

The Search for Father Glocar

By Vernelle Kurak

Ivan pounded on the door that led to the Living quarters above the vacant hardware store. I stood back slightly, suddenly reluctant to meet the reality that inevitably awaited inside that dirty, mustard-colored door. It was a way the world had of taking those moments of romantic anticipation and turning them back to the mundane.

Ivan tried the Latch. The door was locked. He rattled the door. I checked my impulse to try to silence his noisy demand for entry into the house of a stranger. He was, after all, only giving physical expression to my own hunger of the imagination that had brought us here to a small Wisconsin town far down the freeway from our urban home.

The last insistent rattle of the door faded into the soft summer air, and we both stood silent, listening.

The sun poured dappled heat over the shimmering metal of parked cars down onto the white cement sidewalk where it swirled and eddied about my feet. I looked Longingly at the cooling waters of the small river that moved languidly beneath the nearby street bridge, bending to touch the limestone foundation of the vacant store building, in front of which we stood. I wondered if the river's nudge of moisture against the rough-cut blocks was its invitation to travel on with it to the larger world. Or was it simply a reminder that the building and we were but temporary aberrations in the eternity that was the river's own? A soft haze like the buzz of summer flies filled my head.

"Can I help you folks?" A short, stocky man stepped out of the door of the old hardware store. He was dressed like the baritone in a barbershop quartet. Broad red suspenders sloshed across the white of his shirt, their brass clasps fastened to his blue checked and beltless polyester pants. Black arm-garters bunched the sleeves of his shirt just below the spreading circles of perspiration that dampened his underarms. A black

felt bowler hat perched incongruously on the top of his head like a black bird eager to fly off to a more suitable perch.

The man walked toward us, his hand outstretched and a broad smile on his face. "How do you do? I'm George Benson." He grasped Ivan's hand in a handshake as falsely hearty as the tone of his voice. "I'm runnin' for council- man, and I'd sure appreciate you folks' vote." He looked us over. "But you're strangers here aren't you? Did you come down for the Pioneer Days celebration?"

"Oh, that's why the costume."

"Yeah, ain't I somethin'? You should have seen me with my beard. Had to shave it off though; it was too itchy. Well, too bad you can't vote. Did ya ever think of movin' here?" He laughed at his little joke, and only then returned to his original query. "Is there somethin' I can help you folks with?"

"Yes, maybe you can. We're looking for Father Glocar."

[Start flashback]

It had been one of those human-interest stories that along with the gardening column, the week's summary of the stock market, the full-color comics, and the weekly picture magazine added bulk if not substance to the Sunday paper. The article, as I remembered it later, had told sketchily of a Russian Orthodox priest named Emil Glocar who painted icons. It had mentioned that he lived in Eau Claire, Wisconsin and that he had painted all of the icons in the new Russian Orthodox Church at Hibbing, Minnesota. Whatever else the article had said had vanished from my memory.

[End flashback]

"You mean the old guy who lives upstairs? The one who's some sort of priest?"

"Yes, Father Glocar. Is he home? We couldn't get any answer when we knocked on the door."

"Yeah, well, he probably couldn't hear you. Come on, I'll rouse him for you if he's there." We walked the few feet from where we stood onto the street bridge which spanned the lethargic river. From the bridge we could see the side of the building with the river brushing against it. The bright sunlight made me squeeze my eyes almost shut as I peered upward to the second story windows of the old building. Benson, resplendent in his turn-of-the-century dress, cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted upward. "Father Glocar! Father Glocar!" The sound of his voice boomed in the summer air and rebounded off the wall of the building. The top part of a thin, human figure materialized in one of the screenless, open windows of the second floor. An aged Cezanne, paintbrush in hand, pausing from his work to catch a breath of golden Parisian air or to check the green of his palette against the leaves of the mottled plane trees.

"Did you call?"

"You've got visitors, Father. Come down and open your door."

[Start flashback]

Later that year, we had stopped in Hibbing on our way back to the city from a visit to Minnesota's iron range in the northern part of the state. On an impulse, suggested to Ivan that we visit the Russian Orthodox Church to see the icons. "Remember that article about the priest from Eau Claire? He painted all the icons in this church."

The almost-new Russian Orthodox Church in Hibbing was located on the southern edge of town near the modern Iron Gate Shopping Mall. We parked on the tarmac in the adjoining lot and stood for a moment looking at the building. Its walls of gray poured concrete rose solidly out of their American origins. But the golden onion dome atop the stubby spire seemed to have floated there from some exotic, foreign land.

Although it was a weekday, the church door was open wide; we walked in under the vaulted ceiling of the nave. A riot of multi-colored paintings, rich in vibrant colors and slathered with shining gold decoration covered all the walls and ceiling of the bright interior.

[End flashback]

We followed Father Glocar up a narrow, steep flight of stairs leading to his quarters. Dust motes hung in the stale air, and the fall of our feet on the worn varnish of the wooden stairs reverberated from the dim heights of the narrow hall. At last, like mountain climbers gaining the summit, we emerged into a flat above the vacant store front.

"Welcome to my humble home. You have come a long way?" Father Glocar was a tall man, his withered frame and age-eroded face still revealing what must have been in his youth a splendid handsomeness. His hair, its long strands not quite touching the collar of his faded, paint-smearred, dress shirt, was white. Darker in color than his hair, his beard was trimmed in a roughly Van Dyke style. Although they were ringed by rheumy lids, his eyes dominated his long, narrow, aristocratic face. A cool brown, they flashed with obvious intelligence.

"Yes, we've come from St. Paul." Ivan introduced himself and then me.

Father Glocar took my hand. "I am always delighted to meet a lovely lady." He held my hand a moment too long before releasing it, a roguish twinkle in his eye. "Come in, both of you. We will sit down and have some refreshment. Then you will tell me how you came to find me." He shepherded us from where we stood, a sort of vestibule at the top of the stairs, into a larger room. The room exhibited such abject poverty that, for the moment, I could not focus on its details out of embarrassment and pity.

