

The Declensions of the Wild Wood

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The Declensions of the Wild Wood—Betrayals

In medias res being as good as any for the history of a leaf, then I'll say: for, having been loved many a day by both of them, the lovers, as a place known for its depth and silence of birds and rabbits scurrying past, the wild wood was accustomed to being between them in their frenzy, and if a wood can love, loved them back, but faithlessly sought to betray them to the world, it being but a wood and not known for its valor, just for its deepheartedness and peculiar warmth under the boughs.

If it was a thinking wood, then it reasoned if it did at all only that it had known others like them, and they all came to the same, the self-same roundabout ways of dealing with the world outside, and it said I am only one wood in a multitude of natural things, and only one wood in the

world of wide woods, and not a desert or an ocean or a sea, and I can't hide them forever, so why not be shut of them at once, or at least let them stand revealed and see what the rest of theirs think of them, those others who all seek me out from day to day?

Mamie, Marnie, Viola, all had sought refuge in a wood too, and one by one the woods had revealed them, though what they revealed varied with the seeker, just as a magic mirror or wishing well or oracle fetches up from down below or up above the truths and half-truths people seek.

And just as she had managed to evade capture for at least a year, and as the big war was almost over and she near to being freed not by easily ignored decree this time, but by actual Northern victory, it revealed that Mamie was a runaway slave who had lived just down the road and over the bridge, and good at hiding when the men and dogs came through. She'd smeared her body with birch leaves and mushroom juice during the warmer seasons, and lay hidden up in the trunk of a big rotting oak tree, way, way up in the trunk, where she could scarcely breathe, and somehow, every time they found somebody else and

thought it was the only one. During the cold months—she'd first gone into hiding during February, and that's when they found her, then, too, in another cold February, dressed in nothing so much as her pride and her tatters of dress and apron, apron still bulging with a couple of apples from the store of ones she'd hidden away in another tree—yes, during the cold months, she sometimes hid down the road under the wooden bridge on the bank of the stream. From here at night, her feet two floes of swollen cold as they edged across the frozen land, where snow rarely came, but the grass itself was treacherous and cut with cold blades in the penultimate darkness before the dawn, she crept forth to the lawyer's house and raided his barn, his honeycombs in stacks, his cow and chickens (she drank the cow's milk from a bucket and ate raw eggs standing up, for strength). For the lawyer was known to be sympathetic, had had his shed burned once and his house damaged with writings on the strength of it by his slaving neighbors, but if he ever missed the eggs and the milk and the labor of his orchards and bees, no one ever knew of it from him.

And from the wild wood, Mamie learned the lesson that the wilderness taught, that man is a foreigner to it but is a wild thing still, knowing not how to end his terms when the terms are done and over; for, when they caught her stealing from the bridge area into the woods at night's end one night, in the following February, one of the brothers of Mac Tolliver down the road—Mac, the black foreman who had enslaved his own brother—the brother was with her in the chained line. The brother whispered, “Why didn't you try for somewheres else? We's been free, the war's over for two months now!” And they were taken and put back to work for another month, before soldiers came a second time and reinforced their initial likewise brotherly lesson to the slaveowners in the border state by killing two of them and stringing them up in the wood as the slaveowners had done with blacks in their charge; it helped the truly righteous only some that the soldiers were from a black troop, for then it smacked more of impartial justice. Some would say partial, yet only the one who has suffered it, surely, has the right to set penalties exact.

Her black “brother,” Mac’s brother, explained to her. “The black soldier’s only doin’ what’s right by them slavers, but if white soldiers had a-done it, well, it might be because part of the war was about the North up there wantin’ to enslave the South for all its farming and cotton richness. That’s one truth, but it the only one the South hear all the time, and that why they cry out like they the ones hurt. But if all parts of a country can’t work together to share and distribute the money and cotton and things, then what kin’ of a country is it anyhow? That’s why the forward-looking political mens are tryin’ to get things back on track fair and square agin. And some of them is black.” Years later, after much had happened to disappoint Mac’s brother Arness, Mamie had time to wonder about him, to wonder where he was, and why he never asked her to marry him. It wouldn’t have taken much to make her say “Yes,” after their nights smuggled together in a hay loft on the lawyer’s property where Arness had been lucky enough to find a place, even though she knew what she knew. And Arness was all full of the readings the lawyer taught him, and of helping the other men keep away marauders from the

land, for not one of his backward neighbors still could make the lawyer come to heel.

But what she knew about Arness was that he was fond of fucking with more than women; and she knew this because she happened upon him wrestling in long johns with the boy from the stable one night where she had crept softly looking for Arness; the two of them were grappling, and at first in her relative innocence, she had nearly flung herself on them to help Arness, but then she saw him grab the boy's jaw and angle it upward, and plant a savage kiss on the exposed throat, then bit by bit as gently as a mother licking a cub to the mouth, the harsh embrace returned. She watched in secret as Arness flung the willing boy to the floor and pulled his drawer flap down and mounted him, the two of them heaving and groaning, until the final abrupt sigh and moan told her that she'd better leave her shock and make tracks elsewhere.

She never mentioned it to him; he'd been a field worker on Tolliver's farm, and she a house girl, and she'd often watched his bare ebony chest sweating in the sun with the other men's, and wished that he were with her in the house, where she might know him better. But now

that she did, she waited in the interim, a paid and well-paid worker in the lawyer's wife's kitchen this time, and what she was waiting for was a word from Arness. Oh, he'd come for her and get her to go with him to the hay loft, and once in her room on her bed when no one else was there and the lawyer and his wife were in town, but he wasn't coming "up to the scratch," and when a friendly and apparently honest horse-trading friend of the lawyer's offered to drive some of the women further North, maybe even to Boston or New York, Arness, in great excitement, sought her out.

"Mamie, Mamie! This is your opportun'ty. You can get away and go North! Hurry up, girl, pack your things. I'll get your birth papers from Tolliver's records here for you. He hated the lawyer, but he knew what a lawyer could do with records. They won't be much, of course. You's been a slave all your life. But they's somethin' anyway."

Scratching her chin, she'd looked at him, a bit sullen, and said, "I guess I will. Don't no one here seem to be needin' me for anything."

She wasn't sure if he got the point or not. All he said was, "Now, don't be like that. You'll like it up there; not as much trees and farms,

but excitin' city stuff, and lots of opportun'ties. Get packed, girl, you don't know how long before this opportun'ty goin' to come agin."

She didn't have much, only a rag doll from a little girl she'd taken care of once, who'd died and left it to her; and she'd only been actually given it because of the mother's lachrymose and sentimental insistence that "it's for Nanny, Elise wanted her to have it, to remember her always." Aside from that, she had the four new dresses, petticoats, and two aprons the lawyer's wife had given all her women workers, along with a few oddments of underwear, stockings, and the like. This was well-outfitted for a former slave, but she'd not had so much before, and it seemed somehow cumbersome, when what she really wanted was to marry Arness.

She'd flung the things in a large paper sack, which didn't hold up well to this treatment, as it was crammed and splitting down the sides with even this much in it. But to Mamie's gratitude and regret that she had to leave such a kind employer, Mrs. Drew, the lawyer's wife, saw her with this, and shook her head.

“No, no, my girl, you can’t plan to carry your things in that. Go up to the attic and take yourself out one of the suitcases, we’ve plenty of them up there, and the other girls have already been up. Bessie even took a trunk, but she’s an older lady and had accumulated more than you younger women. Just take whichever one you think your things will fit in. And not all cattiwampus, but neatly folded.”

Desperate now, of a sudden, not to leave even though she had only been a slave in the land of her birth, Mamie said, “But can’t I stay with you? I don’t have to work for a wage.”

Sad, Mrs. Drew shook her head. “No, Mamie, dearie, you can’t. We’re not rich, and we can’t keep people on we can’t afford to pay properly; it wouldn’t be right. The world has been turned upside down for you, and it’s an important matter to take advantage of all the world can offer you now. No, we’ll naturally miss all you girls and women who’ve been staying with us in the interim, but you have to seek your fortunes in a better field for opportunity now.”

Mamie burst into tears. “If I hear that word “oppotunity one more time—”

Mrs. Drew hugged her, and said, "I know. I know. It's what my husband calls a 'double-edged sword.' But it's what's best. I wouldn't insist otherwise."

So, Mamie went. And after a few years as a maid in New York City, where she earned a monthly wage a little less generous than what the Drews had paid in the short time she'd been with them, and not earning any more respect, certainly, though there was often the veneer of politeness which usually wore thin around any sort of frustrating happenstance, she married a dockworker named Henry Jones, a man from Jamaica who treated her well once she'd gotten into the habit of arguing every point as if she'd been the lawyer's clerk-in-training rather than Arness. And that ended most of her contact with the wild wood, which though it had flung its children and relatives across all parts of the world, she never saw again except when she visited the parks, such as Central Park and the others closer to home in Harlem. She sometimes dreamed, though, confused images of rubbing her skin with disguising odiferous things and hiding in the subways and city streets, where she roamed looking for Arness, only to find him in a mixed tangle of limbs

and shapes which she couldn't decide about: male or female? She wondered about him, but never mentioned him to Henry, or indeed to anyone else, again.

Marnie's involvement with the woods was a different case entirely, for she owned the woods as property around what she called her home, though to David, her husband for a while, she was not really capable of living in a home, since she treated it and the woods too so much like a house. He tried to make this point to her once, but she said, "Oh, David, you sound like Bill Withers, 'This house just ain't no home!' Don't be so trite and clichéd. I'm trying to improve it, to make it beautiful for us, and liveable, for Chrissake."

So it was obvious to David that Marnie thought she owned the woods, and because David was a backwoods Maine boy from his youth, he knew that you can't own the woods as Marnie thought she did. He little by little began to rebel on behalf of what he understood as natural, as first a gazebo went up just inside it near the house, and then a summerhouse in its depths, totally useless because it took damp to itself

like a sponge, and needed constant repair after the first two months of fall rain, when it was still new.

The main house had only one corner of its realm which was for him, or so in the beginning he thought it was. For in her first rapture with having married him and come into her family's money, Marnie had built him the study he had requested, and had even allowed him to design the fittings himself, complete with a studio bed where he could stay late of nights when he was working on his biographies of famous writers, a series his publishing company had commissioned.

He watched as day by day, inch by inch, hour by hour, Marnie warred with the house and the woods, revising and reinventing and remodeling parts of the still impossibly new house and beginning to carve and cutely ornament broad trails through the wilderness. She even spoke of having lovers' parties which might be charged for hikes through this forested area, which struck David as blatant and tacky commercialism; it only got worse when she asked him to do his "part" and lecture the visiting groups on the love lives of the famous writers whose biographies he was researching and committing to paper. He was

sure, as he tried to convince her, this would constitute some sort of breach of his existing contract with the publishing company. He was careful not to mention the possibility to his editor, because if there was even the slightest chance that the editor might be tempted by any hidden potential in the possibility, he didn't want to arouse the thought.

Many an evening after a quarrel, he sat, melodramatic, with his head in his hands, wondering how they had gone from being a couple in love to being a billboard for romance vacations. That is, they weren't on a billboard yet, but Marnie had already spoken to the mayor of the nearest township about putting a billboard along the highway leading close to the property, and in his eagerness to oblige and rub shoulders, the mayor had given a halfway promise.

And that was how things stood when Beth happened onto the scene, in her role as agent of change for the woods and David, though in the end, neither the woods nor he was able to thank her for her service.

Beth was a young consultant for a decorating firm in the small artists' village in the opposite direction from the prospective billboard town; Marnie liked to spread her net wide. But Beth and David

immediately “clicked,” as she said to him in private not much after they had met, and even though he despaired of her style of language in saying so and had a total disrespect for her mode of employ, he didn’t feel any the less attracted. She and he had very little to talk about, but that was no different from his relationship with Marnie these days, except that it was silence without rancor, so keeping it so quiet as not even to tell himself what he was doing, he showed her the trails in the woods, first. She thought the little lovers’ lanes and their ornamented signs were “cute,” which he found a predictable annoyance, one he didn’t allow to float to the top of the roiling waters of passion from the depths below, where a second later he managed to submerge it.

After he’d shown her a few stray trails and entertained himself, if less her, with a satirical rodomontade of his life as compared with Thoreau’s life in the woods, thus proving he didn’t think too well of himself to make love to her, he then realized that he had overdone it by terrifying her with his bitter tongue. She seemed sympathetic but bewildered about what to do for a man who was as full of critiques of his own existence as he was, and they finally having reached the little

waterlogged summerhouse, it was necessary for him to introduce her into its damp charms and take her in his arms to reassure her that he was a man like other men.

Though the summer house didn't offer much in the way of comforts, as it was mildewy and even a little moldy from corner to corner, side to side, it became their trysting place for a glorious month of adulterous afternoons when he was also able to work unimpeded by stoppages and halts at night, far into the early morning hours, when Marnie was just getting up. Then, he went to bed, and thus avoided Marnie, although not entirely her narrowed mental eye.

And this is how Marnie came to be betrayed by the woods, too. Because though it was a different wood from Mamie's, in a pine-dominated Northern state in the 21st century and not a border state in Civil War years, though Marnie was a spoiled rich girl and not a slave on the run as Mamie had been, the woods in Maine seemed to realize that the stakes were greater for the survival, at least, of its dignity, great enough, perhaps, to endure Marnie's rapid, enraged, and reckless, even insane retribution for its part in the affair when she finally detected it.

For, Marnie crept, one afternoon, up to the summerhouse with a full two gallons of gasoline, just to make sure that the building burned in its sodden state. She poured it all over, then started with her lighter around and around, like a staggering witch around a fire which wouldn't at first respond to her spells. But when it did catch, it caught for good, and not realizing that her husband—or, was it not realizing that *only* her husband?—was inside, she turned and went back the mile to the house, leaving the substructure to burn and raise its own form of alarm in smoke signals of an indeterminate, voiceless, but copious kind. For it was finally necessary for the woods to sacrifice a large part of itself in the betraying of Marnie, and her pettinesses and her ridiculousness, and her murderous rage, and it betrayed her well: she didn't even blink when she told them she'd set it on fire and why—that it had become a rendezvous spot and needed to go, along with her husband, wherever he was—and they didn't blink when they arrested her for murder and arson and property damage. The woods had been burned far beyond the confines of her property when they were finally able to put the blaze out, for even if Marnie could put a fence around a block of land and say it

was hers, the underbrush and pine cones and dry leaves and reaching branches communicated with each other by freer means, guided by the wind and touching each other from point to point and not stopping just because there was a fence, not even one of wire. And her husband probably burned pretty well, too, though she'd not heard him scream or cry out, because he was also guided by the wind, touching point to point with other wilder and freer things, and he had burned with other kinds of fires before, where Marnie's true internal combustion had all the sylvan *sauvage* quality of a Fourth of July sparkler.

And as for transformations, after a few years only, the woods, reforested by loving hands and its own self taking hold too, was on its way back to being what it had been before. Marnie, in the women's prison, as a lifer who might possibly win parole when she felt she would be too old to make good use of it, learned another way of changing. After a few threats and physical assaults on her as the rich woman who'd burned her husband to death and didn't deserve quarter from the women who could say they'd killed theirs because of beatings and forced drug mule operations and such things that were totally foreign to her, Marnie

learned to say the same sorts of things. She became so skillful at convincing herself of David's cruelty and abuse that she convinced others, and they began to see a connection, however erroneous, between her role as the main breadwinner in her marriage, or at least bread-provider, to some of their roles as the income sources for their pimp- and drug lord-husbands and mates. And so after a while, Marnie forgot the world outside, never thought of the wild wood again, really, and after long years of being inside with "my girls," as she called them, came out from jail on good behavior and started a dating site.

Now, it was true that the dating site wasn't the most select one on the web, was even raided twice in its corporate offices (where Marnie worked) by police looking for proof of prostitution, solicitation, even drugs when they got desperate for a conviction. But Marnie's sentimental heart was given to the straight (as it were) and narrow, so her "girls," as they came mostly from her prison contacts, gently hid the truth from her and did the best for themselves that they could by using her books to list themselves on, and everyone was happy. Even Marnie felt that she deserved to be happy. When her heart had had a chance to

soften up again—“But ya gotta stop talkin’ about David and prison and all that to other men, Marnie, really, ya gotta, or they’re never gonna bite. Men hang together always somehow, and they don’t like that stuff” was the advice of her office companion and best friend from her jail days, Jellie—then Marnie met (through her own auspices) Sidney, who wore loud shirts and exposed his chest hairs and liked big gold bling on his chest. He was a stereotype, but by that time, so was she, and Marnie lived in comfort for the rest of her days, happily deceived as to her friends and employees, but with a faithful and kind if totally classless husband. The wild wood had lost something to her, because she had decided in favor of the city jungle instead, and all the reach of the wild wood could do was to make her sigh in the night sometimes for David, the classy, whom it had taken away from her because she didn’t deserve him.

Viola was different from both Mamie and Marnie. She was too young, and fancied herself a poetess, learned later to call herself only a poet, as was proper by contemporary political standards, and liked to

disport herself in the wooded area around her parent's house as if it were really a much larger and more palatial wood, one with "real" animals in it, not just the "small stuff." It wasn't immediately clear to her sensible parents, when she spoke of their acres in these terms, just what sort of poetry she thought would be the result should she really meet something like a bear or mountain lion, but they were mystified by many things about Viola, and so just quietly compared notes in bed at night, making sure while keeping a considerate distance that the poet was coming to no real harm.

No, the poison in Viola's system wasn't being introduced from a treacherous wild wood, though the wilds were deceptively gentle with her as she indulged herself. The poison she indulged in was instead being self-provided in the form of cheap fiction, trashy romances complete with women and men on the front covers either in clothes that only half-covered sultry bodies, or festooned with each other in tangled heterosexual embraces in lurid colors, or both. It followed from this that Viola's poetry was quite rotten when she was young, rotten with the aching for such an experience, while her simultaneous recognition of

herself as not a viable party to such a compact soured the overly sweet sap at the root. And this was because Viola, though not unsightly in any really measurable way, made men nervous, even much older men, by the piercing stares she bestowed, as if they were some of the forms of simple wildlife she often watched in the woods. Had they known it, she was taking their patterns, just as her mother would've taken her pattern to make her a dress, though now that Viola was nearly out of her teens, she roundly rejected her mother's services in this regard. But the glance was the same, the gray-blue orbs of her mother watching a hemline go through the feet on the sewing machine were also Viola's only slightly darker gray-blue ones going over every inch of someone whose insides she was trying to judge from the outside, which usually meant men, since women didn't hold much interest for her.

This, though, was about to change. For, the woods betrayed Viola too, not sparing her due to her years, nor holding back from forcing women into her realm of awareness. It happened like this:

You do remember the lovers, the lovers who cherished the woods and thought they would always have a meeting place there, and whom

the woods betrayed? Yes, it was a glorious day for the wood, ridding itself of both Viola and the lovers at the same time, and who knows what remorse it might have felt in later times when regretting that no one came there anymore. There was no man named Martin to lie back on the trunk of the tree near the western edge of the woods where the gravel road bumped his new red sedan along the way as he went to meet Joya, and smoke weed in perfect privacy and peace until Joya danced into his arms from her husband's plodding embraces. She always told the husband, Baptiste, that she was walking to town for a lunch date with a friend. And there was no longer a Viola, to haunt the eastern edge of the woods and write silly poems to men who didn't know anything about her except that she stared too much and looked at things that were none of her business.

No, because on that strange and resolving day, the wood was aided by the skies; abruptly, clouds had moved in, and while Viola, unwise, ran farther and farther into the woods to escape the vicious wind that had blown up, the wood was giving of itself in a likewise vindictive manner by throwing large branches to the ground, by slapping boughs and

swirling underbrush in tempo with the disorder around it, for it had its own order, and it knew that it had protected human inanity enough on both its sides, and it was decided in its revenge.

Martin and Joya laughed at first as the rain pelted down on them, and pelt it did, covering their clothes with another integument of water, making them darker, seal-like creatures in a foreign medium, the membranes of their skin and hair assuming different qualities, the hair plastering itself to their faces and obscuring their eyesight, so hard was the water coming down, and their skin shining slick and moist against the lurid thunderous sky, as the lightning cracked and slammed all around them, the wood throwing its wounds at them and giving of its anger not to the sky in retaliation, but to them, its previous admirers and tenants and now its prospective victims.

As Viola was making her way towards them without knowing, going in desperation deeper and deeper in than she had ever been before, they had with much rueful laughter decided to shelter beneath a large oak two paces in, because they could see that the storm was so dire in its summer rage that the car was already sunk into the muddy gravel track

too deeply for Martin to drive out that night. They were debating what he should do as they sat under the oak, for though it might be very messy and difficult, Joya would be able to walk home after the storm ceased, assuming that it did. Martin, on the other hand—but at this point, a rustling amid all the huge sounds of catastrophe about them made them look up and around.

It was getting darker and darker, and the clouds showed no signs of dispersing, but billowed forth as black as ever, and as far, from the sky above them all the way to the horizon. But what had been that other, disparate sound, just a moment ago? They looked around, but could see nothing in the gloom of the forest behind them, for forest it seemed now, as dangerous and as thick as something hundreds of miles across instead of only several hundred acres between small towns.

Joya, wet though she was, and therefore not actually able to avail herself of any real warmth by doing so, still snuggled into Martin's chest beneath the tree, and drew her legs up and tangled them with his, her wet skirt forming a little tent over their lower limbs, and dripping as fast if not faster than the leaves all around.

Then again, the whispering of branches stirred against the direction of the wind, just a little, in the sodden mess of boughs behind them.

Martin turned full around, setting Joya aside from him, and stood up.

“Who are you?” he asked, catching sight of a slender form ducking out from under a tree up the rise from him.

But Viola didn’t answer at first, only stared at Martin and glanced, indifferent, at Joya.

“Well?” he felt impatient with this intruder, someone he felt he’d seen before in town, which he probably had, because Viola’s father often drove his family through other towns than the one they were closest to, in order to shop. And Martin could swear that this nitwit had been staring at him the same way the last time he saw her. After a moment, Joya felt his impatience, and wishing to avoid unpleasantness and a scene, she said, “Here, let me try.” She knew sign language, and making certain assumptions, she tried one of the two forms she was familiar with; when Viola just continued to stare at Martin and glare at her, she tried the other one, mouthing the words prominently with what Viola regarded as her annoyingly rosebudded lips:

“Are you lost? Are you hungry?” Joya asked. She pulled the small basket of food they hadn’t entirely finished forward, and held it open for Viola’s inspection.

Viola gave her a scornful glance in return, and looked again at Martin. “You’re that guy that advertises roofing on television.” She waited a minute. “Is that your wife?” That was really the sum total of her interest in Joya, not anything to do with the other female herself, but only wanting to know if Martin was in a sense compromised by previous ownership.

Martin hesitated, and Joya said quickly, “Yes, this is my husband.”

Viola, the born skeptic in the equation of three, looked carefully at their hands before they knew what she was doing. “I see a ring on your hand, but I don’t see one on his,” she retorted, a suspicion fairly accurate beginning to form in her mind, borne of her lurid reading habits.

Martin didn’t like lying, but he also already didn’t like Viola, and his disinclination toward her evident in his every gesture and expression, he answered, “Not all men wear wedding rings.”

Viola watched his face a minute, impassive. Then, “But *you* would, if you were really her husband.” Her instinct for the unsavory was truer than her tact or grace.

The next minute, though, it became obvious they didn’t have time to dispute it: with a loud, subterranean roar, something began to happen to the hillside of thick trees just above them. They looked up, and saw spilling pools of thick, muddy water pouring down in heavy rivulets, in several streaming tides on all sides of them: the hillside, trees and all, was putting in its hand and preparing to collapse.

“Let’s get away from here!” Martin yelled over the wind, which was whipping about over top of the deluge. “Little girl, go back to wherever you came from, and—”

There wasn’t time. Viola, focused on Martin, grimaced with anger, “I’m not a little girl, I’m—” but there wasn’t time. With a groan like a heavy behemoth dragging its body up through sand and silt finally to break the surface of the sea and call out to the elements above, the oak tree and several smaller trees around it sighed heavily and fell, the whole

scene seeming to take place in a sort of inevitable slow motion that it was impossible to escape from as they watched and tried to jump away.

But nothing could prevent what was going to happen: as Viola widened her eyes, at last taking alarm and perceiving her true danger (not to be thought less than important and be prevented from joining with Martin in a tête-a-tête, but to have the tree crush her to the ground). She nimbly jumped aside, but just as she saw the trees atop the thick slurry trip Martin and Joya and fall on them, one vagrant angled and pointed branch from the top of the oak wickedly sliced into her as it thumped to the earth, piercing and pinioning her to the level surface just beyond the trees, the rivulets tangling her loose hair where she lay screaming on the ground in the agony of being lanced into. And as her blood flowed into the streams of water, barely making the surface sanguine despite the quick pumping of her heart, so furious the waters were, her dying eyes were turned at last to Joya, the only other person whose outline and face she could even see through the heaving storm.

