No matter how far I roam,
my love for you will always bring me home.
1958, Slovenia

LIVING WITH COMMUNISM

Hiding in the back of the van hurtling toward the checkpoint, I tried to calm myself. *Mum will have woken up long ago and realized I've gone.* My heart ached. *She'll be sick with worry, crying, inconsolable. Dad, Val, and Lina will be doing their best to calm her.* Under the tarp, alone in the darkness, I sobbed and tried to imagine life without ever again seeing my family, the farm, and everything and everyone I'd ever loved. *God, please give me strength.*

I recalled Dad's advice, "Stay focused. Remember the times we went across before and act the same."

I'd loved and been loved and had done what I thought was right, the way my parents had taught me. Neither prison nor death could ever take that away from me. I wasn't sure who I'd be on the other side, but there was no time for doubt and no telling the driver I wanted to go back. In minutes, I'd either be free, in shackles, or dead by a border guard's bullet. In spite of all the help, I figured my chances weren't good. After the driver let me out, if I could make it to the checkpoint on my bicycle

without Dragon's men spotting me, at least I'd have a chance. Palms pressed together tightly, I prayed for the best, for God's mercy, and to take me quick, if it came to that. I'd heard the stories but tried not to think about what they'd do to me if they caught me alive.

Even with my pass, I was terrified. I'd have been insane not to be, but I was also excited at the closeness of freedom. Others without paperwork had attempted to cross along what they thought was some deserted track. Some made it, but they didn't have the same enemies I had. I kept praying. *Please, God, don't let me make a mistake!*

More than anything, I was exhausted, sick of keeping quiet and always looking over my shoulder. I found some solace. Nobody could ever rob me of who I was. I reminded myself of why I was escaping and how grateful I'd be to make it. Could I ever forgive myself for the pain I'd caused Mum? The prospect of life and liberty on the other side was a kind of joy I knew existed but had rarely experienced.

After the war, possibly the autumn of 1946, my weary nine-year-old heart came to know pure joy for the first time. It's tough recalling exactly when the triumphs of peace and Dad returning from war—alive and in one wonderful piece—resurrected my childhood. But more importantly, it happened. Dad's return wiped away all the relentless fear and havoc that had hung over my older sister Lina, Mum, and me, like some enormous boulder constantly teetering on the edge of a towering cliff. The joy was short-lived. Years later, following that joy would lead me to lose everything I'd worked so hard for. Fascists during the war, Communists after, different goons, same idea: lie, take over, steal everything, kill anyone in the way. When there's nothing left to steal, make a war somewhere and repeat the process.

When the Italian Fascists took Dad, I felt completely naked and exposed, we all did, but Mum somehow kept us going, along with what was left of our farm. Could anything beat the happiness and gratitude in '46 of putting all that behind us? Maybe that was the best time in my life. Back then, dreaming of success was the farthest thing from my mind. Life on our little farm was freedom and all the world

I could ever want.

One of my favorite things was rambling through the forest with Spartacus, our Labrador. Finding a quiet bit of woodland, I'd lie on a pristine and fragrant bed of maple leaves or pine needles. Through swaying branches, the wind gently whistled its hypnotic tune as birds sung a happy chorus. Bright shafts of sunlight made the leaves sparkle in the swirling breeze. Lying against me, his tail happily flapping, Spartacus would bury his warm, moist nose into my side, constantly sniffing for attention while I'd hum the melody to whatever silly song I'd made up. Singing folk and religious songs was something Lina and I did for fun, never anything we took seriously. Happiness was simple and weightless, yet so intense it brought tears to my eyes, eyes weary from too many horrors. Knowing we'd made it filled me with light. All the dark fear was gone, at least so I'd thought.

The most joyful part of those times was having Dad back. Somehow even our prized bull, our beloved Aristotle, a gentle and noble behemoth, had come through unscathed, along with a ragtag assortment of other farm critters. Occasional nightmares and unwelcome memories still sometimes intruded during the day. It was hard comprehending hidden flows of emotion that followed their own logic.

