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Another Time and Place

BY 

Deborah L. Your

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of *Master of Arts*.

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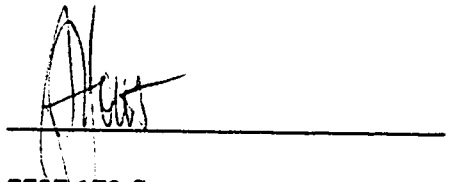

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The undersigned hereby certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Another Time and Place* submitted by *Deborah L. Your* in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of *Master of Arts* in *English*.

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August 25, 1993

For the Michaels in My Life:

My father, my husband, my son

Another Time and Place is a collection of short stories written in the tradition of oral story telling.

The setting is rural Alberta in the early to mid twentieth century. The culture is a Slavic one, including those pioneers who worked to create a community for themselves in a new country. They strived to keep those morals and ideals brought from the "old country".

Some of these stories are folk tales which have been passed down from generation to generation in my family. A few of the others deal with life in Poland and Russia of present day; generously told to, and given to me by friends, and fashioned for my own purpose.

The tales found in this collection are professed by all "story tellers" to have happened, and show the determination and strength of the Slavic people as pioneers, and new Canadians.

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The Road to Eternity

" When you live to be as old as me, you don't stay stupid your whole life. You change. Look, I'm not a small woman--used to be, you know. I'm not a weak woman, neither, and that comes from years of hard living. Does it to you, all right, makes you into something you thought you'd never be. Never could see myself as an old woman, but here I am, big as life!" Olga Dupa, a gigantic woman with arms like a wrestler spoke as she lit her gas stove and put on a kettle of water to boil.

Ela Schmeshna, an old friend of the family, and even older than Olga, sat at the kitchen table picking at a home made doughnut.

"Oh, that's for sure, that's for sure," nodded Ela. "If we only knew when we were young what we know now. But Olga," she continued, "you're just a kid. Only seventy-three! I'm eighty -nine next spring--old enough to be your mother." She laughed, and took a hearty bite of the doughnut, even though the tea wasn't ready yet.

Olga filled a teapot with steaming water and a few tablespoons of tea and left it to steep, then sat down with Ela, whom she hadn't seen for twenty years. Ela had just moved back to Yachiholovach at the insistence of her daughter, Vera Rooka, who felt that her mother needed looking after in her old age.

"How have you been feeling?" she asked Olga as she poured herself some tea.

"Good. Good. I've been a widow, what, about twelve years now," Olga answered as she heaped several teaspoons of sugar into her cup, then dunked a doughnut, losing half of it. "I miss Dimitri, though."

"Well, of course, of course. You knew him all your life. He'd have been about my age by now," said Ela. "He was a good man, so far as I remember." She sipped her tea.

"Oh, for sure," said Olga, fishing her doughnut from her tea with a spoon. "He was always dreaming, though. He loved to read books I couldn't understand, and sometimes I thought he read them just because I didn't know what was in them, to make me feel stupid. I never learned much or read books in my life, but I always got by all right. I never could figure out about science, but he loved it. He wanted to study at the University. Did you know that? Of course, his old man never had two nickels to rub together. That whole family didn't have an ounce of ambition between the lot of them, wasting their time working on stills and making vodka. I always thought that Dimitri would be different from the rest of his no good family, but no." She delicately sipped at her tea.

"You stayed married to him, you said, fifty some odd years? And you

thought he was lazy?" Ela longed to hear every detail.

" You wouldn't know it to look at us when we were old fogies, but we were both good looking young people and made a pretty good couple. I could have done worse."

"That's for sure," agreed Ela. "That's why I left Ludi county; wasn't a decent man anywhere. So, you had a good life?"

"Dimitri worked on his stills most of the time, because he never had to work. Papa died right after Mama, and they left me the blacksmith shop, the house, and Hipolit. You remember Hipolit, don't you, Ela?" She didn't wait for an answer. "He was my only brother. Had a hard birth, so Mama told me, and it made him slow afterwards, couldn't learn and like that. So I hired one of the Hola boys to work the shop, and Dimitri and me made a good living. After five years or so of being married, I gave up on having children, even though the doctor from Tahm said there was nothing wrong with me. So I spent lots of time looking after the people in the village. If they were sick I tended them as best I could, and if they were hungry I fed them. Made me feel important to do it. Maybe I never was too smart, but it always made me feel good when people said thank you."

"Well," commented Ela, "nobody ever said you weren't the kindest woman in

the county."

"Maybe. But while I was working to be a good woman, Dimitri was fiddling with stills and vodka and then telling me I was wasting my time by running around caring about everybody else," answered Olga with a flash of anger. She made a fist and banged the table, startling Ela and making the tea splash. "It made me so mad!" she exclaimed. "I worked day in day out, tended a garden, cooked and cleaned, and never a thank you. That's why I just ignored him when he came in the house one day, his hand over his leg, his face as white as a ghost, saying he cut himself on one of his stills. I heard the explosion a few minutes earlier, and I thought, now what? I never knew what to expect from him from one minute to the next, because we never really talked about things. I had no idea what he was thinking, and he didn't care what I was thinking. Anyway," she continued stirring a fresh cup of tea, "I thought I would teach him a lesson by ignoring him. Besides, he didn't bother with me most of the time, just when something was wrong or he needed me to do for him. Then he came running to me like a lost puppy. So, like I said before, he was holding onto his leg, and I could see the blood dripping from under his pant cuff, but I wasn't going to run to him and look after him like he was a baby. Not this time. I told him to clean the mess from the floor and walked away. I'll tell you, Ela, that was the hardest

thing I ever did in my life, and I paid for it later."

Ela stared at Olga, trying to read her expressionless face. Olga sat calmly at the other side of the table sipping her tea and eating her third doughnut. "What do you mean, Olga, you paid for it later?"

"Well," said Olga setting down her food, "the cut was a lot worse than I thought. By the next day, Dimitri took to his bed, and I couldn't believe how sick he looked. He had a white face, and his eyes had black circles and were hollow looking. I was scared, really scared. I tried not to show him how bad I felt, because, like I said, I was trying to teach him that lesson about treating me better, not just when he needed me, but all the time. You know, Ela, there weren't doctors around anywhere, so what could I do? I made some medicines of my own, but Dimitri was mad at me by then and told me to get out with my smelly herbs, that he'd take care of himself. The room smelled so strong of vodka that I'm sure he was living on it. I know he was pouring it on his leg, because I went in to see it when he was asleep, and the bed and the floor were wet with the stuff. I was beside myself when I saw him lying there, wrapped tight in his blankets. He looked like he was losing weight after only two days, he was so skinny. His hair was even falling out, as if he had any extra to spare."

"But he pulled through all right?" questioned Ela, her wrinkled face showing genuine interest in Olga's gossip.

Olga pushed her chair away from the table to give herself more room, encouraged Ela to have another doughnut and more tea, and continued. "Like I said, I never saw him looking like that before. I tried to put some poultices on his leg when he woke up, but he just grabbed them off, telling me they stunk to high heaven, and to get them away from him. What could I do? He didn't want help, so I thought the best thing to do would be to leave him sleep and heal. That doesn't mean I didn't watch him like a mother hen, all day and all night. One afternoon I went to check if he needed anything, any food or water, but he was as cold as ice. And that was July, on a day that was hotter than I could ever remember. I pulled the covers back and listened to his heart, but I couldn't hear a thing. You talk about shock! I don't remember too much about what I did then or what happened, just that I screamed and shook Dimitri to wake him up, and when I couldn't, I froze like a post, because I knew he was dead."

Ela sucked in her breath. "I seen a lot of death, but never my own husband's." Olga drew an imaginary picture on the kitchen table with her teaspoon. "Oh, it's no story, believe me. I don't remember too much about that day, except I went to the

dresser, got out my black babushka and put it on. I didn't know what I was doing. I just put that on in respect to the dead, like my mama taught me. I even forgot I was wearing a torn old robe and slippers with holes in them, and I walked out into the street like that screaming, Dimitri is dead, Dimitri is dead! I said it over and over, they tell me. I don't remember too much about it, but I guess I must of looked like I was crazy. By the time I was finished, everybody was convinced that Dimitri was dead."

Ela shook her head and clicked her tongue.

"Well, I did what I had to do," Olga informed Ela as she cleared away the teacups from the table. " I asked Bohdan to come and make a coffin. Your son-in-law does a good job."

"Oh, yes, yes," answered Ela. "He's a fine man."

"He came to our home and measured Dimitri for a casket. I couldn't watch. I had to sit in the other room to be able to stand it. After that I covered the windows and mirrors with black cloth like my mama taught me and got rid of all the lamps and lights in the room. I washed him up. He was so small and blue. Even his lips were blue. I dressed him in his suit, but it was too big and looked silly. But I left it anyway since he had nothing else to wear and I had no extra money to buy anything.

I tried to comb his hair real nice, what there was left of it, I mean. Then I put some flowers at his feet.

Boy, was it hot in that room. I just about fainted with the windows closed. That's when I thought, if I don't smell too good, and I'm alive, what kind of shape will Dimitri be in in about three days--if you know what I mean. Remember, we used to wait three days back then before we buried anybody."

Ela wrinkled her nose in disgust. "I remember for sure," she said. "Who could forget such a thing as having a dead person in the house for three days!"

Olga busied herself by wiping the crumbs off the table with a damp cloth, then sat back down with Ela. "I never knew Dimitri had so many friends as when the house filled with people who came to say goodbye. They arrived all day and all night, with me crying and carrying on, because I couldn't help myself. It was a shock. Forty- five years old, and already a widow with no children to comfort me in my old age." Olga sounded so sad that Ela shook her head and clicked her tongue again.

"Enough of that," said Olga wiping tears from her eyes with the end of her apron. "The funeral was in the house, too, with Father Bohja going on and on about how kind a man Dimitri was and how wonderful his vodka was, too. Everybody

cried, I tell you, and then we said amen and took Dimitri's coffin out to the wagon to go to the cemetery. I cried when Bohdan pounded in the long nails to keep the top on. That's the end of Dimitri, I thought, and it's all my fault."

"I know it's a hard thing to watch that lid go on," said Ela, "but remember when Helen Powka died (we were just girls) and the lid flipped off her casket on the way to the cemetery, and she rolled out? It's funny now, but back then I was some scared. She laughed and pounded her frail fist on her knee for effect. "Boy, the things you see in your life!"

"I remember now," smiled Olga. "But I didn't remember when it was Dimitri in the casket." She cleared her throat. " I sat by Bohdan up front in the wagon, and everyone was walking behind. It was so hot, and I felt even hotter, since I wasn't myself. The roads were bad back then-- I don't know if you remember. Every once in a while the wagon hit a hole, and we bounced and the wagon bounced and the coffin bounced. We were almost to the cemetery when your daughter Vera cried that she heard a noise in the coffin. She called for Bohdan to stop, and he did, got off the wagon and grabbed a piece of metal in the wagon box. Then he ripped open the coffin. There were pieces of wood flying all over--one jumped over the wagon and hit me in the head-- until he had the long nails out and the lid off."

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Ela. "What will you be telling me next?" She shook her head in amazement.

" I was on the ground by then, waiting for them to take off the cover, because I couldn't figure out what the heck would have made a noise in Dimitri's coffin," continued Olga. " I couldn't believe it when I looked inside, and Dimitri was there, his eyes wide open, looking like a wild cat. He was so scared he couldn't make a sound. I almost dropped dead. My knees were weak and I felt sick . But forget about me, think about Dimitri! He started to scream 'What's going on, what's going on?' I stood there like a rock. What could I say? That I almost buried him alive? He was throwing his arms all over the place-- I don't know where he got the strength-- and going on and on about choking from lack of air and what was I trying to do? He was mad, I never saw him so mad. Finally, I couldn't stand it and covered my ears, but he kept right on screaming."

"How you must have felt, I can only imagine," Ela jumped in. "Dimitri, alive!"

