

CONSTANTIN OPRANESCU

MEMORIES...

TESTIMONIES...

My Life...!

THE TRAIN OF HOPE



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## FOREWORD

One day, a professor wanted to teach his students how important every creature is and how beautiful and unique is even one little fragile flower. For an example, he took the students to a valley and told them to pick the least attractive flower they could find and to write a report about it.

“Put this flower in a glass of water and study the delicate leaves, observe the shades of colour in the sunlight... what symmetry... Don’t forget that this flower is one which nobody would ever notice or appreciate if you didn’t find it and admire it” said the teacher.

After this illustration, the teacher concluded that people are the same. Every person is different and unique but you need to take time to observe their beauty and to know the depths of their heart. Many people are ignored because nobody took time to admire and discover their oneness.

I am confident that, even from the first pages of this book, you will observe the inner beauty of its author who in a simple way opens his heart and soul to you, the readers.

This book is a simple description of a man’s life. A man who fought with himself, with God, with life’s difficulties, to become free... and free he became not in the way which one would envisage freedom but liberated from his own ego. The Son of God, Jesus Christ was his liberator and Saviour and, as a result, unrestrained from the chains of sin, he decided to follow the Lord anywhere, paying any price.

If we open the curtains to unveil the events mentioned in this autobiography, we will observe the guiding hand of God who is not only in charge of the whole universe, but even takes care of a simple human being who for some was not worth a cent.

God guides your life. Is He at the rudder of your life?

Today, the author of this book is a member at the Perth Romanian Baptist Church. For five years he has followed his Saviour, caring for the ones he left behind. His life is put as a service to every person in need, anyone who is burdened with sins.

Having a new goal and destiny, C. Opranescu goes forward without looking back because “the old has gone, and the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

**Florin Iancu**

Pastor of the Romanian Baptist Church  
Perth, Western Australia.



## A SIGN FROM GOD

It was at the end of October 1994 and the beginning of spring in Perth, Western Australia. It was a routine Sunday when we gathered together in the Romanian Baptist Church of Bayswater. It was not, however, routine because every Sunday is a reminder of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

An ordinary family: father, mother, and a little boy who was a bit spoilt and naughty, entered the yard of the church. I became acquainted and I found out that they had been given the church's address by a taxi driver who gave them a lift some time ago.

After entering the place of worship, I thanked the Lord for these people who stepped for the first time into God's house. I said, "Lord, if these visitors are called by you, tell me. This will be the sign: 'If they pray today with us, here and now, they are yours.' I will take care of them!"

We were all kneeling down together, young and old, at the prayer time. I heard our visitor praying with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We all said "Amen!" I gave thanks to the Lord for answering and approving my sign.

The Holy Spirit worked in their hearts, unveiled their state of being and realizing their need of salvation, they repented and asked for forgiveness. The blood of Jesus Christ washed their sins and the Father embraced them in His love and through the Holy Spirit, who marked them, they became born again.

Since that Sunday, at the end of October, they ended their life of sin. At that beginning of spring, they embarked on the journey of a new life. Step by step the old sinful habits were left behind... the chains of sin which bound them were broken. Their new deeds of faith proved that "the old has gone, and the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The following six months of Bible study, church services, personal prayer and collective prayer, proved that they were consistent in their faith.

Often they asked me to baptize them and, after a few delays, without me refusing, the church decided to baptize them.

On 30<sup>th</sup> of April 1995, I baptized them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, through immersion in water. In this way they testified to the death of their old life and the birth of their new life.

In the following chapters, you will discover in detail the unfolding of a man's tale. I have read this book with bated breath. It is worthy to be read. It is a good help and an example for those in the first steps of faith. It is also helpful to those who have been on God's path for a longer time. I pray to the Lord, that through the Holy Spirit, *this book* will build up the reader's faith.

Pastor Gavril Crisan.



# CHAPTER 1

## THE BEGINNING

It all started around October '94, on a Sunday morning. I had arrived from Adelaide with my wife Aneta and my son Gogu. We were going to settle down in Perth to start a new, fresh life. We rented a little house in Inglewood that was well placed near the shops and the pub across the road.

On that particular morning, I woke up at 5:30. I rose from the bed still tired. I gazed upon my wife. A shade of a smile exposed a sweet dream. Twenty-five years of marriage, some good years, some bad. I looked at Gogu, (who slept in our bed), eight years of age, cute and plump like a piglet. He came after 18 years of marriage. I looked at them again. I shrugged and dragging my feet, I went to the fridge. Following the routine learned many years ago, I opened the fridge door and pulled out the good old cask of wine! I reached for a glass, cigarette, and... a white business card that had been lying on the table for a few days.

I went outside, sat down on the doorstep, and started that morning around six o'clock with a glass of Riesling. I lit a cigarette and drew on it deeply, so deep, that I was coughing for five minutes. Doesn't matter... that's the first cigarette of the day. The wine was the same. First glass is disgusting, the second one is all right, the third asks for the fourth one. And that's it... I feel a bit tipsy. Now I can rest awhile.

I picked up the little white card that had been bothering me for the past few days. It had an address written in Romanian: "Romanian Baptist Church, 451 Guildford Road, Bayswater. Sundays 10 a.m."

A few nights earlier my wife had come back home from work in a taxi. The driver told her in clear Romanian, "Go to church," and gave her this little white card. Go to church? It seems strange. Taxi drivers usually hand out the addresses of hotels and nightclubs, not churches. I know something about

this taxi business as I used to drive a taxi in Bucharest, Romania's capital city, for 7 years.

I turned the little card over a few times and then flicked it away. I had one more glass of wine and then another. My mind had been fogged up, and I felt pleasantly numb... What should I do today? Maybe sleep for another hour or two, take my wife and son to the market and buy some vegetables and smoked sausages? I shook the cask. It probably has another litre. I would have to fish around for it. I would need to get another one... and so on... So on? How much longer like this? I looked hopelessly towards the cask, then to the glass tumbling down the steps... I looked to the heavens... still like this? Is there no other way left for me? I stooped over and picked up the card, which I had so carelessly thrown away. I have done many things in my life – what would happen if I tried this, too? By nine a.m. the cask was dry. I went straight to the bedroom to wake up my wife.

“What is it?” she asked me as she slowly opened her eyes.

“Let's go to church.”

“Are you drunk?”

“Of course I am,” I said to her.

Of course I am, but I am a professional, I walk straight on the road and if I don't say much, no one will notice.

“Please get up, take the boy and let's go to church. Please.”

## CHAPTER 2

### LET US REASON TOGETHER

I did not live far from the Baptist Church, only a few minutes by car. When Aneta heard where I wanted to take them, she was happy. I woke Gogu, with difficulty, but in a short time we were all dressed, perfumed, and ready to hit the road.

Just before we were about to leave, I downed a glass of brandy - for courage! We hopped into the car and left with cheer.

We became lost because of my sense of direction, or lack thereof, but in the end, we finally arrived.

I entered the church with mixed emotions, a sense of uncertainty and stress. I felt a heavy burden on my shoulders. I was already tired, a bit embarrassed and a bit sad; I was unshaven and... half drunk. I heard a voice:

“Welcome to God’s house, brother, welcome to God’s house, sister.” I understood that in front of me was the boss of the church. Without too much fuss, I made my way to an empty seat and sat down next to a man who introduced himself as ‘Brother John.’ I shook his hand, wiggled my moustache at him, winked and asked:

“How are you, coane.<sup>1</sup> What are you up to, sir?”

He only answered with “Shhhh...”

Aneta and George were seated at some distance from me.

The congregation began to sing a calm soothing song.

“Let us pray to the Lord,” somebody suggested, and all the people knelt down with me among them.

When it was my turn to pray, I found myself shouting loudly: “Thank you, Lord, for your great mercy. Thank you for giving me a child, and thank you because in this morning, you found for me a place. Amen.”

And the entire congregation said “Amen.”

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<sup>1</sup> Similar with Lord in Romanian

Again, another calm soothing song was sung, everything was peaceful, and seemed to fit in place. A passage from the Bible was read out loud. I had closed my eyes and sleep was about to take me when I heard: “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow.” My eyelids were pulled up quick as a flash. Then there is another chance! Nevertheless, I was stuck on the word ‘scarlet.’ What could this ‘scarlet’ be?

It must be the opposite of snow. Snow is white, scarlet isn’t; maybe it is black; snow is cold, scarlet must be hot. What is this scarlet? What is snow? Could scarlet be the imprint in the snow, that time, in the street, when I struck my wife to the ground, the sweetheart of my youth, kicking her again and again? Was it blood on the snow? Was that scarlet? What is scarlet? It is the mark of those days when a couple of mates, and me stopped at a barrier outside the city, our drunken shouts resounding,

“Watch out Shepperton, we’re coming in!” Were those days sealed with the painful scarlet of our lost souls?

“Watch out Shepperton, the bandits will take over!”

What is this scarlet? I obsessed over the word; I became frustrated, it is an intolerable word. It popped up from nowhere. I was sitting quietly in church, in my pew, not bothering anybody; this scarlet is gnawing at my brain.

This scarlet is like a comb... you take it to brush your hair, but the hair is not there, your scalp is not there, and this comb-scarlet gnaws your brain, backwards and forwards, in the past, present, and future... I felt like I had a blow to the chest. This word is too much; this word echoed over and over again in my mind, I felt nauseous. I felt so... “I would give anything for a glass of vodka.”

I fiddled with the cigarette in my pocket. I was craving for a smoke. I could hardly breathe. I had to leave or I would faint. Anyway, I didn’t do any wrong to anyone. It wasn’t I who crucified Jesus. What is the big deal? What is this scarlet?

I survived... church finished. The door was opened and I left the building... troubled. Good thing I had parked on the

street, instead of the car park. In the car I had a flask of brandy with a little left. It went straight to the ‘home of the soul.’ I returned to the church courtyard, to find my wife speaking with the pastor’s wife.

“They have invited us to lunch,” my wife cheerfully told me.

“Are we going?”

“Why not?” I replied.

## CHAPTER 3

### OVIDIU

“Why not?”

Why should we refuse an invitation for lunch? I have never sat at the same table with a pastor in all my life. Life is full of surprises.

On the way I tried to put on a smart face which I hoped my wife would like:

“I don’t think it would be a good idea to go into these people’s house empty handed. They may think we are uneducated. Let’s grab a cask of wine.”

She gave me a scornful look. I understood, but I had done my best. My conscience was clear.

We were greeted warmly. It was a big family, the pastor, his wife and six children. It was a full house; a lot of noise, a rich table of Romanian food: traditional soup and cabbage rolls. I hadn’t eaten like this for years. My wife was a great chef; she cooked in restaurants, but at home... pizza, sausages, grill... we didn’t eat Romanian food.

We drank lemonade; we spoke about many things; it was mostly my wife and I who talked; the pastor and his wife just listened. We all rose and the pastor prayed. He prayed for us, for peace, which we didn’t know we were looking for...

We had our eyes closed, and I was listening to his prayer, and suddenly, an image appeared beneath my eyelids: it was of a man called Ovidiu. Many images flashed through my mind in the following moments... years ago, in Adelaide... in my home... I was eating alone. Ovidiu and his wife came to see me. They were both Christians who were old acquaintances.

“How’s it going, old man?” he asked.

“I am eating. Do you want to join me?”

“Yes brother.”

“Do you want some wine?” I asked.

“No, brother, we don’t drink wine.”

We ate, we talked... they spoke to me about God, about how I needed to repent. I told them I was good, I even read the Bible in three days, and to prove it I wanted to show them my Bible, but I couldn't find it and I nearly fell flat on my face in the kitchen because I couldn't see too well. It was seven o'clock and I was already drunk. Ovidiu spoke quietly; "I would like to pray for you - would you let us pray, brother?" "Pray, coane, it is a free country...!" They both knelt down and prayed right there, in the kitchen. I was sitting on a chair, and as I looked at them. I had a strange feeling in my heart. Tears were running down my face... probably because of the wine. Afterwards, Ovidiu told me not to drink anymore, and to go to church.

"Would you like to be a saint?" he asked.

"Me? A saint? No kidding ..." I thought with a loud voice.

"You will be one, you have to..."

I didn't understand him. 'How can I be a saint? Me! The Pope is a saint! What's the matter with these people...'

These things passed through my mind in the few seconds, the pastor was praying for me. Why do these people pray for us? We only met this morning and I don't even remember their names!

I left his house with a peculiar, inexplicable feeling deep down. When I hopped into the old Valiant, everything seemed all right. I turned to Aneta:

"I've never drunk that much lemonade in my entire life." We had a good laugh, and that's how we arrived at the Civic Hotel. We got out of the car; I took my son by one hand and my wife took his other hand and we went straight to the front bar, determined and joyful. A familiar atmosphere, gloomy, plenty of smoke, the noise of cues striking billiard balls, a curse here, an hysterical laugh there - our kind of scene. I emptied the first glass of beer quickly. Aneta took a sip and put her glass down. I was surprised, I knew her as a 'professional'.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked her.

She played with her full glass slowly, and she said, in a whisper: "I don't know man, I don't know. There is something

amazing about those people. I don't know, I don't want to drink. Let's go home."



## CHAPTER 4

### “OUR FATHER”

The days flew past. The weather was lovely. Everything was going well without any worries. I was out all day, looking for a job. I had gone through three jobs in three months and was still out of work but still looking. Memories came back to me - memories of when I left Adelaide. There I had sworn in front of my friends in the Chala Garden Hotel that I would carry on the life that I was so proud of:

“I will find a timber factory in Perth, like this one,” I had told them, “and a bunch of alcoholics like you.”

We got dead drunk there in the Chala Hotel; we had kissed each other goodbye and addressed each other with brotherly curses. At around midnight I said goodbye to them for the last time with tears and sorrow.

The next day I sold my car to a car yard, and popped into the Junction Hotel to have some grog, and to call a taxi to get to my Mother-in-law’s place. I had to spend one more night in Adelaide. I took my place at the bar and grabbed my drink. In my hand I played with an empty key ring. The final key that had been hanging there was sold together with my Valiant. Not long ago this key ring had been full, keys to the house, the garage, the two cars, the two shops and the bread truck. Slowly, one by one, they all vanished. In a few months, we sold everything, even the furniture and all the appliances in the house. We wanted to leave, to run away from Adelaide, to run to Perth to start afresh. What awaited us in Perth? We didn’t know. We had never been there before and didn’t know anyone.

What sped us onwards to this unknown place? What were we looking for over there? “A timber factory and a bunch of alcoholics,” was what I thought. However, my wife somehow scrounged up the telephone number of the orthodox priest, Nilan, and she brought it with her. What were we looking for?

So I was sitting there, with an empty glass in one hand, and an empty key ring in the other, and I felt empty, estranged, forgotten and alone. I was about to cry because of my misfortune.

“Taxi for Con!” called a voice.

I threw the key ring in the bin underneath my feet, I waved everyone goodbye with a typical Australian curse, walked out to the street and jumped into my taxi. This is the last pub I stepped into in Adelaide.

The days flew past. I had no worries. We strolled around Perth like we were tourists. Aneta, my wife, worked a few nights a week. She couldn’t stay still. We often drove past the Romanian Baptist Church. It has a beautiful sign, written in old gothic style, which attracted my attention.

It was Sunday. We had planned to go to this church in the evening just to see what it was like. We were there at 6pm sharp. It was as if the congregation was waiting for us. We sat down, Aneta on the right side, where the women were seated, and I, next to a man who introduced himself as Brother John, on the left side with all the men. They sang nice hymns - they had a nice orchestra of mandolins. The kids were all well behaved. My little Gogu was naughty and noisy-nothing would settle him. I would have liked to listen to what the man at the microphone was talking about but Gogu wouldn’t let me. He pulled the watch on my wrist, the ring on my finger, the pen from my pocket, he grabbed me by the moustache, he scratched my face and I couldn’t whack him one because of these people around me. I stared at the ceiling and murmured, “Lord, shut him up, or I will strangle him.”

What was the guy on the ‘stage’ on about? He says the Lord is good and forgiving and He jealously wants us. He doesn’t want the sinners dead but rather to repent and repentance means to abandon the old self and to renew oneself and to become... a saint. Again this word, saint... it seems that saints grow on trees with these people. Fairy tales to put the kids to sleep, I thought. I looked at Gogu. Look at him... how sweetly he is sleeping with his head on my shoulder. Who put

him to sleep? It couldn't have been the brother's story. Gogu has his own preferred bedtime stories, such as Snow White who hooked on the Seven Dwarfs at the Athene Palace Hotel but, in the end, got into trouble with Ghinea, the policeman from vice squad, disguised as Prince Charming. Gogu is sleeping with a great grin. How did he fall asleep all of a sudden? I glanced toward the ceiling. A thought thunders around in my mind: Could it be possible that, above ceiling and sky, there might be Someone who hears us and sees us, and reads our thoughts every moment? If that's true, then I'm done for...

I left the church with a strange sense of fear in my heart. On the drive back home, Aneta says to me:

"I think we are out of danger."

"What danger? What are you talking about?"

"Weren't you listening to the pastor? He said he doesn't want to convert everyone; he just wants to make us Christians. That's not too bad... I don't want to convert to anything but Christian sounds nice."

"You're right, Christian does sound nice, you're right..." I said.

We arrived home. Later, we were preparing for bed, and Aneta went to put the child to sleep. I was at the table with a cask in front of me. I looked to the Heavens again with a hidden fear. I shrugged, powerless. *If I could ... oh, if only I could...*

I heard my wife talking with Gogu in the other room.

"Gogu, how about I teach you something: the prayer 'Our Father.'?"

"Okay."

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven."

## CHAPTER 5

### IF ONLY I COULD...

It's raining by the bucket load, rain like you've never seen before. The air is fresh, and I feel great. Not long ago we bought a house and moved into it. Gogu called it the 'garden house,' and he wasn't far from right. It is a little house in the midst of a miniature tropical rainforest. There are palms of all types, vines, ferns and God only knows the names of the others. All sorts of birds call the little jungle their home. You can admire the view from inside, courtesy of the large windows and glass sliding doors. The Garden of Eden no less! I have begun to speak using a new vocabulary.

Everything about this morning is beautiful. It's all soaked and sparkling. The water courses down the palms' trunks and I stand beneath a large branch as if under an umbrella. Some tiny birds are singing beautifully; they are so tiny, you wonder from where the song comes.

"Come, woman, come out and have a look at the pleasant rain."

"What is so pleasant? It's rainy and wet and cloudy and windy and cold... better to come inside before you catch a cold!" All my enthusiasm disappears. It seems she is right. It's raining cats and dogs, and I am standing under a tree like Robinson Crusoe and I'm looking at these tiny little birds. They sing so nicely in the rain and I feel happy for no apparent reason.

As I was still looking for a job, I had an interview at a timber factory. So there I went! Everything was resolved quickly – it was no place for me here!

On the way back home, I stumbled upon a pub, Wangara Tavern. On the outside it looked like it had survived a war; inside... I could hardly believe my eyes. These people are more rotten than those in Adelaide. Raunchy Girls at lunch! I had never seen anything like this! At least in Adelaide these shows started at 9 o'clock at night by which time I was usually drunk.

Look at how they twirl around on the tables nearly naked. Men's calloused and dirty hands reaching, groping, touching, feeling. The pub is full of bikies. There is a choking haze; it smells like a dung heap, the music is dizzy and I feel drunk. I am ready to spew.

I headed for the door reaching for the doorknob, which was somewhat higher than usual. Before I grabbed it, I saw my own hand with callouses, two fingers half chopped off from an old accident. My hand is as ugly and as dark as all the others in the crowd. I belong with this mob of alcoholics. Where am I running? Who am I running from? Not, by any chance, from myself? Back to the bar...

