

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Julie Pimblet **Making Connections**

SONNY AND I had hitch-hiked all the way to the boot of Italy and were planning to take the ferry the next day to what was then Yugoslavia. We wandered around awhile on the outskirts of Pescara until finally we found just the perfect place to crash. It was a great field. It was large and lush and flat with few rocks. There were tents set up already so we knew it was a good place to sleep for the night. The tents surrounded one campfire so we reckoned these people were traveling together. Their proximity gave us some sense of security. Such was the logic of the road that you just believed that anyone traveling was an adventurer and you were safe sleeping beside them.

They were a rowdy bunch, laughing and drinking and dancing around the fire. There were about eight people in three tents and a large van. Everyone was bustling about cleaning up and getting ready for darkness--shouting at each other. Tossing sleeping bags about, they were just generally making a lovely racket. We had very little to clean up and began rolling out our sleeping bags on top of the newspapers we had collected to provide some needed padding. We were using the last of the day to catch up on some journal writing and reading.

At about that time the young boy accompanying the group spied us and came loping over for a chat. The boy was preternaturally beautiful with deep raven hair curling around his face, piercing black eyes and startling white teeth which he kept in a perennial smile. He was tall and slim and very animated.

He explained that they were a family of gypsies on an outing touring around Italy. They were a matriarch, her four sons, including Yanoosh, this young man, three wives and a four month old baby. I explained that we were Americans--brother and sister-- traveling wherever the wind blew us and on our way now to his country. He was really pleased that we were going to visit Yugoslavia because few tourists came there in the 1970s and he knew we would find it beautiful.

He told us he would be right back and returned to his camp. We were surprised that he left so abruptly but maybe he was just tired of talking with us.

"What do you think?" Sonny asked without looking up from his book.

"Nice kid," I said, continuing to write in my journal.

"Hey" Yanoosh yelled, coming back across the field loaded down with stuff.

"For you," he gestured, handing us blankets and pillows. He explained that his mother was very upset that we were sleeping on the ground, especially, the girl. That would be me. We were very grateful and asked that they come over and say hello.

The whole party arrived and Sonny and I got up to greet them. Yanoosh introduced his brothers and sisters-in-law, the baby and his Mom. All of the names didn't even stop to register as they passed through my

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brain. They were just too hard for me to take in at the end of a long day hitch-hiking. I smiled at everyone. We had only a tiny bit of cheese that had to serve as breakfast so we didn't even have anything to offer them. But we did ask them to sit and they all squatted, putting their bums on the ground and their knees up in the air. I always thought it would be impossible to squat like that without killing your knees but over the years I have seen it as a common way to rest for many cultures.

They were an exquisitely beautiful people. They all had the same thick dark hair as young Yanoosh, tied back or braided on top of their heads for the women. All of them were dressed in deep rich colors, including the men who wore loose-fitting pants of reds and golds and yellows with open-necked shirts. The women wore scarves and shawls and long skirts of the same vibrant shades and layer after layer of necklaces, rings, bracelets and earrings. I wondered how long it took them to shed all those ornaments when they took a bath.

They had chocolate colored skin which set off beautiful white teeth—perpetually displayed in wide smiles. As they squatted they gestured at me, I guess wondering why I had so little ornamentation for a woman. I must say I felt under-dressed with jeans and a t-shirt and only a single pair of earrings. The sisters-in-law carried on an animated conversation, pointing toward me and making comments. I smiled in their direction.

Sonny decided that the most hospitality we could offer was music so he got out his guitar. There was a tremor of excitement in the air at the prospect of music as you can imagine with a family of gypsies. Yanoosh explained that they had left their instruments at home because of the limited space in the van, so they were thrilled to be hearing a concert. Thus appreciated, Sonny burst into a rousing rendition of "Rocky Raccoon," an easy-to-sing Beatles song. The group listened attentively. At the end of the song they stood up abruptly, bowed, and hurried back to their tents.

"Maybe the Beatles aren't their thing," I said to a clearly disappointed Sonny.

"Well. O-K," he said replacing the guitar in its case. "Guess I won't be needing this tonight."

It was getting dark now anyway so we turned in. As usual we woke with the sun. We got out of our sleeping bags and did a quick wash with towellettes and brushed our teeth, spitting the residue onto the ground. Not a lot of posh etiquette when you are sleeping in a field. After we were finished Yanoosh appeared clearly having seen that our ablutions were completed.

"Come, come," he gestured.

He led us across the field to the gypsy camp. Everything was very orderly and neat with each tent put up perfectly and all belongings stacked inside. There was a generous campfire going with the family milling around in front of it. The naked baby was lying on a stack of triangular shaped pieces of cloth on the floor of one of the tents contentedly chewing on his toes. The matriarch was fixing eggs in a huge skillet at one end of the fire and a large loaf of freshly baked bread was just cooling at the other.

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Having lived mostly out of grocery stores for four weeks we were really excited to see eggs. There was never any place to cook for us so the smell of the eggs and the look of the eggs was our current definition of heaven. They were so tantalizing that we tried not to believe they were actually for us. We weren't sure if this was going to be just a nice visit or a full breakfast but we would try to be happy either way. The doubt was soon erased by the matriarch. One of her grown-up sons was sitting on the only stool in the place while everyone else was beginning to assume the squatting position---with the exception of us, of course.

