

ENCHANTMENT

ORSON SCOTT CARD



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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Orson Scott Card



BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

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*For Kristine
All these years after that first kiss,
and still the magic grows*

Leaves

I'm ten years old, my whole life you've called me Vanya. My name is on the school records, on government papers as Ivan Petrovich Smetski. Now you tell me I'm really Itzak Shlomo. What am I, Jewish secret agent?"

Vanya's father listened silently, his face as smooth, weathered, and blank as parchment. Vanya's mother, who was merely hovering near the conversation rather than taking part in it, seemed to be having a little trouble keeping herself from smiling. In amusement? If so, at what? At Vanya? At her husband's sudden discovery of their intense commitment to Judaism?

Whatever the cause of her almost-smile, Vanya did not want to be ridiculous. Even at the age of ten, dignity was important to him. He calmed himself, spoke in more measured tones. "We eat pork," he pointed out. "*Rak. Caviar.*"

"I think Jews can eat caviar," offered his mother helpfully.

"I hear them whispering, calling me *zhid*, they say they only want to race with Russians, I can even *run* with them," said Vanya. "I've always been the fastest runner, the best hurdler, and yesterday they wouldn't even let me keep time. And it's my stopwatch!"

"Mine, actually," said Father.

"The principal won't let me sit in class with the other children because I'm not a Russian or Ukrainian, I'm a disloyal foreigner, a Jew. So why don't I know how to speak Hebrew? You change everything else, why not that?"

Father looked up toward the ceiling.

"What is that look, Father? Prayer? All these years, whenever I talk too much, you look at the ceiling—were you talking to God then?"

Father turned his gaze to Vanya. His eyes were heavy—scholar's eyes, baggy and soft from always peering through lenses at a thousand hectares of printed words. "I have listened to you," he said. "Ten years old, a boy who thinks he's so brilliant, he rails on and on, showing no respect for his father, no trust. I do it all for your sake."

"And for God's," offered Mother. Was she being ironic? Vanya had never been able to guess about Mother.

"For *you* I do this," said Father. "You think I did it for me? My work is here in Russia, the ol

manuscripts. What I need from other countries is sent to me because of the respect I've earned. I make a good living."

"Made," said Mother.

For the first time it occurred to Vanya that if he was cut out of school classes, Father's punishment might be even more dire. "You lost your place at the university?"

Father shrugged. "My students will still come to me."

"If they can find you," said Mother. Still that strange smile.

"They'll find me! Or not!" cried Father. "We'll eat or not! But we will get Vanya—Itzak—out of this country so he grows up in a place where this mouth of his, this disrespect for everyone there doesn't measure up to his lofty standards, where they will call it creativity or cleverness or rock and roll!"

"Rock and roll is music," said Vanya.

"Prokofiev is music, Stravinski is music, Tchaikovski and Borodin and Rimski-Korsakov and even Rachmaninov, *they* are music. Rock and roll is smart boys with no respect, *you* are rock and roll. All the trouble you get into at school, you will never get into university with this attitude. Why are you the only child in Russia who doesn't learn to bow his head to power?"

Father had asked this question at least a dozen times before, and this time as always, Vanya knew that his father was saying it more in pride than in consternation. Father liked the fact that Vanya spoke his mind. He encouraged it. So how did this become the reason for the family to declare itself Jewish and apply for a visa to Israel? "You make a decision without asking me, and it's *my* fault?"

"I have to get you out of here, let you grow up in a free land," said Father.

"Israel is a land of war and terrorism," said Vanya. "They'll make me a soldier and I'll have to shoot down Palestinians and burn their houses."

"None of that propaganda is true," said Father. "And besides, it won't matter. I can promise you that you will never be a soldier of Israel."

Vanya was scornful for a moment, until it dawned on him why Father was so certain he wouldn't be drafted into the Israeli military. "Once you get out of Russia, you aren't going to Israel at all."

Father sighed. "What you don't know, you can't tell."

There was a knock at the door. Mother went to answer.

"Maybe here in Russia you aren't in class for a while," said Father. "And this nonsense of running, you'll never be world champion, that's for Africans. But your mind will be quick long after your legs slow down, and there are countries where you will be *valued*."

“Which other countries?” asked Vanya.

Mother was letting somebody into the apartment.

“Maybe Germany. Maybe England. Canada, maybe.”

“America,” whispered Vanya.

“How do I know? It depends where there’s a university that wants an aging scholar of ancient Slav literature.”

America. The enemy. The rival. The land of jeans and rock and roll, of crime and capitalism, of poverty and oppression. Of hope and freedom. All kinds of stories about America, from rumor, from the government press. It was 1975 and the Vietnam War had ended only a few years ago—America had bloody hands. But through all the propaganda, the rivalry, the envy, one message was constant: America was the most important country on earth. And that’s where Father wanted him to grow up. That’s why Mother’s Jewish relatives were suddenly the only ones who counted, they and Father’s grandmother on his mother’s side. To get them to America.

For a moment, Vanya almost understood.

Then Mother came back into the room. “He’s here.”

“Who’s here?” asked Vanya.

Father and Mother looked at him blankly.

“He’s called a *mohel*,” said Mother finally. Then they explained what this old Jewish man was going to do to Vanya’s penis.

