

The Rings

by Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch

This story is set during the 1932-33 Famine-Genocide, which was orchestrated by Stalin in order to starve out Ukrainian farmers -- labelled "kulaks" -- who refused to give up their land. In all, an estimated ten million people starved to death. In the midst of the Famine-Genocide, Stalin invited foreign journalists to tour the countryside so they could see for themselves that there was no famine. Many journalists were sympathetic to the communist cause, and they stayed on the official tour and took things at face value. Others saw the truth but reported lies in order to stay in favor with Stalin. Famous Famine deniers include Walter Duranty of the New York Times and playwright George Bernard Shaw. There were a few honest journalists, like Malcolm Muggeridge and Gareth Jones, who heroically reported the truth and were scorned for it.

There are rare accounts of people who escaped from soviet-occupied Ukraine and offered eyewitness testimony about the Famine. "The Rings" is based on a number of firsthand accounts.

Danylo's sharpest memory was of hunger.

When his father had refused to sign the papers handing over their tiny farm to the state, his family earned the label, *pidkurkul* -- or poor farmer who sympathizes with the kulaks.

His father knew that the Communists would send in the Red Army to confiscate their grain, so he had mixed some wheat with the chaff and hid it in the loft. He had also put the best wheat for sowing, up in the rafters. Danylo's mother had hidden a sack of grain in the chimney.

The soldiers who came were a rough and brutal lot. They were not from the village, and they spoke Russian, not Ukrainian. They brought with them a stabber -- a device made of a sharp pronged stick with a bag on the end --to collect evidence of grain.

As one of the soldiers carried an armful of his father's hidden grain to the waiting cart, Danylo rushed forward and grabbed back some stalks of wheat. "Why are you doing this?" he cried.

The man said something in Russian that sounded like a curse. Another Red Army soldier opened the *pich* (oven) and confiscated the fresh loaves of bread baking there. They loaded all the food into the cart and took it away.

A few pieces of stale bread on the rubbish pile had somehow been missed. Danylo's family -- his father, his mother, and three younger brothers -- survived on these crusts and water for a couple of days. His baby sister Larissa was still at his mother's breast--one less mouth to feed.

Danylo watched as those around him appeared to shrink. His mother remarked one day, as she washed her face, that she could feel every bone in her skull. Later, when Danylo carried the soapy basin of water outside to empty it, he found her wedding ring, which had slipped off. She had not noticed. His mother had not been able to get the silver band past her knuckle for years. Danylo dried it on his shirt, and brought it back in to her. From then on, she wore it on a strip of leather around her neck.

When the crusts of bread were gone, one day passed with no food at all, just water. Danylo's feet and stomach began to swell with the first signs of starvation. His father caught and skinned a stray cat, which sustained them a few more days. But Danylo's four-year-old brother, Anatoly, swelled up and died. Danylo caught a hedgehog, and the remaining family survived on that for a while.

As winter set in, the rats, cats, dogs, and birds in the village disappeared. Danylo learned, like everyone else, that one must eat at least one morsel, each and every day, to keep oneself from swelling. If the swelling set in, his feet and belly would get so huge that he wouldn't be able to move. At that point, he would sit and wait to die. When his mother began to starve, Danylo couldn't bear to look at her body--ballooning out grotesquely, as if it were about to burst. Her swelling caused what little milk she had been able to produce to stop. And so Larissa died. His mother died the next day. Then ten-year-old Vasyl, and then seven-year-old Ivan.

Danylo and his father said prayers for the dead. His father reverently removed the cord that held her wedding ring from around his wife's neck. Before putting it around his own neck, he slipped off his own wedding ring and strung it on the cord.

In their small home, Danylo and his father sat with their dead loved ones for hours—perhaps days. What was time, anyway? It wasn't until the corpses began to stink that they dragged their family beyond the threshold. The village authorities had dug a huge pit in the graveyard. Each morning they sent a cart around to all the houses, collecting the bodies. They dumped the bodies into a pit, until it was full. And then they dug a new one.

