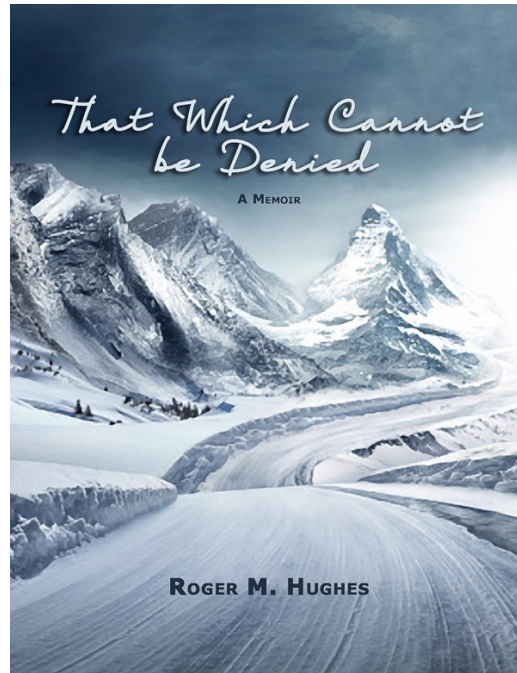


That Which Cannot Be Denied

By Roger M. Hughes



Thank you for your interest in reading this free chapter of my book. I wanted to share this chapter because it is one that has significant meaning for me. It takes place when I was a young man just starting to explore the world alone.

I learned so much about life, about the kindness of others, and about miracles during this adventure. I truly hope you enjoy reading this chapter.

Roger

Part Six – Chapter 5

Not as Easy as I Thought

I was lifted up and carried along by the memory of hospitality graciously extended to me the previous evening. The walk from Trieste to the Yugoslavian border was easy, but things got strange when I reached the border. Getting through the border was simple, but as I stood roadside with my hand out, waving, which was the polite way to ask for a ride, driver after driver whizzed by, waving kindly, but no one stopped. It was maddening, strange, and frustrating until finally, a young American businessman, who I learned lived in Trieste, stopped. “Where are you going?” he asked.

“I am trying to get to the central freeway that runs through Yugoslavia.” I said, pointing to the highway in red on my map, “So, I can hitchhike to Greece.” I said matter-of-factly.

He looked at me as if I were out of my mind. Shaking his head, he said, “Look, the drivers of the cars that are passing you by are like me. They are driving over the border to get gas as gas prices in Yugoslavia are controlled by the state, so gas is nearly seventy percent cheaper in Yugoslavia than in Italy.”

“More importantly,” he said, looking at me with pity, “the highway you are hoping will get you to the central freeway is closed for the winter!”

“Oh.” I said after a pause, “That explains a lot.”

“Yes, I guess it does,” he said, looking at me with pity. He pulled over at a gas station. “Look,” he said, pointing at my map. “See this crooked road going north?” he said, indicating a small curvy line going north to Belgrade. “It’s your best bet,” he said. “No, you’re only bet is to take a bus north to Belgrade. Don’t try to hitchhike as I am sure the fare is less than a dollar. Once you get to Belgrade, there is a highway that goes all the way to Athens, but God help you in finding a ride in the middle of winter all the way through Yugoslavia to Greece!” he said with emphasis.

His suggestion about heading for Belgrade seemed like a good idea. Actually, it seemed like the only idea.

I got to Belgrade late afternoon after a long, arduous journey over the mountains. Next to the bus station where I got off was a little delicatessen. I went in to see if I could get some bread and perhaps some dried meat.

A pretty Yugoslavian girl about my age was in line ahead of me. As she was walking away, apparently having heard me trying to communicate my request in pidgin English she thoughtfully said, “What is it you want?” Her English was much better than my imaginary Serbian-Croatian-Slovakian travel dictionary could muster up for me, which was nothing! “Some type of snack, some bread and cheese, and maybe some meat would be great,” I said.

She picked out a few things for me and, thankfully, the price was next to nothing. I then asked her what direction I should go to find the highway, pointing at my map and how long it would take for me to walk there. “If you were to walk to the highway,” she said, smiling a bit, “you would not get there until after dark. I am going that way. I will drive you,” she said with some authority, ending the discussion. So off we went—my second Good Samaritan and me.

