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**THE THIRTY KILOMETRE ZONE**

by

**Sandra Chmara**

A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
Through English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

At the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

*The Thirty Kilometre Zone* is about a man who becomes lost in the shadows of an unspeakable and unvoiced past, who sets off into the core of his mother's secrets with the hope of somehow finding a way out of the traumatic cycles that have defined them both. Through a parallel narrative, long-eluded memories overtake his mother's dying mind, the very past shielded by a silence meant to save her son from sorrow.

The themes of Chernobyl and Stalin's Famine-Genocides are interwoven through a mainly contemporary setting. After the accident at Chernobyl, Ukraine, authorities defined the fallout field by means of three successive contamination zones extending from the power plant. The radioactive environment has been termed *the exclusion zone*, *the alienation zone*, or *the thirty kilometer zone*. It is this motif that informs both the narrative's themes and title.

## **DEDICATION**

For my darling son, Alexander Nicholai.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to the courage of my grandparents, Anna Grona-Krawetz and Dan Chmara, who faced lives of unimaginable hardship to give us lives of unimaginable ease, dreaming became possible. Without the selflessness, constancy, and faith of my parents, Ted and Olive, no vision of mine could ever have been explored. The journey, once undertaken, was nurtured and nourished by my husband, Greg Meloche, who knew how to keep the dogs of reality at bay while possibility took form. My most tender gratitude goes to my little boy, Alex, whose arrival in the midst of all this became the embodiment of all dreams, all possibilities.

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## SILENCE AND SPEAKING, NARRATIVE AND KNOWING

### *Trauma*

Trauma contaminates time and place. It transmits from human to human, along family lines, and into the very quantum matter of cultural life. In *The Thirty Kilometre Zone*, the question of personal and cultural identity in the face of trauma arises from the oppositional dynamic between narrative and silence. Psychologists Barbara Fiese and Arnold Sameroff posit that understanding the meaning of experience is dependent upon a narrative charting of individual lifetime experiences (Fiese and Sameroff 2). Within that framework of meaning is included both the individual and those significantly touched by his/her experience. There is discursive and expurgative power in language through narrative, and through the interconnected matrix of stories that comprise it. And although narrative creates an existential, cultural, familial, and personal portrait of strength and weakness, success and failure, survival and defeat, for historian James Wilkinson, as long as the traces or remains of history comprise our body of evidence, the state of evidence reflects the state of history. Within these metamorphosing conditions of what, precisely, constitutes historical evidence, and thus history, the narrative ultimately becomes a fiction, a series of interpretations and extrapolations of the past rather than its accurate reflection (Wilkinson). In this landscape of narrative incoherence we find ways to locate the self, traumatized or resilient, or something in between.

Cathy Caruth, in echoing Freud's earlier psychiatric postulations, explains the power of trauma to transcend spatio-temporality through its connection with survival. "External violence is felt most, not in its direct experience, but in the missing of this experience; that trauma is constituted not only by the destructive force of a violent event

but by the very act of its survival” (Caruth 25). We are traumatized, in essence, because of our own inscrutable transcendence of death itself.

Part of what makes trauma so malevolent, though, is not only that selfhood develops along these potentially incoherent, spoken narrative lines but that, in the interstitial silence, the still-palpable vestiges of trauma contaminate and mutate the identities they shape. Following the clues left by speaking and narrative – whether fiction or fact – is at least feasible; in silence, the historical traces required for evidence and ultimately by history, are non-existent. There is no beginning, no starting point, for history. The navigable matrix of even the most artificial meaning and experience becomes broken and deficient. This is the toxic landscape that the protagonists in *The Thirty Kilometre Zone* must traverse. Similarly, it is the landscape that the fiction itself, contaminated by an uncertain and dubious evidentiary climate, and by authorial bias or blindness, must maneuver.

### ***Toxicity***

The metaphor of contamination is played out in the text of *The Thirty Kilometre Zone* through the accident at Chernobyl. Nature endows us with structural templates whose echoes in art create intuitive sites of cohesion among the artist, the reader, and the art itself. Sound waves and a stone dropped into a pool both produce the same effect, both sustaining physical laws. Each ensuing concentric wave weakens as it moves farther from its source. The shape and direction of each wave is influenced, too, by outside interference, so that the metaphor for historicity reflects the post-modern, deconstructionist perspective on origins. It is this template that informs *The Thirty Kilometre Zone*.

The title refers to Chernobyl’s critically radioactive boundaries, whose physical precincts, like the ideological toxicity of the system that spawned a century of trauma encompassing the Bolshevik

Revolution, Stalin's Famine-Genocides and, at its terminal nadir, Chornobyl, continue to be pushed and pulled and morphed by radionuclear, climatological, and human phenomena.

Ground zero, or the dead zone, is circumscribed by a ten-kilometre zone of exclusion or alienation, wherein the highly lethal environment precludes human habitation for, according to some estimates, up to two hundred thousand years. It is at the outer boundary of the thirty kilometre zone that radiologically significant contamination begins, but the true range of contamination spills well beyond the thirty kilometre zone. The physical reality of Chornobyl's fallout hauntingly echoes the metaphorical contamination patterns of toxic ideologies. These spheres of toxicity correspond experientially with history, culture, and the individual. The Bolshevik Revolution rests upon the geopolitical boundary of the thirty kilometre zone, not necessarily as the first locus of historical toxicity, but certainly as the most notable originary instance along the Soviet time line. Each catastrophic moment of ideological devolution – in this case the Famine-Genocides, known as *Holodomor* – tracks directly toward the inevitable metaphorical meltdown represented both figuratively and literally by Chornobyl. The thirty kilometre zone is where the protagonist, Krystof Mahk, must begin his quest.

On a secondary and less prominent structural, thematic, and allegorical level, the three contamination zones also correspond loosely with the first three circles of hell from "The Inferno" in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Several of the literary motifs are mirrored in the organic occurrence of events, and in their rightful places. The *Dark Woods of Error* is a good example of this. Stalin's lost villages would have unsurprisingly been left to decay and eventually vanish in an encroaching wilderness; it is necessarily the place where Krystof must go to find his past. He is the lost Dante, having strayed from the true path. In particular, too, the presence of wolves from the first circle of hell need no authorial affect; they are chief predators in the woods of northern Ukraine. In the first chapter they are heard through the night as Krystof enters the thirty kilometre zone of his journey, and later the dead boar along the way represents evidence of their treacherous presence. Similarly, no fictive elaboration is necessary to reflect the "godless" who inhabit the first circle; historically, communist ideology has advocated atheism, and the guiltless inhabitants subsist in this milieu separated, in this instance through tyranny, from God. In the final chapter, the viscous black rain that falls over Stálink after the Chornobyl accident is anecdotally

accurate, and interestingly is suggestive of the vile rain of filth and excrement in the third circle of hell, as an eyewitness account following the accident illustrates:

*I was in Minsk, in hospital, visiting my sister who was dying of cancer. The doctors had just told us that there was no hope, then came the clouds, the black rain. The next day a journalist from Sweden rang me and said: Do you know what has happened to you over there? A Belarussian friend was sitting next to me and played it down: Come on, that's just Western provocation. (Alexievich)*

Ultimately, the metaphor of contamination reaches right down into the viscera of language itself. “Meanings of words change over time; authors may have used language metaphorically rather than literally; context alters meaning, and so forth” (Wilkinson 84). In *The Thirty Kilometre Zone*, the idea of linguistic contamination plays out in a dialogue in *Chapter 6*, one of the few conversations about her past in which Sonya willingly takes part as her son attempts to learn about the location of her home village:

Sonya: “Was *bolóto na* one side.”  
Krystof: “What’s a *bolóto na*?”  
Sonya: “*Bolóto, bolóto.*”  
Krystof: “Mud?”

There, despite the potential for revelation in this exchange, the conversation ends. The map placing Sonya’s village into Krystof’s imagination dissolves. The language barrier is too profound. The mother lacks the ability to translate for her son; the son lacks the maturity and awareness to seek out a translation for a word he understands in only one practical, material way: *bolóta* means *mud* (after all, he might have been chastised many times for having it on his shoes or pants). But variations on the root are beyond his grasp. He is too young for the complex deviations of language. He cannot know that by changing a single letter – *bolóta* having become *bolóto* – mud is no longer mud. It has metamorphosed linguistically into marshland. The conceptual and contextual divide is unfathomable. Narrative is broken. History is lost.

### ***Silence***

“The wish to hear the voices and feel the passions of a cast of hitherto silent actors has created a powerful tension between the desire to know and the availability of materials from which to derive that knowledge (Wilkinson 82). Although Holodomor killed over fourteen million Ukrainian, Russian, Belarusian, and Kazakh peasants,

survivor narratives have remained outside the glare of attention historically trained on other genocidal nightmares like the Holocaust, the Congo, and Darfur. This is as much a phenomenon of culture as the learned fear of the oppressed. For some cultures, as with families, remembrance becomes a way of denying tyranny its power. Trauma narratives can expunge and edit and emancipate. For Ukrainians, this has not historically been true. The chronology is limited and scant. From Tsarist times right through to the latter end of Ukraine's inclusion in the Soviet Republic, language and literature have been suppressed, denied, and outlawed. Silence has been as much imposed on the Ukrainian peoples as it has been a feature of national character.

A simple Google search on *Holocaust*, for example, results in a return of over 33 million sites; *Darfur*, 17 million; *Hutu Tutsi*, 202,000. A search on the term *Holodomor* returns just 163,000, and on *Stalin Famine Genocide* barely over 21,000. Both *Holocaust* and *Holodomor* were massive, intentional genocides, but with about twice the number of instantiated deaths at Stalin's hand than at Hitler's. Both epitomised unparadigmatic human cruelty and barbarism. In 1933, the worst year of *Holodomor*, in some districts not a single child was born alive, creating a permanent statistical gap for that group – five years later, for example, when those children would have begun kindergarten (Conquest). Both events occurred within a decade of one another, yet the average person would be unfamiliar with the term *Holodomor*, which to the Ukrainian holds the same devastating power as *Holocaust* does to the Jewish peoples. Similarly, in the first fifteen to twenty years after Chernobyl, written eyewitness accounts were unavailable. The Google search on *Chernobyl* (the standard, pre-independence Russified spelling used most broadly in research and journalism), results in 7,710,000 sites. The return figure is particularly eye-opening, since the material effects of the accident for non-Eastern Europeans across the globe outstrip the material effects for anybody, for instance, of the genocide at Darfur. In Canada, Chernobyl's fallout extended as far as Northern Ontario and Nunavut, yet public interest appears to be as unforthcoming as are the narratives.

Such a horrifying epoch has only served to reinforce the existing culture of silence and reticence within the Ukrainian community, and as such, experience has

disappeared into the black holes of both family life and history. With it have gone meaning and understanding. In *The Thirty Kilometre Zone*, Sonya Mahk has lived through a century of this toxicity. She embodies the code of silence. As Antoinette Errante writes, “our position in the world not only affects our interpretation of the world ... our sense of self mediates our telling and remembering of the world - and our place in it - to others.” (Errante 24). Revolution and hunger have left scars on Sonya’s psyche, as have her own transgressions; however, her ability to extrapolate the consequences of those experiences is greater than her understanding of their scars, and of the subsequent – and no less devastating – effects. Knowing about “such an event means being haunted by it from then on, taking on a lifelong burden of responsibility to it (Schwenger 35). Speaking, and thus narrative, becomes a mode of transmission no less lethal than the events themselves.

The metaphors for speaking/silence and nuclear/ideological toxicity come together through the recurring motif of the light at the end of Sonya’s tongue. It foreshadows Chernobyl. This motif arises historically from the case of the Radium Girls in the 1920s, who worked for US Radium Corporation painting glow-in-the-dark watch dials, and who died of cancer and radium necrosis not long after their case against USRC was settled:

*Their sad fate was sealed when they dipped paintbrushes into radium paint and sharpened the bristles with their mouths. There was a resistance to warnings about the dangers of radium in society -- highlighting the importance in the relationship between ideas and social structure.* ( Kovarik 14)

The luminescence at the end of Sonya’s tongue and fingertips represents the spectre of her secreted, silenced experience; it is the evident part of the deep trauma that

has contaminated her, and which she keeps away from her son's life; it is the toxic communist past that haunts her, and it is her own self-inflicted misery. Eventually, as the light slowly extinguishes, it exacts its toll both in the partial excision of the very organ necessary for speaking after the radium finally kills the cellular matter of her tongue, and in the permanently damaged skin of her fingers.

If tragedy writes itself upon us, then we risk becoming tragedy and, more poignantly, becoming tragic. To account for this version of selfhood and history to family and to the world is to become the past, to become the tragedy that changed us, and ultimately, to let that tragedy write itself upon those who hear it. "Both the 'I' and the 'me' are discovered experientially in memory images of the things individuals have done in the past" but in order to include the reader and the hearer it is necessary "to form a triological *me-I-you*. This triad maps onto a temporal triad of past, present, future respectively" (Ezzy 240). So if language itself is shared and public, if the very intersubjectivity of language becomes a site of knowing and knowledge, then narrative must necessarily help define both individual and audience. As such, speaking risks drawing an uncorrupted audience into trauma itself, of re-defining that audience merely through its narration. After all, "oral history's identity work, therefore, is also in 'the remembering and the telling [which] are themselves events, not only descriptions of events'" (Errante 17). The very act of speaking can be seen as the act of inflicting trauma upon the hearer and the reader. It risks engendering the tragic. "A difficulty arises when the virtual experience involved in empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, and empathy with the victim seems to become an identity" (LaCapra 699). In the novel, this is the tacit reason Sonya keeps her son's curiosity about her past at bay.

However, if that intersubjective connection is severed, silence becomes what Niklas Luhmann refers to as *unmarked space* (Luhmann and Behnke 25), in other words, space uncontaminated by the unretractable. It can become power and autonomy. Selfhood is remade spatio-temporally by disengaging the present *I* from the past *me*, and thus safeguarding the future *you*. A distorted cultural and personal logic sets in: silence becomes salvation. It “can be either the outside of language or a position inside language, a state of noiselessness or wordlessness. Falling silent is ... not a state but an event” (Felman 203). *Through* silence and despite it, trauma has already transmitted itself across cultural boundaries, from place to place, and over time. Descendants of trauma feel it in the unspoken atmosphere of the home, and of cultural life, as Krystof does in the kitchen scene of *Chapter 1* where he can only comprehend the stories that surround him in bits and pieces, and later when he is introduced to Stan and Mike, whose very arrival is electric with an unusual salience for which there is no explanation. Even when Krystof later begins to understand the tragic scope of his mother’s life, he is still driven to continue on his search. The narrative gaps have been too destructive. He moves through the disconnected stories of what remains of his mother’s narrative in order to reconstruct *knowing*, and thus meaning, and ultimately self.

In terms of the wider cultural experience, anthropologist Victor Turner states that social culture itself “is more like the debris, or ‘fall-out’, of past ideological systems, than it is itself a system, a coherent whole” (Harper 115). This is true of the personal as well. Selfhood, like the morphing boundaries of Chernobyl’s alienation zones, is influenced by the push and pull of other experiences, other narratives, and other meanings. On the level of both microcosm and macrocosm, the personal and the cultural, we are informed, not necessarily just by events themselves, but by the miscellany of those events, and by a miscellany not of our own making. We must continually map out their incoherence, their shadows and silence. After the intersubjective severing, after silence, the nature of knowing mutates to accommodate for the missing facts. In Krystof, this manifests in his disconnection from his mother, from his past and, eventually, from family life altogether. In moments where premature wholeness in the person of Anjou Kara (who enters his life before he has manoeuvred the debris field and thus the meaning of his own life) threatens his broken nature, he becomes a liar in order to subconsciously retain the only kind of selfhood he understands. He eschews and sabotages the very integrity he has craved, and consequently destroys a



potentially stable future for himself. Krystof is both victim and unwitting agent of an entire culture's silence, and of nameless traumas whose fallout is endured generations after the fact.

### ***Fallout***

The apt nuclear-age metaphor not only informs the novel's structure as the plot moves concentrically toward its climax, but it also illuminates personal engagement with the after-effects – or fallout – of trauma. In *The Thirty Kilometre Zone*, Krystof has lived out his life within the toxic reach of his mother's past. As the story begins deep in the forests of northern Ukraine, for the first time he *consciously* enters the historical precincts of his mother's fallout. Amid the damaged pieces of her narrative he hopes to find answers to the problems that have plagued his life.

Ernesto Grassi writes that “the clearing of the primeval forest in order to delimit the first human place is the beginning of human history. No theory, no abstract philosophy is the origin of the human world, and every time that man loses contact with the original needs and the questions that arise out of them, he falls into the barbarism of *ratio*” (Grassi 6). Chernobyl and its dead zone certainly symbolise the ideologically corrupted origins; with toxic theory and systems delimiting and limiting human place, the only possible outcome is the unliveable. Indeed, fallout and the zones of alienation have become apposite manifestations of the reach and bearing of ideological toxicity and, imminently, barbarism. For Krystof, whose own existential clearing collides and morphs with the indistinct edges of his mother's clearing, becoming trapped in toxicity is inevitable. To break free and to define his own human needs, he must let go of his toxic nature. He must move toward the heart of trauma in his life – metaphorically the climactic, unrevealed cataclysm of Chernobyl and the macabre final scene at Stálink – where, as a doctor, he is faced with an impossible choice. The circumscription of the first human place, inexorably, is the last human place as well; it is the origins of new beginnings.

In the end, Krystof can never discover truth. His narrative matrix is too damaged. In fact, if Krystof represents Everyman, then every narrative matrix is too damaged. Foucault writes that “to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or, conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to

discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.” (Foucault 146). The impossibility of ever knowing truth, of ever uncovering the precise details of traumas is reflected in the protagonist’s lifelong desire to know his mother’s past and his father’s identity. If engaging in narrative, as Fiese and Sameroff suggest, locates selfhood and values and relationships through the stories that compose narrative, then so must silence. And, in a simplistic binaristic construct, what locates also dislocates. With respect to trauma, neither silence nor speaking prevail.

The interplay of silence and knowing are universal and transcendent. The geographically and culturally extensive Dark Ages following the fall of the Roman Empire were simultaneously outcome and response to the massive traumas of disease and war and corruption. In ancient Kievan Rus’, the multi-generational incursions of Genghis and Batu Khan and the resultant unremitting depopulation of warfare and disease also brought about a Dark Age. In the same way that the European Enlightenment and the Golden Age of Kievan Rus’ were preceded by the Dark Ages, Krystof’s personal dark age must follow trauma. Without it, the necessary self-forgetting, the spatio-temporal distance from toxicity, and the integration of fresh experience to crowd out the discord and chaos of trauma, cannot occur.

If Foucault is right, outside metaphysics and within the realm of history, nothing but a mask is the truth behind the origin of things. Either there can be no original essence, or the essence has been fabricated by a succession of outside forms. As such, Krystof’s mother dies with her secrets, and he must still go on. Any journey into the thirty kilometre zone, into the accidents and deviations of narrative and history, demands confronting the unretractable – and potentially the unliveable. Krystof’s choices are our choices: to leave trauma behind, to bear it, to remain trapped with it, or to perform the ultimate act of expurgation. Each alternative is rife with consequences. The basis of how we choose rests in the journey itself.

The ambiguity of Krystof’s choice in the end, therefore, is not ours. It is one he must make alone, and it must necessarily occur outside the narrative, in the interstitial silence of his own story.

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## *Chapter 1*

Beyond Uschélyna, where my mother's village had lain nestled between Poliss'ya's woodlands and the broad expanse of the Prip'yat marshes, no trace of humanity remained. From stories I'd heard it had been a place of folklore and superstition, of witches and vampires and ghostly hauntings. Here, the devil had made himself known, and God, and fear. Now not even a foundation was exposed in the underbrush, not a brick.

Too small and inconsequential to have appeared on any map, Zólota Bráma lay forgotten, choked by a wilderness slowly closing in on its secrets. Once a landscape of wheat and barley and corn, over seasons fallow fields had become meadow. Over the years, meadow had slowly vanished as one tree fell and rotted and scores took its place, fed by ruin and by light. Even the roads and trails, once linking neighbour with neighbour, had long receded into incoherent sutures.

Like the sun city of Teotihuacán, like Jonestown, memory was slipping beneath the surface, drowned in an arboreal sea.

A sudden haze of starlings invaded the sky directly overhead, shrieking, shifting mid-air at right angles into the autumnal canopy that flanked me. Nine days I pushed through a perpetual evening where the forest loomed almost black beneath the sky, and tangles of scrub amassed underfoot. Birch and hornbeam, poplar and oak. A gloomy wall of evergreen and fir.

Whole sections of the woodland had been churned into mosquito-plagued quagmires by herds of wallowing boar. Grasses with razor edges sliced my hands and

forearms as I caught at them, slipping in muck and slop. Nearby, violently gored trees looked like traffic accidents, steel rupturing living wood where bloated, misshapen scars eventually formed around the lacerations and grew on, the only evidence of trauma.

As I hiked along, my steps were swallowed back into the brush behind me. I marked my way with pieces of red cord so I wouldn't track in circles and become lost.

At the end of each day the small hope of discovering my mother's story grew dim. In a landscape where the only human sound was my own labouring breath, I could still hear my mother's voice when, as a child, I had asked over and again, *Mother, tell about the Old Country* and, irritated by my curiosity she had answered, *Leave it be, Krystof. Everything important is here.* And I had learned to leave it, just as she had commanded.

Yes, I had asked but the answers I'd received had been a kind of rebuff, a way of not answering, so that as I grew out of my curiosity I grew away from any possible bond with our history as well. And, like any young person, I simply no longer thought about who I was through her. As my own troubled adolescence took hold and the hardscrabble years of marriage and children and work and medical school seemed to consume my life whole, my mother's past became unimportant.

Only in her declining years did my interest re-emerge from the shadows her unhappiness and reluctance had cast over it. When at last she came to live with me, little was left for me but to stare at her face and now and then take her hand in mine, though on her worst days, under a heavy narcotic cloud, she could no longer feel its touch.

When my mother's face now appeared to me, as it often did during my time in that place, I could not recall what she had looked like in my youth, but only the sunken mask that seemed to have obscured her features, standing in for the woman, the person,

the human being who had been my mother. If I strained to find that youthful woman of my childhood I saw my mother's face as though peripherally, a subject upon which I could not focus my inner eye.

At a time when I felt I had nothing left in my life but my aging mother, I had begun to see something in those wasted features, something beyond what they had become, beyond the colourless mass of creases, the blackened skin around her eyes, the milky film that had coated her irises for over twenty years. It occurred to me that I had not looked at my mother for years. I had not seen her. And in this latest failure I began to lose myself.

I had only begun thinking about my mother's *here* when it was already too late, when she could barely hear or see, and conversation had become little more than a prolonged despair reminding us both of the imminence of her death. It was not dialogue that spurred me toward my search, but rather its absence.

That it might have been too late, that there wasn't enough time left tormented me. It was this fear that drove me into the unforgiving loneliness of a wilderness I knew nothing about, in a country whose politics left me uneasy even where no human had yet come upon me.

At the banks of a brook I removed my heavy backpack and knelt to plunge my head beneath its icy surge, then lay in the scattered light to rest. If I stayed still enough, if I closed my eyes and let the autumn sunshine pour against my skin, I could feel the warmth as it burst through the trees, and I could forget what October could do to the bones. This was my mother's *here*.

This recognition did not excite me. I was not a naive man. I did not harbour childish fantasies about my mother's secrets. I did not feel that I was exploring genealogical hallowed ground. How could I move forward into that unknown terrain without feeling somehow I was entering a circle of hell? No, I could not feel excited.

Yet I could not turn away from this moment. Too much had gone wrong in my life, so that I had become gripped by the idea that some urgent understanding of myself rested in this journey, that without it the fissures in my psyche would rupture my mind like a dam, and that the shattered life left to me would not be worth living.

The forest chilled me. Even in a light breeze the sunshine wouldn't hold still, and shadows shifted against my skin. I rose to keep walking, to keep warm.

Evening fell before I had begun heading back. I had wandered too long. Too late to make it to Uschélyna before dark, I dug a fire pit and when flames rose ferocious and crackling into the dusk I collapsed against a tree to sit out the night in the flea-infested backwoods. The moan of wolves jerked me from sleep and sent a pulse of fear through my blood. I piled desiccated logs and kindling all the higher, stoking the glaring embers to keep myself awake.

In the solitude of those woods, strange memories came to mind. I remembered, in our poorest days, when my mother would mix Bromo Seltzer for her bad stomach and I would beg off sips because it was the closest I would come to something like a cola. What simple delight in the bubbles sizzling down my throat.

I remembered, too, the sticky by-product of her cinnamon buns, when I would come home from school to find a tablespoon of melted brown sugar, butter, and cinnamon waiting for me on a plate. The pure joy of that moment would invariably be

demeaned when she handed over the spoon with some wounding and sarcastic admonishment.

*Do you even deserve this?*

I didn't know whether I did or not, but I knew what to answer: *No.*

*Here. Take it.*

Those licks would go down my throat like clay, yet each and every time my heart swelled to see that plate and that spoon waiting just for me.

The happiest moments I could recollect were those times after the Ukrainian National dances, my mother's deep shadowed kitchen blue-hung with smoke, when the broken ruins of men and women came to her rooming house on Saturday nights. Our roomers made themselves scarce after their Relief cheques arrived to bury themselves at the bars until their money was gone, and so our little group usually had Saturday nights to ourselves.

As a child starved of my own stories I listened for others, even theirs. They talked and drank and filled the house with raucous laughter, or hung their heads and sighed while drowsy, half-hearing children lay slumped into laps.

Over decades, very little in our routine changed. Ashtrays heaped with crushed butts and smouldering cigarettes spilled over my mother's ugly formica table. Year after year as cigarettes were drunkenly dropped, thick brown keloids blighted its pale yellow and grey starbursts. At the centre of the table the garlicky splendour of Old Kureliuk's kobassa wafted from its plate where my mother had sliced and coiled it like a spinal cord around a loaf of black rye. Here and there stubby bottles of beer sweated in place. Next



to the kobassa a single bottle of rye stood tall, surrounded by shot glasses now and again sloshed full and taken back without wincing.

Mysterious words and names drifted in the smoke above my head on those nights. They meant nothing and everything. Sometimes Luba Kara cried and the men grew sullen. In my head I tried the words out. They were silly and meaningless and I pieced them together in whatever ways made sense. At times I could barely tell if they were English words or Ukrainian, or something else entirely.

*Mouth house in, and je dees gabor shin.*

*Not see nye mitch ka.*

Old Kureliuk used words like *bowl shavick*. Kureliuk liked the colour red and everything was red. Or pink.

*Stalling grad.*

*Holodomór* that sounded so like *holódniy* all in capital letters the way they pronounced it that I felt grander knowing such a better word for so ordinary a thing as *hungry*. Hungry, only finer. More. *Holodo-mor*. Later as my mother stood at the bathroom mirror staring expressionless into her own face, a hand resting at her throat, I said I was *holodomór* and could I have something to eat. She answered with a searing slap to my face, leaving red finger-welts that burned when my tears rolled over them and dropped from my chin.

I spent my seven-year-old mind trying to remember those impossible words so eventually I knew what they were.

Mauthausen and abortions. Nazi.

That the word *nai'mychka* meant slave, and that Luba and Boris Kara had been Nazi slave labourers.

That as a young schoolteacher Old Kureliuk had been kidnapped by Bolsheviks in front of his students and sent to the front, never to see his family again.

That *Holodomór* was not hunger but starvation. That it had become Famine equal to Holocaust. Equal, but voiceless. *Don't speak of it, forget it. Forget the past.*

Around my mother's table they forgot the past as best they could, insinuating its moments into conversation only when alcohol made it bearable.

All those years my mother, den mother to them all, habit and haven, remained unreadable. No pain, no joy. No words. From her silence I learned to listen, struggling somehow to locate her in the raw interstices between other voices.

*We ate the leaves from the trees to stop our hunger but we ended up with dysentery. My baby sister died that way. Poor little mite. Not even a priest left to christen her.*

*My God, my God - Horrible. Such trouble -*

*Boris, really -*

*Mama only lasted a few days after the baby. She gave up all her food so we would live. After the baby died I think her heart broke.*

*Boris -*

*God rest them.*

*Starvation and dysentery and heartbreak. That's how many of our people went.*

*It's better to say nothing. Tell him, Luba.*

*If he wants to talk -*

*But what's to talk about? It's done. It does no good to talk.*

*It was a hardship is all I was saying. That's all. If you don't want to listen then don't listen.*

*Well, don't get all bent up about it. What's the use saying such things in front of the children? What's the point in them hearing such things? Can it change the past? Can it change anything now? No. Me, I keep quiet about those days.*

And it never took much to go too far, to evoke too much, to say one word too many. I had learned never to ask questions, to value those rare scraps of information that came out of nowhere and were left to hang until the discomfort between us all became something terrible, and long before the rye and kobassa and bread were gone, my mother's guests pushed back their chairs, bundled up their children, and went home.

That night I had watched Old Kureliuk touch a fresh cigarette to his lips and strike a match to light it, inhaling hard as he waved the flame out and spiked the match into the pile of butts. A curl of grey breath rose, and pain for a moment held, a whole past suspended, pluming in eerie murk above our heads. And how the unspoken stories burned against my skin, the invisible remains of hardship that these men and women articulated in silence and backhands, rage and dissipation.

I watched, fascinated by the red glow of that cigarette. Kureliuk sat with arms crossed over his broad chest, a hand dangling his smoke. He was a burly little brute, a fighter every inch of him. At the UNO dances he was always getting drunk and brawling.

I looked over at Walter – or Young Kureliuk as his brooding teenage son was called - sitting beside him and sharing a chair with his younger stepbrother, Peter. And cadaverous, grey-skinned Mary who lived with Kureliuk but wasn't his wife. She held

Helen and John, two of her four hateful hawk-faced brats on her lap. The youngest, Victor, lay on the floor, curled under the table at his mother's feet. I looked at Luba and Boris, each with a sleeping twin in their arms. I couldn't tell the difference between Taïssa and Anjou, so identical were they, these babies of the group at only about three years of age. Luba's cherryred painted lips and Luba's cigarette.

Except for the twins, who were too young to have yet developed into monsters like the others, I liked none of these children. In response to my natural timidity they menaced and made fun of me, calling me *bastard* and *son-of-a-whore* when we were left alone, words I only understood to be hurtful by their tone until maturity threw light on their meaning and I became ashamed as well.

In the kitchen that night an uneasy jealousy played at my embryonic ego, an ugly feeling I couldn't understand. Perhaps because there were always semblances of mothers with fathers around this table but for me only ever Mother. Always Mother.

Kureliuk's ember burned on, then Luba's. Luba's lips and my mother's lips. The rage that came with midnight and tiredness blew over me and sank away as quickly, hiding but not gone. I felt my scalp begin to sweat. The glowing cigarettes and the glowing yellow kitchen bulb burned into my eyes until I nearly burst into resentful tears. And I couldn't explain. In my mother's arms I began my anxious squirming. *Mother – the light. Can I?*

She knew what I meant. She pursed the grin from her lips and shook her head with prompt, self-conscious jerks. I knew, from the impatient flash of her eyes, that what I was doing would earn me a spanking if not for the presence of her friends. In front of others, when my mother was trying her hardest to conceal the way she was with me, she

was like a terrible actress, her every gesture artificial and uneasy. Otherwise sharp-tongued and ready with a slap, I relished these times when my mother was at her most unnaturally kind.

*Not now. Let the grown-ups talk.*

Sometimes, if I was quick-witted enough, I took advantage.

*Please? Pleease – Just once.*

Now my eyes teared, and she softened. As I slid to the floor to get the light switch on the wall she stuck out her tongue. I reached up and pressed the button with my thumb. Only a sallow light glowed from the living room now. Luba's and Kureliuk's cigarette ends raged red against their faces as they inhaled. But on my mother's shadow-contorted face a ghostly greenglowing spot bloomed, clear as a light on the end of her tongue. She held up a hand and the skin at the tips of her thumb and index finger blazed vividly in the dark like bright nicotine stains. They all stared. When she wiggled her tongue the children laughed. I laughed the hardest.

As my eyes adjusted to the dark I could see bafflement work over the adults' faces. I pushed the other button to turn the lights back on just as my mother said:

*Radium paint. Compass dials. For the war.*

Luba's heavy eyebrows pulled together above her broad peasant's nose. *Well, already –*

*We used to lick the brushes. To keep them sharp. Then they made us stop, so after that we rolled them with our fingers.*

Luba shook her head. The children spilled from their parents' laps to look more closely. Only the ever-impassive Walter remained in his chair. Even the twins were

roused by the commotion and smiled through bleary eyes as they stood at my mother's knees. They wanted to touch it, to see how she had fit a light inside her tongue that way.

To see magic.

That night, missing a father I never knew and feeling more than ever the sting of my mother's coldness toward me, I lay beside her in our sagging cot on the enclosed back porch of the house and let tears drain into my pillow. She must have heard my sniffing even as I tried to conceal it. At that moment I needed a kindness more than air in my lungs. I needed a mother's arms, a fatherly stroke on my head, but my mother paid me no attention. And who was I to blame her? Her life was hard, and I was part of that life and part of her hardship. She needed my petty sufferings as much as she needed the drunks and good-for-nothings who cycled through our lives in the guise of upstairs roomers.

Even long after the house was sold and my mother came to live with me, when the dances at the UNO Hall were just memory and one by one the women and men took ill, grew old, and died, I still recalled these as happy times.

It was, after all, the closest thing to a family I knew.

It was one of the few times I even came close to knowing the meaning of motherly.

My mind orbited these memories, once a torture but now an odd sort of comfort, a tether to my vanishing self. Most of those people, once out of my mother's life, did not enter mine again. By the time I was in med school at Western, and preoccupied by a failing marriage, with the difficult early years of medical practice and paying off debt, I could barely pay attention even when my mother spoke of them. I remembered

something about Walter committing suicide, his stepbrother Peter gone strange with religion, ricocheting between churches and cults with a heartbreaking sense of futility. Helen, a good girl, had married an abusive priest. John and Victor had vanished from the reaches of the gossip mills until one night when I was called into Emerg and saw the name Victor Sokala on the patient roster. I learned he had been quarantined in ICU, so I checked with the nurses to find out why and was told he was suffering from a multitude of problems – pneumonia, Kaposi’s Sarcoma, cryptosporidiosis, STDs – and was critically ill. I suited up and went in to see what was left of him. From head to toe his skin was covered in the black Kaposi’s tumours. He was so wasted it was impossible to tell his gender, his age, or to recognise him as the young man I had last seen at an Easter service at the church before I left for med school. Although his eyes were open he was not responsive. I knew he would be dead in days if not hours. At the nurse’s station I was told a brother had brought him in, and had left without even waiting to speak to a doctor. By the time I had a chance to check on him again he was dead. A call to the morgue a few days later confirmed that nobody would claim him, and that he was to be given a pauper’s burial. I thought back to the difficult lives those kids had endured, the domestic ambiguity of strangers being shoved together under one roof, Old Kureliuk making do with Mary Sokala until he could bring his wife over from the Ukraine; Mary Sokala giving herself over to a married brute just to put a roof over her children’s heads, only to be abandoned when Kureliuk’s wife arrived. No wonder tragedy had made itself a friend to those kids.

In a way, the un-familiality of that household most closely resembled ours, with the exception that my mother never attached herself to any of the drunks who lived with

us, or anyone else for that matter, to save us. I understood the pain of that family, and I did not judge any of them for the consequences they had lived out. After years in my practice I had come to recognise the straight line that could almost always be drawn between family life and outcomes.

A few years later I realised that the constellation of diseases present in Victor were without a doubt one of the earliest cases of AIDS. Given our proximity to a large city like Detroit it did not surprise me.

But the twins. Poor Taïssa, my one abiding memory that of her yellow, cancer-ravaged body, tiny in a white casket that looked more like a flower box. And Anjou. I could not forget her sad revelation while we were together: *I remember my sister the way I remember my own face in a mirror. I never knew where she ended and I began until she died. Her suffering was in me. Her pain was in me. When she took her last breath, in a way I took the first of mine.*

With this unbidden memory I drove my mind toward fear as nocturnal animals keened and huffed and rasped through the dark, to make fear greater than grief. Through the night the wet, fungal smell of rotting trees and leaves drifted in the air above the smoke. Nervous, I dozed and woke in fits, consciousness now and then welling up through my dreams with reminders of Anjou, so that it was all I could do to stop myself from moaning out to the wolves in despair.

Before daybreak I rose, shivering with a cold autumn dew leeching right to the skin, and buried the smoking pit of ash and embers with the soil I had removed. Exhaustion sickened me, but I was hungry too. The saliva in my mouth felt gluey and



thick. It occurred to me I had not had anything, even water, to drink since afternoon the previous day.

Like a peasant I walked the greylit woods beyond the travelled roads, the echo of my own breath a spell I stepped into, forgetting distance and time. With the sun still straining in the east I came across the peculiar sight of a hunter squatting by a stream, pulling vague ellipses through the water with a stick, absorbed as a child. A shotgun lay in the flat shadows at his knee. It was the first time I'd come across another human being since I'd begun my hike. Across the water a wan light began to cast a slanted glow into the woods. As I called out from several metres away the hunter sprang to his feet, throwing the stick into the stream to lift his weapon beneath an arm.

"This is a collective. I've papers for hunting."

"Please, I'm -" I stepped over the boulders and logs that lay between us. "I'm looking for a village."

He studied my entire frame. "What place?"

"It used to be called Zólota Bráma but I don't know what it is now." I smiled, and the hunter stroked the greasy-looking gun barrel.

"No such place hereabouts. Like I said, it's a collective."

"You're sure you've never heard of it? Zólota Bráma?"

The hunter had already turned his back and begun slowly making his way downstream. Now he halted, one foot raised on a mossy clump. He passed a brutal look to me, and his expression made me nervous. "Wouldn't I know what's what in my own *raion*?"

"I'm sorry. I must be mistaken."

I watched as the man trudged along the stream bank in heavy steel-toed boots. With a white sky overhead and the dank woods still in shadow I began to feel again the dismal stirrings of failure along with hunger and thirst. I looked down at the water surging by and bent to cup it in my hands for a drink, but when I brought it to my face I noticed its strange odour, and let it run from my hands without drinking. Before the hunter was gone from sight I retraced my own steps to the track I'd been following and found my way back through the trees. With my energies flagging I walked slowly.

Even with morning finally showing above the treetops I nearly missed a gap in the brush I had just passed. It was difficult to see with so little light penetrating to the forest floor. I tied half a dozen cords to the branches where I found it so I could find my way back to my original trail. As I broke through I could see it was actually an obstructed footpath that hiked sharply back from the track where I walked, grown over with a wild grapevine, the last of its scraggly fruit withered in the cooler weather of this late season. The sight of the vine encouraged me. It was a sign that this area might have once been cultivated.

I stepped in, pushing my way through flaying branches and canes, through a cloud of wasps that droned in the canopy above my head. A strong odour of rot hemmed in from every side. I swatted flies, too, from my face, eyes, my mouth.

Ahead I could just make out the mauled skull of a wild boar carcass poking from the underbrush. Its pliered muzzle was skinned to the jawbone, leaving it frozen in a lipless sneer. Flies leapt in mad staccatos from bone to flesh, crawling between its serrated teeth. Maggots writhed across its one staring eye. I stared back.

The sound of a snapping twig sent my heart hammering. Every noise had a different tenor now. A new unnerving uneasiness with the trail and the ever-changing woods and the long-forgotten isolation of the place stirred in me.

In a day I was due back home. It was futile to go on anyway. I picked up a heavy limb and turned back, carrying it before me along the route I'd already traced, flinching at every sound now as I realised how alone I truly was, and the danger that lurked all around me.

My face ached, my jaw, even my teeth. The pack began to feel heavy but I did not remove it or rest. I walked steadily, anxious to return to Kiev before nightfall.

Suddenly I began to laugh quietly and stupidly and exhaustedly without knowing why.

All my life I had wanted to know what made me who I was: my culture, my blood. My father. How many times as a child in my mother's arms I had looked up into her aging face, eager for the first words of some tale I might catch falling from her lips just once, just one time, one way of knowing that our existence was not borne by the slender strength of her memory alone. I wanted part of the past for myself too. *Tell something about the Old Country, Mother.* But there was nothing.

*Tell about Tato.*

*Sha, Krystof. It doesn't matter.*

I let my tired gaze take in the surrounding trees. A heavy, musky smell was upon the place like a living body odour. Now my frustration was becoming anger. In this place we all shared an emptiness, this lost nation, myself, the *what more* of an almost measureless unknown. We were after what could never be grasped. It was as though I

had come here to prove to myself that I was truly, utterly alone. So I laughed. To keep myself from crying.

Upon my return to Uschélyna I found that my car wouldn't start. Already low, my mood tipped close to despair.

I headed toward a building with a sign that read *Пouma*. I asked the clerk if someone in the village could have a look at my car.

She looked puzzled. "*Gara?*"

"*Gara, gara,*" I repeated, working to control my impatience, then realised perhaps it was a word not used here. "*Avto? Avtomobila?*"

"Ah, *machyna.*"

She smiled and I softened a little. We understood each other. She was a plump, attractive woman in a black turtleneck, with a leopard print scarf tied around her throat. Her wheat-blond hair was caught back in a loose knot at the base of her neck, held there by a pair of criss-crossed black chopsticks. As she leaned over the counter toward me she drummed the fingers of one hand.

"You can call to Dytiatky for service. There is a petrol station. I know the fellow."

"Please - Do you have something to drink?" An ice cold beer would have really hit the spot but I didn't want to say anything. I looked around for a fountain or a sink as the scorched feeling in my mouth became unbearable. "Anything. I'm dying for something to drink."

Without answering she disappeared into a back room and returned with a brown-stained mug. On the outside I noticed with some amusement the regal outline of a lion in gold with an English slogan below: *Your Real Estate Lion*. In spite of my revulsion over the grubby cup I thanked her, then drank the whole tepid offering down in one swallow and wiped my mouth. “This fellow, your mechanic friend, he would come?”

“Pay in American and these days Brezhnev would dig himself out of the grave to check your oil.”

I laughed, and gave back the mug.

She squinted, studying my face as she dangled the mug by its handle on an index finger. “Your accent - You are American, then?”

“Canadian.”

“But you have American dollars?”

I was wary of answering, having heard enough gossip about the crooked *apparatchiks* and the general corruption that admitting I had cash didn't seem like a good idea.

She noticed my hesitation and grinned. “If I tell Andrij to come, he will come. We are old friends. Pay in *karbovanets* or *rubles* or Monopoly money. Anything you like.”

I laughed again. “You know about Monopoly money?”

She smiled, and set the mug down under the counter. “Of course I know. It's not like it's still 1965.”

“No. Thank God for that, I guess.” Although, I wasn’t quite sure why, since a Soviet 1965 seemed no more unpalatable than any other Soviet decade. “Sorry, no Monopoly money. Next time.”

After giving me a bright smile she picked up the telephone and made the call. While she waited for someone to answer on the other end she said, “Tell me, why is a Canadian in a place like Uschélyna?”

“I’m looking for my mother’s place of birth. Her village.”

“Ah.”

“I wonder – have you ever heard of it? Zólota Bráma?”

“Oh – *tssht* - here is Andrij.”

I watched her face grow animated and expressive as she made some small talk with Andrij before getting to the point. In a rapid-fire conversation I found russified Ukrainian hard to follow. I studied her. She was clearly Slavic, her face heart-shaped but her head a little flat. Sweet-featured, she was made up a little too heavily, with a shimmery greenish eye shadow and very thick cinnamon-coloured lipstick. She took the receiver from her ear and pressed it against the opposite shoulder, her arm against her heart.

“He can’t come until morning. Is that possible?”

I paused and scratched my ear. “Morning? Um – I take a plane in Kiev tomorrow. How early can he come?”

She smiled, undoubtedly over my butchered Ukrainian. She returned the receiver to her ear and repeated my question, then pulled it away again. I liked the way she rested it on her shoulder. “Dawn, if you like.”

“Dawn is good.” I nodded. “Early. Early is good.”

After passing along my agreement with the time, she once again pressed the receiver to her shoulder. “He wants to know what make the vehicle is?”

“Zhiguli. The papers say it’s a 1977 model. That’s all I know. It’s a diesel.”

After this information was relayed and the arrangements were concluded, I slipped a bill across the counter for the phone call. But she pushed it back.

“No, no. It was nothing.” She rested her elbows on the counter and leaned forward with a smile. “Keep your money. Some day it will be a relic and your grandchildren won’t believe you have one.”

“I doubt that.”

“But why not? You’ll leave it to them in a glass case and tell them you got it during the Soviet Union’s last gasp.”

“Really?” My paranoia kicked in and I didn’t know what to make of her glibness. I wondered if I was being baited, so to be safe I decided not to make any strong political or ideological declarations.

“Absolutely.” Her hands flew up. “*Ffppt*. Just like that the body soviet gives up its unholy ghost, a seventy-year-old psychopath swearing all his life that money never mattered but he dies with his hands in your pockets just the same.”

Although there were some hard-core communists in the Ukrainian community at home, those in my mother’s circle had all been victims of communism. They hated it and its adherents with a virulence that left no room for discussion or debate. Families broke apart over this divide. And, having grown up surrounded by the products of communism, I had learned my own form of antipathy.

“Hmm – I don’t – I - ”

“It’s all right, I’m only joking.” Her lips stretched across her teeth and she looked away. With a shrug she straightened behind the counter and, making a sniffing sound as she lightly rubbed her nose, let her gaze rest on the counter. “So, I suppose you didn’t plan to stay overnight in our lifeless little town.”

“I can stay in the woods. It’s nothing.”

“The woods! No, no, no.” She tapped the flats of her palms on the counter. “You’ll stay at my place. I could use some company. You can tell me about your Canada. I’ve never met a Canadian before. You can teach me some English.”

“Here’s one.” I leaned toward her and she turned her ear to my mouth. I whispered: “*I defect.*”

It was clear she knew what I had said because she covered her mouth with both hands and burst into laughter. “Who knows, maybe some day I will use it.”

I liked her personality and thought it would make for an interesting evening. I agreed to stay at her place only if she let me pay for the room and board, and she accepted.

Her name was Marya Dobrovska. In the small cottage she shared with her aging parents we had a light supper of boiled eggs, cold ham, bread, and tea. Her parents barely spoke a word, both of them shy with the stranger their daughter had brought home. They smiled, nodded, and made brief comments, then after supper made their exits to play cards at a neighbour’s house.



When they were gone, Marya took out a bottle of homemade wine and explained: “It’s the only thing they do now. They’re retired and they play cards – ” She held up the bottle and swirled it by the neck, “And make wine. They’ll be gone until midnight.”

Marya had majored in art history at university, and I told her I was a heart doctor. As soon as I said it I felt like a bragging fool, though I didn’t understand why.

That night we talked about politics and work and life in our respective worlds. Based on a few hours of conversation I gathered she craved to know a world she could not even accurately imagine outside Grandfather Lenin’s judgment, but was still protective of her homeland.

“Here, we have food, apartments, houses. Everything we need. The days of Stalin and Khrushchev are over.”

“Isn’t that a little like saying the cancer is growing at a slower rate? I mean, do you really believe that?”

“But I have to, no?”

“You don’t have to believe anything you don’t want to believe. Isn’t it time to stop living for bare necessity, especially when everything you’re told you need has been defined by someone else? What about the things *you* want?”

She gave me a tilted smile. “But that is personal.”

“Of course it’s personal. Who else’s wants would they be?”

“No no. I mean that individual desire is not for the greater good. It is not for the collective. That’s what we were taught.”

“You’ve been taught wrong.”

“And is it all so wonderful and utopian in your world?”

“Not utopian. We don’t seek utopias. That’s how we have avoided plunging into dystopia.”

“As we have.” She was not being sarcastic. This was the earlier talk of the Soviet Union’s last gasp.

I drank from my wine glass. “We hear things. Many of us still have lines of communication to family and friends over here. We have an idea what it’s like.”

“Most of it is probably true. We hear things too.”

“Oh?” I grinned. “Like what?”

“That in the West you live between squalor and dissipation. The haves lord it over the have-nots. Capitalism has created a culture of greed and corruption.”

“Sometimes all of that is true. But for the most part people live good lives. We pursue what we want because we can – for good and bad, I guess. People generally have good jobs, good homes, cars. *And* when something is wrong politically or socially, we can protest and complain without ending up in a gulag.”

“It’s not perfect here, but it’s better.”

To this I said, “Well - it’s my first trip here and I find it depressing. It leaves a bloody depressing impression. I mean, I’m barely outside Kiev and there’s this old guy driving a horse and cart, like a scene straight from Dostoevsky. It’s like stepping back into the nineteenth century. Everything seems so much less than it could be. I just don’t understand the attraction to a political mindset that gets you this result. I mean, seventy years ago everyone was willing to kill and die for communism, but the whole republic seems to have just lain down for their regular beating like it was owed to them. Like it was the best they could hope for. God - ”

A look of frustration or hurt changed her features, and I felt that I had gone too far. As the night progressed I found myself feeling insecure about my social skills. It made me realise how long it had been since I'd been in normal social situations, especially with a woman.

The whole night I found myself thinking of Anjou, even though I had been telling myself for the past year that it was better to have ended the way it did. I couldn't help but wonder what had become of her since she left me at Christmas. Sharing wine with this stranger did not distract me from that homesick contraction I still felt when I thought about her, or just recalled her name, how I ached to run into her in some public place just to see her face again.

With Marya I kept saying things I wished I could retract. Yet she seemed not to really notice, and in that mercy I felt even worse.

Over bottles of her father's wine we stayed up most of the night while each mouthful surged into my blood like grain alcohol, making me dead drunk after four glasses. At last the wine rendered our exchange almost nonsensical.

We spent the night together, our undertakings so lonely and mechanical that when I rose at dawn I could not even glance at her half-shadowed form sleeping in the twisted sheets of her bed. The agreed-upon cash left on the kitchen table pinched at my conscience, making me feel like a john paying a prostitute. I debated with myself about taking it back but I couldn't tell whose dignity I thought I was saving. Only when I heard the whingeing bed springs behind me as she turned over did I skulk out the door, the decision made by my eagerness to leave.

While Andrij worked on the car, I found myself missing Anjou all the more, and I felt too that I had betrayed not just her, but my love for her, and the purity of that love. Suddenly that last image of Marya that now flared in my mind just turned my stomach. As I pulled toward the highway in the semi-darkness of dawn I was grateful never to have to see her again. Yet this did not comfort me. Instead, my gratitude felt all the more like arrogance.

I was nearly to Kiev before I realised I had not received an answer to my question about my mother's village, and had forgotten to bring the subject up again, either with Marya or her parents. I punched the steering wheel with such force the entire dash juddered in response. For almost half an hour I swore and cursed until traffic became so heavy it forced my attention. But I could not forget my oversight. I could not forget anything.

