

An excerpt from

The Silence of Trees

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There is a Ukrainian legend that once each year, on the night of Ivana Kupala, the chervona ruta, or red rue flower, blooms in the heart of the forest. Anyone who finds this rue will be granted their heart's desire: the ability to speak with animals, the power to make anyone fall in love with them, the magic to make barren lands bear fruit and barren women fruitful. It is a single red flower that can open the doorway to the past and awaken spirits to visit with loved ones—to say goodbye, apologize, or make peace.

I looked for the red rue when I was a young girl. I looked for it in many places, in different countries, over a lifetime. I eagerly went into the unknown, looking for magic, for mystery, for adventure. But sometimes magic finds you. Sometimes it comes in the least likely of forms: in a small black river rock, a deck of hand-painted cards, a sprig of purple herb or an envelope from home.

Just when you think that life is slowing down, magic happens. The universe sends you a message, like a red rue on your doorstep. The question is, what do you wish for?

At the age of sixteen, more than anything, I wanted to have my fortune told by the mysterious vorozhka, the Gypsy woman who was camped with her people on the outskirts of our

Ukrainian village. Mama expressed her disapproval countless times, but so many of the young women had gone before me and come back with astonishing stories. The vorozhka told Mariyka that she would travel across the sea in search of kisses heavy with perfume. She told Darka that she would find many children gathered around her feet on her father's farm. Even Natalia, who dreamt of going to school in L'viv to study languages, went to see the vorozhka who told her that she would soon ride a train heavy with hope. After finishing my chores, I would sit with Hvostyk purring in my lap and dream of the vorozhka's predictions. Day and night I wondered what she could tell me about my future.

After my best friend, Sonya, went to see the vorozhka, I thought that Mama would finally agree.

"Mama, Sonya's mother let her go to see the vorozhka. Her brother even kept watch as she walked through the woods to the Gypsy camp. And do you know what the vorozhka told her? She told Sonya that soon she would see everything lit up around her. That the night would be broken by light, and she would run into the arms of her husband. Who else could this be but Yaroslav? He often tends his father's sheep at night and carries a lantern? Mama, I need to go see the vorozhka to learn about my future. All the other girls have gone."

As I related the story, Mama never looked up from the bread dough she kneaded. I watched her strong hands squeeze the dough even harder as she said to me in that same tone reserved for scolding little children,

"Nadya, you will not go. I forbid it." Mama bit down on her lower lip, something that she always did when she was concentrating.

"Gypsies are dirty. They steal and lie. What kind of life is that? They have no home. No home, Nadya. Why do you think this is?"

Mama stopped to rub her brown eyes and left flour on her brow. She looked me in the eyes. “Why? Because they take all they can and leave before people realize they have been fooled. We are not fools. This vorozhka is a fake, she performs tricks, uses pretty words to steal money from hardworking people.”

Mama returned to her kneading, “Why, when I was a girl they came too. Marko Pavlyshyn had two cows and one horse stolen. Marusia Ivanovych had five chickens stolen that same night. The next morning when they went to find the Gypsies, they were gone. Coincidence? No, Nadya. Gypsies are dirty, they ride on a bad wind. You stay away from them and their enchantments.”

I ran out to the barn in tears and hid behind the cows. Visions of the vorozhka and her magical powers filled my daydreams. I wanted to learn about my future. I wanted to experience magic and mystery, as in the stories where the young girl, Vasylyna, would go to see the witch, Baba Yaga, in the forest. Yes, like Vasylyna the Brave, I wanted an adventure.

So on the night of the new moon, I had Gypsies on my mind as I walked to the barn to leave an offering for the dvorovy, the yard spirits. The sky was dark with early Spring but heavy with stars to light my path, as I walked to the stable. Around me, howling voices of wolves and the whir of bat wings traveled on the wind. After my sixteenth birthday, it became my task to leave the offerings; and even though I had watched Mama many times before, I was nervous. What if I did something wrong, and the spirits allowed harm to come to the cattle?

I pushed open the heavy door and peered into the blackness, permitting stray starlight to wrestle with the shadows. Each corner held secrets, each shape shifted in the light. I could feel cool air on the back on my neck. Breeze or breath? I didn't turn to check. As I walked through

the barn, I silently cursed the crunch of my feet on straw. Sleeping spirits did not like to be disturbed. I did not want to find their glowing eyes peering at me in the darkness.

At the eastern corner I stopped and knelt on the dirt floor. Hay cut into my bare knees; the smell of manure stung my nostrils. I reached into the napkin I carried and lifted out three slices of Mama's morning bread. Out of my pocket, I pulled the sheep's wool I had gathered earlier that day. I cleaned off a spot on the ground and set down the napkin, carefully placing on it the bread and wool.

I opened my palms above the offering and focused for a moment on my breath, steadied my heart, collected my voice,

“Dvorovyi, friendly neighbors, I offer you these gifts.”

I folded my hands, placed them in my lap, and closed my eyes.

“Be kind to the cattle and sheep, and watch over them. I thank you.”

I knelt in silence for a moment, hearing the scurrying of feet or claws or paws on straw. I listened to the door creak and bang against the barn wall, the soft neighing of horses, the distant chorus of creatures awakened by darkness. I could feel movement all around me.

A wave of wind rushed into the stable and caught in my hair, tossing it up and around into my face. But I remained seated with eyes closed, my hands still in my lap. Only when the wind ran away to other farms, when I felt the calm restored, only then did I open my eyes and rise to my feet.