Ten seconds later, Vanya was down the stairs, out on the street, running for his life, running in despair. He was not going to let a man take hold of his member and cut bits of it off just so he could get on a plane and fly to the land of cowboys. By the time he came home, the *mohel* was gone, and his parents said nothing about his abrupt departure. He took no false hope from this. In Vanya’s family, silence had never meant surrender, only tactical retreat.

Even without the *mohel*, though, Vanya continued to take solace in running. Isolated at school, resentful at home, cut off from romping with his friends, he took to the streets again and again, day after day, running, dodging, leaving behind him ever-grumpier mutters and shouts of Slow down! Watch your step! Show some respect! Crazy boy! To Vanya that was part of the music of the city.

Running was the way he dreamed. Having never been in control of his own life, his idea of freedom was simply to break free. He dreamed of being at the mercy of the wind, carried aloft and blown here and there, a life of true randomness instead of always being part of someone else’s purpose. Father’s earnest, inconvenient plans for him. Mother’s ironic vision of life as one prank after another, in the

midst of which you did what was needed. What I need, Mother, is to kite myself up in the air and cut the string and fly untethered. What I need, Father, when you're setting out the pieces for your living chess game, is to be left in the box.

Forget me!

But running couldn't save him from anyone's plans, in the end. Nor did it bring him freedom, for his parents, as always, took his little idiosyncrasies in stride. In fact they made it part of *their* story; he overheard them telling some of their new Jewish friends that they had to be patient with Itzak, he was between realities, having had the old one stolen from him and not yet ready to enter the new one. How did they think of these glib little encapsulations of his life?

Only when Father underwent the male ritual of obedience himself did Vanya realize that this Jewish business was not just something they were doing to their son. Father tried to go about his ordinary work but could not; though he said nothing, his pain and embarrassment at showing it made him almost silent.

Mother, ever supportive, said nothing even to refer to what the *mohel* had done to her husband, but Vanya thought he detected a slight smirk on her face when Father asked her to fetch him something that ordinarily he would get up and find for himself. He wondered briefly if this meant that Mother thought the whole enterprise of believing in God was amusing, but as Father's wound healed and life returned to what passed for normal these days, Vanya began to suspect that, despite her irony, it was Mother who was a believer.

Perhaps she had been a believer all along, despite slathering the tangy, bacony lard on her bread like any other Russian. Father's discovery of his Jewishness was part of an overall strategy; Mother simply knew who ran the universe. Father was forcing himself to act like a believer. Mother showed not a doubt that God really existed. She just wasn't on speaking terms with him. "Six million Jews died from the Fascists," she said to Father. "Your one voice, praying, is going to fill all that silence? When a child dies, do you comfort the parents by bringing them a puppy to take care of?"

Mother apparently believed not only in the idea of God, but also that he was the very same God who chose the Jews back when it was just Abraham carting his barren wife around with him, pretending she was his sister whenever some powerful man lusted after her.

That was a favorite story for Vanya, as Father insisted that they study Torah together, going over to the apartment of a rabbi and hearing him read the Hebrew and translate. As they walked home, they would talk about what they'd heard. "These guys are religious?" Vanya kept asking. "Judah slept with a prostitute on the road, only it turns out to be his daughter-in-law so it's *all right* with God?"

The story of the circumcision of Shechem was Vanya's turning point. Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, gets raped by the prince of Shechem. The prince wants to marry her and Jacob agrees that this would make everything all right, only Dinah's twelve brothers are more interested in repairing the family wounded honor than in getting their sister married to a rich man with a throne in his future. So they tell the prince that he and all the men of his city have to be circumcised, and when the men are all lying there holding their handles and saying Ow, ow, ow, the sons of Jacob draw their swords and

slaughter them all. At the end of that story, Vanya said to his father, "Maybe I'll let the *mohel* do it for me."

Father looked at him in utter consternation. "*That* story makes you *want* to be circumcised?"

Vanya shrugged.

"Is there any hope that you can explain to me why this makes sense?"

"I'm thinking about it, that's all," said Vanya. He would have explained it, if he could. Before the story he refused even to think about it; after the story, it became conceivable to him, and, once he could conceive of it, it soon became inevitable.

Later, running, he thought maybe he understood why that story changed his mind. Circumcision was a foolish, barbaric thing to do. But having the story of Shechem in Torah showed that God himself knew this. It's barbaric, God seemed to be saying, and it hurts like hell, but I want you to do it. Make yourself weak, so somebody could come in and kill you and you'd just say, Thank you, I don't want to live anyway because somebody cut off part of my privates.

He couldn't explain this to his father. He just knew that as long as God recognized that it was a ludicrous thing to do, he could do it.

So for a few days Vanya didn't run. And it turned out that by the time the circumcision healed so he *could* run again, they took the city out from under him. The American Congress had antagonized the Russian government by tying most-favored-nation status to Russia's upping the number of Jews getting visas, and in reply the Russians cut the emigration of Jews down to nothing and started harassing them more. To Vanya's family, this had very practical consequences. They lost their apartment.

For Father, it meant no more consultations with students, no more visits with his former colleagues at the university. It meant the shame of being utterly dependent on others for food and clothing for his family, for there was no job he could get.