## *Chapter 2*

Just outside Kiev on the way to Boryspil Airport, traffic clogged the road. In the taxi's back seat I looked at my watch again and again, barely noticing the time at all, the tic of a new anxiety. A bottleneck of infuriated drivers worked around an overturned truck, its cargo of fish and crab and lobster thrown into the highway in heaps of tails and fins and staring eyes and broken containers. A rivulet of fishy brown water trickled into the shoulder. The air passing in through the window reeked. At the side of the road lobsters the colour of mildew crawled from the wreckage amongst the silvery corpses of the sea, their claws held shut with bands.

The driver wheeled the car around the mess, pitching me forward diagonally into the back of his seat. The sight of this from the rear-view mirror brought a tobacco-burst of laughter from the driver's thick throat, but I was hardly aware he was even there.

In the taxi I stopped fighting the need to think about Anjou, her face, the thick fibrous scar at the base of her scalp just behind her ear. But like my mother, there was nothing to hold the edges of her face together, a cellular cosmos drawn apart into a mere haze over ten months.

I pulled the photo from my wallet, taken at a picnic the summer before, and no matter how long I studied it, no matter how hard I stared I could no longer imagine her in motion, vital. The mental film of her was already gone. Snippets of history, of tactile moments between us rose in my mind, the habits that had become part of my body's autonomic function. Like how she had stroked rose water and glycerine into the skin of my hands, her fingers working the pads of each palm, each digit, until bone and sinew

had forgotten the shapes of pressure cuffs and stethoscopes. It was the most loving thing anyone had ever done for me, one of the little gestures that redeemed me after the hellish years of my marriage.

I stared into those hands now, turning them slowly before my eyes to examine them palm to back, back to palm, bending and unbending my fingers, studying the abrupt clutch of elliptical creases where the bones and cartilage of my knuckles came together.

I thought of our time together, those three years just an instant compared to the months that drew out since Christmas when I could not figure out how to live without her, even when I knew I would never get her back. During our childhood I had never thought twice about her, yet how close we had come to almost never crossing paths again. I had last seen her just before my marriage. She was a shy, gawky fourteen year old. That summer night seventeen years later, I'd watched her from two tables away through the maelstrom of a charity dinner. Anjou, demure in red linen, sat surrounded by noisy laughing couples and empty wine bottles. Just an inch to the left and I wouldn't have noticed her at all behind the dense carnation centrepiece pushed aside to make room for more bottles.

Something I saw in her then went beyond a physical presence, or even beauty. A face unmarred by any sense of self-destruction. She shone. Her skin and eyes, her hair. I never knew hair could be so luminous. Neither dark nor light, and both. Honeyed satin syrup. She wore it back in some formal design. I craved it laced in my fingers where strands had fallen loose around her face and neck, my smallest desire caught in her every gesture: glances toward the door, the careful way she looked across the cheap wineglass rim when she sipped her water, trying not to feel out of place. Even then I'd begun

making my way along the distances I would come to learn she'd always travelled in solitude.

Through the dinner I tasted nothing. I spoke little to my companions, who chatted casually while I let my eyes find moments of red in the throng of suits and dresses. I noticed nothing — not the silent auction, not the dancing, not the crowd. Even now when I looked back upon that night I realised how deep the hole in my history had been sunk, that to an extent Anjou was part of some sort of lifeline to which I had clung too hard with too much desperation.

That night I watched only Anjou and felt the fates at play because I had known and already lost her once in my life before. I longed to go to her, yet I was ashamed of the way I'd changed, not because I'd grown older but because my appearance had been ravaged by eighteen unhappy years of marriage and drinking. My body had gone from lean to gaunt over work and the anxieties of family life. I wore glasses now. How could she ever have recognised me this way? Why would she want to? Against her freshness I felt monstrous.

Yet on an intuitive level I grasped that I could not afford any further loss of my past. Too, I found myself longing for evidence of goodness in the world, that perhaps in her I could find an antipode to the damage and folly and dissolution I had only ever known, and which seemed more and more to define who I was.

In an instant I was standing, pardoning my way toward her through a labyrinth of bodies and disconnected chairs. If I had excused myself from my table, I didn't recall.

At her side I touched her shoulder, my fingers too near the heat of her skin, her throat. She looked up. She smiled but didn't know me.

My hands began to shake, and my voice as I leaned down to her ear. "We know each other."

"Oh?"

"That scar." While I spoke, recognition lighted her face. "Terrance Kerley was being a jerk. I came out and found you on the sidewalk bleeding – "

"Krystof? My God – "

"Remember? You didn't cry. Not even a tear. And I thought he'd decapitated you, you were bleeding so much."

"Well, how have you been?"

I straightened and smiled nervously. "No complaints. How about you?"

As she turned in her seat she smiled back. "No complaints."

"You look really, really good. Great. Really great." I couldn't get over running into her like this, or the connection I felt with her right then. She was comfortable, a friend from the past, a familiarity I needed.

She touched a curled wisp of her hair just then, as I had longed to do. I was filled with the sensation of it, sick with an exile's longing for home.

Remember when. We loved those words together, our first way of knowing one another again. Laughing: "Anjou, remember how one time you felt my skull because you swore you'd sense how I would turn out in its shape? You were looking for psychopaths. I guess I was a huge disappointment."

Earrings glittered against her neck while she laughed with me.

"Did I? I don't remember that. It must have been a phase." There was a pause, a distant, thoughtful look in her eyes. "I remember – wow, so, so much. We practically



lived at your house. And you, stuck watching us. We were terrors.”

“You weren’t terrors. You were nice little kids. Well – you were little kids.”

She laughed. And I realised then: she reflexively touched her hair most near that scar, the elegance in an act of such self-consciousness.

All before I ever knew that she had grown up to become a linguist; that her master's thesis on comparative semiotics in the works of three major Ukrainian, French, and Canadian poets of the 1960's had demonstrated a mind worthy of a doctorate; that, tired of academics, she had declined to pursue her studies further; that she translated books and articles, correspondence, and industrial and legal documents for income; that for joy she painted. And that I loved her.

Now I looked at the finger of my left hand, naked where once a slim circlet of gold had grown so uncomfortable between canyons of bone and skin, gold I had unconsciously rubbed nearly eighteen years like an irritant, a habit that survived its removal and beyond. All this time I had not been able to stop myself from bringing my thumb over the breadth of my palm that way. Something I had grown to hate, and had kept off most of the time with the excuse that it was a bacteria magnet that might make my patients sick, was now a symbol of lost possibility with Anjou.

At the Boryspil Airport that afternoon while awaiting my flight I bought a twenty-sixer of vodka, and in a grubby stall of the men’s toilet I anaesthetised my shame and regret into a silent, morose semblance of detachment.

All the history I wanted remembered my mother had wanted forgotten, a finger circling and circling one corner in an atlas where there was no Ukraine and no Zólota Bráma. There was no way back. There was only forgetting.

Under Stalin her village had been starved out of existence and razed to the earth, its very name stricken from record. Across entire *óblasts* new towns emerged where before there were none. From one map to another place-names disappeared, reappeared, and mysteriously disappeared again. Some, once gone, were never glimpsed again.

I'd travelled the heart's microscopic nether regions having never learned its great secrets. I thought about those x-ray landscapes on acetate sheets, the blurred grey irradiated maps across which my fingers had tracked the physical routes disease had taken. A heart's apex was the star by which I had always oriented myself, longitudes and latitudes to forge the pathways of vessels, or the chambers from where the mystery of life was thought to spring. This was Roentgen's dream.

But a wedge of muscle the size of a quartered grapefruit peel when cut from the left ventricle will continue beating on its own. Severed from the heart, from a body, the organ grown so large that a surgeon's hands could hardly fit inside the open chest cavity, that section of bloody tissue held in the palm of the hand will have its last battle for life.

If I wanted to continue with this journey I had to do what I had avoided all my adult life: to cut into my mother's pain. How could I begin, or decide how to risk our shared history with the first superfine wound? To decide what should be said, to make myself a god or inadvertently change the story I'd always assumed? To judge the surface of my mother's heart and ask her to imperil it all again, the pieces of a torn heart trying, briefly, to keep living on.

How could I not?

By the time the flight landed at Detroit Metro my own history never seemed more frail, more beyond my reach. Vodka and stale cabin air had made my brain raw. Reminders of Anjou sank deep into my heart and burrowed there.

The anxiety I had felt about Detroit since the Riots only intensified with the misery of an approaching hangover. All along 94 from Metro Airport, to the Dix and I-75, and finally Fort, the city flashed by the cab's back window in a continuous vision of dirt and ugliness and decay punctuated by the gilded-age greatness and sophistication of the Fisher Building, Hudson's, the Book Cadillac, and the Penobscot and Guardian Buildings that flanked the modern three-cylindrical glass structure of the Renaissance Center. Only when we crossed the Ambassador Bridge, its bright red signage announcing itself at the very tops of its two girdered suspension columns, did the band that always ached around my chest when I was over there ease up.

Once home I paused at the front door to find my key, the security light suddenly blazing over me, exposing the sage door where I fiddled with the lock. I entered the mausoleum stillness of the house and went upstairs to my room, quietly so my mother might not be disturbed. The homecare worker, knowing I'd be back, had already gone. I knew she didn't like me much, and always seemed to have left just before I got home. I opened the windows to let in a cross breeze and fell over the bed.

Sleep would not come and I lay staring out the window at shadows and shapes in ochre, bronze, brown. A warm draught glanced across the house, and the curtains suddenly exhaled an aftertaste of rain and autumn decay from the yard below. The air

sweltered with an Indian summer. Outside, a noise of living rose and fell through the night: sirens and laughter, barking dogs and motorcycles and bright rhythms of music high above the wartime cottage rooftops of my Olde Riverside neighbourhood. The noise of cars reverberating along the streets bloomed and faded as the shift-change traffic gave off an unremitting sound. Somewhere a man shouted. Another shouted back. For a moment a child's frail skirl became buoyed by the night and was gone.

I glanced toward the desk crouched deep in shadow. The red light on the answering machine blinked and blinked and blinked. Dust had become the calendar by which I judged the last enervated months before I decided that I had to make that trip. Dust made a home of the medical journals and periodicals I hadn't touched or gone near. Awkward paper piles, scraps. A week, and I might have blown away time with one breath; a month, I could have defaced it with a name in letters just a fingerbreadth wide. In time, dust would make its own peace with the life that lay abandoned while I had helplessly looked on.

I rose from bed and went into the hallway, closing the door behind me. Down the hall the massive longcase clock tocked, echoing and slow from its mahogany trunk. Through the dark I felt my way along the wall and down the stairs to the closed door of the bedroom my mother occupied. Tonight more than ever I needed to be safely drawn into the tatters of her memory. And like my almost obtuse response to her sugary cinnamon bun treats and accompanying belittlement, I seemed to always expect more from my mother even when I knew exactly what I would get.

The house felt so empty just then. I found myself struck by that fear I had been anticipating for years already. There wasn't a day when I didn't wonder how it would

feel when she died, if there was a feel to death when it came so close at her advanced age. If, after years of regarding death from an objective, professional distance, I would feel anything at all when it did come.

Outside the room the air distilled into that familiar geriatric pong: medicines and colostomy accidents, stale diapers, sickness – a revolting constellation to which I could not grow accustomed even after nearly twenty years of my mother's decline. No amount of compulsive cleaning could abate the odours of her dying.

How did a man spend ten years pursuing a single passion just to hate it? To loathe the naked human body with its freckled backs and ballooned-out moles, its age spots and liver spots and warts, its hairiness, its odours, its seepages and leakages, its eruptions, its scars and wrinkles and caked-on makeup and caked-up food and excrement and pus, its mucous, its drool. To cringe at the mere touch of a patient's skin, so that I could not conduct a simple palpation without sterile latex gloves. To nearly retch at the sound of sniffing or coughing or wheezing. The longer I was in it the more I realised I should have been an engineer, or some other science-based professional whose only contact was with chemicals or hard steel, equations and calculations. Over ten years of education had trapped me, leaving me without a fall-back position so that a career change seemed impossible.

I peered in to see if my mother was still awake, noticing the light glinting in her open eyes, a blink. The aura of her cocoon-silk hair glowed white. I entered that room and found her staring, as I had many nights during my life, lost in fear.

“Can't sleep, Mother?”

“My boy, my Krystof.” She stirred painfully to find my shadow.

“Don’t move, Mother. I’ll come in.”

“*Anu, hlopchyk*, what new?”

She still called me *boy*, as she had since I was a child. I went to her, easing myself on the bed’s edge until I was resting against the backboard, careful not to injure her pained bones. I felt conscious of my own smell, a combination of unwashed clothes and hair, perspiration, and booze, but I knew my mother would not notice.

The hardness and bitterness I had grown up with had softened in latter years, perhaps because I was the one caring for her now, and I had divorced a source of discord for us both. As her worries were little by little driven away I suspected she was finally able to let some anger go.

Almost blind, and going deaf, she had begun to keep dread at bay with talk, as though she were tormented by an underlying desperation to make known what her eyes had once seen and what her ears had once heard before her senses left her completely. I never knew whether she had permanently disabled her connections with the past she had always kept hidden from me, but for the last few years she had been repeating pointless stories I had heard before until I wanted to clap my hands over my ears so as not to hear. Now, though, I would gladly listen to anything.

The stillness of the house was broken by the rasp of the clock’s ancient German workings just upstairs at the end of the hall, followed by its sadly lilting, abbreviated melody as it struck the three-quarter hour.

“Tell me about you and *Tato*.” Having never known a father, to me *Tato* was just a word.

It had been nearly thirty years since I had asked, her answers always the same, my mother's stories cycling the same loop, same pictures, the same language. In these pleas I had never imagined how it might have hurt her to bring it back that way. I was too young to understand such things. It was the sameness and the vacuum left behind that always troubled me, why I had kept asking, and eventually why I stopped. Why I needed to ask again.

"Why you say this now?"

In my shrug was carried the immense weight of that doubt, a tension I had begun to wear like a shroud. "No reason."

"Why you ruin you life for this?"

I crossed my arms and stared at the ceiling. "Mother, do I look like him? Am I anything like him?"

At first she was so still I thought she mustn't have heard, so I began to repeat myself: "Do –"

"You quiet now, Krystof. Go to bed. No ask me question like this."

And so the ghost called *Tato* once again vanished between the lips of the teller and the blank mind of the listener, drafting more variations of himself that waned and shifted amongst every little word, every silence.

I relaxed against the headboard, closing my eyes. Beyond us, beyond the door and up the stairs, the clock finally struck midnight, that languid, melancholy tune of old great clocks. In time's greyest spaces when I might no longer be certain if I'd lain a night or a moment, words were becoming the home I wanted more than anything, the one place I had never learned to inhabit.

As she stared into the night I tried to find the story her silence rendered as it always had, a blur across two minds. With my mother's evasiveness, what son wouldn't want to smell the buds of her youth bursting green on the stem once more, or morning air weighted with the river, its musty odour of watery rot hanging about, waiting to be burned off with the later sun? To see that very sun unchanged across the years, my mother's sun and my father's sun, my own. Feel how it burns the scalp. Feel it. Feel anything.

She rested one hand, dry as death, across my forearm. Like this, when I let myself forgive what time had physically done to her, her presence gave me ease. When I thought she might not go on, the small gesture a signal, I urged, "Help me remember, Mother, help me forget."

"Listen me, Krystof."

"I'm listening."

"You no cheat yourself for life. You no do this. You make happy yourself. Father not make you happy. I no make you happy. Just you. Understand?" She petted me in an absentminded way, her touch impalpable against my skin.

At thirty nine I was still her child, who let himself rummage along the half-lit alleyways of half-remembered stories, the tastes in the air my mother and father had known, their fear and dreams in it. I recalled those few stories more vibrantly than even she who had shared them. Those I had heard a thousand times. To listen for such necessary strangers, my mother nearly as inscrutable as the father I'd never known, where they breathed, lived. So much of it I simply made up myself, changing details to better suit my image of hero, of youth, of tragedy, just to fill in the holes.



Then, suddenly she said: "I tell you, Krystof, I never see black man before I come here? Never."

We both knew she had but it felt so much better to anticipate some overlooked memory, to shim up what little we held between us with just one sliver of a word, than to dampen her need to talk just to avoid hearing one more round of the same anecdote. When she faltered or forgot I brought the images along for myself. "I can't imagine, Mother, what it must have been like sitting there on the siding that way -"

"I come by train, I see black man, porter, I scared. I never see black man. I never know about black man before. I cry because I think I see devil. I cross myself. Pray."

How incomprehensible, I thought, to imagine a world where whole communities could live, generation after generation, with no knowledge that other races existed. No black, no Asian, no Aboriginal; nothing beyond their Jewish and Roma neighbours, whose unfamiliar ways only amplified the fears and insecurities of an unworldly peoples. What would the mind perceive from within the superstitious framework of their tiny, bucolic worlds? Didn't the Maori believe white men were ghosts? Already afraid and naive, impossible to make sense of what she was seeing, for my mother only the supernatural added up.

*"Ya baháto pereishlá."*

Yes, she had gone through a lot. "I know, Mother."

"You know, you come summer. August." She crossed her arms over her breast, her fragile, knotted fingers curled into fists, "You so skinny I think I break you. I afraid touch you, hurt you, you so skinny."

"Now look at me, eh?"

"Now look. You big, strong. But I still feel you like that. Close my eyes, I feel you small like that."

But I couldn't imagine my mother that way. The maternal face of my youth was already lost to me, and not enough imagination remained to draft in that younger woman clutching a newborn to her breast. In that image I could only envision the woman beside me as she was now.

A few quiet seconds passed. Only the distant treble chiming from the regulator clock in the kitchen sounded above the usual night time din. In all the time the towering English Shindler clock had stood in that spot at the end of the hall it had never quite achieved synchronicity with the reliable old regulator, a fact that had aggravated me into habitually adjusting the hands forward or stopping the pendulum briefly. Even as my muscles suggested rising my mother's hand moved, tensing over mine, knowing my habits almost better than I did myself. "Leavin lone. No matter."

Without sound her small body collapsed into mine and she was crying, in moonlight the clawmarks of age deepening in her face. I moved my arm round and held her. "Mother - Don't cry. Don't cry."

"What I do? Why God punish me?"

I could not answer her. I could not help.

By the time the regulator struck one with the deeper pealing just behind it, she had fallen asleep slumped into my shoulder. I eased her to the pillow and covered her with a blanket.

With sleep impossible the first night of my return, I went back to my room, not to rest but to find within myself that willpower for my own life. To think about it without cringing. To want it again.

At around five my mother woke, crying out to me. I found her on her side, fists tight against both temples. Immediately I knew the infernos that sprawled along the reticulated veins of her brain casing; auras and shimmering breaks in vision, black-hole scotoma into which the world ran to escape her blinded reach, the pain precipitous, sickening.

After going back to my room to put on my glasses I went to the bathroom, returning holding a tablet and a paper cup of water. I watched the quivering way she took the pill and pushed it on her tongue. And I could have cried because I was so powerless to end her suffering at a time when it seemed to be all she had left.

Back in my room the night continued its slow metamorphosis through the window and I found myself staring vaguely into black and steely darkness, into the fine light of moonfall, into a brazen day that pierced shadow like a white knife.

After the trip I could not seem to live my own life anymore. In a can opener or scissors I saw the jaws of that maggot-eaten boar at my feet. The smell of the woods. The hunter. *Wouldn't I know what's what in my own raion?*

*Sha, Krystof, it doesn't matter.*

*It matters, Mother, even if it hurts.*

The unanswered question back in Uschélyna troubled me all the more as time passed. Guilt over what amounted to a few minutes of pawing and discomfort spilled

over the details of my daily life, black ink blotting my mind, my clarity. I had myself tested for STDs at a clinic where nobody knew me, and waited out the weeks in almost complete paralysis, the image of Victor Sokala preying on my conscience. When everything came out negative I was not relieved, but only despised myself more, not only because I knew I was living in a world where lethal diseases might not test positive for weeks, months, that there was no reason to believe myself safe, but because I had so easily betrayed the love I still felt for Anjou.

I did not return to the office immediately, instead calling my receptionist and rescheduling my patients' appointments. The long wait for the test results had already passed before I opened any mail or listened to the messages left on my answering machine. *Dad, call me when you get in. Dad, it's been a week. Is Baba okay? Call me. It's important. We need to talk. Dad, are you okay? It's been two weeks and I haven't heard back from you. Call me when you get this message.*

The sound of my daughter's voice caught me by surprise. Months had gone by since we had seen each other or spoken. So accustomed had I become to living post-divorce life on my own terms that I had left for the Ukraine without even considering telling my children where I was going. Most of my conference trips came and went that way, so this had absorbed itself into my normal travel habits. Any twinge of guilt I might have experienced for my thoughtlessness was quickly followed by the aversion I felt over calling her back.

At seventeen my daughter had already spent half her life in sullen defiance. If our relationship had been travelling an uneasy path through a bad marriage, the divorce only made it worse. Leaving was not just a liberation from a woman I hated, but from

children with problems I didn't understand and couldn't cope with. My son, DJ, seemed to have no ability to project consequences and was always in trouble. Cryssie was turning into her mother, not just physically, but in personality as well. These were all transgressions for which I could muster little generosity. Interacting with my kids came with difficulty and discomfort, and over time I simply allowed work and the demands of an ailing parent to get in the way.

I could not bring myself to return Cryssie's calls. Not right away.

It wasn't just her, either. When I finally dragged myself back to the office after my trip, I was there bodily but didn't do much, and the backlog I already had only grew. A stack of files on my desk demanded my attention, a mass of pink phone messages too, but I didn't touch them. New referrals cropped up over the next weeks but suddenly it seemed as though each square in the calendar was like any other. I could not focus. I would prepare my rounds for the seventeenth and find out it was only the tenth; a week later I would forget I was supposed to be anywhere at all. I knew I might lose a handful of new patients, possibly even the good will of the referring physicians, and I didn't care. I didn't even care about my patients' health.

In those first weeks I wanted anything but work, yet I couldn't identify what I wanted, what this restlessness was about. It was more than losing Anjou, more than my mother.

At work, thoughts drifted home to my mother, to her discarded life, her obliteration. Unremembered upon her death, even by choice, it would be as though she had never existed.

Hiding out in my office, reluctant to make that dreaded walk up and down the hall all day from examination room to examination room, flipping test results and notes, I turned to the radio just to occupy – or drown out - my thoughts. Even then I took no joy in it. For those first few minutes of the day I kept my fingers compulsively moving the dial through an electronic hiss until the slim indicator line rested on meaningful sound: Art Tatum on piano, sultry, even coy, dizzying, the playful boy. I let myself listen, perhaps to try retraining myself to concentrate. I knew this recording, Tatum's eccentricities. I could almost see it. One hand on the keyboard, the other hoisting a stream of beers. Hours into *Sweet Lorraine*. The 1955 session seems endless and the band grows tired. Tatum, blind tormentor, keeps changing the progressions and chords. Does he know with what desperation he tests the talents of the men around him? Alcohol is his fuel.

I thought about the Ukraine as a chapter unfinished. Having left without finding what I wanted, I could no longer think about anything else. Without a past, I became paralysed in my present. The future seemed altogether impossible.

### Chapter 3

*Tell about the Old Country. Tell about Tato.*

How to speak of these things, she wonders, after all this time? After so much silence in the face of his questions. And what does she tell him? *Don't ask me.*

Don't tell.

In the murky shadows she tries to find his form at his usual place on the sofa. The light is bad. Her eyes are bad. She can't tell the time anyhow. Not by what her eyes see.

But she does hear him, vaguely like under water, paper rustling, pages turning, the dim scratching of his pen on paper. Scratching, scratching. Always scratching.

Even if she wanted to say something now she knows he isn't listening, buried in his books and articles, writing away. From the rocker where she sits bundled in an ivory crocheted blanket she turns in the direction of that stifled noise.

"Krystof?"

She barely hears him say, "Uh huh."

Her son is so impatient these days. Long ago he had stopped asking, stopped wondering about her past. But now, after this trip to the Old Country he has started up with all that again.

"Krystof?" What is it he does over there, the way it takes his attention and drowns out the world?

There is no response. And it is so painful going back, remembering. It is painful and yet she dwells there in that pain. She can't tear her mind from those memories. At times she sinks so fully into them she can scarcely distinguish what's real, and it makes

her wonder if she is going crazy, if this is the senility that took Luba Kara so many years ago when she had sunk into the madness of revolution and war and starvation, screaming *Mama I'm hungry* so you could hear her all though the nursing home where her daughter had put her. *Mama it hurts, it hurts.*

Resting her head back in her rocker, she sleeps it all away.

In half-sleep she can't make out Carla's words, but obeys with her body as Carla braces her by the elbow and waist and hauls her to her feet. Carla is a massive woman, her every effort making her gasp and wheeze.

"What time, Carla?"

Carla's voice is loud, and she speaks slowly to accommodate both the hearing and language deficits. "It's Paula, hon, *Paula.*"

"Okay."

"Nine o'clock, hon."

Later, as she sits on the commode in her bedroom while Carla washes her down, she tells her, "You know, Carla, I young I go to dance. Dance lots. You know?"

Carla wrings the washcloth out in a basin and, lifting the right arm, pulls it across her armpit and down the side of her breast. "I believe ya, granny."

With each quadrant of her body sectioned off and washed, Carla's rough handling leaves her aching, her joints stabbed through with every wrench of her arms and legs. As Carla mauls away she closes her eyes and back it all comes. The memories are random and rush at her from all angles but she no longer fights as she once did. A bird, her mind now soars to that mayhem without will, back toward the planet's east, its broad face



centred upon the Prime Meridian. Left eye of Earth. Still farther, beyond the primeval Carpathian scar, territory of the Slav, Ukraine, up along the tear-stream called D'niepro to the tiny pore wedged between the noise and hustle of history unrolling in Kiev and the geographical maw of the Steppe.

To Zólota Bráma. Golden Gate. To the tiny cottage she had shared with her mother since the death of her dour old grandfather, who had lain dying on a hay pallet by the stove from the beginnings of her living memory, and then had died one morning with a sputtering breath.

To that day when everything changed.

A parcel. 1903, and she was five.

Brown paper broken open like an egg. Mama's broken smile, broken eyes, broken heart as she let its contents spill over the table. A funny black cap, a smockish black uniform and white high-collared blouse each passed through Mama's shaking hands. Black stockings, black shoes. In a moment her mother swept her up by the armpits and stood her on the table, the supper dishes not yet cleared away, and somehow the contents of that parcel were upon her, draping over her small frame like a black shroud.

"Mama? What means *school*?" She was her mother's captive, that young woman's whole life standing on a tabletop in sagging institutional clothes the colour of Mama's dying soul.

In 1903 Mama was twenty. In 1903 she had coarse waves of burnished brown hair, an olive complexion, high, broad cheekbones and Greek nose. Her mouth was a

simple straight line that rarely shifted for laughter or tears. Not at all beautiful, but strong.

Mama didn't speak about school. She just went on pinning and adjusting and hemming while her whole life began to feel angry for being kept standing on a table for so long when the sun was shining and Orest was probably already gone playing in the woods. Her mother's everything fidgeted, made a move to get away. But Mama yanked it back by the armpits then slapped a hard red welt across its naked thigh.

Before anyone from the village had heard of Stalin or Lenin, or even Marx, she had achieved the unthinkable.

Because her fool of a mother had once loved a saint of a man who never loved her in return, a child was sent to Kiev and was, cell by cell, destroyed.

Because a parcel had come. Because in 1903 she turned five.

Shadows sprawled long on the fields by the time she was let off the table. As evening closed she thought of the stygian forest of nightmare, places where devils lived. A fiery setting sun harried her across village fields, through tall stalks of yellowing wheat higher than her head, that stretched forever to the blue, blue sky. When she burst through the wheat she came to a stop just at the edge of the trees where she knew Orest played. Devils lived there, in the shadows, and she wouldn't go in once the sun started setting. Darkness in the wall of woods had always terrified her.

"Orest!"

"Nobody in these woods but us devils." Knowing her fear, he used it.

"You come out of there, boy!"

"Can't. They got me hanging by the toes, and a black cat's sucking my breath."

"Come out or else!"

It was a good enough warning. He emerged from the dark, grinning widely and chewing off the sweet white end of a grass blade.

Waving, she called to him in a childish singsong: "Heh friend!"

"Heh, stinky. How come you didn't come?" He strode toward her, throwing down the grass. "I was waiting forever."

"I got a dress from Kiev. I'm going away."

"Oh yeah? Where?"

"Kiev, stupid."

"I mean where *in* Kiev. What for?"

"*School.*"

"School! What do you need that for?" He scowled as though he hated her for telling him such news. "That's for people with weak blood, not us. People like that rich Kalynsky."

"What means *school*?"

"That's where you go to get your head filled with stupid ideas that get you nowhere."

"What kind of ideas?"

"Lots. All kinds. All useless. You'll find out."

Back inside the wheat they let a sun-golden column separate them as they headed for the village. Beside her Orest darted and ducked about, a boxer, a dancer.

"Orest, how come they have weak blood and we don't?"

"Who?"

"People like Kalynsky."

"*Shee-it* - " He looked sideways at her, the way everybody looked at Mama sometimes. "Don't we have borscht? And plenty of garlic? And what do they eat? Boiled meat and boiled potatoes and cow's milk. To have strong blood you have to eat something that has fire in it."

She nodded.

"But, " he warned, "sometimes you gotta watch out. Sometimes you put too much fire in the blood, like them Turks, and you go mad. It makes you want blood. Some Cossacks are like that, see, because maybe they got Turkish blood in them and they just got to kill. That's from the olden days."

Who needed *school* when Orest was so smart?

"So why you gotta go?" He stopped suddenly to bend over and paw the grasses to find himself just the right blade. He eased a stem from the soil, pinched off the dirty root and stuck the stem between his teeth, glaring through wheat until she answered.

"I don't know. I just have to go. It's something my grandfather did."

With a few hopping steps he caught up with her. "He's dead. Why don't you just tell your old lady to stick her school where the devil can kiss it?"

To this she had nothing to say, and shrugged. It seemed good enough for Orest. Suddenly he jumped in front of her. "Heh - You wanna smooch?"

She stopped. "Sure."

He laughed hard, his mouth opening wide to show his teeth, one of which sat brown and rotting like a pip of kasha just at the edge of his bottom lip. He smacked his

knee and yowled louder. "*Shee-it*, are you stupid! Maybe I was wrong and school will teach you something! You don't even know what smooching is, do you?"

"Do too!"

"Liar. What is it, then?"

Her face felt hot right to the hair.

"Who wants to smooch with a slobbering baby anyhow?"

Her raging eye found him in the wheat and she ran at him with fisted weapons ready. "I'm no baby!" Before her small artillery could reach him he caught her and threw her off, his cruel laughing behind her as he ran, leaving her standing with hands clenched at her sides until she too headed home, calling *stupid ugly Orest* over and over while their vast golden ocean engulfed her and the only friend she'd ever known was lost to her.

Upon returning from Kiev after eleven years at the charity school, her Mama's lush hair had turned to dirty sheep's wool, bulging from her babushka in grizzled tufts. She was hardly recognisable. All her teeth were gone. That strong face had mutated into an etched, sunken mess. She had taken to prophesying, to fear, to nonsense, an embarrassment to her embarrassment of a daughter whose belly was already beginning to bloat with all she knew about love in the world.

What had shamed Mama more? That her daughter had been expelled even as the schools were being closed because of the war, or that at fifteen she was to do precisely to Mama what Mama had done to her own parents at the same age?

Upon seeing her mother for the first time since leaving for school she had been greeted with kisses and, disgusted by her mother's degeneration, had recoiled from her

very touch.

By 1928 when the communists had established themselves in the village and their indoctrination began in earnest, she had become her mother's keeper. Mama had seen things. Had stretched her arms to the heavens and looked up into her strange jar of egg whites and Holy Water, the dismal wintergrey sky beyond baring the mucoidal protein in the fluid. Black clouds and dogs with foaming mouths took shape in the murk. Bears and eagles feasted upon one another there. The hammer and sickle had formed before her eyes. Lately, wavering albumin trees cast themselves in long thin lines from top to bottom of her famous jar. Trees. And souls.

What Mama saw, the villagers of Zólota Bráma did not. They looked, too, at her concoction of amorphous shapes that could have been trees. Or egg whites in water. *See the blood spot there?* Something bad. An omen. Quickly crossing herself. *There's death in the woods.*

Mama. Paraska the Fool behind her back. Crazy thing, though not the only such a one Zólota Bráma could boast. Revolution had done things to the human mind and heart. Revolution had turned fear into an art form, into science. Others, too, fought with memories that still howled through their lives like wolves which had found and torn their minds apart over and again. Old men drooled by windows and cried by night, went wild with fear waiting for Austro-Hungarians and Germans, Poles and Russians, for Anarchists and Nihilists, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, for NKVD and Cheka. Old women were known to have been left giddy with fear, to have once killed their own children for fear, to have died from fear. Infants born in those days would grow up to become amoral political sycophants under the heavy hand that fear would become in this

place.

And so Paraska. Mother and grandmother. Neighbourwoman, madwoman. Possibly a witch, a shaman. A sham. A creature so ugly it was more than any glance could sustain. Mama the Fool. Who could ever believe what came from her mouth? Having brought a daughter into the world out of wedlock who had brought grandchildren to her out of wedlock, Mama was the only person in the village who could not fathom how anyone could be beneath anyone, who could not see that she herself was the village's most insignificant citizen.

Her only child did not love her mother. For all the woman's blameless eccentricity, her daughter did not love her.

Did not love.

Under the tray table her legs are tangled in the folds of a lap throw. She shuffles her feet to loosen its grip but her feet will not cooperate. She tries standing but the effort is only met with weakness and sharp jolts of pain.

Where is she? The steaming bowl is a puzzle. The overcast vision she has of the room tells her nothing.

She takes a deep breath. The smells alone, the noises, place her in her son's living room where the indigo strobe of the television in semi-darkness assaults her eyes. The endless flickering gives her headaches.

"Krystof?" She speaks to the gloom, unable to make anyone out. Those times when she realises she has been left alone trigger such fears - of falling, of being hungry,

having an accident. Of dying.

Soon that familiar figure moves into the space around her. Carla. She can feel her size more than see her.

“What’s that, granny?”

“Krystof. Where Krystof?”

“At work, hon.”

“What? He workin?”

Carla’s voice rises into a shout: “Yes, yes. Workin. Eat yer soup there, eh?”

“What time?”

Carla’s voice tenses with impatience. “Almost eleven thirty, granny.”

“What? Krystof workin late? He go to *shpytal’ya*?”

“It’s still mornin. And I don’t know what a spit yaya is, granny. Ya gotta speak English.”

Morning? She shakes her head. “Dark outside.”

“No, hon, the sun’s out. It’s a nice day. Want me to put yuz over to the window? Maybe look out for a while?”

She scowls and answers sharply. “You shut tv for me. Hurt head.”

“But yer show is on. I thought ya liked yer stories”

“Lights hurts eyes. You know. Hurt my eyes.”

“First it’s too dark, then it’s too bright. Make up yer mind, granny. Yuz have yer spoon there, hon? There ya go, and some crackers too.” Carla pats her head like a dog.

“I know how ya like to make yer mush with them crackers.”

“Not like soup I make. Could be I go to kitchen I make good soup. Not like can.



This.” After dipping her spoon into the vibrant saffron fluid she raises it up, listening to the noodles and broth splashing back into the bowl. She repeats this over and over to cool it down. “Carla, you give salt. Soup need salt.”

“*It’s Paula.* Now, hon, ya didn’t even taste it. Ya know ya can’t have more salt. The soup’s salty enough. Now go ahead and try it. You’ll see.”

“I no like.”

“Oh come on, don’t be a sourpuss. Ya like this soup. It’s yer favourite.”

“I make good soup.”

“I’m sure ya do, hon.”

“Carla, you make my tea?”

“*It’s Paula.* Not yet.”

“I have tea with soup.”

“I know, I know.”

By the time Krystof comes home Carla is long gone, leaving her sitting in the dimly lit room with the television light flashing into her eyes. Pain shocks her nerves. She hasn’t moved for hours and the soggy diaper squelches beneath her.

Carla has placed the phone on the tray table before her but nobody calls. Of her friends nobody is left alive to call her, and even when the phone does ring it is a frustrating exercise when she cannot recognise the names, can’t write messages, and at times can barely hear what the caller says.

As Krystof moves around the kitchen making himself a light supper she calls to him: “Krystof, I no like Carla. You change, find new girl?”

He calls back from the kitchen. “Mother, Paula does a good job. She doesn’t steal or complain.”

“I no like her.”

“Unless she does something that justifies firing her I’m not looking for someone else.”

“I no like her.”

“That’s fine. I don’t like half the people I meet either. But I put up with them.”

Clattering and banging noises come from the kitchen.

“Krystof!”

His figure appears in a rectangle of light, a dark form without face, without recognition, something moving in his hands. Or his hands moving. “Mother?”

“You bring something I eat.”

“What do you want?”

“Okay.”

Louder, slower: “No – Mother, what do you want to eat?”

“Maybe just cookie, tea.”

“What kind of cookies?”

“Kind I like.” He knows she enjoys the arrowroots, soaking them in her tea until they dissolve into a sweet paste in her mouth.

As he delivers the snack he asks, “How is your head, Mother? Does it hurt?”

“Okay.”

Most of the day has long evaporated from her mind, only the everlasting degradations of old age hardening into memory that breaks her will a little more each

day, so that in the dimness and shadow of each night she waits and wishes only for death.

## *Chapter 4*

The Indian summer that greeted my return had passed within a week. Now, more than a month later, autumn had fully arrived.

Although my mind was not on my work and I dreaded waking up each morning, I was still a doctor with patients to whom I was duty bound. No matter how I felt, I didn't have any other choice but to show up and push myself ahead. I passed through the day mechanically. Eventually I found a footing, and the backlog I had left behind began to eat up my time so that at the end of every day I could not muster the energy to deal with more problems, not from my children, not from anyone. What choice did I have but to pore over medical journals, not because I wanted or liked to, but because diagnosis depended on accuracy and exactness, and because my damaged life could not bear the blow of a death or a lawsuit, or the suspension of my license. The work of just eating and taking care of myself and my mother became onerous, and I actually began to consider placing her in a nursing home.

At home in the evenings I disappeared into the rusty tang of beer and blocked out the fact that I even had children. I did not pick up the phone when it rang. I ignored the few more messages from Cryssie that lit up my answering machine. It took the full month to work up the nerve to find out what she wanted.

The café where she had asked to meet was downtown. I found myself circling the streets looking for handy parking but after several passes I ended up walking four blocks through what had historically been the hub of Windsor's black community, and my old neighbourhood. The walk alone along the gloomy grid of streets felt dangerous.

Over the river Detroit loomed, luminous and golden and deceptive by night, a dazzling seraph that belied the filthy, derelict hell at its heels.

I hated being downtown. Few fond memories of that life had stayed with me. After med school I had rarely returned to this neighbourhood except to see my mother. Our house had been demolished some years ago, but even as I came within half a block the site held the same devastating power over me. I couldn't so much as glance toward the now-empty lot that no developer or builder wanted.

Against the cold I pulled my arms around myself, the animal hiding its viscera. I turned south onto Ouellette where the party life of the city's strip clubs and bars was manic, deep bass beats like a carnival, crazy in the chilly night. Partiers waiting in lines laughed and jabbered. Across the street young men shoved into each other, shouting. The smell of pot clung to the air.

The café was halfway up the block. Even in the fall weather there were tables still set up under the jaundiced light of the café's awning. Nobody sat there. Inside the entranceway, at the centre of black-and-cream checkerboard tiles, an oval mosaic spelling out *Meretsky Delicatessen* marked the shop's past. A façade of red clay bricks was slowly crumbling and shearing off as heavier and heavier traffic had rumbled by over the years. With every slight breeze the tattered black canopy above buckled, its hanging shreds barely stirring.

As I pushed through the front door, music from the surrounding buildings hammered along the walls and floor, altering my heart's very rhythms. Inside I paused and looked for my daughter's face. So little time had I spent with my children that I was never completely sure I could recognise them. I was not proud of such a fact.

Over the heads of the milling crowd I spotted Cryssie, and waved an arm to catch her eye. The sudden wall of smoke coming at me stung my eyes, burning into tears. I had given up smoking a few years ago and now I was left with strangely repellent cravings.

I headed for the back tables where it was quieter and where she sat waiting uncomfortably for me. I found myself scanning faces along the way just to avoid looking at her. When I reached the table there were no hellos, no smiles, not even a handshake. Neither of us spoke as I took a seat. Cryssie unwound a blue cotton scarf and settled back into the chair without looking at me once.

I hated the names my ex had given our children. I wanted David and Catherine, but I didn't even get them as middle names. Instead they were saddled with Shadoe Elvis and Crystle Starr. I detested the names so intensely that from their first days I had only called them Shad – at least it sounded like Chad – and Cryssie. After our firstborn, a ferocious argument with my wife that left my face bruised had settled it, and I never tried to impose my preferences again, although there were many more battles and bruises throughout the marriage.

The café was the first time we'd been alone together since the divorce. It surprised me to realise such a detail between a father and daughter but we seemed to have always needed the buffer of another body whenever we were together.

We settled ourselves across the small table and I watched for a waiter. She rubbed her hands and curled them into fists. I found it difficult to look at her. She was so much like her mother, and although she was slender now, her appetite promised the same weight problems down the line that her mother experienced. Few of my own features

were evident in Cryssie. In fact, nobody would ever mistake us for father and daughter.

I said, "So? Something must be really important."

"Well - " She leaned forward stiffly, her elbows on the table. Clapsed hands hid her mouth and, like I'd seen so many kids do, her sleeves were pulled down over her hands as though she were cold. At seventeen she was all grownup, all child. Still she wouldn't look at me. "A lot has changed. How's Baba? I was worried."

"Baba's fine."

"Why didn't you tell us you were going somewhere? I could have looked in on her."

"You could have looked in on her anyhow."

"And how was I supposed to do that? Crawl through a basement window?"

I didn't know how to answer. "So how have you been?" I found myself focusing on straightening the sugar bowl and the small candle and vase with its dusty fabric daisy.

"Don't even - " She let out a small breath, moving her head slightly as her gaze passed to the gritty varnished brick floor. "You know what, Dad, you're a jerk."

In these words I heard my ex's voice. "Yeah, yeah, I'm a jerk. I know. What else is new?"

"No, I mean it. It's been - what, over three years and nothing has changed. When are you going to show up?"

I leaned back in my seat. As much as she avoided meeting my eyes I finally let my stare penetrate, feeling her out, demanding. "I'm here. You asked me to meet you. Obviously you asked for a reason."

I wished I hadn't come. I wasn't in the mood for her talkshow psychobabble. I

removed my coat and draped it neatly on the back of my chair, and in that instant I realised I was acting as though I wanted to stay when what I really wanted was to keep my coat on and bolt. Only now did I think about her phoney nobility in checking in on my mother. With helpers staying around the clock when I was gone, Cryssie's basement window comment felt even more like a jab than it already did. I said nothing. There was no point.

"Well, for one, Mom's in the hospital."

"Too bad." I had nothing more to say. She only watched without blinking.

"God – You know - "

"Cryssie - " I hung forward across the table toward her. "Look, I don't want to talk about her. I had twenty years of that. I can't take it any more. Not even a casual reference. I just can't take it."

She almost sighed, but instead her shoulders slumped heavily. "You know what, Dad? Most days I can't take it either. You knew what it was like. You knew what we – what I was left with. With Kee the way he is. I mean, why couldn't you - "

She fell silent as the waiter approached for our orders.

"You have Irish coffee here?" I asked, needing not caffeine but something to take the edge off my nerves.

"Dad – "

The waiter answered, "No, sir. Just regular."

"Give me a decaf, then."

He marked it down then looked at Cryssie for her order, and as I realised I hadn't let her order first, I felt like the jerk I'd been accused of being. She said, "Just a



cappuccino. Cinnamon.”

Neither of us spoke again until the coffees were brought by. The thought she had left unfinished was understood: why couldn't I even make it through a coffee without alcohol?

I leaned toward her again. Across the table she was so hard, sitting back, rigid against the chair, away from me. I was defensive. “Look – you don't know what it was like for me. What it's still like.”

“That's nice. Nice excuse. Oh, by the way Dad, I'm moving in with Dylan.”

I put my hands to my face and pressed the tips of my fingers to my closed eyelids. I didn't know what to say. When I pulled my hands back I heard my voice bark sharply, “You're seventeen. You're seventeen damned years old. Cryssie - ” I shrank into my chair. Saying anything more would have made it worse.

“I told mom and she thought it was great. I don't know what your problem is.” The muscles on my daughter's face twitched as she tried to control her emotions. “She said you were younger than me when you two started dating. And you were only a year older when you got married.”

“Wow, what a great template, eh? Yeah, Cryssie, take a page out of that book. That's what I call wisdom.”

“Well, I fucking love him. That's all I have to say.”

I just about detonated.

“Watch your -” I looked at her, a stiff smile forming. “That's how you talk about love? You think that and love have anything to do with one another? Cryssie, it's not love. It wasn't love when I met your mother. How can I make you understand? I never

thought about the thousand ways your mother coming into my life would destroy me, but it has. The amount of time I spent loving her – or what I thought was love – has been overshadowed by anger and hatred ten times over. We're not even married anymore yet she's always in my life. Like a nightmare. I can never undo that choice."

"Me and Dylan aren't the same."

"Dylan and I."

"Whatever. We know what love is. You don't. How could you? You're an emotional cripple."

"I thought I was a jerk. Which is it? Or maybe I'm an emotionally crippled jerk. That's it, isn't it?" I stopped before I could descend to her level of immaturity. "Look, Cryssie, maybe you and this kid will still end up together, but trust me when I say that what you find attractive as a teenager is very different from what's attractive in a spouse later in life. You don't know what a real relationship is about because you don't have the life pressures to really test the depth of what you feel."

"That's what we want, Dad. We want to get to know each other better. That's why we want to live together."

"Don't give me that garbage. You're experiencing hormones. Biology. Nothing more. Trust me on that, Cryssie, I've been there and it's not worth it. It's not worth what it does to you."

"Stop being a doctor for one second and try to understand what it's like to be in love. That's me and Dylan."

"And how are you going to sustain yourselves? Welfare?"

"Dylan's mom is kicking him out and he can get social assistance because of his

age. Mom says she'll go with anything I want and sign anything that needs to be signed."

"Well, don't expect that from me. Your mother's a lowlife anyhow, so I wouldn't expect much better from her."

Now the tears broke, streaming down Cryssie's face though she showed no other signs of crying. "Shut up about her."

I sat back, first nodding then shaking my head. "Just remember, Cryssie, you stayed. You and Shad chose it. So don't rewrite history with me, little girl. You chose to stay with your mother."

As she wiped the tears away with the back of her sleeve she sniffed, "You should have fought for us."

"Yeah? Do you know how many times she swung at me with a frying pan for trying to do the right thing for you kids? Do you remember the fights? The way she is when she gets angry? Do you know what she would have done to me if I'd have gone against her when you kids chose her and not me?"

"Whatever." She blew into her steaming coffee cup, her face screwed up with hurt and anger. "Just forget it."

"I never thought your life would come to this. I never did."

She made an ugly, scowling face. "Just leave me alone. You're a fucking asshole."

"Don't use that kind of language around me. Cryssie - I'm doing the best I can. I'm trying to be a father."

"Yeah, right." She held her cup to her lips but didn't drink, then set it down again. "You know what - I have to go."

“Come on -”

She stood up winding her scarf around her neck. “Jesus. Get your head checked. Or get a girlfriend. And get out of my life.”

I didn’t know what I wanted to say, but I was enraged. “You think you’re so ready to play house? At seventeen? Wait. Just wait. Then maybe you’ll know what it’s all about. But I won’t reward your stupidity. You can count on that. You want to live like a grownup, then you can end up on the street if that’s what your choices get you.”

She halted and looked down, levelling a long stare at me. She pushed a hand into her coat pocket and nervously jingled her keys. Even as her words came out there was a misery in her voice I had never heard before: “You always make me sorry I even bother with you.”

For a moment I let my head hang low and stared at the coffee cup before me, half drained though I could not recall taking a single mouthful. Her keys clinked between her fingers. Even when I spoke I didn’t look up or move. “He should have been arrested.”

She seemed exhausted by me, by my mere presence in her breathing space. “Let it go. He’s gone.”

“You were only thirteen. You should have been playing with dolls. But your mother -”

Her chin puckered as she held back tears. “I love Dylan, Dad. I really, really do. Why can’t you see that? And so what if it doesn’t work out? I’ll be the one paying the price.”

“That’s not how it works. If you’re stupid enough to get pregnant -”

“I’m not going to get pregnant.”

My heart wrenched just hearing her speak, the foolish naïveté in her way of seeing life.

Thirteen.

Thirteen and dying for love, dying from the inside out, though at the time I could not see it.

Thirteen.

A formidable age. Fearsome.

Thirteen had decided who she would be, destroyed for the rebirth of adulthood. I had done that.

At thirteen she had a boyfriend five years older and didn't know any better. But I did. I'd let her come to this. I'd let a maniac bully me into giving up. My only daughter had lost herself trying to find a father, trying to find in somebody else the love I never gave her. I, on the other hand, went on as though nothing ever happened.

Now, in this boy's arms, in his bed in darkness she would never find love. I could have told her that. With her body she would learn only the sad artifice of love that would leave a permanent fault line through her. I had done that. Because I had sat on my hands and done nothing while a woman I hated tyrannised me and pushed me around for twenty years.

Reminders of my night with Marya taunted me in these thoughts. Who was I to reflect on my daughter's futile relationship when the same physical artifice seemed only to torture me with regret and loneliness?

I thought of Anjou again, and my stomach felt stabbed through. What I could have had with her. What real love looked like after I'd already ruined my life in reckless

choices, when someone truly good wanted and deserved a goodness she couldn't find in me.

How could I teach my daughter what I had only learned through a lifetime of terrible mistakes, when even fleeting redemption came twenty years too late? She would no more listen to me than I had to my mother at her age.

By the time I said, "I'm so sorry," she was already gone.

The café was closing up when I finally left.

## Chapter 5

If I had pictured my future twenty three years earlier – the sixteen year old I'd been, straight-A student, still promising in cuffed Levis, white tee shirt, white Keds – I never would have imagined twenty three years of other kinds of promise that would pass me by and leave me stuck there, trapped by a moment I went over and over in my mind wondering if there was any way I could have changed it, why I chose it to begin with.

In the dank shadows of the culvert leading to the Windsor-Detroit train tunnel, where I had gone to drink beer with Chuck Labute and Joey Cuccinato, we met a group of girls sitting together in the scrub smoking.

One of them said to me. “Jeez, you’re cute.”

