



The Secret

This story, like most of the others, is about the pursuit of happiness – by escaping from reality. It happens in a unique time and place. It is the story of Dragan from the Island, who was sent to the war by his parents. At that time I did not know his enlistment in the army was a therapy prescribed by his loved ones. Dragan was a handsome young man from Croatia's sunniest island, the only child of a wealthy and influential family of ship owners. He had the whole world on the palm of his hand. He cruised the world in his ships, taking in the most beautiful and interesting things it had to offer. He bragged about his daring escapades, things he saw, women he conquered, cars he drove, and clothes he wore. He was thirty years old and it was like he had lived several lives already. Even his experiences in the war would fit neatly into the jigsaw of his life. But something felt wrong in his story. At times I would find him staring into the horizons that could not be found in the trenches of war. His clouded eyes would slowly follow the things going on around him, until some simple question would snap him out of that trance. Where does he live? – I would sometimes ask myself. He never protested, never got angry, not even at the Enemy. As if he didn't care. He appeared to lack any patriotism, acting like a mercenary fighting in a foreign war. But he was no mercenary. The whole story of this handsome and polite young man was not completely right.

We had been under constant fire from high-caliber anti-aircraft guns. Dragan's small unit was stationed about half a mile away from the field hospital, defending a ruined village, very close to the no man's line. During the fiercest fire, while the rain of bullets poured onto our positions, ricocheting off the stone walls of the burning houses, we were notified that Dragan was found dead in the basement of one of the houses. They were trying to resuscitate him.

With bullets whizzing over our heads and shrapnel flying everywhere, we slithered on our hands and knees over the sharp stones. After a while, we got information that Dragan seemed to be alive after all, but although his heart was beating feebly, they could not confirm he was breathing. Also, they found a syringe and a needle, metal spoon, fire-lighter and an empty foil package. As we continued lacerating our knees and arms under heavy fire, I thought about heroin – the strongest opiate, derivative of morphine. I had often seen what it does to people during my work at the

Split Hospital emergency unit. I must admit that up until then, I hadn't even considered the possibility of drug addiction among my comrades. They all seemed reasonably healthy, both mentally and physically, and they had all undergone thorough medical and psychological testing before assignment to a unit. I had considered addiction to be a problem of civilian society, not present among the serious and dedicated people as my comrades were.

I was worried about the therapeutic options in this case – heroin antagonists, including naloxone, were available only in specialized institutions and emergency care units. I had nothing of such in my war pharmacy, just narcotics for pain control. Breathing arrest and lung edema caused by heroin could not be treated without such medications. What gave me hope was an ampoule of 5 mg nalorphine, which has analgetic effects but is also partly an opiate antagonist. Even this was questionable because I did not know how long Dragan had been in coma.

After we crawled into the first house for shelter, we painfully stood up and our numb legs carried us into the basement. The soldiers were still reanimating Dragan. They did it very skillfully – they had a lot of practice. Dragan had myotic pupils and showed no light reaction, a typical symptom of morphinism. There was a fresh mark from the needle on his left arm, with a pronounced edema and erythema of the forearm. Probably a part of the syringe contents went paravenously. It was also possible that the drug had been much stronger than he was used to and that it knocked him unconscious so quickly that the remaining heroin was injected aside of the vein. The "street" drug is usually 3-15% heroin in the content, but can go up to 60%, so overdose was possible. As my paramedics put the tube down his throat and started mechanical ventilation, I managed to inject nalorphine into a collapsed vein on his right arm. Nalorphine had short action and I needed to get Dragan into the hospital within less than a few hours. But it was still hell out there, and the medical vehicle could not reach the village. Nor could we have carried him on a stretcher because we would have had to cross an open area under heavy enemy fire. A tracked APC was the only vehicle capable of reaching the village safely, but only the commander and I could drive it. Tank drivers were far away from us, the commander was with another unit, and I had to stay at Dragan's side.

Dragan occasionally moved his head, fighting for a spontaneous breath. He started waving his hands as if trying to push someone away, producing animal-like sounds. Soon we were all struggling to control him. I had seen many such sights in dirty restrooms and dark parks, but I could read the unspoken questions on faces around me: what are we to do now, should we tie him up, calm him down, how will it all end? I waited until the typical phase of exhaustion that comes after such a waking or rather – rebirth. All at once, I heard the sound of the APC approaching, crushing debris beneath it. The commander had come for his soldier.

As we carried Dragan into the transporter, he fell asleep. I started glucose infusion and gave him oxygen. As there was a possibility of toxic lung edema, I prepared prednisolone and aminophiline. Once in the safety of the road, we moved him into the ambulance and took him to the Zadar Hospital. Dragan's recovery took a long time, first in the intensive care unit, and then in the psychiatric ward.

I pondered Dragan's case for a long time. Why hadn't I paid more attention to his peculiar behavior, why hadn't it crossed my mind that there could be addicts among those young soldiers? Why had Dragan gone to war? Was he trying to escape from his drug problem, the company that had introduced it to him? Had he needed comfort and support, but was afraid to ask, and so turned to drugs instead? Or did war stress force him to take more drugs than usual? During family therapy, Dragan's parents were able to explain a part of the story. The rest of it will remain Dragan's secret.

I still sometimes dream that I have been mutilated by the sharp stones I crawl over, my hands amputated to the elbow, the phantom pain spreading over the scratched, torn, and tormented knees and elbows. Around me, I see many young men in pain, some dying in agony, and me unable to help them. I wake up covered in sweat, feeling relieved it was just a dream. And I always remember Dragan.

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