Mother took it all in stride. "So we make bricks without straw," she said. All his life Vanya remembered her making enigmatic comments like that. Only now he was reading Exodus and he got the reference and realized: Mother really is a Jew! She's been talking to us as if we were all Jews most of her whole life, only I didn't get it. And for the first time Vanya wondered if maybe this whole thing might not be *her* plan, only she was so good at it that she had gotten Father to think of it himself, for his own very logical, unreligious reasons. Don't become a practicing Jew because God commands it, become one so you can get your son a good life in America. Could she possibly be that sneaky?

For a week, they camped in the homes of several Jews who had no room for them. It couldn't last for long, this life, partly because the crowding was so uncomfortable, and partly because it was so obvious that, compared to these lifelong followers of the Law, Vanya and his parents were dilettantes at Judaism. Father and Vanya hacked at Hebrew, struggled to keep up with the prayers, and looked blankly a hundred times a day when words and phrases were said that meant nothing to them.

Mother seemed untroubled by such problems, since she had lived for a couple of years with her mother's parents, who kept all the holidays, the two kitchens, the prayers, the differentiation between women and men. Yet Vanya saw that she, too, seemed more amused than involved in the life of these homes, and the women of these households seemed even more wary of her than the men were of Father.

Finally it wasn't a Jew at all, but a second cousin (grandson of Father's grandfather's brother, as they painstakingly explained to Vanya), who took them in for the potentially long wait for an exit visa. Cousin Marek had a dairy farm in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, in a region that had been part of Poland between the wars, and so escaped Stalin's savage collectivization of the freehold farmers of Ukraine. Because this hill country was remote, strategically unimportant, and thinly populated, Communism here was mostly window dressing. Technically Cousin Marek's dairy herd was merely a portion of the herd belonging to the farflung dairy collective; in actual practice, they were his cows, to be bred and cared for as he wished. A good portion of the milk and cheese they produced didn't quite make its way into the state-run dairy system. Instead, it was bartered here and there for goods and services, and now and then for hard Western currency. Cousin Marek had the room, the independent attitude, and enough surplus to take in a few hapless cousins who had decided to become Jews in order to get to the West.

"The country life will be good for you, Vanya," said Father, though the sour expression on his face suggested that he had not yet thought of a way that the country life would be good for *him*. What Cousin Marek did not have was a university within three hours' travel. If Father was to lecture, he would have to find a subject matter interesting to cows.

As for Vanya, though, Father was right. The country life *was* good for him. The chores were hard, but for though Cousin Marek was a pleasant man, he nevertheless expected that everyone on the farm would work every day, and give full measure. But Vanya got used to labor quickly enough, not to mention the country food, the whole milk, the coarser, crustier, more floury bread they made in this part of Ukraine. The farm was good; but what he came to love lay beyond the farm. For in this backwater, some remnant of the old forests of Europe still survived.

"This is the *rodina*, the original homeland," Father told him. "Where the old Slavs hid while the Goths passed through, and the Huns. And then they were gone and we fanned out into the plain and left these hills to the wolves and bears." Our land. Father still thought like a Russian, not like a Jew.

What did Vanya care, at his age, about the original Russia? All he knew was that the country road went on forever without traffic, and with grass growing where the wheels didn't make their ruts; and the trees grew large and ancient in the steep-sided hollows of the hills where no one had bothered to cut them down; and birdsong didn't have to fight to be heard above honking cars and roaring engines. Someone had spilled a milkpail of stars across the sky, and at night when there was no moon it was so dark you could bump into walls just trying to find the door of the house. It wasn't really wild country, but to Vanya, a city boy, an apartment dweller, it was a place of magic and dreams, like the paintings of Shishkin; Vanya half-expected to see bear cubs in the trees.

This was the place where all the fairy tales of his childhood must have taken place—the land of Prince Ivan, the grey wolf, the firebird; of Koshchei the Deathless, of Mikola Mozhaiski, of Balda

Yaga the witch. And, because he came here about the same time as his first reading of Torah, he also pictured the wanderings of Abraham and Jacob and the children of Israel in this green place. He knew it was absurd—Palestine was hot and dry, the Sinai was stone and sand. But couldn't he picture the sons of Jacob coming back from herding sheep in these hills, to show their father the torn and bloody many-colored coat? Wasn't it from these hills that Abraham charged forth to do battle for the cities of the plain?

He couldn't fly here, either, but he could run until he was so exhausted and lightheaded that it felt as if he had flown. And then he grew bolder, and left the roads and tracks, searching for the more ancient and lost parts of the forest. Hours he'd be gone, exploring, until Mother grew worried. "You fall down a slope, you break your leg, nobody knows where you are, you die out there alone, is that your plan?" But Father and Mother must have discussed it together and decided to trust in his good sense and perhaps in the watchfulness of God, for they continued to allow him his freedom. Maybe they were simply counting on the visa to come and get him back to some American city where they could hide in their apartment from the gangsters' bullets and the rioting Africans that they always heard about.

If the visa had come one day earlier, Vanya wouldn't have found the clearing, the lake of leaves.

