

An Unexpected Act of Mercy (4970 words)

By Michael Pearcy

Radimir Leskovar woke with a start. He was cold, the night air had reached deep into his bones. He had been dreaming of his wife Kalina and his daughter Sana. In the dream they were waving from a train that was taking them somewhere sunny and warm away from the dark clouds rising above the horizon behind him. They smiled and he smiled and waved. He ran beside their carriage until the train passed the end of the platform and he had to stop. He could do no more for them.

“Be safe,” he heard Kalina call out.

“We love you Daddy,” called Sana.

As he watched he heard the clank and rattle of points changing and the train was taken in a loop back towards the station. The train was building speed until it rushed past him on the platform. In the carriage window he saw his wife and child screaming for his help, begging to be saved from the darkness that awaited them.

Although he was awake he could still hear the metal on metal sound of the points.

The points.

He was stiff with cold as he crawled to the lookout post at the edge of the trees and looked down the slope to the road that led to his small town. There were trucks, three of them, dark in the moonlight. The tailgates were being kicked open and armed men were spilling onto the road, spreading out and moving towards the town. On the road, crawling forward like the devil’s chariot was an armoured car.

Too late. Too late to raise the alarm.

This was their greatest fear. The so-called army of liberation had come into the town and forced the remaining few inhabitants – all men - into the little square behind the town hall, the same square used by the Nazis fifty years before to execute partisans. The bullet marks were still on the wall, the bloodstains had gone. Soon they would be replaced.

There were whispers amongst the men. Where is Radimir? He should have warned us. Perhaps he is murdered. He wouldn’t let us down.

The leader of the soldiers, a colonel – they always declared themselves to be colonels – ranted in his thick northern accent demanding to know where the women and children were – particularly the women. The village men told him they had left when news came that they were to be liberated by the armies of the north. These few men, maybe a dozen, had stayed in the hope of protecting their property. The women had gone, many to the district capitol of Trebinska, knowing what liberation would mean when it came.

“Where are the women and children?”

He drew his pistol. “Where are your women?” he screamed.

No one spoke.

Pistol shots echoed off the ancient stones as the colonel fired at random into the group of men. Fresh blood flowed over the cobbles destined to become the bloodstains that would mark the latest liberation of the people.

Radimir stayed in the shadows as he entered the village. The soldiers smashed doors and windows and looted, stealing food and wine. They became a drunken mob.

Radimir entered a house near the square after the soldiers had ransacked it. Inside everything was broken. He found a first floor window that overlooked the scene.

Slowly, the soldiers returned, drunken and vicious. They taunted the village men and several were struck to the ground by rifle butts.

The colonel fired his pistol in the air. “Where are your women?”

“Safe from you,” a voice called back.

“This is a waste of time. Kill them all,” shouted the colonel.

As the weapons were raised a single villager called out: “Radimir, tell the world what happened here.” The echo of that voice from the old stone walls was drowned by the volley of shots that left a bloody pile of bodies on the ground.

It was a long time before Radimir found the courage to enter the square. The trucks had come and left with the soldiers singing in their drunken victory.

He turned some of the bodies over. He knew them all. Their names may some day fade from his memory but he knew those cold distorted features in the moonlight would stay with him forever.

He fell to his knees and cried, the blood soaking through his trousers.

Then he noticed a movement at the entrance to the square. Had somebody survived? He wiped the tears from his eyes with bloodied hands and looked again. There were two figures. Then he heard one of them laugh. A cold barking laugh.

The soldiers were back.

Slowly – he feared a fast movement would draw attention – he lowered himself into the gore that surrounded him. The blood was cold and congealed. He heaved the dead weight of a corpse over his own body and lay as still as he could.

The soldiers moved towards him. More were entering the square, maybe twenty in all. But they had no weapons. They moved slowly amongst the dead, that horrible laugh mixed with a throaty excited sound. Occasionally they would pause over a corpse, pull at it then move on.

Then one of the figures raised the arm of a victim and bit into it. Blood splattered. He did it again, tearing flesh from bone. Radimir could see others doing the same. The soldiers were eating the flesh of the dead.

Then a sound from behind him told Radimir he was surrounded. He dare not turn his head but he could hear teeth ripping into flesh and grinding on bone.

