CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Father Larkin's line about how he didn't mean anything "pejorative" when he used the word "delusional" kept coming back to me. It was as if I had been shown an escape hatch by someone who didn't know how to operate it. I spent weeks looking for directions in the collected works of Carl Jung and came away bitterly disappointed. Marian apparitions were perhaps the purest example that existed of an archetype emerging from the collective unconscious, wrote Jung, who regarded Bernadette's visions in the grotto at Lourdes as among the most significant events in human history. When I probed for what he meant by this, I found that Jung repeatedly described visions resulting from mystical raptures as both actual and as imaginary, as natural and as synthetic, as projections and as precognitions. God existed, he asserted, but perhaps only in our minds, and that should be good enough. For me, it wasn't. "Jung was always very careful to 'dodge'—your word—the ultimate question," conceded the director of Chicago's Jung Institute, Dr. Peter Mudd, when I sought his opinion. "All he would say is, 'There is something in the human psyche that acts *as if it* were divine.' And he would leave it at that." Contemplating the great man's equivocation, I felt dull and frightened and increasingly bereft. "At least Sigmund fucking Freud knew what he believed," I told Dr. Mudd, who chuckled into the telephone.

The birth of my twin son and daughter in May 1997 brought relief. Finally, I had two answers bigger than any of my questions. I called myself a born-again parent. As months passed, though, I became increasingly aware of the melancholy growing inside me. It began with an acute awareness of vulnerability. All that was dark and dangerous disturbed me in ways I had never experienced, at least not since my own early childhood. Knowing my children were at risk, knowing that the world was full of people who didn't give a damn about them, and most of all, knowing that I could never protect them completely made me sad and

frightened and, finally, angry. I began to take evil personally, and in some way to blame God for that. The Greek philospher Epicurus had framed the problem for me quite succinctly when he observed that there were two logical possibilities: One, God can prevent evil and chooses not to (and therefore is Himself not entirely good), or, two, God chooses to prevent evil and cannot (and therefore is Himself not entirely powerful).

During the spring of 1998, I grew distracted by the question of a diabolical presence in the world. Jung's answer was exactly the sort of obfuscatory twaddle that had made him such a disappointment to me: "Evil is terribly real for each individual. If you regard the principal of evil as a reality, you can just as well call it the devil." I grew more knotted by anger with each passing day, unable to see any semblance of divine plan or invisible hand in the course of events, but only the random pulse of a chaos that could turn ugly in an instant. I found myself compulsively clipping crime stories out of the newspaper. Most of these involved juvenile offenders: A sixteen-year-old girl who had slit a man's throat to steal his money for drugs; two high school boys who were arrested for torturing a cat to death at the same school where seven students, four of them football players, had videotaped themselves setting an opossum on fire, then shown the tape in a classroom; a "gang" of seven- and eight-year-olds who had tried to suffocate a second-grade girl for "breaking up" with one of them. All I knew was that I for some reason felt driven to document the presence of evil in the world. I finally began to see some purpose on the morning before my children celebrated their first birthday, when a magazine editor phoned from New York to say that there had been a shooting involving more than two dozen victims at Thurston High School in Springfield, and that he wanted me to write a profile of the fifteen-year-old killer. The wise thing would have been to say no, but wisdom was by now among the virtues I scorned.

I didn't know if I was losing my mind, but I felt pretty sure that no other journalist assigned to the story was asking himself so openly whether the voices inside Kip Kinkel's head were symptoms of psychotic delusion or of demonic possession. Jung would have said these were equally valid descriptions of the same phenomenon. During that week I spent in the Eugene-Springfield area, living out of a hotel room on the Willamette River, I felt more hollow and hopeless with each passing day. The context of the shootings at Thurston High was what really got to me; in a lot of ways I was more horrified by the kids who surrounded Kip Kinkel than

I was by the killer himself. The levels of desensitization I was encountering in these teenagers created a mood of surreal desperation. As I listened to a story about a friend of Kip's who liked to boast that he had tortured his pet hamster to death by running it over with his skateboard (told to me by a girl whose main claim to fame was having had sex with six boys at the same party), I felt as if my brain were being eaten by ravenous imps.

My condition only worsened during the next several weeks, and by August the cackle of that creature I had confronted on the Piazza Navona three years earlier seemed to ring in my ears unceasingly. I understood only that whatever part of me I had opened back then was rapidly becoming a void, and that if I didn't find something to fill it with, life soon was going to be unbearable. On the morning of August 8, the day the Catholic Church officially celebrates the birth of Mary, I told my wife I was thinking about returning to Medjugorje. Three weeks later I was on a flight to Rome. Like just about every decision I was making at this point, it was one I would regret.

Split had changed tremendously in the past three years and in ways I knew I should applaud. Why then did I find so disheartening the abundance I discovered along the city's seafront promenade? The little grocery store at the southeast corner of Diocletian's Castle, where I had perused pathetically bare shelves on my first visit to the city, was now a supermarket with track lighting that cast a lustrous shine on mounds of oranges and baskets of asparagus. Huge tubs of filleted fish and pork chops reposed inside glass cases, while the aisles teemed with women who pushed shopping carts and wore silk dresses. Tourist boats rocked against one another in the crowded harbor, and the traffic on the street was bumper to bumper. The people still were not particularly friendly, but now an American alone was more likely met with indifference than hostility. Life here was good again, but for some reason I couldn't see it that way.

I found a symbol for my disdain of Split's new prosperity when I followed a broad brick path to what was now the city's busiest and most expensive restaurant, a McDonald's where dozens of Croatians stood in line to pay more for a Big Mac than it cost for a huge platter of fresh calamari at the restaurants on the harbor. Was this what they had fought the war for? My begrudging attitude shamed me, but I couldn't shake it. Wandering among the shops and cafés inside the castle walls, I felt rank and feral and utterly nasty. "Out of shape but spoiling for a fight," I had

described myself to an old friend shortly before leaving home, and his knowing laugh was one of the few sounds I'd heard lately that pleased me.

