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**THE ALMANAC OF DEATH AND DISAPPEARANCE**

*Translated from Croatian by Tamara Budimir*

A CHRISTMAS TALE

My wife and I were accustomed to celebrating Christmas in the intimacy and warmth of our own home, with a decked Christmas tree and Christmas carols that pealed around the entire house off our Marantz hi-fi system. However, on that particular year, in 1991, partly due to what was happening in my ill-fated homeland, and partly because of her aging and ailing parents, we decided to spend the holidays with them in the small village of Carmarthen in Wales. At least, that is what I thought we would do. It turned out, however, that my wife's entire family was going to gather at her aunt's in Brynamman, an even smaller Welsh mining village, some thirty kilometres east of Carmarthen at the very edge of the Brecon Beacons National Park.

Although somewhat taken aback by this unexpected change of plans, I did not mind. On the contrary, I was happy going to the village, to the house of my wife's aunt Nancy and uncle Griff, a house which, with its thatched roof, thick uneven walls and low ceilings, was so reminiscent of the house of my ancestors back in my native Slavonian plains, which were now so distant and devastated by the grenades of those who were in the habit of taking what was not theirs. And so I impatiently awaited Christmas Eve and this gathering around a warm hearth, a glass of blackberry wine, among all these dear people in the heart of south Wales who had replaced my distant Croatian family.

When my wife, her father Dyfrig, her mother Barbara and I in one car, and my wife's brothers Delwryn and Hywel in a second, arrived in Brynamman, we were met by my wife's cousin Adrian and his wife Delyth and their distant cousin Sioned and her young husband Gareth.

The evening was spent in joyous laughter and benevolent baiting of the relatives, and then someone suggested that, whilst we wait for midnight to come round, each of us tell a story, whether true or imaginary, related to Christmas. What follows is what I recounted to them that evening in 1991, in the Welsh village of Brynamman. I intentionally forego using the word "story", if we take this word, like many do, as meaning a fictitious, imaginary and so a prevaricated narrative, even though the syntagm "life story" exists and even though it is a well-known fact that these narratives from life, in other words, those that are true, are sometimes more like fairy tales, more inventive, but also more

painful and terrible, than any imaginary story. Here is what I recounted on Christmas Eve of 1991 to my second, Welsh family:

*“It all happened exactly fifty years ago and is not the figment of imagination, but the living yet painful truth. In December of 1941 preparations for the celebration of Christmas were well under way, even though there were still two weeks left till Christmas. The nuns at the “Marijin Dom” convent on Pale who had been looking after the ailing and feeble for four decades by running primary school classes for the local children and by providing relief for all those in need of their help, no matter to which faith or nationality they might belong were especially busy. When they were not running classes, then they were baking bread for the abandoned children at the state Children’s Home and taking care of every pauper and beggar who came knocking at the door of their humble convent.*

*In 1941 during World War II residing at the convent were sister Jula Ivanišević, a forty-eight-year-old Croat, sister Marija Berhmana Leidenix, an Austrian nun, who at the age of seventy six was the oldest among them, sister Krizina Bojanc, a fifty-six-year old Slovene nun, as well as the thirtyfour-year-old Slovene sister Antonija Fabjan and the youngest among them, the twenty-nine-year-old sister, Bernadeta Banja, who was a Croat of Hungarian descent. Life at the convent was simple even prior to that year and it had always been difficult to make ends meet, but since the advent of the war, everything had become even more difficult and even more uncertain. But the people respected this congregation of sisters belonging to the Daughters of Divine Love who led humble lives, never asking for much, but always willing to offer help to those in dire need. But, as is always the case, there were those who, through their own envy and penury, did not reason in this manner. People such as these will always find a way to wreak evil upon others, and war is always the best opportunity for this.*