He pushed aside the corpse above him and thrust himself upright but his foot slipped in the gore and he plunged back down again. Just two metres away a figure was bent over a body intent on pulling organs from a gaping wound. It raised its head. The skin was yellow, the eyes black glassy pits. It wore no clothes and its chest was covered with blood that dripped from its mouth and congealed in the thick hair that covered its body. Its head lolled on one side as a piece of human gristle slipped from its gaping mouth. That mouth opened wide revealing huge pointed teeth and the creature gave a bellowing roar. Radimir crawled on all fours out of the creature's reach, struggled to his feet and ran.

He ran blindly expecting the clawed fingers to rake his back at any moment and crashed headlong into another of the monsters. They fell tangled together, their faces touching and Radimir felt the greasy slime of the leathery yellow skin. The smell of the creature was like a corpse itself. He punched and scratched and broke free. Radimir ran screaming from the square.

But nothing came. He ran. He ran until the houses were behind him. He ran through thorns and briars. He ran until the forest gave a sense of safety. He ran until he collapsed.

He looked back towards the houses. He was alone. Except he knew he could never truly be alone again.

The night passed slowly. Radimir strained his senses trying to identify threats in the darkness. Dawn began to creep into the forest and Radimir knew he could not keep sleep at bay any longer. He crawled between two fallen trees and let sleep happen. He dreamt of the yellow creatures, of trains, of Sana and Kalina, of being eaten alive.

It was the cold that woke him and the sound of clumsy footsteps. They might not find him in his hiding place but if they did he was trapped. Better to run. He stood up from his hiding place expecting to see a horde of yellow bodies but there were none. Just a single figure, a woman, maybe fifty years old wrapped well against the cold in shapeless peasants' wool, her grey hair pulled severely back – functional. She clasped her hand to her mouth. He simply stared, not prepared to see a proper human form.

“Stay away from me,” she cried, “keep away.”

“I'm not one of those, I'm from the town over there.”

She pulled a pistol from her coat. “Stay where you are.”

“I won't harm you.”

She stared hard at him taking in the filthy state of his clothes, the blood stains, the gore. “Is that your blood,” she asked. “Are you hurt?”

He stared at her for a moment and then glanced down at his clothes. He touched his hair and found it matted with blood. “This is not my blood. I hid. I hid among the bodies of my friends and neighbours. They were all killed last night in the town square.”

“Did they call themselves the Army of Liberation?”

“Yes,” replied Radimir. Then slowly, “It was all my fault.”

She allowed the hand holding the pistol to drop to her side. "I heard the shooting. I've seen what they can do. My own village was attacked two days ago. I escaped but my family, my parents – I don't know what happened to them."

"There is something else, something worse than the Army. They came afterwards. They..."

"Don't," she took a few paces forward. "Don't blame yourself. There was nothing you could do to stop it."

Radimir collapsed on one of the tree trunks and wept. The kind words were too much to bear after a night of horror.

Her name was Mirna Hodak. She kept her distance until Radimir had recovered. He led her to a farm cottage at the edge of the forest three kilometres from the town. It was deserted and Radimir broke in so that he could clean himself and they could both rest in some security. He scrubbed himself in cold water and stole fresh clothes from a wardrobe. They were old well-worn working clothes, a little big for him but warm and comfortable.

Mirna found some tinned meat and they ate this washed down with water. He did not know where her pistol was but he guessed it was handy.

She ate and watched him. "In the forest you said there was something worse than the army. What did you mean?"

"I can't describe it."

"Tell me."

"I don't know how. It was real but..."

"Just say the words Radimir." She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. "Just say the words."

"I went to see if any of our people were still alive after..."

"The massacre."

"They were all dead. Then I thought the soldiers had come back and I hid." He paused, afraid of reliving the detail.

"Where did you hide?"

"I... I lay down with the bodies."

"I see." Her hand was still on his.

"Then I saw what they were doing. They were tearing at the bodies and – they were eating them. They were eating the dead."

"Were these the same soldiers that did the shooting?"

"It wasn't the soldiers. They were monsters. Not human. Animals tearing at the flesh. Screaming. And they made a weird sound like laughing, but not like any real laughter."

They were silent for a moment. Mirna, not sure what to say next, slowly pulled her hand away.

"I don't blame you if you think I'm mad," he said. "I don't believe what I'm saying. So why should you?"

Mirna looked away from him to the forest beyond the window. "When I was a child my grandmother kept back meat from the cook pot. On nights when she

said she could hear the devils screaming she put the meat outside – raw rotting meat. She called it the forest's share: to feed the hungry devils.

"Folk memory, or just a superstition. But she believed it completely. Most of her generation did. We lived a long way from here, deep in the forest. In a place like that it's easy to believe."