I'd barely left my hotel room in Rome. The whole city seemed draped in scaffolding as it preened for the Catholic Jubilee that would begin on Christmas Eve, 1999. I went no nearer to the Vatican than a twilight view from above the Spanish Steps; sheathed in steel bars, wood planks, and crisscrossing cables, St. Peter's looked as if the barbarians were not only at the gate but over the walls. Walking back to my hotel in the gathering darkness, I cut from the Via del Corso onto a side street and was confronted immediately by three young men bristling with badass swagger. When they tried to walk over me—common behavior among the young men of Rome—I reacted by banging shoulders with the most aggressive of the three. He threw up a forearm and I caught it with my own, shoving him off the curb. His two companions turned in belligerent amazement, but the wildness in my eyes backed them off. "I'll rip your lungs out," I told the one I had collided with, and realized the depth of my fury only when I saw his defiance turn to terror in an instant.

My knees trembled all the way back to the hotel, and I became physically ill the moment I was alone in my room, but even my retching was unaccompanied by remorse. "What is wrong with me?" I wondered. No one was answering. I slept badly that night, wracked alternately by chills and sweats, then dozed off around dawn and awoke just in time to catch my afternoon flight to Split. And now here I was, jet-lagged and sleep-deprived, waiting for a bus to the Bosnian border.

Shortly before I left home, my application for a half-million-dollar life insurance policy had been rejected when I'd admitted to the underwriter I was about to take a trip overseas. I hadn't mentioned Bosnia, but I did say I'd be "stopping over" in Croatia, and that alone was enough to delay coverage until I returned safely home. I'd had a feeling of foreboding ever since. This trip was ten times safer than it had been during the war, yet I felt at far greater risk. My greatest asset in dangerous situations, I long had believed, was an intuitive recognition of the right moment to move forward or back away. Somehow, though, I'd lost my reverse gear. Deep inside me was a hysteric who shrieked ceaselessly at God to prove He was there for me. My wife had used the word "possessed" several times during the last week before my departure to describe what she saw in me, and there were moments when I believed it might be true.

I knew in some pre-rational part of myself that this was not the right time for a return trip to Medjugorje. The sense of being summoned that had impelled my journey in 1995 was entirely absent in 1998. Yet I continued to forge ahead, heedless of every warning or apprehension. By the time the bus finally arrived, I had begun to picture my qualms as tiny, malevolent entities that swam in my bowels. "I'll drown you little fuckers in whiskey and Pepto-Bismol," I thought as I climbed aboard, then wondered a moment later if everyone was staring at me because I was American or because I was crazy.

The trip began with a long drive south along the Adriatic shore. A pair of German couples who chattered away in the back of the bus were heralds of Dalmatia's transformation. Though not nearly at prewar levels, tourists were returning to the Croatian coastline. The Germans got off the bus in Makarska, and we turned inland at Ploče, following the Neretva past young men who sold watermelons cooled by fountains they had drawn from the river. Only when we arrived at the border just outside Metković did it occur to me that I hadn't seen anyone carrying a gun since deplaning at the airport. The Bosnian soldiers who lounged in unbuttoned uniforms at the border crossing sat with their machine guns at their feet, and barely glanced at me as I walked past and climbed aboard the bus to Medjugorje.

Bad roads, narrow and broken, were the only significant change I noticed as we passed into Bosnia, or "B-H," as I was obliged to call it from now on, out of regard for the Croatians who continued to emphasize the Hercegovina half of their country's formal name. The rubble of bombardment had long since been cleared, and neither soldiers nor any other armed authorities were to be seen in Gabela. I yearned for familiar sights and found a certain comfort in the bullet holes and mortar damage that still pitted the walls of many buildings in Capljina, the last stop before Medjugorje. I knew this place only as a country at war, I reminded myself.

If I required an atmosphere of death and destruction, Kosovo was less than 150 miles southeast. The Serbs had burned scores of villages and displaced more than a quarter million ethnic Albanians since February; how many had been killed was anybody's guess. The fighting was finished here in Bosnia, replaced by an undercurrent of personal grudges and ethnic hatreds that made travel dangerous for locals but merely difficult for visitors. Most of the foreign currency available in Sarajevo these days was being brought into the country by American and Japanese tour groups, which followed what by now had become an almost standardized itinerary: Their guides always took them first to Sniper Alley, then to the Markale market, where sixty-nine people had been killed by a single

mortar shell in 1994; from there, the groups usually stopped by the Catholic cathedral where twenty-one people lining up for bread had been blown apart by a Serbian artillery shell; then ended their day in the charred skeleton of the Olympic Stadium. What was the difference between me and them? I wondered, and couldn't come up with anything of substance as the bus lumbered down out of the hills and onto the Brotnjo Plateau.

I'd imagined that the sight of the cross atop Križevac would stir my soul and enliven my thoughts, but it did neither. I had fallen as flat as I could remember ever feeling by the time the bus stopped to let me off in front of the rebuilt Medjugorje post office. I passed at least a half-dozen new construction projects during my half-mile hike toward the twin spires of the church; for much of my walk, a cacophony of power tools drowned out all human sounds. Pulling my backpack on wheels behind me, I paused for only a moment in the courtyard of St. James's, then headed across the street to Mira's, imagining that I might find Nicky at his old table. But Mira's was no more; the café's space had been incorporated into the Dubrovnik restaurant. I didn't even recognize the waiters. I sat down to reconnoiter over a beer, hoping to spot someone I knew, but every person who passed was a stranger to me. My dolor was spiced with a generous measure of chagrin; before leaving home, I had not bothered either to announce my arrival or to make arrangements for housing, trusting that I would be taken care of upon my arrival in Medjugorje. Now I sat at a table in what was no longer Mira's, with no clear idea of where to go next.

