Under This Unbroken Sky

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Extract

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There a black and white photograph of a family: a man, woman, and five children. Scrawled on the back, in tight archaic script, are the words *Willow Creek, Alberta, 1933*. This will be their only photograph together.

They are posed in front of a hand-hewn log granary. The adults are seated on wooden chairs, centred to frame. They are dressed in their church best.

The man, his hair clipped short, wears a white, high-collared, pressed shirt, tightly knotted tie, a dark woollen suit, and broken-in workboots. He looks like a tall man. Large hands rest on his knees. His legs are crossed.

The woman wears a dark, modest knee-length dress and low-heeled shoes with sturdy ankle straps. No stockings. On her lap is a baby, a white blur squirming to escape the woman's strong hold. He is round and fat, in stark contrast to the other thin forms.

Three sisters ordered in ascending age are interspersed between their parents. On the far end stands the eldest boy. He is ramrod straight. Chin up. Though they all wear summer clothes, they are standing in four inches of snow.

They stare straight ahead, their eyes lost in shadows. Expressionless. Arms rigidly pressed against their sides. Holding their breath as the

photographer counts: one hundred and one, one hundred and two, one hundred and three ...

Within three years, this farm will be foreclosed. Two years later, one will die. Two others, of whom there is no photograph, will be murdered.

But this day, in the moment right after the shutter clicks shut, this family takes a deep breath and smiles.

Spring

1938

"We got some!" Ivan pokes his head out the hayloft and holds the bucket up victoriously to his cousin Petro.

A motley clan of barn cats mew and whine as they wrap themselves around Petro's skinny legs. Petro wheezes from the dust and hay. Ivan scrambles down the makeshift ladder with one hand, the bucket clanking at his side. He jumps the last rungs to the ground and with his free hand steadies the chipped crock plate that acts as a lid.

"How many?" Petro inquires, already on his hands and knees brushing aside a clearing in the hay for their loot. The cats crowd in close.

"More than one. It's heavy." Ivan sets the bucket down and carefully slides the plate aside an inch. The boys peer into the dark crack.

"Do you see any?" Petro asks.

Ivan tilts the bucket and a scurry of claws against metal narrows the cats' eyes and straightens their tails. "Three." Ivan bats a cat out of the way and reaches into the bucket. He pulls out a fat mouse by the tail and holds it high above the cats. "I'll betcha the yellow one gets him. I'll betcha my gopher skull."

"For what?" Petro is always suspicious of his younger cousin's wagers, since Ivan usually wins.

"Your wool socks."

Petro ponders the odds carefully. Summer is coming and he won't need the wool socks. Besides, the heel and toe are worn out. "Deal."

An orange tabby pushes in, but a thin black female—its teats hanging to the ground, malnourished from feeding yet another litter—hisses back.

"I bet the black one gets it," Petro challenges. Ivan drops the flailing mouse into the fray.

For a moment, the mouse stands still. Frozen. The cats hesitate. The mouse blinks. It spins around and races between Ivan's legs for the open field. Cats blur past, followed by the barefoot boys screaming, "Get him, get him!"

The yellow tomcat reaches the mouse first and leaps. The mouse, sensing the airborne shadow, stops and careens off to the side. The cat lands with a heavy thud, its claws pierce the mouse's tail, ripping off the tip. A matted calico, missing one ear and blind in one eye, jumps with surprise as the mouse scurries under its belly.

The black cat cuts a wide swath and pounces directly on the mouse. Its incisors gnash to crush the neck. "I win! I win!" Petro screams. The mouse twists and clambers up the cat, shakes itself loose, and hits the ground running, its leg injured. "It's over here!" hollers Ivan. The boys crash through the stubble.

The yellow tom skids across the muddy ground and slides onto the mouse, trapping it between its paws. The cat flips it into its mouth and crunches once, then drops it to the ground. The cat bats it with its paw. The mouse lies still. The yellow cat growls a warning. The other cats slink back, except for the black one. It crouches on its belly, tail flicking.

"I win," announces Ivan.

"It's not over till it's dead," Petro states.

