

*Doug Heckman*

## Rossi's Girl

When the soldiers arrived in their forty-vehicle convoy, Rossi was moving his sheep from the grazing area and back to his home. He owned nineteen sheep and one cow. His oldest daughter watched the cow as it grazed further up the small valley. The foreign soldiers drove in that direction.

The lead vehicle of the convoy, a large camouflage-painted truck, blasted its horn at Rossi. Rossi turned and the soldier motioned with his arm to move. Rising out the top of the truck, a goggled soldier manned a machine gun. Rossi remembered a newspaper photo with the Pope poking up through a hole in his spiritual white truck, waving to people in Rome. Rossi imagined the Pope wearing goggles like the soldier.

The truck honked again and shot forward a couple of times, almost knocking the back legs of several sheep. Brown dust rose from under the truck, the exhaust pipes shooting the dust in quick, violent breaths.

Rossi turned and tapped his stick to move the straggling sheep. Taps were a gentle reminder while a scratch in the dirt preceded a whack across their backside. One of his sheep had a bad leg. It walked and ran on three legs. Its hobbling pained Rossi, but he couldn't leave the lame sheep behind.

Rossi scratched the dirt and the herd responded. He watched his lead sheep, the bell clanging around its neck, move quickly to the side of the road. The herd followed him in one motion; the lead sheep had been Rossi's leader for two years now. The herd tumbled over the berm and into the field.

The trucks and jeeps kept coming. The soldiers waved, smiling, as if they were coming home after a long battle. The dust was like smoke and

Rossi lifted his shirt over his mouth and nose. He thought of his seventeen-year-old daughter, up the valley with his family's only cow. He was sure his daughter would be afraid and he could only imagine the soldiers when they saw fear in her face. Rossi felt his breath catch and he turned and walked towards the sheep, the three-legged sheep dangling behind the herd like stray cloth.

Rossi had heard about these soldiers. They were to build a refugee camp. The town mayor had said not to worry, that the soldiers and refugees would live high in their valley, on the floor of the old drained lake.

"How many people?" Rossi's uncle had asked, and the mayor had said maybe ten thousand. The mayor reminded everybody that there used to be ten thousand people living in their village twenty years ago; their valley could handle this influx of soldiers and refugees. Rossi remembered those years; he did not need this young man to remind him.

Young people seemed to think of two things: leaving the country or politics. Rossi's daughter painted the initials of the democratic party on their shed besides the creek and spoke as if she would one day be mayor. Rossi wished she wouldn't want for something that would never happen.

"There will be jobs," the mayor said. "Lots of them. The colonel will meet with me Wednesday and tell me how many. Do any of you need a job?"

The mayor wanted them to laugh at his joke, but Rossi and the rest of the men sat quiet. None of them liked the mayor. He was young and owned a car. Only Mafia and politicians owned cars. This selfish mayor making jokes about jobs did not understand how many times the promise of work had come then disappeared – too many times for Rossi, Rossi's uncle, and the rest of the men sitting at the café. Rossi rubbed his finger on the lip of the small coffee cup and waited to hear more about the soldiers and the work they might offer.

The mayor opened his newspaper, pretended to read, then said, "They will need laborers. Men to dig ditches, women to cook food. They want to clear brush and rebuild the old washhouse." The mayor combed his hair, patting the hairs near his ears with his thin fingers. "The colonel told me I will be in charge of hiring the workers. I'll make sure you get jobs." He picked up the paper and spread it in front of his face.

The men understood that the mayor would take fifteen percent for himself. But the men were polite and waited for the mayor to finish his coffee and paper before they rose and returned to their homes.

Eight days after the soldiers arrived, Rossi began work with nine other men clearing the dry creeks above camp. The soldiers had rerouted the small creeks into a large, man-made ditch. Bulldozers chewed the rich lake bottom to create the ditch. To Rossi, it looked like a wound. The deep cut kept the water out of the refugee camp; the cut allowed the soldiers to put up rows and rows of beige-green tents.

Now that the creeks were dry, the soldiers wanted the shrubs and trees removed. "We have to see the cowards before we shoot them," the colonel said.

