

Cold Fried Pike

In driven snow, he waited at the Zemynos trolley stop for the Daughter, cold fried pike and a bottle of Bulgarian merlot in a blue plastic sack dangling by two fingers like shot in a sling. He snugged his red cap over his ears and brow, but snow piled on his eyelashes, melted, rose in tiny goblets, and then ran all at once into his eyes. He pulled his red cap lower, leaned back a little, and through myriad shades of light reflecting off whirling snowflakes saw the Pasilaiciai cooperatives of Vilnius sprawled out, satellite dishes bailing wired to balconies, Brezhnev-pale, like long gray teeth imbedded in the foggy blue underbellies of late-fall clouds. As evening came on, the opaque cooperatives grew luminous, ghostly, and bluish lights high in honeycombed windows speckled the night. He retreated to the public telephone behind the trolley stop. He called the Daughter, held the receiver close to his mouth, shivering, wind whooshing upward into the cap of the booth and pinprick bits of snow rushing downward around him. He pressed a hand tightly against his red cap, over one ear.

“I’m near. A bunch. Of kiosks,” he told her. “Here’s one. It says, ‘Saltas Alaus.’”

“It says the beer is cold,” the Daughter explained. “But it is never cold. Just wait there. I will come soon. You’re not in America anymore. Don’t buy anything. They will cheat you.”

Next, the Mother’s voice came on the line, “Don’t worry.:

Then the Grandmother’s, “She won’t forget you.”

And the Daughter’s, once more, “I promise.”

He played a little game, waiting a little while, and then counting one, two...and not sooner than two, out snow swirling between two kiosks the Daughter appeared, no hat, boyish hair, dirty blond, a purplish sealskin coat. She shifted a burning Pirma cigarette from one hand to the other, reached up, and blotted melted snow from the corner of one eye with the side of a mitten.

“Thanks for having me over,” he said.

“So,” she said, “you are still looking for your lost relatives from the Soviet Ice Age.” She stared at the blue sack slung from

his fingers. "I see you brought the pike for Grandmother." She dropped the blazing Pirma into the snow and smashed it with a boot heel. "I hope you got it at Remi's," she went on. "They cheat you at the muge. No one regulates the scales."

They headed into the cooperatives, past Remi's, its broad glass front, behind which lavender fluorescent light poured into a gigantic glass tank brimming with live fish, illuminated starkly, set before bins topped with oranges, lemons, and apples. In greenish, stagnant water, metal-gray carp, prominent scales so armor-like, gulped for air, some sucking gills full of water bubbling feebly over algae coating the surface of the huge tank. Below the carp were long, green, hollow-eyed pike, seemingly frozen in the luminous fluid, save for their fore fins slowly sculling water, dirge-like, below which humpbacked brown drum, tails up, lips pursed, siphoned scum from the bottom of the tank.

Farther into the cooperatives they passed a dry fountain. At the center, new snow clung to the black-marble likeness of the lower halves of a man's legs, trousers and shoes.

The Daughter nodded at the legs.

"Leftovers from our brilliant planning committee," she said. "When they built the cooperative, the money ran out do they had to choose: water for the fountain or the statue of Lenin, but not both. They chose Lenin, of course. Now all we have left are Lenin's legs, cut off at the knees, and no water."

"It's a pity," he told her.

"Yes," she replied. "You know, in the Center, just off Kallinauskio Street, they took Lenin down and replaced him with Frank Zappa."

"Zap—?" he said.

"Zappa," she snapped her fingers, "like that." The Daughter seemed to draw herself together, raising the lapels of her sealskin against the wind, and sliding her hands into her coat pockets.

"It's not fair," she muttered and nodded one last time at Lenin's hapless snowcapped shanks. "It's not far," she added, and pushed on toward a dark tower, window glowing on only the highest floors, wind groaning as it raced around its cement walls.

