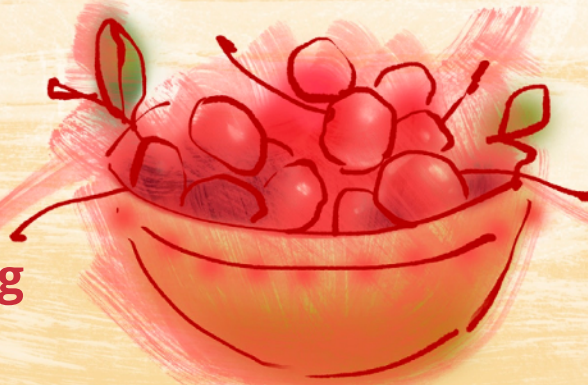




the Bowl of Cherries

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All over Central and Eastern Europe, in villages much like the one in which little Vesnja and her baby brother live, Roma children in Roma families have been born, lived out their lives, raised their own families, and then died anonymously.

Their stories, colored by the daily struggle to survive, thrive, and keep hope alive, have stained and scarred the landscape of Europe leaving behind deep marks of shame and bitterness, sadness and despair. The echoes of their despair leaves a witness of the lost opportunities to realize their God-given gifting and potential. A great loss to us all.

A Bowl of Red Cherries is the sum of the parts of each of their little stories spoken against the backdrop of the even greater story of God's love for each and every precious heart. His hope for the future, and the future of all the Roma peoples, comes through the love that He shares with each of His children by His presence. His presence, revealed in ways of surprising wonder, is always there. For those who are willing to look for it, His presence may be found within His creation.

In the icy depths of the dark Slavic winter, a frail eight year old Roma girl named Vesnja looks on as her beloved father is taken to prison for the crime of stealing a log of wood to nobly save his small family from a frozen and hungry death. Vesnja vows to be strong, to help her mother and baby brother survive the coming year of his loss, and in a whisper she prays "I will never forget your face Father and I will never ever do wrong... for what more can I do."

The Bowl of Red Cherries is a story of God's enduring presence expressed by His gifts of love and care, and His kindness and hope ... and even, as Vesnja will discover, in the gift of an old and weathered cherry tree.



Nada Hitching



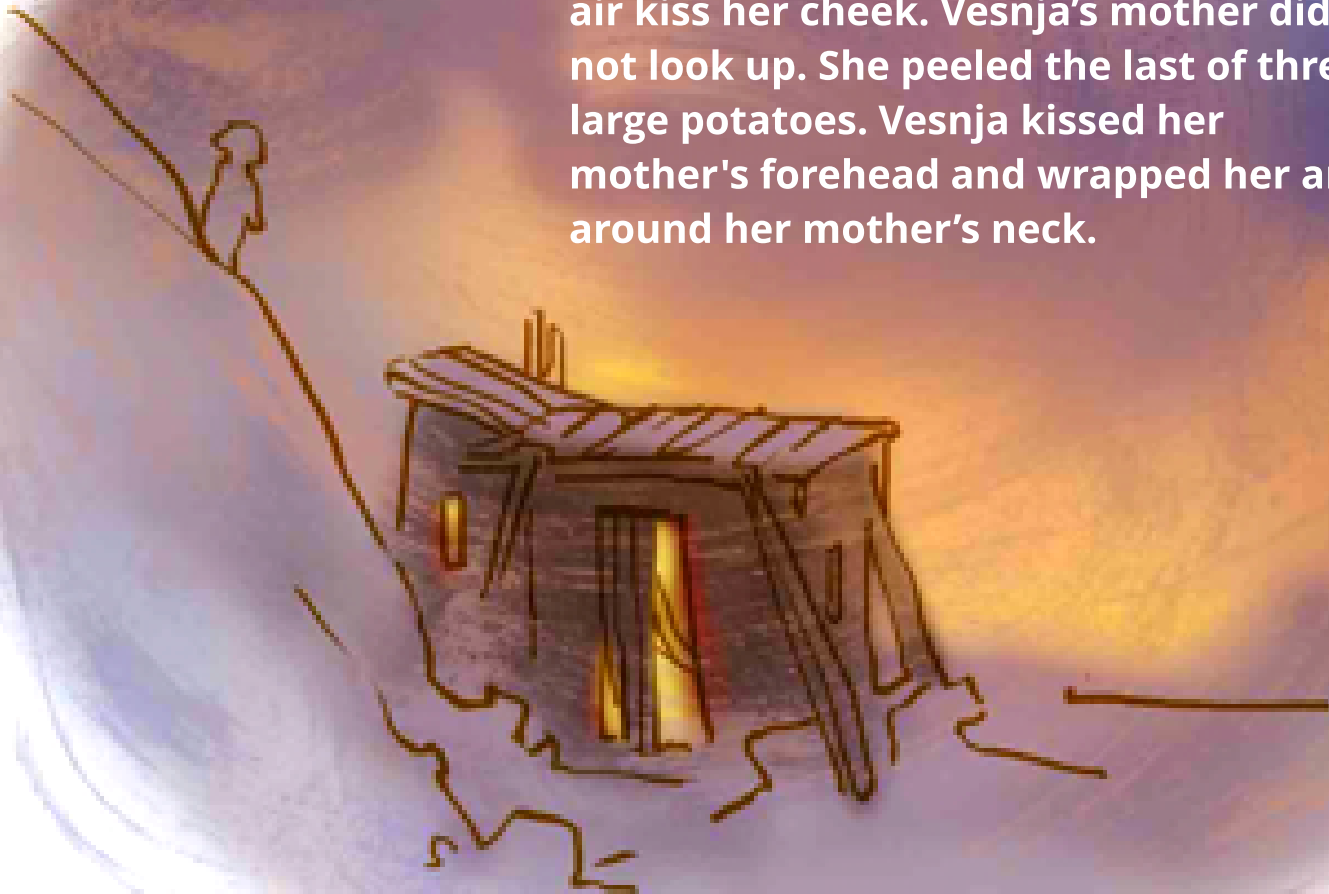
It was a very cold and gray afternoon in March that day when the policemen came and took Vesnja's father away. The farmer was in the field burning some old corn stalks and the smoke hung low near the hard and icy ground.