She was tall, summer-tanned, her long, blonde hair in a pouffed flip with a wide baby blue ribbon across the top of her head. She wore baby blue seersucker pedal pushers and a white sleeveless blouse. As she smoked, she eyed me intently.

I think I blushed. Girls, as a rule, paid little attention to me. I was too serious and awkward socially. Compliments made me uneasy.

“Me?” Nervous, I pushed my hand over my brush cut.

“Why don’t ya come on over here? Come on.” She patted the uneven turf beside her, a smouldering cigarette between her fingers. “There’s plenty of space. Make yourselves comfy.”

“Hey,” I said to Joey, nudging him as we approached. “She looks like Sandra Dee. Doesn’t she look just like Sandra Dee?”

“Gidget? Shit. You gotta be blind, man.”

Joey really pissed me off. "What do you know?"

We approached and offered the girls beer; they shared their cigarettes.

I said to the girl with the blonde hair as I took a smoke from the crumpled pack of Kings she held up: "Hey, you smoke the same cigarettes as me."

"Cool."

I smiled. "Yeah."

So familiar was the culvert to the girls that long before we even realised a freight train was heading our way, the three of them were already struggling up the weedy incline, plopping back down, knees up in the scrub and overgrown grass, facing the train and quietly finishing their smokes. Clicking grasshoppers bounced around us, and a burst of shrieking from cicadas rivalled the clattering train as it passed. I heard one of the others call the girl in blue Sharon.

"It's not the danger," Sharon offered by way of explanation, picking a speck of tobacco from the end of her tongue, then taking a long drag from her cigarette. "I mean, we're not too close, that's what I'm saying. It's the dirt. If you're here a few hours and you sit too close the whole time you get covered with shit. You blow your nose and a hunk of shit comes out."

Everyone laughed.

Chuck asked, "So why don't you just stay up here?"

Sharon shrugged, "You drop your lighter or something and it rolls down. Or you skid down and end up with grass stains on your ass."

We all laughed again. I liked Sharon's sense of humour, her frankness.

"You ever hop the cars and head over?" Joey asked, nodding toward the tunnel as



he swigged a beer, one thumb hooked into his belt loop.

None of the girls had.

Joey barely reached five feet in height, and although the poor guy tried making small talk, none of the girls seemed interested in him. It was usually the way it went with Joey and girls.

“You should. I got cousins over there. We hang out a lot. Go down to Paradise Valley. The Horseshoe. Hear some jazz and blues.”

One of the girls, a short brunette with hideous white eyeshadow, made an ugly face. “Isn’t that, like, the *ghetto* over there?”

“No, it’s great. Lots of atmosphere.”

“Who listens to jazz, anyway? Or blues?” The girl countered. “Old people, maybe. I mean, if the fuckin *Beatles* played over there I’d swim across the Shitroit River to see them.”

We howled.

“Yeah,” the other girl with frizzy black Lucille Ball hair and a green bow clip agreed. “Shitroit. That’s funny. Hey, did you guys ever look in there? I mean, I was standing under the bridge and I swear – *swear* – I saw this, like, *flotilla* of shit go by. I mean real, actual Oh-Henry-bar shit.”

This made us roar. We were having a great time. I thought these girls were totally clued in.

Encouraged, the girl with the green bow sat up straight. “Oh, oh - Or *Elvis*. I’d see *Elvis* over there. For sure.”

The brunette scowled again, eyeing her girlfriends. She rolled her eyes. “You

two are so fuckin beat. Elvis. *Gawd.*”

Sharon pursed her lips: “Oh shut the fuck up, Pusface, I love Elvis. Don’t you guys just *love* Elvis?”

We fellows glanced at each other meaningfully. Chuck said, “Sorry, guys don’t dig other guys.”

“Some do,” the brunette remarked slyly, smiling.

“Not us.”

I was watching Sharon. She wore pale, frosty pink lipstick and no other make up. When she smiled her whole face lit up, and her blue eyes sparkled like water. I couldn’t stop staring at her.

“Well,” the brunette said, “you guys dig grass?”

None of us had used any kind of dope before. Chuck gave a laid-back shrug. It was all the brunette needed. She nodded toward the frizzy-haired girl, who stuck her cigarette into the corner of her mouth to free her hands, reached into her purse and pulled out two reefers.

“Who wants to share?”

Joey pretended to look at his watch. He guzzled down the rest of his beer in one mouthful and said, “Look, I gotta go. My ole lady needs me to take her somewhere.”

For a second I felt badly for Joey who, accustomed to being the odd man out, even in a group of odd men, pre-empted the obvious by making excuses before he could be humiliated by rejection.

He waved. “See you guys.”

“Yeah,” I said, “See ya.”

“Later, Cucc.”

After he was gone we smoked grass and drank what we had left, and spent the rest of the afternoon lying in the weeds along the culvert, stoned, moving up and down the grade as freight trains came and went. After a while Chuck disappeared with the frizzy haired girl and I was left with the other two. All afternoon I thought Sharon had made it pretty clear she was interested in me, but the brunette didn't budge. Sharon skootched over to where I lay and next thing I knew we were making out.

I recalled my feelings that afternoon as something genuinely pure, original, though the object of my heart turned out so very wrong. At such a young age I could not have known that the facts about her were more important than any emotion. But I could not see the facts until it was too late and the overflow of sweetness and humour was turned off like a tap when our lives became complicated and stressful and full of unexpected demands.

If someone had asked me what I would be twenty years on, I could imagine nothing past high school. I was working as a stock boy at Smith's Department Store downtown. My imagination was so stifled it was all I could do to think that maybe someday I could work my way up to a clerk. I didn't understand myself, I didn't understand my heart, my own mind, or my own possibility. If my feelings were like an integer scale, I could admit having rarely experienced much to the right of zero. Until Sharon.

I went crazy for her. I went crazy for feeling. I had to see her every day. I had to *feel* every day to feel alive.

She paid attention to me. She stroked my ego. She let me feel like a man. I lost

my virginity to her, and felt I owed her something for it: gratitude, commitment. Back then she was a sweet, simple girl whose only dream in life was to get married, have children, and take care of her home and man. After watching my mother kill herself working the way she had, the uncomplicated plan appealed to me.

Sharon took the snarls and tangles that cluttered my life and sorted them into good times and good feelings.

Mother, however, hated her on sight. Mercifully, Sharon did not know my mother well enough to catch on. She just sat beside me on the sofa and slowly smoked one cigarette after another. After that first meeting, where my mother treated Sharon with such phoney kindness that the whole time I wanted to lunge across the living room and strangle her, my mother and I had one of the worst arguments of my life.

“Krystof, why you go with dats girl, *taká zhába?*”

“What?” I was horrified. The insult was not to me, but to my heart, my love, to her. I stood up suddenly. “You - What do you know about her? You just met her!”

“Krystof, you no look *na me yak vovk.*”

I lit a cigarette and inhaled hard. “I’ll look at you like a wolf or any other damned way I want to.”

“She *paskúdna*. No good. Why you want dats girl?”

I began pacing the living room. “I’m so sick of - ”

“You no shout *na me.*”

“I’m not shouting! I just can’t believe what a *bassykha* you are. That’s all you’ve ever done, control, control, control. Well, you can’t control my feelings. You can’t tell me who I should fall in love with. If you were a normal mother you’d be happy I found

someone. But you can't be happy for me because you can't be happy *period*. Not only that, but I think you just want me around so you can keep your little *robotnyk* in line. I mean, who else is going clean up puke or fix the windows or clean the gutter? If I'm gone, who's going to be your new slave?"

"I tell you, Krystof, she no good. Ruin you life."

"How would you know? Look at you. You couldn't even keep my father from running off. And trust me, Mother, if I could have found somewhere to go, I'd have left years ago. I hate you. You got that? I hate you."

My mother looked like I'd slapped her. "You should be shame, talk to mother dats way."

"It's the truth." I couldn't believe my own rage.

"You too young for dats girl. Go to school, Krystof. Find good girl *na* nuniversit."

"What if I don't want to go to school? What business is it of yours? It's my life."

"You think life belong to you? Belong to everyone. Not just me. Belong to kids you have too, grankids. You marry bad woman, ruin kids life, grankids life."

"Gee, Sonya – your life belongs to everyone? That sounds like communist talk to me. Like some kind of collective."

Even at her age she was on her feet so fast it made me flinch. Her nostrils were flaring. "You no say like dat, Krytof. I slap you face."

"Try it."

"I do, Krsytof. You watch mouth."

"I'm not going to watch anything. And here's some news, Mother. Sharon loves

me and is good to me. At least if we get married she'll take care of me and be kind to me the way people are supposed to treat each other, not like you've treated me my whole life."

"You no be angry, Krystof."

"Don't tell me what to do, don't tell me what to feel."

"Oy - "

Without a plan for my life, I applied to work on the line at Chrysler, Ford, and GM like every other guy without a plan, and started at the Chrysler assembly plant the first Monday after high school ended. Instead of going to the prom, Sharon and I got married at City Hall and moved into a dank basement apartment on Church Street. Within a week I found out I had received a full scholarship to the University. I was shocked. I had only applied because I had nothing better to do, and because my guidance counsellor kept hassling me about it. The idea of university was beyond my financial grasp, and therefore beyond my imaginative reach. I took the scholarship and registered for my first year in the sciences, but continued to work at Chrysler with the idea that when fall came around I would move to part time status and Sharon would get a job to keep our heads above water while I finished my degree.

That first summer was blissful. When I came home after second shift we often took walks along the riverfront and stopped at the downtown bars to drink until the chairs were put up and the lights went out. I avoided my mother, not just because she had tried to keep me from the happiness I felt I deserved, but because it made Sharon uneasy to be around a mother-in-law who said what came to mind, when what came to mind was

usually criticism. The faults I began to see in Sharon even then I excused and resolved myself. She was slovenly. So I cleaned. She was spending a lot. I worked overtime.

But by September when I was ready to cut down to part time hours as my first classes started, Sharon absolutely refused to work. I found out she was smoking pot with the couple living in the attic apartment two floors above us. We argued endlessly about the practicality and the necessity of the new arrangement, the short term sacrifices for long term advantages. It made no difference.

I had my first taste of senseless marital debt. And I had my first taste of how truly powerless I was in our marriage. Yet I always hoped. I still hoped.

The heart specialist saw life through very different eyes from the department store clerk. Education only threw Sharon's stupidity into extreme contrast. I began to hear, like nails scratching on chalkboard, intellectually amplified, the unrefined way she spoke, her lazy grammar, the way she sounded even dumber when she tried to sound smart, the way she dropped the *g* on progressive verbs – *goin* instead of *going*. *Doin*. *Havin*. At a faculty party one night I overheard her telling two women who were in med school with me, explaining her weight gain, *I figger it's jist more cushion for the pushin, know what I mean?* I could not look my colleagues in the eye after that.

What I once thought was sassy and hilarious, street smart, before long just humiliated me.

How careless I had been about love. How foolish mistaking my first emotional thrill for my last. How different it would have been had I figured out my own life, nurturing my future self, rather than ignoring it.

By thirty six I had been married eighteen years and I was miserable. Aloof at

sixteen had become inhibited at thirty six. The game partier in me had somehow grown into a shitfaced drunk.

When I looked into the mirror I no longer saw a human being. Whatever existential spark was in others I did not see in myself. It was like looking at little more than a sentient corpse. Even when I could see myself for what I was, I didn't care. When I did care, beer helped wash it off.

None of this was a revelation, but I had certainly begun to grow sick of myself this way. It was as though all the fine layers of personality had scaled off through the decades, where what had once been elastic in my nature was now uncomprehendingly fixed and narrow, and it was the worst of who I was. It was a conspicuous reduction of selfhood, a kind of dementia of being rather than memory, which I felt completely helpless to do anything about.

It was a life lived with my heart stopped up in my throat, the same uneasy feeling as pre-dawn phone calls boding disaster, of midnight knocks at the door, always waiting, waiting for that moment that came more often the longer I was married. Screaming matches came out of nowhere, accusations, punches and kicks and black eyes and bruises.

One of the enduring memories I had of my marriage was of a life below ground, a captive of Sharon's madness. For nearly twenty years I hid downstairs at night to get drunk and bury myself in medical journals or tv. The nights I was on call I was grateful to get out of there.

One of the last times I had to endure that life was memorable only because it was the last. After supper, after the kids went to bed, I waited in the basement to listen for



signs that she had fallen asleep before I skulked upstairs for another troubled night. I kept my ear tuned and alert for those warning sounds, the couch springs in the living room above my head that squealed as she heaved herself up and lumbered across the floor, the joists beneath her weight groaning. A fine dust rained from between the cracks of the subflooring and settled into my hair. I always knew she was coming down and my heart choked hard, a sensation that repeated itself daily, hourly, minute by minute, an inner bursting I could not shake even when she wasn't around.

As she approached the basement door and made her way down, I found myself behaving like a guilty man caught in a crime. I had been going over bills, credit cards racked up to the limit month after month, expenditures on worthless discount store junk, fast food, junk food, restaurants, clothes to replace the rancid ones she refused to launder, that she threw out once in a while in green garbage bags when I wasn't around. Our house looked like a warehouse or a second-hand thrift store.

Though I don't know why it made a difference, I picked up a section of newspaper from the pile at my feet. The conversations were merely variations on a theme anyhow, especially toward the end.

"Chris?"

"What?" The way I spoke to her was controlled hatred.

"What's goin on?" Her voice was slow and hushed like a sleepwalker. When she was in her psychotic cycles I never took anything she said at its face.

She stood at the bottom step, one hand on the rail dangling a cigarette and the other scratching beneath her bra where it gouged sharp ruts into her flesh. The light above her head cast her in malformed shadows, a vision so creepy it was as though she

knew the effect it had, and used it to feed my bad nerves.

“Nothing.”

Twenty years after the culvert she had become as trapped as I felt, but in different ways. Since the sixties when she had grown her hair out and started parting it down the middle, she hadn't changed her look at all. Her long wiry blonde hair was still parted in the middle, and hung down like a dirty mop, the home-cut bangs curled off to the sides like an odd triangular winged toupee. The same King brand cigarettes were plugged into her lip every time I looked at her. Drugs and alcohol had left her puffy and tired looking; one eye drained continuously so she always seemed to be wiping her palm against her cheek. Except for the increasing weight gain, hers was a petty sameness that hid the scarier changes inside.

“Chris? I think Crystle was taken by aliens, Chris. That scar - ”

“Cryssie's okay.”

“But that scar. I was readin at the check out stand - ”

“You know you aren't supposed to drink on your meds.”

“I ain't fuckin drunk.”

“I never said you were drunk. I said you're not supposed to take any alcohol with your meds. Why don't you get some sleep?”

“Chris.” She cocked her head and narrowed her eyes at me from the foot of the stairs. “You spyin on me from work? You know I killed before -”

I felt my shoulders tighten together, the muscles between my shoulder blades aching from this habit. “You never killed anyone. Stop saying that.”

“I killed your boss when he was spyin on me. I can kill you just the same.

'Member -"

"You didn't. And I don't have a boss." Without looking at her, I stared hard into the murky tv screen, her dark, distorted reflection coming into the frame. "You have to stop telling people that. You have to stop saying that around people, especially the kids. It's scaring them."

Her voice was right behind me. "Who?"

I wouldn't look. "The kids. Stop scaring them." Under my breath I said *God help me -*

How did it happen that I had gone from a young man who couldn't keep my hands or my eyes off this woman to someone who couldn't even make eye contact with her any more?

But she could look me straight in the eye. She had no trouble staring me down, commandeering my will because she was not ashamed, because somehow even in that mess inside her head she knew that someone who felt no shame could wield power over those who did.

She put the cigarette to her lips and drew on it, the ember fierce in the semi-darkness that surrounded us in the basement. The slumped ash dropped and disintegrated into the sweatshirt she always wore, already grey across her sternum from a whole day's ashes. In a flash her expression changed, growing cold, vile.

"I'm goin out. You're such a fuckin asshole, Chris. I just wanna have fun and you're no fuckin fun no more."

The sound of that word made me cringe. She disgusted me. "Go ahead."

"Don't fuckin stop me."

“Go out now and you’d better find a place to stay overnight. I’m locking up.”

The vision in the tv screen tried to smile, tried to look cocky and confident through the lithium jello world that had imprisoned her for twelve years. “You fuckin think I can’t get someone? I still got it, you know. I could fuckin get a hundred guys.”

I shook my head. “Come on, just go to bed. Or go upstairs and watch your show.”

“Cause there’s guys comin over here all the time, Chris.” She turned and headed back upstairs. “All the fuckin time.”

Part of me believed her. As I looked over my shoulder to watch her go, the rest of me could not comprehend any man finding her attractive. The slow stumping and the sight of the dirty bare bottoms of her feet as she made her way to the top made me notice suddenly how much the house reeked, a rank mix of nicotine and armpits and dog, and overflowing cat litter. All I could think about was getting out of there. Yet I was paralysed. I didn’t know how to get out.

I went over to the fruit cellar and got myself a beer. When I’d twisted the cap off and flicked it into the wastebasket I sat down again in front of the tv. One of the cats jumped up on the arm of the chair where I sat.

“What do you want, shithead?”

The cat mewled and rubbed a patch of fur onto my arm. Although I did not hate the animals, I hated the fact that Sharon never groomed them, and I couldn’t add one more responsibility to my shoulders. They smelled and were filthy and I could not stand having them near me. I grabbed the cat and threw it off. It yowled and hissed, then skulked off under the stairs to hide, caught in the no-man’s land between upstairs and

downstairs.

When I turned the tv on, the screen zipped to life with a crackle. After a few more beers I fell asleep where I sat. I had grown accustomed to sleeping in that chair.

A week later I attended the heart and stroke dinner where I ran into Anjou Kara. As soon as I realised who she was I stopped drinking at one glass of wine. I did not want to speak with her drunk or tipsy.

We left the dinner early and went for a drive to catch up. That night an impenetrable fog lurked across the city. I headed for the river and parked the car along the waterfront.

“Let’s get out”, she suggested, and we did. Outside we each moved toward the front end of the car. With a deep breath, she closed her eyes and declared, “Don’t you just love the fog?”

I had never thought of it but even now when I thought of it, I could still smell that fog. That night I glanced away from her just long enough to see the greyness that had descended over the entire skyline of Detroit, leaving only the buildings’ footprints visible, the fog-lit vehicles zipping like toy cars around the riverfront streets.

It was warm and I took off my suit jacket. Then I had an idea. I laid it against the windshield for her.

“Here,” I said, offering her my hand. “Hop up. We’ll watch Detroit disappear.”

After so many years without any meaningful companionship or social life, I could not believe the ease I felt with her. I was not, as usual, straining for something to say.

Captive within the thick blunted air we stretched ourselves along the hood of the

car. Beside us hushed parkland smelled lush and raw but beyond a few hazy feet it was all we could see. A heavy vapour closed around the car, muting everything; it engulfed the earth whole along the banks. Above, a perforation in the fog veil gave a limited view of the stars. Water-bearer. The Archer. Twinned Castor and Pollux.

Almost in whispers she confessed: "Out here I think I feel possibility most."

The sound sought distance but the fog took hold and her voice was gone. I watched her. I slid my hand along her forearm, a chance in that gesture I would never have taken with anyone else. "You're cold."

She shivered without responding to my touch. I kept my gaze on her eyes as she surveyed the fog and the cosmos. A small momentary surprise transformed her face, then awe as she sat upright tilting her face to the stars, fingers touching the soft skin of her bottom lip. "Wow. Did you see that?"

But I couldn't bring myself to take my eyes away from hers. In their glassy black reflections I might have caught the hot arc of a fireball. Or, perhaps, it had only come from the corner of my own eye. Relaxed, I leaned back against the windshield.

"Make a wish, Krystof."

"Krystof, eh? My mother's the only one who calls me that."

"Should I call you something else?"

"No. I like it."

"Then make a wish."

"What?"

"Just close your eyes and make a wish. Hurry."

I did, and when I opened them again she was sitting up clutching her arms across

her chest, smiling beside me with broad pleasure. “So what did you wish for?”

“Am I supposed to say?” I had grown subdued, scarcely enough energy left to speak: the fear of letting myself feel.

“Don't tell me you believe in luck or jinxes. I don't think I could stand it from you.”

I smiled. “I didn't— I mean, I'm just — I just - ”

“Spit it out.”

“I just wished that your life would be full of shooting stars and fireballs to wish on. That's all. What about you?”

“I'm not saying.” She moved down beside me against the windshield, and grinned. She added: “At least, not now.”

“If not now, Anjou, when?”

“Some day. I'll find you. I'll put it in my will. If you're old and unbearable and still alive to hear it. Or tomorrow. And by the way, your wish — you don't wish like a man at all.”

I managed a wry grin. “My manliness takes issue.”

“No — I mean that any other man would have wished to get lucky, or that I'd shut up already.”

“What are you saying? That if I'd been a little faster on the uptake I could have had my way with you tonight?”

“Do you want to hear this or are you going to make fun?”

“Can I do both?”

“No.”

“Okay, then, let's hear it.”

She pursed her mouth, then looked at me. “I know something about you by your wish. That's all I'm saying.”

I laughed. “So how am I going to know something about you if you don't tell me your wish? I just proved I'm a lot dumber than I look, so I need all the insight I can get.”

She shot me a reproving glare. “Don't you ever use the word *dumb* around me. Or any of its proxies.”

“It's just a word. You know what I meant.”

“There's no such thing. Every word counts. Words like that are parasites. As much as love is a promise, so is hate. They bore in under our mental skin and work their way through our psyche until we end up disfigured, diseased, or dead.”

“That's pretty serious.”

As I thought about what she was saying I felt my mind instantly re-enter the reality of hatred I understood with every breath I drew under my own roof.

“Don't make fun.”

“No, no - I'm not.” I gave her wrist a gentle squeeze. “Really.”

“Because it is that serious. You work with the human heart. If you told me that every morsel I eat influences my heart and health even if it doesn't necessarily affect it, I would believe you. Words are my area of expertise, and I'm telling you something I know beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

“I'll be more careful.” And I would be. It was so much more important to do this for her than for myself.

“We all should.” By now I was feeling completely at ease, my normally tense



body slackening at her side.

I felt twenty years younger and twenty years wiser. I felt as though I were being introduced to the man I should have been. I asked her: "What's your favourite colour?"

"Hmm?"

"Colour, colour - "

"Oh. Green."

"Very fertile, very - "

"Fertile?"

"You know – life-affirming."

"You said fertile. That's what I heard. Fertile. A lady could construe that as a little leading. I mean, I should actually be very embarrassed."

"I meant very *y-o-u*. You."

"So now it's *m-e* me that's fertile. And this is - ?"

"Hey hey - "

"Okay, so what's so important about my favourite colour?"

I was vanishing into the vast tranquility I was already learning in myself through her. I laid my head back, my whole body blissfully limp, something I didn't remember ever feeling before, not even drunk. I answered: "Because when you find me, when I'm old and grey and you've written your will, I'll be in the house with the front door painted green."

"Just the door?"

So restful was her presence that I fell asleep briefly by her side before I could answer, brought back by the blast of a ship's horn sounding the river. Groggy, I

apologised then, realising the time, suggested we get going.

As we got back into the car I said, “So – When did you say you’d tell me about your wish?”

“I didn’t.”

Back at the banquet hall when I walked her to her car and said good bye, I took her phone number but didn’t give her mine, promising to call her to go out for a coffee. I turned back for my car and saw it as though I had never seen it before, a ten year old rusted-out LTD. It made me think about the childhood dream I had of wealth and prestige. Yes, I was a doctor, a specialist, but nothing about my life reflected that. I was actually poor. I did not live in a great neighbourhood, just an ugly old arts-and-crafts at the edge of Walkerville, between the haves and the have nots. It was perfect for my useless life, a place neither here nor there. As Anjou got into her little white Skyhawk I could barely bring myself to smile and wave, wondering what she must think of me now.

I got home so late that I could hear Sharon snoring in the bedroom as I came in the door. For several seconds I felt as though I might wake up beside Anjou from a twenty year nightmare, and life would actually be good.

In bed that night I realised what an anomaly Sharon had become, this sleeping woman not Anjou. I could face that. Staring until my eyes adjusted to the dark, I forced myself to breathe again to the bottom of my lungs. The air felt spoiled with reality.

And I could not weep there beside her, could not tell this woman to leave, let me summon ghosts in my own darkness.

I felt out my ring, then realised I had not been wearing it.

I got out of bed and went to the window. In the east the sun was still young and I

found it too hard to believe in morning quite yet. How I wanted to be back in that fog by the river. I fought to bring myself out of that memory world that was pulling me so wholly into itself.

Sharon never wanted to know what haunted me. Maybe she felt too much a part of it and made avoidance the salve of an unliveable conscience. Otherwise I had to believe she couldn't care, couldn't feel. I looked over toward her. Nothing had ever truly been possible with her.

She was watching me from bed. In the shadows I could see the gleam of her eyes in the fleshy ground of her face, her hair like a dirty smudge against the white pillow case.

I didn't feel hatred, only sadness. I would have given anything to have married a woman like Anjou, to have given her the world, to have made a world with her. But the totality of my experience made me a tattered man whose unwanted demons would have hunted her too. There was nothing romantic in a fool who understood his own failure, and whose consequences would come before every glance every touch every word every moment.

"What time is it?" she wanted to know from her shadows, her blink extinguishing the white triangles in the corners of her eyes. I never looked at her anymore. It had been months since I had even spoken her name. "Babe? What time is it?"

"About five." Babe. It made me wince. She was back on her medication, normalising, levelling. I didn't care. I went on staring out the window, afraid to turn around; afraid, of all times, of all places. On that dim and wet and melancholy morning.

"Oh." Stifling a yawn. "What's goin on?"

Whatever it was that held my interest, she wouldn't find it for herself out there on the grey, wet, half-dead lawn or the grey sheen of the driveway or under any streetlight's lonely yellow pallor. For the twentieth, hundredth, thousandth time I answered, "Nothing."

I steeled myself at the door of the house, my chance to leave, a goodbye just for the mere chance of a hello. *I'm sorry I'm sorry*, I said, keeping my distance by the door with the few things I wanted to take with me. Even with the children crying and begging, I would not stay. *This isn't a life and I'm sorry*.

Not once did I look at her. She watched hard, her faculties keened on that moment, drawing together all the vague quantum particles between us, refining them toward one burning point. The moment was so palpable I might have touched the naked inferno of her comprehension. I shuddered with it, for the emptiness that had existed and thrived between us, the pointlessness of our life together, our squandered youth. I left her sitting there, a hard lump of crossed arms and hate in the cushions of the sofa, without pausing once as I walked away to hear her break into a stream of curses.

It had to end that way. To end things made all things right, all things possible.

I could not even cry.

I was free of Sharon. But I would never be without her. In our children's increasingly bad behaviour she lived on. Phone calls from her at all hours would wake me from sleep. In her drunken, stoned, or psychotic states she would shriek and swear at me without making sense. She called me at work and did the same to my receptionist. Without warning she would stop in at the house and stand on the porch steps screaming

for me, paranoid, vile. At work, sometimes she would just pound on the plate glass shouting my name. Before long I had a security camera placed at the front door of my building. I had a security system installed at my house too.

I would never be at zero again on the integer scale of my life. And how good even zero seemed after the brief, heady ride and the long, stomach-clenching plummet that followed.

## *Chapter 6*

After Ukraine, I could not escape myself or those markers along my past, whose beginning and bearing I could make no more sense of than the path itself.

The way childhood had passed in such a certain, knowable pattern, my first real memory stood out not because of my awakening consciousness but from the first variation from my life's dependable blueprint.

I am no more than four or five, and it is a Saturday in summer. I remember the day because on Saturdays Luba Kara came over early in the morning so she and my mother could set each other's hair in rollers and pin curls. Even at such an early hour of the day, Luba never showed up without vibrant red lipstick smudged across her mouth, while my mother reserved such efforts for special occasions. And what I remember about that particular morning is Luba's normally trim form, massive as a demolition ball in a neat, formless aqua dress with a little white collar.

All day my mother would go about her affairs in her babushka to keep neat until her set could be brushed out and sprayed into a stiff pewter ball at supper. On Saturdays my mother also wore her grey wrap-around house dress with its tiny cherry sprig print and cherry piping. She wore this for chores and because she could later dress without ruining her set.

So it is the hair, the babushka and the housedress that answer the knock that comes at the door the afternoon memory begins. I watch all this unfold from the living room floor where I have been allowed to use a lead pencil with a whittled end to colour on a sheet of newspaper left behind by one of the roomers. Between scribbles I chew on

the whittled part, working the wood between my teeth and rolling my tongue against the lead until a thread of black drool seeps from the corner of my mouth. I rub it off with my forearm, which has slowly turned grey.

When my mother opens the door the two men standing there both remove their hats. From the look of them they are farmers, rough looking in old flannel shirts rolled up past the elbow, and old trousers. I remember seeing their truck through the window from my vantage point on the floor, an old rusted-out mint green Hudson they'd parked at the curb. Most of our neighbours don't own cars. Neither do we, and I think of them as rich men simply for owning a vehicle.

One of the men asks my mother something I can't hear. She doesn't answer for such a long time that I look up to see what is the matter with her. She seems nervous, touching her *babushka* and her throat and her neck, and looking around behind her shoulders. When she spies me in the living room colouring in the faces on the newspaper's front page, she flushes. When she does say something to them, it is in so quiet a voice that I can't make out her words.

The same man speaks again and my mother answers: "No, no. Come in, come in."

That is all. And I know by her face that she must know them somehow, and everything is all right. I am not afraid. The two men lower their heads and step into the house, first one, then the other. I watch them remove their shoes and follow her. They sit together on the sofa behind me, moving in unison with everything they do. They seem like strange tandem machines, and because of this I find myself abandoning my colouring to sit on my knees before them, watching my mother's strangers with deep interest.

As she settles into a chair she announces my name, and their heads nod politely in my direction. To me she says, “Krystof, this is Mike and Stan.”

But in a flash she is bent over me, her quickly licked thumb rubbing the blackened corner of my mouth wet. I swipe away at her spit with my forearm. She gives a sudden smack to the back of my head and tisks. “No-good boy.” Then she returns to her chair.

One of the men sits forward and makes a small movement with his fingers. “This Vera’s boy?”

My mother seems embarrassed, and stammers, “No. No, this is – Krystof is mine.”

I have never been allowed to call adults by their first names and am preoccupied with my mother’s mistake. The closest I ever get to such an adult right is to call certain people in my mother’s life *uncle* or *aunt*, though they are not related to me. I stand with my pencil and newspaper, and come over to the men. To avoid a scolding I decide to be safe.

“Mr. Mike and Mr. Stan, do you want to colour with me?”

But before they can respond, my mother is on me. “Krystof – *tschht!* The boys come long way, leavin be. You sit quiet, or you get.” And she raises the back of her hand to me.

Put off by my mother’s sharp tongue and the warning, I take my newspaper and pencil and sulk far away from her in the kitchen while they talk.

The men stay the whole afternoon, so long in fact that my mother does not brush out her set at the usual time. I grow hungry and think to pester her but remain fixed at the kitchen table with nothing to do but scribble on the newsprint and along its borders until



the pencil's lead is worn flat, and because I am not allowed to touch the knives to whittle off the ends, even that small amusement is denied me. Eventually my mother appears in the kitchen and sets about preparing a supper for us all.

“Krystof, wash you face an handsa. Go.”

Her usually stern face is softened with a very slight smile – or the remnants of one – and her eyes seem almost bright. The evidence of her terrible burdens, normally set into her skin like a branding, seem eased. I wonder what the men have said, what jokes they might have told to create this change in a woman who has only ever spoken harshly to me, who answers my most innocent questions with sharp words or slaps. I find myself hoping they have come to room with us, and therefore make my mother look this way always.

That night the four of us dine together. For the first time in my life that I can remember, we do not go to the UNO Hall. This has become part of life's certainty I have come to absorb as though it were built into my own DNA, something so predictable that until then I could not recall my mother ever having been ill to miss a single Saturday dance or Sunday liturgy, or a day of work cleaning rooms at the hotel. This is what I know. I can depend on this knowability. And, though I can't understand it at the time, it does comfort me amid all the uncertainty of our existence.

When I am sent to bed early and lie awake in the back porch to hear their murmuring voices around the kitchen table, only now do I grow afraid of what this visit might really mean, but I cannot name my fear. Are one of these men my father? Having grown up with an overpowering sense of my own fatherlessness, I have only ever longed to know him. If this is so, why am I afraid? Perhaps they know my father. But why

have they come? Why, in minutes, do they change my mother in ways I cannot do in hours, days, weeks, months of being extra good and obedient – not to please her, but to avoid displeasing her?

When I awake in the morning the visitors are gone. I do not know if they stayed the night or if they've slipped away in the dark. I never hear the front screen door squeal when they leave, nor the Hudson's rattling motor turn at the curb.

In the kitchen I ask my mother, who sits staring strangely at nothing: "Will those men come to live with us?" I am still hopeful, though the look in her face now offers nothing to hope for.

She gives a slow shake of her head. "They just come for visit."

"Oh."

"You ready for church, *hlopchyk?* Anu, go."

That is the extent of my mother's discussion with me about the strangers.

After that they came, in summer only, from time to time over the years, disappearing permanently some time during my adolescence. Even then I would come to know little about them except their names, that they came from somewhere up North, and that they seemed, to me at least, obliged to these visits. Occasionally they brought me gifts – a pair of moccasins, a bag of maple syrup candy, a chunk of pink granite – but I never understood their place in my life or my mother's. And I never asked. My mother had closed the doors on my past with the simple habit of the evil eye, when she would level a look on me that bullied my childish imagination.

On kinder days, my questions perhaps less prying or less cruelly intimate, like the name of the village where she came from, she would answer in her broken English.

“Village? Zólota Bráma.”

“Where was it?”

“Ole Contry, Ole Contry.”

“I know, but where?”

“Was *bolóto na* one side.”

“What’s a *bolóto na*?”

“*Bolóto, bolóto.*”

“Mud?”

By now she would grow exasperated with me, and I realised perhaps a little ashamed because she could not translate such basic terms or, when I considered the simple request to locate her village on a map, I thought perhaps her attitude was less evasion than ignorance, revealing her inability to place herself in her own life even if she had wanted to.

Unlike modern Western poverty, which seemed to intern its victims permanently, poverty in our community seemed more a difficulty to be overcome by hard work and persistence than an existential curse. Most of our friends and neighbours were immigrants who understood that theirs would be the sacrifices of nice homes and easy work so the next generation would be doctors and lawyers and engineers. The majority succeeded. I succeeded, working at Chrysler through undergraduate and medical degrees.

Although my mother worked hard and I had never known her to take so much as a sip of alcohol, most of the people around her were drinkers – some upstanding human

beings, and some outright drunkards. Most fell somewhere in between. In fact, most of the community to which we belonged were troubled refugees of war and poverty who coped with their difficult lives through alcohol.

Certainly her roomers were the extreme end of this set. Growing up, I had watched my diminutive, barely-five-foot mother break up fist fights with the ferocity of a cougar, shouting and slapping and kicking at men twice her size whose rages were fuelled by everything from moonshine to mouthwash.

Even years after I had made a better future for myself, that haphazard warren of rooms and add-ons bulging from the original two-story frame structure that was my home never left me. When I could bring myself to think of it, it was with disgust. As fastidious as my mother had been, into my adult life I had become compulsive about hygiene because of the roomers, any little reminder nearly sending me into a fit of nerves. Human stench or the smell of unwashed sheets or clothes nearly undid me.

Under the influence of that house I had become encoded by its utter lack of privacy, by the perversion of home life that a rooming house represented. Its innocent movie or television depictions with grandmotherly landladies and aw-shucks roomers in bow ties and jackets seemed hopelessly false to me. For me it was a family structure without family, without heart. Its inmates knew nothing of kindness or love.

And I remembered each and every one of the men and women who had passed through my life this way.

On the main floor a family of three lived in what we called a housekeeping apartment, although it was hardly an apartment with only a single bedroom, a hotplate, and a sink and toilet hidden behind a shower curtain. The Feeneys were decent sorts, and

I went to school with the daughter, Iris. We rarely saw them and I think they were ashamed of their poverty and their position in our house. The roomers occupying the five bedrooms upstairs were mostly alcoholics and derelicts. Generally they lived bar hours, slept all day, and when they couldn't afford the neighbourhood blind pigs they returned to the house only to move and talk all night, edgy for their next drinks.

The memories I had of the place never changed, their force like a filthy mudslide through which I could not breathe, could not surface. It was always the same: I am a child again, perhaps six or seven. It is deep in the night, and all nights seem the same. After drifting off I wake in a hard sweat. Bursts of shrill laughter keep me from sleep. Although I cannot see the irradiated clock hands on the table beside the cot where my mother and I sleep in the enclosed back porch, my body knows the hour. Each moment of night carries its own imprint. The feel of midnight is nothing like the feel of three or four in the morning, now my waking body barely at ease, or now dragged groggy from sleep. Two hours can make all the difference.

And his anonymous face is always there, ghost, shadow, a swift movement from the corner of my life. He is part of my subconscious. Every day of my life I wonder. Every night.

The work of keeping roomers is brutal for my mother. It is miserable for us both. For her it means a life without rest after working midnights cleaning at the Norton Palmer Hotel. It means living with strange men in the night, the roomers and Henriette's men who come for minutes or hours or sometimes days. It means leaving me alone most of the time. With them. It means growing up sleeping alone in a cot at night in a winterized porch, my mother locking me in as she leaves every night and waking me each morning

as she returns and prepares breakfast for us both, and a lunch plate for me which I later eat quietly at the kitchen table, always mindful of my sleeping mother just a few feet away. The rest of the day passes finding ways to amuse myself until my mother awakens in early afternoon. Mainly I read from the books we gather at the library once a week.

Only on weekends do my mother and I share that small space behind the kitchen.

I have just begun falling asleep again, hardly closing my eyes with the first clout at the door, and I know it's Jim MacDougall. The last one in at night is always that old MacDougall. Even from the back of the house I can hear him lurching up the stairs, the stifled threat of a vomit at his lips. I know it well. We all do. And because of it, beside me in bed my mother moves her arm across her stomach, awaiting the moment she will deftly sweep the blankets back to make a leap for the bucket and rag under the kitchen sink.

Years of this, different faces, different vomit. The vile sour smell of it, the slimy oatmeal feel of it between fingers in the bucket of bleach has become set in our memories. If not vomit then explosive diarrhoea that covers the toilet and walls upstairs.

Beside me I can feel my mother's every muscle ready her for battle. For several minutes she barely seems to breathe, waiting, her greenglowing fingers plying the heavy seam that crosses her chest where I can feel her heart knock fiercely.

"I'm back, Missus – *guh* – I'm back. So you can stop watchin like the feckin FBI already, eh? Damn – *guh* – garlic an goulash." He struggles up each step, holding still to check his heaving. "*Guh* – Garlic an goulash."

"Ma, he's going to throw up."

She hollers: "You go to bed quiet now, Meester! You not bodder nobody, you

hear? My boy got to sleep. Everybody got to sleep. So you go to bed quiet."

"You – *guh* – you be quiet, goddamn forner. Garlic an goulash takin over the – *guh* – whole damn country."

"He's *going* to *throw up*."

She lands a sharp whack on my upper thigh. "You be quiet, *hlopchyk*."

MacDougall gives off a ferocious belch then begins vomiting at the top of the stairs, gulping queerly. *Guh – guh – guuuuawhhh*. One of the bedroom doors upstairs opens, and another. *Guh guuuuuuuuuuuawhhhh*. And the noise swamps over me. Over and over.

"I *told* you he was going to throw up."

"*Troud cul*," Henriette yells at the top of her lungs as though it were the Cuccinato boys across the street who need to hear. "Keep id up an I ave Johnny ere come oud, uh? *Fif!*"

Of all our *roomeri*, as my mother calls them, Henriette is the only one unfazed by a lack of cash. At the slummy Arcade Tavern where she drinks she picks up men who will gladly keep her drunk until closing time. On our way home from the dances, my mother and I would see her frequently around the Arcade, once falling drunk as she hung on a man's arms while he pushed her into the back seat of a car. Another time she disappeared with someone into the alley behind the tavern. The last time, my mother and I had come upon Henriette unconscious at the bus stop and, after slapping her awake, my mother hoisted her home hip to hip, telling her, "You should be shame, Henry, you so pretty girl. Some day dats man gon kill you, you not stop dis." But Henriette will never stop and my mother's chastisements for her *roomeries'* immoral ways will always fall on

deaf ears.

"Shet – *guh* – shet your mouth," MacDougall gasps between heaves. "Whore – somoughtta - " *Guuuaaawhh guh gaaawh guh.*

The second voice is Izzy's, slow and stupid: "Eh Mac, never mind that trash. Come by later, eh, an wu'll have ourselves a little party."

By now MacDougall is crawling to his room. "Whew. Yeah, yeah sure. Sure. Later."

Henriette closes herself back into her room, hissing, "*Va te faire*, uh? Somebody godto teach you some lesson if you ask me."

In the time it takes for all this, my mother has crammed her bunioned feet into the broken men's shoes that pass for slippers to head for the kitchen sink. As she moves through the hallway I start to speak, "*Mma* -"

"*Sha*," She snaps, "You want trouble, you get."

But I don't heed the threat. I am up and out of bed. Only when the door to MacDougall's room slams shut and the old Scotsman falls into bed with a curse and a long slurry fart does she reach the stairs with me on her heel, switching the light on so she can survey the damage. From the top two steps the vomit hangs down over the risers in moist stalactites. She hauls her bucket to the top and says to MacDougall's closed door: "You should be shame, Meester. You not drink so much maybe you have good job. Not live like dis. Should be shame."

"Shet up forner."

"You no tell me shutup. You shutup."

When she kneels over the pile of what looks like hash and tomato sauce I don't



see how she can keep doing this. As she starts with the first swipe she pushes her face into her elbow to stifle a gag.

“Ma, you need help?”

She doesn't answer. Then the tears start. She cries quietly almost the whole time it takes to clean it up. I hurry up the stairs and haul the bucket to the toilet, dumping the mess into the porcelain bowl. Ten minutes and three buckets later she tucks her disinfected pail and rag back under the sink.

Only now do I feel the familiar queasiness of exhaustion creep to my throat. Once back under the blankets of our cot I feel her relax into the pillow with a long sigh. Just as I begin falling asleep my tatty old orange cat leaps up to my mother's side, mewling and purring to be let out. She strokes its coarse back. "Okay, okay, piggy. You go out now." With a groan she slips from under the sheets. As the cat spills to the floor she pushes her feet back into the slippers and makes her way with the eager animal to the back door. Upstairs we can hear Izzy and MacDougall laughing and shouting drunkenly in Izzy's room. It is almost three.

Even as my mother makes her way back to bed for the last time, I have already begun to dream nightmares and what-ifs and that solitary shadowed face that haunts me.

Almost twenty five years had passed since I'd last seen Mike and Stan, almost as long since I'd thought of them at all. In those intervening years I couldn't recall asking my mother about them. Their disappearance had gone unnoticed through my turbulent adolescent years. They were practically middle-aged when I knew them, and if they were still alive they might be in their seventies.

The breakdown of my life – divorce, losing Anjou, losing myself – had sent me headlong into the past. Perhaps, had I not embarked on this journey, always mired in the strain of a present, no certain future, I might never have thought about Mike and Stan at all. But now they loomed large in my memory, one of the many mysteries that had swirled around my mother's life. I promised myself I'd try to find them. If they were still alive.

The weeks passed; winter came. A blinding snowstorm moved in across the new year, a rampart in white howling over the freezing grey waters of the river just a few blocks away. A sugary coating crystallized over the windows that faced the street, unprotected as the others were by trees and houses and the privacy fences separating neighbour from neighbour. In the eerie insulated tranquillity that followed, as I joined my neighbours to shovel ourselves out, I watched booted and bundled children trudge into the aching glare, into the cold white mess, to erect lopsided monuments, damage each other with puffs of harmless ammunition from driveway to driveway. Even as I watched them I did not think of my own children when they were small and when winter days like these were still an adventure. I was not there enough to experience it. Now I couldn't summon enough emotional connection to feel nostalgic about the milestones I was missing in their lives as they grew into young adults.

Then it rained hard and froze, and rained, and froze again. Trees crackled and disintegrated to the white earth below. Power lines shattered under the weight of a grackle, and we were left in the cold. For two days I didn't venture to work. I kept my mother's room warm with a kerosene heater, and checked regularly to make sure she was

all right. A while back I had bought a baby monitor for her room, so faint had her voice become that I might not hear her cry out in another part of the house, but the backup batteries only lasted a few hours and I could not locate spares. It didn't take long before I became paranoid that she would die in the blackout. I did not sleep, my ear tuned for that profound silence I expected of death.

I spent most of that time in front of the fireplace, wrapped from head to toe in a wool blanket. I sat watching but not seeing the fire rumble and pop up the flue, pulled upward by deep intakes of air like giant breaths. Insects hibernating in knotholes awoke to the sounds of their own bodies shattered in the heat. Some made it groggily to the wood's surface before bursting. The sweetness of burning cedar and birch and apple wood perfumed the house; and, too, the acrid undertones of creosote. Limiting my whole life to that column of bricks did not strike me as strange.

When my friend Andy came over the first day power was restored I was irritated by his presence, but even then I could not recognise the black mood that had been recreating me since Anjou left.

I had known Andy since high school, and despite the superficial friendships I'd forged with the help of alcohol, Andy was by contrast the only person who stayed in my life and who did not drink.

Andy Grant had been born with several physical afflictions. For one, he was a dwarf, and two, he had spina bifida. If that wasn't enough he also suffered from thoracic kyphosis, what used to be called hunch-back. Told he would be confined to a wheelchair, Andy defied even the most pessimistic medical opinion by finding the stamina to drag himself around on crutches all his adult life. Between bouts of pneumonia, which

regularly beset him, and surgeries to ease or repair parts of his uncooperative body, he booted around town in a specially outfitted van and, although he was on permanent disability, kept himself busy with his comic book and sport card collections. In those circles he was revered as the number one expert.

Almost everyone in high school had called Andy *Munch*, short for munchkin. To me he was always just Andy, and I think for that reason he valued my friendship all the more. The thing about Andy was that he was one of the greatest guys anyone could know. He was smart, funny, and wise. But most people could not get past his physical impediments and so, after all these years, I alone remained his friend. He had never married, and to my knowledge, never dated.

My mother loved Andy and showed him more affection in an hour than I saw my whole life. Even on her bad days, when he came over she somehow mustered the energy to sit visiting with him. So when Andy joined us at the fireplace instead of the kitchen table where we would normally visit and share coffees or teas, I found myself sitting on the apron poking at a fire I no longer needed as though it were the most important task of my life. His arrival had caught me in the middle of a six-pack, and I guzzled back the bottle I had been drinking as though he wouldn't be any the wiser if it were gone quickly.

"*Andrij*," my mother was saying, always calling him by the Ukrainian version of his name, "why you no come over more, see me? You know, I lomey sit here byself."

Smiling, Andy just said, "I've been waiting for you to come and see me."

Andy never spoke about the long hospital stays or the weeks of shattering pain when he was laid up at home hallucinating on morphine.

"Oh, *Andrijko*! How I go to you place? I ole lady!"

“You should speak to your son here. Eh, bud?”

“Mm.”

I barely paid them any attention and let them flirt with each other until Andy said, “Hey, Kryss, you’ll never believe who I saw over Christmas.”

“Mm? Who?”

“Shar.”

“Cher who?”

“What do you mean Shar who? Sharon. Your Sharon. Your *ex*-Sharon.”

“Oh.”

“She was with your kids. They look good. Grown.” Andy leaned closer to my mother and almost shouted to her, “I saw your grandchildren. *Grand children*. They’re so big now. *Big*.”

“Yah?”

I thought: here it comes, he’ll say something. So I turned to him and spoke in a low enough voice that I knew my mother wouldn’t hear. “Don’t say anything about Cryssie. I didn’t tell my mother. I don’t think she could take it.”

Andy looked puzzled. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“You know. That stupid kid she’s dating. The shacking up thing.”

Andy’s mouth moved into an exaggerated frown. “Sorry, bud, nobody said anything to me.”

“Anyhow, don’t mention it to my mother. I’d be ashamed if she knew. My kids are nothing to be proud of.”

“Aw, c’mon bud. Don’t say that. They’ll be all right. They’re teenagers. They’re supposed to be screw ups.”

Although I had not thought of it since I last saw my daughter, I realised I didn’t care anymore. I could not feel. I could say the words, but I could no longer feel them.

When my son called a few weeks after Andy’s visit to tell me he had failed all his exams and would not graduate from high school, he also let me know that Cryssie had broken up with her boyfriend and was with some new kid named Justin. I understood the silence. And I didn’t feel much one way or the other.

In all that time I hadn’t lost the overwrought feeling I’d brought back from the Ukraine and nursed like a delirious flu for months. That dead thing, its skinned jaw. My reckless one-night-stand. I could not purge these images from my thoughts.

I had myself tested for HIV again, and again the wait turned my life upside down. Even when the results came back negative I could not be reassured.

Increasingly I began to feel that I was the one lost and not my history. Still, Zólota Bráma seemed to hold me in its inscrutability. I needed to go back.

## Chapter 7

*Mama!*

There was no answer.

*Mama!*

The wind beating so hard against the clothes and sheets she was sure it would all snap away from the line. Like a boar, she would be rooting through the village for their linens.

*Mother? Are you all right?*

*Ah?*

What did she want to say?

*You were calling out. What did you want?*

*Kryst* - In bed she shifts, steaming under the heavy quilt. How her hips ache.

*Krystof* -

Outside her window a blizzard lashes at the shingles. It flaps and flutters.

Laundry drying on the line.

*Ah.*

Her mother's laundry.

Her mother not quite fully mad. Not yet. That hideous head poking from the door, watching her daughter leave for the field. "Beware ravens devouring thoughts!"

*Beware, hlopchyk.*

This childish fifteen-year-old body of hers with its growing burden hidden under broad skirts and bindings. She did not answer, but walked away more quickly, ashamed.

*Mother, you're not making sense.*

*Voron -*

Beyond the laundry the *kalyna* bushes were in bloom, white orbs fragrant in sunshine. And nodding rows of sunflower heads in a breeze as warm as human breath. That forgiving warmth of youth.

Somewhere a *bandura* played, its melody borne into the draught.

Behind her the sound of sheets and skirts and blouses snapping in the wind ebbed away with her mother's voice as she headed for the field on the village road. A few minutes after wading into the ripening sea of wheat to check the crop her mother had planted, she heard movement. The sound startled her. Unrest and political agitators had begun making things dangerous. Communists were burning crops and salting the fields of anyone they believed were nationalists. Her mother was lucky to be thought of as eccentric, and not nonconformist. Eccentrics were pitied. Nonconformists were hanged. Still, there was no telling what anyone was capable of nowadays.

A young man appeared several yards off, a *bandura* strapped to his back.

