

Wild Mushrooms

“Grandpa, where are you?...Grandpa?” I called through the woods.

“*Da?... Da?...*” My father called.

“*Da?... Da?...*” I copied him, and the men laughed. My father patted my head and I went into a sulk. I was ten years old.

There was lots of excitement earlier that morning. At least for me there was. Up early, making noise in the kitchen, in the living room, hoping to wake my dad. Grandpa was living with us. When he and my dad finally woke up, and were having breakfast, I wouldn't stop pestering them.

“Are you finished?”... “You're not having another toast, are you, Dad?”... “No more coffee, Grandpa!”

My heart sank when my dad asked, “*Da*, you sure you still want to go? It's supposed to rain...*Da?* Did you hear me?”

“What?”

“I said, do you still want to go? It might rain.”

“Yes. Yes. It's the best time. We always go at this time of year. In the Old Country my father could always tell the best time from watching the moon.”

My dad pushed his chair away from the table, kind of angry: lips tight, breathing out hard from his nose.

“Well then, we'd better get going.”

The drive to Wurtel Street was long. It seemed like hours. My father and grandfather didn't talk, except for my dad, once:

“*Da*, let me fix your glasses for you. They're crooked. I'll fix them at the next set of lights.”

I could tell they were bugging my dad. He kept looking at them. My grandpa pushed them up with his finger.

“Leave them. They're o.k.”

My dad breathed. I stared out the window, and watched hydro poles and wires and maple trees play rhythms. Once we were over the tracks I knew we were almost there. I'd been a few times before, when my grandpa used to come to visit his friend, and pick wild grapes by the overpass of the railroad tracks. Dad would drive us.

My grandpa used to tell me how they all came over from the Old Country on a crowded boat. A long, long trip. And then by train to the big city. They all found work at the railroads. They all lived on Wurtel Street. Next to the tracks. Families lived with other families in houses that were like cardboard boxes, on a hill that sloped into the river. The boxes tilted like they were going to fall in.

Grandpa's friend, Mr. Zielinski, had never moved away after twenty-five years there. All of his friends had moved on to other areas of the city. It was mostly Haitian families living there, by then. Grandpa would say that Mr. Zielinski clung to his neighbourhood like the smell of cabbage clung to his walls.

When we got there my dad was the first to offer a greeting, “Morning, Roman. How are you?” My dad shook his hand.

“Good. Good. And you, Josef? Still working at the shop yard?”

“No. I found an office job now. A tie job.”

“Good. Good boy. You make good, hear?...Hey, Carl, long time, eh?” Mr. Zielinski grabbed my granddad’s arm and shook his hand vigorously. It seemed like Grandpa didn’t see him. Mr. Zielinski let go.

“And this is little Pauly? Jesus Christ. A big boy now, a strong boy. Last time, you were in diapers.”

This wasn’t true: only a year or two ago. But I smiled. His large beefy hand took mine in a handshake, just like I was a big person.

“Hi, Mr. Sparkyman.” That’s what I called him, what my grandpa called him for me, because he had a beautiful German Shepherd named Sparky. All of my dog memories started with this massive beast, clicking toenails on the apartment floor, knocking me down when I was very little, and slathering me with his tongue. I couldn’t stop laughing *Help! Help!*

There was another man, sitting at the kitchen table. I’d never seen him before. He was more my dad’s age. I didn’t hear his name. My dad seemed to know him, and gave him a short nod, but no handshake, no smile. The man had two missing fingers, and seemed mostly quiet.

Sparky lay on the floor, much older than I remembered him. He’d changed a lot: fat, and looking up at me with milky-blue cataract eyes. He was in the way of one of the kitchen chairs, and when he moved out of the way he hobbled. He lay down again in front of the kitchen door.

Sparkyman got out four brown bottles from the old fridge, the one with the round shoulders and a handle that latched. If my mom had been there she would never have let them drink beer so early. Especially Grandpa.

“One for you, Pauly?”

They all laughed and started talking in a thick Slavic tongue. I didn't understand a word, but I loved listening. Loved the music, the rhythm; understanding the words would have spoiled it. I sat beside Sparky and stroked the thick skin along his ribcage. And waited. I was anxious to get going, but knew it wouldn't be for a while yet. I started to fall asleep on Sparky.

When we all finally left, we went in separate cars. They left Sparky behind which made me disappointed and sad. He was the one closest to my age. I began feeling very small.