Rossi wanted to know whom the soldiers would shoot. The foreman took hold of Rossi's shoulders: "They're paying us good money. Don't ask questions."

The crew used their own tools. They attached sharp blades to six-foot long poles. They sharpened the blades every day. The vegetation was thick, and underneath the old creek bottoms and creek sides were rocks and a mess of roots and dead fallen limbs. Already, two of the men had been injured. One man broke his ankle. He had tried to keep working, using a stick as a cane and chopping with one arm, but it was no use.

Another man, one of the men Rossi had coffee with every afternoon, cut his arm. He had jumped from a snake and into the swing of another worker. Lucky for him, the blade had already gone through a wrist-thick branch. Still, there was so much blood that the soldiers themselves drove the man to the city hospital near the coast.

As the roads were built and the tents constructed and the water pipes buried, more jobs became available. Each evening the colonel met with the mayor and requested more workers and in the mornings the mayor drove to the gate of the refugee camp in his black Mercedes, handpicking from the hundreds who congregated each morning. Word had spread. Some people stayed all day and all night, resting beside the ditch or sleeping under tractors, waiting for a job. But the mayor chose only those he knew or needed to know.

By this time, Rossi had collected three paychecks. He had bought a water hose and two chickens. He had also saved money. Rossi and his wife wanted to finish the other bedroom in their home. Until now, all

three shared one bedroom. The future room was a roofless, concrete square, separated from their finished room by plywood.

He had begun the house years ago when he'd had a steady job fixing potholes in the city streets. He had been too optimistic about this job and about money and when the job ran dry, he boarded up his unfinished home and was angry with himself and his country.

Rossi's wife kept the saved money in a locked tin box, hidden in an old wooden crate in the shed. Each week Rossi presented her the money. It was an event: all this money, so quickly. They would soon need another moneybox.

Rossi and his wife decided that their daughter should work. The couple organized how they would manage the home, the animals, and the jobs. It was exciting to look forward instead of dreading the present. They underlined each of their names, and underneath, each of their schedules.

In the morning the wife would milk the cow and make cheese and bread and work in the garden. Midday, she would take the animals to graze, then return mid-afternoon.

Rossi and his daughter would work at the camp. Early evenings, they planned to take the sheep and cow to graze and return home shortly after dark.

They nailed the schedule on the plywood that separated the finished and unfinished rooms. While Rossi pounded the nail he thought of how tired he was, after only two weeks of work, and he wondered how many days he could continue working twelve hard hours at the soldier's camp, then four hours walking with the animals. His wife stood behind him with her arms crossed. Rossi could read her thoughts: of the child who had died inside her and the child who had died at two years old. If they were here, he thought, they could share in this excitement. They could help make this all happen.

The first day Rossi and his daughter, Irina, walked to work, Rossi tried to see everything. It was a special day; if he concentrated on the purple flowers between the fields of hay, the lone olive tree blocking the morning sun, the bee which landed on Irina's black hair for a few steps and the bellow of a surprised burro across the valley, then the memory of going to work with his only daughter would never fade. Rossi concentrated. He smiled at Irina, calming her as they approached the soldiers at the camp's gate. The soldiers held machine guns.

Rossi wanted this to be more than a job. He wanted Irina to forget about her two lost siblings and to feel a part of what he and his wife dreamed. Rossi wanted Irina to forget his harsh words and tough lessons; he understood that he had treated her more like a son than daughter. Today was to be different: she would remember their excitement and of them walking to work side by side. He and Irina would begin a new relationship.

The guards searched Irina, patting her legs and her stomach, up and down her back. Her face showed the pain of being touched by someone unfamiliar. Then she was issued a badge and when they put the badge necklace around her neck, she smiled proudly. Irina and Rossi walked together to the base camp. Rossi watched the smoke from the burning trash rise straight in the warm morning air.

Irina was placed on a cleaning crew. They gave her plastic brushes and a bright red pail with a white handle. Rossi watched her bunch together with six other cleaning women before he started off to the creekbeds with his chopping saw.

Periodically, Rossi would stop clearing shrubs, trees, and weeds and look down the short hillside to where Irina and her cleaning crew worked. They walked to the portable toilets, the shower trailers, and inside the tents, always carrying their red pails.

