

Luck

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Story

Translated from Czech by David Livingstone

Abram Abramovich and Ivan Ivanovich sat exhausted on a damp, uprooted tree which they had just rolled off the road. They sat in silence, each at one end, as far away from one another as possible. They needed to catch their breath but had nothing to say to one another. Not even their long-shared journey had served to bring them any closer from the way it had been before, for years of their lives, living on the same street, in the same village.

Ivan Ivanovich, a burly, fair-haired man, whose left leg had remained practically lame after an accident long ago, was almost thirty years old. The consumptive, pale, and gaunt Abram, a Jew, was approximately ten years older. If not for the war, if not for their extreme need, they would never have set off together and wouldn't have talked at all, apart from the essentials, as was the norm. The village, however, was dying of hunger. Ivan's lovely wife, Katya, and his elderly infirm mother were just as badly off as Abram's Sara and their five children, and just as poorly off as all the remainder of the fifty inhabitants of Berezovka, whether they were Russians or Jews. They were used, of course, to hardship, having always struggled to get by. Life had been difficult under the czar and it continued to be tough with the Bolsheviks. There did not seem to be any other possibility in this abandoned, damp corner, in this undulating landscape, which was insufficiently fertile, where practically wherever one walked, the earth seemed to be collapsing under its own weight, as if soaking up water. From time immemorial, only mosquitoes seemed to prosper here and only God knows when and why a village had been founded here. It had happened, though. They were used to it, they knew how to live with it. That was earlier, however. If at least, before, there had been a glimmer of hope, now there was none. There was only war. The German army had crossed through a huge chunk of land like a knife through butter, bringing and leaving behind only one thing: death. Death, death, and only death once again. Death in

one hundred different ways, one of them being hunger. But what choice do you have?

When things began to get truly grim, someone had come up with the idea of this journey. It was supposed to be business, not particularly advantageous, but necessary, if they wanted to survive. Winter was approaching. The villagers gathered together what they still had left. Each gave a few items which should fetch the highest price. The price of food. They chose Abram, who had some acquaintances in the town, as Jews always do. At least that's what people say. They chose the cripple Ivan, that was clear as well, he being from a horse family, there being only two horses left at this point in the local kolkhoz. They weren't friends? They didn't like one another? All the better—at least they'd keep one another honest. They'd be keeping an eye on each other. They could be sure of that, both the Russians and the Jews. When all was said and done, there weren't all that many adult males left in the village anyway, so they didn't have much of a choice.

They had set off with an old, creaky wagon and with one of the two remaining horses. There was no time to lose. The fall had already colored the oak trees in red, and a wind was rising above the meadows. Soon the wind would gather in strength, bringing with it black-greyish clouds and the rain. The ever-present groundwater would then connect up with the water from the heavens, and not only the meadows, but all of the roads, would turn to mud, making it impossible for a tractor, if someone actually had one, let alone a wagon with one horse, to pass.

The journey was a long one and far from pleasant, but they had met with luck, one might say. They hadn't encountered anything much worse than hunger and cold. Ivan could manage horses like a part of his own body and after seven days they finally arrived in the town. They were forced to resort to their hiding place only once. Part of their miserly treasure had been used as a bribe to a meddlesome and thieving policeman who was on the verge of making trouble for them. They would miss that ring in the end, but it could have turned out worse. Both were certain of that.

Ivan was particularly annoyed that the Jew had spent part of Friday evening along with Saturday morning in the synagogue. In his eyes, it was an unnecessary waste of time which should have been dedicated exclusively to their affairs. He had to admit, however, that in the end Abram still managed to carry out their business, and the desperate transaction which they had made the trip for was also accomplished. Only one or two of those acquaintances had been

found in the end, out of those whom Abram had relied upon. The rest had vanished in thin air. A former classmate with all of his family had apparently moved away and it hadn't been completely clear if it had been by choice. And the brother-in-law of his wife's brother-in-law? His acquaintances shrugged their shoulders and, with their fingers on their lips, shook their fearful heads from side to side. Papa, Generalissimo Stalin, keeps an eye on everything. He has eyes everywhere, eyes and ears. Lots of ears. He guards everything. Everything? Not exactly everything. The Germans have taken over for him and are almost here. He couldn't guard the Germans, so he guards us even more. Nobody knew anything with certainty, and it was better not to ask. He didn't ask.