Well out of town as evening approached, she pulled over where a small road ran off to infinity. I watched her drive away, her taillights merging into pinpoints, and then she was gone.

I had not seen another car since my ride turned onto the thoroughfare, and there were no cars to be seen now. To the north, west, and south—snow-covered plains stretched out into infinity.

Hard snow covered the road, bordered by two-foot berms of snow on each side. My hoped-for direction of travel, the southeast, had snow-covered mountains stretching across the horizon, formidable, rugged, and forbidding. I knew it was these mountains through which I must travel to reach Greece, a journey of over six hundred miles. There were no signs of life here; no cars, no lights, neither near nor far; even the heavens were veiled. On I walked. I began to wonder, a little late, if perhaps I was crazy.

I walked with purpose for a considerable distance, thinking surely a car would soon pass by and deliver me, but each time I paused, the mountains seemed to be no nearer. Hope was now a stranger.

I had no idea how long it would take me to get to the mountains, much less what I would do if I did. Knowing that walking was better than standing still or sitting down, I walked just to generate some warmth.

“Surely, a car will pass by; surely, there must be a village where I can seek refuge.” But there was nothing. I trudged on.

The gray sky gave way, deepening into gloomy evening, quickly turning into darkened night. I could see no stars, no moon, no lights—near or far. A gray shroud enveloped the dome of heaven. Fear, my only companion, is all that pushed me on.

Finally, giving in to my exhaustion, I sat down on the berm, ignoring that I was inviting a slow

death. Snow fell lightly, and soon I was asleep.

I do not know why I woke up, but I did so with a jolt that lifted me to my feet. Brushing off the light snow that was doing its best to cover me, I stared at a new sight. The canopy of clouds had lifted. The stars shone brilliantly in the deep sky, and now the argent moon was showing brilliantly upon the mountain to the east. I watched, mesmerized by the brilliance of the light. A shadow was growing bigger and bigger as I stared, stupefied.

Then I heard a mighty roar from behind. I turned just in time to see a fast-moving bullet of a car speeding by, swerving to avoid me. I didn't have time to react.

Remorseful that I had been sleeping rather than on alert, I watched the taillights narrow in the distance. What should I expect taking such a fool's risk, hitchhiking through Yugoslavia during the Cold War in the middle of winter? How could I have fallen asleep? What kind of fool would fall asleep alongside a frozen track of snow? Then, suddenly, the taillights brightened. The car was slowing. Could it be, could it really be? One moment I was looking forlornly at fading taillights, but now bright backup lights were coming toward me! The car was backing up! I stood, unbelieving, motionless.

"They're backing up to me," I said, as if in a trance. The car stopped beside me, the passenger window came down, and an attractive young blond lady smiled, saying, "Want a ride?"

I was dumbfounded, speechless, really.

The driver, who turned out to be her husband, leaned over, saying jovially, "If you want a ride, you have to get in!"

Still frozen physically and mentally, I was finally able to blurt out, "Yes, yes, I would very much like a ride."

"Well, then you have to get in the car!" the wife said, smiling, motioning toward the back door. I came to my senses, virtually leaping into the car, dragging my duffel bag with me.

“It was a miracle we saw you along the side of the road, an honest to God miracle,” the woman kept saying, “with the white U.S.A. posted on your bag. I kept telling my husband he is an American.” I listened, stunned, having all but forgotten the labels we had been given only a few days before.

“Where are you headed?” said the driver, a snazzy young man just a few years older than me.

“Athens,” I replied, and both of them started laughing.

“Your second miracle.” said the husband, “That is where we are going, so lean back, my friend, get warm, and get some sleep,” he said, throwing a blanket on me. “You can help drive after you get some shuteye.”

We saw no other car that I am aware of until early morning when we finally reached the border. By then, I had been driving for a while, and we still had a long way to go.

Before this, I didn’t believe in miracles. However, the facts cannot be disputed. After not seeing a single car for more than six hours; being exhausted to the point of not being able to walk; falling asleep on the side of the road; being covered with a light dusting of snow; and then, somehow awakening and being brought to my feet just in time to be seen; because of a label saying U.S.A. in bold white letters, posted on my duffel bag by a stranger; I was in no position to dispute the wife’s conclusion—it was a miracle.

