

When The
Hills Flow
With Wine

KENT ANNAN



MARVIN W. SCHWARTZ

Vera piled the thin, silvery black fish on my plate. Their beady little fish eyes kept staring at me. As a distraction, and for revenge, and because I was hungry, I focused on the technique of eating them: first pinch the head between my finger and thumb; then take two precise bites — one on each side — and a few nibbles to steal all the meat from each. But removing the meat just made their unblinking gaze more grotesque. On a small side plate to my left grew a mound of floating heads connected by frail, centipede-like spines to thin tails.

In Albanian, Vera means “spring.” She was the spunky, dark-haired matriarch of the family I’d been living with for four months in Shkodër, Albania, while I worked with a local Protestant church to distribute food, mattresses, and clothes to Kosovar refugees. Two weeks after I’d moved in, the Serbs had pulled out of Kosovo, putting an end to the conflict and the nighttime rumble of NATO bombers flying overhead.

The refugees had stayed in town for a few months, but eventually returned to their scorched homes. The morning after this dinner, I was leaving Albania to go to Kosovo myself. But tonight I would listen to a carefully calculated petition. I knew the agenda, because Vera had spoken of her plans to my Albanian friends, who in turn had told me. I dreaded what was coming, but Vera and her family had given me much, though they had little. The least I could do was listen.

Vera had olive skin, an athletic body, and a handsome jaw. There was an intensity to everything she did — whether

scrubbing the floor, poking fun at my strange American ways, or making dinner for her family. She was about thirty, though, like everyone else in that country, she looked older than her years. In the evenings, when I came home exhausted after a full day of handing out supplies, she would say, “You my brother; I your sister.” She pressed me for English tips and laughed at my few Albanian phrases.

I was accompanied at dinner by an Albanian friend, who translated. Vera’s seven-year-old son, a fragile leaf who liked math and had sunken raccoon eyes, and her four-year-old girl, a cute little terror, were banished to the bedroom. It was the only time I’d seen them behave without their first being stung by a switch broken off a tree outside. Vera’s husband, with whom I’d drunk beer and watched the European Cup (he cheered for Germany), was at work on the night shift as a security guard.

Since I’d arrived for dinner, Vera had been avoiding my eyes and watching the floor. The table was loaded with fresh bread, a steak of sweetly cooked fish, a plate of the silvery black fish, tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, beer, and *raki*, the local grape brandy, as volatile as the region’s history. The room was decorated with stuffed animals and knickknacks. The faint pink paint on the walls was peeling.

Soon after we’d sat down to eat, Vera looked at the table and told me she had a large lump behind her left ear. It was cancerous, she feared. She asked me to touch it, though I can’t remember if I did. The doctors had told her that there was nothing they could do, that her only hope was the West, that only America could save her now.

I was America. I was wealth; she was poverty. With that made clear, Vera talked to my friend in Albanian and left me to decide, in effect, whether she lived or died, whether her little girl, who liked singing and dancing to Spice Girls videos, would become a motherless child.

I ate more of the small fish. The damn things kept staring at me.

After I left Albania, I spent two months in Kosovo and then returned to a good job and an apartment in idyllic downtown Princeton, New Jersey. In the three years since I returned to the States, I’ve had little contact with the friends I made in Albania and Kosovo — people with whom I shared meals, laughed, played chess, and worked. Nor have I contacted or learned anything about Vera. I remember her shaking in fear and panting for breath one night after she had biked through Shkodër’s unsafe streets to drop off dinner for her husband

at work. She joked with me about her fear, but didn't deny it. I remember turning down the offer she made, in front of the kids, to show me the family Kalashnikov. I wonder about her, her family, the lump behind her left ear. I know I should have done more, but instead of being one small battle I could help win, her situation represented to me an overwhelming global reality that I didn't have the strength to take on.

For me, that night has since simmered down to a single, unrelenting question: When people are starving or dying of disease, is it justifiable to do *anything* other than drop *everything* and try to get food into their mouths or antibodies into their blood? Of course, people will die anyway. But how unspeakably selfish is it to go about improving my life by a hair while someone else is losing her entire head?

