

The Red Van

The blood stains on the pavement, fresh and crimson
In which the old broken man lays gasping
The eight vampires broke his bones, without reason
Except that he was Bosnian and that he was Muslim

In the red van they cruise the streets of my city
To screams and pleading they show no sensitivities
They torture and slaughter without remorse or pity
A seven year old boy witnessing the atrocities

At a young age they tried to make me choose
My father was Orthodox, mother's parents Muslim and Catholic
It made no sense to me for any of my family to lose
For the sake of sectarian divisions and fascist realpolitik

The city of Banja Luka was home to four major religions
Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox, and Jews
But in 1992, ethnic cleansing came to surrounding regions
Extremist fascists emerged, to pay Muslims their dues

The year is 92, and the summer is hot beyond all senses
Sectarian nationalists have taken control of my town
Bosnia is an inferno of destruction, rape and massacres
The worst are the dark nights, when the sun goes down

At night they come to commit their mortal sins
To slaughter and torture you, if you are Catholic or Muslim
But they even murder their own religious kin
Those who speak out, are left broken, dying gasping

I remember: the elderly couple next to my uncle's door
The old woman gave me baklava, chocolate, bon-bons
Of two different religions they were, swimming for the same shore
Their marriage one of love, respect, tolerance

The Red Van Squad visited their home
The neighbours watched them leave in an hour
For days, the elderly couple seemed to be gone
Until younger neighbours came in by breaking their door

They found the old man laying gutted on his living room floor
The old woman decapitated, her head in the toilet bowl
On the table, 7 coffee cups, Turkish coffee poured
The Vampires had coffee, before to heaven releasing their souls

I remember when they came for my grandparents and me
I see them now, standing in my grandparents' apartment
"What is your faith" – he growls at my grandfather
The machete ready in his hand, for his gruesome judgement

Four of them stood surrounding my grandparents
The leader had giant fists and a big moustache
The rusty machetes encrusted with dry blood stains
Made to decapitate, mutilate, and slash

A shiver of fear ran through my body's every section
I ran into the foyer of the apartment, where they stood
He turned and looked in my direction
Walked towards me, in a deceptively cheerful mood

My grandparents turned pale white
As he placed his machete on my shoulder
"Whose boy is this" – he demanded, with might
His hand on my head heavy as a boulder

“My daughter’s son” my grandfather replied
“A doctor in the army, where your people forced her to go”
“Enough of my family’s blood to you we have supplied”
“I am Catholic, my wife Muslim, to you neither friend nor foe”

The leader was stunned, eyes wide, face shocked
Shocked at such defiance, disappointed, in silent rage
The Red Van death squad’s intentions were blocked
By my mother’s status, so he turned over the page

He looked at the death list in his hand, said “Let’s go”
“*Idemo, work to do, visits to pay*”

The Red Van left, more tragedy to sow
More women to rape, more men to slay

Many years have passed since that fateful day
I experienced Bosnia’s war for two more years
As refugees we came to Canada, our lives to save
To put behind us traumas, nightmares, and fears

But a part of me will forever remain
A 7 year old boy, starring at death
Through writing I sought peace to obtain
Through yoga I learned to control my racing breath

No I am not traumatized, nor am I insane
I know that I possess stable mental health
A number of lessons I did however gain
I share them, so the dead did not in vain meet their death

Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Atheists
Are only human beings at their birth
God never intended them to be divided by their faiths
But united in human brotherhood, on the Earth

I didn't which was my side, or which religions were good or bad
"There are only two types of people" my grandfather said
"Any other divisions are blasphemies of those who are mad:"
"The good and the evil. And the evil are by no religion led"

In these times of great fear and tragedy
When not one but a million Goebbels are spreading hate
Remember that fear comes from lack of understanding
Read books, think for yourself, control your own mind and fate

All religions are founded upon the Golden Rule
Do unto others as you would have them do unto you
Reject fascism, do not be their puppet and fool
"This above all, to thine own self be true"

Yes I am a Catholic, Muslim, and Orthodox
The Red Van death squad could not break my love of humanity
My rejection of division seldom understood, often mocked
Brought me enlightenment, tolerance, gave me sanity

There is no division between the religions and races
Only between the haves and have nots
The devil appears with many faces
Inspiring hatred, division, until one's soul rots

The guns are silent now in my homeland of Bosnia
Divided Bosnians are living in misery of status quo peace
Yet, divisions remain, scars upon their collective soul
Their every day is filled with uncertainty and unease

I still see in my mind: the Red Van cruising the Banja Luka streets
Sometimes, at night, I still hear their banging on our door
My breath quickens, my heart skips several beats
From clenching the bed sheets, my fists are tired, elbows sore

To not repeat its mistakes, scrolls of history are read
Their lesson is: reject hatred and all that extremists say
No religion inspires murder, these are lies media-fed
Therefore extinguish intolerance within; never let it see the light of day

Disarm fear with knowledge, with true stories, books, written and read
To the dead of Bosnia, with this, my homage I pay
Only the dead have seen the end of war, Plato said
Oh how true, the philosopher's words remain, to this very day

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