Olga was glad that Ela understood. "I leaned into the coffin and tried to calm him down, to explain to him that I never meant to do such a thing and thought he was dead. He grabbed my dress and yelled right into my face, 'You don't know dead from

alive. You're a fool!' I was crying by then, ashamed and hurt at the same time. Well, the whole thing was one big nightmare. I told him I'd listened at his chest but couldn't hear a heartbeat. 'You, who have ears like stone, couldn't hear a heartbeat! No wonder!' he was waving his arms in the air. He was raving like a madman."

"I'm glad I wasn't there. I would have died," Ela said.

"I thought everybody would," Olga told her. "I was shocked, and so was everybody else. Verna Peesot fainted dead away, while her husband, too scared to move a muscle, let her fall face first into the dirt. A bunch of people turned as white as sheets. Some screamed and some turned their heads because they didn't want to see a dead man rising. Nellie Holinka lifted the skirt of her black dress over her head so she couldn't see a thing. I'll never forget that yellowed underwear she had on, or those jar rings holding up her stockings. Some people, I'm not sure how many, just turned tail and ran away in different directions. In the meantime, Dimitri was going on and on about being buried alive, screaming and carrying on with what strength he had. What a mess. I stood there like an idiot. I couldn't move. I didn't know what to do with myself."

Ela whistled between stained teeth. "In all my years I never heard of such a thing." She moved her chair closer to Olga's. " What did Dimitri do then?"

"Well," answered Olga, "when he finally stopped ranting and raving, he started in on me again, and believe me, he was hysterical. 'I couldn't breathe,' he was yelling, 'I didn't know where I was! You almost buried me alive. Olga, do I look dead? Am I dead? Who said I was dead? I drank a little too much vodka for my leg, but you can see I'm alive.' I was embarrassed, shocked, and worried all at the same time. Then he started in on the old suit. 'This ugly thing isn't fit to bury a dog in,' he said to me. So, we took him home, and that was that, except he never let me forget and kept saying things like, 'I'm scared to go to sleep because you might bury me again.' As if I didn't feel bad enough already."

"Olga, how did Dimitri finally die?" Ela wanted to know.

Olga leaned back in her chair and shook her head. "It was fifteen years later when Dimitri was an old man that he got sick again. By then there was a doctor who came to the village once a week, but he couldn't do a thing for Dimitri. He was only in his bed for two weeks when he passed away.

But this time I was smart. I made sure that I did everything right. I got three people besides me to listen to Dimitri's heart to decide whether he was dead or not. Nobody heard a heartbeat. I washed him up and splashed cold water on his face, to make sure that he wouldn't wake up. Then I dressed him a new suit with shoes and

socks to match. Lucky for me the doctor was in the village, so I asked him to come to the house and check to see if Dimitri really was gone. He said that Dimitri was dead for sure. I wasn't as crazy then as before. I didn't run out on the street and make a fool of myself or cry and carry on. I just told a few friends, and pretty soon everybody knew that Dimitri Dupa was dead, again. ' This time,' they said, ' it's the real thing.' Your son- in- law, Bohdan, came to make a new coffin, because the other one that Dimitri kept in the shed out back, was old and grey. Well, I couldn't bury him in that!"

"Of course not, of course not," agreed Ela

" I couldn't be too careful," continued Olga. "After the funeral, I asked Bohdan to take the new road to the cemetery. It's a little further that way, but it's a lot smoother."

"Amen," said Ela putting her hands together, "Amen."

An Eye for an Eye

One of the most vital and important buildings in Yachiholovach was the Government Post Office. Every day except Sunday, the people of Ludi County would wake up early in the morning so that they would have the time to spend visiting in and around the Post Office. The farmers and villagers would talk about their political views, gossip about whoever wasn't there, and plan their day according to what they could borrow, loan out, or buy and sell. As soon as the mail was sorted and opened, everybody shared the news from outside the county. There was no need for a newspaper in Ludi County. By the time the stories could hit a paper they would be old hat.

For three generations the Yachiholovach Postal Station was run by the Schmeshna family. Stas Schmeshna, who operated it the longest, had always lived there, born upstairs under the low ceiling, the midwife bending over his mother. Stas's mother told him that it had been a difficult birth, not for her but for the midwife, who had cracked her head on the overhead beams and had to drink three full cups of peppermint tea to recover from the pain.

Next door was the Polevka Blacksmith Shop and the Polevka's small house.

Yuzio and Yagna had two children, but Yagna was devoted to a Persian cat named Kasha, which Yuzio had had sent all the way from Big City. Yuzio worshiped his wife, working as hard as he could so that Yagna could have whatever she wanted. His years as a blacksmith had left him half blind from all the welder's flashes, but as long as Yagna was comfortable, he was happy.

Yagna fell in love with Kasha the minute she saw her. The genuine black Persian had round, intelligent eyes and long, thick fur. Even Stas, who didn't like cats, had to admit that Kasha was a beautiful animal.

Yagna, a large woman who dressed in flowered dresses and wore her hair tied back in a severe bun, thought of herself as the height of culture in the village, and her exotic cat proved it. But, when Yagna would coo at her cat, the animal would jump off her lap and escape to another room or hide under a piece of furniture.

The lazy cat had a spot on the Polevka's porch in summer, in a wicker basket filled with goose down pillows. At six years old she was lazy and spoiled, day after day living to sleep and eat, with Yagna at her beck and call.

The villagers watched their step when Kasha was around, fearing the wrath of Yagna, should anything happen to her precious animal. Once, when Nellie Holinka accidentally stepped on Kasha and broke her right front paw, Yagna spread the story

that Nellie lived on squirrels, toads and wild berries because she was too cheap to buy food. Nobody really believed the stories, but they still looked at her sideways, because they weren't sure.

When Kasha was almost seven years old, Stas bought a German Shepherd to guard the Post Office and keep him company. It was a time of worry and stress for Yagna. She was afraid that the dog would hurt Kasha, so she kept her inside the house more and more. But Stas's dog Duja was a loving animal, loyal and faithful, gentle and smart, and his master easily became attached to him.

Because of their different opinions about their pets, Stas and Yagna had a hard time getting along, sometimes ignoring each other completely to avoid an argument. Yagna insisted that Duja be kept chained up, while Stas refused until, finally, Yagna stopped talking to Stas altogether.

Still, Stas broke down and kept Duja chained up when he was busy, to make sure that the dog wasn't a nuisance. Stas knew that if Duja did hurt Kasha, the law of the land would apply. An eye for an eye: any animal in the village that killed or injured another man's animal would be put to death.

After only a year, Stas was surprised at how attached he had become to Duja, his friend, companion and diversion from the loneliness of his life. Stas could often be

found running through the countryside with Duja or teaching him tricks like shaking a paw and lying down. Because of this pampering, Duja wasn't the fierce guard dog that Stas had intended him to be, but docile and loving, preferring to have his belly scratched to protecting the Post Office.

In the summer of their second year together, Stas had the fright of his life, while Duja nearly lost his.

Every Sunday, rain or shine, the Polevka's drove their brand new Model-T Ford fifteen miles out of Ludi County to spend the day with Yagna's sister, Bronka. On this particular Sunday, Stas woke up when he heard the cranking of the motor, but the early morning sun broke through the upstairs windows strong and warm, causing an intoxicating heat and putting Stas back to sleep.

A few hours later, Stas woke to Duja's barking, reminding him that it was time to rise and shine, but when he finally crawled out of bed and made his way to the back door, he realized that Duja was not on his chain but running loose. Stas called sternly, "Duja! Come here, boy. Duja!"

But Duja was having too much fun. He leapt and danced like a fawn, teasing Stas by running towards him, getting close enough to be caught and then dodging away. Stas saw that Duja had something in his mouth, and he had no doubt, by its

size, that it was some kind of small animal. But he couldn't get Duja to let go of it.

Stas grabbed at Duja's treasure, but that made him even more playful, making him think that Stas wanted to play tag with him. Stas moved directly and sternly toward Duja, then grabbed at the thing in his mouth. Duja avoided Stas, ran circles around him, then dropped what he was holding to nip at Stas's ankle. Stas grabbed at Duja, just managing to catch his collar. Still full of energy, Duja panted furiously, his limp dripping tongue hanging out the side of his mouth while Stas scolded him, then chained him up beside the Post Office.

Walking back toward the Blacksmith's, Stas worried about the trouble that Duja might have gotten into while he was free, but it turned out to be worse than he could have ever imagined. He stood paralyzed, terrified by what he saw. There, lying in a dirty heap, was Kasha. Stas could only imagine the fun that Duja had had killing her.

Stas dropped to his knees, picking up the deflated cat and examined her inch by inch as though he were looking for a valve he could use to breathe new life into her. Droopy and lifeless, Kasha stared accusingly at Stas.

"Oy," was all Stas could say as he slapped his forehead in shock and frustration. Panic welled up, but he fought it back, knowing that he would have to stay calm if

he was going to think of a plan to save Duja. An eye for an eye, was all he could think.

"What to do? What to do?" he murmured to himself as he turned Kasha over and over, looking for scratches, blood or wounds. There were none. He knelt there in front of the Polevka's house, not even thinking about being seen or discovered by other villagers and talking to the dead Kasha, "Well, what happened to you? You never exercised. It could have been your heart. Yes, that's what it was. All you ever did was sleep and eat. It's not Duja's fault you're dead, it's Yagna's. Maybe if she'd made you move around once in a while ----"

Stas stopped. All at once he realized that he was on his knees by the blacksmith shop, talking to a dead cat. He picked up Kasha and ran back to the Post Office.

It was hot. Stas couldn't remember being so warm, the sweat pouring down his face. He tossed Kasha on the kitchen table, stepped back and looked at her. "What am I supposed to do now?" he seemed to be asking her, as if she was going to jump up and say, "What are you going to do? I have a plan, but I'm dead now, aren't I?" Then, an idea hit him.

Stas took the old steel tub he kept in the back shed for Saturday night baths and filled it with warm water heated on his gas stove. He talked to himself, fighting to

keep calm. His mother, who had never missed a Sunday church service, had taught him to care for others as he would himself and to love his neighbour. But all he could think was, "An eye for an eye, an eye for an eye."

Carefully lifting Kasha from the table and holding her by the scruff of the neck, Stas dipped her into the tub of warm water. Then he took the special shampoo his brother had brought him from Big City for Duja, and started to wash Kasha's filthy corpse. When he realized that he was sweating furiously while washing a dead cat in his Saturday night bath tub, he laughed out loud. To make matters worse, in death as in life, Kasha was generally uncooperative, flipping and flopping like a fish in a net.

Stas repeated the procedure of heating the water and washing and rinsing Kasha several times, her body looking like a drowned rat. He was amazed at how much of Kasha was just fluff and how little was actual substance. Then he took her and wrapped her in cloths and rags, drying her until she started to look like the long haired puff ball he knew so well. Taking her upstairs, he put her on the window ledge where the sun was still beaming happily through, brushed her almost dry fur and combed the hairs and whiskers on her face. She looked clean and pampered, but her eyes, still accusing Stas, said, "You're in big trouble, buddy." Stas heard Duja

howling and barking. Stas knew that Duja knew.

When Stas was satisfied that Kasha looked clean and natural, he carried her outside, careful to check first that no one was watching. Luckily, it was a quiet afternoon in Yachiholovach, the villagers either at home or visiting friends. Nothing much ever happened in the village on a Sunday afternoon, and as far as Stas knew, no one saw him arrange Kasha's lifeless body in her wicker basket on the front porch of the Polevka home. As he walked away, he turned to see what looked like a healthy cat, comfortably resting. Stas hoped that nobody would ever find out what had really happened to Kasha Polevka, beloved late cat of Yagna Polevka.

Stas Schmeshna was a kind, honest man who had convinced himself that he had only done what was necessary to protect Duja. He had some soul searching to do. He felt ecstatic at his success one moment and sick with guilt the next. What would his mother have thought of him?

For the rest of the afternoon, Stas kept one ear open for the rattle of the Polevka's Model-T. When the family returned he would have a greater ordeal to face: an eye for an eye. While he felt sorry for Yagna, he felt sorrier for himself. He was only twenty-two, with no family living in the county. If Duja were taken from him, the pain would be deep and unbearable for Stas. At least Yagna had a family to help her

and shoulders to lean and cry on. But Stas knew that deeper than Yagna's sorrow would be his own guilt at having deceived his neighbour.