Much later as it seemed, though it was only minutes since Viola had stopped her own groans and cries, indistinguishable at the end from

the shrieks and bellows of the doomed trees, Martin, who could no longer see Joya's face from its being turned away from him under the trunk which pinioned them, said almost conversationally, wasting his last crushed breaths in trivial thoughts, or perhaps not, as it was at the essence of the whole incident, to him appearing truly at last:

“Did you know—” he gasped through his shattered chest and began again—“Did you know? Trees communicate with each other; I read it in a science link. They talk through their leaves and roots, or some—” he coughed, as a cacophony of red burst out of his chest—but it was important even so to continue—“something. They talk. They've fallen on us because we were with each other. We're all dying together.” And he coughed again and was silent. Joya, her arms and one of her legs broken or twisted where she lay under the oak to one side of him, answered, knowing that he might not be able to hear her now, over and above what seemed like death coming and the rushing of the winds:

“Martin.” She was emphatic. “No. Trees may think or talk, but it has nothing to do with us. They probably don't talk of us. The skies

don't talk of us. We are unimportant to God, if there is a god. You have to believe that." She felt herself becoming elegiac in her constant pain. "If there is a god, or if God even thinks. This forest is not God. We are not Children of God. There is only the Universe around us, and we are a part of it." She perceived, though, in the relaxing of Martin's sinews at the only place where they touched, her leg atop his collapsed chest cavity in an uncaring parody of their passionate moments, that he was already gone and lost to her; she became calm. No help was coming, and at the same time, all the help she needed for her life was here already. Joya closed her eyes as her sight dimmed, not wanting to watch the cinematic fade into day for night. The forest sighed again and toppled a few more trees onto the now heaped hillside, their moans more prolonged and slowed down as the storm had a thought, a ponderous thought, of receding. Brown water flew and surged and sprayed over the whole, and after a gentle lightening for dusk, night fell in the wild wood.

Chapter II—The Sense of Wilding in Russia

The wood was deep, the winter was deep, the snow was deep. Kirkutchka had already burned all the logs piled outside the cabin, and now had to go and fetch some more from his store laid up in the shed. They kept dry there, at least, though the dogs pissed on them and knocked them down from their neat stacks when they roughoused inside. At the sound of his steps, the eight dogs started up a mournful whining and mouthing of dog-jabber, redolent of hunger, impatience to be taken out in the sled for a run, and perhaps even a wistful memory of how, during the coldest part of the winter a week ago, he had had them into the house with him, as much for his added warmth as their own. They had slept with him all in a big jumble on the hearth, and it had been a better time and a comfort for the man temporarily deprived of his woman and small daughter while they went on a long trip to America to visit relatives.

No, Canada, he was supposed to call it: North America, so as not to be misunderstood to be referring to the lower parts of the continent where the United States was. The official who had issued his wife's and

daughter's passport had been clear about that, as if putting a flea in his ear. Of course, Kirka, as he was known to one and all in the wide area around, had no enemies that he knew of, but old tales from the family warned enough that an envious friend or even a disinterested party could turn at a moment's selfish reflection into that dangerous quantity, that unknown factor, a willing agent of animosity, so he had taken the official's instruction with a patient and respectful nod, and spoke to his friends even just of Canada. It was only in his own mind that he thought to himself of the entire continent as the land of freedom, except for that heathen's den of Mexico, run by gangs like enough to the gangs in the big cities of Eastern Europe left over from Soviet bloc days. Yes, it was just like that, he thought: the entire continent, separated from him just as the sentence had formed itself in his mind, by gangs and opposing politics, and only when such difficulties were bridged over bringing freedom. He was glad his wife Chabba and little Ludlovi were there now. It was only left to him to get across however he could.

What was to his disadvantage, his extreme disadvantage, in this case was that he was a marked man as to appearance, and of Ukrainian

descent on his mother's side. What had served him well in the countryside, being so big and tall and so dark and brawny and ominous-looking, though no one who knew him well would have thought him brutish, that made him easy to pick out in a crowd in the not-so-distant city of St. Petersburg. There were others as dark, but not others as big. There were others as big, but not others as dark. There were others as dark and big, but not others as tall and brawny, and so on and so on, it went in his mind, as he tried to think of ways to disguise himself against what seemed fated, his discovery. While a trip abroad wouldn't have been out of the question if he were a cosmopolitan type who made such trips, when a man such as he took his well-worn currency and flimsy means of credit and wanted to go on a trip, he was likely to be scrutinized more, and he knew that it was likely, too, that the same little pertinacious, precise, clipped city official would just naturally be his opponent in any battle of wits to once win free and make a bid for permanent freedom. Things were tightening up again in his country, after all the long times of Russians going away, emigrating, living abroad for long periods of time freely. But then, he reminded himself,

he was not a city man, not one who travelled. He had never been further away than to St. Petersburg itself, and had always dwelt in its countryside environs in one place or another, easy to locate, easy to spot, easy to keep track of, easy, he told himself regretfully, to hunt. He had wondered if a new hat or a pair of spectacles might do the trick, but when he tried them on at the only stores he could afford in the city, made uneasy even more by the clerks' manifest unwillingness for him to handle the goods, though his hands were clean and his features well-scrubbed, he saw that it was hopeless. Somehow, he lacked the forehead wrinkles, the facial ridges, that men with spectacles gradually acquired, as his piercing vision was no less good at thirty-five than it had been when he was a boy of fifteen, hunting the squirrels and rabbits with his brothers in the woods. And buying a pair of reading glasses would've been no use, because he didn't need those either; in fact, they obscured his vision. If he left even the slightest magnification on when he read and filled out forms in the official's domain, it would possibly cause suspicion, and there again, they already had him.

Instinctively, he had known what to do, what deceits to employ, when sending Chabba and Ludlovi away. In front of officials, he'd just tried to relax, as his only confidential friend the village clerk, told him to do; the clerk doubled as blacksmith for the many horses still on the farms when the blacksmith was away visiting his daughters in the next village. The clerk—who had been named “Rodney” by his mother Svetlana after a stray young Britisher she'd once met, but who was referred to as Rodeni or Rodenivi by the villagers in more or less deliberate misunderstandings—the clerk shared a number of things with Kirka that were less unimportant than people might have thought, though those same people depended so strongly on external resemblances and chance coincidences in forming their suspicions. They were both big and brawny men, and had good vision, though the village clerk did wear spectacles when reading, due to eye strain, and had had contact with more officials from the government and thus could give some advice. He was also a head shorter than Kirka, but both of them still towered over most of the rest of the people they knew well, and except for the village priest and rabbi, each respected by their own

populations, and respecting each other enough to quarrel over Scripture as often as they could when there was an opportunity to take tea together, they were among the most respected, due to their bigness and solidity, like a good block of cheese, a reliable milk cow or a sturdy horse, something or someone that didn't change, in the way of things, for a long, long time.

One of the things that Kirka had counted on not to change, or at least not to change so fast and for the negative, was his old red truck. His father had bought it new for the oldest son in the family, but all the boys had used it sooner or later, until Kirka, the very last, inherited it as the other boys all left the farm and went on to other lives. His brother Alexei had taught him how to take care of it and repair everything that could possibly be repaired by a simple mechanic, and as it wasn't a new computerized device, the biggest danger was that the blacksmith's office in back of the huge smithy would not be able to order the parts that slowly, slowly got delivered. When one part became obsolete, finally, one that only the blacksmith seemed to understand, he and the village clerk came up with an improvisation that kept the truck chugging along,

though sputtering and not entirely willing, for another three years. Then, abruptly, it died. This was right before Chabba and Ludlovi had gone, and for the loan of his own team of horses in return, Kirka had been able to borrow the priest's old black sedan to run them into St. Petersburg, though not without some fussing over it by the priest, when it came back with a small dent in the fender.

Kirka felt very guilty about this, because not only had it been a goodwill loan, but he kept totally to himself what had happened on the night after he'd dropped his wife and daughter off at the train station. He'd come back out to the street where he had parked, only to find three boys, boys not much more than Ludlovi's age, he estimated, taking the tires off the priest's car and trying to make off with them. This was the old-fashioned kind of wilding as in the fifties and sixties, he'd heard the term from Rodney as an English term. But Rodney had told him that now, the ecological concerns that their friends supported were called "wilding." This absently floated through his mind for a moment. Then, he called loudly for help, though he was loathe to attract attention to his mission there, and the boys with no hesitation attempted to attack him

with two tire irons and a wrench, each of them armed. But he had fighting experience over them, and they were all three spindly, undernourished, city boys. He disarmed them one by one, as they came at him with a due amount of caution in their tactics, he throwing the weapons as far down the street as would suffice to keep them busy while he challenged the others.

They might still have eventually overcome him if they had remained determined enough, but he gave each of them a rough shove, down to the pavement, and at that very moment three raucous drunks, stumbling along the street, saw the boys and started shouting and laughing, at whom wasn't clear, but they still helped drive the three young potential criminals away, so it didn't matter to Kirka whom they were laughing at. He wanted after their help to offer them a ride—it was so symbolic in his mind somehow—three thugs, three rescuers—and he had always been fond of a good literary story as told by the priest or the rabbi, or even by the village clerk, on the evenings when the four of them gathered to play cards and drink a little. It was like a story! But

when the most inebriated of the drunks began to vomit on the sidewalk while Kirka was putting the one successfully removed tire back on and the lug nuts on the others that were in peril without the disadvantageous help of the other two drunks, he decided to beat a tactful retreat. He didn't want to risk a regurgitation in the priest's car. He thanked the three, he wasn't sure for what except that their dubious presence had helped scare the boys away. Then, after driving another long block or two away to get his bearings, he got out and examined the car, cleaning away a glob of spittle from the hood and a piece of wet cardboard that had somehow gotten stuck in one of the wheel wells. He'd straight away missed the small dent, perhaps made by the boys in their rush away, perhaps from some other misfortune, or a deliberate form of revenge for having a car, from them or another vagrant. It was only when the priest got sniffy with him and asked when he was planning to pay for the repair that he realized there was something wrong. Luckily, the dent was small and in a lower section of the back right fender, and the blacksmith was able to fix it and paint over it for little cost.

But somehow, he had never been able to reveal even to his friends the tale of three doubled, the attackers and the drunken defenders, that had occupied his own mind on his trip back. For one thing, their conversation the next time they met for cards, particularly that of the priest and the rabbi, with occasional queries and observations from the clerk, made him self-conscious, and he was reluctant to speak up.

The priest was saying, “Well, you’d have to admit, it was a mitzvah. I didn’t have to lend him my car, and I did.”

“Ah, yes and no,” the rabbi responded.

“Why ‘yes’ and ‘no’?” asked the clerk.

Kirka squirmed a little, not liking to be the subject of even a theoretical discussion. A butt of a joke, yes, he could put up with that easily, but serious discussion was another thing.

“Because. Yes, it was in the halakhah, the path, the way to walk, in general. Generosity; giving; charity. But was it prescribed by one of the 613 mitzvot? Not that I know of. I don’t know of anything that says you have to loan your car to a friend who moreover brings it back with a dent.”

“But—“ objected Kirka. “I had that—”

“Yes!” exclaimed the rabbi. “You had it fixed. No harm done. It was the opposite of a mitzvah to dent it, but it was I believe unintentional, so it was a chata, no deliberate harm to nature, man, or God. No excess—unless, did you enjoy yourself speeding and dent it? That might be a bit of an avone, more serious, more self-indulgent.”

“No! I didn’t speed. Just there and back, just parked and delivered my wife, my daughter, to the train station, and back to the car.” He didn’t mention the boys, though he was tempted, so tempted, to offer them up. Nor did he mention that he had stopped by a sidewalk stand with his family to obtain a map of the railway and a quick meal for the three of them. Three again! The clerk wasn’t superstitious, but he would find the symbolism interesting. He couldn’t be told, either. But what the boys did—what was that? He couldn’t restrain his curiosity.

“Well, just as a point—what would it have been if it had been wrecked, deliberately wrecked?” He stopped talking, abruptly, as all

three men looked at him with their own curious inquiry on their faces. But he knew when to pause, and after a moment, the priest answered,

“Well, I think Avram would have to admit that that would have been an aveirah—an intentional transgression towards nature—if for example you were trying to hit a deer—”

“Why would he try to hit a deer?” broke in the clerk.

“Just an example. Or towards a person or group of people—if for example he did it to hurt me, or priests—”

“I didn’t!” said Kirka, not knowing exactly whether they were amusing themselves at his expense, but unwilling to crack a smile and find out that they were being serious.

“Or if maybe he was expressing antagonism towards God Himself. That would be very bad, a true aveirah,” concluded the priest, a little self-satisfied.

“No, my good friend, it would not be. A car is not God, nor a symbol of God.” The rabbi peered over his own spectacles at the priest, and waited.

“I’m a priest, it’s a vehicle of the Holy God,” insisted the priest.

“It’s no such thing! You don’t celebrate or commemorate the holy day you got the car, so it’s not the subject of an edot. It might be, considering how religiously you seem to regard it, the subject of a chukim, a decree that just is, like keeping kosher, except that in your own way, that would be a case of idolatry, which as we all know, is a danger of your religion anyway, what with the statues and relics and bones.”

“If you’re accusing me of Mariolatry, do keep in mind that that’s an old-fashioned concept geared against the women, and they don’t care for it. And you have a wife, and I have a housekeeper, both of them women. Women are God’s vessels, just as men are.”

“You’re obfuscating the issue,” insisted the rabbi.

“To my way of thinking, you’re both being very confusing,” contributed the clerk. The two of them frowned at him as if he were interrupting a far more important dialogue.

“Could I just say—” started Kirka, but he wasn’t even sure what he wanted to say, so he stopped. They gave him a brief glance, and then the rabbi began again.

“Pyotr, cars have no life, so it can’t be a mishpatim not to ‘kill,’ and in any case, it wasn’t stolen or permanently damaged. No one was injured, basically nothing happened. I think I said it right the first time, when I said the small dent, about which you are making such a lot of fuss, is just a chata, if anything. Now, let’s play cards.”

The priest was discomfited by having lost an argument in front of his other friends, but the two friends not mainly involved in the dispute breathed a sigh of relief. They’d heard a similar discussion with some of the same terms applied, a couple of weeks before. The two disputants had come out in agreement on that occasion, but the overall agreeable atmosphere had still been destroyed because of the subject matter.

The topic under discussion had been the variations in world climate, knowledge of which had even spread to their own little Northwestern backwater. Not only had their own weather varied wildly in all seasons for many years now, which had at first been only a matter of local remark, but there had come rumors from the wider world, whispers and smuggled reports about things being done in other countries in reaction, in objection, in protest, in revolution. There had

been Five Mile Island. Chernobyl had been bad, and that had been something for which the world held them at fault, but then there had been the seaside meltdown in Japan, the various sargasso seas of plastic floating across the oceans, the oil spills, the greenhouse gases, all the many, many things they were finding out about which were of humankind's doing, largely, and towards which men and women seemed to be mostly indifferent except for the noisy minority of them.

That day, the priest had said it wasn't in the path of God to be ruining creation and abusing the commandment to be fruitful and multiply to such an extent that there were way too many people for the earth to support successfully. He didn't like the rabbi's introduction of birth control as a subject, and Kirka noticed that the clerk blushed crimson, at what was unclear, though Kirka's mind was quick, and he surmised that it had something to do with the young woman, Adlina, whom the clerk Rodeni was dating. Still, the priest the next moment was hedging and trying to convince himself as well as everyone else that abstinence and general birth control were somehow related. He wasn't succeeding very well when his friend the rabbi came to his aid.

“Well, but Pyotr, don’t you think, to look at it with me, that it might be a mitzvah to use birth control in order to save the earth? In order that mankind not perish from the face of it? To break what you think of as a commandment (and which isn’t actually killing, but only preventing), in order not to break a more serious and severe commandment?”

“Yes, if we are really God’s legislators on earth. What you were saying about our chata the other day, the way our originally unintentional sins become both—what was it again?”

“Both aveirah and avone. First, we practice an unhealthy, excessive abuse of the earth and God’s gifts, indulging our unwieldy appetites, and of course there are those who retaliate against us folk who object to this usage, and that’s an emotionally cruel avone, too. Then, it’s an aveirah when we have already become aware of our shortcomings and keep doing what we both know is sinning, what all of us really know is sinning, to use more common terminology, because we’ve committed then an intentional transgression against nature, one of our primary gifts from God, and thus against each other, ourselves, and God as our creator

most of all. Doesn't that adhere also to what you believe? It does, I know."

"I think it's in fact that most terrible action, worse than any other I know, akin to patricide, matricide, a God-murder thought, what you called last year a chillul ha-shem, Avram." He was extremely sober as he said this, and even looked tearful, and his friends murmured at him, and the rabbi patted the back of his hand.

"Yes," Avram confirmed, "A dreadful thing, a sin so bad that it makes God look monstrous when people who say they follow Him perform such actions." He looked toward the two less initiated of the conversants, to point up the remark, in case they had missed it.

"I guess I have to give up the car," the priest reflected now, and they looked at him in bewilderment for a moment, until Kirka said,

"As a penitence, Father Pyotr? Because you—forgive me, please—because you feel idolatrous?"

"Not only that. Because I can sell the car and get rid of my carbon footprint a lot better, and I've already got one horse. Not a good horse,

true, spavined and all that, but I can retire him to pasture and if I sell the car, I can buy more horses...”

“Listen to me, Pyotr.” The clerk was smiling ever so slightly, but he stopped and grabbed the priest to his chest and patted his back. “You don’t need to sell the car. Just share it with the people. Don’t care so much about what it looks like; let it get old and banged up in service, maybe.”

The priest winced at this thought, but after a moment nodded and said, “Yes, I could do that.” He thought a moment. “But the horse?”

Avram said, “You can borrow one of mine; my nephew has a mare he may be willing to lend, and I have two already. We will settle all this. Just don’t worship the car, no more, my friend. You are above all that.”

Chapter III—To Canada via Top-Surface and Underground and Air

It had been a phantasmagoric year and a half or more for Kirka. No longer hearing himself called “Kirka” by his best of friends, the clerk, or by his closest other associates, the priest Father Pyotr and Rebbe Avram, by anyone at all, in fact, had seemed symptomatic of the whole proceedings. He had journeyed with his 10-language dictionary and its thick, not always informative pages through country after country, edging his way around bans and restrictions of every kind, acquiring cunning he never had known existed in him. The Covid restrictions had been the hardest to get around, due to generalized panic and mistrust of each country for the other’s rules and regulations and inoculation schedules. He had had precious little left of his money, and no longer knew for sure if Chabba was still working at the doughnut shop in Toronto, a Tim Horton’s, or if Luda was still in school where she’d been placed, because the letters arrived when he was intransigent or just left from a place, and all he had was an original address, at some place called St. Clair West Ave., and a doughnut shop where they would tolerate Chabba receiving mail.

So many times, he'd driven cabs and hauled freight for under-the-table paychecks to keep travelling on, and had not a few times been stiffed of his paycheck, either partially or totally, by sneering employers. And a few times, he'd gone in despair to Russian churches or congregations, and been treated to their charity or sometimes the little they had to offer, a bed for a few days, a job shoveling black nuggets into a coal furnace, free meals which he was welcome to attend for the meagre price of listening to a few sermons and blessings.

He'd gone secondly to Belgrade, Serbia, to avail himself of the Covid shots, and stayed until he got his second, as none of the nationals of any other country whom he'd met had any confidence in the shot he'd been given before leaving Russia. He was grossly ill after his first non-Russian shot, though the orderly in a cheap clinic whom he'd managed to speak to in his pidgin Serbian and who understood Russian but didn't like to admit it out of a perverse sort of pride, had told him that there was poison in the Russian shot, and turned him out. He didn't have time to worry about this, though, but dutifully ploughed ahead as soon as he was well enough.

His first plan had actually been to take trains through the Scandinavian countries and the ferries, as Chabba and Ludlovi were supposed to have done, but it was a closed border by the time he got there, and so Belgrade and the southerly direction had been his only real choice.

He now went by his first name, Dmitry, or Dima where he sensed friendly familiarity, but it was a strange time, and it didn't feel less formal but more so, as "Kirka" had been his name for so long to everyone who'd known him in and around the countryside environs of St. Petersburg. As it turned out, he hadn't had to deal with the clerk whom he'd feared as so formidable when he first got his papers to travel to Canada, but he was much afraid that the time would be elapsed on his paperwork before he got there and was able to dig into any sort of request for asylum or even an ordinary work visa. It's true, Putin's sabre-rattling had destabilized a number of things people in other countries had been taking for granted, and he wasn't hearing good things about the U.S.'s and Canada's policies, of the little he could get from

those who spoke to him in his own language or in such rare patient fragments of other languages as he could pry out of them.

One thing that was becoming clear to Kirka, though, was that he was a lot smarter than he'd ever been taught to give himself credit for being: he was surviving, and not being sent back to Russia or jailed for anything, and he momentarily was wistful for the conversations of the three friends, the clerk, the rabbi, and the priest, that he too could have taken a more active role in. If only they could know how he was doing, how strong he was being, how intelligent and crafty!

After his aborted trip to Scandinavia, and after he passed through Serbia, he gradually made his way through parts of Europe following such momentarily opening borders as there were, taking his chances sometimes with hiding in carts for money, with hiding in car trunks for money, everything costing him money, except when once he'd been astounded by two male cabaret dancers in Spain who'd made it clear that sodomy was the only coin they were interested in being paid in. He'd coughed once or twice at the suggestion, felt his face burn, and shook his head as if to clear it of intoxicating fumes. They laughed, one of them

saying in bad French—which Dima had learned some of from the priest before leaving as a sort of helpful universal along with smatterings of English—“What a shame! And so pretty, too!”

He’d turned away and told himself that Chabba would have no reason for reproach when he met her again, even if it had been two women trying for his favors. He slept on a cold dock that night, waking in the foggy morning to find a stray cat curled up in his lap, and sea gulls squawking above his head at a fish bone the cat was gnawing on in front of her.

From there, he’d travelled to Malta, where he felt he understood nothing, to Portugal, and then he’d gotten a last-minute berth on a ship to the U.K., a fishing boat on which he had good and regular meals, friendly cohorts, who patiently taught him the Portuguese he secretly suspected he’d never use again, and a warm though damp bed to sleep in for the extent of the trip. When it arrived in Liverpool, he was paid the same as the other sailors on the crew, plus a little more, because the Captain had injured his foot, and Kirka had bandaged it up with a makeshift wrap bandage until it healed, as his own had been wrapped by

his brother Adeli when he fell in the woods as a teen. It was a funny thing to him, but he felt he was spending the currency of learning that he'd accumulated all his life without realizing it, only he knew that he was also gathering more constantly, and he was wondering just how much wiser a man he might become.

One thing that remained the same in all the rush and hurry and bright differences of countries, as Kirka (now Dimitry) passed through countrysides and towns and cities, all lit up now with Hannukah, Christmas, and in some places Solstice decorations and slogans and messages, were the pictures of green trees and leaf bouquets, and forests and wordings about climate change and global warming. Three times in a six-month period he'd encountered fierce parades with banners and more slogans, not seasonal this time, but about the death of the Earth, and he'd been impressed enough each time to send a quick note to the clerk with news for his friends, once he'd managed to scabble for notepaper and postage and find a postal station where the postal employees were patient enough to work with him to establish the cost and take his meagre coin. He didn't burden them with much news about

himself, as he felt that until he actually reached Chabba and Luda in Canada, the mention of himself was bound to be disappointing. He felt, though, that the priest and the rabbi in particular would be heartened by the news that the whole world wasn't without resistance wrapped up in their prime sin of indifference to pollution and ruin and devastation, and he got one postcard back from the clerk when he was in Liverpool for the month that said they all were well, the priest's old horse had died after an honorable retirement, and that Dmitry's dogs and farm animals had all been sold, along with the delivery business he'd run as a living. Though the sale was strictly regulated, the clerk had known a few angles to play, and asked in a discreet code previously established for an address as to where to send the money. This posed a problem. He could either take the money himself and be assured of a comfortable passage to the port of New York, which was cheaper to pass through from the route he wanted to pay for, and then on to Toronto, or he could have it sent to the uncertain address he'd had for Chabba for more than a year now. It would make a wonderful Christmas gift for her and Luda, but somehow he was more desperate to be there breadwinning for them in

person, and getting possibly in the upcoming months the booster shot for Covid which rumors had been developing about for a couple of months now. Finally, not wanting to wait longer, he requested to have the money sent to him care of a hostel he'd been helping to keep clean as a living wage, sleeping in the basement in a pile of sacks and mildewed extra blankets. When he got it, he scraped together what he could of his wages and the pounds which he'd been able to get from the bank where he exchanged the money from the clerk. He sent a bigger payment than usual to the Tim Horton's shop with a Christmas card on the outside, hoping against hope that Chabba would receive it safely. The rest, he used to purchase an economy class pre-holiday special rate plane ticket to NYC, leaving a precious small amount over for a bus ticket to Toronto, as an impatient and exasperated Bulgarian-speaking travel agent had instructed him would be best. He knew that some boats he could work on to NYC would have been cheaper and more practical, but he was tired now, tired and worn out with all he'd been through, and he felt if he could just see his family again, it would all have been worthwhile.

At the last minute, though, in the plane terminal, as he was answering questions at the desk and trying to understand what was being said to him in a version of English dialect he hadn't heard before, he finally got the message that he was prohibited from entering the U. S. regardless of where he'd last been, because his original paperwork came from Russia, and travel was being for some time restricted from that country. He reasoned to himself that people so far had been good, or at least not demonstrably evil, so desperately he repeated the English words he knew to the clerk for his urgency, "Christ-i-mous. Christ-i-mous. Too-roan-to. Too-roan-to. Too-rowan-to?"

He had serious misgivings when the clerk ripped one of the green stamps out of his passport that he'd had in it for months, muttering under her breath, but then she drew two more bills out of his hand, which he was holding tightly and tried at first to tug back from her. She stapled something else in his passport, said something he didn't understand to him which seemed to be about Canadian Customs, and pointed him to Gate 42, where people were already boarding.

He nodded rapidly, said “Thanks you. Tanks you. Merrys Christ-i-mous!” She flashed a quick and weary professional smile and waved him on, and he made haste to take his one carry-all bag filled with his worldly possessions and stumble his way onto the plane.