Although he was heading in her direction, he did not seem to see her. She continued on, fingering a head of wheat and knowing that next week they would be out with sickles. Just to make sure she picked off a grain and pushed it between her teeth, felt its give, its telling texture. A neat trick learned from Paraska, the village fool who believed ravens could steal thoughts.

As she watched the young man she began to wonder what he meant by trespassing on her field. She waved an arm overhead until he caught sight of the movement and came to a stop.



"What were you doing over there?" she demanded, and spit out the grain.

He was not tall as men go, but he was lean. He had a wild mop of curls she didn't see often on grown men. When they were within a foot of each other she noticed he held a tin can filled with wild strawberries. He popped a handful into his mouth and, after a few sloppy chews, looked around at the blue sky and the wheat and the forest.

"Nothing."

"This is my wheat."

His glare passed over her as though he knew what the heavy skirt and bindings meant. "So what?"

Suddenly self-conscious, she crossed her arms to cover herself. "If you think you're going to start stealing – "

"Relax, sister. I'm not interested in your wheat. I'm just interested in getting myself from one place to another, and it happens your field is in my way."

"I don't like people trampling my wheat."

"Who's trampling?"

"You are."

"So are you. What's the difference?" He shifted the weight of the *bandura* and adjusted his grasp of the leather strap that held it to his back. "Look, if you think I ruined your wheat, have your parents come on over to my place and take what they think is fair. But it's buckwheat I've got."

"I'm not interested in your buckwheat."

He shrugged. "Fine." And he began heading off in the direction he had been traveling. Without breaking his pace he turned and continued his way walking backward.

"Tell me your parents' names and I'll make it right with them."

"I am Grechovska, and I speak for myself." Even that much impudence made her mouth go dry, a new skin she had begun to wear since everything had started going wrong.

Now he halted and headed back toward her, his dark brows coming together over the bridge of his nose. "Sunny?"

How, she wondered, did anyone know her by that name?

"It's me. Orest." With a laugh he held his arms wide. "Orest Romaniuk."

This was not the same boy she had last seen a decade ago. "Orest? I would never have recognised you. Never."

The way he tried not to look at her now told her the rumours must have reached him. There was only one family in their entire *uezd* that consisted of a mother and pregnant daughter, where the mother was a lunatic, and the child had no father.

"So," he said, his eyes mocking in the old way, his lips twisting into a leer so that she half expected to see that rotten tooth still standing out from his gumline, "I see how much good your school did you after all."

As it had been that last time, she might have curled her fists and lunged at him had he not become suddenly serious.

He said, "I thought you'd grow up to be taller. And your hair – it's gone dark. But now that I look at you - "

"I changed, you changed. Everybody changes."

"Your mother's been - " His eyes darted between her belly and the ground at his feet. A deep flush burned in her face. "Anyways - How's Mama?"

"What do you care? You know what's going on anyhow." Even before she said the words she could hear that new, hard hatred erupting in her voice, and she could no longer hold back, could not control the sharpness or its bite.

Orest licked his red-stained fingertips one by one then wiped his hands down the front of his trousers. Neither spoke for a moment, and she realized their reacquaintance this way had the feel of such clumsiness that she headed back for the road rather than stand with him in either silence or speaking a minute longer. Although she offered no urging, he followed.

It was nearing sundown. Some of the farmers were already harvesting and the workers came off the fields, sickles over their shoulders, leaving behind gigantic sheaves in perfect formation. This was a proud and excellent farming community. In good weather and after not a bad day, groups of women and men usually exploded in song, tossing stanzas across the fields, the men beckoning and the women responding. Today, though - and lately most of the time - there was no singing.

She stopped near a long raspy old swinging gate. It was the remains of the gilded iron gate that once marked the entrance to the road, the 'golden gate' by which Zólota Bráma was named. They were no longer golden and, in their corroded, ruined state, had since become little more than a relic of feudalism and a symbol of bolshevism. She stepped on the bottommost rung and, with a kick of her heel, sent the gate in a slow creaky swath. When it passed a near-full circle she stopped and propelled herself the other way. The unwillingness of either to be the first to say another word stood between them. In her own mind she was trying to figure out what he wanted following her this way when she hadn't seen him in ten years. While he stirred his fingers around in the tin

and pulled strawberries from within they didn't speak. She watched as he dropped fruit into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

Just as the gate came to a rest in front of him she jerked her chin in the direction of the harvesters. "Look at them. No matter what, nothing ever changes around here, eh? It's like the dark ages."

He stopped chewing and laughed harshly so that bits of strawberry shot from his mouth and spewed down his chin: "Is that some sort of joke? I'm going crazy it's changing so much."

She looked at him as though he were a fool. "If you went to the city you'd see what a backward place this is. In the city they've got factories. And girls even work there. They're wearing their skirts above the ankle now. They put rouge on their lips."

"They sound like harlots to me," he remarked with a shrug. And still the strawberry remained. Such slovenliness disgusted her.

Her chest tightened. "They're no harlots. They're just honest girls earning a wage."

He reached between his legs and scratched at his groin for a while. "Maybe you were gone too long. Maybe you forgot what this place was like."

It was a bitter thought. "I've forgotten nothing."

"Well, there it is."

"There what is?"

He took another handful from his tin and gazed off into the trees over her shoulder.

She sneered, "You're going to give yourself the shits if you keep eating those

things."

"At least I'll be the one doing it to myself."

She made a face like he was crazy, as crazy as her mother. "Bah - In the end we'll both be six feet down, forgotten, and nothing we ever did will mean anything."

"Does it matter so much now? We're barely even alive. Work, eat, shit, and sleep, work, eat, shit, sleep. That's it."

"You've got your *bandura*. Where does that fall – under work or shit?"

This comment he ignored.

She propelled the swing again with her foot, riding it back and forth, back and forth. "So where did you learn to play? I don't remember you playing."

"Remember that old Blind Kovalyshyn?"

"No."

"He practically lived in a chicken shack behind the church."

"I don't remember."

"Anyhow, one day I was messing around with some of the fellows. We were going to steal coins from the church. We didn't know Blind Kovalyshyn was around. He heard the whole thing and came round behind us so quiet we didn't hear a thing. He beat the devil out of us with his cane, the whole lot of us. Pytro Shura got brained. Mykola – what was his name, he's dead now – what was his name?"

"I don't know - "

"Mykola something – Died with the influenza."

"Who cares?"

"Mykola – "

“Well - ”

“Wasyliuk, that’s it. Wasyliuk. Anyhow, he got his nose busted flat. Blood everywhere. Afterward the old man made us come around once a week to learn *bandura*. I’m the only one stuck to it. The other fellows couldn’t manage so many strings, or playing left and right hands at the same time. But I stuck to it.”

“Oh.” She swung herself again. “Shouldn’t you be in the war, fighting somewhere? How old are you anyhow?”

“I don’t believe in the war.”

“Don’t worry, the war believes in you, and in no time you’ll have no choice but to go.”

“I’ll worry about that when it comes.”

“So what’ll you do?” She laughed, “Shoot yourself in the foot? Blind yourself?”

He didn’t seem to find amusement in these suggestions but he said nothing just the same.

Really she didn’t care and didn’t know why she had bothered asking to begin with. On her next pass she tempted him, “Get on.”

Ignoring her, he put the edge of the tin to his lips and emptied the rest of the berries into his open mouth.

“Look what fun it is,” she teased. “It’s better than a drunk.”

“What do you know about drinking? At your age?”

“I know plenty.” Now she brought her vehicle to a languid halt with the toe of her boot and leaned forward over the gate. With a grin she asked, “Heh - you wanna smooch?”

With the subtle shift in his expression she knew her words had landed with unexpected weight, and she realised how she must look to him.

"Come on, get down from there. You shouldn't even – with – Damn, you act a fool."

With that he simply walked away, his hands in his pockets, and his gait slow and slouching under the *bandura's* heft. She draped herself over the gate, staring after him down the road as he wandered off into the woods.

On her way home she realised that he was still his old nasty self, and that she was glad to have seen him again.

As she passed the Church she noticed some of the villagers collected out back. She went over, moving into the cluster of figures pressing around.

"What's going on here?"

Hryciw Yashchyshyn was standing there.

"They found the priest. He hanged himself in the woods there."

The echo of a smile remained on her face. She shook her head. "What?"

"Paraska the Fool found him."

"What are you talking about?"

"Paraska was out looking for these sticks for her damned gypsy nonsense. She goes out behind the Church where she thinks the trees are more holy and finds this ladder - You know, Wirniuk's big cherry picker?"

She nodded him on but didn't realise she had been holding her breath, terrified they would somehow blame her mother.

She was watching him with a predatory intensity as he went on. "Anyhow, says

she looks up and there's the priest hanging there, in his priest dress and everything. She's been going around telling everyone it was an evil omen for a priest to kill himself."

Her voice was barely there. "The idiot."

Now her gaze passed to the forested enclosure beyond them, the dark woods of nightmare.

"If you ask me, if the Cheka weren't scared of her they'd have sent her to Siberia already." Yashchyshyn gave a shrug of his shoulders. "Anyhow, they started saying it was the Cheka murdered him. Nobody ever listens to Paraska anyhow, with all her ranting and raving. But when they went back to the rectory they found a note, too."

She struggled against a shudder that traced her back and made her skin crawl. Her eyes held Yashchyshyn's. "He left a note?"

"Sure."

"What did it say?"

"Strange thing, that. Not much sense."

Her heart vaulted. "Well, what already?"

He looked up at the sky, his expression like a man reciting poetry: "*I have feasted upon my hunger.*" That's it, not even an explanation."

What must have been the priest's dying vision when perhaps his rope had wrung from him this final shattered thought?

She asked: "Did they – has he been taken down yet?"

"No. They're arguing about who should handle his body. The deacon is out of town."

Now Yashchyshyn's eyes found her middle, the telltale bulge that was becoming



more difficult to hide all the time. As though he hadn't been aware of who he was speaking with, he lowered his eyes, hawked into the ground, and took a few steps away from her. He would not look at her again.

At home her mother was frantic, rushing out of the house to meet her as she entered the yard.

“Say a prayer, daughter!” Paraska grabbed her sleeve, but she yanked her arm away.

“I'm not saying any prayer.”

Her mother trailed her through the yard toward the house. “No, no, daughter, you must. You don't know what's been done.”

“I know. I heard.”

“You heard, but you don't understand. It was for us, for you and me, for his sin. His hunger.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The sins of the father. The Good Book tells as much.”

“Stop ranting or you'll get us both – ” She halted, her eyes fixed on the branches of the birch before them. Up in the tree, on the lowest bough, a massive raven dangled by the neck, a piece of white butcher's string forming a noose, a blazing white gash against black. It must have been over two feet long, its glossy blueblack feathers flicking and flashing in the breeze.

Beside her, Mama leaned into her neck, her hot oniony breath foul against her skin, and whispered: “The devil won't come for us, daughter, not now. He'll ride by in the night and pass this house, thinking he has already taken the priest's soul. We're safe,

daughter. We're safe."

There were names they used. *Khár'ya. Kourva.*

Whore. Bitch.

By 1928 she was thirty, and had borne seven children. Seven transgressions. Seven times over. Three were still alive. Only two of the four dead ones had lived past infancy. Pavlo had wandered off and drowned at the age of six. The eldest, Katryna, had died from influenza in 1926. Katryna had been a great help. Without her, the burden of three children and a halfwit mother were almost too much.

But Orest was a real friend, taking the boys on like an uncle, bringing quail or boar meat over after a hunt so they wouldn't have to kill a chicken or pig. Even after the communists had passed an edict forbidding hunting or fishing altogether, somehow he still managed to help, saying he just had himself to worry about, and it wasn't worth cooking much for one man.

He never asked, never judged. In the end, she understood that on some level he knew how things were for her.

By 1928 after a decade of fierce resistance, the village soviet had been set up. Guns were confiscated. Farmers protested. People disappeared.

The Komsomol began to twist the minds of the village children, who then began to denounce parents and brothers and sisters and neighbours.

Orest began to speak about leaving. About going to Canada.

## Chapter 8

*Voron -*

I let her sleep.

When she babbled nonsense that way, giving me glimpses into the dark matter of her past, it frightened me. Beware what?

What if she were lost there, stopped knowing me, forgot the last moderately peaceful years of her life and became trapped with emotional and mental torture?

Watching my mother's decline changed me as a doctor. Each day I relearned pain through new eyes. Yet the more sensitive I became to inward and physical suffering, the less I could cope with it. I felt myself coming apart at the seams, disengaged by nature, by nurture, and by the pile-up of my own failures.

I always remembered my mother as cold and comfortless. Maybe it made me feel like I was – and could forever be – completely self reliant emotionally.

But there were glimpses of kindness in my mother, her lost self. Just as I had begun losing sight of the woman to the grotesqueries of old age, I had seen enough of my mother's humanity to at least harbour a lifelong consideration for her, even when I could never actually summon love. Even when there was nothing but hatred in my heart. Sometimes family could not be about love. The glue that kept families intact might be anything but love. Sometimes the best that could be hoped for was only pity, only compassion, only kindness.

Or need, the sick dependency of need.

Sometimes love was little more than a malformed appendage, a cruel reminder of

what was possible yet impossible. This was DNA's double bind.

Rather than hate my mother, I tried to understand her, and in doing so I found myself lifting the fingerprints of her deeper nature from memory. I came to believe that the habitual unkindness she showed to me was the manifestation of fear and disappointment, anger and despair over the life that gave her nothing without exacting a formidable cost. My mother was human, and humane. In a hundred little ways she showed it to me, even if I was too great a fool to see it until it was too late.

Mostly, these moments came when nobody was looking.

When the clammy night air in our house became so miserable that it was hard to breathe, most of our household stretched themselves out on sheets or towels in the back yard to sleep. Even out there it was difficult to rest in the heat with the hard, lumpy turf beneath our bodies and a strident shrieking of crickets and cicadas that sounded until the earliest hour of dawn. Depending on how drunk our tenants were, their snoring and rasping and hacking above the night's noises often made sleep unthinkable.

Like most immigrants from agrarian nations, Mother farmed our narrow strip of property from curb to alleyway. Out front were her flowers and bushes, an assortment of petunias, shrub roses, marigold, curry, primrose, boxwood, holly, cedar. The women from the church traded roots and cuttings and seeds and bulbs so that, scattered across the whole city were the horticultural descendents of my mother's generation of gardeners. Along the side of the house a long strip of crimson climbing roses were trained to a succession of trellises. Out back were rectangles of raised vegetable beds where staked tomatoes and cucumbers grew; beans and peas climbed against the chain-link fence; rows of beets, carrots, potatoes, lettuce exploded from the soil. From our apple, pear, and

peach trees we got fresh desserts, pies, cobblers, and cakes. What we didn't consume fresh my mother preserved during weekends of blanching, sugaring, and salting over bubbling pots of brines and syrups that ended down in the cellar in neat and colourful columns of mason jars that fed us all through the year.

Out there the heady aromas – especially the peppery tomato plants and mown grass – were what I remembered best about the nights we spent outdoors.

Sometimes, though, when my mother was not working and our roomers could not be bothered coming outside, even for respite from the sweltering humidity, or they had not even made it back from their debauched evenings, Mother and I would find ourselves out there alone. As we lay there one night, staring into the eerily still shelter of the massive maple and poplar trees that shaded our yard, or beyond to the stars, I asked my mother what she thought stars were.

“Heaven,” she said, as surely as if she had told me that beets went into borscht, her finger poking, poking upward to where we stared. “God make hole there, in sky. Hole everywhere. Heaven lights. God watch us.”

“Why do you think that?” Next door, our new neighbours began shouting, their braying voices carrying through open windows.

My mother seemed not to notice. “God look. They see. Things so bad, maybe They help.”

“Why doesn't God help *us*? Can't They see us too?”

“God help us, Krystof, help us.” She was very reassuring in the way she answered but given the ugly reality of our lives, how could I believe her?

“How? Why can't we have a normal life without roomers? Why can't I have a

father? Why didn't God do something about that?"

"Could be *roomeri* dead without us, Krystof. Could be God want us here, help dats people. Henry, MaDougga, Ezzy."

"So what? Who cares if they die? I hate them. They don't even deserve to be alive."

"No, Krystof. *Tsscht*, no should be say like dat. No hate them. Dats kind people, who know what happen? Bad life. Could be father, mother beats them, hurts them. Could be they have war, father sojer, come back sick *na* head. You know, could be God see you from there - " She turned up her chin to the starry night. "See you, help you. You smart boy, *hlopchyk*, God know this. You make good life you so smart. I know."

Hearing my mother say this about me made my whole body go warm with gratification. In those hours it didn't occur to me to think about my life as it was - friendless, fatherless, poor. Instead I thought about all the great moments to come. In cinemascopic visions I pictured that day my mother spoke of, the good future she seemed to know lay ahead of me. My fantasy included wealth and prestige. I envisioned walking around like a big shot, flipping bills out of a huge roll to poor kids like me, a fat stogie hooked in my fingers, the slickness of a mob boss on me. Cadillac was my vehicle of choice - I did not yet know that finer cars existed in the world, only that in our automotive city of GM, Chrysler, and Ford, with the Motor City across the way, a Caddy was as good as it got.

Out there on the lawn we lay quietly while the neighbours continued fighting for hours, and when some of the kids began to cry I was certain they were being beaten. Although there were both white and black families in our neighbourhood, what made

these new neighbours so different was the fact that the two elephantine white women living there had two black kids with them in addition to two white kids, and this I had never seen. I asked my mother how these kids had come to live with this white family.

“Could be they orphan, you know, got no family, no mama, no papa. Could be ladies take them, feel sorry. Who know?”

In the aftermath of their fighting I grew afraid of them, as though such rages made me as vulnerable to the violence next door as those kids were. They all swore like the drunks who populated our house, even the youngest who couldn't have been more than four or five years old.

What I learned about the family I heard as my mother and I were walking home from the bus stop after church and ran into Mrs. Cuccinato, our neighbour across the street, who was also returning from church with her children. Too many households on our street were headed by women, no husband in sight. My mother, Mrs. Cuccinato, and the new neighbours were among them.

Mrs. Cuccinato greeted my mother first. “You hava new neighbour, Missa Mahk.”

I was always amused by the way the immigrant hodge podge of our neighbourhood communicated in broken English as varied as any national system of dialects.

“Yah, yah,” my mother responded, frowning while I scuffled my feet impatiently behind her on the sidewalk. “No good. Pig.”

Mrs. Cuccinato would have to have been blind not to know what my mother meant. Within a few weeks of moving in, the neighbour's yard was littered with garbage

and household debris. Through the window I watched one of the little girls on the driveway one hot day as she peeled off her socks and shirt to douse herself with the hose. After towelling herself off she tossed the towel onto the driveway and there the items remained, over time growing so black it was difficult to distinguish them from the cement.

“I sorry for you. I see man come, night.” Mrs. Cuccinato shook her head disapprovingly, surprising given the regular traffic of men who came to her place as friends of the handful of rough-looking women she kept as boarders. “Black man. You know he papa two black kids.”

“Yah?”

“Oh, sure. One my girls tell me. They sister, women. Two sister. Black kids one sister, white kids other sister. No – how you say, *marito* -” She turned to her eldest, Maria, nudging her. “*Marito* -”

Maria roused from a disinterest that equalled mine. “Husbin.”

“*Si*, no huzzabin. He man – that one, he from Detroit.”

“Scream lots,” my mother offered confidentially, “women. All night *ack-ack-acka*. Shout and yell – *oy-yoyoy* – You not believe.”

My mother’s strange utterances made the Cuccinato children snigger. Somehow Mrs. Cuccinato managed to backhand them all with one swipe. They quieted immediately, but the expressions left on their cowed faces made me uneasy.

“Oh, I believe, Missa. Believe, believe. I hear. Everybody hear.”

After everyone had said goodbye and the Cuccinatos disappeared into their own yard, I asked my mother as we continued down the street toward our house, “How can



those ladies have black kids when they're white? I don't understand."

The idea made no sense to me. Without even a rudimentary sexual knowledge at that age, I couldn't figure out how it was possible.

In response my mother yanked my ear. "You leavin be. Not you business."

I didn't ask again.

When school started that September I found myself in grade five with one of the black kids from the house next door. His name was Terrance Kerley, a stocky boy with matching angled chips on each of his two bucked teeth. At first recess I went directly to him in the playground, where he stood leaning against a fence post bouncing a ball by himself.

"Hi," I said, "You live next door to us."

"So what?" Now Terrance really pounded the ball at the cement, his mouth working like he was sucking on something that kept moving around his mouth. The ball came back at him like a bullet. He caught it and pounded it again. His lips squeezed into a stubborn line over his protruding teeth.

"So nothing. I just thought - "

"See this ball?" Terrance held it up, his unblinking eyes staring me down until I had to look anywhere but at him. "My daddy gave it to me."

"Is that your dad that comes over at night?"

Terrance sniffed and went on bouncing. "Naw. That's just my mom's boyfriend. Lou."

I was actually surprised not to hear the cusses coming out of Terrance's mouth

that I heard from their house every day. I didn't mention it. I figured he was afraid of getting strapped. I said, "Oh. Where's your dad?"

Terrance shrugged. "I d'know."

"I don't know where my dad is either."

"He coming back?"

Now I shrugged. Then something occurred to me. "If you don't know where your dad is, how could he give you that ball?"

"He sent it through my mom."

"Oh." Then I said, "Hey, Terrance, how can you be black when your mother's white?"

Terrance just shrugged again. "I d'know."

I don't know what I expected him to say anyhow, what magical answer would clear up the mystery for me. Then he startled me by pulling back his arm and whaling the ball right out of the school property and into one of the surrounding yards.

Our mutual fatherlessness was the common ground that connected us in spite of the many differences that should have kept us apart. Within a few weeks I found myself ditching school with Terrance. He was going to take me to the train tunnel that passed under the Detroit River where we would hitch a ride to look up his older brother and hang around Detroit all day. Our freedom lasted nearly half a morning before we were caught by an eagle-eyed railroad worker. He was the one who called a constable and had us hauled away by the scruffs of our necks.

Summoned by the principal during the hours she needed for sleep, humiliated by

such an act of disrespect, my mother, ashen and stooped, came to school to answer for me in the principal's office. Then, no longer trusting me to be where I was supposed to be, she returned at the end of the day to coldly walk me home. Not a word passed between us. Ahead of us I could see Terrance - his mother had not come when notified - kicking bushes and swatting at tree trunks with a branch.

At home she merely shoved me in the direction of the basement door. This was new, and I didn't know what she would do with me. Halfway down the stairs I tripped and skidded the rest of the way on my behind, landing not quite near the bottom with my back against the stair post so that I was afforded a view of this petite fury practically lunging down on me.

I had never seen her so enraged. I didn't know what would happen, but in that instant I imagined I would be killed if she reached me. The thought sent a jolt of energy into my muscles and I sprang to my feet. But she was faster than my nervous system. She grabbed me by the hair and stopped me dead. Her voice was not frenzied as I thought it would be. It was bitter and hard, and her words hissed through clenched teeth.

"You hateful little devil." The linguistic abyss of her emotional range was being plumbed, and she required her native language to express herself in all the terms such rage demanded. And like a theatrical mark taken from somewhere off stage, on the word *hateful* she lifted me with both white-knuckled fists hooked into the waist of my pants, and dragged me to the basement floor where words and slaps and backhands punctuated the subterranean silence. "Don't you - ever - shame me that way - again. If I ever catch you - with that boy - "

"Terrance is - "

“Shut your mouth - ” An open hand remained poised in the air above my face, ready, “or I’ll shut it for you.”

Something in her absurd strength and the cadence of her rage and the out-of-body visual I suddenly had of my mother lifting me by my pants struck me, and in an instant I was laughing so hysterically I could barely breathe. The sound made her pause. A look of disbelief passed over her features, then rage. She began to kick me, then shake me by the collar. I laughed all the harder. The more I laughed the less I felt her blows.

But I heard her voice, bursting through the frenzy of her physical violence as she began to beat me in earnest. I heard her words. Words and splintered phrases alternated with slaps and kicks and curled fists. “I work - like a slave day and night - so you can have something - and this - is what I get for it? This - is your idea - of gratitude? You know how lucky you are to go - to school for nothing? How lucky you are - not to be taken into the army? Do - you - know - what your life would have been like - if I hadn’t come to this country? You would have been – shit – human garbage. But I come here for a second - chance and what do I get - but an - ingrate - brat - of a son - who disrespects me and disrespects this country. Shame on you. Shame.”

It was as though I had fallen into ice water. Such was the effect of her words. A vision of my mother’s exhausted grey face each morning, now hovering above me with black-ringed eyes, and the feel of her ruined, callused hands as she grabbed at me, reminded me of the hardship behind her rebuke. I thought about Mrs. Cuccinato across the street, and how many times the police had come to take her away along with the five or six nasty looking young women who filled the rooms of her house. How many times my mother had taken the sobbing Cuccinato children into the living room until someone

came by to pick them up. Or the Kureliuks sitting at my mother's table bragging about every scam they pulled through their fleapit tavern just to make a little extra cash, or the way they made their way from one stranger's funeral to another, wedding to wedding, just for free meals. And Terrance's mother next door, sitting on the front porch like a sack of potatoes all summer, cracking peanuts and flirting with the men passing by while my mother became thin and grey with overwork and anxiety.

Suddenly my laughter ceased. I burst into tears.

"I'm sorry!" I choked out, "I'm sorry! I'll never do it again!"

The pummelling came to an abrupt end and I began to hiccough. Without another word my mother dragged herself up the stairs and left me there, crying and hiccing uncontrollably. From the porch above I heard the cot springs compress. A moment later her sobs echoed through the basement along with mine. I hiccoughed and wept until no more tears would come, and there I sat on the bottom step, bent forward over my knees, hiding my face in my folded arms until what seemed like hours later when Mr. MacDougall emerged from some dark corner of the basement.

I started at his appearance. Above my seated form he seemed like a giant, swaying unevenly and reeking of urine and booze. The sun-browned skin of his forearm poking from the end of a too-short sleeve had the fine crinkliness of tanned leather. Although there were people just like MacDougall inhabiting my life, I found him especially vile. Even on a good day I couldn't stand looking at him. He reminded me of a diseased rat and I hated him. After the many times I saw my mother battle with him, after the mess he always made of our house, I wished someone would shoot him in an alley behind the Old Vic so he wouldn't come around any more. Not only was he ugly

both inside and out, but his ugliness infected the air around him. In my childish mind, if he were to hold his arms out, the ugliness would extend as far as his reach. If I passed him on the stairs or in the hallway I ran around him. Or I would refuse to navigate any space with him at all, ducking into another room until he was gone. All it would take was a touch from him and I was sure I would die. It was worse than the cooties that infected our school because there was nothing funny about it.

“Yer blockin the way.” He belched. “Git up. Move yer arse, laddie.”

Although I didn’t get up, I made myself small and skootched to the very edge of my step to give him room to pass. Going upstairs was even more terrifying than letting MacDougall brush up against me. Without looking at him, I turned toward the stair post, shame still pricking me so that even MacDougall seemed a better man than me.

Despite my accommodating gesture, MacDougall didn’t budge. Though I wouldn’t look at him, I could feel him glaring down at me with those horrible, bloody yellow eyes. Slowly he moved one big dangly hand down his trousers pocket. Above me he made a hissing sound like a radiator releasing steam. “Yer ole ma give it to ya good, huh lad?”

My response was little more than an embarrassed shuffle of my feet. A large sliver of wood on the post caught my attention and I gave myself over to picking at it.

“Damn garlic n goulash talkin shit all the time. Cant unnerstan nothin you feekin people say. Like nigger talk them bitches talk next door. White niggers, all of ya.”

MacDougall’s hand reappeared from his pocket as slowly as it had gone in. He shoved something under my nose. “Ere laddie. Try this. Good fer the nerves.”

The thing caught my attention. It was a fancy flask, its carved surface dappled

with black and grey and silver. I looked but didn't move. MacDougall waved it under my nose invitingly.

“Sure, go head. It's joy juice, lad. Good fer the nerves. Good fer what ails ya.” He uncorked the flask with a swugging sound, and wiped the opening with his shirt tail.

There was no question of my nerves. My stomach was clenched into a shaky ball. I couldn't bring myself to go back upstairs to face my mother.

“Just nuff in ere,” MacDougall coaxed on, swirling the flask so I could hear its liquid contents, “fer a lad yer size.”

When I wouldn't comply, MacDougall pushed the uncorked mouth of the flask against my lips. His tone rose into one of complete irritation.

“Bloody try it, lad. Fellas like us needs a wee bit of pick-me-up when the feckin bastards gits us down.” He laughed a low, maniacal laugh, the mucous in his throat rasping thickly each time he took in air. “Or them bitches. Like yer ma, eh?”

It was no secret he hated us but, as had happened with the kids who called me bad names, I could not stand up for myself or my mother. All I could manage was a vicious glance. Having just suffered my mother's wrath, I did not want to meet with this man's temper. When he touched the flask to my mouth again I swallowed what he poured in. It was worse than the cider vinegar my mother sometimes gave me for my health, but not so bad as the gag-worthy cod liver oil that was spooned down my gullet every Friday night while my mother pinched my nose and followed with a drop of peppermint oil to help mask the wretched taste of dead fish. The joy juice ate its way down my resistant throat. As it settled into my stomach the clenching feeling disappeared. Warmth swiftly flowed through my body and into my tingling skin. I gulped down what was offered until it was

gone. In no time I was drowsy and calm. Shame vanished.

Then MacDougall's generous flask disappeared and he clumped unsteadily up the stairs past me, muttering, "Feckin brat forners. Give ya a headache."

I leaned against the post and nodded off. When the sound of my mother preparing supper woke me, I found I could readily mount the stairs on my own volition. I could look my mother in the eye. I could obey her commands to help with the meal and sit across the table from her without resistance, without hanging my head like a kicked dog.

That day I did not hate MacDougall quite so much. I didn't hate my mother. Or Terrance. Or the railroad worker, the constable, the school principal. I did not even hate myself.

Sleep did not come that night, though. The drowse and calm that had come over me after taking MacDougall's joy juice turned into restlessness and bad dreams. I was in the market with my mother, then in the parking lot we became separated. Her figure, remote and in the distance, passed between the cars and poof! in a crowd she vanished. After what seemed like hours of wandering in a panic through the lot in search of her, suddenly I was back in the market and lost amid the stalls. It grew dark. In a maze of fruit and vegetables, whose fungal stench of raw and rotting meat and poultry and eggs I even unconsciously knew to be there but could not actually smell in my dreams, I became disoriented and lost. People ignored me. They saw through me as though I didn't exist. Even as I begged, I received no help. I found a phone but my fingers misdialed. I hung up and misdialed again. And again and again and again. Even when I tried to dial zero I could not get my fingers to complete the full rotation. I cried into the receiver but what came out was a hollow, guttural wail that sat in my chest like a rock.



This was not the first time I had suffered this dream. It came to me several times a year, in slightly different ways. Sometimes I was outside again by the end of the dream and I could see my mother vaguely inside another building across a vast, unlit lot, and she seemed unaware that I had become lost.

In the morning when I woke, my mother wasn't home, as sometimes happened when one of the other girls was sick and she was offered overtime. My mother always took overtime, so I was accustomed to periodically getting myself ready and preparing a breakfast, putting the dishes in the sink, and setting off to school.

On my way home that afternoon, knowing she'd be home and starting supper or finishing laundry before getting a few hours of rest before her shift, I picked a fat bouquet of the dandelions that sprouted below the fences and boxwood hedges all along my route. For some reason I thought about the cinnamon buns. Two houses away from home I pushed the dandelions down a drainage grate and watched them settle into the reeking sludge below, a brilliant spot of yellow in all that blackness.

That my mother was not home yet was strange. At the kitchen table I set up my books to do my homework. For over an hour I read and read the same three lines of my history book. After a while I just picked at the bubbled burn marks on my mother's table. Frustrated, I moved to the living room and drew a chair over to the window to sit in it, waiting for my mother to come up the walk from the direction of Chatham Street.

Supper passed and she was still not home.

By dusk I barely realised I was sitting in the dark. Some of the roomers upstairs began to stir. I heard the pine flooring whine. The toilet flushed and I listened as the cascade of water gushed down the discharge pipe behind the wall.

I did not have supper, not because my mother was not there to prepare it, but because I could not eat, as sometimes happened when I grew anxious. It occurred to me: perhaps they had asked my mother to come back in the afternoon, which meant she would be working until midnight. And even then, if that were true, there was still her regular midnight shift. It might be another night before I saw her again.

With the relief of this idea I lay myself on the floor pressed against the legs of the chair, my heart echoing hollowly in my ears. I could not raise myself to my feet. I couldn't think. I could not cry.

Long after the roomers clumped down the stairs and headed for the bars I went to bed that night without doing my homework. I couldn't focus.

But my mother did not come home the next morning either. School went by in a distracted, exhausted fog. When I couldn't produce my homework, Miss Gibbons scolded me. As the recess bell rang and we rose to stampede outdoors, Miss Gibbons pulled me aside.

"This isn't like you, Chris. First that little escapade with young Mr. Kerley and now this. I'm very concerned about your welfare and your future. There are two things I can count on in this class. One is that you have never missed a day of school, and the other is that you always do your homework to perfection. You're my best student. What could all this nonsense be about?"

With deeply crosshatched skin from her forehead to the double-wattle that tucked into her lace collars, Miss Gibbons might have been several hundred years old. All her dresses seemed indistinguishable except for the fabric or trim. Her breath smelled like feet and mothballs through the heavy, sweet perfume she wore, and she liked to lean in

toward me when we spoke. Behind zebra striped cat's-eye bifocals her eyes were like mercury under the puffy and sagging lids. Her hair was pressed into a series of cottony waves that made her look like George Washington.

I shrugged. "I don't know, Miss Gibbons."

"You do know, Chris. Now, why don't you tell me why this happened? It must have been important."

"No, Miss Gibbons." I looked at the papers on her desk, already marked with thick red smears of ink. "I mean, I don't know."

But Miss Gibbons was undeterred. She craned her neck so I could not avoid looking at her. "Chris?"

"I -" My throat crushed on the force of my voice trying to eek its way out. "I mean, I've just been having t-trouble sleeping."

Miss Gibbons' crosshatches scrunched together over her nose. "Because of your mother's tenants?"

"Huh?"

"Don't say *huh*, Chris. It's unbecoming. Say instead, *pardon me*."

"Sorry, ma'am. I mean, pardon me."

"The tenants, the boarders. Are they making too much noise?"

"Yes, Miss Gibbons," I lied. "It's because of the noise."

"This will not do, Chris." Miss Gibbons tapped my hand and stood so commandingly I thought she might strap me. I flinched. "Now, I'll let this go, just this once. But if this happens again I will speak with your mother about your living situation. It isn't healthy for a young man to grow up under such circumstances, especially a bright

fellow with your promise. It's – well, I'll just say it, Chris, it's unseemly. Perhaps I should speak to her about it sooner rather than later.”

Fearful of this possibility, my response was swift. “No, Miss Gibbons. Please, I won't do it again. It's not really that bad. Or that noisy. It's not that bad.”

Miss Gibbons raised a finger in warning. “As I have said, Chris, not one more time. I will not stand by and watch your future destroyed. I expect better from you. Am I understood?”

“Yes, ma'am. I understand.”

As I left I could feel her old quicksilver eyes track me from behind her glasses. Once I reached the stairs I ran down the flight and out the main door.

It was a Tuesday when I had last seen my mother, the first time any physical punishment had gone beyond slaps into the realm of a beating. The night her son had shamed her. The night of joy juice and nightmare.

I thought of our conversation under the stars, that perhaps after the violence she had shown me she had felt she had ruined my life, that I needed to be saved from her. The truth was, I didn't know what to think.

None of the roomers seemed to have noticed my mother's absence. Nobody came by to ask about her. Laundry day came and went, and they didn't seem to mind lying in bedding rank with their own sour stench, their dirty feet, their vomit and urine.

One afternoon someone came to the door but I sat frozen at the kitchen table, afraid to see who it was, afraid someone might discover I had been left alone and would therefore drag me away to some orphanage. Instead, I hid under the table, out of the line

of sight from any window or door in the house, until I was certain the caller was gone.

At the age of eleven I did not know what to do to find my mother. I had never been to the Norton Palmer Hotel and I didn't know how to get there. Like most immigrant families, we had been instilled with the fear of authority, of doing something that would earn us mysterious deportations or exiles for infractions we never quite articulated or understood, but which kept us living cleanly and lawfully and humbly. I was afraid to go to any authorities for help, for fear I would be considered a trouble-maker and get us both deported. This was especially true given my recent truancy. I was a criminal now, my name written into the thick book of juvenile delinquents by the constable who had taken us in. I felt I had marked us, and therefore might have even caused what was happening.

My mother had disappeared, the stuff of my recurring dream. As a child I could not have known that there were avenues of help available to me. Instead, I simply waited. For disaster. For resolution. I waited for my mother to show up. Mornings I woke myself up, ate, and headed for school. Afternoons I did my homework and sat on my chair by the window to watch for my mother's approach. For supper I scrounged in the cupboards for food. Crackers, baked beans, peas, soup – whatever there was between the kitchen and fruit cellar downstairs where I tucked into my mother's canning: peaches, wax and green beans, tomato sauce, corn, carrots. Evenings I washed my dirty dishes then resumed my place by the window, waiting. Nights, I washed up and went to bed, but I could not sleep. My body fairly vibrated from anxiety. My ears remained tuned to the sound of my mother's return but there was nothing. Her absence from the house gutted my life during those few terrible days. Without her, as cruel as she could be, I

grew afraid.

Saturday passed. None of my mother's friends from the UNO Hall came by to see why we hadn't shown up for the dance. Sunday came and went and I did not show up for my weekend as altar boy. No priest or parishioner knocked on our door to inquire why.

Mail piled on the windowsill by the front door, where I kept each unopened envelope in order of arrival so I wouldn't get in trouble when my mother saw them.

Monday afternoon I returned home from school to find her on her cot (I now had my own, on the other side of the back door). She was curled on her side, a position I rarely saw her sleep in, for she normally slept like a corpse, flat on her back. Although she didn't move when I opened the kitchen door to the porch, she was awake. Her breathing was heavy. Normally frizzy, her hair now lay flattened and limp against her scalp.

"*Anu, hlopchyk?*" There was a strain to her voice. She inhaled deeply but moaned halfway through a breath.

"I - " Momentarily my body surged forward over the stoop toward her, then stopped abruptly. "I - "

"You no make trouble?" Now she turned her face toward me. She was ashen, and thinner than I recalled. The black circles normally marking her face like a raccoon had grown sunken. As I remembered the way she had looked the last day I had seen her, I knew my mother was sick.

I swallowed so hard my throat hurt. "Mama -?"

"*Tssht, hlopchyk.* You no worry. Everything okay."

“Mama,” I said, choking down a sob I could not allow, “You want something?”

“Maybe soup. Heat soup. Borscht. Put cracker, tea.”

“Yes, Mama.”

Downstairs in the fruit cellar I found a mason jar of borscht. My hands shook as I lifted it, and it nearly slipped from my grip. Only the shelf catching it on the bottom stopped it from hitting the floor.

Behind the borscht I noticed a bottle of the rye I saw on the table every Saturday night. For what seemed like a long time I stared at it like I was fully and truly seeing this thing for the first time in my life. I uncorked it and took a mouthful down. In an instant I did not have to think about the way my mother looked, or the guilt I felt for transgressions I no longer knew I had even committed. I was free.

That night I fed my mother and let her sleep, and I lay in my cot on the other side of the porch, her hard breathing a strange comfort when silence had hurt so much.

Illness and a hospitalisation had cost her the hotel job. In those days there was no forgiveness for illness. We were now in debt for medical care, and my mother couldn't work while she recovered from an operation whose exact details she kept from me just as she had kept everything from me.

By dawn Saturday morning I was employed at my first job as a stock boy at the market, and when some of the farmers needed a hand on their farms I was often taken out to River Canard or MacGregor to pick fruit or vegetables. By the time summer came and school was out, I became a favourite farm hand, often spending my weekdays living with the farmers and their families, and weekends at the market helping with produce. In no time I grew familiar with pints, quarts, four-quart baskets, and bushels, and the money I

could earn by filling them.

I opened a bank account for us. I taught myself money management. With my pay I was determined to help my mother any way I could. Until she recovered sufficiently, I kept the house and did the laundry, I bought our groceries and cooked. I discovered how devious our roomers were when it came to rent day. I grew shrewd and tough. I grew up.



## Chapter 9

My mother tells me this crazy story. I'm maybe six, in the tub splashing around like a madman. She's exasperated by the length of time I've been playing games in there, and comes upstairs to stand at the bathroom door wringing her hands dry with a kitchen towel.

"You know, when I was a girl I knew a boy who spent too much time in a tub. When his mama finally pulled him out by the arms he was already shrunk down so bad he slipped right out of his skin. *ShlyAAP*, just like that he came out. It was horrible, let me tell you. Looked just like a skinned rabbit."

I'm sneering. "That isn't true."

She likes this kind of teasing.

"Oh it isn't, eh? Just you look at your fingers and toes. That's where it starts." She grins wickedly to see me examining my fingertips. "It won't be five minutes before it isn't just the fingertips, but the whole body that gets all wrinkled up."

"How did they get him back in - the boy?" I want to know, doubtful but still worried over a salvation for boys like that. I start getting up and she comes over to hold my elbow as I step from the tub.

"Well, his mama tried, that's for sure, because he could sing like an angel and he was supposed to win a big prize from the Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church for his beautiful voice. That's why he was taking a bath to begin with."

I am impatient and cross. "But they got him back in, right?"

"Well, first they tried a shoehorn, but his head kept getting stuck and his mama

didn't want to tear his skin. He was one of those boys who had no scars at all - not one - because he was so proud that way. If it were me I'd have stuffed him back in no matter what. I mean, it's not like anyone would see a scar around his behind anyhow, but just the same it was her boy and she didn't want to mess up his perfect skin."

"Well," I consider as I towel off, "once I tried to put my head into the leg of my pants. It was like that, wasn't it?"

My mother doesn't seem to like being helped, and irritatedly agrees. "Something like that, a real time she had anyhow. Then the priest came and said a prayer, but it didn't do any good then either, just like today."

"Then why do we pray if it's no good?"

"Prayer is good. That's why we go to church every Sunday, isn't it? It takes a thousand times more prayer from one worthy person to do any good these days because of all the evil. That's why the priest burns the incense, to help the prayers get through. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between a prayer and a swear. I mean, even in church you have plenty of bad people. Think about that. With the world as wicked as it is, do you blame God if we make Them so sick to Their stomach that They can hardly look at us, much less listen to our whimpering? And in between that is all the swearing and cursing and hate. And that's just the wickedness that comes from our mouths."

I was already distracted, thinking back to the boy.

"Did he always look like a skinned rabbit, after?" I want to know as I pull my pyjama top over my head.

"After a while he started stiffening up without his skin, but by then it was too late anyhow because his skin went like tanned horsehide and wouldn't fit anymore. What else

could his mama do but use it for people to wipe their feet at the door?"

"But did he look like a skinned rabbit the whole time?" I repeat, and mother asks why it matters so much but I don't know. It just does.

"Sure," she tells me, already forgetting where she left off, "till the day he died. Only without his skin he wasn't always so red and shiny. After a while he was as brown as an old shoe, and as hard. One day they found him curled up like a pork rind and that was it, he was dead. His mother cried like a baby for raising such a stupid boy."

"I'm out now," I announce, "and I don't feel anything coming out."

"Well, that's good. It's the first sign, you know."

My face is pinched with growing annoyance. "Well I don't want anyone using my skin for a door mat."

"Heh," says my mother, faking indignation, "am I the kind to use her boy's backside for a door mat? What's the use of it when I could probably get a nice *valisko* out of it?"

That was the most I ever heard my mother say at one time, the closest thing to any story I'd ever heard from her.

"Mother?"

"*Anu, hlopchyk?*"

Beside me at the dining room table where my mother was sitting so I could cut her food and help her eat, she was small as a child. So shrunken and deformed had she become that she looked more like Andy than a child. Cryssie and Shad were on the other side of me, slumped forward, elbows on the table, eating like they were bored out of their

minds and couldn't wait to leave.

With this growing sense of my own incoherence I began to realise that my own children were no less lost than I was. For the first time in years I felt, not only that I should, but that I actually could do something for them. I had invited them over for Ukrainian Easter to begin introducing them to a culture they didn't even know they shared with me. Next year I hoped to take them to the Easter service and the blessing of the baskets at the church as well, to show them what a traditional Easter was like in our community. But with this one weak gesture standing on such fragile ground between us, I could not risk anything by forcing them to stand in a church from daybreak until noon. They had been as close to my mother as Sharon had allowed them to be. Instead she raised them with a stronger bond with her own parents, whose idea of family time was to park themselves on the collection of couches and barcaloungers that ringed their rank living room and stare at one inane television show after another, hardly a word passing between them. I was sick of my ex-wife's legacy. I needed to change something.

"Mother, do you remember that story you told me when I was little about the boy who fell out of his skin?" I don't know why I had remembered that story to begin with.

"Okay."

I carved a piece of ham on my mother's plate into a dozen tiny slivers, and passed a forkful to her toothless mouth. As she mashed it down I knew it was futile to expect this story from her again. She was barely present.

I recounted it to my kids and by the end they were roaring.

"No way," Shad said, dipping a piece of ham into a heap of ground horseradish and beets. "I never heard Baba tell any kind of story like that."

“Yeah, yeah,” I laughed. “She actually had that in her.”

Then my mother spoke. “Arrest come. Take boys.”

“What’s that, Mother?”

“Take boys. Go to *Kanáde*.”

“Ma, it’s Cryssie and Keegin. Cryssie’s a girl. You’re confused.”

“God,” Cryssie said, snorting her offence, “she’s as blind as a frickin bat.”

Shad elbowed her. “Shut up.”

“Come on,” I said, glaring at the sullen face beside me. “Have some compassion.”

My mother grew frustrated. “Boys, boys. Misha, Stashko.”

I turned back to her. “Which boys? What are you talking about?”

“Stashko. Misha. They leave.”

“You mean Mike and Stan, Mother? Is that who you’re talking about?”

“Ol Contry, Ol Contry.”

“You knew them in the Ukraine?”

“*Vidyizhdzhaly. Zalyshyly.*”

To the kids I said, “I think she’s talking about these two men who used to visit when I was a kid. Mike and Stan.”

I leaned closer to my mother, speaking obliquely into her ear so she could hear.

“Mother, are you talking about Mike and Stan? From up North?”

“Yah, yah. *Romaniúk, nazyvyly. Romaniúk.*”

To the kids I said, “She’s telling me they were called Romaniuk. I never knew that before.”

Although my obsession with the Ukraine was intensifying, and all I could think about was finding time in my schedule to make another trip, this new information from my mother spurred me to head up North.

Over the long May weekend I thought this was a trip worth taking with my kids, to give them the connection to a history that I had been denied, and which I had only denied them in return. The old ways had penetrated deeply in me. *Forget it, forget the past.*

It was the first time my kids had been anywhere besides Graceland, where Sharon headed on annual pilgrimages when she wasn't too unbalanced to share the drive down to Memphis with her parents.

I had grown up in a primal seabed, a lush Carolinian flatland. As we travelled up past Barrie I found the wild and rocky Precambrian topography of the north startling.

"Look at this," I remarked to the kids, Shad beside me, Cryssie in the back seat, earphones plugged into her ear canal like hearing aids – certainly not the massive padded muffins we wore when I was young. They weren't interested.

Kilometre after kilometre of granite and gneiss, blocks and sheets and bands layered, collided, piled up in ancient chaos, hummocks milled smooth by glacial retreat. Vast whorls of gneiss eddied along banks and shorelines. Pink, grey, black, silver, salmon walled the highway on both sides. At times I could see nothing else around me. Eastern white and jack pines grew twisted and sparse, windblown, boughs staggered. They leaned over the road, over rock that barely seemed fit to nourish more than a weed. In this strangeness, my own country, I felt the primordial aeons rise up around me. A palpable sense of human insignificance against raw, physical geology grew conspicuous

in me. Although I had always loved the verdant shores of home where Lake Erie met Lake St. Clair in the choppy strait of the Detroit River, I couldn't imagine how I had lived nearly forty years without exploring this fresh landscape.

Somewhere between Coldwater and Port Severn, several kilometres of highway work funnelled traffic into single north-and-southbound lanes. In the south I had never seen construction equipment on the sheer size I saw on that site, wheels dwarfing crews hanging around nearby, a driver clambering two stories up a ladder to the cab. After observing all this I realised it was the scale I found so startling.

The sights along the endless, drawn-out drive took me back to that piece of pink granite Mike and Stan had brought with them on one of their summer trips. I imagined them pulling off the highway to pick it up just for me. That they had done this for a boy they didn't know was remarkable to me, mostly because they had not seemed like thoughtful or sensitive men, but rather hardened by some adversity that, despite my own difficulties growing up, were even now too remote from my own experience to conceive.

And what had I done with that granite? What would any stupid boy do with a piece of rock whose importance as a sentimental gesture was lost to him? It was not a toy, not a tool, not anything useful in my unimaginative world. My mother, ever practical, had immediately put it to use as a weight to keep the wind from slamming the back door shut in summers.

At a greasy spoon along the highway we stopped for lunch. When I thought about how we had ended up on this trip, the three of us together for the first time, I regretted that I had perpetrated the same silence on my children as my mother had on me. Without feeling there was anything to be proud of in my life, I had not told them the stories of my

past. As we ate meals of hamburgers and chipped beef drowned in gravy with fries, I told the kids about Mike and Stan's visits, about the granite, and what had happened to it.

During the brief weeks when we were friends, I learned that Terrance had a collection of die-cast model cars and trucks that made my heart somersault. He had a Lincoln Specialties crane and a power shovel, Tonka trucks, half a dozen Dinky cars, and large scale die-cast models with moving parts and working steering wheels. Out in the shambles of his back yard was a world whose possibilities overrode my revulsion for the mess, and sparked my limited imagination. I was the boy who coloured in eyes and teeth in newspaper photos, not one who drew pictures. Creativity was not a gift of mine. But Terrance's yard was a terrain of soggy boxes, a caved-in sofa and shattered plastic children's pool, of smashed terra cotta pots, of bits of lumber and stagnating puddles vibrating with mosquito larvae. Its possibilities were limitless as long as there were lumbering Fords and army Jeeps and patrol cars and dump trucks to navigate it.

If my mother knew I played in that yard she would have scrubbed me over with bleach. But my mother was asleep, and what she didn't know didn't matter. Terrance was in hot pursuit of a cherry red Cadillac with his classic black and white cop car, and I was in a corner pushing clumps of sod into a muddy depression with a dozer. Behind me Terrance's black-and-white was *woowooing* wildly over the broken arm of the sofa as the Caddy plunged into the popped springs below.

