to rise up and continue living. The Croat looked down at her arm, where Sava held her. Sava released her hold, embarrassed.

“Reunion with my husband is the last thing I want after I die. And you? Do you want to spend eternity with your husband?”

“When I was young, I might have answered yes.”

“Ah, isn’t that the story of every Serb. And when did you have Dušan, the true love of your life?” Sava could not tell whether the woman was smiling or sneering. It could be so hard to tell with Croats.

“Soon after we were married.

“And Dušan’s back at the camp?”

“Yes. I managed to keep him out of the tower, so he scavenges during the day. He’s small and just pokes around, so no one bothers him.”

“Shut up! We’re almost back to the camp. You can talk in the barracks after the meal.” One of the guards near them snapped. Her name was Blanka, a black curly-headed bitch who was sleeping with an officer at Brickworks, according to camp gossip.



“You might want to be careful about having your boy out in the camp, even if he doesn’t steal anything. I don’t think it will be too long before they round up some children and take them to one of the new pits. They do that every few weeks when it is quiet, and every few days when new cars come in. Jasenovac only holds a few thousand between all the camps, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“No one has told you? Every group of children they take for training now – Hitler Youth training, training for the army, or for a skill– if they tell you it’s for training, then they are going to kill the children. At first they did take some babies – the blonde, German-looking ones –for training, but they realized it wasn’t working and cost too much. What good is it to plan too much for the future if you don’t know for certain that you’ll be alive two days from now? That’s what they are thinking. If they tell you there is going to be work, your baby is probably safe, though he won’t get food or water more than a mouthful during a clean day. So he might die anyway, from the heat and later the work, especially when they are not young enough to be of much use in planting and harvesting, or if they are wasteful with seeds.”

“But there are lots of children around the camps. They wouldn’t kill just the children.” Sava had heard plenty of talk about the mass graves and adults being slaughtered, but even Croats couldn’t just kill children by the hundreds, she thought.

“I used to think they wouldn’t, either. I thought I knew Croats. We were Croats, all our neighbors were Croats, and they were good to us. But being here has taught me one thing at least.”

“What?” Sava asked.

“No one truly knows their neighbors.”

## **Isak**

It took three Ustaše to carry the skin into the tannery. They threw it onto the first table they saw. Isak winced. It was a large one, an entire skin from a mangy-looking cow with a ragged, torn edge along the neck from where some novice had cut away the head. Isak grabbed one of the corners to inspect the hide. It was still bloody, and smelled of dung – just like the rest of Jasenovac.

The guard supervising the tannery nodded and asked the Ustaše who had brought the skin, “Where did you get it?”

“A Serb family not far from here hid it in the woods. We didn’t find them until now. Thankfully Sadik was with us. He’s a real mountain boy. We led it back to the camp and Sadik cut it up near the kitchen. Thought we’d bring the skin to you. You can work with this, right?”

“Yes.” Isak replied. It was almost six. He would have to stay late, clean late, eat late to take care of it. The guards filed out the door, jostling one another like overgrown school children. Isak wondered how many of the people they had killed today alone. He had heard rumors that several of the guards could boast responsibility for hundreds of deaths, executed without a pistol.

Isak dragged the skin to the salt-water bath. He struggled to lift it, and coughed as he tipped it into the mixture. All day long he worked to suppress his coughs, to hide them from Danijel. Strength and health was the only reason a Jew like Isak could stay alive in Jasenovac, and he felt Danijel was waiting for Isak to fail. The more tanners Danijel

could send to death at Jasenovac the more the foreman depended on Danijel, and that was the one other way to stay alive in the camps.

Isak heard a noise outside, a guard screaming.

*“Malo kopile! You little bastard!”*

Isak walked to the shuttered window by the door. He unlatched it, and allowed it to swing open as he hid further back in the tannery. It would be dangerous to be caught watching the Ustaše. They liked to pull spectators into the show too much.

Outside in the yard there were several of the Ustaše. They had a boy with them, in the middle of a circle. The boy was running from guard to guard, attempting to push by their legs. His movements were frantic, erratic. He would run from one end of the circle and smash into the knees and calves of a guard, before falling onto his back in the yard as the guards laughed. The boy would then pick himself up and do it again. There was blood on his face and running down his legs, but it did not faze him. He clawed at boots, slapped calves, and tried to bite the guards' ankles. Whoever was the boy's victim would laugh and either kick the child or reach down, bending at the torso like a weak tree in the wind, and slap the child's mouth. After a few such attempts, Isak could see thin bright blood on the boy's lips, like rouge. The boy did not seem to notice the added pain, and continued to scabble against the legs of the guards as a panicked animal against fence posts.

Throughout this entire process the boy did not make a single noise.

Isak's stomach grew sour. The boy wanted life. He seemed to know that he was in a circle of death, and breaking out was becoming impossible. The rouge on the child's lips was darkening and spreading to his chin. His cheeks were red and the blood trickling down his legs and face seemed to flow more quickly, to be dripping down from the

child's shoulders and over the heels of his bare feet into the ground, where it could become lost with everyone else's blood.

One of the guards put out a hand and grabbed the boy's neck. The boy's eyes widened enormously. Isak jerked towards the window. He could stop it. He would only have to walk outside, and they would be diverted. The boy could run to Stara Gradiška, with the women, and hide with the other children there as they stole and starved and died. But at least he would live longer than today. Isak moved towards the window.

Still holding the child's neck, the guard walked the barefooted boy over to the makeshift gallows in front of the tannery. The boy kicked, but weakly. He could not breathe.

Isak covered his mouth with his hand to keep from vomiting. He reached towards the door. This was one of them. The oppressed, the child needing protection and brotherhood. Isak pressed himself against the door, waiting for the boy to scream. If the boy screamed, if the boy cried, Isak knew he could open the door and walk out, could sacrifice himself. He waited. There were no sounds outside, except for the Ustaše.

"Little bastard," they taunted. "Do you want more soap? We will give you soap. All you had to do was ask! We'll even give you a little gypsy for a whore, and you can show her how to use that soap. What do you say, you little thief? Think you can just steal from us?"

The boy did not respond. He did not make a single noise. Isak waited behind the door. He heard the slap of rope against wood and the grunt of the guard, heaving and tying the rope to the gallows. There were cheers. Why hadn't the boy called out? Isak was shaking, ready to run outside if the boy called. Ana was dead. Tito would never overcome the

Poglavnik. Marija and Josip and Andrija would be in Italy the rest of their lives, growing fat and golden in the sun. And Isak? An empty Jew in a foul tannery, waiting for a boy to call for help.

The moments slid by. The yells of the Ustaše faded, before disappearing. Stillness returned. Isak's shaking stopped. There was wind. It breathed through the camp, moving stench from one part of Brickworks to another, allowing each prisoner to smell the tortures of the other prisoners. Brine, bricks, metal, burnt skin, sweat, fear. The yard's gallows groaned.