During lunch, Rossi sat on a rock so he could watch Irina eat her lunch. Rossi ate his bread, cucumber, and tomatoes, and watched his daughter eat. She kept pushing stray hairs behind her ears. When she talked with her workmates, her hands were quiet and her head barely moved. And when she rose after lunch, the red pail looked awkward, bouncing against her thigh like something dead and heavy.

Late in the afternoon, Rossi sat and picked at his wet shirt. He and his crew were on a break. The afternoon winds had begun and he felt the cool air on his belly, around his neck. Below in the camp, Irina walked to the cream-colored portable toilets.

Rossi asked his uncle, who was leaning against a large rock, "Have you shit in those boxes?"

"Never," the uncle said. "Thinking of Irina cleaning up the soldier's shit?"

"Yes." Rossi took a drink of milk.

"It's not a good job, but it's money."

"How often do you see the truck suck out those boxes?"

“Every few days,” said the uncle. “I don’t keep track.” He crumpled up his paper sack, said, “Don’t think of shit. Think of money.”

Over the next two weeks Irina received her first two paychecks, turning the money over, along with her father’s, to her mother. The first paycheck was received with smiles, the second with a more serious face, the mother counting the money, making marks.

Also during this time three lambs were born, one in the afternoon under the wife’s watch and two in the evening, just before Rossi walked home. They were healthy and Rossi put the lambs, along with the ewes, in a pen next to the house. These lambs offered the family something to talk about besides work, long hours, and the burning itch of cleaning soap.

Rossi’s hands began to tear during his fourth week. He had worked now twenty-seven days without break.

Rossi blamed his wounds on the water the soldiers constantly gave them. Rossi was not used to drinking water so frequently, so instead of drinking the water, he soaked his hands, arms, and head. Then he would pick up his chopping saw and begin work. The wet skin grabbed at the wood’s grain and blistered. Then the skin tore: red lines of underskin, the color of ripe prunes.

Rossi taped his hands to hold the skin together. The soldiers gave him gloves but they were too loose and slick. Rossi kept his hands taped.

His wife and Irina were so tired that they didn’t have the energy to care for his hands. Everyone hurt in one place or another. Even the ceremony of collecting paychecks staled.

It seemed to Rossi that his family was losing the ability to smile, to touch, to love. The only meal they ate together was breakfast; he and his wife didn’t hold each other before sleeping; absent, even, were the moments when Irina and Rossi would talk while the cow and sheep grazed.

Rossi had heard the rumors about the soldiers promising girls citizenship in their country if only they would fuck them. Rossi began to hear the soldiers in his mind while he worked.

*Meet me in my tent.*

*After work, outside the gate, in the abandoned tobacco building.*

*Quick. In the washhouse. In the corner. It’ll be quick.*

*Go to the second dumptruck from the end. I’ll bring my sleeping bag.*

He imagined Irina falling for this and it made chopping the green wood and chest high grasses easier. When he thought about Irina with one of these soldiers, his torn hands no longer hurt.

He bragged to his workmates that his daughter was a Democrat, that she wanted to be mayor one day. Even if given the chance, she would not leave their country. Especially with one of those soldiers.

The colonel said another week of hard work and the refugees would arrive. Rows and rows of tents, Rossi counted over four hundred, were lined up like checkers on a checkerboard. The unburied water pipes, blue and thick, like tree roots, lay between the tents. Toilet boxes laid like drops of white bird shit over the flat, dark expanse of dirt.

Rossi was impressed. The soldiers were good workers; they had built a new city in their valley. He asked the mayor how long the refugees would stay. "Until the war is over," said the mayor. And how about the soldiers? The mayor hoped they would never leave.

That night, Rossi and his wife talked about this possibility. They could fence their grazing land. They would buy more sheep, more cows, maybe a goat. Paint. Maybe a water pump. Electricity.

After talking, Rossi's wife held Rossi's hands and touched his torn skin lightly and rebandaged the wounds. Rossi felt the bandage on his skin. He fought against his optimism.