I locked the door behind me and stepped toward the house. My fingertips tingled, and the air seemed lighter, brighter than before. My stomach growled, and I hurried toward home knowing that inside Mama would be preparing fruit compote. But before I reached the house, the winds returned and brought to me beautiful violin music. Music that suggested mystery, evoking

images of the vorozhka and the magic of her camp. Music that tempted me to follow. I looked quickly to the house and saw the hearthfire inside. Tato and Mama would expect me to linger outside. "Our Nadya lives in dreams," they always said. So I could steal away unnoticed for a few moments. I turned away from the house and toward the wind, urged on by the music.

Running quickly through the trees, I found myself at the edge of the forest, not remembering my path. As I stood hidden by thick branches, I saw in front of me a woman dancing in the shadows, a whirlwind of long layered skirts, her blouse buttoned to the neck while rows of beads caught shades of crimson, copper and gold from the flames as they rose and fell in rhythm. The music mingled with the cries of the forest, carried by the winds into the trees to blend with the running waters of the nearby stream.

In the distance, a man stared into the woods and sharpened his blade, which shone ruby red in the firelight. And though I knew he could not see me, I suddenly remembered stories Mama told me about Gypsies who kidnap young women to sell into slavery in far away lands. I shivered, savoring for a moment the thought of strong arms around me carrying me into a Gypsy wagon filled with perfumes and silks and furs. I would be forced to travel to exotic places where people played with monkeys and rode on top of elephants. They would teach me to dance and dress me up in long flowing silk gowns and gold chains. People would watch me and other women perform seductive dances, and they would shower our feet with coins and pearls. I would never have to dig in the dirt or clean up after the horses and cows. Mama and Tato would never again tell me what I could and could not do.

Mama and Tato! They would soon notice that I was gone. I turned away from the camp and faced the woods, angry for having to leave. How could this beautiful music be evil? This sad melody, so soft and familiar, that slid across my body and pulled at my chest with bittersweet

secrets ... how could the music be “bad” when it filled me with dreams of dancing and adventure? And how could the woman who danced like flames on the wind be “dirty”?

Straining my ears to keep the music with me as long as I could, I stumbled through the forest. It seemed to take twice as long for me to get home as it had to find the camp, but I wanted to remember each turn so that I could find my way again. I went to sleep that night planning my next visit to see the vorozhka. My dreams were filled with clapping hands, stomping boots and music so powerful that it painted pictures in the clouds and lifted me off the ground to dance on air.

Intoxicated by the chords of music that danced around my memory, I waited with impatience for the next full moon, watching the sky each night for the crescent to slowly fill. When it finally absorbed all the milk of heaven, I lay in bed waiting for my parents to go to sleep, watching as shadows poked their heads out from corners and then disappeared when I blinked them away.

I watched Mama and Tato’s nightly rituals from across the room, all the while pretending to be asleep in the bed my sisters and I shared. Even after our oldest sister Maria married, the little bed was still tight with three of us tucked inside, and I was always stuck in the middle.

Mama let down her hair and brushed it gently. Tato sharpened his knives for hunting. After he finished, he read aloud to Mama one of her favorite poems, “Seven Strings” by Lesia Ukrainka. Lesia’s words gave me courage as I waited for my parents to go to sleep,

"I have faith in that magic, faith in those powers,

Because with my heart I know them as true,

As oracle for these mysteries, these precious fantasies

With my sincerest heart, I welcome . . ."

My eyes grew heavy as I struggled to stay awake, lulled to sleep by Tato's voice and the sound of weary fingers rubbing against onion skin pages.

When I awoke, I was aware of silence in the room, except for occasional sighs of sleep. I carefully disentangled myself from my littlest sister Halya's embrace. She clung tightly to my waist, her head against my shoulder, as if I could keep her safe from the dreams which left her whimpering. I eased out from her arms and stepped onto the floor. Our little house had no room for secrets, and so I moved with cat's feet to gather everything I would need. A cloud slipped away from the full moon and her light shone bright on my sisters' faces.

Larissa lay on her side, facing the window. Little moans escaped her lips every few minutes, while in sleep, she wiped away strands of hair that covered her mouth and nose. Her beautiful long hair, brown with golden streaks from the sun, that she brushed one hundred times each night before she went to sleep, lay around her like Aunt Katia's hair when I found her drowned in the river. I shook away the memory and crossed myself for luck.

Halya lay curled in a ball, filling in the space I had left. Two tight, thin braids poked out from her head. She was always sad that her hair was so thin, just like Tato's. That night Halya slept silently, her lips half open, a flush on her cheeks. I hoped that she would not be troubled with the nightmares that usually filled her sleep. I would not be there to hold her while she trembled, to sing her back into dreams when she sometimes awoke screaming.

Deep in my stomach I felt a tugging toward them, back into the warm comfort of the down blanket Mama made for us last Christmas. I had never really disobeyed Mama or Tato before, and I hoped to go and return before they awoke. I had a question that drove my feet into boots warm from sitting beside the fire. A question that forced my hands to wrap my babushka tightly around my head. A questions that pulled me deep into the night.

I stepped outside, clutching in my mitten the small black stone I found on the riverbank after we buried Mama's youngest sister, my Aunt Katia. The night after her burial, I had convinced my older sisters, Maria and Larissa, to take me to the river to offer flowers to the rusalky. According to legend, all women who drowned would become transformed into one of these river spirits, beautiful maidens who bewitched passers-by with their voices. I imagined Katia as a rusalka, face aglow with moonlight, delicate shards of music slipping off her tongue to pierce their hearts and lure them to their deaths.

While Maria and Larissa leaned against the trees talking about how Mama could not sleep from grief, I set the flowers on the water. It was after I stepped back that I saw the glittering stone on the bank, a piece of night sky filled with stardust that settled perfectly into my palm when I lifted it away from the river. I felt Aunt Katia near me and heard silver bells on the waves; so I carried the stone home and set it beside our bed.

