

**ESCAPING  
YUGOSLAVIA**

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# CHAPTER 1

Raj would always remember the strange men.

The harrowing incident happened one freezing winter's night in 1946 when Raj was just six years of age. It would remain one of his earliest and most unpleasant memories and, after the initial shock wore off, would shape his view of the world for the rest of his life. The visit from these uninvited guests created a phantom in the young man's mind that filtered his decisions from that day on and Raj never forgot and never forgave.

Dinner was simple that night, as it was most of the time. The last of the slaughtered pig from a week earlier sat thinly sliced atop a wooden platter, a pinkish-brown deliciousness that emanated heat and steam, filling Raj's nostrils with a simple joy. It was indeed a treat, with the rest of the swine's flesh to be cured or smoked as refrigeration was unaffordable at that time. The soup that accompanied it was thick and salty, laden with boiled carrots, potatoes and onions. Hard, dark bread was a staple in the household; the satiating carbohydrate was cheap and plentiful and made his mother's hands tough and dry from the years of kneading.

The aroma of dinner was exacerbated by an empty stomach and a freezing winter. Neither Raj nor his siblings had left the home that particular day. The bite of cold in the Balkan Mountains was severe, especially for a child of six years. The freezing cold was just as great a risk to children as was the falling snow, with sudden and rapid storms that could trap the most experienced woodsman in a dreaded maze of perpetual white as visibility just vanished. The winter winds at such a high altitude were also extremely hazardous, breaking branches and felling trees as the tremendous force of air pushed the deadly freeze into every corner of their world. The snow had fallen hard for the past few

days and, if it wasn't for the brave men of the village, communication between the farmers would cease to exist. As it was, leaving the house would only be risked for absolute necessities, while leaving the town would be undeniably foolhardy.

But still the men came.

Prayers were said before the first bite. The fire that baked the bread kept the home warm too, and the family's two cats showed their appreciation by sleeping spread out on the warm stone in front of the roaring flame. A few well-placed candles helped brighten the room as well, illuminating the meals before them as shadows danced against the old, stone walls. Raj focused on his plate as he unconsciously mumbled his thanks to the heavenly hosts. His mouth salivated and fingers itched for dinner to begin.

'Amen.'

The final blessed word was a relief. Raj ignored the cutlery, which allowed him a split-second start toward the food and a larger initial portion than his slower siblings. For his age, his technique was flawless, dipping his bread into the broth before him with one hand while grabbing a cutlet of meat from the platter with the other. The din was wordless now, with only the primal crackle of fire and consumption of food, filling the air.

'Slow down, Raj.' His father broke the silence. 'No one will steal it off your plate.'

As if spurred on by those words, his older brother Vlad reached over to take a piece of meat from under his nose.

'Vlad,' Raj's mother snapped, offering a well-worn look that posed more of a threat than mere words ever could.

Raj kept eating, chewing faster to fit more in while his jaw started to tire from the incessant, rapid movement. His brothers and sisters must have been starving too, as they spoke no words and chewed vigorously themselves.

'Mirko.' Raj's mother looked at his father. 'Did you put Chomp in the barn?'

'Sure did,' answered his father. 'Why?'

'He's barking at something out there.' His mother had keen ears.

In unison, everyone suddenly stopped chewing and listened.

'So he is.' Raj wasn't sure if his father sounded surprised at the dog barking in this weather or that his mother could actually hear it through the din. 'What could be out there now?'

‘Could just be a rat,’ offered his mother then returned to her meal. ‘Even rodents need shelter in this weather.’

Raj stopped his feasting to take a drink. A little sip of water was all he needed to keep the food moving and clear his mouth for the next round. His eldest brother Krizan burped aloud, which drew the ire of his father.

‘If you want to be a pig,’ his father scolded, ‘you can eat outside in the pen, if you like.’

‘Beg pardon,’ whispered Kriz, embarrassed.