*On the morning of 11th December a thick layer of snow lay about which was not surprising for the Romanija mountains at that time of year. Almost half a metre of snow had fallen overnight and “Marijin Dom” on Pale was left completely snowed in and cut off from the rest of the village except for those who were willing to encumber themselves and struggle through the snowdrifts which could swallow an entire man in places. From early in the morning gunfire could be heard, and as the day went on, it drew closer and closer to Pale and “Marijin Dom”. Still the sisters went about their daily chores trying not to seem overly worried about everything that had been happening around them as of late. One of them kneaded bread for the convent, another knitted woollen scarves and gloves for abandoned children, a third cut wood for the convent, and a fourth prepared a frugal lunch for herself and the sisters. But when the Chetniks surrounded the “Marijin Dom” convent at the close of that day and started shooting at the windows, they knew that this was no joking matter, and when one of them,*

*bearded and filthy, with a fur cap on his head and a dagger at his waist, started hammering on the doors to the convent with the butt of his rifle and howled:*

*'Open up, may the devil take you!'*, they had no choice but to let them into the convent. The bearded men immediately fell to plundering whatever was to hand, but since there was not much to steal from these humble and poor sisters, the one who had first come knocking at the door ordered that the sisters go out into the courtyard, and gave orders to his men to set the convent on fire. The fire had not even started to blaze, as the Chetniks forced the inappropriately clad and poorly clothed nuns out into the snowdrift and across the precipices of Romanija, which were difficult to traverse even in summer. They drove them off in the night, eastwards.

*'Where is it you're taking us, son, in this tempest?'*, asked the oldest of the sisters, sister Mary.

*'Hold your tongue, you Ustashi whore, and off with you if you don't want a bullet in your forehead right this minute!'*, grumbled one of them and struck the old woman in the ribs.

The sisters spent the rest of the journey to Careve Vode in silence and in fear of their lives, trampling through the deep snow and striving to avoid the Chetnik's rifle butts which thundered down upon them from all sides whenever one of them stumbled or got stuck in the snow. They had grown accustomed to the cursing and blaspheming. Aging sister Marija had it worst, although the younger Antonija and Bernadeta tried to help as much as they could, by supporting her under her armpits. But as the mountain path climbed up the steep eroding inclines of Romanija, and the snow grew ever deeper and impassable, it became increasingly difficult for the seventy-six-year-old woman to keep up with the rest. She began to gasp for breath, her forehead was covered in droplets of sweat, whilst a fierce fever raged inside of her. It was only a matter of time before the old woman would breathe her last breath and release her soul to the Almighty Creator to do with it as he saw fit.

On seeing that the old woman was steadily slowing them down, and as they wished to reach the first station of their journey before the end of day, the bearded Chetnik leading them and whose orders the others, so it seemed, followed, decided to leave the battered and exhausted old woman in Sjetlina. There his men could rest a while, revive themselves amongst their own, interrogate the sisters, and then on the following day, at first light, continue and so on to Goražde and the security of the barracks there, where, they knew, a warm meal and new supplies of rakija would be awaiting them. They lingered at Careve Vode for only a short while, just enough time to drink some water and smoke a cigarette and for the sisters to get their breaths back. And then they continued onto Sjetline where they were truly welcomed into the home of Jovan Šainović with its warm hearth, and even a bite to eat. *'We'll spend the night in the barn, and tomorrow we move on!'*, said their leader whom their host referred to as 'duke'.

*'I'll leave the old woman here... so she doesn't slow us down... the state she's in, I don't think she'll last long.'*, concluded the bearded leader. *'Just give the orders, and she won't see the light of day'*, added another bearded member of the gang going for his knife, adding: *'Whoever my knife stabs, needs no bread or water!'* They all started sniggering; only the sisters did not find it funny.

*All night long the bearded men took turns interrogating the nuns – whilst some slept, others interrogated them, slapped them, tortured them and then they switched. And so it went on until the break of dawn. The nuns did not sleep a wink.*

*In the morning they reluctantly bade sister Marija farewell although they knew that the rest of the laborious journey would certainly kill her. Like this, she at least had a chance of surviving. Having spent a sleepless night, chilled to the bone and hungry they continued on their way at first light with a silent prayer on their lips. Defiance welled up in Bernadeta, the youngest among them, and although exhausted and desperate, she headed off uphill through the snow with even more fervour than before.*

*'See her go, just like a young filly!'*, bantered a greasy, red-headed Chetnik to his tall, rake-thin comrade who had stopped, taken off his fur cap and was wiping his sweaty forehead.