Although she did not tell me until I was older, that same night after we visited the river, Mama had a dream. In it, Aunt Katia's ghost stood over my bed, touched my forehead and said, "This one hears my voice on the night air, I will watch over her."

Mama said that Aunt Katia would do all that she could to protect me, I need only follow the river.

So I kept the stone with me for good luck, and that is why I carried it for protection the night I went to see the vorozhka. It rested inside my palm, beside a tiny gold earring I had found along the path to Sonya's house last month. The earring was going to be my payment for the vorozhka's fortune-telling.

I stopped to peer into the frost-covered window where my family lay sleeping, then turned away, tightly clutching my black stone. My nose grew numb in the breath of twilight. As I

walked past the barn toward the woods, I focused on the stone in my hand and the light of the moon on the path. I remembered stories that Baba had told me while I sat on the floor watching her embroider beautiful red and black patterns on cloth. Stories about the Lisovyk who lived in dense forests. I could still hear her voice in my ear:

“Little Nadya, you must always be careful in the woods, because that is where the Lisovyk lives, and he is a tricky spirit. Why... he casts no shadow! The light of the moon is swallowed in his long white beard. His blood is blue like the winter sky, and so his skin glows with a deep blue light that you can see in the heavy darkness of the forest. His big green eyes will open wide when he sees you, and if you see him they POP out!

"Yes, yes, the Lisovyk is tricky. He changes his size a hundred times in one night. One minute he is tall like the oak, and the next minute he hides behind a mushroom. You will see the light flicker from his skin as he runs around the trees. He wears his clothes backwards and puts the left shoe on the right foot and the right shoe on the left.

"But do not laugh, my little mouse, because the Lisovyk is proud. He will lead you in circles and make you lose your way in the forest. If this ever happens, listen to me, this is what you must do. Sit down on the trunk of an old tree. Take off all your clothes and put them on backwards. Do not forget to put the left shoe on the right foot and the right shoe on the left. This is important, little one, do not forget the shoes. Only then will the Lisovyk lead you back to where you want to go. But do not laugh at him if you see him, or you will be lost in the forest forever.”

I smiled, remembering Baba Hanusia, Mama’s mother, who lived with us until she died. I missed her stories and her warm hugs. As I passed the creek, I heard the murmur of water against rocks, like whispering voices. I began to hum softly to myself so that the rusalky who lived in the

creek would not enchant me with their songs. Aunt Katia could not protect me from the spells of her sisters of the water.

Luckily, Sonya had forewarned me that I would need to bring the vorozhka an offering. She also told me that the Gypsy woman would be sitting near the fire through the night of the full moon, because it was her job to keep the rest of the Gypsies safe on nights when magic was very strong. I clutched the stone in my mitten, trying to avoid the dark corners of the forest which seemed to swell against the glow of the moon.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose, and an eerie silence grew out from the shadows, broken only by the sound of my quiet humming. As the leaves broke their hold on the sky, I saw the shudder of a campfire, but no beautiful woman sat beside it. My eyes adjusted to the light of the fire as I watched flames twist around the wood. Smoke smeared my view of the camp into a haze. I tried to blink into clarity the smudged impressions of ragged horses beside wagons, paint flaked and peeling. In my ears, neighing blended with snores and sighs from nearby tents. I closed my eyes to savor the spiced breath of the night: spilled wine, woody musk, and budding night flowers.

Then behind me, fingers dug into my shoulders and spun me around as I struggled not to fall. I opened my eyes and stared into the face of the Gypsy woman. The same woman I had seen dancing several weeks before, but somehow not the same. Where were her beautiful clothes? She wore mismatched rags, like those my mother would sometimes wear around the house: a torn shirt of blue and white flowers, a skirt of red and yellow stripes. The colors, which may have once been bright, were now muted by blotches of dirt. Her hair hung in heavy clumps around her thin face. I dropped my gaze to her bare feet, so tiny. Smaller than little Halya's feet. How could a grown woman have such small feet? Then I noticed the blood.

Her feet were covered with scratches; the stains on her clothes were a mixture of dirt and blood, fresh blood that continued to spread across the dull patches of color. Her torn blouse revealed bruises on her neck and chest. And her face. Even in the dark I could see blotches covering her cheeks, forehead and chin. What had happened to this woman? We had both walked alone through the same woods.

I wanted to ask her if she had been hurt, offer some kind of help. Should I extend my arm for her to lean on or give her the handkerchief that I carried tucked inside my boot? Instead I stood there in silence, staring into those black eyes that watched me with contempt and rage.

She pushed me, then dropped her hold. Stepping backward, she wrapped her arms around her chest and raised her head to stare almost above me, into the night beyond my right shoulder. Firelight caught the features of her face, and beneath the dirt and blood, I saw a plum crescent birthmark that stretched from the corner of her left eyebrow to the crease of her lips. I took in a deep breath, and the Gypsy brought her hand to her face, catching my stare.

Baba told me to respect those who had been marked for a special life, even if the rest of the world hated and feared them. Baba would stretch the neck of her blouse open to show me the tiny brown birthmark shaped like a foot on her shoulder, caused by the “guardian angel who stood there when she was born.” So the Gypsy had also been born with a sign, setting her apart from the others, marking her for a life of fortune telling and magic.

Russian words heavy with a foreign accent seemed to grow in her mouth until she was forced to spit them out in a gasp, "Why have you come here?" Avoiding my eyes, she stared above and beyond me. The only words I could mutter in my Ukrainian tongue were those I had practiced every night for two weeks while lying in my bed,

"I came to have my fortune told. Can you h-h-help me?"

The wind shifted, bringing her smell to me: sweat, blood, urine; heavy scents, sour and metallic like those that filled the barn after Tato butchered runts of the litter. She exhaled deeply and rubbed her hands along her arms.

