Half a Murderess

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[15] It wasn’t until the cart with the festively-dressed band of party-goers had left for the centre of Bubani on Friday evening that Marina truly began to hatch a plan for getting hold of Nona without attracting Uncle Renato’s attention. She didn’t want the family to feel like the Zanut women had decided to leave because of them. That’s all they needed, getting burdened with a bad conscience.

If anything, the homestead had made Marina fed up with feeling she was a burden to them, but it was impossible to explain that feeling to them without the words giving rise to something like an accusation. Renato would say he wanted them to stay, and then Marina would end up out looking too much like a martyr by explaining to him that they had inconvenienced the family enough, that Anton’s pay was by no means sufficient to settle the eternal debt they’d accumulated. But then it would sound like Marina wanted more. In fact, she didn’t. Marina just wanted to get away, as far away as she could.

She and Nona, Marina thought, were thinking along the same lines, at least this time. When the little woman was praying to St. Anthony in her little room, Marina crept past so she wouldn’t disturb her, but at the same time she wished the old lady was praying for their departure. Marina was so bent on running away that she was even prepared to leave her Nona behind, but already then, in front of the post office in Rovinj, it was clear to her that even Nona intended to leave the family sooner or later.

And Marina was like a fish out of water at that moment, flipping and flopping between the painful harassment of Fabio’s attentions and the sense of duty she had, knowing that Anton’s money often made life easier for everyone on the farm. The family could hardly get by. The olive trees, their pride and joy, provided in addition to olives plenty of work, yet not enough income so that that Milica might treat herself to a new dress for the party.

Marina was struck by the image of Fabio and Milica, who had been scrambling up onto the cart few minutes ago. Milica whispered to Marina before leaving: “Can you see I have a couple of moth holes?”

Marina laughed, shook her head, and patted her cousin on the shoulder, “You’re pretty, no one will notice.”

But Fabio critically sized up his wife’s clothes as he got on the cart, and at that moment it seemed to Marina that those two had an impossibly cryptic relationship. He didn’t say anything to her, but his eyes oozed silent contempt. She was almost certain that Fabio still loved his wife, Renato’s daughter. And yet she was just as certain that he no longer wanted her. How could it be that such a long relationship had turned into such a knot of emotions, with Fabio looking for an exit, begging for one, by losing his head over another woman?

Marina shuddered at the thought that she herself was the other woman, and again she was visited by the anxious image of their clumsy and violent fooling around in the goat barn. *Putana*, Nona’s voice echoed, a thousand times.

Despite the cold look, Fabio offered Milica his hand to hold. Would the same thing happen to her and Anton if they insisted on staying together for too long?

They headed cheerfully into the night, dusk already creeping up the driveway. As the cart drove off, Zorka buried her face in her hand and sobbed because she, the youngest, couldn’t go with them. Nona, who didn’t even come to see them off, peered out the kitchen window and shook her head.

“You’re not missing out on anything, pumpkin. Look, Mommy didn’t go either! And do you see me feeling sad? No! I’ll have a fine time here at home. I want for nothing. Once you’re old enough, you’ll be able to go to parties too.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Marina glanced at Nona again, who was still shaking her head. Marina knew that Nona thought the child was spoiled to high heaven, and she knew that she blamed it on her.

When she and Zorka returned to where it was warm, she overheard what Nona was murmuring. Like she was talking to herself, though Marina knew the words were really meant for her.

“It’s a dispute with God, because the girl is so pressed to her mother’s skirt. It’s not natural.”

That was enough for Marina. “If it were up to you, all little children would be swept into the sea, and the ones who didn’t sink would get to live. As long as that’s what your God commanded!”

Nona wasn’t used to being spoken to like that, but she didn’t react. Until then, Marina had never realized that she herself had the possibility of controlling the levers, but she still felt that she was waking, waking from under Nona’s yoke. Nona was the last person who could tell her what was and wasn’t natural. Marina was already thinking that she didn’t want to drag her all around the world, to wherever it was she and Zorka decided to go. But tonight would be, so to speak, the only opportunity for them to talk about the decision to leave, so after she’d put Zorka to bed, she’d return to the kitchen and try to talk to Nona.