"Perhaps I was a fool not to sign our land away," Danylo's father wondered aloud one day. Then he and his son walked to the collective, intending to sign up. But even from the road, they could see that the workers in the state farm were no better off than the kulaks. The only people who were not starving were the party comrades (Communist Party members) —and they had confiscated the grain in the first place—so Danylo and his father returned home.

They resorted to boiling shoe leather and drinking it as broth, but this did not stave off the swelling. Word broke that a horse had starved to death in the commune; so Danylo, his father, and the few other surviving villagers walked to the collective, knives in hand, to carve up the horse. Without waiting to cook the meat, Danylo sat down on the ground and cut it into bloody chunks, devouring a morsel on the spot. The horse meat that they carried away lasted for several weeks.

When another horse died, on a state farm, Danylo and his father tried to repeat their success. But the party comrades foiled their plan. The horse was thrown into a pit and covered with acid. By the time Danylo and his father got there, most of the flesh had sizzled away. His father threw himself on the horse anyway. He cut off a hunk of still-intact flesh from the horse's hind quarter. Danylo tried to pull it away, but his father had already cut off some smaller bits and had swallowed some poisoned meat.. His father doubled up with pain, almost immediately.—and died that night.

Danylo said a prayer for his father. He sat beside the cold body from dusk until dawn. It wasn't until he heard the creaking wheels of the corpse wagon, that Danylo broke his meditations. As he dragged his father's corpse over the threshold in the early morning light, a glint of silver shone from the leather cord around his father's neck. With the corpse collectors only yards away, Danylo reached down and undid the cord from his father's neck. As he retied it around his own, he noticed that the two silver wedding rings looked unnaturally large.

Danylo walked through the house one last time, as if to imprint the image on his memory. It was nothing more than a one-roomed mud shack. Everything of value had long been bartered

for scraps of food. There was one small, sharp knife, so he took it. The only remaining item was a silver spoon that had been passed down, mother to daughter, for generations. It was his mother's prized possession. Danylo carefully wrapped it in a bit of cloth and placed it inside his shirt. He stepped outside and walked through the frozen strip of land that constituted their family farm. For the sake of this meager property, his whole family had been killed. How could he leave this place? His family had farmed this small patch of earth for uncounted generations. Danylo despaired at the thought of abandoning it. With his family gone, this was all he had in the world, yet he knew that staying guaranteed his death. If he could somehow survive, perhaps he could reclaim it one day.

As he walked down the main street and away from his home for the last time, he was struck by the absolute silence. No bird sang; no child ran in the street.

Danylo's uncle had a farm about ten kilometers away. Danylo and his siblings had been taken there once with his parents for a family wedding, and so he knew the general direction. He set off, hoping that things would be better there. He was so weak with hunger that his legs wobbled, but he had no choice but to forge ahead. He rested frequently, nibbling on bugs and early spring shoots of grass.

When he got to his uncle's home, he realized that things were just as bad there. Going through the motions of hospitality, his aunt offered him a stew made of boiled water and grass. Danylo ate it, with his hollow-eyed uncle, aunt, and their children looking on. He thanked them, but he knew that he must leave. Their generosity in the midst of such dire need touched his heart.

Twenty kilometers beyond his uncle's farm was a town with a train station, and so Danylo set out for there. Perhaps a train would be his salvation. The town was not much better off than Danylo's village, although not everyone was starving. The street was lined with swollen people. But there were also market stalls selling food, and Russian-speaking townsfolk went about their day-to-day business, seemingly oblivious to the misery all around them.

Danylo went up to the first market stall he passed. "How much for that?" he asked, pointing at a loaf of white bread.

"More than you have to pay for it," answered the man behind the stall, as he appraised Danylo's homespun clothes.

"What do you have that I could afford?" asked Danylo. And he unwrapped his precious bundle and drew out the silver spoon.

The man examined it with cold, appraising eyes. "I'll take that for this," he said, and he held up a small loaf of the cheapest, blackest bread that he had.