He came upon it in the midst of a forest so old that there was little underbrush—the canopy of leaves overhead was so dense that it was perpetually dusk at ground level, and nothing but a few hardy grasses and vines could thrive. So it felt as if you could see forever between the tree trunks, until finally enough trunks blocked the way or it grew dark and murky enough that you could no longer see beyond. The ground was carpeted with leaves so thick that it made the forest floor almost like a trampoline. Vanya began loping along just to enjoy the bouncy feel of the ground. Like walking on the moon, if the Americans really had landed there. Leap, bounce, leap, bounce. Of course, on the moon there were no tree limbs, and when Vanya banged his head into one, it knocked him down and left him feeling weak and dizzy.

This is what Mother warned me about. I'll get a concussion, I'll fall down in convulsions, and nobody won't be found until a dog drags some part of me onto somebody's farm. Probably the circumcised part of me, and they'll have to call in a *mohel* to identify it. Definitely the boy Itzhak Shlomo—on your records as Ivan Petrovich Smetski. A good runner, but apparently not bright enough to look out for trees. Sorry, but he was too stupid to go on living. That's just the way natural selection works. And Father would shake his head and say, He should have been in Israel, where there are no trees.

After a while, though, his head cleared, and he went back to bounding through the forest. Now, though, he looked up, scouting for low limbs, and that's how he realized he had found a clearing—now because of the bright sunlight that made the place a sudden island of day in the midst of the forest twilight, but because suddenly there were no more branches.

He stopped short at the edge of the clearing and looked around. Shouldn't it be a meadow here?

where the sun could shine? Tall grass and wildflowers, that's what it should be. But instead it was just like the forest floor, dead leaves thickly carpeting the undulating surface of the clearing. Nothing alive there.

What could be so poisonous in the ground here that neither trees nor grass could grow here? It had to be something artificial, because the clearing was so perfectly round.

A slight breeze stirred a few of the leaves in the clearing. A few blew away from the rise in the center of the clearing, and now it looked to Vanya as if it was not a rock or some machine, for the shape under the leaves undulated like the lines of a human body. And there, where the head should be, was that a human face just visible?

Another leaf drifted away. It had to be a face. A woman asleep. Had she gathered leaves around her to cover her? Or was she injured, lying here so long that the leaves had gathered. Was she dead? Was the skin stretched taut across the cheekbones like a mummy? From this distance, he could not see. And a part of him did not want to see, wanted instead to run away and hide, because if she was dead, then for the first time his dreams of tragedy would come true, and he did not want them to be true, he realized now. He did not want to clear the leaves away and find a dead woman who had merely been running through the woods and hit her head on a limb and managed to stagger into the midst of the clearing, hoping that she could signal some passing airplane, only she fell unconscious and died and

He wanted to run away, but he also wanted to see her, to touch her; if she was dead, then to see her death, to touch it.

He raised his foot to take a step into the clearing.

Though his movement was ordinary, the leaves swirled away from his foot as if he had stirred a whirlwind, and to his shock he realized that this clearing was not like the forest floor at all. For the leaves swirled deeper and deeper, clearing away from his feet to reveal that he was standing at the edge of a precipice.

This was no clearing, this was a deep basin, a round pit cut deeply into the earth. How deep it was he couldn't guess, for the leaves still swirled away, deeper, deeper, and the wind that had arisen from the movement of his leg carried them up and away, twisting into the sky like a pillar of smoke.

If that *was* a woman lying there, then she must be lying on a pedestal arising from the center of the deep hollow. Women who bumped their heads into tree limbs did not climb down a precipice like this and climb up a tower in the middle. Something else was going on here, something darker. She must have been murdered.

He looked at her again, but now many of the leaves that had blown up from Vanya's feet were coming to rest, and he couldn't quite see her face. No, there it was, or where it should have been. But no face now, just leaves.

I imagined it, he thought. It was that leaf—I thought it was a nose. There's no woman there. Just a strange rock formation. And a pit in the middle of the forest that had filled with leaves. Maybe it was

the crater from an old meteor strike. That would make sense.

As he stood there, imagining the impact of a stone from space, something moved on the far side of the clearing. Or rather, it moved *under* the far side of the clearing, for he saw only that the leaves began to churn in one particular place, and then the churning moved around the circle, heading toward him.

A creature that lived in this hollow, under the leaves like a sea serpent under the waves. A terrestrial octopus that will come near me and throw a tentacle up onto the shore and drag me down under the leaves and eat me, casting only my indigestible head up onto the center pedestal, where it would eventually lure some other wanderer to step off into the pit to be devoured in his turn.

The churning under the leaves came closer. In the battle between Vanya's curiosity and his morbid imagination, the imagination finally won. He turned and ran, no longer bounding over the forest floor but trying to dig in and put on speed. Of course this meant that his feet kept losing purchase as leaves slipped under them, and he fell several times until he was covered with leafmold and dirt, with bits of old leaves in his hair.

Where was the road? Was the creature from the pit following him through the forest? He was lost, and when it would turn to night and the monster would find him by his smell and devour him slowly, from the feet up . . .

There was the road. Not that far, really. Or he had run faster and longer than he thought. On the familiar road, with the afternoon sun still shining on him, he felt safer. He jogged along, then walked the last bit to Cousin Marek's farm.