"*Errrrrt!*" The black-and-white braked loudly and skidded end first toward the unravelled piping where the Caddy had gone over. "Holy shit! Did you see that? Call for backup. Ten-four, Sarge. *Kssht* – this is car eleven, you read me? *Kssht*. Go ahead, car eleven. *Kssht*. We got a vehicle over the cliff. Send backup. *Kssht*. Any survivors,



Captain? *Kssht*. Ain't nobody alive down there. There's bodies everywhere. *Kssht*.  
Ten-four, Captain."

How I envied Terrance his cars. As I glanced over at him by the sofa I wished I had a father as generous as his. Of course, as always happened, thoughts of a father led to anger toward my mother. In uncharitable moments I always blamed her for my father's absence. If she had been a kind, beautiful woman he'd never have left. I knew this was true because more and more I was thinking about how desperately I hated my life with her – the anger, the tenants, the silence. The more I thought about it, the less I wanted to stick around. I promised myself that as soon as I got the chance I'd be out of there forever. I'd go somewhere so far away that the old lady would be lucky if she saw me again before she died. There were days when I contemplated running away. The same unhappiness I suffered had driven my father away, I was sure of it, only he had not been hampered by the ignorance that kept me under my mother's thumb. At least that was how I saw things.

As I rolled my truck into the mud I said to Terrance. "I sure wish I had some nice cars like these. You sure are lucky."

"Yeah."

"You must have twenty cars. Huh, Terrance? You think there are twenty cars?"

"Maybe. I d'know."

"Do you play with all of them?"

"Sometimes."

"Which one's your favourite?"

Terrance was sitting against the sofa now, mindlessly rolling the car's wheels on

the palm of his hand. He held up his patrol car. "I like this here. It's the only one I really like."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"They're all so cool. I don't know how you can pick."

"I'm gonna be a cop when I grow up."

Truancy had not yet entered our thoughts. "Yeah?"

"Uh-huh."

"Cool."

"Hey, Chris."

"Yeah?"

"What you give me for one of'm?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll trade you. I'll traade - " Terrance's head rolled around to take in the whole yard where his collection was strewn, but he reached behind him and pulled up the Caddy from the other side of the arm. "I'll trade you this here for sumpin."

I couldn't believe it. He was willing to part with something so incredible that for an instant I thought him impossibly stupid. My breathing grew heavy as I contemplated my pathetic stock of possessions, anything he would want. I could come up with nothing. I had no toys of any value that hadn't been worn down by someone else's children before they got to me in some pitying act of charity on the part of my mother's friends.

"I don't have anything, Terrance."

"How bout that striped stone?"

“What striped stone?”

“Back step. That one.”

“The one we use to keep the door open?”

“I guess.”

This request baffled me. “What do you want that for?”

“I d’know. It’s nice. I like it.”

This made me think Terrance doubly stupid. No matter, I quickly calculated my mother’s reaction. She had spent no money on the stone. Anything heavy could easily take its place to perform the same task. I would run down to the river and look for one. I would find a replacement at the school, in an alleyway. A stone, a cinderblock, a brick, I would kick a crumbling wall to replace that stone if it meant having that Caddy in my hot little hand. Possibly, mother wouldn’t even notice it was gone.

But she would notice a new toy in my possession. She would think I had shoplifted it. I thought of the many nooks and crannies in our old house, the attic, the basement, the shed out back. I would have to strike a balance between hiding the car well and not arousing any suspicion by frequenting one particular spot too often.

It didn’t take much more internal debate before I was on my feet. I hopped the chain-link fence and within the span of a minute I was the proud owner of a cherry red General Motors Cadillac model car. It came at a cost I could not have calculated as easily as my mother’s reaction. The next day, Terrance invited me to the river with him. Despite the fact that school was weeks away, he carried a back pack. As we stood out front on the sidewalk ready to go, Terrance’s mother or aunt was sitting in an old armchair on the porch, her massive legs flung up on the rail. Both women looked so

much alike I could not tell which was Terrance's mother. The way they all spoke to each other there was no way to tell. In the still and sultry August air she kept her house dress hiked up over her doughy thighs. Her appearance seemed somehow indecent, and I found it difficult to look at her. She hollered at Terrance.

"Where the fuck you goin, you little shit?" In her lap she had an open bag of Wonder bread, and she was devouring the loaf by the slice.

"Playin."

"Playin. Playin. Well aint you somethin. I said get me my smokes. Dint I say get me my smokes?"

"Fuck you."

This exchange shook me. A hot surge rose up the back of my neck and my face. I could not look at Terrance.

"C'mon, Chris. Let's go." And we were off, Terrance shoving me ahead of him, his pack rocking against his back as he ran. Behind us, Terrance's mother or aunt was calling us both disgusting names.

Until we reached the river, neither of us spoke. Finally, I broke the awkwardness. I gestured to his pack. "What do you have there, Terrance?"

"Nothin. Juss some stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"You know. Juss stuff. To have fun."

"Oh. Like toys." I grew excited, and quickly forgot what had just occurred. "Did you bring your cars, Terrance?"

The expression on his face made me feel like an idiot, though I could not tell why.

“Naw.”

“Do you think we can play with your cars when we get back, Terrance?”

“Never mind the stupid cars, dummy. This’ll be more fun.”

I shrugged, and followed. “Okay.”

For half an hour we walked up and down the riverfront. We tottered along the twisting lines of railway track that crisscrossed around the station and turnabout. At Terrance’s lead we inspected the massive pilings where the barges pulled up to transport freight cars across the river. I did not know what we were looking for, but I guessed it was the perfect place to play whatever fantastic game Terrance would concoct. We went over to the docks down Ferry Street. Without explanation we came back to the pilings, then doubled back to the train station where Terrance stood staring at the window for the longest time. Then, without a word, he shrugged off the backpack, fished around inside and, to my growing confusion, brought out the rock.

“What are you - ”

Before I could finish my question, Terrance hoisted the rock over his head with both hands and slammed it through the station window.

“Run!”

I ran. I took off like a startled rabbit and ran. Terrance peeled away in the other direction. Terrified, I raced straight home, tore through the back door, locked it behind me, and crouched under the sill of our front window pulsating with fear, waiting for the police to find me. They did not, but when I saw Terrance again it was close to supper time. He came strolling down the sidewalk kicking a soda bottle. I could hear it clattering and tinkling all the way up the street. It went on so long that when the sound

came near the house I peered out the window from my hiding place just in time to see Terrance stop in front of his house, haul back his foot, and punt the bottle into the street. He was not in handcuffs. There were no police. I was safe.

Over the years we were neighbours, I rarely ran into Terrance. My next encounter with him was on a Saturday a few years later when we were perhaps fourteen years old. Luba Kara had brought her twin girls over while she and my mother did each others' hair. The girls were out on the sidewalk. I could hear them playing one of those patty-cake games, their small hands clapping together in rhythm to their rhyme.

So so-rry *Pla-ay-Mate*  
I can-not *Play-With-You*  
My do-lly *Has-The-flu*  
She might *Throw-Up-On-You.*  
Boo hoo *Boo-Hoo Boo-Hoo –*

Suddenly I heard a yelp, followed by a loud thudding sound, and silence. I went out to find one of the girls flat on the sidewalk bleeding from her head. The amount of blood pooling around her stunned me for a moment, then I was out there at her side. Her sister was standing beside her, sobbing almost soundlessly, her pallid face puckered in fear, dark unblinking eyes fixed on the twin on the ground. But the twin on the ground did not say a word, did not cry. When I realised she might be seriously hurt I shouted for my mother and Luba, and in a confusion of Ukrainian and girlish sobbing, she was bundled up and taken to the kitchen, the blood flow stanching with my mother's clean kitchen towels. Afterward, we learned that Terrance had been in the old hickory tree and, having seen the girls on the sidewalk below, yelled *Geronimo!* and threw himself with such force on the girls that Anjou had been knocked to the sidewalk, her head bouncing off the concrete, split open by a large stone.

If Terrance had been a strange and inconsistently troubled boy as a child, there was no question when I saw him for the last time in 1967. Thanks to my four-semester schedule I was already in med school, but had come home for a visit. That night I headed over to Detroit to bar hop with some of the engineers I had known from the University, all of them now working for one of the Big Three. Although I was in med school, I was still a source of ridicule for the engineers, who considered every other discipline or career choice little better than an artsie cop out.

It was a steamy July night. None of the bars we hit was air conditioned, so after getting some beers from a liquor store we stayed outside, heading toward a retaining wall around a small park just to avoid the unbearably clammy bars. It took some of the fun out of our plans, and we quickly grew bored. I found myself gazing around between sips at the steamy and uninteresting park, the seedy street we were on, the shoddy buildings. After a few drinks I noticed a black guy in uniform who had come to sit against the end of the wall. I wouldn't have paid him much attention except that I saw, when he turned in our direction, the angled chips in his bucked teeth. I went over.

“Terrance?”

“Yeah.”

“Chris Mahk. From next door on Glengarry. Begley School. Remember?”

“Oh, hey, yeah - ” Terrance reached up and took my outstretched hand. He was already gone, his eyes barely focusing on my face. He was sweating hard. “Hey, man, how you doin?”

“Good. Long time no see, eh?”

“Yeah, man.” Terrance was blinking hard, in time to some private riff. He took a

drink from the beer he held between his thighs.

I looked at his uniform. "You join the army or something, man?"

Terrance nodded and sniffed. "Airborne. Eighty second. Just got back from 'Nam. Finished my tour."

"Whoa. 'Nam, eh? That's some bad shit going on over there."

Terrance laughed but his eyes were unresponsive. "Fuck. Got to kill me some Charlie, man. No complaints. My guys and me went in there and blew a whole fuckin village all to shit. You shoulda seen it. Take one of them fuckin flame throwers you got yourself some fresh fuckin barbeque. Know what I mean, man? It's cool, it's cool. Yeah. Yeah, man, it's all right."

I was careful with my words. "No kidding."

"No, seriously. I'm goin back soon as I get checked out." His eyes stared at me without blinking, and I could not look at him. He slouched into me, a gesture of confidence, so I leaned down to hear what he had to say. "I gotta get off the shit. Gotta test clean. Y'know? But it's hard, man. It's hard. Over there I been on a hundred different kinds of junk. I gotta test clean. Man, I gotta get me re-upped. I mean, they don't care if you're stoned all to hell twenty four seven over there, but you gotta test clean first."

"So you're not having an easy time?" I felt like an idiot, not knowing what to say.

"If I could only test clean, man. That's just it."

"Well, I -" I glanced back at my buddies but Terrance had my sleeve.

"So you joinin up? They want guys like us. You go in there, you get any bitch



you can. Some of em think you'll marry em if they get with you. I mean, they'll whore themselves out to ten guys a night they think'll get em out of there. It's great man." He smirked, "Cep when you're pissin fire, eh?"

I did not want to talk to Terrance any longer.

"Look, Terrance, I have to go. My buddies - " I gestured toward the guys laughing and talking on the other end of the wall.

Terrance's indeterminate gaze followed mine, his expression growing cold and enraged. "Oh. I get it. It's always like that. Nigger good enough to kill for you, white boy? Nigger good enough to do your fuckin dirty work? We good enough for - "

From my pocket I took out a twenty that I had intended to use to buy beer. Quickly, I stuffed it into his shirt pocket. "Here, buddy, buy yourself a case or something. Take a load off, man."

"- war but ain't you got no use for the black man, maybe just to shoot the shit for old time sake? Yeah, I know fuckin white shit like you, I know what you want. Ain't none of ya man enough to do what I done over - "

"I have to go."

I left Terrance in the middle of his sentence but as I turned away I could hear him going on as though I were still standing there. I told the guys we had to leave but they didn't want to go. I told them there might be trouble if we stayed but they thought that would be fun.

I left on my own, nervous that Terrance might follow me. From the look of him, even if he lived to make it through another tour, he wouldn't have made it back again.

It was past two in the morning and I had to get home. The next day I awoke to

gaze out across the river from my mother's back door, where I had gone to sit on the steps and drink my coffee. A few columns of black smoke rose over Detroit. I thought it strange, perhaps gas line fires given that they seemed to be concentrated in the same area. I did not give what I saw another thought. That day while Sharon visited her parents with the kids, I stayed at my mother's to study.

By late afternoon I realised I was hearing gunfire and sirens echoing over the water. Accustomed to occasionally hearing such noises from Detroit, I paid no attention until it became worse, and it did not subside as it normally would.

What I saw when I looked out my mother's back door that afternoon left me dazed. What had started as a couple of fires that morning had become a black canopy over the city's West Side, plume after plume feeding the cloud roiling overhead in the humid July air.

"Mother, come see this."

She had been preparing a light supper for us both, and came to the door beside me.

"*Sho tam?*"

"Look - " I pointed to a spot between the trees and rooftops.

"*Oy, Bozhe!*" She seemed to be hearing the pandemonium, too, her ear cocked, her face grim with concentration.

"I'm going down to the river to have a look."

"You careful, *hlopchyk.*"

"Ma, it's in Detroit. We're in Windsor. The bullets can't fly that far."

"You no be smart with me. You get."

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll beat me to death if I get shot. Very reasonable.”

I headed down to the tracks at the waterfront and sat on the banks with dozens of others, all of us looking on, our faces uncomprehending, our expressions fixed by shock. Men and families still in church clothes stood around in clusters, heads now and again shaking dismally, the conversation low and funereal. Somebody had a transistor, its garbled message crackling among us, its owner passing messages along.

*They’re saying –*

*I heard –*

These were the phrases that began every sentence.

Detroit had gone mad.

For five days back in London I became consumed by news, fixated with the disintegration of a city I had known all my life, a city through which I had rambled with no more thought than I did my own back yard. But in London nobody else seemed interested, or didn’t understand the importance of what was happening. How could they? Outside of Essex County, Windsor was derided as the asshole of Canada as much as Detroit had become the asshole of America, with nothing anybody wanted, peopled by grubby blue-collar masses nobody was interested in, an underdeveloped backwater with little more respect from the rest of the country than hillbillies received in the States. In London you could walk block after block and never see a face of colour. How could they understand what we, in Windsor, were touched by on a daily basis? Detroit was our sister, our brother.

I thought of Terrance. Poor, displaced, unhinged Terrance. Black, white, American, Canadian. He was all of us. For some reason I could see him at the heart of

all that violence, the killing and destruction, the rage, a broken man with nothing left to lose. It was my last contact with him.

In the end, though, my first transaction with Terrance was the thirty pieces of silver by which I had betrayed the simple kindness of two men who had wanted nothing more than to give me some small reminder of a few summers when, for a day or two, my mother almost seemed happy.

## Chapter 10

Highway 69 was a long, straight two-lane stretch that felt hours longer than the six we had already travelled from Windsor. Most of it we tolerated in utter silence, the tinny jangling from Cryssie's earphones the only sound in the car. From there we headed west through Wahnapiatae and Coniston, then onto the Kingsway Road toward the heart of Sudbury.

Once we passed the industrial businesses and suburban subdivisions on the outskirts, we found ourselves in a city that at times seemed to have barely advanced after the Depression. In other areas it seemed stalled in the fifties. I half expected to see Studebakers or Dodge Ramblers parked around some of these places. Some buildings and houses looked exactly as they might have fifty years earlier, carved with troglodytic intransience into the solid granite scarp.

Cochrane was a short jog off Kingsway in a neighbourhood of old ramshackle houses built up into the rocky hills. The address I was searching for was a small clapboard cottage, eaves warped from neglect. The house almost seemed abandoned. Weeds overtook the lawn and clawed their way up the peeling siding. The cement stoop had crumbled from an unremitting presence of moisture both from the dank soil below, and from the broken eaves above that permitted a destructive line of rain to escape.

I had only found one S. Romaniuk in the phone records for the Sudbury area, where my mother had told me the brothers were from. I found no M. or Mike Romaniuk at all.

I knocked on the creaking summer door with its shredded paint and screening. I

knocked again, and looked over toward the nearest window. I knocked again, only now realising how anxious I had become for this moment.

“Can I stay in the car?” Cryssie asked, her face miserable as she studied the house, the door, the yard, the street.

Shad echoed, “Yeah, I want to stay in the car too.”

I spoke under my breath. “For God’s sake, I brought you up here specifically for this, so we could find out about our own history. What do you want to stay in the car for?”

“It stinks. I can already smell it and we aren’t even inside yet,” Cryssie whined.

The air was rank. Someone moved inside. The scrape of a chair against a floor or wall was clearly audible through an open window.

Annoyed, I said quickly, “Breathe through your mouth. Or chew some gum.”

“Dad, I’ll puke. I swear I’ll puke.”

“Your mother’s a slob. Why doesn’t that bother you?”

“Da-a-d, come on! Just let us sit in the car. You can tell us everything on the way home anyhow. It won’t make the drive so frickin boring.”

“Stop using that word. It’s no better than the real thing. What did I tell you about talking like trailer park trash? You weren’t raised on Drouillard Road, were you?”

“No.”

“Well then, talk like a lady. Like you were raised properly.”

She huffed her disdain.

I waited to hear a footfall from inside the house, then told the kids to go sit in the car. Finally the door opened. An elderly face peered out from behind the sagging screen.

Through thick, grimy bifocals, he tilted his head up and down and up again to get a look.

"Uh-huh?"

"Are you Stanley or Mike Romaniuk?"

"I don't want nothing." Slight accent. *Th* pronounced *t*. Memory had somehow purged it.

"I'm not selling anything. Please - "

"What do you want?"

"My name is Krystof Mahk. My mother knew some men named Romaniuk, but I'm not sure if I'm in the right place."

"Eh?"

"Did you ever visit Windsor - down south - about thirty years ago? Two men named Stan and Mike - "

"Mike? He's dead. What do you want?"

"Mr. Romaniuk, I think you knew my mother."

"No, no. He raised us alone. No woman."

"No - " Accustomed to poor hearing, I raised my voice. "*my* mother. You knew *my* mother. Sonya Mahk. *Mahk*. Windsor."

"You got to be kidding! This is some kind of trick. I'm an old man. It's a trick to steal my money."

"Look, I don't want your money. I have some questions to ask you. That's all."

He was suspicious, angry. "What questions?"

"Please. I'm just trying to find out about my family."

The old man began closing the door. "No, no. I don't want no part of this. No

part. I'm done with that business."

Business? This man had to have been witness to my mother's past, to something that had silenced her and kept me untethered all my life. I placed my hand over my chest. "Please, Mr. Romaniuk. Just a few questions. I would be so grateful."

Through the narrowing opening he grumbled, "Questions bring trouble."

"Please, please – I don't want trouble. Look, I grew up alone. I had no family. My mother – Sonya – never talked to me about anything. I had nobody. I just went all the way to the Ukraine looking for something, anything that could fill the holes in my history. I thought maybe you could help me."

The closing door halted, just a couple of inches to spare. "Ukraine? You been over there?"

"Just in October."

"You find anybody?"

"I couldn't even find Zólota Bráma – I mean, the place my mother's from. I couldn't find anything. I didn't even know what I was really looking for. I mean – how could I?"

Behind his spectacles those crêpey eyes gazed past my feet. "Zólota Bráma. There's something I never heard in sixty years."

The intensity of my excitement made my voice shake. "You know it?"

But he did not seem proud to admit it. "Come in."

I entered, and behind me the wonky screen door wailed shut with a crack. It bounced a few times before settling unevenly against the stop. My host took me up a short flight of stairs to the right, into a small kitchen that had likely not been altered since



the house was built. The plain green asbestos flooring was worn away in some places right to the plank subfloor. All around the edges under the cabinets and along the walls the grime piled up like a black beach. Every strength I owned was tested against this filth. I could barely stand it. Still, it was nowhere near the revulsion I had begun to feel about my patients.

At a kitchen table stacked high with newspapers and odds and ends, Mr. Romaniuk took a chair and gestured for me to take the other. I did.

“So ask your damn questions.”

I swallowed hard, and for a second I could not think what I wanted to say. I cleared my throat, then cleared it again. How to begin? After all the interpersonal disasters of my life I no longer expected cooperation from anyone.

“Okay. Okay. Well, I guess I - ” I pinched the end of my nose. “What – I guess I just want to know what brought you to our place? How did you know my mother?”

A shaky hand made its way to his face, crazed purple with spider veins and broken capillaries. One finger rested over lips pulled tight over the dentures he wore, and tapped for what seemed quite a while.

“She still alive? Mama?”

“Yes.”

“She never told you nothing?”

“No. Never.”

He folded his arms across his chest and rested back into his chair. “Not even after me and Mike showed up there?”

“No. I’m telling you, it was like growing up in Witness Protection. I asked and

she'd get angry or tell me to mind my own business. She never said a word about her life, not a word."

With his palm out to me, he leaned forward. "Looks like I got your life in my hand." With a crushing motion he snapped his hand into a fist. It struck me as a strange thing to do.

"So you know something?"

Now he patted his palms on the tabletop before him. "I know enough."

My stomach dropped. I was certain my face was paralysed into a stare. In those three words I felt as apprehensive as one of my patients awaiting a risky procedure. I was breathing hard, powerless to unask the question, to retrace my journey that day, go home and get drunk over the same things one more time, resigned to doing nothing just as I had done all my life. In an instant I knew I would face my mother's demons if this man opened his mouth, and I could never again know my own life as it had been before this. Beneath the knowable contours of my life, that sameness forged by my mother's pathological privacy, I began to feel something seismic beneath my entire emotional and psychological ground. Before my companion spoke a word I knew I was coming undone.

"Yeah, me and Mike come up there that summer after we seen her name in that there *Visnyk* – The Herald. Christmas it was. Bunch of women in the picture making *pyrohy* at the church down there, and there she is, back row, same face only older. Only the picture said her name was Mahk. We knew her by Grekhov."

"Grekhov? I never knew that."

"Didn't you never see no papers? No passport, no baptiz paper, nothing?"

"No. Nothing."

“By God.” Incredulous, he kept shaking his head,. “That was her maiden name. Anyhow, Mike and me didn’t know what to do. We waited till the farm could spare us and we could make the trip. I tell you we drove all day and night, me and him taking turns, then after a few hours at your place we drove day and night all the way back. It was a shock, I’ll tell you. A real shock. Me and Mike never said nothing all the way home. Not a word.”

“So - ” My heart was squeezing into a fist in my chest. “Who was she to you?”

For a moment he stared into his hand, now drumming between us on the table. I waited, holding my breath until he spoke.

“Countryman.” He barked into a fist, the phlegm cracking in his throat. “Same village.”

What was seismic in my suspicions only a moment ago became something massive, tectonic, whole continents of my reality cramming up against these words, these mere words. They seemed so much larger than they were, and the weight of so little was suddenly so great that I felt myself crushed beneath them.

“You – Then you were there.” My mouth would not produce saliva. I could not swallow. “Back then. You were there.”

“Sure. We left in – what – thirty, I guess. We never heard from no one after that. It was like the village fell off the planet. We sent letters but never heard nothing back. We sent packages. We tried calling but even the operator never heard of no place called Zólota Bráma. It was gone.”

“I– Yeah.” My head kept shaking, over and over. “Yeah, it was the same thing when I was over there. Nobody had ever heard of it.”

From behind the dirty lenses of his glasses he squinted, and eyed me up and down. “That so, eh? I’m not surprised. That’s the way things were over there. That’s how they did things, those damn commies.”

“What did you know about my mother, then?”

“Well, Katryna, Pavlo, the babies, they all died. Me and Mike never knew none of them except Katryna and Vera. Even them we didn’t remember so good, except Vera was a deaf-mute.”

“And who are these people?”

“Kids, kids. Her kids.”

The silence between us was so intense I thought I had gone deaf. “What?”

“Sure. I mean, by the time me and Mike left, the only one still alive was Vera, but she was only three or four. We asked what happened to Vera, down there when we went those times, but she never talked about it. All I know is there was no Vera.”

Vera. My mind unravelled back to that first visit. I thought about the hushed way the three of them had spoken, excluding me. Something about that name resonated with me.

“But - ” My mind stumbled over these truths I had yearned for all my life. The wildly firing synapses of my brain would not let me grasp them. Of all the possibilities, I couldn’t have envisioned hearing this. “You’re saying my mother had a family? I had brothers and sisters over there?”

“Sure.”

“A-and you’re telling me they’re all dead. All of them.”

He shrugged dramatically, frowning. “I’m saying what I can say. That’s it.”

I sat there, trying to envision my mother with children other than me. I tried to see her as a family woman with a brood, not the old hen with her one straggling chick. I could not picture it.

“My mother lost these people. She lost her whole family.”

Mr. Romaniuk went on: “We were lucky. Our dad – I mean, Orest Romaniuk, he wasn’t our father but he raised me and Mike just the same - he started taking us to the city one year and next thing we know we’re over here. We were damn lucky. That’s the last we seen of Sonya. Until that time we come down there.”

I was not hearing his words. I could not push my mind past my mother’s suffering, not just because she had experienced the brutality of communism, and had lost an entire family I had known nothing about, but because even when she must have believed she would find a better life, she had only traded it in for another kind of suffering. In the face of such facts I felt unabashed shame. I thought about the one time I had told her I hated her, and the eighteen years of my marriage when I had made only a handful of visits a year, all because of Sharon. The insensitivity I had shown her most of my life sprawled out behind me like a map, each locus of unkindness a black mark I had left behind.

“Jesus. Jesus.” I could hardly speak above a whisper. “God - ”

“Well, I guess.”

At his tiny kitchen table, with space enough for our two chairs, I sat across from this final connection to my mother’s past asking baffled questions, and listening with a distraction that made me only half-hear what he was telling me. “What else do you know? What was it like back then? What was my mother like? And my father?”

“Oh, she didn’t have no husband, no man. She just kept having babies. Back then people talked. We heard some things. Some said she was in with the communists that way, having relations with them damn Muscovites they sent down to turn us. They said all kinds of things back then. Even said she was a prostitute. Me, I never seen nothing like that. Me, I figure the way things were it wouldn’t surprise me if the commies were getting what they wanted out of her like they did to lots of our girls. I mean, what choice did women like that have?”

The implications beneath these words horrified me. None of it was a possibility I could imagine in the context of the mother I knew. Yet I could not stop my mouth from opening, the words from pushing past my lips. “What – what are you saying?”

“Look, you asked. I told you questions bring trouble.” He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “You know, you young people are all the same. You don’t want to know the hard parts. You have it too easy, if you ask me.”

I wasn’t listening. I felt sick beyond the physical force this information produced in me. If I found it difficult to imagine the woman who had raised me, her hair not yet streaked with white, how could I envision the young peasant girl over there whose body was nothing but a transaction, a seizure, a salvation. I thought about my mother’s solitude and her virulent morality and while I could follow the dotted lines, I could not face the shape they formed.

Whole lobes of my brain seemed to explode beneath my skull. It became impossible to connect perception with my eyes, thoughts with words, sheer bodily impulse with movement. My hands began to tremble. A hard knob choked in my throat. How well this explained my mother’s silence, its malevolent undercurrent of secrets, and

if I could be so generous, the wisdom in her choice to shield me, not just from all that despair, but from what such despair could have done to me had I known it. And I had so glibly wanted to claim her past for myself, to breach the boundaries she had lain out around herself, to colonise her life without knowing that even the least strength of character and esteem I could claim might have been torn from me with this simple knowledge.

“You know, kid, you think you know what’s what because you read it in books or you see it on that there television. You think you know about truth. Well let me tell you, there’s things you can’t even imagine, hard times other people lived every day like it was nothing. You got no idea.”

“I’m pretty sure whatever my mother experienced over there was bad enough to justify never speaking of it again. I get that.”

“You got no idea.” Stan wiped his mouth. “One day you’re minding your own business, next thing there’s strangers in your village. They got guns. They take ours away. They take over the government. All the time they round us all up and make us sit in the church and they’re trying to get us to join a collective. They make these meetings when we’re trying to harvest, when we’re trying sleep, or milk our cows or pick in the orchards. They make it so we can’t work, so our food rots and we can’t go to market. Night and day it’s like that. They stand there screaming about communism and how great it is, and how the collective is the only way to go. But we don’t budge. Next thing they start taking the men. They beat them, they put them in jail, they send them to Siberia. Some they killed. One time I remember they kept us in there for three days, no food or water. People got sick. One lady who was pregnant lost a baby. It just died in

her right there. She walked around with that there dead baby in her another month. But they didn't care. When they saw we were that sick they gave up and sent us home, then when they figured we should be better they started it all over."

I felt so badly. "God, Mr. Romaniuk, I know it was terrible. I know that."

"You don't know. Do you know how many families went hungry because their papa was sent away? You know how many families went to the collective because they lost their farms that way, even though they never wanted it? Then there was them stupid ones who went to the collective on their own, said they believed what they were hearing. They gave up everything. God damn, they couldn't even have no more than one change of clothes, can you believe it? One pair of shoes. More than that and you were a capitalist pig. That's how they talked. Everyone was a capitalist pig, even if you couldn't tell where your next meal was coming from. So off they went with their children and everything over to the collective. They worked like mules. A week passed, two weeks, a month. Months passed and none of them damn buggers got paid, not once. But they were worked like mules just the same, always with the guns to their backs. Our people starved in the collective, but you ever hear that? You young people read in your fancy books about ideas like it was nothing. You go to school and study words, and think you're big shots because you think you know about that there socializ and communiz, but you got no idea how words murdered men just the same as guns. Words and ideas. That's how it was with those damn Muscovites all the time, big talk and big ideas. They were going to save the world. Well, they done things over there if you had to live through it you'd be in the crazy home."

Something in his words echoed Anjou's that first night at the park, about hatred



being a promise, about the toxicity of words. The divide separating Stan and Anjou was great, but somehow they had come to the same understanding.

Stan frowned deeply. “Me and Mike, we spent our whole lives wondering what happened back there in the Old Country after we left. I mean, she was still there after dad took us to Canada. Sonya, I mean. And there she was making *pyrohy*. It was like being hit by lightning.”

My energy was disintegrating by the minute. Even from the black hole into which I was sinking I could read the heartache behind this pronouncement.

He went on: “Jesus, what the hell, eh? It was crazy. You got no idea how me and Mike got turned around like that. Mike, he always drank but after that he stayed drunk for days until I got so sick of it I beat all hell out of him and took away his booze.”

By now I felt completely deflated, worn out. I could barely focus on what he was telling me. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You got your answers, eh boy?” He was showing his bitterness.

“Well, I - ”

“Well, let me tell you, we wanted answers too. Only thing, we knew when we went down there that it was bad news. Nothing but bad news. But we had to know.”

“I don’t know what to think. I just don’t.” I pressed a palm against my mouth and took a deep breath, realising only then that I had barely breathed in the last few minutes. I raked my fingers through my hair. “I never saw this coming.”

“Questions cause trouble. I told you. You asked, you got. We asked, we got.”

I glanced up at those sad, hard, old eyes, “Why did you stop coming around? What happened?”

He shrugged. "Mike got sick. He got that there zerose of the liver. I took care of him at home till he died. I couldn't leave him alone. After that I had to take care of the farm on my own. Next thing I know I'm an old man. I couldn't make the trip alone. I just didn't care no more."

"I know you don't want to hear this, but I think you should go see her. She would appreciate it. You could come back with me or – or I'll arrange something."

He nodded, not in agreement but as an acknowledgment of my having spoken, a smouldering expression hardening his dull eyes. "You young people, you got no idea what hardship is. We come in 1930. That there Depression just started. My uncle's farm where we lived didn't hardly survive. We worked like dogs, all of us, just to feed ourselves. Me and Mike, we went to school for the first time in our lives. Dad made us. No matter what, we had to go to school, learn to read and write. We went right from Depression to war. You got no idea."

"I have some idea. I know what poverty is."

"I loved my brother. He was all I had. Mike joined the navy. I was in Hong Kong, that area, fighting the Japs. Infantry. He went in with the navy. He patrolled the English Channel and the Atlantic right around there."

"I'm sorry. I know you had a hard life. I'm so sorry."

Now he seemed newly irritated by me. "So you didn't look so poor to me down there."

"What's that?"

"You and Sonya. You didn't look so poor. Nice house and everything."

"Nice house - ?" I thought that was amusing considering we lived in a slum.

“Well, we took care of it. We always took care of what we had. But we were poor. I remember having nothing. Just work. Mother would work midnights cleaning rooms at the hotel, then she’d come home and get a few hours of sleep before she had to get the laundry done and the cooking. She kept roomers in the house all my life. Alcoholics, tramps. Just the garbage of society. Until she was too sick to do it. She scrubbed laundry by hand until we could afford a wringer washer. I don’t know how she did it. I don’t know how she survived. She had an operation and lost her job, and we were in debt for the medical bills. After she recovered she found work cleaning houses here and there, but by then she was already in her fifties, sickly. She couldn’t read or write, and nobody wanted to hire her. Windsor went through more than one Depression, believe me. When she got sick and moved in with me the neighbourhood was so bad she got nothing for the house. Nothing.”

“She was hard. Know what I mean? Just hard, eh? That’s what I remember.”

“No, I know. You’re not hurting my feelings saying it. She was a bitter woman.”

“Look, kid, you got somewhere to stay?”

Thinking about my children and their delicate nostrils, and that he might ask us to stay with him, I lied: “I have a hotel booked.”

“Good, good.”

“My son and daughter are waiting for me in the car.”

“Oh, you got kids?”

“Yeah. Seventeen and nineteen.”

“They come with their old man, eh, keep you company for that trip. I remember what a drive that was. Hard drive. You got some good kids there.”

“They’re trying.” It was the best I could say.

Stan rose to his feet, yawning, and declared that he was tired and needed a rest. I asked if I could come by again later but he said it would be hard to keep talking this way.

“Would tomorrow be better?”

“You should go home. Go to your mama. She’s probably worried being left alone.”

“Mr. Romaniuk - ?”

“Eh? Stan. Call me Stan.”

“You said that this fellow you called dad wasn’t your father.”

“No. He was my mother’s friend. Like an uncle.”

“Did you ever know your father?”

“Never.”

“What was your family name, before you were adopted? So I can look for it if I go back. Maybe it’ll help me find my mother’s history if I knew the name of her countrymen.”

Stan did not look at me.

“It don’t matter. I don’t want no more part of the Old Country or nothing. I don’t want nobody asking nothing for me.”

“But - ”

“You got to go now. I’m an old man. I don’t get my rest, maybe I get sick and can’t feed myself no more. You got to go.”

I didn’t press him. I said goodbye, leaving him with my card, including my home phone number scrawled quickly across the top, and rejoined my kids in the car. I didn’t

say a word to them. My mood was too low, and they didn't care enough to ask.

That night we stayed at a small motor lodge by the highway. Despite such a long drive behind me, and what would likely feel like a longer one ahead of me, I could not sleep. I shared a bed with Shad and heard nothing but his teeth grinding all night.

The thought that was amassing and formulating before me seemed too absurd, not because it was implausible, but because I could not bear it. I could not help but suspect that Misha and Stashko were my mother's relations, a part of her family lost neither to politics nor death, but rather to time and place. I didn't blame Stan, after all the grief of his life, if he could not bring himself to exhume the corpses of his past, if he couldn't open his arms and embrace me, or admit to me that we were kin. I was nothing to him but a reminder of heartache.

To the kids I said nothing about my porous suspicions. Early the next morning, in a rawness we wouldn't have felt in Windsor since March, we headed back home. There was no conversation. All my best intentions were impossible to fulfill. I was too bewildered by what I had discovered.

Back along the 69 I thought about the answers I still wanted despite it all, and was piqued by the way I could not seem to pass into the inner circle of my own life. I was forever trapped outside it all.

But what troubled me more were the thoughts I had about my mother. What could I ever say to her now? How would I look at her again without a palpable sadness? I had departed Windsor hoping to find answers, to somehow help myself feel better about my broken history and the defective remnants of my life, but I only felt worse, more broken, more disconnected not only from my life but from truth.

## Chapter 11

Silent one, sleeping on her pallet by the stove. Past two years of age and not a sound, not a word. Prayers from Paraska have done no good, Holy Oil smeared across small lips in cruciform, birch twigs crossed and blessed beneath the child's pallet, a sip of Holy Water for good measure. Such silence in a child is unsettling.

At daybreak the others had headed out to the field, leaving her all but alone for the first time in a while, so long she aches not to see her own growing hatred reflected in the faces that surround her each day, to know peace and calm, not this.

In her trunk she keeps a poem. Kneeling there alone she would read the forbidden words on paper dried brown in her lap. For as long as she has been alive the possession of such words has meant arrest, imprisonment, or exile. For mere words. Branded a danger to the Tsar, to the Cause, to the Party. In her lifetime words have carried more threat than entire armies.

Something in these moments keep her from vanishing, one surviving ounce of respect.

*When I die, then make my grave  
High on an ancient mound*

Words like these make her feel, for the moment anyway, that a light is just flickering to life, a match not yet caught fire. It is too hard to see it the other way, though how much closer to truth it is.

*Make my grave there — and arise!  
Sundering your chains,  
Bless your freedom with blood  
Of foemen's evil vein,  
Then in that great family,*

*A family new and free,  
Do not forget, with good intent  
Speak quietly of me*

Water for thirst, rest for exhaustion. Love, in answer to the numbing desolation of loneliness. And God. For whatever senselessness would otherwise come of it all. For survival. In every thing will be found its own requital, or else death. A moment steeped in these words and she might believe in that requital; but a moment cannot change truth.

How far back, then, must anyone go to claim the right to water, rest, love, God?  
To words?

How far? To war and war and war – the mind's war with heart, body with the spirit, visible against invisible?

To the ugliest moment of the soul, perhaps. To any place called home.

To Zólota Bráma, that nation unto itself uniting some hundred or so peasants into an unremarkable whole, a place so poor that those who leave almost never come back. The rest of them live in a world unchanged over hundreds of years. City life has become just a small curiosity.

Of the outside world most could never understand why skirts have crept above the ankle, couldn't believe women working in factories and painting their faces, or young men running away from the motherland like hooligans.

But they were running, and not just men but women also, old and young alike. In these days parents will leave children behind and men their wives, starting new life, new love, new lifelong binds, never once looking back. Some are never heard from again or, after leaving, live with the reasons why they never again hear from those left behind.

Those who remain hope somehow to vanish inside their own forgetting, as though any

world they refuse to touch will also never touch them.

The old life has become like a scalding, its scars and pain changed but no less vivid. With Shevchenko returned to darkness and the trunk closed she goes to the cupboard and takes out a jar of *kvass*. For a long time she stares at the sloshing liquid then sinks forward against the wall, covering her face, thinking, as she does more often now than ever, what might have become of her if she had not made her mother's mistakes her own, if those mistakes hadn't marked her. If she had let opportunity take her wherever math and literature and language and science led. What might have been avoided if only, if only, if only –

The sound of the children's voices come in snatches through the windows, a gusting autumn wind pushing and pulling at their conversation so no words can be made out. She takes back a mouthful of *kvass* and shudders as it sears every inch to her stomach, then quickly returns the jar to the cupboard as the door opens and her hunters spill into the house looking so jubilant she knows they will feast today.

Confiscated guns and grain and fallow fields have begun an almost imperceptible cascade of ruin. Without grain, wildlife ravage the gardens and woods; without guns the farmers can't keep them off. Birds and vermin gorge in orchards, tearing into apples and pears and plums before they are ready to be picked. Eating them green means suffering dysentery, even with oil of turpentine to inoculate bowels, and the very young and the elderly have begun to die.

Through this time, the villagers have trapped and fished all that could be caught, seizing birds from the air with crude nets, the boys knocking squirrels out of trees with slingshots and rocks until, with nothing left for the wildlife's very survival, even rats and



mice abandon them.

But the ravens. The ravens stay.

"Look, daughter." Paraska draws a fist from the mouth of an old butter crock, brown worms writhing between bony fingers. From hollow eyes a savage glee blazes in her. "The dew brought them up. I was right to go at sunrise."

She stares at those disgusting things, her heart jerking hard. Mama, Mama - madwoman. Fool.

Damn them all. Damn the children, stones in her heart. Damn a life not worth the price of even a single heartbeat, a breath.

The pallet where the silent one sleeps. One last stone and no way out.

She takes Paraska's crock and dumps the squirming contents into a bowl to rinse them off. Damn this life.

*Krystof? Krystof! Oh, please, Bozhe, Bozhe -*

It is time. When Orest comes long before dawn she is already dressed, and opens the door before he reaches it. Her mother is gone, but as with most of her early risings she leaves no indication where she intends to go. Doubtless somewhere into the woods for her herbs and roots.

Since about midnight a spring storm has tyrannised the horizon, intimidating through darkness. It makes the air feel strange: heavy and light at the same time.

Everybody moves like shadows passing in and out of objects. The lamps are left unlit. She gets the boys and Vera up, and feeds them what little there is. Stale rye and

hot milk. Some sunflower seeds, mostly rancid. Dandelion. Chickory coffee. It's more than they have fed upon at one time all winter, and better. Before they start, Orest does something she has never seen him do before. He breaks the bread and kisses both pieces.

"Thanks be to God," he invokes, lifting up the half he is still holding in his hand. He breaks it again and gives half to Stashko and half to Misha. He does the same with the other, and hands one piece to her, and she gives him a quizzical look. Orest and Stashko stuff themselves with it. Misha is queasy and can barely eat; it's the prospect of leaving home, though it's not much of one at that. Not once has she asked if they wanted to go, it's just something that feels like an ending, a consequence. Rather, it is consequence altered. She gives Misha a taste of *kvass* to calm his nerves and pushes him to eat as much as he can. Yet she is hardly able to touch a bite herself. Nausea wrenches the desire for nourishment from her.

As they're heading down the road in the dark she asks Orest about breaking the bread. "I've never seen you do it before."

He shrugs. "This is different. It's the last time, you know? They – the boys – it's only right."

With arms crossed over her chest she keeps pace with him in silence.

They pass the houses and Church until they reach the spot where Orest and the boys will continue and she and Vera will be left behind. She avoids looking in the direction of the Church. After the hanging, nothing has ever felt right.

The boys take Vera just a little further and wait with their one small ragged cardboard valise that constitutes all they own, which amounts to a change of clothes. The moment they reach the gate there is a tight pull in her chest. It goes all the way to her

throat and lodges there.

"Well," Orest begins, awkward with the moment. It's so dark she can't see anything of his face except the occasional glint of his eyes in whatever moonlight glances from behind the clouds. He rocks back on his heels a little. She can hear his breath: it's like he breathes for the world entire this morning, the sound hovering so eerily above them all like a memory of smoke, like clouds. She thinks he must be exhilarated with the first sense of his deliverance and doesn't quite know what to do with himself.

She won't uncross her arms, partially because it's damp and chilly, and because she's so uncomfortable that she can't think what else to do. "Um - Well, it's good you're starting so early, then."

"We have to get to L'viv, you know, at dawn tomorrow morning."

She looks over at the boys and Vera. Inside she feels so hot it makes her sick even after all the time she has had to get used to the approach of this day.

"Look, Orest, as far as it goes after today they're yours. You know? I'll never do anything to cause trouble for you in Canada."

"Look, I'll write when we get to my Uncle's place. Just to let you know we got there okay."

"That's fine. But after that it's better they forget about what they left behind. A new life is a new life."

"I promise they'll go to school, they'll go to Church - Maybe even be head altar boys - "

She swallows; nothing goes down but air. She offers a strained smirk. "Don't go crazy, eh?"

They laugh quietly, uneasily. Like strangers. Fire burns up her insides again, and before she loses her nerve she tells Orest, "I forgot something. Wait here till I come back. Just wait."

At a full run she heads back down the road to the house. She bursts in, pushes her way past the curtain of her bedroom and drops to her knees in front of the trunk. In the dark she rummages until she feels it in her hand. She pulls it out and leaves.

They're all waiting for her at the gate. Parched and gasping, she stops beside Orest. Everyone has their eyes on her, wondering what she's doing.

"I found this - in Baba's trunk - " she manages between breaths.

Stashko leans over on his tiptoes. "What is it?"

"I'm getting to that, eh?" She unfolds the handkerchief and shows them. In such poor light it's hard to make out. She lifts it up. Her hands are trembling hard. "It's a coral necklace. Orest, I'm giving it to you to take care of for them. You know what this is worth."

He reaches out a hand and reverently touches the necklace with his fingertips. "Where did Mama get something like this?"

"I don't know. But the thing is, I'm giving it to the boys."

Misha grimaces as though his mother is an idiot. "I'm not wearing no necklace, that's for sure. I'm no girl."

She gives a frustrated sigh and shakes her head, "It's maybe not such a bad thing you're going, eh Mish? Maybe being around all these stupid Communists is sucking the brains right out of your head. It's not to wear. This is expensive Black Sea coral. It's expensive because it's rare. See how fine the beads are, and the colour? That means it's

worth a lot."

"So you want for us to sell it in Canada, for lots of money?" Misha asks.

"No. I'm not giving it to you to sell. And God knows if you ever sell it for booze or women I'll haunt you till the day you die. I swear. And that goes for all of you. It's for you to keep, like an inheritance, and if you ever have children you'll give it to them. That's how it works."

Orest takes the necklace just as he has taken the lifelong custody of her sons. "I'll give it to them when they're fit to hold on to it themselves."

"And you'll take it to a good jeweller, Orest? So he can separate the strands and make an exact gold clasp?"

Although she can't see his face, his voice is quiet, distant. "It's a nice thing for them to have."

She looks at the boys, "And you're to divide it equally between all your children, see, boys or girls, it doesn't matter. And they're to divide theirs for their own children. It'll be divided and divided until there's nothing left but a bead. Hear?"

Both boys answer, "we hear," but she knows that at their ages the idea of ever reaching their next birthday is just as incomprehensible as having great-grandchildren.

She straightens, closing her eyes for a moment to take a breath against that dry fire in her throat, and puts her hand there. She has no answer for them if they want to know why. She only knows it has eaten away at her all night, and in the end she's afraid some lowlife Cheka will steal it anyhow. It's the only good legacy she has ever had and it might as well go to Misha and Stashko as Stalin. Maybe sometime before they die they'll think of it as a good legacy too.

"Well," Orest begins again, hiking up the leg of his trousers and securing the necklace, now rewrapped in its linen shroud, into the top of his garter, "we better get going."

She takes Vera by the hand and steps back with her, giving them room to collect their things.

"I'll write when I get to my uncle's," Orest repeats, as though she won't believe him.

She nods. "You watch for the Cheka, eh?"

"Don't worry, we have our papers."

"Maybe some day when you're rich men, maybe even scholars, you'll come back and see how things are around here, eh?"

He won't return the thought. Orest has resisted with every energy even the mention of her ever joining them overseas. Rebirth is pointless if the cause of death is brought along from the old life.

They start down the road, everyone waving uncertainly at one another in moonlight. Even Vera waves her mute farewell.

But as she watches them fixing their steps at a comfortable pace she grabs Vera by the hand and follows behind, out of breath.

"You'll make sure they go to school," she presses, right on Orest's heel. "Don't let them ruin their lives."

"They'll go, they'll go."

"And I know you'll have your uncle's land for yourself, but see to it they know how it is with land, eh? Make sure it's the first thing they do for themselves when they're

grown, Orest, is get themselves some land."

"Don't worry. I'll kill them if they become Communists. If they so much as turn red with embarrassment I'll beat it out of them."

"But make sure about the land. They have to belong to something, Orest, they have to feel safe somewhere. Even if it's just a little house and a garden."

"It's Canada, Sonya. It's paradise over there, so don't worry. Now we really got to go or we'll be late."

She stops and holds Vera to her side. The child wants her brothers and tries to go after them. Even as she pulls Vera back she hears herself begin to cry out "Orest!", the word dying in the still air between them. For a moment he turns around, in a sharp break of moonlight, walking backwards away from her. He waves and turns away.

When the three figures move beyond the range of her vision and are finally swallowed by the distance, she heads for the village.

The way back holds the pall of ghosts in such quiet. Thunder rumblings have moved closer, in from farther plains, moving like a current through the soil and up through her feet to her heart. Every rumble settles there, leaving her winded. The sensation unnerves her and she swiftly lifts Vera into her arms to move faster, to get out of the shadows of morning. She approaches the Church and the collection of small huts in the background. In the strange blue fluorescence of the hour as lightning begins to crisscross overhead, the houses of Zólota Bráma remind her of pale gravestones. With every nerve she fights the impulse to run after Orest and her sons.

One night just before she feels fully asleep she is pervaded by a sound like wind,

which seems to move along the house. It grows in volume, crying around the corners of her room. Fear brings her into wakefulness. Half-conscious, she somehow feels it has power only in her sleep, like nightmare. Maybe five minutes of darkness go by and there is no other sound. She can't sleep again and lies in bed staring at the cracked window above her head. She tells herself to remember to fix it but she rarely remembers her nocturnal thoughts. Only dreams.

Nobody is surprised when Bohdan Kowaliw is arrested for trying to stop the Church bells from being taken. It's still dark when they get him one morning, and the sound of Mrs. Kowaliw and her four children crying and screaming on the road goes into her spine like a spike. It scares her because of Kowaliw's living so close. None of her close neighbours has ever been arrested or deported or killed. It's always someone whose face she has already forgotten. There is an habitual pattern of resistance, reaction, ruin. Sometimes the ruin is death, sometimes everyone just wishes it were. It's the only message the villagers need understand.

Within a few days her mother vanishes. At the village soviet where she goes to ask if they know what's become of Paraska she is told the old fool has probably gone crazy enough to get herself lost in the woods. The men there smirk when they look at her.

“If we find her body, we'll let you know.”

The first day of what would have been Orthodox Lenten, the church bells are cut down by the most strapping young Komsomols in the area. The two bronze relics gong against the earth, a punishment without crime, sentence without verdict. The big bell cracks in half from the impact, and the men spend the rest of daylight loading the remains



into the backs of wagons confiscated from the farmers for this purpose. Over the next few days, between the Cheka and the Komsomol, the Church is looted and stripped. Most of the peasants are too afraid to watch except from behind the protection of closed curtains.

She peers from her window but the Cheka are on the road in front of her house so frequently that she stays out of sight. After all, what is there to see? It isn't hard to imagine the ruin of the sacred. It isn't impossible to feel the loss of historic icons slashed from their gilt frames - the Virgin and Child, the Last Supper. In one final peek, Crucified Christ is taken down and burned on the road as though to prevent His ever rising again. Hay wagons cart away altars and the fragmented remains of the *iconostas*. Every cartload goes off toward the old gate in the road, and for the citizens of Zólota Bráma it is like a lingering deliberate dismemberment.

In a few days some of the Cheka wives and Pioneer children are seen wearing skirts and vests and blouses made from sacred vestments. All the jacquarded and brocaded colours of Easter and Christmas – purple, blue, green, red - and the Sunday golden silks, flash like distress signals against the plain clothing worn by the peasants in the road.

Orest and Misha and Stashko have walked away from this. Probably they will never look back. If they don't, they will be safe.