Danylo was in no position to argue. He handed over the spoon and grabbed the bread, tearing off one chunk on the spot and devouring it. Almost immediately, he felt a little bit stronger. But Danylo considered how much he had paid for that one loaf of bread, and how little he had to buy more. He knew that he had to come up with a way to get to a safer place.

As days passed, Danylo became adept at stealing bread from the market stalls. He also learned how to evade the grasp of the party comrades, who scoured the streets, looking for urchins like himself.

Most days, the comrades were content with keeping the ever-encroaching multitude of starving children away from the market stalls, but one day, their ambitions intensified. They methodically swept the streets and caught every last child. Danylo feared for his life as he and the others were herded into a vacant warehouse across from the train station. As the door was closed and bolted from the outside, darkness enveloped the sorry group. Most were too weak and exhausted even to protest. All around Danylo, little ones curled into balls and fell asleep. The windows of the warehouse had been blackened with paint, making it impossible to look out. But Danylo still had his knife with him, so he drew it from his belt and scraped a tiny bit of the window clean—just enough for a single eye.

What he saw amazed him. A Red Army officer was in the middle of the square at a makeshift desk. Behind him was a rack of what looked like Ukrainian folk outfits. The officer had a metal box and a sheaf of paper on the table in front of him. A lineup of city people had formed. As the officer marked down something on the paper, he would hand each person what appeared to be money from the metal box, and then the person would walk behind the desk and choose an outfit. What in heaven's name were they doing? Danylo wondered. Putting on a play? After more than a dozen people had chosen outfits, Danylo lost interest. Like the other inmates, he found a bare spot on the floor, curled up into a ball, and fell asleep.

He awoke with a start some time later. There was a horrible, frightening, and otherworldly sound outside. It was so awful that Danylo was almost afraid to look out, but his curiosity got the better of him. He crept back up to the peephole and looked out.

There, just thirty feet in front of him, was what could only be a train. It was like a fire-breathing monster, and he shook with fear as the huge creature screeched to a halt. Once his heart had stopped fluttering with fear, Danylo examined this odd contraption as best he could. It was made up of individual wheeled boxes, all linked together like sausages.

One of these boxes was a sleek unit, with huge glass windows on the side. Even from the warehouse, Danylo could see that the windows on the train compartment were either painted or papered over. Strange, Danylo thought. Perhaps it's to transport urchins?

Just then, a door opened on the compartment and a uniformed man jumped out. He fiddled with the lower part of the doorway until a set of metal steps appeared, reaching to the ground. Almost immediately, a number of well-fed adults stepped out of the doorway and onto the platform of the train station.

Danylo knew, just by looking at them, that these people were foreigners. They wore strange clothing, and many of them carried pads of paper and were writing in them, even as they were stepping down to the platform. There was also a Red Army officer mingling with the group.

As if on cue, a group of townspeople appeared. Danylo was shocked to see that these people were dressed in the Ukrainian folk outfits. They all looked healthy and well-fed. One young girl walked up to the foreigners and presented them with the traditional welcoming of braided bread and salt. As this performance was being acted out, others set up a table in the square and placed an embroidered cloth over it. They motioned the foreigners to sit down at the table. Then the actors brought out bowls and platters filled with steaming food. Danylo could hardly contain his envy as he watched the well-stuffed foreigners stuff themselves even more. What was this all about?

Shortly after, the people got back on the train, and it pulled away. A few minutes after that, a party comrade came over to the warehouse, removed the bolt, and opened the door wide.

"Phew," the man muttered in Russian. "Don't you *khakhols* ever bathe?"

Danylo and the rest wandered out. Their lack of hygiene was the least of their worries.

As the days passed, other trains came in, but they carried goods, not people. Some of them were filled with wood and coal; some were empty. Danylo watched as children like himself hopped into these compartments when the party comrades weren't looking. More often than not, the comrades would search the cars before they departed. It was the rare urchin who escaped this

way. Danylo knew that he had to get on a train himself one day soon. Any place would be better than here.

