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Grandma Maja

Darko Cvijetić

My little boy Mile was thirteen, Đuro fourteen, Anka twelve, Boško eight, Uroš nine, Dragutin three, and Milutin barely one, when the house burned. Later Mile and Đuro did not come back. Neither did their father, my man, come back from that village of Jasen by the Sava.

I immediately recognised the voice of this one. Instantly, although it was forty years after. There was a Croatian village Maglajci next to Bjelajci. This one with the voice came from Australia to visit it once again.

It was 1982. I had been lying in bed for days on end and, I swear by God, I thought I would not get up anymore. The voice made me rise, and fixed me to the sky, for one whole minute.

One whole minute of the sky.

The same voice, forty years earlier, told me to run away to the right, to the woods. It was the voice of this man who showed up in the yard. Back then, it was the voice of an Ustasha, from Maglajci, all the males from that village were there, or most of them. All from Bjelajci were in the woods, or most of them. My Ostoja, as well.

They took us out in front of the house. One of them set the house on fire, and the other one ordered the third one to kill us all. This one with the voice was the third one. He first cocked his rifle. Then Anka, at her age of twelve, said she was going back to the house to take out one-year-old Milutin, so he could also get killed, and not burn up with the house. She did not wait for his answer. She simply went into the house, on fire, but not yet burned down. She brought Milutin outside, and stood by us.

That Ustasha, the third one, from Maglajci, who escaped to Australia after the war, the one that was supposed to shoot – kept staring speechless. Then he told me: ‘Run away to the right, to the woods, take these children, woman!‘

I gathered them all, and ran away to the right, to the corn fields. We were wandering for four days, and then joined the other people taking refuge.

Yes, he knew us, and I knew him, he was from the neighbouring village, he saved us all. And, here he is, forty years later, again in the same yard, in front of the newly-built

house. He was searching for his village, the Croatian village. He lost his way, the village is gone since 1944. The partisans forced out all the Croatian villagers and brought in the unfortunate Serbian people from Kordun. He lost his way. That one, with the voice. Anka asked him who he was looking for.

He was looking for Maglajci, for anyone from that village. Anka did not recognise him, and how could she have. Stipan was his name. 'Those people are not here anymore', she told him.

I got up from my bed, like a ghost, and approached him. 'Do you recognise me, Stipan?'

He got frightened, for forty years he has been afraid of such a question. 'I don't, grandma.'

'You were supposed to kill us all, Stipan!' He looked at me aghast; how come I knew his name, and what did I recall? 'Don't you remember that there was a house at this place, that it was set on fire, that I was standing here with my children? Don't you remember, Stipan, that my Anka, a small girl at that time, went into the burning house to take out little Milutin, my Mićo, so that the child wouldn't burn down with the house? You were supposed to kill us, that was the command. And look at us, Stipan, still standing here, in front of you, you haven't shot yet!' He was in complete shock.

'Our people set Maglajci on fire two years later. There are no more Croats here, Stipan, do you hear me?'

He was petrified. He remembered everything, and he broke down completely. I approached him and caressed his cheek. An old man, just like me…and yet he was crying, sobbing, whining like my Milutin, like a small child…

Anka took his arm and led him in. Then we were silent. For a minute. And even longer. One could even cross a field of thorns.

I lit the fire, in the house.

Translated by Ana Stanović Obradović and Mirjana Savić-Obradović

From, *Why Are You Sleeping on the Floor,* Chapter 5 – "Grandma Maja" by Darko Cvijetić

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