

Day of the Killing

Meadowlark was a small town an hour and a half south of Kansas City. The emergency call center was located in a claustrophobic back room of the single-story, all-brick police station which resembled a rest stop bathroom. It was ten at night, and Nick Cooper was alone when he received the call. “Nine-one-one, what’s your—” he said nonchalantly into his headset microphone, while opening a packet of sugar for his coffee. He wasn’t able to finish his question.

A child was shrieking in frantic bursts, and a woman was whispering. “Go back upstairs, baby, please.” Her voice was urgent. “Please! Go! Go now!” And then suddenly she shouted. “Oh my God!”

“What’s your emergency, ma’am?” he demanded, knocking over his coffee as he lunged for his computer. He told himself to remain calm, but the sound in his ear of a terrified child was incredibly upsetting. His fingers bordered on useless. An address showed up on his computer screen. “Please, ma’am, can you—”

“Hurry!” she screamed. “Please help us! Hurry!” Eight seconds into the call from the residence at 2240 Lincoln Street, Nick lost contact. The female caller gasped and said “No!” in a desperate voice. Then there was the sound of what he assumed was the phone clattering to the floor. The line went dead. He tried to call back. No luck.

Nick sent out the emergency signal over the radio. “Possible robbery or domestic battery underway at 2240 Lincoln Street,” he said, speaking so fast his words ran together. “Female and child in the residence. No further information. Call ended. Unable to reestablish connection. Over.”

Officer Diane Varga responded within seconds. “Dispatch, this is 808. I’m headed over now.”

Nick grabbed his phone and pressed the speed dial for Barry Shipps. Of Meadowlark’s two detectives, Barry was the more likely to respond quickly even though he was off duty and probably not near his radio.

“This is Detective Shipps.”

“Detective,” Nick said, “This is dispatch. Can you stand by for a possible call-out to 2240 Lincoln Street?”

“I can do better than that,” Shipps answered. “I’m filling up my car at Casey’s General just down the road.” A beat later Shipps was back in his car on his radio. “Dispatch, this is Shipps. I’m en route.”

Diane was in Nick’s ear again. “And I’m turning off Victory on to 223rd. Almost there.”

“Roger 808.” Nick almost said be careful. He stopped himself. Every time he ran into Diane in town, he found himself whistling Van Morrison’s “Brown Eyed Girl.” He took a deep breath and folded his trembling hands in his lap.

A mostly white, working-class town, Meadowlark had its fair share of old farm families scattered about the outlying areas. There was one nice place, a beer garden and brewery called The

Crooked Crow, which had just enough rural charm to draw people out from the city on sunny weekends. Other than that, there were just two sit-down restaurants. The Wagon Wheel and Gambinos. Last ditch, there was a Subway inside the Walmart.

The words “Sweet Water Creek” were etched into a plaque on a decorative stone wall at the intersection. Officer Varga turned into the neighborhood. It was relatively new, ground broken just six years earlier, with only half the plots sold and a number of uninhabited homes. Moderately priced wooden constructs, they were nevertheless sizeable and blandly pleasant, nestled between a couple of small, unimpressive country ponds and some magnificent old elms.

Diane rounded the corner and noticed a red Radio Flyer tri-cycle overturned on the sidewalk. The silver handlebars gleamed in the cheerful glow from the porch lantern two doors down from her destination.

The house at 2240 Lincoln was one of the larger in the neighborhood, sprawling across a gradually sloping lawn with tasteful landscaping and a terra-cotta stone fountain jutting up from behind a cluster of poorly tended rosebushes. Diane got the feeling that here in Sweet Water Creek, everything was all right. Better than her life, for sure. Her intuition, as she stepped from her car and faced the house, did not say to her, “crime scene.”

“Dispatch, I’m on location,” she said into the radio mic attached to her uniform chest pocket. Diane walked at a fast clip up the sidewalk toward the front door, framed by two slender evergreen trees on either side. She knocked loudly three times.