Vesnja watched as the black and white car drove slowly up the stoney lane and toward the little village. She squinted her eyes and strained her ears until she could no longer see or hear it. She put her hands to her face to cover her eyes,



"I will not forget what you look like," she whispered to herself."

Vesnja lifted back the heavy woolen blanket and felt the smokey warm moist air kiss her cheek. Vesnja's mother did not look up. She peeled the last of three large potatoes. Vesnja kissed her mother's forehead and wrapped her arms around her mother's neck.



Vesnja's chubby baby brother played with her curls. Pressing against his mothers side, he giggled and tried to stick his dirty little fingers into her mouth. Everything was a game, and it was time to play.

Vesnja glanced around the hut. She saw the shoes, still covered with mud, that her father had worn on that cold, cold day.

She searched with her eyes till she saw his axe. The axe which he had swung that icy winter's day. She remembered how he cried while swinging it. "It is wrong, but it is all that I can do," he kept saying over and over to himself.



Her father's axe was sharp but would she be strong enough to swing it as he had done. She wondered.

She put her face into her hands and whispered, "I will not forget how strong you are."



"I will not forget how strong you are."

Mother placed two hot and steamy potato pancakes on the plate before Vesnja. She looked up to her mother as she tore off half of the pancake, blew on it, and broke it into little pieces. "I will help you find the wood mother," she said, "and I will help you chop it."

Vesnja and her mother knew just how long a year was. They measured it by the stove and by the wood stacked against the wall. They measured it by the table and the cloth bag of corn flour underneath it.

Mother glanced at the wood against the wall and the bag under the table. "Our God will provide. Our God will provide," she said. Vesnja put her face in her hands and whispered, "And I will not forget to thank you God."

"I will not forget to thank you God."





Soon winter was over, the grass became green again, the farmer went into his field with the tractor, and Vesnja's baby brother grew a little white tooth.

The new year had begun, and it was time to get on the bike and start to search. Search for things to eat, for things to wear, and for things to put into the little house.



The air was sweet with the lilac in the little parish church garden just outside Vesnja's village.

Holding on tightly to her mother, Vesnja felt the warming breeze in her hair as they peddled down the lane.

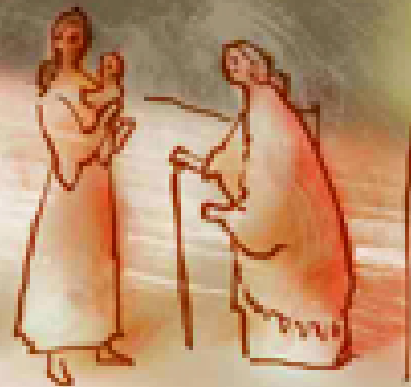
Many miles they traveled together before they entered the big town. There they would search in all the trash bins and large dumpsters until they found some hope. Half a loaf of stale bread, a bag of old apples, some green shoes with only one lace, some carrots with brown ends, an unopened can of fish, a comb with only nine teeth, a small torn yellow jacket with a giraffe on the pocket, and a round lace tablecloth. Mother examined it slowly as she held it up. It was covered with little red cherries!

She did not say anything, but as she turned to Vesnja, she nodded her head and smiled.



Pushing the bike with her little brother on her back, Vesnja walked and walked. The town seemed to grow larger as the day went on. With the warm sun high in the sky, Vesnja grew tired and hungry. Her legs felt heavy, but she kept on walking... and searching... and helping.

Vesnja ran to catch up with her mother. She was standing by a large, black, shiny gate. A bent old woman with white hair and a soft voice was standing by the gate and pointing to the garden in the back. As they passed through the gate, Vesnja and her little brother blinked and sniffed.



It was a garden of hope!

Flowers and fruit trees, nut trees and vegetables. The bent old lady slowly walked across the stones in the grass toward the back end of her garden. Every tree was full of white or pink flowers, and Vesnja knew that each one was a promise of summer's sweetness for anyone who was willing to wait. The old lady came to the very end of her garden. There Vesnja and her mother and brother stood under an old and wide cherry tree whose branches were spread out to hold its proud and fragrant bouquet of spring.