"It's dead," says Ivan. The boys crouch down low.

"It's still breathing," asserts Petro.

A heavy black leather boot crashes into the earth in front of them. The boys hear the mouse's bones crush, see blood trickle out from under a man's cracked sole.

Ivan and Petro look up against the noon sun, unable to discern the man's features. Ivan stands and takes a step back to assess his adversary. The man's eyes are sunken, a grizzle of grey whiskers shadow his face. His hair is long and oily. Filthy clothes hang off his skeletal frame.

Ivan runs for the barn, screaming, "Mama!"

Petro remains frozen where he squats, gasping for air. The man licks his chapped lips and speaks with a voice caked with dust: "Get up."

But Petro doesn't get up. He turns to the sound of a .22 being cocked. As does the man. Ivan's five-year-old arms quiver from the weight of the gun: "Get off our land."

Maria appears from behind the makeshift shack attached to the cabin. Her hands are raw from scrubbing bedclothes with lye and ice water. She looks to her son, his finger on the trigger. She looks at Petro, gulping for air. She looks to the man. A railway tramp.

"Whad you want?" she asks in broken English. "We no have nothing." She repeats it in Ukrainian: "Nichoho nema." There's nothing left. The man looks to her and Maria sees his eyes. She sees past the face, past the weathered lines, past the dirt and grime, and into his eyes. "Teodor?" she asks. But she already knows the answer and starts to shake.

The man walks up to Ivan and takes hold of the barrel, waits for his son to unclench his grip. Teodor slips the rifle from the boy's hands, ejects the bullet, and hands him back the gun.

The metal bucket crashes to its side, shattering the crock plate. A blur of brown vanishes under the barn. The black cat with the swollen teats saunters away with the other mouse clenched between her jaws.

SOMEHOW THE CHILDREN have fallen asleep. Maria drapes burlap bags over the ragged twine strung across the middle of the room, separating the sleeping quarters from the remaining few feet of living quarters. As always, she takes a moment to count them in their sleep. Five children snuggled together on one straw mattress. The girls and Ivan sleep curled into one another, while Myron lies lengthwise draped across their feet. At thirteen, he is getting too big to be sleeping with the girls. Five children, Maria counts, almost to assure herself that she hasn't lost one through the day. Their breath is quiet and even. Maria hangs the last burlap sack.

No one spoke all day. They ate their meal of borshch and flatbread in silence. All eyes watched their father. Watched him scrape the bowl with his fingers once the flatbread was gone. Watched him guiltily take a second bowl. Watched him shovel the broth past his cracked lips, unable to slow himself down. Watched him roll a smoke with the stash that Maria had saved for him almost two years earlier. Watched him inhale, eyes closed. Watched him exhale and open his eyes as if surprised to see them staring back at him. Watched him as they went to bed, as he sat outside staring into the night. No one said good night. The children are asleep now, certain that when they wake up the imposter will be gone.

Maria stokes the fire. A large pot of water boils.

OUTSIDE, Teodor is oblivious to the mosquitoes swarming his head. He exhales another long draw of smoke. He has forgotten to ask what day it is. Six hundred days and nights reduced to scratches on a wall. Four hundred and eighty thousand steps paced in an eight-foot-by-eight-foot cell. Five steps—wall, five steps—wall. One hundred and fifty steps shuffled down the corridor past the closed cell doors. Eyes

to the floor. Eyes to the floor. The only sound the click of the guard's boots and the chattering of leg irons.

Shiny Boots's trouser cuffs were frayed at the back. The heels of his boots were rounded, more on the left than the right. Shiny Boots preferred the strap over the lash. He'd spread his feet apart for better stability. He had small feet. Teodor had to shorten his step not to overtake him and breach the mandatory six-foot distance.

Ten steps down the stone stairs. Eighty-five steps across the dirt yard to the iron gate groaning open. Six steps to the outside world. How many days ago was that? One hundred and eighty-six thousand steps. He takes another puff on the cigarette.

"I'm still here," his voice rasps.