Isak moved towards the window. The small boy was hanging in the tannery yard. His feet were no longer dripping blood. His skin was becoming blue, and even from the window Isak could see the stark red of the boy's eyes where the blood had burst and spread over the front of the eye in that moment when pain becomes a reality and one realizes that pain is a forerunner of death, the Olympic athlete passing the baton to the last runner who never fails to catch.

Isak was about to open the door to check if the boy was still alive, but there was movement. He withdrew into the tannery and watched silently as a grey uniform trod calmly up to the gallows to check for a pulse. The grey hat shook, sadly, Isak thought, as the fingers were withdrawn from the strangled neck. The guard walked towards the tannery. Isak retreated further, but the guard only grabbed a small stool from the front of the tannery. A scuffling on the soil told Isak the man was setting up his stool by the body. Isak peered out from the window into the darkening yard. The man had removed the silent boy's body from the gallows, and it was laid out like a proper corpse on the soil, arms crossed over his chest, feet straight and together, more calm and orderly in death

than the boy had ever likely been in his life. Beside the boy the guard knelt in the ground, a rosary dangling from his hands as his lips moved in quiet prayer over the small prisoner's lifeless figure.

Isak leaned against a wall and sank to the floor. "Ana," he whispered, feeling a little foolish. The Croat mourned more for the death of this small prisoner than Isak had mourned Ana. He breathed once, closed his eyes, and with an empty tongue began to recite the mourner's Kaddish.

### **Sava**

"Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on me, a sinner." Sava intoned as she pulled weeds and rocks from rows of beans. A Roma behind her sang a folk song. The notes whistled through a gap in the Roma's teeth, and her breasts hung low in her loose white shirt, almost touching the ground. The woman must have had several children. The soft rounds of her stomach pushed against the waistband of her skirt. Sava's stomach churned. She had not eaten since before sunrise, and the sun was beginning to set. Even the watery soup and the small portion of stale bread in her pocket were appetizing in her hunger. Dušan would be waiting back for her back at the camp, with the other children.

Sava's fingers were sore and forming new callouses which were soft and shiny beneath the dirt. Small bits of rock and soil and thorns were embedded in the flesh of her fingers from the hours of work. She bent low to pull a weed, stepped forward, stooped, and picked up a rock. She felt a rough hand on her back. Turning, she was startled to find the Roma with the low-hanging breasts and the breathy voice standing beside her. The

woman's neck was covered in moles that jutted away from her skin. The woman's hand was extended.

"Bread." She said, the word whistled out from between the gap in her teeth. They were black, and her tongue was a strange dark red. Sava shook her head.

"I don't have any bread." She lied. The woman pointed to Sava's pocket. How the Roma had seen that slight bulge Sava could not guess.

"Bread."

"No."

"Bread!" The woman's voice rose, and she moved closer to Sava, who took a step back, as if they were dancing.

"I need it for my son. He is starving." Sava's hand moved towards her pocket.

"They give you Serbs food," the woman lisped. Sava could barely distinguish the words. The woman's accent, combined with her uneven teeth, obscured the sounds.

"They do not give any food to us Roma. Our children are dying. Yours get soup. Your bread, give it to me! You will get more."

Sava's throat constricted. It was dry. She moved a hand over her pocket. It was such a small piece of bread, stale. By now it would smell like her skirt and taste like her sweat.

"My son needs to eat. He will die." She tried again.

"My daughter is dying now. I need bread for her, we have nothing. They give us nothing because we are Roma, but you? You are Serb. They want to make you Catholic. They do not want us at all." The woman grabbed Sava's arm. Her fingers were tenacious and strong, a washer woman's hands, not a beggar's. Sava shook her arm, but the woman's fingers remained.

“I am a mother, and I need to feed my son. Let go!”

The woman reached with her free hand for Sava’s pocket. Sava writhed away, but the woman had not let go. Instead, the woman grabbed onto Sava’s other arm and pushed her to the ground. Grunting with effort she clawed at the woman’s face and loose breasts, kicking and scratching with any strength remaining in her small body after a day in the fields. The handkerchief wrapped over her hair came undone and fell to the ground. The woman pulled at Sava’s thin strands. The Serb bit her own cheek to keep from screaming. If the guards came over, neither woman would ever need bread again.

Sava’s hand splayed over the ground, her fingers searching. A rock, not much more than a sharp pebble, was under her hand, then clenched in her palm and lifting, swinging towards the Roma’s head. Dušan needed bread.

There wasn’t much blood, but the Roma rolled off of Sava, holding her temple, cursing and crying. Sava grabbed her scarf from the ground and quickly moved a several rows to the left, out of reach of the woman and her starving brood at the gypsy camp. The Ustaše called to the prisoners. It was time to walk back to the camp. The sky was darkening. They had several miles to walk. Sava could feel the blisters on her feet inside her hard leather shoes. At least she had shoes. Many of the women did not, and their feet were becoming swathed in callouses. Sava got in line. She looked around for the Roma, but could not find her. Her hand dropped to her side, protectively shielding the bread hidden behind the fabric.



Dušan sat beside her that night. He was thin, skeletal-like even, but his stomach was bloated and his cheeks drooped, fleshy and puppy-like. She sipped from a bowl of clear broth, the taste of meat and vegetables only a trace rather than a flavor.

“Mama.” Dušan said, his voice quiet and clear. She shook herself from her thoughts and lowered the bowl to him. He dunked the piece of bread that had remained in her pocket all day into the bowl of watery soup. He sucked on it and munched it, his eyes glazing over in the dull, animalistic pleasure of filling his stomach. After he finished chewing one mouthful, he tilted his head upwards. “Mama, are you going to pray for us? You haven’t prayed for us tonight.”

Sava placed her hand on the ground on his opposite side, encasing him with her body.

“No, I do not think we will be praying tonight, Dušan.” She said.

“I can pray.” He swallowed any crumbs remaining in his mouth and clasped his hands. “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy...”

“Shhh, Dušan, that’s enough. We are not praying tonight.” Sava said before giving him the lightest kiss on his shaven head.

Sava turned in her sleep. A cockroach scuffled by her head on the floor. She watched it quietly, its thread-thin legs moving at a blinding pace away from her and towards another mother and child. It stopped when it encountered the bodies blocking its path, but, as if determined to make it to the wall, climbed and clicked its way over the rough clothing of the small girl, over the mother’s bony hips, and down the other side. After that, Sava lost track of the roach. The woman and her child remained sleeping,

undisturbed and breathing evenly, flung out as they were on the wooden floor with only a single blanket between them. The child was mostly wrapped up. The mother held a corner over her chest for warmth.

