MUSHROOM SOUP

Early Thursday mornings, when the shop first opens, just after the women have had their coffee and buttered rolls, I make my regular appearance at Europol, my favorite Polish deli. It was there among them that I rediscovered the homemade ethnic dishes my immigrant tyotyas and babushkas treated me to as a child: The pastries, cakes and confections, cheeses and cold cuts, kielbasas and saladkas- the complete Slavic cookbook that I had lost with their passing. It was this memory evoking food that, at first, drew me in and reminded me that a distant time ago, when football meant soccer and borsht and kasha were served with every meal, long before I rooted for the Mets and followed college hoops, slathered French fries with ketchup and danced to rock and roll, I was molded in mind, spirit and tradition by the only assets my ancestors, the displaced and homeless refugees of the Second World War, had been able to retain throughout the brutality of their dispossession.

In growing up, learning to speak English, and later as an young adult, I had slowly expatriated my cultural past, the legacy they had left me. In adding my ingredient to the melting pot, I had become part of the predominant mix. Walking through Europol's door that first day, in all appearances fully American, I knew I was its prodigal child when the familiar sounds and smells and sights of the deli embraced me and forgave me my absence. Welcome home, the cheerful pastry case, brightly lighted as a Christmas tree with its neat pyramids of jelly-plump, chin-powdering pashki- the ethnic doughnuts of all Slavdom- seemed to say as I stepped into the shop. We're glad to have you back with us. You've been gone too long. But that first time, before experience taught me better, I simply thought, "Who needs to wait for heaven's consolation now that there's simple solace here in two pashki, and a cold, cold glass of milk?"

Past the sweets, neatly stacked on trays above the cold cut case, the pierogi, overstuffed with meat or kapusta- cabbage to us who don't speak a Slavic language- steamy fresh from the ovens in the rear kitchen, reminded me of the child I had been before my steady, inevitable transmutation. In later, learning visits, I would sample kapusta in the golabki, the traditional cabbage stew, or, for a change, with the kotleti, savory or sweet stuffed hamburgers with their endless variation of meat and vegetable fillings, like my bent-backed Babushka, her long gray braid curled on her head in the Ukrainian style, would serve every Saturday evening before night mass. Once again, I rediscovered hot kielbasa sandwiches topped with sauerkraut of slivered fermented carrots and more kapusta that my Matushka had served her growing children when we trotted home for lunch. No tyotya ever visited without bringing a ring or two of the spicy sausage that disappeared as soon as it was sliced.

And though that beloved kapusta in all its permutations seemed to dominate most dishes, the humble, sustaining potato was a close supporting second. I could never resist it: I willingly surrendered to those fragrant potato pancakes, crispy on the outside, soft on the inside, easy on my memory of breakfasting with the old folk. And potato dumplings with a dash of sour cream evoked a portrait of my Old Spiced Dyedushka's clean-shaven chin spattered with

a small white dab. To have one was to be close to him again, to remember from where and whom I had come.

Yes, those prima donna potatoes and cabbages called out to me, but the attraction of beets and mushrooms, cucumbers and the green tomatoes in brine that my father loved so well, the saladkas, the soups and bread, was just as suggestive. And this was only the initial taste of recall, a peek at the first page of my neglected scrapbook.

Since then, of course, there has often been an item or two that my Americanized taste buds are reluctant to sample. I do not dare try Tatar despite my Dyadya Vadim's enthusiasm for it- raw ground steak crowned with an uncooked egg- even if it is accompanied on the side by chopped dill and pickle, a generous scoopful of diced raw onion and an obligatory shot of vodka. Gelatinous pig feet leave me flat. There hasn't been enough vodka distilled to lull me into eating them. My belly can't get past the imagery- or of oxtail, best reserved for swatting flies and out of soup. Marinated fish in creams and sauces, so popular among my elders, never had appeal for me, nor that whole smoked herring- syelyodka- dried and vacuum sealed in plastic, fins, scales and all, smiling glibly through thin, curved lips. I could swear they mock me. "Your people might have killed me," the fish tells me, "But you don't have the guts to eat me." And it's right. It stares at me behind a glass wall through condemning eyes and reminds me that my digestion is better when the food I am eating doesn't resemble its living state.