By the time I finished the beer, I was so blue that I thought seriously about catching the first available ride out of here and heading home. But there wouldn't be another bus until the next day, so I walked up the road to the first house offering rooms for rent, paid twelve dollars to stash my backpack, then stepped back outside, still feeling lost. I walked toward Križevac as far as my old digs at the Pansion Maja, then veered off into the fields, looking for something I couldn't name and didn't expect to find. I was walking through a cow pasture, aiming myself vaguely in the direction of Bijakovići, when I looked down at the ground in midstep and saw that my foot was about to come down on a viper that lay coiled in the middle of the path. I was barely able to extend my stride so that my foot came down right next to the snake's head, then stood frozen. Several seconds passed and the viper didn't move. Finally, I lifted my foot and in that moment felt, if not protected, at least very lucky. Ten feet away I turned to watch the snake slither off into the grass, then just stood

for some time, listening as a cooling breeze rustled the leaves of the fig and maple trees at the edge of the field. After a few minutes, I noticed that my mood had lightened considerably.

I turned and went back the way I had come, remembering all of a sudden that Nicky had recently opened an art gallery, the White Lily, not far from the church. I found the place in no time, built into a corner on the ground floor of a four-story building still under construction. The gallery was closed, but there were a table and chairs under an umbrella just outside the front door, so I sat down in the shade. Nicky drove up two minutes later, immediately followed by Ivan Bencun.

My jubilation was short-lived. Within the next half hour I learned from Nicky that I had arrived in Medjugorje at the worst possible time. Mirjana and Vicka both were out of the country and would not be returning before my departure; Jakov was in the U.S.; Marija had been in Medjugorje for almost a month but planned to leave for Italy the day after tomorrow. Rita had taken off two days earlier for her annual prayer retreat and was not coming back until right around the time I had to catch my return flight from Split to Rome. Worst of all, Father Slavko was in England and, after that, was scheduled to spend several days in the Netherlands; he might or might not make it back before I had to leave.

Nicky understood my disappointment, especially at Slavko's absence, but even that was beside the point, Nicky said, "because Our Lady is here. It's Her you've come for, even if you don't know it." I nodded in a sort of patronizing despair. He laughed, not unkindly. "Doubt it all you want, old boy," he said, "but the fact is, you've come back." Bencun, who couldn't understand a word we were saying, nodded vigorously and gave me a wide smile. Our friend had given up Mira's, Nicky explained, in order to finance construction of the Hotel Marben, which was what he called the building that provided the shade in which we sat. The place was still months from completion, but Bencun had begun receiving guests several weeks earlier and insisted through Nicky that I must stay there, at a substantial discount, of course.

Nicky and Bencun both looked about the same as they had three years earlier; I could see in their eyes, though, the toll that the past several months had taken on my appearance. Nicky actually seemed to feel a little sorry for me, and said he could imagine how exhausting having two babies at the same time must be. I asked about the other Loopers. Most were gone, he said; Karen had called once from a treatment facility in Victoria, British Columbia, but was never heard from again. Milona had

married Charles, as I knew, and was now a mother. Her husband and daughter had accompanied Milona when she arrived from Paris for a two-week stay in June that had been a complete fiasco, Nicky reported; Charles broke his own arm during one of his fits and had to be driven to Split to have it set. Rita had remained, of course, and was now essentially a fixture of the place, said Nicky, who was himself spending only about half the month in Medjugorje, and the rest traveling in pursuit of his latest obsession, tracing the true lineage of the French royal family. I possessed no interest whatsoever in the subject, and could barely pretend even slight enthusiasm.

When the call to evening Mass sounded, I headed in the direction of the church, taking my old seat on one of the benches just outside the northeast entrance to St. James's. The nun with the beautiful voice still sang "From All Quarters," the swallows still spiraled and swooped from the bell towers, the old ladies in black dresses still clutched their rosaries as they knelt on the paving stones. Why, then, did everything look so much dimmer, as if the holy glow that bathed this scene three years earlier had been brushed away with the back of some indifferent diety's hand? As the congregation rose to recite the Our Father and prepare for the Eucharist, I felt as if I were standing outside looking in. When my benchmates shook my hand and said, "Peace be with you," I repeated their words but felt like a fraud. For the rest of the service I kept struggling to come out of myself, to simply be present, but no matter how I tried to rise above it, misery continued to overwhelm me. By the time the Mass was ended, all I wanted was a pillow for my head. Jet lag, I told myself; in the morning, I would feel better.

And I did, sort of. After breakfast with Nicky, I moved my bag to the Hotel Bencun, then spent most of the rest of the day walking. I went through the fields to Bijakovići first, then up Podbrdo to the site of the first apparition, where perhaps a dozen other people sat or knelt in silence. I took my own seat on a rock that was right in front of the steel cross that marked the spot where the six seers had assembled on a June evening seventeen years earlier. Cards marked with prayer requests were piled at the base of the cross, but I couldn't bring myself to read even those. My gaze kept drifting to the village below, where the sound of hammers hitting nails suggested a telegraph operator in the grip of an epileptic fit.

I made a brief stop at the Blue Cross on the way back down the hill, then entered Visionary Way out of the fields. The curtains were drawn at Mirjana's house, and at Jakov's too. A sprinkler watered the flowers

on one side of Ivan's house, but I saw no other sign of life. I kept walking until I arrived at Križevac, then trudged to the top, stopping at each station of the cross to kneel on the rocks just as the true believers did. I even recited the Our Father and the Hail Mary at the first couple of stations, but my prayers felt so forced that I simply knelt in silence at the third station, as if waiting, for what I did not know. Beneath the cross on the summit, I sat with my chin in my hands and allowed myself to wonder how much of what I remembered was true. For a moment, I wanted so badly to be certain of something, anything, that I felt like beating my head against the rocks and wailing. Instead, I hiked back down the mountain, and along the way ordered myself to stop whining.