“Police!” she called out, but there was no answer. From somewhere close by came the clipped repetition of an upset dog yipping nonstop. She felt her pulse quicken. This can’t be too bad, she thought. It’s Meadowlark. And yet, something was telling her to hurry. She punched her finger on the doorbell, ringing it in frantic succession. The hollow bong of the bell echoed inside. No footsteps on the stairs. Nothing.

The door itself was wooden, framed on either side by decorative windows. Diane peeked inside, trying to focus through the textured glass. The first thing she saw was a pair of tall military style combat boots sitting just inside the entry. They seemed somehow at odds with the modern home and its vast, shiny floor of polished blond wood. It appeared to be one great room; open plan, like a city loft. Right by the front door was a curved staircase winding up to the second floor. An electronic device, possibly a home phone, lay in smashed plastic pieces on the floor next to the bottom step. Diane moved slightly to get a better angle. Now she could see more of the interior.

She caught her breath.

The beautiful blond wood was stained. There was a red mess in the middle of the room. Her heart commenced hammering in her chest. It was not going to be nothing, as she had hoped. And Nick had mentioned a child.

“Dispatch, I’m looking through a window at what appears to be a lot of fresh blood,” she said into her mic, more loudly than intended. “Possible fatality here. I need backup and EMS.” With a barely discernible edge of panic, she fumbled to unholster her semiautomatic Glock pistol and raised it to a tentative ready position.

She rang the bell once more. “Police!” she yelled again, this time in a wilder, louder voice. She tried the door and gave it a hard shove with her shoulder. It was locked and solid.

Diane raced toward the shadowy south side of the home looking for another entrance. As she ran, she heard Nick sending out another emergency tone over the radio requesting all units for backup. She slipped in a patch of mud rounding the corner and caught herself with her free hand. She could now tell that the dog barking frantically was in the backyard.

At the end of a row of bushes was a wrought-iron fence with a gate. Broken and tied shut with a bungee cord. Diane became frantic in her attempt to wrestle the rusty thing open.

“Come on!” she whispered, frustration mounting. Finally it gave, the hinges making a horrible scraping noise like claws dragging down a chalkboard. As she began crossing the backyard, two other officers responded in succession that they were on their way. Diane said, “Shippo? ETA?”

His voice came over her mic. “Five minutes.”

“Roger.”

Diane stepped on something that let out a loud squeak. “Shit,” she whispered and looked down to see a duck-shaped dog toy under her boot. As she progressed farther and her eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw several partially eaten, old yellow tennis balls strewn about in the overgrown grass and weeds. At the edge of the patio was a giant green plastic sandbox in the shape of a turtle. Next to it was a toddler’s water table just the right size for a small child to stand and splash and use all the colorful cups to make the water wheel spin. She thought of the red tricycle near the neighbor’s yard and pictured a child’s chubby churning legs. A little three-wheeler hurtling down the sidewalk and then kicked aside without a backwards glance, forgotten in pursuit of some new adventure.

So Nick had been right. Diane was now sure that her first priority at the scene was to save a child.

The light seeped through the shutters of the back windows, and Diane crouched close to the house as she made her way across the patio toward the door. She saw the barking dog. There were actually two of them; small, black and white Boston terriers. Anxious but sweet creatures, they looked baffled at having been closed out of the house. Their eyes were wide and wet, and both were panting and pacing, completely beside themselves.

Diane turned the handle on the door. “Back door’s unlocked,” she said into her mic.

Nick was the first to respond. “EMS has been notified. They know you’re waiting on a second officer to enter the residence. I’ve told them to stage at 2218 Lincoln and wait for update.”

“Copy,” Diane answered. Nick knew the routine. She was, without question, supposed to wait on a second officer to enter. If she went in, she was going against procedure. She’d get in trouble. Diane glanced over her shoulder at the sandbox. The water table. Then she decided. She’d rather lose her job than lose a child.