Sava turned back over to her original position and pulled Dušan's body closer. He smelled like shit and rotten potatoes, and she stifled the urge to bury her head in her own rank sleeve. One of his teeth was beginning to rot, a little milk tooth that was turning black. When he smiled, it sometimes gave him a devilish appearance. Not that he smiled very often.

He adjusted his body slightly against her, and she forgot her momentary repulsion and wound her arms around him. His skin was still smooth and his face, though dirty, had begun to lengthen and its features to grow prominent. He would have Stojan's nose, she thought, large and crooked and flat. But the shape of his face was hers, and the breadth of his forehead was like that of her dead brother. His eyes were as large as most children's, but his eyelids barely seemed to cover them so they seemed to rest on his face rather than in his face. She knew every bit of his skin from the few years since his birth, the one that had lived to walk.

Underneath his small, dirty rags were a few scars from pox, and a scratch on his belly that had never healed well from a year ago, from when he grabbed the field cat and it became angry. Beneath his chin was a small birthmark, light and brown, like honey smeared on his skin, and in the summer months his fingers were always stained with the berries from the bottom of the hill near the church and he smelled like their neighbor's goats, musty and strong. Sava smiled, remembering his full-faced giggle as he crunched a

field flower in his right hand under the morning sun, his mouth wide, his eyes squinting, his laugh bursting from his mouth in gleeful stutters.

Sava grinned at the memory and buried her nose into Dušan's cheek, and he arched his back in his sleep while pushing her face away with a dirty hand, his eyes still closed. She wondered, had he laughed since coming to Jasenovac? How long had they been here in the camp? Her callouses had deepened and widened, spreading over her hands like a rash. She knew her hair had become grey. At night, when she ran her fingers through it hair would fall to the ground, and it was the hair of an old woman, coarse and grey as the mountain rocks jutting from the snow.

The women sleeping around her and Dušan began to stir. One of them yawned, and when she breathed out Sava could see the billowing grey breath in the air. The Ustaše began yelling outside. It was Blanka. Sava could tell from her city accent. The girl was malicious, plain-faced and cruel. Several of the women had lost fingers to Blanka after they were caught stealing bread. Sava had met the women after they were punished. They had stolen for their children. Most of them had died from the infections.

"Dušan," Sava murmured, placing her hand gently on his arm. "Dušan, wake up darling. We have to get up. We need to hide."

Dušan stuffed his fists into his eyes and yawned, arching his short spine and twisting his head. He began to curl into a sleeping ball again, but Sava shook him more firmly. "Dušan, come." She said, placing her hands beneath his armpits and lifting him onto her hip. His body, heavy and limp with sleep, nearly slid off her hips. The other women gathered with their children by the door of their barracks. They all shook their children, pinching their offspring's cheeks and lips to make them look healthy, straightening their

dirty clothes, running hands over their shaved heads before stepping out the door into the early morning chill. The women and children formed lines in front of Blanka, who was pacing and smoking. Sava noticed a small troupe of male Ustaše near the entrance. They were untidy – shirts partially unbuttoned, belts slung over hips, caps tipped like young men at a pub rather than a prison camp.

“Dušan” Sava whispered in his ear. She wanted him to look alert, energetic, healthy. She avoided the line, and stood instead on the side of the barracks, out of sight from the other women. She had glimpsed a few women she did know, but they seemed to have hidden their children. Their hips were bare, and their faces were pale and serious with fright. She heard Blanka and Maja talking to the women. She pressed her back against the side of the barracks and listened.

“Today we will be sending the children to Zagreb, to be trained. Your children will be well-fed and given skills that will serve them well in the new Croat state and a unified Europe. These fine Ustaše gentlemen,” Maja gestured at the pack of male guards, “will escort your children to the cars, where they will be transported just a few hours to Zagreb, to train and learn. They will all make you very proud. The Poglavnik thanks you for your sacrifice.” She nodded at the men by the entrance. They hopped to attention, before approaching the women and children. A few sauntered, but many walked quickly and seriously, all earlier merriment forgotten on their faces. They began to pull children from their mothers, both of whom began crying and fighting. Above the din rose Blanka’s voice. “If you resist, we will kill you and your children. The Poglavnik is being generous with you – do not abuse his generosity.” This quieted the crowd of women. The guards continued to pull the young ones from their mother’s arms, but the consequences were

real in everyone's mind. They had all heard stories of the woman whose baby was smashed into the ground inches from her face, and whose brains and blood sprayed over her like water from a spigot. The memory of this story prevented any of them from fighting hard enough to merit their child's death. Except Sava.

She waited, her breathing becoming labored. Her heart felt enlarged and beat against her chest with so much force she was positive it would crack her chest open along the seam of her breasts, like a nut. Dušan wound his arms around Sava's neck, and he buried his face in the dip of her collarbone.

There was crying, and cursing as the male guards began separating the mothers and children. Sava turned, and ran the other direction, away from the entrance and deeper into the camp. The tower rose above them, watching them as she ran, her lungs burning, the calloused flesh of her feet conducting the jarring impact of her steps with each downbeat of her flight. There was a halting pain in her foot and she lost balance, falling to the ground like a small tree with Dušan in her arms, who cried out as she attempted to roll to the side and not fall on him. As she rolled back over, to stand up, she saw only black. They were shoes, a hand's breadth from her face. They were soft leather, and recently repaired on the seam.

A guard stood in front of Sava. "Give him to me, ma'am." The man said. She raised her head and looked him in the face. He was not angry, neither was he impatient. She hugged Dušan more tightly as she lay on the ground. The guard slid his hands around Dušan. They brushed her stomach and breasts. Dušan's arms clamped around Sava's neck. She choked. Dušan gave a small scream as the man wrapped his arms more fully around Dušan and pulled up and away, pulled Dušan from his fallen mother to his upright

body. Sava moved with him, as if the three of them were dancing and the man was lifting her from the ground. She threw her feet beneath herself and stood fully, her arms encasing Dušan like coils. They both held the child, like parents before a baptism.

“It’s not training,” She pleaded, “I know this isn’t training!”

“It is, it is training, I promise you.”

“No, it’s not training, I know what this is! Give me my son.”

The man held fast to Dušan. “The Poglavnik needs him.”

“He is a Serb, the Poglavnik doesn’t need him! It’s because the Poglavnik doesn’t need him that we’re here! Now give me back my son!”

“No.” The man said quietly.

“Give me my son!”

“If you do not let go, he will die here. If you do let go of him, he will be taken to training. He will live.”

“The Poglavnik doesn’t want Serbs. Not alive, anyway.”

“He is a child. We can train him. The Poglavnik doesn’t want rebellious Serbs.” The guard pulled on Dušan, and Sava pulled back. Dušan shouted in pain. The guard released Dušan with one hand and reached to his belt. He pulled a pistol from it and held it to Dušan’s head. “I am taking your son. Let go now, or I will shoot him here, in your arms.” She cries to God in the same prayer that he has used – he doesn’t know what to do.