*'Well why don't you break her in?'*, he answered gasping for breath.

*'I'll break her in as soon as we reach Goražde, don't you worry! Both her and that other one. And the rest of them are not so bad. Maybe you get to have a go, if you have something to have a go with'*, sniggered the toothless redhead and continued walking through the snow.

*At some point around noon of the next day the 'duke' decided that his men and their prisoners should take a break on the wooded verge of a meadow, before heading down the goat trail on Romanija that led towards Goražde. He was well aware that it was better not to expose oneself to too great a risk by remaining on the plateau, but like this, with the dense woods at their backs, even if an enemy did approach unwittingly, they could still make their escape and reach the safety of the crags of Romanija which they knew so well. Just as they had sat down in a circle and lit up their cigarettes, with the nuns crouching like frozen birds beneath a fir tree, a fawn jumped out of the tickets right next to them. Startled by these unexpected guests, it froze and sniffed the air. The tall, rake-thin Chetnik immediately lifted his rifle and fired. The shot dislodged snow from the branch of a nearby tree, and the fawn fell dead on the ground. The air reverberated with the shot fired and the rake-thin man's cursing: 'Ustashi motherfucker!'*

*They entered Goražde at around ten in the morning on 15th December and immediately stationed themselves at the barracks where they were met by their commander, Chetnik major Jezdimir Dangić,*

personally, a man who had been given the task of organising the Chetnik movement in east Bosnia by no other than lieutenant general Mihailović himself. They locked the four haggard and weary prisoners in a room on the first floor. Despite their ordeal, they were happy to finally be somewhere warm and with a roof over their heads. The room was simple, bare, with dirty walls, wooden floorboards coated in black axle grease and four metal army-issue bunk beds. On each of them there was a coarse army blanket. In one corner there was a grey, wooden stand with a blue and white basin beneath which stood a metal water pitcher. There were two large windows on the east wall of the room and a door that lead out onto the balcony that overhung the courtyard of the barracks. The door to the balcony was locked, but so dilapidated that it could be broken open by anyone exerting even a small amount of pressure. The sisters immediately washed themselves with cold water, vigourously rubbing their frozen limbs, and lay down each on one of the beds in order to win back at least a little of their strength. It was amply clear to them that there would be no sleep, as even through the closed windows they could hear the drunken brawling of the Chetniks who, as the day went by, became ever noisier and more intoxicated.

In the commander's office situated at the end of the same corridor as the nun's room, behind a massive, roughly hewn table sat major Dangić, face to face with the bearded man referred to by his men as 'duke'. In the middle of the table, on a plain metal tray there was a bottle of rakija and a handful of glasses. In the corner of the room, glowing with red heat, stood a largish Turkish oven of cast iron that disseminated a pleasant warmth. Having reached for the bottle and poured rakija into two glasses, major Jezdimir turned to speak to the 'duke'.

'How did it go?'

'Well. We didn't run into any Ustashi. The convent on Pale we burnt down, and we brought them back as prisoners. One of them, the oldest, we left at Sjetlina at Jovan Šainović's place. He says we have more and more followers among the common people and that more will join us soon. On our way back we did not encounter any of the enemy.'

'Of course you didn't! Since the beginning of this month the Italians have forced the Ustashi to leave Foča and handed it over to us, and with the partisans we've had an agreement not to attack each other for over two months. Now we need to use this situation to our advantage and expel as many Muslims and Croats from these regions. And those that won't go... need to be dealt with in another fashion. Is this understood?! Cheers!', said the major lifting his glass and downing its contents in one.

'By God, it's good!', said the 'duke' contentedly and returned his glass to the table, while the major reached for the bottle again. 'But what are we to do with these we've brought here?', continued the 'duke' before downing another one.