Father Glocar stopped at an assemblage of furniture which resolved itself into a small settee, with uncertain legs; a straight-backed chair, tied with wire; and an armchair, its upholstery punctuated by escaping springs. These three derelicts stood around a low coffee table in what I recognized as a conversational grouping resembling those found in the grand drawing rooms of Europe.

Our host shoved aside a litter of glossy art books on the unstable settee and presided solicitously over my seating. Having accomplished that, he then cleared the rubble of books and papers from the armchair to make a place for Ivan.

"Will you have tea? Or, perhaps, a small glass of wine?"

A bottle of Chateau Toumilon Bordeaux stood on the small table in front of me along with a generous slice of Brie, partially concealed by the miscellany that claimed most of the space on the table.

At our assurance that tea would be fine, Father Glocar went off to prepare it, freeing me for a moment to take in my surroundings. The old, painted walls of the room with their cracked and broken plaster bore mute testimony to the ravages of time and neglect. . A single light bulb hung by a slender cord from a high, water-stained ceiling. The smell of turpentine saturated the air. From where I sat I could see the source of the odor. On a large table just inside the archway leading to the vestibule were dozens of containers each containing one or more slender handled artists' brushes. There were coffee cans, fruit jars, milk cartons, a supermarket at the service of art. In the center of the table rose a silver candelabrum, many branched and haughty above its common companions.

[Start flashback]

I had been raised a Lutheran and had attended, under the tutelage of my parents, a tiny, country church in northeastern Iowa. The church stood atop a rolling hill, its simple lines and pointed spire leading the eye, as obviously intended, ever upward toward heaven. Inside, the church walls were unencumbered by decoration save for a single picture of Christ in his agony on the cross.

The picture, which hung above the altar, was almost apologetic in the paleness of its colors. Even the nails which pierced Christ's waxen hands drew but one drop of crimson blood. As a child, by both precept and example, I was taught that the Lutheran religion was a grim business.

It was of that simple church of my childhood that I thought as I gazed at the colorful spectacle inside the Hibbing church.

I was slightly repulsed by the gaudy, prodigal decoration that covered the entire ceiling and most of church the walls. The painted figures seemed too decadent, too much of the earth.

A young priest joined us a few minutes after we had entered the proper. He told us that he was a recent graduate of St. Vladimir's Seminary in Chicago and that he was newly assigned to the Hibbing parish. Although

the icons had been painted before his arrival, he knew that scaffoldings had been raised to provide a platform from which the artist could reach the vaulted ceiling and upper walls. The priest was eager to explain to us the conventions that governed both the content and the form of icons. They were based on prescribed forms and had flat, two-dimensional figures designed according to abstract patterns rather than on the personal observations of the artist. Historically, the Byzantine artists who painted them had remained anonymous. As he told us the history of icons, the priest pointed out several special ones. There was the Virgin Mary. The icon showed the head and torso of a woman dressed in a silken gown. The golden ring around her head representing the halo looked to me like a nineteenth-century lady's summer hat. On one side of the building were several saints; I did not catch their exotic names as our guide pointed them out.

Some saints were dressed in ermine-trimmed robes; precious stones glittered in the many rings of their fingers. An especially holy icon, we learned was the one of Mary Magdalene, there near the center of the room. I looked more closely at her. Behind her figure, as in many of the other icons, was a pattern of golden domes like a vision of the legendary Baghdad. Mary Magdalene seemed to look back at me, her sly eyes slightly mocking. A golden chain around her neck held a cross. The cross rested on her chest just between the soft surge of her breasts.

The priest told us that the church trustees were thinking of printing a pamphlet to explain the significance of the icons and to identify each of them. Such a guide would be handy to give out to visitors such as we. He hoped he had been informative; he apologized for not being able to recall just then the icon-painter's name although he knew that he lived in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. We told him that the artist's name was Father Glocar and that he too was a Russian Orthodox priest.

[End flashback]



Father Glocar returned carrying a small tray which held three restaurant china mugs and a cracked, brown ceramic teapot. "Which would you prefer, Earl Gray breakfast tea or spring herbal?"

"Either would be fine."

"Then Earl Gray it shall be. The British, you know, can judge your class by the tea you drink." He spooned tea from a tin into the pot. A cracked saucer served as a replacement for the pot's missing cover. We sat in silence for a moment waiting for the tea to steep. Finally, Father Glocar, who had taken a seat on the straight backed chair, leaned forward and, holding the saucer in place with one hand, poured the three cups full of steaming tea.

"Sugar?"

"No, thank you."

I took the cup he handed me gingerly. The cup's inner grime contrasted darkly with the amber liquid it held.

"A biscuit?" He offered an open box of Ritz crackers. "No? Perhaps later." He set the box on the floor by his chair. "It is a long journey from St. Paul just to visit an old and lonely man."

"We read an article about you in the paper."

Ah, so I do reap some good from that tawdry affair." I waited for him to continue; when he did not, I went on.

"And we visited the church in Hibbing to see your icons."

"You liked them? A labor long and hard rewarded only by another opportunity to glorify God. When one is of the church, they think one needs not the sustenance of the world."

"They did not pay you?"

"Board and room for the two months I was there." He smiled. "And they remember me in their prayers. But enough of me." He looked at Ivan. "Your name is Russian, is it not?"

[Start flashback]

It had been a fine summer day about two months after our visit to the Hibbing church when we drove to Eau Claire to find Fahter Glocar. Even though I had not understood the paintings in the church, I was willing to reserve judgement about them. The only religious art I knew anything about was western European.

At the university I had attended, the art history department was reputedly one of the best in the country. Several of its professors were eminent authorities in their respective periods. One was noted for his criticism of the Flemish painters, another had written the standard text on the Pre-Raphaelites, and a third was a distinguished lecturer on expatriate American painters of the pre-Modern period. The department's class offerings were divided precisely by periods and genres: Italian Renaissance; Nineteenth Century English Landscape Painters; and so on. Exams often consisted of a series of slides depicting art works which were to be identified by date and artist, then discussed in relation to style or movement. We students quickly learned to look out for the ringer, the slide of a work outside our area of study or one that was simply an imposter. There had been no course in Eastern Christian Art.