Dušan’s face contorted. His face was wet and shiny, his eyes closed tightly together. He whimpered, and clung to Sava’s neck. She breathed heavily. Her eyes met those of the guard. He did not look angry. The hand holding the pistol trembled slightly, but there was no hesitation in his eyes, which were the same shade of brown as her husband’s. The

metal lips of the barrel were pressed into Dušan's temple, right above his ear. The indentation of his temple had always reminded Sava of the dip in a flower petal. It was just as soft and pink as a petal might be. She felt that every detail of his frail body was imprinted on her own. If he was taken away, what would she be? A mother without her child lost her definition. She would be no different than any other woman here who had never fought to keep the bread meant for her child's mouth. She would be the same as all of them, all the young ones who used to dream of men and the old ones who had buried children. Was Dušan to be her Isaac? A mountaintop, a tower, the desert, the dust of Jasenovac – what was the difference?

The guard breathed in, sharp and quick, and she saw his finger jerk, as if pulling the trigger. She released Dušan, pulling her arms from around his body, separating his clinging arms from her neck, and stepping away. Dušan screamed, his mouth widening and his little blackened and broken teeth bared in grief. He flung his body from side to side. The guard slipped his pistol back in his belt and attempted to balance the screaming, heaving child. Sava took a step towards the two, wanting to reclaim Dušan from this guard, but the guard's hand instinctively reached back down, towards his pistol, which stopped Sava's advancing steps.

Sava felt a sharp, salty stinging in her eyes. Tears welled there, and then spilled over her face, running over the corners of her lips and over her gaunt cheeks. She wiped at her face with her hands, which were full of grit and dirt and sharp with callouses. Dušan continued to scream, and each scream tore into Sava's brain, enraging her, but the sight of the pistol with its lips to Dušan's petal-soft temple kept her from attacking the guard, who was backing away from her slowly.

“He is going for training. That is all. You will see him again.” The guard assured her. She sank to the ground, clenching her skirts with hands white from tightness, her arms rigid like a corpse, her face inhuman with agony and coated in the thick, salty, runny damp of grief.

“Mama! Mama!” Dušan cried. He threw himself from side to side in the guard’s arms and reached his arms out, stretching them as far as his wingspan towards his mother, his blood, his hands frantically splayed and concentrated on her figure. “Mama!” He screamed. Sava lay on the ground, her face in the dust. She could taste it, taste the ground as she cried.

“Dušan.” She repeated like a madwoman as the guard finally turned and walked away, Dušan’s arms restrained but his cries still piercing the air like bullets, “Mama!”

The cries finally faded, but Sava remained in the dirt, numb with pain and grief, her mouth and lips coated with the ground. She could taste grass, and feel pebbles and dead insects on her teeth. None of it mattered. Dušan was gone. She hadn’t been strong enough to take him away. She hadn’t been strong enough to test that guard with the hesitating fingers and the unhesitating eyes, to see whether he would force that pistol’s bullets through the shaft and barrel, emerging with a crack from the chamber and, with another crack, tunneling through Dušan’s thin layer of skull, his brain, the other side of his skull. But she could not test the guard. To smell of her son’s blood, to wear the colors of guts the way one wore clothes – Sava couldn’t bring herself to it. She couldn’t risk that perhaps he would not die if the guard took him, but that if she had moved forward, Dušan would have been killed without hesitation. She saw the guards – they thought nothing of Serb life.



She heard guards shout orders, and the crying of children. They were out of sight, but she could hear their hoarse, plaintive voices asking questions and begging to return to their parents, fading slowly into the air and distance. Laughter from the guards. There was whistling. Sava pushed herself to her knees, until she kneeled on the ground, her buttocks resting on her calves, her arms wrapped around her chest in a self-embrace. Names floated in her head – Sveti Naum, Cyril, Mary, John, Mark, Stephen, Nicholas, Christ – her mouth began to move instinctively in recitation, but she clamped it shut. She lifted her hand to her mouth and drew her fingernails over it, pulling skin and drawing blood, clawing and distorting her image away like a determined animal, before beginning a new prayer.

“God, damn them,” Sava whispered. “God, damn you.”

## **Vlatko**

There was a line of them, a long line, squinting in the bright, cold sunshine. The trees lining the Sava were still bare, their limbs branching like black veins into the sky. Vlatko guessed there might have been a hundred in the line, or maybe many more. His wooden board that he used for shoveling dipped into the earth again. He flipped the dirt onto the growing pile by the side of the grave, and looked around him. The other Roma looked nervous. They kept glancing at the approaching line. They were all sweating with effort, their thin skin heavy with a moisture they hadn't thought their bodies were still capable

of producing. The earth was full of clay, and the pieces fell to the ground with a clatter like small pebbles. The line was approaching slowly, and Vlatko could hear a faint crying, like the mewling kittens he and the other children might find roaming the street when he was young.

Sometimes – as children -- they would let the kittens live and give them to the pretty girls, or the ugly girls if the pretty girls did not want them. The other boys would sometimes grab a rejected kitten's neck and laugh as it cried, as the flexible skin of its jugular pulled up and around before they snapped the spine or smashed the delicate skull into a wall or with a stone. Such a small quantity of blood was in a kitten's head that the pavement would often carry a rusty mark no larger than two hands spread, though the chunks of stark white bone might fly further. Afterwards the furry body would dangle from the child's hand before it was tossed into the street to be eaten by stray dogs or gradually pulverized by tires and feet.

The mewling grew louder. Only one of the guards leading this line held a gun. Mallets, chisels, and knives could be seen dangling from belts and boots or swinging in the hands of the other guards. The guards' jackets were unbuttoned and swung on their forms, which had become thin and ragged over the past several months. Vlatko could see the guard Miroslav to the left of the line. He looked ill, from his current charge or from his time serving the Poglavnik Vlatko couldn't tell. The first time Vlatko had seen Miroslav the guard had a belly that curved out and over his wide leather belt. In his shiny boots and a fresh, grey woolen cap, Miroslav had strutted around the camp, giving orders and smoking contentedly as if he were a dapper young Nazi. Now Miroslav's flesh was sagging and yellowed, and his protruding belly had been replaced by a slight billowing of

his uniform above his belt. He held a mallet in his left hand. The old, smooth wood of the handle glistened slightly in the morning light.

Vlatko looked back down at the ground. The wind blew through the holes in his shirt. He shivered as it dried the sweat on his arms. Wiping his hands on his trousers Vlatko scabbled out of the hole and moved to its side, to start piling dirt along the grave.