Three days after the mayor told Rossi that he hoped the soldiers would stay, one of Rossi's sheep was killed by a soldier's jeep. It was near dark and Rossi was halfway home. He was tired and it had been a hot day and he was glad the sun had set. He walked through the fields and felt the cool air in the depressions. He heard from the hills the bells of other sheep herds.

At the road, he picked up one of the lambs. The lambs were slow and were always trying to suckle their mothers. The one Rossi carried was especially slow and he held onto it like a bag of corn.

Rossi moved the sheep down the road. Then from nowhere it seemed, like some children's demon dream, the camouflage jeep came fast around the corner. The jeep tried to stop. It skidded and swerved.

The truck missed the herd, but went into the ditch. Rossi heard the high-pitched squeal of the sheep dying and he let go of the lamb. The herd didn't know where to go and they circled like stagnant water. Rossi made his way to the accident.

The soldier was out of the vehicle, standing and looking at the dead sheep. The sheep's entrails showed. The white wool was red. It was

Rossi's lead sheep, the bell-sheep. Rossi looked at the soldier, but the soldier didn't say anything. The soldier moved his hands in a strange motion.

Together, they lifted the sheep from the ditch. Then the soldier got paper and motioned Rossi to write his name. The soldier moved his hands and said, "Dollars. Dollars." The soldier would pay him money for his lead sheep. Rossi refused the soldier's paper.

After gutting his dead sheep, then building a crude sled to pull the animal, Rossi collected his herd and continued home. It was quiet without the bell and the sheep moved slowly, unsure of this change, this absence. The short-legged lambs had no problem keeping pace.

High clouds in the east dimmed the following morning. Rossi had a difficult time rising from bed. He felt out of rhythm. The sun was still filtered by clouds when he and Irina walked to work.

Irina appeared unaffected, talkative. They spoke about the sheep and about the accident. She wanted Rossi to describe how the soldier acted; she seemed happy when he told her that he appeared sorry and that he had offered to pay for the sheep. She said his actions made sense, that the soldiers were polite and friendly. "They are always smiling," she said.

They passed a small lake, its surface like green mush with the low light, and Rossi threw in a stone to hear the deep, double-blop sound. Irina bragged about the large TV in the soldier's tents. She said that as she swept and mopped the floor, she watched movies or sports. She described the photos on their tables: color photos of mountains and beaches, of families standing in front of well-kept homes, of children, all colors and ages, and all smiling, just like the soldiers. Irina held Rossi's hand as they walked. She picked up a stick and dragged it along the dirt road, making a long snake. Rossi thought of his dead lead sheep.

The colonel met with everyone before work started. He told them they were doing super work. He liked the word "super" and said it a couple more times. The interrupter repeated him, "super, super." The colonel was a tall man, bald, and his voice was sharp, like someone angry. He told them that the refugees would soon arrive, as long as the war didn't end. He didn't want their work to come to nothing. They worked too hard and too long for the war to end too soon.

He was proud of their work, he said. But before the interpreter could finish the translation, the colonel jumped off the wooden box and walked away, three or four other soldiers behind him.

Rossi had a hard time working. His blade felt dull. The other workers chopped in front of him, leaving him scrap pieces of half-torn trees.

He chopped and cut. Then he remembered that he had left the sheep's bell in the ditch. He panicked. The bell had a distinct sound, one he could distinguish from twenty or thirty other bells. It had been his herd's bell for all his life, and his father's before. How had he just left it? Surely someone would find it and take it for themselves.

His chopping became less accurate. He missed a branch and struck a man's foot. The man was wearing thick shoes, but the man was furious. Rossi held the chopping saw with both hands, trying to hide his shaking hands.

During lunch the men talked about the refugees. The workers were worried the refugees would not come and the camp shut down.

"The war will not end," said the foreman. "Those bastards are too tough and the bastards they are fighting too stupid to quit. The refugees will come."

Rossi ate his food and looked to the low clouds. Down valley, they seemed to be breaking up, like blocks of drying mud.

The workers agreed that the war would continue and ate and talked about their fields and how they needed rain. They complained about the government; they laughed about an accident that happened in town. The story about the couple who had tried to escape the country by hiding in a dump truck loaded with corn. They breathed through tubes thrust out the back of the truck. The driver stopped in town to take a piss and a small boy had stuck rocks, chicken shit, and other trash in the tubes.