They sold what they had, or better said, exchanged them, and placed the modest-sized pile of rare goods onto the wagon, in a prepared ahead of time hiding place between old rags and several bundles of hay for the horse. It went slowly, however. Ivan knew that he wouldn't have been able to arrange it any better; he probably wouldn't even have got as much as they did. They set off on the return trip at the break of dawn, Sunday morning. Not much had changed, but their mood, without having said anything, was slightly more positive. They had accomplished their task, done as much as they could, and were now returning home. Ivan continued to stare at the Jew with suspicion as he—morning, noon, and evening—would pray, or whatever he was doing, gibbering and chattering while comically rocking back and forth. Perhaps he's not even praying, and if he is, who knows to whom? If he were calling upon the Devil instead of God, who would be the wiser? Who knows what he's actually doing? Ivan certainly didn't. He would stare at the way the Jew chewed his bread with onion or with garlic, nothing else at all over the entire period, each time turning over and investigating everything in his hands three times to make sure (the Devil knows what). All this, instead of being grateful that he had at least something to stick in his mouth. And his constant washing of his hands before every meal, like some kind of aristocratic lady. All this constant foolishness, all these delays. All in all, an odd black bird that Abram. Just like all of them.

Well, not exactly all of them. Ivan knew a number of Jews, that's true. That people's commissar with a pistol at his hip, who had been in the village twice, he was also a Jew. He certainly didn't pray, not that one. And he certainly didn't resemble quiet Abram. Nor did that Samuel Hirsch, the former owner of the textile factory and the richest man in the village up to the revolution. His bones had been probably gnawed on by wolves long ago in Siberia, but Ivan still remembered him vividly from his childhood. He, along with the farmer

Voznecky, were the only ones in the village to have a carriage. He would proudly—it appeared to Ivan—put on airs riding in it along with his fat wife and their three pretty daughters. Ivan only actually saw him once, perhaps twice. The man hadn't done anything to him, but he would remember that look of his forever, whereas Samuel Hirsch understandably wouldn't remember snottynosed Ivan. He didn't even notice him, didn't even spare one little look at him. He was a zero, nothing, empty air. That was a sufficient reason for hatred. No, that one didn't resemble this pauper Abram at all. Each of them was different and it was hard to decide which of them was more contemptible. Ivan didn't like any of them. Perhaps only those three daughters of Hirsch, but those were women and they didn't count.

Abram, in contrast, observed the Russian with unmitigated distaste: the way he constantly scratched his bare chest and elsewhere with his dirty hands, the way he wouldn't wash even when he had the chance, and the way he stuffed himself. Yes, stuffed himself; there was no other way of describing it. He would stuff himself and gobble down everything which he could get his hands on, stinky lard, unripened apples. He belched and farted and would drink liquor in the evenings. Only in the evenings, not during the day—that had been their agreement from the beginning, and to give the Russian credit, he had tried to more or less keep to it. Nevertheless, it was unbearable at times. He would keep silent and frown, in almost a threatening fashion, and when he did say something, it was even worse. The filth which would flow from his mouth as soon as it opened—all those vulgarities, the dirty and sleazy jokes! Abram was ashamed that he had to put up with it, that he had to listen to something like that. And Ivan had found a girl, a skinny tramp, on Friday night. Abram hadn't even been spared their shameful animal squealing. And the Russian had a wife at home, a young and pretty wife. Abram knew her. Her name was Katya, a kind-seeming person at first glance, proper and quiet, with gentle eyes. Ivan should be ashamed of himself!

Abram hadn't said anything. What could he say? It wasn't his concern. Everything he was forced to see and hear deeply repulsed him, however.

And then with that horse! The man's behavior with the horse irritated the Jew more than anything else. The Russian called the horse "Mishko," like a person, and behaved towards it as if it were a person, with everything which that entailed. He called the horse not only "Mishko," but also "brother" and "turtle-dove" and "my darling," and he would constantly caress and hug the horse. He would place his hand on the horse's thin shoulders with his rough, dirty fingers

entangled in the mat of its light-colored mane. He would speak to that horse, whisper to it, explain and promise something in a soothing, persuasive voice. In the evenings, he would even stick his face next to the horse's and more than once, when he had drunk a bit, he would, God knows why, begin to weep out loud and shamelessly while hanging onto the horse's neck.

Abram didn't like it one bit. A person is a person and a horse is a horse—and that's the way things are. He had never even touched that large, seemingly calm, animal, being actually a little afraid of it and preferring to respectfully keep a distance. It was another thing, however, which bothered him even more. It would happen, and this on a daily basis, and God knows how many times, that Ivan would beat the horse. He would actually brutally whip it or hit it with his cane, while at other times he would pound it with his hand, often clenched in a fist. It never took much, and Ivan would explode into flames like a bundle of straw, screaming and storming, losing control of himself and letting out all his fury on the horse. On that same horse whose mane he had shed tears into during the night. To his brother, to his turtledove, to his darling. When this happened, Abram would cringe helplessly, overcome again and again with horror, pity, and the depth of the impassable chasm which can separate man from man. At this, he would suddenly realize that people and animals are of the same essence and can actually dissolve into one another.