Vanya never got a chance to tell about his adventure. Mother took one look at him and ordered him to bathe immediately, they'd been searching high and low for him, there was almost no time at all to get ready, where had he been? The visas had come through suddenly, the flight would leave in two days, they had to drive tonight to get to the train station so they could get to Kiev in time to catch the airplane to Austria.

Eventually, when they had time to relax a little, sitting on the plane as it flew to Vienna, Vanya didn't bother to tell them about his childish scare in the woods. What would it matter? He'd never see those woods again. Once you left Russia there was no going back. Even if you had left a mystery behind you in the ancient forest. It would just have to live on in his memory, a question never to be answered. Or, more likely, the memory of a childish scare that he had worked himself into because he always imagined such dramatic things.

By the time the plane landed in Vienna and the reporters flashed their lightbulbs and pointed their cameras at them and the officials inspected their visas and various people descended on them to insist that his parents go to Israel as they promised or to inform them that they had the right to do whatever they wanted, now that they were in the free world—by this point, Vanya had persuaded himself that there was never a human face in the clearing, the pit was not as deep as he imagined, and the churning

of the leaves had been the wind or perhaps a rabbit burrowing its way through. No peril. No murder. No mystery. Nothing to wonder about.

No *reason* for it to keep cropping up in his dreams, haunting his childhood and adolescence. But dreams don't come from reason. And even as he told himself that nothing had happened in the woods that day, he knew that something *had* happened, and now he would never know what the clearing was or what might have happened had he stayed.

True Love

So Father's plan had worked after all. When they arrived in Vienna, it was a matter of a few hours' paperwork to confirm his appointment as a professor of Slavic languages at Mohegan University in western New York, where he would join a distinguished language faculty, the Russian jewel in the polyglot crown. Soon the family was established in what seemed to them a spacious house with a wide garden that led down to the shore of Lake Olalaga—which quickly became the familiar Olya, the common nickname for *Olga*, and sometimes, in whimsical moods, Olya-Olen'ka, as if the lake were a character in a folktale.

Raised on stories of America—and especially New York—being a jumble of slums and pollution, Vanya found the woods and farms and rolling hills of western New York to be a miracle. But none of the woods was half so ancient or dangerous-seeming as the forest around Cousin Marek's farm, and Vanya soon found that America might be an exciting place to arrive, but living there could become, in time, as boring as anything else.

Yet his father was satisfied. Vanya reached America young enough to become truly bilingual, quickly learning to speak English without a foreign accent, and taking to the way Americans pronounced his name—*Ívan* instead of *Iván*—**eye-vun** instead of **ee-vahn**—so readily that it was soon the name he used for himself, with *Vanya* surviving only as his family's nickname for him.

His father and mother were not so linguistically fortunate—Father would never lose his guttural Russian accent, and Mother made no effort to progress beyond American money and the names of items at the grocery store. It meant that Mother's world barely reached beyond their house, and though Father lectured at other colleges and enjoyed his students, he, too, centered his life around his son.

Ivan felt the pressure of his parents' sacrifice every day of his life. They did not speak of it; they didn't have to. Ivan did his best to take advantage of the opportunities his father and mother had given him, working hard at his schoolwork and studying many other things besides. They had no cause to complain of him. And when he was tempted to protest their sometimes heavy-handed regulation of his life, he remembered what they had given up for him. Friends, relatives, their native land.

Ivan's respite from his parents' expectations was the same one he had found in Russia: He ran. And when he got old enough for high school athletics, he not only continued with long-distance running, but also took up all the games of the decathlon. Javelin, hurdles, discus, sprints—he was sometimes the best at one or another, but what set him apart from the rest of the track team was his consistency: His combined score was always good, and he was always in contention at every meet. He lettered three years at Tantalus High, and when he began to attend Mohegan University, he made their track team easily.

His parents and their friends never understood his need for athletics. Some even seemed to think it was funny—a Jewish athlete?—until Ivan coldly pointed out that Israel didn't bring in Christians to fill out its Olympic team. Only once, near the end of Ivan's junior year in high school, did Father suggest that the time wasted on athletics would be better spent refining his mind. "The body goes by the time you're forty, but the mind continues—so why invest in the part that cannot last? It isn't possible to divide your interests this way and do well at anything." Ivan's reply was to skip a day of finals while he ran all the way around Lake Olya. He ended up having to do makeup work that summer to stay on track for graduation; Father never again suggested that he give up sports.

But Ivan was not really rejecting his father. During Ivan's years at the university, he gravitated toward history, languages, and folklore; when he entered graduate school, he became his father's most attentive pupil. Together they immersed themselves in the oldest dialects of Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and Serbian. For one year they even conducted all their conversations in Old Church Slavonic, lapsing into Russian or English only when the vocabulary didn't allow a modern thought to be expressed.

Everyone could see how proud Father was at Ivan's exceptional performance—several papers published in first-rate journals even before he entered the graduate program—but what they never knew was how close they were. Not as Ivan imagined American fathers and sons were close. Ivan did not speak to his father about his dreams, his yearnings, his frustrations, his hopes. He certainly never mentioned that he still had nightmares about a circular chasm in the forest, where some unnameable creature stirred under the leaves.

