

Long Road Home

written by Katherine Paterson ~ illustrated by Emily Arnold McCully

Chapter One : A Family of Kosovars

a breakfast serials story

My name is Meli Lleshi and my English is quite good now, almost as good as my Albanian and better than my Serbian ever was. So I think I am ready to tell you how I came to leave Kosovo and come to Vermont, USA, a state more than twice the size of my whole native land.

It began one afternoon in March. I remember I was hanging out the laundry, and my two little brothers were in the garden playing war. As soon as I saw Uncle Fadil's

Army—had started fighting back against the Serbs, Adem Jashari was every Albanian boy's hero. It didn't matter to us that the outside world thought of the KLA as terrorists; we Albanian Kosovars regarded them as patriots. Adem Jashari was our George Washington, determined to free Kosovo from Serbian rule.

There was a Serb family living right next door to us. They even sent a cake over when my little sister, Vlora, was

born. The Serbs in Kosovo were becoming more and more oppressive. It didn't make sense. There were so few of them compared to us Albanian Kosovars, but Milosevic, the Serbian dictator, had armies and weapons and a great hatred of us. He kept yelling that Kosovo truly belonged to Serbia and that the Albanians must be driven out. One man can inspire many people to senseless hatred, Papa said, and he was right. Even our next-door

neighbors rarely spoke to us now.

Uncle Fadil parked his truck in front of the store. "Isuf, Adil! I told you to run in and tell Papa that Uncle Fadil is here." Just then both Uncle Fadil and Aunt Burbuqe got out of the truck. Granny must have died! I thought. Aunt Burbuqe hardly ever left her alone. "Is Granny all right?" I yelled.

"What?" Uncle Fadil looked up, startled. "Granny? Of course."

So it was something else. "I'll tell Mama you're here," I said, and ran up the outdoor stairs to the apartment.

truck turn the corner, I was afraid that something terrible had happened. Uncle Fadil never came just to visit. He was too busy on the farm. He only came in the summer to bring vegetables to Papa's store. "Isuf, Adil," I called to my brothers. "Run in and tell Papa that Uncle Fadil is here."

"Why is Uncle Fadil here?" Isuf was eight and knew something was wrong.

"I don't want to go in," said Adil, who was only six. "It's my turn to be Adem Jashari."

"No," said Isuf, "you're a Serb. I'm Adem Jashari."

Ever since the KLA—the Kosovo Liberation



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Soon everyone had gathered in the parlor: Uncle Fadil and Aunt Burbuqe in the two good chairs; Papa; Mama, with Vlora on her lap; and Mehmet on the couch. Adil and Isuf leaned against Papa's knees. There was no place for me to sit, so I leaned against the kitchen door. All of us were waiting.

Uncle Fadil cleared his throat, then half nodded toward the little boys and Vlora, as though signaling to Papa and Mama. Then he jerked his head at me.

At first Mama looked puzzled, then she said, "Meli, take the little ones into the kitchen and make some tea for your uncle and aunt. They must be thirsty from their trip."

Uncle Fadil nodded, obviously relieved that Mama had understood.

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Papa gave the little boys a gentle shove, and Mama put Vlora down on the floor. I took Vlora's hand and we started for the kitchen, but not before I caught the smug expression on Mehmet's face. He was only thirteen—less than two years older than I. Why could he stay and not I?

"And shut the door after you," Mama called out.

I left a tiny crack in the door. I couldn't help it. I had to know what was going on. But before I had even started filling up the kettle, Mehmet got up and pulled the door completely shut.

Why was Mehmet a grown-up all of a sudden? It wasn't fair. I was almost as tall. But then, Mama had asked me to make tea, a job she usually reserved for herself.

I got four tea glasses off the shelf. Mehmet might be in there pretending to be a grown-up, but I certainly wasn't going to make him a glass of the best tea Papa sold in the shop. I arranged the glasses on a tray, putting a spoon in each one so the hot tea wouldn't crack the glass.

"Come away from the door, boys," I said. "You

mustn't eavesdrop."

"Why not?" Adil said. Isuf ignored me and kept his ear pasted against the wood.

The teakettle began to boil. I poured the tea over the leaves in the pot. "Isuf, come away from the door, I tell you. It's grown-up business."

But no sooner had I said it than Isuf turned toward me, his brown eyes full of terror. "Meli," he said, "he's dead."

"Who's dead?"

"Adem Jashari. They killed him. They killed all his family. Even the children."

to be continued....



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