“Of course.” She laughed to herself and looked up to the moon. “Of course that it why she came. To see the 'Gypsy' in the forest.” Her hands smoothed her skirts and settled into fists.

“Are you frightened? Scared of the lady covered in blood?” She began to wave her hands in front of her in circular motions and lowered her voice to a raspy whisper. “Ooh, this ‘Gypsy’ must have been doing something ‘bad’ in the woods. Black magic. Maybe dancing with the dark god?” She stopped for a long second, then looked into my eyes,

“Are you sure you should be here, *gadji*?”

Fear blew through me, catching the cold in my bones, strengthening my shiver. For a moment, I heard Mama’s voice as if she stood beside me, “Be careful, Nadya. Come home. Don’t trust her, she is a Gypsy. It is all a trick. You will disappear into the night, and I will never see you again.” I clenched my fists and bit my lower lip.

The vorozhka raised her eyebrows and took a step toward me. “What is the matter, peasant girl? Are you scared that I am going to have my brothers steal you?” She wiped blood off her lips, rubbed her eyes.

Then she stepped around me and closer to the fire. She was shivering. Dark circles hung under her eyes, and blood streamed in thin lines from the right side of her temple down her face. Her Gypsy face: hollow and full of shadows. . .and young. Not much older than my Ukrainian face: lighter and rounder, surrounded by brown hair woven into one neat braid.

“That is all you girls come here for. To see the mysterious Gypsy camp. To have your fortunes told.” She spit on the ground. “Your people only come here when they want something. Or someone to blame.”

I stood watching her as she rubbed her hands up and down her arms, arms covered with fine, black hair. I whispered, “What happened?”

She lowered her eyes. Her voice angry as she mocked me, “What happened?”

Looking around, she calmed herself and lowered her voice, “What happened? New soldiers arrived in the neighboring village. They decided to explore the woods—”

“Soldiers,” I interrupted. “What kind of soldiers?”

She looked into my eyes. Again the hairs on my neck rose.

“Soldiers are soldiers. They fight. Their life is war. And we. . . what are we in war? Things to be moved, broken, used, thrown away, claimed by whichever side comes through our camp.

“My family, we travel far. We see how this war breaks people and land. We pass empty villages. We see pits they dig for bodies. We know the death smell.” She rubbed her hands together. “We come here...to seek a quiet place. I went too far from camp.” She laughed bitterly. “I thought I would be safe in the woods.”

I shook my head, not comprehending. She almost smiled.

“Poor stupid girl, you don’t understand.” Sighing heavily, she turned around to face the fire. I gasped when I saw the gash that divided her blouse in half, lines of blood criss-crossing like embroidery on silk. She continued, “Five of them. They threw me on the ground. Laughing. Shouting, ‘You like it, Gypsy bitch. Bark for us. Lick it. This is your lucky night.’” Her voice

cracked, and she shuddered. “I tried to bite them. Hit them. Scratch them. They beat me. Two held me down. They—”

Suddenly she turned around to face me, tears in her eyes. “Now do you understand?” She shook her head. “Probably not.” The Gypsy picked up her skirts in her left hand and turned toward the river.

“Wait here, peasant girl.” She wiped her face. “I am *drabarni*, a vorozhka. I will read your fortune.” She looked around the camp. “But first I need to clean myself in your river. Be quiet. You do not want to wake my brothers.”

She walked away.

I held my breath, feeling my chest tighten as I watched her back recede into the forest. When she finally merged with the trees, I exhaled, my hands cupping my nose and mouth, afraid even to make a whimper. What if the soldiers were still nearby? What if her brothers awoke? I sat down and looked around. Each time the moon crept out from the clouds, shadows darted along the campsite. Light would linger on dirty clothes and dishes arranged in strange, neat little piles. Firelight blurred with moonlight on the dull surfaces of the metal washtubs stacked beside an old maple tree. I looked around for cut wood for the fire but could not find any.

Such a woman, this Gypsy. So strong. That she could gather up her skirts and walk to her family’s camp with her head up, wiping away blood. Who was I next to her? She was right. I was only a peasant girl. What could have brought me away from the safety of my family?

Then I remembered why I had disobeyed Mama, why I had crept through these woods. I needed to ask the vorozhka if Stephan and I would marry.

He seemed so far away from me as I sat in the Gypsy camp, and I knew he’d be furious if he knew I’d come alone. Especially if he knew about the soldiers. They must have been Russian.

Tato said he heard rumors that Russian soldiers planned to reclaim the land from the Germans, but Tato had shrugged these stories away. Ever since the Germans closed down the schools and libraries, information became more and more difficult to learn from the outside. So rumors hung on every tongue. But if they were Russian soldiers, I wondered how their return would affect Stephan.

I remembered how the German soldiers came to our village two years ago during the hot summer. They gathered all the young men, including Stephan and his brother, for three weeks of "training". When he returned, Stephan wore the uniform of German police, his eyes darker, heavier; scars on his hands and face. His brother never came back.

When Uncle Vasyl spat at him and called him a traitor, I could only clench my fists. Stephan's skin lost its rosy color, the laugh lines vanished from around his eyes, his lips. His "training" had silenced the music that once filled his face. After putting on that uniform, he never again picked up his guitar. I can't even remember him laughing. Never aloud, only chancing a few careful smiles with me. Stephan would not tell me what happened during those three weeks. He never talked about the missions he would be sent on, when he would be gone from the village for weeks. I searched his scars for clues, peered into his eyes for pictures, but they never came. He was closed to me.