Nor did Ivan speak much more readily to Mother—but Mother seemed to know most of his feelings anyway, or guess, or perhaps invent them. When he was in high school he would come home smitten with love for this or that girl, and Mother would know it even though he said nothing. "Who is she?" she'd ask. When he told her—and it was always easier just to tell—she would study his face and say, "It isn't love."

The first few times he insisted that it was *too* love, and what did she know, being old, with true love long since replaced by habit? But over time he learned to accept her assessment. Especially when, not long after, and then, she would say, "Oh, poor boy, it *is* love this time, and she's going to hurt you." To his grief, she was never wrong.

"How do you know?" he demanded once.

"Your face is an open book to me."

"No, really."

"I'm a witch, I know these things."

"Mother, I'm serious."

"If you won't listen to my answers, why do you ask me questions?"

Then, when he was twenty-four, the Berlin Wall came down. The family watched everything on television. As he switched off the set, Father said, "Now you can go back to Russia to do your research."

for your dissertation.”

“My dissertation doesn’t require research with sources inside Russia.”

“So change your topic,” said Father. “Are you crazy? Don’t you want to go back?”

Yes, he wanted to go back. But not for research. He wanted to go back because he still saw a certain leaf-covered clearing in his dreams, and the face of a woman, and a monster in a chasm; and for the same reason, he did not want to go, because he was afraid that the place didn’t exist, and because he was afraid that maybe it did.

So he spent the rest of the year finishing up his classwork and passing his comprehensives. Then another year of groundwork research for his dissertation and it was late July of 1991, only six weeks before his ticket back to Kiev. Naturally, that was when he met Ruth Meyer.

She was the daughter of a doctor in Ithaca, a couple of lakes away in western New York. They met at a Presbyterian wedding—the groom was a friend of Ivan’s from the track team in college, the bride a roommate of Ruth’s. They reached for the same hors d’oeuvre on a plate and within a few minutes stood outside on the porch of the house, watching a thunderstorm come in from the southwest. By the time the rain came they were holding hands.

“Say something to me in Old Russian,” she said.

Old Russian was too modern for him. In Old Church Slavonic, he said, “You are beautiful and wise and I intend to marry you.”

She closed her eyes as if in ecstasy. “I love it that you speak a language to me that no other woman will ever hear from you.”

“But you don’t understand it,” he pointed out.

“Yes I do,” said Ruth, her eyes still closed.

He laughed; but what if she *had* understood? “What did I say?”

“You told me that you hoped I’d fall in love with you.”

“No I didn’t.” But his embarrassed laugh was a confession that she had come rather close to the mark.

“Yes you did,” she said, opening her eyes. “Everything you do says that.”

After the wedding, Ivan came home to his mother and sat down across from her in the living room. After a few moments she looked up at him.

“Well?” he said. “Is it love, or is it nothing?”

Her expression solemn, Mother said, “It’s definitely *something*.”

“I’m going to marry her,” he announced.

“Does she know this?”

“She knows everything,” he said. “She knows what I think as I’m thinking it.”

“If only she knew *before* you thought it, you’d never have to think again.”

“I’m serious, Mother,” he said.

“And I’m not?”

“Don’t tease me. This is love.”

By now Father was in the room; there’s something about the mention of marriage that brings parents, no matter what they were doing. “What, you fall in love now, when you’re about to leave the country for a year?”

“Maybe I can postpone the trip,” said Ivan, knowing as he said it that it was a stupid idea.

“That’s good, marry now when you don’t have a doctor’s degree,” said Father. “Her father plans to support you?”

“I know, I have to go. But I hate waiting,” said Ivan.

“Learn patience,” said Father.

“In Russia you learn patience,” said Ivan. “In America you learn action.”

“So it’s a good thing you’re going to Russia,” said Father. “Patience is useful much more often, and you especially need to learn it if you plan to have children.”

Ivan laughed giddily at the idea. “I’m going to be such a good father!” he cried.

“And why not?” asked Mother. “You learned from the best.”

“Of course I did,” he said. “Both of you. You did the best you could with a strange kid like me.”

“I’m glad you understand,” said Mother. That wry smile. Was it possible she wasn’t joking? That she had never been joking?

During the weeks before he flew to Kiev, he spent more time in Ithaca than in Tantalus. His mother seemed sad or worried whenever he saw her, which wasn’t often. One time, concerned about her, he said, “You’re not losing me, Mother. I’m in love.”

“I never had you,” she said, “not since you escaped from the womb.” She looked away from him.

“What is it, then?”

“Have you told her your Jewish name?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Oh, right, Itzak Shlomo,” he said. “It hasn’t come up. Does it matter?”

“Don’t do it,” she said.

“Don’t what? Tell her my Jewish name? Why would I? Why shouldn’t I?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m such a fool. Now you will, because I asked you not to.”

“When would it come up? Why does it matter? I haven’t used the name since we came here. Our synagogue is Conservative, so is theirs, nobody cares if I have a gentile name.”

Mother gripped his arms and spoke fiercely, for once without a smile. “You can’t marry her,” she said.

“What are you talking about? We’re definitely *not* first cousins, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“You remember the story of the Sky, the Rat, and the Well?”