It was the food at first that beckoned my memories and sustained my stomach, but as time went by the little deli would come to offer much more. I heard one rustic philosopher put it this way once: "'Tain't the meat. It's the humanity." And now, come every Thursday morning, I am lured from the peace and contentment of my two suburban acres to the shop, its offerings and denizens, and the seemingly never-ending urban renewal within which it thrives.

No, the call is not just for the food and memories, nor the pleasure of the ride. As I drive, I dream. I imagine Main Street, where the deli is located, the way it was when the trolley ruled. I see my wife, also part-Polish, part-Russian, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, with hair wispy blonde as corn whiskers, strolling its crowded sidewalks with her older sister as children growing up in the thriving, bustling post-war factory town. This, long before the civic leaders dreamt of cityhood and revitalization, the impossibility of a plant shutdown and the economic distress that would follow, long before anyone understood that what is old and sometimes shabby should not of automatic necessity be replaced by a promise and aspiration of something better.

I imagine the pair weekend shopping at Merle's Records for a 45 or admiring the latest fashions at the Women's and Girls' Emporium, then browsing the Five-and-Dime, Woolworth's, the Old Owl Book Store, maybe purchasing a red-ear slider or a paperback. On the special occasion of his birthday, having saved their special pennies, buying a sweater for Dad at Seccombe's Men's Shop. No Saturday could pass without a visit to their Irish grandparents whose own mothers and fathers had spun remembrances of the Civil War that, like umbilical co-ax linking the generations that followed, brought living, breathing connection to history that is

usually found packaged in words on a page. The two would bring their treasures for inspection to Grandma and Poppa in their sprawling mahogany-trimmed midtown apartment on the second floor of a tottering, converted Victorian. They'd sneak into a shaky and mysterious rear balcony from which they'd been banned as a safety precaution and huddle. Grandma'd call them to the kitchen table for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a scolding. Poppa'd treat them to stories and their pick from a wooden case of locally produced bottled soda of rainbow colors and fairyland flavors. The girls still kept a collection of tatty dolls he'd made for them from clothes pins when they were toddlers. After lunch, with a dollar from the old folks, the sisters would take in the matinee at the Capital Theater and round off another lovely, lazy Saturday at Vonetti's Palace of Sweets with a Pink Lady before the inevitable slog back home.

It was deteriorating, the wise elders proclaimed. It had to go. Better things were just around the corner. Change is good they said. I slowly drive along Main Street, past those better things, looking for signs of what used to be. But the better things that replaced the old world leave me feeling out of place. The irony that these big, medium and small-box better things are themselves so tentative and transient, much more so than what they replaced, embitters me though I share the hopeful dreams of those town leaders who lost so much trying to make a sunnier future for us. They had had it all along right there on funky, cozy post-war Main Street. Now they have McDonald's and Starbuck's to console them.

But my consolation is still on Main Street, in Europol and the women who remind me of that older, better time. I park across from the deli. There is always a free space on the ghost-town street and few cars pass where once a traffic cop stood on his platform, bringing order to the chaos of downtown traffic. I jaywalk across the street, hardly acknowledging either direction, never fearing a cop's admonishment. Why bother looking both ways? My experience tells me no one is coming. My ears confirm it. There's no danger. There's nothing at all. Just go.

The shop is part of a block-long strip that replaced the buildings my wife and her sister used to frequent. It was built in the late 60's and now is partially abandoned by fly-by-night businesses that sparkle and vanish like the flash of a firefly. Only Europol lingers and thrives.