“Come as often as you like, stay as long as you will. This is your cherry tree now,” the old woman said softly as she turned to walk back to her cottage.





Vesnja did not know what the lady meant, but she knew that she had never seen such a beautiful place. She put her face to her hands and whispered softly "I will remember this place forever."

Mother leaned against the strong trunk of the tree. Vesnja napped in the tall grass made cool by the shade of its leaves.

"God provided us rest under this cherry tree," said her mother.

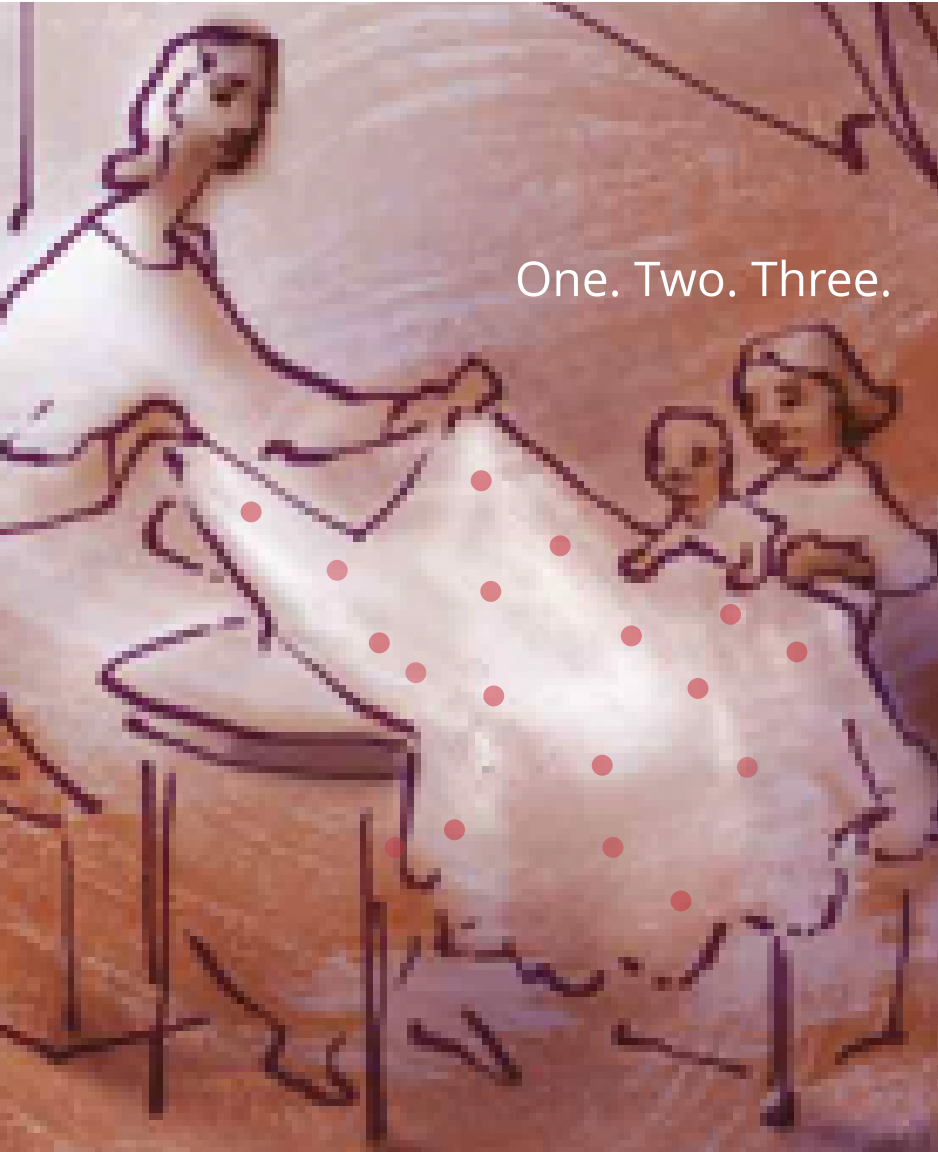
Rest... Rest... Rest.

The cherry tree was a part of their family now and it would join in to help them through this long year.

Spring passed and summer blazed on. The air was hot and dry and the ground was dusty. There were many flies, and at night, the mosquitos swarmed around Vesnja's head. The corn was growing in the farmers field and Vesnja's brother was learning to stand up all by himself.

