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SMILEYBIRDS

A Chapter from the Novel *Funny Uncles*

RAYMOND FILIP

Ginty Bone went through his mid-life crisis at birth.

His mother's womb was no Utopia *in utero*. The infant swam out nauseated, as if from a pulsing bog, full term, shivering, and imperfect. A flawed olfactory nerve would never allow his nose to smell roses in a garden, or gas leaks from a stove. One corner of his mouth drooped from facial paralysis, forming a worldly sneer. A birthmark, red as the map of Russia, splotched his right arm. The defect could be eliminated as easily as a stork bite, the doctors assured Ginty's parents. A primitive X-ray machine then proceeded to obliterate the packaging error of blood vessels, along with his wrist bone, leaving a pound of cartilage called an arm. The handicapped mess may as well have been cured, smoked, and rendered into lard.

Ginty would never believe in re-birth: two-timing reincarnations. One bad trip was enough. The stars revealed no purpose for the joke of nature, no way to get warmer beyond third house in Leo with Gemini rising galactic gossip. Surrounded by Third Reich ashes, his mother and father had met and married in a displaced persons camp after the second world war.

Had the Nazis won, Ginty could very well have been put to sleep for good as an "impaired" child.

Adolf Hitler had also been cursed with a maimed arm. The Nazi strong man kept his hand slung inside a pocket following an attempt upon his life. The culprit, a certain Colonel von Stauffenberg, had been a one-eyed, one-armed, three-fingered, bomb-carrying assassin. Hand of fate. After all the experiments in death camps by Himmler's medicine men; after all the X-ray battalions shining unprecedented light on cryptogenetic engineering, muscle regeneration, bone transplants, and chemical protectants against burns; after lampshades made out of Jewish flesh; German sawbones could not come up with one simple remedy for one little birthmark that could have just faded away with time.

Ginty's mother, Rasa, dressed her son in sleeves of equal length. When the boy learned how to walk, she knitted him a jacket ten sizes too large. The woolen armor with red reindeer frolicking on the back was designed to overprotect her scarred baby all the way to manhood! Her drip-dry bundle of joy shuffled along smothered inside the jacket, a sight gag.

Ginty Bone's official name also did not fit: Gintaras Bonavicius. After the family had emigrated to Quebec, French and English loudmouths would call him other names such as "monkeyface," or "Export A," because he was the new "bohunk" on the block.

Bullies would stuff Ginty into a trash can and rumbly-roll him across the street. He came home crying with a lettuce leaf in his hair. Sharky Muscoli soothed him by boasting that he could heal his shrumpy arm with a magnifying glass. The skin only needed more sun. The sun makes everything grow. So with the precision of a blowtorch, Sharky aimed his magnifying lens at the short arm.

"Watch. It's gonna start to grow any minute now," Sharky smeared some spittle across the white cicatrix where Ginty's wrist had been. "All it needs is more water like a flower."

Ginty glared at the blazing dot of sunlight upon his vestigial wrist. All he could think of was how overjoyed his mother would be. A fresh arm sprouted out of the old arm!

"Any sec now . . . any sec ..."

The sun's ultraviolet rays finally struck.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!" Ginty shook off the stinging pain.

His eyes smarted with tears.

Sharky convulsed with laughter.

Ginty's bugaboo hand was an attention grabber. As a counter-irritant, he would dangle his arm, like the claw of a fiddler crab, under girls' noses.

"You're an ugly creep!" Linda Petrowski screamed at him with revulsion. "You should wear a stocking over your face! My dog is afraid to bark at you because you're so strange."

One Sunday, Ginty accompanied his mother to St. Joseph's Oratory. Maybe Brother Andre could cure his crooked smile and arm? The Miracle Worker had beamed on venerably, even after his sacred heart attacks. Infirm people knelt with foreheads pressed against his tomb. Rasa lifted her son up to touch the glass receptacle in a marble stele preserving the goodly frere's heart. The red thingamabob made Ginty scary sick. He started to bawl. Rasa held Ginty up while he lit a red votive candle. Good pacifier. Jesus had also been afflicted with a stigma. Hand of fate.

Yellowing crutches from healed sinners hung repentant and still in the passageway between the crypt and the chapel. The priests hid their money in the tabernacles, Ginty's father once said. The mortified saints, the stations of the cross, the *Te Deum* tedium forced Ginty to see black spots in his vision, not God. All men were created in His image. But Ginty did not resemble anyone there, or not there. Faith was freaky.

"The devil is dead! The devil is dead!" Ginty ran out of the Oratory, sliding down a railing past women in black pilgrimaging up the steps on sore knees.

Portals, gates, doors: Brodie desired to see what was on the other side of all things. He would stomp in and out of the electronic doors at Steinberg's to guarantee that he was more visible than the Holy Ghost, alive and hopping in this world proper. Shut in? Or shut out?

In nightmare-land, Ginty saw the German quacks butchering his arm, guffawing, their eyes two beady *umlauts*. Daytime, he would try to brush away the radiation burns with toothpaste. The damaged limb had been spared amputation thanks to a salve known as Silver Powder. Rasa kept left-over packets stashed away in her closet. Souvenirs. Blame it all on unconscionable malpractice? German measles? Fallout from Hiroshima? *Laumes*? A mock moon over the delivery room? Ginty's mama said nothing. Mumface.