Then one day, he saw his chance. The party comrades were sweeping the streets for every single child again, and so Danylo knew that another passenger train was coming. Would another charade also be performed? The comrades wouldn't dare search a passenger car for urchins; that would be too embarrassing for them, since urchins weren't supposed to exist.

He dashed away from the streets altogether, and hid on the outskirts of town. Then he waited for the train to appear. When it roared in, he skulked back into town, making sure to stay hidden. He needn't have worried. All attention was focused on the spectacle of rosy-cheeked "Ukrainians" and the delicious, steaming dishes they were serving.

The door to the train car had been left open, so Danylo waited until the uniformed man wasn't watching. Then he dashed inside. In a flash, he took in his surroundings. There were two rows of cushioned benches and a pot-bellied coal stove at the far end of the car. He hid himself quickly, behind the stove.

A few moments later, he heard a set of footsteps. He was afraid to look out to see if it was a Red Army officer who had followed him on to the train, or simply one of the passengers. He tried to stay still; he tried not to breathe.

The footsteps sounded louder and Danylo soon realized that a person was standing in front of the stove. A shiver of fear shot through him, and then he heard the voice of a young girl speak in Russian. "They'll find you if you stay there."

Danylo was frozen with fear. He wildly hoped that somehow it wasn't him she was talking to; but the next thing he knew, a hand rested on his shoulder.

"I can see your shoulder as clear as day," she said. "It would be better if you hid under here."

Danylo dared to look out. A well-fed girl about his age stood before him. Her gloved hand pointed to a space underneath one of the benches. Then they could hear voices, close to the open door of the car.

"Hurry!" cried the girl.

Danylo scrambled from behind the stove and rolled under the bench. The girl shoved some luggage underneath the bench to hide him, and then she sat down on the bench above him.

How was it that she had been so willing to help him? Had this girl scraped a bit of paint off her own windows, and recognized the truth where her parents had not? How many others really knew what was going on in Ukraine, but preferred the charade?

Danylo settled himself under the bench and looked around. He noticed that one of the items she had shoved under was a wicker basket lined with a checkered cloth. He could smell sausage, and cheese, and bread. As the other passengers got onto the train, Danylo's stomach rumbled loudly. He prayed that no one could hear it.

Moments later, the train roared out of the station, and then Danylo could hear an official checking the passenger tickets. After he left, Danylo closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but the aroma of the food next to his nose was overwhelming. He reached in and drew out a long link of kobasa, a smoked sausage. Almost swooning with hunger, Danylo drew the knife out of his belt and cut off a piece of meat. He bit into it and chewed with pleasure. He took a few more bites and then put it back in the basket. As the hours passed and the memory of the wonderfully fatty kobasa filled his mind, he couldn't stop himself from reaching in and taking another bite. Before he knew it, the whole link was gone. He would have liked to eat the bread and cheese too; but by sheer force of will, he stopped himself.

It was a good thing he did, because a few hours later, a hand reached down and picked up the basket, momentarily exposing Danylo to anyone who happened to look down. The girl quickly rearranged herself above him, though, covering him back up again.

"Rachel, you little imp," said a man's voice. "You've eaten all our sausage!"

"I'm sorry, Papa," said the girl. "I was starving, and it smelled so good."

"Next time, ask if someone else wants a bit, before you devour the whole thing," the man said in an exasperated voice.

"I will," she said meekly.

The train rumbled on, and night fell. Danylo drifted off to sleep, only to wake up with a jolt hours later, when the train was still. Eating all of that kobasa had upset Danylo's stomach and he was doubled over with pain. He had an urgent need to fart, but he was afraid that if he did that, he would wake the people sleeping in the compartment.

