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## Tortured

~ Fall 1981 ~

SCHOOL was in full swing, and I found it difficult to wake up on time during the week. Weekends normally allowed me to sleep in a little, but on this particular Saturday, I had asked Mom to wake me early. I loved helping Dad work outdoors. It excused me from household chores and thrust me outside and where I most wanted to be. I was more adventurous than my brother or sister, so I volunteered for great outdoor escapades.

I rushed through my morning routine to join Dad outside. He was inside one of the several tomato greenhouses that occupied our property.

This greenhouse, unlike the others, was ten yards wide and twenty yards long and stood only three to four feet off the ground. It had a chest-deep trench, dug out by hand, extending the full length through the middle, and on either side, the earth was dug down about a foot from the surrounding ground. The exposed wall of dirt acted as an insulator around the interior of the greenhouse and made a planting bed.

“Hi, Dad,” I said, stooping down to enter the doorway. I climbed down the steps, and Dad smiled when he saw me.

“Good to see you up early,” he said. “Working men don’t sleep late.”

“I would have been here sooner, but Mom made me eat breakfast.”

“Good for her. Digging dirt in the woods requires lots of energy. We need fresh top soil to fill the planting beds.” He pointed to the earthen shelves that extended out on each side of the trench. Dad knew where to find rich soil ... free. Mother Nature had an endless supply for the taking in the rich bed under the canopy of forest trees.

We climbed out of the greenhouse and walked to the barn. Our workhorse, Mircea, heard us coming and let out a soft neigh.

“Grab a bucket of oats for him while I get his harness,” Dad instructed.

I enjoyed feeding Mircea from a bucket. With his long nose marauding deep in the pail, I had little fear he would bite me. Up close, I inhaled his sandalwood scent.

With Mircea fed and hitched to the wagon, Dad climbed up to sit on the wagon seat, and I hopped into the wooden box formed by four outward-slanting side rails that outlined the wagon bed. I liked standing in the front of the box to look over Dad’s shoulder as I rode along. The side rails were designed to either sit atop our wagon or homemade sled. We used the sled when snow covered the ground. The wooden box easily held two cubic yards of dirt.

Dad nudged Mircea forward with a verbal click and flick of the reins. I stood tall with a smile on my face. We didn’t exchange much conversation, but instead, we listened to the whistle of the wind and the hoof-beat of the horse.

When we got to the woods, Mircea wove through the canopy of trees at his master’s signal. Dad studied the variety of trees as much as the forest floor. Sunbeams filtered through the tree canopy, illuminating a patchwork quilt design on the rusty-colored autumn leaves. When Dad found the spot he was searching for, I grabbed my small shovel and helped him clear the area to expose the dirt. Shoveling was hard work, but it gave me a sense of pride to be included, even if I wasn’t much help because I soon tired.

After several minutes, I planted my shovel in the dirt and leaned on the handle.

“Are you tired already?” Dad asked me. He flung a spade of dirt over his shoulder into the wagon box.

My arms and upper back burned, but rather than admit it, I redirected the conversation.

“Will we ever run out of soil for the greenhouses?”

Dad chuckled. “I doubt it. God has given us more than enough good soil. I can’t wait to show you some of the most beautiful and expansive forests next year when we travel to market through the Carpathians.”

I was looking forward to that adventure. When I was younger, I would have simply been in the way. I straightened my shoulders and stood a bit taller.

“Why do the Communists always try to stop us from growing and selling our tomatoes?” I asked.

“Our family’s struggle with the Communists began before President Ceaușescu took office and way before you were born, Son,” Dad answered. “It started with your grandfather. He died the same year you were born, which is why we named you after him. He was a great man who stood firm in his convictions about freedom and fairness. Grandma Maria died less than two months before Grandpa Neculai did. Grandma was the heartbeat of his life. When she died, so did his will to live.”

“What did the Communists do to Grandpa?” I asked.

“Well, I was ten years old when a very traumatic thing happened, and since you’re ten now, I think you’re mature enough to learn a significant part of the story.” Dad stuck his shovel in the dirt and motioned for me to sit next to him on a fallen log.

~ **Summer 1946** ~

THE police roared into the driveway, spewing pebbles into the yard and dust into the air. They had come many times before to harass and intimidate, so their arrival was no surprise. What was surprising, however, was the attitude of their approach on this

particular occasion. Vehicle doors flew open before the wheels came to a complete stop, and men jumped out with malicious expressions. Before a word was spoken, it was apparent they were on a serious mission.

“Mr. Cismigiu!” one shouted in an authoritative voice. “Come outside immediately, or we will forcefully enter.”

