

Behind Pavel Dragojevik, the eastern sky remained black where it met the earth, for dawn was at least an hour away. In the anemic light of the paltry campfire steam from the teapot created ghostly images that hung in the gelid air until exorcised by the rising winds of the approaching storm. The young man seated at the fire was easily recognizable as a combat veteran. In addition to his worn military greatcoat and the occasional flash of firelight on the barrel of the pistol he kept readily accessible in his belt, there was a hard glint in the eyes that never stopped searching the darkness. Here was a man who knew deep in his soul that death and maiming could occur at any moment from any quadrant and eternal vigilance was the only hope of survival. Anyone who had known the precocious bookworm that had endlessly challenged the Utilitarian and Socialist teachers (sent to educate and indoctrinate the children in the government sponsored schoolhouse just a kilometer away from where he now sat) would have been at great pains to recognize Pavel in the gaunt features of the huddled figure.

He was a liberal in the classical sense of Hobbs, Locke, and Montesquieu: the rule of law should prevail, individual rights should be respected, and government should be limited to its primary duty of ensuring the safety of its citizens and the opportunity for all to rise as far as their courage, intellect and ambition could take them. It was not surprising that conflicts arose when the schoolmasters began proselytizing socialist tenets to the effect government was also responsible for ensuring gratification and happiness for everyone regardless of their abilities or efforts. It did not seem rational to Pavel for a government to forcibly deprive someone of their belongings because, in the government's opinion, the happiness engendered in a poor person who received forcibly redistributed property was quantitatively greater (and therefore of more social significance) than the

unhappiness inflicted upon the more wealthy person whom they deprived of possessions earned by their own labor.

The crisis point came one afternoon in his final year at school. Challenging the schoolmaster's assertion that socialism was the only true path to peace, brotherhood and equality, Pavel had stated it was silly to think people would work at their maximum potential when all they would ever derive from it was the same benefit as any mediocre worker – like childish notions of fairness among children on a playground. And to gratify a few special interests by diverting funds from defense of a country in order to increase funding for social programs was patently immoral. Jeopardizing future generations for fleeting political advantage was unethical and foolish.

It was when the schoolmaster asserted his sincere belief that government had the duty to ensure happiness for all its citizens that Pavel ensured his own expulsion from school. Arguing that Napoleon no doubt sincerely believed he was benefiting Europe when he conquered his neighbors and no doubt Genghis Kahn sincerely believed his path was righteous as he slew thousands of people; Pavel asserted that sincerely believing did not prove the accuracy of anything. He knew too many people that despite a preponderance of objective evidence showing they were wrong, clung tenaciously to their sincerely held beliefs. Throwing caution to the winds, he added that lying politicians and agenda-driven journalists clamored incessantly for society to reset from capitalism's meritocracy to the inherent mediocrity of socialism as the only way to lead mankind to the promised utopia of peace and brotherly love. Yet when their policies failed and the inevitable day of reckoning came, they were never called to account for their self-indulgence. It was the sweat, toil, and tears of common people such as himself that had to discharge the debt. For of one thing he was absolutely certain: peace, brotherly love and a classless utopian society might exist in the kingdom of heaven; but it most certainly did not exist among the kingdoms of earth. The elites' evasion of the consequences they wrought was not even a personal matter anymore. Man's existence had become so unthinking and reflexive it was merely the way of the modern world.

“Big snowstorm coming”, Pavel did not realize he was mumbling, as a sudden gust of wind sent a shower of sparks into the night. Glancing at the sky, he continued in a

whisper, “Two -- three hours maybe. Can’t risk the pass getting snowed in. I’ll have to wake them up soon.”