The car door was open again, and that there were some men smoking on the platform outside. Without giving much thought to a plan, Danylo rolled out of his hiding place and, on legs leaden and numb from being cramped up for so long, hobbled out the car door. A uniformed man on the platform tried to grab his collar as he sped past, but Danylo broke free. He ran and ran, as far from the train as he could get. Then, when his pain would let him run no farther, he collapsed on the ground in agony and let out one long, loud fart. He felt immediately better. Looking around, he saw that he was completely alone. It was the deepest part of night. He hugged his bundle to him and fell asleep.

He woke to the feeling of bright sun shining in through his eyelids. He tried to get up but realized that he was almost numb through with cold. He wriggled his arms and legs to get the circulation back and then stood up and looked around to see where he had landed. The train was long gone, and Danylo was in the middle of nowhere. Not a house, field, or village in sight, just mile upon mile of open steppe. Danylo walked back to the train tracks and waited for another train. In the days that he waited, he ate roots and grass and bugs. And he dreamed of the lovely kobasa.

When a train finally passed by, it didn't stop. Danylo had to run beside it and hoist himself onto an empty freight car. He was so hungry by the time the train pulled into a station that he decided to risk going outside, to see if he could find food. He was no sooner off the train when a Red Army soldier grabbed him by the collar. "Where are you going?"

Danylo had already seen the fate of urchins who had been caught, so he thought fast for a plausible excuse. "I was visiting friends and am just on my way back home."

The soldier looked Danylo up and down; he didn't buy the story for a moment. "Come with me," he said. He took Danylo to a freight car that had been pulled off the tracks, and shoved him through the open door. It was filled with filthy and emaciated urchins. There was no food or water in the car, nor even a pot to pee in. The soldier locked the door behind Danylo.

Each day, a few children died. The doors were opened to remove the dead children, and the live ones were led out to relieve themselves. Food was brought in, on occasion, but never more often than every other day. Danylo saw that his legs were swelling and he knew that starvation was again setting in. He considered trying to escape on the daily visit to the lavatory, but he knew he wouldn't have the strength. His only hope was to lie still enough and hope that he was mistaken for dead.

He felt himself gripped by the ankles and hands, and tossed on the top of a mound of corpses. He forced himself not to cry out. He had seen so many dead bodies in his short lifetime that it surprised him how upset he found himself to be. What kind of monsters were these comrades, who considered people like Danylo to be no more than rubbish to be thrown out?

The cart rumbled away from the freight car, and Danylo felt himself swaying back and forth, precariously perched on top of a mass of human bodies. The sweet, sickly smell of rotting flesh enveloped him as the cart pulled away from the train depot, away from the village, and into darkness. Danylo drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

The cart came to a jolting stop, and Danylo had to force himself to keep still. Suddenly, he felt the cart tip, and then he and the bodies tumbled out, into a pit. A gust of fresh air enveloped Danylo, and the smell of rotting was momentarily replaced with a sharp whiff of freshly-dug black earth. The scent brought back memories of his family farm. Each spring and summer, that same wonderful scent of rich, black earth was in the air for seeding and harvest.

The lovely scent was soon extinguished, as the weight of corpses from the bottom of the cart fell on top of him, covering him completely.

Danylo lay there amidst the dead for what seemed like hours. He was afraid to dig himself out in case the corpse collectors were still there, yet he was even more fearful of staying where he was. He knew that if he drifted into unconsciousness, he would suffocate. When he could wait no longer, he slowly burrowed his way to the top. He remembered that the commissars in his village sprinkled lye on the mass graves to make them deteriorate faster; so when Danylo sensed he was near the top layer of corpses, he gingerly flipped each body over, making sure not to touch the upper surface and risk burning from the lye. When he finally broke through, he was glad for his foresight. The sharp smell of lye hung in the air.

It was still dark, but Danylo could see that daybreak was close at hand. The dark of the night looked almost bright compared to the hellish darkness at the bottom of the pit. In the moonlight, Danylo looked at his hands and feet and was dismayed to see them ballooning out with starvation. He had very little time. If he didn't find something to eat, he would die.