I felt my shoulders and neck tighten with the cold that crept onto the campsite as the flames began to die down to a flicker. I thought perhaps I could gather wood for the fire, but no sooner had I lifted myself up, then I saw the Gypsy returning from the river, carrying firewood. She walked toward the camp, and I was mesmerized by the thrusting, swinging motion of her hips. When she walked, she led with her pelvis in a motion both awkward and graceful. Small feet followed her hips through the grasses; her shoulders and arms an afterthought in movement.

She was beautiful and terrifying. The vorozhka had a warrior's spirit. Baba had talked about it, told me stories of women who rode the steppes with long swords strapped to their backs in days long ago. They would return after dying in battle to live a new life fighting for their freedom and their families. This Gypsy was such a woman.

She stopped beside me, near the dying embers, and put the logs on the fire, blowing the flames into life. Her clothes were wet but rid of most of the blood. Her hair smelled of the stream, and I wondered how she had escaped the rusalky but did not ask.

I was puzzled by her calm. She stood aglow with fire that shimmered in her skirts, her fingers, her eyes, her hair. I wanted to touch her, to see if she was real, embrace her and tell her that I was sorry for all that had happened to her, but she frightened me. And she was proud . . . a vorozhka with the spirit of a warrior. I was only a peasant girl.

She leaned over me and pulled a shawl out of a dark satchel hidden beside a log. I was struck by the beautiful scarlet and silver flowers embroidered on the black cloth that shimmered in the light. She pulled the shawl tightly around her shoulders and picked up the satchel, tying it to her waist. Only then did she turn her gaze back toward me and said bitterly,

“So, you are still here. My brothers did not find you and take you into the woods.”

I stumbled on my words, “I’m sorry. I-I came to ask—”

She interrupted me, “About love, yes? All you girls running into the night aflame with love. Do you know that all around you trains carry people away? To be shot, burned, tortured.” She sat in front of the fire and motioned for me to sit down next to her. I could smell a perfume, like berries and mint, on the scarf around her shoulders. She continued, “Each girl thinks that time stops death for passion. Well, I will read for you, but my hands shake with what I know. If

you saw with my eyes.” She sighed. “If you saw with my eyes, then you would seek different answers.”

She rubbed her hands together over the fire and said, “First, my payment, peasant girl.”

I gave her the gold earring. She put it between her teeth, biting down. Then she lifted it closer to her eyes.

“This is all you have for me?”

I nodded, panic spreading through me.

“Very well. I will read for you.”

She pulled something out of the satchel and began to unwrap a set of cards from the scarlet silk cloth that held them together. Her gestures stretched into my thoughts until all I saw was the movement of her body in the night. She placed the silk on the ground in front of her and handed me the deck. I began to look through the cards, pausing to admire each one. They were beautiful, covered in pictures of kings and queens dressed in fancy clothes of bright colors and gold. Each card told a story, and I wanted to savor them all. Holding them, I felt carried away into another land; the pictures danced in my mind, stories unfolding. Only the icons in St. Sophia's Church could compare with these hand-painted cards. The vorozhka placed her hand over mine and said,

“No. Not for your eyes to admire. You would get lost. Just shuffle them back and forth, placing one hand over the other. Think about the question that drew you out from your bed and carried you here.”

I closed my eyes, feeling her warmth still on the cards, and pictured Stephan in his uniform, swinging me around, his arms at my waist. Shuffling the cards, I remembered how he would wait outside Teacher's house to walk me home. I could feel my cheeks in a half grin as I

thought of how handsome he looked in his crisp, dark uniform, his boots shiny like coal. His dark brown hair tossed about like young stalks of wheat in the wind. I could almost smell the leather strap that held his gun when I would throw my arms around him, as he whirled me around and around. He would say in that deep voice,

“My precious Nadya. What have you to share with me today?”

He would set me down and take my books into his arms, watching my lips as I told him of that day’s lesson, interrupting me with quick kisses, then urging me to continue. The right side of his lips would hint at a smile, the small dimple hidden there almost revealed as I jumped about with excitement because I had learned a new thread of history or a new poem by Taras Shevchenko.

“Your face is on fire when you come back from Teacher, Nadya.” And he would draw in a deep breath, “You are so beautiful.”

Then I would blush under his dark brown eyes. Baba used to say that dark eyes were enchanting, they held the magic of the night. Would I marry this man, spend my life with him?

The Gypsy again put her hand on top of mine, took the cards and started to lay them out on the silk in a pattern of lines and crosses. When I began to ask her a question, she looked at me sternly and brought her finger up to her lips.

“I need silence to tell your story, peasant girl.”

I grew braver, “My name is Nadya.”

“You are gadji, not Gypsy.” She didn’t look up.

I watched strands of moonlight wrap around her as she created images on silk before me, stained glass gods and goddesses glowing in the fire's light. She spoke their names as she turned each card over. They sounded like poetry or a prayer.

“Lovers, Queen of Swords, Star, Emperor, Page of Cups, Devil, Seven of Cups, Tower, Sun, Ten of Coins.”

After laying out the ten cards, she closed her eyes and took my hand, and I jumped. Her palm was cool and dry, mine was sweaty and warm. The vorozhka drew several deep breaths. The air pressed down around me as I waited for her to speak. When my lungs began to hurt, I realized that I had been holding my breath. I exhaled, watching her face in the fire. The smell of coming rain hung in the air.

The vorozhka finally opened her eyes, and I watched her lashes separate with moisture between them. She pulled back her hands and brushed her hair away from her face.

“My name is Liliana,” she said. “I will read your fortune.”

Liliana peered into my eyes. “Understand me, these are not tricks. Not games I play to take your riches.” She held the gaze in silence, and then continued, “This is the story of your life. A story that unfolds in these cards painted for my mother by a man who loved her many years ago. A story that I see in these images. In your eyes.”