Glancing at the emaciated mule tied off at the rear of the rickety two-wheeled cart, he contemplated its chances of surviving the trek out of the valley. There was little doubt it was starving. There had been precious little grazing as they fled across the forests of Bukovina into the mountains. Though he did not believe in abusing livestock, there had literally been no choice in the matter. For twenty miles in any direction the countryside had been denuded by mobs of defeated Austro-Hungarian soldiers passing through en route to their homeland. And the victorious members of the Serbian Army had fared little better, for they too had been left to their own resources in the aftermath of the armistice. There was just no food in the valley. Here and there among the burnt remains of houses and barns, Pavel caught fleeting glimpses of wolves – furtive silhouettes foraging among the cattle and pig bones that disappeared almost as soon as he spotted them. Although they were somewhat of a threat to the mule, they were far less worrisome than the two-legged predators that had, since the incident in the forest, harried them for days.

Even now, awaiting the dawn, Pavel did not see what he could have done differently. The two members of a partisan patrol owing allegiance to Bela Kun had appeared suddenly from the woods, demanding the mule and rickety cart as requisitioned supplies in their class struggle to bring socialism to Bukovina. When Pavel and his brother-in-law Danil had refused to release the wagon, they were arrested at gunpoint and summarily sentenced to death as counter-revolutionaries...although the offer of clemency was made if Danil’s wife (Pavel’s sister), Sofya, cared to redeem their lives by means of the most basic of male/female relationships with the two partisans. It was at that point Pavel pulled the pistol he kept hidden in his boot and shot the oldest horseman. Danil had dispatched the other with his knife. Rapidly hiding the bodies a few yards into the forest, they left the roadway on a game trail and moved both day and night by circuitous pathways to reach the valley where they had grown up.

“Bastards!” The expletive hung in the night air like the steam from the teapot. It could equally have been directed at the Red Partisans who relentlessly searched for them now, or the government officials that discharged him and his brother-in-law without food,

pay or even a transport voucher to get home. As far as Pavel was concerned, one could pick either, for both filled him with equal dismay and disgust.

He stared pensively at the fire as the tea steeped. The old Roman road they had used to enter the valley ended fifty yards to his front and they had fabricated an outpost there. His brother Danil had the guard shift and was to return to the fire at the first light of dawn. That the partisans would come, Pavel had no doubt. At his back was a little known trail he had discovered while hunting as a child. It led to a pass across the mountains into Moldavia. If the mule got the cart up the trail and over the pass, they could slip over the border, out of reach of the Red Partisans. But they had to move at the first sign of color in the eastern horizon. If the snow drifted across the pass or the partisans caught them, they would surely die.

The only provisions left for breakfast were part of a loaf of rye bread and a half-liter jar of honey they had taken from an unattended beehive upon entering the valley yesterday. But the honey would sweeten the bitter tea, making it less of a chore for Sofya to get the children to eat. The situation was dire he had to admit. Yet, if anything it had been even grimmer as they stood trapped on the Field of Blackbirds and contemplated the trek across the Albanian mountains to Durazzo on the Adriatic Sea. And meager as the ration for breakfast was today, it was bountiful compared to what they had dined upon when they finally reached Durazzo. Pavel knew his sister, his brother-in-law and more importantly, himself. They had survived that evacuation. And by God they would survive this one as well. But deep within, he had to admit they had nearly died.

At the battle of Mt. Cer, the Serbian Army had defeated the invading Austro-Hungarian Army, driving them out of the country for the remainder of 1914. But 1915 was to be different. The Austro-Hungarian Army once more invaded and once more it looked like the Serbs would defeat them. But unexpectedly, Bulgaria invaded from the Eastern frontier, attacking the rear of the Serbian Army. The Serbs were squeezed into a pocket at the Field of Blackbirds along the border with Albania. Surrounded and cut off from any hope of rescue, the French and British had promised food, medicine, and evacuation if the Army could reach Durazzo on the Albanian seacoast. Faced with the stark choice of capitulation or an evacuation over the mountains in the dead of winter without food or transport, the Serbs to their credit, chose the latter.