Raj’s dad, Mirko, was a well-respected man in the village to whom many came to seek counsel. Mirko had a great respect for tradition, both patriotic and religious, often telling stories to the children that were passed down through the generations. But, as he taught Raj often, good manners were beyond mere tradition; they were an intrinsic virtue and a sign of class that transcended social status or educational pedigree.

‘You might want to check on him, dear,’ suggested Raj’s mother, worried about their pet dog Chomp. ‘He hasn’t stopped barking.’

‘I’ll just finish this...’ But Mirko’s voice was cut off by a loud rap at the door.

‘God almighty, who could be out there now?’ His mother sounded genuinely surprised.

‘I’ll get it,’ insisted Mila, Raj’s youngest sister. She jumped off her stool and was ever ready for a social event.

Raj kept eating, as did the other two boys. Manda, the eldest sister and most cautious in the family, put her spoon down and stared in anticipation at the door.

‘Wait, Mila,’ her father warned. ‘I’ll get it.’

So Mila stopped in her tracks, looking a little disappointed. Another knock cracked at the door; this time louder than the first.

‘Hold on,’ Mirko yelled.

‘Brother,’ came a distant voice from beyond the door, ‘we can’t hold for much longer, it’s freezing out here.’

‘Who is it?’ asked Mirko, purposefully slowing his gait. ‘Who’s out there?’

‘Brother.’ The strange voice pleaded this time, a little louder, thumping at the door now. ‘By the grace of God, please let us in.’

‘Gather the children, Kata.’ Mirko’s voice turned hard, with an edge that demanded respect. He grabbed a walking stick resting near the

front door. With the stick now in play, both cats instantly decided they were warm enough before silently darting from the scene.

'Come to me, kids,' Raj's mother immediately called.

The children had already stopped eating, mystified by the exchange at the front door. They scampered around the table and sat beside their mother. Kata grabbed her youngest offspring closest to her; Mila nestled in her lap and Raj snuggled as close as he could before reaching to the table for another slice of crusty bread.

'Brother, please.'

Mirko cautiously lifted the timber bar that held the door in place, but before he could pull the door toward himself the outsider pushed hard and barged his way in.

'What's wrong with you?' the stranger asked brusquely, almost shouting, as he looked down at Mirko who lay on his back after taking the surprise hit from the door. 'A brother could freeze out there.' The man coolly smiled, taking off his fur-woven head cover and shaking snow all over Raj's father. There was no warmth to this stranger's charm, and his actions did nothing to assuage the family's trepidation.

'Does Tata have another brother?' Raj stopped chewing and enquired to no one in particular.

Raj had a large immediate family, and an even larger cohort of cousins, uncles and aunties, but he had never seen this brother before. The only familiarity the strange man showed came from the smell he had brought with him. Raj knew that smell; his father called it the devil's brew, or Rakija, and cautioned all his children against acquiring the taste.

'No,' Raj's mother replied, 'this man is no...'

'As usual the children show us the way,' the strange man interjected lightly, 'after all, we are all brothers in this lovely land, all comrades working to the same goal.'

'You're no brother of mine,' cursed Mirko, but as he tried to rise to his feet the stranger slapped him across the top of the head with his snow-covered hat, sprinkling a slurry around the rising man, then the stranger kicked Raj's father in the chest, forcing him back to the floor.

'Now, now, Miki,' the man mocked. He reached down and grabbed the thin walking stick that lay across the floor. 'Is this how you welcome *all* of your guests?'

The cold was now filling the room from the doorway left ajar

and Chomp's incessant bark was heard far more clearly through the opening. A couple of candles had become extinguished adding both a touch of darkness and further suspense to the space. Raj and his siblings huddled closer to their mother and watched uncomfortably as the shadow of the stranger danced across the room.

'Slavek, shut that dog up!' Another man peered through the door and grunted an indistinguishable answer before disappearing.

'What do you want?' asked Raj's mother.