In '48, Lina and I jumped at the news we'd be getting a brother. That more than anything helped place in time what was otherwise a timeless interlude for me, between the Fascists leaving in '44 and the Communists choking the life out of everything by the mid-50s. Mum was certain the baby would be a boy. She'd even picked out a name, Val. I instantly loved the name and marveled at her certitude but didn't for a moment question it.

Whatever our challenges, it was wonderful growing up knowing my family loved me. It gave me a sense of certainty and solidity about who I was, even from a young age. I don't think my parents ever consciously tried to cultivate it; it was just there. It was a joy that burned inside like a gentle but inextinguishable flame. That pure love was the greatest gift I'd ever been given. It gave me something warm and sure to hold on to.

After the war, Lina and I couldn't wait for the future to arrive. We'd lay awake at night dreaming about it out loud. Before bed, we'd pray for Mum and Dad, our farm, our health, togetherness, and a brighter future. God had different plans.

There'd been talk in our village, Zana, that the Communist government was hunting subversives, but we didn't know what it meant. Gossip grew that the secret police were collecting information about everyone. Rumors circulated about harassment, arrests, torture, even murders. Some said officials deliberately targeted innocent people to leave no doubt. There were no boundaries.

Communist propaganda encouraged people to report anyone criticizing the government, even family members. Religion was banned. All were to be reborn into a new faith, an insane brew they called reductivist empiricism, just a fancy way of saying God didn't exist. To us Catholics, Communists were deluded lunatics dancing merrily to Satan's tune. To urbane Communists, we were ignorant country folk needing re-education. Their way of admitting they were impatient for our demise. Curiously, they still wanted us to see them as charming and enlightened. Their newspapers promised prosperity and protection, even from atomic fireballs. Nobody believed it. We knew the Japanese had been vaporized and melted, dripping discarded flesh, not even fit for maggots.

Despite our loathing of Communism, we respected Tito, the national leader and genuine war hero who stood up to Stalin. It was Tito who kept us from falling into the Soviet abyss, and we were grateful for that much. Many countries fully behind the iron curtain had it worse than us. From our perspective, Tito was a strong but terribly fearsome father. There was definitely no utopia for us in the regime's vision of independence from East and West. For those who didn't stand to gain from all the lies, theft, and false promises, there was little to show for all the suffering, except perhaps bitter survival. We didn't know whether all the stories we heard were true, but the message was clear enough—the regime wasn't squeamish about doing whatever it took to keep

power. As Catholic Slovenians with family ties to Italy and Austria, we were not well placed to prosper in this new larger country, Yugoslavia. Communist propagandists pretending to be journalists were constantly talking up threats from the East and West. Mostly, they'd bang on about enemies within. Naturally, this included Catholics.

Communists did more than write in newspapers. They'd dragged priests out of churches during Mass and if they failed to renounce God, they'd shoot them on the spot. The warm body bleeding out, the executioners would give a sermon on the evils of religion, decree Church festivals, ceremonies, and gatherings banned, and warn about what could happen to those who didn't leave the Church. Many brave priests continued holding Mass in people's houses. These tiny congregations were often infiltrated by informers. Beatings, arrests, torture, and murders followed. Sometimes the informer was the priest himself. Eventually, an uneasy truce prevailed. The price of faith was living with discrimination.

As might be expected, absorbing everyone into some miasmic Communist blob created resentment. Those not on the take didn't much like subsidizing lavish lifestyles for countless local petty despots. Oppressive taxation without liberty, privacy, a say, or prospects was a good recipe for unrest. As long as technology and informers couldn't read our minds, we could always dream of better days. Anger, resentment, and hope thrived.

I never spent much time in formal schooling, but I think my siblings and I received quite an education. These days, I sometimes wonder if the reverse is true. I'm not sure if learning ever ends, but it's the personal and immediate part of learning that made me want to write. Having said that, no one should intentionally rely on anything here as accurate or truthful. I grew up with stories. Some were about Yugoslavia. Some may have ended up here, as fiction. Maybe some people can lay out stories in one unbroken, even stream of immutable truth. Not me. If you're looking for propaganda, you need not look far. Radio. Television. Perhaps even history books. If you're looking for the truth, God help

you. God help us all. Maybe the burden of searching and occasionally sharing should be meaning and truth enough?