He got the message fairly quickly that his seat was the middle seat in row 52, but with his huge build, which had shrunk in girth due to going without some meals, but which had not shrunk in structure, he took up too much space in an economy seat in that position. He drew himself in as much as possible, but was still an obvious encumbrance to his fellows on either side. When the man on the aisle seat complained, probably about that, to the stewardess, and while she stood bewildered, looking again and again at Dmitry’s ticket and obviously trying to be tactful to all three persons while succeeding in being useful to none, the head steward came along and—as Dmitry was charitable enough to think—chewed her out unfairly. He looked and looked, took away Dmitry’s bag, which Dima had been clenching tightly to his lap, and shoved it up in the overhead, pointing it out to Dmitry and saying a lot of things too fast in an aggravated temper.

After it was once established to Dima's satisfaction that the bag would still be there, by means of the steward pointing in dumb show first to one of their row's inhabitants then to the other, and showing that their bags were there, too, Dima relaxed and sat back, ready to enjoy for the first time an adventure on a plane, reassured by the blasé attitudes all around him that the plane would more likely than not land safely in Toronto with him on it. But the steward wasn't finished with him yet.

More impatient conversation he didn't understand and beckoning and even a little irritable voice-raising established that Dmitry was to have the window seat, where he could more easily cram himself against the wall of the plane. When the woman who'd occupied that seat was finished making her sad, self-pitying mournful sounds and changing seats with him, the steward gave the three of them a thumbs-up sign and a quick, self-satisfied grin, boasted (as it seemed) something to the stewardess, who was still dithering back and forth in the aisle, and then they both left.

This last gesture, while Dmitry was waiting for the plane to take off, provoked some homesick reflections about his friend the priest,

who'd once told Kirka, when he was still Kirka, that in the Roman gladiatorial contests, the thumbs-up sign had meant the reverse of what it meant now, had in fact meant a death sentence, whereas the thumbs-down sign, now meaning a negative, had in that historical period been positive. As Dmitry was not the morbid sort, this memory did not make him nervous or queasy, but he did wish that he was going into a future with his friends in the offing, rather than leaving everything he knew so far behind.

Once the plane started to taxi and took off, Dmitry was in a wonderland of sensation and observation. He amused himself with watching his fellow passengers, with trying to figure out the totality of the tri-lingual message that came over the intercom from the speakers, and watching the stewardesses make the face mask announcement. Most of what was going on, he felt he understood, but when he took off his face mask, one of the precious three he had left, given him by a priest in Portugal, another stewardess came bustling back and after a few tries made him understand that he had to put it back on.

When they started the drink and snack service a few hours later, he was surprised to encounter not only a fizzy beverage, which he had tasted before in some of the EU countries, where they were cheaper than ones in the countryside of Russia, but a small packet of something salty and crunchy with the English legend “P-E-A-N-U-T-S” on it.

He experimented under his breath saying the word to himself again and again, tried to get it right, wanting very much to look it up in his dictionary, which was up in his bag in the overhead luggage compartment, and grumbling something to himself which the Portuguese sailors had taught him, a mild curse word, he had surmised.

“It’s peanuts!” said the woman beside him, “peanuts,” evidently having recovered her good humor at having lost her seat. Her voice, he noticed, was a different accent than he had heard before, but she seemed also to be speaking English.

“Thanks you. Peanuts,” he said, smiling back.

“This is an American airline. American and Canadian airlines mostly serve peanuts.”

“America! Canada!” he said softly, beaming in agreement to these pleasant words. Then “Peanuts.”

She soon lost interest and shut her eyes after smiling at him very broadly a time or two. He watched out the window for a while, staring out at the unchanging waves and the varying angles of the clouds and sun until he got bored with that. A little while later, he could smell food cooking, and then the stewardess came back to speak to them again. She asked each of them something with several choices, and the man in the aisle seat on their side of the aisle shook his head and said something else. The woman next to him took a long time, but finally seemed to answer the question to the stewardess’s satisfaction. He understood that it had something to do with the food, and he was indeed very hungry, but he didn’t know what the questions were about.

When the stewardess came to him, she fed something into the little screen she had in her hand, and prepared to type in it again. Seeming to steel herself for the problem, which she was as aware of as he by now, she said, distinctly to him, and as if he were hard of hearing,

“Regular menu, vegetarian menu, or kosher menu?”

“Menu? Menu.” He said. That seemed to be another word for “food,” which he knew. He thought again. “Food, yes!”

“Yes, but which menu? Regular, vegetarian, or kosher?”

He thought. He didn’t want her to think he wasn’t hungry. He didn’t know for sure, but the words all sounded familiar, like words he might’ve heard in Liverpool. So he said, “Yes, regular veg-e-table kosher menu.” He looked at her to see if he had been successful. He didn’t know why the airplane was serving only kosher food, but he had learned that word from the rabbi, and moreover had eaten with his friends at the rabbi’s table, and so had no hesitation.

“Yes, but which one? You can’t have all three unless you’re going to pay extra. One unless you’re going to pay.”

He understood “pay,” and said, “No pay.” Then regretfully, “No menu?”

The stewardess said, “Oh, damn, he doesn’t understand.” She held up three fingers and tapped them off one by one. “One—kosher. Two—vegetarian. Three—regular.”

Dmitry was tired and confused again. But it seemed that the kosher menu was only one of something, dollars, possibly, or pounds, so he said, “Kosher one?”

“I think he wants the kosher menu,” contributed the woman in the seat next to him.

“Okay, kosher all right with you, sir?” the stewardess said, already typing it in.

“Kosher one, yes, kosher one. Kosher good, fine, kosher!” he gave her the thumbs up sign enthusiastically.

“Well, it’s always a matter of opinion, sir, but we’ll get you that kosher meal. Okay, that’s nothing but a G&T for you, sir, a regular for you, ma’am, and a kosher for the window seat. Fair enough. It won’t be long, now. You can put your tray tables down, we’ll come up the aisle in just a minute.”

Another stewardess approached and after a consultation muttered something to the one who was waiting on Dmitry and his aisle mates. She asked to see his ticket. She had some trouble making herself understood, but then she said to him, “You don’t have ‘kosher meal’

selected on your ticket. There's no check at all. I mean, you're due a meal, but we only have a certain number of kosher and vegetarian, and you're not one of them."

Seeming to feel his meal slipping away, the hungry Dmitry looked hopefully to his own stewardess for clarification. "Menu? Food? Meal?" he asked, recognizing finally the word "meal," too. She nodded, then rolled her eyes at the other stewardess and said something about "not much English," and he asked,

"Kosher? One?"

"Joyce, there's a rabbi here, with some of the long side-whiskers, and he insists he can only eat kosher. And there's a kosher check on his ticket. By all rights, he should have that kosher meal, he arranged for it."

Dmitri's thought processes were slowed by hunger; he hadn't eaten breakfast that morning, nor supper the night before. He'd saved all his remaining money to share with Chabba and Luda. At this mention of a rabbi, he thought that for some reason, by some means or other, Rebbe

Avram was here on board. Standing up halfway, he exclaimed, “Rabbi here? Rebbe Avram?”

“Well, how am I supposed to know his first name! Oh, no, here he comes, up the aisle when we’re trying to get the supper carts going. How do you want to deal with this, Joyce?”

The one who was his stewardess turned from Dmitry to the swiftly approaching rabbi, a stranger to Dmitry, as he saw. He didn’t understand what the problem was, but they evidently didn’t intend to feed him even for one of whatever the currency was, and they had a rabbi to back them up. He sat waiting.

The rabbi poured out some impassioned speech in heavily-accented English, then after the stewardess said something about “English,” he started again to Dmitry, in what Dmitry recognized as a language Rebbe Avram had read to them a bit of. Then, he tried another language, and finally, a likewise heavily-accented Russian, which was so partial that Dmitry couldn’t get the gist at first. After a moment, he seemed to understand that the rabbi wanted to eat his, Dmitri’s meal, and he thought about it just a second, and noticed that the rabbi’s beard and

side locks were shot full of gray. He felt ashamed that an older man should have to beg for his food from him, though the rabbi's clothing looked prosperous enough, so he said to the man when the passionate speech stopped,

‘Rabbi menu food kosher? One to pay?’ And he felt proud of himself because he had said it in English. Then, he had another inspiration. ‘Mitzvah?’ he queried. Buying an unknown rabbi a meal for \$1 or £1 in addition to his own meal, which seemed to be receding into the unforeseeable future, surely ought to be a mitzvah in the minor sense, even if he wasn't Jewish.

The rabbi got excited and raised his hands ceilingwards, and said ‘Mitzvah, da! Mitzvah!’ And then he spoke in further rapid English that Dmitry didn't understand to the two stewardesses. By then, one of the serving stewardesses was pushing the cart up to them where they were, people behind them were eating, and to his great embarrassment, Dmitry's stomach made a huge grumbling sound. The stewardess nearest him served him a meal after leaning over and yanking down his tray table and locking it. The rabbi was still standing there, waiting for

something. The woman next to him got hers, too, and the man next to her, an alcoholic beverage. Then, the rabbi leaned into their seats, took the cover off Dmitry's tray, and waved a hand around over it, murmuring something first in what Dmitry thought must be the Hebrew prayer language Rebbe Avram had read to them, and then again in broken Russian. It wasn't a prayer like Father Pyotr's, but it was a prayer. Dmitry waited until he finished, and the three of them, the rabbi and the two stewardesses, had gone back down the aisle. He wondered when they were going to ask for the money for the rabbi's meal, but when he looked back and located the rabbi about six rows behind him on the aisle, the rabbi was praying over his own meal. How about that! They had fed the rabbi, and all because he, Dmitry, had willed it. If they asked him for it later, he could easily give them a dollar or a pound; he still had some of both exchanged for before he left.

He turned hungrily to his meal, then happened to notice that the woman next to him, who was already eating, had exactly the same thing he did. "Kosher," he said to her, pointing to her tray. They both had somehow been given a blessed tray.

She looked at him, and said, a little bit testily, “This is a regular menu, and so is yours.”

“No, mitzvah!” he said proudly. “Kosher.” He knew a blessing when he received one.

Chapter IV—The Maple Leaf and Some Regrets

Dmitry had been three weeks in Toronto, Canada, and he was walking extremely tenderly around Chabba and Luda. So many things he hadn't understood when sending his wife and daughter before him at the beginning of May 2021, in the spirit of "women must be honored first," now were becoming apparent, mainly through Chabba's spiteful iterations to him of all her troubles since arriving. She seemed full of hate for him, so much so that he didn't dare tell her what his own troubles had been, but bowed a meek head and just listened.

It had been necessary to be legal here, for her satisfaction, so he hadn't gotten any under-the-table jobs, but had gone immediately with her to the visa office and let her translate for him, which she did in a new and efficient and clipped English. She didn't even seem to be apologetic or afraid when confronted with the officials and the many rules and regulations, and put in immediately for asylum, making his case out to be much worse than it had been in Russia. After all, there they had been happy, a small happy family in a close-knit community, whereas here they were hardly speaking except to exchange necessary information, or

to have one of the infrequent disputes in which he rarely decided to stand up for himself. He felt embarrassed to hear her lie about how bad it had been, because he had been a good provider, and in Russia, she had appreciated him, praised him, loved him. Now even her glance was sour every time she looked at him. But one brief time when she was in more communicative mood, she explained that she had made her and Luda's plea the same way, not lying, she said, but only stressing the political repression and lack of freedom of expression and other such freedoms, which truth to tell, he had gotten used to. He did point out to her that in the deep countryside in Russia, among those Putin accounted "peasants" without exactly saying so outright, these repressions of speech and the like were often disregarded among trusted neighbors. They might roll their eyes at each other, or sigh "the Kremlin," or "Putin," or "the generals," and shrug, and smile. The abuses of power were tacitly understood to be nearly universal, and so with Russia. The discussions he'd had with the more rebellious clerk and the conscience-stricken priest and politically inclined rabbi had not been, after all, for Chabba's ears at the time, as they would have made her extremely anxious. And

he didn't dare mention them to her yet now, as he was still in hot water for having taken so long to arrive.

Finally, after the fifth week of sitting at home while waiting for his papers, and bearing up under her scorn for him when she came back from work, contributing what he could from the quickly dwindling amount of money he had left, and cleaning the apartment with inexperienced zeal to make things easier on her, he lost his temper. It was a rare event, but occurred when she was making some stew in a pot on the stove and haranguing him for the thousandth time about how long it had taken him to arrive, how hard it had been on her and Luda, how little they had to look forward to. It was New Year's Eve, and though Luda's little church school Christmas projects were pinned up in forlorn splendor around the apartment, Chabba had refused to get a tree or perform any other decorating tasks. She didn't even hide her negative emotions in front of Luda, but made scathing comments to Dima which Luda might not have been fully able to understand the substance of, but which she certainly understood the tone of. The first time this had happened, the six-year-old had ducked out of the room with tears on her cheeks, as quiet and

restrained as if she were the one being shamed. But little by little, she had been veering in her sympathies toward the woman who had provided for her, with whom she had borne all their troubles, all this time. Now, she just sat in the same little kitchen where her parents were when her mother scolded, half turned away from her father, but glaring at him every time he happened to meet her glance.

This night, Dmitry had just plainly had enough. When Chabba started fussing, his temper rose. He muttered under his breath at first, but he hadn't even had so much as a friendly word from anyone who knew him, no other men to work with who might listen to a companionable complaint, no way out of the hell he was now going through. He picked up one big fist, and as Chabba, her back to him, insulted him yet again, he slammed his fist down in the center of the kitchen table three times in rapid succession. Something cracked, and things were silent and still. Even the noise from the surrounding apartments was suddenly in abeyance, the drinking songs, the cheery inebriated conversations.

This managed to get Chabba's attention; she turned white, though whether with anger or fright was unclear. Luda quickly slid out of the room like a tiny, silent shadow from the corner where she had been having an inaudible murmured conversation among three little dolls.

"You will stop talking to me like this!" yelled Dima.

"Are you crazy?" hissed Chabba, under the sound of a fire engine going by outside, the only other noise that could be heard. He now glared at her. Yes, it seemed like fright, but not of him. "If the landlord heard you, he will throw us out! He already has asked for January's rent because he won't be here tomorrow, and I had to tell him that I don't get my check until the 5th this month. Yes, you must be crazy!"

"That doesn't happen here in Canada! These people are not like that!"

"Oh, yes? Then who came in here with the keys when I was at work, Luda was at school, and stole my watch? The good one, the gold one, from my mother? The only jewelry I had that I hadn't sold for food or clothes? But I can't move now, and I can't accuse him, or his wife.

You have seen the bugs, the cockeroaches, all over everything, and the poison we have to have around to get rid of them. Did anybody see that in the country in Russia? I never saw one, not even in my aunt's poor house in St. Petersburg, before I came here!"

"Well, if this landlord is so scared of a little noise, then what does he think about a wife who won't give her husband a minute's peace or understanding, a husband who suffered for her all over Europe, who sent her every extra bit of his money he had, who fasted, and wept, and prayed, and got cheated, and robbed by people who didn't pay him for his work, who got approached in his poverty by lechers and mamzers for sex, and who—"

"Lechers and what?"

"I don't know, it means a loose-liver, it's a word Rebbe Avram taught me—"

"Oh, yes, of course, all the drinking friends in Russia, you miss them more than you ever missed me, us!"

“They took care of me, of both of us, sent me my money, sold the business and animals for us. Keep your bitter tongue off them, they helped provide for you!”

“Well, if it’s lechers you want to compare, then you should know you are lucky you are still a husband now. I had offers, all sorts of offers, and not all of them kind, and it was even little Luda I had to protect once! And one night---one night—” she stopped.

He stopped. Gradually, the party noises in the apartments around them were starting to resume, but he was staring at her. He didn’t know whether to sit back down, or to keep quiet again, but she wasn’t saying anything more. She stood, and now her lip was quivering. He had borne up under all her reproaches, but her confessions might be more than he could tolerate. He stood and stared at her, just waiting.

“Well, what?” he asked. “One night, what?”

She collapsed into the opposite chair, and started to weep. “He was an old man, a very old man. Like your friend the rabbi, or the priest.”

“You cheated with a priest??”

“No, but like that, old.”

“Where was Luda?”

“She—she sat in his living room, until I—until I was finished with him. It was a big place, but shabby. She was okay when I got up the next morning.”

“But why? Why did you do this—this—thing?”

“Because our other landlord was a—what you said—a mamzer, right? He put us out a day early because I wouldn’t sleep with him. And he was married, too. We had no place to go. I took Luda to a restaurant after the doughnut shop closed, and we sat there with tea and cookies until they closed, too. There was an old man there who kept watching us. Finally, he came up and asked us to go home with him for the night. What was I supposed to do? I couldn’t leave Luda anywhere. I didn’t know if they would take her from me.”

He paused. Chabba was his wife again, in dire distress. Then, he craned his head back towards the other room to see where Luda was. All was quiet, but in the middle of the room’s silence, he heard a soft, childish snore. Something between the grownups. She had gotten bored, and gone to sleep in a corner of the couch. Going to sleep on

couches was obviously what he had heard a teenager on the street a week or two ago call a “default defense mechanism”; he understood now what the boy had tried impatiently to explain to him.

“But—have you been checked out? He might have had a disease. You took a big chance. It only happened that once? Or—or did you continue with him?”

She laughed a little hysterically. “Oh, I was lucky. I got lucky. He first asked me to cook for him. I was nervous, and he seemed to be trying to put me at my ease. I asked what he wanted. Everything in my head was as clear as a crystal or an icicle, just when I didn’t want it to be. I mean, I wanted to be able to forget it. He wanted me to warm up some soup and bread, and to eat with him. I didn’t really want to, but he insisted. It was good soup, good bread; I was hungry, I hadn’t had a chance to eat that day.

“When he finished, he told me to go to the bedroom, and look in the dresser and get out the blue nightgown. My heart was beating so hard, I didn’t know what to do, and I was fluttering around, I suppose, like a butterfly in a net, and he repeated ‘Just go in and get the blue

nightgown. Do as I tell you.’ So, I went in, and got a real surprise. It wasn’t a fancy lace or anything, it was a big, flannel cotton nightgown, a size or two bigger than me, a long old woman’s nightgown sort of thing. Like Mamar Deita used to wear when she answered her door in the mornings for milk, remember? Not decent of her to do, of course, but as she was a neighbor—”

“Yes, as she was a neighbor. And then what happened?”

“I brought it in, and showed it to him. I felt ridiculous. ‘This one?’

“‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I want you to put it on.’

“‘Here?’ I asked. ‘My little girl is just in there.’

“He got a funny, strange smile on his face, and said, ‘No, of course not here. I’m not asking for a strip tease; there are places for that. Go in the other room and put it on.’

“Well, I did, and I was careful to sneak in and put my clothes in the chair next to Luda, in case I had to rush out. I went back in, but he wasn’t in the kitchen anymore, and I could hear him moving around in the bedroom. I to tell the truth began to wonder just what sort of crazy

man I was dealing with. But he came back in a minute later, in old men's striped pajamas, and winding up an old-fashioned alarm clock.

He said, 'Okay, time for bed. Will your little girl wander off at night, or will she sleep where she is?'

"I said, 'She'll not leave where I am. But if she wakes up, she may come looking for me.'

"Well,' he said, 'That can't be helped.' He beckoned to me and I went behind him, thinking of all the things that could've happened differently, if I had found a different apartment, if my landlord had been a woman—"

"Ah, that might not make a difference—"

"Yes, I know, but less likely. There's a big idea here of women being for each other—"

"Maybe, but people are people."

"This time, though, I did get a really odd feeling. I all of a sudden wasn't afraid of him, didn't worry if he was going to murder me or be rough. It was somehow just necessary that I was there."

"I'll bet it was necessary!"

“For me, I mean. He was a very calming old man.”

Dima tensed up again. “Don’t tell me that you have affections for him.”

“Let me tell you the rest of the story. I was very upset and nervous, yes, and it makes me angry now to think of how close I came to something worse. But he just wanted me to sleep with him, after all, that’s all it was.”

“Well, yes! What do you mean, that’s all it was??”

“No, I mean---to sleep. He cuddled me up like I was his wife, you know, he must’ve had a wife at some point, a woman of some kind, and he told me to try to sleep. He was snoring away like Luda in there in about five minutes. I can’t say that I slept much, I was thinking too hard, but I did fall asleep for about an hour near morning. When I woke up, we went through the same routine backwards. He was up and dressed, and then I had to go change. When I came into the kitchen, he was feeding Luda some eggs and bacon and toast. She now had a funny expression, too, but she looked better once she saw me. He made me eat

and while I was doing that, I heard him on the phone. ‘Just come over, there’s someone I want you to meet.’

“I started now to worry that he was looking for a marriage or something, and I even felt sorry for him. I sent Luda out of the room, and explained to him our situation, and he said, “Perfect! I know just what to do. I thought I was doing the right thing.’ And he refused to say more until the door buzzed. He buzzed someone named Fletcher Tomlinson in, and he said to me as he was answering the door, ‘My nephew.’

“I got curious, then, but when Fletcher came in, it was again a moment of panic for me: he was a RCMP! In uniform!”

“A--?”

“A policeman. You’ve forgotten. A Royal Canadian Mounted Police.”

“Not good, then. Not good?”

“Well, I thought not. I wondered if Mr. Tomlinson, the old man, was getting ready to turn me in as a vagrant, or something, but for an old man who had only just met me, he had a good memory. He repeated,

with only a reminder or two, which I was able to relax now enough to give him, everything I had said. The policeman even wrote it down! He asked me if I could prove I had paid the rent up until that day, and I had the receipted check in my pocketbook with me, and when he saw that— Well, the manager at Tim Horton’s has a saying. He says, ‘It’s all over but the shouting.’ And it was! We were driven first to the apartment to check on our things, and that—that manager the landlord was at that moment with his handyman putting our things out on the curb. The policeman arrested him and called another car. Later that same day, they took me to a housing office, and got me this apartment. All I had to do was pay the rent by the next paycheck. Of course, this landlord isn’t much better, but at least he’s got a wife on the premises, and isn’t interested in me.”

“And is that all the times such a thing happened?”

“Yes. But you needn’t act so sure that it was my fault.”

“I didn’t say it was your fault. But—well, at least I’m here now.”

Chabba looked at him directly, in an ordinary way, for the first time since he’d seen her again. “Yes, but we can’t pay the rent for

several more days. And look, you cracked the table.” But it was now a mutual problem, not just another addition to her list of grievances.

“Yes, I know. But if we can only wait that long, I will be able to work in two more weeks, the man at the visa office said so. My work papers will be here. And Chabba, one other thing—”

She reached across and touched his hand tentatively, and he grasped hers tightly, carrying it to his lips and then putting it back on the table, where the crack running across the top surface made a jagged line below their linked hands. “Yes, Kirka, what, what?”

“Don’t keep calling everyone a ‘mamzer.’ Rebbe Avram led me to believe it’s not a very nice word. I was very upset when I said it.”

“So was I!”

“Remember Luda’s little ears.”

“Oh, yes.”

They sat in silence just looking at each other’s faces for a few minutes, noting the changes that had happened both permanently during their separation, and recently, since the cessation of hostilities a little while ago. A sleepy, confused Luda came in as if at the mention of her

name, and taking a look at the scene, processed two things: “Oh, gross, you’re holding hands!” and then a minute later, “Yes, I thought I heard that; you really broke the table!”

It was getting dark outside, though it was a little lighter than it had been a week or two ago at this time, as the Solstice had passed, and while the dinner cooked at the stove, Chabba now cracked feeble jokes with both Luda, bewildered by this change of front, and Kirka, as he was now once again in his strength, who was nearly as confused, but happy. He ducked out of the room at a convenient moment and counted his money. Yes, he might just have a wee bit extra, he reckoned, counting a final bit in his pocket.

“I’ll be back in just a short while!” he called merrily, wrapping his scarf and heavy jacket around him and starting for the door.

“Wait!” called Chabba. She sounded panicky. She dashed into the room, in the dark, where he stood by the front door at the top of their entry stairs. She approached him with hesitation, and he looked at her, puzzled. “You are coming back, aren’t you?” Her voice was like Luda’s, like a little girl’s.

“Ah, why should I come back, you horrible wretch, you, after you bomb me with curses and don’t feed me, and give me hatred? What makes you think I will come back to you?” he thundered. But then before she could take him seriously, he added “Try to keep me away! I just need to run down the street, I will be back by the time you have supper on the table.”

Reassured, she said, “Well, be careful. It’s night, there are drunks out there.”

He grabbed her to him and planted a kiss on her cheek from the considerably higher altitude he had to lean from, then said, “And you, too. Lock the door, but leave the chains off. I have my keys.”

When he got to the street, he considered for a moment which direction to go in first. It was latish for shops to be open, but the LCBO stores would be open much later, so he headed first for the nearby Polish pastry shop, where he had once or twice stuck his head in the door and looked with longing. When he got there, the woman behind the counter was already closing up, and threw her arms up in the air in exasperation to see someone else enter, but still, she didn’t turn him away.

“Yes, what?” she asked. “I’m closing, hurry up.”

He decided to share his attitude of joking joy with her. “What do you mean, ‘Yes, what?’ There are ten pastry shops at least in these two blocks, and I bring my important business to you! Show a little respect!”

“How did I get so lucky? You aren’t Polish.”

“I could be, for the price of those cookies there. And some of those things there, those tubes, covered in snow. And—”

“How much are you planning to spend?”

“I have”—and he counted—he needed to save some to get himself and Chabba some vodka and kirsch for their drinks, and to find some little doll or toy for Luda at the corner store, or perhaps a bag of candy—
“Let’s see, I have this, and this. It looks to me like a five and a ten. And all for you, and some good Polish pastry.”