They were lining them up now. They were all under age seven, Vlatko guessed. The smallest ones had the large head and fleshy cheeks of infants. A few of the older ones held the hands of their siblings, who toddled on the dirt path pawing at their wet eyes with sticky clenched hands, their mouths contorted in fear. They must have just been taken from their mothers. Two Roma children were in the back, their eyes furtive, their faces concentrated not on their destination or abandonment, but on escape. It showed in their dark eyes, which roved, looked at the weapons held by the guards, analyzed the spaces between Ustaša legs and the distance to the woods. Their faces were beautiful, Vlatko thought, some of the most beautiful he had seen. He could not tell whether they were boys or girls or both – their heads were shorn and prickly and their clothing seemed to be whatever soiled rags they could scavenge. But their eyes were large. One had a dark mole on the cheek, and while they looked in opposite directions they never ceased holding one another's hand. They were tinier than the other children, some of whom looked to be infants from wealthy families, their milk-plump cheeks red and fresh in the cold. Vlatko thought it might be their eyes – Roma children possessed bewitching eyes that were at once crafty with experience and innocent with age, malicious, large, dark, and carved into their faces by want.

As they aged they would become like the other Roma, the ones back at Uštica and like the men digging beside him. Their eyes would become stupid and mean from the harshness of their life. The women's breasts would sag and the men's sex would become rotted with disease, their thighs raw from the sweat and chafing of their wandering.

Vlatko turned away from the children, but the image of a mute dangling from the tannery gallows was in his mind. . He looked to the ground. He looked at the trees, and the sky, and his fellow gravediggers. He looked at his feet and toes. There was no water with which to wash himself. The soap was gone almost as soon as he had taken it from the mute – someone had stolen it from his pocket that night while he slept. The slight breeze on his neck made him aware of the crusted dirt lining the folds of his skin at the base of his skull and the creases in his eyelids. He was no longer a young man, after this winter. His hair, which had been thick and black before, was now a short and white, and his chest hair had become white also, before it began falling out.

Vlatko went back to his work, pushing dirt in a line along the back of the grave. They would have to put it all back, soon, a graveyard blanket.

“Come on! Come on! We are taking you to a new camp! Don't be scared.” One of the younger guards coaxed the children. Vlatko could see the guard's profile in the pale sunlight. He must have been a very large man, Vlatko thought, before the guard's food became almost as scarce as the prisoners'. The width of the Ustaša's shoulders remained impressive, but his uniform was loose. The folds of his jacket flapped loosely and Vlatko could see three rough holes cut into the guard's belt where he had adjusted it to accommodate the dwindling circumference of his hips. “Stand here now, right here, in a line. Very nice. We are going to count you, alright? So look straight ahead, see the

mountains? Look at the mountains while we count.” The guard’s voice sounded like rocks being crushed, low, steady, halting. His mouth smiled but his eyes did not squint with the smile and his eyebrows remained firmly in one place as his mouth curved. It was unsettling.

The children shuffled and shifted confusedly into a line parallel to the grave, with a few feet between them and the lip of the earth. The guards wandered around, placing themselves among the children, separating siblings when possible. A few guards squatted to the ground to look at the children’s eyes, rub their hair, quiet them, and remind them to stare straight at the mountains while they were counted.

“Sadik?” Miroslav called to the guard with the notched belt.

The guards shifted their loose formation.

“What do you want?” Sadik shouted back, but his voice did not grow in volume, only in intensity. He was a thin guard, calm, with large eyes and thin lips.

“Feel like running?” Miroslav shouted, his hands resting on either side of his belt buckle, hanging loosely by the thumbs which were curved over the edge of his pants waist.

The guard Sadik did not respond, but gestured at the Roma to stand on either end of the line. Vlatko walked to the far end of the children, as he always did. He was to keep them from running away. The guards did not have enough ammunition to waste on shooting children. Some squabbled like baby piglets and cried. He saw one older child slap a small, sobbing child across the face, before bursting into a string of apologies and violently embracing the little one, frantically stroking its hair and wet face and shouting what were meant to be soothing words into its ears, about the Lord and the Mother and a

new body and full bellies. The Roma children he had seen earlier – the ones with the large, crafty eyes and shorn heads – stood still and watched the other children with impassive, almost curious faces. The one with the mole on its cheek watched a carrion bird soar over the children and the grave, more interested in its arcing glide than the guard at the opposite end, who ran a calloused hand through his greying hair before pulling a hammer from his belt.

Vlatko focused on placing one bandaged foot before the other and ignoring the pain of his toes, which were grey and yellow and filling with more pus every day. He made it to the end of the line, and stood beside a small boy, the last child in the line. The boy wore a soiled tunic, beneath which his bottom and the tip of member could be seen. He seemed unaware of this. His small stomach was round and bloated in the belly, but the small, curved bones of feet and hands stuck out from the skin as if they were being drawn slowly from beneath the skin into the outside air. His legs were mere twigs, his feet black in the dirt, and his knees were scraped from falling on the walk from the camp. The delicacy of the boy's bones struck Vlatko; if he reached into the boy's body, Vlatko was sure he could snap a rib like a papery strand of straw. Despite the hunger in the boy's face, his cheeks were fleshy and drooped like a puppy's jowls beneath his eyes and fretting eyebrows. Around the boy's wrist was a worn rosary, and the boy was sucking on the prayer beads. Vlatko wondered where a Serb boy had gotten a Catholic rosary. Vlatko thought of taking it from him, but worried the boy might cry and draw attention to them.

The lightest thudding sound could be heard as Vlatko stood there beside this boy, who stood silent, sucking the rosary absentmindedly. Vlatko closed his eyes. Thud. Thud. A small scream, like a kitten in pain, smashed against the sidewalk. He could sense the

other Roma moving at the end of the line, the shuffling needed to fill a grave, the muted sound of bodies piling in the dirt. Thud. Thud. More mewling. The guards busied themselves talking to the children. No one was near this little boy except Vlatko. The child was too small to run so he stood by the corner of the grave, rhythmically suckling the prayer beads. Thud. Thud.

Vlatko felt his heartbeat quicken, and wondered if mute boys could scream in pain. Vlatko reached out, slowly, slightly, and touched the boy's tunic; the child was filthy. He needed soap. The boy did not notice Vlatko's hand on his shoulder. He was gazing at the mountains and at the carrion bird circling the hollowed ground. The fibers of the tunic were rough, and yellow. He was a Serb boy, it could be seen in his face. With another three years, this boy would know of Roma. This boy would hate Roma. Vlatko placed his hand fully on the boy's shoulder, and wondered when the last time he had voluntarily touched another breathing person was. He couldn't remember. The boy did not even seem to notice the stranger's hand. His mouth made a small, slick, slipping sound on the rosary. A tree at the edge of the field creaked. Vlatko looked towards the woods, half-expecting the mute boy to be swinging from a limb, dirty and dead but with wide eyes questioning the gypsy man's need for half a rotten turnip and a piece of soap.