Early as the morning is, I am not her first client. As I open the door, I see the other Thursday morning regular is there, buying his groceries, for the deli carries almost everything that a supermarket does apart from fresh produce and butchery meat. He is a grim, sodden-looking fellow. Our eyes do not connect. Perhaps he has recognized my ancestry, and it draws a grudge. Perhaps his belly is as sour as my father's was from eating too many pickled green tomatoes. Perhaps he is ill, or in mourning. I'll never know because we do not speak even the few words of Polish salute that I know. But the women light up as I enter and greet me by my Slavic nickname, the name my own babushkas and dyedushka, tyotyas and dyadyas called me as a child, a name I almost never hear my friends or wife call me anymore.

Oksana looks up at me from behind the counter. Her wink is a promise to serve me just as soon as she finishes with the silent gentleman. Ella is putting the glittering kaleidoscope of

cream and gelatin cakes and pastries into the display case, early morning fresh from her favorite bakery several towns away. It's one of her preferred tasks, but the cakes are fragile and must be handled with care. She is the young, early thirties, owner-manager of this magnificent complexity and the success of the operation and livelihood of her helpers rest on her small, sturdy shoulders. Today she sports a short buzz-cut with highlights, and I compliment the look. She reads the respect and affection I hold for her in my eyes and smile, and we chit-chat. Before long, we get to laughing and chortling so much so that she splits the pudding cake and must plaster it back together at its open seam. But no harm done: it's happened before, and the cake never tasted the worse for it.

I tell her I won't see her for a few weeks, another operation. This time carpal tunnel. In an instant her mood changes and she seems stunned into disbelief, as if to wonder why my previous ones were not enough for one person to bear. Her face contorts and eyes water, but I am cheerful, just as I was before my other surgeries and remind her that it's a good thing. I am old, her age more than twice over, and need a little repair. That's all. I'll be fine, I assure her, better in fact. Just like when I was 40. She smiles a sad, loving kiss.

Oksana calls me.

"Dyen dobrih, Zhenya! And what can I get for you today?" she asks in proper but thickly Slavic English.

I reply the way I always do, the greeting being equivalent: "Dobrih dyen, Oksanatchka!'

I use Russian syntax and the familiar suffix, yet again revealing my ethnicity, doing my best to acknowledge but ease the tension Russians and Poles have historically endured. Oksana is half Russian and half Polish. She gets it. As always, all is well, though my shame for the butchery of my ancestors never fully eases. If I could hammer all those sabers into skillets, I'd still feel guilty.

"I'll take some world peace, please."

That gets the same chuckle it always gets from everyone in the deli. That's what I always ask for at first and they are expecting me to say it again and again.

"I wish!" she almost sings. Wistfully sweet and sour as she always does.

So I order a few sandwiches of Swiss cheese and Babushka's ham, lettuce, tomato and pickle, mayo and mustard for me, just mustard for my wife Rosemary, 6 containers of various saladkas, a ring of skinny kielbasa, a few cream and raspberry-filled pashki, a thick slice of bakery blueberry cake, 500 grams of traditional Polish butter guaranteed to be 86% fat- and then I freeze in disbelief and the world becomes a pin-point focus: I have spotted the Holy Grail, the rare home-made specialty that I am always scouting, cooling right before me on the counter: Wild mushroom soup.

Ella walks by on an errand, but I corral her, busy as she is.

“That’s mushroom soup, no? “I stammer. “Did Bagrusha make it today? Is it hot?”

Ella nods, but Bagrusha, having overheard everything, comes out of the kitchen in back. Yet another short-haired blonde, she makes the saladkas and specialty dishes and despite my ignorance, enjoys our culinary conversations. She even listens to my suggestions and flatters me by trying them sometimes. And when she promises to make me a special saladka or dish that’s been unavailable, it’s always in the case the following week.

Her accent is almost as good as Ella’s and her English grammar generally precise. I heard Russian syntax and idioms translated word for word into English throughout my childhood.

“Yes, I made it! It’s good! You will like.”

Ella nods knowingly. Her eyes say, “Grab it!” So I ask Oksana if I can get a large container, and she says “Of course!” The deal seems to be done so our conversation turns to the women whom I don’t see.

“Where’s Anyatchka this morning? Still sleeping?” Anya is 100% Russian, like me, though she was born there. I am the first born of the first American generation.