“I am overwhelmed. Okay, show me what you want, and I will put it in the box. I will stop when your money is spent, Russki.”

“My good friend, I would expect nothing less, or more. Okay, these, and these, and these—”

“Wait, wait—how many people are you buying for?”

“Three. And one is a child. But we have a big celebration tonight! We are a family together again!”

Her face softened momentarily. She sighed. “Okay, go on.”

He pointed, changed his mind several times, miscalled things by what they looked like in Russian shops, with her proudly correcting him each time, until the box was far fuller than he thought it should have been.

“Do I have enough left for tax?” he inquired anxiously.

“I will stop you. You may have two more pastries; I can at least do that. Mind you, though, remember me to your friends—” and then sotto voce—“if you have any.”

He cautiously selected two more that looked particularly appetizing, one with what appeared to be caraway seeds, and another looking like a chocolate wafer, one of the very few chocolate things in the shop.

“Okay, you’re done. Forget the tax today. Justin Trudeau is a rich man, he won’t come for it, not on January Eve.” She expertly tucked in

flaps and taped the box on all sides until, though as full as it could possibly be, it was sturdy and taut and heavy. She pushed it on top of the counter, and gestured to him to take it.

“Thank you! Thank you so! You are a good woman! I will be back! My wife will come! We will tell everyone! A good woman!” And he put his valuable fifteen dollars on the counter for her.

“Don’t I know it!” she remarked, but finally cracked a smile at him and waved him away with her hand. “Go! Go! And Happy New Year!”

“Oh, such a Happy New Year to you! You’ll see, we will be back!”

“Mind you do. Bring your little one. How little?” she inquired as an afterthought.

“Just six. Just in real school this year.” He waved at her and made quickly for the door, saying one more time, “Happy, Happy New Year!”

When he reached the street and happened to glance back in as he now headed in the opposite direction, towards the LCBO and the small five-and-dime on the corner—called, inaccurately “The Dollar Store,” when things there were neither as in the old days five or ten cents or a

dollar, but sometimes much more—the woman in the pastry shop was still watching him walk away.

He had some sensitivity to what people thought of him in this new country, so he went to The Dollar Store first, not wanting to carry alcohol in where people might be bringing children. Having sold his watch for what price he didn't know in Malta, he looked with some apprehension at the clock above the checkout counter. It was late! He had to hurry.

“Dolls?” he asked the man, who was alone there. There was almost no one else in the store buying anything either.

“Back there in the far corner. Except for those mini-imitation Cabbage Patch Dolls, they're up here at the front.”

“No, they're ugly.”

“Well, we agree on one thing. They sell well, though; and kids love them.”

Not wanting to be unpopular when he was in such a good mood, Kirka said no more about that, but went to the back corner where he had been directed. On the way there, however, he saw a little square box

with figures of a farmer, his wife, two children, and many different barnyard animals on it, including two dogs of different kinds. Suddenly he felt like crying. He hadn't even had anything to drink yet, but he missed his friends, and felt sad that he was in a city, even such a big and modern and nice city as he felt Toronto might be shaping up to be, and he also wanted Luda to know where she came from, so he looked for a price. It was ten dollars too much, it would eat into the expense money he was saving up. He re-calculated. He hadn't seen Chabba drink anything at all alcoholic since he'd been here, and he himself had had nothing since a beer or two in Liverpool, on a lugubrious evening when he was feeling totally sick of his life. Maybe he could get them something cheaper at the LCBO than he had been planning. He counted again.

“How much is this?” He asked the man at the front, taking it up.

“Didn't find a doll?”

“No, but this. How much?”

“Well, there's a price tag somewhere—here, here it is.”

“Oh, I think that maybe since it is last day of your year, you want to get rid of it for lower price.” He deliberately played up his difficulties with the language, though for five weeks now, Luda and Chabba had been ungraciously tutoring him in English, and refusing to speak to him in Russian. This evening had been the first time he had heard Chabba speak Russian since he arrived, except for brief impatient commands, as if to an idiot.

“Look, Mac—”

“My name Kirka. Dmitry Kirkutchka. You nice man. My little girl six. She from a farm, but does not remember that, since she come here to big city. You want to throw something else in for same price?”

“Not really, no. Listen—”

“Then maybe, you give me a lower price for this, so that I have money left to buy my wife something. A little thing. Maybe a bottle of wine.” He had learned that Canadians, like this man seemed to be, on the whole tended to regard wine as polite and acceptable. He wouldn’t mention vodka and kirsch.

“Wine’s expensive.”

Ah, now the man was negotiating. “Cheap wine. Or maybe beer.” He threw in the clencher. “We not able to celebrate Christmas a week ago because paycheck late, and tonight is New Year’s Eve.”

“Fuckin’ Polish peasant!” exclaimed the man under his breath.

“Not Polish, Russian, and my mother from Ukraine. What means ‘The Dollar Store’ if nothing is a dollar? Little children come in here, and you lie to them?”

“I notice your English isn’t that bad after all.”

“I need this farm.”

“I need some money.”

“I need—forget about it. I tell everyone, man in dollar store is a cheat. A cheapskater. Not like the nice lady at the—” then he ceased abruptly, feeling that probably his new and recent friend at the pastry store wouldn’t welcome more people coming in for discounted goods.

“You not have the spirit of giving. You not a good Jew.” This was a shot out of left field to the man, but he grinned at that, and so Kirka capped it off with, “You not a good Christian either. Not a good

Muslim,” he prepared to reel off as many religious condemnations as he

could think of, sure in his heart that every true religion believed in generous giving, but it turned out not to be necessary.

The man was really amused, and started laughing at him, in a better humor now. “Well, I’m not a Jew or a Muslim, and hardly even a Christian, but I’ll tell you what: you drive a hard bargain. I’ll give you five dollars off. That’s the most I can do, and that’s a lot, because we’ve only had it on the shelf for a month now. But you’ve given me a story to tell my friends, so I guess that’s something. Take it or leave it.” He braced his arms against the counter with his hands splayed out and looked up at Kirka with a challenge, but smiling now.

Kirka looked at the price again, figured that if he hurried he could just make it to the LCBO before Chabba really started to think he wasn’t coming back, and then squinted his eyes and calculated. When he opened his eyes again, he happened to notice some little fuzzy toy evergreens, just the right size, on the shelf above the man’s head.

“How much those?” he asked.

“What, the ornaments? A quarter each.”

“Give me ten. Many, many trees in Russia. People all over the world need trees. Trees dying. Water dying. Fish dying. All animals coming to their ends. I need trees for my daughter’s farm.”

“You’re getting that toy for a little girl?”

“Smart little girl. She can figure almost better than me.”

“I find that hard to believe; cutting corners must run in the family. You’re an odd person, you know? A really odd person.”

“Everybody odd to somebody.”

“Okay, so the farm for five dollars off, plus \$2.50 worth of the little trees. Here, I’ll ring you up.”

Kirka looked at the clock again and winced. It was getting very late, almost six-thirty, time for Luda’s supper. But, he thought, she’ll be up late tonight, and if she liked his gift, things would be totally right again with Chabba, too. And then after she went to bed, he and Chabba could have the “welcome home” he’d been looking for all this time and hadn’t yet received....

“Did you hear me? I said—”

“Yes, I heard the price. Here, and here are fifty cents. The next little boy or girl that comes in, give them two trees. Or give one to a boy and one to a girl,” he continued, his sense of fair play taking over. “Maybe soon, we all be planting trees.”

The man looked at him funny, as if about to make a remark concerning drinking or something of that nature, but apparently decided against it. “Well, you’re not one I ever thought I’d see payin’ it forward.”

Kirka was in a hurry to leave and reached out for his bag of goods, putting the box of pastries in the top, but this remark caught his attention. “What means that, please? To pay forward?”

“Making a charitable donation.”

“Oh, my friends in Russia are a clerk and a priest and a rabbi. Learned men. They teach me about to pay forward. I do it on my own, too, but I spend much time with them when I was there.” He sighed, but then put the sad thoughts behind him, saying “Happy New Year, and thank you.”

“Yeah, thank me,” said the man, shaking his head and laughing in spite of himself.

Kirka didn't waste time trying to get a discount in the liquor store, one place where he was sure it would be no use. In any case, the prices were posted under the bottles, where they sat on shelves in neat rows. With some anxiety, he re-counted his money, finally deciding to be strict with himself. He deducted the bare minimum that they needed to have from his money for the next few weeks, and stuck it back in his wallet and tucked it away. That was not to be spent.

Vodka first, then kirsch. He looked over the bottles, with regret recognizing a bottle brand that the priest had treated them all to one evening about three years ago. He paused for a moment to wonder where the priest got his money, but then he looked at cheaper and cheaper vodkas, until he found one he could afford. It was a smaller bottle, too, but then, he asked himself, how much did they need? Just a little to salute the New Year in their new country. When he got ready for the kirsch, he couldn't find it anywhere, and had to ask a busy clerk where it was. The man muttered something like “Geez, you like that

stuff?” and waved a hand over towards a far wall. The other people gradually filed out with their purchases while he was still looking, and the man impatiently locked the register and came back to help him when he had a minute free.

The kirsch was with the brandies that were used a lot for cooking special holiday recipes. Closing his eyes mentally at the price, which left him only three dollars of extra money in his pocket to spend for anything for himself for the next few weeks, he made his purchases in quick order and went home as fast as he could on the wet pavement, which was slick with a light fall of snow that hadn't been there when he went in the LCBO.

He had to tread the stairs up to their apartment from the second-floor elevator area in their building with extra care, as his arms were full of his three large packages, two in one arm and the bag of bottles in the other. He heard the swift tread of Chabba's feet coming to the door to meet him as he reached the top, and she pulled the door open with a mighty heave. He was afraid that maybe she was angry again at his

lateness, but whatever had been her original thought, when she saw him loaded down, she exclaimed,

“Oh, my God, Kirka, what did you do?”

“Don’t worry, I used my money. Our account money is still safe.”

“What will you use for expenses for the next three weeks or so?”

“I’ve dealt with worse. I’ll eat light, that’s all, if you’ll still feed me. Now come here and look what I’ve got. Luda, where are you?”

He placed the alcohol bag in Chabba’s arms, and waved her to put it away, as they heard Luda’s feet hit the floor and come running toward them. With an excess of pride, he placed the large white pastry box on the table, and while Luda’s and Chabba’s eyes were still digesting that bit of information, he drew out the farm, set it in the center of the table, and looked at Luda. Her eyes were big and round, but she seemed afraid to touch the box. He took out the ten little trees and put them all around the farm box as if they were a windbreak series, and then gestured toward it with royal dignity, saying “Luda, this is for you. Do you remember our farm in Russia? It wasn’t all like this, I didn’t wear that funny hat, those clothes, but we three lived there before we came here.”

She thought a moment, and said, “I remember the snow. There’s no snow in this one. And I remember the dogs. And I think the cow. I liked the dogs and the cow. And there was a cat—what happened to our cat?” She was worried, clearly, about the animal friends she had only just remembered.

“Our friend Rodeni, Rodney, sold the animals to people who would love them and take care of them, and Rebbe Avram and his wife took the cat. When I was in Liverpool, in England, Rodeni wrote to say that the cat had had a litter of kittens.”

“Oh,” she sighed softly. “I wish I could have one.”

“Maybe someday, when we are a little richer,” he said, winking at Chabba, who wasn’t ready to be this sentimental yet, but who was just as pleased and surprised to see him and his gifts as Luda was.

“Is there anything in the box?” asked Luda, hoping against hope. Her full heart had been too emptied before in her short experience, and she seemed a little afraid.

“Yes, some toys, the animals and such. It’s for you!” he said again. “But,” he warned, sensing that she needed a caution statement to

solidify the question for her, a negative thing too, before she could believe and accept the gift, “you have to keep them picked up and put in the box when you’re not playing with them, so that no one will step on them and get sore feet, and so that you won’t lose them.”

She put tentative hands on the box, which looked like a barn with a farmhouse attached to one end. Then, “Can you open it for me?”

He took his pocketknife and carefully punctured the perforations at the barndoor end of the box. Picking it up, he tipped the box over with its end to the table, and all the little figures came tumbling out, to squeals of delight from Luda, knocking over Kirka’s careful windbreak of trees. Chabba picked up the farmer’s wife, and teased,

“Kirka, never, but never, have I worn an apron like this, and I’ve never been this fat!”

“Give it time,” he responded, quoting something she had once said in a much bitterer moment to him, and she swatted at him with her dishtowel.

Gesturing at the pastry box, she said “I can only guess what’s in that, but we’re already late for supper, and so none of whatever it is until

we eat our meal.” Luda made a half-hearted groan, but when asked to do so, she and Kirka swept all the figures and the trees back into the toy box, she ran it into her bedroom, and when her mother told her to put bowls and saucers on the table for the stew and bread and butter, she came in happily and bustled around between them, all signs of childish worry now removed from her brow.

When she placed his stew bowl in front of Kirka, Luda said, “Nana, you’re the best.” She was being loving to him in her two languages, since she said “Nana” as she hadn’t called him since she was four, having opted after that for the more collegial “Papochka,” but the “you’re the best,” was in English, and she said the next moment to her mother, “Isn’t he, Mama?”

Chabba laughed her joyful laugh, which he hadn’t heard for years now, two at least, since they had first made plans to leave Russia. “Oh, I don’t know, I think we’ll have to wait after supper and see what’s in the white box. It might be white mice.”

Luda liked this idea, but when Chabba pointed out that they would only run away, she lost interest and started on her stew with real

appetite. They ate stew and skimped on the bread, since they knew from the box that it contained sweets, and then, when Kirka saw what the grumpy but kind Polish woman had put in the box, all the sweets, the extras he didn't remember ordering or paying for, he blessed her and told Chabba just where she was located, that she had asked to see Luda, which excited Luda and made her feel like a special celebrity, and Kirka insisted that they would have to buy only from that store. They waited casually for a while after supper to propose dessert, in part to heighten their enjoyment.

Luda was so overstimulated that she couldn't sit still, because not only did she have the fascinating new toy in her room, but she had her father back again, and her mother wasn't unhappy or unpleasant anymore, and it all made her delirious. She sang songs that were part original, made-up, silly rhymes and part songs she'd learned in school. Then, when she was out of the room, Kirka sneaked a little of the vodka with a dollop of kirsch to Chabba and himself after rinsing out their coffee cups, and before long, they were singing some old Russian folksongs, A Ukrainian love song or two that Kirka knew, and Chabba

was attempting to teach Kirka some of the modern carols she and Luda had learned in Canada during the early fall, which was extra difficult because she only half-remembered the lyrics. But when Luda heard them making this much noise, she came back in and corrected their tunes and words, until all three of them were making as much noise as the people around them had been making all day.

Just as they were at their loudest and happiest, though, there came a large, loud, banging at the door, and an irate voice calling out something indistinct to them. Chabba mouthed the word “landlord” to Kirka. She was trembling, he saw, and as she started to stand up and go for the door, he said, “This stops now.”

“No, Kirka—”

“I will go. Sit and be still.” Deliberate and just as loud as the landlord in his own way, he clumped his big-booted feet towards the door, paused, then pulled the door open and stood in the doorframe, solidly confronting the shorter shadow in the hall. “I can help you?”

“Who are you? Where is Mrs. Kirkutchka?”

“I am Mr. Kirkutchka. I am helping to pay rent now. Are you someone important?”

“I’d think so: I’m the landlord. But if you’re living here, the rent goes up. Three here now instead of two. Wear and tear on the apartment.”

“Don’t be smart with me. Are you building another room on? Are you limiting the noise around the building? Are you repairing all the whining pipes? Are you getting rid of bugs regular? And when are you in here that we are gone, to see wear and tear on apartment? No wear and tear beyond normal here. I am a man, not an ape. And my wife has missed a family gold watch, that was locked in here when she left. It is gone, and is part of the wear and tear on my family.”

“See here, I won’t be here on the 5th, when your wife’s check comes in for the rent. I will be in Cancun. I need my money to travel on; I leave tomorrow, which is the 1st, and no banks open. Other people have paid, you must pay, too.”

Kirka decided to carry things off with a high hand, to see if that would help. “A RCMP helped my wife find this apartment, at a housing office, and they know the rules about rents and evictions.”

The landlord backed down a little: “I didn’t say eviction, I just said—”

“Look, Mac,” said Kirka, copying his recent acquaintance from The Dollar Store, “I’ll tell you what I can do for you. I have cash for some of the rent. If that can help any with your trip, then you are good, right? And you owe me a receipt for it, give me now. And Chabba, my wife, will mail you the rest of it on the 5th, when her check comes in. That’s the best we can do, at last minute.”

The landlord was heard to grumble, but at last he pulled out a small booklet from his back pocket and said, “Okay, it’s \$1200 for a month. Until February 1, when it will be due again. And watch the water usage, people in this building are using too much hot water.”

“Clean people, clean building.” Trying not to show that he knew exactly how much he had in his pocket already, and was aware that it wasn’t enough, trying to make it look, in fact, as if he were a power-

operator who carried cash around all the time instead of someone who was still waiting to open a bank account, Kirka pulled his wallet out, flourished the money, and counted with ostentation. “Okay, I have \$750. That will have to be well for now, until you come back or until you get Chabba’s check. I want a receipt for \$750, now. With your name on it, and the date.”

“Relax, I know how to make out a receipt. Been doing it for years.” But it was clear he was unnerved by being confronted by an irritable, monied giant. He handed the receipt across and waited for the cash.

“Chabba, come here, moye kokbannya. Look at this receipt and see if it’s like your others.”

The landlord harrumphed with impatience, and Chabba leapt up and scurried to the door. She didn’t meet the landlord’s eyes, but scanned the receipt Kirka handed her, looked up at him and nodded, and tucked the receipt in a small folder from the kitchen shelf which she disappeared with into the bedroom. Kirka knew that his practical wife

had a small combination safe there where she probably kept all papers and other valuables, especially since her watch had gone missing.

“And let’s have an end to this harassing.” Kirka was firm, but he knew he might be overplaying his hand. He slapped the money into the landlord’s eager grasp.

The landlord glared at him, then turned on his heel and went away swearing under his breath, counting the cash again, even though he had watched Kirka count it.

Luda had seen this whole encounter, her eyes even more like saucers than they had been during the gift-giving. When Kirka sat down again, grasping his wife’s hand and squeezing it once or twice, Luda reached out and grabbed his other hand, and she squeezed it. He smiled at her reassuringly, freed his hand, and reached up and pulled on her loose braid.

“Now, we have dessert!” he said, and they started to eat from the over-rich sweets and cookies, until they were all three sated and sick of sugar; there was still a whole half-box of treats that the Polish store

owner had packed for him. He picked them up and started to put them in the refrigerator, when Chabba said,

“Oh, no, there they will get soft. Here, I have a locked bread box, too, built so the bugs cannot get into it. We will make them last.”

Though the sugar and all the excitement should have perhaps made Luda too awake to go to bed, it was in fact she who initiated the bedtime ritual, by asking Kirka for a story. “Tell us a story, Nana,” she said, including her mother in the group when they went in to wish her goodnight. Kirka was in fact chockful of stories, but not one he could tell his young daughter, for his travels had not been such as he could distress her young sympathies with. But he finally thought of some of the magic tales the Portuguese sailors had been able to half-communicate when once he knew the rudiments of simple language, and he told her one or two of those, trying to save some for another time, so touched was he by her sudden renewed preference for his company.

He didn't want to think it was only the toy; he knew, for example, that she was a very bright child, and she had obviously been made tense and upset by her mother's stress over the six months he'd been apart

from them. But it was as if a giant weight had been lifted from all three of them, and he had moreover been able to present himself as their hero and savior, a heady role for any previously unappreciated human. Still, he'd spent all but \$3 of his personal money, and that wouldn't help them, because the \$750 he had given the landlord had been earmarked for groceries and family expenses.

Now the question was, what were they to do for the several days before Chabba's check came? They were low on groceries, and her check was several days away still. He didn't want to lose the advantage he had gained over his formerly low status.... He thought and wondered if the housing office might have any tips about free food. He thought he would just go out with the keys someday when Chabba wasn't at work, and could stay with Luda, who was off from school for another week. He thought he would see if they knew of any free food he could get for them. He had partaken all over the world in different places from these sorts of charities, and he assumed they must exist in Canada, too. After all his trials, and after having once more acquired his position of responsibility as father of a family, he had lost all shame about asking

for what was there for anyone for free. Pride would be nice to have again when his two girls were provided for, but pride for now meant making sure that they were.

That night, when Luda was asleep, and the riotous noises from the neighboring apartments and streets had started to become more localized to their own spots, he and Chabba went to bed together, just as they had been doing since he got there, but that night, Chabba turned towards him instead of away from him, and they consoled each other for the harsh words, and the long time they had been apart. And the last thing he remembered hearing was Chabba giggling like a very young girl at something stupidly funny he had said, making up for not giving him due credit all this time by giving him more credit than he deserved for being amusing.

Chapter V—Free Food, Volunteering, and Gainful Employment in Ontario

“Chabba, did you see this story about this—this ‘strannaya avariya’ in this place called ‘Indiana?’ Not in Canada, for us good luck, but still bad luck for United States.”

“Why are you reading that paper again? You should be reading the English newspaper I get, the *Globe and Mail*. That would help you learn better English. Luda and I can’t teach you all your letters.”

“But this story I didn’t see. True, I didn’t read all of the English paper, but this story deserves front page. In Indiana, tree killed three people, all at once! Not bad tree, either, but it was due to big rainstorm, unpredictable, and bad bank erosion of tree line. And stupid people—why not run for the houses when a storm hits? Or there was a car there, too—it was better than staying out in the rain. And ouch! tree crushed two of the people, a man and a woman, and a younger woman, a branch cut right through her, through her, straight into the ground! The people had to clear six trees off of them, total, to get the tree off and out. Just

imagine that! And they had a picnic basket with them. The storm must really have been sudden.

“And what do you call this “strannaya avariya” in English?”

“I don’t know, a crazy thing, something that doesn’t often happen—oh, I know, a ‘freak accident.’”

“‘A freak’s accident,’” he repeated under his breath. “That’s not a kind thing to call a person, I think. Do you think they were circus people?”

“Not a ‘freak’s accident.’ A ‘freak accident.’ ‘Freak’ means the accident, not the people. Wait a minute, that story *was* in the *Globe and Mail*, about a month or two ago. From last September, that’s when it happened. Took a lot of time to reach the world news. And what do you mean, not a bad tree? To use the English words Father Ivan used in his homily last week, trees don’t have ‘moral agency.’”

“I didn’t understand ‘moral agency.’ I wish you would take me to the Russian services there so that I can understand. I try to tell Father Pyotr in my letters what we talk about at church, and I have to put half of it in English that I don’t spell right.”

“Moral agency means that they don’t think, don’t have the ability to make conscious moral choices. They can’t decide to be bad or good the way humans can.”

“I think we don’t know that about something as old and quiet and ‘solemn’—the word that was in Luda’s storybook last week—something as old and quiet and solemn as the forests and trees. They may think different in a way from us. But what I meant was that the tree was not rotten, or torn up by lightning. It was a big, heavy tree, but it was the erosion of the bank in that ‘freak’ storm that brought it down with the roots—”

“You mean ‘from the roots’.”

“No, I mean ‘with the roots exposed, all up in the air, like a topsy-turvy.’”

“Have it your way. But you’d better look to the time, Kirka. Your cab stand will be calling in a few minutes to find out why you’re not there yet.”

“I have a surprise call yesterday from the food shelter. They like

me so much that now they not only give us food to bring home, but also hire me as a part-time delivery person. Cab company agrees to keep me on.”

“Oh, Kirka, but they don’t pay as much as the cab stand does, and you don’t get tips. I know that good works are important to you, but we need something to live on. I’m only making as much as I was before even though wages went up, because I have to take time off to get Luda back and forth from school on the TTC. And it’s not the ‘food shelter.’ A ‘shelter’ is where people stay for free, a ‘food bank’ is where you get and distribute free food.”

“Like you say before, ‘have it your way.’ But the director there knows that more than food, I want to work from ‘conservation of natural resources,’ and taking care of oiled-up baby ducks, and things like that. He gets me today the paperwork for jobs like that, when I go. Remember, I told you. He tells me two names, one that I have to go around Ontario to do, and may be away for whiles, which is better and pays better, but I think you don’t like as much. The other, is only here in Toronto, not as broadscale for me, not as good for big environment, but

still with animals and getting people to follow the conservation rules, and working with dogs. I have many, many qualifications for both, and now that I have had driver's license, for cab, I can fulfill a qualification, just like that. That's the word, right, 'fulfill'?"

"Yes, that's the word. So, tell me again, what are these jobs?"

"The Toronto one is for the 'Toronto Parks, Forestry, and Recreation Division,' the Ontario one is for the 'Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.' I get three uniforms, he says, and I pay for part of cost. Maybe because I am so big; probably, they have to tailor me special. I get dress uniform, spring-summer uniform, and fall-winter uniform. The only thing I don't like about jobs is that I may have to carry a gun and police people to do right. I don't want really to be policeman. But there are what he called 'canine handlers,' that means dogs, and I can do that. And if I am 'conservation officer,' I can 'patrol lakes, trails, and back roads to protect natural resources and ensure public safety.' Maybe I still get to help clean up oily spills in my free time of volunteering. And I do know about guns, so if I have to have one, I can do the work. But it may be a year or two before I will

have to carry a gun, because of work permit restrictions and I not yet citizen.”

“Did the man at the food bank give you all this information? You sound like you memorized it.”