"I could believe it better if the creatures I saw were like wolves, or wild dogs but they were human forms – almost human"

Mirna brought her gaze back to Radimir. "They may be the same shape as us but that does not make them human: no more human than a mad dog."

In the afternoon they made a plan to escape. "On the other side of the town," said Radimir. "A friend of mine has a smallholding. He kept an old farm truck in the barn. If we can get there, and there is some fuel, we can escape."

At dusk they set off towards the town. Radimir had armed himself with a short handled axe. Their fear gave the forest all the primitive foreboding Mirna would have known in her childhood. They stopped in unison when they heard the first screeching cry. Nothing was said as they resumed their march but Mirna pulled the pistol from her coat pocket and checked that the safety catch was off.

They saw two figures in the distance who looked like they were simply resting together at the side of the road. Radimir feared they would prove to be two more half-eaten corpses but as they approached one of the shapes stood up. It was an old woman.

"Help me," she pleaded.

Radimir jogged forward and she collapsed in his arms when he reached her.

"They're watching," she murmured. "Be careful. All day they watch. Now they are closing in."

The other figure was an old man, presumably the woman's husband. He was unable to move – paralysed - and as he stared at Radimir he tried to form words but his jaw seemed set and only a trickle of blood and saliva oozed out.

"What happened?" asked Radimir.

The old woman sank to the ground. "We were travelling at night to avoid the soldiers and these things ran at us out of the darkness. We couldn't fight them off. They were all over Boian – biting him and screaming. I had nothing for a weapon – I could do nothing. Then they left. But they watched. All last night they watched and all through the day. Just watching. After a few hours Boian became ill. It spread from the creatures' bites. Yellow stains on his skin, and puss, spreading and joining. He could not move by morning. Can you smell him? He smells like he's rotting from the inside."

Mirna had been standing guard with the pistol. "They are here Radimir," she said.

"Can we carry him with us?"

“No, the pain is too much.” The woman broke down. “They are coming for us. Closing in all the time.” Suddenly she was in control again and she looked up at Mirna. “Give me your gun, just for a moment.”

Radimir and Mirna exchanged a glance as she handed the pistol to the woman.

“Is it ready? I just pull the trigger?”

“Yes,” said Mirna.

The woman levelled the pistol at her husband’s head. There was a small movement from the man: slowly, painfully he closed his eyes and made two slight jerky downward motions with his head. Yes.

“I love you Boian” she said and pulled the trigger.

She looked up at the two younger people. “God go with you”, she said as she slipped the barrel into her mouth and pulled the trigger a second time. The woman’s body slumped on top of her husband. Mirna took the pistol from her hand and looked deep into the forest. There were lots of small movements in the bushes as the creatures closed in on their prey.

Radimir was watching them as well. “Last night,” he said, “they didn’t chase me once I made a run for it. More interested in dead meat. Get to the centre of the road and let’s see what happens if we keep walking - but be ready to run.”

The creatures watched warily from the undergrowth, snarling occasionally, but as Radimir expected they let them pass.

“How many bullets do you have for that pistol?” he asked.

“Four more,” she replied.

“Do you know what happens if you shoot one of these creatures?”

“No. I remember my grandmother saying the devils of the forest must have their heads cut off and their hearts removed and burnt. But I’m sure a bullet in the head will do the trick.”

“I think that old lady on the road showed us the way, save two bullets for us will you?”

The night was moonless and they began the journey across the town. Radimir chose a route that avoided the town square. He led the way keeping close to the walls and using alleyways where he could. They could hear the creatures screeching and making their inhuman laugh. Radimir guessed there was a large group in the town’s square finishing off the corpses.

They reached the far side of town where they would have to cross an open space to reach his friend’s cottage and the barn.

“I’ll make a run for it,” said Radimir. “If all goes well you can follow. If not...”

“If not,” she said, “I’ll make sure you get the bullet I’m keeping for you.”

Radimir braced himself and launched into his run. He reached the cottage and tried the door. It was locked.

“I’ll try the back door,” he called to Mirna. “You okay?”

“Fine,” she called back, “just hurry up please.”

The back door was unlocked and Radimir went through the house to the front, pulled the bolts on the front door and stood in the opening. He waited,

listening for any sounds in the darkness. It was quiet. He looked across to Mirna to call her, In the darkness behind her he could see figures in the road. She had not seen them. Too late for silence.

“Mirna,” he shouted, “come here, quickly.”

The creatures saw her and started to run towards her. She heard them and turned to face them.

“Mirna, run,” shouted Radimir.