Yet I haven't abandoned my middle-class lifestyle. I still buy CDs, work full time, eat out, and so on. But I'm not happy. Whereas earnest late-night discussions of the world's ills over a philosophical beer once felt important, now they play out as farce, a mockery of those we pretend to care about.

I'm embarrassed that my existential crisis sounds like the essay question for an Ethics 101 midterm. But I try to answer the question nonetheless. First, because I'm angry with the poor and the suffering: they're making my food taste worse, my music sound half a note off, my orgasms feel even more fleeting. Second, and slightly more nobly, because I want to know how to live — namely, to what extent I should help. Third, because I was taking the blame for Americans that evening, and I want to spread it around.

A few days before that dinner, after I had moved out of Vera's house and was sleeping at the church where I worked, Vera had dropped off a plastic bag overflowing with gifts for me: a bottle of homemade *raki*; a ceramic candlestick holder painted in soft blues and pinks; a package of yellow, green, and orange highlighters; a little blue-and-white stuffed bunny; an undersized and slightly stained white T-shirt; and a blue velvet music box with a miniature plastic ballerina inside, spinning in an eternal pirouette.

I thought of this touching, characteristically Albanian assortment of gifts as Vera continued talking to my friend over dinner; I understood few of her words but all of her meaning. Inside me, a new war broke out, pitting my compassion and sympathy against my increasing resentment and anger, an irrational reaction to . . . what? Her manipulation? Her desperation? Her simplistic but accurate assessment of the situation? Then Vera found the evening's refrain and paused for translation: "I am glad you are not sick. I would do everything for you." She came back to it throughout the night. The mound of heads, spines, and tails grew on my plate.

As I sat there nibbling the fish and sipping *raki*, the gifts she had given me a few days before came to seem like cheap Trojan horses. Inside them hid symbols that now sneaked out to attack. The candle, flickering on the verge of burning out in the pink-and-blue ceramic holder, was her life. The orange, green, and yellow highlighters underlined the economic statistics that sealed our respective fates. The white shirt was stained

with my complicity. The music-box ballerina was me, dancing out of the situation and back to a land of sanitized hospitals and medical insurance. The toy bunny was a symbol of virility, mocking the dying mother. The *raki* would leave me with a low-frequency hangover that lasted long after this evening. Gifts, indeed.

While these strained symbols spun in my head, Vera suddenly pushed back from the table, opened the door to the other room, and yelled something. The leaf of a boy floated in and gave her a white plastic bag full of pictures. *Please, no*, I thought. Vera had picked up some of NATO's wartime strategy: hit them with everything you've got. She reached into the bag.

Not long ago, on my walk home from work in Princeton, I bought a copy of *Inferno*, by James Nachtwey, a massive book of photos taken in various places of war and extreme deprivation. It cost \$119.25 — more than many Albanians make in a month. The photos are black-and-white, beautifully composed, and uniformly nightmarish.

I bought the book to prove I'm not scared to look at a bulldozer spilling over with dark, skinny legs and arms on its way to dump the newly dead onto a massive pile of decomposing flesh. I bought it hoping to connect the dots between the flesh-draped skeleton of a man in Sudan crawling toward his grave, the bullet-splattered brains on a Bosnian street, and my one-bedroom apartment in Princeton. I bought it as a book of icons, because I want to see God, to glimpse the reality of a world beyond, where there are no more tears or death. I bought it as a diary of my fears. I bought it as a means of self-flagellation, a whip to display on the coffee table. I bought it as a mirror. I bought it as a compass.

I haven't looked at all the pictures yet. They make my flesh tingle and my stomach creep up my throat and my head throb and my watery eyes ache.