“No, he told me linkings, and I looked it up with Luda on her little computer the last time I took care of her, when you were at work on Saturday. But I have it written down, here on this paper, and in English, too, and I translated all the words I didn’t know. See?” He was very proud of himself, and Chabba sighed. She knew that when Kirka got an enthusiasm, he didn’t let go of it willingly.

“Well, just try to get something that brings in some money. And you’re right, I’d rather have you here close at hand, to help with things, than to be away long times in other parts of the province.” Relenting a bit, she kissed him on the forehead, and said, “Good luck.”

“We are getting better and better, Chabba. That computer was a good idea.” He looked at his new Timex and jumped up, muttering to himself once he discovered how late he was going to be if he didn’t hurry. True, he was allowed to take the cab home and with a little

finagling with the cab owner, whom he negotiated charitable donation tax breaks for with the food bank, he was allowed to drive the cab to food bank deliveries just for the food bank's payment of the gas bill. And he knew that they valued his work. But Chabba was not quite as invested in conservation and ecology as he was, which was a secret grief to him, and she was pushing him to look for other kinds of work that paid higher than the cab job, even.

Kirka had a plan, though. Three months from now, on Earth Day, April 22, as it was celebrated in the province by most churches, and on which their church recognized a special secular festival when animals could be brought to the church for blessings, he planned to do two things: to take a recently born kitten he'd gotten reserved for Luda at a local shelter to be blessed for her. Going ahead with the adoption was a plan which Chabba had given cautious consent to, and which the disgruntled landlord had had to agree to in order to be consistent with having allowed his other tenants to have pets. The second thing Kirka planned, after the kitten was safely ensconced in its place in Luda's bedroom, in a big cardboard box with a small litter tray and food and

water bowls, was to take Chabba and Luda on a surprise outing to the shore of Lake Ontario, where he hoped they would all be able to participate in a cleaning up of some ducks, ducklings, and a few other varieties of water bird who'd been in a winter oil spill on Lake Michigan, and were being washed up and re-routed to other places in the Great Lakes. It was already in fact underway, but the volunteer organization was still not drawing a big enough crowd just for the birds, since part of the volunteers had been siphoned off to clean up the shores of Lake Michigan themselves. He was cagey, he thought, in this, because he knew women's tenderness for creatures from the way Chabba and Luda had been in Russia, and the way they were so excited, the both of them, about the kitten, which Luda was already thinking up names for. He was telling himself that cleaning up shore grasses and coastline would certainly not interest either of them so much, but that he could participate in those activities, when necessary, by himself.

True, on the weekend of the shoreline cleanup, he'd have to take cab time off and travel a little, but in his usual provident way, he'd been saving up money for gas and oil, and had cleared the trip with his boss at

the cab stand, who was once again being cut in for a tax credit, due to the willingness of Kirka to work a little harder and provide some other volunteers with rides for the weekend. They would also pay a small fare to the cab company for the trip, and a member of the 'green' committee involved had negotiated for motel rooms for them near the site. Kirka's room with another male recruit was being provided for free. Kirka was feeling both virtuous and useful, and was both casual and cautious, working a dodge around Chabba's scheduling by not quite saying what he needed the travel time for, just telling her that he needed time away for something which might be a plus recommendation for his new chosen profession of conservation officer.

Chabba herself was also feeling virtuous, due to her recent attitude of tolerance for all of these great enthusiasms of Kirka's. Luda was just feeling rewarded for some unclear accomplishment of virtue regarding obedience, that had produced the offer of a kitten from her parents. And feeling virtuous, as all three of them were finding out, helped them be more accepting of each other's foibles.

Sometimes, though, Kirka's serious nature warred with his basic optimism, and he seesawed back and forth, to Chabba's patient despairing of getting him to see economic matters and family management her way. One Saturday when she had to work and he was only on cab driving for a few hours in the early morning, he took a sleepy and grumpy Luda in the cab with him, letting her ride up front, with pride introducing her to his polite but sometimes annoyed fares, and recounting her school records and exploits when they would rather have been silent or occupied in their own conversations.

As it turned out later, he had also taken her with him for what he regarded as his much-needed new haircut for the job interviews he was going on for his conservation officer position. When they came back, and Chabba met them at the front door after her shift, she wanted to laugh and fuss at the same time, and didn't know which to do first, and so ended up doing a not-very-convincing combination of the two.

"You took Luda into a dirty man's barbershop? Kirka, you know better than that! With men too much drinking and playing cards and swearing, and filthy talk? What becomes the matter with you now,

here?” Even Chabba, when sufficiently upset, tended to lose her grasp on her otherwise mostly perfect English.

“No, no! I didn’t go to usual place, and anyway, they are not that bad. I went to someplace called—let’s see—” he drew the card out from his pocket, and looked at it—“Sylvia’s Styling Emporium. Pretty penny too but look at me now! Good, no, ‘superior’ haircut styling, nice hot towels and shave, nail trim, all the works, I even had my toes worked on!”

“Oh, Kirka, why? You are not a male model, just going for an interview or so! Why you are needing all this making up, like a woman putting on rouge to catch a husband? Think of the cost! What did you pay for all of this? And Luda there, too!”

“Don’t worry about Luda there.” He peeked around the kitchen door frame to see where Luda was. “The only thing Luda was likely to see or hear different was people with lots of tattoos, funny-colored hair, strange clothes, talking about some things that God be thanked! I didn’t even understand. I’ve seen some like that before in other countries, not

so much even in St. Petersburg, but they were all André's friends, so it was all right."

"Am I going to regret asking who André is?"

"He is person, or maybe she is person, not so sure, doesn't matter, he said to call him "'he' and 'him,' so that's the way it is, anyway, he is person who cut my hairs. All of them, on my head and on my face.

What a touch! If I could always go there—"

"Kirka!"

"Don't worry, I know we don't have money for right now, but sometime I'll go back, maybe, when we do."

"You had your hair cut by someone called 'André'? How much did this cost?"

"Don't worry, I don't think he is really French, not even French Canadian, so not so much as you might expect. I think to ask him if he is homesick for Montreal, but that makes him laugh for some reason, so I just drop it. They all very nice to me and Luda, and they gave her some free hair bows and clips, have you seen her? She is in Cloud Nine!"

“Yes, I see that you both are happy like horses under the apple tree; when she came in, I just thought you’d taken her to buy her some hair ribbons, and that’s all I knew. At least you got that for free, though probably somehow it was included in the cost. I was beginning to wonder where you were. Do you know, it’s almost supper time?”

“Yes, but while I was under towels for my neck, we talked about conservation, and Zefira, that was one friend, give me a copy of two big, important newspapers to bring home, ones they’d had in the shop for a while, and so didn’t need.”

“Not Russian, I hope. What’s wrong with *Globe and Mail*?”

“No, nothing’s wrong, but these had special articles on global warming, and it’s just what we thought in Russia. All that free land that Putin’s bragging about in the Eastern parts and Siberia, yes, it’s being opened up now for farming, but that’s only supposably, because zoning is often bad. Not for farming, once you already buyed in.”

“Bought in.”

“Okay, but if we had decided to go that way, and stay in Russia, we could have invested money bad and found ourselves running a police

station or something, because of zoning. But the writers figured he's still being very smart, to encourage Chinese into Eastern Russia, and there are also cases of some Russians actually getting farmland and going ahead with farming. And it says that Putin is very smart to let more immigration in, and that so is Canada, 14% more immigration in Canada lately, because boths have aging populations, more people dying in Canada than being born right now. Says United States not so tolerant of immigrants, also not so fortunate with climate change. Stupid and sad for United States, lucky us that we didn't go there. Would you believe it, the 'lucky' line is at top of United States and China, land above that in Canada and Russia and Scandinavia all is going to be best places to live in a few years. Not good for the rest of the world, I'm not gloating, but I know you will be happy for Luda. And we can help, if people other places will let us."

"Yes? And where did you read all this? I didn't know you could read so fast!"

"I not read all of it. It was like all barbershops, they said to call it 'salon,' anyway, full of talk. But when they find out what job I am

going to get, they gave me these papers. Maybe now you can read them, too, and see what I am talking about. Here—” he drew two folded up paper sections from his big overcoat pocket and passed them across to Chabba, who received them while rolling her eyes. When she opened the papers up, she saw *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*.

“Kirka, maybe the New York paper, yes, but *Wall Street Journal* is big capitalists, what do you think they would say? What is good for business! Why do you trust them?”

“That is the point! Global warming is getting bad for business now, and so even people who are only interested in making money have to pay attention. We will get their help sooner or later, let’s just hope it’s not too late.”

Chabba was a bit intrigued in spite of herself. “It’s hard to believe that there is a declining population here; so many people everywhere! We lived in such a tiny place in Russia. I know you will want to write to your friends back home, but please to be careful what you say about Putin. We just do not know who reads besides your clerk, and I guess the priest and rabbi. We do not want to be those people we hear of here

who get poisoned or hurt at a distance by government or Kremlin without anyone knowing how.”

“We could change our names.” But he offered this more as a way of stopping Chabba from worrying rather than as a serious alternative.

She breathed a sigh of exasperation at him, and reluctantly, he grinned.

“Okay, but do you know what André’s name was before he married Zefira? ‘Roberta.’”

“So, two women together.”

“Not now. They can change anything here! I know some people did that in St. Petersburg, too, but expensive. Here not so expensive as there. I try not to be rude, but I said to Zefira, ‘But don’t you think maybe declining population happens because of people changing sexes and not so many children being born?’”

“Ah! And what did she say?”

“She laughed at me, said she and André have three, all school age. In fact, it was two of them that Luda played with in the children’s area while I got my haircut and other things. She said that only one of them

was adopted. I didn't ask more, I didn't think more was any of my business.”

Chabba laughed out loud at this. “Kirka, you are so funny! I never have known you to stop asking questions, whether it's your business or not, when you want to know something. Well, let's see the ticket for this magnificent transformation of you—how much was it?”

At this, he looked a bit worried, but handed her across the receipt. He also shoved towards her the small bag he had carried in surreptitiously, which she had noticed, but had assumed was one of his usual surprises.

“Two hundred and fifty dollars! For a haircut and a shave? And what's this in the bag? What do you need with all this hair stuff?”

“Well, but, we can all use it. Zefira says it is ‘unisex.’ That means for all.”

“I know what it means! Where do we get this money from, Kirka? Do you think I want to work so that you can waste your money on being so beautiful?”

“So you do think I look good?”

“You looked good to me before!”

“They gave me the bag of ‘products,’ that’s what they called it, ‘products,’ for free, because I offered the kids and Zefira a ride to the park. We left them there, and I don’t even need to go pick them up. They are close enough to it to walk home. Of course, three other friends went with them, but one of the kids sat up front with Luda, and the adults in the back, with the other kid on a lap. I’m probably lucky that a RCMP didn’t see that, I don’t think it’s the same as it used to be in the old days, with kids free to sit on laps. Still, we were only going two blocks.”

Chabba sat down at the table where he was sitting, the new table he had likewise bought for them to replace the one whose top surface he had struck his fist into on New Year’s Eve. Like him, it looked all shiny and new, and she realized that in spite of having been there for a longer time, she with her ideas hadn’t changed so much as Kirka with his ideas had. Or maybe really it wasn’t that he had changed so much, as that his broader view of things had been possible because he had been out among people more, and hadn’t had to have his troubles in front of him

all the time at work, as she had had to. Tim Horton's was okay, and they treated her fairly and appreciated her work, had even offered her a supervisor's position, which she was considering, trying to sort it out with what Kirka's new responsibilities might be. If he got the job he wanted in the Toronto area, that is.

He had made it through three rounds of exams and interviews, and was awaiting a fourth, and had passed a very important shooting test and gun knowledge review, as well as having near the beginning been certified with the driving exam. But there was still some prejudice operating against him as a new immigrant, which he made light of, going out of his way to be friendly and accommodating to all his superiors and equals alike in an effort to get along. And there were things he wouldn't be able to do at work until he had been in Canada longer and gotten more of his paperwork processed, so he would have to work at the lesser jobs the forestry service gave him. Chabba wondered if they secretly despised him for his bright and cheerful nature, as a few stray people in Russia had, too, until some encounter or other with the sleeping temper within set them right.

Chapter VI—The Russian War on Ukraine Comes to Toronto

It had been a cold and bitter winter season so far in Toronto, with less snow than Kirka was used to in the depths of the woods in Russia, but a piercing, freezing, cold lake breeze blowing fairly constant across the streets. He had been accepted as a new recruit to the Toronto ranks of the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division, and while he was still being channeled towards work as a conservation officer, who would of necessity carry some sort of gun and various other official equipment, he had had a choice about some of his beginning work and preparation, and was just now happily taking training in a greenhouse on one side of town. His basic home farmer's knowledge of some plants and growing lore had helped him out, and he was now more accepted by his peers, and known as one who would always be of aid if he was aware of anything helpful to do with a problem. He was also teased about his great height, which a few in the service nearly equalled, though none were quite as strapping. For some time, his particular chums at work called him "the Jolly Green Giant," which had to be explained because such commercials for vegetables as had once been on the television

when these men were younger, he hadn't seen. After a while, for brevity's sake, his nickname was reduced to "GG," and he began to feel quite comfortable about being thus addressed.

So, in the midmorning of February 24, when he got to work without having looked at the news, he was appalled and shocked to be greeted with stony silence and frosty stares. He thought he must've done something wrong with some of the plants, but none of the supervisors of the greenhouse said anything to him, and neither did anyone else. When he tried to meet their gazes in an attempt to judge what the problem was, they studiously avoided looking at him. The only one who met his eyes, and that with an undisguised hostility and totally new dislike, was his friend, Olexi Hruvonychiy, who came from a small village in Zaporizhzhia Oblast in Ukraine, just five or six settlements away from where Kirka's mother had lived in her young girlhood before meeting his father on a student's trip to St. Petersburg. Olexi, for whatever reason, on the one hand seemed not to be avoiding him, but on the other was constantly glaring at him.

This didn't seem right, as several days before they had last worked together and had been laughing and hitting each other with the water sprays at spare moments in the greenhouse. But now, in the greenhouse office where the men and women went to fill out their worksheets and charts and sort through plants and seeds at their sorting tables, he was clearly very angry about something.

Half wondering if it might be a joke—Olexi was fond of the gentle prank now and then—Kirka smiled back hesitantly a time or two, but this only seemed to make Olexi's face grow redder and angrier. The rest of the room got very quiet when Kirka softly and with some caution went over to Olexi's desk.

“Olexi?” he began. But he didn't have a chance to say more before Olexi, seemingly furious to be approached, jumped to his feet, his head reaching roughly Kirka's mid-chest, and in spite of being far shorter and less massive, challenged back in a loud, raucous tone, “Yes, Fuck-face?” He said it in English at first, but evidently so that there would be no mistake, he followed this up with, “Yebat' litso! Rossiya otstoy.”

This seemed very provocative, but Kirka was a little unsure of his ground, so he stood going through the recent past in his mind, attempting to decipher this latest joke, though it looked less and less like one every minute.

In the background, he heard one of the English-speakers whisper rather loudly to one of the former Eastern Europeans, “What’d he say?”

She replied, “About the same again, in Russian. Oh, and he said ‘Russia sucks.’”

But still, no one moved. They seemed to be waiting to see what the bewildered Kirka was going to do or say. He just stood there, his ears burning and his face now reddened, too. Was he fired? Had they deputed Olexi to let him know, this way? Was this a Canadian initiation custom of some kind?

Finally, from the side of the room, the bookkeeping clerk Boxy Withers, who also had acquired a humorous nickname, as there was nothing “boxy” about him—he was as thin as a stringbean—called out to Kirka, “GG? You’ve seen the news today, right?” He was the only one of them, with his quick accounting intelligence, who had clued into the

fact that Kirka possibly knew nothing of Russia's invasion and attack on Ukraine.

“The news?” Kirka now said stupidly. He was absolutely at sea.

“What means this, ‘the news?’ Have I been fired?”

This produced a certain rustling around, maybe a relaxation among some. There were even a couple of quick half-laughs, though they were immediately hushed by others.

“GG, Russia invaded Ukraine. They attacked with missiles and full armaments. People are dead.” Then Boxy too was still again, waiting.

But to this, Kirka said, “NO! What? NO! What means—” then he caught himself in the middle of a badly constructed sentence and said, “When? Why? When?” He looked past and over the still aggressively positioned Olexi's head to the rest of them. “What was it for? Why Ukraine? Why now? That bunch of Kremlin—Kremlin—stupid—” and he lost track of his English again as his frustration mounted, his thoughts first of his job and of not wanting to lose it or to look like a fool, or worse, a bully. Then as Olexi drew his attention again, he

thought of his friend, his new and good friend, and of his cousins in Ukraine and the remainders of the Ukrainian his mother had taught him in the songs and stories and words of affection she often bestowed on him. He remembered in a haze too the secret Ukrainian bad words his cousin Rostovanych had taught him during a visit to Russia two summers, long ago, when they were teens.

There was nothing to be gained by trying to protest his innocence to the room; he was a Russian, however related to Ukraine, and that was all they knew. And right now, he almost didn't care about how many tricky Russian poisoners there might be lurking in Canada. For one thing, he'd cautiously broached this subject to Olexi and Fiedelsen the grower's assistant, and they'd both pooh-poohed it. They pointed out that he was nobody important to the Russian government in the way of political rebellion or status, which had made him feel safe and like one of them. Right now, what was important was what he'd heard Boxy on another occasion call "mending fences" with Olexi.

He thought for a minute. Olexi clearly knew Russian. But that wasn't the way to approach him. He reached down with his huge, well-

shaped hands and grasped Olexi's forearms so that he couldn't move, though the minute he did, Olexi began a strong resistance.

"Hey!" Kirka yelled down at him. "Blyad' yourself!" But since he had just said something very like "fuck-face" in Ukrainian, Olexi was a little confused, while still resisting the fierce grip of Kirka's hands. If this was the enemy, why was he speaking Ukrainian instead of Russian?

"So, you! You Ukrainian rapist, philanderer, malingerer, greengrocer, inventor, so what, you—" he had strung together a list of English words which he'd learned, with less and less sense to the insults, but he was gradually catching the attention of Olexi and the room. Five or six men who'd started up from their chairs when he first grabbed hold of Olexi now paused, conferring in whispers and shrugs with the Eastern Europeans, some of whom knew Ukrainian.

Olexi looked directly into his face, still red, but doubtful now. Swiftly, Kirka followed up his advantage before Olexi could get mad again. "So, hey, blyad', do you know what? Rosiya vidstoy, Rosiya vidstoy, Rosiya vidstoy!"

Now it was Olexi's turn to be hesitant. A flicker of a grin crossed his face, and his arms in their intertwined grip with Kirka's relaxed into a looser position. "Yeah, you the blyad'," he smirked. "You not even watching or reading the news. Putin and the whole Kremlin could come to drop poison in your tea mug and still you would be dozing that big head of yours and moaning, 'What means, what means, what means—'"

"Hey, hey, you know what about Putin? He have a name that means 'farting' here! 'Pootin'! My own little daughter tell me that. And you know what else?" Kirka was vividly aware of the people around them in the room relaxing, but even though he could hear them starting to chuckle and make remarks, he was so thoroughly caught up with the notion that he might've won his friend back that he took it even further. He didn't customarily use bad language or rude talk, but he shouted to Olexi at the top of his lungs, grabbing him now and dancing him around in place, their chests bumping together willy-nilly, "You know what else? Putin smokche velykyy ukrayins'kyy chien!"

There was an uproar all around now, as some were shouting and laughing and others querying for a translation. “What does he say? What was that?” they wanted to know.

Finally, Alice Sampson, Boxy’s co-worker, who’d been an attaché’s clerk in Vienna at one point and had picked up a thing or two, answered, “He said, as near as I can make out, ‘Putin sucks big Ukrainian dick!’”

“And what was that before, that ‘Rosiya vidstoy,’ or whatever?”

“Oh, they just agreed about what most everyone else is thinking, that Russia also sucks.”

With the ice now broken between Olexi and Kirka, who got together in a corner so that they could talk about what was happening, the room had erupted into chaos and disorder of a happier sort, with some people laughingly imitating in pidgin English, Russian, or what they thought sounded like Ukrainian the recent drama between the two men. In a few minutes, someone had brought several six packs of Molson’s into the room, followed by two supervisors who’d been alerted to the news that the recruits were having a bit of a field day. They came

in and shared in the general melée and the beer, casually reminding Boxy when they left an hour later that at least some business had to be conducted.

When the day was over, and it was evening and time to go home, Kirka felt much better about his friends, in particular Olexi, but he was grieving for Ukraine and wanting to speak to Chabba about recent events.

She too, as it turned out, had been a little blind-sided by the news, and she too had been in a manner tested in her loyalties. But being Chabba, she had simply told people that they had left Russia to escape the repression and the military machine and had sympathized with her co-workers who'd been affected in her usual steady way. For some reason, people seemed to take her at face value more than they did Kirka, whose good nature could perhaps seem overdone to some suspicious souls.

Luda had questions and had been treated to a few odd hateful remarks at school, but she took after Chabba in some ways, and though she'd been warned not to talk too much about Putin or Russia or politics

at school, had felt free to tell people that her grandmother was Ukrainian. This was simple and direct enough for children's ears, and they had asked questions about the grandmother. Luda had told them what she knew, but was regretful that she had never known the grandmother to have more to tell about her to friends. Kirka and Chabba promised to tell her more about her grandparents later, but they first tried to gather the news themselves from the small television they'd acquired, explaining some things to Luda where she sat with them, and glossing over other things that they felt might make her afraid or anxious.

During the next few weeks, they found that they had much to do to reassure the Canadians they had come to know about their definite loyalty to their new land. While the people around them were polite and quiet for the most part, the people who'd come to Canada from other parts of Europe more recently, like them, needed better proof, and it took repeated criticisms of Putin and the Kremlin and Peskov and Medvedev and any and all of the oligarchs and anyone else they had heard of to make people feel more secure about them, the Kirkutchkas. It was no time to be quiet in fear of Putin, but to stand up and be counted, even if

one had so recently come from under his dominion that it was more difficult to summon the courage.

Canadians all around them were starting funds and making donations and joining societies for the support of Ukraine, and though Russians were a bit suspect among that number, when Kirka and Chabba followed Luda's innocent lead and held out the memory of the now dead Ukrainian grandmother, Iryna Voludnyn Kirkutchkyna, it was easier to find acceptance among new friends and allies. There were some old friends and allies among the Russian community who of necessity fell away, as they turned out to be of the more Kremlin-supporting ilk, but they were in the minority in Kirkutchka's immediate circle, as it was the richer Russians, like the ones in Aunt Tanya's and Uncle Fyodor's church, who found themselves at odds with the tide of most new Canadian citizens from Russia. Not that there weren't others, and dissenters from the Ukrainian-following groups were carefully watched for and avoided. As Canadian citizens, they of course had rights too, but the hate laws and hate speech in Canada were superior and strict, and the

authorities made certain that everyone was protected as much as possible from rough forms of dissent.

Two things happened at the same time, though, that affected their awareness of spiritual matters. One concerned Father Ivan, and one concerned the friends back home. Father Ivan at their church delivered a fiery speech against the invasion and attack and roused the ire and earned the condemnation of his higher-ups in authority. Apparently, Patriarch Kirill in Russia had already laid down the law regarding church policy, even so early, though not in a formal speech yet, planned for later. Father Ivan was warned, but only the once, to fall in line with church policy as it adhered to Putin and his beliefs. The Ukrainian church across town had beckoned but once as well, and Father Ivan took his chance with that congregation and went as an assistant minister at a reduced income with no privileges until he had proven loyalty, when his formal religious status might be restored, though he would always be under the authority of the other priests there.

This involved Chabba and Kirka in a decision quite momentous: did they follow him with whom they were comfortable, and whom

because of this act they trusted, or did they drop church altogether to become part of the churchless population, the secular and nonreligious? The Ukrainian church was meantime flouting Patriarch Kirill and making separation noises, as fellow churches in Ukraine would do in a few months, after difficult struggles with spiritual issues and political ones alike.

They were discussing this early one Saturday morning within earshot of Luda.

“I wish I could talk to Father Pyotr,” Kirka said, “but according to the clerk, he is somewhere in Spain, trying to get to the United States, where he has a niece. His housekeeper moved to St. Petersburg to be with family as well, because she couldn’t support herself without that job.”

“What about the clerk and the rabbi? What are they going to do? Surely they won’t take the chance and stay in Russia now. It must be quite crazy there!” Chabba said.

“And what about the little cat?” said Luda, fervently. “If the rabbi and his family move away, what will happen to our little cat and her kittens?”

Chabba got ready to scold, perhaps to tell Luda something along the lines of people being more important, or something like that, but Kirka shook his head at her behind Luda’s back. She said after all quite gently, “Maybe when your father writes, he can ask for the cats to be given to someone else who will love them. Okay? Cats are very smart creatures, Luda, they can sense necessary changes and make them well, probably better than us. But your father will write about them too, okay?”

“Okay,” said Luda, reassured. The other issues were still on her mind, about her father’s friends, but she felt she had acquitted herself of her particular responsibility, and so subsided and waited for the conversation to proceed until a point where she understood something else.

Kirka switched on the television and found an early morning cartoon show, and when Luda looked at him with a question in her eyes,

he gestured towards the set gently. Thus given permission to leave the serious conversation that had momentarily distressed her, Luda took her doll and sat down before the television in a little chair just her size that they'd bought her.