He could see the silhouette of the huge mound of freshly dug earth. As his eyes adjusted, Danylo could also see that the pit had been dug in a farmer's empty field. He realized that he was standing in the midst of a potato field that had lain fallow for a year, but had partly reseeded

itself. A few brave seedlings had grown wild and were beginning to rot. What madness was this? Farmers were starving to death in the midst of soil so rich that it practically planted itself.

The mound turned out to be the best place to look. As soon as he found the first potato, he scraped the dirt off it with his knife and then bit into it. The taste of juicy, raw potato filled his mouth. It tasted almost as good as the kobasa from the train. Once he finished the first potato, he dug out a dozen more and hid them in his shirt. His feet were still painfully swollen, inside of his shoes, and his hands were so big that it took an effort to make them work. But he knew that the swelling would soon go down, now that he had eaten.

The most important thing, at this point, was to get away from the mass grave and hide before daylight. But Danylo also knew that the weather was changing. If he were to survive the winter, he had to find warmer clothes. He turned back to the spot in the mass grave from which he had emerged. Here, the bodies covered with lye had been turned over, exposing the unmutilated corpses one layer down. Gingerly, Danylo stepped back in amidst the bodies and looked for warmer clothing. Ghostly faces of hollow-eyed children, and men and women old before their time, stared back at him. A sob caught in Danylo's throat as he stood there, hugging himself in sadness. Who mourned for these innocents, piled like so much rubbish in a farmer's field? Danylo vowed to himself to live—not only for his own sake, and for the memory of his family, but also as a tribute to those who died.

The dead were dressed in rags no better than his own, so he opted for quantity, removing several large threadbare coats, layering them one by one. He tied rags about his shoes, both for warmth, and to hold them together.

Then he wandered on weary legs, in the only direction he knew—away.

He wandered, delirious for days, subsisting on bites of potato. Once the potatoes were gone, he used his knife to dig through the frozen earth for roots and bark. When he found a set of train tracks, he followed them. Days later, they began to vibrate beneath his feet. When the train came, it moved slowly enough for him to jump into a freight car as it passed.

Days blended, one into another, as Danylo hopped from train to train. Sometimes he entered a boxcar that was already inhabited by one or two hollow-eyed children in rags.

He learned that the famine ended at the River Zbruch. He heard tales of the few who had escaped the soldiers' bullets and crossed to the other side. What the other side held was a

mystery, but Danylo was sure it had to be better. Otherwise, why would soldiers try to stop them from crossing?

He rode the rails in the direction of the River Zbruch. When he got there, it was a crisp, cold day and he could see soldiers posted amidst the trees along the icy banks. Danylo hopped off the boxcar and hid in the bushes before the train stopped. From his hiding place, he observed the soldiers' movements.

There was a cluster of Red Army soldiers by the train station. Danylo watched as the train came to a halt. A soldier walked up to the boxcar he had just vacated and looked inside. Thank goodness he had decided to jump off early! Danylo darted from bush to bush, making his way downriver and away from the station. There were soldiers as far as he could see, but he had no choice but to keep moving. The river itself was almost completely frozen over in spots.

As he got farther away from the station, Danylo kept his eyes on the banks of the river. His biggest challenge was to remain hidden. The land beside the River Zbruch was largely clear, open, and covered with snow; so even his footprints would betray his escape. During the day, he hid behind the scarce bits of brush that he found. He traveled during the cover of night, placing each step quietly and carefully. As he got farther away from the train station, he saw that there were slightly fewer soldiers, but they were still there. He also noticed that the soldiers paid particular attention to the areas of the river that were narrower and to the parts that were more or less frozen over. After days of traveling by night and hiding by day, Danylo could see the changes in the river. It had become much wider. His heart sank. How would he ever get across? As he continued, he saw a small island in the middle of the river. It was only big enough to hold about a dozen trees, but there was deep brush along the edges. Best of all, the river looked frozen right to the edge of the little island. It was getting darker, and Danylo had not seen a soldier for a few hundred yards. Should he take a chance?