I grab a new glass and try to get into the routine but I can't... I cannot do it anymore. Yesterday was Sunday. I wish every day was a Sunday. Yesterday I took my woman and my child to the church. It is good there. I don't know why it is so good but I feel, perhaps, like I am safe there. There is a soothing peace, warm colours, warm words, friendly people and nice children. Then there was me, among them, ugly and unshaven, with dirty thoughts and breath reeking of alcohol. Yesterday I left the church with the sad thought that my place is not there, that I dirtied the carpet I walk on and the bench where I sat. Now I am in the place I have known for thirty years, the place I loved for thirty years, among people who were like I had been for thirty years, doing the things I have done for thirty years. I have in my nostrils the smell in which I was born but even here, I don't feel at home anymore. There is no longer a place here for me. Even the barmaid gave me a dirty look and she served me with disgust, not even talking to me. I put down the glass and when I found my way out, I felt disoriented, confused.

Outside the pub, there are withered trees, holes, and rubbish. "What place is this? What am I doing here?" I slowly made my way to my car. "Where should I go? I don't know..."

I took off down Wanneroo Road, towards home, slowly.  
"Oh, if I could... if only I could..."

## CHAPTER 6

### SAINT AGNES

I drove down Wanneroo Road at a slow speed. The rain had stopped but the sun was still hiding behind the clouds. There was a lump in my throat. It was as if something was weighing down on my chest. I sigh deeply. I felt like a tattered rag. I am sad, very sad... Will I cry? Me? When was the last time I cried? A long time ago... maybe when I was sixteen?

That was when I first left home, when I left my mother, and my hometown Bals. The night before, I had met all my friends - about ten of them - the scum of the town and I was the youngest. It was my first stride towards freedom. We had to celebrate the departure into the unknown. We congregated in a little pub at the end of the bridge over the Oltet, a bridge of iron made by the French during the time of the war - we were very proud of that bridge. There we began drinking freshly corked wine because it was autumn (the time for wine-making).

“Hey, I would shout you drinks until daybreak, but I am broke, I don’t have one penny” said I.

“But you have a gold ring!” replied one named Pelican, leering. I became very angry. I spat at him and I swore on him and his ancestors.

“It’s not mine! Do you want me to sell my father’s ring? He is doing time in prison and is suffering greatly. How can I sell it? I have it from my father who is cutting sugar cane in the Danube Delta<sup>2</sup>; the little ring of my daddy, with the ruby in the middle!” and again I cursed and swore and spat at him. Suddenly I stopped and stared at him. I took off my ring and threw it on the table and swore and cursed upon my father.

“Get five litres of wine for it, you greedy Pelican!”  
We got dead drunk there and started to sing an old farewell song:

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<sup>2</sup>Notorious Prison Camp.

*“Adieu, Bals, farewell,  
I have left, and your bridge I will never see again,  
I leave with you my memories and love,  
I go on my own, a vagabond.”*

That was when we spotted the police coming, and we ran away, along the river. I arrived home after midnight. When I saw my mother waiting for me, a deep sadness gripped me and I began to cry like a baby. She looked at me in a way that showed her heart was breaking.

“You have started in your father’s footsteps, my little boy. Go to bed.”

I cried myself to sleep. It was the last time I remember crying.

Why do these thoughts invade my mind now? It’s all in the past. Such is life, sometimes good, sometimes bad, most of the time bad.

The car rolls slowly down Wanneroo Road. Without realizing, I park at the Northlands Tavern. I step up to the front bar, like it is my own living room. My eyes fall upon the billiard table. A little old man is circling the table. He is wearing shorts, he is very skinny, with his baldhead shining; a pool cue in his hand. When he sees me coming in he stops, looking straight at me. His look strikes me like a blow to the chest, and I bow a little. He does the same, sneering at me. He is beating his cue on the ground. It seems to me like he is holding a pitchfork.

“Why are you staring at me, eh? What, you think you scare me? Why are you sneering at me?” I am building up my courage. I order a drink at the bar. Then, with glass in hand, I turn to look around. The old man is bent over the billiard table, eyeing a ball exactly in my direction. He isn’t looking at the ball; he is looking into my eyes. Lying in wait, I am his prey. I slowly put the glass on the bar, and carefully make my way to the door not taking my eyes off the old man. “What are you looking at? Why are your eyes on me? You think you are scaring me or what?” Who is this man? What does he want? I am sick of this place. On the way to the car, I buy a flask of

Saint Agnes Brandy from the bottle shop. I get into the car and look upon the bottle in my hand.

“Saint Agnes, Saint Agnes. What do those saints want from me? I am cornered. Oh, if only I could...”

If only you would try, man!

Try what?

Throw it.

Throw it?

And throw the tobacco.

I do it. I throw the flask and the tobacco and the matches and the cigarette lighter under a bush.

“Enough is enough, I will show you who I am. You wait and see me, Saint Con. I start the car and leave for home still fighting with my self. I left a part of myself under that bush.



## CHAPTER 7

### SAINT CON

I left the tavern behind and left that little old devil to be the master of it. I left behind the booze and the tobacco and all the things I alone know. Enough! I am a new man, a holy man, like all those holy people from the church. One of them is called Luke. He really is a saint. He sings nicely and conducts the orchestra and speaks very nicely, too. He once said that God hates the sin, but loves the sinner. I liked this saying: It means that He loves me, too. I wonder? I recall what Ovidiu told me back in Adelaide. He was the first to speak to me about God. He told me that I have to be holy. How strange those words seemed to me then. Now, after meeting these people from the church, I can believe that saints are for real. They even heal the sick. The pastor's wife merely laid her hand on Aneta's forehead when she had a migraine, spoke some words I cannot recall, and my woman fell asleep immediately. She woke up about fifteen minutes later in perfect condition. They are holy people - now I believe Ovidiu - but that's not all. I myself became a saint. I threw the alcohol and tobacco under a bush at Northlands Tavern and now I will shave my beard. I will be a saint.

I arrived home just in time to catch my wife before she left for work. I went straight to the bathroom and shaved before speaking to her very gravely.

"From now on I am a saint. I won't drink, I won't smoke, I won't swear at you anymore and we will go to church every Sunday." She laughed.

"Are you drunk, or can you drive me to work?"

"Let's go." I am determined, no joke. In the car we stayed quiet for a while, and then she asked me:

"What joke is this? What saint are you talking about?"

"I am not joking," I thought aloud: "If I get rid of alcohol and tobacco I will become a Christian, for sure." She laughs again.

“Well! A holy devil ... who would have thought?”

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I dropped her off at the ‘Orient Express,’ in Northbridge, and went back home. I was happy for no reason and I felt good. An old song sprung to mind, and I started to sing quietly.

*“Catherine, I would like to see you dead,  
With a funeral wagon at you doorstep,  
Pulled by masked horses.”*

Wait a minute! This is not an appropriate song for Saint Con. How about another one?

*“You are so beautiful,  
And I love you so...”*

This one sounds alright but I think I will learn a hymn or something at the church. I arrived home singing happily, with a loud voice.

*“Paraskiva, I loved you...”*

I worked a little in the garden. There is always something to do in this amazing garden. I picked Gogu up from school, we ate and then I said:

“Let’s go in the spa, Gogu.”

“Okay.”

We have a big spa under the trees, in the shade. I warmed up the water a little bit and we played around in it for about an hour. After a short pause, I sat contemplating the beauty of this garden. A few dozen palm trees, brick paths, a small mound full of flowers and vines and around the spa itself tropical plants and flowers. The birds around us were singing in a way I have never heard in my life. There is a little

waterfall cascading into the spa, with a faint rushing of clean, clear, warm water. It's like a dream come true. Gogu dived under the water and pinched me. His skin was wrinkly from the long time spent in the water. I felt it was time to get out. "Come on Gogu, get out, that's enough, you may catch a cold." But he didn't want to listen. He made a face at me, screamed and threw water in my face. I insisted and I was losing my patience.

"Get out, boy, or I will break one of those branches over your back." When he saw it was a serious matter he jumped out.

Something inside me broke. I looked around and tried to break a branch from somewhere. I couldn't find one in any of the trees. The branches are long like a day of fasting, some as long as five metres and they rustle in the breeze. There were crows squawking in them and not a ray of sunlight shone through them. There is no fruit to be found. And so I will destroy them all. I will demolish this house made of cardboard. I will build a pub. What do I need this jungle for? The snakes will eat me here! Look how I am sitting in the water for two hours, like a frog. What am I doing here? I am not a frog! Or maybe I am... I jumped out of the water, and the cold wind cut through my bones. I am freezing, my teeth are chattering, my knees are shaking. Only a few metres and I am inside. I run to the bathroom, and cover myself with a towel. I sit on the edge of the bathtub. I start with the classic swearing... Saint Con... What saint? No more. Maybe those saints in the church were breastfed holy water, Saint Luke, Saint Joseph... what about me? I rise and begin to pace around the house, still wet. I am looking for something, even in the rubbish bin. I am looking for cigarette butts and I cannot find one.

I quickly get dressed. "Gogu, I will be back soon. Lock the door after me."

I get into the car and I speed off straight to Northlands Tavern, to the parking lot. There in the same place I threw it a few hours ago, my pack of cigarettes still lies there. I snatch up the pack my fingers fumbling as I light a cigarette. The smoke

goes straight into the 'house of the soul.' Saint Agnes is poking out from under the bush. I almost forgot about her. I take a deep swig. Oh, thank you Lord! This thought freezes me in my tracks. When I was in the church, I thanked the other Lord the same way. There are two Gods? A terrible fear came over me. I threw away the cigarette and the bottle back under the bush. I fled that place. I failed. I lost. That's it, though. This was the last time. I will start again, right now. I will show them what a saint I am.

But before nightfall, I found myself back there again. Just before midnight, when I had to pick up Aneta from work, I passed by that parking lot. I picked up that bottle and pack of cigarettes from under the bush. When Aneta got into the car, I offered her the bottle.

“Want a sip, woman?”

She laughed. “I do, Saint Con.” We both laughed, but something tore inside me.

## CHAPTER 8

### THANK YOU, LORD...

“Thank you, Lord, for Your great mercy.”

Again I was on my knees. Again I was in the Lord’s house, on a Sunday evening. I didn’t want to go but my wife wouldn’t let me escape. Again we were on our knees which kind of hurt; and my back too. I couldn’t be bothered with prayer; I couldn’t be bothered with anything. So what was I doing there? What keeps me from getting up off my knees and walking outside? I don’t know, I don’t understand what is happening. All I know is that I am on my sore knees, with my back aching but still...

“Thank you, Lord, for Your great mercy.”

Fifteen years earlier I had heard a similar prayer. I was on a cargo train which was carrying coal from Romania to Marseilles. At a small station on the border, Feri Baci, who was chief of the station, had dumped Romeo and I in the wagon the night before. Romeo was a thief from Bucharest. The wagon was half loaded with sacks of coal. Feri Baci hid us under the sacks and told us:

“Tomorrow, after the train has been loaded I will shout loudly, ‘Thank you, Lord, I have finished this work.’ This means the train will be ready to go.”

Romeo and I were in the corner of the car, shoulder-to-shoulder buried under piles of coal, when we heard the password:

“Thank you, Lord, for I have finished loading the train, and that tomorrow morning the border guards will come to inspect and seal it.” Thanks for the good news, Feri Baci. We feel a lot better now... so what’s going to happen if they come? If they do not find us, we will reach France, the country of liberty but if they grab us, we will be sent straight back and thrown in jail. So my friend Romeo encouraged me. Romeo knows what he’s talking about, since he’s wandered in and out of most of Romania’s prisons over fourteen years. We shared a cell for four months in Aiud Prison. Now we are sitting here,

at the bottom of a coal wagon, next to each other. I could hear him breathing, and I felt safer with him close by.

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I remember one day in jail, while we were watching the prisoners being beaten for no apparent reason, I said:

“I can’t imagine what I would do if one of these pigs would start on me, I think I will slash his throat.”

A thief from Sibiu City glanced at me, with sadness. “Better to not get mixed up in any trouble, *gagiu*<sup>3</sup>, I feel sorry for you...”

The next morning, the sergeant inspected the cells. I heard him shouting.

“The boss from Cell Eight ... come here.”

That was me. “Shhhh ...” whispered Romeo as he stopped me and he went up front. “That’s me, citizen sergeant,” he responded as he went up front.

He had barely finished talking when he was whacked a couple of times in the face.

“The cell is not in order and the beds are not properly made. Go and clean up.”

“Yes sir, citizen.”

He came back, after a few minutes, with bruised cheeks.

“This is my breakfast,” he laughed ... I have felt small in front of him...

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“Thank you, Lord, for Your great mercy. Thank you, Lord, for we have finished loading this train...”

The border guards didn’t come the next day but they did after what seemed like a week or so. We lost count of the days, being in the dark all the time. We had some plastic bags to use as toilets. It stank in our dark hole; we drank our water

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<sup>3</sup> Man, in gypsy language.

sparingly - we had only ten litres. We ate bread that Feri Baci had dried on the stove, and there, in that tangible darkness, in that filthy pit, in the painful silence, I remembered God.

“God, if you save me from this, I promise I will never get drunk again. I will not steal anymore. I will fast one day a week. If you save me from here, I will go to church every Sunday. I will not cheat on my wife, if you save me from here...” I hear footsteps pacing. With a sudden, metallic clang, the door in the roof of the wagon opened. A few rays of light strike through the sacks of coal. It’s the border guards.

“Save me, Lord!”

“Get out of there, you, I can see your leg. Get out or I will shoot you. Get out! I am going to shoot you if you don’t!” I am paralyzed, I don’t know what to do and I shout inwardly:

“Save me, Lord, I will hang a cross around my neck, and I will wear it until I die. A big cross, a big cross I will put around my neck, save me, save me!”

“Let’s go corporal, there’s no one in there.” They slammed the door shut, sealed it, and I heard the footsteps departing.

“Thank you, Lord, for your great mercy.”

## CHAPTER 9

### THE LOST CROSS

I checked to make sure the cross was around my neck under the shirt. It's a wooden cross with a silver image of the crucified Lord Jesus on it. I even have one hanging from my car's rear view mirror. I feel the cross stuck to my skin. This is the second cross of this kind I have worn so far. A long time ago my mother gave my wife and I a large cross made of black wood to bring us good luck. I wore it for a few years but it didn't bring much luck.

One day I remember that I had a big fight with my wife when I wanted to go to a soccer match to watch my favorite team, 'Rapid Bucharest.'

She said, "You're not going anywhere!"

I said "No way! I am going to the match!" So I went.

I went to the stadium. When I sat down I pulled out the cross and kissed it, "God, help Rapid, and calm down my wife." It was pointless. Rapid lost, and when I went home I found all my clothes thrown out the window.

"Go and sleep in the stadium with Rapid."

That cross didn't help too much, though on the third attempt to cross the border, I hoped it might help. When they caught us and threw us in jail, I ripped it from around my neck, and threw it in the dirt. I thought it was a great sin. Later on, after I arrived in Australia, I confessed this in my first confession when I went to the Romanian Orthodox Church in Adelaide. Father Jonah questioned me,

"Have you stolen, brother Constantin?"

I answered:

"I have stolen, father."

"From the rich or from the poor?"

"Without discrimination, Father, everything that was within my reach."

"God forgives you. Don't steal anymore."



I told him the story about throwing the cross in the dirt.

“It’s alright, God forgives you. Don’t do it again.” The priest stared at me until I left the church.

The next Sunday, he preached in the church, “Before, the criminals were on the cross, but today, the crosses are on the criminals!” I guessed that he was talking about me but I couldn’t understand why he was talking like this. I thought he was too clever and I too stupid to understand and to date, this remains an unsolved mystery for me.

I feel around for the cross underneath my shirt as I go out from the church. I don’t know what happened there tonight, I couldn’t concentrate though I feel good and my head feels clear and refreshed. After arriving home, I leave the wife and the boy. . .

“I am going for a bit of a walk.”

“Don’t end up at the pub,” advises my wife.

“We’ll see.”

I don’t have any money since I am again without a job. I decide to withdraw some money from the ATM, buy a little bottle, and walk around with it for company. I head for the ATM. There are two people in front of me. I think: ‘how good it would be if I didn’t drink, didn’t smoke and was a good Christian. It would be good, if I only could... if this machine doesn’t give me any money, it will mean I have to try again... to become holy again.’

It’s my turn at the ATM. I read on the screen the words ‘Out of Order.’ I depart with fear. The machine had been working a few moments earlier when those others in front just took out money. Now it’s not working. Strange! I leave with the feeling that somebody is watching me, like when I left the Orthodox Church after the confession and felt the priest’s eyes boring into the back of my head.

I feel a sliver of ice sliding down my chest. I put my hand under my shirt, expecting to grab some snake or lizard, but it’s just my cross, made from black wood, with the crucified Jesus on it. It is strangely cold. It came loose from my neck. I looked at it, and then I hid it in the furthest reaches

of my pocket. It wasn't cold anymore. What was that all about?

I headed for home in a hurry, panicking, and the words of Jonah, the priest, come to mind "Before, the criminals were on the cross, but today, the crosses are on the criminals."

## CHAPTER 10

### THE FIRST BIBLE

I began to read the Bible. I started from the beginning, where God made the heavens and the earth. This is the second time reading from the Book of the Lord. To this day, I still have my first Bible. It's a little book with a red plastic cover. It must have been through a fire because the cover is half burnt. Half of the last page was torn out, I assume to use as cigarette paper. This Bible fell into my hands while I was in Shepperton, Victoria, two months after I arrived in Australia.

I was together with two other Romanians and we were a menace to that small town. As if that wasn't bad enough, a man bumped into us who introduced himself as Vasile the Mad. When he learned what business we were up to in that town, he quickly made himself scarce. But he left the profound impression of being a disillusioned wanderer, a professional drinker, a bit scared, but thirsty for adventure and a lover of the unknown. He also left something else for me – a small Bible with a red plastic cover, which was put through fire. I carried it with me all the time and even read it at some point. What remained in my head was a saying: “Do not trouble the stranger and do not take advantage of him.” Whenever I was wronged I remembered this teaching and I asked myself: “I wonder why this man persecutes me? Isn't he still a stranger in this land of immigrants?”

The Bible I read now is a large book with brown covers and big letters. I read again the passage about the stranger, and remember the times beforehand, where I was taken advantage of by other strangers like myself. In jail it is the same. The biggest wrongs do not come from the prison wardens but from prisoners like yourself - the ones with whom you share the same suffering.

“Do not trouble the stranger...” and as I read on “Do not trouble the orphan, or the widow.” I like the Bible because it mainly occupies itself with downtrodden people without help

from anyone. Strangers, widows, orphans... I read the Bible and I like what I read. The pastor taught me to pray before I start reading the Bible; to pray to the Lord to give me wisdom to understand what I read. This man knows a lot, but not only that, he wants to teach me what he knows. If only I could have met him a little earlier...

## CHAPTER 11

### ON AN EXCURSION

We were about to go on an excursion. We gathered at five in the morning (a strange time to meet!) in front of the police station in Ballajura (a strange place to meet but a safe parking place!). Together with our son Gogu, we showed up on time and waited for the bus to come. Eventually, the bus arrived - an ancient, hulking machine, barely holding together. There at the wheel was Rob, a round, jovial Australian.

“Toot, toot! Toot toot!”

My wife whispers to me: “We won’t even reach the market in this rusty pack-horse.” After we all took our seats, I whispered to her:

“With all these saints on board, the bus would run even without an engine.” The last to get on was the pastor. I don’t know why but I had the impression he had counted us, one by one.

“Toot toot! Toot toot!” We leave cheerfully, all singing with boisterous voices. We all have little books full of songs, which are numbered.

“Song number forty-seven!” Everyone wets their index finger on their tongues, and turns the pages to song forty-seven:

*“O, Lord, I shout to You,  
Look upon my weakness.  
With Your arms give me deliverance,  
Accept me, the way I am.”*

A beautiful song! Accept me the way I am! Would God actually accept me the way I am? I look towards my wife. What about her? Among these saints I feel like a drop of ink on a white sheet. Gogu, my little son, lives in my shadow. I promised him, that over twelve or so years, I would make a professional drunk out of him, just like his old man. My wife, too, has been under my shadow since she was fifteen. I taught them what I knew.... Things I had learned from my father. What should I do?