Diane pushed the door inward and held out her foot to stop the dogs from following her inside. She closed it softly behind her. As she crept into the house, she glanced back. The front paws of both Boston terriers were against the glass, flexing and pleading, coaxing her to return, to come let them in.

The back door opened into a far corner of the lower level next to a round glass breakfast table and four chairs. An empty wine bottle appeared to have rolled to a rest against the wall. On the table was another bottle of wine, and underneath on the floor was an elegant cylinder of Stoli elit vodka.

Diane was not much of a food snob, but noted that this was no chips-and-dip poker party. In the center of the table was a thick wooden cutting board covered in a semi-eaten array of olives, salami, crackers, cheese and grapes.

Though she tried to focus on the entirety of the scene, the bloodstain was hard to ignore. If she glanced up and across the great room, there it was again. Mesmerizing. Sickening.

Despite the fact that the room was open concept, it was dotted with chairs and a sofa as well as bookcases, end tables and floor lamps. Hiding places everywhere. She moved stealthily, her pistol ready and her eyes flitting back and forth from one quiet corner to another.

As she inched past the breakfast table she had to watch her step. The shattered remains of several glasses were scattered about, big and little shards everywhere. Of the four yellow upholstered chairs surrounding the breakfast table, one was overturned and one was stained a shade darker where there had been a spill. Next to the fallen chair was a wet photograph.

Diane leaned down to get a better look. It pictured two brunette women. That much Diane could tell from all the wind-swept hair. They were standing in front of an unusual building. The design was vaguely Middle Eastern, almost like a mosque with no minaret. Whatever had pooled on the floor had seeped through the paper and the women's features now bled into one another. Diane imagined someone sitting at this table holding it shortly before. Reminiscing? Do you remember when we...? Yes, let me just go grab the photo...

Separating the living area from the kitchen was an island in the shape of a crescent. Several tall chairs ran the length. It was not until Diane passed the breakfast table that she could see over the kitchen bar.

The little puddles varied in size and looked like something left on the sidewalk after a big rain. Except they were crimson. The droplets leading away resembled a beaded necklace, almost like a thin strand of bloody pearls.

The slaughter had happened between the refrigerator and the inside of the bar, where the sink and dishwasher were located. The surrounding walls and appliances were splattered. Diane felt a tightening in the back of her throat. The front of the refrigerator was papered in finger paintings now artistically spotted with tiny red flecks; a nightmarish rain slanting over neat box houses, a stick family of three, fluffy clouds and a happy-face sun.

The trail of bead-like blood moved from the kitchen puddles to the big slick in the middle of the room. It was messy, almost as if mopped, and Diane imagined someone crawling on hands and knees before managing to haul up on his or her feet for one more staggering go at life. She had an irrational urge to start running through the house calling out for the child, but she'd already broken one rule just by entering.

On the wall across the room, an oval wooden African mask with holes carved for the eyes and mouth stared at her with an expression of horror.

Diane looked anxiously over her shoulder at the table laid out as if for an indulgent wine-and-cheese feast among friends. Then she looked ahead, at the nightmarish slop of a human spill beckoning her to come see; come see what unspeakable thing has happened here.

Maddie

Ten weeks before

Her eyes keep coming back to the top left corner of my face. She looks away toward the window, out over the man-made neighborhood pond visible from her home office, but then it's right back to the place where I've been sewn back together.

I don't know how this is going to work. On her website she says she is "above all a nonjudgmental, compassionate and discreet psychologist accomplished at using writing therapy to address anxiety." For fucksake then, stop staring. I've told her I'm here because I'd like to feel less nervous.

She smiles at me. That's better. She says, in a lilting infomercial voice, "There are many, many extremely helpful exercises used in writing therapy. What I love most about it is that you can explore as far and wide and deep as your imagination and inhibitions will allow. We'll try a variety of approaches and see—" she tilts her head to the side in a way that is at once obviously rehearsed and yet strangely attractive "—see what works best for you. Maddie."