It was about six o'clock when the Polevka's came home. Stas, who had intended to be outside to watch their reactions and then help Yagna with her grief, was frozen by fear and couldn't move from his chair. He couldn't face his own lies or listen to the speculations as to what had happened to Kasha.

Stas heard Duja barking happily in back and knew that Yagna's idiot son was visiting him, talking to him, probably giving him a scrap of food. It had always given Stas pleasure to know that her boy's affection for Duja irritated Yagna, but now that realization only brought him misery.

Stas sat quietly, scarcely breathing as he waited for the axe to fall. Suddenly he heard a scream and then another.

Stas felt the sweat build up on his forehead, then slide down his face. Quickly he wiped it away with the white handkerchief his mother had given him with a tiny cross in the corner and his initials, S.O.S., Stas Orest Schmeshna, embroidered up the side. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Stas forced his legs to move, stuffed his damp hanky into his shirt pocket and answered the door, knowing it was Yuzio, Yagna's husband.

Flinging the door open, Stas was greeted by a small, tired looking Yuzio. "Stas," he began, looked up at his neighbour and stopped. "Are you all right? You're sweating and real pale."

"I'm fine," replied Stas nervously, his eyes looking past Yuzio. "It's just the heat. It's given me a headache."

"Okay, if you say so," continued Yuzio. "I just wanted to ask you if you've been home all day." He looked directly at Stas, examining his every move, checking his reactions.

"Been home all day," answered Stas, his voice cracking on the word "day". Yuzio's piercing stare was making him even more tense than he already was. "The whole day," he emphasized. "Why? What's wrong?" he asked hypocritically, the sweat building up again. "It sure is a hot day," he said brightly as he wiped away the telltale perspiration with his hanky.

"A hot one, for sure," agreed Yuzio watching Stas wipe his face. "I came over cause I'm pretty upset, and I'm trying to get to the bottom of things. Do you know anything about Kasha?" he asked bluntly.

"Kasha?" a terrified Stas repeated. "Like what?"

"When Yagna's upset, I'm upset," explained an agitated Yuzio. "This morning

when we woke up, we found Kasha dead on the porch. She must have died sometime in the night. Yagna took one look and told me to get rid of her-- to bury her in the back. She's funny sometimes. Loved the cat to death, she did. But she's sensible too. A cat's just a cat, she told me. So, I dug a hole, threw in the cat and that was that. We didn't think about it again, and we had a good day in the country to boot."

Stas knew what was coming, but he didn't say a word.

"It's crazy, like I said," continued Yuzio looking right at Stas. "Somebody dug up the cat, washed it and put it back on the porch just like nothing ever happened. Must have been kids, I imagine. You think they would have better things to do than play jokes on a good woman like my Yagna."

Stas gave a loud, unnatural laugh. The sun had gone behind a wisp of clouds, and suddenly he felt cold. He put his arm around Yuzio's shoulder and steered him inside the Post Office. "An eye for an eye, Yuzio," he said.

"Huh?" Yuzio was puzzled.

"Come with me, Yuzio," said a relieved Stas. "I have a story to tell you."

It was going to be a long, hot evening.

Breaking New Ground

After the freakish death of Dimitri Dupa, Gregor Tvoya knew that something had to be done about burying the dead in Ludi county.

Poor old Dimitri had died twice, the first time a mistake on the part of his wife Olga, and the second time the real thing. To make sure that such an embarrassing mistake never happened again, Gregor took it upon himself to solve the problem.

Having taken over a successful business from his father Jerzy, Gregor was the richest man in the village, but he could never get enough. He dreamed of doubling his riches. He thought that by building a proper mortuary, he would benefit the people of the county and himself as well.

A bachelor in his late sixties, Gregor considered himself quite a radical thinker. After all, he had gone to the University in Big City where he had studied business. He saw himself as learned and well read, unlike the people of Ludi county, who had never been anywhere.

Like his father's, his skin and eyes were dark, and he had a head full of thick, snow white hair which made him look artificial. Gregor never went anywhere without an exotic wooden pipe which he'd bought in Big City as a young man.

In the Tvoya tradition, Gregor had a loud, overbearing voice, and when he spoke he was so convinced that he was right that nobody ever got a word in edgewise.

Nevertheless, when Gregor decided to build a mortuary in Yachiholovach, he had to brace himself for a fight, when everyone thought that he should leave well enough alone. In turn, Gregor decided that they were just ignorant peasants who had no idea about growth and change.

"Pah!" spewed Bohdan Rooka, "when you're dead, you're dead. Believe me, when the worms eat you, they don't care how you're dressed. There's no reason to spend a fortune to be buried when it doesn't make any difference here or there. Leave your money to the living where it'll do some good."

"That's for sure," piped up Ivan Hola, Bohdan's best friend and a fellow elder of the community. "We've been burying the dead for more than a hundred years with no complaints so far. If it ain't broke, don't fix it, I say."

"As if you two knew what I'm talking about," seethed Gregor. "You've lived in this place for so long that you can't see past your own noses. Well, I'm sick of your ignorance. Trying to talk to you two is like trying to have a conversation with a rock and post. Get into the present," Gregor continued. "It's time to look forward, not backwards."

Gregor went on and on about the horrors of being buried alive, as Dimitri was--stories that he had heard about the subject, and he puffed on his pipe and paced back and forth in front of Ivan and Bohdan, who followed him with their eyes. As Gregor talked, he knew that his wallet would be fat if he could convince the village to let him build his mortuary, because he knew one thing for certain: people were born, and people died.

Everyone in the village was easily swayed by Ivan and Bohdan because they were well respected . And Gregor knew it. It would be his job to win their approval. "Get into the thirties," he said. "It's time to make a change."

A week later Gregor called a meeting of the village men in his impressive home. The Tvoya house had a large kitchen and living room which Gregor never used, preferring to spend his time in his huge library, surrounded by his collection of detective novels, a full selection of books on how to become rich in business, and a set of encyclopedias which had never been opened.

In the back of the house was a shed that held fifty sewing machines, five cutting tables and various equipment that made up the Tvoya garment business. Most of the clothes worn in Ludi county came from Tvoya's, and the business, two generations old, was run in the same efficient way by Gregor as it had been by his father. The

Tvoyas had always hired the women of the county to work in the garment business; it was women's work. However, the ladies weren't allowed at the few important meetings he had held in his house.

Twenty of the county's most important men came to Gregor's meeting, and he said things like, "Glad you could come," and "Make yourself comfortable," and other greetings that would make him look friendly. Smoke was billowing from his pipe as he explained, "It's about time that we all had a serious talk about the future of our county. Since you're all important men, I hope you'll listen carefully, because your decisions could make or break this place."

Gregor wasn't stupid; he appealed to their vanity. He stood up, his piercing eyes full of conviction. "My idea will benefit everybody," he announced.

The men shifted uneasily in their chairs, but no one spoke because they didn't know what to say. Sensing the men's confusion, Gregor jumped up and hit his fist to his palm to emphasize each crucial word. "You" (slap) "need this for the good of the" (slap) "village." "Think of " (slap) "how much my" (slap) "father did for" (slap) "Ludi county. You would be" (slap) "fools not to grab this" (slap) "opportunity!" His eyes grew even darker, hypnotic, his pipe throwing out billowing clouds of thick, white smoke.

Bohdan and Ivan stood up together and explained, "We have to worry about living before we think about dying. We're worried day to day about having enough to eat, clothes to wear and a roof over our heads. Dying will come soon enough, and then we'll worry about it."

Gregor stayed calm. "Were you listening?" he asked them. " I don't think so. This idea will do what you want it to. It won't take food from your mouths, it will put it there by giving you jobs; it won't take clothes from your backs, it will make sure that you have plenty of what you need.

People will travel from everywhere to use our mortuary." He tapped his pipe on the edge of a crystal ashtray.

The room grew tense while indecision hung in the air, as thick as the white smoke from Gregor's pipe. Gregor knew he had their attention, and he continued, "As promised, you'll all make money from my mortuary."

Suddenly there was a lot of mumbling and rustling in the room by men who had had poor crops and by those who were excited at the possibility of earning money. Hope was winning over doubt.

Gregor dealt his last card. "Ivan and Bohdan, I hope you'll agree that building the mortuary is a smart idea. When it's running, I'll need someone to build coffins,

someone to dress the dead, someone to dig the holes. There's no telling how well this idea will catch on. We'll be able to build another mortuary in Vici County and then another and another." He stopped, carefully wiping the sweat from his brow with a white handkerchief. " We'll all end up rich. Remember, I'm not doing this for myself," he lied. " I'm doing it so that the county will grow and prosper and we'll have something to leave behind for the generations to come."

Gregor's thick white hair stood up in furious clumps, his dark face growing darker by the moment, his round, intense eyes waiting for an answer.

The men asked Gregor to leave the room while they voted on his idea. The room was filled with tension and a great deal of grumbling.

Raised voices said, "It's a stupid idea."

Pleading voices said, "But we need the money. This year my wheat crop was thin."

Decisive voices said, "Let's just do it."

Careful voices said, "No way. He's crazy."

But the voices of reason said, "He's rich and we need money. We're in favour of bringing business into the county. Let's have a vote."

Ivan and Bohdan handed out small pieces of paper that they tore from a writing

pad in Gregor's living room, and everyone shared the two pencils they were able to dig up from their coat pockets.

When the voting was over, Gregor was called back into the room to hear Ivan and Bohdan announce the results. "Only four against and the rest for; we will let you build a mortuary in the village. But you'd better keep your word," warned Ivan and Bohdan.

Gregor couldn't hide his excitement, his smile growing wide, smoke and promises escaping between his clean, white teeth. "You won't be sorry once the mortuary brings in people from other counties. Remember, they won't just come here to have their dead buried. They'll buy food from the grocery store, they'll need clothes from the garment business, and they'll use the blacksmith shop and other trades. We're on our way to prosperity!"

Within a week Gregor's project was the talk of the county. Those who agreed with him grew excited, while those who thought the plan was silly couldn't wait for him to fall on his face.

The next spring loads of materials, such as stucco siding, cement, nails, large wooden doors, and stained glass windows came in large trucks. The village was full of excitement. Ivan and Bohdan were given the positions as foremen of the job, and

they worked long and hard to get the mortuary built, for which Gregor paid them well. He watched with satisfaction as he saw his dream come true. His wealth would double, he thought. How could he lose? Everyone needed clothing, and everyone died.

After three long months of hard work, in the mildest spring anyone in the county could remember, the mortuary was finished. The building was a fine two-storey structure with four large rooms on each floor, a beautiful red tile roof, real stucco siding with bits of glass in it, and three stained glass windows in the design of red roses. The building was strong, built of the finest materials, and sure to stand for many years.

Without a doubt, the official opening was a milestone in Ludi county, everyone showing up dressed in his finest clothes. That day showed that the county was moving towards real progress. Gregor wore the best suit that money could buy, and his pipe was filled with a rich, aromatic tobacco chosen for the occasion. He had never been prouder than the moment he announced the mortuary officially opened.

"People of Ludi County," he announced in an official tone, his dark eyes scanning the crowd. "We have done it. I hope that building this business brings our county the wealth it deserves."

There were cheers from the crowd, which was caught up in the fever of Gregor's speech. He raised his arms to calm the noise. "There will be no more mistakes like being buried alive. Plus, there will be a discount for every one of you when you go."

The noise started again as the crowd gathered around Gregor and cheered. The afternoon was so exciting and the building so impressive that those who had been against the mortuary all along changed their minds, even though they had sworn up and down that they would never agree with Gregor's stupid idea.

Immediately Gregor was forced to hire a real mortician from Big City. The bloated, pale undertaker was kept at a high wage now that the mortuary was open and ready for business.

Everything seemed to be running smoothly, but Gregor had one problem.

Everyone in Ludi county was healthy. In fact, in the entire history of the county, there had never been such a run of well being. Illnesses were minor and easily cured, and injuries received in accidents were superficial.