We had stopped at a roadside telephone booth on the outskirts of Eau Claire. The local phone directory did not list a "Glocar" nor was there an entry for a "Russian Orthodox Church." I decided to call the art history department at the Eau Claire campus of the University of Wisconsin. Surely, art historians would know of Father Glocar, a painter of icons, who lived in their midst. My query went unanswered. No one in the art history department knew of such a person.

[End flashback]

"Actually, the name is Turkish in origin, but my parents were Russian speaking. They were born in a village in the Carpathian Mountains in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire under the Hapsburgs."

"Then they are Russian Orthodox?"

"They were, but they are both dead now."

"And you?"

"I send some money each year to my father's church, but I no longer attend."

"Yes, America is far from the old country of your parents and me."

"You were born there too?"

"I was born in Serbia. Such a long time ago. I was at the University in Prague, then the seminary. For twenty years, I served a parish in Bereznyy. Twenty years and then the church she says go, go to America. No reason given, no choice offered. So here I am an old man among strangers."

"But you paint icons for the church. Surely, they appreciate that."

"A painter of icons was not so bad. But a painter who was a priest they could not tolerate so they sent me away•"

"How about family, relatives? Do you have relatives here?"

"But you have a parish here, don't you?"

"Ha! Twelve people. And it is not here; it is at Huron, twenty miles from here. I go there once a month to say mass, and they give me a few dollars. No, it is not a real parish. The church has sent me into exile because I am an artist."

"My wife. She has been in an insane asylum for many years. And a daughter. I do not know where my daughter is. She blames me for her mother's illness. She said if I had not been so stubborn, if I had stopped painting, we would still be in the old country, and her mother would not be ill." He held his tea cup in both hands and looked down at it. "Maybe she is right. But it was a choice I could not make. I must paint."

[Start flashback]

Next I had called the local newspaper. No one I talked to had heard of a Father Glocar. Some suggested that I was mistaken about Eau Claire; perhaps the painter priest lived in River Falls or Menominie.

The community of my childhood had been homogeneous: everyone of Norwegian ancestry and all baptized into the Lutheran church. One of our favorite pastimes as children had been to repeat horror stories about the Catholics which one or the other of us had heard from an adult. Stories of nuns who killed their babies and buried them in the dark cellars of their nunneries. Of priests who could hypnotize you in an instant and make you a Catholic, and who, at night, took off their black frocks and held orgies with the nuns and with you if you had been captured by their spell. As a child, I had known of only two religions; the dark, evil bewitchment of Catholicism and the pleasurable but righteous and only true way to heaven of Martin Luther.

Some faint vestige of that religious dichotomy had stirred within me as I sat in the phone booth. The Catholics, who predominated in Eau Claire, would know of Father Glocar. I would call the Catholic archdiocese to find him. The man who answered my call was friendly and helpful; I imagined him to be a priest, perhaps a secretary to the archbishop. Yes, he knew of Father Glocar. Father Glocar sometimes gave painting lessons to the Catholic children at their summer camp. I copied down the directions given me. It was a downtown Eau Claire address. Above an empty store front right by the river. It would be easy to find. We could not miss it.

[End flashback]

Father Glocar brightened. "But I have you for new friends now. Ivan who is my brother and you." He turned to me with a smile. "You who are so tall and blonde; not a Serb, no, but a woman who loves art who has come to see my paintings."

I set my untouched cup of tea on the low table. "Yes, I would like to see them. Where is your studio?"

"It is in the front of the building where the light comes in from the east." He waved his arm to indicate the room. "You look about you, you see this place, it is a poor place. But the light in the studio is good. I can work there. The social worker, he says I must move. He says this building is unfit for habitation because there is no toilet. But I manage all right. The library is just up the street; there is hot water there to wash with too." He nodded toward the stack of books next to me.

"I got here for the art books anyway." And at night, if I need it there is a gasoline station that is open twenty-four hours. But no, the social worker, he will not listen; he does not care about the light or my painting. He says I must go to the old people's home where they can take care of me. But I will not go. Let them keep their welfare it is a pittance anyway. Old people's home, ha!" He snorted in disdain. "Where would I paint there? Forgive me, you do not want to hear my troubles. Come along, I will show you my studio." He led the way through the vestibule to a large room that stretched across the entire front of the building. I saw that it was from a window at the end of this room that Father Glocar had leaned out to answer our summons from the street.

An easel stood in the center of the room catching the best light from the large, open windows. It was the only piece of furniture in the room, and it stood in the only open space available. Leaning against every wall were thick disheveled stacks of paintings. More were piled about on the floor in loose-leaf edifices of canvas, card-board, and plywood. Any piece of flotsam with a surface flat enough to receive oil paint had been pressed into service as a canvas. The icons of the Hibbing church had not prepared me for this; for these thousands of paintings were not icons, although later I would find one or two among the stacks.

I looked through the pile of paintings nearest to me. Here were the impressionists: Monet on plywood, a Seurat on a canvas board; and the cubists: a Picasso on the back of a piece of oilcloth, Braques on cardboard. Or here, the pre-Renaissance Italians stacked familiarly with the Moderns. It was as though the neat categories of art had been sucked up in a maelstrom and then dumped helter-skelter here in this room.

[Start flashback]

Ivan and I had often had long discussions about the definition of art. We agreed that art was something conceived and executed by humans in imitation of nature and that every art work was intended to be viewed by someone. In other words, implicit in the artist's creation of a work was the expectation of an audience. Given this universal connection of artist-art work-audience, we also agreed that art, the link between artist and audience, was a form of communication. Where we differed was on what distinguished art from non-art. Ivan felt that there had to be at least some small degree of agreement on the part of the audience that any given work was art. I maintained that what defined a work as art was the artist's intention to communicate an emotion or a truth of some kind. The audience's understanding of the message or, for that matter, the recognition that there was a message there was not necessary.

Though I staunchly maintained my position, I was slightly uncomfortable with it, for it expanded the definition of art to include nearly countless examples of bad art. I rationalized that bad art was still art; it was just an inadequate or awkward communication. Much the same as with writing, which is writing whether good or bad.