Several officers had exited the far side of their vehicles and remained there. They had heard that Neculai had a stash of hunting rifles, and they kept the vehicles between themselves and the farmhouse windows. The air was stagnant and heavy. The disturbed dust rolled away from the vehicles like waves in slow motion.

Neculai Cismigiu exited the front door as stately as his name sounded. His wife, Maria, and his son watched anxiously from the window. His expression was not of surprise or alarm, nor was it threatening. He simply locked eyes on the lieutenant and kept walking forward off the porch. He knew who had yelled his name.

The other officers stood on full alert, their body language directing attention to the lieutenant. Not a word was spoken. The crunch of gravel pierced the silence as Neculai walked across the driveway. He stopped and faced the lieutenant, close enough for a handshake that did not happen.

Lieutenant Victor Căpreanu was a familiar face and name to Neculai. The police force and officials assigned to govern a city, county, or region were made up predominately of citizens from the same area. Others might be transferred in from the outside to ensure proper training and adherence to the communist rules, but often one’s new worst enemy might have been an old acquaintance. Lieutenant Victor and Neculai had been schoolmates and had known each other since youth. They were never close friends in school, but they had not been enemies either.

The lieutenant exhibited a billy goat nature, not content until he had bullied his way to the top. It did not matter if anything or anyone got knocked off in the process. He had often drawn attention to himself by force.

Victor and Neculai had chosen vastly different paths in life. Victor had embraced communist ideals once he realized that such a pursuit was a fast track to the top of a rocky pinnacle. Communism needed a heavy hand to enforce infringement of liberty. This suited Victor's personality.

The established elite in Bucharest may not have approved of all his methods, but at certain times, they probably found a ruthless man like Victor useful. This was one of those moments.

"Hello, Victor."

The eyes of Victor's posse darted between the faces of the two men. Neculai was unarmed, but one officer cautiously moved his right arm backward, resting a palm on his holstered revolver. Tension filled the air.

Neculai spoke calmly. "You called me out here ... and here I am."

"You have lied to us," Lieutenant Căpreanu accused. "I will ask you once more, and only once, to surrender your guns. We have more than one witness who provided all the proof we need that you have guns. We are not going to waste any more time looking for them. You, Mr. Cismigiu, will tell us where they are immediately. If you don't, you will wish you had."

Neculai suspected that neighbors, hoping to gain personal favor, had become informants and told the authorities that he was harboring undisclosed firearms.

"I can't give you," he stressed, "what I don't have."

He knew exactly where the guns were hidden. He had wrapped them in protective cloth and lowered them into an abandoned well. But it was true that he did not have them at the moment. The guns were safely out of reach.

Victor lunged forward and swung his right fist upward and jabbed deeply into Neculai's gut. Victor's arm was massive and his punch powerful.

Neculai had no time to tighten his abdomen to absorb the blow. The shock wave shot upward through his chest cavity, forcing the air from his lungs and bruising many organs along its path. Neculai doubled over. Stones punctured his knees as his body sank to the ground.

Victor kicked his foot outward, catching Neculai in the crotch then smashed his knee into Neculai's face as he fell forward.

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Watching from the window, Maria gasped. She grabbed Cuța by the arm as he darted for the front door.

"Son, I know how you feel," she said, and then lowered her voice. "If only I had one of his guns! I would aim for the heart of the savage."

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Neculai curled onto his side and vomited.

Victor was not finished. He grabbed Neculai's hair, yanking his head back at an odd angle.

"Have I made myself clear?" he roared.

Neculai did not answer. Victor released his hold with a thrust, and dust and gravel scattered when Neculai's head bounced off the ground.

Victor circled his prey.

Neculai gasped for air as he rolled to his knees and tried to stand. Blood dripped from Neculai's mouth. He braced his hands on his thighs, pushed himself to an upright position, and turned to face his opponent.

"I didn't hear your answer," Victor sneered.

Neculai whispered distinctly. "You ... will ... never ... get ... my ... guns."

"Ah, so now you admit you have them," Victor said triumphantly. He snapped his fingers and an officer appeared at his side.

"Prepare the boiling water," Victor ordered.

Officer Gheorghe sprinted to the porch. Neculai flinched, as if to give chase, then grabbed his bruised rib cage.

"Don't worry, Neculai." Victor laughed. "We are not here to torture your wife. That might be another day, if you don't cooperate. We're simply going to borrow a little water and boil it on your stove." Victor's voice thickened with sarcasm. "Your wife won't object, will she?"

The house door crashed open as Officer Gheorghe bolted through it. Maria screamed. She grabbed Cuța's hand, and the two ran to the bedroom and shoved the door shut.