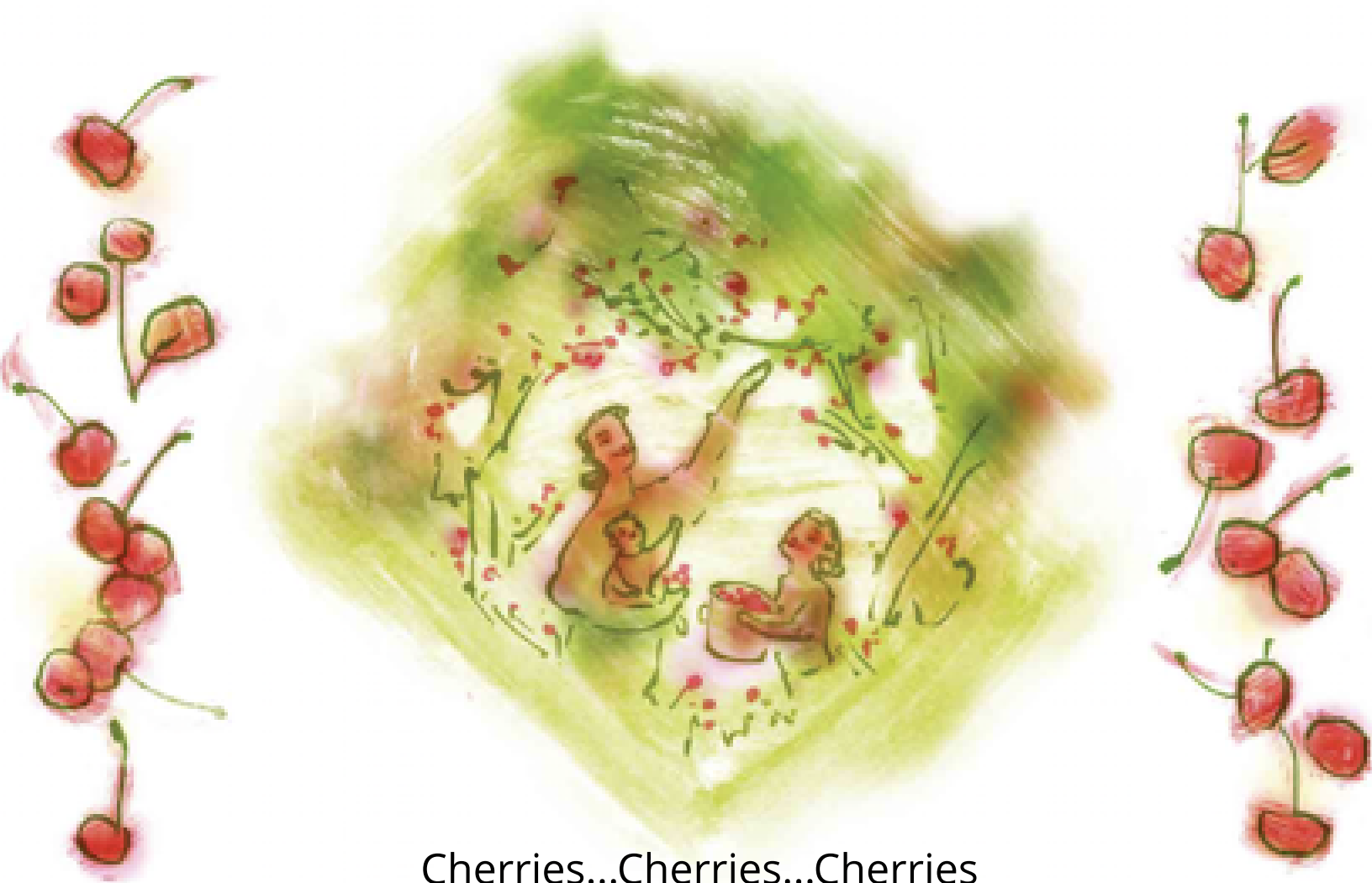


Vesnja's mother looked into the large cloth bag to see if there was flour for the bread. This year was not yet over, and the bag was still half-full. They would go to the town today on the bike and search for more hope.



One. Two. Three.

Vesnja's mother placed the cherry lace tablecloth on the table and smoothed it carefully. Vesnja took her brother's chubby finger and pointed to the cherries as she counted. One, two, three. Vesnja placed folded clothes into the basket of her mother's bike and lifted her baby brother in as well. The tree seemed to greet them each week with its shade and its promise—the promise of a sweet reward for the patience of waiting through the spring and summer. And now it was time. The waiting was over. Hope had come!



Cherries...Cherries...Cherries

They opened the gate and went to their tree. It had kept its promise and the cherries, dancing as so many deep red and shiney twins, bobbed up and down as the hot summer breeze caught the branch above their heads.

Vesnja climbed and shook the branches as the sweet fruit fell in to the cloth that her mother had placed on the ground. They sat on the ground and ate till they forgot that they had ever been hungry or thirsty before in their whole lives.

Vesnja's baby brother's face was stained red and he giggled in delight as his mother opened another cherry and placed it between his lips.



Rest and Fruit



Vesnja's mother collected the cherries in her apron and clothes and made ready to leave for the hut. "God provided for us fruit from our tree," her mother said. "Rest and fruit."

The tree had kept the promise of the Springtime flowers and given up its sweet fruit. Vesnja and her brother would be tasting sweet cherry jam and juice for weeks to come.

As the cold autumn came, the leaves fell, the farmer harvested the dry corn in his field, and the smell of burning wood was thick in the air. The last summer grapes on the vine were black, and pinched, and sweet, and Vesnja's little brother had started to walk.