*'We'll get rid of them in another fashion!'*, sneered the major before continuing in a serious tone: *'I leave for Foča tonight to organise things there. You do as you please with them. Just make sure they're not here when I return.'*

*'Understood!'* said the 'duke' ending the conversation, upon which he rose and, slicking down his moustache with the back of his right hand, he went out into the corridor. Passing by the room where the nuns were, he could not resist stopping and eavesdropping in the hope of hearing what was going on behind the grey, locked door. All he could hear was a mute, heavy silence.

In the barracks courtyard, however, he was met by the shouting of the exceedingly inebriated and ribald Chetniks who, secure in the barracks grounds, and behaving like a pack of wolves, had been freed of all fear, while the rakija warmed their blood and fed their raving imaginations which had been plagued in the previous couple of days by the four helpless virgins who had never been touched by a man's hand, and who were now under lock and key in a room on the first floor of the barracks. Which is why, upon seeing him, the redbearded, greasy Chetnik went up to the 'duke' and slurred with a tongue thickened by rakija:

*'Let us have them, duke, just for an hour or two! The Ustashi whores will start singing to another tune. Just for an hour, or two!'*

*'My orders are that we have to be rid of them by the morning. What will happen from now on until dawn – is none of my business!'*, said the 'duke' and nodded in the direction of the building, as he headed towards the barracks exit.

What followed is difficult to put into words. Like all true evil. Words do not seem to have been created for this purpose.

The drunk Chetniks, led by the greasy, redhead and his rake-thin companion, climbed to the first floor and barged into the room with the imprisoned nuns, eager to take the little they had left, which the bearded rabble had not yet taken from them. As if expecting this, the four sisters were waiting for their tormentors on the balcony. After these had broken down the door and piled into the room like rabid dogs, the sisters were ready, and holding each others hands, they jumped off the balcony and onto the stone-paved path running around the barracks headquarters building.

Rushing angrily down the stairwell, the bearded tormentors found the bloodied, broken, yet still animate bodies of the nuns. The drunk and greasy redbearded Chetnik channelled all his impotent rage into his right hand with which he reached for his dagger that glimmered in the gloaming that was settling over Gorazde.

*'Is it death you prefer, you Ustashi whores?! Well, Merry Christmas to you, sisters!'*, he growled and drew dagger across Bernadeta's white throat. The rake-thin Chetnik did the same to Antonija and the rest.

*The bodies they threw into the cold waters of the River Drina on the same evening, waters that had, according to witness statements given later, run red with the blood of eight thousand murdered Muslims and Croats."*

The heavy, sticky silence that permeated the room once I had fallen silent was finally broken by Delyth who asked quietly, almost fearfully, as if dreading a possible answer:

– And does anyone know what happened to the oldest nun, the one they left behind in... what was the name of that village?

Taking a sip of blackberry wine I continued:

– They do, they certainly do! Everything is common knowledge, but some would rather everything were simply forgotten. And so:

*"As the days went by sister Marija, instead of growing feebler and feebler, began to recover by the day. Her fever had already dropped by the second day, and the feeble body of the seventy-six-year-old woman began to recuperate. When he saw this, her host Jovan Šainović sent word to Goražde stating 'that the old woman had recovered completely and what was he to do with her?'. A number of days later a Chetnik arrived from Goražde with the answer. They loaded the old woman onto a sled and told her they were taking her to Goražde where the other sisters were waiting for her. When Jovan returned to the village on Christmas Eve, one of his neighbours asked him what had happened to the nun he had taken to Goražde. 'She joined the other sisters!', replied Jovan.*

*He had not lied.*

*However, the curious villager recognised sister Mary's rosary which now, like a silent accusation, hung around Jovan's godless neck."*

– You know, you certainly chose a tale to tell for Christmas! – raged my wife on our way home.

– Well, it wasn't my idea, was it? And everything I recounted really did happen – I replied defending myself and added – and besides, the event may be terrible, but it's also instructive. I don't see what the problem is!

– The problem is that Gareth is a member of the Welsh Guards and in a couple of months he's heading out to Croatia as part of the UNPROFOR mission.

– So much the better! – I said decisively. – Let him know where he’s going, whom he can trust there and whom he should avoid.

We spent the rest of the ride home in silence, each of us in our own thoughts on that Christmas in 1991.