Nine flights up, they arrived at the flat and entered the living area. The Mother and Grandmother were seated at a small square

table covered by a green and white-checked tablecloth, jammed within a meter of two pianos, one ebony, and the other walnut. A large blue bowl of red soup sat precisely in the center of the table. The Daughter shed her sealskin, took his coat and red cap, hung them in the hall closet, and then returned to seat herself in the small space between the table and the pianos, next to the Grandmother. He set the sack with the pike and wine next to the large bowl of red soup.

“The beet soup looks delicious,” he smiled and sat opposite the Grandmother with the Mother and Daughter at each elbow. The Mother removed the pieces of pike from his bag, fried, dark brown, one tailpiece and two back pieces. She returned to her seat, patted the one side of the blue-gray bun atop her head, and folded her hands in her lap.

Directly across the table, the Grandmother stared at him, watery eyes, thick, white hair laying in two tangled piles on her slumped shoulders, like filamentous froth at the bottoms of two waterfalls. She regarded the pieces of pike with a brief smile, and the suspicion, pressing her chin a little to the top of her chest, breathing audibly through both nostrils, gazing down at the green checkers of the cloth, tracing one checker with the tip of her index finger. Then the Grandmother commenced to tell a story about fishing for pike with her father when she was a little girl, how after she had hooked their first pike it swam in frantic circles about the boat, wound the line around her father, then escaped without a single splash, showing its teeth, depositing the red and silver spoon into the bow of the boat with a flash and a dull ring.

“Amazing,” he said.

“I watched my father struggle to release himself from the lines,” the Grandmother continued. “Heaved his shoulders upward, then thrust his neck up and out as far as possible to squeeze free. He looked at the tackle box and then at me with the sad eyes of a lost dog. I went to the box, got his knife, and cut him free.” The Grandmother took her fork and shoveled one of the back pieces onto her plate. With her fingertips she tore a piece of pike flesh from the base of the dorsal fin, and put it on her tongue, where it lay in a little pile, like a tiny tangle of white thread. “My vengeance,” she said and swallowed the bit of pike. “Only a few

weeks later my father said the KGB were coming for us. KGB said my father and brothers were Partisans, Forest Brothers.” She swallowed again, glancing at the Mother. “And my father told me to hide in the closet on the second floor behind the thickest coats. ‘Now!’ he said, and I did, but the closet had been recently painted and the fumes were suffocating. Then I heard KGB men come and walk all over the house, up and down stairs. Clap, clap, clap,” she said and paused to walk with her fingers on the green checkers, thumping the table hard with each fingerfall. “I heard on KGB man ask my father, ‘Is that all? Do you have everything you will need?’”

He tried the red soup, viscous and sweet, sipped one, two, three spoonfuls. “Don’t mind me,” he grinned with red-stained gums. “Please go on.”

The Grandmother’s fingertips and the checkers upon which they had walked shone with fry oil. She swallowed a second pinch of pike, but a single thread of pike remained on her lower lip. “Mother,” the Mother said, “you eat like a bird.” She thrust her hand forward to pluck the pike thread from the Grandmother’s lip, but the Grandmother parried with her soup spoon and continued.

“‘Where’s your daughter?’ this KGB man asked. ‘I have no daughter,’ my father replied. When I heard that I could bear the paint fumes no more. I ran from the coat closet, out the second-story window, just in time, because this KGB man went to search my closet next!”

With her eyes, the Mother continued to follow the pike thread quivering on the Grandmother’s lower lip. “So you disobeyed your father?” she asked, a question sufficiently disarming to permit the Mother to reach out, pluck the pike thread from the Grandmother’s lip, and flick it into the air.

His eyes tried to follow to arc of the pike thread across the tiny flat.

The Grandmother recoiled from the Mother’s pike plucking. “Yes,” she replied, “that is what saved me.”

The Mother’s having launched the bit of pike distracted him so much that his soup spoon slipped irretrievably into his soup. Only a feeble glint of silver light remained in the deep-red depths

of his blue bowl.