Before he could think too carefully about it, he dashed down to the shore of the river and stepped upon the ice. It held firm. As he looked down at his feet, he saw other footsteps in the snow. Perhaps this was a sign of a successful escape? He kissed his parents' wedding rings for good luck, and then dashed out toward the island. He knew he would be in full view for hundreds of yards around: a black speck on the white ice. But what choice did he have?

When he was so close to the island that he could almost reach out and touch it, he heard a shot behind him, then felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. Danylo threw himself into a bush and rolled into the depths of the island as he heard more shots.

Suddenly, he heard a shrill scream. He lay, not daring to move, waiting for a shower of bullets to pierce his rags. He heard footsteps running away from him, and then another scream. He dared not look up.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a bone-thin woman running away from the island and back toward the land of famine. In her arms she held a bundle, stained with blood. Danylo realized that the woman and her child must have hidden on the island just before he had. He watched in horror as the grief-crazed mother ran up to the soldier and set the body of her dead child down at his feet. Then she threw herself at the soldier, pounding her fists and flailing her arms. The soldier was so surprised that he dropped his gun and grabbed her by the wrists.

Danylo didn't wait to see more. He scrambled to the other side of the island, then dashed across the ice to the other side of the river.

Danylo had no memory of the next few days. Weak with hunger and delirious from the throbbing pain in his shoulder, he somehow stumbled across the countryside toward freedom.

His next recollection was when he was safe. The village Danylo found himself in was much like that of his childhood, though slightly more prosperous. Most of the houses had thatched roofs; but some had tin roofs, and eaves troughs decorated with beautiful, swirling patterns punched into the metal.

The Krawchuk clan, who had adopted Danylo as their own, lived in a blue-washed clay cottage at the outer end of the village's only street. When Danylo had made it to the village, emaciated and near death, Anna Krawchuk was the first to notice him. She had been on her way to the well when she spotted a heap of rags not far from her door. She cradled him in her arms, as if he were her own child, and took him home. She nursed him back to health with sips of rich, fatty borscht (beet soup) and kolach (braided egg bread) dipped in honey.

The bullet had grazed the surface of his shoulder, creating a superficial gash about three inches long. His layers of rags had stuck together with oozing blood and pus. Anna cut away the cloth and the dried blood, cleaned the wound with an herb tincture, and then bound it with a cool, damp, bread poultice.

His teeth chattered so badly with cold and fever that Anna made a bed for him on top of the *pich*, and bundled him in a down-filled comforter. For added warmth each night, she had her two sons sleep on either side of Danylo.

Danylo suffered days and days of delirium. The hand-painted border of flowers along the top of the whitewashed walls seemed to spring alive, their leaves stretching out to grab him. The red petals seemed to drip with blood. The delicate lace curtains on the windows fluttered innocently in the breeze by day; but at night they wavered like white-knuckled hands, thin to the bone, and fluttered as if in the last moments before death. Danylo clutched his parents' rings and prayed for deliverance.

As soon as he was strong enough, Danylo asked Anna to take him to the graveyard. She seemed to know instinctively what he wanted to do, and so she took along several small handmade candles. To get to the graveyard, they had to walk down the main street and through the centre of the village. They turned left at the *chytalnya* (reading room) and crossed over a footbridge, and then up a small hill. Even though it was winter, the cemetery seemed beautiful to Danylo. He envied the people who were buried here. They had died one by one, and each had been grieved for and prayed for individually. He wandered through the rows of gravestones, with Anna following a few feet behind. He methodically brushed snow off the stones as he went, and read each inscription carefully. When he came to one labeled Larissa, a sob escaped his throat.

He fell on his knees in front of the stone, and prayed for the baby sister he had lost. Anna took a few steps forward and gently placed her hand on his shoulder, murmuring prayers. Then she knelt down beside Danylo. She handed him a candle and a match. He set the candle on top of the headstone and lit it with the match. Then he prayed for the girl in the grave, but mostly he prayed for his own sister. He repeated his tributes until he had prayed for every one of the lost members of his family.

It was dark by the time they walked home.