While everyone else in the county couldn't believe the run of luck, Gregor was devastated. Because he wanted to prove the worth of his mortuary, he waited day after day for a death. Yet, as each day passed, even the oldest Ludians seemed to show an impossible vitality. Six months passed as Gregor's mortuary stood waiting.

By now, Gregor had passed worry and moved all the way to panic.

At night, when the sewing machines clanked away in the structure behind his house, he brooded over all of the money he was losing because of the county's stroke of good health. Gregor ran the garment business around the clock to make up for the money he was giving away to the staff at the mortuary, but it still wasn't enough. He pulled at his large wooden pipe, the smoke curling around his face, rising to the ceiling, lost.

Six more months passed without death or illness in Ludi county. Gregor was beside himself. If he couldn't find business in his own village, how could he expect other counties to believe in his idea? Humiliated, he began to spend more and more time in his library, surrounded by his books. Once in a while he would leave his house, but he never spoke with anyone. Usually he went out late at night to clear his head, travelling deserted roads and alleys, avoiding everyone he saw and hoping that no one noticed him.

Gregor lived like a vulture in the desert, anxiously awaiting death, anticipating horrible accidents that never happened and waiting each day for news of disease or disaster. The bloated mortician he'd hired from Big City packed his heavy bags, cursed the name of Gregor Tvoya and Ludi county and vowed never to return to an

unnatural place where nobody ever died.

Gregor started to lose interest in his garment business because he knew that his investment in the mortuary was taking him towards bankruptcy. It was painful for him to realize that he was losing everything that his father had worked so hard to build, that his house was all he had left, and that it too would soon be gone.

After fifteen months of perfect health throughout Ludi county, Gregor, no longer able to stand the pressure of his financial ruin and humiliation, suffered a massive stroke and died. He was found by his sister Dorota in his favourite chair, a book in his lap, his cold pipe clutched firmly between his white teeth.

When Ivan and Bohdan came to collect his body, they couldn't believe how small and old Gregor had become. Not knowing how to use the chemicals in the mortuary properly, Ivan and Bohdan looked at Gregor, scratched their heads and decided to bury him the only way they knew how. They washed him, dressed him in the finest clothes they could find in his closet, and since he had never gone anywhere without it, they laid his pipe at his side. He was buried as he died, a poor man with great debts.

Some months later, the government took over the mortuary for the taxes that Gregor owed on his house and businesses. After several important meetings between

government officials and village elders, it was agreed that the building should be put to use. Therefore, Ivan and Bohdan were given permission to redesign it. They built shelves on the top floor to hold incubators and small divisions to put chicks in. On the bottom floor they made square cages for the laying hens and stripped the floors of rugs and carpets, leaving a cement surface which could be easily washed. They opened a hatchery, producing healthy young chicks and eggs. The villagers continued to run the clothing business out of the Tvoya house, where it prospered. Soon, the village began shipping out loads of clothing , eggs and chicks to neighbouring counties, and everyone in Ludi county, who invested in the business, shared the profits.

The village went back to burying their dead as they always had, and as he had planned, Gregor Tvoya was remembered as the man who had brought progress to Ludi county.

Holiday Cheers

Most of Dr. Vladek Dobry's patients paid him in vodka, because he liked it that way. Even though he loved to drink, he was the best doctor that Ludi County had ever known. Dr. Dobry had moved to Yachiholovach ten years earlier, shortly after his old friend, Gregor Tvoya, penniless and humiliated, died of a stroke. The two had met at the University in Big City where a teenaged Vladek studied medicine while Gregor studied business, telling him all about his plans to take Yachiholovach into the future with his new ideas. Later, when Vladek came to the funeral and saw how badly the county needed a doctor, he decided to stay.

Dr. Dobry was appreciated by his patients, always at their call and willing to work for food and vodka. Even though he enjoyed a glass of vodka three days out of five, he never drank enough to let it affect his work and was accurate and efficient. All were pleased with his compassion and kindness, because he looked after animals and people alike. He had a special talent for diagnosing illness, using medical instruments only to back up his findings. As far as anyone knew, he was never wrong.

Dr. Vladek, as he was called, had been a faithful servant to Ludi County for five

years when he faced the most difficult test of his medical career.

Christmas that year was like any other in Yachiholovach. He spent the day going from house to house sharing the Christmas spirit with his friends, cutting a handsome figure as he walked through the village, and greeting everyone he met. Tall and sturdy, he had a full belly that matched his heart and a round, red face with an understanding smile. He was a widower in his sixties, a grandfather six times over and a favourite of the older ladies of the County, who had hopes that they could catch a man of his respected position.

Dr. Vladek never left the village on Christmas except for medical emergencies. Christmas belonged to him, and because his family lived a great distance away, he belonged to the village. He spent the day answering the many invitations that he got before Christmas day, first from the Ciemniaks, next the Glupeks and so on.

It was late evening by the time he reached the Frosa home, and it was obvious from his swagger that he had been busy indulging in the fine vodkas served at Christmas time. "Oh, well," he had been saying by way
of explanation throughout the day, "It's Christmas!" The Frosa's were his final visit, and Dr. Vladek looked forward to a long, relaxing visit. Roman and Mira Frosa and their young daughter Basha were fond of Dr. Vladek, and since they were one of the

few families in the village who paid him with money, he was grateful for their friendship.

Mira Frosa was a tall, sturdy looking woman in her early thirties, while Roman, who was much older, was short and homely. Roman thought Mira quite a prize, with his beautiful Basha his treasure, while in return Mira fretted constantly over the health of her family and made sure that both of them dressed and ate according to her directions.

Mira Frosa visited the doctor's office at least once a week with her six- year- old Basha in tow, convinced that the child was suffering strange and painful illnesses which Dr. Vladek could never find. She wouldn't hear of a bleeding nose or cough as being normal, so he invented diseases for her which took only simple treatment. For this, Mira was grateful. Basha enjoyed the licorice sticks that Dr. Vladek kept in his office, while Mira amused the doctor with stories of Basha's serious childhood ailments, all the time waving her arms in anger about how ineffective most modern medicine was and how powerless she was to do anything about it. But she trusted Dr. Vladek. He listened and understood, she thought.

The Frosa family had politely asked Dr. Vladek to be sure and make their house, where he would enjoy a fine meal, the last of his Christmas visits. After all, who

could match their hospitality? When he arrived, he found that Mira and Roman had already been joined by their parents, Mira's sister and her husband, and Roman's three single brothers.

Everybody knew Dr. Vladek, and there was hugging and kissing and back slapping while they greeted him, "We're so glad you could come. Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! Come in, come in."

Mira brought Dr. Vladek a glass of her home made wild raspberry wine, because he always told her that no one made wine as good as hers. Then she proposed a toast, "To our friend, Dr. Vladek," and everyone repeated, "To Dr. Vladek," and emptied their glasses.

Mira and her mother made a late supper, while Roman filled Dr. Vladek's glass as fast as he could drain it. The Frosa home was filled with the happy voices of the families as they celebrated the best holiday of the year. Meanwhile, Roman's mother Bronka was busy putting Basha to bed. Dr. Vladek talked and laughed and made himself at home, glad that he had made the Frosa home his last stop.

A short time later, just as everybody was about to sit down to supper, Bronka Frosa, Roman's mother, a large, fierce woman with a great shock of store-bought blonde hair, flew into the room and, in an anxious whisper, asked Roman if she could

speak to him in private. No one else noticed that Bronka was upset, and the guests continued with their festivities, talking and drinking and enjoying the best food of the season. A few minutes later Roman returned to the room looking flushed and worried.

Leaning over Dr. Vladek, he whispered in his ear, "Mama thinks that something is wrong with Basha. I don't know whether to believe her or not. She is easily excited, you know. But still, would you mind checking, just in case?" Despite his doubts about his mother's news, he had an urgency in his voice that caught Dr. Vladek's attention. The doctor politely excused himself and followed Roman out of the room.

"Mama didn't say anything when she put Basha to bed," explained Roman as he led Dr. Vladek upstairs, "but she noticed that Basha was dizzy and red in the face. Before she got her into bed, the child fainted. Mama tried to wake her by putting a cold cloth on her face, but it didn't help. Then she came and got me."

Dr. Vladek listened, but said nothing.

In the meantime, Mira came flying up the stairs, almost knocking over Roman in an attempt to get to her daughter first. "What's going on? Mama Frosa just told me that Basha is sick! And you didn't come to get me? How could you!" she scolded Roman.

Roman tried to calm Mira down, while Dr. Vladek stood weaving and wobbling and looking quite drunk.

Roman looked at Mira and said, "There's no time to argue now. Let's think about Basha." Then the Frosas were back with Dr. Vladek, showing him the way to Basha's room. Dr. Vladek tried to look sober, but his legs were weak and rubbery, and he staggered as he walked, bumping alternately into Roman and the wall. When they got to Basha's bedroom, Roman and Mira rushed in, while Dr. Vladek stood in the doorway, breathing deeply to prepare himself for work. Sure, he usually had a glass of wine or vodka in the evening because he enjoyed it, but had he never been too drunk to work! He was confident that he knew what he was doing.

The Frosas hovered over their daughter, calling her name and shaking her, but they didn't wake her up. Her face and throat were bright red. Dr. Vladek tottered over to Basha and tried to calm the Frosas. "I need room to work," he explained as he encouraged them to move back from the little girl. "She'll be fine. Just keep calm."

As soon as the Frosas were out of his way, Dr. Vladek went to work examining his patient.

"Was Basha outside today?" asked Dr. Vladek as he touched her face.

"No," answered Mira, close to tears.

"She wasn't sick this morning?" he wanted to know as he steadied himself against a bed post.

"You never saw a happier child," offered Roman, holding his wife's hand. "All she wanted to do was to get at her Christmas presents. I bought her a new doll, and Mira sent all the way to Big City for a special china tea set, and ----."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Dr. Vladek as he held a lamp close to Basha's face and looked into her ears. Then he pulled back her eyelids and checked her pupils. His body tipped back and forth, but he managed to stay standing as he checked the child and tried to calm the panic-stricken parents. Although they had always had confidence in Dr. Vladek before, Roman and Mira wondered if he was in any condition now to look after their treasure.

"Roman, he's stinking drunk," whispered Mira. "Are you sure he knows what he's doing? I know he's a good doctor, but look at him. He can hardly stand up, let alone give a proper diagnosis!"

In spite of his condition, Dr. Vladek knew what Mira was saying, "I know what I'm doing," he slurred. "Trust me."

While he was talking, he was working, squeezing Basha's hand and examining

each finger nail. Then he put his ear on her chest and listened. When he put his face close to her open mouth, he exclaimed, "Ah ha!"

"What is it?" pleaded Mira. "Did you find something? Will she be all right? Dr. Vladek stood up as straight as he could manage, faced the Frosas and said, "Roman, Mira, Basha is fine. She doesn't need us because she's doing the right thing already by sleeping. She'll be just fine in the morning."

"What's wrong with her? Tell me! I can take it," insisted a distraught Mira.

Straightening his suitcoat, Dr. Vladek said matter-of-factly, "Basha is drunk."

Roman and Mira looked at each other, then at Dr. Vladek, then at Basha and back to each other. "I don't believe it," said Roman. "It couldn't be!"

"Impossible," added Mira.

"I'm telling the truth," persisted Dr. Vladek, seeing their reaction. "She must have gotten into the wine. It's not serious. She's only a little drunk. Any other doctor could use fancy equipment to tell you the same thing."

Roman and Mira examined the doctor's face.

"Maybe you think that I can't tell because I've had a drink or two," continued Dr. Vladek, " but believe me, I can still smell drink on Basha's breath."

By this time Mira had turned pale, but she didn't budge from the room or make

any moves to argue with the doctor.

Roman, who felt the doctor was saying that he was a bad father, thought about asking Dr. Vladek to leave his house, but he was a timid man and knew that he couldn't do it. Instead, he stood where he was, turned a bright red, then purple, not having the courage or strength to make a scene. He thought, "What if Dr. Vladek is right?"