Kirka beckoned Chabba from the living room to the kitchen before he answered her previously deserted question about the rabbi and the clerk and their whereabouts. "Rodney Hessaminov, the clerk, got into fighting over the war and was beaten up. It was the first time he'd said what he felt out in public for years, Rebbe Avram said. When he was out of hospital after taunts from the guards keeping the ward, he right away got his papers forged for leaving. Rebbe Avram writes of these things less secret now, because he is himself with his wife and all three of his young children in Israel. But he says he won't stay there, since Israel is not on the side of Ukraine, for the rabbi's great disappointment. He also looks to come to the United States or Canada, or failing that perhaps Switzerland when the weather is better. For now, he doesn't enter arguments. He says that he received one other letter from Hessaminov three days before he wrote this letter to me, and that he had

been successful to Poland, where he had one cousin and one friend to put up with. They all are away from there safe, though they've only sent fragments—fragments?—” he queried the word.

“Yes. Or ‘snippets.’”

“I like that word. Like snipping a story from a paper with a scissor. Yes, they've only got snippets of word about our other neighbors, many of whom don't believe that Ukraine was invaded, or who think Ukraine started it. Rebbe Avram said, let me think how to say it—‘the ability of an average Russian to lie to himself about the war is already very great,’ or like that.”

“Sad, when we know the truth. And sad, that the truth is as it is. Well, since we have promised Luda, you will need to inquire about the cats, and I suppose the cow and the dogs as well, if they are still alive. She will be sure to ask.”

“No, for a fact I don't, because the rabbi has been writing in a—oh, I think Father Ivan would even call it a Biblical way about the dividing up of his household. It is a truth that Marmar Dieta's two sons were the ones who took over our delivery business months ago when they

obtained a license, and they bought the cow along with her calf, a female too. Marmar recently took the cats in from the rabbi to keep rats away from the dairy. It is that even indoor creatures of leisure must work for a living now. The dogs will pull the sled until they are too old to pull anymore. But we will make it gentle news for Luda. She has a gentle heart, and though I don't know if she remembers Marmar at all, you will know that she held Luda as a baby and also gave her peaches when she was three or so. Funny to remember that now. Ah, all our old friends!"

"Okay, but maybe give Luda some time before you tell her, so that she won't be too distressed about the animals. It will seem like you had time to write away and get an answer back, because you can't really let her see the rabbi's letter." She hesitated. "I know I was strict with you about your drinking friends when you first got here; but I want you to understand that I wish them all well. In calmer thought, I do know how much they did for us, and if there's anything we can do for them—" she gestured in a way that Kirka understood.

"That's my Chabba," he said, and bent to nuzzle his face in her neck.

The time that spring slowly passed, and gradually, most of the European countries other than Hungary and Bulgaria and a few more began to send support in the way of money and weapons and goodwill messages to Ukraine, as did Canada, the U.S., the U.K., and other countries here and there in the East, large and small. Some intrepid fighters went and joined the forces in Ukraine, though privately to himself Kirka wondered sometimes if they were as tough and determined and ready to fight as the Ukrainians were. There were few if any intermissions in the war, since Russia kept up vile and unspeakable kinds of illegalities and war crimes, as they were claimed and found to be, and being observed didn't deter them from doing so again and again. He lost all sense of himself as a Russian citizen and instead kept taking English lessons from the newspapers and the television and when they had time, from Chabba and Luda, in many Canadian matters, though the politics were very confusing to him.

Work was a steady pursuit of knowledge as well, as he helped catalogue and care for plants and inspect planting sites and fulfilled as much of his training as he could while still not fully a citizen. It was

sometimes daunting to know that he would have to be there for a whole three years before he would be eligible for full citizenship, but he was a disciplined worker, so he did his best and kept himself busy. He and Olexi had become even closer, and if ever one of them had a doubt about something to do with the war situation, they chewed over it at lunch or during beers at a pub called Eddy's after work, consulting each other and not getting into any more moments of misunderstanding. Sometimes European listeners were both amused and bemused to hear them talk, as being around Olexi had resuscitated some of Kirka's memories of Ukrainian words and phrases, but other times they spoke back and forth in English, and then sometimes Olexi even condescended to explain something in Russian that Kirka was having trouble with. A couple of times, interlopers, usually a Russian drunk or two who had stumbled into Eddy's and heard their dialogue, tried to pick a fight or set them against each other. All it took, though, was for the two of them to stand up, all 6'9" of Kirka muscled and lean and the angry bantam energy of the 5'8" or so Olexi breathing fire and smoke, and the challenger or challengers backed down and went away.

One evening, though, Kirka had to go home to take Chabba and Luda to a choral performance Luda was in, and Olexi had declared his intention of just going on along to Eddy's for one beer before meeting his fiancée, a Polish girl named Anya, for dinner. Kirka didn't want to say anything, but he had seen some rougher characters hanging around there lately, and though they weren't Russian, they still seemed uncouth, and quarrelsome, as they sometimes even challenged each other. He was worried for his feisty friend but knew he couldn't mention his concern on pain of giving great offense.

"Okay, friend," he said in an offhand way. "Just one beer, though, or I'll think you're trying to beat my record."

"Which is?" Olexi sounded a little testy, so he didn't push it.

"Why, two, of course," he answered absurdly, being witty as he could, cuffing Olexi roughly on the arm. "Say 'Hello' to Anya for us."

Olexi relaxed and they laughed and shook hands to part. "Yes, I will. When we get married, it'll be your turn to come to our house for dinner. We've been to your place three times now, and you've only let us take you out once!"

“Pssht, taking out is much more expensive than fixing a meal at home. Not to worry. See you on Monday,” he thumped Olexi once more on the chest, and Olexi sucker punched his arm as he withdrew it.

Kirka and Chabba and Luda had a quick, light meal, which Chabba said was all Luda should have before singing, and in the hurry to get ready and get to the school auditorium, the dialogue with Olexi was forgotten. They stayed out until nearly eleven having early season ice cream at Mike’s, which had been way out of their way, but on the trolley route. When they got back to the apartment, yawning and almost ready for bed, a figure rose from the steps to the building and came to meet them.

Even in the darkness, they could see that it was a woman in a dressy outfit and a heavy coat, two items which didn’t seem to go together, really, as she looked as if ready for an evening out but forced to put on a coat for extra warmth at the last minute. It was Anya, they saw as they approached more closely.

“Anya! What are you doing out here in this chill night air? You must be frozen,” Chabba said. “Here, Luda, go up and unlock the door.

Come in, Anya, come in! Whatever are you doing here? Where is Olexi?”

“Oh, I can’t come in! I just came to get Kirka, because Olexi never came home from work! He was supposed to meet me at Zander’s for a special dinner, but I waited and waited, and after an hour and a half, I called your phone and Kirka’s to see if you had seen him, but neither of you answered. So, I called your apartment, but no answer there either. I couldn’t think what to do, but I knew you would be home sometime soon, surely. We have to go find him, what if he’s sick or something? Or had an accident?”

Kirka thought quickly. He knew how to raise a constable fast, and he also knew where Olexi was likely to have met with misfortune if not from sickness or an accident as Anya had thought. He said, “No, Anya, you’ve been out here in the cold long enough. We were at a chorus recital with Luda singing, and we couldn’t turn our phones on in the auditorium. And that’s why we weren’t home. You go on inside with Chabba and get something to eat and drink, I’ve got you on my speed

dial and will call when I know something. Chabba, keep the land phone free, too.”

Without giving them a chance to argue or propose alternatives, Kirka walked away, checking his pockets for his recently cashed paycheck money, then finding as much as he felt he needed, jogged up the street to where traffic stopped and hailed a passing unengaged cab. He gave Eddy’s name to the driver, who also needed the address, as he was not really familiar with the part of town closer to Kirka’s work.

“Stop, let me out here!” Kirka cried, when they reached the door of the bar. “No, or wait a minute, let me look for a friend, I’ll come back to you and tell you if to wait more or not.”

“Great, another drunk, I guess,” responded the driver in a surly tone.

“I not drunk, and he not either, probably, but he might have been attacked. You get a big, fat salary for a ride to a hospital if so. So just stay here, and don’t take anybody else yet.”

“He better not bleed in my cab, I’m not a bloody ambulance. I’m running the meter, starting now. No, I’ll give you five first. Hurry up. Business is good this time of night.”

“All right,” said Kirka. He dashed first into Eddy’s and was at once lucky in that he saw the regular bartender there, and also the usual bouncer, who was just going off-duty while another guy came on. Kirka quickly asked after Olexi, but all the bartender could tell him was that she had seen him leave and about three or four people leaving right after him. It’d gotten busy then, around 7:30 p.m., and she’d not had time to notice who came or went after that.

“Think, though, male people or female people? Who, Alexis, follow him out? Are they here a lot, or just some riffraff from every now and then?”

She looked concerned. “What’s wrong?”

“His girlfriend, engaged, just now come to my house, she’s with my wife, she says that he never meet her for their dinner date. I have notice before these big—what they are—baboons who have come in lately, and they always look at us and look in their eyes like they want to

fight. He want to come alone tonight, and you know how he is—the word—he eats fire, he not likes to be thought unbrave, so I not stay, and my daughter had a recital and I had to go....” he trailed off in worried tones.

“Oh, wow! Yeah, I did see one of that type talking to him one time, getting kinda loud. But they’re not Russian, I don’t think, and they’re not from Ukraine either, as far as I know.”

“No, no, just regular street trash, no political reason that I know. They been coming here for a couple week now.”

Barney, the off-duty bouncer, had come up to the bar and been listening to this exchange. “C’mon, Kirsha—what’s your name again?”

“Kirka.”

“C’mon, Kirka, I’ll help you look for him. If they’ve roughed him up, he’ll likely be outside in one of the alleys or doorways. That type of bruiser doesn’t have much imagination.”

So, they went outside, and after checking his cost with the taxi driver, who was still waiting, Kirka and Barney looked here and there, under dumpsters, in dumpsters, under piles of cardboard, all around the

bar for a city block. They had just finished, as they thought, the very last alley on the block, a dark one with a streetlight busted out at its mouth, when they heard something stir and heard a slight moan. It was so very slight, though, that Kirka's heart misgave him.

“Olexi?” he yelled. “Olexi!” Behind him, Barney switched on a small flashlight he carried at the end of a keychain; it had a surprisingly strong beam. He shone it down the alley to the gullet of the thing, where next to a dumpster and covered over with a pile of cardboard and wooden crates, they saw a pair of legs. Again, Kirka's heart misbehaved: the lower pant leg was reddened with blood, and there was a pattern of drops from one outstretched shoe to a spot under the boxes.

They raced down the alley, Barney stripping off his hoodie jacket to put around the attacked one, and they started to throw boxes in all directions away from the body buried at the top of the legs. When they finally shone the light on Olexi, and it was still recognizably Olexi, in spite of his lips being swollen up three sizes or so and split and bleeding, his handsome features bruised and discolored, and his clothes bloody

and torn up, he managed a weird, unfocused look from his two black eyes and said to Kirka,

“Is that you, you sodding stupid Russki piece of shit? Hey, shmatok layna,” he greeted Kirka in Ukrainian. “Where have you been?” But he grinned then winced, unable really to smirk as he wanted to; the effort had caused a trail of blood to run down his chin, and when he tried to sit up, a groan of large proportions came out of the depths of his throat.

“Sit still, buddy, don’t move,” said Barney, running a practiced hand across Olexi’s midsection gently. This, however, brought up a huge vomit of Ukrainian curse words, and he said “Okay, what’s your name, what’s his name, Alex, is it? I know you guys come here all the time, sorry this happened, we’ll be watching the door more from now on. So, Alex—”

“It’s Olexi,” quickly put in Kirka, as he saw Olexi getting ready to make an objection to anything which wasn’t his real name.

“Olexi? Okay, Olexi, I think you’ve got a broken rib or two, and I don’t know where all the blood around you came from, but—”

Olexi interrupted. “I kicked one’s teeth out, and one pulled a knife on me, and I think I may have cut his nose off, but I threw the knife away—” he appeared to swoon for a minute, then gestured in a direction it was impossible to trace, as it seemed to go in circles around his head—“over there.” Then he was either out or delirious, telling them about three big dudes—though he called them mockingly “dudesses”—the size nearly of Kirka, “that great useless mountain who is never here when you need him, where was that big rosiys’kyy lokh, that useless Russian fucker, anyway? Not good for anything but dropping bombs and raping people, why wasn’t he here?”

Kirka tried to answer that he was sorry, that he was here now to take Olexi to the hospital, that he had never dropped a bomb or raped anyone in his life, that he was sorry he hadn’t made Olexi come away from the bar—

“Made me do what? Who made me come away from the bar? I don’t come away for any man-mountain or anyone else! I only— Anya?” Then he fainted and seemed to come around again while they were still moving boxes away from him.

“Look, Kirka, he’s not really all here, he’s delirious from pain and stuff right now, he’ll keep fainting away and coming around again. I think we need to call an ambulance, do you have a phone or you want me to use mine?”

Kirka’s pride right now wasn’t invested in proving how well he could speak English; rather, it was more important to get Olexi to the hospital by the quickest possible way. “You speak better than me, you do it. He live nearest probably to the trolley line that go to Toronto Western, is that good enough hospital?”

“Sure,” said the bouncer. He called and when asked, obviously, how much the patient had imbibed, answered sternly and grimly, “Not much, maybe one beer. He’s been roughed up pretty badly by—he says—three bigger men—”

“Nobody’s bigger than me!” shouted Olexi, then groaned. “I big Ukrainian dick, I the biggest of all! Even the man-mountain ol’ Kirka the Russian piece of shit says so—I—” and then he apparently fainted away for good for a while.

Barney, who had concluded his call, seemed to be unable to repress a laugh at this latest claim, but only said, “Well, I’ll be damned! If I hadn’t been in the bar, I would think he was really plastered good and proper! Damn my eyes for not catching those three following him out. I’ve got an idea I know exactly who they are, and I’ve got some friends, too, and we’ll—” He stopped and started searching the ground under his left foot, at about the same time as the taxi driver came up the alley with the cab, slowly, looking for Kirka.

“Hey, Bud, do you still want the cab? You’ve already racked up \$125.00.”

“Oh, shit!” said Kirka. He turned to the bouncer. “Is it a possible for me to ride to the hospital with him and stay with him for night?”

The bouncer gave him a funny look, his attention distracted from whatever he’d found under his shoe. “Stay with him for the night?”

“No, no, I not mean that!” said Kirka impatiently, his good English getting rushed in all the tense evening. “I mean,” he went more slowly, “to contact his fiancée and tell her about him, where he is, how he is.

And to call my wife and daughter. I not made of money, I can't afford to pay for cab and ambulance, too. Will hospital pay?"

"Someone will, don't worry about it," said the bouncer grimly, then getting amused at his own misunderstanding about the two men's relationship, he guffawed and clapped Kirka on the arm.

"Mac?" the cab driver reminded him that he was waiting.

"Here, I only have five more dollars for tip, here's \$130.00. I hope you not are angry for waiting so long."

The cab driver laughed, and said, "No, no, it's okay. Great fare, actually. Paid for standing still. Take care, Mac." He saluted the both of them, got in his cab, and drove away.

The next minute, the bouncer was again looking at something he was scuffing around with his shoe, bending down to peer at it, the gradually fading flashlight trained on it now. Then, he suddenly jumped away. "Oh, man, fucking gross!"

"What is it?" queried Kirka, without much interest. He was more concerned with getting Olexi to the hospital and getting in touch with Chabba and Anya.

“It’s a nose, man, it really is a nose, just like he said! It’s not his, so he really cut off somebody’s nose! Teach those bastards to pull a knife on this little banty rooster!” He gave the nose a good kick under the dumpster, and continued, “If all three of them dare come in again, I’ll know which is which by who doesn’t have something big and ugly in the middle of his face.” He grinned, and shook his head, but the next minute, they heard the ambulance approaching, and while Kirka stayed in the alleyway with Olexi, Barney flagged down the ambulance where it was pausing in the road and got it to come to them.

The long evening was starting to wind into a long night ahead, so while Barney told the EMTs what he thought was wrong, and they cautiously loaded the now quite unconscious Olexi onto the ambulance, Kirka made a quick call to the land phone and talked swiftly in Russian to Chabba. The depth of her own worry was signified by the way she didn’t even reproach him for not speaking English, and the guarded way she answered in front of Anya. It would probably be the next day before Anya could go to see Olexi, though the EMTs told Kirka reassuringly that they had seen worse on a regular Saturday night booze-up in the

club zone. They also said it was really good that Olexi hadn't had much to drink at all, as they would be able to treat him more quickly and thoroughly in the hospital.. They were already finished loading him up when Chabba said to Kirka,

“I hope you won't mind, but I'm going to put Anya in the bed with me, since you are staying at the hospital with Olexi tonight. She is so worried, and even though her mother has called to find out if she is still with us or coming home, it's too late to send her home on the TTC, even if it's running. It wouldn't be right. So, you can grab a little snooze at the hospital, yes?”

“Sure, I can,” he said, feeling that the standard for manly behavior had more than been met by Olexi tonight, and that he had something to live up to, though in a less dramatic way. “So, you will be able to let Luda stay with your friend Betty from work while you and Anya come tomorrow?”

“We'll see. I'll call her in the morning and try. We have to get a good night's sleep first. Good of you, so good of you, is what Anya keeps saying, first of you and then to me. We will be there sometime

tomorrow. I know you have to go outside hospital to call, so maybe call before first visiting hours? Then we will come. Ya tebya lyublyu; dobroy nochi. I love you. Goodnight.”

He responded in kind briefly and disconnected, as he was being whistled at and called to by Barney. “Your ride’s ready to go, Kirka. Don’t worry, the RCMP will get these guys from our report; or maybe, me and my friends’ll go after them ourselves—that nose might be a little hard to explain, even in self-defense, against three. Tell Olexi, yes, he sure is one big—” he happened to catch the impatiently waiting faces of the EMTs who were gesturing to Kirka to get aboard the ambulance. “You know, the biggest you-know-what-he-said,” and he grinned and waved to Kirka as the doors closed behind him and he and Olexi and the EMTs sped away into the night.

Chapter VII—The War Continues, and So Does Daily Life

After Olexi's three days in hospital, during which he was found to have two broken, one cracked, rib, a dislocated shoulder, and various facial cuts and bruises, Kirka managed to wangle a halfway promise from him not to go back to Eddy's unless they both went in together, and Kirka was made by Olexi to promise the same. Kirka knew from experience that he himself would've probably had a hard time fighting off three against one as well, so this concession to male pride was not too difficult. When Olexi came back to work on the Wednesday after his Friday night misadventures, Kirka had already taken the trouble to prepare their co-workers and the supervisors, in the sense that he knew it might be troublesome professionally for Olexi if he got the reputation of being a quarrelsome, street-fighting sort of person. As an eventual part of the park rangers, he would have to have a clean arrest record, as would Kirka. So, steered in the right phrasing of the matter beforehand by Barney, the bouncer, who had Mounties in the family, he told the supervisors on Monday about Olexi being jumped by three men when he stopped to have a beer. While Kirka didn't lie, he

did sort of shape the tale to create undeniable sympathy for Olexi, and quite definitely left out the part about the other side's missing teeth and nose. Barney had even come to see Olexi once in hospital while Kirka was there, and he'd prepared them for the kind of interview Olexi was likely to have with his superiors, and how to account for the fact that the RCMPs hadn't been called in. He said as bouncer, he could put in a brief report about unspecified customers being attacked by the three unwelcome visitors. He also, with a particularly dangerous smile and a glitter in his eye, told Olexi and Kirka that the three attackers had met their own match in a street brawl too, without saying how he knew or who was involved. Olexi, though, was well-satisfied in his friendliness, as when Barney had left, he mentioned slyly to Kirka the scraped knuckles the bouncer'd had.

Machismo having been satisfied on all sides but that of the original attackers, the winter slowly gave way to the early spring, with the weather still chill and breezy in Toronto, but with some gusts bringing heavy lakeshore rain instead of snow.

Chabba, Kirka, and Luda started sporadically attending the Ukrainian church where Father Ivan was now installed, and though they did go to the Russian services that were offered there, they also enrolled Luda in the church's courses of reading the Bible in Ukrainian.

Earth Day, April 22, came and went. Luda's new kitten, who against her parents' preferences about Hungary being so recalcitrant towards Ukraine had been named "Budapest,"—"Because he's always Hungary and he's a bad boy!" insisted Luda—was blessed with the other animals.

It was on a Saturday afternoon, when Kirka had just paid a second visit to Sylvia's Stylinig Emporium to get his hair and beard attended to, that Chabba and Kirka sat relaxing in the kitchen, Luda in the next room with the kitten. They were sitting companionably at the table, with Chabba trying to work out many things in her mind. One minute, there was silence; the next, they heard a pitiful mewling, and a soothing series of words in Russian from Luda. She appeared in the kitchen, the kitten Budapest held in a precarious way in her arms, with one of the hair

ribbons from her visit to the Emporium the first time tied too tightly around its neck.

“Look, isn’t he cute?” she said, holding him up in the air for inspection.

“Luda!” exclaimed Kirka, angry. “You know how we showed you to hold that kitten, and you also don’t tie tight things around its neck, which could get caught in something and strangle it dead. Now, you can just bring it here, and give it to me, and we’ll cut that ribbon off and throw it away. That’s one hair ribbon that went to waste! Chabba, hand me the scissors.”

Luda made some protesting noises as Chabba held the kitchen scissors out to her husband, but Chabba said, “Listen to your father, Luda. Animals are not people, we don’t put clothes on them and silly things like that. A cat rubs up against things and squeezes through things, and climbs things—St. Anthony, I’m surprised that we even got you one!—and your father’s right, the ribbon could get caught on something. The kitten wouldn’t know how to get loose, and it could get hurt or dead.”

“But in the picture in my picture book, the kitten is wearing a collar around its neck, and the dog is wearing a little sweater, and that’s a book from the school book sale, too!” Luda finished with triumph.

Kirka cut the ribbon from the kitten’s neck and said, “This is how you hold the kitten when you ever have to carry him,” and he cradled Budapest against his enormous chest and began to croon and stroke the kitten’s soft fur. Within a very short time, the frantic mews ceased, to be followed by an uproarious purr, which made all three of them laugh.

Kirka continued, “That is the difference between true life and fiction, Luda, and between true life and advertising. A cat is not like a dog, a cat is not willing to have anything around its neck. Sometimes people who have outdoor cats put collars on them, but there are some cats who get hanged in trees when a branch catches on their collars, too. Remember that. Budapest is an indoor cat and doesn’t need an ornament; he is beautiful enough as he is.”

“But Mrs. Macready’s dog wears a little coat when he goes out, I’ve seen him.”

“Dogs are different, and cats without fur can be, too. This Northern climate is hard on some dogs and cats with really short or non-insulate fur, so when they go out to make their business, it’s okay to put a little coat or vest on them. Do you see the difference?”

“What about that big dog on the corner?”

“That is purely the people’s vanity. You know about vanity from church,” said her father, being a bit sanctimonious.

“Yes, let’s not be vain, Luda,” Chabba added, in a joking tone of voice, which made Kirka look at her with an unwilling smile.

“I don’t feel vain with my new appearance,” her husband retorted, “I am trying to fit in. Once this haircut is made, maybe Leo at my regular barber’s can keep it just in shape. Then, I can go back to salon once in a while, for a special treat.”

“Ah, my husband, the handsome conservation officer, who will ‘fit in’ with his size 400 uniform and his small, little, short height of 7 feet!”

Luda giggled. “Maybe I should put a ribbon in your hair, Nana.”

“I am not 7 feet! I am 6’9” only. And I am not fat, either. You have already said you will have to take my uniform in.”

“Only at the waist, and maybe the hips. When do you get that, by the way? I will have to have enough time to do it by hand, remember that we gave my sewing machine away before we left Russia.”

“I won’t know if I get the trainee position until after my next couple of interviews. The one after that will tell exactly what position I get to train for. So far, I’ve done well enough on the tests and reviews to be qualified for a supervisor’s track position, but I don’t want to do that, in case it’s too much time behind a desk. There’s also enforcement officer, which seems like more guns and policing, not so good but possible, and park ranger. Park ranger, even in a city the size of Toronto, would be better for me. I may even take some veterinary or reforestation training in a few months, when the opportunity crops up. I would like that. But all more official positions wait on my citizenship status,” he concluded, finally putting all his preferences and plans out in the open, which he had been a little leery of doing before he began making so much at the cab stand, and before he could see his way clearly through the haze of official documents and requirements.

“And another thing, Chabba,” he continued. “We are making too much money right now to continue getting free food at the food bank. But just barely too much. What do you want to do?”

“Well, I don’t want to take the supervisor’s position at the doughnut shop unless we can work it in with your job, so that I can get Luda back and forth from school okay. We need a car, but early days for that. Wait until you know about the job before you break off with the food bank, if you can. Is it against the law to continue to get free food there if you’re making too much?”

“I don’t know, probably in a minor way. I know other places I was, there were sometimes strict rules, but it never affected me before, because I never declared my income. I had to be deceitful in order to save money up for us here. I’ll check.”

“Yes, and I know you don’t like to take credit for things you’ve done for people, but if necessary you should just mention a little that you helped them by ferrying people back and forth, and their grocery deliveries, and by getting them in good with the cab company.”

“I think that we have already been all this time living on the credit for that, Chabba.”

“It can’t hurt just to mention.”

“How am I supposed to bring it up? No, I think Andy will be thinking of me when I tell him how we are fixed.”

Chabba patted his shoulder as she passed, uncharacteristically forgiving of his seeming rejection of her notion about calling in their debts. Then, she kept wiping down the kitchen counters and soon took out a large ham which the cab company’s owner had given them, unseasonable though it was in this month of May. She prepared it for the oven, and the three of them sat together quietly for a while, not saying much, the kitten scampering around their feet and then back to its comfortable place on the living room sofa for a nap.