We went into the tunnel under the river. I always loved that. It was thrilling: the length and the curve, the darkness and the string of orange lights. I always imagined it no longer supporting the weight of the water above, and crashing down on us, washing us away like leaves.

I wanted them to hurry. We travelled through cow country. In the greyness, in the cold, the big animals seemed frozen; no chewing, just staring. We passed a lot of cows breathing out their steamy ghosts.

My granddad rubbed his hands, over and over, making noises with his voice: *nyaah aah*. He was starting to do that more and more.

“Could you stop that?”

He didn't seem to hear, just kept on. My dad glared ahead at the road, breathing out thick again. I watched my grandpa from the back seat.

When we reached the edge of the woods, I recognized it immediately. “Daddy, is this the place we got that tree?” The previous fall my dad took me to the same spot to dig up a birch whip, which he planted in our front yard.

“Same place, Paul...You can remember that?”

“Yep.” I nodded.

“Geez, that’s some memory you got.”

We went deep into the woods, mostly birch and maple. We walked on a carpet of damp red and yellow leaves. I liked the smell, it was sharp. It was like wet fur, like we were walking on the back of a large animal. The quiet was so overpowering that the men naturally talked in a hush. I stayed beside my dad. The men all carried wooden eleven-quart baskets. My job was to keep an eye on the ground for wild mushrooms.

“But don’t touch, Pauly. Some of them are poison.” And another thrill passed through me. Then I thought of the cream-of-mushroom soup my mom always made for me from a can. I loved that soup, especially speckled with pepper. How sure could I be that none of those mushrooms were poison?

We all took our own paths. I was with my dad. I wasn’t much good at finding mushrooms, so I looked for toads. My dad, though, had nearly a full basket after wandering for only a little bit, maybe less than an hour.

“Let’s go back to the rock.”

That was the meeting spot, their usual spot they said. When we got there, the man with the missing fingers was waiting, smoking a cigarette. His basket only had a few mushrooms in it. We sat on the huge rock, my dad hoisting me up. He lit a cigarette as well.

“How’s your dad doing?”

My father looked up at the treetops. He seemed annoyed by the question. “He’s o.k.” - then stayed silent, tried to let it drop.

“My dad tells me he’s been to the doctor’s a couple of times. That he might be going to stay at the hospital.”

“Just a check-up. It’s nothing,” he said, really irritated.

They both stared into the quiet.

As apology for his abruptness, my father offered: “He wanders, y’know. In his head. The doctor said it’s normal. It’s to be expected, y’know. Old age.”

The other man nodded. Then Sparkyman came rustling towards us, his basket full.

My dad jumped up. “Where’s *Da?* Isn’t my father with you? Where is he? I thought you two were together?”

“No. He wasn’t with me.”

My dad flushed, got a panicked look. He started to call:

“*Da?...Da?...*”

Then we all started:

“Grandpa, where are you?”

“Carl!...Carl!...”

I called “*Da?...Da?...*” too, and they laughed. I sulked.

The woods said nothing.

“We should all split up and search.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. You stay here. I’ll look for him,” my dad said. He was angry. Getting that look, breathing hard again.

“Christ, why does he do this to me?” he said to himself, out loud.

He was going to leave me at the rock, but thought twice about it, and so he took me with him. He seemed to know where.

“Daddy, where are we going?”

“A place Grandpa used to take me, when I was a boy. His favourite spot. He’s probably there.”

When we walked for a few minutes we came to a large algae-covered tree. He was there, sitting on a fallen log, rubbing his hands together, talking to the tree.

“...and then the mountains will crack open and all the animals of the world will come out like a river. Big cats, cats with one eye rolling round and round on their face. They’ll cover the walls...”

Rubbing and rubbing.

“*Da!...Da!...*” My dad tried to get his attention.

Grandpa looked at me, and his hand reached out.

“Josef?...”

“*Da!* I’m over here. That’s Pauly.”

He looked confused, and we helped him up. I took his empty basket. We went back to the rock. Sparkyman and his son didn’t say anything. They just looked away, not sure what to say. My dad still seemed angry. We weaved through the woods back to the cars. We said our good-byes, *see you, give us a call*, and watched Grandpa as he struggled into the car.

As we drove back toward the city, I leaned my head against the back-seat window. We passed a huge stone cross, fallen crooked, planted in a farmer’s field. The glass pressed cold against my face. It felt exactly like Grandpa’s hand.