“Mommy, why were you mad at Nona?” Zorka asked in the bedroom. That’s alright, Marina thought, she’s old enough to follow and understand everything.

“I’m not really mad, pumpkin. You know how it is with families. We always make up afterwards.”

At the same time, she was already thinking about how unusually calmly Nona had accepted her remark, and she wondered if she might have been able to learn to control Nona years ago if she had just stood up for herself and kept on. And she wouldn’t really dare go around the world alone with this little one, so it was only right to have Nona come along with them, and the Zanut women could live together on their own.

Even if she convinced herself, she wouldn’t be able to leave without her. In addition to burdening her family, she would also miss her, because Nona was in fact Marina’s barometer, her conscience and measure of strength all at once. When Marina was fine and stable, she felt a duty to take care of Nona, but when she was shaken to the core, Nona was her only pillar, a role model who amazed her and kept her safe in the harbour.

Without Nona, she had already failed once. When she came back after Anton left, Marina, despite the absence of words and any expression of emotion, felt that she continued to live, mainly because of the will she saw in this old woman, a more stubborn will than any Marina had seen in her life.

She descended slowly into the kitchen, thinking about how to start the conversation. Upstairs she’d heard deaf Uncle Renato saying goodnight to Nona and going to bed. He was getting old.

“I was thinking.”

Silence.

“That’s something new,” said Nona.

Marina shrugged, tired of running into a wall. How do you deal with something like that? With someone like her.

A little out of some sudden revenge, and a little out of despair, she let it all out, without even thinking of what she was saying.

“We have to get out of here. On our own.”

“No kidding.”

“Should we go together?” Nothing. That wall. “Should we go together, or would you prefer to stay here, with the family?”

Nona cocked her head.

“Let’s go together.”

“Where are we going? And when? “

Nona looked up and a glimmer of victory appeared in her green eyes. “To Yugoslavia.”

It occurred to Marina that from Rovinj Nona had sent a telegram to somewhere in Yugoslavia. Was it possible that the woman was such a visionary that she could see it coming? That she already knew, before Marina herself knew, what she wanted? Nona had prepared the path? Always a step ahead of her. Nona’s green flashing eyes ran into Marina’s sympathetic, almost admiring brown eyes, and something like warmth passed between them.

“To Yugoslavia? Where in Yugoslavia? “

Nona clapped her fingers as if she had just magicked up a solution: “To Maribor, Slovenska Street.”

Marina stared. She truly didn't have the faintest idea whether Grandma was cruelly toying with her or whether what she was saying has already been settled.

“Where do you get…?”

“The child still underestimates the mother,” said Nona, shaking her head. “We have to wait for the answer by telegram, but we’re definitely going, yes.”

And she looked almost satisfied that she was able to surprise her daughter.

“But how will your family take this?”

“Not my family. Our family. They will take it the same way they took us in. From one day to the next,” said Nona, cutting off the conversation while at the same time waving her hand for Marina to stop harassing her with her questions.

My God, she’s still a capo di banda, thought Marina, who just couldn’t believe it, and at the same time Nona’s rediscovered determination was a huge relief for her. So they really were leaving with Nona’s blessing.

Marina didn’t know the first thing about Yugoslavia, a kingdom whose king she couldn’t even name. No one around here had ever lived there. However, she was now able to learn everything, and she felt like she was on a cart, with the reins in her hands. Were they really? Nona was driving, she had to admit that. But even if the cart was being steered by the old woman all the time, Marina was now feeling good and happy to follow her willingly. Given that Nona was Slovene and that they’d be running away from the fascists and to the Slavs that everyone had been considering them to be anyway, Marina’s future seemed light, pleasant, and comfortable. They would start living!