Rossi doubted the story was true. So he ate his bread and watched the base camp. Irina came out of the shower tents and emptied her red pail onto the ground. The water was gray and foamy. As she bent over, Rossi saw two soldiers near a tent, looking at his daughter. They stared at Irina bending over.

The feeling was the same as when the soldiers first arrived: his loss of breath when he feared for his daughter alone with the cow. But he had ignored his fears, any premonition. He had listened to the mayor and the promise of money.

Rossi didn't know if the feeling now in his heart was from shame for not listening to intuition or due to the soldiers' stares. Rossi's mouth dried and he drank milk to wet it.

Irina stood, wiped the hair behind her ears and started for the water spigot in the middle of the camp. The soldiers followed. Then they all

stood together and Rossi could see Irina smiling and putting her hands on her hips. A soldier put a hand on Irina's back.

Rossi picked up his chopping saw and headed down the creek. His workmates saw where he was going. Rossi heard their jeers and laughter as they watched the soldiers touch his daughter.

At the edge of the base camp and he was moving closer, the chopping saw held high. In his mind he saw the soldier's leg, cut like the small trees in the creek: severed skin and lengths of leg. And blood. Blood like his co-worker's wound. Like blood from his lead sheep.

Rossi hid at the edge of a tent. He could smell the soldier's clean bodies. It was the same smell that made him hold his breath every morning as they touched he and his daughter at the front gate.

Irina was teaching the soldiers words. "Tired," she said and the soldiers repeated it with a gross accent.

"Sleeping," she said. But the soldiers motioned, no; they meant another word. Then Irina quickly said, "Oh. Tent. Tent." The soldiers shook their heads again and laughed and hit at each other and wanted her to say another word. Irina was confused.

The soldiers kept saying their word.

Before the soldiers could make her say what they wanted her to say, to make her say what they wanted to do to her, Rossi was walking towards them, the chopping saw in his right hand.

But then the soldiers suddenly walked away, laughing with each other, their backs to him. Irina turned and saw her father. She didn't move, surprised to see her father down in the camp, the saw in his hand.

Rossi stood with Irina. He told her to put the red pail with the white handle back where she found it. He told her they were going home. Irina paused and her face changed back to the expression Rossi was familiar with: defiant and strong. He told her to hurry and that he would wait.

Rossi stood near the spigot in the middle of the base camp. He thought of what he would say to Irina on their walk home. Before she had wanted to be mayor. Now she had become infatuated with the soldiers and their fancy equipment, their attitudes, their money. For the promise of something else. Something new and foreign.

Two soldiers went to the shit boxes. They took their rifles and helmets with them. Rossi heard metal clanging inside the boxes. He imagined the heat in there.

Rossi sat on a pile of used lumber. He laid his chopping saw down on the gravel.

The clouds that had covered the sun all morning were beginning to break. The hills down the valley were bright, making the clouds above Rossi a darker gray. Rossi thought of his wife with the cow and sheep; she would be with them for another hour or two. He and Irina would walk there first. First, he would take Irina to where his lead sheep was killed. They would look for the bell together. He wouldn't describe to her the sheep's insides on the dirt or the blood on the rocks, but he wanted to describe how the herd acted without their leader. Their movement as if they were in a tight pen, the sheep running into each other. The fear. They had everywhere to go, but, bumbling, they stayed tight in the herd, confused.

Irina walked towards him from across the open area. Rossi hoped they would find the bell. He could ring the bell for her to make his story more real. He wanted his daughter to understand. He wanted her to believe in his decision. If he had to, he would convince her with the stories of when she was very young. Of how he and her mother became lost after losing two children, how Irina had helped them focus again. Then he would relate all this to their country. Rossi was confident she would understand.

Irina met Rossi at the spigot. He asked if she was ready and he picked up his chopping saw. She said they could come tomorrow for the rest of their pay.

They walked past the soldiers at the gate. They were searched. As they patted Irina, Rossi looked down the valley, unable to watch the soldiers touching his daughter. The hills around him were lit with the hot green of midday sun.

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