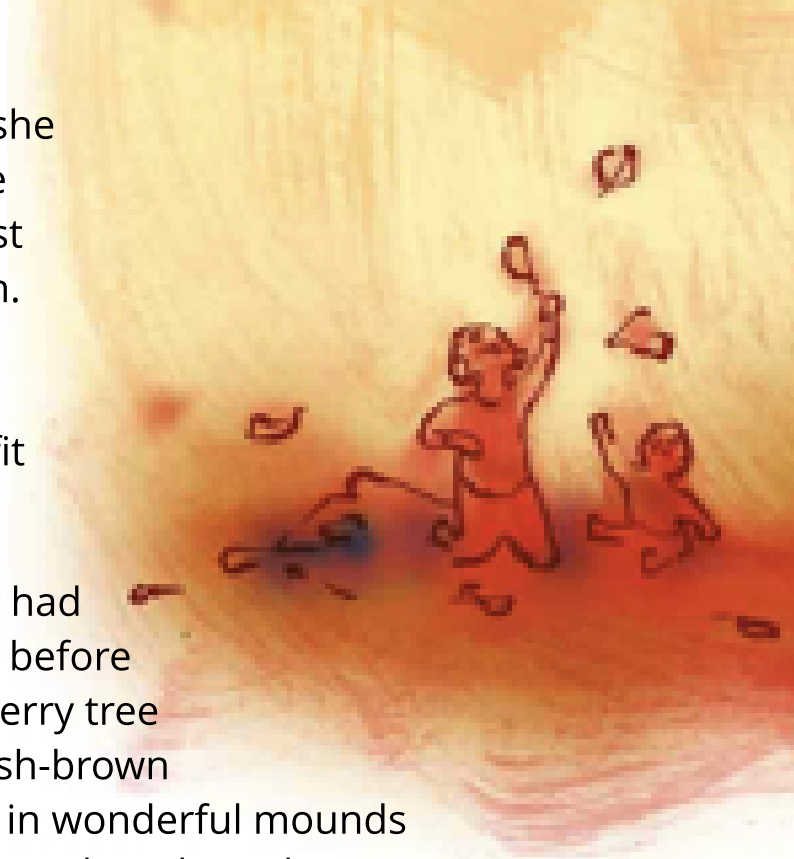


Their visits to the cherry tree had become the most important day of their week. Many talks they had had there, and many things Vesnja had learned about life.

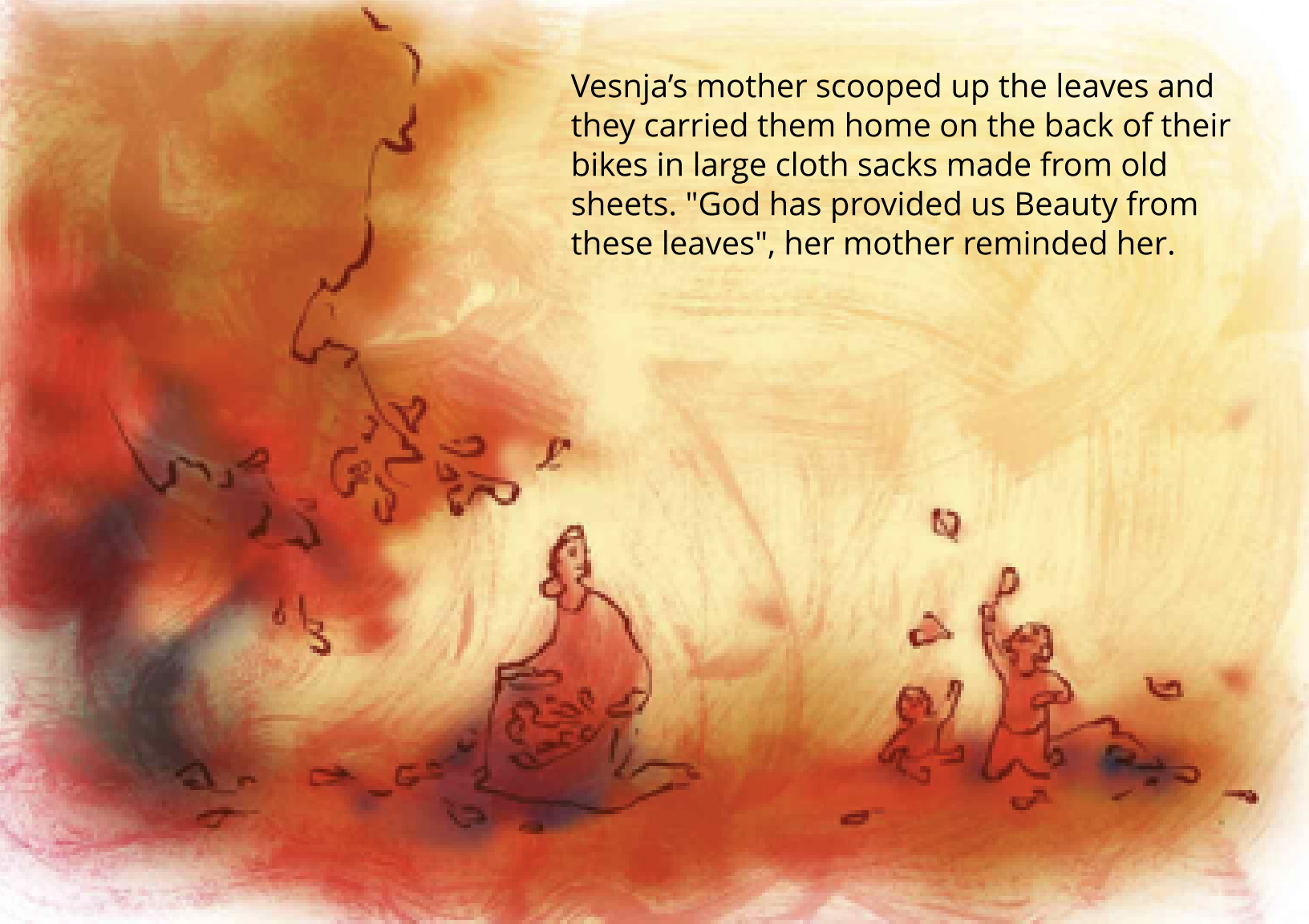
She was not so sad that her father was gone now. She had managed well to remember what he looked like and she knew that one day he would return and she would introduce him to the new member of their family...the old cherry tree.