When she went to bed before Nona, she felt relieved, relaxed. Nona had given her something she hadn’t had in ages. A clear sense of control. Assured that the horse harnessed to the cart hadn’t bolted and she still held the reins.

Zorka said, “Give me a word to make a rhyme, Mommy.”

“Homeland,” Marina said, absently.

She didn’t think that Zorka would know the term. “No, Mommy, I said a word. Like ‘flower’”

“Find me a rhyme for ‘flower’.”

“That’s easy! The *flower* is a *clover*.”

Marina burst out laughing, “You’re a little clover! That’s not a rhyme. Do you even know what a rhyme is?”

“I do. It’s the first thing that comes to your mind.” Zorka had a strange power to make her forget before going to bed, when she covered her, smothered her, lovered her baby skin, her baby, clover-soft skin.

At night, Marina dreamt that someone was banging a drum hard and loud. At first she couldn’t see where she was in the dream. She closed her eyes tightly in fear, but the drumming didn’t fade yet … You could hear the wooden footbridge breaking up and threatening to send everyone on it crashing down into the stream. What was this, on the footbridge? It reminded her of a military parade… the banging could be a regimental drum… What bangs so hard that Marina had to open her eyes in her sleep? When she opened them, she saw the crowd around chanting and trampling everything below her: the footbridge disappeared, everyone was in the middle of Trieste’s Piazza Grande, and some raised their hands in close-fisted salute, others clenched their fists so that it is not clear which of the raised arms belonged to the fascists and which to their opponents. But all the time there was banging, as if the footbridge was still breaking up, only the footbridge was nowhere to be seen…

In her half-sleep, a howl crept up on her. Someone roared through the crowd, almost an animal sound. In the last remnants of her dreamlike images, Marina looked around the square to see what this strange noise was, who was suffering so much, who was being burned or trampled alive, what was happening…

Then the dream faded into a gloomy morning. The door slammed below, but the roaring still didn’t stop. When Marina looked around Nona’s bed, it was empty. She was already up.

Who was roaring? Marina’s head was pounding. With a delay of a few seconds, she recognized Uncle Renato’s hoarse voice, still roaring away in indistinct syllables, occasionally coalescing into a grotesque: “NOOO!”

As soon as she realized who was screaming, Marina sprang up. Nona was already outside in her nightgown, and Zorka was sitting on the bed, frightened and rubbing her eyes. Marina gave her a quick peck on the forehead, and then she was already in front of the house, next to her grandmother, calming Uncle Renato, who was crying and angry, howling, howling, howling, porko dio, madona, putana, roaring, why, why me, and how Is this possible …

Neither Nona nor Marina managed to extract from him the cause of his wretchedness.

“What, what is it? Tell me, tell me, if I ask you!” Nona tried tries to calm him down, to catch him by those hands used to shovelling, but she was too weak, too small, she couldn’t match his stocky body.

Then Renato swung his hand towards the upper terrace of the grove, and all that comes out of his mouth is, “Dio mio, my olive trees!”

[16] When they crested the hill, they immediately saw that the century-old olive grove was gone. All over the wide terrace, which the day before had been covered with lush and ancient wizened trees, there were forked branches and idle stumps. Renato’s howling was so grotesque it spread into the recesses of Marina’s head, like a background to the killing fields before her. Almost every tree had been cut down, mowed down. Murdered.

There wasn’t even time for Nona or Marina to say anything, no time to say: Who would do that? All they could do was stare blankly at the utter desolation.

Regardless of why someone had cut Uncle Renato off at the knees, regardless of who could be so malicious, regardless of whether the evildoers were upset with the family’s political activities or the presence of three Trieste women at the homestead, Nona and Marina were of one mind. It was so obviously time to leave that they felt like the right time had already passed.

Killing fields. That’s only word that came to mind as they surveyed the greyish wooden hands reaching into the dawning day. Marina chased away the thought of last night’s dream and of the fact that it might really have been axes she was hearing when she could have done something. If she’d gone to check what was going on outside, if she’d woken Nona and Renato, maybe they could have seen who on this dry earth could have taken it upon themselves to take the life away from breathing trees. On the other hand, if she’d done that, she might not be here anymore.