'Oh, my lovely sister, Kata.' The man's smile exuded a dark sarcasm; in fact, his intimate knowledge of everyone's identity only heightened the tension in the room. 'We want what everyone wants.' He raised Mirko's cane and pointed around the room as he spoke. 'A warm fire, a fine meal and a safe home.'

'You could start by closing the door,' Kata spat back, her intuition overruling any logic required to ease the situation. 'The poor kids will freeze.'

The strange man made his way to the table, ignoring Raj's mother completely. As he approached, he reached beneath his coat and drew a broad hunting knife. Mirko leapt to his feet as Kata hugged the children closer.

'Petar!' commanded the stranger and a third man suddenly entered the domain, a long-barrelled rifle in his hands, pointed directly at Raj's father. 'You should stay down, Miki.'

'Leave my family alone.' Mirko's ire began to show, but he made no further move toward the antagonist. 'What do you fucking want, anyway?'

'Do you hear this, Petar?' the man smiled at his gun-slinging colleague, then shook his head. 'No one listens anymore. I just told you what I want, Miki, but you seem to be hard of hearing.' And with those words, he quickly turned and smashed the butt of his knife into Mirko's forehead. Raj's father stumbled back to the floor, his hands holding his face, which only partially stopped the crimson flow from smearing the floor.

'Tata!' Raj cried, tears streaming down his face. Mila, too, was in tears.

'Is Tata alright?' whispered Manda to their sobbing mother.

The older boys breathed heavily, but their mother gripped them tighter as to avoid them acting foolishly. Their hearts were pounding and sweat glistened across everyone's face. The temperature grew considerably warmer even with the door open and the freezing mountain winds

circulating. The distant dog bark accelerated both in tempo and volume only heightening the fear and confusion in that little stone room.

The stranger turned his attention back to the table and nonchalantly flipped his bloody knife around. With a stab he gorged a large piece of pork from a plate then ever so slowly slid it off his glistening blade with his tongue and teeth, not once taking his eyes off Raj's mother.

'How often do you eat meat, Kata?' asked the man, chewing purposefully with his mouth open, meat juice flowing onto his stubbly chin, his left foot now casually resting next to the plates on the dinner table.

'Take your feet off the table, please?' Raj's mother held back her tears, but the disdain in her tone was ever clear.

'If you joined the Party' - the man totally ignored her once again - 'you would enjoy it daily!'

'You're godless,' Mirko interjected, 'and drunk.' He still bled but seemed to have retained his composure slightly as he began rising to his feet yet again. 'You and all yours are godless. No soul. Not even the devil would waste his time in your precious Party.'

'You have a hard time taking orders, Miki.' The stranger smiled, tapping the walking stick in a sign of frustration.

'We fought your kind for years,' Mirko proudly announced. 'If all you're doing here is looking for members, you can fuck off right now.'

'Oh, Mirko the wise!' The stranger didn't seem to be leaving in a hurry. 'It seems to me you're still fighting.' The man appeared a little more irritated with Mirko's insolence. He continued chewing but more aggressively than before.

'Has no one told you?' the man spoke faster now and turned to face Raj's father. 'You lost! The war has been over for years. Your God and Jesus were defeated. Your Hitler and Himmler were smashed. Your generals and priests were slaughtered.' A sinister laugh followed the man's gaze as he turned to the crucifix hanging above the fireplace.

'Go on.' He seemed to enjoy pointing with Mirko's stick, particularly at the holy symbol. 'Say your useless prayers.'

He threw Mirko's walking stick into the fire as he walked across the chamber and violently tore the wooden cross off the wall, throwing it at Mirko before spitting a chunk of masticated pork at his feet. As his final insult, he stood with his back to the crackling fire before stretching both arms wide in an emulation of the crucifixion of Christ, his shadow now ominously spreading even further across the small room, almost

enveloping everyone beneath it. The sinister stranger then looked at the ceiling and took a deep breath before making an announcement. 'Welcome to Yugoslavia!'