Roman went to the small table in the corner of Basha's room where she had set up the small, pink tea set that Mira had so carefully picked out for her as a Christmas gift. The small porcelain cups were neatly arranged for a party of dolls with one space left for Basha. Roman picked up the dainty, flowered teapot, opened the lid and looked inside. Then he motioned to Mira.

"Wild raspberry wine," gasped Mira. "Basha loves it. She must have been having a tea party with her dolls all day." She lowered her head. "I'm sorry," she offered Dr. Vladek. "I should have trusted you. I'm angry with myself for not being a better mother. I should have been watching her."

"I can see that you love your Basha. Being a good mother has nothing to do with it. She's a child. They get into things. And Roman," Dr. Vladek said, patting him heartily on the back, nearly winding him and then clutching his arm for balance.

"You don't know nearly as much as I do about drinking!"

After that they laughed, a long laugh of relief which broke the tension. "Basha will be fine, it was only wine. I can tell by the way she's breathing, by the way she looks, that it wasn't enough to hurt her. Keep her quiet tomorrow, and give her plenty of water. And try to keep her away from the wine, or she'll end up like me!" He laughed.

Mira and Roman's ordeal was over. Not only had Dr. Vladek forgiven them for doubting him, but he seemed to have forgotten the whole thing.

After putting Basha on her side and tucking her in, Mira invited Dr. Vladek to come downstairs to supper. The three took their places at the dining room table and explained to everyone that all was fine, that Basha was well and sleeping peacefully. Bronka gave a sigh of relief.

Before they started to eat, in the true spirit of Christmas, Dr. Vladek raised a glass to his friends. "To good friends, good food, and good wine," he said with a sparkle in his eye.

Independence Days

Easter was a time of new beginnings for Yachiholovach. Not only was it a spiritual time, but it was a time of rejuvenation. Spring brought with it special duties. Fences were painted and repaired, while houses were cleaned and polished with loving care inside and out and the ground was prepared for spring seeding. Chores which had been neglected or put off in the winter were quickly and diligently completed. By the time Easter arrived, everything was in perfect order. However, it wasn't Easter, but Easter Eve, which brought on the biggest rush of emotions in Ludi County.

Easter Eve was the one day of the year that belonged to the youths of the county, a group under seventeen, who got together every year to pull pranks. Clever and imaginative, the capers were planned during the long winter months and practiced over and over on paper and in imaginations. By the time Easter Eve came, the group was ready. The village elders called the youngsters troublemakers, even though many of them had once been practical jokers and had made the same kind of mischief that they now hated. Everyone was nervous and afraid that they would be the next victims of the Easter Eve pranksters, who struck quickly, silently and, above

all, successfully, because in the entire history of Ludi county no youngster had ever been caught during an Easter Eve prank.

Actually, the tradition had started by accident and for another purpose many years earlier. On Easter Eve, young men had once gone from house to house to reveal their interest in certain young ladies. Front doors were painted blue, or bunches of spring flowers were left on doorsteps with anonymous poems informing the women of their suitors' interest. Many a young lady blushed and giggled on Easter morning.

As the years went by the tradition changed. The sentimentality of Easter Eve turned to mischief, and nobody was free from the pranks of the youths. So when Dorota Tvoya, sister of Gregor and daughter of Jerzy, moved into the small teacher's house on the edge of the village, she was anything but safe from the Easter Eve troublemakers.

Dorota had been in the University of Big City for three years studying education and returned to take a teaching job in the village, where she thought she was needed most. Even though she was small, she was strong willed and independent, for what she lacked in size she made up in spirit. There were few people in the county who cared to argue with Dorota Tvoya.

Jerzy Tvoya, Dorota's father, manufactured clothing in a large shed in his back

yard, the village women working on pedal sewing machines from Big City. Jerzy sold his goods for a profit through the countryside, and there was a rumour that some of his dresses brought twice the price in Big City. It was impressive, if you lived in Big City, to own a Tvoya garment.

Dorota had turned her back on the way her father lived because she knew that money couldn't buy happiness and because she wanted to make her own way by working as a teacher. Most of all, Dorota was proud of her small house, not only because it had been given to her by the county but because, to her, it meant freedom and independence from her father. In the year that she had lived there she had made the house her own by decorating the inside with her books, pictures of friends and relatives and small ornaments she had collected while a student at the university. She also had a coal stove, some simple handmade furniture and a small, comfortable bed.

To Dorota, luxury was a thing of the past. The water she drew from a well just outside her door always tasted cold and fresh and she used an outhouse some twenty feet from her house (which was a real inconvenience on cold winter nights).

The outhouse was a one-seater with faded boards that had never seen paint or whitewash and had a hole cut above the door in the shape of a heart. Dorota had spent a long time patching up the holes in the walls by pasting up newspaper photos,

old greeting cards and magazine articles, not only to decorate, but to make sure that no one could peek through the boards while she did her business.

Dorota was twenty years old when Easter Eve finally saw her as teacher and not student. She had become a part of the older generation without even knowing it, because until then she had thought of herself as safe from the pranksters, still being a youngster herself. After all, less than five years ago she had been one of them. Whenever she remembered her part in lifting Nick Rooka's wagon to the top of his house, she had to laugh. It was the hardest work she had ever done and the group had worked frantically and noiselessly to make the prank a success. In the three years that she had been a prankster, Dorota had lost count of the number of windows that she had painted with white oil paint. Once, she and two others had moved a newly built fence into the yard next to it, later standing breathless from laughter and exertion, vowing that no matter what, the three would always keep the secret.

This year was particularly cold for April and it was well after midnight when Dorota finally crawled into bed and cuddled under the huge feather quilt which her mother had given her when she left home to study in Big City. Sadly, her mother had since died, and the quilt was now Dorota's great treasure. Even though it was Easter Eve, Dorota slept soundly, while many Ludians sat bundled on their front steps

guarding newly painted fences. Some watched for pranksters from inside their homes, but there was little rest in Ludi County that night.

Easter morning brought with it a layer of silver frost and Dorota awoke early, refreshed by the cold air in the room. " One thing about the nippy mornings, they really made a person jump," Dorota thought as she carefully slipped out of her feather cocoon, put on a robe and shoes, and shivering, made a quick trip around her house to the toilet. The frost on the grass whipped at her ankles leaving her even colder as he jumped through the dampness. But when she got around the corner, she stood frozen by what she saw, or rather, didn't see. He toilet was gone, leaving behind a foul smelling hole. Suddenly she remembered that she had become a part of the older generation in the Easter Eve games and she smiled. "We'll just see about this," she said aloud.

Dorota ran back to her house, dressed as quickly as she could and hurried to her father's house. It was day break, and the place was quiet. This year Dorota's older brother Gregor had chosen to stay and study in Big City, but her father, Jerzy, had a housekeeper whom Dorota thought might be awake. Dorota's father slept like a log every Easter Eve, awaking each Easter to find everything as it had been the night before, because he thought that he was too rich and influential to have a prank pulled

on him.

She knocked quietly on the front door of her father's home. Everything was so still that she felt guilty at waking the household. As she waited for someone to answer, she peeked over the fence into the back yard. Sport, her father's prized English Pointer was gone, and so was his luxurious doghouse (which had real carpeting on the floor and two glass windows). In spite of herself, Dorota giggled, because she knew a good Easter Eve prank when she saw one.

Dorota ran to the front of the house and went into action. She knocked frantically. After some minutes, a cigar smouldering in his mouth and his thick hair standing in every direction, Jerzy opened the door. He was tall and well built with a full head of dark hair which set off his dark eyes and skin, giving him an air of intimidating confidence. He usually smoked a cheap cigar, not caring whom he bothered by its smell. It was so much a part of him that it seemed glued to his mouth.

"Dorota," he yawned, the cigar holding its place on his bottom lip, "you're up early. What's with all the banging?"

Dorota looked past him to the left and then the right, "Sport, where is he?" she asked excitedly, bouncing her head this way and that and trying to see past Jerzy.

"He's in his doghouse," Jerzy answered, with a fierce yawn that threatened to dislodge his cigar. "Come in the house. It's cold out here. This is no place to stand on an Easter morning. Tillie will make coffee."

"No," she protested. "Come to the back with me, and you'll see that Sport is gone." Dorota impatiently bobbed up and down like a small child. "Come and see." She might have been dignified as a teacher, but she acted like a little girl around Jerzy.

Jerzy seemed to wake up. "I don't believe it!" he exclaimed, sweeping past Dorota on his way to the back yard. "A grown dog doesn't just disappear into thin air."

Of course, Dorota was right. All that was left of Sport was a patch of dead grass where the doghouse had stood. Jerzy twisted his face in confusion, puffed heavily on his foul smelling cigar, and examined the empty space that had once been Sport's dwelling. "Those damned Easter Eve pranksters," he said under his breath. Jerzy scratched the back of his head, making his hair more messy, blew out clouds of cigar smoke, and stood looking around as Dorota had done earlier. "They won't get away with this," he said . "They don't know who they're dealing with here." Dorota bit her lip, wanting to laugh at Jerzy's dramatic threat. It was true, he had power and

influence over the people of Ludi county, but deep down she knew he was a big pussy cat.

"Papa?" she asked, urgency in her voice. "Can I go inside and use the bathroom?" Still scratching his head, thinking and smoking, he didn't hear her, so she went in and used it anyway, having needed it for the last half hour. She left him standing there trying to figure out what had happened to Sport.

When Dorota joined her father a few minutes later, he was talking on the telephone. "---- No, nothing. Didn't see a thing. Okay, Okay. Goodbye." Jerzy abruptly hung up. He turned around to see Dorota standing in the doorway watching him. "Nobody saw Sport or heard anything," he announced, smoothing his hair down with his hand.

"You're not the only one who had a prank pulled on you," Dorota informed him while she casually pushed back her cuticles. "They took my toilet too."

"Your toilet!" Jerzy laughed. "Your toilet!" he repeated, almost losing his balance and falling over his favourite leather armchair. "Now that's funny!"

Dorota had never seen her father lose control before, and she was angry that he was treating her problem like a joke. "That toilet is important to me," she said defensively. "It's mine and I need it. I want it back."

"All right, all right," he said, wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes and catching his breath. "We'll go looking for the toilet and the dog. I'll get dressed, hitch up the team and meet you in front of the house in a half hour. We'll go see what we can find." He was still chuckling as he walked past her up the stairs.

All that morning Dorota and Jerzy looked for their treasures as the wind blew wisps of smoke into Dorota's face from Jerzy's cigars. They searched up and down the roads of Ludi County, Dorota watching one side of the road and Jerzy the other.

At noon, after several hours of looking, Dorota spotted her toilet in the middle of Nick Rooka's cow pasture. Pointing excitedly, she said, "Over there. It's my toilet!"

"Where?" asked Jerzy fighting with the wind to light another cigar.

"Over there, there!" she pointed, bouncing up and down on the seat of the wagon. "In Nick Rooka's pasture!"

"That's not your toilet," Jerzy said turning his head to hide a laugh. "That's just a pile of hay," he teased.

"No it's not," protested Dorota, pulling at his coat sleeve. "Let's go see."

So, Jerzy turned the wagon down the road to the Rooka farm, finding that Dorota had indeed seen her toilet in the middle of Nick's cattle pasture, where a herd of Jerseys contentedly grazed around it.

"I told you," Dorota chirped as she jumped off the wagon and ran to her outhouse, with Jerzy following behind like a sturdy steam engine. When they reached the toilet, Jerzy circled it a few times, scratched his head, smoked, touched the building, smoked some more and commented, "Uh huh," and "Hmmmm," like a surgeon planning the best area for an incision. Looking at Dorota, he finally said, "We won't be able to move this thing. It'll fall to pieces before we load it on the wagon."

"Let's at least try." Dorota tried to get around her father. "If we're careful, it'll be okay. A person needs a toilet."

Jerzy looked down at his daughter, put his hand on her shoulder and explained while his cigar twitched with his mouth, "Listen, it's worse than that, because if we even try to open the door, the whole thing will fall apart."