"Let me explain this story as simply as I can. Nadya, your heart is filled with love and dreams of romance. You live in a world of fantasy, but your beliefs will soon be tested. Lurking nearby is tragedy, separation. Loneliness will chase away your spirit of hope. This is true, this will happen.

"In the future, I see warmth, stability, a large family. You will cling to them and give your heart away to those you love. This is true. But first there will be death and deception. A breaking away from your past.”

“Nadya, you will need to walk away from here, but do not forget where you came from. You will need to learn how to open your heart again, once the silence slips in. Remember how to forgive. Others *and* yourself.”

Liliana squeezed my hand gently, “In the future, you will have a choice. You will find yourself completely shaken. Stand still and die alone, or move forward and find happiness. Nadya, even trees know how to dance in the wind.”

I looked again at the cards before me; and out of the corner of my eye, I noticed rose streaks creeping out from the east and stretching across the sky amidst dark clouds, violet in the light of the coming sun. If I didn’t return home quickly, Mama and Tato would know that I had been gone all night. I quickly stood up.

“Liliana, thank you.”

She opened her eyes and nodded in my direction.

“Be careful, peasant girl. Nadya. Yours is not an easy path. Those boots brought you here. They will carry you far away, but the steps you walk are familiar. Remember the roots of home, or you will always be searching. Remember, sometimes to leave is to find yourself.”

We looked at each other in silence before I turned and walked quickly toward the forest. Only a few steps into the woods, I caught the smell of something burning in the distance and began to run toward my parents’ farm.

I strained my eyes to see the source of the smoke beyond the forest, my heart beating fiercely in my chest. What could have happened while I was away? I left no candles burning. I had shut the door behind me.

My hand went up to my neck to clutch the crucifix I had been given at my christening, and I said a prayer amidst gasps for breath as I ran, “Guardian Angel, please watch over my

family. Please keep them safe.” I watched patches of sky through the leaves grow brighter as the sun began to rise.

I smelled burning wood and flesh before I reached the end of the forest. Then I saw the barn being devoured by fire. Flames shot up from dark pools that reflected the colors of the sky. The sides and bottom already black, large holes revealed animals on fire. I watched smoke rush out, saw cows trying to get through the flames. Those that tried to escape were struck through by sharp pieces of burning wood planks. Those that remained, collapsed from the smoke. I could smell them as the flames consumed their flesh.

I stood paralyzed, listening to the animals scream. The deep moan of the cows as they fell to the ground. The cries of the sheep, like children. The sound of flames like raging, angry winds rushing through the barn filled my mind. Where was my family? Why didn't they come to stop the fire?

Thoughts raced through my mind. I could not stand there and do nothing. In my mind, I saw soldiers murdering my family, raping my sisters, stealing all our belongings. I had to do something. I ran back into the woods, heading south to the Bilyks' farm. But when I got there, only ashes and the charred frame of their house and barn remained. I found no trace of the Bilyk family.

My knees collapsed, and I fell to the ground and wept. I wanted to scream, to wail, but fear of more soldiers nearby held my voice inside my throat. Instead, I clenched my fists and pounded them against the ground, ripping out large clumps of grass and digging my knuckles into the soil. Why had my prayers gone unanswered? Was it because I had disobeyed?

My skin tingled with fear and grief. Even before I felt the rains, I heard the rhythm of large drops around me. Then cold taps covered me, like my mother's fingers on the back of my

neck, like my sister's hard kisses on my cheek. I could smell wet greenery around me, mingling with smoke and burning wood. I could feel my clothes and hair, heavier with the weight of water. In the sky, sunshine and rain. My breaths settled into staggered gasps. I clutched my shaking knees as I tried to stand.

I walked quickly back into the forest, toward the house. The nearest farm after the Bilyk's was Sonya's family's farm, and I could only get to them on the main road. First, I would have to check and see where the soldiers came from. If they came from the woods...I shuddered. If they came from the woods, then the road would be safe. But if they came down the road, then I had no hope of reaching Sonya's unnoticed.

Thoughts kept rushing through my mind. Pictures of Mama dead, blood trickling from her lips, clotting in her soft, brown hair. I could feel my head pounding, my stomach curling up. I saw her clearly, even as the trees blurred in the rain, even as the world around me faded into one of Halya's nightmares. I felt it. I felt it deep inside of me. She had been killed. I would never see her again, never feel her hug me, never hear her quietly sing, never see the wrinkles in her eyes when she laughed. A scream welled up in my throat, and I forced myself to keep walking. Maybe if I hadn't gone. Maybe if I had stayed awake, watching the moon, I could have seen the soldiers. What if everyone were dead? What about little Halya? Oh, God. Halya. I brought my hands up to wipe away the tears and the rain.

Suddenly I saw Stephan ahead of me, blocking the road to the house. He stood in his uniform, his hands open to me, and I ran to him and collapsed.

"Oh God, Stephan...the fire, the barn." I couldn't get the pictures out of my head. I couldn't stop shaking. "Soldiers are here. Mama...she's dead. I know it. Stephan. Mama. Halya. Help them...we have to help them."

He stood there without words, holding me, but his arms felt stiff, his embrace not tight as usual. I pushed myself away and looked into his eyes, struggling not to fall, the mud slippery, my legs trembling.

“Say something.” I threw my arms up into the air and brought my hands down in fists. “Say something. My family is dead or dying, and you haven’t said anything. We need to help them, Stephan. What should we do? Where should we go?”

“Nadya, we need to leave.” He avoided my eyes. “The Russians are coming.”

For a moment I stood there, not understanding his words. Coming?

“No, Stephan. They are already here. The barn, Mama, Tato—”

He shook his head and looked down at his boots.