He hasn't seen his sister, Anna, yet. She hasn't come out, even though she's just eight inches away on the other side of the log wall. Teodor saw her watching him as he followed Maria to the shack. At least, he saw the torn slip that serves as her curtain fall back into place. Now he can see light through the chinks, obscured intermittently by movement inside. Maybe it's her children. Maybe it's her. She'll come to him in her own time. Teodor knows that she's ashamed of him, but he can forgive her that. She took his family in. He owes her his life.

It was my grain. The words roll dull and hollow in his head, worn from the constant repetition. Come to the land of wheat. A hundred and sixty acres. Ten dollars is all it will cost. Come, they said. Thirteen days in the steerage of a ship crouched in vomit, piss, and shit with his wife and four children. Come.

A year renting the land, waiting for a homestead entry. Working as a field hand in exchange for the loan of an axe, a saw, a team of horses, and a plow. He signed a contract he couldn't read. They said everything will be fine. You have three years to pay it back. Build a farm, clear the fields, dig a well, plant the seed. Learn English. The

second year, lose the crop to hail. They give him more seed, add one dollar to the contract, shake his hand, and call him Ted.

Three weeks before harvest, they come for their money. Eleven dollars. They take it all—the house, the barn, the shed, the lumber, the fields ripe with grain—and say, "Leave." It was August. The grain in those fields was worth sixty, seventy dollars.

He took one wagonload of seed. From his field, his sweat, his pay. One wagonload to start again. And they arrest him. *It was my grain.*

The words collapse into dust. He swallows. His tongue licks at parched lips.

Above, a wash of northern lights pulse green and white across the prairie sky. Below, a chorus of frogs croaks. Their song swells across the fields, reverberates in Teodor's chest. Teodor listens, eyes almost shut. He leans against the shack, his smoke burning low between his fingers. He breathes in the space between him and the sky.

The frogs fall silent. The night has paused. Teodor is aware that he is holding his breath. He looks instinctively to the paddock. The scrawny cow chews compulsively on a fence pole, oblivious to the unsettling quiet. Teodor leans forward slightly, rooting his feet to the ground, ears straining, eyes squinting to penetrate the darkness. His muscles coiled, ready to fight or flee. Cautiously, a lone bullfrog picks up his refrain and soon a bevy of females answer.

Teodor breathes deep and flicks his smoke into the night. Spring has arrived swollen and impregnated by the retreating frost. He can smell her sweet decay. He can almost hear the earth heaving and groaning beneath his feet, opening herself wide to push her seedlings into light.

Teodor crouches down and places his hand against the cool ground. For a moment, he thinks he can feel her heart beating, but realizes it is his own pulse. This surprises him because it means he is still alive. A movement catches his eye.

His sister's side of the cabin is shrouded in darkness. The oil lamps have been blown out. And then Teodor sees Anna standing at the window, a few feet to the left of him. She doesn't see him crouched in the shadows.

She is pale. Her face has lost its roundness. Her flesh clings to her bones. Dark circles heighten the sunken appearance of her eyes. Her hair, which she used to wear in braids coiled on either side, snaked with ribbons, is shorn and matted. She looks much older than the one year that separates them. Teodor remembers her eyes being icy blue. In the old country, boys had written poems about her eyes.

Anna stares straight ahead. Teodor wonders if she is looking for her useless husband. He hasn't seen Stefan since his arrival. But there is something about the closeness of her gaze that convinces him that she isn't looking into the night, or to the paddock, or at the sky. She is staring into her own reflection. Into her own eyes. Teodor wants to stand up and tell her that he is here. But Anna steps away from the window and disappears into the blackness.

MARIA EMPTIES another pot of steaming water into the metal tub that serves as both bath and scalding tub for butchering chickens. She has no soap, no towels. She tears another strip of cloth from the remnants of a white linen skirt. Elaborate embroidery still adorns the hem.

She wore this skirt under her everyday skirt the night they escaped. The soldiers didn't take clothes. They took horses, cows, weapons, tools, even the shovels. They tore down holy icons and nailed up posters of Stalin. They took the land and the grain and said, You own nothing. Those who refused to meet the harvest quotas were marched to open pits and shot. After that, the quotas were met. The penalty for concealing even a handful of wheat was death. A bounty was offered.