Vesnja knew she was growing up when she put on her old grey sweater and saw the arms which had dragged on the floor last year were now almost the perfect length. But the sweater was not. It was old, and tired, and torn. Little girls like Vesnja did not think of getting a new sweater that fit each year.

Vesnja mounted the old bike which they had found together by a dumpster the week before and she followed her mother to their cherry tree in the old woman's garden. All the reddish-brown leaves of their old friend had now fallen in wonderful mounds of crispy autumn color under the tree's now-bare branches. Vesnja realized that she had never seen their tree naked before, and she thought how strong it looked. Her baby brother toddled through the leaves and they dove underneath pretending to hide from each other.



Vesnja's mother scooped up the leaves and they carried them home on the back of their bikes in large cloth sacks made from old sheets. "God has provided us Beauty from these leaves", her mother reminded her.





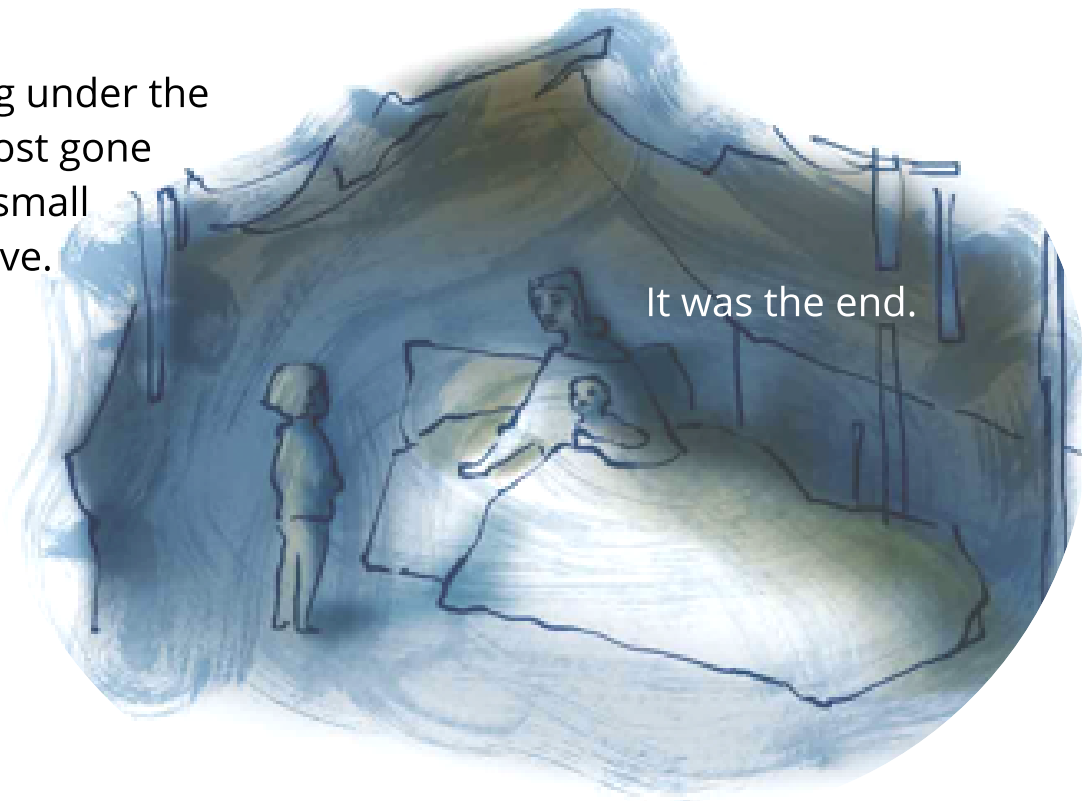
Rest and Fruit and Beauty

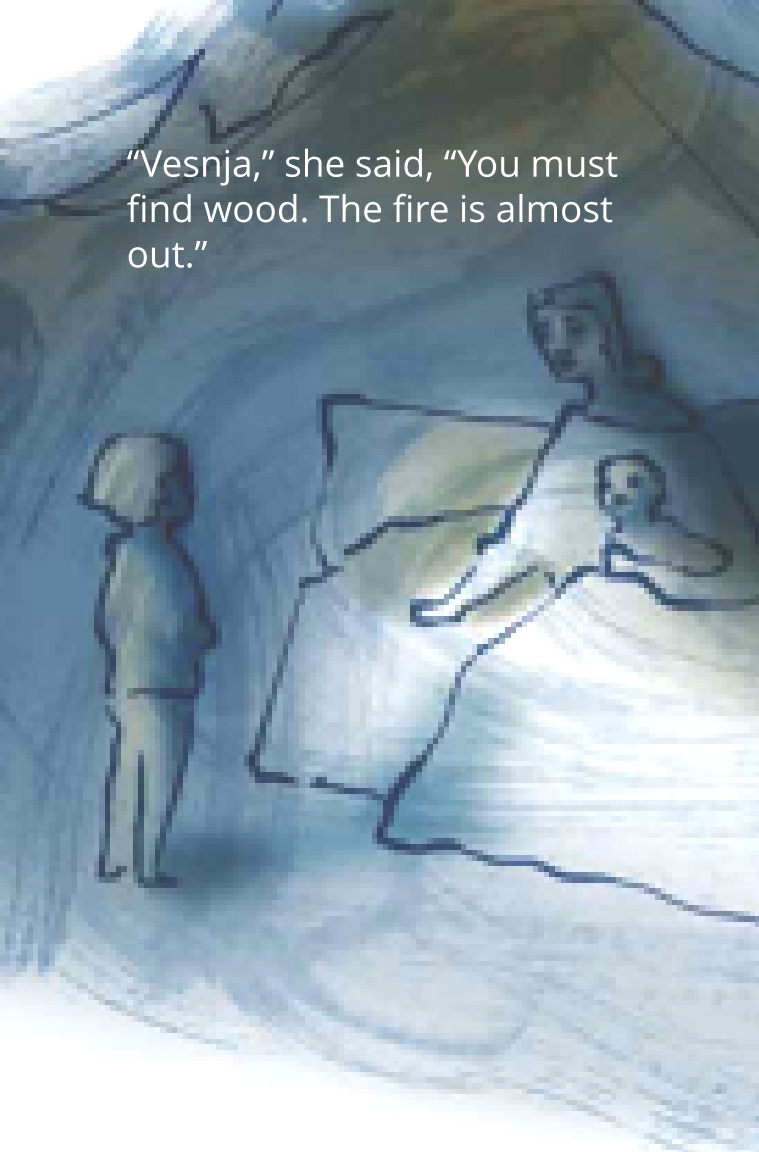
The beauty of the dried leaves and the dried cherries of the summer wrapped themselves around Vesnja's old and tired sweater. The pinks, the reds, the purples and blues each took their turn as the dye in mother's big black pot gave to Vesnja a new and beautiful sweater. Together, they filled the little hut with the colors and the memories of the old woman's garden and the warmth of the summer sun.



The winter folded in. The sky was dark and snowy, the water in the trough froze hard, the blanket on the door let in the icy wind, and Vesnja's brother learned to say "DADA." The year had been long. Too long. But the cherry tree had been a help through it all.

Mother looked in the bag under the table. The flour was almost gone and there was only one small piece of wood by the stove. She placed it in the fire and made some bread. They sat together and tasted the cherry jam on each warm slice. But, it was the last slice. It was the last log, It was the end.