I nod, and the hair I wear pulled over the left side of my face must move a little. She's playing it very cool, but her fascina-

tion is evident. I'm not surprised. The bruise has faded but the whole mess is still pretty shocking.

I feel discouraged. I need this to work, but this woman is not what I expected. It was important to me that I do writing therapy, and there were not all that many choices in my area. When I chose Dr. Camilla Jones with her private practice in Overland Park, I pictured a lady in a sophisticated suit and some grandmotherly pumps. Kind eyes. Silver hair.

This woman, this Camilla, has told me that her name rhymes with Pamela. What? Instead of Dr. Jones, she wants me to call her Cami J. She is dressed in a loose, floral off-the-shoulder T-shirt, yoga pants and a baseball cap. I hate to be shallow, but I have to point out that there are rhinestones all over the front of her cap. All over. Everywhere. It's probably as hard for me not to gawk at her cap as it is for her not to gawk at my face. The focal point on this cap is a giant rhinestone fleur-de-lis. This troubles me. She's got to be in her early sixties even though she looks fucking great. Honestly, though, I just didn't want my psychologist to remind me of a Zumba instructor.

Finally she is looking me in the eyes. "Maddie?"

"Yes?" I don't know why but I am clenching my fists, then opening them, then clenching them again. I used to get carpal tunnel syndrome from all the writing, and I would do this when my wrists were sore. I stop.

"Let's cut to the chase and start easy. I want you to write down twenty things that set off your anxiety." She passes me a piece of lined notebook paper and a pen. "Try not to think too much about it. Just what scares you or makes you sad or nervous. Write the first things that pop into your head, okay?"

"Okay."

1. When charlie cries. Anything bad happening to charlie.
2. When Ian drinks vodka in the basement. Or when he won't wake up.

3. When someone shoots kids in a school, or really when anybody goes and shoots a bunch of people randomly, but especially kids. I don't like the guns in the house either.
4. When someone drives a gigantic eighteen-wheeler through a beach parade in France and mows everyone down.
5. ISIS.
6. It sounds silly but I get scared when I go somewhere to meet new people and they want to sit in a circle and have me tell them about myself. I don't go to the Meadowlark mom's brunch thing anymore.
7. When the Middle Eastern guy on the treadmill in front of me gets off and walks away and leaves his big backpack sitting there.
8. When I call the dogs and they don't come and I can't find them. (Probably just because this happened last night. They dug under the fence but they didn't get hit by a car. I patched the fence where they got out.)
9. When my parents or Charlie get sick. Deadly new strains of the flu.
10. When Ian goes to dangerous countries to work. All the things that could go wrong.
11. Funerals. Hospitals and lakes.
12. When Ian gets angry at Charlie.

13. That an alligator can lunge out of the Disney lagoon and snatch a little boy right out of his father's arms.
14. When my heart races uncontrollably. This happens usually when I start missing Joanna and thinking about how she probably still hates me.
15. Drowning, especially little Syrian kids that wash up dead on the shore, I can't even cope, sometimes for days, and I dream about Charlie drowning and sometimes I worry about the dogs drowning. Tidal waves.
16. When I take Charlie to the park and then suddenly he's gone and I can't find him.
17. The darkness in some people. Like, that guy in Germany who paid some other guy to cut him up a little bit at a time, cook him and eat him.
18. When Charlie cries.
19. When I have to leave Charlie with Ian.
20. That something is wrong with me.

I slide my paper across to Cami J, who, now that I have gotten a better look at her in very tight seventies-style flared yoga pants, I am tempted to privately think of as "Cami Toe."

She begins to read silently. I say, "I think I repeated myself. I think I wrote 'Charlie crying' twice."

She nods, concentrating on my list. "Repetition can be informative."

After a few minutes she looks up at me, and this time she doesn't even bother with subtlety. Her eyes take a little trip up

and down the wrecked and winding road from my lip to my brow. "Does it still hurt?"

"When I smile. A little."

"Is that why you don't smile?"

"I don't? I'm pretty sure I smile." Then I smile, to prove it.