Ella jumps to her defense.

“Anya is a hard worker! She has 3 jobs! She works in the afternoon- you already know!”

“Yeah,” I shoot back. “Here and taking care of her two St. Bernards! Tell her my poodle is almost as big as they are.” We all laugh, exchange smartphone photos of our dogs and have a discreetly confidential discussion regarding cleaning up after big ones, the women ultimately resolving it’s a man’s job. Outnumbered, I surrender.

But despite the gaiety, that mushroom soup is on my mind, and I remember a friend who might like to try some. So when Oksana asks me if my order is complete, I ask if, in lieu of world peace, I can get another container of the soup. “In lieu of” throws her off for a moment, but then she gathers herself up and says “Sure!” No food tastes as good as shared food.

Oksana disappears into the kitchen and I notice that the small space has filled with a few more customers: a tall young man straight as a flagpole, long-limbed and strong like a world-class bicycle racer or pole-vaulter; yet another short-haired, blonde, middle-aged lady patron speaking native Polish; and a Black senior citizen standing in the backdrop of shelves, taking the scene in but, it seems to me, shyly aware that he is neither blonde nor blue-eyed nor Slavic. He’s wearing an immaculate baseball cap that says “Vietnam” on it, as foreign a place to the deli ladies as the deli is to him. The potential bicyclist completes his transaction and exits with a gratified look on his face; the Polish lady and Black gentleman remain.

Europol is the kind of place where strangers break into avid conversation sparked by a common love of good eating and their willingness to recommend their favorite foods. I ask Oksana how she serves the soup.

“Don’t microwave the soup. Mushrooms get too nervous. Use a saucepan,” she advises.

“Right,” I agree. “How about some sour cream on top?”

Oksana’s contented and relaxed expression changes as if a swarm of flies has just settled on the varyeniki. She is aghast and gives me a horrified look.

“No, no, no! Just the soup!” She admonishes me like an outraged nun, as if I’ve just gargled with holy water and a frog jumped out of my mouth.

Her reluctance to use sour cream confuses me. I imagine it a perfect complement and pursue my suggestion though she is still gagging at the abomination.

“But Oksana- we always put sour cream in our mushroom soup when we were kids!” I protest.

“No, no, no!” she repeats, and losing self-control, contorts her face as if I’m out of my mind insisting on such a desecration, like painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa.

This seems to be an appropriate moment to chime in, and the middle-aged Polish lady takes advantage of the opportunity.

“No, no, no,” she exclaims with kindly condescension and a good-natured tolerance for my gastronomic naivete. “Sauerkraut is not good for mushroom soup!”

I’m still scratching my head. “Sauerkraut”? Where did she get that?

At this point Ella tries to bring enlightenment to us all.

“Zhenya said ‘sour cream,’ not ‘sauer-kraut’!” she laughs raucously. Oksana and the Polish lady scratch their heads.

A little bell rings in my mind, and I recall the Russo-Polish word ‘smetana’ that appears on all those containers in the refrigerated section.

“Smetana! I meant ‘smetana,’ not ‘kapusta’!” I explain to Oksana and the Polish lady. And then we all crack up; even the Black gentleman who was studying the scene with shy thoughtfulness chuckles.

I take advantage of the general carousal to include him, so I sidle up and say, “If you like good food, you’ve come to the right place.” He replies, in a voice just a trace too confident to conceal defensiveness, “I’ve been here before.” Perhaps he sounded more poised than he felt because I heard him through my own insecure filter. But in Europol we are all together. So I decide to make him part of the conversation and of us pan-Slavs.

He had made a striking first imprint on me, and I liked him the way I sometimes do when I meet a stranger and feel a friendly connection. His was a modest, quiet dignity and his manner conveyed a well-worn strength. He was immaculately groomed, neatly dressed and his clothes

looked new and freshly pressed. They fit him like a marine's display uniform. His shoes sparkled parade black, and his fine teeth shone white through a smile I have often trusted. He was leaning on a cane, but gave the impression of standing at attention, tall and erect. I wanted him to feel part of the fold, a natural element of the common embrace.