[End flashback]

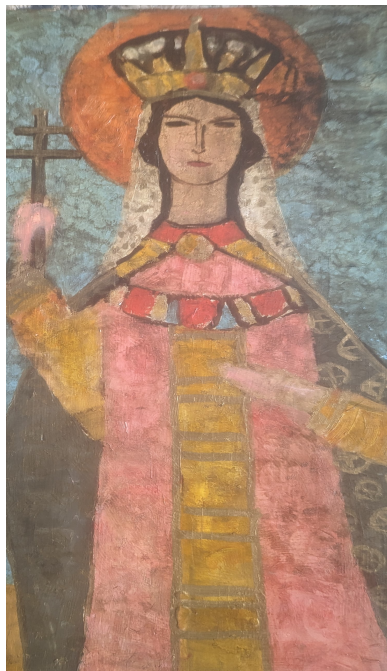
"You must tell me what you like. What color is your living room? We will find a painting to match it. Here, this one, it is very nice. The blues and greens they go with every color." Father Glocar had turned salesman; he bustled about holding up one painting after another.

"I'm sorry, Father. I'm not sure that..." I stopped in mid-sentence nonplused.

"It's so hard to judge without a frame. I will put this one in a frame so you can see." He fitted a painterly seascape into a worn but elaborate frame he had at hand for just such a demonstration. "This painting is only \$50.00 but for you I will part with it for \$30.00. I would be happy knowing that you had it, and I only need money for more paint and canvas. What do you think? Nice, eh?" "Wei1... well, yes. It does fit that frame." But, I wanted to see your icons. Do you have any?"

"Oh, you are a special lady. The lady shall have an icon." He rummaged around in the pile of works near the corner of the room. "Here is an icon. Saint Agnes, patron saint of women. She is beautiful is she not?"

The picture he displayed was painted in oil on a on inch pressed board cut in a long rectangular shape. The image of Saint Agnes stared out at me, her dark hair and red-bowed mouth more fitting to a Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile, than to a Christian saint.



"How much is it?"

"Oh material world that must put a price on the head of a saint."

"It isn't for sale?"

"For bread alone I would not sell her. But you see how it is with me. The art supply store will not give me any credit. I must go on somehow. You make me a gift of \$60.00, and I will give you the icon." He set the icon up on the easel. "It is a desecration for the artist to sign an icon. You look and you will see that no icon bears the artist's signature. But for you, I will make my mark down here in the corner." He picked up a brush and made a small decipherable symbol in black on the left-hand corner of the icon.



"Come on, we have to go." Ivan whispered urgently into my ear. To Father Glocar he said, "We didn't come to buy anything. We were just interested in getting to know you. We aren't much for art." I heard in his tone the urgent effort to save me from an unwise purchase.

"Yes, we really do have to go. But I want to buy that icon. Will you take a check, Father Glocar?"

"From a wonderful lady like you I would take a check anytime. I can see in your eyes the honesty."

I took out my checkbook and wrote a check to Father Glocar in the sum of sixty and no one-hundredths dollars.

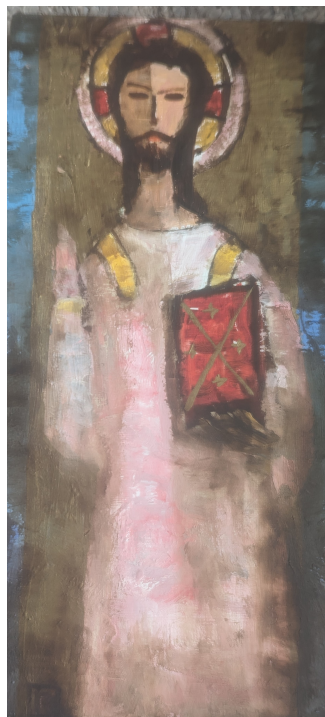
[Start flashback]

We had argued that day on our way home. Ivan felt that I had thrown my money away. He said that as a painter, Father Glocar was a fraud, a charlatan who pawned off bad paintings on people like me by playing on our sympathies. A painter with no style but that borrowed from books. I pointed out that while indeed I had been moved by the poverty in which Father Glocar lived, it had been the icons that I had gone there to see and those had been what I had purchased. And further, while Father Glocar's paintings were reminiscent of different historical styles, they were not copies of others' work. Had Ivan not been so worried about my money, I suggested, he would have noticed that in the subjects chosen—medieval cities, foreign landscapes, and religious themes—as well as in the extensive use of palette knife and the sure choice of color, there was a style that was unarguably Glocar's own. I reminded Ivan that he had accepted as a gift from Father Glocar a painting of a magnificent medieval city full of colorful Byzantine church domes. I ended the discussion by pointing out that if he wished, he could think of my \$60.00 as a donation to charity.

[End flashback]

It had been a few weeks after that first field trip that I returned to Eau Claire alone. Father Glocar was still in his quarters above the vacant hardware store; although he had to move within the month, he still had nowhere to go. I had brought with me a reproduction of a saint from a medieval church frieze that I asked Father Glocar to paint. He had immediately recognized the figure as that of San Clemente and had agreed, somewhat reluctantly I thought, to make a copy of it for me. I gave him a fifty dollar advance and found two more icons to buy among the stacks of paintings. One was a figure of Christ dressed in a startling pink robe. Christ's narrow face glowered with a misanthropy which belied the golden halo around his dark neck.

The check I made out that day was for a hundred and thirty dollars.



It was on this visit to Eau Claire that Father Glocar told me about the reporter from my city who had come to interview him for the story that I had subsequently read in the Sunday paper. The reporter had taken some thirty or more of Father Malkar's paintings home with him. He had said that he wanted to see which fit best into the large, Victorian house he and his wife were in the process of redecorating. It had been many months since the reporter had been to Eau Claire, almost a year, and Father Glocar had not heard from him. Father Glocar asked me to call the reporter when I returned to the city to ask for the return of the paintings or for payment, which, even at the bare minimum of \$30.00 each, would amount to a considerable sum.

I made the call that evening. The reporter, very angry or perhaps alarmed, protested vehemently. He had paid, he said, Father Glocar's social worker for the paintings. The paintings, he said, had now been framed and hung at considerable expense. Father Glocar was an old man, he said, and a foreigner who perhaps did not understand the American system. Furthermore, he said he did not know what business it was of mine, and he would appreciate it if I would not bother him again. He was a busy man.