Of course he did. It was a tale she had told him as a child, and he studied it again in folklore class. A not-so-nice rabbinical student rescues a young woman from a well, but only after she promises to sleep with him. Once she’s out of the well, she insists that he promise to marry her, so that they are betrothed. Their only witnesses are the sky, the well, and a passing rat. Back home, he forgets his promise and marries someone else, while she turns down suitor after suitor until she finally pretends to go mad in order to make them go away. Then his first two children die, one bitten by a diseased rat, the other from falling down a well. He remembers the witnesses to his betrothal and confesses to his wife; she does not condemn him, but insists that they divorce peacefully so he can go and honor his promise to the young woman. So that’s how it happens that he ends up keeping his word after all. The moral of the story was to keep your oaths because God is always your witness, but Ivan for the life of him couldn’t figure out what she was getting at.

“I’m not betrothed to anyone else but Ruth,” he said.

“You think I don’t know that?” she said. “But there’s something.”

“Something what?”

“I dreamed about that story.”

“This is about a dream?”

“You were the man and Ruth was the one he never should have married. Vanya, it won’t work out. This is not the right girl for you.”

“Mother, she *is*, you just have to trust me on this.” Impulsively he bent down and kissed his mother’s cheek. “I love you, Mother,” he said.

~~When he stood straight again, he saw that tears dripped down her cheeks. He realized that it was the first time he had kissed his mother in years, the first time he told her he loved her since—maybe since he was eight or nine. Or younger.~~

But she wasn't crying because of his kiss. "Do what you do," said Mother softly. "When the time comes, you must trust *me*."

"*What* time? What is this, a game of riddles?"

She shook her head, turned away from him, and left the room.

Of course he told Ruth all about the conversation. "Why shouldn't I know your Jewish name?" asked Ruth, shaking her head, laughing.

"It's not like it was my real name," said Ivan. "I never even heard it until we were about to emigrate. We aren't very good Jews, you know."

"Oh, I know," she said. "As I recall, at Denise's wedding you were reaching for a shrimp."

"So were you," he said. "But I'm the one that got it."

She raised an eyebrow. "I was reaching for *you*," she said. "So I got mine, too."

He laughed with her, but he didn't really like the joke. Their meeting was pure chance, or so he had always thought. But now she had raised another possibility, and he didn't care for it. Was I set up? If she manipulated that, what else might she have plotted?

No, no, that was complete nonsense, he told himself. It was Mother's weird objection, that's what made him suspicious. And besides, what if she *had* plotted to meet him? He should be insulted. Beautiful, intelligent girl maneuvers to meet awkward, penniless grad student—how often did *that* happen? Oh, all the time—in grad students' dreams.

Mother was so eager for him to get out of New York—and away from Ruth—that for the last week he had to keep asking her for clothes each morning because she had already packed everything. "I don't need to take all my clothes with me," he said. "I'm a student. Everyone will expect me to wear the same shirts for several days between washings." She shrugged and gave him a shirt—but from her ironing board, not from his luggage.

All of Ruth's family came to the airport at Rochester to see him off, and so did Father. But Mother wasn't there, and that made Ivan a little angry and a little sad. All these years, he had thought that Mother's amused smile was because she was secretly smarter than Ivan or Father. But now it turned out that she was superstitious, troubled by dreams and folktales. He felt cheated. He felt that *Mother* had been cheated, too, not to be educated better than that. Was that something she picked up from her Jewish grandparents? Or was it deeper than that? Not to see her son off on a trip that would take at least six months—it wasn't right.

But he had other things to worry about. Being jovial with Ruth's mother and father, saying goodbye in restrained and manly fashion to his father, and then prying Ruth away as she clung to him weeping, kissing him again and again. "I feel like I've died or something," he said. She only cried harder. That had been a stupid thing to say, as he was about to board a plane.

After all her mother's remonstrances and her father's patient instructions to let the boy go, it was Ivan's father who was finally able to lead her away so Ivan could get on the plane. He loved Ruth, yet he loved his family, and her parents, too, but as he walked down the tube to the plane, he felt a burden sliding off his shoulders. His step had a jaunty bounce to it.

Why should he feel like that, suddenly lighter, suddenly free? If anything, this journey was a burden. Whatever he was able to accomplish in his research would be the foundation of his career, his whole future. When he came back, he would become a graduate and a husband, which meant that his childhood was truly over. But he would still be hanging fire until he became a professor and a father. That was when his adulthood would begin. The real burdens of life. That's what I'm beginning with this trip to Russia.

Only when he was belted into his seat and the plane pulled back from the gate did it occur to him why he felt so free. Coming to America, all the burden of his parents' hopes and dreams had been put onto his shoulders. Now he was heading back to Russia, where he had not had such burdens, or at least had not been aware of them. Russia might have been a place of repression for most people, but for him, as a child, it was a place of freedom, as America had never been.

Before we are citizens, he thought, we are children, and it is as children that we come to understand freedom and authority, liberty and duty. I have done my duty. I have bowed to authority. Mostly. And now, like Russia, I can set aside those burdens for a little while and see what happens.