"You know, Sir," I said to him, "this mushroom soup is a rare treat. Do you like mushrooms?"

"Mushrooms," he murmured softly as if to himself. "Mushrooms…" And then, like Ulysses finally returning home, struggling to recognize what had once been so familiar a decade before, "I haven't eaten mushrooms in a long time. But yes. I do enjoy mushrooms."

"Why then," I blurted, not knowing what to make of him but trusting his smile," You should try this soup, with or without sour cream! It's wonderful!"

I couldn't have expected what followed.

"Well, I'd like to…" he said, but a tentative tone sounded in his voice, as if there was something standing in the way. He could see in my curious expression that I couldn't understand why he was holding back, and he seemed to know that I would not overstep a boundary to question his hesitation. Still, he must have felt enough at ease to offer an explanation. Or maybe it was just a perfunctory drill he'd performed many times in the past before an unwelcome audience.

"I can't carry it. Military incident." He tapped a crippled leg with his cane and for the first time I realized that he was walking on a permanent disability.

An "incident." Only people who live with enduring injury can appreciate the brevity of his explanation. Their pain is nothing they wish to explain endlessly and again to the prurient and callow, who have no bona fide business asking deeply personal questions recalling a hurtful past that predictably inflames the present. They are weary of the mandate to explain every bitter detail. It grinds them to create an issue of something that unblemished folk, whole folk, believe their world rotates around. It trivializes their struggle to make life right. It marginalizes them even from those who care.

Sure, he had trouble walking. But so what? His legs don't define him any more than a scab defines the healthy. And when we think they do, we just don't get it and certainly don't get him.

"Long way to go?" I still didn't understand how thoroughly he had been incapacitated. He played his hurt off as masterfully as I have learned to play mine.

"No. Just up on the Hill. Nearby."

The Hill. A redeveloped area. Where my wife's grandparents had lived.

“No car today?” I carelessly asked though I was already unsettled by what I sensed was coming. He had to have a car. Everybody has a car. But he had obviously walked this morning, walked despite the effort and pain his walk had involved.

“No. I can’t drive,” he replied without elaborating.

He didn’t have to. My five previous successful operations made me understand. I could use my remaining arm again. I could, after 2 years of surgery and therapy, raise a coffee mug to my lips and trash that nasty sippy cup I had bowed my lips to. I could lift my hand enough to shave my face and brush my teeth, comb my hair and put a hat on my head, scratch my back, even hoist a grocery bag. I could shower myself without sweating from the effort it took. My paralyzed deltoids were finally firing. My restored biceps were filling in wrinkled skin-bags once packed so tightly with steady muscle that had guided a one-arm motorcycle from Connecticut to California and back, years before the stenosis set in. Brilliant surgeons and a dedicated physical therapist had rebuilt my once powerful, now worn-out body with their skill, and my dear and supportive Rosemary, my cherished friends- including the Europolistas- had loved and nurtured me back to health. I am still getting stronger every day because the habit of physical therapy I had formed has morphed into beneficial physical culture. I am becoming monstrous, an elderly one-armed Bruce Lee. I will make it. The garden needs tilling. The bike is idling.

But sometimes even brilliant doctors reach the limit of their miracle work. Not everyone recovers to his same-old-used-to-be. And if they are successful, not everyone can tolerate the grueling basic maintenance it takes to just not fall behind.

But I can and I do.

And I thought our veteran guest could and would as well.

And I imagined he understood that I had interpreted his few redolent words as he meant them.

He must have exhausted his medical options though, to be left balanced by a stick. Grueling effort is a sweaty habit with men like that. He never would have stopped progressing if his doctors had been successful. He’d be running marathons. His luck was just lousier than mine; that’s all the difference.