When I arrived back at the Hotel Bencun, Nicky was out front, and suggested that he take me to meet Marija Pavlović before she drove to Split to catch a flight to Milan early the next morning. I hadn't met Marija during my previous stay in Medjugorje, and rode back to Bijakovići in Nicky's new VW Golf, hoping the seer would break this evil spell that had been cast over me. When we arrived, Marija and her husband, Paulo, were standing out front, watching a backhoe dig up their front yard. The sewer pipe had burst, and the two of them were intent upon seeing that it was repaired before they left for Italy. Tall, with long limbs and sloped shoulders, Marija was warm but distracted. We made innocuous conversation for a few moments, but even then most of what Marija said was drowned out by the machine's roar.

Marija's sister Milka soon drove up in an enormous black Mercedes sedan, then climbed out wearing a linen pantsuit and a Rolex watch. Milka was now in her thirties, and had married a wealthy businessman from Ljubuški, Nicky explained. I felt staggered by the idea that this was the same little goatherd girl who, along with Mirjana and Ivanka, had been the first to report seeing the Virgin Mary back in June 1981. Nicky interrupted Marija's conversation with her sister to ask if we—I—might sit with her during her apparition that evening. It would not be possible, Marija answered, and suddenly seemed not to want to look at me. "There will be another chance," she said, but I doubted that.

On the way back to the Hotel Bencun, Nicky observed that it was Marija's last night in Medjugorje, and that she obviously had plans. Something about his expression, though, made me feel that even he had noticed that the light around me was much weaker than it had been three years earlier. Ivan and Mira Bencun insisted we eat dinner with them that evening. Between bites, I asked who had been the most memorable recent

pilgrims. Nicky said he had become quite involved (as a sort of spiritual adviser, apparently) with a pair of homicide detectives from Dublin. "Rock-hard guys," he explained, "until the day one says to the other, 'My life is going nowhere.' 'Neither is mine.' 'Let's go to Medjugorje.' So they come in with a tour group, looking totally out of place. The first thing they do is climb Križevac. They're almost to the top when all of a sudden they both see flames all around them, knee-deep, flaring up out of the rocks. 'Harry, do you see what I see?' The other one nods, then asks, 'Why doesn't anybody else see it?' 'And why isn't there any heat or smoke? There's a fire, but nothing's burning.' They come down off the mountain and vow that they will never breathe another word to anyone else. But one talks, and for the rest of their stay those two were surrounded by people assuring them they should trust their experience, not their minds. By the time they left, their faces had softened so much that the other people on the tour group said they wouldn't have recognized them if they hadn't watched it happen."

The visitor who had most affected Medjugorje's parishioners that summer was a middle-aged Canadian woman who almost half a century earlier had been famous as one of the first thalidomide babies, born with no hint of an arm or leg on one side. "On the other, she has just a little baby arm with an even tinier hand at the end of it, and the stump of a leg that ends about midthigh," Nicky said. "Beautiful face, though, and this magnificent red hair. She arrives and immediately announces she has come here to climb Križevac." And this the Canadian woman had done, refusing all offers of assistance to literally drag herself over the rocks with her stump of a leg and little baby arm. "That face when she came down," Nicky recalled. "No one could stop looking at it. I've never seen determination and joy in such perfect harmony." I could almost see the woman myself, reflected off the faces of Ivan and Mira, who sat smiling broadly even as their eyes filled with tears.

Hearing this story seemed to unhook me from my misery for at least a few hours, and that night I slept soundly for the first time in weeks. In one of my dreams, a woman who may have been the Virgin Mary seemed to call to me through a fog, repeating again and again a short phrase that I couldn't make out until she had disppeared into the fog and I heard the words "Carry your cross."

I was jarred awake by the sound of a concrete drill that had gone to work on the roof of the Hotel Bencun right above my room. I lay still for a moment, feeling pounded by the big tool's vibration, then burst out

laughing. For some reason, I had remembered a story told to me during my previous visit to Medjugorje, about a group of British pilgrims who happened to arrive in the village on the day of the annual pig slaughter. Following a tradition that went back nearly two centuries, the parishioners of Medjugorje had agreed that they would all kill their pigs on the same day; among other things, it permitted them to sell the skins in bulk to a tannery and the offal to a dog-food manufacturer. Anyway, the British pilgrims had stepped off the bus at midmorning that day just as the slaughter was about to commence, and within moments were greeted by the sounds of pig after pig after pig squealing in its death throes. So horrified were these pilgrims that they insisted their driver take them straight back to Split and away from this hellish place. The story hadn't amused me much when I first heard it in 1995, but for some reason I now found it gut-bustingly funny. People who couldn't understand that pigs had to be killed before they ate bacon, or that even a religious visionary might become distracted when the sewer pipe broke, weren't ready for this place.

After breakfast, Nicky suggested I come along on a drive to Ljubuški, where he intended to buy his first cell phone, or "handy," as they were called here. I jumped at the chance to escape, even if only for a couple of hours. Ljubuški was transformed: The city center I remembered as grimy and ravaged now was lined with shiny new sidewalk cafés and stores that sold knockoff Nikes or bootleg Ray-Bans. The older buildings all bore patches of mortar where bullet holes had been filled in, but a good deal of the town had been rebuilt. The most impressive change was that Ljubuški no longer seemed dangerous. Immediately after the signing of the Dayton Accords, Nicky explained, the Croatian army had surrounded the town with troops, tanks, and artillery, demanding that the HOS thugs who had ruled Ljubuški for the past four years surrender their weapons. The disco gangs were dismantled almost overnight, and if there were any guns left in town, their owners kept them well hidden. However, when Nicky and I sat down for lunch on the terrace of what was supposed to be the best restaurant in town, we heard a good deal of vehement conversation at the tables around us; a couple of shouting matches actually broke out.