“Sing, brother, sing!”

Some words come to my mind very clearly, as if I have always known them: “Though your sins are like scarlet, I shall make them white as snow...”

“Hey, brother, come and sit next to me.” It’s the pastor’s wife. I sit near her, embarrassed and I wonder what is wrong with me. Why am I embarrassed? I know how to talk with the ladies. I have a silver tongue that they love although now, I don’t know what to say. I hear her asking me:

“Do you have any relatives in Australia, brother?”

“Yes, I have. My mother-in-law and my sister-in-law are in Adelaide. I am most fortunate to be rid of them as we have hated each other for twenty-five years.”

“Perhaps the time for forgiveness and reconciliation has come, brother.”

“Even unto death, I would not forgive her for all she has done to me,” I respond.

“What has she done to you, brother?” I try to recall how she had wronged me. What was it again?

“Lots of things...” I mumbled.

“Where is your father-in-law, brother?” she asked.

“Down below, burning in the furnace.”

“This means your mother-in-law is a widow and your sister-in-law is an orphan. Lord have mercy on them. Let us sing, brother.” The pastor’s wife had a wonderful voice but I stayed mute. What should I sing?

*Where is my father-in-law?*

“Down below, burning in the furnace.”

*Where is my father?*

“Down below, burning in the furnace.”

*Where am I heading?*

“Down below, in the furnace.”

*How about my son?*

“In the furnace.” Why? Why? There must be another way...

“Sing, brother, sing.” The pastor’s wife carried on looking into my eyes. “When God will touch you, whatever

you liked before, you won't like, and what you didn't like, you will like. Sing, brother, sing..."

How can I sing? What can I sing? The ballad of suffering and shame! What does this ballad say? It says that I have brought into a foreign country a widow and an orphan girl and in a short time I rejected them. Stranger... widow and the orphan... What should I do? What is left for me to do? Nothing else, sing, brother, sing:

*"Come to Jesus, come,*

*Cry for your sins,*

*He forgives you*

*He loves you, now..."*

The rickety bus made it safely to Albany\* and back within the day.

It wasn't just an impression - the pastor had counted us at the start before entering and on leaving the bus. He counted us all, one after the other, like the shepherd counts his sheep.

## CHAPTER 12

### GOOD NIGHT, BOB

The demons play on our roof. After the sun goes down they start tapping on the roof. There are owls and possums in this forest, and all sorts of things living here – that’s what we try and think. Perhaps there are animals in the ceiling. Someone is wandering through our house in the dark, and even during the day I hear strange noises. I am afraid to sleep at night. It has begun again...

I recall similar events happening a couple of years back in Adelaide – when I used to sleep with Bob’s ashes under my bed. The devils walked through the whole house just like now, and just like now I was afraid to turn the lights off.

Bob was an old friend. I met him in Adelaide, in ‘Dom Polski,’ a short while after my arrival from Shepperton. Bob was older than me by about 25 years, but he was fit, danced with young girls and drank beer by the gallon. We went to a lot of parties and did many things together but we lost touch for a few years. He remembered me in the final days of his life. One night he called me and left a message.

“I am at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. Come and see me.”

I arrived at around 8:30 at night. Bob was nearly at the end of his journey; he was coughing badly and spitting blood.

“How are you, old man?” I asked.

“Dying, but this is not your concern. Here’s what you have to do.” He gave me precise instructions, which I followed immediately.

I went straightaway to his house. In a corner of the bedroom was an old vacuum cleaner. I opened the filter lid and pulled out a thick wad of cash.

“Take the money, and do what you like with it,” Bob had told me. “You were good to me. You shouted me drinks every now and then. I don’t want the money to be squandered by me. Take it, drink the whole lot. If you want, you can disappear



from my sight because I don't need you, though if you want, you can visit me in hospital."

I visited him often. He kept getting worse.

"How do you want me to bury you, old man? Do you have a preference?" I asked.

His reply: "Burn me to cinders. Let there be nothing left of me. Do not bring a priest to the funeral or I will kill him." A determined man, indeed.

I put him in a nursing home to die there. One day when I went to visit him, he was sitting in a wheelchair in the backyard. In front of him, on the table, was a beer, untouched – this is a bad sign. I sat next to him. He opened his eyes:

"Roll me a cigarette."

I put it between his lips and lit it. I looked upon him. He was barely breathing, only thin wisps of smoke were coming out of his nostrils. His face was very pale, almost transparent. Where is the Bob of old times? There is but a shadow left. I say to him in a low voice,

"It looks like this is it, old man. I think you have finished this match. Are you sure you don't want me to bring a priest to forgive your sins?"

His words come through a veil of smoke:

"Do what you like. I have put my soul in your hands..."

I remained stunned, as if I was seeing through his eyes. This man has given me everything. Only his soul remains and he wants to be rid of it, to give it to me. What am I to do with it if I don't know what to do with my own? What can I do with your soul, old man? I bitterly cursed his fate and mine.

"I am going to get a priest, old Bob." I didn't find a priest, but I sent a Catholic monk. I do not know what happened between them. After a few days, 'White Ladies' Funerals' handed me a container holding Bob's ashes.

And what was I supposed to do with them? I threw the container under the bed.

"Good night, Bob."

## CHAPTER 13

### DEMONS IN THE ROOF

All the trouble began when I put Bob under the bed. Night after night I was awoken by voices and whispers. Once I received a blow to the stomach, another time a kick in the back. There was giggling and laughter. I was sleeping by myself in the bedroom, my wife and the child in another room. She, too, had nightmares.

We made plans. “Sell the house and move from here. Sell everything we have and we will leave this cursed place”. There were many things to sell. It was not so easy.

We put everything up for sale, and every night, before I went to sleep, I got dead drunk. Then, when I went to bed and turned off the light – everything started again. Dancing, noises, steps, laughing, giggling. I was trembling with fear. With great difficulty I fell asleep. It was at that time that I began to pray.

Problems came from all directions. We didn’t see any escape, so we prayed to God. I used to wake up at 3 o’clock every morning. I put an icon in front of me, got down on my knees and would pray to the Lord to save me from this fear and this place, from all my problems and to protect me from my enemies, from my friends and from the Mafioso who decided to kill my son. I bowed my forehead to the ground repeatedly and I was gripped with terror. During the day I was chased by lawyers, sales agents, Chinese, those who I had deceived and those who wanted to deceive me. The tax people, the banks, enemies and friends were on my back – and this was during the day. During the night I was chased by the devil. I prayed day and night, sober or drunk, and saw no way out. I prayed to Jesus, Our Lady and all the rest.

We sold all we had in six months, the house, with all the furniture, the little truck, the ‘Italian Corner’ and ‘Transylvania,’ (our two small businesses which brought us many hours of headache) and the cars. The rest we gave away

to those in need. We had a big party to celebrate our good luck, and then we left Adelaide.

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But now everything starts all over again. The demons walk through the whole house. They have come after us, 3000 km from Adelaide.

In church I say to Brother John:

“I am afraid of the dark. I hear them walking through my house.”

“Who?” he asks – he’s a man of few words.

“I hear them walking, everywhere! I am even afraid to talk about it.” I say to him hurriedly, hoping that he will tell me some secret, or spell, that will make them flee to the neighbours. For a while he is silent, then he says:

“Know that to be afraid is a sin before God.”

This is all he said to me on the matter. I scratched my head... I can’t take it anymore. This is too much. I have to be afraid to be afraid... I need to do something.

What am I to do? I had arranged for my wife, Gogu and I to all sleep in the same bed for a short while, to see how that would go, and then we would need to do something about it.

So it was. We told stories, chatted, Gogu fell asleep and when I was about to sleep, from the kitchen I heard something falling down. I jumped out of bed and went to check. I turned on all the lights... nothing. It’s impossible.

I said to Aneta, “Woman, I’ve had enough. There are demons in this house. They have come for us from Adelaide. We need to do something. Tomorrow I am going to find a priest and bring him here”

“Well, we have a priest at the Baptist church, call him.” Aneta laughs, she isn’t worried, as if she was born in a haunted house. “Go, call our priest, go, go!”

“No, no! That is not a priest. I want a real priest with a beard and moustache, a raincoat down to his feet and with his acolytes. I want him to come here, to bring candles, holy

water, to hold a service, to recite a psalm, to give an exorcism, to do something, I can't take it anymore!"

She laughed, quietly, so Gogu didn't wake; I looked at her... she looked happy, serene, pretty, purring like a cat, and says,

"Since you stopped drinking and smoking, you look like an alien, especially in those pyjamas." She laughed again.

Since when do I no longer smoke or drink? It's been three days. They passed quick enough, not too hard and not too easy either. This time I will show everyone - Saint Con, version 2. I hurried back to bed, and told Aneta,

"Get up and turn off the light." She laughed quietly, calmly, in a way I have never heard before.

## CHAPTER 14

### SIN UNDER CONTROL

It is hot. The sun is as big as a chariot wheel. It bounds over the hills, red-orange; it cooks us alive. I have found work at a furniture factory. All day I cut chip wood with a circular saw. Dust, so much dust... Here the hammer and nail does not exist. They have guns loaded with staples of different sizes. Bang, bang, bang, it is like we are on the war front. Gunfire, banging, dust thick enough to cut with a knife, great thirst... I drink water like a camel. It's an order. I haven't touched alcohol for three weeks. I am losing weight, the skin is peeling off my hands, there is an itch all over my body, especially on the feet, and my lips are always dry. Aneta is the same. A week ago, early in the morning, a voice woke me up – a perfectly clear voice, distinct, manly, saying:

“Drink four litres of water with your meals.” Then I was enlightened. I woke up Aneta and said to her,

“Don't you see we are dying of thirst? We are dehydrating!” And we both agreed that we hadn't really ever drunk water in our lifetimes. When we stopped drinking alcohol we hadn't replaced it with anything. We had a little water – we didn't like it. Even before, we had taken medicine with wine. I said to Aneta:

“We are dying of thirst, woman. God told me to drink four litres of water a day.” She didn't laugh anymore, but she said,

“Give me a glass of water, old man.”

So we began to drink water from that very morning. It wasn't so bad after all, especially if it's cold but today it is too hot. I cut metres of chipboard; the dust is dripping off me. I have a keg of cold water at my feet but my thoughts are flying around a cold beer. What's the big deal? A hole wouldn't open up in heaven if I drank a beer. I remembered a scripture that says the man is a slave of the sin that rules over him but I think, as long as I am in control of that sin, then I am not a slave. I

am the boss. It's quite simple. God is more tolerant than the people from the church.

That night I stopped at Bassendean Hotel to 'control' the sin. I controlled it so well that I don't know how I managed to get home. I think Aneta was expecting it.

"Is that it, Saint Con - has version 2 ended?" I told her that it was written in the Bible, that sin is cunning; that the boss is the slave, and that a hole won't open up in heaven if I have a cask of wine. Good night, ciao bambina!

Sunday morning, a little hung over, a little ashamed, I took Gogu my son, and his mother and we went to church. We each sat in our places.

"Let us pray to the Lord."

The whole church knelt. I listened to the prayers. They were sophisticated and pompous. Instead of 'Our Father who art in heaven,' I hear 'Our Father who travels through the heavens.' I listened to their prayers, and I imagine how God travels about the sky, through the air, like a hurricane, like a wind, like a breeze going where it pleases.

God is a spirit that can even enter a train wagon full of coal...

Where are you, God? Not here. You are in Heaven, in the abyss... I felt You were close when I was in that wagon full of coal in which I crossed the border. You were there at the bottom of the wagon when I was making oaths and saying in my heart,

"If you save me from the soldiers I will fast. I will go to church. I will stop stealing. I won't lie or get drunk. I will hang a cross around my neck..."

Where have these oaths gone? They drowned in the Danube ... but didn't I try? Of course I did, but I couldn't do it... Am I not trying now? I can't, Lord, I can't! Why don't You hear me? Where are You, Lord? Travelling through the sky? Are You with the believers? What about me? Where are You, Lord? Did I leave You behind on the coal wagon? We met in the bottom of that wagon, but then I lost You. You were closest to me then, closer than now in the church. Even though

I left you, You continued on Your way. I didn't want to leave. I was thirsty, looking for water, and my friend, Romeo, was with me. We got off the train. We found water, tobacco, and money, some food, and we returned in a hurry but the train had already left and You with it.

How many trains had I missed up until now? The wagon where You were had gone as well. I hear the train whistle in my subconscious. The train whistled, then it left, then God left, yet I am on the floor of the church, on my knees, just like I was on the bottom of that train car.

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That train was gone... I lost it and I feel that this is the final train. I need to hang on to it with everything I have. I will not miss this one.

## CHAPTER 15

### THE SPEECH

“Thank you God, for Your great mercy”

We rise to our feet and I rub the numbness out of my knees. It is good in this place. It is quiet and restful here. The pastor prays. I close my eyes and listen. He prays for the righteous and the sinners. He says that God gives rain over the good ones and the bad ones. He was right. I hadn't thought about it until now. He prays for us to be holy, just like Ovidiu... It's as if Ovidiu is next to me, saying, “You need to be holy...” I see him kneeling, praying for me and the pastor prays for me too. They are all praying for me. I don't know how it came about that I am such an important person.

The pastor speaks nicely as he talks about the sinner who comes to faith and Jesus forgives his sins. He talks about a cross on which we must crucify our sinful nature and be born again.

How easy it is to talk about it. But to crucify the sinful nature you need to have a cross handy, with nails and a hammer, then grab it by the throat, to whack it on the cross. Then take the hammer and the nails and nail it on the head. I can almost see the sinful nature desperately trying to escape, growling and cursing, and then you have to get another nail and hammer it into its stomach, to watch its guts flowing from its mouth onto the ground. Then when it touches the ground it twists and turns for a little while before it gets lost in the dirt.

I'm dreaming...? What an imagination this is? The cross of sin is erected on the horizon. There is a crucified shadow - a corpse is hanging on the black cross and that is where I am... and Ovidiu... and my mother... and my child...

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“Brother Con shall tell us later on what he thinks about the time he has spent with us. We have been together for three



months.” It is the voice of the pastor that wakes me up from my dreams and this ‘Brother Con’, I think, is me. What does he want from me? I sit down in my place and don’t bother anyone. What does he want from me? Does he want me to talk to them? Okay, I will tell them. I will tell them everything. Who do they think they are? Maybe they think they monopolize God. Are they His only children? Then what am I? Are they the only ones who know about God? What? And I don’t? Of course I know, I read the Bible in three days. I will tell them everything. They will then see who they call ‘Brother Con.’

“Do you have any words for us, Brother Con?” I rise and stiffly walk out to the front. I open my mouth, and I intend to be ironic; perhaps this could be the last time I step foot in this place. There was silence in the church.

“Father, I would like to say a few words about this church,” and in the next few moments I began to say words which were not my own.

“I like you all, especially the children. Father, I come here with pleasure because in this place there is peace and I feel joy and my worries disappear when I listen to your songs and your speeches. You are all saints but I cannot be the same. I would like to, but I can’t... How could I? For thirty years I have lived as a sinner, an alcoholic, with fear in my heart, uncontrolled and dirty. This is what I have seen in my father’s house, this is how I have lived, and this is how I am and this is how I will die. Father, I would like to be a Christian but I can’t... only with some sort of divine intervention, only with a push from God I might be one but otherwise I will die the way I am destined. This is what I had to say.”

This was not what I actually had to say, but nevertheless it was what came out of my mouth. The pastor replied:

“Dear brother and friend Con, we will pray constantly for God to give you this ‘push’ which you need. You will receive it when God decides. Now, you may go in peace to your homes. God bless you all.”

## CHAPTER 16

### CONTRACT

I received from the pastor two identical brochures. I don't know why he gave me two, maybe one for me and one for Aneta. They are comics, childish, with drawings. The title was "How the devil makes fun of people." It shows, in amateurish drawings, on the first page, a pub, where Satan is a waiter and Death is the bartender. A few drunks are sitting at a table, having fun. On another page, the drunks start to fight with each other. On another page, they make peace, and on another they dance and sing and drink together.

On the last page is Death, who hurls them into a lake of fire and brimstone. I looked on this booklet with sympathy. I sat in the car under the shade of a tree, with two beers close by and I feel very good. I don't like to step into the pub but after work, I go to the parking lot of the Bayswater Hotel and park under the shade of a tree. There I drink two bottles of beer to wash the dust from my throat. God takes care of me and always leaves me that space under the tree where I can refresh my soul with a cold beer. I looked at the booklet that the pastor gave me and on one page is Death, behind the bar, holding a scythe, and the Devil handing a bottle to a victim who has a bushy moustache, just like mine. I think to myself,

"Hey, old man, the shade comes from God but it's clear that the beer comes from the Devil." I throw the bottles out the window and start the engine.

Always when I leave church, the pastor's wife asks me,

"Which road did you take to get here?"

"The Tonkin Highway," I answered.

"Go back using another road," this joke continues. What does she want to say through this? I don't understand. However, let's do it today. Let's go back home another way today. I head toward Grand Promenade, and I make the sign of the cross:

"Lord, protect me from the breathalyzer."

There is a lot of traffic on Grand Prom. At the intersection with Alexander Drive there is a long line of cars. It doesn't really bother me. I feel calm even though it's 32 degrees and I'm cooking in this twenty-year-old car. My eyes glance over the brochure. On the last page is a contract which says, 'I swear in front of God that I will not drink from today onwards.' A space is underneath for a signature and the date. Without realizing, I sign it and put the date – December 1994 - and I throw the brochure behind me onto the back seat. There is unease in my mind and inside I try to raise some courage, thinking, 'It's a joke, I signed a little comic, who cares...?'

The lights turn green, and off I go. There is a refreshing sea breeze that blows through the windows. A strange thought goes through my head – I had signed a contract with God... I had done my share, now let's see Him doing his share. I will buy a lottery ticket and win the jackpot. Lord, help me to win the lottery this Saturday. That's it! I'm a made man. I stop at the Nollamara News Agency and buy a ticket. Best not forget to put it in God's Bible when I get home, for good luck.

It is dawn and I watched with anticipation as every ball dropped, every number... not a single number matched. What is this? There's no gimmick to being a Christian - back to the cask of wine.

## CHAPTER 17

### PAIN IN THE NECK

“Come and pick me up from work tonight,” said Aneta. Very well, it’s Saturday night and tomorrow I am not working. ‘Sunday is for God’ said the pastor. My son Gogu was playing with his video games and it was nearly midnight.

“Gogu, my son, let’s go and pick up your mother from work.”

“I’m not coming. I’m staying home,” said Gogu.

“How can you stay home by yourself, Gogu? What if a robber breaks in? How can I leave you alone? Come, let’s go.”

But he replies: “God will protect me.” We stared at each other.

“Okay, Gogu, God be with you... but lock the door after me. Bye.”

It is about midnight and the streets around Flinders Street are empty. If I hurry, I will be back within half an hour. I hope God will ‘protect’ my son, according to his belief.

I can now smoke a cigarette in peace. Nobody can see me. I have been trying to smoke discreetly recently because everyone has their eyes on me. So I sneakily light a cigarette, take a drag and instantly I feel a hand is clamped around my neck. I feel I can no longer breathe or shout. I am squirming in the chair and let out a shout with a voice even I cannot recognize.

“Oh, Lord, don’t kill me, I won’t do it again. Don’t take away my days, forgive me, I won’t do it again.” The next moment, I don’t know what happened but somehow I was moved from the seat I was in, because the next thing I knew I was in the passenger seat. I took my cigarettes and the lighter from the glove box, leant over the driver’s seat and threw them out the window. I shouted at the top of my lungs:

“I won’t do it again, forgive me, Lord!” The next instant everything was normal again. I returned to reality and drove

the car through the intersection. I didn't know what to believe, I was afraid, I felt like crying and murmured silently, "Thank you Lord, for your great mercy."

