

ISSUE NUMBER 9

AUGUST 2014

Street Girl



FLY LEAF

Anton watched the people leave the gothic-style church after a rare winter wedding and felt the dull ache in his stomach spread to his heart. He blinked away the tears before they could fall.

The bookstore was emptier than usual and the loneliness became too much to bear, so he put up the closed sign. A door slammed and footsteps pounded on the sidewalk.

“Stop you pest!” someone shouted. He turned to see Radu grab a street boy, throw him to the ground, and then straddle him, lifting a clenched fist. The boy had on a blue hat that became pulled down over his ears as he squirmed to get free, but Radu had a strong grip from years of working in the market.

The punch connected with a sickening thud, and the boy let out a high-pitched wail. Anton With his arm hanging midair, ready to strike like a hammer, Radu scanned the street and locked eyes with Anton.

“Anton, come and help me. This boy robbed me again.”

Anton approached the scene with hesitation. Radu swung again, his punch glancing off the boy’s cheek.

“Help me,” Radu said again as the boy twisted on the ground. Anton was always worried about being robbed by the street children, but they usually stayed out of his bookstore. Still, he was afraid of them.

Radu pulled his leg back and landed a kick along the helpless child’s side. The boy winced, but Anton kicked him again and again until the boy released a wailing cry, tears running down his cheeks. Radu lifted his arm to strike him once more and said, “You’ll never rob me again.”

Anton recognized the defeat in the boy’s tear-soaked face and grabbed the shop owner’s fist. “No more,” he said. “Let him go.”

“That’s fine for you to say. They constantly steal food from me.” Radu straightened and released the boy, turning his attention to Anton. “They don’t want your books and you have no money.”

The boy dragged his broken body away with blood trickling out of his nose. His left eye was swollen and red. A long strand of black hair fell out from under the boy’s hat and dangled behind him as he hobbled away and disappeared down the empty street.

Radu wiped his bloody hand on his stained shirt. “You shouldn’t have stopped me.”

“He was just a street kid.”

“Fine for you to say. They don’t steal books, but I saw you kick him.”

Anton walked into the bookstore. He locked the door and went out the back entrance not wanting to see the place where he kicked the boy so many times.

A pack of stray dogs gathered outside his house in Grazoveste. The dogs were even more numerous than the street children in Romania. He would usually chase them away with curses and handfuls of rocks, but this time he just walked around them.

The dinner he made remained untouched, and he threw it outside to the dogs resulting in a noisy feeding frenzy. The TV and radio couldn’t drown out the bedraggled boy’s cries that ricocheted in his mind.

The store remained closed the next day while Anton lay in his bed until noon. He glanced at the picture of his wife on the end table. He stared at her pale blue eyes, made even softer by the coating of dust that had accumulated over the years.

“Why did you have to die?”

With no answers he placed the picture back. A tear fell onto her cheek. The house was filled with sorrow and

he walked out toward the street.

The dogs were gone, but he knew they would return everyday for food. Gray clouds drifted across the sky threatening to bring snow. A boy walked in front of him. His clothes dragged on the ground and a nauseous glue smell came from him.

Anton followed the boy to an overgrown vacant lot. The boy carried a brown bag; Anton knew it contained the glue that the street children inhaled. He saw another boy and girl come out from behind an old shed. The taller boy reached out for the bag when the boy reached him. "Oh my God," he said. He recognized the boy as the one he had kicked. The boy inhaled deeply from the bag then stumbled backwards, his hat tumbling off his head. Long strands of the same inky hair fell across his face and shoulders and his shirt pulled tight around him.

"He's a girl," Anton said aloud.

A girl. He kicked a girl with all his might.

His mind fluttering, Anton returned to the store and stared out the front window. He saw the girl walk by towards the market across the street, and saw Radu watching from the window of the market. He dashed out the door and grabbed her arm. She reeled back and pulled a knife out.

"I just wanted to keep you away from the market. That man will kill you."

She looked back and saw Radu looking at her. "I wasn't going in there but—"

"Come in here," he pointed toward the bookstore.

"Books. No thanks. I can't eat books."

"You can have my lunch."

"How do I know you won't try anything?"

"You have a knife."

She pointed toward him. “Did you help that man beat me?”

He stood still, unable to look in her eyes. She started to cough so harshly that she doubled over. He winced when he thought of how hard he had kicked her. When she stopped coughing he gave her his lunch and a hot cup of coffee. The smell of glue from her tattered clothes filled the store. A lady opened the door, saw the girl, and then turned and left.

“I know you’re a girl. What’s your name?”

“Anca,” she said.

She looked at the books on the shelf.

“Why did you dress as a boy?”

“So perverts stop trying to buy me or rape me. It’s already happened to me enough.”

He fell silent and after a moment asked, “Do you read?”

“Of course. I went to school until my mother let an alcoholic boyfriend move in. He abused me and when I complained to her she told me that I was lying. I can never go back.”