I had arrived in Bosnia three weeks before the country's national elections, and at a time when ethnic tensions were perhaps higher than they had been since the signing of the Dayton Accords. All sides were most concerned with how the Serbs would vote. Moderate candidates were receiving strong support from NATO, and the United States was being

particularly aggressive; Secretary of State Madeleine Albright recently had warned that only those committed to the Dayton Accords would receive U.S. support. This implied threat had backfired immediately; the UN-backed candidate for the Bosnian Serb presidency was promptly labeled a Western stooge by her chief opponent, a rabid nationalist who was destined to win the election by a wide margin. The leading Croat contender already had promised to divide Hercegovina from Bosnia and join the Croatian government in Zagreb. Within a few weeks, the Serbs blew up the homes of ninety-six Muslim families who applied to return to native villages near Prijedor, and the Croats had done the same to the homes of sixty Serbian refugee families in Drvar. The "process of peace," as Albright and her boss, Bill Clinton, liked to call it, was going nowhere fast. Meanwhile, the situation throughout the rest of the Balkan states was growing more volatile by the day: Romania was a de facto military dictatorship run by not-so-ex-communists and ethnic nationalists; Bulgaria's most powerful economic and political force was the Russian mafia; Greece, like Macedonia, was waiting to see if NATO would follow through on its threats to intervene against the Serbs in Kosovo, where ten thousand ethnic Albanians were being driven from their homes each week. Violence and chaos were so much a part of the atmosphere in Bosnia-Hercegovina that even Western diplomats were admitting that a new outbreak of war could be avoided only if the thirty-five thousand NATO troops in the country remained well into the next century. The Queen of Peace, I observed, was reigning over a principality that seemed to shrink second by second. Nicky insisted this meant only that the Warning and the Great Sign were imminent. They had been "imminent" for almost twenty years now, I observed; "Waiting for Godot" was holding up a lot better than divine prophecy.

"So now you scoff," he said as we sat among retired killers on a sunny terrace, eating trout almondine.

"'Blessed are those who do not see, yet believe,'" I replied. "P. T. Barnum would have taken that line to the bank."

"I see. You want to be clever and 'with it' again."

"It's getting a little late for 'with it,' whatever that is," I told him. "I'd just like to know what's real. Sometimes I think I'd welcome even bad news if I could believe it."

"Our Lady is what's real!" Nicky shouted so loudly that heads turned at every table on the terrace.

I nodded, but only as a way of suggesting we change the subject.

The silence between us lasted until we were in the car and on our way back to Medjugorje. On the long curve beneath Ljubuški's ancient hillside fortress, Nicky announced that he was leaving in forty-eight hours to attend a series of meetings in Vienna, and would not return to Medjugorje before my departure. "You can't do that!" I said. "I can't?" Nicky asked. Yeah, well, of course he *could*, I allowed, but he shouldn't. If Father Slavko and Rita were around, or if Mirjana and Vicka weren't out of the country, it would be different, I said, but in my present condition I didn't think I could handle this place without companionship. "You need to seek Our Lady's companionship," Nicky replied. "She's there for you in a very unusual way. We've all recognized that since you first showed up three years ago, but for some reason you never have."

I was thrown into a vaguely guilty silence. Why, I didn't know, but I'd never had "a big thing for the Virgin Mary," as I found myself putting it, even in the immediate aftermath of my first visit to Medjugorje. My experience—even while I was here—had been of Jesus. Christ's majesty and mercy were what I made the objects of my religious practice, to the degree that I had one. Even when I sailed into the spiritual doldrums and discovered myself becalmed in a sea of blood-streaked bile, the one part of the Catholic liturgy that never failed to move me was that "Lamb of God" litany just before the consecration of the host. Mary, though, had always remained an elusive and doubtful presence. I ruminated on my lack of a "personal relationship" with the Madonna during much of the next two days, sitting for long spells among the crowd of mostly old women who gathered around the statue of the Virgin in St. James's courtyard. Nothing seemed to change, though, and then it was time for Nicky to leave.

We ate a late dinner together on the evening of his departure. At one point, he demanded an accounting of my stay so far, and I admitted being bitterly disappointed that my experience of Medjugorje this time was so much less profound than it had been three years earlier. "Who do you think you are?" Nicky demanded. He sounded as if, against his will, he was more astonished than angered by my attitude. "Do you expect fireworks every time you show up?" I thought about this for several seconds, then said I was more guilty of anticipation than expectation. "Whatever word you want to use, it doesn't work that way, old boy," Nicky said. "Not for you, not for anybody. Very few people who come here have an experience that even approaches what you were given, yet some of them are fed for a lifetime by what they find here. You've come back in less than three years, insisting your plate is empty and that you need a second

helping. Your ingratitude is enormous." I was still sitting with that thought when Nicky said good-bye.

My distress only increased after loneliness was added to the mix, and the next three days were dark indeed. I strove to shake my black clouds in a closed circuit of aimless wandering between the base of Križevac, the Blue Cross on Podbrdo, and the altar of St. James's. I spent hours alone in the fields. The other pilgrims seemed increasingly pathetic and absurd to me, pitiful souls who had traveled thousands of miles to look for something they could not find in themselves. I knew I was no different, yet could not stop searching for the invisible thread that connected me to what I had experienced three years earlier.

I attempted escape by making a day trip to Dubrovnik with Postar's son Mate, who was just finishing his military duty and had become intent on a trip to the U.S. All during the drive to the Adriatic, Mate peppered me with questions, opinions, and items of gossip involving assorted Medjugorje characters. His descriptions of extramarital affairs between people I knew and still faintly admired made me feel increasingly ridiculous as we cruised south along the magnificent coastline in Mate's Mercedes.