I reached Northbridge and took a left turn into James Street. I feel like I am in the middle of Hell here. Hundreds of people of all kinds – perhaps thousands - are wandering the streets.

See, there is Solomon, the Ethiopian, with his gang on a corner on Lake Street. He is frantically hitting a beat on small black drums. His band of small black dancers is wildly jumping over each other to the rhythm of the drums. Two lesbians are kissing each other with great passion outside the ANZ bank. A group of dead-drunk aborigines is passing a long thin cigarette. An old man handing out pamphlets comes from William Street, with a placard slung over his body. 'The Lord is coming' reads the sign. A young boy with a shaved head stops in front of him, swears at him and spits in his face. The old man wipes the spit from his face and continues. I raised the windows and locked the doors of the car. I don't know why I feel so stressed. I know these surroundings and should be comfortable but this night I can see the spirits behind these lost souls.

Everything is unrolling before me like a film. The traffic is blocked because of the crowd. The old man with 'The Lord is coming' written on his chest is at my window. It appears as if the same words are written on his face, judging from the tears streaming down his cheeks.

"The Lord is coming, repent, repent! The Lord is coming!" I read his lips through the window. The man was talking to me but then he carried on walking, passing through the flock.

I have arrived at the 'Orient Express' restaurant. My wife, despite her size, was trying to hide behind the doorway. I drive up onto the footpath, barely missing a drunk Chinese man. Aneta hops into the car, a little tired and nervous, and says,

"Let's get out of this inferno."

We quickly reach Charles Street. Not a single person on the street. No traffic, either. It's as if we are in another world. Aneta relaxes, and says:

“Give me a cigarette, old-timer.”

“What cigarette? From where? I don't smoke.” I rub my sore neck. “I don't smoke. Okay?”

“Hey old-timer, we all know you smoke in secret, so come on, give me a cigarette and don't be so childish.”

Should I tell her? She would laugh. She would think I was insane. I told her:

“I don't smoke anymore because I am sick. And my throat hurts and I don't want to smoke ever again. I would recommend that you do the same, otherwise you will have trouble with...” I point to the sky above.

“Fine, Saint Con, we don't smoke anymore, we will start over again, alright?”

“Okay.”

## CHAPTER 18

### THE SISTER-IN LAW COMES

“Denise is coming. Let’s go to the airport.”

“OK.” So off we went.

What will my sister-in-law Denise say when she hears that we are going to church? How she will laugh. Not too long ago we ran a small shop in Adelaide and we all worked there to make a buck; Aneta, Denise, my mother-in-law and myself. There were twelve food stalls with kitchens from every continent in a circle with a bar in the middle. Business good or bad, our glasses were full. One day, when I thought of myself as a great chef and I was stirring each and every pot, drinking cold beer with a dash of brandy, I was telling them about how I would spend my eternity in Heaven after I escaped this miserable earth. How I would relax under the shade with a bucket of vodka on ice, with some nice blonde girls beside me.

“In heaven, old man,” shouts Denise from the other end of the kitchen, “You will sing Hallelujah all day with Saint Roger. You will eat ambrosia and drink holy water.”

“No, no, no! I know better than you.”

“How do you know, old man?”

“From John Turin.” I was lying. I didn’t know anything from John Turin. I never asked him. I reached for the bottle of brandy and took a swig - that is pretty much what I always did when I remembered John Turin.

This man was a memory from my childhood. I never saw his face, at least I never remembered seeing it. He was our neighbour and when he saw us kids in the back yard, he would put a mask on and come around and scare us from behind the fence. After a time, we stopped getting scared, as we knew it was old John. As he was suffering from tuberculosis he went away and eventually we forgot about him.

After some years had passed he re-appeared when I was around 25 or 26 years old by which time I was in Bucharest living in Domeni Square. My wife had gone to stay with her mother in

Constanța so I was left to myself. During one of my nights of drunkenness I woke from an uneasy sleep crying with chest pains.

I tossed and turned for a time in darkness and pain, shouting out for my mother. At once I opened my eyes and saw him clearly. He sat cross-legged, very tall and skinny, with his head in his hands. He was not looking at me. He was looking down. I knew it was old Turin, even though I never once saw his face. I reached out towards him, and after that I do not remember what happened. Perhaps I fell asleep.

Oh, if I only could, what wouldn't I ask? I would find out so many things. I would have asked why he was so sad, why he visited me, where did he come from, and what was the place like where he now stayed? I could have asked him so much but I did not have the strength.

Yes, I was lying to my little sister-in-law. John Turin didn't tell me anything, and I always tried to forget that meeting, to drown it in the bottom of the bottle whenever it surfaced.

"We're going to the airport, old-timer! You are lost again!" Aneta interrupted my daydreaming.

"Dad, te rotesti<sup>4</sup> around in circles." Even Gogu jumped at me. I had forgotten about him. I'd forgotten about both of them in fact. In my reverie I had passed my turning and had to double back to Leach Highway to get to the airport.

Denise arrived and she was the same as I remembered her. She couldn't have changed over the last few months anyway. Gogu was very happy to see her again. In the car, on the way back home, Denise says,

"Don't laugh at me, but for some time now I have been going to a Baptist Church." But, we did laugh, we laughed with ease and comfort and with love.

"I knew that you would laugh at me... but I had no choice. Some time ago, I was walking with Tony on the street and an Australian stopped us and asked if we knew Jesus

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<sup>4</sup> Turn, in Romanian



Christ, the Lord. I told him I did but Tony told him he was a Buddhist, and didn't know too much. This Australian, who turned out to be a pastor, explained to us a bit of scripture. So, we invited him to our house, and he invited us to his church, and so we have been going to church every Sunday to listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Don't laugh at me, it's a very serious matter."

Aneta embraced her dearly. "No one is laughing at you, little sister. We too are going to church." And she started to tell her in detail how we came to know the saints. I drove the car feeling relaxed and with a sense of peace. Something is changing! We have come to God - all three of us. God is great! We put 3000km between us, but God destroyed the barrier of distance and made us one in His love. Still, I say:

"From now on we will all sing Hallelujah along with Saint Roger, drinking holy water!" We all laugh, and so does Gogu, even though he doesn't understand what is going on. Denise adds:

"Still, it is best that Mum doesn't know anything... for now."

## CHAPTER 19

### THE RAPTURE

“What are you hiding there?” I asked Aneta.

“It’s a video tape of Billy Smith.”

“Where did you get that from?”

“From Sister Lidia.”

“Since when are you and Mrs. Lidia sisters?”

“For a long time.”

I read the tape’s cover – it’s Barry Smith, not Billy Smith, and I question her.

“What is it all about? What kind of movie is it?”

“It’s about the Revelation, about the rapture, about the coming of Jesus Christ; let’s watch it.”

I put the tape down and go out into the garden. The birds are chirping through the trees; the heat can still be felt in the shade. I wander about among the trees. The Rapture... I can’t figure it out... where have I heard this before? Aha, that’s right, now it’s clear. This must be a very nice movie - ‘The Rapture from the Harem’. I know this film as I’d watched it a long time ago.

I remember that there were beautiful Persian rugs in Romania, brought from Iran or Turkey. People would break their backs working to save money in order to buy these carpets. They would buy ‘The Rapture from the Harem’ and hang it up across an entire wall. The rug shows Bedouins riding horses, with a sword in one hand and a woman under the other arm.

It was a long time ago when I watched a movie called ‘The Rapture from the Harem’. An old film, it showed lots of nice girls belly dancing, very scantily clad, beautiful and joyful, covered in thin, brightly coloured veils. They danced on a great table, on elastic net. Their long legs tripped up in the net, falling and writhing and an Arab is chasing them, getting closer, and closer and closer...wait a minute, dirty old man! This is another film...Get behind me, Satan!

This happens all the time. I think of something nice then my thoughts run astray. I want to say something nice but end up saying something I shouldn't. I want to do something good and I do something bad. I look at a child and I see the legs of the mother holding him. In the church I listen to some Christian praying his heart out and I think he must be drunk. I want to kneel down and pray like they do but my knees hurt, and my back aches. When I want to laugh, I find myself crying – something must be wrong with me.

It looks like there is too much light in the garden and the birds annoy me. Where can I hide, where can I rest? I hurry towards the toilet and go in. I lock the door, lower the seat and sit down. It is good in the toilet, no one comes to bother me and it is nice and cool. I am missing a bottle of wine. I would very much like a bottle of wine... red, white, whatever.

Oh, if I could, if only I could... if only I could hide in this toilet for ten years. I could rid myself of everything and become ten years older. Many things can change in ten years. Life can change in ten years. Oh, if only I could... if only I could forget everything. What am I going to do? What can I do? I need help... Help me Lord... I knelt down right there and then, resting my arms on the lid of the toilet, and I cried out:

“Lord, who am I hiding from? Is it from Aneta, from Gogu, from Billy Smith, from me, from you? Please listen to this prayer and save me, save me and liberate me.”

I hear Aneta calling me.

“Hey, old man! Come on, I've put the tape on. Let's watch Barry Smith.”

“Coming.” I flush the toilet and go into the light. Let's watch 'The Rapture from the Harem.'

The film was about a different kind of rapture. This man talked and wrote on a blackboard, explaining and proving how the world is heading towards self-destruction. He explained how the devil governs the world, and how only believers will escape the hellfire. He said that to become a Christian is simple:

You need to regret your past sins,

You need to recognize that Jesus is the Son of God,  
And that He died for your sins,  
That He came back from the dead,  
Then to receive Him as your Lord and Saviour.

He also said, “Many of you, very many, will surrender to Jesus Christ, without even wanting to. The Holy Spirit will work in you and will call you.”

He also said, “Whoever wants to, repeat after me.” He began a prayer. I looked at the TV as this man prayed and in my mind I saw Ovidiu. It was no longer Barry Smith, but Ovidiu, kneeling, eyes closed, praying for me. I looked to Aneta. She was down on her knees and was repeating the words of Barry Smith. I also joined in the prayer.

“I recognize that I am a sinner and regret the sins I have committed. I now want You, Jesus Christ, to become my Lord and Saviour, Amen.”

And then it was finished. Barry Smith was gone, along with Ovidiu. Aneta was nowhere to be seen and Gogu was asleep next to me on the floor. I fell into a deep sleep.

## CHAPTER 20 THE MOTHER-IN LAW COMES

Denise left the same way she arrived, like a spring breeze, leaving behind a sweet scent. She also left behind the spirit of forgiveness; she forgave and washed clean a painful past. At the airport, with a few minutes left before her flight, I took her to a quiet place, put my hands on her shoulders, and told her,

“Denise, I have wronged you greatly. Please forgive me.”

“You are forgiven, old man.” She blinked her eyes and then was gone.

She left behind some news as well. Good, bad, who knows? She told us in passing,

“Soon you will find my mother coming here. Now that she has heard you have been converted, she is very angry. Please don’t tell her that I am going to church too. Good luck!”

Good luck... we will need it. I felt strange. Unrest came over my heart. To be honest, I did not need any more visitors at this time. Sometimes I felt strange even to myself, like an unknown visitor. I sometimes remained impressed with the words I spoke, the songs I sang and my own thoughts. Looks like I didn’t have any more resources or room to accommodate anyone else. Even Gogu, my son, was changed. He would kneel down and pray every night before he went to sleep. Who taught him this? What would he pray? I will probably never find out.

And now, the mother-in-law is coming... It’s as if she is bringing back something I left behind. What will she bring? We will see.

Shortly thereafter she arrived. We met her at the airport; we kissed the air next to our cheeks, hopped in the car and:

“My son,” (she spoiled me), “let’s stop at the pub; I want to buy us some drinks.” Am I hearing right? I give a hesitant response,

“Thanks, but I don’t drink anymore.”

She insisted. “How can you not have a drink with me? My treat!” I started the car. I felt ashamed. How can I tell her that I don’t drink anymore, that I’ve become a Christian? How shameful my reputation will vanish. But still, this was not my worry. It was something else. I felt like something was missing... I couldn’t put it together. The mother-in-law buying me drinks... she hasn’t done so in 25 years. For her to honour me with a drink... In my mind I recall a distant saying from a preacher: “If someone honours you with a drink, they are in fact dishonouring you.”

My mother-in-law was the wife of an alcoholic, and she suffered greatly because of him. He himself suffered because of the drink, from which he ended up dying. Now she wants to ‘honour’ me with a drink. Me, an alcoholic and the son of an alcoholic! Why now, when it should be her dream to hear that I don’t drink, don’t smoke, and don’t hit her daughter anymore? Why now, of all times! I don’t get it. I drive the car in silence. I am no longer interested in the chatter between the others. I don’t want to hear anything. I don’t want to say anything and I seem defeated...

“Stop!” she says. “Let us buy a bottle of something, here is a pub.” She is not joking.

Eventually we got home. She liked our garden even though it was hard to see much because it was dark. We sat down outside to have a chat. I was sitting on the doorstep, my mother-in-law on a little chair.

When she opened the bottle, Aneta went to bed with Gogu. She told us,

“Don’t stay up too long, it’s late.”

We talked for a while. My mother in law pounced:

“What is the matter with you? I’ve heard you’ve been mingling with people from sects! Stay away from these cultists. They just want your money. I know them. What will they say about your child at school? ‘Child of the cultists!’ Everybody will tease him and make fun of him!”

She continued to speak along these lines for around an hour, all the while drinking from the bottle. I held fast.

“I’m not drinking, I have to take medicine.” She didn’t believe me.

“Come, have a glass! Look what these people have done to you! They’ve brainwashed you, that’s it, you have rejected life... come on, have a glass with me.”

So I did. I had a glass... and another... and another... This was a job I knew perfectly like a professional! By midnight the bottle was empty. Then Aneta came from her bedroom, shouting.

“You’ve had enough, go to sleep now! Look, the sun is about to rise any time now! Just what you needed, to hit the bottle again. You are good for nothing. You ...”

I snapped back so as to not lose face and thus another one of our classic fights began. I think that in 25 years of marriage, we spent more time cursing and swearing at each other than being in each other’s arms and comforting each other. Gogu appeared from his bedroom, scared. I shouted at him, too.

“Go back to bed! It’s not your business. Look, woman, you’ve woken up the child. I hate you more than anyone I’ve ever hated in my life.” After this sentence, we stopped and looked at each other. My mother-in-law slipped behind me, going to her bedroom. Aneta and Gogu, both crying, disappeared into the house.

I entered my bedroom with a heavy feeling in my heart. I lay down, fully clothed, in the dark. There was a pain in my chest. Where was this pain coming from? Can sorrow hurt? Everything was going so well... better than it has ever been. We had entered a new world, believing that I could belong there. I had just learned a new game, and now the rules have changed. Everything fell down like a house of cards. Usually, when I went to sleep drunk, I would call for my mother until I fell asleep but this night, the face of the pastor came into my mind and I heard my hesitant, sobbing voice,

“Father... help, I’m dying...”

## CHAPTER 21

### ROMEO AND ALI

I was working at a furniture factory, making lounge suites. Whilst the furniture was very expensive and sophisticated, the working conditions were shocking. I tried to make friends there. They all had faces weary from a hard life but no matter who I invited for a drink after work, they'd all reply,

“I don't drink.”

“Not at all?” I was amazed.

“Not at all. Never.”

I could not swallow this outright lie but still, I accepted the situation.

There was one fellow called John, a bandit from Balga, my neighbor. With him was a young lad, Sam, who was fifteen years old though he was around two metres tall and well built. They were good friends and apparently distantly related. Sam had to go to court soon. He had broken into twenty-nine houses within one month. He was very diligent - seven nights a week - a robbery a night, no rest. Here, he had to work five days a week, which seemed a bit more reasonable.

During a lunch-break, John told him, “You will see my dad in prison and I will make sure he looks after you.”

I invited both of them for a beer at the Bayswater Hotel. “We don't drink.” They lied with such a straight face.

At knocking off time I took a flask with me in the car and headed home.

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Memories... John and Sam, Romeo and Ali... distant memories come to my mind, memories I thought long forgotten, from the time just before I fled Romania. In that time I met many different types of people - unusual, out of the ordinary types of people.



Romeo – thirty-five years of age, fourteen years of that spent behind bars. He could pick any lock known to man.

Ali – Romeo’s nephew, twenty years of age and a well-known pickpocket in Bucharest. Three years spent throughout various jails in Romania.

For what were these people fighting? For what was I fighting? To where were they running? Where were any of us running?

We travelled together, along with a few others, for around a year, getting to the border. What were we looking for? A train! We were waiting for a train, a train others told us about, a train to freedom. We would always wait for this train. Wait, day and night, for weeks at a time. Rain or shine, we would wait in the freezing snow, for hours on end. We waited, our gazes never wandering from the railroad tracks. We waited on the edge of a small, unknown town.

Look! Here it comes! It stopped at the red light. Quickly, quickly! Running through the snow, joints frozen but with sweat dripping from us, we grabbed hold of a wagon, quickly climbing up onto the train that would take us to freedom. We had to be quick so that the guards on the last wagon would not see us. After the train got going again, we checked the place where we knew the documents would be held, seeking verification of our destination. We read the destination...

This isn’t our train. It is going to Russia! We cried, laughed, swore, cursed, and jumped off at the next stop, all the while shivering from cold. We would find a new place to wait. Waiting is a painful thing.

In these mountains, I learned what it is to be human. I learned about hope, disappointment, friendship among thieves, love for a wife and child. I learned about patience, depression, hate, desire for revenge, madness and human endurance. We travelled many kilometres, walking through valleys and forests, carrying large backpacks, intoxicated from alcohol, our nerves shot, shivering at night and sweltering during the day.

One day Romeo and I found ourselves stuck at a small train station, shouting at each other, both angry for no reason.

The others in the group were scared. The hatred had been festering in our hearts, and now it was time for everything to be let out.

Romeo became silent. He took out a long knife, stared long and hard at it, and then began to clean his fingernails with it. He slowly approached me, without looking at me and then, out of nowhere, Ali appeared, a beer in his hand, with a jolly face. He put his arm on my shoulder and pushed me away, laughing.

“Come, old man, let’s see if there’s anything worth stealing around here.”

So we left them, and went to the back of the station, walking along the railway. Ali whispered to me secretively,

“Romeo is a good boy, he likes you, but that won’t stop him from slitting your throat. Beware...”

I snatched the beer out of his hand, drank the lot, and smashed the bottle on the railway. Again, Ali whispered:

“Buy yourself a knife, or I will steal one for you.” He was smiling, this kid is always smiling, so it’s hard to know whether he is serious or he is joking.

Memories, thoughts... years passed through the darkness of life. Romeo and Ali... John and Sam...

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I reached home, having hit the bottom of the flask. There is a blue Rover parked in the driveway. We have visitors. When I went inside, I saw someone whose head seemed to hit the roof. Lights were wrapped around him; these white lights were all around. His arms were raised as if he was holding the sun in his huge arms. I liked these playful lights and at the time I wondered to myself what this could be. From the top of the ladder he was climbing, close to the ceiling, I heard the voice of Peter.

“Peace be with you, brother, I have come to help you with painting.”

It all disappeared; the shining lights, the bright rays melted, the angelic (drunken) vision vanished. Now I looked upon Peter's smiling face, his head shining and paintbrush in hand, clothed in the light of the sun. He was painting the ceiling, right under the sky-light. I looked at him. He laughed, a bit uneasy at my silence.

“If you are upset, I will put on my slippers and leave.”

I scratched my head. I wonder why these people call shoes slippers?

## CHAPTER 22

### DRUMSTICKS

“I will teach you how to get rid of them! Don’t give them any attention and they will vanish from your life. Otherwise, they will drive you nuts and you will end up as Baptists - the greatest shame of all.”

My mother-in-law was telling me how I could escape this predicament. From what she says it appears that these Christians are like some sort of disease. If one breathes over you, that’s it, you are in the waters of baptism. In the water... you go in drunk and come out holy. Is it really like that? It sounds too easy. Christianity is a thing that is very hard to reach, unimaginable for me...