In a burst of fury the Mother told him to get off the stool, pulling it out from under him so that he hit the dirt. Undeterred he just got up with a laugh and brushed the dirt from his clothes. With a sweeping gesture she indicated that this was where I was supposed to sit, the most honored guest. At first I demurred insisting---by way of frantic hand gestures---that we save it for her when she is ready to slow down. She overruled me and I took the seat.

The rest of the family hunkered down and waited for chow time. When the eggs were ready each person got a plate to make serving easy for the Mom. They gave us plates too but she took mine and spooned some eggs onto it before I could wait my turn line. One of the sons gave me a thick piece of bread and he showed me how to spoon the eggs on top of the bread for eating with my hands.

I stared at the feast awaiting me. The eggs were fluffy and flecked with tiny specks of herbs. They were beautiful, the color of the sun. The bread, however was a different matter. It was at least three inches deep. How could I take a bite of those eggs when the bread was so enormous? Not to worry, that same son now sitting in the dirt, did a mime for me showing me just to open my mouth very, very wide and take a big bite through the eggs and the bread. I didn't want to offend my hostess so I gamely opened up and took that bite. I was nearly in ecstasy savoring the thought of freshly-cooked eggs. As I bit down, there was the most searing pain shooting through my mouth. I couldn't even gasp because my mouth was full of the oversized bread and eggs. My eyes immediately filled with tears and they started streaming down my face as I fought back the gag. The eggs were fired with pepper or chili so hot I could not even take another bite. I clutched my mouth closed, fearful that if I opened up all of the food would spill out.

The eggs continued to torture the inside of my mouth. I turned red. The tears continued to stream down my cheeks. The gypsies were convulsed with laughter. Clearly they couldn't believe that anyone could be such a wimp. As tears continued to flow, they continued to laugh and Sonny was just confused.

"Is it too hot? Do you want some water?" He asked.

I shook my head yes and then no. He meant temperature, not spice. I was letting the eggs I had in my mouth lie there as the saliva worked on them and started breaking the bite down to a smaller size.

"Pepper, pepper!" I gasped, finally having enough space in my mouth to talk. "They make their eggs with hot pepper."

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What a drag. So many weeks without eggs and now that we have found them they are the enemy. Sonny has a cast iron stomach so he chomped away to the delight of our troop of hosts. Yanoosh knew I was suffering so he took my plate away and gave me a nice orange to eat. Everyone smiled at me. I munched on the orange while the whole family devoured the eggs. I looked sadly at the precious golden treasure as it disappeared down mouths that were not mine. I sighed.

My repeated requests for the Mom to take the seat went unanswered as she never did really sit down. With all those grown-up children you would think someone would help her, but not so. She bustled around the fire with her large bum knocking into the paraphernalia stacked up around it. Her dress swished in the dirt almost as if she were dancing. There were plates to clean and pack and food to store and bread to cut up for everyone, none of whom were making a move to assist her. She didn't seem to mind, as she was intent on finishing the chores. The rest of the family squatted around the food in animated conversation with their colorful clothes floating in the air accompanying their broad gestures and their jewelry flashing in the sun. Sonny and I looked a bit pale and boring by comparison. Still the warmth of the fire, the generosity of the sharing and for Sonny, the endless bounty of the eggs, enveloped us into the family.

About this time the baby started to stir in the tent. He began making little whimpering sounds. Do you think his own mom jumped up to attend to him? Not so. The grandma, the matriarch, stopped her work in the breakfast clean-up and went into the tent. In her arms she carried a small plastic basin full of steaming water. "My God" I thought, "It's bath time for baby."

Everyone reading this just flashed on a memory of seeing a baby being bathed or bathing one themselves. It is a very cautious maneuver with the baby being held closely and the water being put, oh-so-gently-along the back and the arms. Great care is taken with the baby's eyes and ears, ensuring that no soap or water gets into them. Gently, gently goes the baby bath.

As I was thinking about this myself, remembering bathing my younger brothers and sisters, the grandmother spread her hand flat across the baby's chest hooking her little finger under one arm and her thumb under the other. This gave her a total grip on the baby from his front. With one swooshing movement she turned the baby upside down and plunged him head first into the basin of water. She pulled him out quickly to reveal a wailing infant, mouth totally agape, and face the color of deep scarlet. He shrieked at the top of his lungs. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

Not to be deterred she took the soap in her free hand and grinded it onto the head of the baby. Thus soaped up she used the suds and with two soapy fingers drove them into his ears. He screamed bloody murder. Now he started kicking and trying to knock her hand away with his tiny fists. His face contorted in rage at his terrible predicament.

With a deft flick she turned him upside down and plunged him into the water. Back out he came and again with those same two fingers she

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rubbed them in his ears and his eyes quickly dunking him back into the basin. He sputtered in fury.

Finally finished she dried him on a towel while he struggled, wailed, kicked, screamed, and shrieked. Ignoring his protestations she placed him in the center of the triangular pieces of diaper and pieces of material laid out on the floor of the tent. He kicked and screamed and flailed about, his face a crimson mask. Patiently she slid his arms down alongside his body and began wrapping him in the material. Right over the body, left over the body, layer after layer she put the material on him, wrapping him up. At the end she took the pieces that were hanging down and folded them up before tying the whole bundle. He was essentially a papoose, ready for mailing.

With the shrieking package in her hand she placed him tenderly in a sling that was strung across the tent. Two pushes sent the sling gently swinging. And, just like that, within two seconds the screaming, crying, wailing, fighting infant was totally, quietly, effortlessly and deeply asleep. Sonny and I exchanged glances. We had a lot to learn.