"You've always hated my toilet," cried Dorota melodramatically. "I'll bet you if I went inside and sat down, it wouldn't break. I'll make you a deal," she continued. "If I can do that, we take it back to the village right this minute, and I mean right now."

"All right," Jerzy said sarcastically, eager to prove her wrong. "If you open the door and that piece of junk still stands up, I'll kill one of these cows, eat it raw, then

carry the toilet back to the village on my shoulders."

Dorota scowled at Jerzy for making fun of her problem but was happy because she had gotten her way, knowing that it was hard for her father to refuse her anything. She pushed softly on the back wall, causing the building to creak painfully, then moved to the side and pushed the other direction. The toilet swayed from side to side but remained standing. "There, you see?" she gloated. "It's just fine. Now, I'll open the door."

Dorota tugged at the door handle-- and pulled it right off. "No problem," she said. Grabbing the edge of the door, she threw it back as hard as she could and pulled it off its hinges. The toilet lost its last support while Jerzy grabbed his daughter and pushed her out of the way as it collapsed into a dusty heap. Dorota looked as though she would cry as she examined a piece of her independence lying at her feet, a pile of rubble.

Jerzy fought back a smile as he told Dorota that he would have the school committee build her a new toilet, fit for a teacher, but she told him it wouldn't be the same. He calmed her by explaining, "Just think, you won't have to worry about the toilet falling over while you're using it. One strong wind and that thing would have gone down, with you in it."

Dorota examined her father's face, dead cigar and all, trying to figure him out. She knew that he had always hated her toilet, and she was angry that he had won.

In all the excitement they had almost forgotten about Sport, who had been missing for hours. "We can't do anything on empty stomachs," Jerzy announced. "After a good Easter dinner I'll go out and look again." Dorota got up next to him on the wagon, offered no sympathy or help, and sulked all the way back to the village. She couldn't help but notice that Jerzy was in a good mood, encouraging the horses to keep up their brisk pace and sucking on his stub of a cigar.

"Drop me off at my house," she said with a sigh. "I'm not hungry."

"You can go home after dinner," Jerzy tried to convince her. "I'm not leaving you alone on Easter. We're family. We have to stick together."

Dorota felt guilty. Had she been wrong about her father by thinking that he didn't care about the way she felt? "All right, I'll come," she reluctantly agreed.

Jerzy pulled the wagon up to the stable, telling his daughter to go inside the house. "Tell Tillie I'll be right there."

As soon as she was gone, Jerzy stomped out his cigar butt, unhitched the horses, gave them grain and water and put them in their stalls for the night. In the corner of the stable stood something large covered by a piece of tan canvas. Jerzy bit off the

end of a huge cigar which he lit as he surveyed the mysterious object. He pulled at the canvas to reveal a newly built toilet of whitewashed boards, a door with a pretty brass knob, and a heart carved above the door. Jerzy had paid Nick Rooka to build it three weeks earlier, then waited for just the right time to give it to Dorota, but he had been afraid she would refuse his gift. Now, he would wait a few days so that she wouldn't suspect that it was he who had taken her old toilet. Then he would give her the new one.

After a quiet Easter dinner, Jerzy walked Dorota to her house and helped her cover the offensive hole behind her house. "It won't be long, and you'll have a new outhouse," promised Jerzy. Dorota softened, gave her father a kiss on the cheek and went into her house.

Later that evening Jerzy lay in his bed with mixed emotions, feeling happy that he had gotten rid of Dorota's hideous toilet and sad that he had lost Sport. Still, he was confident that with his influence in the village he would have the dog home very soon.

Meanwhile, Dorota made her way through the brush behind her house until she came to a clearing. She reached into the hollow of a log and pulled out a large package wrapped in brown paper. She opened it to reveal a variety of table scraps--a

piece of bread, a ham bone, and some cooked vegetables--and called, "Sport, here boy!"

The dog jumped up and licked her face, glad to see that she had come to take care of him. Feeding him the scraps, she felt guilty for leaving him so long, wishing that she had skipped dinner with her father and come back as she intended, but Sport was all right. She would only keep him a day or so before returning him to her father's back yard. She was glad that Sport couldn't talk and that he was a good dog who didn't give her away by barking or whining.

She had never seen her father so animated as he had been Easter Eve, while she watched him through the kitchen window, as he carefully loaded her toilet onto his wagon and drove away. He had really been something in his day, she had heard. Even at his age he was still one of the best Easter Eve pranksters in the history of Lucas County.

But only one of the best. She didn't plan to punish him for too long.

A Friend of the Family

Yan Pais sat on the steps of his house beside the main street of Yachiholovach. His home had once been the Post Office, but after the government built a new one, Yan rented the old building, loving a location that brought him plenty of company. A young man named Pavel Volny sat beside him holding his Irish Setter pup on his lap. Yan leaned over slightly and stroked the shiny fur of the little dog, while he studied the face of his visitor. A young student who was interested in the history of his village, Pavel enjoyed talking with Yan and hearing stories about the past. "How long have you lived here, Yan?" he asked, his intelligent eyes and gentle face showing a genuine interest.

Yan, who loved to talk and did so with relish whenever anyone would listen, explained, "I've lived around Yachiholovach forever. That's a long time for somebody like me. I'm seventy-eight-years old, and that's the truth. Seventy-eight last July." Small and bent, Yan scratched his balding head, then smoothed down the few strands of hair he had left.

"But I wouldn't have made it past twenty-two if it hadn't been for Ralf. Ralf was the best friend I ever had. When he died, I cried like a baby." Yan shook his head,

and his eyes clouded over. Pavel shifted positions, and the pup briefly opened his eyes, looked around, yawned lazily and fell back asleep.

"I was a young man when me and my wife Vanda decided to leave Zniyiu. It's about eighty miles north of here. We were young and stupid. Had a little girl, too, named Ala. I guess she must have been about two years old then, so she's pretty old now, maybe fifty-five or more, even. I don't see her and her family like I'd like, because they all live in Big City. Her husband's a fancy-schmancy lawyer, and they have kids of their own." Yan sat silent for a minute and gazed up at the clear, sunny sky, squinting his eyes and crinkling his face. Pavel sat quietly, taking in the words of the old man.

"Anyway, Vanda had an old aunty named Warwara who lived in some village I never heard of named Yachiholovach. She kept on writing us these letters telling us how great the place was and couldn't we just come and see, so we decided to come down here and have a gander. We ended up buying a little piece of land. Had a tiny house on it already. See, Pavel, I wouldn't be sitting here right now talking to you if it hadn't of been for that old lady. And Ralf, of course. But I'll get to that, I'll get to that," he said. "Lucky for us, we were strong back then, because we had to start with nothing. That little farm was in the middle of nowhere, about fifteen miles from

here, and that was on foot, cause I didn't have a motor car or a horse even. And to get out there!

"Nowadays there's all kinds of roads in Ludi County. But back in the twenties, all we had were those narrow wagon trails, and all I had were these." Yan stretched out his short legs to show Pavel that it couldn't have been easy. Pavel nodded his head in understanding.

"The first winter we lived here, back in 1921, it was really something. The wind nearly blew the house over, and it didn't let up for days sometimes. You never saw anything like it; I never did before or since. When you went outside, you'd find coyotes and rabbits froze to death in round balls--died trying to keep warm. Yep, that winter was really something." Yan took out a pouch of tobacco and made himself a cigarette, and by the quickness of his hand, it was obvious that he had been rolling his own for a long time. When he was done, he hadn't lost a string of tobacco. He offered the package to Pavel, who refused.

"Anyways, me and Vanda were getting pretty worried, because it was snowing and blowing, and it was forty below at least. We were running out of food. That doesn't sound like much, and we wouldn't of been too worried if it was just us, but we were thinking of Ala. We could live on biscuits, but she needed good food to

grow, and we didn't even have a cow for milk that winter. So, when I needed some, I had to walk to Stan Rooka's to get it from him. His grandpa Nick owned the Rooka place then. That Nick was some great guy. I always offered to pay for the milk, but he never would take the money. Said keep it for Ala."

"I guess we're pretty lucky these days," offered Pavel. "I never worry that there's no food on the table." Yan appreciated Pavel's polite comment, and he smiled and nodded as he knocked the ashes off his cigarette.

"Well to make a long story short--as if I ever could--I put on the warmest clothes I had--a big fur coat and leather boots with rabbit skin lining. I tied on a sack and put on some leather gloves I bought from an Indian woman lived near us, and a fur hat. I thought that they'd be enough to keep me warm. You got to remember, I was walking at least five miles, then riding in an open sled for another ten!"

Pavel sat up, his body straight and his eyes wide with interest. His curiosity and attention pleased Yan, whose voice took on a dramatic tone as he continued.

"Vanda was real worried, because she knew I was walking that five miles to Nick Rooka's. From there Nick always gave me a ride in his sled to the village, every time, never any questions asked. He was a tough old bird, that Nick, and kind, always ready to help. I started out real early. It only took me a couple of hours or

so to walk that first five miles, even in the snow. I could really move in those days, because I was as strong as a bull. Built kind of like you Pavel, only not so tall. Back then the rheumatism wasn't aching in my bones, either."

Pavel stretched out his long legs, the small dog moving to a space between him and Yan. Yan touched the pup gently, not wanting to disturb or startle him. The sun was hot, but the porch sheltered Yan and Pavel.

"Then what happened?" Pavel broke the lazy silence.

"Well, it wasn't easy, Pavel," explained Yan. "The snow was packed down real hard and was getting harder by the minute from all the wind. I kept my head down so I could breathe, but it was hard. I was really huffing and puffing. But I wasn't tired," he added quickly. "Don't think I was tired. I could walk forever in deep snow with a bad storm blowing and not get tired. I got to the Rooka farm in about two hours. I'm not sure exactly, never owned a watch in my life."

Pavel commented on Yan's strength. "I wish I was like you were," he said, although he felt that Yan was pulling his leg a little. Still, he wanted the old man to go on because he was enjoying hearing about the old days. For his part, Yan was more than happy to oblige.

" Like I said, I didn't have a watch, I just told the time from where the

sun and moon were in the sky. It was still morning. I know that. Lucky for me, Nick was more than happy to take me to the village that day. I tell you, he was some great friend. They don't make them like Nick any more. Always ready to help, he was, no matter what.

" But it was a cold ride into town. It took about two hours riding in the open sleigh. No fancy covered wagons for us! I never been that cold before or since. We made it there all right, but I felt like I would never be warm again."

"But you had a chance to warm up when you got to the village, didn't you?" Pavel asked lazily.

"You bet. When I got to the village the first thing I did was visit Vanda's auntie, cause I knew she always had a hot fire going in winter." Yan laughed. "Thank God the old woman was home, and happy as ever to see me, wanting to know if we were all okay. She sat me down right away by the fire, saying, "Warm your bones, warm your bones." She brought me tea and cake, so I ate and drank and was warm in no time. She was running around getting some setter pups--just like yours, Pavel-- ready to go to new homes. She had four of those dogs, but only three were spoken for, so I started to think of Vanda, all alone in that little house in the middle of nowhere. I thought, wouldn't it be better if she had a dog to look after her and keep

her company? So I asked Warwara if I could have the last pup. She was more than happy to give it to me, even though I offered to pay for it. But she said no, she never took money from family for anything . She thought I was a real gentleman to think of Vanda the way I did."

"So you got yourself a setter?" Pavel asked, the new information sparking his interest. "Was he like mine?" He touched the copper-coloured pup napping between him and Yan.

"Just about the same," Yan said. "He was a great looking dog, that's for sure, and as far as I can remember, that was the only day he was any trouble." Yan stopped to roll himself another cigarette, taking care not to disturb Pavel's pet. While the lengthening shadows offered them some relief from the heat of the afternoon, the two visitors continued to enjoy each other's company.

"I bought food and other supplies, tucked the pup under my arm like a sack of potatoes and went to find Nick. He was over visiting Bronek Dupa, picking up some bottles of vodka for the ride home. Old Bronek used to make the best vodka in the whole county--that is, until his son Dimitri took over from him, and then his drink was even better."