The air seemed to grow colder, and the sunshine paled for a moment. Inside Vlatko's head grew with pressure and heat, but his hands were cold except for the skin touching the boy's tunic. His eyes felt cloudy with salt and he couldn't see anything except that Ustaša with the notched belt slowly working his way behind the line of children, his arm tireless in its swinging, thudding, pounding with the hammer, oblivious to the limp, sprawled forms behind him, like so many kittens smashed on the pavement. The Roma

children were on the ground, Vlatko could just make out the contours of their bald brown heads and knew their dark eyes had stopped their roving glances. The guards moved and talked to the children, hiding their view from their siblings and companions. The Roma glided around the bodies, feigning ignorance and disinterest while they scanned the outside of the children's pockets and shoes, looking for the slight bulge of treasures hidden by parents or bits of bread for later that could be snatched out of a piece of clothing before the earth breathed in its bloody bounty and the bread was wasted on worms.

The thin hammer-guard, Sadik, was coming closer, swinging his tool like a fierce barbarian from the old north. The child's shoulder burned Sadik's hand. His eyes were filled with the mute boy staring at him from the dirt after being kicked like a dog, staring at Vlatko's arms full of a piece of string, bread, soap. Vlatko couldn't breathe. The field had grown so quiet.

"Move, Roma." The guard stood to the side of the boy, sweating and heaving. The hammer pulled back into a horizontal arc behind the boy's head. Its silhouette cast a small shadow on the ground. Vlatko closed his eyes.

"Poor little bastard," Vlatko thought.

He released the boy's shoulder, and threw himself at the guard.

Sadik and Vlatko's thin bodies fell to the ground. The other Ustaša crowded around the pair. Sadik and the others grabbed Vlatko and pulled his hands to the middle of his back. Vlatko felt a tendon snap in his shoulder. They held him over the edge of the grave he had just dug and his eyes fell on the heaped bodies beneath him. He glanced back to the sky. A camera flashed. A hammer swung.



The boy ran towards the woods during the commotion, his small legs unsteady and weak, teetering like a bird with a wounded foot. The rosary dangled from the child's wrist, forgotten, swinging carelessly.

Sadik stood up from the edge of the grave. He was sweating, and there was a rusty splatter over his chest and thighs. After dropping his bloodied hammer to the ground Sadik pulled a knife from a sheath on his belt. He wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve, spat into the ground, and began walking after the child with the rosary.

## **Sadik**

Sadik lifted his hat with his right hand and ran his left hand through his hair. He flicked his hand when reached the back of his neck and drops of sweat flung from his fingertips into the air and over the sparse spring grass. He leaned down and picked the child up by its tunic. Its stiffening arms and legs swung in the air as he walked back to the grave.

“Here.” He tossed the body towards a Roma. The man was not quick, and the body fell to the ground. It was kicked into the grave. “Markus.” Sadik said hoarsely to another guard standing by a pile of dirt, looking bored. A camera hung around the man's neck. Sadik wondered what would happen to the photograph of them and the gypsy. Markus steadied the camera with one hand as he pulled a flask from his pocket with the other. It

was dented and corroded with age. Sadik unscrewed the lid. The opening was so small the booze trickled from it. Sadik could barely get a mouthful. It was warm, and there were small grains that got stuck in his teeth. He wondered if the grains were dirt.

“Does it bother you?” Markus asked.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Sadik wiped his mouth.

“The Serbs, and Jews. The children. Look at the grave.”

“There were Croat children in that line today.” Markus hooked his thumbs on the edge of his uniform pants and avoided Sadik’s stare.

“I didn’t see any.”

“Liar.”

“Communists are not Croats. Chetnik babies, commie babies, Yiddish-babbling bastards...what does it matter? These little ones would kill your own the second they were old enough to hold a gun or a knife. You think it bothers me? Kill a third. You knew what you signed up for.”

“I’m just tired of the blood. I wish they had all left.”

“Tired of the blood? You don’t do anything with blood! You stand over there taking your pictures and smoking your cigarettes and just waiting for the show, waiting for the little bastards to run and the big bastards to fall down. Tired of blood.” Sadik snorted.

“You call your little taste of Jasenovac blood? You should come with us to the Sava the next time some cars come in. The water is less bloody, you pussy.”

“Stop being an ass, Sadik. I became Ustaša because I wanted to fight. I come from mountain stock, I am not afraid of other men. But we don’t fight here.”

“We are fighting a different fight. This is not your average war.” Sadik gestured at the grave, which was being filled in by the Roma, who were silent, their eyes lowered.

“What do you mean?”

“Chetniks are dirty, and heavy. They breed like rodents and fight like bears. It is better to kill in Jasenovac than to try killing a Chetnik up close.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve fought Chetniks.”

“In this war?”

“In the past. I’m from the mountains, too. There were Serbs in my village. At the start of the war, I made sure to sign up before they could get me.”

“What happened to the Serbs in your village?”

“I burned them.”

“Sadik!” One of the guards yelled to him. “We missed one!” They were holding, by the scruff of the neck, a Croat boy. He looked old, perhaps eight.

“It’s a Croat. Why is he here?”

“Parents are communists, I think. They’re both in the Sava at this point.”

The boy began to whimper. He was pale, and moved like a cricket, with a springy feistiness. The kind of feistiness that would shit on an Orthodox church during a feast day, Sadik thought.

“We can bring him back to the tower. The grave is already being filled in.” Sadik said.

“God, give me a cigarette.” He demanded of Markus. A tightness in his chest had formed. The boy was so pale, and squirming. Sadik felt the impulse to make the little Croat boy laugh. Markus handed him a cigarette.

“We’ll just leave him out. No one is going to notice one body.”

Sadik struck a match to light the cigarette, but his hand shook. He glanced up at the little Croat. The boy had a sharp nose and a minute cleft in his chin, with a shock of dark hair over his pale face. The blue of his eyes was almost obscured by his large black pupils. Their eyes caught. The cigarette dangled slackly from Sadik’s lips and his hands remained poised and shaking with a second, unlit match as the Croat boy and he stared at one another.

Sadik broke their gaze. “The camp with the women isn’t too full. We’ll leave him there. Easy.” Sadik tried to sound nonchalant as he tried to light his match for a third time. He breathed in relief when the swift scratch created a flame. His body relaxed as he sucked the heat into the roll of tobacco and it caught and smoldered inside his cupped hand.

“It’s easier this way. I’ll do it, Sadik, if you’re tired.” Markus offered, stepping forward and removing a knife from the belt around his grey uniform. Circles of dark sweat had formed under Sadik’s armpits. He felt ill. He could smell the bodies around him, the living and the dead. The sweat of his fellow Ustaše, their rank breath on the breeze. It all felt incongruous for a moment, the blood splattered clothing and the sunshine, the new grass pushing its way from the earth and the corpses barely submerged by the earth.

