

## FORGIVENESS

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translated from the Bulgarian by Eireene Nealand

*Walking the streets of Milan, I found myself faced with a drunken beggar. [...] Suddenly dawned on me that he, with his few begged coins, had long before the rest of us reached, a happiness, some of us have striven for all of our lives, and which we, with all our ambitions and efforts, never reached.*

St. Augustine, "Confessions," Book VI, Chapter 6

I went out to beg in the streets just after Christmas Eve. This year, for the first time in my life, I had neither sarmi<sup>1</sup> nor pumpkinbread on the table for the occasion. Up until then, I'd scraped together enough money to make ends meet despite the difficult times. Eh, I'm not complaining. Though not easy, my life has been good. Most of it, I spent as a photographer for The Bulgarian Union of Photographers, yes, the official photography company of the Bulgarian state. After the 90's, however, everything fell apart. Our union, you see, was dismantled. It was part of the Communist Minister's Council. My husband was also a photographer, so after The Changes<sup>2</sup>, we had no idea what to do - no money coming in, unemployment everywhere. We owned a small room on the ground floor of the building we lived in and so, in the spirit of the new times, we decided to start our own business and to open a restaurant. For two years, we tightened our belts, and poured in all our savings, decorating the place with love and our dreams. At the beginning, we managed to break even and even earned a little money. Soon after, however, some unpleasant people began to appear. Parked out front in were black cars with tinted windows. They entered, ordered, and purposefully failed to pay, drank, fought and even shot guns. My husband, when he asked them to leave, or at least to deal with their problems

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<sup>1</sup> "Sarmi" is a Bulgarian traditional dish cooked for Christmas. It is made by cabbage leaves, stuffed with minced meat and rice

<sup>2</sup> The Changes is a widespread term in Bulgaria (in Bulgarian: "Prehod"), which addresses the period after 1989. It is related to the changes that happened right after this year, connected with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. After 1989 started the transition of the country from a totalitarian political system and socialist economy toward democracy, capitalism, and a free market economy.

outside, found a gun pinned to his head. Finally, they set the whole place on fire and that was the end of it. Soon after, came the Videnov's winter of massive inflation and no bread on the shelves – that must have been 1997. It was incredibly hard. People were cold, starving, and miserable. Our family struggled with the question of where and how to find enough money just for bread. Then, my son went abroad, emigrated, to seek a better life -- at least for himself. Shortly thereafter, my husband unexpectedly died, and suddenly I found myself a single woman without work or money. Those years were hard, but even then, I didn't fare so badly that I had to beg on the streets. Somehow, I pushed through those times. Then, with the coming of the new century, which arrived along with our king, the situation became even worse. His majesty and I are almost the same age. I was born in '36, he – '37. But we were like the Prince and the Pauper, same ages, different situations. Along he came, ruled the country for a while, made promises -- for things like a better life -- reclaimed some land he said was his own, and left. Ah well... What haven't I seen! Next came the kind of politicians that make highways their priority, as it is now proclaimed on the news. Well I do not know how one can have such a priority while people are starving. But it's their business. Here I am, 70-odd years old, with nearly 40 years of service behind me, and a minimal pension of 150 leva.<sup>3</sup> Don't ask me how long it's been since I've paid for heating and water. I'm barely feeding myself, let alone paying for something extra. For several months during the summer, I lived completely by candlelight. Thank god it was warm, so I didn't have to switch on the heater. A good woman, a neighbor, took pity on me and helped me get a job as a cleaner in a shop. I was grateful, since at my age hardly anyone would have hired me for another job. And after all a salary is a salary, I managed to pay for electricity and heating, and water. After three months, however, a new boss arrived and as soon as he learned how old I was, he ordered me not to come back the next day. I was not of a "working age," he said. For a while, I went from friend to friend, in search of another job, but no one would take me on. I don't blame people. I already had difficulty walking. I could barely see. I'm not as flexible as I was before. And there are so many young people who can do even the lightest work more nimbly than I can. It was just before winter and I decided: I'll wait for Christmas to pass, for our savior to be born, and then, shame or no shame, I'll go out into the streets, begging. The first day, when I showed up on Vitosha Boulevard, I wondered where and how should I stand. "Poor you, Angelina, how can you bear it: to bring out your cardboard box and spread it on the pavement like you're the poorest person on earth?" I thought to myself. My internal struggle was excruciating. I seated myself lightly on the window ledge of a closed shop, under construction, in front of the cartons pasted on the window. I sat and pretended I was

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<sup>3</sup> 150 Bulgarian leva (BGN) is approximately 90 US dollars (USD). This amount is the minimum monthly pension in Bulgaria after the 90s and almost the same up until now. It is the full income of many of the retired people.

waiting for someone. Looking from side to side, blinking my only seeing eye, while the other, clouded by glaucoma, went deep into sleep under its eyelid, I slouched in a hand-knit cap, given to me by my grandmother. I also wore an old jacket of my husband's. It was thick and warm, a bit big, but I thought – come now, this is excessive vanity, I don't need to go out dressed as if for a ball? After two hours I gathered the courage to pull out the cardboard box and place it in front of me. Then, I waited. I had no gloves, so I kept my hands curled into each other to keep them warm. The wind howled, flurries and snow began. I was freezing like a dog and all the while busy people passed by me and the empty box. I knew what they must be saying to themselves, "Another beggar!" And they would be right, it wasn't just me! A little way down from me, a young boy, ragged, poor and slim as a recently-planted willow had also stretched out his hands. Later I realized he was a junkie. And surely not yet eighteen. Across the street, one dark-faced guy made himself look like a cripple. He'd wrapped his supposedly wounded leg with bandages, and was dragging it while begging for money. Around two hours must have passed since I had been sitting there when a gypsy woman arrived, all in rags. She began berating me, scolding me and menacingly waving her hands, telling me to clear out of there immediately. Her point: this was her spot! She had "worked" here for years. She kicked away my box, and I left. What else could I do? Even in the streets, it's a struggle, you know! There are positions, a hierarchy, rules that must be followed if one wants to survive. The next day, I saw this same woman, wrapped in scarves, and deliberately hunched like an old woman, so that people would pity her. Anyway, I moved to another place and slowly began to get used to my new role. Shameful or not, every day I sit out on the streets, starting at noon, when it is the warmest, until 5 or 6 in the evening. I stay there on the street with the little cardboard box in front of me, watching dozens of empty faces pass by. Women in high boots proudly knock their heels on the pavement, and by the guilty looks they cast toward me and my empty box, I can see that they suffer too, begging for love. Men in suits, walking confidently with mobile phones in their hands, talk importantly, while from the look in their eyes, I can see they also beg for a little truth in their own world of lies. Families with children pass by, souls begging for something to fill the emptiness eating them from the inside. And while they pity me, I cry with my only good eye for them. Hell is on earth! I realize. Here we suffer so that we can purify ourselves for a better life after we disappear into the great beyond. So let me tell you, I am not ashamed of what I do, because I realize that everyone on earth is a beggar. Each of us begs for a piece of his own missing truth. And so, I pray for forgiveness for all the sinful souls who pass by me every day.