What kind of water do they use, I wonder? Even the pastor who dunks you must have great power! But still, the water means everything... I once heard the pastor say:

“When I baptised a girl, she left a hand above the water. That was the hand that she used to steal everything.”

So the main thing is to be completely immersed. You enter as a thief and come out a saint. What a miracle... I too would like to see this miracle.

I had worked for many years with wood, using machinery. I would put in a plank of wood and a picture frame would come out the other end. I guess that is like what happens with the baptism. You go in filthy and come out clean. What a story... but what if it isn’t a story? What if it is true? This is the best way to get rid of myself. I have been forever trying to escape from who I am (which explains why I ended up in Australia) but in the end I always catch up to myself. “Hey, I’ve got you, where do you think you’re going? There is no running away, I am your shadow...”

Maybe it is my only way out. Oh Lord, I’ve found a new hope. It is here, in that little church on the top of the hill in Bayswater. How can I get to those marvellous waters? My

whole body feels itchy. God, there is a way out and I've found it.

“Only if you treat them with indifference will they ever leave you in peace.” She is still on the topic. “They pounced on me as well, over in Adelaide but I told them straight – ‘Leave me alone, I have my own beliefs, I am an Orthodox.’ And they left me alone. Not even a phone call! Such hypocrites, they could have at least called from time to time. Complete lack of education. Listen to me, escape from their clutches, before it is too late!”

It's easy to say... somebody then rang the doorbell. Aneta opened the door; it is Maria, the wife of the angel Peter from the top of the ladder. She has a great big pot in her arms.

“I have brought you some drumsticks. We had a barbecue, and I saved some for you. Since you are so busy with painting the house, I know you can't have much time for cooking. I can also stay and give you a hand with cleaning up. I know how many things there are to be done when moving house. My sister will come and pick me up later tonight.”

My mother-in-law gives me a wary look. I know what she's thinking, ‘be careful, you will never be rid of them.’

So I open my mouth and say, “Madam, I don't think it is good what you are doing. We are not new immigrants, that I need such help. I have a job, money in the bank, my wife and mother-in-law to help me with household chores and the painting. You don't need to bring me a pot of food, I am sure you have your own troubles, your own children to feed. So come, let me drive you back home. You probably have many things to do around your house as well.”

With a sad look on her face, she said, “Don't worry, I will call my sister on her mobile to come back and get me, she can't be too far away.”

“No, I will take you home.”

We got into my car and left. She didn't say a word for the entire drive. I tried, unsuccessfully, to make some inane small talk. She asked me to stop a little distance from her house as she felt like walking for a while.

“However you like, it’s a free country! Bye.”

She left the car looking extremely sad. I don’t think I had ever seen such a miserable face in my life. She gave a weak attempt at a wave and let her arm fall back down.

I drove away with a very heavy heart. I looked back at her through the mirror. She was hanging her head and was walking slowly, as if dragging a weight behind her. I had a feeling she was crying.

Why was she crying? Why should she cry? No one died! Did anybody die? Maybe I was dying... and she was crying for me... what have I done? I turned away someone who came to offer sincere help and food. No one has ever offered me anything without asking for something in return. What have I done? I trampled on the love of this woman. Lord, what have I done?

I have arrived! I have arrived! The Princess Road Tavern! A double brandy, another double brandy, and another... it is good medicine, it cures me of everything. Why was that ugly barmaid giving me an ugly look? She tosses the glass at me. Such disrespect! She scowls at me, the ugly hag, and she’s too skinny! Unbelievable!! See how she is giving me that look! Unbelievable! Skinny hag...

“Hey, where is your scythe?” I shout.

“Pardon?” she retorts.

“Your scythe, where have you hidden it? It’s not on your back, so where is it?”

“You’re drunk, old man, shut your mouth or I will fill it with a bottle.”

I use my choicest curses, both Romanian and English and exit the place, into the dark night. There are not many streetlights here.

It’s only a few hundred metres to home... I can drive it but just in case,

“God, Holy Mother, protect me from the police so they don’t come across me driving drunk. Amen.”

I arrived home safely.

My mother-in-law is waiting for me. “Aneta has gone to bed, let me make you something to eat.”

“What are you making?”

“Drumsticks!” she exclaims.

“Where from?”

She takes off the lid of the pot that Maria had brought.

“Chicken!”

“I am not hungry...”

## CHAPTER 23

### THE LETTER FROM CHITILA

“Your mother sent a letter from Chitila,” Aneta informed me as she handed me the letter. Unopened, I put it aside. I know what it will say; a kilo of onion is 5000 lei<sup>5</sup>, a loaf of bread 1000, the ceiling was leaking, and to fix it means 50,000 lei. It is raining inside the house and it would be nice if it rained beer and sausages instead. I know what she always writes; that my brother wants to buy another house, and still needs more money. There’s never any good news. Always somebody dies, or is very sick, or someone has been thrown in prison and I have to be informed. Does no one get married anymore? No one has a baby? No one wins the lottery? I don’t like to get letters.

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I have only ever received one good letter but I read it too late. It was around 1981. I was trying to get a job as a sailor with NAVROM, in the town of Tulcea. I was with my friend Cristi. We both worked as taxi drivers in Bucharest and had plans to escape from Romania. We needed to get out of town by boat, and once we were out of this port, we were out of the country. We would get off at the first foreign port.

We gave bribes out left and right. Everything was arranged, but in the mean time, Niky showed up - The dark angel... He passed through like a phantom through my life. We were in Tulcea, as usual. We finished our business and were waiting for the train to Bucharest. We were passing a bottle of cognac between us so we wouldn’t be bored. All day Cristi had been rather quiet, kind of thoughtful.

“What’s wrong with you that you are so sombre, brother?” I ask him.

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<sup>5</sup> Romanian currency



“Nothing’s wrong, but I’m wondering if we are burning gas for nothing. I know someone who can smuggle us out of the country quicker and easier.”

I was fuming. “Who? Where?”

“His name is Niky. He’s like an angel and stays at Veta’s in Giurgiu Road.”

“Where did he come from?” I ask.

“He came from Italy. He comes to Romania once a year and he smuggles back groups of ten people each time. He knows a special train and a special station where we can board. Last time he took a group of ten women and a man. I was too afraid to go myself and I didn’t trust any of them but together with you I would risk anything.”

I jumped on the chance. “Then let’s talk with this angel of yours. When can we see him?”

“Tonight,” he answered. “When we get back home, we will go straight to Veta’s place.”

With great anticipation we arrived at the North Station (after a short stop by ‘first class’ to get a few drinks). We got a taxi and went straight to Veta’s place. We rang the doorbell which was opened immediately by a tall woman with a nice figure, if a bit vulgar. Apparently she knew Cristi well. I understood then that she was Veta.

Later on as I got to know her better, I learned that she was a woman with a big heart. She would later shelter us, a group of eight people, for two weeks, hiding us from the Secret Police.

There at Veta’s place we met Niky, a young man, perhaps twenty-five or so years of age, well built, tall, blonde, wearing a black shirt. His white face and blonde hair were a stark contrast with the black shirt. ‘Dark angel, angel of death, angel of fortune’, were all thoughts that went through my mind. Where could this phantom lead us? Angel of darkness, I don’t know where but I will follow you to the ends of the earth.

“Ask me everything you wish to know...” He smiled and sat comfortably on a sofa. Veta made some Turkish coffee. We talked well into the middle of the night. Then we decided.

“Niky, we will follow you everywhere.” So we did, but instead of America, we ended up in the Aiud prison. When we were released, I found a letter from Tulcea Port in which I was informed that I was approved to embark on a ship as a sailor. Too late! Now I had a criminal record... I was like everyone else now.

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Well, back to the letter from Chitila. I had forgotten about it. I was working in the garden all day, going up to the house every now and then and passing by the cask of wine in the fridge. The wife and mother-in-law were in the house, it's Saturday so no one is working. Apparently people don't work on Saturdays in this country. That night Aneta asks me, “Light some coals so we can have a barbie.”

Gogu is overjoyed and asks, “Who is coming? Are kids coming too?”

“No one is coming, Gogu, it will just be us.”

“Why, Tashi, where are your friends?” he asks.

It is a good question, where are my friends? No one comes to our house. We don't have friends, not even acquaintances, except for those from the church, but they have left us mostly to ourselves since my mother-in-law came.

I lit the barbeque. We gathered around and I ask,

“What are we going to cook?”

“Drumsticks!” My mother-in-law laughs and brings a plate piled with chicken drumsticks.

Drumsticks... Maria... I feel tears welling up. I fill the barbeque with the meat, add salt, pepper... My appetite has vanished. It is as if I see Maria again, coming through the door with the pot in her hands. ‘I brought some drumsticks for you to eat.’ And I sent her home... Lord, what have I done? How I would like now for Maria to be here with us and Peter, her husband as well, to eat drumsticks together and to drink cold water, cold water... Where is my cask of wine? I hate this drink but still it attracts me like a spell. Lord help me.

“There is a letter from my in-law from Chitila.”

“Yeah I know, the price of the leek has gone up.

“You want to read it?” my mother-in-law tempts me.

“I don’t have time, I’m cooking.”

“Then, listen to me, I will read the most important parts.”

She begins to read my mother’s letter.

“I hear that you are mixing with Christians at their meetings. What do you mean you can’t find a Romanian Orthodox Church? Just wait, I will come there and find you one.”

How strange this life is... I was near my mother for thirty-three years, and she never tried to take me to church. Now, when I am forty-five and I want to make peace with God, she is ready to travel 25,000 kilometres across the world to stop me. I wonder what is happening? I feel two powers fighting over me. What significance can a drunkard like me have that is worth two sides fighting over?

“I slipped in this letter a rosary of the dream of the Virgin Mary, so you can wear it to bring you luck.” This hit home with my mother-in-law who was reading to me. The two ancient rivals, now united, fighting against my slim hope that I still cling to.

I ate drumsticks and drank wine in silence. Outside it is dark, but by now, so is my mind, and my speech has become slurred. I poured water on the fire to put it out and said a short goodnight to everyone. “I’m off to bed.”

Aneta, my mother-in-law and the child remained outside to do battle against mosquitoes. I entered my room with a burden on my chest, a weight on my shoulders and a desire to kneel. I slowly got down on my knees, in the dark. I closed, my eyes and waited in silence. I felt better, in the dark, alone. I felt like I had melted into the night and in the corner of my eye I could see Ovidiu, also kneeling.

“You need to be holy, brother...”

It seemed like the pastor’s wife was beside him.

“Change your ways, find a new path,” she whispers, “What you liked, no longer like.”

Maria is there also. She reached her hand toward me and somehow, like a far away echo, I heard the pastor's voice.

“Welcome to the house of the Lord, brother. What is your name?”

What is my name? My name... Oh, my name is bad... better that you don't know... Oh Lord, I pray, I beg, end my life, I don't want to live anymore...

## CHAPTER 24

### “CHIN UP, TO GOD”

There are nights when the darkness wanders around, when dreams hurt and I feel like even my breath leaves me. There are nights with bad dreams but I am not afraid. There are nights when I shout ‘What do I have? I have nothing to lose. It wouldn’t matter if I were to never wake again!’ There are nights that, while I’m sleeping, I find myself on my feet, or have unknown conversations for a while. I feel what happens inside me. I see strange things. One night I met with John Turin, who had been dead for twenty years.

I woke up Sunday morning after one of these nights, indifferent to the beauty of the morning, the singing of the birds, of the cool splendour in the garden. It is Sunday. ‘Sunday is the Lord’s day,’ the pastor used to say. I noticed my mother’s letter next to the bottle on the table. I gulped down a glass (for my hangover), and opened the letter.

‘I’ll come over there and find you a good Orthodox church.’ She seems right... how can I change my ancestor’s religion? What would be wrong? Isn’t Christ there? Of course! Isn’t the Pope there? No! The Pope is with the Catholics. It’s settled then ... I had found my way out of trouble. Neither priest nor thief, I will be a Catholic.

Didn’t I see the Pope when he came to Adelaide? Of course I did. When he came, we went with the masses to welcome him. There was a great clamour. We took photos and then, I remember clearly, we went to the circus on Port Road. Here I took a shot of Aneta next to an elephant but elephants have nothing to do with this!?

That’s that then, we go to the Catholics. I know a nice cathedral, next to the Royal Perth Hospital. Surely God must be there.

“Today we are going to a Catholic Church.”

“Sure, let’s go, I am happy that you have returned to your senses.” The mother-in-law is overjoyed. Even Gogu is curious

and agreed. Now we are waiting for Aneta to wake up. It's only 9:00 in the morning, still early for her. My mother-in-law and I plot how we can trick Aneta not to go with the Baptists anymore (because it is the height of shame), but to go with everyone to the Catholics.

And Aneta appears... on the horizon... let's not rush her. She yawns, "I had a bad night, I couldn't sleep well at all." I immediately rushed her. "That's it, somebody put a spell on you, let's go to a priest, so he can get rid of the curse. We will go to a serious church, with bells and candles, with a serious priest, who has a great beard and moustache. He will clean you of all evils!"

"Shoosh, old man, I am in no mood for jokes."

"But I'm not joking at all. I have decided with mum - we go to St. Mary's Cathedral, near the Royal Perth Hospital. We will be Catholics, like the Pope in Rome!"

"You're joking...?" Aneta isn't taking me seriously.

"Not at all." I assure her.

"Then even worse, you are insane..."

"No, I'm not! You are!"

"No, YOU are! You and your whole family of alcoholics!!"

A swear word slips out, a curse, then from her as well, then the mother-in-law as well. Gogu appeared at the door, bewildered.

I shout at him, "Go away from here, and don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong!" I sent him away with a kick but he just starts screaming, like everybody else - it's a crazy house.

'Sunday is the Lord's Day,' I recall the pastor's words. Aneta cries,

"Leave me to go one final time to these people who treated us so nicely."

I look over to the mother-in-law. She is firmly shaking her head.

"No! We are going to the Catholics." I decided. Then Aneta doesn't say a word, she looks at me with very sad eyes

and tears are running down her cheeks. She goes and sits at the table, puts her head in her arms, crying softly. I hear her whispering...

“God, I pray, take away my days, end my life, I don’t want to live anymore...”

I was shocked. Where have I heard this prayer before? Where and when? Oh yes, this was the prayer with which I closed my eyes last night. Why? Why would we wish for death? We have a whole life in front of us; we have a child to look after... Why do we both want to die?

Aneta is still crying, her head on the table. I gently touch her with my hand. I feel in my heart a great love for this woman with whom I have shared twenty-five years of my life, through good, and through bad. I lean over and whisper in her ear,

“Come on, get dressed, let’s go to the Christians, quickly!”

She raised her head, looked at me briefly, and ran into her bedroom. “I will be ready in five minutes.”

She was ready in no time.

“Fine, fine, very well, if you feel a calling... go, go then!” shouted my mother-in-law after us.

“I’m coming too! Take me! Take me with you!” Gogu jumps in my arms. He is in his pyjamas, bare-foot and scruffy. I hug him tightly and whisper,

“My child, I won’t take you now, because we are in a hurry, but don’t worry I will come back later and take you. Just wait, we will take you, don’t be afraid, we will not leave you, but please wait a bit. We have an urgent appointment. Bye, bye, my son.”

So we got into the car and headed off quickly. We can’t be late. The skies were dark with rainclouds. When we reached Grand Promenade, I felt my heart beating fiercely. I looked at my wife sitting alongside me, and she seemed very beautiful, like she was in her youth. Again, I felt a great love for her, and a deep, painful regret. In my mind I saw Ovidiu, then Maria, and tears began running down my cheeks like the rain. I felt as

if I was in the rain, a pleasant, warm rain, peaceful and calm. I hear Aneta, as if she were some place far away.

“Why are you crying dear?”

“I don’t know... but why are you crying?”

“I don’t know, dear...”

I didn’t know anything, even where I was driving to. This is why I ended up at the vineyards in Middle Swan. We got hopelessly lost. Worried, and a little frightened, we rushed to a place where no one was waiting for us, looking for something we never lost.

“Don’t be upset, little old man, we will find it, don’t get angry... easy, Tashi, we will find it. Let’s turn back; we are going the wrong way. Go that way instead, don’t get angry, darling.”

I listened to how she was trying to please me. She knew that if I couldn’t find an address or I got lost somehow, I would normally panic and head home, or more likely to the nearest pub.

When I saw the church’s great steeple piercing the sky, we rejoiced. We laughed through our tears and so we entered the courtyard. The pastor’s wife welcomed us and shook our hands. She looked softly in our eyes and said,

“Chin up, to God.” She walked past us to the back hall, to the Sunday school, and shouted again.

“Chin up, to God!”

Before I was about to step into the church I raised my head toward heaven. The sun shone through the clouds when we entered God’s house.



## CHAPTER 25

### THE HELICOPTER

We quickly got on our knees, like those around us. The hour of prayer has begun again.

“Thank you Lord, for Your great mercy.”

I peacefully stay on my knees with my hands clasped together, resting on the church pew. My head is leaning on my hands. My forehead is radiating heat. Am I sick? No, nothing is wrong, I actually feel very well, relaxed, calm, peaceful. It is good here ... very good here... peace, calm, security. It is good here.

Home... I don't like that place anymore. There is too much tension, too loud voices, too much alcohol and too much never-ending work for no reason. Oh Lord, it is good here...

It is like that time, twelve years ago when I was alone with God. Then I was at the bottom of the wagon full of coal, the wagon that drove me to freedom. I was getting near the border and despite being afraid, I felt at ease. I was praying, kneeling down at the bottom of that wagon,

“Lord, save me from the border guards, if you save me...”

How many things I promised God. And I asked but a single thing. “Save me!”

And now I sit in the house of the Lord, among the people of the Lord, and I have nothing to promise Him. I know I can't promise anything because I have nothing of worth. I know I can't keep to my word. My word lasts until the first glass of wine.

“Save me, Lord. Other people can promise the moon and stars, I pray for you to save me from this cask of wine. Save me from all of the evil that is in me, of the hate that I carry. Save me, Lord, from lying, stealing, adultery, laziness, jealousy, greed, foul words and curses, hate, anger, fighting

save me Lord, from myself, and save me from my mother-in-law. Amen!"

I feel good on my knees. On my right is old man John. He is small of stature and thin, I don't know why but as we are kneeling together, with our eyes closed, I feel as secure as if I was leaning on a rock. His prayers come from a far away place, from the bottom of his soul, mixed with tears. Right now, as I am kneeling, I feel that he is tall, reaching the heavens. I feel so good in this position. There is peace, silence I feel as though I am resting after a marathon... a long marathon... long run... run... run...

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Run... run...

Many years ago, somewhere near Deva City... we were on a run for freedom. We were a miserable group of five men and three women. Running along the railroad searching desperately for the train of hope, but people were searching for us. The Securitate (Secret Police) was on our trail. Whatever station we reached, they were there. Once they tracked us all the way from Sibiu to Deva. We changed trains several times, disembarking at many small stations. We hid where we could, in the forest, in the cornfields, in abandoned barracks. It was a desperate flight.

We reached a small irrigation trench, filled with water, which seemed to me as wide as the Danube River. Niky, the Dark Angel, jumped to the other side without looking behind. So did Ali. Romeo and Cristi helped the women, then crossed as well. I was scared but I jumped across, not quite making it, instead grabbing onto the steep bank. In a fraction of a second I realised that no one was going to help me or wait for me, even though the Secret Police were right behind us. Out of desperation I pushed my body forward. I grabbed onto the long grass and climbed out. I ran as fast as I could to reach the others. Night fell, the chase slowed. Autumn comes quickly in the mountains. We hid in a huge haystack. We rested for a

while, and then we lit a fire, opened the cognac and vodka and had some food.

A sudden explosion of incredible sound hit us and a bright light pierced through the night, washing over us.

“The helicopter!” Niky shouts. “Put out the fire! Hide in the hay! Quickly! Quickly!!”