“Markus, don’t try to impress me. We’ll take the boy back.” Sadik exhaled. He tried not to look at the boy. The shape of the mouth was so familiar, a curve of the lip so mischievous and scared at the same time. The child did not have shoes. His feet were black with dirt. The tips of his toes had specks of dried blood. Sadik had a strip of cloth

which served as a handkerchief in his pocket. He had the urge to wipe the child's feet, to clean off the blood. Certainly they could take him back to Stara Gradiška, or somewhere, anywhere but this pit of dead children, the sight of which seemed to both fascinate and repulse the child. He was staring at a dead girl of about four years old, a little Jewess. The soil had not covered her entire face, which was fat and cold and innocent. Sadik wanted to cover the boy's eyes, or to tell him why she was dead, but he stayed silent.

"No, Sadik. You were right. Look at him, a growing commie." Markus grabbed the boy's chin and looked full into his face, as if trying to pull answers from it. "If he could, he would kill us." Markus lowered himself until his eyes were at the same level as the boy's. "I can see it in his eyes. You are right, Sadik. You are right." He nodded at the Ustaša holding the boy. The man nodded in return, grabbed the boy's head and yanked it back towards his chest, exposing the child's throat. Without hesitation Markus slid a knife across the skin below the boy's chin. The little Croat's eyes grew wide, but he was silent and fell to the ground. Antun, a thin guard with a pinched nose and a tic in his left eye, picked the body up and tossed it into the part of the grave still being filled in with dirt.

Sadik's entire body had grown cold. The boy's body lay in the grave at broken angles, barely distinguishable from the masses of clothing and bodies of the others. Crumpled, pale, covered in blood. Dropping his cigarette Sadik clambered into the mass of bodies, stepping on arms and legs, tattered clothing and bloody faces until he was standing over the dead Croat boy. Sadik extended his hand and touched the boy's face lightly, the way a man touches a butterfly.

"Sadik?" One of the guards asked.

Sadik withdrew his hand and turned from the boy to see who was speaking to him, an erect statue among fallen bodies. Markus' camera flashed.

The barracks smelled fresh when Sadik returned that evening. The door had been left open and a breeze, fresh from across the grass and the Sava, seemed to have blown in, removing the stench of the guards' rotting dicks and belches. Sadik closed the door slowly, his fingers lingering on the cold metal door handle. He rested a hand on the splintered wood for a moment, before walking to Markus' cot and removing a bottle of homemade rakia from beneath the cot mattress. The bottle cap unscrewed slowly, creaking like a church's door hinges. Sadik swigged a few mouthfuls, swirling the liquid through his teeth to spread the taste until he finally swallowed the burn. It ran down his constricted throat as roughly as if he had swallowed sand. Sadik walked to his cot and laid down. He didn't remove his shoes. Soil and mud clattered quietly onto the mattress. His hands covered his face. Up to his wrist Sadik's hands were clean and bright, but from his wrists to his forearms his skin and hair were crusty with dried blood.

Sadik rubbed his forehead. He ran his tongue over his teeth and the inside of his cheeks to lick the remaining alcohol from them, before he gasped once, like a man about to die and covered his face again with his clean, cold hands.

"Kristof," Sadik whispered.

He began to cry.

## **Dragan**

Dragan knelt in the field, after the other guards and the Roma left. The grave was piled with fresh dirt and sod in irregular clumps. Chunks of grass and soil were strewn over the top. They would adapt to the new topography and the dead fertilizer far beneath. The Roma had made the grave deep – no animals would dig that far down. The wind was slowly removing the foul smells of the afternoon. Hundreds of bodies sweating, the smell of blood and infected skin, overturned earth, the stench of Roma breath. The moist soil gave under Dragan’s knees. He could feel the cool damp through his uniform pants as the breeze slowly whisked away the remainder of stenches. Looking up into the blue above him, Dragan realized something.

He felt nothing.

There were hundreds of bodies beneath, and around him was the gritty, drying paste of blood and dirt. Dragan was tempted to poke the blood-mud, but held himself back. He thought it might be disrespectful of the dead, whether they were Orthodox or Catholic. He wondered whether it mattered who was Orthodox and who Catholic when it came to death? Death was not particular. It had claimed the little Catholic boy the same way it had claimed the small Serb, or the Roma man whose picture was taken as they held him over the pit. The brown warmth of the man’s arms felt stuck on Dragan’s palms, the imprint of the soft black hair above the wrist in Dragan’s hands.

“Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Dragan intoned. He had prayed this as Sadik had run by and the little Gypsy children fell to the ground, their roving eyes finally still, their elbows and knees sprawled at odd angles like dead crickets. A part of him wanted to see them again. Wanted to raise these

dead up from this mass grave of damp soil, to see the children's limbs moving, to hear their crying and shouting and bickering as if they were Croat children. They were not Croat children, and they should have left when Pavelić was given power. Dragan blamed the parents. What parents would remain Orthodox in a country for Catholics? What parents would sentence their own families to death? Here, in these mountains and near these waters they should have known. Death is the result of foolishly waiting for calm.

He thought it was the mother today. That Serb woman, who had actually let him take her boy, the little one Dragan killed. She had prayed a prayer he knew as a child, one they shared. It was a Psalm, and she said it before she recognized him as a guard. He had been too far away from the church for too long. Even a Serb's faith was moving compared to the other guards, whose invocation of Mary ended in cussing or a joke about Veljko's pure wife at home, who, they joked, slept in long underwear. Dragan thought she looked like a prude, with her stern little mouth, her large hips, and her perfectly smooth hair. But the Serb woman whose son he had taken was small and fully curved and angry and resigned. He had kept himself aloof, but as he took her son the fear and high emotion in her voice had moved him, caused him to notice the enjoyable arch of her nose, the rich brown hair that fell around her face, her small, loose breasts beneath her dress.

Dragan had pulled children from their mothers before. Screaming children from angry mothers who spat and clawed at his face before another guard could intervene and subdue them. Roma men were especially fierce. Direct orders had been given that the Roma were to be separated by sex and age before anyone attempted to take the children away, otherwise the men would fight and scream and die trying to save their brown bitches and pups. But this Serb child, with his bloated stomach and jowls and round eyes, and that



prayer in his ear, that Catholic prayer in Orthodox lips, and the clamminess of his hand as he steadied it around the handle of his pistol and held it to the temple of that child, that Serb.