I wrote to Father Glocar in care of the Eau Claire public library to tell him of my conversation with the reporter and to suggest that he hire a lawyer to help him get the money due him.

My third visit to Eau Claire had been just before Christmas of that same year. Ivan had accompanied me somewhat reluctantly. He, too, felt compassion for Father Glocar's situation but he did not believe that my buying of a few paintings would change it; it would only delay the inevitable for a moment and hold out false hope. I suggested that hope was all any of us had to comfort us against the onslaught of the inevitable and that the gift of hope was one far greater than the few dollars that I paid Father Glocar for his paintings. Since we did not know where Father Glocar had moved, our first stop was at the public library; the librarian would know the address from his library card.

The library faced an open square. The other buildings contained the Eau Claire city offices and a new county jail. All the lightposts around the square were decorated with Christmas wreaths and in the square itself stood a large creche. A recent snow had blanketed the nativity scene, lying thickly on the camels and the three wise men in their desert robes; it had even drifted in about the manger and the baby Jesus. The crisp snow crunched under our winter boots, as we walked about the square toward the library.

The address the librarian gave us was on Barstow Street, the main business thoroughfare of Eau Claire. Father Glocar lived at number 411[^] in what had once been the Knights of Columbus hall. We found the address without much difficulty. It was an old, two-story building, its first floor shop windows sealed up with a rust-colored brick that did not match the deep red brick of the original construction. An interior decorator's shop occupied the first floor of the building which abutted on the left, directly next to the brown painted entrance to the second floor Knights of Columbus hall. Two oil paintings were displayed in the decorator shop windows along with sweeping lengths of drapery material and pleated fans of wallpaper samples.

"Look, those are two of Father Glocar's paintings." "Do you think so?"

"I'm sure of it. They're from his French Impressionist period."

"This must be the place then."

Ivan knocked on the door. After a moment, he knocked again.

"He can't hear us. He's way up there somewhere. Try the door."

The door was unlocked. Ivan opened it and called up the long stairwell.

"Father Glocar! Father Glocar! Are you there?"

A door opened at the top of the stairs. "Who is it?" "Father Glocar, is that you? It's us, your friends from St. Paul." We hurried up the stairs to save him the trip down.

"Father Glocar. How are you? We've come back to see you"

"Bless you, my friends."

His gaunt frame, more stooped now than the summer before, was encased in a long woolen topcoat. His thin wrists and large, bony hands stuck out of the too-short sleeves of the old coat. I grasped his hands in mine as he leaned forward to kiss me on either cheek. His hands were cold.

"My dear, what a lovely fur coat. You will need it here in this place. I have no heat."

"We're so glad to find you, Father. We thought we had lost you again. So this is your new place?"

"Yes, it is a good place for my painting, except now in the winter. My studio even has a skylight."

The slanted ceiling of the room Father Glocar called his studio vaulted upward some thirty feet. The clear, hard light of the northern winter filtered down on us through a huge, dusty skylight. A half-finished painting stood on Father Glocar's easel directly under the skylight. A paint-smear palette lay on top of a nearby stool while about the stool's legs stood the now familiar assortment of containers holding the paint brushes. As in the other studio, the rest of the large room was littered with the stacks and piles of Father Glocar's paintings. I could see the faint steam of my breath as it met the frigid air.

"It's so cold. Surely you can't paint in here?"

"I was painting just now when I heard you call. The winter days are short, and I must make use of the light while it lasts. When my hands get too

cold, I go to my living quarters and warm them at a small electric heater. It was a gift from my Jewish lady."

"Does she own the shop downstairs? I saw two of your paintings there."

"No, she is not like them, those swindlers."

"But they sell your paintings for you, don't they I saw a price on them."

"They sell one or two. For the frames, they charge more than for the paintings. I get only a few dollars."

I looked around the room. "What was this room used for, before when the Knights of Columbus were here?"

"You know that this place belongs to the Knights of Columbus ?"

"We asked for you at the library, and they told us there that you lived in the old K.C. hall."

Ivan, who had been walking around looking at the room, spoke. "It looks as though it might have been a chapel at one time. See, you can make out the mark of a large cross that must have hung on that far wall. The paint did not fade so much behind the cross."

I stared up at the faint outline of the cross. "Why would they have a skylight in a chapel?"

[Start flashback]

Once grown and away from the influence of my parents, I had no longer attended the Lutheran church. Occasionally, I would accompany one of my friends to a service at the Catholic cathedral in St. Paul. A copy of St. Peter's in Rome, the cathedral was built on Summit hill overlooking the city. The Catholic mass with its ancient ritual had interested me as an historical artifact. I was enchanted by the knowledge that for nearly two thousand years, the elaborate ceremony of the Latin mass had been virtually unchanged. To me, it seemed like a painted masterpiece made briefly animate before my eyes.

After the white-robed altar boys had performed their small duties and disappeared into the sanctuary, the officiating priest would turn his back

on the congregation and take communion. Removing a silver chalice from the tiny, double-doored tabernacle, he would raise it high with both hands, chanting a Latin incantation. He would do the same with a dollar-sized wafer. After he partook of the consecrated host and wine, he would carefully polish the cup with a spotless white cloth. Then after folding the cloth with meticulous care, he would replace it and the silver chalice in the tabernacle. The whole ceremony was performed in a solemn silence broken only by the occasional melodious cadences of ancient Latin.

I would lean forward in my seat, straining to see around the curtain of the priest's vestments every brush-stroke of history.

When, in an ill-advised attempt to make the mass more accessible, the Catholic church changed the language of the mass from Latin to English and turned the priest to face the congregation, I no longer went to the cathedral. They had destroyed the artifact.

[End flashback]

Ivan moved across Father Glocar's studio to two large double doors.

"What's in there?"

"Come, I will show you. It is a grand place the Catholics have given me."

Father Glocar opened the doors.

The room we entered was even larger than the studio had been. Many windows lined the long wall to our left. At the other end of the room were two more windows and a door with 'EXIT' lettered on it. The third wall was taken up by a row of wooden doors. The doors were numbered one through twelve. The room was empty; thick swirls of dust and plaster covered the floor.