“Oh, God.” My stomach cramped, and I turned away from him to throw up into the bushes. I bent over clutching my stomach, the throbbing in my head even louder. If the Russians were not here yet, then it was the Germans who had burned down the farm. The Germans. I started to scream and beat my fists against Stephan. He grabbed me tightly and cupped his hand over my mouth. I bit him, tasting blood, but he continued to hold back my scream. I shook my head back and forth trying to free my voice.

“If you scream, then they will come for both of us.” He waited a moment and released me, and I stepped away from him.

“Why didn’t you warn us? Why didn’t you stop them? You wear their uniform. You must have known. How could you, Stephan? I-I could have been inside.” I watched his face. Nothing. No expression even in his eyes. Anger clenched my jaw and tightened my chest until I was speaking in gasps. “I could have been inside, Stephan.”

He went to hold me.

“Don’t you touch me,” I said, pulling away, “I don’t know you.”

“Nadya, I didn’t know. They didn’t tell us. As soon as I saw smoke I ran to find you. When I saw the barn and house on fire—”

“The house? Oh, my God. I only saw the barn on fire. I have to get them out.” I made a motion toward the house, but he grabbed my left arm.

“Nadya, I looked inside the house. I looked for you. Your family was taken away. There’s nothing for you there.”

“You saw them being taken away? Why didn’t you stop them?” I tried to shake off his grip, but he held firmly to my arm.

“I’m one man against twelve. I could do nothing. When I didn’t see you being led away, I thought they had killed you. I thought you were dead, my Nadya.” He pulled me to him, holding me tightly, but I stood there stiff. My head against his chest, I listened to his words, hearing his heart beating through his uniform. Hating his uniform, trying not to hate him.

He continued, “I looked in the house, but you weren’t there. I was going into the woods to look for you, when I saw you coming down the path. Precious Nadya, I’m so glad that you’re alive.”

I could say nothing. An emptiness settled into my chest that swallowed all the pain. I could only stand there and be held as the rain pounded down on my face.

The line of time blurs with age, leaving only certain points pronounced in memory. The road away from my parents’ home is a fog of bitterness and regret, but the day when Stephan was taken away is painfully clear. We had been given shelter in a small Slovak village by an

elderly couple who had lost their own son in the war. Jan and his wife allowed us to sleep in their barn in exchange for a few days' labor on their farm.

The evening before his capture, Stephan and I sat sipping burned coffee in the old couple's home. I had felt his anger but could say nothing. Neither word nor affection had passed between us since we left my family's farm. He had begged me to go outside with him, to talk away from the old couple's ears. How he pleaded, and he looked so ragged, stripped of the polish of his uniform. His pants ripped at the knees, his shirt soiled down his back and under his arms.

When I finally agreed, we went outside and sat beneath a large fir tree. I was so afraid and felt so alone. I wanted the nightmare to go away.

Stephan had taken my hand, "Nadya, what would you have me do? I love you. I couldn't have stopped them. Are you going to damn me like everyone else?"

He looked so broken, so vulnerable that I wanted to kiss him then. Bury my face in his chest, have him hold me as everything else faded away.

"Nadya, did I choose to wear that uniform? Even now, after we buried it, I still feel it. I can't get rid of it."

He stroked the beard brought on by weeks of travel. I had never kissed him with a beard, he had always been cleanly shaven, his face smooth. This was not a face I knew. Everything was foreign now.

"Do you hear me? You just stare at me with those big green eyes like I'm a monster. I didn't kill your family. I have enough guilt without that on my head."

I clenched my fists. My family. Killed. As he watched. I wanted to spit in his face. Curse him for not saving them. Curse him for taking me away from everything.

"God, you can't imagine what I've seen. What I've been forced to do. Nadya, I am so ashamed. I try to escape in dreams, but even they are filled with blood. So much blood on my hands." He buried his face in his hands, his fingers pulling at his hair. I wanted to scream and weep at the same time. Cry in his arms. Push him away.

I could smell his breath, mint and coffee. I wanted to take his hand, trace the scars on his wrist with my tongue. Taste his skin. Rub my lips against the soft hairs of his arm.

"If there is a Hell, this war will fill it with people like me." Stephan looked at me. He had such long eyelashes for a man. I knew that he wanted me to say something, do something.

But I did nothing.

Instead I watched the shadow of leaves on his thigh, his hand resting there, scars on his knuckles, his fingers. Scars he could not cover. The winds brushed through the long stalks of grass, the sound of it like hushed murmurs. Like prayers. But I had not found my voice.

While I sat staring off into the hills, Stephan's fingers brushed against my lips. Part of me lay buried under the ashes of my family's barn; yet no matter how much I had tried to hide inside myself, I wanted so much to be touched, to feel alive. He was all I had now.

When I felt his fingers on my lips, I kissed them despite myself. Closing my eyes, I bent back my head and inhaled deep and long, taking in the sweetness of raspberries crushed underfoot and the dark, moist smell of sweat and dirt. His fingers lingered on my lower lip before sliding slowly down my chin, down the center of my neck, stopping at the hollow above my collarbone.

He leaned over and kissed me in a moment I wished would last forever because everything else faded away, but the old couple shouted for us to come back inside the house. Then the soldiers came. We tried to hide Stephan under the table, but they found him.

Laughter. Loud laughter as Soviet soldiers stood inside the old couple's house. Their faces were like my brothers. Not the angled, blond faces of the Germans, but brown Slavic faces, thick eyebrows, full lips, black hair. Calloused hands, nails caked with dirt. Smell of sweat and manure worn into their skin. Faces like Tato's. Like Stephan's. Mixed up words in the Russian tongue,

“...punish traitors...abandoned Motherland...liberate...dog sleeping under table...worthless...traitor...good dog...broken but useful...”

Then a whirl of fists and blood. Stephan thrown around the room, his face battered, his body beaten.

