



# INTRODUCTION

As human beings, we sometimes find ourselves in a place devoid of light, filled with sharp edges and sorrow. As we walk forward in this fearsome inner landscape, an abyss opens up before us, and we are helpless not to tumble into it—unless grace extends its gentle hand to save us. We do not always know how we arrived at such a precarious point; but once there, we know we need healing, meaning, love, peace, hope, and happiness. We know that we are seeking something to fulfill us and take away our angst and our sadness. What we do not always know is that we are seeking God.

The true life stories in this book reveal people who have teetered on the edge, in seemingly hopeless situations, and arrived at the other side of grace. As diverse as they are, these individuals—a homeless drug addict, a lonely youth, a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, a nightclub stripper, a cocaine abuser, and a confused atheist—all possess two vital elements in common: they have discovered hope and healing in a loving God, and they received help in their journeys of faith through the Blessed Virgin Mary's presence and messages in Medjugorje.

Following each story is a message that Mary has given to the world, a message that speaks to the storyteller's life, and perhaps to our own. And for those eager to probe the deeper, reflective waters of discipleship—either alone or within a prayer group—a scripture passage, prayerful reflection questions, and a spiritual exercise at the end of each chapter offer an opportunity to enliven our faith.

These explorations can show us where we are on our spiritual journey, as we peer into the places in our lives where God

can touch us more deeply, bringing us healing and wholeness, and molding us into the likeness of his Son.

I have had the privilege of meeting each of the protagonists in this book. They came my way providentially and shared their remarkable tales with me, true in every detail. While on pilgrimage in Medjugorje, I encountered the Nobel Peace Prize nominee, the former stripper, and the former homeless drug addict turned happy family man. I was the confused atheist, brought back to life. The one-time cocaine abuser joined my prayer group and became a friend of mine, and the lonely youth became my husband.

Because I wanted the raw candor and the breadth and depth of each person's journey to remain as accessible and immediate to the reader as they were to me when I first heard them, I transcribed and edited the tellers' own words from our lengthy interviews, shaping them into first-person narrative form. In telling their stories, these ordinary people opened the door to their extraordinary lives—to a view more fantastic than fiction—and showed how God lifted them into his loving arms, often out of a living hell, and raised them up to the heights.

One might ask: Are these people telling the truth? Can God do such things in people's lives, or are miracles and dramatic transformations relegated to the pages of the Bible? These questions only the reader can answer, for they lie in the heart, in the delicate balance between empiricism and faith.

Whatever the answers might be for you, may these stories bring you close to the living God and his beautiful mother as they take you on a journey that reveals a Creator who loves us, even when we're at our worst.



ONE

# GORAN

A schizophrenic, homeless drug addict calls out to Mary, beginning an ascent from the streets to the life of a happy, healthy family man.

I woke up again. Who knows how long I'd been unconscious. This time I'd downed a bunch of pills, a bottle of vodka, and a shot of heroin; but trying to kill myself never seemed to work.

Shivering, I crawled across the floor of the derelict, windowless building I'd wandered into and pulled a sheet of plastic over my dying body. I just wanted to rest. Unable to sleep for months, I only traveled in and out of nightmares.

It was the middle of winter. I was thirty years old. I had no one and nothing, not even food. As I lay on the floor, staring at the wall, I felt utterly alone—despised. Perhaps this was just another nightmare . . . but the bitter cold that cut into my bones told me otherwise. I felt dead, but I was still alive.

For the first time since I was a child, I began to cry. I tried to pray but I couldn't remember how. I never really learned, and I hadn't ever really tried. What were the words? Through my tears, and from the depths of my soul, I began to call out to the Mother of God . . .

## Terrified and Alone, I Reminded Myself That I Was a Real Man

That night of dejection spent on the cold concrete floor occurred in my hometown of Split, Croatia, on the Adriatic coast. Years of drug and alcohol abuse had brought me to such a state, but even before I turned to substances, my life had its share of sadness.

Tragedy hit our family household early and left a lingering gloom in its wake. When my sister was four, she fell out the fifth-floor window and landed at my mother's feet—dying a couple of hours later. My brother, when only a year old, contracted meningitis and became a deaf-mute. After that, my mother, always in pajamas and glued to the television, drank herself into a serious depression, and was then diagnosed with leukemia. Father, a sailor, worked away from home on a ship, earning bread for the family. While I, with no strong hand or authority to guide me, began to steal bits of money from my mother's purse.

Every moment, I looked to escape my depressing home life by wandering outside or into fantasies. I wanted to be just like my television and film idols, who taught me that a real man had to go to sports games, wear tattoos, start fights, go to jail, and end up with scars on his face. No one taught me that being good could be the most beautiful thing in the world. My friends persuaded me that good traits and softness were for weaklings and women. When I was eleven years old, they encouraged me to smoke and to drink alcohol. This disgusted me, but I figured that real manhood meant holding a cigarette in one hand and a beer in another. Besides, when I drank, I could do things I would never do otherwise.

