

Long Road Home

written by Katherine Paterson - illustrated by Emily Arnold McCully

Chapter Two : A Costly Caricature

a breakfast serials story

STORY SO FAR : *Meli Lleshi, eleven years old, is telling the story of how and why her family left Kosovo in 1999 and came to settle in Vermont. Her uncle has just informed the family that the Kosovar hero Adem Jashari and his family have been killed by Milosevic's Serbian army.*

"Isuf! Get away from that door!" I said, but Isuf had already pulled the door open and both he and Adil had run into the parlor and flung themselves at Papa. Vlora was right behind, headed for Mama's lap. The grown-ups were sitting as though stunned.

"Seventy people!"

Mehmet broke the silence. "The butchers just went in and slaughtered them."

Uncle Fadil's head was down and I could barely hear him. "It is said that one child escaped—one of the little girls."

"Meli," Mama said softly, "bring Uncle Fadil and Aunt Burbuqe some tea, please."

My hands shook as I poured tea into the glasses. *What would become of us now?* Adem Jashari and his family were our only hope against Serbian cruelty and Milosevic's oppression. I brought in the tray and passed the tea to the four grown-ups. "Fix a glass for Mehmet," Mama said. "And one for yourself, too. You will have to be grown-ups now."

"Me too," Isuf said. "I'm almost nine."

"You may have a sip of mine," Papa said. "And you too, Adil." He patted Adil's head, forestalling a whine.

For a long time we sat in silence. Even the little ones were still. At last Uncle Fadil said, "We came because we want you to come to the country with us. No place is safe, but the country is safer, and if things go wrong, we will have food."

Leave home? Leave school and all my friends? I couldn't bear the thought. Besides, if no place was safe, why couldn't we stay right here? Our Serb neighbors were no longer friendly, but surely they would never harm us. The police were annoying, but they'd never actually hurt any of us. Still,

Adem Jashari and all of his large family were dead. What did that mean for us? For any Albanian in Kosovo? But to leave our home?

Everyone was looking at Papa. He would be the one to decide. Papa took a long sip of his tea. "Thank you, brother, but how can I leave my home and my store? My children have never known another

home, and every Albanian in the neighborhood depends on me, on our store, for groceries. What would we do in the country? You are very generous to invite us to share your home, but we would only be a burden. Here we are among friends. Here we are needed."

"You would be among family with us," Aunt Burbuqe said.

"Yes," said Papa. "And family is more important than anything. But your house is not large, and we . . ." He laughed and hugged the boys. "We are blessed with many



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children. If there is a crisis, your own daughter will want to return from Prestina with her family. The house would burst like an overripe pumpkin."

Uncle Fadil shook his head. I thought he would object, but he just said, "We must get back. Mother is alone." He looked around for a place to set down his glass, so I quickly took him the tray. "If you change your mind, my brother, we can always make room for you."



Spring came. School went on much as usual. I was sure Papa had been right to stay. Everything was quiet—too quiet, perhaps—but I had begun to believe that the worst was over. After all, what could be worse than the massacre of the Jashari family?

Then came the end of May, and that terrible afternoon when all I wanted was to be outdoors—not crowded with fifty other upper-grade children into a room of the tiny house that we Albanians used for a school, since all the schools now belonged to the Serbs. It was so hot that I couldn't listen to Mr. Uka drone on and on. So I began to study his nose. It was so big. He reminded me of a pelican, so I drew a picture of a pelican that looked a lot like Mr. Uka and showed it to my best friend, Zara, who sat in the same desk as me. She began to giggle, which set me off.

"Zara, Meli, come to the front," Mr. Uka said.

I tried to slip the picture into my pocket, but it was too late; he had seen it. Mr. Uka held out his hand. "Very clever," he said. "But what do pelicans have to do with the history of Kosovo?"

"Nothing, sir," I mumbled. I could feel Mehmet's disapproval on the back of my neck. I didn't dare turn to look. I knew how angry he must be.

"Then we will keep it for science class," he said. "And I would like the two of you to stay after school and catch up on history."

When Mr. Uka finally dismissed us, Mehmet was nowhere to be seen. "He ran home to tattle on me," I said to Zara.

It wasn't fair. I knew Papa would want an explanation as to why Mehmet hadn't waited—why he was letting us girls walk home alone when Papa had told him months ago he was to look out for us. Papa would be angry at us both.

As always, we had to pass the police station on the way. A Serb policeman was loitering outside. "Where are you girls headed?"

He spoke, of course, in Serbian, and I had sense enough to answer in Serbian. "Just home," I said. He shrugged. Out of sight of the station we began to hurry, and when I left Zara at her house I began to run. I was very late.

Yes, there was Papa waiting outside the store. "Meli, thank God, you're home. But where is Mehmet?"

to be continued...



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