Dubrovnik's restoration was remarkable, and even a glimpse of the old city from the hilltop where Mate parked his car cut through my crust of cynicism. A volunteer army of artisans from all over Europe had replaced the red-orange roof tiles and patched the limestone facades of buildings that absorbed the blasts of more than two thousand artillery shells during the Serbian siege of 1991–92. More than five hundred of the old city's buildings were hit by shells during that thirty-six-week bombardment, but Dubrovnik's magnificent high walls, nearly twenty feet thick in places, had held up under the shelling. Six years later, the sandbags were gone and the shrapnel scars on the buildings had nearly all been filled in. The enormous limestone paving stones of the old city's main street, the Placa, had been either repaired or replaced. The church bells rang and the Onofrio Fountain splashed. Tour groups assembled under Dubrovnik's magnificent clock tower. Nearly every Croatian who visited Dubrovnik for the first time since the war burst into tears when he entered the old city and saw how beautiful it still was, Mate told me.

The two of us spent a couple of hours ascending to and descending from the old city's walls. For Mate, climbing the stone staircases that rose steeply from the Placa provided numerous opportunities to look up the short skirts of young women who were coming down. He could hardly contain himself, and I, as an American, could scarcely imagine what

hormonal storms raged inside a twenty-two-year-old male virgin. A series of long climbs combined with Mate's increasingly hilarious struggle with his lust made us both a little light-headed. He attempted again and again to make me his accomplice in lechery, rolling his eyes in derisive disbelief when I insisted that I had long since investigated what was up the skirts of as many young girls as I needed to know.

When I asked Mate if he thought he would remain a virgin until marriage, he became quite serious and said he hoped that he would. Like me, though in a very different way, Mate was living in two worlds, at one moment insisting breathlessly that the tall blonde in the orange dress was wearing nothing underneath, then in the next asking if I would like to meet his best friend in Dubrovnik, an elderly nun who guarded the relics of the the city's most famous saint.

He had been five years old when the apparitions began, Mate reminded me when we sat down for lunch at a restaurant perched on a seawall above the harbor, and could hardly remember a Medjugorje that had not been a center of religious devotions. He was and would remain a believer, Mate assured me, but during his adolescence had developed an increasingly scornful attitude toward many of Medjugorje's foreign pilgrims, especially those who were reluctant to leave. "As far as I am concerned, anyone who stays in Medjugorje for more than three months has something wrong with him," he said. "They think they can only believe when they are here. They are afraid to face their lives." What about someone like Rita Falsetto? I asked. "Rita should either become a nun or go home and get married," he answered curtly. "She stays here so that she will not have to decide what to do." What about Nicky? I asked. "Nicky thinks there are one set of rules for him and another for everbody else," Mate said. "He tells everyone they have to go to Mass every day, but Nicky's idea of attending Mass is to walk around the church smoking cigarettes. He is a hero for what he did during the war, for sure. But there are a lot of people who think he should go home and be remembered, instead of staying until everyone forgets he is here," he stated with startling vehemence. "And I do not believe his story about his wife," the young man railed. "I met Nicky's youngest daughter when she came here to visit, and she was a great girl. There is no way she was raised by a mother who is possessed by demons. Nicky is full of crap." I smiled in spite of myself; Mate's stridency was spectacular.

He became distracted again a moment later, when three attractive young women in sundresses sat down at a nearby table. "What do you

think of the dark one?" he asked. Nice, I assured him. Yet when our meal arrived, Mate prayed aloud over it, ignoring the curious stares and uncomfortable expressions of the girls at the next table. Will you do that even when you are in the U.S.? I asked. "I will do it wherever I am," he answered. "I know that God exists. I will never forget *that*." Mate spoke respectfully of the visionaries, and was particularly admiring of his cousin Jelena, the inner locutionary, who still was studying theology in Rome. "Jelena goes so deep that when I am with her, I can only listen; I know I have nothing important to say." Nevertheless, he was skeptical about the Secrets, Mate admitted: "The people who are waiting for the world to end bother me even more than the permanent pilgrims. I want the world to go on. I want to be part of it. Like you."

For a moment I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Instead I kept my mouth shut and let my young friend have his illusions.

I descended again into an oppressive loneliness after returning to Medjugorje. The Bencuns treated me like a member of the family, but neither Ivan nor Mira spoke more than a few words of English. After an evening Mass, I ran into the Irish tour guide Philip Ryan in the church courtyard and felt like clinging to his sleeve. I had misread the young man as a bit of a prig back in 1995, spreading infantilism and inhibition with a spiritual scorecard and a self-satisfied smile, and had decided then that he would be one of the Medjugorje characters I didn't have time or space for in my book. I apparently had failed to realize the excruciating pain he was in from a mountain-climbing accident that had nearly crippled him. Now fully recovered, Philip was proving to be considerably more thoughtful and tough-minded than I had imagined, and not nearly so stiff or self-involved. He even had confessed to a core of romantic vulnerability. Back in 1995, I had been astounded and even a little annoyed by Philip's indifference to the assortment of young women who tried to capture his attention. Now I understood this was merely a matter of high standards: He was carrying a torch for the beauteous, brilliant Jelena Vasilj, and ached for her with touching grace and fidelity. I had learned only the day before from Jelena's cousin Mate that Philip had no chance, but as we stood in the twilight on the edge of a crowd that had gathered around the Virgin's statue, I didn't have the heart to tell him, and knew it wasn't my place, anyway.

So instead we talked about my faltering faith, and how difficult I was finding it these days to distinguish between experience and interpretation, thought and understanding, perception and imagination. Philip remarked that prayer was the only defense we had against our confusion, then told

me what would become one of my favorite Father Slavko stories: About a year earlier, a couple of unusually earnest German reporters had spent a week in Medjugorje preparing a report for one of the country's largest newspapers, and on the day they were to leave admitted how moved they had been by their experiences here. They still believed that the apparitions were a psychological phenomenon, the reporters said, some exalted work of wishful thinking, but thought the place was wonderful anyway, because of the deep worship they had witnessed, the moving faith and the astonishing conversions. "The fruits, you mean?" Slavko had asked. Yes, the reporters replied. "Well, you are much more mystical in your thinking than I am," the priest said. The reporters laughed. What? they said. "I am merely a man who has walked out into a field and found apples on the ground that I know have fallen from a great tree," Slavko explained. "You walk out into the same field, see no tree, yet find the apples, and insist that they must have fallen from the sky. That is truly miraculous."