Cupboard doors slammed and pans clanged as the officer searched for a large stove pot. Moments later, water could be heard sloshing from a bucket to fill the chosen vessel.

Victor retrieved a pack of cigarettes, sliding it slowly from his shirt pocket. He ran his finger over the cigarette filters, as if counting, and then pinched the last one, extracting and lifting it to his lips with the theatrics of a man with whom time was of no concern. Lighting it, Victor inhaled deeply ... and then aimed and blew a dense cloud of smoke into Neculai's face.

Neculai dodged and stumbled.

"I strongly advise you to stay right here," Victor said. "Don't even think about leaving."

Neculai glared at the Lieutenant and Victor smirked. This was not a time for words.

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Officer Gheorghe came out of the house carrying the steaming pot of boiling water. Lieutenant Victor motioned to another officer on the opposite side of a nearby police vehicle. The officer reached inside and grabbed something off the floorboard. As he rounded the rear of the vehicle, in the officer's hands were polished knee-high military boots.

Neculai's eyes widened.

A wicked grin curled the edge of Victor's lips as he took the boots. He placed them carefully on the ground in front of each of Neculai's feet with precision, as if to avoid marring the polish. He stepped back and with a nod beckoned Officer Gheorghe to pour the boiling water into each boot.

"Don't make the mistake of disobeying me again, Mr. Cismigiu."

*Maybe there is a twinge of guilt hidden deep within the man after all, Neculai thought. Maybe Victor can't use my first name, as that is too personal for what he is about to demand.*

“Step into the boots and shove your feet to the bottoms,” Victor commanded. “Do *not* test my patience, or I’ll drag your wife out here and give you the privilege of watching her do the honors.”

Neculai closed his eyes and drew in a long, deep breath. He would never allow a finger of Victor to touch and harm his wife, but to willfully step into boots of boiling water was an action beyond courage.

Victor and Gheorghe grabbed Neculai, and he stiffened but did not struggle. Hoisting his bruised body, the two men hovered Neculai over the boots, and Victor snarled. “Point your toes!”

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Maria’s face was buried in her bed pillow, one arm wrapped tightly around her son, her body trembling with tears. Her husband’s scream pierced the air but did not drown out the roar of laughter from Lieutenant Victor.

Vehicle doors slammed and tires spun as the officers sped away.

Maria ran through the house and out the front door. Her son could outrun his mother in a normal footrace, but this was nothing normal. She was jumping off the front porch when her son sprang from the front door.

Neculai had collapsed on the ground and fainted from the pain. Steaming water poured from the boots and soaked into the dry ground. Maria knelt at his side, caressing his head and screaming for help.

Cuța stood frozen with shock at the sight of his father’s raw, red legs. He did not know what to do. To pull off the boots would rip the flesh away. The scalding water had already emptied. He approached his mom and stood behind her, reaching down to hug her shoulders as she rocked and sobbed.

“Run, Cuța,” she whimpered, her voice trembling. “Run for help!”

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Dad and I sat in silence for a moment. I didn't know what to say or do. There was a faraway look in his eyes. He finally turned toward me.

"That moment changed me forever, Son," he said, shaking his head. "Since that day, I've had a hatred for communism. Just like your grandfather, I knew I could never surrender my pride and sign my allegiance to that party and its ideals."

"Did they ever torture Grandpa again?" I asked.

"They tortured him repeatedly, and not just physically. The Communists took land, guns, and freedom from many families. Grandfather lost a lot of land, but he never revealed his hidden stash of guns. He loved to hunt."

Hunting was a dream for me. "Will we ever be able to go hunting?"

"Sadly, we are not permitted to hunt anymore. The privilege only is granted to Communist Party members loyal to Dictator Ceaușescu. You, might share his first name, but that is the only thing I hope you ever have in common with him. As you know, I help Vasile, when the elites from Bucharest come to hunt after we get our first good snow."

I knew Vasile was the game warden in our county in addition to being the forest warden.

"Maybe I can ask permission for you to get close to the action," Dad said. "It might be easier to obtain Vasile's permission than your mother's." Dad smiled and laid a hand on my shoulder. "Let's finish filling this wagon before lunch."

He stood, grabbed his shovel, and continued tossing soil into the box. I rose slowly from the log, my mind reeling with the story he'd told me, trying to imagine what stepping into a boot filled with boiling water would feel like. As I shoveled, I thought wistfully about the grandfather I had never met.

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When we returned home, we unloaded the soil onto a large pile near the greenhouses. After lunch, we shoveled the dirt from the pile into

a suspended wooden frame where a wire mesh separated the small rocks, roots, and sticks.

We mixed the clean soil with the right amount of sand and aged chicken and cow manure to create the perfect consistency. This was our secret recipe.