Regular training has been so successful for me, and I am getting so much stronger that I leave my compliant old Saab in the garage whenever the weather is willing and there’s no cargo to haul. This Winter’s Day had a claim on my contentious, one-ton, mid-engined two-seater that slams my back on every manhole cover and rides so low to the ground you can drag your knuckles on the pavement through an open window. It’s a lockbox to confound a contortionist. But it appeals to the man-child who dreamed, as a boy, of M.G.’s, Triumph’s, and Austin Healy’s. It’s not built for comfort and my neck suffers whenever I overdo it, but buttons on the steering wheel make it easy for me to shift all 6 speeds on the road and on the track.

That's what I was driving, and it had taken only 1 lumbar and 2 cervical spinal fusions to enable me to do it. But there wasn't the remotest chance he could get in himself or that I could help accommodate him. Even if I could have poured him in, how would I get him out again? And let's say he'd make the fit, there might be room for his cane but where would the soup go? There's an engine where the backseat should be. A spare tire fills the frunk.

His eyes fixed on mine and for the first time studied me. And as he awaited my response, I realized that my reply would be as close-fisted as that of those who would exclude him from even the outer circle.

I pointed to the empty sleeve though I knew it wouldn't make any difference. "I get it," was what my mouth allowed, but "I can't take you in my car," flowed like cement from a mixer.

Friends, even new ones, among other favors, give each other lifts. I had failed to help him and bridge the bond.

He gave me the 'I've overestimated your sincerity, Kind Sir' look. He'd been traveling at the light speed of potential friendship when he slammed into the inconvenient wall of those of us who simply don't care.

I had expected that we could have become friends. The door had cracked open, but my unanticipated rejection precluded any possibility of that. And worse, it had cheapened the hope that there could ever have been any friendship at all.

Some men stand tall despite a crooked back. They don't beg the unwilling for a favor. Sure, friends take. But they also give. Friendship maintains the balance. Cheap-suit grifters tilt the scale. That's all right then: Life continues past uncomfortable interludes. I knew he had given up on me when he brought out his stuffed wallet and tried a different approach.

"I've got money," he pointed to a thick wedge of bills. "I can cover the gas." He almost stammered. Then hesitating awkwardly, as if this episode had cost him his grace, "…and your time." He was asserting his solid worth and slamming me for supposedly doubting it. For being a fraud. Frauds can always be bought.

He had lost his poise. That soup had suddenly become important to him.

Or maybe it wasn't exactly the soup. Maybe it was a different sustenance he was seeking.

"It's not the money," I took a breath. No, I thought. It's not the money I need. It's to reclaim some understanding between us. It's about your dignity that I'm trying not to stomp on. But I own many shortcomings I am not conscious of, and I am bound to trample you despite the call to stay true. My own duplicity sickens me, but penance is a slow, uncertain teacher.

"It's not that," I told him. "I don't want money, and I have the time. It's just that I took the sports car today because the weather is nice. The car's very low and squeezed-tight tiny, like

a go-kart. There's no backseat. I couldn't fit you into it. And even if I did, you couldn't get out. I wish I'd taken the Saab. It would have been perfectly comfortable for both of us."

"Oh," he said with the sudden self-possession of a gentleman soldier, "that's all right. I understand." His cool was restored, and with it came a deep chill.

Maybe he did understand I wanted to drive him home. Maybe he was tired of having to relive his exhaustive disability yet again before another outsider. What is certain is that he wasn't looking at me anymore, as indifferent to my good intentions as if they'd been cruel. He had withdrawn deep into a place reserved only for him. Nothing new. Turtles do it all the time. They're cold-blooded survivors. Unless they need to cross a road, like Main Street.

And despite my romance of a better past, small-town Main Street had never really embraced dark skin.

"I'd be happy to drop you off if I had the big car," I tried to recover. I repeated my description of the roadster but now I was sounding like someone looking for an excuse to avoid a burdensome task. And who needs a useless, very public display of his two-facedness, real or perceived?

"It's ok, really. I wasn't expecting it. I'll be all right." But eye contact had been lost, and any further conversation ended abruptly.

Until, that is, the middle-aged lady who had agreed that sauerkraut is inappropriate topping for mushroom soup, made, in Polish, an innocent request for a special cold cut.