Sometimes she'll look over and find Vera staring at her with eyes so dark and knowing that it makes her nervous, as though the girl has already become aware that the world she lives in is one in which silence is truly the last and perhaps only right, the only

thing that cannot be taken away. Even at the age of four, Vera seems aware of the need to learn how not to speak. And so, not knowingly, but coincidentally, her own life becomes silent like her daughter's. Every action is communicated in silence. Silence becomes effortless.

Without Orest, there is nobody to lean on, nobody to talk to. Not even with her mother's disappearance, not with the departure of her sons has she felt such loss. Maybe only Katryna's death came close with the enormity of what it meant to have an arm or leg amputated when survival depends absolutely on having the arm or leg.

In her worst moment when she could do nothing but dwell upon what life has become, she makes herself so sick with regret and dread that she lies in bed for nearly a whole week, her appetite grown fragile, feeding the girl on some of the preserves and foodstuffs remaining, though they were meant for the hungry months of winter. She has always sounded off her fears with Orest and has always been soothed by his music, but now there is nothing.

If darkness overtakes her for that time she accepts it as something owed to her, like a perverse compassion and the only one she has ever endured. She avoids, yet even avoidance is refused her: Yakieff comes over again and, as sick as she is, she drags herself out of bed in the middle of the day as he goes on pounding at the door. She has lain with the curtains drawn to keep away the light. When she opens the door she's almost blinded with pain from the glare. He has come, he says, just to clear a few things up about the Romaniuk business.

“I'm sick.”

He comes in anyway. Over and again he extracts information, doubling back on

himself, twisting context. As before, he pushes her into her mother's room and rapes her quickly. He leaves her, dark-eyed and depressed on the bed and, until he's gone, unaware of anything she might have said. Then she looks down and notices a rip along the bodice seam of her nightdress, and that Yakieff has had a full view of her sagging breast. Disgusted, she pulls the fabric together to cover herself. She goes back to her room and changes, then fixes the nightdress with a determination to offer nothing of herself again. Just the thought of being craved repulses her.

A new order comes through while many of the villagers have already begun to harvest their crops late in June. She has been working long hours and has rented Prytlak's mule to cart the grain. She's in the field hacking down miniscule inches of her crop, Vera roaming behind under the restrictions of a rope umbilicus to keep her within sight.

Every minute she must look behind her, yelling the girl back to keep her well out of the path of the swinging sickle. Above, ravens by the dozens wheel like vultures, hawing and shrieking, swooping in turn into the heart of her crop and every crop in the area; they fly off in all directions when she shouts and bangs a stick against a pot. But in minutes they return, unafraid. In Wirniuk's field not far off she can hear his youngest children running about screaming and making a racket.

None of the villagers can handle this sudden population explosion amongst the ravens and crows and blackbirds. Rats can be trapped or poisoned or killed in their nests, mice too; cats can be let loose on them. But without guns nothing can be done about ravens.

It's mid-afternoon when she glances up and notices Prytlak lumbering toward her, clutching his fat stomach with both hands as he moves. Amused by the sight, she stops

and watches, stretching her back. He stumbles and falls, picks himself up and continues until he reaches her, breathless. He bends over, setting his palms on his kneecaps.

"It's been posted - " he pants, sweat washing over his thick face and throat. "My mule - I come to take the mule - "

"What! I paid for it and - "

"Shut up you goddamn whore!" He straightens, his face scarlet with wrath and weariness. He swallows and swallows. His voice is pathetic, broken like he can't stop himself from wailing like a baby. "They're coming for the animals. I'd rather sell them before they take them, and I got to do it now. Now give it over."

Panic makes her heart flutter wildly. Vera has come over, tugging at her skirts, and she irritatedly brushes her off. "But can't you leave me the mule just for now? I can't do the work by my - "

"What do you think? That any of us can do the work ourselves? I got to use my own wife and daughters like oxen."

He goes straight over to the mule and begins unharnessing, his hands moving briskly. "There's nothing to be done, Grekhova. You might as well go home."

Her hand falls on his fleshy brown forearm like a hook. "Prytlak, listen, I - "

But there is nothing to say that makes sense when nothing makes sense to begin with. She drops where she's standing and cries into her knees, heavily like an animal. Vera only stares.

If it had only been the confiscations, but it's the slow progressive cumulation of losses. She stands and dries her face with her hem, swinging Vera into her arms as she walks away. Prytlak and his mule have already gone off in the opposite direction.

The authorities leave no time to spare for such things as Prytlak has in mind. Prytlak, and a dozen others, think they can reach one of the bigger cities or towns and make a little money before the communists can organise. Inside twelve hours the villagers watch the animals herded away - cattle, goats, sheep, oxen, horses, pigs, everything. Old Fazyk's worthless cow and One-Eyed Marusia's milk cow are taken. Poultry, even tiny yellow peeping chicks and ducklings and goslings that cannot be rounded up are stomped beneath heavy-soled boots, their soft bodies burst open like blood-filled eggs all over yards. Such small things are everything.

Out on the road, any animal holding up the exodus is shot in the head and left where it dropped. The people are morose, none of them moving an inch toward the felled creatures bleeding into the soil. They have been told: so much as one animal disappears and the whole town will be taken out and executed.

How will any of them live without milk or meat? None of the Communist faces divulge an answer. They don't care. Maybe because Kowaliw being taken away and Paraska disappearing are so thick in the village memory, maybe because they think putting up a fight will do no good, or that in some covert way they can still come up with a plan against the livestock confiscations, the villagers of Złota Bráma say nothing about this latest action. It is such a devastating moment yet there is still a helpless sense that someone out there is thinking up a plan. There is a feeling that triumph is lurking like a cat waiting for the best moment to pounce even when such a thing is hard to see.

By harvest time, most of the grain rots right on the shaft and is finished off by vermin, and finally a hailstorm. There is barely enough for food, nothing for sowing or market.

After about a week, like everyone else, she is ordered to the GPU to answer for herself about her 'bitch-kulak dishonesty' in cheating the Party of its rightful grain. She is thin, haggard, and tired, and her appearance above all else convinces them she has brought nothing in this year because of the loss of her mother and sons, because of the hailstorm, and because there were no animals for hauling. They let her go because she has the look of hunger about her. It seems to satisfy them.

## Chapter 12

Bluewhite, the patient lay mounded beneath an icy white halo of light. A litany of disease was encased in his skin and blood, muscle and bone, a life already beyond the salvation medicine could offer. Once, a young woman had been torn from the tangled heap of a highway accident. The heart and lungs had been pulled from the wreckage of her flesh and placed inside this other wreckage of flesh.

We had been trying to resuscitate for forty minutes, my tensing muscles aching to the shoulders. I worked impatiently. I worked ungenerously. But I worked. Massage. Defibrillation. Epi. Defib. Twelve minutes. Seventeen twenty twenty-five. Forty.

Forty minutes was a valiant effort. Forty minutes was right. Forty minutes said this was a human being worth the heroics.

But I was no hero. I was ghost and I was man, unable to thrive outside the physical dimension or within it. My body merely obeyed an autonomic effect created in the crucible of experience. I could not be anyone's hero or god.

I could not be fully human, either. I could not be flawed. I could not share the frailties of those I was duty bound to help. Though I felt I was falling apart, I could not. Too many people, themselves falling apart, depended on me.

Nurses and patients had begun to talk about me. On rounds I'd walked into the middle of a tête-à-tête between a CICU nurse and a visiting family member, whose reactions to my presence in the room made it plain that they had been discussing me or criticizing my care of a patient. Based on word of mouth, general practitioners were now referring other cardiac specialists at patient request. Nobody smiled anymore when I

came to read their charts or discuss their rehabilitation. In every cold expression I saw my own growing inhumanity reflected.

No measured count from the monitors gave evidence of heart rate or brain activity. The slurry mechanical sucking normally coming from the respirator was conspicuous only in its absence. The anxiety that surged in me when I came in contact with patients began to ease.

“Time?”

“Eight o’ four.”

“Get it down. We’re done.”

Before I stepped away, I pulled the sheet from the man’s head with latex-gloved fingers grown sticky with blood. The nurses watched me from across his body. In this room we had learned to read eyes behind the masks that concealed our faces. They had been noticing this strange new fixation.

I looked, not to see the patient’s face, but to see death. I needed it. Since my mother had moved in with me I had been doing this with patients. Sometimes death was noticeable, recognisable. Waxy, pinched, yellow-grey, the beautiful translucence of life drained away from the eyelids, nose, lips. Other times I couldn’t even tell the patient was gone. I would have to look at the purpling hands or feet as oxygenated blood ceased circulating.

Silence tightened around our bodies while I covered the man’s face once again.

Before an orderly pulled away the gurney, one of the staff gave the dead belly a slap, its torpid cellulite quiver echoing off the flesh in ripples. Outside in the waiting room I said to the wife *I’m sorry I’m sorry* because I had lost the ability to give comfort in



any better way. Sorry, yes, in my own numb way, that I could do nothing for her dead husband who had yearned for this end through living. Sorry that someone had slapped his fat into ripples just as I was leaving, a disrespect I had answered with the greater disrespect of silence.

Sorry, too, that in the presence of this fleshly mountain I was possessed not by life and death, but by Anjou.

I had not seen her since Christmas, unable to pick up the phone because I did not even feel worthy of her friendship much less a second chance. There were tricks my mind played, the sensation of life arcing out of control on me: a wild whipping hose across the lawn, let go, powered by the surge of matter through too small an opening for its force. This was the mental and emotional backdrop I'd been left with.

All the time I worked on my patient, the thought of Anjou never left me.

At my locker while I changed, that last moment before the gurney was wheeled away flashed through my mind. I had to keep myself from gagging.

That any flesh should haunt me.

That all flesh would.

What had been heady and unthinking in my feelings for Sharon was deep, full, and vast with Anjou.

Before we had even declared feelings for one another I found myself heading to Toronto with her for a literary festival where a Ukrainian author she had translated was reading. Knowing I had not maintained contact with the Ukrainian community since my mid teens, Anjou seemed more excited to include me in a meaningful cultural event that

we could both share than she was over witnessing the fruit of her work in the hands the writer Oleksa Pawliuk.

Even now I wondered about the signs of an end in our beginning. For one, the plane arrived at Pearson after a two and a half hour delay for what was only a forty five minute flight. Two of those hours had been idle æons on the runway suffocating in thick oxygen-depleted air that had begun to taste sourly of human breath, and another half hour circling in a holding pattern above the airport waiting to land. It took over an hour in a cab fighting stand-still traffic to cover the distance between airport and city. By the time we emerged in the Bloor West village it was after midnight. The neighbourhood was in a blackout.

I followed Anjou with our luggage as she headed up the steps of the Jane Street address where the cab had let us off. From outside, with faint moonlight to see by, the building appeared to be an old townhouse.

Three flights of stairs in that blinded nothingness. By then I was ready to drop. I had not told Anjou that I'd come off an all-night call at the hospital after a full day's work. On our way up the stairs Anjou kept saying how sorry she was.

“What are you apologising for?”

“The wasted time. This - ”

“Come on. It's not your fault.”

“No, but - It's just - ” She was glancing back at me as I trailed below her on the stairs. “Look at you. I mean, you look like some poor sherpa.”

“A regular Gunga Din, eh?” Now she was laughing, and I was too. “So, who are these people again?”

“Friends. Colleagues. They’re all in one way or another interested in breaking down the Iron Curtain through literature.”

“Interesting.”

“We’ll see.”

“What do you mean?”

“Depends on how drunk they are. I don’t know if you know this, but Ukrainians like to drink.” She was being facetious. All I could manage was a half-hearted grin.

The third floor hallway of the apartment where we headed was illuminated by three long dinner candles stuck into a cooking pot full of sand, their flames leaning into one central flame just like an Easter service. The door was tucked awkwardly into a corner like an afterthought, abutting the one beside it at their hinges. Anjou knocked and announced herself, then let herself in, with me following behind. Immediately I was struck by the claustrophobia of the room, even as the walls receded to blackness. About half a dozen shadowed figures stood before us holding ruined china teacups by their dainty handles, candlelit from within. The moment we walked in the door a low rumbling shuddered the floors and windowpanes. For a moment at least, in the steepness of my sickening fatigue, stars danced among mortals along the chipped gilded rims of teacups.

Inside, Anjou began with cheerful greetings, pumping outstretched hands and kissing cheeks bent to her while trying to introduce me around. The names I heard that night in darkness I’d forgotten again with sunrise. Most names I couldn’t associate with the faces that swirled around. A Pawlo and a Mykola – or was I confusing that name with Nykola and Yevgenia, a married couple introduced together? And there was a much

younger woman whose peripheral presence was more remarkable only because it was clear she had no literary or intellectual connection to the group. Nothing in her behaviour during the early morning hours after our arrival indicated even a faint interest in what anyone was talking about.

Yuri, the old sick steer. My tired mind perceived no meaning at all in what Anjou'd said. For a moment I was seven again, and piecing together sounds into words that didn't make sense. When the man named Yuri moved away from us I asked Anjou, "I don't think I heard you right. Yuri the old what - ?"

"Sixtier. *Shestydesiatnyk* . He was part of a dissident literary movement in the Soviet Union," Anjou explained. "Back in the sixties they rebelled against their spineless literary predecessors – You know, state-prescribed social realism and conformity. They were all about innovation and experimentation. By 1965 Khrushchev started cracking down. A lot of them ended up in the gulags."

"Oh, wow. This guy was in a gulag?"

"No."

"But he's reading in this festival."

"No. He hasn't written anything in years. I think it's like a lot of artists who identify with a movement or an era rather than their own voice. Once the movement is over, their talent dries up or their work becomes passé. Actually, I think part of the reason he's such a mess is that he wasn't sent to the gulags. It sounds perverse, but I think for some artists to have gotten through their entire creative life without so much as an arrest must have made a lot of writers believe their work or their ideas had no teeth when they were most desperate to bite. That's pretty demoralising."

“So what does he do for your group’s cause?”

“Well, we aren’t really a group. And we don’t have a cause. We just all want freedom of expression in the Ukraine. Anyhow, as for Yuri, he’s more of a hanger-on. He likes to buzz around the literary world, and they like to have him because he’s a part of cultural history.”

The man in whose apartment we had arrived, the last to be introduced, welcomed Anjou in broken English while pouring out shots of vodka for a *salut*, laughing drunkenly all the while: “Welcome Missus translator, welcome.” The way he said it brought vague thoughts of old Dracula movies to mind. I thought his name was Danko, but I couldn’t tell if it was a surname or a nickname or otherwise.

“Well, well,” he bellowed, grabbing Anjou around the waist and laying a sloppy kiss on her mouth. “Little *Kanádaska* have man!”

“Danko -” Looking uncomfortable, Anjou pulled away from him.

I didn’t know if I was expected to lay him flat or joke with him. I didn’t want to do anything to embarrass Anjou, especially if this was just part of their friendship. I couldn’t tell.

“No, no, Anjoushka,” he went on with an overdramatic frown carving deep grooves into his skin. “Is good. I no look *na* you no more. My heart breaking. *Anu*, for you - ”

After dipping his thumb into his glass he made the profane gesture of smearing an alcoholic cross on Anjou’s forehead, startling her with this odd sacrilege of blessing. His milky fish eyes stared her down while she brushed the dripping liquor away with the back of her hand and glanced uneasily at me. I gave her hand a little squeeze. Danko

wandered away with his vodka bottle and shot glasses. Once drinks were poured, rounds of toasts found voice.

*To us! May our hopes not be in vain.*

*To family!*

*To Grandfather Lenin, who rests as fresh as the day he was born while all he touched decomposes in his stead.*

*Oh God –*

*To Uncle Karl, who never laboured a day in his life but knew all about the working life.*

*Huzzah huzzah!*

*To Uncle Joe –*

*Man or megabomb?*

*Does it matter?*

*Oh don't be such a bunch of damned pricks about it, and let's get to it already.*

Everyone laughed in one burst.

*Na zdorov'ya!*

*Dai Bozhe -*

In this brilliant mood everyone but Anjou raised shot glasses of acid homemade vodka, scintillating in bare flame-light, and took them back quickly. She alone had refused a drink. To see the grimaces that twisted all our faces made us laugh through our choking. Someone shushed. *Quiet. Keep it down. You never know if the walls have ears. Spooks might be listening.*

A haze of cigarette smoke fouled the air. Among them we were the only ones not

smoking. Within ten minutes my eyes were afire. Who said what, who was who, were all mysteries to me as I began to wobble from fatigue. Anjou noticed and touched my elbow. Just a little longer, hold on, she assured me, and another hour passed.

Fatigue and vodka only made me stupid. At times everyone spoke so thickly and so hurriedly that it was all I could do to hold their words down long enough to sense their meaning. For a few minutes I fell asleep standing up; in so small an apartment with so many bodies there wasn't even room for us all to sit at one time.

Yevgenia and Nykola, Oleksa Pawliuk's Ukrainian publishers, came from D'niepropetrovsk and had remained during the whole delay only to have just time enough for drinks before heading back downtown to their hotel. They'd come to greet us along with the others but with a full roster all weekend they could not stay any longer. They were the first to leave. At the door the wife briefly turned back. Candlelight yellowed and warped her shadowed face, a hollow-eyed skull of flesh.

"In case you're wondering, Yuri, the law of extinction is clear: adapt or die."

The man named Yuri ran his palm across the back of his neck. "I'm not my country. You're not."

"We are all our countries."

Without waiting for an answer, Yevgenia turned and yanked at the sticking door until it cracked free of the frame.

Yuri only shook his head and made his way toward us, breathing heavily with boozy nicotine breath, his eyes inflamed in their bloated lids. "My English I am practicing with you, yes? Is good?"

Anjou smiled. "It's fine."

We were by the kitchenette, which consisted of a sink and hot plate and a wretched grey formica counter criss-crossed by deep dirty cuts, fragments peeled away to bare chipboard. Yuri reached into his shirt pocket to produce a crumpled packet of bubble gum. As he unwrapped a piece and folded it into his mouth he offered one. "No?" For a moment he just chewed, then he looked us over and blew a small putrid pink bubble; it snapped, and he remarked with a grin, "She have big problem, Yevgenia. Us, we never believing enough for making good."

"I'm sorry - " I felt as though I had dropped into the middle of a conversation in which I hadn't participated. "I don't understand what you mean."

"Em, I am meaning that believing – God, future, this things – have no meanings left for us in Ukraine. Is nothing. We are having nothing now or ever, and are probably never having something. For you, here, is different." He wagged a finger. "Yevgenia, she not understanding this things."

Through growing weariness I found myself struggling to keep up with the conversation.

Anjou answered: "That's the most helpless thing I've ever heard, Yurkó, coming from you."

"From I seeing, whole country start to give up. I just finish it. I done to giving up."

"Come on. The communists took their churches away and the people went underground. Same thing with literature. You know that. Nothing important is dead, just dormant."

With a shrug he crossed his arms over his chest, a gesture that made me realise



what a powerfully built man must have once existed beneath his puffy flesh.

"But normally. Of course you don't agreeing. For me, is true. For you, for Gena, is different. You – you never living life over there. You never knowing. Gena, she don't seeing with eyes, with head. She seeing with heart. I seeing communism killing part of human character, something like that." As though to make a point he chewed his gum heavily a few times, his eyes glassy and hooded. "Me, I preferring any reality, even ugly one, only for to keeping character whole, pure."

Neither Anjou nor I commented on such an ironic declaration coming from someone in his state. A giddy exhaustion in me surfaced from the impression of absurdity in such a glum, theatrical setting. I tried not to laugh but Yuri caught the smirk in my expression.

"What being funny?" His face gave no signal of comprehension, only that he, too, wanted something to amuse him.

"Nothing. Really. I guess I'd like to call for détente right about now." I leaned forward on the counter now to keep myself upright, my elbow by the hotplate, trying to shift my position to keep myself from falling asleep.

Anjou went on: "You never used to speak this way, Yurkó. You've never been helpless over there. Even now you've risked your own safety by bringing in writing from the West. There was always a choice for insurrection. There still is. To change things. Maybe not to be so hopeless."

"Please, you are mistaken to judge other time, other place with mind of woman who was not understanding suffering or fear."

Now Anjou leaned back with less enthusiasm for the debate, and elbowed me.

"So much for détente."

We both grinned but a lurid smile like a scowl crept over Yuri's lips. "Normally, I understand naïve Western way to seeing our history. Perhaps we tired to killing and dying. For you, everything we was have been nothing more than news for television. Like soap opera show. For us – " He pointed an index finger to his forehead like a cocked gun and snapped forward the trigger of his thumb. "– *P-khhew.*"

Yuri gave a politely disgusted look but said nothing more, passing a predatory gaze to the tall bottle of unlabelled vodka on the windowsill across the room. To Anjou he gave a mock salute. "Later, Missus translator!"

When he was gone I noticed Anjou wipe her perspiring palms on her hips.

"He make you nervous?"

"Not – I mean, not his views or anything. That's fine. I just hate drunks. I hate having them around. You can never really ever trust anyone who drinks, don't you think? There's always something hidden behind it, something scary and dangerous. Happy, centred people don't need alcohol or drugs to mess around with mood or anxiety. I mean, did you see him when we walked in?"

I was too preoccupied with the implication of her words to think back to what he did or said at the door. Not once since we'd been seeing each other had I been drunk around her. I thought to say something, anything not to let her words hang there between us, but not a thought came to mind. After all, was I happy? Centred? I couldn't defend myself - or any drinker for that matter. Worse, I couldn't bring myself to look at her just then.

For the rest of the night I scarcely spoke beyond a brief effort with the young

woman, who gave such terse responses that I gave up any pretence of sociability.

Day breaking across the room illuminated its compactness more utterly than candles in a blackout had suggested. Even in the slummy neighbourhood where I grew up I had never known so insufficient a total living space to actually exist.

At six in the morning Anjou was ready to go. Lena, the young girl, had waited by the door in her black twill coat until she could no longer stand, then sat curled against the jamb, her head pressed into the corner complaining, "Let's go already, do you want me to vomit I'm so tired?"

Since Anjou and I left before her, I never did figure out who she was waiting for.

Amongst morning commuters the two of us were pallid in the eerie irradiated lighting of the subway car. Once we were well on our way, the car rocking and swaying, she asked how I liked our little gathering.

"Kind of interesting. Quirky, I guess. Odd."

"How so?"

"Anjou, you're talking to a guy who grew up with the dregs of society. You're talking to a guy who just spent eighteen years with a woman whose idea of a good time was front row seats at an Elvis impersonator contest. I'm a social misfit. When I get around people who actually talk about important things, I feel tongue-tied. Don't get me wrong, I had a good time, but it was strange for me."

Her gaze dropped. "Hmm."

"Hmm what?"

"Hmm nothing."

"No, it's something."

“I don’t know, Krystof. You surprise me sometimes. You’re such an accomplished man, but in some ways it hasn’t really made a difference in who you are.”

“That could go either way. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Could be both, I suppose.”

“But mostly bad.”

“I don’t know yet. I don’t know you well enough.”

But she would.

Beyond exhaustion now, and gaining a second wind, my mood was pensive. *You can never really ever trust anyone who drinks ... scary and dangerous.* The words rolled over my thoughts in surges. Would she ever really be able to trust me?

“Krystof?”

“Mm.”

She was staring into the subterranean blackness beyond the grimy window. “I should have said something earlier.”

“About what?”

“Actually, it should have been one of the first conversations we had.”

Now she was watching me. She looked ready to cry.

“What’s wrong?”

“This is so weird. Having this kind of conversation. I mean, it’s 1983.”

“Spit it out.”

“Remember the first night, after the dinner when we were at the park?”

“Of course.”

“Remember I said I knew something about you because you didn’t wish you

could have your way with me?”

I was grinning. “Oh-oh – you found me out.”

She laughed uncomfortably. “No. But the truth is, sex - I’ve had a long time to think things over, the mistakes I made, their trajectories in my life.”

“Okay.” I shook my head. “That’s true about any thinking person, isn’t it?”

“Is it? I’m not so sure. I mean, think of AIDS.”

“True.”

“If most people thought about consequences, AIDS would be a rare sub-saharan disease you got from a monkey bite. The thing is, sex blinds you. It really does. You see things in a person you’re having sex with that wouldn’t be tolerable if the hormones weren’t getting in the way. Does that make any sense?”

“Mm - ” My brows pinched above my nose. “Kind of.”

“I’m not perfect, but I’m a good girl.”

I rested a hand on her knee. “I know that.”

“If you hadn’t been having sex with Sharon, would you have married her?”

I didn’t need to think about it, but it stung no less. “No.”

“See? It probably wouldn’t have gone past three dates, and nowadays that’s three dates past the roll-out-the-condom stage for most people.”

It dawned on me what she was trying to tell me, the bottom line rejection in it. The stomach acid roiled in my gut. I swallowed. “True.”

“I can’t live like everyone else. I mean, morals have a place. Virtue has to mean something. There are good reasons not to just live like feral animals rutting with everyone who comes along.” She took a deep breath. “Krystof, if we’re heading

anywhere with this, I don't want it to be about sex. I don't want you to be a mistake. I can't handle that in my life."

I touched my cheek to the top of her head but it didn't feel like a tender gesture. It felt sad. "I don't want that either."

"I know a lot of men would break up over something like this, so I'll understand if it's a deal breaker."

I was saying the words: "Look, I was married eighteen years and I haven't had sex in fifteen. I think I can handle it."

The very opposite played through my mind. I was thirty six. I had been married eighteen years. Fifteen years without sex. Without affection. Without warmth. I needed that contact. But I needed Anjou more.

Beyond the balcony doors of our hotel room I noticed her standing outside in the cold, pulling close the heavy white courtesy robe that made her so tiny, that starkly illuminated her figure in the grey haze. An unearthly gunmetal sky draped the geography bounding the lake beyond, itself livid and leaden-looking. Only the intensely burnished leaves glowed, a horizon afire in the late morning mists. On the shore a small flock of gulls, paper white against dew-jewelled grass, had settled quietly to squawk and strut amid the dying blades. So motionless had she been standing that they moved unconcerned in her presence.

Frail drizzle stirred the air, almost too like mist to be rain, to wet my skin the way it did, erasing trees and boats in the distance. She rested her hands on the balcony rail, and took a breath.

I stepped out. The gulls scattered but she didn't flinch. "How long have you been out here?"

"Not long." She hardly moved.

I approached and stood behind her. Hair like damp worms settled against her pale skin. At the water's edge the docks faded away, the sloops and cutters and yachts ethereal in the incoming mist. Beyond them only decaying spiles and a dim sandbar could be seen from our position.

"Did you even sleep?"

Between pinched fingers she twirled a sprig of euonymus. "A little."

"It's cold," I remarked. Dew and the rot of autumn chilled me.

Twirl, twirl.

"I thought maybe – that – " She shook her head slowly, as though whole worlds would come loose from within. She glanced down at the stalk in her fingers as though it was a surprise to find it there. "I wonder how this got here. Funny. Mum planted these. All over."

"I remember when she gave my mother some cuttings. A blight got most of them a few years later. I had to dig them all out."

"I was trying to make a Japanese garden for her. They were going to be like the waves. Like water. All around, with boxwood in front for the land."

"Anjou, I'm sorry." I dared a smile, moving my hands around her waist and shoulders, my cheek against her temple.

"Why are you sorry?"

I kissed her hair. "I'm sorry because you lost everyone you had. Because you've

been lonely and I've been lonely, and I'm sorry because it could have all been different for us if we'd been together all along."

"Life doesn't cooperate that way."

"Still. It might have cooperated just a little."

"It might have." She let the sprig fall from her fingers.

A movement of rain I could hardly see implored. Echoes of freighters supplicated the morning, a lonely timbre of the lake that formed the border between two countries.

She turned to pass me and disappeared inside the room.

After I saw her for the last time before Christmas I went numb. I could not believe she had ended it. I convinced myself it was temporary, a breather. I toyed with calling her to see if I could make things right, though I did not even understand what had been so wrong.

I was there to see her take that hand when she crossed the street. I'd extended my hand believing she was crossing the street to me. But she had raised her palm to clasp some other hand not mine. She didn't even see me. At that moment I knew what numbness really was.

At dusk in the intersection in cold I stood breathless, a fool. A scarecrow. The ozone smell of wet snow rose from the pavement at my feet, a tarry gleam beneath the halogen headlamp splay of idling cars warming my knees just a foot away. I stared in her direction even as she passed me, through me. In the intersection I stood motionless, startled forward only by the shout of horns all around. Halfway to the corner I turned my head and watched until she disappeared because I could not forget I loved her, though by



now I began to hate my love.

Buses lit from within in pale nuclear green surged past, catching me in hydraulic blasts and diesel exhaust. I jumped out of the way to the curb and stood there in a kind of paralysis, so lonely I could not see a point in anything beyond that corner. Everything around me seemed to take on my loneliness. The shoppers, the hollowed-out Christmas music from the stores, the conversation, the buses. This was a good time for loneliness, after the rush, before home, before the sun was fully set, before night completed its fall to darkness.

Amid the sidewalk crowd of Christmas shoppers I thought of her arms warm around me, their surety when her feelings were of love and not doubt, not indifference.

Why, why did I stand there, hands in my coat pockets, until even the buses ceased to exist? How could I have still hoped for her so deeply?

At home, wine deadened the taste of what had become of me. In the dark I let the television run on, unwatched, static, the room throbbing blue. Only once did I move from the corner of the sofa, making a run for the toilet to vomit up wine and bile. At the sink, where I sucked water from my palms to rinse my mouth, and splashed my tear-streaked face, my reflection in the mirror made me look as though I had gone insane. And I felt it, too, wailing past my mind.

### *Chapter 13*

In August I returned to Ushélyna. Upon passing by the post office I saw that for some reason it was closed, and I was relieved.

The place felt very different now. Under a cool summer wind I found the spot, marked by red nylon cord on every tree and bush so that it looked like some perverse Christmas decoration. I pushed through and hiked all afternoon across dense undergrowth. Strange arboreal whispers rose and fell across the entire forest, giving the place a cursed feel. Crows by the hundreds screeched from their boughs. I still bore the fear of predators that had struck me that last morning when I had found the path. My heart tore in my chest with every unfamiliar sound.

I came across fruit trees scattered through the woods, now gnarled and riotous, their yield gone bitter, wormy, diseased. Orchards fragrant with cherries and apples and plums might have once bent low with the weight of their bounty here. No more.

Buoyed by such evidence I pushed through, always taking notes and compass readings to navigate my way back. I hiked until my spine felt broken.

After a while my eyes grew fatigued from the scrupulous search for signs of human intervention. Every oddity caught my attention and I ran to each one, crouching on my hands and knees to tear green velvet mosses six inches thick from angular formations. They burst in my fingers with a sharp smell like air after rain. I scraped at crusted dirt until some of my nails were raw. With every object I hoped I had found a gravestone, a marker, a milestone. Anything man-made. Anything that would cry out

from beneath this wilderness death-shroud that humans had once brought civilisation to this place. The formations yielded nothing.

A clear light began to show in the sky above and I realised the forest was finally thinning.

On an August evening I stepped from a palette of emerald, lemon-lime, jade, blue-black, a ghost painted into madness. A prison of shadows sprawled across my vision as the lowering sun pierced the trees to the west. A white stork wheeled in silence, its black-scalloped wings brushing the air with long, flexuous pulls.

Ahead, vivid red flashed through a poplar stand. I headed toward it, pushing through webs of scrub.

In an instant my whole body went into a kind of shock. I stood unmoving amid the wind-pitched trees. I did not take a breath. My mouth hung open. What was left of a red shutter clung to its hinge. Around it a glimpse of rotten-grey clapboard siding was left to scale over time until it resembled a diseased fish. A few rusted roofs of corrugated metal were tucked amid the trees.

Even in bright sunshine, surrounded by the flamboyant shades of summer, I could not help but feel that, rather than coming upon the quaint remains of a settlement, perhaps even my own mother's birthplace, I had instead stepped into an eerie underworld, its spectres pressing around me in the cries of wildlife. I felt as though I had stepped into a grave.

I began to regret coming alone, for suddenly I felt threatened and unprotected, and somehow swallowed by the same force of forgetting that must have destroyed this place. It was as though, having arrived, I might never make it out again. My history readings

came back to me, the destructive and obliterating past that had subjugated this land. It wasn't just Stalin. Or even Lenin and Marx. It wasn't just the Austro-Hungarians, Russians, or Poles. Not just the Ottomans. Death dwelt in this place, now and everlastingly. Sviatopolk The Damned had slaughtered two brothers for this land. Batu Khan had finished the work his grandfather Genghis had begun with plague, murdering men and children and carrying away the raped women for his slaves, so devastating the populace that the Dark Age that prevailed afterward had gratefully numbed all remembrance.

This was the history that lay in wait all around me here, where vines had crept over rooftops, heaped in snarls of decay and foliage that smothered a handful of cottages and outbuildings in unnatural darkness. Most of the structures had already caved in. In some houses the skeletal arms of birch and pine reached from chimneys or shattered windows to get at the light. Humans had once lived here. Now only a strange emotional imprint remained of their existence.

I turned around, trying to orient myself to a layout, to make out the beginning or end of this place.

Split-pike fences meant to keep gardens and small livestock safe from predation alternately lay splayed and tortuous in their disintegration. I stepped over them, the grey wood splintering and snapping under my boots through weeds that pushed up from beneath. Yards grew thick and riotous. The air was both freshly verdant and rank. Living things stirred underfoot. Somewhere amid all this I could hear the faint clucking of chickens.

Around the other side of a house I found what remained of a road. I checked my

compass bearings and turned eastward, away from the setting sun. Even as I went I felt somehow pursued. I thought of my mother, who had escaped this fate, how easily my existence might have been eradicated by a single choice she had made: to go or stay.

Ahead, the entire front of one dilapidated bungalow was still covered with propaganda boasting the wonders of Soviet faith: a huge faded red and black poster of a stony Lenin proclaiming *Lenin's Party Is The People's Party*, and over the door in crude peeling hand-painted red letters: *Comrades! Communism Is The Light Of The People! Long Live Communism!* Passing it, I thought: *damn communism. This is what you get for it.*

A half-dozen chickens and perhaps twice as many chicks squabbled and fluttered restlessly in the surrounding turf. Out front by the porch a rust-blazed section of concrete sewer line sunk upright served as a well. A sheet of warping plywood weighted with a fieldstone lay across its opening.

Then I saw them. Alone, an elderly couple sat on a plaited willow bench beside a house pressing apples into cider. They wore clothes dull and torn and patched into worthless rags. All around was a desolation they hardly seemed to notice. Startled by their presence there, I passed into that living graveyard. Intense emptiness loomed larger than my own animate energy. I felt consumed into isolation, cancelled out as a human being, as stark and solitary as they were. I had not brought life here but had somehow already lost myself in every step inside this place. If epiphany had a dark antithesis it was this moment, some fundament about life, about myself, not taken in but taken, so that the recurrent feeling I had struggled with before, that my life would never be whole again, plagued me all the more.

At the sound of my approach they both raised their heads, their eyes meeting mine with hollow stares. They ceased their work of pressing cider. They were not startled by me, as I might have been. Rather, their chalky faces betrayed terror.

“Hello,” I called out, raising my hand in as friendly a wave as I could manage.

The woman stood, uncertain what to make of me, her soft features folded into uneasy lines. She did not seem to blink.

“Don’t worry, Little Mother,” I tried to assure her, holding my palms up in a gesture meant to relax any tension. “I’m looking for my mother’s village. Is this Zólota Bráma?”

She was a stout little woman. She shook her head, her jowls wagging. “Stalinsk, sir. We’re Stalinsk village.”

When I was close enough I realised she barely reached my elbow. Closer, I noted the two smelled abominably of body odour and unwashed clothes.

Puzzled by their presence, I asked, “Do you live here?”

“Yes, yes, sir. Since fifty nine we’ve lived here.”

“Is there anyone else around?”

“Just we two, sir.” Although her hands were at her sides, her plump fingers worked restively behind her coarse woollen brown skirt. “Are you government people? Are you from the commission? Because my husband and me, well, we’ve taken care as best we could. The tractor died, sir, awhile back. We’ve taken care as best we could.”

“I’m not from the government, Little Mother.” I looked around and found myself increasingly stunned by their survival in such a ramshackle life. “What is this place?”

She made a hard swallowing sound and I realised I was still making her nervous.

“Like I said, sir, we’re Stalinsk village.”

“No, I mean – I – what are you doing here? What happened?”

Now she moved her hands beneath the generous bosom that overhung her waist to pinch her fingertips together. She shrugged dramatically. “Nothing happened. Nothing at all.”

“How has it come to this?”

“Why the world has forgotten us, sir. And we have forgotten them.”

The woman invited me to stay for supper, and I sat in their broken-down hut still fairly dazed from my discovery of this place, of them. Arms crossed, I found myself watching the wife. She wore a white babushka and, over her dull calico blouse and brown skirt, a stained white apron. She worked at a large ball of dough on the flour-dusted oilcloth, whose surface was embellished with a faded garland of yellow daisies. She was making *pyrohy*.

From their table I looked around the two-room house. A sickening fusion of mould and mildew, of armpits and dirty hair and spoiled food glutted the air. Without soap or disinfectants to get the better of that sulphurous rotten-egg smell of well water or the accumulation of bodily odours in clothing and sheets, they could not hold back the inevitable. I had to occasionally stifle my heaving with a coughing fit that brought tears to my eyes. It was all I could do to control my anxiety about the conditions, to remain gracious. When they spoke, poor digestion and decay were on their breath.

Though the air stirred warm and fresh through the windows, that hush of

abandonment drew my mind from the sound her floured palms made as she rolled out a ball of dough. She used an old vodka bottle for a rolling pin, a haze of dirtied glue remaining from its paper label. I'd been concentrating on the chink of her wedding band over glass, a softer whisper of flesh. The pulse of her hands was so unvarying I might have set it to music. Its cadence filled my mind. Out there, toward those woods barren of all human tenancy, it was absence that obsessed me.

I watched the wife, and her husband who sat at her side, silent but for the laboured rasp of his breathing. The two of them belonged utterly to each other and to the nothingness that surrounded them, that swallowed them, consumed them. I thought about what strange routines made for their normal day compared to mine, and how without thinking about my participation in the world it was part of my life even when I was utterly alone. At home in Windsor supper would have meant listening to the news, perhaps nursing a beer while I prepared a quick meal for mother and myself. In the street outside would be the intermittent noise of traffic and pedestrians, jabbering children with ice cream cones from the little shop around the corner. And truly I would go about my routine without once consciously hearing those sounds that proved everything in the world was right and alive. But here, it was the lack that filled my ears. Inhuman silence made me feel negated from life.

August breezes stirred in the trees outside, raining twigs and nuts from their branches. Such sounds were deafening. On the metal roof of the hut they rang dully like weak pellet shots on tin cans. As sunset blazed in thick shafts through the westernmost windows, night began its slow progress from the opposite horizon.

Despite the odour, the two rooms were otherwise tidy, the roughly plastered walls



painted white. Both the plank floor and ceiling were finished with a caramelised shellac that had begun to flake with moisture and inattention. In one corner, tucked high against the ceiling on a shelf and festooned with a yellowing lace curtain, was an icon of Christ lacquered to a wood board. Vividly coloured embroideries had been tacked randomly to each wall, some at odd, incomprehensible diagonals that left me with an unsettled urge to adjust them when the owners weren't looking. Little more filled the room beyond the old style formica-and-aluminum kitchen table with its four vinyl-padded chairs so much like my mother's from childhood, and a hard wooden bench like a pew placed against one wall by the stove.

No electricity had been fed by the State into the area; no plumbing or sewage system. Just outside the back door a fire crackled and spit in the bulk of the stone summer *kukh'nya*, where a cauldron of water had not yet begun to simmer.

The husband slinked over to the seat beside his wife. He was thin and withered, stooped. Brown pants of a nondescript age sagged over flat leftover buttocks. Salt-speck whiskers bristled across his unshaved face. I thought him simple, but a decent sort.

Now I leaned forward, crossing my arms on the table. "It must be hard getting out. Do you get to Uschélyna?"

The wife drew the back of one hand along her forehead. She gave an undaunted frown. "If I need to get through I get through all right."

I glanced at them both and felt sorry that this was what their lives had come to. "But if you needed to get anywhere –"

"We do for ourselves."

"What about medicine? A doctor?" I had not mentioned my profession.

She turned her dough and worked the oblong into a round. “I don’t worry about things I can’t do nothing about. If we get sick, we get sick. If we die we die.”

“What about moving, maybe just to Uschélyna?”

“But why should we? It’s home, isn’t it? Nobody’s around to bother us, no craziness from the world, nothing. Not even the government comes around here. It’s a good life. We got no worries.”

I reached to my pack on the floor for my medical supplies but thought better of it. Later after a rest, when I had earned their trust, I would have a look at them but for now conversation was what I wanted. “So, Little Mother – you are well, then.”

She glanced at the old man, who fretted over a pulled thread on his brown plaid flannel sleeve. “Vitaly, enough with that! Sure we’re well. And why not?”

“I suppose –” I leaned back clasping my crossed knee. “— I’m sorry – How are you called?”

An odd little gilded grin broke across her face, infantile and disquieting in a woman her age, more of a wince, for no suggestion of pleasure or mirth rose in her eyes. Nearly every tooth had been capped in gold, the movable assets I had seen in hundreds of mouths in my lifetime, assets that meant survival when all sense was in ruin.

“Mijdiak,” she answered, working at the stubborn edges of her dough as it sprang back against the effect of her vodka bottle. “Vitaly and Stefania.”

“Mijdiak.”

I tried on a vague smile hoping to earn her confidence. Mijdiak: cuivre, copper. From what pre-Christian lineage a family had originated by their name. Cossack blood, hunter-gatherers from the Steppes. Named of nature. Deer Fly Rooster Cloud. Poppy,

like my own. The work of cobbler, miller, tailor or smith. Familial dispositions had needed no camouflage from creation: to call a family Cold or Trouble or Smart had been enough. A flaw in character, a handicap, a gift, and through the unfathomable depths of time a family's future was plumbed.

"And what brings you here now, to look for your mama's place?" the wife asked, a hint of her natural uneasiness with talk, with strangers, perhaps with me.

"I just – I guess I want to know where I came from."

Mrs. Mijdiak peered briefly toward a window as she continued working her dough: "Of course you won't leave tonight. It's not safe in the woods by yourself."

My mind drifted back to their name. "By any chance," I wondered, looking up and smiling at the silent little man at my right, "did your people tend to have red hair?"

The old man perked up from his preoccupation with the sleeve. Through deep greyish wrinkles a sudden grin etched across his face and he began sweeping a beefy hand repetitively across one spot on the table's worn oilcloth surface. "Mama says I may have my grapes if I'm good and bring in the cows. I bring in the cows."

The smile faded from my face. For a moment I stared first at Mr. Mijdiak then his wife, who wrung the flour from her hands on her apron and reached over to pet her husband's thickly crevassed ash cheeks with fat dimpled hands that, were they not so masculine, might have been a toddler's. "It's all right, Daddy. Do you want your nap now?"

"I should bring in the cows, I think. Or I won't get my grapes. Mama said –"

"You'll get your grapes, old man. Have your nap now."

Taking a muscular grasp of his elbow she hauled him to his feet. He began to cry,

and jerked his arm from her grasp. "I'll fight you!" he shouted, fists up to the end of her nose. But she slapped them, hard. A cloud of flour met the waning light and dissipated. I felt ashamed witnessing such a moment between them.

"Try it, old man, and I'll knock off your cabbage. That's a promise."

"I want my grapes or else you'll let this dirty Muscovite eat them up!"

"He won't. I'll see to it. Now come along."

But the old man wasn't to be consoled. He wept even as his wife led him shuffling to bed in the other room and closed the door on him. The wailing became sustained within the character of that house, that desolate village where perhaps for decades herds had neither been brought to pasture nor returned.

Lowering my head, I felt something imprecise, close to shame. "I'm sorry. I didn't realise - "

From the other room her husband began barking *Mama! Mama! Mama!*

As she returned to the table she commented with a small wrench of her head in the direction of the noise: "Bless him, poor man. Not a thing in his head left to worry him but his dear herd and his grapes, and still he never knows we've got neither. And I envy him his hollow paradise."

Once again Mrs. Mijdiak set herself exhaustedly to her task. She shook her head, drilling an overturned cup down into her dough and pulling the pale circles from its rim. "He's been this way a while but —" *Mama*. "— some days it gets worse, some days better."

I leaned forward on the table and watched her lay the doughy rounds aside on a scant whorl of flour to her left. "It's a terrible disease. Terrible."

– *Mama!*

As she pinched up little balls of her potatoes-and-cheese from the full bowl before her and pressed them into the centre of her circles, she shrugged. “He’s an old man. It’s bound to happen.”

“How old is your husband?”

All the while she worked at her *pyrohy*, folding filling into the circles and pinching the crescents closed, then laying them in ordered rows on a clean but ragged dish towel in front of me. *Mama. Mama. Maaama* –

“Let me see.” As though to study the scaling plank ceiling, Mrs. Mijdiak bent her head back and stared without blinking. *Mama Mama.* “Fifty eight come June.”

I hardly thought that old. I said, “My mother will have ninety years next year.”

“Ninety years –” The idea of it seemed repellent to Mrs. Mijdiak. “And she is well?”

“Her mind is strong but she is very frail. Arthritis all over the body. Terrible pain.”

“Oh, arthritis. It’s a rotten thing, that is. I’ve had it in my one knuckle for years now, but all over –” *Maammaaaa.* Mrs. Mijdiak frowned dramatically, giving the afflicted knuckle a floury rub. “— I couldn’t bear it.”

Absentmindedly, I began stroking the oilcloth daisies with my fingers. *Mama Mama.* “Is there nothing to be done about your husband around here?” *Mama!*

The yelping was so disruptive that I glanced uncomfortably to the closed door hoping for some relief. Noticing this, Mrs. Mijdiak smiled a little pitiaibly but continued with her *pyrohy*. She nodded back over her shoulder. “Why don’t you take that knife

and cut up some onions? You'd really be a help to me. Look there – on the window sill, see?"

I obliged, and set to work dicing onions to fry in the iron skillet that sat at the ready on her counter with a dollop of butter. The knife was a useless old thing, honed to an arching point. It mashed into the onions and in a few minutes my burning eyes and nose streamed so that I had to continually push my sleeve against my face to mop myself up.

Suddenly I realised the old man's squawking had ceased, creating that silence I found more disturbing than noise. The wife seemed scarcely to notice.

Outside the windows of the little cottage a frenzy of birdsong intensified into one last scuffle for a meal before nightfall.

While we worked Mrs. Mijdiak told me that this place had been built in the late fifties to house workers for a new collective slaughterhouse project that had failed before it had even begun. She had followed her husband to work after the village's construction. Within two years they were the only remaining inhabitants, left as caretakers until the slaughterhouse project was revived. The crude roads that had already existed were cleared and widened to make way for heavy machinery and transports, but had never been paved. After five years the roads had been overtaken by vegetation and all but forgotten, and with it both the village and the Mijdiaks. Little by little they had ceased caretaking most of the structures except the soviet building across the road and their own home.

“So, you see, when I saw you I thought you had come about the slaughterhouse. I was afraid that when you saw we had not tended everything just so, you would report back to the commission and have us arrested.”

That two old people in such poor physical condition could be arrested – that they even needed to fear it - for failing to live up to an impracticable Soviet standard disgusted me.

Everything about their isolated life was that of the pioneer. They hauled buckets of reeking water from the well across the road. One cow provided milk, from which Mrs. Mijdiak made her own butter and sour cream and yogurt. Chickens laid eggs in the coop-  
soviet across the road, and occasionally one of their hens offered a scrawny neck to the stump and axe for a hearty meal of meat. Hand-pressed sunflower oil or honey were traded for flour and sugar at Uschélyna when the government truck came with supplies and their paltry wages couldn't be stretched far enough to keep them in shoes otherwise.

A lean-to of an outhouse stood fifty feet from their back door, flanked by a wall of cord wood that seemed to help keep back the encroaching woodland. Mrs. Mijdiak was left to chop and split the wood on her own, to manage the pioneering life alone with the burden of a mental invalid.

Although they retrieved their wages once a month at Uschélyna, no government agent had ever been to see them, or seemed even to be aware of their existence. Such had been the final telling incarnation of a place that had known human habitation from the time of Scythia.

Death did dwell in this place. Long ago Party apparatchiks had exterminated it. Now, maps blotted it out. Time was devastating it. Here in this disintegrating cottage in

a forgotten village were the last witnesses to that life, the last surviving voices that could tell me if this had once been my mother's birthplace.

When we were finally at supper with fresh steaming cups of tea, enjoying the *pyrohy* and fried onions with spoonfuls of thick sour cream, I told my hosts some news from the rest of the world, about Reagan and Gorbachev and the peace and nuclear disarmament talks, Arab terrorists hijacking planes and ships all through the year, the space shuttle program. But to Mrs. Mijdiak the news was meaningless. So far from anything in the world, Khrushchev was the last Soviet president they remembered, and beyond that they knew only that communism was hopeless and treacherous, and that it was well to have been forgotten where they were. The space shuttle as a means of travel left her wincing anxiously, with the comment: "It's folly tweaking God's nose in such a way. Folly."

"What do you mean? The shuttle might eventually find resources."

"And so the tower of Babel was such folly. In the end God will just move heaven farther from our reach and it will be our own fault."

I left her comment alone. Now I wanted to ask about the vanishing orchards I'd passed on my way in.

"How far along was the construction on the collective?" I stabbed a plump *pyrih* with my fork and slopped it around the plate in a mess of browned onions and sour cream before biting into it and chewing. "I noticed orchards through the trees. Was this part of your work?"

"They were there when we came in fifty nine. After the houses were built we started our work in the fields, clearing the scrub to make grazing pastures for the cattle



that were to be brought in.”

I swallowed a mouthful. I did not realise how hungry I was, and worked relentlessly at the *pyrohy* Mrs. Mijdiak had heaped before me. “So – your group did not clear any land.”

“No. We intended to. Well – I should say we cleared only a little of the scrub and the weeds. We had only just begun to dig the foundation for the slaughterhouse. It wasn’t long before the authorities stopped communicating with us regularly. When we ran out of fuel for the machines we stopped digging. We waited to hear from our superiors but they only said to wait. The machine sat in the field where we stopped. It’s been there ever since.”

I paused, and wiped the butter from my mouth with a tissue I’d had in my pocket, for they did not provide a napkin and I did not wish to ask.

“God, what waste.” With pursed lips, Mrs. Mijdiak could only shrug. “Was there any evidence of a settlement there? I mean – something that would explain why there were orchards already existing in a wooded area?”

Mrs. Mijdiak’s fork hesitated over her plate. She took a sip of tea, and it went down with a hard gulp. “I – we – We all knew it was an old place, an old village. We knew that all right.”

“How?”

“Well, out there – now the woods have grown over it but back then we saw the outlines of foundations. Something that looked like a church, something larger like that.”

“A church? Then it must have been a bigger place than this is now.” Between our conversation and the meal I noticed how Mr. Mijdiak was eating, how he picked half-

heartedly at the three *pyrohy* on his plate, handling his fork as though he couldn't understand what to do with it.