"This must have been the lodge hall." Ivan's voice echoed hollowly in the vacant room. "Where they had their social functions. Those doors, what are they?" We moved across the room to the row of doors.

"They are small rooms. I use them for my closets." Father Glocar opened the door with the numeral '1' on it. Inside, two ragged white shirts hung on a crooked rack. He opened the next door. In that room, a single pair

of trousers hung on a nail in the wall. "It is very handy I can organize my wardrobe."

"How about this one?" I opened the door with the number three on its panel. Inside stood a narrow wooden coffin. I closed the door again.

"Where are your living quarters, Father?"

"Right there." He gestured toward a door whose lettered sign said "Members Only".

Father Glocar's quarters consisted of one long, narrow room. I could see a rumpled bed against the far wall. There was an old refrigerator and a part of a freestanding kitchen cupboard whose lack of a countertop was compensated for by three old boards. The other furniture in the room varied in shape and size, but not in quality, from that in his former living place. A long over-stuffed davenport rested one of its ends directly on the grimy floor; a ragged throw of uncertain color covered a few of the deficiencies in the davenport's upholstery. There were two mismatched straight-backed chairs as well as a bright if somewhat dirty turquoise bean bag chair.

"Sit down, my friends. I will fix you some coffee." "We don't need anything, Father." After a moment's hesitation, I chose to sit on the davenport. Ivan sat on one of the straightbacked chairs apparently preferring it to the indignity of the bean bag chair.

"So this is your place, Father. It's certainly big. How did you find it?"

"The Catholics offered it to me. The Archbishop. He knew I had no place, and he arranged it. I give painting lessons to the children at the Catholic summer camp."

"So you don't have to pay any rent?"

"I must pay the electric. That is hard. But I use the electric heater very little, and at night I sit in the dark. I am only one month behind in the bill now. With God's help, I will find the money to pay it. Besides it is good for them too that I stay here. It keeps the vandals away."

The room, while not so cold as the others had been, felt chilly to me. I shivered and pulled my coat collar about my neck.

"You are cold. You must have some coffee to warm you up. I apologize that I have only instant, but it is quick to make, and here I have hot running water. At least in one of my bathrooms."

I had not noticed until this moment the two doors near the place we had entered the room. One door was marked "Men" and the other "Ladies". Father Glocar took two cups into the "Men's" room. He turned on the faucet and let the thin stream of water run for a moment before filling the cups.

"The water system is hooked into the one downstairs, so I do not have to pay for it. Not for the hot water either."

He set the full cups on the top of the toilet tank and spooned generous scoops of instant coffee into them from a small jar. He brought the cups back and handed us each one. The coffee was a murky black, darker than the expected grime that lined my cup. I lifted the cup to my lips; the coffee was tepid.

"You haven't told us how you've been, Father. Is everything all right with you?"

"It has not been so good for me. First the Welfare. They have cut it off. They said I must go to the nursing home or I would get nothing from them. What do I care? It was so little anyway, just enough for some paint and a bit of canvas."

"Did you get your money from that reporter? The one who took your paintings?"

"He is a thief. He took my paintings and gave a few dollars to the Social Worker. A few dollars for more than thirty paintings."

"The Social Worker admitted that he took the money?"

"Yes, he said it belonged to the Welfare to make up for the pittance they gave me. They're crooks, both of them. They worked together to cheat an old man."

"How about your parishoners? Don't they help you?"

"Ha! They looked out for nothing but themselves. They are ashamed to have an old man who paints for a priest. It is the Catholics who help me. They give me this place for free. And the Jews. See there, that heater?" He pointed to a small electric heater on the floor. "My Jewish lady, she gave me that. And sometimes she brings food." He looked slyly at me from the corner of his eye. "And you, my Lutheran friend, you like my paintings. You buy them."

He paused a moment and stared off into space. "It is a sad thing that I, a priest of the Orthodox Church, must depend on the Catholics and the Jews. What does that say?"

[Start flashback]

When my mother died, her funeral was held in the country church of my childhood. My mother had been a gentle woman, well-educated for her generation. Times had often been hard for my family, and, for many years, she had earned sorely-needed cash by teaching school in one or another of the one-room schoolhouses which dotted the Iowa countryside.

The day before the funeral, I had gone to speak to the Lutheran minister who would conduct the service. He was a young man with a pale, round face and thinning brown hair. I asked him if I could tell him about my mother's life, about her quiet kindnesses to others and about her intellectual and artistic interests. Perhaps he would like to incorporate some of what I told him into his sermon. He was polite but firm. He had already prepared his sermon; he had as much information as he needed.

The church had been almost full for the funeral. A few of the people I recognized, but most were strangers to me as I, the daughter from the city, was to them. I sat with Ivan in the second pew directly in front of the pulpit. My mother's coffin rested in front of the altar. A shiny, metallic pink, it was covered by a large garland of white lilies mixed with baby's breath and asparagus ferns. On either side of the casket stood urn-shaped baskets, each filled with roses and carnations. The church seemed smaller than I remembered it and even more plain. In spite of the religious trappings, it looked strangely secular, like a town meeting hall.

After a hymn and an opening prayer, the young minister, robed in white with an embroidered stole around his neck, took his place in the pulpit. He began with a Bible reading about how God had sent his only son, Jesus, to die for our sins so that we could be saved. He began to explicate the verses and to exhort us to repent of our evil ways and to ask forgiveness so that we too, like the dear departed here before us, could be gathered home to the kingdom of heaven. I could hear in his words no hint of the person who had been my mother. She had become anonymous, a non-being whose ritual disposal served only as an occasion for the minister's pious homilies to reverberate from the pulpit.

[End flashback]

"Your parishoners don't help you at all?"

"They came with a pickup truck, two of them, and moved my paintings here from the old place. That was six months ago. I have not seen them since."

"You no longer go to your parish?"

"It is so far. Twenty miles. When I used to go, someone had to come and get me, and then, by the time someone took me home, the daylight would be gone. There would be no painting that day." Again he paused. "And then there are my eyes."

I could barely speak. "Your eyes, Father?" "Cataracts. Cataracts in both eyes. But it is the right eye that is very bad."