It had to be someone who knew there would be no young people at the homestead that night. There must have been several of them, many, many strong men, to cause so much damage in a single night. This was a physically demanding crime. The result was so symbolic, so loathsome to the heavens, that Marina saw the last month of her stay in the city, the brick that had been thrown through the Zanuts window, the blood that dripped from her hand after she picked it up…

As she looked around the olive terrace, at the crushed pride of Uncle Renato, who was still hoarsely cursing and wailing, she thought that a fellow human being was really the worst thing that could harm you in this world. A fellow human being will do his best to bring you down.

Uncle Renato was helplessly tugging at the branches, clutching now this now that branch, howling broken by longer and longer silences and helplessness, when he mumbled only: “Do you two even know how long it takes for one olive tree to grow… I knew each of them, I could recognize each one…”

Surely the others would be coming back soon, thought Marina, as they stood helplessly on the terrace. She and Nona watched in amazement as Uncle Renato knelt down and caressed a stump, the fourth in the front row of grove. It was only then that Marina realized she’d forgotten about Zorka. She looked back toward the house. Really. She could see Zorka’s head in the distance. The little girl, barefoot in a nightgown, was peering from the threshold and moaning helplessly. Marina ran up the hill.

Zorka’s “Mommy, what happened?” fell into the void at first, and it was as if someone had turned on a curtain of sound, and Marina once again became aware of the curses that were flying from Renato’s lips into the skies.

“Does Uncle Renato have a sore tummy?” It would have been funny if it weren’t such a shot in the dark.

Bits of “Porko dio, sonnofabutch, how are supposed to survive now?” made their way up to the house and it was no wonder that Zorka hopped quick as a tick into her mother’s lap like a tick, as soon as Marina came up the slope. “Shoo! Shooooo!”

“Why is he so angry?” She wasn’t about to give up. “Maybe he’s shooing away a turkey bird.”

“Calm down, honey, it’s nothing, nothing that concerns you… Some bad people cut down his … they cut down our olive trees.”

It was too late for Marina to make something up, and besides it would be pointless trying to hide the truth from this little one.

Zorka frowned as if she were going to cry. “Will bad people come to get us?”

“No, honey, no. Someone was just very naughty. Shameless. Awful. They won’t come for us, don’t worry, we’re safe here.” As she embraced her, Marina noticed the tears in her eyes.

“But why did they cut down the olive trees?” Somehow Marina realized she couldn’t say that some strangers needed firewood for the winter. This was a lesson for her, too.

“I don’t know, pumpkin, they’re just evil… Some people just aren’t nice.” Marina pressed her eyes shut so Zorka wouldn’t see her tears.

What to say at the nasty invasion of strangers on the homestead? The hacked olive trees were a warning, a threat. After all, she couldn’t give her any guarantees they wouldn’t really come for them next time, no, she couldn’t. Again Renato’s howling echoed across the terrace, in the foreground, and Marina wished that the cart with the family would come so someone else could take the weight of this event, which, though a heinous crime, was above all tragic for everyone who lived here and had taken them in so warmly.

It was still a while before the revellers got back from Bubani. All four, Renato and the Zanut women, were on the driveway waiting for them, shattered and downtrodden. At first, the partygoers didn’t even notice that something was wrong. Only Fabio, as he got off the cart, stared at Marina and blurted, “You all look like you’ve just smelled death.”

It was true. They had smelled the death of an illusion, of something naive. Renato, who had exhausted his stock of screams and curses, grabbed Frenk by the shoulder and helplessly led him upstairs. They were soon followed by the others, who, like Nona and Marina, were staring in shock at the killing fields.

While the family members joined Renato, the Zanut women went into the kitchen and sat down at the dining table. They heard shouts, “Do you know what I’d do them if I caught them!” They heard Renato complaining anew, they heard guesses about who could have done it, though nobody knew for sure, and though they all heard everything nothing touched them closely and more acutely than the thought of their leaving.