They continued on their way. The journey grew shorter with each of them minding his own business. Despite their mutual dislike of one another, which they were well aware of, their shared goal kept them in check. At one point, however, things began to grow tense. They had stopped for the night near the road at the edge of the woods at a point where a structure had originally stood. Now it was only a ruin with a few bare walls and fallen roof timbers. Even this, however, at least provided the illusion of shelter although they were planning on sleeping outside anyway. There was also a well. They had spent the night here before, on their journey to the town. Ivan took care of the horse, and they made a fire and sat in silence around it. After a short period of time, a dark figure emerged from the shadows of the ruins. She appeared before them even before they'd noticed the noise she made. They were startled. A piece of dry bread stuck deep in Abram's throat; he coughed and the onion which slipped out of his hand rolled away into the dark. Their fear was only temporary, however. It was a woman. Actually, more of a girl—dirty and disheveled and even more petrified than they were. She could have been around fifteen or sixteen years old. She spoke up, told them her name was Nina, but who knows if she

actually said Nina, as she spoke so quietly and hesitantly, one could hardly understand her words. They began to ask her questions, but she only answered confusedly. She was trembling all over, with her hands pressed to her chest while gazing fixedly at the ground. Her eyes betrayed her, however. Despite her shame and fear, her pale eyes would lift every so often and focus, against her will, on the half-eaten slice of bread in Abram's hand. He finally understood, invited her to sit at the fire, and shared his food with her. She gobbled down everything which they gave her but remained on edge. She cried out something about the Germans, about shooting and the dead, about villages burned to the ground somewhere nearby. Perhaps. She seemed to be saying something like that. They could only guess from her disconnected speech, often interrupted by tears.

They told her she could travel with them and she seemed to accept their offer. It was difficult to communicate with her. Her limited vocabulary and obvious trauma—from God knows what terrible experiences—had seemingly turned her into a half-animal, a timid forest creature. She refused their offer to lie down with them on the blankets around the fire pit and returned to where she had slept before: between the four bare walls and the fallen timbers. She was apparently sleeping on a few handfuls of damp straw in one of the corners. They didn't try to stop her.

Abram fell that night into a deep sleep. His evening prayers, voiced with a heart full of fears which he could not suppress, had not been a great success. Despite this, with the help of God, he had finally fallen asleep. He was awakened by noises, the origin of which he was unable to immediately determine. It took a little while for him to come to his senses and realize where it was coming from and what was actually going on. This only served to increase his horror. The despairing scream and tears were coming from the ruins. The scream of that girl. Abram looked around him and, though it was almost pitch black, noticed that the blanket next to him was empty. There was no doubt as to what was going on. There was no doubt as to the identity of the rapist. Abram stood up. He walked uncertainly towards the ruins. It was against his conviction, against all of his established customs, which urged him not to get involved with these people. He wasn't thinking of this, however. He wasn't thinking about what would be appropriate, or about what Ivan would do to him. He only stood up and headed in that direction. The screaming was unbearable. The quiet which suddenly followed was little better. He had taken only a few steps when the furious Ivan flew toward him from inside.

"What are you doing here?" he screamed. "What the hell do you want? Do you want to watch, Jew?"

"Where is she?" Abram asked as calmly as possible.

"She ran away."

"Where? Where could she go at night?"

"How should I know? She'll come back in the morning, don't worry."

"And if she doesn't?"

"If she doesn't, she doesn't, the Devil take her. I don't give a damn!"

"How could you do this, Ivan Ivanovich? What kind of man are you?"

"Do you think I'm going to confess to you?"

"You have a wife at home—"

"What business is that of yours, you . . . you kike! You . . .!" And suddenly he was squeezing him around the neck.

"Nothing, nothing at all," groaned Abram, readying himself for a blow.

Surprisingly, the Russian let go of him.

"I just don't understand it. I can't understand you," said Abram.

"I can't understand you, either. And how could you, anyway? Have you ever been interested in us? Me, or her, does it even matter? The same, miserable, Russian rabble! Or isn't it like that? Don't try to pretend."

"I could say the same thing about you."

"I doubt it."

"Perhaps, it's not the same thing. We, at least, don't kill your children, don't rape your women, neither our own, nor yours."

"Because you can't!"

Abram only waved his hand in disgust. Are they any better than the Germans? he thought to himself. But he didn't say it out loud.