The Mother and Daughter slurped a little red soup. When the Mother spoke to him, the wire rims of her glasses cast little circles of shadow on her eyes, making her appear nocturnal, owl-ish. He turned his full attention to her so as not to disclose the accident with his soup spoon.

“I would welcome paint fumes.” The Mother shook her head. “The Director of the music school has the nerve to force me to give piano lessons in a brown room. No window. Floor, walls, ceiling, all brown. It’s as if we play underground in a cave, a thousand kilometers from civilization. Some days I light a candle and watch the tongue of flame try to overcome the shadows of the room—and fail. I told this woman, if she will buy but one can of paint I will paint the room myself. ‘Fine,’ the director said, ‘I will deduct the paint from your wages.’ And I said, ‘How? You haven’t paid me in six months!’”

The Mother commenced slurping more red soup, loudly, as if such strong slurping might quell the angry quivering of her upper lip. The Grandmother stripped her piece of pike to the bone and counted its vertebrae with her pinkie, one, two...

The merlot! He suddenly remembered.

“Mother!” the Mother said, reaching over and batting the Grandmother’s pinkie from the third vertebrae.

“Mother!” the Daughter said, took a fork from the table, held it up to her face, and began to peer through the little spaces in the prongs. She turned the fork sideways and narrowed her steel-blue eyes so their slits precisely fit the spaces between the metal prongs. “The Director of the music school will never pay you. I don’t know why you let her cheat you.”

“The merlot!” he said and reached to open it.

The Daughter turned to him. “The Director is the sort of person who is putting the new floor down in Grandmother’s flat,” she said. “I gave this man enough money to buy good quality wood. Well, the floor buckled, in two mountain ranges. I told this man, ‘I know cheap wood when I see it.’”

He extracted the cork from the merlot; the bottle sighed.

The Grandmother leaned his way a little and glanced over the lip of his blue bowl where his spoon lay drowning in beet broth.

The left side of her mouth drew up in a small snarl, then relaxed, a brief smile. How irretrievable the doomed spoon! Outside, the wind whistled. The Grandmother was onto him. On the balcony, the lip of the satellite dish rang against the iron balustrade until the ringing was nearly continuous. The Daughter half-rose from her chair, but the wind subsided a bit and the ringing stopped. The Grandmother settled back a little and with a fingernail plucked the ribs in the pike's dorsal fin, one, two, three, making a dull brittle sound, like strumming the teeth of a comb. "Wood," the Grandmother said, set the bones of the back piece on her plate, and took up a new piece of pike. "Now I remember. I went out of the second-story window and fell into a pile of wood. How it hurt. But fortunately it was autumn, the woodpile was high, and leaves had fallen on the uppermost logs. I lay there in the logs until they all left—by 'they' I mean my father and two older brothers. They shot on of my older brothers when he tried to escape. They shot my father and other brother later, at their headquarters."

The Mother returned her spoon to the red soup. "Last time you said they shot all of them at headquarters."

The Grandmother set the dorsal fin aside, ladled a little soup into her bowl, dipped her spoon into the red liquid, and, giving her little half-snarl, let the shank rest on the lip of her bowl. "Yes, of course, they shot them all."

"Mother!" the Mother said. "You know perfectly well I have an uncle, Petras."

"Dear," the Grandmother replied, "he is not your uncle."

The Mother dipped her head, low to the brim of the blue bowl with the red soup. A long swatch of blue-gray hair had unfurled itself from her bun; it hung so low it nearly soaked itself in her soup. She took up the spoon and began slurping loudly again. Then she put her head up from her bowl and looked at him. "You see?" the Mother said, eyeing the Grandmother suspiciously in her periphery. "She can't help you find your lost relatives."

The Grandmother sighed and stabbed her pinkie into the new back piece, under the skin along the spine. "Laying there in the woodpile," she went on, "I was all in bits. I couldn't tell my legs and arms from the pieces of wood I'd fallen into—and blood,

there was blood on the wood, darkening the bark, what a sight, as if I were an animal slaughtered by hunters.” The Grandmother’s fingertip popped out the other side of the piece of pike and a little white floret of flesh bloomed around her pinkie. “Then darkness fell.”