Houses and barns were searched and fields stripped until there was no more grain. Every day she had prayed to the Virgin Mother for Teodor not to fight back. To stay alive.

The soldiers would come, usually four at a time: two on horseback, two in the cart. They had a gramophone that they hand-cranked and Stalin's voice boomed the praises of collectivism. Then they would go door to door until the cart bulged with sacks of wheat. They carried pistols, but the starving don't fight back. Theirs was always the last house searched. Teodor had an arrangement with the soldiers, who had learned long ago that he made the best homebrew.

He was allowed to keep a pound of wheat, but if the liquor's quality ever degraded or the quantity diminished, the arrangement would be terminated. Maria hated Teodor for robbing her babies of even the smallest morsel of food. The soldiers would go through the motions of throwing their few belongings out the door and driving pitchforks into the thatched roof for contraband, while Teodor disappeared into the night and returned with half a jar of amber liquid.

But that night, he came back with a whole jug. They almost shot him on the spot, accused him of withholding grain. He assured them he had saved it up to make this batch. A gift for them. A token of respect for their difficult jobs. The liquid was clearer. He assured them it was purer. They were suspicious. Teodor had to drink first to prove that it wasn't poison. After that, they relaxed. The first drink made them feel like men, the second reminded them that they were powerful, and the fifth made them stupid.

Maria sat on the edge of the bed as Dania, Myron, Sofia, not yet five, and Katya, barely six months old, clung to her in their sleep. She could feel their bony arms; the swell of their bellies. She played over and over in her head what she would pack. And she prayed. She prayed for a miracle. They had to leave. She would not choose which

child would eat and which one would die. They should have got out with Anna and Stefan, before Stalin, before it all happened. But then they still had hope. By the eighth drink, the men were unconscious.

They took the three horses and slipped away under the cover of dark. Teodor in the lead with Sofia, followed by Dania and Myron, and Maria bringing up the rear with Katya. They travelled only at night, following the bush, avoiding the villages and blocked roads. If the horses' ears pricked west, Teodor went east before veering back. In daylight, they slept hidden under leaves and branches. They spoke only in whispers. She told the children it was a game to see how well they could hide. When they ran out of their few spoiled potatoes, they ate grass and berries. When one of the horses lay down, unable to go farther, Teodor whispered in its ear as he slit its throat and then they ate it.

When Maria wanted to stop, Teodor made them keep going. His belief never faltered. They would make it. He didn't allow for any other option. With every step, Maria expected the bay of tracking dogs; with every shadow, someone to betray them; with every bend, soldiers waiting; and with each crack of a snapping twig, a volley of shots. But no one came. She had her miracle. But it wasn't her conviction that had carried them; it was Teodor's. She would have lain down.

Five days later, they were safe in Halychyna, in Lviv. Teodor sold the horses for a few coins. Enough to pay for a forged exit document and third-class rail to the port in Hamburg. They told everyone they met what was happening to their country. People shook their heads and looked away. Some offered them bread.

Teodor found the government people who wanted Ukrainians to come to their country. The Canadian representatives smiled, gave them food, and arranged their passage. One even spoke Ukrainian. The men wrote their names in logbooks and beside Teodor's name wrote *Farmer*.

They didn't want to talk about what was happening in Ukraïna either. They didn't want to hear about Stalin and that there was no drought; that soldiers were cutting down fields and confiscating seed; that people were eating horses until there were no more horses; eating dogs until there were no more dogs; eating rats, because there were always plenty of rats. They didn't want to hear that. They wanted to talk about Canada having the healthiest climate in the world and farms for everyone. They wanted to get them on the boat.

Maria was only to bring practical items but had managed to carry her wedding linen. She used it to bundle their other belongings: two pots and a pan, a few utensils, a goose-down quilt, her mother's hand-woven wool blanket, sewing supplies, tonics, medicine, seeds, two sets of clothes for each child, a hairbrush, six skeins of wool, and the family crucifix and Bible that she had retrieved from under the outhouse floorboards. The only other sentimental item she had smuggled in was a handkerchief filled with the rich, black earth of her homeland.