Mrs. Mijdiak cut a *pyrih* in half and put it in her mouth, masticating as she spoke. "Maybe it was. I don't know. It wasn't like this, the houses, I mean. It wasn't like they were still standing or anything. There was nothing out there but the outlines, you see. And the woods had already begun to take them."

On her face was an expression of self-reproach, as though her answers were somehow incorrect. She ate the other half of her *pyrih* and washed it down with a mouthful of tea.

Stifling an enormous belch, I asked, "Were you originally from this area?"

"I don't remember my home. I was a child when hunger took my parents, and after that the soviet sent me to a children's village."

"Children's village? I don't understand –"

Now Mrs. Mijdiak rose from the table, taking a loaf of bread from her cupboard to bring to the table where she sliced thick slabs off with a knife. She handed a piece to her husband, who tore into it like a starved prisoner. She held one up to me. "Bread? It's nice for cleaning up your plate."

I took it, and found it well worth it to sop up the butter and onions and sour cream that pooled on my plate. "About the children's –"

"Yes, yes. We were orphaned, you see. My parents gave all their food to me so I wouldn't know the pain of starvation. But they died and I was alone. The authorities gathered us up in a hay wagon – I remember this. We were taken before dawn, dozens of us picked up from village to village from piles of the dead. In some places they lined the

road like cordwood. Those were the refugees who walked to their deaths looking for something to eat. The living children were tossed into our wagon but they were barely alive. They bleated like lambs while they died. Nobody cared. Communism took everything. Our homes, our pride, our land, our choices, even our souls. It made monsters of us. Vicious monsters.”

I thought of the political delicacies that kept friends and colleagues back home, still romancing communism, nit-picking between superlatives, as though somehow there were material differences between Marxist and Marxian, between Stalinism and Leninism, between Bolshevism and some new-order Socialism. But here, even a simple woman like Stefania Mijdiak comprehended the single load-bearing beam which bolstered the whole ideological structure.

“What did the authorities intend to do by this?” I wondered.

Mrs. Mijdiak poured us all more tea, and she herself took a slice of bread and wiped her plate clean. Now she noticed her husband had barely touched his supper, so while she talked she cut his food into small bites and fed him. “But we were corralled in a field. Like animals. The fence was higher than a house so you couldn’t see over it. It was late winter when I came there. Most of the children had no clothes. I had on a little dress my mother had made but no shoes, no stockings, no skivvies. Nothing. We were put in there together like animals. You must understand this, young fellow. We were given no food and no shelter. We lived out there in the open through the rest of the winter.”

The images her story produced horrified me. I felt I wasn’t making my question clear, or she had veered off with her thoughts. “But what was the intention of these

children's villages? I don't understand."

Her husband ate mildly, chewing and swallowing each mouthful she fed him. Just outside the door the fire was out in the stove. The room was darkening fast. "But - the children's villages were a death camp. We were meant to die there."

Having never heard such a thing outside the Nazi Holocaust, I was astonished. "But you did not die."

"I survived because I ran away. I ran away because I was so frightened by the sounds and sights of that place. Children shrieked and wailed all day and all night. Oh, you should have heard it. It was frightful. Everywhere on the field the dead lay rotting. It wasn't to be borne. They were torn apart by animals that smelled us in the wind and dug under the fences or clawed through to get at us. Children were eating the corpses. I was so frightened. I found a spot where some animal had dug through and I burrowed under the fence that way. I ran into the woods."

I was stunned, and watched Mrs. Mijdiak stand to wipe her husband's greasy mouth with the hem of her apron and then efficiently collect our supper plates for the large galvanised basin she had left to simmer out on the stove while the heat died down. I stood to help.

"*Tcht, tcht – sit.*" Her hand went up in a warning as she turned to her basin and filled it with dishes and cutlery. She went on, "I survived. I stole food, I begged it. I did anything I could to stay alive. I found goose foot and I ate it and other herbs from the forest my mother taught me about before she died. I picked through roe droppings for seeds. I ate things no human should eat. But Christ the Lord held me through it."

Her last statement brought a hot blaze to my face and neck. Still, I tried to be

congenial in my tone, though I could not contain my ire. “Christ? Where was Christ when they starved your parents to death?”

“Oh, young fellow you shouldn’t say such things. It’s blasphemous. Christ is our light through evil, not the cause of it. We are the cause of it, our own wrongdoing. Our sins bring suffering to many. The sins of the many bring suffering to multitudes.”

I could have argued all night over this, but I did not pursue it. “So – at some point you settled here, then?”

“I came here after I married my husband when they started work on the slaughterhouse. Where we live – this is what the soviets built for us. For all us collective workers. You can tell it’s soviet, not before when people really built good houses. The government built them cheap, not for lasting. If we didn’t have the other places to pull apart for our own use when we needed it, we’d be living like pigs in a sty.”

“Your opinion on communism seems unconvinced.”

“Communism is for the birds. It’s for lazy men and fools, not smart, hard-working folk like Vitaly and me. It’s all backward – destroy the ones who have any spirit in them, and make the drunks and layabouts their masters. It’s backward, it is. Even the Bible doesn’t like lazy men. God likes the hard-working. He rewards them. It says so in the Good Book itself. The master comes back to his farm and finds that some of his people have misbehaved in his absence, sloughing on their work. He throws them out. Others have done little more than nothing. He throws them out. But the ones who have been a real help to him while he’s gone, who’ve used their God-given talents and not hidden them, they are rewarded. God likes the hard-working.”

The vanishing light left us in near darkness quickly. Mrs. Mijdiak lit a naphtha

lantern and set it on the table while dishes were washed and dried and put away. When she was done I took the basin of filthy water and tossed it down the privvy out back where she had asked me to discard it, “to keep vermin from coming near the house.”

“Please, take our bed while you’re here,” she said as I came back in the door, wiping her hands with her dish towel then hanging it from a nail jutting at an upward slant from the wall beside her cupboard. “It would honour us.”

But I declined, ashamed to be thinking only of their hygiene. “Your hands are full enough around here without a bad night of sleep as well.”

With laced fingers tucked neatly where her stout old breasts met her stomach, she raised her head proudly. “God help us when we can’t be good hosts in our home anymore.”

“I know of no more excellent hosts.” I gave a genial pat to her shoulder. “Even if you will allow me to let you have your own bed.”

“Still, it’s important that a woman offers her best to guests.”

“I put my hand to her fat cheek. “Now not another word, Little Mother.”

After she pulled my hand away from her face she kissed it heartily and turned back to her cupboards to busy herself there. “Will you join us for our evening prayer, then?”

This offer took me a little aback. I had not been in a church in years, and had not entered an Orthodox church since my early adulthood. “I don’t remember it.”

“I’ve a prayer book. Can you read it?”

“I can make it out a little.”

She then brought her husband to the corner where the icon stood on its high shelf,

and knelt him on the floor before it. She lit two candles. “Now that Vitaly’s in this way I give the prayer and he gives the responses. If you like, you may give the responses with him, yes?”

Although uncomfortable with it, I agreed. I was not quite agnostic but not much of a believer either, in that I did not feel any mental or emotional reality of a God in my life, had not attended church in years, yet through indifference had never bothered to think about where I stood.

Mrs. Mijdiak lit an extra candle for me, and when she handed it to me I was struck by the sweet honeyed perfume of it. We each knelt into our own glow of candle light, and Mrs. Mijdiak began crossing herself, with me and her husband following her cue – I out of ignorance, her husband out of forgetting. “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

My fingertips blundered between Catholic and Orthodox positions, for I could not recall if I should cross left to right or right to left. I watched Mrs. Mijdiak scrupulously, sharing Mr. Mijdiak’s prayer book and following for the appropriate response. “Amen.”

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Right to left.

“Amen.”

This was repeated once more before, in a rich contralto voice, she began to sing the prayer, and we the response.

*O God, be merciful to me a sinner.  
O Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,  
Through the prayers of thy most pure Mother  
And of all the Saints, have mercy upon me.*

*Amen.*

*O heavenly King, the Comforter,*

*Spirit of Truth, who art in all places  
And fillest all things,  
Treasure of all blessings  
And Giver of Life:  
Come and dwell within us,  
And cleanse us from every stain;  
And save our souls, O Merciful One.*

Now she touched her husband's hand and Mr. Mijdiak joined her in singing the next response. When I heard it I was so moved I could not follow it myself, but instead stared first at the old couple kneeling beside me, heads bowed in such simple reverence, then at the icon of Christ above all our heads.

*O Holy God, Holy Mighty  
Holy Immortal,  
Have mercy upon us*

While crossing ourselves to its cadenced lament, we repeated this response two more times, a chant, a holy mantra which the old couple expressed with their whole bodies, somehow, bowing into their own fingertips as they began to cross themselves, a synchronicity I found touching.

As the prayers continued I felt at once I was in a more sacred place than any church, perhaps most because belief had followed such simple people into oblivion this way, when in my world of excess in Canada I could not be bothered with any expression of gratitude.

And I could not condemn their simplicity or their ignorance, or belittle their faith in any way. This moment was something pure and innocent.

I choked down a tightness that lodged in my throat through the Prayer to the Holy Trinity, The Lord's Prayer, and hymns; through a Prayer of St. Antioch, and the Mother of God, to Guardian Angels; and, finally, for Repentance. Before we rose from aching



knees we once again crossed ourselves three times and repeated the same words we had intoned at the beginning of the evening prayers. Mrs. Mijdiak was the first to rise, drawing her husband up by the arm beside her while blowing out their candles. I followed and handed her the candle, offering her a simple thanks.

She gave a squeeze to my forearm and winked meaningfully. “You’ll sleep now, because the Lord’s spirit is with you.”

I smiled, a little embarrassed. In my social circles nobody spoke this way. It seemed strange and anachronistic, and yet poignant because it needed nothing of intellect or empiricism or my own foolish embarrassment to simply be.

Hand in hand with her husband, she turned for their room, then paused, having forgotten something. Over her shoulder she said to me, “If you must go to the privvy, I keep the lantern and matches there, under the cupboard. It makes it handy.”

“Oh - ” I glanced to the spot where she indicated and saw the items. “All right. Thank you. Good night.”

“The Lord’s peace be upon you.”

The couple retired, leaving me to the privacy of their only other room. I set up my sleeping bag on the floor between the cold iron stove and the table. I stripped to my underwear, unzipped the bag, and lay inside.

An open window brought in the clement evening while the last of the day-dwelling wildlife began to quiet for the night and a new cacophony rose up in its place. Not far from the house two or three nightingales piped and chirruped from tree to tree. Insects and frogs rasped and clicked and squealed. And still it was too much not to hear the possibility of other lives beyond this house.

From the other side of the doorway that separated me from my hosts, the unmistakable noise of lovemaking arose in the darkness. Embarrassed, I retrieved my notebook and redoubled my concentration just to ignore what I was hearing. The very idea of the old man's infantile dementia, the terrible hygiene between them, their social unawareness of their guest's ability to hear, were faintly repellent to me. Perhaps fifteen minutes later their efforts came to a clamorous and sudden end.

After making a few notes by the lamp, whose feeble light scarcely reached two feet until it was swallowed utterly into blackness, I blew out the flame and lay once again in the uncomfortable flannel sack of my sleeping bag.

The couple in the room beyond were already snoring like bears. Midnight dragged by. The exhaustion of the day had overwhelmed me but I could do little more than drift along in a jarring, unfamiliar landscape of half-sleep. A frenzied keening of wolves rose from the forest's sheer pitch. In the confines of my sleeping bag, there on the bare pine floor, my neck and shoulders began to ache.

I thought about the easy conversation I had shared with this stranger about her traumatic past. I thought about my mother's reticence. I wondered why it was so easy for some to divulge such painful memories, and not for others.

After a time of twisting and wrenching myself in my cocoon, I felt I had worn myself out enough to sleep a little. A few minutes went by as I lay there in slow forgetting, and I let night swamp over me. What passed for sleep was but a few hours of restlessness. I dreamt of nothing. All night I was utterly conscious of my own body and its pains. I heard everything. The synchronous rumblings from the other room refused to fall away from my ears. After a while a muted silvery light shone in the windowed

squares, of which I was only vaguely aware in contrast to the unfailing black that had surrounded me since blowing out the lantern's flame. A greyness transmuted the room. Morning rose in that greyness, in the same greyness that rose in me, and I lay there in it, aware, weary, aching.

## Chapter 14

Mid December. Eiderdown snow, hoary quilts flung half-forgotten over sleeping children. A winter cold and lean and wretched.

The window above her dead mother's bed wept ice. She returned to her own bed with Vera for warmth.

Time froze in the small cube of her house; she moved only within its necessary limits. Others moved within the limits time had carved away for them, too, lives encased in a single frightening moment. Occasionally, time imploded in one hut or another. Arrest. A deportation. An eviction. Death.

Between, all was stillness and silence.

Early on a January morning noises in the road disrupted her sleep. One by one lamps were lit in windows. Pale gold light cast itself in misshapen squares on the snow outside where dark, slow-moving beings passed in and out of that macabre stage in a progression.

In the doorway she emerged wrapped in her quilt. In shawls and blankets, in darkness, the villagers peered from windows or cracks in doors, feeling safest when they could not be known. They craved disappearance.

Someone whispered: *Are you soldiers? Is there a war?*

The village grew silent with fear, watched familiar gestures describing fear: bent heads, haunted eyes that saw nowhere, a thin palm dragged from a coat sleeve, *please, if you would*, when none had a thing to give. When the living could spare nothing for the

dying.

Radyk, shouting through the coldness and shadows: *Get up, swine, get up already! Move on, you swine!*

The creatures once more receded to shadow.

She returned to bed and lay listening for the rasp of feet dragged through snow.

By daybreak all movement had ceased.

When at last she dared look from the window she was stunned to see people in the road who looked as though they had just sat against the fences for a rest, some who appeared to have dropped where they stood, falling backward or forward or twisting to one side.

Radyk issued his orders: the bodies were to be left. Dirty kulaks from Sonyachny to be viewed and studied by the dirty kulaks of Zólota Bráma. An example.

The corpses fell prey to the burgeoning raven population, pecking first at the eyes. Fingers. Toes. Loitering and cackling, black marks like sin in the sacred snow. Then, rats came snuffling hungrily into fresh wounds. Faces disappeared into dark caverns of gore.

The living passed the dead this way, some making unauthorised signs of the cross and hurrying by muttering outlaw prayers. Others moved as though the obstructions were no more to them than a squirrel or dog left to bloat and implode for the maggots.

Somewhere between the rising of the sun and its setting, bodies were robbed of precious shoes, boots, socks, coats, scarves. Dead children lay naked and swollen in the snow, themselves the paleness of snow, their stick limbs broken to pieces so that what they wore might be slipped away hurriedly, without struggle. Women who had once

modestly covered themselves in the glare of daylight were stripped bare-breasted and thrown aside like sacks until some carnivorous beast ate away the soft delectable flesh of their breasts and stomachs. Men, sitting when they died, were left gruesomely on their backs with legs stiffened straight up into the air, their starved genitals left to be eaten away by ravens or rats. At night, wolves and wild boars came to drag off heads or arms, or entire torsos.

Closed fists on closed wooden doors cracked through the pre-dawn air like gunshots.

Men and women were dragged by the ankles and armpits from cold beds. *Get up, there's work to do.* Stabbed out of bed with sticks by twelve year old Komsomol boys and girls puffed proud to be honoured with such work on behalf of the Party.

On her way out the door, having hurriedly stomped her feet into boots, she looked back at her daughter sitting up on the pallet near the stove, her tortured face silent with screaming, gnawing her fingers as spit foamed from her mouth. But all she could do was look. No time was left to think what must be said.

From the road they could hear the villagers' children cry out, trapped alone in their houses while parents and grandparents and older brothers and sisters were corralled to the tempo of shouts. Komsomol youths prodded them along with sharpened sticks. The villagers kept themselves clustered away from the cadavers that only reminded them of their own fates, moving where directed.

Two confiscated haywagons were hauled out by several men, one lamp attached to the front of each so that every little jostle sent erratic tracts of light over the snow.

Half the village was pointed to the left toward the Church, half behind them, toward the NKVD headquarters. She was forced left.

The men began lifting the first bodies, and slowly the women joined them, recovering from their revulsion by the feel of bayonets and sticks like fingers in the smalls of their backs. The low voices of the Komsomol and Cheka murmured down the road long beyond the gate, becoming part of the hypnotic clop-clopping and the shriek of axles and children behind them. Now and then the Komsomol youth laughed brightly, teasingly. The villagers worked without speaking.

At first all she could hear was the creak her own boots made in the heavy snow. The totality of such pandemonium became a pulse too tedious to hear. Her mind drove deeply into that one sound.

Behind their queue, haywagons ambled along with cycloptic lamps beaming through the greyness and freezing in place only for passengers as they were pointed out -- here, an old man with no boots; a woman there; an adolescent girl and a boy of three or four and an infant girl. They took the skeletal remains and flung them by the wrists and ankles into the backs of the wagons. The sound of flesh thrown into flesh. Some retched quietly.

The woman beside her began to cry. She hadn't noticed anyone walking at her side. It was Irena Prytlak wiping tears with the back of her frosty sleeve, trying to hide any sign of her emotions. The grotesque parade marched on, another ten metres and another yet, fanning into the trees at the side of the road, returning, splitting and fanning again.

Then, "Over here - "

Someone called from just ahead and the eye of the wagon fell yellow against the rails of the big gate, lighting three black forms folded into one another as though the bones had been yanked from their skins. Mother, father, daughter. So ragged even a thief couldn't find use in stealing their clothes. Three inhuman marionettes, bloodlines like strings cut from the Party hand, purposes served and needed no longer. Entire lives sacrificed for the difference that made no difference at all.

The rest of the queue moved to the other side of the road, leaving her and Mrs. Prytlak with this group of cadavers. At first she didn't move. Mrs. Prytlak fell to her knees crossing herself. Then she leaned over and touched the bodies. Her hands vibrated, passing from wrist to frail wrist, each replaced with such care that it was certain they were all alive the way Mrs. Prytlak was handling them.

"My Lord - " Mrs. Prytlak cried in a hoarse voice, glancing over her shoulder at the guard walking behind the wagon holding his bayoneted rifle, prepared to skewer and unwilling even to waste bullets on peasants. She lowered her voice, "The girl's still alive. My dear Lord, she's alive -- "

Mrs. Prytlak became stone. Her lips parted. Drool seeped forever from the corner of her mouth, down and down Mrs. Prytlak's chin. Her hands began twitching. In this trance she bent over the girl and put her palm over that horrible beakish face, and squeezed. "God save us all."

Her own bulging eyes raced between Mrs. Prytlak and the girl. She looked back to the guard and to Mrs. Prytlak again, terrified of what was being done, terrified that to be standing there was to be sentenced to death. Then the child opened her eyes, looked directly at Mrs. Prytlak, and spasmed. When it was over Mrs. Prytlak lifted the emaciated



wrist once more. Taking both her hands away she stood, shaking out her coat hems as though she had just finished sweeping the dust under the bed. Mrs. Prytlak wouldn't make eye contact, her face wretched while vapour blasted from her nostrils like a bull as she lost her wind.

One of the men from the wagon came from behind. "Well?"

Neither woman answered. They went on loading the bodies. The whole time Mrs. Prytlak wouldn't look at her, but just as they started up the road again the woman said, "Christ is born."

"What?" No room for comprehension lay in this declaration.

Mrs. Prytlak nodded behind them toward the first sun. "Today it's Christmas Eve. Don't you know?"

After, she doesn't remember how it was she lifted that girl herself, touched frozen bones not yet stiff with death, saw the milky glare of all the dead staring eyes. The horror she remembers, will always remember, arises not just from what she was doing that night but from the mere idea of it.

The parade-march slowly turns to listless shuffling in the rhythms of arthritic axles and crunching ice. Morning comes against too-white snow. The corpses are gone, the wagons vanish, and it isn't so changed a place after all.

Once home she can't even recall having gone back there, to lie like death across her bed. Though she remembers herself that way as though she'd just shaken herself from a vision.

At some point she forces herself to sit on the edge of the pallet, her hand reaching

for the enamel chamber pot beneath with an instinct she knows well. Her insides rumble violently; she drops to the floor fumbling her skirts up and squatting over the pot while her intestines open, the pain of being disembowelled with a cleaver. She remains there, her head hanging in the fabric tautening between her knees. The pain in her stomach is fierce. She struggles to breathe and sits in total silence while the room fills with odour. Then she rises hurriedly, pulling herself toward the door as if somehow the obscenity will reach up from the chamber pot and possess her. Outside in the snow bank she sinks to her knees and stays there until cold rain blasts against her skin, at first like tears but then like knives, glassy droplets leaping off the snow white of the road and rooftops. She leans into it until her skin goes numb.

Two Cheka wives are hurrying by and stare at her.

"She's crazy," one remarks to the other. "Just like her mother."

"They say she was some kind of whore."

"Whore!"

She wants to sleep, deeply and into the night. If she had a knife in her hand she'd rip it across her wrists and throat. Blood keeps her alive and if she lets it out, lets it all go down into the white river of the road -

"I know how," she reminds herself. In Kiev she'd seen men whose wrists were sculpted in a dozen scars like the outside layer of half-complete statuary. It was Orest who'd told her if those men really wanted to kill themselves it was best to do the slashing from wrist to elbow, or across the throat. If they'd only known the proper way - But how many times had those men tried it, to get out of the army, to end the fears of revolution, Communism, poverty; how many times bandaged and patched and sent back to their

fears? If they'd only done it right.

"Wrist to elbow," she reminds herself. She holds out her arms, studying. "Wrist to elbow."

She doesn't just think of slashing her wrists. She wants to slash everything: her face and throat, her torso and breasts, her arms and legs and the bottoms of her feet. She wants to leave not a single inch without responsibility and retribution for everything the body as a whole had done. If the least part is guilty, so is the whole.

She goes back inside. She takes the chamber pot out to the privvy and leaves it there. Back in the house she cleans herself up.

Who knows how long it is before she can think and feel and sense once more, before she realises with absurd shock that Vera is not in the house. In such strangeness a minute or week is eternity. She goes out tramping through frozen snow that blazes back into her blinded eyes, searching for the child, calling for her.

"Vera!" she shouts, "Vera - "

In echoes her voice meets a mute wind so cold it shears away her breath. Out there her isolation is immeasurable. Except for the road where the dead have passed, where they have all just been, no small footprints in snow lead beyond the village or fields. When she comes across any villagers she says little, only, "have you seen Vera?" But they don't know. They want only to mind their own business.

Along the way she notices Wasyl Meshka out back of his house digging. He's bundled from head to toe, just a small opening for his eyes and nose. He's knee-deep in his hole, half-buried like he was digging his own grave, and makes no physical response to her presence. His eyes are wild but everything else about him has an indifference of

surrender.

"You seen Vera anywhere?"

She asks, but something in her voice already implies Vera's end, a hopelessness and helplessness. Meshka stops, flips his shovel over and scrapes the soil back into a little pile. She looks down and recognises the shrivelled ribs of a roan horse. Meshka gets down on his hands and knees, yanks his mittens off, and pulls ice and dirt from the mangy hide.

"Ah - thanks be to God," he says from behind his scarf, genuflecting to touch his cheek to the ribs where grubs and maggots have already worked through part of the flesh. Meshka's stare is aimless. He's in his own world. Only the horse consumes his mind with the visions and perfumes of death that will come from his stove tonight.

She turns away and hurries for home, where she feels panic again, that maybe she should have left the door open just in case Vera came wandering back; maybe told her neighbours to keep an eye out, or maybe kept a fire going. Just in case. There's always the possibility of just in case. As though the whole thing has been a mistake or an oversight she checks all over the house again, under beds and in trunks and in the outhouse and the granary and chicken shed.

While she's in the yard gathering twigs and branches for her fire Mrs. Prytlak comes over. Mrs. Prytlak has never stepped foot on Grekhov property. With wary eyes, clinging to her branches and twigs, she watches Mrs. Prytlak enter the yard. The woman comes over and starts saying something. Most of it she can't hear, because she's still thinking about Mrs. Prytlak in her yard, the strangeness. Mrs. Prytlak's mouth is saying Vera " - heard you were asking" or something like that.

"I don't know," she says, "maybe they didn't know she was one of ours."

One of ours, she repeats to herself, stacking branches for the fire. Though she won't look Mrs. Prytlak in the eye she shrugs and says, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Her arms are full and she can't stop moving or stacking.

The woman's voice is rough, angry: "I'm not the only one. There's others think your Vera went with them. I'm not saying on purpose, Grekhova - "

"Went? With who - ?"

But she is ashamed to know the unspoken thing. Her eyes are burning bloodshot fire. Her breath steams cold in the air. A stick falls away from her armload and Mrs. Prytlak retrieves it, saying, "Just don't expect them devils to tell you nothing, except lies and more lies. So you may as well stop killing yourself going around asking where she is. You'll never find her. They took her and that's that."

And just like that Mrs. Prytlak leaves.

Alone in the yard, a horrible sinking rushes her whole body. She's sick, right to the blood of her, to the marrow. The kindling drops as her arms go limp. What comes from her throat comes in pulses like choking. Tears freeze on her eyelashes.

Ten times she heads out the gate to go to the GPU and make her situation known, ten times she turns back. For a long time she just stands there staring out at nothing. Ignorance is the narcotic and they are all its addicts. Willing or forced, there is no possibility without it, none with it.

Malaise claims her. She can't stand to think or feel, yet can't seem to force thought or feeling away. When she imagines what's become of Vera, her voiceless child,

her daughter who could not even scream or cry out for help, she vomits uncontrollably. Then she begins to fear that all this time without word from Orest and the boys means she has sent them to their deaths as well.

Refuge has come in sleep alone, although even a profound sickness of the mind and heart and soul will only permit a body so much sleep. In her waking she's alone and terrified. In sleep she is haunted, faces and voices coming to her night after night, so vivid she can't tell certainty from dreaming, night from the day. Sounds come from her mother's window. At first she thinks she hears *here, here, I'm here*. At times it sounds like *Vera, Vera* -

Under its spell she cries herself out of consciousness.

By spring they have already buried a few who otherwise, in other circumstances, would have lived. The old and the very young don't last. Meshka goes mad and is found in bed, his throat slit from ear to ear, they said like a big smirk for the Communists. For an illiterate it's as much as could have been said. The Prytlak boys have been stealing wheat from neighbours and one has already been killed over a handful of grain. Like Meshka and his horse, once they've had at their own rot and thanked God for it, they'll go after each other. It's where hunger must take them.

As for her, she neither courts death nor life. The phases of her hunger are in the stretched skin aching to its utmost, the bloating of malnutrition in her face. Her eyes are swollen nearly shut. Through winter she had cooked shoes to eat the leather, one thin strip a day. She lived on slivers of wood. Now that spring has arrived, worms are a delicacy. She craves them, and twice a day, dawn and dusk, she goes to them,

supplicating on hands and knees. Her stomach distends as though the child she will never carry awaits its own inexistence.

On through summer some vegetables are planted. Fruit trees are plucked bare. Some villagers even manage to grow a little wheat for themselves behind their fences. Summer is only a moment; it can't stop the coming of another winter.

The singular event of the Church finally being made into rubble marks the end of the fleeting season that lets them live, but none of the villagers has the strength to care. In general Zólota Bráma becomes inert, withdrawn. Beyond their own windows nobody is seen to move. Now and then someone from the GPU comes nosing around for something to suspect, eyeing the progress of bloating and sores and protruding bones, and the faces that begin to resemble strange dry birds howling silently from nests.

For a time she watches and hears a whole separate universe co-existing beyond her window. The Communist officials and their families remain solid and healthy, and they tell the villagers that if they weren't so lazy and stupid they wouldn't be going hungry.

Zólota Bráma is a masterpiece. The village officials give witness to the Party's superior ways. The proletariat ideal is proclaimed with raised voices and fists. They kneel at the altar of their words, raise icons to their moustachioed and bearded gods. Their own invocations make the pupils of their glassy eyes grow large. Even their offspring still wear the vestment clothes. They are themselves everything they have wished to destroy.

There is a warp in the lowest left pane of the window by the door, like a single

distinct corrugation formed in the making, molten glass accidentally folded once upon itself and sealed that way in the hardening. She has come to watch the road through the warp itself. It absorbs her: the way the creatures in the road walk into it and disappear before making their disjointed reappearance on the other side. When she watches she keeps her eye on it, looking to see where the creatures go as they pass through the distortion. She wants to see what they become in the nothingness of that place, if they resemble something other than their vanished selves. She can never quite make it out. Then she imagines herself seen from the road by those other eyes. She envisions the warp across her own face like a glass scar, and how even in its explicit breach she is still largely herself, whole. She is more than that distortion which feasts upon the others and spews them out, permanently distorted like itself.

The dead are great teachers.

“Where are you going, Mummy?” one of the Cheka guards shouts.

“To the river for a swim.”

They laugh, watching her pass in the moonlight, the parched and swollen face of hunger that makes them recoil with disgust.

She hears the kick of metal behind her as one of them lifts his gun to her. But she is not afraid and she keeps walking.

“Don’t bother,” another says. “They’ll scrape her off the road like everyone else. Save your bullets for better animals.”

“Eh, Mummy – keep to the road, eh, where the wagon can find you. They don’t like traipsing all over the place for corpses.”



Once out of their sight, she walks straight into the forest, the dark woods of nightmare, the place she had so feared as a child, westward where she knows there is still life.

Yes, the dead have much to say.

## Chapter 15

In the pale dawn light my mother lay staring into the ceiling of her room.

“Mother? I’m up. Do you want anything?”

She was so still. The air, the light, the room were all terribly still. I went to her and lay my hand on hers. Rigor had already set in. Her fingers were blue to the palms.

Whatever my mother’s last vision was, I felt certain it was a lonely one. Of all the mercies she had been denied while on this earth, in her final hours she had not even been allowed the simple kindness of a held hand, a reassuring stroke, the sight of her only child at her side - some evidence that she was not alone. The thought of this was difficult to bear. The old cliché about dying peacefully in sleep did not seem as providential now as it had always sounded when I heard patients’ families make this statement about loved ones.

I called the coroner, then Paula’s office to cancel her contract.

I stayed with my mother waiting for the coroner to arrive. In the years of her incapacity when she became home-bound, I had brought in a cassette player so she could listen to music I knew she loved: Ukrainian choirs, a bandurist chorus, Rachmaninoff’s *Vespers*, and a copy of some traditional folk music I had found in Toronto. I had even slipped in a Red Army Chorus recording which, had she known it, would have made her livid.

I turned on the Rachmaninoff tape, the last thing my mother had listened to. It was always fairly loud so she could hear, and the first sound exploding into the room was the powerful call to prayer in the tolling carillon. Then, the magnificent liturgical voices

flooded the air: deep basses growling beneath clear and transcendent tenors, the full, pure, rich altos and sweetly quavering sopranos.

*Amen!*  
*Come, let us worship God, our King.*  
*Come, let us worship and fall down*

For four hours I sat in a chair beside her trying to muster a thought. I could not.

I could not think. I could not cry.

Images poured through me, time in rewind, a cliché of life flashing before my eyes. I was four again, afraid of every little change in my tenuous world, my mother the only security I knew. I saw the lonely seven-year-old me crying into a pillow, aching for a hug or a moment of gentleness from my poor, dispirited mother. I heard Jim MacDougall's odious voice *garlic and goulash garlic and goulash*, calling my mother a commie whore, a foreigner. The dozens of roomers streaming through our lives who treated her like dirt. The bigots, liars, cheats, the sluts and drunks and junkies.

*Blessed are all who take refuge in Him.*  
*Arise, O Lord! Save me, O my God! Alleluia. . .*

I saw my own hate toward my mother. I saw how callous I had been in the face of her abject life, the burden I had been for her, and yet in the small ways in which she had been capable, she had not failed me.

*Now that we have come to the setting of the sun,*  
*And behold the light of evening,*  
*We praise the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit –*

I saw Stefania and Vitaly in their slumbering, forgotten realm, my mother's courage in leaving that place, and the cowardice in their staying.

*Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant*  
*Depart in peace, according to Thy Word,*  
*For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation,*

*Which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people—  
A light to enlighten the Gentiles,  
And the glory of Thy people Israel -*

I saw the spectral lights at the end of her tongue and fingers, at one time vivid and unmistakable in the dark – the manifestation of a malevolence with which, in ignorance, I had amused myself - over the years slowly dimming, until eventually her teeth began to fall out and the blackened spot left on the end of her tongue had to be cut away. For as long as I could recall, the skin on her fingers had been numb and discoloured from the many skin conditions radium contamination had caused.

Not once did I think about the father I never had, only the mother I would never have again.

When the coroner's attendants came, I insisted I be allowed to remain in the room while they transferred her to the body bag. The doctor in me was still in control. I watched the way they gently handled her, easing her over to the gurney and the open bag. I heard, more than saw, the zipper closed over her grey-green face, her eyes still staring. I followed the attendants to the front door, held it open for them, helped them manage the front steps.

By now, some of the neighbours were out on their lawns staring, curiosity and commiseration on their faces. I stood on the driveway's edge and watched the attendants load the gurney in. My mother's body lurched rigidly with every bump and joggle. The doors closed behind her. The attendants got in the van. There was already something funereal in the way the vehicle pulled out of the driveway. Before the neighbours could make a move toward me, I went back inside.

That evening I started making calls. Anjou's was the first number I dialled. How easy it was to pick up the phone when it had nothing to do with us. When the answering machine came on, my heart dropped a beat with the disappointment of missing a chance to speak with her directly. I left a simple message.

"Um - hi. It's me. Krystof. I'm just - Well, Mother died this morning. I thought you might want to know. Um - Bye." I added: "I hope you're doing okay. Bye."

Then I called Stan. He was home. After reminding him who I was, I told him the news.

"So she's gone, eh?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, may she rest in peace."

"I'd like you to come to the funeral, Stan."

"I don't drive no more."

"It's okay. I'll make arrangements. Just pack your bags. I'll have a cab pick you up and take you to the airport. I'll come and get you myself in Toronto. We'll drive back to Windsor."

"That's a lot of trouble - "

"Please, Stan. Just come. She doesn't have anybody left. It would mean a lot."

"Well - but I'm an old man. I got to get my rest."

"You won't have to worry about anything. You can rest on the plane, and in the car to Windsor. We'll make as many stops as you need along the way."

"You got someplace for me to stay down there?"

"You'll stay with me, if that's okay."

“No, that’s fine. But I’m an old man. I need my rest.”

“I understand. And thank you, Stan.”

Around midnight the phone rang. I had been working my way through a bottle of rye for the last few hours, trying to deaden myself into withstanding the night alone with my thoughts while I cobbled together the eulogy I would deliver in two nights. If it was the hospital calling, I’d have to make up some excuse even though I was on call. I rolled across the bed to answer. It was Anjou. The sound of her voice jarred me. I was not expecting her to do anything about my message.

It was clear I was drunk. Though she didn’t say anything, her silence was all the judgment I needed.

“Sorry – I was sleeping,” I lied, and tried to sound sober. “I haven’t had any rest for – for a while. Long time.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Well, thanks – thank you for calling me back. That means a lot. It really does.”

“Your mother was the last of our parents’ generation. I just wanted you to know that I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.” I sat up against the headboard as though it would somehow make me sound more upright, less fall-down-drunk. “I mean, she suffered a lot.”

“I know. She had a hard life.”

“Did I tell you, Anje - ” I swallowed to moisten my throat, “Did I tell you I was in the Ukraine?”

There was a hard pause. “We haven’t spoken in almost two years.”

“Right. Right.” I covered my eyes with my hand. “Sorry, wasn’t thinking. Just

hearing your voice - Guess it threw me.”

“Anyhow, I’m sorry about your mother. That’s all I wanted to say.”

“She loved you so so much, Anje. She cried – when – ” I didn’t finish. I thought about the times Anjou had come over and, upon seeing that my mother was awake and it was one of her good days, happily spent time holding my mother’s hand and remembering the past we all lived through, telling her about her parents and some of their mutual friends, gossip my mother had become isolated enough in latter years to absorb with great satisfaction. Sometimes in warm weather when I had my mother out on the patio where she could overlook my evolving, albeit insufficient garden, I would watch the two of them, their heads tucked together while Anjou said something that produced laughter. I was proud of Anjou for being such a friend to my mother, and as a son I felt that I had done something right for a change because the woman I loved so dearly was loved so much by my mother. There was tenderness there that my mother had only been able to elicit in the last years of her life, and I hoped in some way there was redemption in it – for my mother because so many woeful years had cheated her of both tenderness and the capacity for it, and for myself because I had only added to that woe by marrying Sharon and staying with her long after her presence in our lives became insufferable.

To my last remark there was no response. I tried to speak, but I could only manage a frustrated gasp. Finally what came out sounded like begging: “Will you be at the funeral?”

The hesitation in her simple “I don’t know” was enough. I knew she would not come.

When the conversation ended, so shallow and disappointing, so unlike all the

ways I imagined our speaking again, all I could think about was that in two years I had not curtailed my drinking one bit, even when I thought we would find a way back to each other.

Although I had hidden it from her, never drinking in her presence, never letting myself be drunk around her, how easily she had found me out. It was about half a year into our relationship, and she had come to the house one evening for a visit. She went into the basement for something and found my stacks of empties under the stairs – case upon case of beer, wine bottles rolling around, whiskey and rye. I was an indiscriminate drunk. From the bottom of the stairs she'd called up.

“Did you have a party?”

I came to the open door above her, puzzled. “No. Why?”

“All these empties. Under the stairs.” The first evidence of her disillusionment in me flickered in her eyes.

“Oh, that.” How easily the first lie came, anything to douse the hurt way she looked at me. “That’s from a staff party I had last summer. I just haven’t had the chance to get rid of it. No time. You know?”

“Oh.”

No liar can outlast truth. Little by little I proved what I was to her, and little by little disillusionment no longer flickered in her eyes. It flamed. It burned there in every glance she gave me, in the doubt behind anything I said or did.

Still, it didn’t change a thing. I had done nothing to earn back her trust in me. By the time she left me, I had simply acquiesced to my own failure as though she had been like a bigot telling someone it was skin colour or genetics that had been so intolerable.



Alcohol had become such a natural part of my life, a sick kind of relationship with which Anjou had unwittingly found herself in competition, and against which she had lost.

Even after that phone call, when I listened to her hang up and I held the receiver until the dial tone droned in my ear, I could barely manage to feel embarrassed that she had caught me drunk. I believed too much in my own lie, and its power to win anyone over. Especially me.

When Stan emerged from the arrivals level at Pearson, I was taken aback by his appearance. He seemed much older than the way I remembered him in Sudbury less than a year ago. It might as easily have been my own reinterpretation of his demeanour as some sudden decline in health.

We shook hands, and he followed me to collect his luggage.

“Are you okay, Stan? Do you need anything? Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“I’m okay. They give me that there snack on the plane.”

I smiled. “Good, good. I’m glad. You just let me know if you need anything.”

“Well, I - ” He lowered his head and pulled at his nostrils, crazed with spider veins and cratered pores. His fingers were massive, thick, grubby from a lifetime of farm work. “Look, kid, I don’t never go nowheres important. I got no suit to show Mama respect.”

“Well, then, a suit it is. When we get to Windsor we’ll go look for one.”

“I got the money. I’m good for it - ”

“No, no, Stan, I asked you here. Keep your money.”

“Stan Romaniuk pays his own way.”

“If Stan Romaniuk wants to part with his money, then why doesn’t Stan Romaniuk donate it to a good cause in my mother’s name? That way, everyone’s happy.”

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. “You’re a funny fellow.”

I smiled. “I’ve been called many things, Stan. Funny was never one of them.”

Stan slept most of the way home. Strangely, I did not feel like talking anyhow. All the questions I might have had for Stan that, even just a week ago, would have been like life and death for me, seemed burdensome now.

At the other end of the visitation room my mother lay in profile, dwarfed in a simple maple casket. The only flower arrangement in the room was the red rose casket spray I had ordered. She had loved red roses and I wanted her to be surrounded by some of the few truly gracious things she had ever known in her life.

The sight of her from outside the doors of the visitation room was difficult, and as Stan and I waited for the kids to arrive, I could not bring myself to want to go in. Sharon had promised to get the kids to the funeral home, but almost half an hour had passed and they were still not there. We had agreed to go in together as a family but I could not leave my mother alone any longer.

I said to Stan: “Do you want to go in now?”

“You’re not waiting no more?”

“No. Knowing my ex-wife they won’t get here till next week.”

“You young people and that there damn divorce. Nothing but trouble.”

“Yeah. You said it.” As I opened the door and let Stan go before me, I asked,

“Didn’t you ever get married?”

“Me? Never. Mike neither. The farm took all our time.”

As we entered we went silent, assuming all the reverence commanded by the circumstances. The two of us made that long journey of a few metres together but I felt desolate, and my mother’s whole heartbreaking lifetime caved in on me. I walked to the casket and knelt beside her. Stan knelt at my side, crossed himself, and lowered his head.

Years had gone by since my mother had done her hair or worn make up, or even had teeth in her mouth. The face I stared at was not my mother’s. The black, sunken rims of her eyes had been covered in a lifeless beige foundation. Unaccustomed to the structure of teeth in her mouth, whatever they had done made her look as though she were trying to stifle a yawn. I put my head in my hands and cried, crossing myself and trying to think of a prayer. *Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name –*

But I couldn’t remember the way it went, only vague impressions of kingdoms coming and daily bread. I placed my hand on the cold, hard, sinewy remains of her hand. Somehow the feel of her like that did not bring on the disgust and revulsion I experienced when I touched my living patients.

Stan rested a hand on my back as he sniffed hard then pulled a hanky from his pocket to wipe his eyes and nose.

“My grandmother used to tell me tears of grief are bad poison. If they fall on black earth, grass won’t never grow. If they fall in the river, the river will dry up, and if they fall in the sea the ships will all sink. But if they stay in the heart, the heart will die.”

“All I can think about is what a miserable life she had. She cried so much. What could I do?”

“Well,” he began, rising, groaning as he heaved himself up. “Maybe she made her peace with it. I got to sit, or maybe I don’t get up again.”

“You go ahead, Stan.”

But Stan hesitated and stared at my mother, his brows puckered. “Where did you find this here?”

I looked to see what he meant. He was fingering the coral beads of the necklace I had the funeral director include to go with the embroidered Ukrainian blouse she was wearing.

“Mother had it.”

“She buy it?”

“I don’t know. I doubt it. She never spent money on things like that.”

“Someone give it to her, maybe?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. Probably. Or she had it from the Old Country when she came. Why?”

Stan’s mouth was pulled into an exaggerated frown. “She didn’t have it. I remember that.”

“Then I couldn’t tell you. She just always had it.”

“Crazy thing. Them beads - ” For a moment he caressed them, then blew his nose in his hanky and stuffed it back into his pocket. “They always looked like fresh blood to me. Drops of blood.”

I turned my head and watched Stan hobble away. When he had seated himself on one of the sofas reserved for family, I stood. My knees were locking. I leaned in and touched my mother’s head.

Never again would I be able to pester her, *Mama, tell about the Old Country. Tell about Tato.* I only hoped I had not inflicted too much pain by asking. In the end, nothing I might have learned could have erased the marks her life and its secrets had made in her, and ultimately in me. Knowing my father's identity would not have made him a father. As much as I had yearned for a sort of gilded superhero in him, the truth was probably less than illustrious, a Kureliuk, a Jim MacDougall, Terrance Kerley, a bum. What was the point in yearning one day more? Anjou had said it: there was nobody left.

How long I remained by my mother I did not notice. When Sharon finally came in with the kids, her live-in boyfriend Wayne shambling along beside her with his hands stuffed down his jeans pockets, only twenty five minutes were left of the visitation time I'd scheduled just for family. Furious, I met them halfway down the aisle.

"Where have you been?" I was asking any of them, all of them.

Sharon was dressed in an old concert jersey, its faded, once-ornate design cracking away, the words *Styx Paradise* printed across the front. She was polishing off a sundae, sucking on the plastic spoon. "Oh, take a fuckin downer. So what, you think Granny Clampett over there's gonna know?"

"Sharon - " I could have put my fist down her gullet. "I'll know. And the kids will know."

I glared at my son and daughter, who almost flinched like I was about to hit them.

"This is how you show respect to your Baba?"

Cryssie stuck her jaw out at me. "Cripes, it's not like I was driving, Dad."

"You're old enough to have common sense. You're old enough to know right from wrong." I couldn't even glance at Sharon. "Even when nobody else around you

does.”

Sharon got her hackles up, her spoon halting between the cup and her mouth.

“Why don’t ya pick up your own fuckin kids next time, huh?”

“Mom, cool it.” It was Shad, his hand on his mother’s forearm. “It’s okay. You and Wayne can go.”

Before turning back for the door, Sharon shot me the finger. The ever-impassive Wayne followed her out like a lazy old hound. How glad I was that we had divorced before my mother died. I would have been humiliated just having her standing next to me.

It took all my willpower not to let my anger out on the kids as I herded them over to the casket. I could have booted them from one room to the other. Even their obvious discomfort with being there worked my nerves.

“Um, Dad – ” Shad stood there beside the casket clasping his hands and unclasping them, his darting eyes incapable of settling on my mother. “What are we supposed to do?”

Now he shifted his weight, trying even harder not to glance at the corpse of his grandmother. They had never been to a funeral, or seen a dead person before.

Although I had not been a physically demonstrative father, I put my hand on his shoulder. I was calming down. “Well, anything, I guess. You can say a prayer or think about Baba.”

“Like what?”

Cryssie collapsed into tears. “Dad – Dad - ”

“I know it’s hard, guys.” I wrapped my arm around Cryssie’s waist as she pushed

her nose into my shoulder and sobbed. "I've seen a lot of death, and it's even hard for me."

"Dad," Cryssie wailed, "did it hurt?"

"Did what hurt?"

That Cryssie was snivelling like a child was provoking. "Did it hurt to die?"

The image of my mother possibly in pain, alone all night, flashed into my head. I needed a drink. "I don't know. I wasn't there when it happened. Chances are, she just took a breath and died."

"I can't look. I don't want to look at her."

"Cryssie -" Ready to explode over her childish melodrama, I checked myself. It was not the time for castigations. I needed to understand. We all needed understanding.

I let go of my daughter and rested my hand on my mother's. "Look, it's okay. See? It's still Baba."

"It doesn't look like her."

"No, not the way you saw her."

"What does it feel like?"

"Hard. Cool. Unreal." I took my hand away. "You don't have to touch her, but you can't spend the next two days avoiding looking at her. You have to face it. Now, come on. I want you to meet someone."

Over at the sofa, Stan was already on his feet.

"Stan, these are my kids, Cryssie and Shad."

His smile was apprehensive.

"Kids, this is a very old family friend, Stan Romaniuk."

He held out his hand to each of them and they shook it.

“Your Baba, she was a tough old bird.”

That evening a small but steady trickle of people came by for the services. People from the church, neighbours from Glengarry, from my place. Paula.

When I saw Andy approach I met him at the casket.

“I’m sorry, bud,” he offered, shaking his head. “I liked your mother.”

“I know. I appreciate it, Andy.”

“Think I could - I’d like to see her.”

“Oh - ” I looked around for some way I could boost Andy up, something he could stand on.

With the heel of his crutch he nudged me. “Maybe – if you – Could you give me a lift, bud?”

Andy pulled his arms out of the braces of his crutches while I held him steady, then I heaved him up against my chest and rested my foot on the kneeler, essentially letting him sit on my knee. He was heavier than he looked, and I huffed and strained under his weight.

“Well, old friend,” he said to my mother, giving her hand a squeeze, “if I had been fifty years older, or you were fifty years younger, I’d have made you my queen. You were always nice to me. And you meant it. I knew that. So God bless. May you rest in peace.”

He elbowed me and I eased him down, supporting him as he fit his crutches back around his forearms.



“That was really nice,” I said, leading him over to the couch where he could take a seat. “Dad.”

He grinned up at me. “Man – you’re a piece.”

“No, you are.”

He laughed. “Shut up.”

I bent down and bear-hugged him. “You’re a great guy, And.”

“I know it.”

There were people I neither knew nor recognised, only to discover our mothers worked together at the Norton Palmer, or my mother had cleaned their house for years before her retirement. A woman about my own age made her way toward me. When she reached me she put out her hand, and I took it.

“Chris, I’m so sorry. Your mother was really decent to us when we most needed it.”

“I’m sorry – ” I was taking in her face, trying to place it along my life. “I don’t - ”

“Iris. Iris Feeney. We rented - ”

“Oh – Right, right! Iris! Now that I look at you, I can see - ”

“You know, there were times when we didn’t have the money for rent, and your mother was so good about it. Even when my dad could pay what we owed, your mother would tell him to put it aside for me. I know you guys were barely scraping by yourselves, I know that, but you have no idea what that meant to us.”

“Thank you, Iris. You tend to remember how hard it was - ” I threw a glance in my mother’s direction. “How hard she was. But it’s nice to hear those kinds of things.”

The visitation room was full, to my relief, when the *panakhyda* began. I had always feared nobody would show up. Before the service, the priest called me aside. He was a short, rotund man, and as he spoke with me he fingered the gold cross hanging around his neck and down over his belly. Against the sombre black cassock it glowed and flashed richly.

His accent was so thick I could barely make out what he was saying. “Young man, *Matyr* die at home?”

“Yes.”

He closed his eyes and exhaled deeply, clearly dismayed. “Is too late now, of course, but you suppose to call priest. Is right thing to do. I come, bring *d’yakh* for blessing service. I know you never call for Holy Unction, before *Matyr* die, too. Is right thing to do. Is all right thing to do. But is too late.”

I was speechless. I stood there feeling like I’d failed my mother one last time while the priest and what was left of the once-magnificent choir – a handful of tone-deaf old women and men – positioned themselves at the front and to the side of the casket. I took my seat. Although I should have been moved by the service, I was too dazed by guilt to pay attention. When it came time to deliver the eulogy I didn’t even hear the priest mention my name. Shad had to prod me.

I went to the podium and began: “Psalm 70 says *Cast me not off* - ” The words choked in me, and I paused to compose myself. “*Cast me not - off in the time of old age: when my strength shall – shall fail, do not thou forsake me... And unto old age and gray hairs: O God, forsake me not* - ”

Delivering that eulogy took everything out of me. I sat back down quickly. I did not want to face anyone again.

## Chapter 16

What had been distraction and restlessness over the last two years darkened into something I had not known before. The black dogs of Churchill and Tolstoi and Lincoln set upon me.

In a mental haze I got Stan to Toronto and on the plane back to Sudbury. By then I was glad to see him gone, his old-man surliness, his abrupt manners and, in the end, a way of circumscribing his history with a reticence that rivalled – although admittedly more broadly - my mother's. To have been surrounded by so many people in so little time took all my endurance so that by the time my mother was in the ground even the dinner at the hall became too much.