I was still laughing at my mental image of Slavko's deadpan expression when Philip asked me bluntly, "Do you believe in God?" I stopped laughing, stood blinking and stammering for a few seconds, then found myself answering in a surprisingly strong voice, "I believe in God, but I'm not sure God believes in me." It was the most succinct expression of my inner state that I had managed in months. I was marveling at how good it felt to speak the truth, even if it was a truth that damned me, and barely listened as Philip began talking about the "dark night of the soul," a phrase coined by St. John of the Cross to describe the period when a convert feels that God has abandoned him, and told me the stories of several saints who had lived through it. Philip did not capture my attention again, though, until he went silent and closed his eyes, as if listening to some inner voice. "You know," he said a moment later, "I've been struggling myself lately. And I've had this recurring thought that what I need to do is climb Križevac barefoot, to really feel the rocks against my flesh, not so much as a penance but as a way of experiencing myself as human, in all my weakness and vulnerabilty. But it just struck me that maybe you're the one who needs to do that." He smiled. "I don't know where the thought came from," he said, "but I'm pretty sure it wasn't Satan."

I laughed but dismissed the idea in the same breath. I felt I had gotten to know my weakness and vulnerability well enough during the past year. All through the next day, the idea of climbing Križevac with bare feet kept entering my thoughts, and I kept saying no to it. Finally, at just before six P.M., I headed toward St. James's with the intention of sitting through

the Rosary service that preceded the Croatian Mass. I walked past the church, though, and continued toward the Mountain of the Cross. I didn't feel I was making a decision so much as clearing my mind of interfering thoughts. At the base of Križevac, even as one part of me stood apart and mocked the enterprise, I sat on a rock , removed my boots, and slung them over one shoulder. I could hear the prayers of the Rosary by the time I had ascended to the third station of the cross, and already was wondering how I would make it to the top. I placed my feet more and more gingerly, trying to find a spot on their soles that hadn't been bruised, moving so slowly that it took me several minutes to negotiate a single switchback. At around the fifth station, though, something in me released and I began to walk through the pain rather than trying to go around it. I moved much more rapidly, listening as those seated outside the church finished the prayers of the Rosary and joined the Mass. I stopped to pray at each station, my mind gloriously empty. By the time I reached the summit, my feet felt incredibly hot, as if I had been walking on coals, but there wasn't a mark on them. Below, I could see the faithful assembled in a long line around the church, waiting to take communion. There was no epiphany, but my head stayed clear; thoughts seemed to flit past, deflected by some invisible shield.

I didn't stay on the mountaintop long; the sky already was turning dark above the horizon, and I knew that I would be lucky to make it to the bottom before the light was entirely gone. I had descended only as far as the thirteenth station, though, when I nearly had a bad fall. My feet were so sore that they seemed to slip off the rocks the moment I placed my weight on them; I attempted to compensate by hurrying, which nearly pitched me headfirst over a boulder when I lost my balance between strides and saved myself from serious injury only by catching my hip on the big rock. I persisted but slipped twice more before reaching the twelfth station, where I decided enough was enough. As I sat down to put on my boots, I spotted two figures struggling on all fours across the rocks below me. I couldn't tell if they were coming up or going down. When I tied my laces and climbed down to their level, I discovered two women, one middle-aged, the other in her sixties. Both were overweight, bathed in perspiration, and looked terribly frightened, the older woman especially. As soon as they saw me, the two began to cry out in German as if they had found their deliverer.

Waving her arms and gasping for breath, the older woman seized my arm and hung on tight, speaking to me nonstop even after I told her I

didn't *sprechen Sie Deutsche*. With the aid of hand signals and my tiny German vocabulary, the two made me understand that they had intended to climb the mountain, but that the old woman's legs had given out and then they both were too afraid to try climbing down in the gathering dark. Convinced they would be forced to spend the night, the two women had been looking for a place to lie down and were wondering if they would survive until morning.

Barely able to see more than twenty feet myself at this point, I used my hands to tell the pair they needed to follow me down the mountain. The older woman insisted she could not continue on her own, so I was forced to take each of the women by one hand and lead them, walking backward on the rocks, toward Križevac's base. Imagining how ridiculous we must look made me slightly giddy, but the old woman's fright was so palpable that I had no choice but to take her seriously. Also, finding my footing as I tried to look behind me over one shoulder in the dark very quickly became an absorbing task. And the old woman never stopped talking. She must have said "*Gott segnen Sie*" ("God bless you") a hundred times by the time we reached the relatively easier ground at the fourth station. I had realized about two stations earlier that this would be the defining moment of my return trip to Medjugorje. From somewhere inside me, whether out of my imagination or my intuition, came a voice that said I had taken my portion of grace three years earlier, and that all I could receive this time was an opportunity to give. I actually felt grateful for it, and listened with an odd, almost embarrassed detachment as the older woman continued to thank me profusely. When we reached the bottom of the mountain, I led the women to a café, sat them down at a table, bought them each a soft drink, and said good-bye. The older woman grabbed my arm again, said "*Gott segnen Sie*" another six or seven times, then pulled a rosary from her pocket and pressed it into my hands. I hung it on the statue of the Virgin outside St. James's as I headed back to the Hotel Bencun, then slept peacefully until the concrete drill woke me at seven the next morning.

I was drinking espresso at a café across the street from the Hotel Bencun and thinking about going home when Philip Ryan popped his head in to say that Father Slavko had arrived back in Medjugorje during the night, but would be leaving again tomorrow, this time for three weeks. A line of people had formed already outside his office door, Philip said, and if I held out even the slightest hope of seeing Slavko, I had better get over to the rectory at once.