One day, I stole a car and escaped with two friends from school. We sped to different towns, piercing through traffic, but the police caught up with us. That night, at age eleven, I slept in jail for the first time. Terrified and alone, I reminded myself that I was a real man who knew everything in life and didn't need anything or anybody.

## Every Day, I Grew Worse

It might seem that my constant lies, drinking, and small thefts meant that I didn't love my family. On the contrary, I loved them very much, and so I suffered. I searched for comfort in the streets, since I couldn't bear to stay at home and see my mother drunk and depressed or watch my brother in his debilitating condition.

When I was thirteen, my mother died, and my world collapsed around me. My father remarried eight months later. I hated him for replacing my mother, but I hated my stepmother even more. I didn't know why, because she really did bring light into the house. She was a devout, prayerful woman; but the more she prayed, the more I hated her.

I announced every two or three months that I was going to kill myself, but no one believed me. My family and friends thought I was simply passing through an initial stage of shock.

On the first anniversary of my mother's death, I returned home and asked my father if I could chat with him. I wanted to talk about my feelings—everything that was going on in my heart. He was sitting in front of the television, watching the world soccer championship in Argentina. Not bothering to look up, he barked, "You have nothing to say. Get lost in your room, and study!"

I went to my room, took a pistol that I'd borrowed from a friend, put it to my head, and fired.

In a panic, my father sped me to the emergency room, where doctors attempted to remove the bullet that had lodged in my brain. But doing that was too dangerous, so they left it there. When I woke up after surgery, my father and stepmother, trying to ease my worry, told me that the bullet had been successfully removed.

A short time later, I was in a bar when a fight broke out, and someone hit my head with a beer bottle. When I went to the hospital to get stitches, the doctor told me I had something inside my head. I peered at the x-ray—and there was that bullet.

This gave me the excuse I needed to cause chaos. I stormed home, shoved open the front door, and shouted, "You lied to me!" I was always looking for someone to blame. Everyone else was at fault. I was the only good person.

My father saw that something wasn't right with me. He knew the company I kept, but he thought, "He is still young. He'll get over it. These are his crazy years." But I didn't get over it. Every day, I grew worse.

## I Was Immediately Addicted

Tiring of alcohol hangovers, I began to mix over-the-counter pills with my drinks. Then one of my friends who had just tried marijuana announced one day, "Forget about alcohol—we just fight and get beat up when we drink. That's crazy. Man, this new stuff is super. You smoke your fill and laugh the rest of the day." My other friends and I grew curious, but we feared marijuana because we didn't want to be drug addicts, only delinquents.

Our friend explained to us, nicely, that marijuana definitely wasn't a drug, or addictive. Not only that, he said, it cleared your mind, improved your studies and behavior, and gave you a great feeling of freedom. So I lit up my first joint—and liked it.

Around that time, I started to get tattoos, images I couldn't explain, even to myself. They certainly never gave off the manly image I was fighting so hard to maintain. At age fifteen, I had the words "Mommy, I love you" inscribed on my right shoulder. A year later, I had a cross on the crest of a mountain tattooed on my left shoulder. Some years after that, I had two hands in prayer, clasping a rosary, drawn over my heart.

As time passed by, though, my tough exterior began to match my hardened interior. With alcohol, pills, and marijuana in my system, I also moved further away from reality. I was beginning to lose it: forgetting things, cursing uncontrollably, and falling deeper into depression and paranoia. I thought that people wanted to kill me; and to numb my insane fears, I drank. Sometimes I tried to cut down or quit the substances, but I couldn't.

Time passed, and I lost my desire to cut back on anything. One day, a friend came to see me and said, "Man, enough of depression and aggression—I have the real thing. I just tried heroin, and there is nothing better in the world. It's madness. It's perfection."

Needing to escape my mental agony, I allowed someone to shoot me up. As the heroin entered my veins, euphoria flooded me. I felt no shame, no embarrassment. An awakening of something like love expanded inside of me, and I wanted to help everyone—or at least give everyone advice. I was immediately addicted.

The next day, I quickly found money and bought more of the drug; but not knowing how to use the needles, I ended up torturing myself. By the time I found a vein, I had covered myself in blood, from the top of my arms to my knees. After that I simply used more alcohol or marijuana to dull my fear of the needles. And heroin didn't cost much, at least at first.

