

# In The Old Village

- Walter Cummins

As dawn cast a dim light over the room, Karlik found himself sitting on a wooden bench, one of several rows in a small wooden building of bare beams and raw lathing. He was wearing a grey suit of a heavy coarse fabric, the trouser creases like ridges beneath his damp palms. The material gave off a sweet, oily odor. Sunrays filtered in through a single small window of ancient panes high in one wall. When Karlik looked around him, he saw the room was filled with people from his old village, the men also in dark suits, posed as he was with hands on their thighs, leaning forward, but looking down at the broad splintered floor boards, none meeting his eyes. The women stared straight ahead, expressionless, some twisting beaded necklaces with fingers at their throats. But he had left this village many years before and had no memory of the trip back. His life was in the city.

Before Karlik could speak, ask what was happening, he heard someone tugging at the doors on one side of the building, a creaking at the hinges. He expected people to get up to help from inside, push shoulders against the stubborn wood. But no one moved. He found his body rocking back and forth, just slightly, mimicking the movement of the doors. When they broke open with a loud cracking, as if the wood had splintered, he gasped and quickly covered his mouth. None of the others made a sound.

Four old men stood in the entranceway, peering inside, measuring space. Karlik blinked and remembered who they were, how much they had aged, shrunken, the flesh of their faces collapsed, their suits hanging on thin bones. After a moment they nodded at each other and moved back out of sight, only to reappear with a large wooden crate hoisted on their shoulders. They stepped through the doorway, clenching their jaws, staggering under the weight. Why wasn't anyone helping, Karlik wondered, the younger ones, the men like himself. He wanted to rise and go to them but could not move.

Shuffling across the floor, barely lifting their feet, they took a very long time to reach the center of the room and finally kneel to set the crate on two of the benches that had been moved forward, out of place. Three of the old men stepped backwards until they stood pressed against the lathing of the front wall. But the fourth went back

outside and, in a moment, returned with a wooden toolbox. He picked out a mallet and a notched iron lever and held them up to the sunlight, as if assuring that he had chosen correctly.

The old man positioned the lever under the crate top and swung the mallet. The iron rang against the metal of a nail. He swung again and pried upward, swinging and prying, moving the lever around the edge of the crate, raising the top bit by bit. Karlik saw that he was the only one in the room watching the man's progress, flinching at each swing of the mallet. Yet he was mesmerized, barely daring to breathe.

When the top was loosened, the other three old men stepped forward to help lift it, and Karlik realized the wooden box was not a crate at all, but a coffin, a body inside, face in shadow, only the flesh of folded hands visible. It must be a funeral. He was back in his village for a funeral.

The building darkened, the sunlight suddenly gone. Karlik glanced up toward the window, expecting to see heavy clouds. But it was the branches of a huge tree swaying in a fierce wind, blocking the light and seconds later letting it stream past. Darkness and brilliance alternated within the room, so rapidly Karlik felt dizzy, gritting his teeth and swallowing again and again to hold back the nausea.

In one of the flashes, when the room glowed, he thought the sides of the coffin were quivering, the ends sliding backwards. Then a long darkness, and he was not sure. But at the next moment of light, the ends dropped to the floor, the clatter resonating from the rafters. Both sides teetered and the darkness returned. Karlik heard their fall, first one and then the other.

Now he could see the body flat and rigid on the benches, dressed in a grey suit very much like the one his was wearing, the exposed skin of the hands and face dark and leathery. He wanted to speak, to tell the old men to repair the coffin, that what was happening was an outrage. But before he could open his mouth, the body began to twitch, first the arms rising with stiff, halting movements, then the trunk. The corpse was lifting itself, and the others just waited as if nothing were happening.

Darkness returned, but only for a second, and now the light penetrated, dazzling in its intensity. The corpse turned its face to Karlik, straightened an arm and pointed directly at him, empty eyes fixed on his. It was his father, a man who had been buried long before this day. A message had reached him in the city years ago: "Your father is dead." Karlik remembered it. He was sure it had happened.

"You!" Karlik heard the word roared, the sound like a thunder that shook the room. He rose and plunged forward, tumbling people from the bench in front of him. At last he could speak. "Stop this!" he cried out to the old men. "Stop this now!" The others began to moan, everyone in the room, steady, in unison, louder and louder. All light disappeared. Darkness was total, and hands fell upon him.