"*Nesuk man galva*"—don't dizzy my head, would be her stock reply. Communication between mother and son would remain a life-long trial of incriminating silences.

The language attempted to be spoken at home was Lithuanian. Lithuania is a tiny bump in the Baltic. Major exports: timber, amber, and wife-beaters. Ginty's papa, "Vaclovas the Terrible," was the unrecognized champ. Whenever the mood hit him, he would double up his belt and flog his wife and children. No motive necessary. A crease in his pants would be sufficient reason. The stove or fridge served as whipping posts.

Ginty's first memory was of blood. Something red from inside his mother's forearm streamed out after Rasa had shielded her face from a thrown drinking glass. His father laughed while washing his hands. Vaclovas strafed the sink with spit more often than he spoke. When he wasn't yelling, he wasn't talking. He lived inside himself and did not charge rent. Unmanly things, fears, uncurled out of his mouth in the form of cigarillo smoke. Alone on the kitchen chair, his throne, running his fingers constantly over his scalp, he recited his mental arithmetic. Devalued dreams.

"DP" pissed into a dirty snowbank had been the first words of welcome for the Bonavicius family and others lining up at the starting gates in Halifax. The International Refugee Organization had offered them new homelands in Canada, England, the U.S.A., Latin America, Australia, New Zealand. Roll a worn Reichspfennig across a map of the world, where it lands, you settle.

Repatriation was as inviting as a bullet in the head. The last traces of independent Lithuania had been wiped away with the soil under their fingernails. A distant aunt in Detroit had been willing to sponsor Vaclovas. Twice he had applied, twice he had been rejected, because of his criminal past.

In Hamburg, Vaclovas had been arrested for door-to-door black marketeering. He would zoom through the Reeperbahn on a junked army bike with a suitcase full of sin. He sold cameras to midgets and nylons to transvestites. American Lucky Strike and French *Ami* cigarettes were the hottest currency going. Worthless 1,000-reichsmark notes were lit as matches.

Outside rathskellers, orphans begged with outstretched hands brittle as breadsticks. Vaclovas gave one ragamuffin a 3-D French postcard of a bare-breasted tart.

His handsome income, and other endowments, impressed his eighteen-year-old sweetheart Rasa. She was just another frightened fraulein singing harvest songs while clearing rubble to earn her ration cards. What could be wrong with a well-groomed bachelor from the landowning class who had never dug up a potato in his life? Vaclovas' underground riches provided the farm girl with the raw materials of romance: diamonds, fur, wine. Rasa's idea of finery up until then had been flowered muslin. A peasant princess, she showed off her fox stole and rings in front of the open mouths of the camp choir. But before their hymns had ended, Vaclovas would have gambled off all that glittered in Rasa's jewelry box.

For six years, Rasa and Vaclovas, their firstborn daughter Dahlia, then Ginty, lived within the sealed society of camps in Lubeck, Kiel, and Schleswig. Six years of "soon, soon, soon" waiting for their papers to be stamped in the raffle of refugees. Six years of bathing, dressing, eating, in a common bathroom, common kitchen, common dormitory: a three-ring circus. The inmates bickered over lost scissors, where the Weimar Republic had fallen, and the search for God, until the lights went out at a common time, and the spectators were compelled to sleep with each other in grumbling silence, as if in a common grave.

Vaclovas had accumulated enough fancy signatures for the Counter Intelligence Corps to certify that he was not a communist, nor a pro-Nazi collaborator, nor a crook of any bent, but a "desirable." There was always something wrong, red ink in the margins. At long last, in January of 1951, the Bonavicius family was shipped to their next residence on earth: Montreal, Quebec. Treasure Island.

The Fairsea, a British liner loaded with exiles up to the crow's nest, rocked across the stormy Atlantic. Mountainous waves crashed with the impact of cement against the sides of the creaking vessel. Knock-kneed grannies prayed their aves and paternosters below deck. Cone *With The Wind* reeled for ten days in the movie room. In the ship's hospital, scarlet fever chased pneumonia through Ginty's one-year-old body. In the dining lounge, Vaclovas and company got smashed on enough beer to drown Bismarck's navy. The passengers danced and romped as wildly as horses and hyenas, waving goodbye to the Old World, the waxworks of history.

A better life awaited some in the hot-diggity-dog-diggity-boom town of Ville-Emard: the "garlic district" or "Gattuso Ghetto." In the center of the city, a war memorial that only God read anchored the xenophobia. Leave, and you were going places. Immigrants, more plentiful than herrings in the sea, slaved in neighboring factories for bosses as vicious as stone griffons on facades. Their children were molded as straight as mason's bricks to succeed in school and to honor their parents. The semblance of a loving home was maintained as vital as the chambers of the heart.