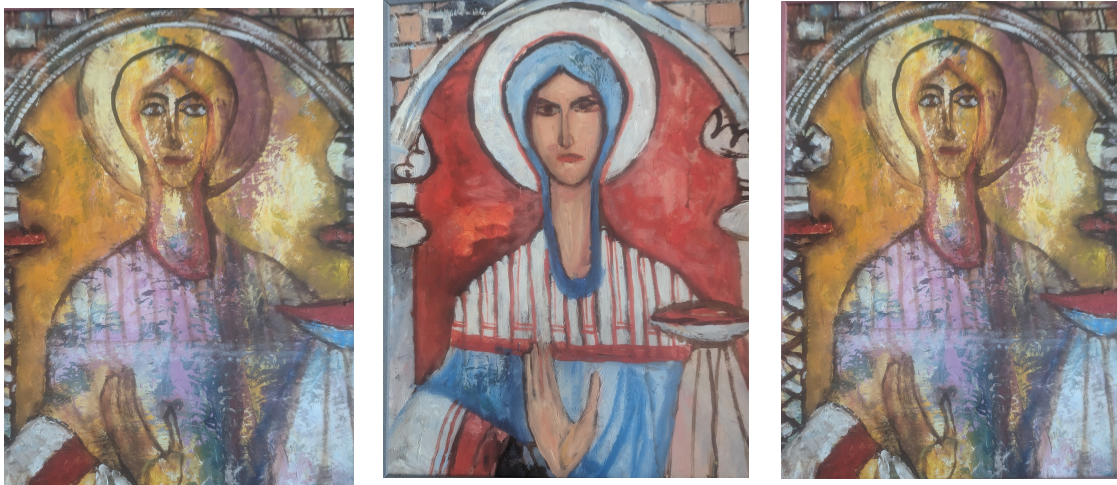
I could see now traces of white film in the back of his pupils. "But the doctors can do wonderful things now for cataracts. There's some laser treatment that's supposed to help."

"Yes, I go next month to the clinic. They will use the laser. But the doctor said it would be a miracle if they save my right eye. For the left, he has much hope. It would be enough. I could go on with one eye."

"Yes, you*could, and I understand the laser treatments are not painful." We sipped our coffee in silence, each of us in our own way pondering the vagaries of life. "I have finished your San Clemente. It is in the studio."

"Oh good. I want to see it. And I'd like to pick out two other paintings for Christmas gifts."

We returned to the harsher chill of the studio. Father Glocar held up his San Clemente. It was quite unlike the original picture in the art book which I had asked him to copy. Yet it captured the essence of the original. "I like it very much, Father. I have just the frame for it. An antique one with a gilded molding."



"This is the first one I painted. I was not satisfied, so I painted two more." He displayed the other two versions; each was quite different from the other. "My Jewish lady, she wanted to buy one, but I told her they were for you." "Yes, and I want them all." Somehow, I could not tolerate the thought of anyone else owning a version of a painting that I had commissioned. I wanted the transaction to remain pure, solely between me, the patron, and Father Glocar, the artist.

"This is St. George, isn't it?" Ivan had picked up a small board on which was painted a medieval knight in armor mounted on a white horse.

"Yes, you see the emblem on his shield? That is his heraldic."

"I believe I would like to buy this. I've always admired St. George. A slayer of dragons."



I turned away to hide the smile on my face. I knew there would be no argument on the trip home today. Ivan was making his own offering of hope to Father Glocar.

I selected two icons—figures of saints unknown to me—from amongst the stacks of paintings. For the first time I recognized the characteristic asymmetry of their faces for what it was, visual evidence of the painter's failing eyesight. As I gathered my purchases together, I noticed the painting on the easel, the one Father Glocar had been working on when he had knocked on his door. It was a landscape painting with white birches, their leaves shimmering with new yellow-green.

"I'd like to buy that landscape on the easel, too." "I have not finished it."

"But I like it the way it is, unfinished." To me, the painting captured that promise of spring which stays in our heads through the Long winter.

Father Glocar picked up his paint brush. "I will just make these birches a little better."

I grasped his hand and stopped the brush before it touched the canvas. "No," I told him. "Don't do any more. The painting is perfect the way it is."



When I returned home, it was Father Glocar's first version of San Clemente that I framed in the antique frame and hung on the living room wall. The alternate versions

I stored away in the attic. The other icons were hung about in other rooms of the house. The pink Christ, my favorite, I hung in the bathroom, the disjunction of its placement there somehow pleasing me.

Visitors to our house sometimes commented on the antique frame which held San Clemente but rarely did anyone ever mention the painting itself or any of the other Father Glocar icons on the walls. The two recipients of my Christmas gifts had thanked me for my thoughtfulness and had taken the paintings away. They never spoke of them again, nor did I ever see them displayed in their homes

[Start flashback]

That summer Ivan and I had taken our first trip abroad—elven countries in six weeks. We walked miles through countless museums and cathedrals in Europe. At last I saw the original works of art that had been represented in the colored slides in my art history classes. Ivan had grown tired of the great cathedrals and museums more quickly than I; in the final days of our trip he would often sit outside in the shade of a tree or on a park bench to watch the people while I went inside alone. At the entrance of each cathedral there would be a box for donations and a large sign telling of the enormous costs of renovation and maintenance. Sometimes there were pictures of past restorations, and sometimes the work would be in progress amidst the throngs of tourists. At the church of Santa Maria Delle Grazie in Milan, large scaffoldings partially obscured Leonardo's Last Supper; the art restorer was busy cleaning it as tourists watched. According to the sign, it was very exacting work and only about one square inch could be finished in one day.

I would put some coins in the donation box in each church, sometimes calculating how many seconds my contribution would help keep an ancient building standing.

At every museum I would visit the tourist shop to buy postcards or posters of my favorite works in the museum's collection. It was, I knew, a vain attempt on my part to carry home with me a fragile moment of

experience. At the Jeune Paume in Paris, I bought a poster of Monet's water lilies.