There is a story that is told, that some men have inside of them a beast who comes out in rage or on nights of the full moon, to eat human flesh, to terrorize villagers. I remember watching the soldiers' straight postures transform into those of bears and wolves as they pounded Stephan's face again and again. They grunted and growled, hitting Stephan in the chest, in the belly, in the back. And when he fell to the ground in pain, all three soldiers snarling and spitting, continued to kick him.

Then the soldier with the crooked mouth had slithered toward me. His breath foul. Alcohol and garlic. His lips caked with food, spit and dirt.

“Pretty little bird...hold her tight...good hips...firm breasts...fine stock...hold her...that's a good girl...open your eyes...such nice skin...I'll be back for you...”

I watched from the doorway as the soldiers dragged Stephan down the path. His hair was matted with blood over his left ear, blood that trickled down his neck and soaked through the collar of his shirt like sloppy embroidery.

The last to leave was the commander, who turned and smiled at me, “We’ll be back for you, little bird.” Then he slammed the door behind him. I stepped up to open it, but the old man who lived in the cottage reached across me and bolted it shut.

In shock, I stood for a moment looking at the grains in the wood. There were faces and animals. I could see an entire story hidden in the tree that became the door of this old couple’s home. I wondered if either of them had ever seen the characters in the wood.

“Come, girl.” The old woman put her arm around my waist and nudged me gently toward the table. “Poor girl. Come sit down, and I will brew you some fresh kava.”

As I walked, I cradled Stephan's overcoat. All I had left of him.

Jan, the old woman's husband, sat down at the table and turned to his wife.

“Let her be.” He said, shaking his head. “They take her husband out to be killed, and you serve her coffee?”

Not my husband, I thought. I used Stephan’s name so they wouldn’t separate us. I decided to never again use my father’s name, and I never did. I wanted no harm to befall my family, if they somehow survived. The Russians would not connect them with a daughter who has run away with a German policeman. Even if that police officer was taken to be killed by Soviet patriots in a remote Slovak village. How could they know?

I allowed myself to be led to the table by the old woman and sat down in the same spot as before. Before the soldiers came. Before they took Stephan away.

Jan’s wife glared at him. I looked at Jan, who seemed to shrivel in size with the exit of the soldiers. His shoulders slumped, his head sunk down and his hands trembled even more as he pulled out his pipe.

“You do not know that they will kill him. They talked of digging ditches,” his wife hissed while preparing the coffee.

Jan began to refill his pipe, “Don’t talk fairy tales, wife. You know what it means. We’ve seen the graves. You’ve seen them.” He looked at me and continued, “You should know what happens. So you don’t wonder. Forget about hope.”

I felt a chill. The icy wind still circled even though the door was shut.

“They first tell the men to dig deep ditches. Next they order them to strip--”

“Jan! This is not the time—”

Time. I had no more time. Soldiers took that and everything else away from me. And always excuses to cover the graves. First Russians killed Dido and Uncle Ivan. Not starvation, they said. Collectivization. A plan. Always a plan. What excuses for the Germans who murdered Mama, Tato, Larissa, Halya? And now, again, the Russians. Now they took away Stephan.

Time. Where was my past? My future? The vorozhka was right. What are we in war? Things. To be broken. Used. Thrown away. I had no more time. I had nothing. I couldn’t even feel anything. Just dead inside.

“Shut up, old woman. She should know the truth. She is alone now.” Jan stared at me.

I looked down at Stephan’s coat. Why did I let him leave it with me? He would need it out there. I was warm in this little house. I pulled at my ripped blouse trying to bring the two sides together.

“I’ll sew that for you, dear.” The old woman said, noticing my efforts.

“Don’t interrupt me, wife.” He continued, “Listen to me, girl. The soldier will order them to strip. Then tell them to turn around and face the ditches...”

Feeling the ache in my right eye, I gently touched the bruise on my cheek. There was a little blood on my hand when I pulled it away.

"...Then they are shot. They have dug their own graves. Unless the soldiers use their swords. That is how they killed our son. But he was one of the Hlinka Guards."

I looked under the table and realized what a tiny spot it had been for Stephan to hide in. He must have been very cramped, especially with his bad knees. How could we have thought they wouldn't find him under the table? Even with the tablecloth, it would be the most obvious hiding place. Poor Stephan.

Jan pounded his fist on the table, "Listen to me, girl. Listen to me because I know about war and death. The man you love is gone. Forget him now, or he'll haunt you forever."

He shook his finger at my face, "You can sit there silent for a while, but you better let that pain out. Cry if you have to. Scream if that's what's inside. If you let death take away your voice, you'll be looking for it your whole life."

He glared at me, then reached out for his wife's hand. She walked over and took it. He continued, "War brings death too soon. Get used to it. You are alone now."

I rested my elbows on the table and buried my face in my hands. I had been alone since I left Mama and Tato to see the vorozhka. Even on the long road here to Slovakia, even with Stephan walking beside me, I was alone.

The old woman whispered, "Jan, enough."

I saw the spilt coffee on the ground, coffee the soldiers spilled when they ripped the cloth off the table. I reached over to lift up a rag from the corner. After carefully hanging the overcoat on the back of the chair, I knelt down beside the table and dabbed at the small puddles, watching my shadow repeat my actions. I stared at her, my dark twin, pulling me away from the old

couple, pulling me into a world flattened into ashes. A world blunted into shadows, not sharp with pain and guilt.

The cottage air suddenly seemed too thick, the tobacco too heavy, the voices too familiar. I stood up, reaching again for Stephan's coat.

"I need to go outside." I said, aching for the openness of sky.

"It's the middle of the night, you shouldn't go alone," Jan's wife said in protest.

"I *am* alone." I unlocked the door and walked outside.