We extinguished the fire using our clothes and threw ourselves into the haystack.

“Do you think they will see us if they get the light on us Niky?” I ask, after taking a long drink from the bottle.

“As if we were in the palm of their hand.”

We were covered by straw as we trembled out of cold and fright. The noise was deafening. When the light came over us, a woman cried hysterically. The noise of the helicopter rotors thundered in our skulls, and the light made it seem like it was easy to see the bottom of my pockets. At once the noise abated and darkness came over us once again. I could hear the woman was sobbing. It is Cristi’s wife - she is crying and screaming.

“I can’t take it anymore, I want to go back home, to my children... I don’t want to go on, I can’t...” She keeps screaming, without ceasing, shaking, choking on her tears. Niky grabs her violently, taking her away from Cristi who seems paralyzed. He pushes her to the ground. Two loud slaps are heard and she cries yet louder.

“My little children... I don’t want to die here, I want my children.” Another two slaps resound in the darkness.

Cristi clings to my jacket, he is shaking me. “What should I do, Costica?”

“Be quiet, and have a drink from this bottle, leave Niky alone, he knows what he’s doing, he will silence her.”

“My children!!” She screams yet again. Yet another two slaps are heard, and then Niky speaks.

“Shut up, shut up! Wait a little longer, just a little longer... this night we will get on the train... this night I will take you to America.”

She shut up. No one moves a muscle. Niky is still whispering in her ear.

“I will take you to America, this very night, all of you. I won’t leave you here in the hands of the communists. I will get you out of here this very night; we will get on the train; this night our train is coming. It is coming...”

We were exhausted. Completely immobilised, my right leg was twitching occasionally, my mind had no will to operate.

“In this night we leave for America, all of us...”

I heard Niky as if through a dream, and replied in my mind, “Not with me... I’m going nowhere, I want to sleep for years, sleep for a few years...”

I went to sleep but not for long. I was awakened by a voice shouting,

“AMEN!!”

The pastor had spoken, a bit too close to the microphone and the congregation said ‘Amen’ also. We get up off our knees and sit on the pews.

“Song number 120.” Says the pastor...

*Come to the water of life...*

## CHAPTER 26

### ALOIS VERNALIS

The drive back home was joyful. We talked about the peace which we had discovered, about repentance, about the pastor and his wife, about the beautiful children and their beautiful songs. We recalled our days in Adelaide and a pastor back there. He used to send us letters every month. I never saw him once but I read all his letters.

Those letters are still real, still following me. This stranger would send us letters, telling us how we were sinners. We knew this, very well in fact, but I was fascinated by the way this man impacted our lives. From time to time he would send us a message. ‘The Good News,’ an invitation, ‘Come to God’s House.’ I never answered this invitation, never thought to call him up, or at least send a postcard. He sent me these letters every month for three years. Now there are 3000 kilometres between us and I regret that I never took action. Aneta actually met him once, at the opera.

It happened like this:

After Aneta had left for the opera, I pulled the cask of wine closer and Gogu and... the train. We assembled it all, the railway, the station, the signals, the train and the wagons. Pluto was the driver, Donald Duck the assistant and Gogu was bestowed the Chief’s whistle.

“Gogu, I am the Ticket Inspector. Give the signal to leave please.”

And off we go!

“Toot toot! Look, it’s Mickey Mouse!”

“Stop the train, tashi, let’s pick up Mr. Mickey Mouse.”

“Where are you going Mr. Mickey?” I ask.

I answer with a squeaky voice. “To work, at Hollywood!”

“Good boy,” I praise him.” Take his money, Gogu.”

“Ten bucks, Mr Mickey. Thanks. Come on, quick.”

“Gogu, it’s Ms Minnie Mouse too. Pick her up.”

Gogu laughs, he is enjoying himself. “Good day, Miss, where are you headed?”

“I’m chasing Mickey to the casino. Since they fired him from work, he has been playing dice all day long, even the mice at home are starving.”

“Tax her, Gogu, and pick her up!”

“Let’s take her for free, Mr. Ticket Inspector, she looks miserable, okay?”

“Okay!”

We both began to enjoy this game.

“Hey Gogu, see those two kids next to their Mum?”

He looks off into the distance. “I see them, stop the train!”

“Jump on, who is your father?” I shout.

“He is Gheorghe, son of Opran.” I still answer with a parrot’s voice.

“And where are you going?”

“To Craiova - to visit our father in prison.”

“What is in that sack on your shoulder?”

“Bacon fat, sugar, and 200 cigarettes - for our father.”

“Come aboard, how much do we charge them, Gogu?”

“They look penniless, tashi. I tell you what, just give us a cigarette each and go keep Donald company,” Gogu decides.

Toot toot! The train keeps going, climbing up hill, down hill, up hill again... Now there is a young man and a girl running after us. It is hard for them, running uphill, fighting along the way, hitting each other, falling down, getting up and continuing the chase. No! I am finished with them.

“More coals on the fire, Donald! They don’t have a ticket, nor luck, leave them behind!”

Toot toot! We approach Bucharest City. Look, it’s Viktor, full of wounds on his face. He is carrying a dead body over his shoulder.

“Viktor, who is that on your back?”

“A friend, he died from intoxication. It wasn’t my fault! No one told him to drink methyated spirits! It’s not my fault, it’s not my fault...”

“Then why are you carrying him?” I ask.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Throw him in the canal and hop on the train. I will take you far away from here, far away from him, far away from yourself, in Australia... Australia... Jump! Quickly!”

I turn to Gogu. “Blow the whistle, Gogu, make the train wail.”

Toot... toot... the train moves desperately, faster and faster. Look, there is Cristi, he wants to join us, too... he has asthma and he will choke.

I shout to Gogu, “Kick him in the mouth, Gogu and let him die.”

Toot toot! Look, the police are chasing that poor little man.

“Why are they chasing you?” I shout.

“I stole a barrel of sardines.”

“What did you do with it?” I asked.

“I ate it!”

“Kick him out Gogu, he will spew in the train.” Pluto blow the horn! Donald put more coal in! ” Toot... toot...”

“See, Gogu? Can you see? Over there, behind that huge heap of snow... something is hiding. It’s Niky, the angel. There are seven fugitives with him. They are looking for a train. The train of life, the train of freedom, a train with no stops, a train with no destination, a phantom train, the last one, the last train of hope... more coal Donald, more speed! Do not let them on, this is not the train they are looking for.”

“Tashi, we have to stop! There’s a red light! Stop the train!”

The fugitives catch up to us, they hang on to the ladder at the back, and they break into the train.

“Hang on! Where are you going? Wait for us! Where are you going” they shout.

“To the Aiud jail... to jail...” I reply. “Get off while you still can! Don’t follow us! Get off!”

Toot toot! More speed! More speed!

“Gogu, put that big ashtray on the railway. Let’s imagine that ashtray is a mountain - Mount Retezat. I want to crash this damned train, destroy it along with all the damned passengers... more coal, Donald!”

“Tashi! Stop so we can pick up Mama!”

“No, let her live.”

“Too late! She is at the door!”

The door opens wide and in comes Aneta. She has come back from the opera.

“What are you two doing here?”

“We are travelling on the train.”

“That’s enough travelling for you, Gogu, it’s very late, go to bed,” she says.

“Good night, Mr. Ticket Inspector, leave the train here, we will crash it tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay Chief Gogu, good night.”

Aneta came back from Gogu’s bedroom after putting him to bed. She opened a beer, lit a cigarette, sat on the sofa and after she let off a cloud of smoke, she asked me,

“Guess who I bumped into at the opera.”

“The phantom?” I replied from the floor, where I had lay down, my head resting on the cask of wine. “The Phantom of the Opera.”

“Not quite. I met the pastor, Alois...”

Alois, Alois, where have I heard this name before? Alois Vernalis... I remember this name from my schoolbooks in Latin class. It meant always green.

“What does he look like?”

“He is tall, distinguished, wears glasses, a warm voice. He is... you know... I can’t explain.”

Alois Vernalis... what other Latin words did I remember? ‘Vanitas, vanitatum et omnia vanitas,’ vanity, vanity, everything is vanity! Who said this? An ancient philosopher perhaps? Anything else? ‘Tzarno vino!’ No... that doesn’t sound right... oh yes, it meant red wine in Serbian, or black wine... doesn’t matter. I fell asleep there on the floor, my head on the cask of wine.



This was the first time I had spoken in Latin to my wife.

This was the story of a damned train, which is still waiting somewhere, at the foot of Mount Retezat, waiting for the green light... waiting for the light...

This was the first indirect meeting with pastor Alois.

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We are on the drive back from church still, free from worries, calm and at peace. I drove up the driveway, stopped and pulled on the handbrake. I looked at Aneta. My little old woman is still beautiful. She appears calm, at ease. She looks back at me, smiling.

“What are you thinking about, old man?”

“About the phantom of the opera.” What did you say Alois looked like? Is he handsome?” I asked.

“Handsome? Very! He is fat, has a big moustache, a huge beard going down to his belly, and a flowing black robe reaching down to the floor, swinging incense on a chain...”

“Get out of here!” We entered the house laughing, happy like never before.

Gogu tugged at my neck. “Want to go to the movies?”

“Easy, easy, Gogu, you are heavy! We’ll go anywhere you like.”

My mother-in-law appeared at the door, seemingly emerging from shadows. “Next week I am going back to Adelaide.”

“Praise the Lord!” I slipped out. Oops! I don’t want to upset her, especially not before she leaves.

However, she is grinning ear to ear and for the first time, for twenty-five years, she hugs us with sincere affection. What a miracle! A miracle!

## CHAPTER 27

### BANG, BANG

“I’m getting out of here, I’m moving. I’m not staying in this house any longer; the ghosts are eating me, they’ve already started, look, they started at the feet...” Two toes wiggle through the hole in my socks. “Slowly, slowly, they will eat everything, and I will be left with nothing but my bare skin! I’ve had enough! I refuse to live in terror! We have to do something.”

I didn’t even get to finish my thoughts when I heard banging in the roof, like footsteps. We all looked to the ceiling.

My mother-in-law recovered faster than us and said calmly, “Give me your socks so I can sew them up, or everyone will laugh at you since you walk with torn socks.”

“He he he...” we hear laughing from the cupboard. All of us looked at it straight away.

“There is no doubt, in this house there are ghosts, devils, phantoms, evil spirits. We need to do something.” I decided.

Aneta had an idea: “Let’s bring the pastor to read from the Bible, to pray for us, maybe he can save us.”

“Pastor?” The mother-in-law interrupts. “Bring a real priest in full garb, he will kick out the demons.” Is she joking or serious, who knows?

Wednesday night I went to church. There is a Bible study going on; not everyone goes, but I went. At the end I approached the pastor.

“Father, I have a problem. I need your help.”

“Tell me brother, what is your... problem?”

“A band of demons has taken up residence in my house, ghosts or whatever. They pay no rent but they have given me gray hairs!”

He laughed.

“I’m not joking, father, there is always banging, and things moving throughout the house. I would ask you to please

come with some brothers, tell them something, I don't know... Maybe the demons will be scared and leave us alone, otherwise I will have a heart attack!"

"Brother, we don't really believe in these kind of works in our church..." he responds.

"Pastor, but if he believes?" Luca came to my defense, somebody does love me after all. "It will be done according to his faith, let us go and have a night of prayer in our brother's house, what is wrong in that?"

"Very well then, Saturday night we will come and pray." The pastor decided.

However, on the way home he must have changed his mind because he appeared with his wife at our door that same night.

The mother-in-law had been working all day, making cakes and donuts but when the pastor and his wife appeared, they didn't take any notice of the cakes in the slightest. They got straight to work. They prayed in turn in every room. I pointed a finger towards the roof:

"The boss is there."

They prayed for the roof, too, then in the garage, in the backyard and again in the house. The pastor prayed beautifully to the Lord to clean the entire house and for the blood of Jesus to cover every corner and to bless it. Then he called the Holy Spirit to wrap around us and to make us holy.

I felt that my heart was reaching up to the heavens. It's now or never! I had the faith in my spirit that every demon had gone to the wasteland and that my house was cleansed. At every prayer I would look through half closed eyes, looking for my mother-in-law. She had her head bowed, her eyes closed, mumbling something, and making quick, tiny crosses over her chest ferociously, one after another.

"Amen!" The prayer was finished. They ate some cakes and left.

It was still early, so we sat down in front of the television. We joked and talked and watched.

After a while my mother-in-law exclaims: “Do you still hear anything? I tell you, something has happened here, look what peace and quiet there is.”

It was true; there were no more bangs or other strange sounds.

“Unbelievable! It’s true!” she continued. “Something happened... it really is true, a higher power exists...”

I turned the television off. It was true; there was a peace and quiet I had not experienced for a long while. They are gone... but the next moment a huge bang made us all jump.

“Oh no! It’s impossible! They’ve started again!” I cried.

“Tashi, tashi, it’s nothing, I just dropped the toilet seat, don’t worry, it’s nothing.” Gogu appeared at the door, embarrassed.

We started laughing. We felt relaxed. Later on everyone went to their bedroom. We were happy, free. From that night there was peace in our house, although occasionally a branch would hit against my window... bang, bang... bang, bang...

## CHAPTER 28

### FLAMES (THE LAST BOTTLE)

We returned from the airport silently, sad even. We had prayed enough to be rid of the mother-in-law. I had the impression that she was an obstacle to our faith but it was as if I had need of such an obstacle.

I found a place to retreat to in the garden shed. My mother-in-law is gone ... is this real?

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From the beginning, she was an obstacle in my life, and in my wife's life also. Ever since she first saw me (from afar, of course), she was against me. I wonder why? I was a handsome boy, a bit cheeky, coming from a bad family but at the age of seventeen I was still almost innocent. And Aneta... a beautiful girl of fifteen years, who smoked *Virginia* cigarettes and drank Italian liquers. I was passionate about plum brandy and I had *Carpathian* cigarettes in my pocket for three years. That is the lifestyle we learned from the houses we lived and grew up in.

It seemed everyone was against our love. The stronger their opposition grew, the stronger our love grew. Our love was like a flame. It burned strongly; the flame burned our wings and it burned those who were around us - but what did we care?

I had to travel 25 kilometres from my hometown of Bals to meet her in Craiova. We would go everywhere, the park, movies and pubs if we had money. Otherwise, we would sit down on a bench in the People's Park until late in the night. One night a policeman approached us.

"I have been watching you for a while. It is 10 o'clock and I've finished my shift. There are some hooligans in the park so it would be wise if you went home to avoid trouble."

We made a show of being scared, thanked him, and I even told Aneta,

“This policeman is a very good guy.”

Then we went on the bus which took us to the area she lived in. We kissed for a while I then went back to my place to sleep... at the train station. It is nice and warm in the waiting area of the train station, the chairs very comfortable. I had barely closed my eyes when I was disturbed by a kick in the shin and a baton to the head.

A well known figure of the Railway Police shouted at me, “Didn’t I tell you I didn’t want to catch you around here again? Miserable vagabond, what is this, your father’s house? Get out of here before I arrest you and break your bones!”

I rushed outside, limping due to the pain in my leg, so I wasn’t able to evade a boot coming from behind. I ended up outside, sprawled on all fours. I headed for the Old Platform, swearing.

“This is a good guy too...”

There was a train for workers that departs from the Old Platform at sunrise. I could rest there until the workers started to come. It would be cold but better there than outside. And life goes on...

Aneta’s parents were strongly against me and against any sort of relationship between their daughter and I but with the growing of their hate, so our love grew. Our love burned like a destructive fire, burning everything in its path. When the flames became too dangerous, my love’s parents put some several years and hundreds of kilometres between us. Not so my mother; not only did she not run from us but she embraced this consuming fire, she joined us, and together we were consumed by the flame.

Yet we were against any sort of rules and regulations, human or godly and in this passionate love we destroyed one another. In that time, we had no enemy worse than ourselves. Out of nowhere, alcohol became the daily reality in our lives and as the size of the glass grew, so the size of our love diminished. At first I felt good, like a bird escaped from its

cage. Slowly, slowly, the flame of love kept getting smaller and smaller and in a few years, it became merely smoking ashes damaging us and those around us.

A small flame, a tongue of fire, snaked its way in the darkness. This little unexpected light, this lost hope refound, was Gogu, our child, born after eighteen years of marriage. It was then that we left behind our sick and rotten love and we kindled the fire around this new life. It seemed that a new wave of fire was washing over us. We had to live for this hope, or die. We took care of this dear little fire, we warmed our hands in it. Every now and then, our hands, warmed by the fire of this young life, would touch. We felt good. We heaped more tinder on the fire, more and more, until there was the danger that we would smother it.

Then we heard, from somewhere above, from a new world yet old, a voice barely intelligible, "Come to Me, those weak and heavy-burdened, and I will give you rest..."

His fire bellowed then, tongues of fire reached towards the Heavens, we became torches; a man, a woman, and a child, walking through the flames, like purple-coloured waves.

In the heights of the sky, the flames are united with the clouds, lightning streaked across the sky, and in the light of the morning, there appeared, shining... the plane...

I could imagine her at the window, calm, assured, with headphones on, listening to music she wouldn't understand. She would flip through a magazine, without understanding a word. Quiet, secure... she flies away further and further each second and the plane disappeared among clouds set ablaze.

She is not here anymore. Where is she? She left ahead of her time. If you had stayed a little longer, one year, two, or ten... I would have had so much more to say... to say, say what? You are not here any longer...

I shout after the plane that has already disappeared,  
"Maaamaaa... forgive meeee..."

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“Are you well, old man?”

Aneta is by my side. I am thirsty, my throat is dry. I get up and head for the fridge. There is still one bottle of beer left over from Gogu’s birthday party last week. I take it in my hand and just look at it. One bottle, another one... how many? I take a sip from the bottle, and another one, and another... enough! I am full of it; I don’t have any more room. My stomach does not accept it and I feel the cold liquid stuck in my throat. It doesn’t want to go down. Two steps to the sink. I empty the contents of the bottle into the drain and throw the empty bottle into the bin.

“Enough.” I say out loud.

“What is enough, old man?” Aneta was just behind me.

I feel light, as if a heavy burden has been lifted. I respond quickly, surely: “It is finished, the sun has dawned on our street. Good morning, sister!”

“Good morning, brother!”



## CHAPTER 29

### UNCLE MICHAEL THE TROTTER (WALK OR DIE)

“I’ve walked around five continents, sixty countries and 640 cities in ten years, with my backpack in tow. Out of a total of 92,000 kilometres 28,000 were on foot. Someday I hope to cover the whole world, with the help of God and people ... and Romanians especially. I yearn to write a book of several volumes and in different languages... I have seen many things in my travels. I’ve journeyed on foot through forests and deserts, jungles and great cities of man...”

He is a tall man, well built, a bit hunched over, around 65 years old. A traveller of the world, he wanders on foot, backpack securely fastened, exploring the world. There are not many people like this. He told us to call him ‘Uncle Michael,’ but who really knows him? God alone.

“I was attacked by bandits in Arabia, they stole my boots in Italy, they beat me and stole my clothes in Egypt. I’ve suffered from great hunger and thirst...”

Many things this man has endured, he’s had a hard life, travelled on dangerous journeys... what fate is driving him? Poor nomad, where will his destiny take him? I would like to get to know him better. From the airport I drove him straight to the church though we didn’t have much time to talk. The entire congregation was listening to his tales. The pastor had invited him to the microphone. It’s obvious he is good at public speaking.

“I’ve suffered the heat of the desert, the cold of eternal glaciers, rains and winds, found shelter wherever I could – I’ve slept under bridges, in abandoned houses. I’ve walked until my legs could no longer support me but I always kept going and going forward ... ever forward...”

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Always forward... go, don’t stop... Thoughts memories invade my thoughts like waves...

“Walk, walk Costică, and don’t stop – you won’t be able to start again. If you rest you will not rise again. ‘Walk or die,’ this is the motto of the French Legionnaires.”