"Have you been to see a plastic surgeon?"

"No. I probably will eventually, though." The truth is, I have always been what my grandmother called "*jolie laide*". Beautiful ugly. My eyes are peculiar and pale gray. My smile is asymmetrical, and there is something foxlike about the shape of my face. I've never lacked for male attention, but I know that whatever appeal I possess lies in my oddity. I have not decided yet if I like my developing scar or not. Sometimes when I look at myself in the mirror I think it is a far more honest cover for the book that is me.

Cami J nods, her eyes moist with motherly empathy. She taps my paper. "You are doing a lot of what we call 'catastrophizing.'"

"That's a new word for me."

"It's more and more common now that we have the constant stream of bad news. The irrational fear of catastrophe. It's easy to overestimate the possibility of an extremely rare tragedy befalling you or a loved one."

I think about telling her about my intimate knowledge of rare tragedy, but I decide to save it. I say simply, "Accidents happen. Anything at any time."

"Anything? Alligators?" She smiles, leans forward and winks. "German cannibals?"

I shrug and then I can't help it. I laugh. German cannibals.

"There is something else going on here though," she says, and the whole Zumba vibe is gone, and she is deadly serious. "Would you like to tell me more about your relationship with Ian? Is he Charlie's father?"

I nod, and to be clear, I would love to tell her all about Ian. Really, because it's a great story. But for some reason I suddenly

can't speak, and the thought of what's happened to Ian is too much. I find myself paralyzed, my tongue a slimy fish crammed in my mouth, swampy water in my nose. This happens sometimes. I remember being held under, my face just inches under the surface, eyes bulging and air so close and inviting that I opened my mouth to breathe...

The water poured into my mouth and down my throat. It took over and that was that. Everything was different.

"Which way is your bathroom, please?" I manage, standing up. "I'm going to be sick."

Maddie

2001

Charlie's father. The love of my life. Ian.

Wait. Let me start at the beginning.

I was a “do-gooder.” A lot of my friends were do-gooders, too. Back then I lived in a part of the world that most tour guides didn't bother to mention. If they did, they used words like, “war-ravaged. Impoverished. Lawless.” All three of those adjectives would have held quite a bit of appeal for me. I found it thrilling to live in, as it was sometimes called, “The darkest, most forgotten corner of Europe.” So, I was smack-dab in the middle of my do-gooder phase teaching poor students English in one of the isolated former Soviet Bloc countries known collectively as the Balkans.

I was based in Bulgaria, and my best friend, Joanna, lived one country over from mine, in a little-known but very combustible place called Macedonia.

I first met Ian at a fund-raiser. That sounds boring, doesn't it? He was far from boring.

We were in Ohrid, a touristy resort town a few hours south of Macedonia's capital city of Skopje, not far from the Greek border. Picturesque in a run-down way, its stone villas were stacked on a hill overlooking the sun-dappled lake water. At the highest point, looking out south toward Greece, was the domed, post-card perfect thirteenth-century Church of St. John, so lovely and tranquil that it belied all the discord in the village over which it presided. If it weren't for the tangible tension among the people milling about the twisty alleys and plazas, Ohrid might have been comfortably charming. Instead, it was a holiday destination packed with people of two warring religions, and it seemed to me that everyone was eyeing everyone else with a mixture of bloodlust and suspicion. The country was on the brink of civil war.

The benefit for the Red Cross was "dinner and a show" in a ramshackle tavern perched precariously on waterlogged wooden beams, hanging over the muddy edge of a lake. Joanna worked with women and children in refugee camps around Macedonia. Her boss, Elaine, in Washington DC had asked her to attend the charity event and given her two tickets. She'd begged me to come visit for the weekend and go as her "plus one."

Jo had a habit of plaiting her hair when she was bored or nervous. Now she was hunched over her vodka tonic, fingers weaving, her hazel eyes on the handful of mousy intellectuals milling around the communal dinner tables trying to decide where they should sit. "And to think," she said, "we could be somewhere else watching paint dry and having so much more fun."