I have a photo from seven years ago when I lived in a hostel in Strasbourg, France, with a group of young French professionals and refugees from around the world, mostly Sudan, Sierra Leone, and other sub-Saharan African countries. Five of us became especially good friends: three Sudanese Muslims, an atheist Serb-Croat from Sarajevo who had deserted the army, and I, an American Christian who worked with a local charity. When it snowed — the first snow the Africans had ever experienced — we played like kids, throwing snowballs at each other and sliding on the slippery sidewalk. We played animated games of ping-pong and chess. We talked religion over post-sunset meals during Ramadan. At a New Year's Eve party we danced together to Bob Marley's "Buffalo Soldier." The three Africans made fun of the Serb-Croat and me: "What wrong with you? No can move your bodies!" I introduced the Serb-Croat to coconut rum, because he needed something to help him sleep. I have a picture taken the night before I left. The five of us are sitting on the Serb-Croat's bed, and he's holding up his bottle of rum and threatening to show the Muslims' imam the picture and tell him they've been drink-

ing during Ramadan.

The next morning I talked with one of the hostel managers who worked with immigration. He told me that the Serb-Croat would probably get a visa — maybe temporary, maybe permanent — but that the Africans' outlook wasn't good. Odds are, if they haven't been deported by now, they're being exploited somewhere for cheap labor, living with roaches, struggling to get by, trying to dodge police and racist thugs. I'm sure their faces still light up sometimes, but in the darkness.

I've known others like them. They're now part of my history. Dead or alive, well or not, they're mere memories, unfinished stories, cause for reflection, fodder for an essay.

The first picture Vera pulled from the crumpled plastic bag was of herself holding a dirty little boy in a tight embrace. He was an orphan — her favorite at the orphanage where she was employed by a U.S. charity for about seventy dollars a month. In the next picture Vera stood beside a blond American couple who were holding the little boy. Vera looks proud in the picture, like a meaningful member of the group, though later she would realize she was just a prop, a bureaucratic step along the way.

Then came the pictures of the same boy in his new home in the States. Vera tossed one after another onto the table, next to my plate of staring, discarded fish heads: the Albanian boy surrounded by plastic toys in bright primary colors; the Albanian boy eating hot dogs at a picnic; the Albanian boy dressed in a rainbow T-shirt, posing with his new classmates; the Albanian boy lying in a cozy bed, dreaming the American dream. And so on. My friend translated for Vera an article clipped from a U.S. paper about the adoption. It described the harrowing adventure the American couple had undergone to rescue a poor orphan from the clutches of Albania. The adoptive mother had sent the photos, the article, and a note promising regular updates; she hadn't written since. "Why hasn't she written?" Vera asked me.

I didn't answer. Guilt by association had stolen my ability to speak.

A couple of months earlier Vera had told me, in halting English, an abridged version of this story. I'd thought it was the story of an orphan who had moved across the ocean to a better future, and of the caring orphanage worker who was happy for the boy, though saddened by the separation. Now I understood it was a story about us versus them, about despair versus hope, about the fear of an untreated lump versus the miracle (for some) of modern medicine.

The night was wearing on, and, as usual, the local hoodlums were starting to shoot their Kalashnikovs. I listened, trying to discern whether it was a malicious volley or a solitary drunk shooting at the moon.

During the refugee crisis, the safest place around Shkodër was a refugee camp run by the Austrian army. It was a ten-minute drive north of the city, patrolled by perfectly sculpted, twenty-year-old soldiers ready to shoot their machine guns with deadly precision. One afternoon when the

crisis was in full swing, a few volunteers and I went there. We took a soccer ball.

We started kicking the ball on a field beside the camp, and about twenty boys, ages ten to fourteen, came out and joined us in a game. A few of the boys on my team were good. We clicked. We made the extra pass and scored creative goals. It was sport at its best: generosity, grace, companionship.

After sixty sweaty minutes of play, we told them we had to go. The boys gathered around to say goodbye. As I hugged the first boy, he kissed me on the tender, sensual part of the neck; I felt suddenly disarmed, and less lonely. The next boy kissed me in the same way, and the next.

As we walked out with the boys still at our sides, we passed a tent in which a soldier was lecturing thirty men about landmine safety. The next time those boys played soccer in the fields behind their homes in Kosovo, the celebration of a goal might be punctuated by an unexpected blast, their slender legs reduced to bloody stumps. But for the moment, they didn't care about land mines. We'd had a wonderful time playing soccer, and the memory of a shot past the goalie into the left corner of the net was still fresh. They were happy and waved goodbye as we drove away. That's what I wanted from Vera.

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