My car was parked right across the street from the deli. I might have prevented what followed if only I had suggested we step outside to see if he could get into it. If I hadn't assumed it was not possible to do a friendly turn. Perhaps the brief walk would have spared him the innocent lady's blameless request that he mistook as criticism of some outlandish audacity she imagined he had committed. But Europol is a small space, and I had blubbered too many excuses and apologies to this man who had been overburdened with a life-long surfeit of unsolicited ones. A trip to the street on a crippled leg: just another painful exercise in futility.

This had been an unpleasant public scene, the kind that's always been his determined practice to avoid. And now the in-crowd was talking about him, the outsider, defending this white guy's reluctance to take him, another welfare-disability moocher, home. Why had he gotten involved with these people when the experience of a lifetime had cried No! No! No!? What fantasy had lured him into that inhospitable space? He knew better, so why had he gone there? His own damn dumb fault. Would he ever learn? Another sucker more. Just another sucker more.

I could see him withdraw to his strategic stand, the one he had occupied when he first came in. He would not leave the shop; no, he wouldn't run away. The honest don't run. He'd play the incident down. But damned if he could be right with these strangers.

“Yes, Hunter’s is tasty, but don’t you think it’s too salty?” I lamely asked the Polish lady, deflecting way too loudly, trying to get him to understand that her comment had nothing to do with him.

But by this point he was in his own warp-zone and nothing I said now would make any difference. Nor had anyone who had overheard our conversation stepped in with an offer of a ride. Not to a Black outsider. Not to a stranger’s neighborhood.

Just stay quiet and don’t get involved. You can’t expect us to take the risk. We read newspapers and hear the news. And just last week… Please understand: We’ve suffered enough.

Perhaps in a better world the Polish lady would have volunteered. Living in this messy one he could expect little humanity, if any at all.

You must be soldier-straight and strict to survive in this world, and strong enough to do it on your own. Don’t expect anything; don’t get too close to anyone- you’re bound to be slammed past disappointment if you do. It’s a lesson even old-timers sometimes neglect. The secret of even tentative happiness is to need nothing from anyone. Stand straight and tall on the legs you have. Your dignity is your best defense- and your only defiance. Remember that and never waver. You must stay strong and independent. To be free. To keep your sanity.

Oksana, dear oblivious Oksana, passed my filled bag over the counter and smiled broadly as I showed off curling it above my head with my carpal tunnel compromised wrist. “Bravo!” her wide grin seemed to say. For two years I hadn’t been able to lift it and could only manage juggling it with her help. Look at me now, Ladies! And thank you for seeing me through hard times. You kept my belly full and my soul at peace.

“See you in 2 weeks then! Thank you, thank you! Bye-bye! Say ‘hi’ to Anya and Arboosh for me! I miss them!” I cried out as I always do when the party is over. The lady customer smiled at me, and I smiled back. I nodded to the Black gentleman, and he nodded to me. He was holding two small bottles of sauce in his free hand. In the background, a harmony of bye-bye Zhenia’s rang bell-like clear and sweet.

But there was no peace for me this time and the camouflage I wore just intensified my frustration and dissatisfaction with myself. I left unsettled and insecure, as if I’d played the last note of the tune disastrously wrong. Perhaps he’d come back sometime, and we could make each other understand that we are not so unlike. After all, humanity shares a gene pool so narrow as to make us all blood related. But I doubt he will ever return. And even if he did, what then? There’s that little worm that mistrust turns into a serpent.

All of us wish there were a satisfactory ending to stories like this. We’ve all lived them in one form or another. Misunderstanding, mistrust, fear, insecurity, pain and, sometimes, plain bad luck- these components of Main Street never seem to change. But then again, the soup is soothing, and some good soul is always cooking it; our dream of common humanity persists… and perhaps someday we will become human enough, redeveloped enough, to let it blossom

whenever brother and sister strangers meet on all the Main Streets of the world. In the meanwhile, yet another opportunity lost, lost, lost.

Gene Burshuliak

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