My legs would no longer respond. I didn’t have any strength left but still I shuffled my feet forward through the dust of the road. We left the ‘Phantom Train’ at Belgrade. We were going to tackle Yugoslavia head-on. We knew we had to get to Sejana, which was the gateway to Trieste. Then we somehow had to cross the Italian border.

“Walk or die, do not stop, Costică,” offers Romeo, he too shuffling his feet along. “If you sit to rest you will not rise again. Your muscles need to reach a point where the pain stops rising, then you can ignore it. Walk or die.”

I fully believe him. This man knows many things, things he has learned throughout his turbulent life, even through his fourteen years in prison. Walk or die... walk... until when? We were 130 kilometres from Belgrade, on the road to Zagreb. We pass through a little town at around 10:00pm. Where are we going? If I ask ...

“Romeo, you know how long ‘till Zagreb?”

“No,” my friend answers, “But I do know that it’s around 1000 kilometres to Italy!”

He hadn’t put anything in his mouth since morning. Not wine, not food, not tobacco. He took a few swigs from the flask of water we carried with us from Romania. It’s like he had become something more than human. If we pass this town we can stop and wait for a car, a truck... maybe it will take us. There is still a little ways to go. Walk or die...

“STOI!” We both stiffened. It was the first ‘stoi’ I had heard in my life. Soon it would be one after another.

Two police officers sprung from the shadows. They were the local police.

“Documente!” We were done for.

“Back to gruel for us,” mutters Romeo.

I take out my National Military Service certificate. I had all my documents with me, even my working card<sup>6</sup>. I begin the 'conversation.'

"Machina, camion defecto... finito, caput. Retorno Belgrado, mecanico! Razumi?"

He looked at the military certificate and his face lit up.

"Rumunski vojnic! Dobro! Rumunski vojnic..."

I quickly confirm. "Da, da, soldato de la Romania, soldato, camarad..."

He hands back the documents. "Dobro, dobro, pašli, vira, go... bârje, bârje..." I get the impression he is imitating me. "Vira, vira..." He waves his hand, telling us to go on our way.

"Huala lepo, gospodin<sup>7</sup>, gratia, la rivederci, jiveli, salut." We about face and walk down the road.

"STOI!"

We swallowed, audibly. I looked at Romeo and he gave me his old catch-phrase.

"It's back to the jail for us, coane Costică!"

I glance back over my shoulder at one of the officers. He has a great big smile on his face. He points at the bag I have in my hand and says:

"Voda, voda." I look at my bag, it is leaking water. The lid of the flask came loose. I bow respectfully.

"Huala lepo camarad, capitano, gratia..."

We went on our way again (after I tightened the lid on the flask). We heard how they were laughing as we left. They knew all along we were fugitives but they didn't want to take us in. God knows why... Then I realised that the pain in my legs had gone. We walked another few kilometres and went to sleep in a little patch of bushes just off the main road. We woke up early in the morning, snails all over us, freezing from the cold. The road went on and on - freedom was at Trieste - around a thousand kilometres more.

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<sup>6</sup> Working I.D. Card, Required in Romania at that time - 1983

<sup>7</sup> Thank you, sir in serbian

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Uncle Michael had finished his speech. I saw the church's treasurer giving him a stack of dollars. Then the pastor spoke.

“Brother Con, if I'm not mistaken, I believe you have a spare room in your house. Take our friend Michael and give him a home for the time he is in Perth.”

“With pleasure. I wanted to talk with him a bit, to get to know him better.”

I threw Michael's backpack in the boot of my car. A little Romanian flag fell out onto the gravel. I kicked some gravel over it to cover it up, to hide it, forever...

“Let's go, Uncle Michael.”

## CHAPTER 30

### THE BLOOD

#### (LORD, LET ME FORGET!)

“Leave me alone, leave me alone, I haven’t killed anyone. I didn’t kill anybody. Leave me alone, leave me... help...” I woke up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night. I was curled up in bed and arguing with Satan.

“I haven’t killed anyone, I am innocent, innocent...” I’m trying to defend myself from an invisible accuser. What does he want from me in the middle of the night? The accusation falls again like a hammer:

“You are a murderer. There’s no escape for you. Who will you go to trial with? Yourself...? Remember... Remember... You shook your woman’s hand and together have decided the death of the unborn baby from her womb. You prayed in the night for your plan to work. Who did you pray to? Remember... Remember...”

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Many years have passed since then. Ten? Twenty? Who would remember? Or who can forget?

The woman of my youth was lying in bed suffering unbearable pain. We were worried but happy that we were rid of an unwanted baby. My mum knew an old woman in Chitila who knew how to kill unborn babies. It was there where I had taken my wife - an eighteen year old child.

The love of my youth groans, twists and turns in bed. The sweat is dripping off her. She squats on a bowl. Blood flows and pieces of flesh from our baby, blood and flesh... blood flows... I catch it in the palm of my hands and I stare at it, it drips through my fingers, it’s sticky and warm, it’s dead

blood... it's on my hands, on my face, on my whole body, it penetrated inside me.

"I haven't killed anybody... nobody..." I scream in the middle of the night against my life, against my very existence, against me and the blood I feel on my lips. There's no escape for me.

"You are a murderer. You don't have any chance. Where will you hide? Where are you running? I'm here! I'm here! I'm in your mind, in your veins, in your eye and in the sweat of your brow. Where will you hide? Murderer!"

Who would help me? Who would protect me? I put my wife's hands into mine - first one and then the other. I look at them, I kiss one and then the other... I feel a sweet and sour taste on my tongue. It's the taste of the blood. There's blood everywhere. Over her body and mine. Over her life and mine...I feel my wife's hands damp in mine. Damp and soft...

"Again you two shake hands? What are you planning now? Who do you want to kill this time? Come on, do it, or are you afraid now? The other time you were not afraid at all! What is your plan now? Who is your next victim? Maybe your selves!!! Ha, Ha... You are next now... Haaa... Haaa!"

Oh I'm so scared... I'm afraid... I'm so afraid... I hide in my bed and cover my head with the blanket. It feels as though my fingers are stuck together with the sticky dead blood. I would like to pull my hands out of the cover so as not to dirty the bed sheet but I'm scared. I'm afraid of the air, of the darkness, of the giggles of laughter that resound in my head. What could ever cleanse these hands full of blood?

"My dear brother, poor dear brother, how the evil one is torturing you ..." The pastor, appeared in the corner of my eye ... the pastor is here. I shout towards him from the darkness:

"Father... Father... my hands, the hands... I'm a murderer... my hands are with blood..."

“My priceless brother, there is another blood that was spilt at Golgotha. The blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ cleanses you of any sin. Sleep now... rest...”

“You will be holy, brother... you have to be holy...” Ovidiu has arrived. He knelt and stays sad, with his eyes closed. “Be holy, brother, be holy... sleep... sleep now...” I fell asleep in my own sweat. How long, I don’t know... a male choir woke me up. There were many men’s voices, a choir like thunder, like a waterfall flowing all over me singing:

“Teach him, O Lord, how he will answer us in the end”. The same verse sung again and again by heavenly voices. I had before me the image of a green landscape, dark green grass. Behind it were yellowish hills, the air was purple and in the middle was a little tree with a round crown, rusty red. When I opened my eyes the image had disappeared like it was a picture painted on my eye lid.

I woke up peaceful, maybe a little older... I had a sweet and sour taste on my tongue – which I still have even now as I write down these words. O Lord, let me forget! Amen.

## CHAPTER 31

### A 'MONSTER' IN THE WINDOW

The words flow like a gentle stream. I read somewhere in the Bible about the flowing of anointing oil on Aaron's head, running down his hair, his beard, his robe... likewise the pastor's sermon comes out of his mouth, like a river that floods the house of the Lord, wave after wave, and grace after grace. I get comfortable on the bench and feel I am under a shelter. The rain can't reach me while I'm in this shelter, I am not afraid of anything. And the waves flow...

"You must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with one born of the Spirit."

"Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

How can I get baptised, I've already done it once! The priest dunked me when I was a tiny baby. Not that I can remember, I was too young. I do remember when I baptised my son Gogu. I took him to a Greek Orthodox Church, Saint George's. The priest read from a book in Greek but I didn't understand a word. I looked over his shoulder, looking at the book, and understood the word 'exorcism.' I was wondering what that word was doing there, in this situation, when the priest turned his head and spat three times, right in my face. Then he handed the child to the godparents. I paid him the fee, received a certificate, happily went back home with the entire congregation and held a great feast.

Maybe that's what my christening was like. They threw me in the water and I came out a new baby. 'You must be born again,' says the pastor. In that case, I came out of the water brand new, born-again, for Christ, towards a brand new and clean life. Oh, Lord, why didn't the priest let me slip into the water so I could drown and not have to go through 45 years of a dog's life. In the name of a new, clean life, I made a mockery of my own existence and that of those around me.



I look at my son who has leaned his head on my shoulder. You have been very lucky, my boy, very lucky indeed. Oh, Lord, if you hear me and know me, please forgive me for the life I have lived. Lord, I regret it, I feel regret when I look back, I feel very sorry... What can I do, how can I fix things? How can I repair everything I have destroyed? What can I do with the pain in my heart? Who can I give it to? Who? To Jesus Christ... of course! How could I forget?

‘The blood of Jesus will cleanse you of all your sins.’

Of any, of all... Lord, clean me and my wife and forgive us. I look at Aneta. She was also looking at me and she seems happy, liberated, and calm.

“The grace of God be with you all,” concludes the pastor.

“Amen,” responds the congregation.

I quickly jump to my feet. “Brother pastor, brothers and sisters, I want to tell you that my wife and I are decided for Jesus and wish to be baptised as soon as possible.”

There was murmuring and joy among the church but to my surprise, the pastor said:

“Very good, praise the Lord but don’t be in such a rush. We will pray, talk and wait with patience. There is no hurry. God bless you, everybody.”

For the first time I left church unhappy and angry. As I drove home, Aneta sat next to me in the passenger’s seat and Gogu sat by himself in the back.

“Why doesn’t he want to baptise us? What do we need to wait for? What’s wrong with us? They don’t want to accept us into the church. You see the kind of people we are dealing with? You see?”

Aneta is disappointed too. “Don’t worry, we will find someone to baptise us. We can try the Pentecostals or some Australian church.”

Suddenly we hear Gogu screaming in the back.

“Tashi, tashi, there is a monster in the window! A monster in the window! Stop, stop!” The poor child is shrieking.

I stop the car and try to calm him. Aneta goes to him in the back seat. Gogu points to the corner of the window.

“Look, there, there was the face of a monster, looking at us through the window. There, in that corner...” The boy is afraid, he is shaking. I notice that even I am shaking a little.

As the cars speed by us, I put my head on the steering wheel and begin to pray. “Lord, you know I am easily frightened, and how I am this close to dying from fright. Have mercy on us, and protect us from evil spirits. Please find us a place where we can be accepted and baptised. Do not leave us in the hands of the evil one, just when we thought we got rid of him. Strengthen us and give us courage. Amen.” Then I added, “Let’s go to the pastor to talk with him. And you, Gogu, behave; it was just your imagination. It all comes from that damn television. Oh, Lord, have mercy.”

## CHAPTER 32

### BIG HURRY

“Stop... stop at McDonald’s!” Gogu is hungry. If he puts something in his belly his fright will go away. An ice cream for me. Nice! Where had they been hiding this delicacy for 45 years?

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We arrived in Ballajura, at the pastor’s house. He is standing out front, talking with a young man dressed in an immaculate suit... with a cowboy hat on his head. His face was pleasant and calm but his eyes always looked down.

The pastor introduced us.

“Brother Con, this is our friend George”

I note, he is a ‘friend’ and I am a ‘brother.’ We enter the house, sit at the table and talk. I forget the reason I came. George has a lot to tell and I listen closely. He left Romania on a trip to Russia. He travelled thousands of kilometres by train through Siberia going through China, then the Phillipines, Malaysia and Indonesia. He said he carried a Bible with him the whole way since leaving Romania, and he would sometimes look through it.

In Manila he found himself penniless. He wasn’t able to buy a plane ticket to Australia. He prayed to God to help him and some woman ended up giving him \$500. He almost fainted when this happened but he understood that his prayer had been answered. When he arrived in Australia, he sought out a Romanian Orthodox Church, which he found, but he didn’t find the peace he was looking for so he started searching for other Christians. He is still searching.

Then he got married. The woman wasn’t a Christian but he prayed for her every day and had faith that God would answer this prayer.

While he was in the eastern states, he wanted to get baptised but the Romanian church there wouldn't do it. Disappointed and discouraged, he left his woman behind and came to Perth. He needed to rent a house, find a job, find a church and get baptised and then bring his wife over to start a new life.

This man's life seemed very interesting to me. George had a very troubled past, a violent temperament, a lot of alcohol that had also ruined his life. He had just turned 35 but to look at him now, meek as a lamb, sober, with tears in his eyes asking to be baptised in the name of the Lord, he looked like a child.

To his shock, the pastor says,

“Wait a little longer, there is no rush to get baptised. We need to pray about it ... perhaps you could bring your wife over for us to see her and we will pray about it, just wait.”

George looked like he had seen a ghost. This was something he was not expecting.

“Not even you will baptise me?”

“Just wait, later, bring your wife here first and maybe we can baptise you both,” the pastor said.

George looked so sad, even his cowboy hat seemed to droop. I felt sorry for him especially since I had received the same treatment.

“Come stay with me, brother, I have a free room. Michael the Trotter has just left”, I told him and off we went. On the way, I told him that they didn't want to baptise me either even though my wife wanted to be baptised as well. He put us both off. George loosened up a bit. I told him that I too was an alcoholic and a bad man and God saved me from all that. George loosened up even more when he saw that we were similar and he started looking at me eye-to-eye.

By the time we got home, we were good friends. We sat in the garden until dark whilst he told us his adventures and we told him ours. Then we went inside, sat at the table, prayed, and ate and prayed again. And again we talked about God and how He worked in our lives.

Later, George, with tears welling up in his eyes, told me:

“If no one wants to baptise me, then it must mean that God does not want me. If I have to end up in Hell, then let it be as soon as possible... I don't want to live without God.”

My wife and I trembled. That night we went to sleep for the first time since we met God with doubt in our hearts.

Then, early next morning with the start of the new day, God took charge! At noon, we found the pastor of the Romanian Pentecostal Church knocking on our door. He wanted to talk with George. They got along well from the start especially as they were both from Moldavia. With the patience of a child, I ask him,

“Will you baptise him, brother? Will you take him to your church?”

“I will, brother. He is just a lost sheep,” he replied.

Praise the Lord! A great joy comes over us. The pastor opened God's Book and read. He then prayed for us.

A week later, George found a good job. Then he bought a nice car. His wife called him and gave him great news – she was pregnant. He then rented a nice house and hired a transport company to get his things across from over east. The date for the baptism is set; an unseen hand prepared everything.

The following Sunday evening, all of us went to the Pentecostal church when some evangelists came from Romania and America. The whole Baptist church was there as well. Powerful preaching and powerful praying were the order for the night. I heard people talking in languages I didn't understand. Eventually the preacher called for people to repent. Many people came out to the front. I told myself that I don't need to go, I am done and I just need to be baptised.

The pastor continued to call the sinners. I see George leave my side with a smile on his face and head straight for the front to kneel with the others. It was as if I was chained to him and surely enough, I followed. The pastor prayed for each one of us individually. When he reached me, he put his hand on my head, and shouted:

“Come out, Satan, from this man, and never come back!”

He moved on and the other pastor came.

“You were to die, but you live, give praise to the Lord!”

So I lifted my hands, gave thanks and shouted to the Lord. It felt as though a current of warm breeze was flowing around my head. At the time I didn't understand it but later I realised that it was God's Spirit that moved among us like a gentle whisper. This was my first experience in a Pentecostal church.

Soon after, George was baptised. It was a hurried affair and I had the impression that the pastor rushed everything so he could keep the whole event mysterious and holy. It was a pleasant rush. It seemed like no one even had time to contemplate what happened when my brother, George rose quickly from the water, leaving behind any wish he might have had for death. He rushed into a new life in the Lord.

This was the first baptism I had witnessed. When would mine follow? God knows!

## CHAPTER 33

### CELL ZERO

‘Men at ease have contempt for misfortune as the fate of those whose feet are slipping.’ These are words from the Bible - the words of poor Job. It feels like I wrote them last summer. ‘If someone falls down, kick them! If someone is stupid, let them die.’ The law of the jungle. ‘The small fish gets eaten by the big fish.’

Even the Bible speaks about this. The words resound in my mind and my heart. ‘Men at ease have contempt for the fate of those whose feet are slipping...’ But why? If he slips, leave him alone, don’t kick him. If you can’t help him up, leave him where he fell. Hmm... but what if he gets up? What if he crawls back up and becomes stronger? Wouldn’t he come after me? Of course he would! So if you see him on the ground, then you should kick him hard!”

I wonder why we are fighting so hard?

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Looks like time has warped... I am at Aiud Prison, in Cell Zero, next to the Murderer’s Cell. What am I doing here? I didn’t kill anyone. I am a good boy. I love life, a happy drunk. I just wanted freedom to see the world but they caught me trying to cross the border through the mountains and threw me in jail in Aiud - here in Cell Zero. What a strange number, “0”. It could have been anything but zero isn’t even a number. So then I am a zero. I am in Cell Zero, along with these other unfortunates, with no names, no numbers, and neighbours with the Murderer’s Cell.

We are 30 prisonieri here on a relatively small space . And the fight for survival is tough for all in Cell Zero. Raul Ren, prisoner, the terror of Sibiu, dominated over all in Cell Zero. He trains his body all day and likes to beat everyone who crosses his path. That’s how he got here in the first place.

He likes it here, this is his life. Look at him... right now he noticed a skinny gypsy sitting in the corner who can't go to work (or doesn't want to work) anymore.

“What is it? You can't do it anymore?” Poor gypsy... he was the punching bag. Punched, kneed, and elbowed, until he is down. Then... if he is down, he deserves a kick in the mouth. Poor gypsy. The gorilla has lost control. The rest of us watched, terrified. We wanted to be small, very small, smaller than the zero of Cell Zero, to not be noticed, to be dust, wind, invisible. Fear is a horrible thing.

I wonder why people treat each other in such a way? In prison we are all at the mercy of human nature. The guards are the rulers here. Any bandit with muscles and fists of steel falls under the blows of the guards. Look at this one, he tumbles around in the filth, he is bound with heavy chains and he shouts, spitting out teeth.

“Why do you beat an unarmed and chained man? Why? Why!” His screams are cut short by a kick. What for? Because you are on the ground, thus you deserve a kick in the mouth. And he receives the second, and the scourge of Suceava City, who keeps every prison he has been through under the terror of his fist, is writhing around in blood and dirt, and everything will end after he shines the boots of those who kicked him.

What for? Why such a struggle?

He who has a clump of sugar and a slice of bacon is more powerful than he who trades his bread for cigarettes, and holds all the other prisoners in the palm of his hand, but if a guard drinks a bottle of rum, nothing matters anymore.

The people are insignificant, without name, without number... this is Cell Zero, neighbours with the Murderer's Cell.

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There, in Cell Zero, I first heard about Nebuchadnezzar. December's winter chill had set in. I was shivering from the cold and I was quickly pacing the cell, trying to warm up. Five steps forward, five steps back. I bump into another thief, shivering and marching like I was.

"Let's walk together," he says.

"Okay." We started walking together, shoulder to shoulder, five steps forward and five steps back.

"In this way Nebuchadnezzar enslaved the people of Israel, just as we are, enslaved by this devil here and now," he rambled.

He didn't dare pronounce the name of President Ceausescu, though again, I wasn't really even listening. I was far away, daydreaming, about how I might escape from jail and run to Australia. I didn't care about Nebuchadnezzar.