Yan crushed what was left of his cigarette under his heel, then kicked the butt off

the steps with the toe of his boot. He stroked the young setter and smacked his lips. "I can still taste it today, as smooth as ever, but powerful, too."

Pavel leaned back on the step, supporting himself by his elbows. The combination of the relaxing afternoon and Yan's story were having a sedative effect on him.

" Like I said before, thing about Nick's sleigh was that it didn't have a cover," Yan emphasized. "We had to ride right in the open, and the wind was in our faces, yet. It was even worse than walking, because at least when you walk you keep your blood going and stay warm, but it was really freezing up there on that wooden seat.

"Nick really laughed at me when he met me in the street and saw me with that pup under one arm and a big sack of supplies on my back. 'You need a ride, stranger?' he asked me."

" I must have looked pretty funny when I think about it, " chuckled Yan.

'Why are you worrying about carrying a silly animal home, when your family is waiting for you?' Nick wanted to know.

" I told him that Vanda was going to need some kind of company out there when I was working out in the fields.

" Nick laughed again and said, 'How is that little thing going to keep anybody

company? It looks more like trouble than anything else.'

" Nick was always laughing. He was a big guy with a long, thick beard and curly hair, and nothing bothered him. He had a big voice. When he laughed, you knew that somebody was laughing, and he'd laugh at anything, even if it wasn't funny.

Yan laughed as he remembered. "I stuck that pup under my coat, while Nick drove the sled, telling me that we better have some of Dupa's vodka if we didn't want to freeze to death. Then he laughed. I tell you, I was as cold as I ever got in my life, so I wasn't in the mood to argue. I took a good, stiff drink of the vodka right out of the bottle. It burned all the way down. If my outsides were frozen, my insides sure weren't. After five or six drinks, that cold weather felt as warm as today."

Yan leaned against the top step like Pavel, while the pup snuggled beside him. Pavel shifted slightly and then sat back comfortably.

"Nick kept on driving and drinking, passing me the bottle, and before I knew what was happening, I guess I got pretty drunk. So did Nick. It was lucky for us that his horses knew the way home. But there's no excuse for me almost killing myself. It was getting dark, and I still had to get back. We got to the end of the road where I had to jump off the sleigh and walk the rest of the way . Nick was way

drunker than me by then, or maybe he wouldn't of just dropped me off there in the blowing snow and forty below to find my way alone. But he did. He just dropped me off right there on the side of the road, and, believe me, it was real dark by then. I was too drunk or maybe too stupid to tell that I was having trouble standing straight, so I just got off the sled with my groceries and my pup and started to walk home. There was only one direction I could go and only one path, a kind of trail where wagons could go in the summer."

"You must have been scared, huh?" asked Pavel.

"I didn't have the sense to be scared because I was too drunk! Lucky thing for me that the snow was packed hard, because I didn't sink when I walked. If that snow had of been soft, I'd of just sunk out of sight, the pack making me heavy and the pup trying to get away. Then he jumped out of my coat, so I let him walk. After Dupa's vodka, I didn't even have the brains to think that he might freeze his paws, being the house dog that he was up to then."

Yan talked to the young setter beside him. "What do you think of me for doing such a thing?" The dog jumped up and licked his face.

"I don't remember exactly what happened out there, being as I was so drunk," he continued, "but I remember being real tired. They say a man can fall asleep like

nothing when he's real cold, and he can freeze to death just like that." Yan snapped his fingers. "Believe me, that's the truth. The colder it gets, they say, the worse tired you get. You can trust them on that one."

"I believe you, Yan," Pavel assured his old friend. "I read about that in a book at school, but I never knew anybody before who just about froze to death." Yan sat up straight, feeling important.

"Well, I didn't get a chance to sleep on account of that damn pup. Whenever I fell into the snow, he pulled at my clothes and yapped and barked and whined something awful until I got on my feet again. Then he'd be quiet. Then I'd fall, and he'd start all over, making a racket to raise the dead. We kept on like that for a long time, me falling and him making me get back up. I don't know how long, I just know that that pup kept on barking at me and chasing around me in a circle being as loud as a small pup could know how.

" Vanda told me later that it was around midnight that she started to panic, because I was late by about five or six hours, and she couldn't come looking for me because she couldn't leave the baby. Instead, she paced the floor, walked to the window and looked for me and prayed. She lived a long time, Vanda did, but she told me that was the worst night of her whole life.

" All of a sudden she heard a dog barking outside. She never had heard a dog barking out there before, and since it sounded close to the house, she went to look. That's how she found me, laying face first in the snow about a hundred feet from the house, with that pup yapping and jumping around me and tugging at my sleeve."

"You remember any of what happened then?" asked Pavel.

"Not much. Vanda told me the rest. She got me up and into the house. I was nearly dead by then. I guess the only thing that kept me from freezing solid was the vodka, but a couple of my fingers didn't make it."

He held up his right hand to show Pavel the proof. "As for the poor pup, he was nearly frozen, too, when Vanda took him inside, wrapped him in a blanket and put him by the fire. The next day I told her the pup was for her, to keep her company and look after her when I was gone, but she told me that it would be better if I kept the dog, since it had more sense than I did."

"But what about Ralf?" questioned Pavel. "When did you meet him?"

Yan laughed so hard that he started to cough and then choke. "Vanda was real mad," he said when he caught his wind, "and I don't blame her one little bit. I nearly worried her to death because I was too stupid to stay sober when I should have. So the next day she treated that animal like a king, and she said she was going to call

him Ralf after her grandpa, who had red hair same colour as the pup's. From then on Ralf was a part of our family. Ala and him were the best of friends. He watched her like a hawk--never let that child out of his sight. Ala loved that dog cause the two of them grew up together, protecting each other. He was sixteen when he died, and she was already gone from home."

"What ever happened to him, Yan? How did he die?" Pavel wanted to know.

"Like I said, when Ala left home for Big City, Ralf was already sixteen, something like ninety or more years to you and me. He slept a lot by then. When I went for groceries, he liked to take a wagon ride with me and then snooze on the sidewalk in front of the grocery store when I was in. Everyone in the village knew Ralf by then, so they just stepped around him and went about their business. Then, one afternoon, for no reason, old man Glupek drove over him with his wagon, laughing the whole time like the devil. After that the whole county hated him for what he did to Ralf, and treated him like the murderer he was, not talking with him or visiting him for anything. But Ralf was gone, so hate didn't do any good then. Yep, the day he died, I lost my best friend. I tell you, I was a grown man, but I cried like a baby.

"After old man Glupek ran him over, I picked up Ralf and put him in the wagon,

but he only lasted an hour or so. I couldn't bring myself to put him out of his misery, cause I kept having this hope that he was going to jump up and lick my face. I talked to him the whole time he was dying, with him looking up at me with those big eyes of his like to say, "Why?" Yan shook his head. "I still don't know the answer to that one."

Pavel felt uncomfortable, sorry for his old friend, who lived alone with his memories.

"Yan?" asked Pavel.

"What?" answered Yan, while he teased the pup with his hat, tenderly slapping the dog's face with it, then taking it away. They were having a gentle struggle, the pup growling and snapping at the hat and Yan laughing.

"Do you think the dog I have could ever be like Ralf?" Pavel asked, amused at the scene between Yan and his setter.

Yan settled down, petting the dog on his lap. "Well, he's a beauty all right, and seems pretty smart. "Don't you, boy? But," he continued , "you'd need to train him , talk to him all the time, teach him things. Maybe he wouldn't be just like Ralf, but he'd be close. Course, there'll never be another Ralf!" Yan took out his pouch of tobacco and started to roll himself a cigarette, but the pup nipped at the package.

"Smart enough to know that smoking is bad for the health too, I guess," said Yan.

"Oh, he's smart, for sure," agreed Pavel. "We got him from a dog breeder here in Ludi County, been breeding dogs for fifty years or so. He has purebred dogs from all over the countryside."

"You don't know if they got any dogs from here in Yachiholovach, do you?" Suddenly Yan was alert and excited. "They didn't say whether the old Warwara had given them any setters?"

"I suppose she could have. Don't know for sure," answered Pavel.

"Sure they did," said Yan setting down his pouch of tobacco and picking up the pup, lifting him eye to eye. "This little fellow is as near to Ralf as I've ever seen. I bet you he's a relative of some kind to him. I just bet."

Pavel could see that he'd lost his pup to Yan, but he felt glad. After all, Yan loved the animal already. "Sell him to you, Yan. I'm going away to school next year, and the family doesn't want the trouble of feeding and training him."

"Deal," was all that Yan said.

As Pavel walked away, he turned to see the pup running in circles around Yan, the old man's package of tobacco and papers in his mouth.

"See?" he called after Pavel, "He's trying to save my life already."

Another Time and Place

Michal Kolega felt out of place in Ludi County. He was intelligent and adventurous, but life as a farmer left him no choice but to stay put and live a quiet life. While he ploughed the fields, he dreamed of far away lands. As he milked the cows, he made up stories and poems in his head, while his wife Emilia complained that he spent too much time thinking and too little doing. The only time that Michal had to himself was in the spring and summer when downpours made the ground too wet to work.

Michal, who came from a town near Big City, had decided to live in Ludi County when he was twenty. He had been passing through Yachiholovach looking for work, when he met Emilia, a young and beautiful farm girl with white skin, blonde hair and dazzling blue eyes. Having just been a soldier in the Second World War, Michal walked tall and erect and had dark skin and black hair complemented by dark, piercing eyes. Emilia had never seen anyone as handsome as Michal, and he had never seen anyone as beautiful as she was then.

Exact opposites, Emilia and Michal fell in love immediately and were married shortly afterwards.

Emilia had an innocence that appealed to Michal, who was so impressed by her that he could refuse her nothing. On the other hand, Michal's worldliness and experience took Emilia's breath away. Because she couldn't bear to leave her life in Ludi County, Michal decided to settle there and become a farmer, even though he knew nothing about living in the country. At the time, it was just another adventure to him.

After a short time, it was obvious that their love was strong, but their differences were stronger. For the first five years of their marriage, Michal tried as hard as he could to be a farmer, but failed miserably. Emilia worked at his side, teaching him how to plant crops and raise livestock, but he wasn't interested, and she ended up doing most of the work herself. By the time ten years had passed, Michal was bored and unhappy in his marriage, while Emilia was frustrated and angry, spending her energy caring for their daughter Izabella, who was then eight.

Much to Emilia's disapproval, Izabella was just like Michal, with an adventurous spirit and love of learning. Because of their similar natures, Izabella and Michal were the best of friends, always laughing and singing together. Izabella never tired of Michal's made up fairy tales about magical lands or about people he had met when he was a young man.

When Izabella was seventeen, Emilia died. Saddened by her death, Michal realized that he had always loved her, even though their love had been soured by resentments. Now that Emilia was gone, Michal felt lost. At only thirty- nine, he faced a life of loneliness. Izabella would be leaving for school in less than a year, and he had no intentions of having another love in his life.

Kind and intuitive, Izabella, saw that her father was deeply depressed after the loss of Emilia. The first Christmas after her mother's death, she tried to cook a decent Christmas dinner, but she knew she could never make a meal like her mother. Nevertheless, Michal told her the meal was wonderful. He took her hand and, smiling, said, "You're a good cook, just like your mom." But Michal only picked at his food.

"By the way you're eating, you'd never know," Izabella answered playfully, trying to cheer up her father. "You're just like a chicken scratching at oats."

They laughed, but Michael's laugh was low and quiet. "That's why I stayed home today and didn't go to aunt Klara's," he explained. " I just don't feel like being sociable."

Izabella was glad that she didn't have to spend the day with her aunt. Klara Bratowa, Emilia's older sister, owned the grocery store in Yachiholovach with her

husband Jarek. They thought they were better than everybody else because they were business people, and they never failed to point out his failure as a farmer to Michal.

When she was growing up, Izabella had once heard her aunt and mother talking about Michal, saying what a poor provider he was. After the visit her parents had had a fight, her mother asking her father, "Why can't you be like everybody else? Why can't you bring in a decent crop?" Angry and hurt, Michal tried to explain. "I was never cut out to be a farmer. I've told you that for years now, but you won't bend, won't try something different, somewhere else."