When it was all over and I had my house to myself again, I collapsed on the sofa to rest, and slept through until morning. The next day, tired and rundown, I lay there as dark thoughts bore down on my mind like a driving black rain, what I'd failed at, who I'd failed, how, when. But there was no why. Never a why.

I tortured myself about the way I seemed almost fated to disappoint myself and everyone around me. *Cast me not off in the time of old age: when my strength shall fail, do not thou forsake me...* I couldn't even get death right for my mother - even when I didn't believe in those elaborate rituals myself. This prayer, that service, say this so many times, respond this way, cross yourself like this, not like that.

The Holy Unction I'd denied my mother, even if out of ignorance. Now the *panakhyda* in forty days.

That I had not chosen good for my life, had not chosen my children when

choosing them meant saving them. Had not chosen my mother in her time of need. I had not chosen Anjou because I could not bring myself to choose sobriety. That I couldn't seem to recognise goodness when it came my way, or when it did I lacked the wherewithal to meet it.

That if my mother, as caustic and bitter as she had been most of my life, had made it to heaven, it was not on the blessing of some arrogant priest, not because she or I crossed ourselves the right way or said words in a prescribed way, but by her own struggle for salvation, by the pure compassion of God.

That if I were myself hellbound it would be because I deserved no one's compassion, not even God's. I did not know what salvation looked like. I did not know where to find it. I did not even know if it was there at all.

After a few hours I could almost feel my brain cells and nerves bursting, a sensation so intense I nearly jumped from the sofa where, for the last day, I had lain virtually incapable of even moving a finger. I needed to do something. I needed to move, to occupy my mind before it truly imploded and I was left in a slaving psychosis.

I went into my mother's room and surveyed it. Everything had been left as it was the day she died. In the bed where she'd slept for five years even the disorder of mussed sheets was torture. I bundled them all up and threw them down the basement stairs to be washed.

As I wandered around the room I noticed her belongings. Was this all that rooted her? Gave her place? I began piling everything on the mattress. The fear of being there too long drove me harder. Even the things I couldn't imagine my mother ever caring

about were heaped up – her hard candies, her box of tissue. Leaving them behind was more than an epic denunciation of her character, it was also somehow what I saw of myself in the fractured mirror I held up to us both. Tubes of used up lipstick, every one of them the same brand and colour. I knew her reverence for consistency, her need for it. I found the one expensive thing she'd ever owned, not because she'd purchased it, but because a guest had left it in a suite at the hotel, and when it was never claimed she had kept it for herself, as many of the cleaning staff did. It was a bottle of Chanel, and she had used it so sparingly it had lasted nearly thirty years. It shone, golden and precious, at the bottom of the bottle. For a moment I inhaled the cap to remember the comfort of that scent on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings when a sparing dab on each side of her throat would transform her from a charwoman into a lady. Here was a fragrance I missed over the years, every small dignity of my mother's life having been taken, and replaced by pain and foul odours and isolation. It hurt sharply to realise such a thing.

At my knees, between the pages of a Russian copy of Tolstoi as though from the fingers of Karenina herself, the spectacular gift of colour drizzled, dazzling, to my lap. I shook loose the contents of those pages, blinking, unsure what I had seen.

Flakes. Stained shards in lamplight like the Rose Window of Notre Dame. Pressed violets and azalea; coreopsis and rose petals. Marigold. Primrose in clumps or dissected to single florets, in pink and deepest velvet crimson. Sweet tangy lavender. Her whole garden.

Mildewed pages fanned my face as I searched for more of these bouquets, inhaling. Then I collected them again with care, ethereal with tenderness as they were, these frail witnesses to her anguished fears of any ending. I sealed the tissue bits in an

envelope I found in my desk upstairs, a kind of love letter in my mother's own limited language.

In the remains of emptied drawers I came across a lacquered paperbound volume. The cover was like gleaming prismatic oil. It was empty.

For a while I sat utterly still against a wall, too tired to go on.

Mama, Mama. What am I going to do now?

By afternoon the room was crowded with boxes. They spilled out into the hallway. I filled them with my mother's whole inconsequential life, strange-angled planes in her character that I had never known, never paid attention to, never cared about. During the move from the house on Glengarry I had hurriedly and inattentively tossed her belongings into boxes, deciding what should be kept and what thrown away without even consulting the woman whose existence and memories I had presided over like a judge: junk, junk, toss, give away, toss, keep. For all I knew I had discarded the very information I had turned my life upside down to locate, in the odd collection of chocolate boxes and plastic and paper bags filled with papers and notes and odds and ends.

I came upon her wallet in a drawer, its old curled and broken photo of me from grade school, kindergarten pictures of Cryssie and of Shad. Had I even given her their school pictures from any other year? I couldn't remember. There were a handful of one dollar bills, a five, and some coins. The drawer was heartbreakingly barren except for a collection of hard peppermint pits from the candies she'd sucked down and, for some reason, discarded there.

In the closet were half a dozen framed needlepoints, colourful flowers and birds; a

stack of black-and-red cross-stitched *rushnyky*, neatly folded with tissue paper. In all the years I could look back on, I never remembered my mother doing needle work.

Without will, inert, I conceded to it all, wrapping the frames in sheets of newspaper, stratifying this missing identity, one next to the other, jogging gift-knots hard until the rough twine rasped into my palm and fingers and drew blood. I fed lengths of it from the disembowelled centre of its bobbin. In truth, I didn't even think about what I would do with these things once they were packed. I just needed to clear that room. To never see her death through that doorway again.

Amongst it all was an old sewing box. Inside were papers, photos. I sifted through. There were engagement announcements for people I didn't know from the fifties and sixties. Death announcements. I didn't even understand how my illiterate mother would have known what she was snipping from the newspaper in these mementos. Yet there was Old Kureliuk, his wife, and Mary Sokala, *beloved wife of the late Walter Kureliuk*. It was a brazenness that would have scandalised the whole community, yet I had never heard my mother speak of it. I thought, again, about all those kids and their catastrophic lives. No wonder.

In amongst the obituaries was Jim MacDougall's. *Beloved son. Beloved husband. Beloved father*. I had known nothing of this man's life, yet in the meagre pile of trash extracted from his room, enough had been salvaged to identify the kin to whom he belonged. Although he had died in our bathroom after falling dead drunk and cracking his head open on the sink, he had still commanded a whole column of loved ones, brothers and sisters and cousins and children. Even grandchildren. I remembered how my mother had scrubbed her bathroom floor tiles until her skin was raw trying to get the



blood out, and how we couldn't afford to replace the bathroom sink that MacDougall's booze-soaked head had broken, so for years thereafter, until I had earned enough to afford the needed work, we brushed our teeth and washed our faces in an old enamel pan that sat in the basin, pouring the grimy water into the toilet when we were done.

Henriette Dupuis' end had been saved as well. One day she just never showed up at our house again. Rumour passing between our roomers reached our ears not long afterward: her body had been found under the River Canard bridge east of town, having bled to death from a botched home-made abortion. She, too, had been claimed by nine brothers and sisters, and buried in a Catholic cemetery.

I thought of my mother's obituary. *Beloved mother of Krystof. Grandmother of Cryssie and Keegin.* That was it. I didn't know her parents' names, or if she'd had brothers and sisters. I had considered calling Stan to list the family she had lost, then thought better of it. If she had kept that from me, she would not have wanted her community to know.

Boris Kara and, later, Luba, were also represented in my mother's things. *Predeceased by beloved daughter Taissa (1955). Survived by Anjou of Windsor.*

Anjou. Even in the sepulchral privacy of my mother's room I could not escape what I didn't even know how to surmount.

Exhausted just from the sight of her name, I laid myself down in the city of boxes, a Gulliver among streets I'd fashioned in the emptiness between the rooms of my house. The oxidised obituary notice crumbled in my hand.

In the streets of that ersatz city the debris was where I might finally lose myself, lose my mind, where my love for Anjou could even decree a beginning and end upon

itself. I could write that obituary myself.

With the paper in my hand, I rested it over my heart and let my eyes close in an expression of repose, reminding myself of her, detained as she was in my mind, smaller than life though life itself was contained in her; how she sat, forever immobile and changeless in a red linen dress while time did things to the world around her. How life was killing me but she just went on touching that curl on her neck, that scar, oblivious of me at another table, just to the right of that everlasting carnation centrepiece.

Sometimes I'd looked so hard I couldn't see anymore, so far in that it stopped making sense. I had looked at it all in so many ways, from depths that nearly broke me. The impression of that one transcendent moment of my life had already coiled deep into the blooded nodes of my brain; they'd have had to drill holes just to let it all out.

I'd hidden the hurt, loving her as I did, and looked back only to hate her with all my sick heart, to hate love, to hate my love for her because even after two years I still couldn't let go.

On paper I had even exorcised grief to relive it, make it physical, my paper pain. *Anjou, I love you with all my heart. I will do anything if you would just give me another chance.* Once words took shape I reread not to relive but to revise. *I saw you there that night. I saw you take that other hand, how you looked through me like I wasn't even there, like I had never been there. You don't know what love is. You couldn't.* Nothing had helped, my every effort keeping me in a kind of emotional perpetual motion, moving backwards and forwards between impossible extremes.

But if I couldn't exorcise language, perhaps I could exorcise vision. Remake the seeing of my own eyes.

I got up and went to my own room, the bureau drawer where my time with Anjou reposed in darkness and dust. I found the picture I had taken during our trip to France. There was a picture of the two of us in Eze, my grinning, stupidly happy face almost unrecognisable in a beard I had grown during our trip. The black wrought-iron sign overhanging the vaulted stone doorway beyond her that read '*Verrerie — M. Henri Casson*'. I could barely make it out, the way it had been scratched into the iron plaque like cuneiform, but I remembered what it said just the same.

I could close my eyes but it was inscribed on the backs of my eyelids: how casual she was in white shorts and a black summer top, her tanned legs crossed, left forefinger touching one of the two glasses sweating across the table. Mine had been the untouched glass. Thirsty? I could never drink; look, but don't touch. I'd been locked outside the everlasting sunshine of her existence. After all, wasn't I her creator? Hadn't I put her there, alone with her freeze-frame thoughts? Didn't I expect of her the very things she couldn't bear?

I memorised lines I already knew by heart, the lines of a forehead, nose, and chin, the lines of her body perched in a chair, of concentration in her brow. She hated having her photo taken so I did it on the way back from the toilet. That men's room with the sign outside the door, '*ce payant*', and the seated old man guarding the toilets, his fist down the mouth of a gallon jar for the collection and not a shred of toilet paper anywhere.

She knew about the photo by the time I sat down. She hated looking like a tourist and rolled her eyes whenever I took the camera out. I laughed, telling her *it's my camera and I want pictures. I want something to remember this by.*

We walked around Eze all the way up to the monastic Exotic Gardens at the top

of the hill to have a look at the sea and the swollen earth of terra cotta rooftops. Stone steps were inclined toward suffering, ecstasy. Vine-bower tunnels seemed too lush, too green. Visitors were meant to go up there like medieval monks punishing themselves for God. On the sign that led the way someone had marked out the 'x' in *Exotic* and replaced it with an 'r'. Somehow she swallowed back tears when she read it, and went up, fingering the aromatic Spanish rosary pressed from rose petals like a cure of Nostradamus' at the bottom of her pocket. We weren't even Catholic but the Sisters had seduced Anjou with promises of its lasting perfume, promises like armour, her shield.

At a dusty corner shop in the village where the street was pitched at a forty-five degree angle we found an exquisite hand-blown crazed crystal vase. *It's not like we're married.* We settled on two smaller French-cut bottles, one green and one white. On the way out someone had spilled water over the cobbled street, and in her leather sandals she'd skidded backward until I grabbed her hand and yanked her up to the curb.

We held hands wherever we went, the way school children held hands crossing streets. Plans had been made for over a year but between the planning and the vacation much had changed. She was interested but my interest was deeper, diving within every impression as though I'd been born to it and torn from it, and had finally returned to the only thing I'd ever known. During that holiday with Anjou I felt my life finally coming together. I wanted to end our trip by asking her to marry me.

Before leaving Eze she picked lavender stems and kept them on the dashboard. Under the windshield's heat their fragrance grew stronger. *I'm going to keep these,* she told me when we pulled back onto the Bas Corniche, along the dusty hairpin roads bounded by woody ancient graffiti'd aloe and lavender and palms. She had held the

blooms near my nose, wanting me to be as intoxicated with the scent as she was. But on those unfamiliar roads I was nervous. I'd gone so long without a drink I thought I my teeth would break if I gritted them any harder. I only pushed the stems away. *Come on, I'm driving.* I remembered her distant expression as the echoed ghost of all my failure.

For a long time I couldn't even recall the feel of a smile in the muscles of my face when every gesture between us had inexplicably become so hollow and she was distancing herself perceptibly almost every day. It was happening very quickly, this slippage. I had looked forward to the vacation as a restorative, had done all the right things —flowers, expensive dinners, champagne — but at night she took her showers and went to bed before me then woke up first, ready for breakfast and the sights before I'd even opened my bloodshot eyes. Between night and the edginess of day my nerves were strained beyond coping.

We drove around Cap d'Ail and down to the sea, spending the afternoon picnicking on a wild isolated stretch of rocky shoreline, saying nothing. After a while I took my clothes off and climbed naked and barefoot down the cragged embankment to the water, leaving her alone with the concrete menace of an abandoned Nazi gun bunker at the top of the hill. When I moved to dive into that blank window of water above volcanic rock I could see her start toward me, reaching protectively to her heart, a tensed fist over her heart until I surfaced safely and she could let out a relieved breath. I swam out into the cove by myself while she sat back at last, my stranger, watching me blurred and refracted out of proportion by the broken sea below.

Back at our hotel in Nice we headed to the restaurant next door with its weedy latticed patio where even bougainvillea refused to range, otherwise lush and fuchsia

along the wrought-iron gates that lined the streets. At dusk, when darkness worshipped shadowed places, the dank corners quickened with microscopic movement. Spiders dangled, solitary, in their spun silver dreams. Mice under that brambled alleyway wilderness around us peered black-eyed for scraps delectable enough to die for. Whining pests rose to the ears unseen as dust.

As the sun set, brown songbirds owned the territories of the patio. Creepers and sparrows bold with authority danced across shade-flecked concrete. Droppings peppered the white acrylic chairs and tables, salvation in the quick wipes of waiters just an instant before sitting. Under the open sky, dining on lasagne and spaghetti bolognese and *salade niçoise*, and thin dried-out pita breads with a smearing of overcooked tomato sauce meant to pass for pizza, Anjou made the tense atmosphere possible with her silence, her inability to make eye contact.

And yet I did try. I tried.

Friday night *mariachi*. A slim tanned man arrived for supper at the table beside ours unable to comprehend the menu. When the waitress approached us to translate, Anjou had said: "*Disez-lui que c'est 'ham'*. 'Baked ham'." The very act of speaking, even to a stranger, was an open door. As the waitress walked away I reached across the table to touch the pink oval curve of her fingernails as she restlessly touched the rim of her water glass, an instant of contact, the first intimate touch in over three days that made her start as though electrocuted. She couldn't look me in the eye, or wouldn't.

"What's going on?" I wondered. She had to see the betrayal and fear that were beginning to settle on my face.

"Sorry – ?"

"Anjou, don't." I let go of her hand. It lay lifeless beneath mine anyhow. "Just talk to me."

"When have you been drinking?" Not an accusation, but bare suspicion.

"What?" This was my innocent *who me?* act. Even I could barely believe it any more. I stared at her hand. Underneath her nails it was so clean, so much within my comfort zone.

"I can always tell. You think I don't know, but I do."

She curled her fingers into her palm, a fist. I observed this with an intensity beyond proportion to the gesture. Shaken by her emotional withdrawal from me, I was baffled by an inwardness that was beyond what I knew was in her nature. I picked up the knife from beside my plate and, stabbing down the steaming roast chicken breast with a fork, carved away a small white morsel. With great difficulty I lifted it to my mouth and chewed.

She reached out now afraid to touch me, clearly afraid of the reasons why things weren't as they should have been. She tried for the attention of my eyes. I chewed on, staring nowhere. The privacy of my own silence now was almost reverent. I was thinking back to a conversation. An omen.

*You don't love me enough,* she had confessed into the warm skin of my back while I'd lain in bed drifting between shadow and form, her supple body a contour of my own:  
*If you did we'd have been married by now.*

I had not moved in bed or breathed, moored to the sleepy introspective touch of her fingers from behind me, dwelling longest over ribs as though any better love were measured there. Long after she'd entrusted her words to my dreaming mind I'd answered,

*Then let's get married.*

I'd felt her starting body on mine, her hand withering back to her own physical familiarities. Breath, hesitant in her words: *I can't marry a man who can't be honest with himself. If I did you wouldn't know how to be honest with me.*

*Then why are we still together?*

*I don't know anymore, Krystof. I just don't know.*

*Anjou –*

But she had already pushed herself away from me.

At the table my bare nodding became a gesture. I let my fork and knife down as though in readiness, and raised my elbows to the table. Slowly I rubbed first my forehead with the heels of my hands, then my eyes, my beard. The full weight of it all was there. A vanishing sound like a moan escaped the hollow of my slumped shoulders. Words began on my lips but pulled back. Finally I looked up.

As I rose she watched me turn toward the courtyard gate. A few paces beyond her I hesitated and cleared my throat almost imperceptibly. Such self-reproach was in the gesture of my open palms. I came back to her.

"This is me." I tapped my chest with the full flat of my palm. "Me. Take it or leave it, but don't play games with me, don't take cheap shots about drinking. My life is hell. Between my office and the hospital sometimes I don't get to sleep for two days. So what if I take a drink so I can calm myself after being elbow deep in disease and death? And yes, I have lousy coping skills, I admit that. And I could cut down. In fact, I have. But I'm not some kind of booze hound like our old roomers, like Kureliuk. You don't know what that does to me when you insinuate - "



“I wasn’t insin -”

Having said it, I vanished into the dark interior of the restaurant an executed man.

This was our hard way out of each others' lives, and I was making it easier. Our tandem performance betrayed nothing to any audience around us, a protocol of restraint we had taught one another through the final act of our relationship.

In our hotel that night, in bed in darkness, without even facing me, she made her first whispered confession. “I don’t know how to be happy with you”. And I wondered why it still came as such a shock.

Some time during the long, silent drive home from Toronto I began to speak but even words seemed forgotten. A few vehicles hissed by, showering the air. In the blinding betrayal of oncoming headlights, shadows of raindrops blemished her skin.

Seventy kilometres she'd been leaning against the passenger door pressing her eyelids. Headaches made her eyes dark and sunken. Her face hid nothing.

If despair was in the solitary glance she gave me, it must have been etched somehow in the first glimpse we ever had of each other. Something finite was in us even then. But if I knew anything that resembled truth it was this: she was all I had left and I knew I was losing her.

The homeward road was a ghost, our distances resolved in music to which we had once planned our life. Desmond and Brubeck. Neil Young.

*When you were young  
and on your own  
How did it feel  
to be alone?*

I remembered them all.

Along the drive home she told me she didn't want to hear the music. *Please.*

*Turn it off.* I was the one who inferred a wounded catch in her voice.

*But only love  
can break your heart  
Try to be sure  
right from the start  
Yes only love  
can break your heart  
What if your world  
should fall apart?*

I stroked my beard, a nervous habit developed since I began growing it. I reached forward for the radio knob, the small sudden quiet of unconscious surrender. *You used to like Neil Young.* Words coming back to me so subdued I wondered if I'd said anything at all.

Intermittent gusts like sand sprayed the car. Beside me she arched, a scarcity of movement forming the flux in our tensions. This forever falling rain.

The road was a ghost. Dim orchard aromas in the rain, peaches plums apples. Once she had noticed such things: summers and mellow autumns had once blown in through open windows as we'd sped along the highways of these same quiet hay-strewn southwestern Ontario farmlands. Sudden putrid rifts of manure choked the air, churned acre after acre into rich soil grown up from the antediluvian past.

I let my eyes search the green neon instrument panel before me. Blurred roadlight reflected hot white against my glasses. The time: two-eleven, twelve. I could hardly focus.

Pattering living liquid glass willed shape upon itself. Now the wipers forced away beading arteries of rain; again, and it was latticework tears. I longed to reach

outside and leave my fingermark along its flawless limpid face, inside the distorted tease of night and headlights.

My hypnosis grew along white slashes looming and ebbing to the blackness of highway, until I felt I'd been existing between their metre all along. Until I could barely remember her voice the way it had been only a moment ago.

A glance at the radio one more time, for focus, for holding the long moan of ennui at bay. Not the music, not that especially, but anything to break the lapping of wipers and rain, blood pulsing in my ears. Silence.

For the last two months we dragged ourselves through time together, we dragged ourselves apart. The first hint of something irreparable was when we didn't spend Thanksgiving together. When at last the end came in a small restaurant neither of us had ever been to, and would never be again, there were no histrionics, no tears, only sadness and defeat.

"You were right, Krystof. You are you, hellish life and sleepless nights and a nip here and there to calm your nerves. That's you. But I can't be me if that's you. I can't hold my own integrity together as a human being when I'm forcing myself to smile even though I can taste the booze on your breath. You knew right from the beginning what I stood for, but you just kept on playing the part of everything I wanted in a man."

I shook my head. I was getting ugly, puerile. "Come on, Anje. You want yourself, a male you, a mirror of you so you never have to really work hard at a relationship. You want a guy you can skip hand in hand through life with – *let's eat here.* Okay. How about buying this quilt? Perfect. Let's go to church. I thought you'd never

*ask* – without anybody putting a strain on you. Real human relationships are work.”

My derision had done its job. She was put out. “I guess that implies you knew how to really work hard at your marriage. I don’t know. That’s not how it looks to me. But that’s neither here nor there.”

“Just say what you want to say. Say what you mean.”

“I can be happy alone. I’ve been happy alone. But I can’t be happy with you. I’m sorry.”

What I said came out like a dare, a provocation to a duel. “I love you.”

“I know. You don’t think I know how much you love me? You have to know that I’ve loved you, too, in ways I never imagined.”

“How could I know? How was I supposed to know when we’ve been together like buddies for three years?”

Her face pinched up with hurt. “Krystof - ”

“No. I mean, you got what you knew was coming anyhow. You could hold me at arm’s length and never really risk your heart fully, and in the meantime just wait for the boot to drop because you were the one who was going to drop it.”

“I didn’t have to risk my body to love you.”

“You never loved me.”

“Don’t. Don’t let us – I don’t want this. Not this way.”

I didn’t answer. I could feel my hands begin to shake. “Don’t do this, Anje. Don’t. I don’t know how to live without you.”

“You will. You’ll learn something new about what love really is, and you’ll meet some nice nurse - ”

“Oh, God - ” I didn’t know what to do with myself, to sit or stand, put my hands on the table, in my hair, take her hands, take her in my arms. I was dying. “God, Anje, don’t. This isn’t a neat little life lesson for me. You’re driving me crazy. There’s no greater purpose. Just pain. Just loneliness. Don’t go talking about lessons and meeting anyone. I can’t take it.”

She stood from our table. “Then don’t learn anything. Ever. Don’t move on. Don’t look for happiness. Don’t take responsibility for the ways you’ve undermined what we had. Blame me all the way. I know you do anyhow, right? I planned it. I knew it was coming, waited it out.” She hefted her purse strap over her shoulder. “No, Krystof, just do what you do. Nothing.”

And she was gone.

All at once there was no living with any circumstance that could bring this back.

In my city of boxes, exhaustion bloomed, nauseating.

## Chapter 17

Through the cabin window I watched the eerie rippling of atmospheric light amid the clouds, inflamed drifting heaps caught in freeze-frame. Beyond was a black eternity of space to contemplate.

It was my first night flight, and the stormy skyscape offered up a beguiling spectacle. The plane was mostly empty. Passengers who would normally do everything to ignore one another for six hours milled around talking in small groups. At the back of the cabin someone strummed an acoustic guitar and began singing mournful little Ukrainian tunes.

*We two sowed our own ashes,  
Planting good fortune for you and for me.  
My trees of ashes, my trees of ashes  
My beautiful, darling sons,  
My beautiful sons.*

These were the songs I had grown up with, quietly sung at back tables in the smoky Saturday-night hall of my childhood, when the hours we had spent in hard dancing had left us drowsy, and drink had made the grown-ups wistful. Between the dance and the migration back to our house, we would collect around these tables and, in melancholy *a capella*, be permitted small, bearable measures of our Ukrainian selfhood that daily vanished into the laconic ways of our people.

*My thoughts, my thoughts,  
In you my suffering rests!  
Why did you write upon my page  
Your melancholy lines? ...  
Why did the winds not scatter you  
Like dust across the steppes?  
Why was my misery not lulled  
Like my own little child? ...*

Little by little the Ukrainians flying toward Kiev that night began to sing along. Despite all the accents - the flattened North American drawl, the full, Russified vowels and clipped consonants, the heavy shushing of our jumbled Polish past, each of us placed in definable histories and places by the way we spoke – we all knew these lyrics as though we were one. In my mind I saw the thousand church halls and UNO halls and Prosvita halls all around the globe where the scattered nature of survival had once found a cheerless kind of wholeness.

*If I had taken up a bandura  
And played the things I knew,  
Through that very instrument  
A bandurist might I have become.*

*But everything for those eyes,  
When they were truly mine,  
Just for those chiding eyes  
I'd have given my soul away.*

Had I not been so fragile I might have joined my fellow passengers. Instead, I turned my face to the stormy night and let tears that had grown so wearisome fill my eyes.

By the time we reached the ocean, nearly everyone was sleeping, eased by music and longing, by darkness and droning engines, and by the uninterrupted exhalation of the ventilation system.

Rest rarely came to me anymore. In the months after my mother's passing I had become a ghost, a dimensionless occupier of space and time, but not its occupant. The black dogs had taken me down and ripped into me. I laid myself down for them.

Two full years without Anjou was upon me. Just the smell of a frigid winter, of wet snow and slush, the cold and unreachable suns of day, the endless sixteen hour nights

all dragged my emotions into self pity and loathing. At the office I had my assistant book appointments only three days of the week. As my mind went into low gear, my body followed. On the Fridays and Wednesdays I booked off I went home to my sofa, and in a mental paralysis watched television for hours on end without seeing a thing. I moved only to use a toilet. I ordered monstrous pizzas so I could freeze what I didn't eat and spread what was left over several days. The very idea of cooking or going anywhere to eat sent my nerves into paroxysms.

Every time I looked at a bottle of booze, my need for it began turning into disgust. Yet I still sought out my perverted lover, cowering before the fridge and liquor cabinet for hours, sick for its tranquillity while I tried not to open the doors. When disgust wasn't enough, when I opened those doors, just the sight of so many bottles filled me with as much juvenile hatred as I had ever expended on my mother or Sharon.

Booze had deformed life for me. I had subsisted in the distortion of that world for so long I couldn't even recognise that I myself had become distorted and deformed, and it was I who had inflicted my distortion and deformity upon anyone who came close to me. When I reflected on the time Anjou had left me, I realised how much she needed to protect herself from me. Back then I'd felt she had gone out of her way to hurt me, but all she'd done was prevent me from hurting her. No insinuation from her was necessary. The truth was there in bold face. I was a booze hound. I was Kureliuk. I was all my mother's roomers in the making.

The truth was, Anjou didn't just deserve better from me, she deserved better than me. She tried to tell me what drinking could do to my life but I never saw it as a problem. And as long as I never saw it as a problem I had no idea I needed to change



anything with her. I truly believed it was about the two of us being different people with different takes on life. But it wasn't a take on life. It was me. Just me being negligent about what was meaningful and worthy. It made me a con artist and a liar with the one person with whom I might have found some peace.

When spring arrived I felt my thoughts pull back to that wild and unkempt terrain, the old couple, the red shutter, and that inhuman atmosphere of seclusion. It was clear that Stálinsk would soon be swallowed up into nature, and although I hadn't the energy for any part of my life, I needed to go back, to explore its secrets before I made the same mistake as I had with my mother, and it was too late. In too many ways it already was.

When I emerged from that serendipitous path I'd discovered on my first trip, and which had led me directly to Stálinsk, something had changed. The otherwise tended yards had grown weed-infested, the long and swaying grasses gone to seed. Sunken areas in the ground formed pools of rainwater. The road I'd once followed into what was left of the village seemed to have perceptibly narrowed as vegetation spread from the lush edges of woodland that had already claimed everything else. While wading through I strained for the sound of Stefania's chickens. I could not make them out.

"Hello?"

As I approached I kept calling out, now and then stopping in mid-step to listen for their voices or the sound of some work they might be carrying out – the fall of an axe, a scythe whispering over grass, the slosh of churning or laundry. Only the refrain of birdsong, the trill and chirp and squeak and call that filled the forest in every direction, could be heard.

When I came upon their coop-soviet where I had first spotted them, its dilapidated signage still peeling and fading, I peered into the open door. Although the nests were still there, nothing remained of the flock except perhaps a dozen broken eggshells scattered around. Blackened stains I took to be blood marked the floor here and there. It was clear some animal had gotten in.

With a curious mixture of hope and disappointment, I began to wonder if they had finally saved themselves from their lonely fate and moved to Uschélyna. To anywhere. Yet, since leaving home I had been thinking only of seeing them again and delving further into the shadows of their memory and my own history. I could not help but be disappointed if they had gone.

“Hello?” I called out again. “Are you here Little Mother?”

I went to their door and knocked, but only silence greeted the sound, itself as loud as gunshots. Overhead, ravens waded in the treetops, hawing their rejoinder.

I stepped away from the doorway and took a moment to think about what I should do. It was too late to start back through the woods. So vulnerable was I mentally and emotionally that I could not bear the physical vulnerability of a night in the woods. If there was a possibility that the Mijdiaks had gone off to fish or pick mushrooms, I could wait for their return and, if they didn't, I would simply spend the night in their house and leave again in the morning.

It was a beautiful, warm spring day. I let down my backpack to wander around the village. During my last trip I had been so engrossed in talking with the Mijdiaks, and Stefania had been so starved for companionship and conversation, that I had spent all my time in and about the house with them.

Unencumbered by my gear, I set off back toward the abating roadway.

After walking for several minutes I spied the house with the red shutter I'd first glimpsed through a poplar stand in August. The shutter itself had fallen, and the building sat nearly buried deep within dense masses of foliage. I stepped in and worked my way through, the branches tangled into a nearly impenetrable mesh. I hooked my fingers through, pushing and pulling and ripping away, the fresh smell of broken green wood overpowering the musky airless pong that seemed to have lurked for an age where I toiled. The building was only a few metres away, but it took some minutes of struggle to reach a distance that should have been crossed in a half dozen easy strides.

Perhaps the canopy had saved it from total collapse, protecting the little building from the elements, for the walls were all standing, and the roof, although dank and thick with moss, was largely intact. I thrashed my way around until I found the door, now warped and hanging open from a single rusty hinge. I pushed at the frame to see how strong and solid it was. The walls barely shifted. I decided to take a chance, and broke away the vines that congested the entry. Spiders dropped soundlessly to the ground and over my arms. I shook them off. Once cleared, I stepped in.

When my eyes adjusted to the gloom I could see that vines had broken through the roof at one time, and now hung down in leafless, dead snarls where tendrils had coiled back upon themselves over and over in a confused quest for light. Cobwebs and spider webs, which festooned the bedroom doorframe and corners, between beams and across the empty windows, barely stirred. Whatever glass panes might have once graced the frames were gone, perhaps shattered with the warping and shifting that accompanied the building's decay, perhaps pilfered by the Mijdiaks over the years.

The structure was similar to the Mijdiaks' house. A tumbledown pot-bellied stove listed against what would have been the same wall in the Mijdiak house. A crude wooden cross was tacked high against one wall. No furnishings took up the meagre space, but on the floor was an overturned enamel pot, white with a black rim, its bottom corroding. When I moved toward it I noticed how spongy the pine floorboards were. I stepped carefully, testing each spot before I let my full weight down. When I reached the enamel pot I kicked it over. Spiders and pill bugs, centipedes and millipedes ran helter skelter from its dark, dank interior, then scuttled toward the walls and vanished. During my survey of the room I wondered if my mother had grown up in a house like this.

Further along, the floor was too decomposed to hold my weight. I did not enter the other room. Instead, I returned outdoors and clawed my way round to the window. By now fine bloody slashes crisscrossed my arms and hands and face as branches I had pushed away whipped back on me. When I peered into the darkness the only object I could make out was a dilapidated iron bed frame.

The representations of these simple objects was so very human, so universal. Shelter, food, rest. Even God, though the subject and character of faith might change culture to culture, epoch to epoch. What that house left me with, in all its ominous disengagement from the living, was my own heightened awareness of connection; of the individual fragility that was continually at odds with the nature of human consciousness, the everlasting spirit of our contact with this world that was left behind when we were gone. In this place there was no existential life-force of the spider or the squirrel, though such creatures had no doubt lurked in this place for decades, had quietly occupied their corners and beams, mated, nested, raised and discharged generations. Only the skeletal

and scatological miscellany of their habitation continued in the shadows.

I did not know the people who had lived there yet in the totality of this derelict house, even without its scattering of meaninglessly functional items, I could almost feel the sacredness not only of life itself, but of a life, of living, and of having lived. My imagination took me to places like Auschwitz and Stalin's Pantheon, and to their dead who spoke in their still and quiet ways to anyone willing to listen. A pile of shoes was never just a pile of shoes, nor a wall just a wall.

I remembered buying my home after the divorce, when Anjou had enthusiastically taken charge of decorating and furnishing, we had found subtle reminders of past owners – an old hockey card from the 1940s behind a baseboard. Newspapers from the 1920s in the attic. A 1936 penny in the basement behind the derelict octopus furnace. These discoveries had spoken to us about more than the past; they were the very signatures of living. After investing in the first really valuable piece I ever owned, the Shindler clock I kept in the hall, I had taken it into my home with a very real sense of responsibility to an inheritance handed down to me through all the other owners, and which I would return as a legacy either to my children or a new owner.

Yet I had not seen my own children that way, those precious parts of both past and future I had all but abandoned to a madwoman. I had been so afraid that if my mother died without leaving behind the trail of her own experience, she will have been obliterated on this plane. This inconsequential cottage told me otherwise. My mother could not leave herself behind through the grand and material ways others could – through stories and genealogies and conquests. Nonetheless, she had left herself to me in the most fragile ways, and it was up to me not to let fragility claim her or my children.

I continued rambling along the forest's edges searching for other houses. All the buildings lay at fairly equal distances from the road. Some had caved in. There were what appeared to be barn-like structures further back in the woods, compacted and fragmented into greying stands of lumber by the dense growth of trees all around. In the underbrush I found a rusted shovel blade, its wooden handle long gone. In another place an aluminum chair frame sat upright in the scrub, its seat and back rest rotted away. It was as though its owner had just been sitting in it, perhaps watching his neighbours or the road after a long day's work, then got up and never returned.

In this handful of houses and outbuildings was a moment of time, nothing more. It wouldn't have mattered if the village had been inhabited two years or two hundred.

In no time twilight was upon the place. Everything glowed warmly. As I made my way back to the Mijdiaks' I called out. Perhaps, if they had merely gone out, by now they had returned. None of my calls was answered. At their front door I hoisted my pack and entered, with a twinge of dread about spending the night in a place that had already felt haunted even with the two of them there. Now, utterly alone, I braced myself for that eerie apocalyptic feeling I knew would assail me as darkness fell.

The scene that greeted me inside the house was odd. The air, caustic with the smell of rotting meat, hummed with flies. I lifted my shirttail and pressed it over my mouth. Cobwebs hung in every corner. Dead leaves lay scattered across the floor.

On the table everything that would have been necessary for a meal was laid. The bulk of fly activity came from the wood stove, where a pot stood. I let down my pack on one of the chairs, then went over and looked in. A black, quivering crust of flies and white maggots coated the entire surface. Though I could not recognise the bloated rot

inside, I took it to have been some kind of meat. A loaf of bread, green and hairy with mould, half eaten by mice or rats, sat on the counter. Beside it a blackened plate of what might have been butter gave off a putrid, gassy stench. Beyond, the back door was wide open. Curiosity quickly turned to concern. I swatted my way through the flies and went out into the yard, dropping my shirttail as a fresh breeze gusted along the house.

Outside, I surveyed the scene around me but could see nothing amiss. I walked toward the *kukh'nya*. I opened the door and looked inside. Only the ashes and coals of an old fire spread over the oven floor. I looked back through the door again, to the situation inside the house. Something must have happened. The Mijdiaks had clearly left in a hurry, and from the look of the house and the overrun yard, it had happened a while ago.

Whatever it was I needed to see or know, I made my way along the periphery of the house, past the rain barrel and around the corner, past the ladder and pitchfork and shovel and wheel barrow leaning up against the far wall. Nothing looked out of place. I came round the front of the house and back around the other side.

The only oddity I could make out was a pile of clothes, now visible some ways behind the *kukh'nya*. I headed toward it. I halted. There in the breeze-blown grass was the familiar brown skirt and faded calico blouse, and the white babushka. There was Mrs. Mijdiak. I loped across the yard to her side and all at once I was back on that path with the dead boar. The air went thick with the smell of putrefaction. Flies swarmed around. I couldn't breathe through them. I couldn't breathe.

“Oh God, Oh God - ”

I rolled her over. Mrs. Mijdiak had been dead for at least two weeks. Her eyelids

sank into empty sockets. The full nightmare howl of her open jaw gave way to the gold teeth glinting in what light remained of the lowering sun. Thick accretions of grave wax had formed on her cheeks, and that sickly dead skin had begun peeling away. Wild animals had torn into her shoulder.

I fell back into the weeds, away from her. It took me a moment to think again. An image of poor, bewildered Vitaly flashed through my mind, and my heart battered fiercely behind my sternum. I had seen no evidence of him anywhere. My gaze traced the darkening edge of the woods. He had probably wandered off looking for his good Stefania, and had probably died trying.

“Oh, dear God. Dear, dear God - ” I could manage no other words.

Night was coming fast. I ran for the far side of the house where I had seen Mrs. Mijdiak's gardening tools. I grabbed the shovel and entered the house for the lamp and matches I knew would be on her counter from my last visit. They were still there. I picked up my pack and brought everything with me to the spot where Mrs. Mijdiak lay. About a metre upwind from where she fell I set about digging her a grave.

With the blade's edge I cut away an outline. I dug in and began tossing shovelful after shovelful to the ground beside me.

The lassitude and inactivity of the last months had taken their toll on me. I was weak and inept. The splintered shovel bit into my flesh. First blisters formed, then with each shovelful the skin sheared from my palms. From my pack I pulled out a towel and tried to use it to pad the handle, but it only made the work more difficult.

For about a foot the earth was workable enough, then it became suddenly hard where I came upon a layer of clay. Several times I had to make my way to the well just



to slake my thirst with that malodorous water. Though I grew hungry I did not stop to eat. I could not. Not with Mrs. Mijdiak in sight. Every half hour or so I had to stop just to give my throbbing, bleeding hands a rest. My back felt as though it would break in two. Out there, the blackness of the night became so pure and turbid as to imitate blindness. Fumbling for matches somewhere by my feet, I lit the lamp and dropped into the cool grass for a rest.

While I lay there a faint tremor growled along the ground like a rumbling freight train or a passing transport. The night caught fire, brief and blinding. To the northeast a luminous column of fine, pale blue light shot into the sky, and with it a pyrotechnic geyser. I was in daylight, then blackness again. I could not tell if I blinked or not, but I did not move my line of sight from that place. I watched as an eerie blue-green glow and a kind of raspberry colour bloomed over the treetops. I stared. I could not figure out what I was seeing. It was the strangest thing I'd ever encountered, so strange in fact that my mind even entertained, for a brief and senseless moment, the idea of something unearthly and unnatural. Something had exploded. But what? Then I thought, at that hour of the night, perhaps I was witnessing the end of some massive concert not far away.

I could give it no more thought. My macabre task awaited me.

Darkness had long fallen when, in the wavering glow of lamplight, I used the shovel to work Mrs. Mijdiak into her grave. I buried her.

Like a sleepwalker I returned to the house ready to collapse. Before I entered the house I noticed that same pallid blue light flashing at random in the woods. Just as I was about to call out, I stopped myself. I did not want to bring attention to my presence. I

could not trust that, if someone were out there, they did not mean me harm. Worse, in this highly corrupt society I could not risk being blamed for the catastrophe of these two lives. As I continued watching the lights, I realised no human hand was behind them. I grew apprehensive and hurried into the house.

With Mrs. Mijdiak's apron, found hanging on a nail by the cupboard, and gagging through a shirt I tied around my face, I carried out the pot that had been on the stove and set it by the privvy. I found it strange that all the flies were gone. Outside, not a cricket chirruped. When I returned I left both doors open, cleared the table, and laid myself on top. Although I had nutrition bars in my pack, I couldn't touch anything. Rot and death were all I could taste.

The night's silence struck my ears so deafeningly I could feel a tense pain start up in my temples and at the base of my skull. Never before I had experienced such an utter absence of sound. My own breath seemed strange and hollow. From my last trip I couldn't recall if night had been this way. Yet, I would have noticed something so unsettling. With my pack under my head for a pillow, I turned on my side and tried to sleep.

I rested, but did not sleep. In the soft incandescence of the Mijdiak's lamp, I stared into the jerky jittering shadows of the wall. Eventually, my eyes met the mild, melancholy gaze of the Christ icon above the lamp. His gilt halo caught the light and blazed intensely. For a while I watched. The dancing flame and shadows made the face seem alive. His eyes blinked. His mouth moved in silenced invocations I was not a good enough man to hear. Still, His mouth moved on, and His eyes seemed to dart in my direction, then to the wall, the door, and back to me. I wondered, as I returned His gaze,

if it had bothered Him that I had not buried His earthly daughter in consecrated ground, that I had not crossed myself or said the right things – that in fact I had said nothing at all.

I thought about Mother along with Mrs. Mijdiak. My mother had been a devoted church goer and had raised me to take our faith seriously, though I had not. Mrs. Mijdiak, on the other hand, seemed more than devoted. She struck me as genuinely devout. The question of salvation occurred to me again, occasioned by so much death and loss in so little time. How could I help but think of such things? I wondered if I could ever know that I had done good with any more certainty than I had felt in all the terrible things I had done. Could I ever know that I was good the way I knew Anjou was good? Was it enough for my mother to have believed in her own salvation when, in her small, frightened, angry existence, out of her own ignorance, she had not lived out the evidence of her deliverance? Especially not to me?

By the time I caught the eye of Christ again, it was daybreak. Even above the rot, and the haunted, funereal hush that fell over everything, I noticed an unusual, caustic taste in my mouth.

As day broke at last, and the air turned a dirty grey, I heard something behind the closed bedroom door. I could not make it out, but any prowling animal was a possibility. I thought of rats, of mice. After the night I had just passed, even the sound of vermin brought me some relief.

I got off the table and found Mrs. Mijdiak's frying pan for a weapon. With it held out before me, I cautiously opened the door. That hellish, foul room bore down on me with a physical force, its odours seizing the air from my lungs. It nearly knocked me to my knees. I pushed my face into my sleeve and held the pan up with more resolve.

Something on the bed moved. I directed my weapon there.

Buried to the neck in blankets was Mr. Mijdiak. Nothing was left of him but a gaunt cadaver. I let out a moan and dropped the frying pan, then went to him.

Something beneath the covers moved. I pulled the blankets back, ready to swat away some predated rat or mouse. But there was nothing, only Mr. Mijdiak's hand. As I looked down at his fingers I noticed they had been chewed down and mangled, and were black with dried blood.

For a moment I thought my mind was playing tricks on me. The deafening silence of the place so spooked me that I felt watched on every side. I even doubted whether I was still alive and had passed into some unexpected hell. Something moved again, and this time I was certain I was seeing things. I watched Mr. Mijdiak's bloodied hand. I heard, in that still, quiet grey house, a feeble hiss escape his mouth, and an anguished whimper. But the dead had a history of such small sounds. I touched his hand and cried out, stumbling backward onto the floor as I did. Mr. Mijdiak was warm with life.

Sweat poured suddenly from my hair, my armpits, down my back and chest. I began to hyperventilate. I could not breathe. I gulped mouthfuls of air but I could not get enough. As I choked, thinking I was asphyxiating, my throat began to tighten. Heavy palpitations thrummed in my chest. My mind slid into frenzy. Every bacterium, every virus and microbe, the cobwebs and spider webs, the silence that pressed in from the walls and ceiling, mutilated fingernails and flesh all seemed to be brushing against my skin. My neck, my leg, the back of my arm, my collarbone. I punched the air in vain to get them off. I dragged a hand along my face, my arms. In one instant I was on fire, then

chills wracked me to the marrow until even my intestines clenched into long, agonising spasms. Anaphylaxis, cardiac arrest, nervous breakdown. I was dying. A feeling like vertigo overwhelmed me, and I grew light-headed. Pure, black terror went keening across my brain. I was a madman. I was going insane. Strange prickling sensations vibrated in my fingers and toes, and before I could drop to the floor amid all that unbalanced me, I ran for the door.

Outside I plunged into fresh air, into the hurting clarity of day, into that place where there was no Vitaly and no Stefania. I ran into open space. I dropped to my knees. Tears poured down my face. I chewed the air for oxygen, yelping for breath, a strangulating sound that ripped into the silence so absolutely that I could not have been more aware of my own isolation, my distance from help, from any human being.

As the sensation began to subside I stood to face this nightmare. All around, I noticed, everything was coated in a strange white powder. I touched it, smelled it. Perhaps it was a fungus or spore of some kind. I could not identify it. My apprehension intensified. I wanted to go home.

Yet there was Mr. Mijdiak.

I took no more than one step toward the house before the cascade of symptoms reeled over me again. I vomited until nothing but the acrid taste of bile filled my throat, until my stomach tore through with each spasm. When it was over I tried crawling away. My muscles were going into shock. Shattered, I slumped into the weeds, too weak to move.

I couldn't tell how much time passed while I lay in the yard fighting myself back to stillness, fighting the need to get home, to get to Vitaly, fighting my own helplessness.

I had to go to him. Yet I could not face what lay beyond that door. Stefania in the night had been enough.

In the grass I lay paralysed by the bewildering games my mind and body played with each other and the silence. I thought of those gentle, iconic eyes high up on the wall in the house beyond me, and their gaze through the night. It was all I had at that moment of something human and humane, a face I could look upon without despair.

The day had come in warm as summer. Its context made it difficult to face the illogicality of the things I had done and seen since yesterday, and what I still must do. After a while I managed my way to the well and drew up the bucket. I drank thirstily, then sank my head inside. The water was bracing.

Rain began dropping like coins through the trees, although the sky was clear. When it started pelting me I knew I must go back to that shelter. I was still on the verge of hyperventilating. But before I moved I noticed that what ran down my arms and face was not rainwater, but something black and viscous. I thought back to the strange sights I had witnessed over Mrs. Mijdiak's grave and my eyes sought the same north-east direction where I had seen it. Above the trees the sky luminesced with a pinkish red. I knew something strange, perhaps a chemical fire, must have happened. It was the only explanation for these odd physical phenomena.

With a deep breath, I headed indoors to see Mr. Mijdiak. As I passed through I dragged one of the kitchen chairs into the room and sat by his side. I found him conscious, his toothless mouth gawping, a weak rasping sound emanating from his throat. I touched his sunken yellow cheek.

"I'm here, *Bat'ko*." My breath was getting shallow again. I took another deep

breath. "I'm here."

I could barely bring myself to look at him. Starvation was killing Mr. Mijdiak. From his condition I could see death was not far. In the profound stillness of that setting, where the only audible sounds were our own laboured breaths, I sat with him waiting for the moment when mine alone would satisfy that unappeasable quiet that was becoming more and more disturbing to me. Nothing could be done to ease his suffering. I carried no narcotics, no barbiturates, no syringes, only the pallid curative of aspirin and acetaminophen.

The rain didn't last long, but the hours drew out almost beyond my endurance. At times through the day I cried. Sometimes I found myself wandering around the little cottage nosing through their things. There was nothing to see, no secret life, no hidden history.

Somewhere around noon I tried to eat a nutrition bar. After one bite I vomited. I wished Mr. Mijdiak would die.

In the afternoon the intense stillness was disrupted by the sound of a helicopter. I went outside and stood in the yard shading my eyes with a hand. I searched the sky in every direction. Coming from the south, I saw that it was in fact a whole fleet of military helicopters. They were heading north-east into the raspberry sky. Now I was afraid.

I needed to get out. I needed the safety of home, to be away from this lunacy and this place, and to hole myself up in the knowable mess of my own life. In a panic I ran into the house and grabbed my pack, preparing to tear through the woods all day if I had to.

But there was Mr. Mijdiak. He was here and alive. I went to the bedroom door

and stared at him.

“*Bat’ko, Bat’ko* - ” I pushed my head against the door frame. “What am I going to do?”

Out beyond Stálink the sounds of something dangerous and frightening were increasing. The air was full of that breathless beat that came with war and disaster, and I wanted no part of it.

I shrugged myself into my backpack and hurried over to Mr. Mijdiak. Even as I yanked the covers from his starved bones, his mouth opened in a noiseless wail, and I could see the agony I had inflicted in his dying eyes. Slowly, and with care, I tried to slip my arm under his head but he howled. I thought of Mrs. Mijdiak’s wheelbarrow – if I could –

But every jounce and jostle over the terrain would send knives of pain through his whole wasted body. How would I push a wheelbarrow through the woods, over logs and through thick tangles of brush?

I let myself slide to the floor, and put my head in my hands.

What were my choices?

How could I be someone’s god by deciding what mercy looked like? To leave him in his bed, alone and suffering through the last conscious hours of his life? To take him with me only to inflict so much more harm, and in the end kill him anyhow? To stay, and risk a danger I could clearly perceive was, if not already upon me – the caustic taste in my mouth, the vomiting, the white powder and black rain – then certainly imminent?

Was the last shred of his life worth more than mine?



Or was I to put my palm over his face and snuff him out like an animal?

I had never faced the possibility of ending anybody's life. A twelve year career stood on a credo I had never violated: first do no harm.

No matter what I did, could there ever be forgiveness for the choice I made? For making the wrong choice?

From my place crouching on the floor I stared and stared at Mr. Mijdiak. Blood hammered in my ears. I could hear nothing else. I stood, and covered him gently with his blankets. I touched his cheek. From my position at his bedside I could see through the door into the other room. Up in the corner those dark, tender eyes were observing me. I went over and pulled the icon from its shelf. The dirty lace festoon fell away. I brought it back to Mr. Mijdiak and set it against the wall in the covers beside him.

“Rest, *Bat'ko*. Rest.”

*The End*

## **VITA AUCTORIS**

Sandra Chmara was born in Sudbury, Ontario but grew up in Windsor where she attended Riverside Secondary School. In 1988 she received a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of Windsor, where she is currently a candidate for a Master's degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. She hopes to graduate in the fall of 2008.