"Vesnja," she said, "You must find wood. The fire is almost out."

Vesnja broke the ice in the trough and got water to boil with the last of the fire's embers. She made warm cherry tea for her mother, wrapped up her neck, and bundled her father's sharp axe into the basket of the bike.

She knew that without wood they could not live. She covered her face with her hands and whispered, "I must not do wrong, what else can I do?"

Determined not to steal, she left the little hut and went out into the snow to look for sticks of wood by the side of the road.



On and on she peddled. Driven by the snow and the wind, Vesnja searched to find a way to warm their hut, to make the bread, and to bring the life that only wood in a stove can bring to a family like Vesnja's in the dark and in the cold.



I must do right. What else can I do?

Straight to the cherry tree Vesnja went. She stood under its large branches and spoke to it of her need for the life of the wood. "I must do right," she said. "What else can I do?" They seemed to understand each other. They were family. What else could they be?

As Vesnja stood with snow around her cold feet, she heard a loud crack and watched as one of the large limbs, all covered with snow, broke away from her cherry tree.

The tree seemed to cry as the snowflakes fell off the bark landing hard upon the snowy ground.

The tree had given up on of its limb; It had given Vesnja life.

She took out her father's little axe and, with all her might, chopped off some of the branch, placed it in her basket, and hurried home.



"God has provided us life from the tree,"
her mother said quietly,
"Rest and Fruit,
Beauty and now Life."

The house was warm
that night as Vesnja
snuggled in her little
bed beside her baby
brother.

Many trips she would
make that winter,
slowly taking from
the limb the slices
of life that would
keep their fire hot,
their oven full of good warm
bread, and cups and cups of sweet cherry tea.