I knew not what to say, but I was thankful for being saved.

It turned out the driver and passenger were a young American couple on their honeymoon. They had picked up a brand-new black BMW in Munich and were on their way to Athens.

When we reached Athens, the couple insisted upon delivering me to the youth hostel. I thanked them profusely and waved goodbye before it dawned on me that I did not have their names or address. I had no way to thank them. Hopefully, they will read this chapter and know that their kindness resonates with one lonely sojourner to this day.

Terry and Jack arrived two days later, together. I was greatly relieved and overjoyed to hear their voices coming up from the stairwell, ecstatic really, as I had spent two nerve-racking days with no idea

where they were or what I would do if they did not show up before our boat was scheduled to sail. This thought was so horrific I can only describe it as an hrrair.

Being a practiced thespian, however, as they came up the stairs, I assumed an attitude of casual repose, leaning slightly over the landing. I heard them babbling about what they would do if I didn't make it to Greece in time to catch the boat. "Have a nice trip, gentlemen?" I said in my best baritone. "You had me worried."

They looked up in shock. Then, spotting me above, they raced up, pounding on me ecstatically, then even a hug or two.

I must say, it was the first time Terry expressed joy in seeing me, and I returned the affection, though I couldn't help but put a dig in. "Aren't you glad that you don't have to explain to Mom how you lost me in Yugoslavia?"

He laughed heartily, then gave me a genuine smile and said, "Yes, yes, I am!" giving me another hug.

So, all was well, except for the inconvenient fact that we were as close to being busted as three guys could be, and we still had two days before our ship sailed for Alexandria. After the two-day sail, we still had to make our way back to Cairo. All in all, we were in a sorry state.

So, we followed the most rational course that came to mind. We marshaled our few remaining Drachmas, went downstairs, where we knew we would find a number of hostellers at the sidewalk café, and purchased a bottle of cheap wine, bread, cheese, and olives; then sat down to enjoy our last meal as we considered the gloomy state of our finances.

Fortunately, our passage back to Alexandria and our train tickets to Cairo were pre-purchased. All we had to do was survive without food for the next two days after paying our fee for the hostel and survive on the two-day voyage back. So, things were not all that bad!

Then another miracle happened. A fellow hosteller told us there was a clinic that would purchase blood for about ten dollars a pint only a few blocks away. We were saved! Ten dollars each would be just what we would need to get back to Cairo. It seemed that once again, we might be saved.

On the way to the clinic, Jack said flat out that he would prefer to starve if the clinic wasn't spotlessly clean. Terry and I agreed that we would head for the door if we didn't see the needle coming out of a sealed package. Fortunately, the clinic was spotless and, more importantly, staffed by a bevy of young Greek nurses who were abuzz to find three young Americans at their doorstep.

The senior nurses, however, maintained a strict discipline that prohibited fraternizing. Terry and Jack went first, behind the cotton curtain, and soon reappeared, saying, "Nothing to it." They waved the Drachmas they had earned. Still, having never given blood before, I was a bit nervous.

Laying down, I looked up at the prettiest nurse. She smiled, but almost immediately, the room was swimming. I felt clammy and cold, and then I clicked out.

How long I was out, I do not know. I could hear commotion from somewhere and Terry yelling, "I want to see my brother!" rather loudly, followed by "I want to see my brother now!"

Then Terry and Jack burst into the room and, as Jack told the story later, over and over again, to our friends at the American University of Cairo: "There he was, sitting up with a ring of the prettiest Greek nurses you would ever see, one patting his forehead with a wet towel, another offering him dishes of olives, until the head nurse shooed them away, giggling of course."

I remembered little of what happened, but I never tired of hearing Jack tell the story.

So, this time, we actually managed our hard-earned funds well, and to the best of my recollection, the remainder of the trip went without mishap. The weather was balmy, considering that it was winter and the Mediterranean behaved. Now, the only issue was how our adventure would be received at home.

If you enjoyed reading this chapter and would like to preorder "That Which Cannot be Denied" (available March 30, 2023), please go to <https://www.rogermhughes.com/book>