He poured the wine. Red on glass. “Have some,” he said, and set a glass by each woman, one, two, three.

The Mother sipped her merlot and grumbled, “I want to know the sort of person who originally painted my piano room dark brown; a sadist; a barbarian; an animal, two yellow eyes in the night. Now, I think brown. I hear brown. Brown!” She turned to the Grandmother, who had just deposited another pinch of pike on her tongue. “Do you have any idea what brown tastes like?”

“No, dear, what?” the Grandmother said.

“Cold fried pike!”

He took up the bottle of merlot again and topped off their glasses, during which each tried to wave the spout away with their hands. One, two, three. He poured anyway.

“The moon,” the Grandmother went on, “was high and fat and cold-blue in the autumn sky. I crossed the Vilna River into the Uzupis District and followed the main street, hiding in corners, sometimes crawling from building to building. It grew late. In the wild wind above, streetlamps swung on squeaking wires and shadows of buildings swayed, as if alive, waiting to devour me. It was All Souls’ Night.

“Last time,” the Mother interrupted, “you said it was All Souls’ Eve.”

“Too dry,” the Daughter muttered, smacking her lips and sucking in air. She swirled the merlot in the glass, pushed her nose and forehead into the glass and inhaled. When she withdrew her snout, her eyes rested, dead-on the meniscus, then on him. “How much did you pay for this wine?”

He didn’t know what he’d paid for the merlot; if he withheld the answer too long the Daughter would surely notice his hapless soup spoon missing. The Mother saved him.

“Light,” the Mother said, her tongue moving forward and back in her mouth, so stained red it seemed black. “I mean, if the

Director won't purchase paint she could at least provide adequate electric lighting. What am I supposed to do? Squeeze light out of the piano? Make light from music? Now, that would be something!"

He turned away from them all. He could feel their eyes following him. He glanced out the window, and then pretended to inspect the pianos, the ebony, the Estonia, the walnut, the Latvia—but he was actually overcome by the ferocity of the wind. The satellite dish had started ringing again.

"Especially impossible," the Daughter said, "to make light with the Estonia. It is junk. I think it was made three hundred years ago out of doors on a wet day in February."

The Mother pinched a chunk of pike by the greenish, translucent ribs of its tail. She lifted the tail section mechanically, like a crane, swung it over the Grandmother's plate, and released it to thud on the ceramic surface.

"Oh yes, oh my," the startled Grandmother responded. "It was All Souls' Eve...I kept myself in the moving shadows until I found myself in the graveyard. A sea of candlelights flickered among the gravestones. It was so beautiful I wanted to be dead. I wandered among the lights of graves a long time, my pieces in pieces, and my soul wanting to sweep my pieces into a tiny little pile and deposit them in the earth. In the darkness I heard people talking, some even laughing. I crept along in the darkest parts of the cemetery so no one would see me, to a spot where, apparently, the breeze had blown out many of the candles, or no one had come to visit graves to light them. I didn't mind dying, my last breath leaving, or being hidden in the ground from the sight of everyone. But I remembered my father telling the KGB man that he had no daughter. I worried about that. I worried about people forgetting me...I made it to an area near the Vilna River. I looked for the perfect place to rest. I saw an infant's grave with one prong of the cast-iron cross broken off, lying rusted in the clay. I picked up that piece of cross, lay down near the infant's grave, and covered myself with fallen leaves. I held that little piece of metal cross in my hands tightly, as if it were my last connection to the world outside my pile of leaves."

The Grandmother stopped speaking, nibbled at the last bits

of thready pike tail flesh, and then placed the whole pinch of it into her mouth with one finger.

“Grandmother,” he said cheerily, pouring the whole heel of the merlot into her glass, “what great stories you have.”

He smiled.