Marina took up a topic that was hanging in the air: “This is your chance, in Yugoslavia…”

“… In Maribor, on Slovenska Street…” added Nona, as if this was a settled truth.

Marina suppressed her irritation at Nona’s told having told her anything more. “Where would you live there? In an apartment? On our own? Anton doesn’t have that kind of money…”

“The Grudens will take us in. Until we can stand on our own two feet. Dr. Gruden is a surgeon and he’ll find you a job. That’s all you need to know. If Anton’s money runs out and you don’t earn enough, I’ll start working too. Gruden’s children aren’t so good at Slovene in school. I’m not ready for the scrapheap yet.”

Marina gawped. This was the longest response she had received from Nona since they moved in with the family. Ever since Nona prayed again and again in her room while she and Zorka slept, she often wrapped herself in silence before Marina.

She’d arranged everything, but how and when had she managed to do that? Now it dawned on Marina what Nona had been doing that day in Rovinj at the post office. It seemed to her that she was overwhelmed by something like gratitude, something she wished would last. Nona answered her next question before she’d even asked it.

“It’s entirely possible that the olive trees had to fall because Uncle Renato took the three of us in under his roof. If you get involved in political business, you have to be prepared for the revenge of the fanatics. I’ll tell him we’re leaving. You just keep quiet.”

Nona was clearly not unaware that Renato had made a pact with the communists, and interestingly, she never tried to influence him, but stoically adhered to her faith. Was it really possible that local bigots were out to get Renato sheltering women from Trieste? Wasn’t it more likely that he would have been so insidiously attacked by the Italians, by settler fascists? Did they, the refugees, really present so much misery for their benefactors? Marina’s thoughts were racing, but she decided in an instant that she would not wonder about matters to which she could in no way find unambiguous answers.

“Hold off at least until we’ve cleared the devastation on the terrace,” she said to Nona. “Uncle Renato might be offended at us for leaving him.”

Nona snorted and looked at her contemptuously, “Child.”

“Why *child*? I don’t understand.”

“You need everything drawn for you. Just because they took us under their roof and didn’t cast us out all these years, that doesn’t mean we can call this place home. A refugee will never be a master of the manor, remember.”

Marina could tell from Nona’s answer that she knew more about Renato’s feelings than she had let on. She was so worried about how to turn down further family hospitality that she didn’t really even think that their departure would be a relief. Concerned whether Nona really knew her relative better than she did, Marina had to accept the possibility that, as refugees, they would be an eternal nuisance to anyone who dared to help them. However, they will have to learn to bear this burden.

Things were turning as fast as they did in the earthquake, and she was moved when, a few days later, the family dragged all the forked branches from the olive grove and sawed them into firewood behind the house. She knew that Nona had already told Renato the news, she could tell from Fabio’s torn face, which followed her everywhere. He knew they were leaving, and he couldn’t help himself. Maybe he’s the only one who would really miss them, Marina thought, and avidly embraced Zorka before putting her to bed.

“You’re going to go to school,” she whispered.

“Why will I have to go to school? I want to stay here, with my cousins,” her daughter said quietly.

“You’ll see, you’ll like it.”

Zorka turned excitedly and looked into her eyes: “Mommy, do they also have turkey birds in Maribor? What about goats? “

Marina wrapped the blanket tighter around them and kissed her on the forehead. “They have all sorts of other things,” she said, and even thought to herself how strange it was to go into the unknown again when they had barely gotten used to it here.

And she knew that she would be looking for herself for months and years again, that she’d feel unwelcome, uprooted, and that she would like, if anything, to protect Zorka from those feelings.

“They have books, right there at home, in the apartment. Think. You can read whatever you want!” She hoped she wasn’t lying. But in a medical family, surely they’d have books?

Zorka thought for a long time and just before falling asleep she murmured: “Maybe they also have a book about a turkey bird.”