I scarcely ever dreamed of writing anything more than reminder notes to self. Not that reminders aren't important, especially now that I'm old. To me, writing feels like rocks poking up above the frothy surface of a fast-flowing river, slippery islands jutting out above the white fury of life's present concerns. Before I go, I'd like to linger on those rocks to get a better sense of life's fast-flowing river, but the rocks are slippery, and there's so much swirling around demanding attention that it's not always possible to linger. Perhaps committing something, such as it is, to paper is a way of helping me navigate the river.

In my youth, if the news of Val's impending arrival was one of the happiest memories, losing Aristotle was one of the worst. I thought I might not be able to bear it. With our farm still struggling to recover from the war, Dad announced he'd decided to sell Aristotle. I immediately knew Aristotle would not be long for this world and pleaded with Dad not to do it. It was one of the only times in my life I ever shouted at Mum or Dad. I was ashamed of myself, but I didn't know what to do. The tears poured out of me until I couldn't stand it. I ran out of the kitchen, to the end of the hall, and collapsed onto the floor in the corner. Lina came to console me. I tried telling her it was all right, but I could hardly speak through my sobbing. It was not all right.

I ran to the barn to find Aristotle. He was standing in his favorite spot, looking at me with his big black eyes glistening in the lamplight. He nodded, like he knew something was up. I carefully hung the lamp and tried hugging his massive neck. I tried to be strong, but I couldn't stop crying. Aristotle, gentle and stoic as ever, let out a couple of bellowing breaths. I wanted to stay with him all night. Eventually, Mum came, rubbed my back, kissed me on the top of my head, and told me to come inside.

The next day, Mum, Lina, Spartacus, and I walked next to Aristotle as Dad led him up the road to a house on the other side of Zana. Nobody said a word. I felt so ashamed and scared for Aristotle. At the house,

a man exchanged a few words with Dad and gave him some money—Aristotle was no longer part of our family. I did my best to keep it together and gave Aristotle one last hug. As we walked away from the house, I cried and turned to look at Aristotle one last time. He was looking straight at me. He raised his majestic head and let out a loud and long bellowing cry, the kind I'd never heard from him before, as if he knew we wouldn't see each other again. I shook and sobbed all the way home. We'd sold a member of our family. I couldn't stop crying for days. I couldn't even bear to look at Aristotle's favorite part of the barn for weeks.

One day, I saw Dad standing in Aristotle's spot in the barn, his head bowed, shoulders hunched over. Putting my hand on his shoulder, Dad turned away. He'd been crying. It wasn't something he did often.

I took off my boots and socks. "Look, Dad, don't you remember?" I pointed at my toes.

"What are you talking about?" he said.

The big toe on my right foot was a little smaller than my other one because while still young, Aristotle had accidentally stepped on it with a hind hoof.

Dad nodded. "You screamed in agony."

"I thought he'd clean chopped it off!" I said. "But my toe was still there, bright red and throbbing. Mum came running, asking what was going on, and I accused Aristotle of being clumsy while I'd been cleaning his space."

"After inspecting your toe, Mum chided you, saying Aristotle had always been interested in you since you were a baby," Dad said.

I reached up and wiped the tears from his cheeks.

The only reason I still had that toe was because Aristotle had immediately rebalanced himself so as to not crush it. If anyone had been clumsy, it'd been me. There was a lot more to Aristotle than I'd thought. Growing up around him, I think he knew I loved him. We all did. Aristotle probably understood more than I'll ever realize.

Aristotle taught me letting go of family was impossible; I could

only keep loving them and live with the pain of separation. It was a lesson that came in handy when, not long after Aristotle passed, we lost another member of the family. A big fancy car—Communist flags on the front flapping furiously as it sped through Zana—ran over Spartacus. Between Mum, Dad, Lina, and me, there were too many tears to count. For weeks, I'd cry every time I passed an old collar hanging near the door. I could hardly bear to look at it. Eventually, Dad took it away. But that made me cry even more. At least we could give Spartacus a decent burial.