She started her run as the creatures were spreading out to surround her. She fired a shot at the nearest creature. It yelped as the bullet knocked it sideways and down.

Radimir ran forward with his axe raised. He was screaming at the creatures. Mirna fired a second shot at close range and another creature was thrown back against a wall. There were three left, closing fast on Mirna.

He reached Mirna at the same time as the creatures and swung his axe at the neck of the nearest one. The axe cut through the flesh and his arm was jarred as the axe came to a stop against the spine. The creature’s blood sprayed out. It crumpled to the ground freeing the axe so that Radimir was able to make a wild swing at another creature. The blade caught this one full in the chest but the axe became locked in the creature’s ribs and when it fell it took the axe out of his hand.

Mirna fired at the last creature but despite the bullet passing through its chest its momentum carried it straight into her and they both crashed to the ground. Its blood was flowing over Mirna and it was pressing down trying to bite. Unable to bring the pistol to bear for a second shot at the creature she dropped it and clamped both hands round its neck in a desperate struggle to keep the poisonous teeth at bay.

Radimir recovered his balance and instinctively threw a wild kick at the creature’s head. The two were locked together so the kick had the effect of knocking them both sideways. Radimir scooped up the pistol with its remaining single bullet, put the gun to the creature’s head and fired. The bullet in the brain propelled the creature sideways.

Radimir helped her up and they ran to the cover of the cottage. They crouched in the doorway catching their breath.

Radimir handed the pistol back to Mirna. “There are no bullets left for us now,” he panted. “Were you bitten?”

“I don’t think so,” she replied. She tossed the gun away. “What use is a gun with no bullets.”

“I left my axe. Won’t be long.” He raced back across the street and grabbed the axe handle with both hands. The creature was not dead but achieved that state as he pulled the axe from its chest and a flood of blood cascaded onto the road.

“Radimir, there are more coming,” Mirna called.

He sprinted back to the cottage where he and Mirna slammed and locked the door behind them. They waited for the onslaught. Nothing came.

“I’ll go upstairs,” said Radimir. “Maybe I can see what they are doing.”

Mirna's fear grew as she watched Radimir climb the stairs. Had he locked the back door? She peered into the shadows of the house and listened. Nothing. She crossed the room slowly, realising she did not have a weapon now the pistol was finished.

There was a short dark corridor that led to a back kitchen; its blackness emphasised by the first dim efforts of dawn through the kitchen window. No movement. She stepped into the corridor and listened. No sound. Slowly she walked through the corridor. Two paces, four, six and she was in the kitchen. She listened again. Nothing. In a rush she ran to the back door. The bolts were not in place and she slammed them home not caring about the noise and turned to face the room with her back to the door.

Radimir called from the top of the stairs. She snatched a large carving knife from a hook on the wall and ran down the corridor and up the stairs. She joined him at a window overlooking the space outside.

The second group of creatures were busy with their comrades, bent over them tearing at their limbs and eating their flesh. One was on its hands and knees drinking the spilt blood.

"They must smell the blood, they were not interested in us, only feeding," said Radimir.

"Killing and eating," said Mirna. "Killing and eating. But so very dangerous – just one bite..."

As they watched, some of the creatures began drifting away from the corpses. They had already gorged on the bodies of the massacred villagers but eating was as instinctive as breathing and running to the smell of fresh blood was an irresistible urge.

"They are following the smell of blood left by the Army of Liberation," said Mirna. "That is the only thing that would bring them out of the forests. We have to tell someone what is going on here, the massacre and the creatures."

"The creatures! Nobody will believe us," said Radimir. "And who do we tell? Our government has run away and the army from the north will kill us before they listen to stories about flesh eating monsters."

"Not if we take one with us," she said, "they will have to listen to us."

"And then they would shoot us."

"Look," said Mirna, "Now there is only one left outside. Between us we could catch it and then they would have to believe us."

"Where? Where would we take the creature Mirna?"

"Trebinska. The northerners cannot have captured Trebinska – it's the regional capital. Our own soldiers must be there."

Radimir feared the idea but in his heart he heard a lone voice calling to him from the town's square – "Radimir, tell the world what happened here."

Radimir went to the adjoining barn to check the truck was there and that it had fuel in the tank. He collected rope and a sack. Mirna stayed at the window watching the remaining creature as it pulled flesh from bone and ate.

Radimir called her to the front door of the cottage.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said. “It’s two to one in our favour.”

“One of us needs to distract the creature and the other must get behind it and whack it with the axe.”

“Are you giving me a choice?”