After a short time, Luda went back to the living room, too, and keeping his voice down to a gentle murmur, Kirka asked Chabba something he’d been wanting to know for quite some time but hadn’t liked to bring up first. Since Chabba had started out their renewed

relationship late last fall with reproaches and hostility, he hadn't imagined the answer could be good.

“Chabba, I've been waiting for you to tell me, and wanting to know, what exactly happened with Uncle Fyodor and Aunt Tanya when you first got here? I got only one of your letters, and that talked about what you'd told me before, which I didn't receive the letter of, and that it was necessary for you and Luda not to stay with them anymore because of it. What happened? What was that all about? Are they still looking down their noses at me because I had only a delivery service in Russia with my little farm, or was it something else?”

“Do you know, Kirka, that we have been gone from them for so long that I never even think about them? Mostly not at all. It was what it's always been, but in Russia Tanya was only my too smug and rich aunt who married beneath her and bossed him around. Never generous with a kopek, not that one! But here, even Fyodor is a big man, still bossed like a drayhorse, but a big man to other people. Which means when she lets him talk, he gives proverbs and sayings and all sorts of foolish advice, too, just as stupid as she is.”

“Is that it?”

She glanced back into the far rooms before answering. She leaned closer to him at the table, then shook her head. “No.” She was short with this. She waited for a moment. “It was the sort of misunderstanding that could be explained to anyone else, but not them, you know.” Tying her hair back in its bright ribbon a little tighter, she said, “Our little Luda had a fine boy who liked her at school, just a small crush, you know; for kids. He saved up his money and got a card and all, and when Luda came in and showed us, so shy and proud, it had a five dollar bill tucked into the card. With sweet words and all that, he wanted to buy her candy; didn’t know what she liked; wasn’t sure of her health, whether she could have sugar or not. I was already much impressed with this boy, but all of a sudden, Tanya cries out, and Fyodor starts swearing in Russian, most that surely, I don’t think Luda understood, only she knew something was wrong. And do you know what Tanya came out with, right in front of her? ‘Yes, Chabba, just like you, you see, bought by the first man who gives her a cheap kopek!’”

I sent Luda out of the room, but even before I could take up the card and the bill, Tanya had grabbed them up from the table and locked them into the kitchen drawer where she keeps her stupid things, her secret things, I guess, papers and money registers. Dirty thoughts, for all I know, she seems to have enough of them. ‘And she will take it back to him, and we will call his parents, and tell them what we think of it.’

“This was too much for me to bear; I said ‘You will not do that, because I will not allow it. It is only a small, silly thing, a nice thing, really, a little boy likes Luda. He has given her what he could give, didn’t you hear her read what he wrote? Who could find something wrong with that? They are only children.’

“‘A little girl who takes money from a little boy, yes, that kind starts early! And she only five! Aren’t you ashamed? For him to be giving her money.’ And I tell you, she really shook her finger in my face.

“‘Well, I can’t afford to give her much now, so it must have seemed like a big, generous gift to her,’ I said. ‘I have never dirtied her mind with telling her bad tales about people’s money, though I can now think of some things I could have said about some people. And have you

given her so very much, with all that you have, that you have a right to look down on the boy's gift? No, because I pay you some of my check each month for us to live here. I buy all her clothes and school supply, and we never eat out, except when she comes with me to be treated by Tim Horton's worker friends there. So what right do you have to say what will be done with my child?'

"'We have the right because you live here with us,' Fyodor then felt confident to put his boat in the race. 'Bend the twig as you mean it to grow on,' is what they say here, and that is very true. And that is another thing. It is a pure disgrace that you do not find a better work, but to have your child there around that sort of people cannot continue. You don't want to be painted with the same brush, do you?'

"'Look,' I was angry enough by this time for anything, 'I want that gift back for Luda, and I will make my mind up what to do with it, and what to tell her. That is not your place. If you don't want us to be free people like other Canadians, you could have said so at the beginning. If your house is not a free place for us, then just say so.'

“Tanya lost her mind then, I think, for a minute. She cried out again, like a swooning duck or a bird that had suddenly been shot from the sky, and then slapped my face—no, really, Kirka, I am telling you, don’t look so amazed, she slapped my face, and with her big ham-handed slap, it did hurt, too! And she drew herself up from the table and stood up, and said ‘So be it, then! You just go and see where else you can find to live, on your foolish little income. We have taken you in from the goodness in our hearts, and you have spit on us! You can just go find some other place to live. And what happens to you there will be your judgment!’

“Now, I had already had quiet plans to myself to find another place, and had saved up the money for it, little by little, in an account that grew very slow and very small, bit by bit, that they didn’t know about.

Fyodor had taken me to his own bank to open an account when I first got here, and before I knew what to do here, but when I was a little smarter, I saw that he had put himself as a signer on the account. I went to a different bank with my little money. Oh, they didn’t yet take anything, but he was wanting to keep an eye on me, and who knows? All rich people’s money comes from somewhere. I had asked already around

work for advice about a place, and they had shown me the papers, and I was learning how to read from Luda and her books. If I am to be called a peasant, by people who in Russia were no more than me, just because they have somehow got some money from land deals there and who knows what else here, then I would show a peasant's cunning, I told myself. When they were eager not to have me downstairs with them in front of their big television, or maybe overhearing what they say on their telephone in the evenings, I have been upstairs with Luda, learning from a kindergarten book. Before long, it's true, I found some Russian papers, too, but the cheapest ads were in the *Star* and in the neighborhood papers, so I smuggle some of those in, too, and swear Luda to secrecy. And her little ears, as you have said before, had been going that night for sure. She had listened to us talking, and knew what was about, as far as us getting ready to be thrown out on our bottoms, and she didn't ask me any 'whys?' or anything like that. She was ready to go, too.'"

Kirka looked a little bit grim. He hadn't realized that it had been anything that tumultuous, involving so direct an attack on Chabba

herself. He had known for some time that it was likely to involve their dislike of him; Chabba's aunt and uncle had never really been subtle about that, always condescending to him, disdaining his accomplishments and his very real strengths which he had from the beginning shown on his family's behalf. But to imply that Chabba herself, a member of their own family, had been for sale, even in a casual sense, was more than he had anticipated. "So—what did you do then?"

"There wasn't much else to it. I went upstairs and used a little burner phone I had bought the week before to call for apartments. I heard the old two passing by quietly in the hall outside our door after a while, so I made sure they couldn't hear me. Soon, I had a few places to look at in the next day or so, and I was lucky, it was a Friday, and I wasn't working on the weekends then, for two weeks.

"And Luda was quiet. Very quiet. She wanted to know if she had done something wrong by accepting Jeffrey's gift, and I tried in few words to explain that when women got older, they had to be careful not to take money from men they didn't know, who weren't related or

promised to them in some way. And I reassured her that it was a very small gift, but a nice one, and that Jeffrey sounded like a good boy, sweet-natured. And for the first time—and she had already heard me talking back, so it didn't surprise her—for the first time, I criticized her great-aunt and great-uncle to her. I explained full out that they were hard-hearted and selfish rich people who liked to have people dancing to the tune they whistled, and thought that money could make that happen. She waited, looked up at me with so much faith, I couldn't have gone back on leaving after what she said next: she said, 'But we're not going to be that kind, are we, Mama? We're not going to be dancing when they whistle.' I told her no, and that was it, we were settled. The only other thing she asked me, just before we went to sleep, was whether she had any hope of getting her gift back. And I really wasn't sure about that, because I didn't have a key to that drawer, had never been allowed into it, not even though my money went too into the household finances, and was recorded in those household books, or at least, so I had been told.

I went out the very next day, the Saturday, taking her with me and leaving her with one of my work friends for the day, at her apartment. And I worked hard, even going into areas I didn't know, and by the evening of that very day, I had the first apartment, the one of the—" she lowered her voice even more—"of the mamzer. And he didn't act at all improper then, but as if nothing concerned him but the money and the way I would keep the apartment. Well, maybe that was because in the back of his house was his wife, but she didn't appear, really. I asked if it was possible for us to move in on the Sunday, because I had to work on Monday, and if not, it would be another whole week. I should have been warned, my friend Betty tells me now that she knows about him, because he didn't ask for any references except my work ones, no personal ones at all. I could have given him the names of co-workers, of course, as friends, but no names for my relatives. I'm saying, if your relatives won't speak for you, and I just know they would have been so mean-spirited as to refuse, then who will?

"So, when I went home that day, Luda and I talked, and packed our things to go on Sunday, and we didn't have much with us still; it didn't

take long. When Tanya came up to get me for my usual part of the preparation of the evening meal, which I helped their cook with, she was out of sorts because I hadn't come down automatically. I said, 'Yes, but see, we are moving tomorrow, and we are now packed to be ready to go. We appreciate your having allowed us to live here so long—' it had been a matter of less than four months—'but it is really time for us not to trouble you any longer.'

“She was—or pretended to be—horrified because we were moving the next day, and not going to their church. I can tell you to this day that I am not sorry to be in our own quarter, and now at our new little church, and away from that village of all rich people except us, in a too-big building. I pointed out that I had been dutiful and had gone to church every week, except when I worked on the Sundays, and she and Fyodor had always been unpleasant about that as it was, though they never refused the money from it. She made a few hateful remarks in a regretful way, as if she hadn't been the one to bring matters to a head, and then floated out. I remained without argument back to her about whatever she said, just letting her and eventually Fyodor too, talk, when

he found his voice. But after all that, a little demon in my brain, a little wise demon, told me what to do, and I did it without a murmur, that night.

Now, you remember that Uncle Fyodor was a little short-sighted? He didn't want to admit it, but his eyes had gotten worse over the years. He didn't see well at all, and I thought, 'That, perhaps, can be turned to account.' And Aunt Tanya was just the least little bit more forgetful than before, and occasionally misplaced things, though she had sometimes tried to blame at least the misplaced household things on the cook, until they were found. She had looked in my direction, too, a time or two, but I had pretended well not to know what she was saying.

She always went to bed first, while Uncle Fyodor stayed up to watch the late-night news. I waited until she went to bed, then I was very, very quiet. I crept into the kitchen, and got a sharp knife that I had been thinking about for just this very purpose; I went up to the drawer that had the gift to Luda in it, and jimmied it. I hadn't done such a thing for a while, not since our old cabinet in Russia used to get stuck in the lock, but I figured they were much of the same kind. They looked alike,

anyway, even though ours was poorer. It popped right open! I could have had a look at the books at any time, but no time for that now. I checked, and there was the card, but the \$5 was out of it, and there was a fat roll of cash with a band around it to one side. ‘Robbing two children infatuated with each other!’ I thought, ‘I’ll show you.’ So, I left the money there, knowing that they must have counted it. For Luda’s sake, I would put a five of my own back in the card before I gave it to her. I just knew that if I dared take her five back from them, that they would even maybe report to the police that they had been robbed; they were that kind. But the card I tucked into my pants and shirt at the waistband, then I quickly closed the drawer, and snapped the lock to again. The work wasn’t over, yet, though.

“I went into the living room and got Fyodor’s attention just as he was finishing the news. ‘Uncle Fyodor,’ I said, ‘As you know, we are leaving tomorrow, and you have church tomorrow morning. I need to know the balance of my bank account, and I can’t find the paperwork anywhere. Could you please check your copy for me?’ I had of course already closed the account as main signer the day before, but he wouldn’t know

that until he got his copy of the next month's statement; he had not contributed a penny.

“It's late,’ he said, trying to get out of it, probably trying not to do anything that Tanya would blame him for later. ‘We can do it tomorrow before you leave. Why are you so disorganized? I thought you could handle your own bank account, and here you are like a schoolgirl, unable to keep track of her own papers.’

“Well,’ I said, not really stretching the truth at all, ‘I think Aunt Tanya wants us out of the house as soon as possible, and I don't even want to ask her to look, because she's not the one who helped me set up my account, you are. I don't want her to get angry with you, either.’

“So, giving a great big sigh, as if it was so inconvenient for him to take a key he kept on the key chain in his pocket and go to the drawer he had open nearly every day, counting up his money, he went in front of me. Sure enough, as I squinted down at the lock, I saw I had left a small scratch. But he didn't notice, and after more tries with the keys than I had needed with the knife, he got the drawer open and started pushing

his glasses back up to the top of his nose from their usual spot, to see what was in the drawer.

And so then, on the sudden, I said, ‘Wait a minute, where’s Luda’s card? I thought Aunt Tanya was keeping it for her to return in here? Along with the money? And the money—pfft!—who cares, it was only five dollars, but the card isn’t even here, either. And that should definitely be returned, don’t you agree?’ And making him more and more nervous by the moment, I put a hand in the drawer, and made as if searching.

“‘Here, Chabba, don’t do that, don’t disarrange things!’ he said. ‘She’s put it somewhere else, for safekeeping, depend on that. If you will leave an address, we will send it along when we find it. It’s still not a proper thing to have happened, but if you will send it back, then all the notions can be satisfied.’ And with that, he pushed my hand away and relocked the drawer. Even more than that, he shooed me towards the staircase ahead of him. What better cover for my schemes? And because he was a coward, I thought of another little knot to add to the picture I wanted to leave behind.

“I turned and planted a big, wet, insincere kiss on his close cheek, and said, ‘I’m going to miss you, Uncle Fyodor. We will be fine, I don’t need your money, but I’m going to miss your wisdom and your advice, you know?’

“He coughed and coughed, and then before he could recover his thoughts, I started up the stairs. That would keep him feeling guilty against Tanya and about us, to limit his power for long enough that we could get away.” She grinned at Kirka, and he grinned back. He was seeing something in her again of the frisky, pert-natured woman whom he had courted and married against her aunt’s and uncle’s flat disapproval, though her widowed mother, for the short amount of time her mother had been alive after the marriage, had adored him.

“So, if my daughter is being courted by this—what was his name again?—Giovanni? Italian?”

“Jeffrey. An ordinary Canadian boy of the English descent kind.”

“So, where is he?”

“He’s in the old school district, as far as I know. And I think for Luda, it was just a sweet first romance, because she is a sensible girl at

bottom, and she knew we had to move. If you look up on the cork board in her room sometime without embarrassing her, I think you will still see his card there. She spent the \$5 without even knowing that it wasn't the same one he'd given her; he had gotten a brand-new bill, and I did the same. I remember she spent it on gummi bears, which she had always wanted me to buy her, but we had never really had any extra even for that before. And our luck picked up after we moved, for a while. For one thing, you kept sending us money on regular times; and I was always impressed with the people I worked with, because I never got a card or letter from you that had been tampered with, even though they must've known I was getting money from you, too."

"So, these are good people in Canada!" Kirka was breathing a sigh of relief at the fortunate end of the tale even though he knew there had been hard times for his girls in between then and now, and he felt jubilant at the successful resettling of his family.

"Now, Kirka, watch that disposition of yours to trust everyone too easily. People are people everywhere. We have just been more lucky

than not. We have gotten away from bad relatives, and have had good friends, in the main way.”

“You know, Chabba, I am surprised that they never followed you to the first apartment, trying to continue their interfering influence. And you never went back to see them?”

She laughed out loud, reaching over to pinch his forearm. “Now, why would I do that? Why invite more trouble? I never gave them the address of where we were going. I knew myself, knew my strength, hoped you would come soon, didn’t know we would have more bad luck before you got here. No, we were careful to leave while they were at church, and the cook, Silvia was her name, was not allowed to go to her church on Sunday morning, because she had to have their big Sunday dinner ready when they got back. She and I were friends, and she helped us find a taxi that wouldn’t charge too much, friends of hers, so that we didn’t have to carry our things onto the buses. All looked well. No, they won’t bother us, you can be sure. We are on our own for good or for bad, but I think we are doing all right. I have some friends at work, you are making friends at the places you go, maybe in a few years,

we will have some more family friends to exchange dinners with, with real dates and friends for Luda. And we already have Anya and Olexi. Time enough when Luda's grown up a bit more, though. She is like you at her school, she makes friends well, doesn't fight with anyone, makes peace where she goes."

They sat and chatted on more ordinary topics for a while, waiting for the ham to be done, then just before it was time, Chabba took some relish out of the refrigerator, and some potatoes she had already fixed, and checked the oven. While she was taking out the ham and roasted vegetables and putting the finishing touches to their meal, Kirka monopolized the conversation, telling her about more of the information he had been finding out from the computer research he'd been doing with Luda's help.

"You will think I am a genius man, Chabba. You remember when we were talking about trees, and whether or not they could think as we do, talk with each other, make things around them happen? And you thought no, and I thought maybe? Well, I have found a man on the computer who says I am right. There is some big museum in America,

not up here, but in United States, the Smithsonian. The Smithsonian. And they have put on the computer a sort of magazine you can read like you can read from a library. There was an article on it about a man, a German man, named Peter Wohlleben. I think I pronounce it right. And he has written two books, *The Hidden Life of Trees* and *Inner Life of Animals*, about the Earth, and he has talked a whole village into seeing things his way and logging more gently. A lot of people! There is also a woman who does the same kind of research, and she is Canadian, up here where we are. Her name...her name is Suzannah, no, Suzanne, Simard. Suzanne Simard. Now, she is not as loving to trees in the same way, she is more traditional-talking scientist, but both of them say the same sorts of things about trees thinking, acting with each other, doing things nobody thinks about trees being able to do. Just like us, they think!”

“They say what you want to hear, though, Kirka. Don’t be too naïve. Do lots of people agree with them?”

“That may not matter. Did lots of people agree with Einstein at first? I don’t think so. But trees raise young, they keep cut-down stumps alive

like they are remembering their ancestors, they show respect to each other, they act better than people, or some people. They tell each other of danger, and pain, and can change a little and defend themselves some ways. I think they can probably be happy and sad. I know I have been in the trees in places where they seemed old and cranky, or happy and calm. I believe this, I do!”

Chabba tried to appreciate this new point of view, but while putting the meal on the table, and before calling Luda in to set the plates, she said, “Yes, but, Kirka...don’t tell this to the people you want a job from, okay? There are sure to be many more people who don’t believe this, and you don’t want to get a reputation for being a crazy man. No, no—” she held up a hand as he started to protest—“don’t tell me now why you are right. If your article was good, it told you also about people who don’t agree, am I right?”

“Well, yes, but...it also said that none of them could disagree with the science that Wohlleben had done, only with the way he decided to talk about it. As like poetry, like life for the rest of us, not to be so dry and mechanical, like usual science language. He is right. They all said

the same things in other ways, they just don't like it because they are really aligned with the people who are victimizing the planet and making it bad. Once you know something really lives and feels like you, you can't mistreat it. That is what he is trying to do."

"All right. I believe you. Now, let's not talk about it during our ham, okay? Luda will take this talk to school, and you know how children are, they may treat her funny. If you want to read these books and it's not all science that is too special, then be sure to get the books from the library or buy them once we have the money for you but read carefully and use that good brain of yours, not just your good heart. No more, though, now, okay? You have to go to your final interview on Monday, and you cannot bring this up to them. Get the job first, and then if you make friends of some of them, time enough then to be the funny tree man. Kirka! Kirka! I always knew we felt the same about animals, but now about trees, I don't know if I can see it or not!" And she giggled and swatted at his shoulder, leaning onto his back and calling into the other room for Luda to come. They ate peaceably, the three of them,

each full of things that had been happening and all three making the most of their weekend hours.

When Kirka went to bed that night, he propped his head up on his arm and looked out through the cloth curtain, to where the moon was shining over Toronto. It was big and nearly full, and he was contented and full of ideas, felt as if he had a resemblance even to the moon where it hung. Monday would tell, Monday would be his final test for his calling, now that he was here in his new home. Once this step was over, all he'd have to do is follow the path set out for him, at the greenhouse and in other entry-level parts of the work, until his citizenship papers were complete. He resolved that as it was no longer necessary to come up with the carefully phrased letters he'd been sending to Rodney, Father Pyotr, and Rebbe Avram, since they were all out of Russia safely, that he'd write to Rebbe Avram in Israel. Rebbe Avram would keep him in touch with the other two, he felt sure. He was hoping against hope that he would have good news, not only for his family, but for the friends from whom he also heard on rare occasions, who also wished him well.

Chapter VIII—Ecology Concerns and the War Coincide

The spring and summer passed slowly and quickly at the same time. While sunny days and balmy skies were the rule in summertime Toronto, with lakeshore-bound natives and tourists making for the Islands and other pleasure sites, both Olexi and Kirka had a so-called “weather eye” cocked on the Russian war on Ukraine.

While they fed and watered plants, groomed plants and flowers, and set them out in the gardens and plots in various parks and public sites, the companions discussed armament classes, battles, and locations of troops in Ukraine, as they’d seen and heard on the radio stations they listened to at work and as they saw on the television at night from the CBC. Kirka really didn’t like the idea of following social media accounts, but Olexi insisted on showing him at least how to follow the *Kyiv Independent*, which now Kirka and Chabba found time for every day. Gradually, as Ukraine began to crawl out from under repeated pummelings by Russian forces and retaliated with strength, bravery, and ingenuity, the friends became more hopeful, with Olexi forgiveably gloating over Kirka about the superiority of all three qualities in the

Ukrainian Armed Forces. Kirka's heart was with him, as each Ukrainian victory brought him closer to being less Russian, in a sense. He really didn't want to be identified as Russian the more the Russian forces were found to have committed all sorts of war crimes and atrocities. He learned some Ukrainian from his young Luda, who was still taking Ukrainian language courses at the church. He also learned Ukrainian from Olexi at work, and was deeply grateful and delighted when a stinking drunk waddled up to his and Olexi's table at Eddy's one night and gurgled,

“Why don't you bunch of Ukrainian queers go fight Russia? So we don't have to listen to your constant gibberish here!”

Olexi took such things in stride now, laughing it off the more as Ukrainian victories began to accumulate and the Russian case to look sadder and sorrier. He weighed the possibilities of going to Ukraine himself to aid in the fight for Ukrainian freedom, but when Anya resisted the suggestion and reminded him that they were to be married in the autumn, in November, and that she needed his wages and her own both in order to maintain the new apartment they'd signed up for, he

contented himself with making generous donations to funds going to Ukraine to outfit and supply Ukrainian soldiers, and writing letters of support to various members of the troops, both those of people he'd known in Ukraine when young and those he was deputed to write to by the agencies he signed up with.

In August and September, as Ukraine gained the ascendancy over Russia and the tide of war began to turn, victory seemed near at hand. Chabba and Anya, Kirka and Olexi had been commiserating for months over the photos of destruction in Ukrainian cities and countryside, the war having been conducted against civilians by Russia as much or more than against armed forces who might be able to retaliate in kind. But now, the friends were elated to witness the wholesale flight of the Russians and the progress of Ukrainian forces nearer and nearer, across Donetsk and Luhansk, and into or near Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts.

When they came in to work one day, the two of them riding in a “new” used hybrid car that they had bought together and were sharing the expenses on, which car Olexi would take on his honeymoon with

Anya and Kirka was free to run around in on some agreed-upon weekends with Chabba and Luda, they happened to meet up with Ronnie Fiedelsen, the grower's assistant, in the parking lot.

“Well, Kirka, looks like your months' ago joke about Putin being like the word “pootin” has gone from your mouth not to God's ears, but to the devil's.”

They laughed a second, then saw that he had a grave expression on his face. “You must've seen the news about the leaks from the Nord Stream pipeline into the Baltic Sea.”

“Yes, I see now what you mean,” answered Kirka, grimacing. “There were a couple of them, weren't there?”

“Four, to be exact,” replied Fiedelsen. “It's been accounted the largest methane leak the world has ever experienced. And due, they think, to Russian sabotage.”

“Oy, why is it everything always in secret and hidden and sneaky and perverted?” mourned Kirka, banging a fist against his head. “Not that it would be better in the open. But why not honest war, instead of this—but this was never an honest war to begin with. And we saw,

Chabba and I, that now that perverse, deluded, sneaky double-sided little khuyesos is once again threatening nuclear attacks. A khuyesos! A—”

“Yes, a piven’,” agreed Olexi.

But Kirka had no further words. His frustration was too great to waste more abuse just now on Putin.

But Fiedelsen, though he smiled briefly, answered seriously, “Yes, you two can call him a ‘cocksucker’ all you like, in all the languages you know, but real cocksuckers are mostly nicer, and it doesn’t change the fact that he has plenty of Russian warhawks and television evangelists for the war against Ukraine behind him. If they weren’t egging him on and supporting him, he couldn’t do this alone. Remember Peskov and Medvedev, and Kadyrov, and the others.” He picked up his grower’s catalogue again where he had momentarily placed it down on the hood of their car, and added, “I often think of what that great American lady, Madeleine Albright, said about meeting him. She said he seemed like a lizard, I think, or a crocodile, or some other cold-blooded animal. We the warm-blooded have our prejudices, of course. Cold-blooded animals

fit into the great plan, whatever it is in its totality. But cold-blooded people, cold-blooded killers—that's a different matter.”

With great passion, Kirka threw his duffel bag containing his planting clothes to the ground, and said, “I going to go fight! I going to go fight! You too, Olexi, we go fight! You can represent me not to be bad Russian! We go fight for Ukraine!” He kicked the duffel bag several meters and burst into angry tears, not hiding them, but brushing them away impatiently with the back of one hand.

But Olexi shook his head sadly, said, “Oh, no, we not going now. We do what we can here. I want to fight too, Kiruchka, but it is hard to make your way in a new land, hard here for both of us though we have so far been lucky, hard for Anya and Chabba without our help, and harder even still for you in Ukraine, where you would be standing out like a big thumb. And you have also Luda. We have to fight our fight here, and send money and supplies when we can, and keep people here aware and informed so that they too will contribute.”

Still unconvinced, Kirka shook his head. “But—“ he began.