Afterwards, Izabella's mother guiltily explained to her, " With his brains, your dad could have been anything he wanted, even a doctor. Instead, I wanted to stay here to rot in Ludi County. Maybe I should have gone away with him years ago, but I'm just too set in my ways. I keep hoping things will get better, that one day this life will make him happy."

Izabella knew that her parents had loved each other, but they couldn't agree on anything. As much as Emilia cared for Michal, she criticized him for his lack of ambition. She would scold him: "If it wasn't for me, we'd all have starved to death a long time ago."

Even though Michal worked long, hard days, Emilia took the credit for keeping

him going. She grew a large garden, put up preserves and always made sure that there was food on the table. Whenever she could find the time, she sewed their clothing on an old machine she bought at the Tvoya garment factory when the company switched to new electric Singers from Big City.

After Emilia's outbursts, Michal would disappear for hours, returning after a few hours with nothing to say.

Izabella felt sorry for her father and resented her mother for talking to him like a child, because in her own way, she understood his pain and isolation. She had felt it herself as a young girl. Sometimes Izabella and her father would stand in the lean-to and listen to the rain falling on the roof, or watch the drops hit the ground and form deep puddles. At these times, Michal would tell Izabella the stories he had made up while ploughing the fields. Often he would recite poems he had written for her, which explained how he felt about his life. A bright and inquisitive child, Izabella had listened attentively.

Since Emilia's death, Michal shared more of his feelings with Izabella than he had for the first seventeen years of her life. "Don't be afraid to dream," he told her one evening when she talked about going away to school. "Be whatever makes you happiest, even if it doesn't make you rich." Izabella understood what he meant

when Michal explained, "I'm not in love with money, and that's hard in a world that runs on it. I only ever wanted to live a peaceful and happy life, reading, travelling and learning. But it wasn't enough for your mother or her family. I was never a good farmer because that's not what I'm made of."

After Emilia died there was no longer any reason for him to stay on the farm. He sold it for a handsome profit to a young and ambitious farmer, and he and Izabella moved into a small, comfortable house in Yachtholovach.

Michal made friends easily because he loved to talk about politics, the world, business and other interests which he found, much to his surprise, he had in common with the villagers. He stayed up late at night, rose in the early afternoon, ate when he was hungry and took long walks in the spring rain whenever he had the chance. Izabella was sure that her father would be happy now, but instead he grew older looking, his jet black hair streaked with grey and his piercing dark eyes cloudy and tired. "I don't feel very well, but it'll pass," he said, trying to explain it away. "It's not serious."

"Go and see Dr. Vladek right now," begged Izabella, having a hard time believing that anyone could look that bad and not be sick.

Michal gave in and agreed to see the doctor. Some days later he showed her the

bottle of medicine Dr. Vladek had given him, and she felt better.

One Sunday evening, Michal told Izabella about his days as a soldier. "You're old enough now to know the true nature of man," he said. She had never known that he had spent two years in Europe fighting on the front lines. They talked about death, which had stared him in the face every day. "People die these days, and everyone gets upset about it. All the crying, and for what? There's this dead person all tucked into a nice, clean box--clean clothes, make- up and combed hair. That's dignity in death. During the war we carried a green blanket in our packs, and when a soldier was killed there wasn't always time to bury him, so we just wrapped him up and left him there, right where he died." Michal shifted uneasily in his chair, and Izabella was moved. "Sometimes we didn't see a soldier fall and would end up walking over him, stepping right on him. You didn't make friends out there. There was no time." He stopped, lit a cigarette and smoked it without inhaling. Izabella had never seen her father inhale when he smoked. "I think I'll give up this habit," he said examining his cigarette. "What do I get out of it?

" An officer came by the lines one day and said they were looking for a clerk at Headquarters," Michal went on. "Said they needed a guy who could read and write and file, stuff like that. I volunteered in a second, even though I could only type with

one finger. That lie probably saved my life." He leaned back in his armchair, Izabella sitting across from him on the floor. "Nobody kept track of where I went, so they thought I was missing in action. How could they keep track of the men, when there was so much killing?" he explained. "My ma and pa got a letter telling them about me being dead on the same day there was a letter from me. Two weeks later they got another letter from me, and they knew I was no dead man."

Izabella was uneasy because she could see her father's face changing as he spoke. His eyes grew large, and his hands gripped the arms of his chair. She could see that the memories were painful ones. Her father had been to so many places and seen so many things that she suddenly understood the isolation and boredom he must have endured in Ludi County.

By late spring Michal's health was worse, despite his insistence that he was fine. Emilia's sister Klara visited Michal and Izabella from time to time, complaining about the way they lived, and that they didn't eat properly or keep their house clean enough. Klara, in her late forties, was homely, with a short, bloated body and an old-fashioned hairdo and clothes.

"Emilia is turning over in her grave to see the way you two are living," she squawked. Dishes and clothes are everywhere. What a mess!" After which she

cleaned the house herself, Michal silently watching and putting up with her intrusion and Izabella leaving altogether. To Michal and Izabella, Klara was like bad weather. She came and she went, and there was nothing they could do about it.

A year after Emilia died the spring was warm, but Michal was always cold, walking around the village overdressed in an undershirt, thick stockings and warm boots. In the evenings he sat in his armchair, layering himself with blankets. Izabella was worried about Michal but didn't say anything, while Michal stopped smoking the cigarettes he never inhaled.

It was the middle of June when a strange looking travelling salesman came through Ludi County selling a new invention from Big City: door bells. When he knocked on the Kolega's door, Izabella was at school, and a bored Michal invited him inside to show his product. Michal listened as an overweight salesman in a pin-striped suit told him about the wonder of the doorbell. "Have you ever been sitting there," he made his pitch, "and there's a noise like something banging? Is it someone at the door, you ask yourself, or just the wind? Who knows? So you're relaxing, and you get up to answer the door, but nobody's there. So then you have to come back and try to get all comfortable again. Then you hear some more banging. You could be jumping up and down all night, thinking, is it a person at my door or just the

wind?" He held up the button to the doorbell. "Well, with this little beauty, you'll never have to wonder again." He put the button on the table, his puffy finger pointing. "You only need two little wires. You hook up the first part to the second part with those wires, then hook this to the box there inside your house, and when you press the button, vee-ole-a." He pressed the button, causing an attached box to play "bing bong."

Michal looked at the salesman and rubbed his chin. "I don't know," he said.

The salesman slumped in a chair. "I knew it. Nobody will buy one of these things. I didn't sell one of them to anybody in the whole County, and believe me, I've been everywhere. I even tried to get the big grocery store on main street to stock some, but they told me I was wasting my time."

"Nobody bought one?" Suddenly interested, Michal leaned forward.

"Nobody," answered the huge salesman.

"Then I'll be the only one in the county to have one?" Michal asked.

"The only one for miles around," guaranteed the salesman, a smile lighting his face.

"I'll take one," said Michal laughing. "I always was different from everyone else,

anyway."

The salesman drove away from the Kolega house a happy man, because at last he had sold a doorbell, and that was a start. Immediately he was off to peddle his product in another county.

When Izabella came home from school, the doorbell was all ready to go. A clean white button had been installed outside the front door. She had no idea what it was.

Michal, who had been watching for Izabella, called, "Press the button!" She pushed on the small button and heard a loud "bing bong." She pressed it again and again, laughing.

"I love it," she said, "it's great."

"I bought it from a travelling salesman for twenty dollars," boasted Michal. "It's the only one in the whole county. We're the only ones in Yachiholovach with a doorbell."

Some months later, in mid July, it was Michal's fortieth birthday, and Izabella tried to find him a gift that would cheer him up. Stella Hola offered to sell Izabella a book that her brother had given her called "Examining the Unexplained." After Izabella leafed through the book filled with mysteries, she jumped at the chance to buy it for her father.

Izabella helped Michal celebrate his birthday by cooking him his favourite meal of baked chicken and buckwheat bread and baking him a chocolate cake with the message "Happy 40" on top in white icing. Michal smiled and ate with as much appetite as he could, but the sadness in his eyes that Izabella had become so used to seeing never left him.

"Here," said Izabella, handing Michal a small, colourfully wrapped package. "This is for you."

Michal took the present and opened it slowly, careful not to rip the bright wrapping paper. He hadn't had the chance to open many gifts in his life time, and he was grateful for the book and excited to have a chance to read something besides the "Ludi County Star."

A few weeks later, in early August, Michal and Izabella were relaxing and talking when Michal brought up the subject of the book he had gotten for his birthday. He explained all the things he had read about that had plagued the best of minds for years. Then, unexpectedly, he turned to Izabella and said, "Let's make a promise right now. If they can, whoever dies first will let the other know if there is a world on the other side. The book says it's possible."

Izabella had such a shocked look on her face that Michal went on to

explain," It's nothing to be afraid of. We won't scare each other or anything. Like, imagine there's a cup on the table. It could move or slide onto the floor for no reason. Something like that." Michal was excited.

Izabella agreed at once, because she didn't want to hear another word on the subject and because she was afraid to think about anything happening to either one of them. "Okay," she finally said, her voice quivering, "I promise."

The next day Klara stopped by to see Izabella, who would be leaving for school in three weeks and was unhappy to see her aunt. Klara went on and on about how stupid and useless it was to have a doorbell, not to mention what a waste of good, hard earned money. "Nobody in their right mind would use that doorbell. If your father ever did one thing that made any sense, I'd drop dead on the spot."

"The doorbell makes him happy," retorted Izabella. "That's all that matters. He's been so sad since Mom died." She wished that her aunt would leave and wanted to throw her out, but being polite and out of respect to her mother's memory, she held her temper.

Michal's health was getting worse, his clothes hanging on his slender frame. Izabella was worried. She reconsidered going away to school and leaving him to take care of himself, but when he came home from his daily walk looking tired and pale,

she decided to put off talking to him about it. Instead, she asked, "Are you all right?"

"Bella, go and get me some help," said Michal, slumping down in his arm chair and clutching the velvet arms.

Without answering, Izabella ran from the house to find the doctor.

By the time Izabella returned with Dr. Vladek, Michal was resting in his armchair, his eyes closed and his hands hanging limply over the sides. Izabella stood by nervously while the doctor listened at his chest with a stethoscope and looked at his fingernails. But the doctor had known the moment he walked in that Michal was dead.

The day of his funeral, Izabella was quiet and sorrowful, knowing that she had lost not only a father but a best friend as well. Perhaps she should have felt angry at him for leaving her, but she didn't, only pain that he was gone.

At the cemetery it started to rain, a cold autumn downpour, which took Izabella back to her childhood when she had stood in the lean-to with Michal and watched the drops form puddles on the ground. She was chilled to the bone when she reached home. All she could think about was her father, that she would never again see his face or hear his voice. Death had cheated them both of a great

friendship. She dried herself off, put on her robe and sat in her father's velvet armchair, where she could feel closest to him.

Just as Izabella dozed off, the doorbell rang. "I can't face anyone," she thought, half asleep, "not right now." The bell rang again and again until Izabella was forced to get up and answer it. To her surprise, no one was at the door, so she stepped outside to see if anyone was there. Nobody was in sight, and Izabella's hair and shoulders were soaked with rain when she came back into the house. She closed the door and was getting a towel, when the doorbell sounded again, making her run to the door to catch whoever was playing a trick on her. Again, nobody was there. Izabella banged on the white button to stop the noise, but it kept on ringing. "Must be rain in the thing," she said to herself.

Izabella stood still and listened to the continuous "bing bong" of the bell. Finally, she had had enough. She grabbed the outer box of the doorbell connection and pulled at the wires inside. Suddenly, the house was silent. All she could hear was the rain falling on the roof. Looking out the window, Izabella watched small puddles form on the sidewalk. She smiled. Then she clapped her hands and laughed. "Dad," she said. "Dad, I heard you."

She went back then and reconnected the wires to the doorbell, but there was no

more noise, no more prankster ringing the bell.

Izabella knew that her father had kept his promise to speak to her, to tell her that everything was all right and that they would meet again in another time and place.