Ivan seemed to have heard him, however. "I didn't want to hurt her," he said. "I wanted to comfort her, bring her pleasure."

"Pleasure!" Abram couldn't help himself from laughing. "Do you think that gave her pleasure?"

"You!" the Russian began again threateningly. "What do you know about pleasure?"

"*Borekh hashem*, I have five children, don't I?"

They dropped the subject. Ivan wanted to ask what the connection was, but he didn't, although he didn't know why. You're talking about something else, he thought, and was certain of it. Having said that, those five children were there. Four of them were even boys. He knew them, they weren't so bad,

not yet. He'll definitely ruin them. Make them into the same black birds as he is himself. He doesn't know how to do anything else. But they weren't that way yet; they were cheerful and bright. They were alive and kicking. Ivan, that giant of a man on the verge of thirty, didn't have any children, God knows why. It didn't make any sense.

"If she doesn't come back and go with us, she'll probably die somewhere," Abram couldn't help mentioning when he had buried himself once more in the blankets. And whose fault is that going to be? He decided against saying it aloud.

She didn't return. They didn't speak all that much in the morning, but both postponed their departure as long as they could without putting it into words. They needed to do this or that, should they give the horse something more, should they take more water? All in vain. She didn't appear. They had to set off without her, and the horse, that third silent wretch with protruding ribs, received a good beating that day. When the yellow moon came out that night, round and seemingly full, some horsehair on the horse's neck, moist and salty, looked like a handful of seaweed or algae.

Another day passed and still another. They didn't even sleep the final night. They continued with their journey. They were too excited to rest. The third day, at early dawn, they approached the place from which they had departed. The October morning fog initially prolonged the illusion that they were back home. Then the sun came out. Frozen with horror, they climbed down from the wagon, both the Jew and Ivan, the latter suddenly ludicrously awkward. They were standing in the middle of the ruins of a fire. There was nobody and nothing, only sooty remains. Nothing, only silence screaming at the skies.

Night descended. They sat next to one another on a tree trunk, drinking a bottle of vodka. They hadn't even bothered to make a fire. Abram got up, approached the horse, and threw a blanket over it; Ivan had forgotten for the first time. Abram remained standing and, as always, began to recite the prescribed evening prayer.

"You're praying? Your children are dead and you're still praying?"

There was not any anger there, merely vast astonishment. Abram did not answer. He raised his arms helplessly. What shall I do? (he asked his arms), tell me what I should do. Steam rose from the nostrils of the horse. The horse was exhausted and had injured its leg. It shut its eyes and, despite the horse blanket, shivered slightly. Ivan caressed it.

"It's had enough," said Abram. "We should . . ." He didn't finish his sentence. "You could eat the meat and take the rest with us on the journey."

"On what journey? Where can we possibly go?"

"I don't know." He shrugged his shoulders at Ivan.

Abram threw a blanket over him just as he had with the horse.

"I couldn't put it in my mouth," he remarked. "It will rest, you'll see. Perhaps it will be better by the morning," he told Ivan.

As if it actually mattered.

Abram woke to a cold morning with a terrible pain, a scream, and blows raining down upon him. A German soldier was pointing a gun at him and kicking him incessantly. Ivan was no better off. Five Germans were standing in a circle, one of them apparently an officer. Abram didn't know, he couldn't even make a guess, how long it lasted until they finally let him stand up with his hands above his head.

First they shot the horse. Two Germans looked it over and one said the horse was kaput; then they shot it. Ivan silently crumpled to the ground and, for a second, Abram thought they had killed him, too. They quickly made him stand back up. With kicking and punching.

"That girl," Ivan whispered, "it's good she ran away. I . . . didn't do anything to her. Yes, I wanted to, but she screamed, fought with me . . . I let her run away."

"That's good."

More and more blows, and constant screaming.

"Where are they?"

"Who?"

A blow from the butt of a rifle.

"You Jewish swine! Are you going to tell us?"

Finally, Abram understood.

He didn't know. He really didn't know. They weren't here. They had only arrived from the town yesterday. They hadn't been here for a week.

A blow after each sentence. The Germans searched the wagon.

"Food. Only a little food," one of the soldiers announced.

"They don't seem to know anything," the officer stated. "We can end it."

"What do they want, Abram?"

"They're going to kill us."

"I know. But what did they ask about?"

"They didn't get them! They don't know where they are."

They made them stand against the wall of a burned house.

"Abram?"

Abram realized that, for the first time, Ivan had addressed him by name.

"Abram, a miracle . . .?"

"I don't know," Abram smiled. "Perhaps only luck. Incredible luck."