"Free drinks," I answered. I was indifferent.

"Should we just leave?" she asked, sitting up bright-eyed and suddenly enthusiastic.

"If you won't get in trouble," I answered, openly encouraging a runner.

She wilted. "I might, though. If you help me kiss a few of

the more important asses, I think it would be okay to leave in an hour.”

At that moment three men walked in, one of whom was very tall and, at least from a distance, shockingly handsome. I leaned in to whisper, “Is he on the list? I might be willing to volunteer.”

Jo leaned back and laughed. “Uh, no. I can guarantee you I’ve never seen that man before in my entire life.”

“Wait,” I said, noticing the man’s companions. “Isn’t that your friend Hillbilly Buck? From the American Embassy?”

“Holy shit, yes, it is,” Joanna answered, standing up and waving the trio over to our table.

Hillbilly Buck was our name for Mr. Buck Snyder, the whiskey, rabbit-toothed military attaché to the American Embassy who Joanna sometimes called to discuss the security of her refugee camps. We had christened him with the nickname Hillbilly Buck one night after he’d spent a long drunken dinner bragging in his southern twang that, “All these Balkan women, man, they don’t care. You can say anything. Man, you can do whatever. If you’re riding with big blue you’re still gonna get your dick wet.” “Big blue” was Hillbilly Buck’s name for his American passport.

As we pretended not to be watching their every move, Joanna and I waited to see if the men would actually come sit with us. Jo reached over, touched my arm and said, “Thank you for coming. I’m so glad I’m not here alone.”

I’d been slightly reluctant to get on that horrible bus on this particular occasion. A clash between Macedonia’s Christian majority and the growing Muslim minority had resulted in a recent escalation of violence, and like everywhere else in the region, a fog of hatred and fury hovered over the quaint mountain villages like an industrial cloud. Macedonia was no longer safe for anyone.

However, Joanna hadn’t exactly twisted my arm to get me to come. I really loved visiting her and felt lucky that we had both ended up living in Eastern Europe after graduate school. It was

however, an uncomfortable five- to eight-hour bus ride for me, depending on how long I was detained at the border separating our two countries. Also, I was tired from work.

I was at the tail end of a fourteen-month Fulbright Scholarship in Bulgaria that involved teaching English classes at the University of Sofia while working on a nonfiction book. My days were comprised of writing, travel and teaching, and I was mostly happy.

I'd met Joanna Jasinski when we were both high school students on a summer exchange program in Spain. We'd had a shared interest in linguistics, making out with Spanish boys at discos, Russian and German philosophers and *The Cure*. At the time we met, we had both wanted to "grow up" to be interpreters, and we often spoke to one another in a hodgepodge of the various languages we were studying, infuriating and alienating others. For a long time, we were one another's only friend.

She majored in international studies and became an aid worker, and I went into journalism. We were eventually both drawn to work and study in the former Soviet Bloc where we could put our Slavic language training to use, and over the past year we had visited each other more than a dozen times. We kept the wolves of loneliness growling just outside the gate.

After stopping to speak to a few people, Hillbilly Buck and the other two men began crossing the restaurant. I was able to get a better look at them as they moved out of the shadowy entrance and toward our table. Hillbilly Buck was never a handsome man, but next to these two he looked positively rodent-like. They were tall, broad at the top and slim in the hips. One was blond and angelic, with curls and cartoonishly huge blue eyes. The other man was the one Joanna and I had both noticed at once. He was strikingly shaped, with a cleft chin and shoulders like rolling hills. He walked with his eyes on the view of the lake outside, lost in thought or as if he were alone. Unafraid.

His brown hair was short on the sides and tousled on top, and

he wore dark, neatly pressed jeans. His chest. I paused there for a second. His chest. It was a show-stopper even beneath that horrible apricot-colored dress shirt. There was something boyish about his outfit, like a kid dressed up for his school musical. His classic features were more suited to a black-and-white photo, him seated at an outdoor French café with an espresso. His youthful attire looked wrong on him, and I remember thinking that if he showed up in my hometown of Meadowlark, Kansas dressed in that apricot getup, he would be beaten to a pastel pulp just for walking in the door.