She coughed again. “Are you sick?”

“I may have leukemia.”

“Seriously?”

“I wouldn’t joke about that. A doctor told me once in a clinic.”

“Let me take you to a doctor.”

“No, never. They will take me back. I was just kidding anyway.”

She took a book from a shelf about a magical kingdom. She leafed through it. “You know what I like about books?”

“What’s that?”

“You never know what you will find when you turn

the page.”

Two small street children tapped on the window and she started to leave then stopped to give the book back.

“No, keep it,” he said.

Anca joined the children outside. They shuffled down the snow-covered street while he closed the store and went home. The dogs waited, and he picked up some rocks to throw at them but decided against it. The snow fell in dreamy swirls while he walked to the overgrown lot.

Two footprints led away from the place where Anca lived. They belonged to the smaller children. Why didn’t she go with them? He looked inside the shed and saw her breathing erratically while her eyes stared straight ahead. The book was open on her lap. Her face shimmered from the poisonous paint they sometimes inhaled instead of glue. He felt her forehead and gasped when he realized she was burning with a fever. Her eyes rolled back and left empty white sockets.

“No,” he yelled and picked her up. She flopped in his arms as he carried her through the snow for ten blocks until he reached the hospital. The nurse saw him and refused to let her in.

“She smells of glue or paint. I know she’s a street kid. We don’t take them here. If we take one then they all will come.”

“My God. I will pay for her.”

“Fine,” she said, a suspicious glint in her eye. They placed her on a gurney and rolled her into the back. He held her cold hand. They gave him many forms to fill and asked questions he didn’t know the answers to. Then an alarm rang. The shrill sound brought people running and they surrounded her after pushing him out of the way.

He watched in shock and prayed for help. Suddenly, it became too quiet and the doctor approached him with

a gave expression, and when he shook his head, Anton collapsed to his knees and wept. They had to escort him out of the hospital after a few hours. Nothing seemed the same. His heart was broken. The sound of the kicks to a dying girl's side echoed through his mind.

The lot was covered with snow and he approached the shed slowly. The boy and girl stood inside beside a small fire they started in a can. The pages of the book burned in the flames sending smoke up toward heaven.

"Hello," he said. They both turned and tensed.

"Anca is dead."

"No," they both yelled. "She went home. She'll be back later."

He shook his head and sobbed. "Get out," the boy punched him in the stomach. Grunting from the force of the small boy's attack, Anton turned and left the children in a requiem of silence.

He went to the store and began clearing out his belongings. A "For Sale" sign was hung in the window. He could never open it again after the girl died and what he had done to her right in front of it. He stared outside and saw the two little children walking down the street. They went into the market and then ran out with a pack of cookies. Radu ran after them and grabbed the boy. Anton moved with lightning speed and grabbed Radu's arm forcing him to release the boy. Then he pushed him back against the wall. "Don't touch them."

"Are you crazy?"

"Just leave them alone. Here take this." He shoved money at Radu then pushed him away. The children watched, and backed away in fear.

"Wait, come in here. You can have my lunch."

They followed him in. "Books," they both said.

"They can be more interesting if you read them

instead of burning them. Anytime you want one you can come here even if you do just burn them.”

He walked through the cemetery with a bunch of flowers. The snow crunched under his feet and he knelt before her grave. He placed the flowers on it.

“Don’t worry. I promise I’ll look after your friends. They’ll never be alone and you won’t either. I will come every day. I’m so sorry that I hurt you.” He collapsed on the blanket of snow, and cried.

His tears fell onto the flowers where they froze and shimmered in the light. He felt a gentle touch on his shoulder and it comforted him. When he turned he saw a page of a book on his arm.

His hand shook when he saw that it came from the same book that he had given Anca and then he pressed it to his heart.

Back at the bookstore he saw a street child walk by with black hair dangling from underneath a hat. He ran outside but knew it couldn’t be her and slumped against the wall.

Radu swept the sidewalk, a menacing look carved on his face. He pointed at two street children walking toward the store. “Look what you started.”

Anton turned and smiled when he saw the boy and girl walk into the bookstore. He removed the “For Sale” sign and, tucking it under his arm, followed them inside.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WILLIAM FALO'S stories have appeared or are forthcoming in Emrys Journal, 34th Parallel, Skyline Review, Foliate Oak Review, Oak Bend Review, Open Wide Magazine, The Linnet's Wings, The View From Here, The Monarch Review, and others. He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

MARK PARA lives in the Chicago suburbs with his wife, Helena, and his dog Dino. He draws inspiration from intricate craftsmanship and vintage charm. His taste is further influenced by his love of cars and modern architecture, as well as a great appreciation for the simplicity of nature. Among his many hobbies, Mark collects fine automatic timepieces and spends time restoring his antique Mercedes 250S. His other designs can be seen at www.paradesigns.com.