Rest and Fruit
Beauty and Life



On the first day of spring after the long winter was over, the farmer planted seed in the field, the robins made a nest in the bush by Vesnja's house, a stray cat that had wandered in to her village was having kittens and Vesnja's baby brother was learning to throw a ball. Vesnja's mother had just come back from the cherry tree and she had a story to tell. Vesnja sat down by the door of her hut and her mother started to tell it.

"Today, the old woman met me at the gate and told me the story of the cherry tree.

One day a long time ago, when she was very young like you Vesnja, the old lady's father died. She was very sad and she thought her little heart would break.

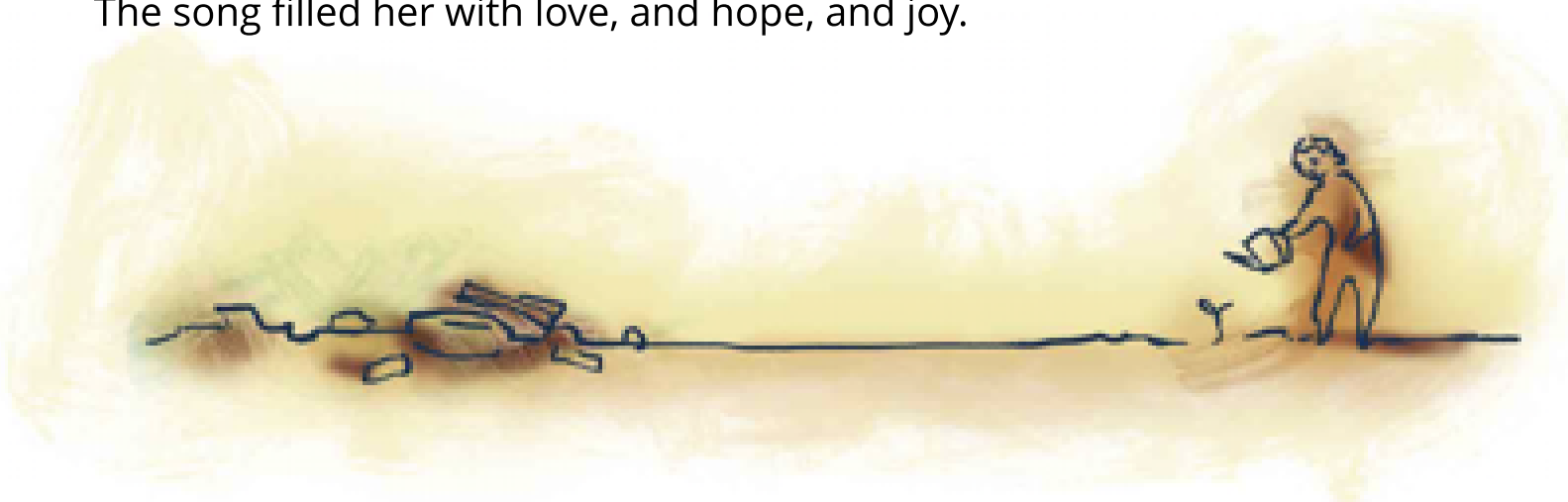
"But her mother came to her with some cherries in her hand and said, 'Let us plant the seed in these cherries and when the cherry tree grows, we will remember your father. In the Spring, we will rest under the shade of its branches. In the Summer, we will eat of its wet fruit. And in the Autumn, we can gather its leaves and dried cherries to dye the wool for the sweaters we will make. Then in the winter, we can take some of its strong wood and make the fire to warm the house. In this way we will never forget your father.'"



Vesnja listened very carefully to her mother telling the old woman's story. Then she took the cherry seeds and went in search of the perfect spot to plant them. She thought about how happy her father would be to see the tree beginning to grow when he soon got home. As she patted down the dirt over the cherry seed, she sang a little cherry tree song to herself. A song of Rest and Fruit, a song of Beauty and Life. Her heart swelled as she thought of the old cherry tree and of her father and the love she had for them both.

Every day Vesnja watered the seed. Every day, the hot sun warmed it. Every day, Vesnja sang her little Cherry Tree Song. "Rest and Fruit and Beauty and Life."

The song filled her with love, and hope, and joy.



One day, weeks and weeks later, Vesnja saw with delight that a small green shoot had broken through the soil. It was stretching upwards towards the sun. She hurried ran up to it and gently touched the little leaf.

Just then, she heard the sound of footsteps coming up behind her and felt a soft pat on her head.

She quickly turned to see her father standing tall and proud above her. She jumped up with joy into his strong arms and together they spun round and round. Vesnja's mother and baby brother came quickly out of the house. There was much joy and all were so happy to be together again. He father was as tall and as strong as she remembered him to be. "I never forgot what you looked like, father," she said. "I never forgot how strong you are, and I never ever did wrong. What else could I do?"





There were many stories to tell from all sides, but from Vesnja's side they were all about the cherry tree.

The four of them held hands together and around the new little cherry tree shoot, they danced and danced while Vesnja sang the Cherry Tree Song:
"Rest and Fruit and Beauty and Life"



"Rest and Fruit and Beauty and Life—that is what our cherry tree gave us while you were gone, Father. Now, you are back home. All is well, and all will be well."

Rest and Fruit and Beauty and Life

The End