Over time, I needed larger amounts of heroin to achieve the same high, so I started stealing from my parents' house, where I was living. I took gold, plates, vases, mixers, the coffee pot, and more, and sold them cheaply. In the beginning, fifty kunas [about ten dollars] paid for a day's worth of heroin, but after about three or four months passed, crisis struck. I now needed 100 kunas, then 200, 400, 500 each day. Who can earn that kind of money?

## Seeing the Truth Shattered His Heart

Then came more craziness. I started stealing outside my home and breaking into cars. With every crisis, I came home drunk, asking my father for more money. He was beside himself with worry, seeing that I was totally out of my mind. One day, while I was out, he went into my bedroom and began searching for evidence that could explain my behavior, and he came across syringes and the band of rubber I used for making my veins pop out.

My father's world crumbled around him. Seeing the truth shattered his heart. He knew I was in trouble, but this . . . ? In an effort to help, he tried to get close to me, but we were too alike, and when our anger flared, he sometimes beat me to bits. Finally, he realized that while I was on heroin I was insane, and there was no point in beating me.

So he tried to extend some sort of love by approaching me to have a talk. But a thick wall towered between us. "What

could you possibly tell me now that would make any difference?" I asked him. "Where were you all those wasted years? Leave me alone."

In desperation, my father sent me to the psychiatric unit of Split hospital. There my friends brought me drugs and alcohol. I was a well-seasoned actor. I had a different story for every doctor and nurse and always got what I wanted. I knew when and how to be lovable. I even knew how to cry to attract pity and attention. The doctors never noticed anything wrong with me. On the contrary, they proclaimed my father insane for bringing me there, since I was the one good boy in the whole ward.

## Together We Declined into Decay

When I got out of the hospital, I returned to shooting heroin and spending time with a girlfriend named Zeljka. She was essentially drug-free, but often asked me to give her some heroin to try because she saw that when I was using, I behaved well, slept well, and seemed to be happier. I knew that if I started having to share my heroin, it would cost me more money, so I told her I didn't think it was a good idea. Eventually she said, "Listen, if you don't let me try heroin, I'll go see my other friends, and they'll give it to me."

"Uh-oh," I thought, "if she goes to them, she'll get involved with another man who will supply her." I wanted her to be my marionette, my doll—to spend her time only with me. A few times I even beat her because I heard she was out with other friends. So I decided to give her some of my stash, and together we declined into decay. To support her growing habit, she, too, began to steal from my father's house.

In another attempt to help me, my father found me a job, reasoning that if I worked eight hours a day with his friends,

in healthy surroundings, perhaps I would change. He made a huge mistake. I disgraced him. I stole from half of the company, and came to work sporadically and drunk. One day I even raised a knife to my boss, and so they finally threw me out.

## Zeljka Got Pregnant

Zeljka and I stayed together for almost six years. I thought I was in love with her. I even had the words “I love you Zeljka” tattooed on my arm. And she believed she was in love with me.

At one point, Zeljka got pregnant. She wanted the baby, but I didn’t think our lifestyle could support a child. When she was three months pregnant, Zeljka wanted us to change the way we were living and start on the right road, but I decided that she should abort the baby.

Zeljka borrowed money for the abortion, and together she and I went to a private doctor in Split. She handed me the money to pay the doctor when he was done. What happened next, in truth, reveals what kind of a man I was. While she was lying on the operating table, I ran out of the waiting room and spent the money to get high. And that, in essence, was the end of us.

Even with the little self-esteem she had, Zeljka finally understood that I was no good. When she left me, I was devastated. I had thought I was in love. In truth, she had just been another one of my habits. If I had loved her, I would surely never have treated her as I did. Still, I felt angry and betrayed, and I had “don’t” added to my “I love you Zeljka” tattoo.

## My Father Saved My Life

I continued in my wayward direction, and one day, coming home drunk and in a crisis, as usual, I asked my father to give

me money. But he had had enough. He drew back his fist and hit me in the left eye. Without hesitating, I pulled out a small knife and stabbed him in the left side of his abdomen. The police came, dragged me out of the house, and locked me up.

After a few months, I was released. With nowhere else to go, I went home. I stood outside the front door of my father's house and asked to come in, but this time my father made the smartest move possible—one that saved my life.

He locked the door and told me through the cracks, "My son, you are not welcome in this house because all your life you could have chosen your family over the company of your friends in the streets, but you chose them. You are old enough and smart enough to decide what you want, so you can have your friends. Drug yourself, go out into the streets; and one day, if you decide to come back, we will give you all the help necessary to be normal, to be yourself again." I had hated my father all my life, but in that moment, no words could describe my rage.

## They Sent Me to a Psychiatric Ward

For nine years, from age twenty-two to thirty-one, I slept in the streets. For nine years, I detested my father and that family of mine. My hatred brought me to madness, and at the same time, it kept me alive, able to sleep out in the streets, those God-forsaken streets.