“Shhh, shhh, no,” added Olexi, patting as high up on the huge back as he could reach with Kirka bent over one door of the car, pounding the top. “I have already this argument with Anya, many, many times. She says if I go she will leave me, and I say ‘If you that kind, then leave, you don’t really love me if you don’t love Ukraine,’ and she says ‘I love Poland, and Ukraine, and all free lands, and I hate Russia and places like that, where people don’t even know they not free. But you already have joined every Ukrainian freedom society here you can join, and you doing good work, and giving some of your hard-found money, it is time for you to do good on your promise to me. I have my right too, in this free land.’ And finally, I decide that I make good work for Ukraine from a distance, like someone needs to do. I fight the fight here.” He paused. “You fight the fight here, Kirka. People here need to see that not all Russians are on the side of the warhawks and Russian fascists, like Fiedelsen says. And in our work, we help to repair damages that not-caring people with no concern for the environment as beauty but only wanting it as territory, like Putin, make.”

Kirka wiped his face and looked down at his friend. “You are a good friend, Olexi, you so good a friend to me. Ya tebe lyublyu, you crazy Olechkin.” He grabbed the other and hugged him in a hug that wrapped him around until there was very little of him still left visible. Olexi hugged back, but then separated himself again, saying mischievously,

“Besides, you know a country like Ukraine, having to pay to outfit so many soldiers, cannot easily afford to costume a big Russian bear five times the size of a normal man just so that he can prove himself in battle.” Kirka aimed a swipe at him, but he danced back out of range.

Fiedelsen, smiling now that he saw the two at their usual back-and-forth, answered to them both, “Okay, you two, you’re going to be late if you don’t get into the changing room soon. We have to do some pine trees for one of the parks this morning, brand-new tiny seedlings that will need to be planted next spring. Let’s get to it! Inside!” And he walked over, bent down, and picked up Kirka’s bag by its handle, tossing it to him through the air, and giving the thumb’s up when Kirka caught it, then turning with a wave to them both and going on inside.

It was while they were sorting seeds at their desks later, grouping the tree nuts and the flower seeds and ornamental plant seeds in separate plastic containers for each park which was going to receive some of each that they heard a loud, ricocheting noise in the hall outside of the office room, in the main way coming in. They all looked at each other in bewilderment; it had been faint at first, but periodically, it kept repeating, getting louder and louder and less episodic. Kirka knew what that sounded like: it sounded like gunfire. Wasting not another minute, he ran, quickly for someone of his size and weight, back to the nearly-closed door of the rear office, where Fiedelsen and Boxy Withers had been consulting about something moments earlier. They were paying attention to the noise outside only scarcely, since it hadn't really penetrated in the same volume there.

“Give me a gun! Do you have a gun? Anything?” he promptly the two startled men. He held out his hand and waggled it emphatically.

“A gun?” said the rarely but now surprised Fiedelsen. “What the hell--?”

“Somebody gone crazy, I don’t know, out in the hall, shooting us up! Hurry, or we will have corpses on our hands.”

“But you’re not passed to carry—” began Boxy, until the noise got louder and louder, almost right outside the still closed outer door. “You better be sure, and you better be good!” he said, drawing a tranquilizer gun that carried multiple darts from the cupboard, and checking swiftly to make sure it was loaded. Then he threw it across it to Kirka, who looked at him, for a moment incredulous. “You want me to use this?” he hissed quickly back, peeking through a crack in the door to see that Alice and Olexi were motioning everyone to the floor and watching the door with apprehension.

“It’s all we’ve got in here!” Boxy whispered back.

“No, I’ve got a service revolver,” responded Fiedelsen. “Make room for me to stand beside you, hurry.” He pulled it from his duffel bag and edged in by Kirka.

Kirka whispered to Boxy in the sudden hush before the outer door opened, “How strong is this stuff?”

“Horse and large animal tranquilizers. Can kill a man if not cleaned out of the system soon enough; that’s why I said, you better be sure—” but he didn’t get a chance to repeat his edict before four AR-15-toting maniacs alternately swilling from bottles of opened hard liquor and waving their guns gaily in the air came in, laughing and unfocused, but still dangerous, and laughing all the harder when they saw the people in the room all gathered on the floor.

Outside, they heard the shrill sirens of the RCMP, six cars at least, Kirka reckoned privately, but they were outside, and the gunmen had made it all the way into the grower’s office room without meeting any capable resistance, which might mean that they had left bodies behind them that needed medical treatment. It would take too long for the RCMP to get there, they couldn’t wait.

He and Fiedelsen seemed to be escaping notice for the time being, and they each took time to draw beads on the ones in the front, thinking simultaneously to take them down first and then rely on the surprise to get the other two. “Well, looka here!” said one of them in an accent that rightly or wrongly Kirka associated with Saskatchewan or Manitoba.

“Looks like they knew we were goin’ to have a party and got all ready for it!”

“Yep,” said the other one in front, in a voice that rang rather of Queens New York to Fiedelsen, and bullies he’d known when visiting cousins there, though Kirka didn’t place the sound. “They won’t be messin’ with any truckers again, like the little pussies they are up here.”

“Shut yer yap!” said one in back. “We still have to shoot our way out of these barracks and through those assholes outside. No point in leaving a callin’ card yet, is there?”

“Who’s yappin’ now?” said the fourth one from behind.

At this point, to his horror, Kirka saw Olexi stand up and raise calming hands towards the four men. He said, “Oh, no, sir, you have it wrong is what it is. I know you see the sign on the outside and it say ‘RCMP,’ but that just because some of the horses are stabled here. This a greenhouse, not a barracks. No guns here, no army, no nothing. Plants, see, plants?” He held up a little pine tree and placed it conveniently on one of the long sorting tables in front of him, like a teacher giving a lesson. Then, he put his hands up for good measure.

“Well, listen to that, Davie. Listen to the little wop or spic or whatever he is. Where you from, anyway?” He gestured Olexi’s way with his gun, and even Olexi jumped a little nervously aside, which made the four men chortle and laugh. They then amused themselves for the next two minutes by waving guns around in the air in all directions, which made everyone in the room duck a little more.

But Olexi had obviously had his eyes on what was going on behind him, in the inner office, though he couldn’t have heard the conversation, or have known what a generally poor weapon Kirka was preparing to fire with. Without turning around to look at the men behind him, while the four intruders were making merry and making much of their power over the room, he beckoned forward swiftly and then pressed his hand downward, to tell them to stay close to the ground when aiming.

Waddling like disabled ducks, Kirka and Fiedelsen made for the relative cover of the last sorting table and positioned their guns for aiming on the top surface.

But Olexi had drawn the men’s attention, and they were too drunk to notice at first that there were two other weapons in the room. “Did

you hear me, boy? Where you from? I don't know why I'm askin' you so nice." And the one who'd asked fired a sudden burst of shots across the ceiling, which made everyone jump and duck again; predictably, this amused the men.

"Oh, I'm from Ukraine," said Olexi, taking a swift glance behind him as he saw the four men edging further into the room. They were all four heavily armed, even carrying what looked like knives and possibly hand grenades on their belts, and they were all in the room now. Olexi gave Kirka a quick nod and Kirka waited no longer but took aim and shot at the first man's exposed neck, where he hit true, the dart hanging dangling and seemingly useless for a few seconds, a few long seconds, while the man seemed to be trying to figure out what was wrong with his neck. "Fucking Christ, you keep bees in here, too?" he yelled. But then his hand touched his neck, he pulled away the dart and looked at it at first with incomprehension, then started to waver around, his gun now almost more dangerous than before, as it tilted up and down precariously. Fiedelsen aimed at the second man and hit him in the shoulder, and without waiting for any words, Kirka shot at him too, not

being so lucky this time, but hitting him in the chest just inside the V-neck of his shirt buttons, where it hung again as the other one had, for a minute, seeming, though, only to prick him and fall to the floor.

“Damn it, Harry, I think these little bastards are shooting bee-guns at us, or something. There, look there, at the back, two of ‘em. Or is it three?” He started to take aim, which prompted Kirka to fire at will at all four, hitting them with about three darts each in pretty good order, until his tranquilizer gun was empty and he ducked under the table, motioning to Olexi to “hit the deck” also. Fiedelsen was meantime firing as well, but the last two bullets went astray as the rear two men pulled back and tried to fire from a distance, their steps now extremely woozy and their shots going wildly around the hall where they were standing, nonetheless daunting for being bizarre and crazy shots.

Fiedelsen, who’d been watching Kirka’s success as well as he himself fired, handed him the revolver quickly and said “Two more bullets. Do your best!” Kirka shot up to full height and aimed quickly, successfully pegging one man right in the heart, who was heard from no more. But as he took aim at the other one, the man for once shot truer

than ever so far, and sprayed bullets all around Kirka in the ceiling and wall behind him. Kirka'd fired and ducked, and that man went down with a bullet through his brain, but Kirka slumped against the wall, his face white, three red splotches growing on his person.

Olexi took one look at the now defunct four gunmen near the door, and hearing the clattering and warning approach of the RCMP officers, he ran to his friend and Feidelsen to see how they were. When he saw Kirka sitting there weakly against the wall, blood all over his arm and a red crease across his brow, and another red blotch high on his opposite shoulder, he started alternately swearing and praying in such a way that none in the room had to ask what he said.

“Don't danger your religion, Olechkin,” responded Kirka weakly, summoning up a slight smile at his friend's profound verbal capacity, “I'm going to make it. You probably looked worse than me when I dragged you out from under boxes.” Fiedelsen grimly picked up his gun and said,

“Kirka, my chum, this may not interest you now, but there's a medal in this for you, and almost certainly a promotion. Not to worry,

the RCMP will have an ambulance. You too, Olexi, you are a real badass, to use rough language. So, for your punishment for taking so much initiative without permission, you can just haul your sorry butt to the hospital with him and see after him. And don't the two of you come back to work until you both come. Don't worry about the paychecks, you've both earned them. And after all, we wouldn't want Damon without Pythias."

"Who?" asked Olexi absent-mindedly, gently touching the red spot on Kirka's forehead with a kerchief he'd had shoved into his hand by an anxious co-worker nearby, who'd wetted it with a newly-opened bottle of water. "Who's that?"

"Good friends, never mind. Just go with the ambulance and call me here—" he handed Olexi a personal card—"when you know how he is."

As it turned out later, though Olexi and Kirka didn't know this much about it until a Mountie came to take their report in the hospital, Kirka's right arm in a sling and his left shoulder with a big bandage on it under his shirt and jacket, the shooters were all truckers who'd been part

of the earlier trucker's attempted takeover of Ottawa and Toronto the winter before, and they'd been spoiling for a fight for all that time. One of them was from the U.S., and had been a rabble-rouser there, which made his charges international. The other three, two of whom were dead now from Kirka's revolver shots, were from Canada, though they'd travelled a lot in the U.S. for the trucking business.

"But I thought truckers were just maybe a little rough, but well-meant, not bad—" protested Kirka to Olexi and the officer who came to take the report from them, since Kirka was now having his turn in the hospital, with Olexi in attendance.

"Yeah, and some of them are like that, eh?" answered the officer. "But some of them are like the ones you met up with first, real big bits of hell on a cracker. You know, in fact, it was a group of truckers from a trucker's bar in Manitoba who turned them into us, and a trucker's barmaid who identified them from pictures. They'd spent too much time having big talks among themselves, and she overheard them, but she and the bartender were afraid to talk at first, until some of the other truckers dropped a word to us about the group, too. So, there you go. Listen, if

you two ever decide to switch professions, after you get your citizenships cleared away, I mean, why not apply to the RCMP? We're always looking for—" a nurse looked in for a minute, and even though it was a male nurse, he lowered his voice—"a couple of ballbusters like you two." He saluted them, which made them both feel grand and important, and though Kirka had to content himself with a nod, as his arms were both still sore, Olexi made a smart salute back of the type he'd seen military men and women make. The officer took his iPad with the report on it out, contented with the way things had happened, apparently.

It was into October when the subject of rewards for heroism came up again for Olexi and Kirka, and they discussed what sorts of things they were likely to get rewarded with, just between the two of them, fantastically and playfully. But while Olexi had lived there already for two and three-fourths of a year and so wasn't very far from his full citizenship conditions, Kirka secretly dreamed of being able to ask for full citizenship for himself and Chabba and Luda, and he made the mistake of telling Olexi how sincerely and devotedly he wished for this.

A mistake it was, because though a tower of secrets with other things, never known to break a confidence, Olexi did not keep this to himself, to Kirka's great and lasting embarrassment, but eventual happiness. To someone and somehow, Olexi voiced this great wish of Kirka's.

Kirka had only been a day back at work when Fiedelsen and Boxy Withers called him into the inner office, and with a grimness and total seriousness and without a smile, told him that he had been called for by someone in the Ministry for the Interior, who wasn't even given a name.

"What am I calling him?" asked Kirka, very apprehensive lest his family was going to be deported despite everyone's recent assurance that he and Olexi had been heroes along with Fiedelsen.

Boxy snorted and looked at Fiedelsen, saying, "I'd go for 'Sir,' constantly and all the time."

He went to Chabba's work midafternoon when he was dismissed to go to this mysterious interview, and tried to prepare her for possibly being deported, even maybe back to Russia. She became very flustered, and protested that she'd already been more than a year there, that all

their papers were in order, that Kirka had been a hero, everything that she could say and think of. But Kirka had heard things of government from Rodney in Russia, things about government clerks and officials, that if true defied belief, and he was terribly, terribly nervous.

When he got to where he was going, he gave his name to the man at the front desk, who scrutinized his personal and work I.D.s, his credit cards, his driver's license, and who then without a word gestured him to a seat, where he sat for only five minutes or so before a pleasant-looking but equally unsmiling young woman with pink and green hair and a suit and tie on asked him to please follow her. This reassured him a little, because she looked like some of the people he'd met at Sylvia's Styling Emporium. But when she led him down a long, lushly carpeted hallway, complete with golden-colored wall-mounted drinking fountains and cupholders in fixtures beside them up and down the hall, to a place outside the door at the end, and requested him to sit there in one of three seats again, she didn't smile. Nor did she smile when she asked him, briefly, "Would you like a drink of water?"

His mouth did feel dry and he answered as he got to his feet again to go towards a fountain, “Yes, please.”

But she abruptly motioned him back down and said “I’ll get it for you. Please keep your Covid mask on while you meet.”

“Then, no thank you, no water. I’m fine,” he said.

She gave him a close glance, but then said, “Okay. It’ll be a few minutes.”

“Thank you, thank you,” he said.

She looked at him curiously, but then turned and went away, back down the long hall and into the elevator.

In about five minutes, a tall man, not as tall as Kirka, and much slimmer, in a gray charcoal suit of impeccable make and condition and a dark blue tie, came from some unpredictable direction or other where Kirka hadn’t been looking, and gave him yet another piercing glance. This was all of it making Kirka feel very much as if he might’ve stepped into the Kremlin by mistake, though he knew that couldn’t be, that that would have been much worse.

He tried to be brave, and met the man's gaze for a minute, then looked down and at his own knees. But the man coughed very slightly and said,

“Dmitry Kirkutchka?”

There was no denying it, that was his name. He remembered Boxy's instructions. “Yessir.” He glanced upward very briefly, not wanting to be evasive or suspect, but then looked back down at his knees. This was hard!

“You don't have to call me sir,” the man's voice became a little softer and gentler, though it still seemed a bit steely to Kirka. “My name is Dev. We'll stick with that.”

Now what? wondered Kirka. On first name, no, even nickname basis with a minister of some sort? Were they trying to throw him off-guard? But he wanted to show he was paying attention. “Dev,” he repeated patiently, though faintly.

“Would you like a drink of water?” asked Dev.

“Yes, may I get it?” came out all in a rush. Then, he was aghast at his own temerity. They all seemed to want for him to have water, but he

felt he shouldn't let people wait on him there. Or maybe there was something in the water, like in the Kremlin....he vigorously put this thought out of his mind.

For answer, Dev gestured gracefully with one hand towards the nearest fountain. "Why don't you take your mask down and be comfortable? Have some water; I'll be back out with you in just a second," he finished.

"But—" Were they trying to trick him now? The woman had said to keep the mask on.

"Yes?"

"Your friend, no, your secretary, the woman—" he replied in desperation, in case they wanted to see if he would tell the truth—"she said to leave my mask on." He waited a second. "I have all shots," he added. And waited.

"Oh, Linda!" sighed Dev. "Don't worry about it, you can bring the water in with you if you want. She's just extra cautious. I have all shots, too." A phone rang behind the door just to the side of the chair bank where Kirka sat.

Dev frowned. “Just a minute, I should get that call. I’ll be with you in just a minute, Dmitry. Is that what they call you, Dmitry?”

“Well, Dmitry, or Dima, or really, Kirka,” he said, but then he felt he’d been too talky.

“Okay, Kirka, if that’s what you prefer, I’ll be with you in a tic.” And he disappeared into the office and closed the door behind him.

The door was nearly soundproof, but not totally. He could hear the sound of Dev’s voice saying something, a slight laugh, a rising and falling pattern, then an angry, impatient sound, as of an expletive, though he couldn’t imagine it of the smooth gentleman he’d just encountered. Then, he seemed to hear a clipped sound, as of a phone being replaced in its cradle.

The next moment, Dev stuck his head around the door. “Won’t you come in, Kirka?”

Kirka walked past him into what looked to be fairly much of a standard office space, though the desk seemed expensive, and the paintings on the wall were fancy-looking watercolors to him.

Dev gestured again, towards a chair on the near side of the desk, and said, “Won’t you have a seat? Did you finish your water? Do you need to throw the cup away?” And he gestured again, towards a neat round wastebin in the corner.

“Oh—” Kirka was embarrassed, and blushed, he could feel it. “I forgot to get it.” Dev looked at him with something of the same curious look that Linda had given him as she walked away. It rushed him into speech. Maybe better with another man, after all, just to be frank and direct. “I’m sorry, I so nervous. Dev, sir, Dev, are you going to deport me and my family back to Russia?”

Dev’s mouth quirked a little, but he kept a respectful face on, at least. “Have you done something to be deported for?”

“No, no sir, I think no.”

“Dev.”

“No, Dev. I do ordinary things, things most people do; drink a little, talk a little—”

“And say what?” said Dev, a bit sternly now.

“Just drinking things, you know. Not much bad things. Oh, swear a little, sometimes. But I go to church with my family.”

Dev grinned broadly at him now. “I’m not a moral censor, Kirka. A little boasting and drinking and some swearing, all perfectly normal. And church-going too, I suppose.” He said then, “So, when you fired a tranquilizer gun and then a service revolver at some men coming in with weapons to the Park Service Greenhouse #24, and shot two of them dead with Mr. Fiedelsen’s gun and brought the others close to death with the horse tranquilizer, what heading of the above ‘ordinary things’ did that come under?”

“So sorry, so sorry,” said Kirka. Who would’ve known that some violent truckers had such a powerful friend as Dev? But then, he heard a muffled sound, much like Luda made when she was reading a book too old for her and didn’t want to be caught out, a stifled laugh, of sorts. Not quite believing it, he glanced up under his brows at Dev, who was now grinning broadly at him. “You are laughing at me,” he accused.

Dev said, “Oh, no, no. I always deport heroes who save the lives of twenty-four other people all at one time, at great personal risk to

themselves; I send them straight to Russia. Don't want that kind in Canada, do we?" And leaning across the desk, he held his hand out to shake Kirka's. It was unmistakable. He wanted to shake Kirka's hand!

Gratefully, Kirka grasped the outstretched hand and shook it with enthusiasm, much enthusiasm.

"Okay, so I understand that you want us to expedite your citizenship papers—oh, and those of your wife—your wife Chabba—and a little girl—Ludlovi? All of the same last name?" And he put a pair of expensive-looking half-lenses on and flipped through a thick sheaf of stapled paper in front of him.

"Well, yes, except that in Russia, you know how a woman's last name go not exactly the same as her husband, but like it—you know?"

"Yes. Do you want to continue that here? Let me know now if possible, so that we can have an official record of the names."

Kirka thought. They were in a new country now, and people had been calling them "the Kirkutchkas" for a year or more now, without correction. "No, maybe not," he said. Then with more confidence, "No. We have our name all three 'Kirkutchka,' like other Canadians."

Dev grinned again, though it wasn't clear at what. "Sure you don't want to call the wife and ask first?"

"No, she's at work." He thought again. "Beside that, she didn't fire guns at the bad truckers, I did."

"Ah, so we have a confession!"

But Dev couldn't throw him off now, he knew when he was being teased. "Yessir. Dev." Then, he thought of something else. "But I didn't do it without my friends. Mr. Withers gave me one gun, Mr. Fiedelsen helped shoot with the other then gave it to me, and my best friend, the best friend a man could have—"

"Ah, yes, Olexi Hruvonychiy, the Ukrainian gentleman, the one who drew their attention long enough for you and Mr. Fiedelsen to get in place, yes, a very brave person, and I understand you and he like to insult each other and make constant warfare, one on the other." And he smirked up at Kirka through his half-glasses, then looked back down at the paper. "Yes, they will come in for their just share of rewards, too. In fact, they already have."

This puzzled Kirka extremely. "But—"

“Yes? I of course understand that you know all about these things better than I do.” And he crossed his fingers in a teepee shape and waited.

“Well, nossir—I mean, Dev, but when I left today, Boxy Withers, that’s the bookkeeping clerk, he said—he said—” suddenly, he had a suspicion, about this whole day and all his friends at work. “He must’ve been teasing me, too! Just like you!” The sheer relief at the fact was even better than he would have expected it to be. “I’ll get him for that, I’ll—”

“Oh, how do the plantings of Ontario ever survive, with all these vendettas and warfares going on in my greenhouses and parks?” Dev moaned.

Kirka grinned now. “He said I was supposed to call you ‘Sir,’ constantly and totally, something like that.”

“So you did, until I stopped you. So just go back and tell him he’s fired.” And he stopped smiling abruptly.

Kirka looked up at the motionless lips for a quirk, or a twist, but saw nothing. Then, he happened to glance a little higher, into the sharp,

flinty black eyes. They were watching him intently over the tops of the spectacles.

He laughed. “Almost, you had me, but I knew that couldn’t be right.”

“NO? And how do you know?”

Again with even greater freedom, Kirka joyously raised his voice and exclaimed, “Because, this not the Kremlin. It’s Canada!”

Dev smiled in a very broad and satisfied way. “No, it certainly is not the Kremlin. Don’t ever worry about that. Now, I’ve got to ask you to leave, because I still have three more appointments to finish tonight before I go home to my own family. So, your paperwork is nearly complete, you’ll have to go through the ceremony, you and your family, at the designated time, but we’ll be sending you more paper about that—we could do an email and you could print it out, but unless you prefer that—”

“No, we like paper, to lock up.”

“Well, me too, on the whole, though it can create an awful mess.

So, Kirka, it's been a real pleasure meeting you, and of course yanking your chain a little about that foolish Kremlin of yours. You're a Canadian now, as nearly to it as makes no never mind, as an old nurse of mind used to say. Relax, go out for a drink, swear a few swears. But not too much of that churchgoing, now, that stuff'll kill you."

Kirka said goodbye to Dev quite happily, thanking him so many times that Dev actually rolled his eyes at him. Then a more relaxed Linda led him back to the front desk, where for some reason, he was required to show all his I.D.s again and sign out. Then, he was out on the street, wanting to tell the world, but it was too late to go back to work now, and besides, he didn't want to reveal it to anyone at all, but to hug it all to himself until he got home and could tell Chabba all about it.

Epilogue

It was the next day, after much celebrating at home with Chabba and Luda, the second of whom only understood basically that now something that had been worrying her parents was at an end and she was “really a Canadian,” before Kirka heard the ominous news from Olexi and the others. Olexi had taken a promotion for his reward, to be a supervisor over spring plantings in 10 of the parks next year with an increased salary, and Fiedelsen had simply taken more pay, as he had his mother’s nursing home debts to pay off. But they both came to talk to him along with Boxy and Alice in the planting rooms in the greenhouse, and after he heard what they had to say, he felt a lot less like celebrating, too.

It seemed that a whole host of badly prepared Russian soldiers, without provided food or protective gear or anything but decommissioned weapons and stray bullets found on the streets were gathered in Belgorod across the border from Ukraine, and they seemed to be staging a protest. But Fiedelsen suggested that perhaps they were even decoys. At the same time, strange beams of light that were said to

be lasers aimed at NATO satellites in space in order to prevent their tracking Russian movements on the ground had gone up from several cities in various places in Russia, straight up through the clouds and into space. Finally, and what seemed the craziest and worst to the friends discussing the war, was that there was a huge Russian submarine also called Belgorod, capable of carrying 8 nuclear warheads, each one with unlimited range and big enough to cause a radioactive tsunami along whatever coastline it was fired at. It was evidently roaming through Northern seas near the polar ice caps, then was lost to NATO's vision for a while, then was found again, with the supposition among many that "Putin" (as if he were the only warhawk) meant to test it sometime soon.

They could not possibly guess whether there were that many Russians actually crazy enough to let him do so, or to further allow him to use it as a weapon if the war continued to go against him, as the brave Ukrainians and their assorted allies were still causing to happen. But that evening, Anya and Olexi came over for an unannounced visit, and when Luda and her kitten were safely asleep in their room, the adults sat around the table, discussing not whys and wherefores, which were long

past being discussed, but ifs and whens. All they could say for certain was that the free air of Toronto and the good country of Canada still protected them from harm right now, and that it was up to them as well as up to every rational person on the globe to fight tyrannies, and to try to keep the planet and its denizens, whether human, plant, animal, or even, imaginably, mineral, revolving around in good health and good company for another Earthly day.

N'EST-CE PAS FIN