“Theoretically, yes.”

“But I know my place, I’ll provide the distraction. You will be much better at whacking than me.”

Mirna had the kitchen knife and the rope. Radimir took the axe and the sack.

“When you are ready,” said Radimir.

She opened the door and waited in the opening for a moment checking the creature was still alone. “Good luck,” she said and walked out of the cottage.

“Here baby,” she called. “I’ve got a little surprise for you.”

The creature lifted its head blood dripping from its jaws.

“Be a good boy, come quietly.”

It took a pace towards her.

“We plan to give you a nice ride in a truck. You’ll like that won’t you?”

The creature began to move towards Mirna increasing speed as it approached. Mirna backed off. Radimir ran from the doorway with the axe raised. As he closed the creature became aware and turned towards him. He prepared to swing the axe. Instinctively the creature changed its point of attack to Radimir’s throat. It moved surprisingly quickly, narrowing the gap between them so that his swing with the axe started too late.

The creature crashed into Radimir and the two sprawled to the ground, the axe flying from his hand. The creature was snarling and attempting to drive home a vicious bite and the poison it contained. Radimir had both hands on the creature’s neck warding off the brown and yellow teeth. He could smell the stink of death on its breath.

Mirna ran towards the fight. She looped the rope around the creature’s neck and pulled back with all her strength. After a moment the creature was forced to release Radimir as it was pulled onto its back. Mirna knew her knife would do too much damage and snatched the axe from the ground. She struck the creature’s temple with the flat side of the axe head. It sprawled on the ground.

Radimir rolled sideways onto his knees and jammed the sack over the creature’s head. He took up the rope and wrapped it round to secure the sack. Together they held the creature down and tied its hands and legs so all it could do was thrash about on the ground. Then it seemed to calm and accept its new condition. Radimir and Mirna lifted it into the back of the truck and tied it down. They rested for a moment as the early morning sun began to sneak under the clouds.

Radimir was rubbing the back of his hand. "I think the creature bit me when I put the sack on its head."

She examined the wound. "It is only small, perhaps it will come to nothing."

He went into the kitchen and pumped water over the wound. He bound a cloth round it. Mirna looked on. There was nothing to be said.

The journey to Trebinska would take two hours assuming the roads were clear. Radimir climbed into the cab and Mirna took the seat beside him.

"My wife and child went to Trebinska, Kalina has relatives there," he said. "I don't want her to see me like we saw that old man on the roadside. If I get bad will you..."

"Of course I will. But you must stop thinking like that. You'll get to Trebinska and see your wife and your child – boy or girl?"

"Girl, Sana."

"You'll see them both."

They climbed into the cab and headed for Trebinska. As he drove further into the countryside their fear of the creatures was replaced by fear of the Army of Liberation. They expected road blocks. After an hour he stopped the truck.

"I need to piss."

He swung his legs out and sat looking down at the ground.

"What's the matter Radimir?"

"I can't see properly – everything is shifting. Like being drunk."

Mirna slipped out of the passenger door but before she could reach him he made a lunge for the ground, landed badly and sprawled on the grass.

He looked up at her as she tried to lift him. "My arm, it's getting stiff. Take a look at the bite for me?"

She removed the bandage and winced. The skin around the wound was turning yellow and there was puss oozing from splits that radiated from the site of the bite.

"We will get you to a hospital. They will have antibiotics or something. It will be okay. I'll drive."

He peed on the ground where he lay and she got him into the passenger seat. She drove as fast as she dared, watching him as much as possible for any signs of deterioration.

She didn't see the road block until it was too late. The guards opened fire at the speeding truck. The windscreen shattered and she was aware of Radimir's chest erupting in blood.

The truck rolled onto its side in a ditch exposing the fuel tank as more bullets ripped into the metal. Mirna heard the tank explode. She had been thrown on top of Radimir who was deathly still. She climbed out through the shattered windscreen and ran from the flames.

The creature had been thrown from the back of the truck but burning fuel had splashed across its legs. It screamed with the pain. She ran towards it but the soldiers held her back.

“The creature,” she shouted. “We must save it” Her words were meaningless to the guards, the ravings of a woman in shock.

The creature became engulfed in flame and in its agony it was indistinguishable from any human form. One of the guards raised his rifle and shot it in the head: for those times, an unexpected act of mercy.

Mirna fell to her knees on the grass. She wept for Radimir, for her family, for herself. And then she began to laugh: human laughter, a laughter rooted in despair - unlike the hollow screeching laughter she could hear filling the forests around her.

END