Then Grandmother frowned.

“Stories?” the Grandmother said, placed her forearms on the green-checkered table, and leaned toward him, close, closer, a motion accompanied by eyes of others, following. Her eyes dead on him, the Grandmother dug a finger into one corner of her mouth, retrieved a bit of pike meat hidden there, and tucked it under her tongue. She sucked the last morsel of pike and fry oil from the tip of her pinkie, licked her lips, and rose from the pile of pike bones on her plate. She walked around to his side of the table, reached into his blue bowl with two fingers, and drew his soup spoon from its red depths. She laid the spoon neatly at one side of his bowl, sucked once on each of her stained fingers, and left the room.

The Mother and Daughter leaned forward in his direction.

The Daughter leaned close, closer than the Mother. “You have come all the way across town,” she whispered, “all the way from America, to find out if you are one of us.” She leaned so close he could feel her hot breath lingering in his ear. “You feel cheated, don’t you?”

“Grandmother told the same story last time you were here,” the Mother whispered, coiling the fallen lock of hair around her index finger. “Do you remember? We tried to stop Grandmother. We tried to keep her from boring you. We don’t believe her anyway. We’re not taken in by her.”

“We hope you will come again,” the Daughter said. “It’s not often we have a man visit.”

“Yes,” the Mother added, smiling broadly, “please come again.”

It had stopped snowing when he left the flat of the three women in the Pasilaiciai District. Snow had not accumulated everywhere; streets and sidewalks were wet and dark, but all else seemed to glow in a new coating of white. The Daughter offered to guide him back to the Zemynos trolley stop. He thanked her

but told her he was sure he knew the way back, though he didn't. He told her this because he wanted to be alone, and it turned out that he found his way.

He caught the Nineteen trolleybus and got off at the Pienine stop, three before his. He crossed the street to a large blacktopped lot next to a dairy plant, where two streetlamps, like great eyes set against old mortar lines of soot-crustrated bricks, emitted a hollow yellow light, feebly illuminating crumbling blacktop enclosed by a high chain-link fence. The lot was inhabited by dozens of dogs of all sorts, sizes, and situations, some chained to houses too small for their bodies, some tied to stakes driven through the asphalt, some loose and pacing the perimeter. A Corgi and a shepard trotted to the fence. They stared at him with the kind of wonder one expects of dogs. When he picked up a stick and began to drag the tip over the links, they bared their teeth. Then the shepard thrust its head into the space between two joint posts, snapping, snarling, gums draping out its jowls, bright red with oxygen, eyes popping, darting side to side. Other dogs soon joined the shepard, their barking thrown back by the brick walls of the dairy, percussive and riotous. The Corgi leapt onto the shepard's back, and other dogs crowded around and onto the shepard, until the whole mass of dogs coiled into one huge wave and dashed itself onto the blacktop, sending smaller dogs in all direction and landing the shepard on its side with a great groan and expulsion of air. With his stick he raked and rattle the chain links with so much force the fence rang continuously. Dogs wriggled, righted themselves, and rushed the fence, impacting it with such force that the interlocking metal links sagged outward, ringing in eerie, echoing chords. When he dropped the stick, the dogs quieted, some resuming their milling, as if he never had never sent the chain links ringing in the first place.

He snugged the red cap over his ears and crossed the street back to the trolley stop. There, for a long stretch of time, he held his breath and remained perfectly still until he was sure. The sensation was unmistakable, a ringing in his ears, a pressure in his jaws, a bitter acid in the back of his mouth. He reached up with two fingers and massaged his mandibular joints, but his jaws would not loosen and drop. He couldn't recall when he'd set his

jaws so hard. The ringing in his ears went on. He looked the long way down the dark street, anxious to see if the Nineteen were anywhere in sight. He pressed his hands to his red cap covering his ears but they rang so loudly he could think of nothing else but stopping the sound. He shuddered once and it started snowing, not a driven snow, but straight down, a windless, silent, heavy fall.