They were crammed into the lower deck of the ship with two hundred others. They pushed their way to a stack of crates beneath a hatch, which in the days to come would provide their only fresh air. They clung to their heap of possessions. The children—too weak, too overwhelmed—never wandered. She made them eat the foul-tasting stew ladled from the massive kettles into their dinner pails. She held the chamber pot for them to throw up in. She wiped their faces and sponged their bodies with her skirt. She held them up to the hatch until her arms went numb. She told them stories and sang lullabies, coaxing them to sleep, to forget.

When the ship arrived at the pier in Halifax, she had to open the handkerchief at customs. The officers laughed at her pile of dirt, but they let her pass. She carried it on the train across the country, two thousand miles. And when the tracks ended, she carried it on the wagon across the prairies and north into the bush. And when the wagon ran out of trail, she

carried it on foot. Even when she had to leave behind clothes and a pot, she didn't put down the handkerchief. When the children were hanging from her waist and wrapped around her neck, she held on to that bundle. And when they finally staggered over the last hill and came to their squat of land, buried in trees and rocks, she fell to her knees, kissed the ground, and mingled her precious soil with this new land.

That was at their old home. Their first home in Canada. It's where they built their house, broke the land. Where Ivan was conceived on a still, warm April night. Teodor had led her to a patch where he had cleared the land of scrub and roots. This was where he would build their cabin. He had marked its frame with logs. He took her hand and guided her through the stick drawing. Here's the kitchen, here's the children's rooms, here's the pantry, here's the stove, here's the windows—see, they look out over the fields. In what was to be their bedroom he had laid out the wedding linen. Blue-white under the full moon. They made love there, immersed in stars. She had never been able to scrub the grass stains from the precious cloth. That was the last place her family had called home.

"Teodor, the water is ready," Maria calls softly out the door.

The man who walks through the door is old. His body moves stiffly, his shoulders hunched over. His gait is almost a side-to-side shuffle. The feeble light of the kerosene lamp cloaks him in shadows. He seems hesitant to remove his clothes in front of her.

Maria pulls a chair up close to the steaming water. "Sit," she urges him, as if he is a small child. Teodor sits heavily on the rickety chair, exhausted by the effort. He leans over and tries to untie the broken string that acts as a shoelace. His fingers fumble with the knot, his hands tremble. Maria kneels down before him. "Let me help."

He doesn't protest. He is beyond dignity. He leans back and looks straight ahead, his hands limp in his lap. He looks past her, past the

split boards of the wall, beyond the night. He doesn't blink. The binder twine snaps as Maria tugs at the knot. Gently, she loosens the stiff leather that sticks to his bare feet and ankles. Ever so carefully, she slips the workboots off. He doesn't flinch. Maria tries not to gag and refrains from covering her nose. His feet are caked in black. Sores ooze where the oversized leather tongues have rubbed mercilessly, and on the back of his heels the blisters have widened into a raw gash. His overgrown toenails are cracked and split.

Maria doesn't make a sound. She sets each foot, as if it were fine porcelain, on the makeshift towel. She fills a washbasin with the warm water and brings his feet to it. Not until Maria rolls up his ragged cuffs to keep them from getting wet does she gasp. The sound catches in her throat, like a wounded bird, before she swallows it down.

Teodor's bony ankles are a mottle of bruises—green, yellow, and brown. Each one branded by the chafing of iron shackles. Layers of rings, some recently scabbed over, others faded to deadened white scars. The constant wearing of steel on flesh.

Three feet away, one of the children coughs and rolls over in their sleep. As if caught in an act of transgression, Maria pulls the pant cuffs down before realizing what she has done. She looks up to Teodor's face, but he isn't looking at her. His eyes are fixed on the door. In the lamplight, she sees the creases that furrow his forehead and are etched around his eyes. He is listening to a lone coyote. Its plaintive howl echoes across the prairie, climbing higher and higher in pitch before trailing off. In the sustain, the coyote stops and listens. Calling for someone to answer him, someone to find him.

Maria lowers Teodor's feet into the basin.