Hunger, cold, and exhaustion made it an odyssey of suffering. Death stalked them in myriad forms...cold and exposure...wounds from the incessant sniping and raids of the Albanian Partisans (who sided with the Ottomans and their Austro-Hungarian Allies)...accidents, as the marchers grew ever weaker from starvation, cold and fatigue. Day after day, they shuffled along the trail to ceaseless exhortations of the army's leaders: Move on! If you stop, you die! – There's safety at Durazzo! – There's food at Durazzo! – Keep moving! An endless mantra that formed a counterpoint to the never-ending crunch of boots on crusted snow.

For Pavel, Durazzo revealed the value of government promises. Staggering and shambling out of the hills, the retreating army found nothing but wind-blown sand dunes. German submarines had forced the diversion of their supplies to a beach sixty kilometers farther down the seacoast. People died amid the sand dunes at Durazzo, chewing tree bark and saw grass in a frantic effort to assuage the emptiness that suffused their bellies; staring ceaselessly out to sea for supply ships that never arrived. God alone knew how the army's leaders had managed to get them up and moving down the beach as people reeled and fell in mid-step, dying of starvation as they marched that final sixty kilometers to where the food had been landed. It is true that eventually they were evacuated to Corfu. But that march to Durazzo had cost more than 50,000 lives.

Awakening Sofya and the children, Pavel hurried them as they packed and ate. As the first streaks of sunrise lit the eastern horizon, Danil returned from the outpost and they started the mule up the trail. Supplies were gone now, and only the two children, a couple of cooking pots and some blankets added weight to the cart; yet the mule strained and faltered repeatedly to keep it in motion. The sun was visible above the horizon as they passed out of the forest at the top of the trail. Pausing to give the mule a respite lest it die and leave them stranded, Pavel could plainly see the summit of the pass. He knew the trail was much less steep on the other side of the mountain and once beyond the crest, in minutes they would be in a beech forest that might provide a rabbit or grouse for a meal when they finally reached the plain. Once across the border, he intended to camp for a day or two, letting the family recover and the mule graze. He had heard General Denikin had a Volunteer Army fighting the Socialists in the Crimea and that was where he planned to go...the only haven within reach.

As Danil took the lead rope to start the mule moving again, Pavel glanced back along the trail up the mountain.

“Damn! The Partisans!”

Grabbing a rifle from the cart, he cut off his brother’s protests, and ordered him on in the curt tone of one used to command.

“Get going, Danil. You know what will happen to Sofya and the children if they catch you. I’ll hold them off ‘til you’re over the border then I’ll slip through the forest and meet you. Now go! I’ll catch up with you. God be with you, Danil.”

Taking cover behind a rock outcropping near the edge of the trail, he waited for a clear shot at the lead rider. He thought a few well-placed shots would make them deploy into a skirmish line, slowing them long enough for Danil to get the family into Moldavia. It was not much of a plan, he knew, but it would have to do.

With the first shots from his rifle, the partisans dismounted and scattered among the trees. Moving on foot, they presented little to aim at and for nearly an hour Pavel spaced his shots carefully, striving to make every one count. When the snow began to fall, he deemed it time to make his escape, for he was sure Danil was by now over the border. Running rapidly from his position toward the treeless summit, he was just passing the crest when the bullets struck, dropping him to the ground like a crumpled newspaper.

“Rotten Bastards!” The words hung in the air amid the falling snowflakes with the frosted vapor of his final breath.

### Epilogue

On 14 November 1920 the last military and civilian personnel of the Volunteer Army evacuated Sebastopol in the Russian Crimea on ships bound for Turkey. Among them were a young woman, two small children, and Danil Dragojevik. They had no country; no property and they were the only living members of their family. Somehow, it was never the biased journalists and venal politicians that were called to account for the results of their self-indulgent agendas. It was always the tears and blood of the common people that settled the debts they heedlessly wracked up. It was a lesson Danil would take pains to teach his children. And he would make sure they understood it was not even a personal matter. It was merely the way of the modern world.