Mirko was on his feet now, with crucifix in hand. A blood smeared forehead enhanced the anger in his eyes. His body looked tense and his breath moved fast. Petar was still pointing the barrel at Mirko's head, but his hands were now trembling and he had taken an inadvertent step backward; the threat was clearly over and a violent reality was emerging. Even the menacing stranger, who sarcastically chewed everyone's ear off moments earlier, stood silent and focused, with his arms back at his side and knees slightly bent, ready to pounce with blade still in hand. The youngest two children, Raj and Mila, were openly crying now, with their mother Kata still holding tight as silent tears also ran down her cheeks.

*Bang.*

The distant shot rang from the outside cold; its echo was quickly swallowed by the wind. The dog's continual bark now fell silent; the beast's final act relieved all the tension in the room.

'Mama?' Krizan asked. 'What was that?'

'Hush now,' their mother consoled, 'everything will be alright.' But her tears told a different tale, as did the quiver in her voice.

'What have you done?' Raj's father turned from stoic to inquisitive, an authentic surprise overtook him as he suddenly ignored the intruders and walked to the door.

As a final strategy, the leading stranger pulled out a small pistol and aimed it coldly toward Mirko's head.

'Keep walking.' The strange man was confident once again. 'We can finish our conversation outside. You might just meet your God tonight.'

The tension arose once more. The execution of the family dog was devastating, but now the threat had reached a new level.

'No, no, no,' Raj's mother cried, raising her voice at every word.

'Mama?' questioned little Mila.

'No, no.' The matriarch seemed lost to her children.

'Mama?' This time Raj looked to his mother.

'No... no...' The men had left Kata and her children to themselves.

The wind gathered momentum and blasted an icy breath into the room forcing the remaining candles to dance violently before extinguishing their tiny flames. The hearth still burned, but the fire's roar no longer held sway in that room; the flame was now forced



to submit to the wind's domination. The diminishing fire reflected perfectly the hopelessness engulfing the young family.

'Mama, where are they taking Tata?' Vlad asked in a tone that was not eager to hear a truthful answer.

'We should go to him,' offered Krizan, the eldest sibling. 'We can help.'

'No, no, no.' Their mother tried to grip all five children at once and raised her tone after hearing her son's idea, but her arms were nowhere near wide enough, and just as her husband's fate seemed out of her hands, so was the control of her eldest children.

'We've got to do something, Mama,' Krizan desperately suggested.

'What are you going to do?' Kata answered meekly, her voice losing its earlier assured authority.

'Grab a knife, Vlad,' Kriz ordered. 'You too, Manda.' He got up and slipped away from the table.

'Me?' Manda sounded shocked. 'A knife? What? Do I need to, Mama?'

'Do I need a knife too, Kriz?' asked little Raj, confused by the ordeal.

'Don't be silly,' Mila told her younger brother. 'Only the older kids can carry knives. I'll get mine ready, Kriz.'

'No, you won't,' Kriz commanded. 'Stay with Mum. You too, Manda. Come on, Vlad.'

'Are you sure?' asked Vlad.

Krizan didn't offer an answer and both boys made their way toward the doorway and into the cold and dark of the outside world. A step away from breaching the threshold and a familiar, but louder, sound was once again heard...

*Bang.*

A few moments later Mirko came stumbling into the house, snow covering his head and blood pouring out of his left arm. The Communists only injured him, but the same couldn't be said for the family dog. Kata and the older children rushed about getting all that was required to tend to her husbands' wound while Raj and his youngest sister sat with their father and hugged him while crying.

'It's okay, kids.' The injured patriarch tried to comfort the little ones. 'I'll be fine. It's just a scratch.'

'Why would those bad men do this?' asked Mila, sniffing between words.

'I don't know, child,' answered Mirko, giving her a kiss on the forehead. 'But I do know in this country now most people do things for one of two reasons: they are either hungry or they are greedy.'