He looked at that woman, right into her eyes with his pistol ready to remove one more Serb, her Serb, from the earth. He wondered if God was behind his bullet. Training. It was what they were told to say to the mothers, to the wives, to the brothers and sisters and aunts, as if the Poglavnik really did want them in the NDH, filling the still air with the chanting that clawed itself into one's chest and the smell of incense that remained on one's clothes and hair and skin so that to walk by a church was to smell like a holy Serb.

There was a wetness seeping through the fabric on his knees. The dirt was damp. Dragan leaned over and slipped his hands beneath the surface, as if reaching towards the dead beneath to pull them from their grave. Dragan thought of the boy he and Sadik had killed. He had killed the child the moment he refused to place him back on the ground, the moment he held that pistol to the boy's temple and the mother had let him go, had left him in Dragan's arms. Dragan had shaken horribly as he walked away, and after the child had finished screaming the boy asked, "Are you scared?" And Dragan had laughed that such a small Serb should ask an Ustaša carrying him to a killing field whether he was scared or not.

"No, no, no," Dragan had said. "I am just a little cold. This breeze is cold."

The child did not seem to understand Dragan's accent, but seemed instead to forget that it was Dragan who had torn him from his mother. The little Serb became curious as they walked and fumbled with the rosary peeking from underneath Dragan's collar. Dragan pulled it out and the child played with it for a few moments, tugging at the beads

and rubbing the crucifix. When he became tired of playing with it he held the crucifix in one hand and rested his head against Dragan's chest, like a doctor listening for heartbeats. The little child breathed a prayer. "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world."

Dragan stopped. He could see the other guards and the children, lots of children, gathered at the entrance, scuttling around, whispering and wailing as the guards yelled and pushed and cajoled them into a single mass for marching.

The small heartbeat of this child, caged in his delicate ribs above his bloated stomach, would stop soon. It would be gone, and the child's insignificant mass would grow cold so quickly while Dragan's heart kept beating blood and growing warm in the sun and cold in the wind, but always moving and dancing and praying while this little Serb and his faithful mother dwindled and died and became skeletons and their flesh would fertilize these fields, which the Poglavnik would need for all the crops the new Catholic state would produce because God's bounty is given to the faithful and they – the true inheritors of this land – were the faithful and true church, built on the rock and filled with rocks that were used to build walls and sometimes kill Serbs.

"It's time to walk," Dragan said to the child. He began to lower the breathing body to the ground, but the child was clinging to the rosary and the beads rubbed against the back of Dragan's neck. "Let go! Let go of the rosary!" The child could not understand, and looked at him, still in Dragan's arms, suspended halfway between the ground and the air. "Let go!"

The child was confused.

Dragan sighed, and holding the child in one arm, slipped the rosary from his neck with the other hand. Dragan set the child, feet-first, onto the dirt. He could hear the other

guards calling to him to bring the boy over, but he ignored them. It would only take a moment. He wrapped the rosary around the child's wrist, which was no bigger than a few fingers. The child immediately brought the rosary to his mouth and began sucking the beads. "Come now," Dragan said, and gave the boy's shaven head a push towards the other children. The child seemed to have forgotten that he had just been pulled from his mother and began, as children do, to run towards the others gathered near the entrance, a loop from the rosary dangling from his wrist.

The guards acknowledged one another with hands raised, Dragan flicking his fingers and nodding as if to signal that the child could continue wearing the rosary. As he walked after the running boy a dull, throbbing pain began drumming in the cradle of his belly and he wondered whether the priest who told him to join the Ustaše was wrong.

The face of the Serb mother in her tears blended with the face of Christ's mother, crying at the foot of the cross. He shook his head, but the image remained of these women in the dirt, anticipating the corpses of their now-breathing sons, their faces pitiful and pale and glowing in the light. Dragan had watched, paralyzed, with the pain in his stomach pounding through his flesh, as Sadik walked after the little boy with the rosary, a hammer held loosely in his large fingers and after, as the boy was tossed into the grave, Dragan wondered if his mother could sense it, could feel the bond between their flesh crushed by the force of Sadik's hammer.

The image of the dead children, of Mary with the face of the Serb woman and the rosary reclaimed from the cold wrist of a dead child filled Dragan's mind as he sat on the freshly dug field, above the hundreds of small smashed bodies and limp gypsy men,

hidden by the worms and pebbles and soil. He rocked until he was sitting and wrapped his arms around his feet and began to pray, his voice coming in gasps. "Hail Mary, full of grace," but the prayer stuck and he could not move past the first line because the mothers were crying and their sons were dead and he had given a rosary and taken a life.

He fell to the side into the dirt and lay there in ball, his arms around his knees in an empty field. He cried and buried his face between his knees. The grit from kneeling stuck to his forehead and cheeks, which were clammy from tears. He tried to pray again holding the rosary, which he had taken back from the child's body before it was thrown onto the others.

"Hail Mary...Hail...hail..." He cried as he tried to pray but his throat was closed and he could only gasp through tears as the image of Sadik and his bloodied hammer and a small body wrapped with a rosary walked behind his eyes.

He laid in the dirt until he was quiet. The sun shone more brightly and the wind blew cold and fresh over the grass. He got up, and wiped his face with his sleeve. Dirt coated most of his uniform. He would have to change when he got back to the camp.

The other Ustaše from the barracks were eating when he returned. Sadik was not with them. Dragan walked to his building and went inside. The door creaked. The tannery must have been busy while he was gone, because the air was full of the sharp, pungent smell of brine and drying animal flesh. He had a bag. His father's, from the Great War. Another time when Serbs and Croats were faced with their differences, with the differences that tore apart the land, damning families and rupturing governments. The whole world had read of them, had thought of them here, of their mountains and their terrorists and the empires. But now, did anyone think of them? Did anyone know what

happened in Jasenovac? Dragan wondered. He changed out of his uniform and placed that, his remaining clothes, and any food he had in a bag. He took some food from one of his friend's trunks, and left a note of apology. He placed his razor, his pistol, a lighter and cigarettes on top of everything. He wrapped his winter scarf around his neck. It was spring, but it could be very cold and he knew he would be walking for a while. Perhaps he would desert, or simply ask for office work. Then again, they could kill him for leaving the camp.

It no longer mattered. His throat was still closed and sore, and the face of the Serb woman was forever merged with that of the Holy Mother. The rosary, which he had held in the field, was dirty with blood and soil, his tears, the child's saliva. He placed it around his neck, before slipping his uniform jacket over his clothing and placing a warm hat over his head. Dragan quietly left, closing the door behind him, and walked towards Jasenovac's gate for the last time.

\* \* \*

Survival was not the only thing what they wanted.

The world did not notice a mother losing her faith, or the consequences of a stolen bit of soap. The Jew in the tannery dies in a mass grave – no one knew and no one wept. Communism fails, faith fails, life falters. The baton was passed from Pain to Death in the mountains and valleys, but the world did not notice.

Because the valley was alone.

And the valley was named Jasenovac.

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