Chasm

In these heady days of revolutionary change, it was hard for Ivan to concentrate on his research. The manuscripts had been sitting for hundreds of years in the churches or museums, the transcripts and photocopies for decades in the libraries. They could wait, couldn't they? For there were cafés springing up everywhere, full of conversations, discussions, arguments about Ukrainian independence; about whether Russian nationals should be expelled, given full citizenship, or something in between; about the low quality of the foreign books that were glutting the market now that restrictions had eased; about what America would or would not do to help the new nation of Ukraine; whether prices should remain under strict control or be allowed to inflate until they stabilized at "natural" levels; and on and on.

In all these conversations Ivan was something of a celebrity—an American who spoke Russian fluently and even understood the Ukrainian language, which was patriotically being forced into use even in intellectual discussions that used to be solely the province of Russian. He had the money to pay for coffee, and often paid for stronger drinks as well. He didn't drink alcohol himself, however—as an athlete, he had ostentatiously *not* acquired his father's vodka habit. But no one pushed it on him; he could drink or not drink as he pleased, especially when he was paying.

Not that these conversations were at a particularly high level. They were just neighborhood chatter and gossip and rants and diatribes. But that was the point. At the university, he would still be his father's son; in the cafés, he was himself, listened to for his own sake.

Or was it for the sake of his money? Or his Americanness? Or just good manners? Did it even matter? After enough weeks of this, Ivan began to weary of the constant conversation. No one's opinions had changed, nothing important was being decided, and Ivan was sick of the sound of his own voice, pontificating as if being American or a graduate student gave him some special expertise.

He began to spend more time with the manuscripts, doing his research, laying the groundwork for his dissertation. It was a mad project, he soon realized—trying to reconstruct the earliest versions of the fairy tales described in the Afanasyev collection in order to determine whether Propp's theory that all fairy tales in Russian were, structurally, a single fairy tale was (1) true or false and, if true, (2) rooted in some inborn psychologically true ur-tale or in some exceptionally powerful story inherent in Russian culture. The project was mad because it was too large and included too much, because it was unprovable even if he found an answer, and because there probably was no answer to be found. When he hadn't anyone on his dissertation committee told him that the subject was impossible to deal with. Probably because they didn't realize it themselves. Or because, *if* it could be done, they wanted to see the results.

And then, in the midst of his despair, he began to see connections and make reconstructions. (

course his reconstructions might be merely a projection of Propp's thesis onto the material, in which case he was proving nothing, but he knew—he *knew*—that his reconstructions were not nonsensical and they did tend to coalesce toward the pure structure Propp had devised. He was onto something, and so the research became interesting for its own sake.

Bleary-eyed, he would rise from the table when the library or museum closed, stuff his notebooks and notecards into his briefcase, and walk home through the dark streets, the gathering cold. He would collapse into bed in his tiny room, sublet from a professor of Chinese who never intruded on his privacy. Then he'd rise in the morning, his eyes still aching from the concentration of the day before, and, pausing only for a hunk of bread and a cup of coffee, return to the museum to resume again. The harder he worked, the sooner he'd be done.

That was how the autumn passed, and the winter. Shortages of coal and oil made the bitter cold even harder to bear, but, like Bob Cratchit, Ivan simply bundled up and scribbled away regardless of the chill in every building in Kiev. He was so immersed in his work that sometimes he didn't even read his mail from home—not from Mother, not from Father, not from Ruth. It would sit in a pile until, finally, on a Sunday when the library opened later, he would realize how long he'd gone without contact from home and open all the letters in a binge of homesickness. Then he'd scribble hurried and unsatisfactory answers to all of them. What was there to say? His life was within walls, under artificial lights, with row on endless row of Cyrillic characters in old-fashioned handwriting shimmering in front of his eyes. What could he possibly tell them? Ate bread today. And cheese. Drank too much coffee. A dull headache all day. It was cold. The manuscript was indecipherable or trivial or not as old as they claimed. The librarian was friendly, icy, flirtatious, incompetent. The work will never end, I wish I could see you, thank you for writing to me even when I'm so unfaithful about writing back.

And then one day it wasn't cold. Leaves were budding on the trees. Ukrainians in shirtsleeves flooded the streets of Kiev, taking the sun, carrying sprigs of purple lilacs with them in celebration of spring. How ironic. Just when the season was about to make life in Kiev worth living again, Ivan realized he had accomplished all that he needed to do in Russia. Everything else could be worked out on his own, without further reference to the manuscripts. Time to go home.

Funny, though. As soon as he thought of going home, it wasn't Tantalus he thought of, or the shores of Lake Olya, or his mother's face, or sweet Ruth's embrace.

Instead he thought of a farm in the foothills of the Carpathians, with wild forest just beyond the cultivated fields. The face he saw was Cousin Marek's, and what his body yearned for was not the loving embrace of a woman, but rather to hold the tools of the farm and labor until sweat poured off him and he could fall into bed every night physically spent, and rise in the morning to face a day filled with a thousand kinds of life.

Even as memories of the place flooded back to him, Ivan realized that there was key information he had never known as a child. The name of the town where he would have to transfer from train to bus and from bus to whatever ride he could get on the road to . . . what village? He had no idea how to tell a driver his destination. He didn't even know Cousin Marek's last name.

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