"Nebuchadnezzar did the same thing to God's people, as this murderer now does to us but God will save us from the chains of the devil. Have faith in God and you will be freed too. I know you're no criminal but you tried to run over the border. Anyway, whoever you are, pray to God that He will free you from the devil's clutches."

I look at him slyly. "So how did you end up here, *coane*?<sup>8</sup> You look like a decent enough fellow, not like a crook."

"I want to flee to America. I have all the emigration papers completed but they aren't letting me leave. So, I locked myself and my family inside the house and hung an American flag out the window."

I was getting excited. "Just like in the movies, comrade. How did it turn out?"

"They broke in and arrested me and my wife. The kids are staying with brothers from church. It was a mistake... and now I have to pay."

I was confused. "Where is the mistake, my brother? I don't see anything wrong in what you did."

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<sup>8</sup> Similar to Lord, in Romanian language

“The mistake was that I lifted the American flag. I should have brought out Jesus’ flag, the flag of the Lord... I made a mistake... God forgive me!”

He was truly downtrodden but before I had the time to think about what the Lord’s flag looked like, a thief bumped into us.

“Hey city slicker,” he shouted at me. “Leave this idiot alone, he has nothing but Scripture in his head.”

He gave the poor man a slap on the head and carried on.

“Who do you want to convert? This man?” He points towards me. “Well, this is a shifty one from Bucharest, you simpleton, he will eat you for breakfast.”

He turns to me again.

“I’m from the capital too... a robber from Ferentari<sup>9</sup>.”

He pulled from his pocket a pair of dice and rubbed them in his palms.

“If you have anything on you, let’s play.”

We retreated to a corner. He sat cross-legged on the freezing ground and I knelt down. I took out two packets of cigarettes and put them down.

“Go for it, gagiu<sup>10</sup>, half-and-half...”

We sit on the freezing dirt of Cell Zero and the dice tumble between us. Time began warping again, melting through the cracks of life, through the curses of those in Cell Zero.

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Now... here, down on my knees... in God’s house...

My hands searching along the cold carpet... searching for the dice of Cell Zero. My eyes closed, my head high, empty of all thoughts and memories. I am searching. My fingers probe along the carpet... where are the dice of Cell Zero? They’re gone... everything is gone. Cell Zero is gone. I am free. I

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<sup>9</sup> A Gipsy suburb in Bucharest

<sup>10</sup> Man in Gipsy language

have escaped from Aiud Prison... now I feel free... here,  
now... I have abandoned Cell Zero. Only just now... only just  
here.

## CHAPTER 34

### ON A MISSION

I can't keep quiet. It's as if a fire is coming out. I want to tell everyone that there is a way out. I have found the way out and this way out is available to everyone – the forgiveness of sins through repentance. I want to tell everyone that God isn't a menace, with a sword over our heads but in His love He sent His Son to die on the cross for sinners like me and so many others. I want to shout it out – there is an escape, an amnesty that everyone can experience through the grace of God. I can't keep my mouth shut.

“The Romanian Association is holding a meeting next Sunday and they have invited us to come along,” says the pastor at the end of the service.

‘Praise the Lord,’ I think.

“If anyone wants to, they are free to go but their meeting interferes with our service.”

Later on, when I found him alone, I asked him,

“Why don't we go with the Lord Jesus to them? Let all of us go, to spread the news of salvation.”

“Dear brother, we have been spreading that news for ten years, and they still hold to their way,” he replied.

“It can't be, there must be some way to make them understand. We have to mix with them, to be the light, like the Lord said.”

“Brother believe me, we have done all we can, all we know how. The church prays constantly for the lost Romanians. However, if you feel that the Lord is sending you to them, then you should go. We will pray for you.”

I will go - I have to go. I would go even if I were nailed down... nailed down... I suddenly felt small, like chaff in the wind.

My Lord, you came to me even though my sins nailed you to the cross. You, my Lord, were nailed together with my sins and when I wished for death, You came to me, You

touched me with your bleeding hand. You washed away my painful past, and You put in front of me all the Heavens.

What can I do now? Keep quiet? I can't! Even if I were to be nailed down, I would not be able to stop myself telling everyone that God is real. He is not just rites and rituals and myths but He is the Lord and he can change lives and forgive sins. I would go for sure.

And I went. That morning we prayed in the church for the Romanian community. Then the church blessed Aneta and I and we were off... on a mission!

We arrived at the Kiev Club around noon. When we approached the door, I figured out what the club was about by the smell. I remembered from Adelaide these types of places - taverns hidden in the shadow of a sport club. When I entered, I felt my skin crawl. I hadn't entered a pub for three months. A poster on the wall explained what this 'football club' was all about - there were several women wearing only high-heeled shoes in obscene positions.

'Get behind me, Satan.' I plucked up my courage and entered with my wife in tow. The meeting was in full swing. There was a pub atmosphere. We received many glances, but no one paid any attention as we quietly took a seat in the corner.

It was I alone who knew what was in my heart. I understood that when a recovered alcoholic approaches a pub, he feels a fear, unrest and troubled, and that the same thing happens when a sinner approaches a Church.

"See that man at the head of the table? His name is Vick. He hosts the Romanian radio programme every Saturday night. He's a good man but a heavy drinker. I met him at the restaurant where I work. I told him about Jesus and he asked me how much I get paid to bring people in the church, God have mercy!" Aneta whispered to me.

I look at Vick Radio and it's like looking in a mirror.

'There is an escape, my friend, just wait, and you will hear the great news. I will tell you, Vick and everyone, that there exists an escape that you are unaware of. Just wait a little

bit and I will give you this good news, which will set you free. Just wait a little bit longer.’

At that meeting they talked a lot, focussing on the soccer team, which, they claimed, could unite the Romanian community. I didn’t really agree with the idea of a soccer team being the centre of anything. But what did I care? I had Jesus with me and I wanted to offer Him to everyone, that He might be the one to unite the Romanians.

When the discussions slowed down, I raised my hand. The president gave me the okay to speak. I stood up, and I began to speak words that didn’t seem to be mine.

“Brothers, I am a Christian...”

“Sit down, what do you think we are - Turks?” I had barely opened my mouth when it was shut again. There was quiet in the room.

“Sit down, we are Christians too!” It was coming from a lady over forty years of age. I continued.

“I came here to tell you about the good news of making peace with God. I confess that I was once an alcoholic too...”

“Sit down and shut up, none of us are alcoholics here!” I looked at the one who cut me off, a little old man who was hiding behind a bottle of beer on the table.

“Listen to me a little while, please. God moved me from Adelaide, from my friends and relatives, and brought me here to Perth. Here I met the pastor of the Romanian Baptist Church, a man blessed by God...”

“Sit down and shut up, we know him as well!”

“This man put a Bible in my hand and showed me that there is a way out. Today I came to share this news, that Jesus Christ forgives all our sins. He is the way out. He is the Lord. I came here to call you...”

“Sit down, man! We don’t deal with religion or politics in this place. Here everyone does what they please. Don’t bother us, mind your own business!” This was coming from the proprietor of the establishment. He was a man of around sixty years, tall, slim, dressed impeccably in a white shirt with a black tie. He must have been the boss... but...

“There is a way out for you too,” I say to him directly.

“There is a way out for all...”

“Sit down and shut up!”

“There is a way out for everyone...”

“Sit down!”

“Jesus is the Saviour...”

“Sit down!”

“Jesus loves you...”

“Sit down!”

The cries of the drunken mob were victorious. I sat down and it was as if something broke inside me. I wanted to be somewhere else, alone and to cry for all those helpless victims of their own devices.

But Aneta, my lovely wife, stood up, and spoke for me but I didn't hear anything. I looked at each face in the crowd and realized that I know them all from a long time ago. Indifferent faces, nervous faces, attentive faces. I knew all of them. Looking at them was like looking into a mirror. Look at Vick Radio, he is already drunk...

‘My dear brother, how I would like to tell you the secret, but you don't want to, you can't hear it... how I would like to show you the way out... how I would have loved to...’

I watched all these people, all their faces, their glasses and bottles in front of them, the cigarette smoke that wafted in the air... Here, in front of my eyes, I could see little dramas played out, small adventures, their destinies laid out like wares at a market, lives in search of the truth, which some might never find, troubled souls... and over everything hovers a cloud of alcohol.

I watched each person and realised that I came to bring something that no one wanted. These people didn't want to be free. The pain inside grew and again I wanted to be alone somewhere, where I could cry in front of God ... with God.

From the Kiev Club we drove straight to the pastor's house. He appeared to be waiting for us. He didn't ask anything, he probably knew what happened. His wife put some food on the table. She looked at me and said,

“Sit down...”

Oh, no... I don't want to hear these words ever again. I looked her in the eyes, that calm and relaxed face. I felt her assurance and security and it flowed into me. Suddenly I felt an unbelievable joy. I looked around. Everything in the house was so exactly placed, so stable, unshakeable. I thought about where I came from and I shouted to the Lord,

“Lord, have mercy on the Romanians!”

Then, I sat down and dug my spoon into the soup. I was starving.



## CHAPTER 35

### EVE (THE BRIDAL GOWN)

“On the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, with the help of God, our church will hold a baptism,” announces the pastor at the end of the day’s service. “Brother Con and Sister Aneta, at their insistence, will be baptised.”

At last they decided to baptise us.

I look at Aneta and she looks at me. In this church, the men sit on one side of the church and the women on the other, so there was some distance between us. After 25 years of marriage we understand each other without words. Better to keep quiet because after too many words there would be fighting. ‘At last... they decided,’ she seems to say.

We left the church, a bit more thoughtful, a bit more serious.

“There’s not much time left until God comes to take His Church. If we are baptised he will take us too, right?” Aneta is very curious.

“Of course He will, didn’t you hear what the pastor said? Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved.”

Gogu hadn’t said a word the entire trip. I looked at him through the rear-view mirror. He sat quietly in the back seat, looking sad.

“What’s wrong Gogu? Look, we are getting closer to McDonald’s, don’t you smell anything?” I tried to cheer him up.

“I’m not hungry...”

I paid him a bit more attention through the mirror as he looked as though he was about to cry.

“What is it, Gogu, what’s wrong, my son?”

He opened his mouth and said through his tears,

“Dad, if Jesus comes to take you all, who will remain to baptise me?”

I saw in his tears a hopeless worry. For the first time he felt left out of our priorities. I pulled the car over and went back to sit with him. Aneta came as well.

“My son, don’t be afraid, the Lord won’t leave you. He won’t. My child, where we go, there you will go too, as long as we walk the path of the Lord together. He will take all of us to Heaven. Don’t cry, just have faith in the Lord, my son. Don’t cry ... don’t cry...”

By now both Aneta and I had tears in our eyes, tears we hadn’t experienced before, tears of joy and love, because we felt the Lord among us. Cars were speeding alongside us, but everything seemed calm. The Holy Spirit was with us, the love of God was here. God’s hand was over us, we were all in one embrace but each one of us, in our spirit, held in our arms Jesus Christ.

Monday we went shopping to buy white clothes for the baptism. We took Gogu with us, and went looking through the shops in the city. We were looking for a white dress, like a wedding gown, the kind which my wife never had....

When we got married we were but two naive, dirt-poor children, and bad too. Though we didn’t know it at the time, we thought we were the centre of the universe and didn’t consider anyone else... there was no one like us. When we were married, at a townhouse in Chitila, we didn’t have anything but our ordinary clothes but we wore them with pride. I only had ten lei<sup>11</sup> in my pocket, seven of which I used to buy a bottle of wine and the rest was used for the bus. A cousin of mine picked some flowers from the garden there and gave it as a present and... but why am I remembering this now?

A white wedding gown ... the gown of purity and virginity... who could wear it? White shoes, white shirt, white pants, white socks, everything is white but still I felt like I had darkness in the depths of my heart. I wanted to be cleansed of any stain and be baptised.

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<sup>11</sup>Romanian currency

Our shopping had made us hungry, especially Gogu. Somehow we ended up in Northbridge, near the restaurant where Aneta worked.

“Let’s go to Tony’s and eat,” she proposed.

I went on the defence, like an echidna retracting behind its spines.

“I would rather go home...” I mumbled.

“No, let’s go to the Romany restaurant,” she insists.

Again, I was on the defence. “I think it would be better... to go to McDonald’s.” I felt like I needed an ally. “Come on Gogu, tell her, let’s go to McDonald’s.”

“I don’t want to go to McDonald’s,” he says. “I want to go to a real restaurant. We haven’t been for a long time.”

My ally was gone.

“Look, the Brass Monkey! Let’s go there, we’ve never been there before,” Aneta attacks.

I gathered up in my arms the white shoes, the white socks, the white pants, the white underwear, while the sweat was dripping down my face.

“Look, around the corner, on James Street, a kebab shop, they have fish, anything you want... let’s go there,” I plead.

“I’m not going to that Turkish dump,” she is starting to get angry. “I want to go like proper people, to a proper restaurant, to sit at a proper table. Don’t take me to a kiosk for hotdogs. I want to go somewhere so I can feel nice!”

My knees were shaking, I didn’t know what was wrong with me. I was holding the clothes for the baptism so tight, as if I was scared someone wanted to steal them. I barely restrained myself from shouting.

“You...Eve, do not take me back to the pub. I have just escaped from that place. We are going home.”

I started walking back to the car. I didn’t even think to look back and check if they were coming after me. I was still grasping the clothes tightly, and was rushing to get away from the world. I didn’t look back at all. I got into the car, sweating and breathing heavily.

I wanted to pray, but the only words I could think of were ‘Every one for himself! Amen!’

After a few minutes Gogu came with Aneta. They were both laughing happily, with donuts in their hands.

“Hey, Dad, want a bite?” asks Gogu. “Come on, have a bite.”

“Okay, Gogu. Delicious! Whoever invented the donut must have been a genius.”

I started the car and slowly, as if to not disturb anyone, I drove out of Northbridge as if walking on tip-toes. Aneta and Gogu were enjoying themselves in the back. Next to me, on the passenger seat, the white shirt had almost fallen out of the bag. What a brilliant white it was, like a wedding gown.

## CHAPTER 36

### TOGETHER (THE BEGINNING)

“In this week before the baptism you will be put under the test. The devil will do everything he can to trip you up. It happened to me, too,” Brother Octavian advised.

“What can I do?”

“I don’t know. God will look after you. I will give you the clothes I was baptised with.”

“I already have my own,” I protested.

“They are no good, use mine,” he insisted.

“Very well, brother, I will do it.”

Octavian was a sailor who never believed in God, but he asked for a sign. When he fell very sick and just before the operation he was scheduled to have, he prayed on his hospital bed: ‘God, if you are out there, give me a sign!’ Then he felt the hand of God comforting and healing him. He looked around and saw that no one else was in the room but still felt an invisible hand touching where it hurt the most. This was the sign that brought him to believe.

“It will be a hard week. Beware of Satan.”

Therefore, I spent the rest of the week around the pastor’s home. One evening he was sharing with me his experiences with the Lord Jesus. All of a sudden I felt easy, light. My heart became warm, full of love and kindness. The Holy Spirit was upon us, upon me. It was moulding my life, renewing my heart. I felt the tears drying up on my cheeks, as if a warm breeze dried them.

And thus the days passed for the remainder of the week.

The big day came. We left the house happy, rushing to the church. It was the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 1995, nine o’clock in the morning. I was a bit emotional, a bit hurried and impatient. What will become of us? From today onwards we begin a new chapter in our lives. Everything is new. We have begun a new life in a new place, new jobs, new house, new friends, new

hobbies, new clothes, new books, new food and drink, new speech... everything is brand new. How can everything change so? What is new in us?

Some time ago, I remember I prayed for God to take my life. He answered this prayer after all – he took away my rotten old life and gave me a new one.

Not too long ago either, I heard my wife praying to God one morning: ‘Lord, take my life, I don’t want to live anymore.’ God took her life, too, and gave her a new one.

Great is your power, Oh Lord!

This morning we are rushing to church. We have been to so many places together throughout our 25 years of marriage, we have done so many things together... still, I feel that what we are doing now is the greatest adventure of our lives. We are adventuring in the land of God. We have a child who is a part of our adventure. It’s hard to believe that we are living this adventure right now, running at full speed to God, who is waiting for us with open arms, all three of us.

Great is your power, Oh Lord!

The church was crammed full of people. Even members from the Pentecostal church were there. I had the feeling that they were all looking at us. Of course they were. After all, we were the reason they came. To let the people get a better look, we were seated on two chairs right up at the front, next to the pulpit, as if we were on display.

I felt rather awkward at first, but I recalled the Lord’s words: ‘Whoever is ashamed of me in front of the people, so I will be ashamed of them in front of my Father.’ Why should I be ashamed and embarrassed? I’m sure most of them have been in a similar situation.

Despite the occasion, I still felt that the programme was too packed, too many songs, too much speaking. A good few hours went by.

A Pentecostal brother sang a song... a beautiful song, warm and swaying. I liked the melody, but I couldn’t understand the words even though they were in Romanian.

I liked the melody and his voice, the words didn't interest me. What peace I had in my soul, so calm... 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.' Oh Lord, how rested I felt at that moment.

I wanted to touch my wife's hand, to give her the calm I was feeling. I wanted to grab her hand but I didn't move a finger. I only looked at her hands. Her hands were so white. They were resting in the lap of her white dress. There was so much softness in those pale hands... where had I seen such pale and transparent hands before?

It was so restful, so peaceful, and so calm... I might fall asleep...

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Sleep? Not a chance! I was lying in the bed, covered with an old raggedy blanket, clothed in prisoners' rags - clothes worn by people caught trying to flee across the border - different to the clothes given to the common criminals. This is the Aiud Prison.

It was cold even though there were a hundred of us in the Section 5 dormitory. We were numb, shivering from the cold, waiting for morning. It was December with freezing winter nights. The sun shone only a little during the day trying to fight off the cold.

I was lying with the cover over my head, breathing so I could warm up the air under the blanket. I was thinking of my wife, who was locked up in this hell too. There were just a few walls between us, a few corridors. It was late at night.

The door opened, and I heard the footsteps of heavy boots getting nearer. A hand grabbed the blanket off me and the policeman said with a low voice,

"Move to the visiting room."

I got out of bed, put my old boots on and hurried to the visiting room, the policeman behind me. I was cold and frightened. Who could visit me at this hour? Where was this cop taking me? Does he want to take me outside and shoot

me? My teeth were chattering. From fear, from cold... who knows? We crossed the courtyard and headed for the main building. The cold was cutting off my breathing and I started shivering even more. I broke out in a cold sweat. Where was this cop taking me? Who would visit me in the middle of the night? He wants to kill me, that's for sure.

We ended up in the visiting room. He left me waiting in front of the grille separating the prisoner and the visitor. On the other side appeared Aneta, my partner in suffering. The room was well-lit, so I could see her very well as she approached slowly, cautiously. I was stunned. I was in front of the woman I always loved, who belonged with me, even though there was a wall of steel separating us. Who can put such barriers between souls? What right did they have? What authority? How did we wind up here? Is this the end? This woman had followed me since she was a child, I took her everywhere ...even here. Oh Lord, what have I done?

I pressed my hand to my forehead, I was unsteady on my feet. She took a step forward, and put her fingers through the grille. Her hands were white, almost transparent. Her fingers were trembling. I wanted to touch them, but I didn't have the power to lift my hands.

"Say something..." she whispered.

"How did they allow you as a visitor?" I wondered.

"I have been on a hunger strike for ten days," she answered slowly, as if she were far away.

"Why did you do this?"

"So I could see you, I miss you..." she answered.

I looked at her hands, the incredibly white hands and her fingers hanging onto the grille. How I wanted to touch them but I didn't have the strength... I didn't feel worthy.

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All the songs finished and the church was quiet again. The pastor climbed down into the tank full of water. He called us to follow him. I was in the water, together with the woman of my life. The pastor was there too - and the Lord - He was with



us. The pastor asked us a question, sounding as though it was from some place far away,

“Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?”

“Yes, I do!”

“Then I baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

~~The end~~

THE BEGINNING