During those years, God came into the picture only when I used his name to curse. I often bought and sold drugs around churches and shouted insults at the people going in. And the only time I went inside a church was to steal the money out of the collection box.

At first, I had a few friends who let me sleep in their homes—if I had money or drugs to share—but after I hadn't



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At first, I had a few friends who let me sleep in their homes—if I had money or drugs to share—but after I hadn't

taken a bath for several months, I smelled like a decaying animal, so everyone started to avoid me. I began sleeping in old wooden sheds, on the sidewalk, in parks, and under bridges. I lived like a sick, rabid dog, left to fend for itself, as I rotated between the streets and jail. My daily routine became breaking into homes and apartments and threatening people at gunpoint. My own brother would walk to the other side of the street to avoid me.

Many times, when I spiraled into a dark depression, nothing could calm me down—not drugs, not booze—nothing. Seeking relief, I sometimes took a knife, a piece of glass, or a razor, and cut my arms, neck, and face. I watched the blood pouring out, and it gave me a strange kind of calmness.

The authorities and social workers in Split had no idea what to do with me. Finally, after twenty-seven house break-ins, store robberies, and purse or wallet snatchings, they agreed that I should receive punishment. They sent me to a town outside of Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, to a psychiatric ward with locked doors. I walked through those doors sad and scared, because 90 percent of the residents had killed people and were diagnosed with serious mental illnesses. I received therapy with injections and pills, and I came to see that I was just a plain drug addict who overcame my fear of others by acting aggressively, while the other residents were psychopathological murderers who liked to kill. I decided this wasn't the place for me and started to plan my escape.

First I had to steal some money, then get some clothes other than the pajamas all of us had to wear. The clothes came easily. To get the money, though, I stole from a man who had committed four murders—with an axe. But I didn't care. I was blinded by the hope of a trip out of town.

I managed to escape to Split, where I lived as a fugitive because there was a warrant out for my arrest. For three weeks, I managed not to get caught, but during that time, I contracted hepatitis C and turned completely yellow. When the authorities found me again, they immediately shipped me back to the ward. I felt terrified to return. I knew that the quadruple murderer was aware I had stolen his money, and that he was in the ward for life, so I figured he would kill me sooner or later.

The moment I entered the asylum doors, the doctor put me into a room and beat me almost senseless. At one point, he drove his fist into my stomach and said, "I am God here. I can do what I want. I can kill you if I want to." He and the staff then put me into a straightjacket and tied my legs to a bed.

And then came the worst punishment. With cruel calculation, they placed me in the same room with that murderer. What horror. For seven days, he just sat there and looked at me, calmly, with eyes of ice. Every time he got up, I wet myself from fear. I knew that people were murdered, in that asylum, for much less than what I had done.

On the seventh day, he broke his silence. "Listen, you vermin druggie . . ." and then he cursed my mother. "For seven days, I've been thinking to myself, 'Will I choke you or not?'" Then he said, "You know who I am, what I am, and what I did. And I really did decide to choke you like a rabbit. But then I thought, 'If this guy had the courage to steal money from me, I admire him.'" He then stood up and put a cigarette in my mouth.

From that moment on, he fed me at mealtimes, untied my legs and took me to the toilet, took off my pajamas when I had bowel movement, and even wiped my behind.

Even after my week in hell ended, each day was an ugly, frightening experience. Many of my teeth and most of my hair

fell out while I was there. I knew I didn't belong in that place, but what could I do? I had to put up with the punishment, and now, because of my escape, I would be detained another six months. The chief doctor on the ward told me that if I committed one more criminal act when I got out he would see to it that I returned and stayed forever. So, I decided that I would never use drugs again. When my sentence was over, I planned to return to Split, find a job, rent a little room, and somehow begin to live normally.

When my day to leave was finally announced, a fear of the outside world seized me so fiercely that the night before my release, I grabbed a razor and cut my veins. The staff patched me up the next morning and set me free.

## I Was Waiting for My Time to Die

I went to Zagreb, about eighty kilometers [fifty miles] away. As soon as I got there, I purchased two containers of pills for schizophrenia, took ten of them, and drank two liters of wine. I felt deathly afraid of returning to that mental institution, yet I had no capacity to be a man good to his own word. In that hour and a half, I had forgotten the past two and a half years of my life.

Shortly after that, I returned to Split, but by then, I had ruined myself completely. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I am a tall man, and I weighed about 56 kilos [123 pounds]. I felt far too weak to break into houses. I could hardly walk. People spat at me. They beat me, harassed me, cursed me, and chased me from their districts, calling me a lousy, sick pest. I begged the dealers I knew to give me drugs but they refused. In the streets, when you have money, you have friends; when you don't have money, you don't have anyone.

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