Most of the people waiting on the steps outside and in the hallway that led to Slavko's office were Croats who wore expressions of either distress or determination. A handful of pilgrims loitered on the periphery, perhaps hoping just to catch a glimpse of Medjugorje's globe-trotting holy man. My chances didn't look good, but I pushed through to the open doorway of Slavko's office, where a nun sat in the chair playing receptionist. I knew Slavko must be on the other side of the closed door that led to the room where we had sat together so many times before. The nun shook her head as soon as she saw me, but spoke very little English, so I pretended not to understand that she was trying to send me away. I inched into the room feigning a baffled expression while the nun responded by speaking to me more loudly in Croatian. Her tone grew increasingly menacing, and I was preparing myself for a scene, when the door behind the nun opened and Slavko stepped out to see what was going on. He barely seemed surprised to see me, raising his eyebrows slightly, then knitting them into a frown. "I have heard you are here," he said, sounding none too thrilled about it. I knew he had to leave again the next day and that there were many people who wanted to see him, I told the priest. Nevertheless, I had come by to ask for a little of his time. Slavko looked exasperated for a moment, then seemed to force himself to smile. "Speaking of time," he said, "I wish you had chosen a better one." The door behind him opened wider; inside I saw a grim-faced man and a woman whose face was bathed in tears. Slavko watched my reaction for a moment, then told me in a clipped tone, "Come back at one o'clock and I will make an hour for you. But know it is difficult."

I avoided the eyes of the people in the hallway as I stepped back outside into the sunlight, feeling more guilt than relief, and more relief than satisfaction.

When I returned at one, the nun quickly opened the door to the meeting room and waved at me to get inside quickly, before anyone noticed. I sat alone for a few minutes before Slavko stepped through a second door, clasped my shoulder briefly in greeting, then sat down opposite me looking harried and exhausted. He said he was glad to hear I had not abandoned my book, asked the names of my children, then told me that he had just come from The Hague, where he had stopped to take the confessions of the Bosnian Croats who were about to stand trial as war criminals. It had been one of the worst experiences of his life, Slavko said. The moral suffering of these men, and especially of their families, was terrible to witness. But perhaps even worse was the hypocrisy of the United

Nations and of the "Euros" in particular. "These trials are not about justice, they are about politics and they are about power. Who has it and who does not." I had never seen Slavko angry or anguished, but now he was both, and the force of his emotions startled me. For three years, I had been thinking about seeing this priest again, almost daily expanding my agenda of confessions and questions, imagining how he would supply the words that eased my mind and restored my trust. Slavko didn't want to talk about me, though, and I sat in a sort of benumbed disassociation as he went on about how Radovan Karadžić—"a man responsible for the deaths of thousands"—continued to live like a feudal lord in Pale. The former Bosnian Serb leader could be seen every day in the backseat of his Mercedes sedan as it drove from his hilltop chalet to the Famos factory where he maintained his office, escorted by three Jeep Cherokees filled with armed guards. "There are perhaps twelve of them," Slavko said. "NATO has thirty thousand soldiers in Bosnia, and they are afraid to arrest Karadžić. Yet they arrest a Croatian police officer who let the militia use his home as a command center and tell this father of four children that he must go to prison for twenty-five years because some of those men killed Muslim civilians. It is the injustice that hurts these men, that hurts us all. Those who order the killing, those who orchestrate the horror, those who spread the evil, they cannot be brought to justice, but those who are swept up in it, who have seen their own families butchered, they must be punished. Hypocrisy is too good a name for this."

I sat stunned, nodding, wondering what to say as he ranted on. Arming and training the Muslim and Croat federations soldiers to create a balance of military power in the region had been an absolute condition of the Dayton Accord, Slavko observed, but the Europeans had blocked this at every turn. Nearly a million Croat and Muslim refugees who had been told they could return to their homes in Serb-controlled territory still were being denied entry, while their houses were either occupied by Serbs or burned to the ground. "Instead of confronting the conditions that led to war and trying to change them, NATO and the UN insist that if they stay in this country long enough, its troubles will go away. In fact, they are only creating more hatred, more pain, more bitterness. Real peace must be based on justice, and justice must be based on truth, but you cannot tell this to men who care nothing for justice and even less for truth, and who do not know the difference between a country at peace and a country occupied by foreign armies. The opportunity to create a climate of forgiveness and reconciliation is slipping away in front of their faces,

and they either do not or will not see it." Slavko was practically shouting, his face drawn, his expression tortured. "You should go to The Hague and talk to the men there," he told me, "then go to Pale and see what is happening there. This is a situation the world must acknowledge, or the next war will be even worse—much worse—than the one before."

Almost before I could grasp what was happening, Slavko told me that he had given me all the time he could and that he had to meet with the families who had been waiting to see him since early that morning. "I hope that if you come again, we will have more time and less distraction," said the priest as he stood, then smiled at me almost as kindly as he had three years earlier. "I know you are struggling," he said. "So are we all. I will pray for you. Go with God." He touched my shoulder lightly, turned, and walked out of the room. I stood alone, feeling stupefied and vaguely ill for several minutes, then finally went back out through the office into the hallway, studying the faces of those who waited for Slavko. By the time I stepped outside, I was aching for home.

Rita would be returning to Medjugorje in a couple of days, and I wanted to see her, but not nearly as badly as I wanted to be with my children again. That evening I told the Bencuns I was leaving, presented the copy of Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* that I had brought for their daughter Ivana, and said good-bye. When the Globaltours bus pulled up in front of the post office at seven the next morning, I was waiting for it.

I arrived at the airport in Split that afternoon just in time to catch the flight to Rome, then rode back to New York seated next to a jeweler from Philadelphia who offered me a lesson in how to buy pearls. "The most important thing to remember," he said, "is that you get what you pay for."