[End flashback]

After our return from Europe, I had taken a new job. Although I sometimes thought of Father Glocar, my job and the other demands of everyday life had taken priority. The opportunity to return to Eau Claire to see Father Glocar did not present itself until the following spring, almost a year and a half after our Christmastime visit. Laura, a young colleague of mine, entreated me to go with her to a week-end writer's conference at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. I had agreed, telling her it would give me a chance to look up Father Glocar, if he was still alive. On the trip of Eau Claire, I had told her a little of Father Glocar, the painter of icons, but most of our talk had been of the conference agenda and of Laura's new career as a free-lance writer. She was interested in writing scripts for television. Television, she said, was the only medium now for writers or, for that matter, for any artist. She told me of the seven-week series on television art currently being aired by the public broadcasting system.

On our arrival in Eau Claire, Laura and I checked into the dormitory where the conference organizers had provided rooms. It would soon be dinner time; I suggested we drive downtown to visit Father Glocar. Afterward, we could eat in the restaurant just down the street from his place. I could tell that Laura was somewhat doubtful about visiting a stranger and an old man, but I assured her that she would be welcome and that it would be an interesting experience for her.

I drove from the university campus to downtown Eau Claire. Nothing in the downtown area looked familiar to me at first, and I could not find Barstow Street. We drove around the downtown blocks again, often forced out of our way by the directive maze of one-way streets. Finally, I recognized the restaurant on the corner down the street from Father Glocar's. There were no parking spots there on Barstow Street, but we found the municipal lot two blocks away.

The weather had been muggy all day, but clear. As I parked the car, it suddenly grew very dark. Within seconds, huge raindrops began to fall. Laura had a rain slicker, but I had only a suit jacket. I put it around my

shoulders. "Let's run for it." We ran toward Barstow Street. The rain came now in torrents. I tried to stay near the shelter of the buildings, but I was soaked before we had gone a full block.

A sudden lightning bolt flashed; its light bounced off the pouring rain and sparkled on the wet street. Thunder crashed about our ears like the explosion of a shell. "That was a close one!" The lightning flashed again, even more brilliantly. "We'd better find shelter." Laura's words were almost lost in the thunder's roar. We ran faster

"Laura, wait! Here it is. This is Father Glocar's door."

She ducked under the awning of the interior decorator's shop, while I stopped in the pouring rain in front of the door. I tried the latch; it was locked. I, too, moved under the shelter of the awning. "This is the place, all right. But the door's locked."

I brushed the rain from my eyes with the sleeve of my coat. There were no paintings in the window of the decorator's shop, only drapery and wallpaper samples arranged artfully over a stepladder and two saw horses. "Let's ask at the restaurant; they'll know about him."

We ran the last hundred feet to the restaurant door. Inside, the restaurant was filled with crowds of young people, the noise of their talking and eating accompanied by loud rock music. In spite of the noise, the restaurant seemed a safe sanctuary after the fury of the storm. My hair was dripping wet; I pushed it back from my face and removed the soaked suit jacket from my shoulders. Laura had removed her rain slicker; she did not look wet at all.

"Let's ask the bartender." We moved over to the bar. The youthful-looking bartender was very handsome. "We're looking for Father Glocar. He lives upstairs in the old Knights of Columbus hall. Do you know him?"

"Glocar? No, I never heard of him. Why don't you ask that guy over there." He pointed toward a man who was removing used glasses from a small table and placing them on a tray. "He'd know if anybody did. He's been here a long time."

We walked over to the other man. He did not look more than thirty years old. "Do you know a Father Glocar? He lives upstairs just down the street."

"Never heard of him."

"He's an artist, a painter. An old guy, sort of tall with a beard. You must have seen him around."

"Naw, I never heard of anybody like that, and I've lived in Eau Claire for a long time. If anybody here knew him, it would be me." The man was positive.

Laura and I agreed to give up for the moment. We could have dinner here. By the time we were done, the rain should have let up and we could go back to Father Glocar's door.

When we came out of the restaurant after dinner, the rain had stopped. It was dark now; the twilight of the spring evening had been consumed by the fury of the storm. We walked the short distance down the street to number 411[^]. Above the door, the aluminum numbers of the address glittered slightly with the light from the streetlamps.

I pounded on the door. "It's hard for him to hear. He's way up there." I pounded harder. My knuckles hurt. I shook the door. "Father Glocar! Father Glocar!"

Laura looked embarrassed. "Look, there's a movie theater across the street. We could ask there."

The movie theater's marquee was lit up with the name of one of this year's surprise hits, a low budget horror movie that was on its way to becoming a cult film among teenagers.

The lobby of the movie theater was warm with the order of popping corn. A crowd of youngsters stood around apparently waiting for the next feature to begin. The young woman running the box office did not know Father Glocar. "Ask them," she said, pointing at the teenagers. We asked them. They shuffled and milled about; a few smiled shyly. No, they didn't know.

We went back across the street to Father Glocar's door. I pounded on it some more. There was no sound inside. I backed up into the street and looked up at the shuttered second floor windows. Not a bit of light anywhere, but Father had said that he sat in the dark to save on the electric bill. I knocked on the door again.

“We could come back tomorrow.” Laura’s voice seemed uncertain.

“It’s just that we can’t hear way up there, Laura . If only we could get up there; but the door is locked.”

“Is there a back door?”

Of course, the door in the large lodge room marked ‘Exit’. There must be a stairway up the back of the building leading to that door. Maybe it was an outside stairway so we could get up closer to where Father Glocar was. “I remember there was a door. Let’s go around back and find it”.

We had to go down the block to the corner, around it and up the alley that ran behind the solid block of buildings. The alley was only dimly lit. As we moved slowly down the alley, I peered up at the back of the buildings struggling to make out which would be Father Glocar’s.

“It should be right here, somewhere.” Even as I spoke, I saw the rubble. It lay in giant heaps behind the front wall of the building. The wall itself was propped in place by clean new wooden timbers. I could see the back side of the second floor windows; they outlined the shutters that faced the main street. Just past the rubble was the back of the door on which I had been pounding. Four eleven and one-half Barlow Street was only a façade. There was no building there.

The next day at the writer’s conference, a woman who was from Eau Claire told us that Father Glocar had died three months earlier. She did not know what happened to his paintings.