Hillbilly Buck bellowed introductions so loudly that I concluded he was already drunk. “Ian and Peter, meet Joanna and...”

He snapped his fingers repeatedly in my direction.

“Madeline,” I said, pointing to myself helpfully.

“That’s right. I remember you now. Ian and Peter work for the British ambassador. Part of his new close protection team. They’ve just arrived.”

An elderly accordion player in a ragged suit suddenly started making a musical racket on the other side of the restaurant. Joanna said loudly, “I take it your bosses also made you drive down to this nerd-fest on your night off?”

Hillbilly Buck nodded irritably, but curly blond Peter leaned forward and said, in all earnestness, “I was told there’s going to be a folk dance show after the food!”

Joanna laughed out loud, her pretty face pink with delight. “Ahh. No one’s prepared you for the number of folk dance shows you’re going to have to sit through living here. The good news is not all of the singing sounds like a lamb being sacrificed.”

Peter looked perplexed. He was adorable. Massive, yet cute. Powerful but pleasant. Not smart.

Joanna touched his arm and said, “Sit down next to me. You’re officially my new favorite person.”

I snuck a few glances at Ian, who had taken the seat across from me. He appeared wholly engrossed in his menu, and took

no interest in me or Joanna whatsoever. He was reading it like he had eaten poison and on it was written the formula for the antidote. No Macedonian fish tavern menu could be that interesting.

I resolved to appear unimpressed with him, as well. A couple of minutes later, Ian had a little chuckle to himself. He leaned back, lit a cigarette, and laid his plastic menu down open on the graffiti-scratched wooden table. (The Balkans had nothing against cigarettes, not in a restaurant or even a hospital, for that matter.) After pensively raising his eyebrow, Ian sat up and said, in a charming English accent, "Well, I think I am going to go for the crap."

Jo didn't miss a beat. "In America we say 'go take a crap,' not 'go for the crap,' and what might be even more helpful to you is knowing that we would almost always keep that information to ourselves."

"That is helpful! Thank you. But," Ian said pointing to his menu, "I was referring to the Lake Ohrid crap. Right here."

"It's either that," he continued in a tone of complete seriousness, "or the house special, which is the Lake Ohrid throat." He leaned forward and fixed his tree-bark eyes on me.

"What do you fancy? The throat or the crap?"

He pushed the menu in front of me. It was immediately obvious to me that whoever had translated "trout" and "carp" for the English menu had made some very unfortunate spelling errors. "Oh I would definitely go for the throat," I answered.

Ian looked amused. Suddenly I saw myself as I supposed he did. I was wearing a conservative beige turtleneck, and I had not taken my hair down after finishing my lecture earlier in the day. I had donned my reading glasses to examine my menu, and I suddenly felt every inch the dowdy librarian I imagined he saw before him.

"Really?" he responded. "I wouldn't have thought so. You seem like a nice young lady."

Heat rose to my cheeks. He gave me a coy smile. I could see it in his eyes. He was teasing me.

“Nice shirt,” I said back, annoyed. He didn’t know me.

“Thank you,” he said, having a quick look down at what he was wearing. He then physically picked up his chair and angled it away from me and toward Joanna. She, though busy tolerating one of Hillbilly Buck’s stories, registered this realignment with a glance at Ian and a flicker of a smile.

The toothless octogenarian playing the accordion suddenly fell upon our table like a vampire bat on a herd of cows, and I started digging through my wallet for a tip.

Ian and Peter eventually left with Hillbilly Buck who announced he wanted to go somewhere “cooler.” Joanna and I stayed at the tavern, dancing for hours with the scruffy old accordion player and his equally unkempt grandsons who were in the band that came on after.

That’s how we were. Back then.