The Bonaviciuses failed to keep up with the Jonases. Their peers had already commenced down payments upon automobiles and Singer sewing machines. Vaclovas and Rasa moved ahead slower than an arthritic snail in amber. Rasa had found a job at RBI Richtone bakeries. But Vaclovas quit the roadwork for which he had been contracted overseas. Sweat was too *déclassé* for him. He had not traveled over seven thousand miles onto new promising land to dig ditches.

Week after week, month after month, year after year, Rasa and Vaclovas continued to unroll insults like toilet paper. If Rasa refused to surrender a share of her paycheque for beer money, Vaclovas would beat her with a broom or an open hand, slamming her headfirst down the basement steps. The children crouched into themselves, afraid even to ask for a nickel to buy a pencil.

Other fathers wore a perennial crocuses-are-blooming smile, on constant standby to answer questions about how to knot a necktie, or who made me? Ginty and Dahlia flipped through television channels, a combination lock into the merrier world of "Howdy Doody" and "Father Knows Best" — shattered by a vodka bottle Vaclovas had shot at their new status-symbol Phillips TV one night to adjust the zigzag. And Ginty never did learn how to knot a necktie.,

But his father's corkscrew logic invented an exercise that could add muscle to his weak arm. Vaclovas forced Ginty to open beer caps for him. If the bottles bubbled over, or if the art of twisting the metal tops off Dows and Molsons proved to be too tough, Vaclovas would whack Ginty in the head as punishment. Punishment for holding the opener with his good hand, the wrong hand. Punishment for turning a doorknob with the wrong hand. Punishment for lifting a spoon with the wrong hand. Punishment for holding an ice cream cone with the wrong hand. Punishment for opening the TV with the wrong hand. Punishment for shaking hands with the wrong hand. Punishment for spilling tobacco while rolling a cigarette for the old man. Hard as a rubber hammer, Vaclovas' backhand left welts on Ginty's neck. What hurt even more were the words "silpnas šunytis" — puny puppy. Ginty melted with tears before he could breach into small tuna cans that were harder to open than big soft Bravo spaghetti sauce tins. Vaclovas would cut half into a can of Campbell's chicken noodle soup, demonstrating proper procedure like a drill sergeant. Ginty would then gouge at the sharp edges until blood from his lame fingers blended with ten fluid ounces of chicken noodles. If Ginty could not hack it, Vaclovas would spank him with a fly swatter or a bolo bat, swearing that he should have killed the runt at birth. Abuse or dark discipline? The strapping figure of a father indulged his appetite for violence with the delicious fury of an animal who eats its own young.

Rasa also knew her place: the basement. Marriage had collapsed into an endurance test. After another ringsider of a fight, Rasa and her brood scurried into the cellar fast enough to hear the wham of a chair against the door behind them. Their

bodies ached as if thrashed through a threshing machine. They lay low until Vaclovas went to sleep, snoring, peacefully.

Upstairs again, to neutralize the fear in the pit of their stomachs, they munched on *auseles* pastry in the shape of donkey ears. Ginty wriggled two on his temples, snorting and imitating his father. He and Dahlia then tiptoed into their sofa bed. Rasa gave them a "butchki", a kiss smelling of borscht, then left for work on the night shift.

In the morning, Rasa bestrewed Swiss chocolates and *Porky* and *Little Lulu* comic books upon her children. Not to look morose, Ginty would stick a finger in the corner of his lopsided mouth and do a smileybird. It was the only way he could hoick up a huge gravity-defying grin. When left alone in the house, he would seize Rasa's nailpolish and daub smileybirds all over the mirrors and windows, scrawling indecipherable words, poetry in lotion, kiddie hieroglyphics.

Ginty's paralyzed major and minor zygomaticus muscles restricted his facial expressions to two: hangdog or smileybirdy. The motile side pulled up, the palsy side pulled down. Ginty felt as if he were being mugged by his own mouth. He compensated by smiling with his whole being. Yet no one could read his body English. Ginty appeared to be either Woody Woodpecker hyper or depressed.

"Nesijuok!" — Don't smile, Rasa would snap at him, right before clicking her brownie camera. In the family photos, Ginty was always caught blinking, as if slapped in the face.

The Montreal Children's Hospital could not correct his asymmetry either. Ginty stood a breathing specimen of what parents dreaded their kids would look like. A nurse unfurled his sleeve and paraded his bad arm for the sympathetic and parasympathetic scrutiny of interns and pre-med students. The attending physician lectured to them about the poor articulation between wrist and fingers, flexed and extended, abducted and adducted, and the inoperative *flexor digitorum profundus*.

"Make a fist," the doctor assumed a bodybuilder's pose.

Ginty clinched, clenched, clamped together the tendons and phalanxes of his fingers.

"Harder! Harder!" The doctor coached him on.

Ginty strained and strained, trembly as a weight lifter's one-arm snatch.

"We have a winner!" The doctor raised Ginty's feeble hand.

The amphitheatre rippled with chuckles. Medical attention seemed to be the only attention lavished upon him.

Next, Ginty found himself in an examination room laid out on a table. He was told not to budge as needles punctured his nerve fibers. The whisker-thin needles pricked as fiercely as the bite of Northern Ontario no-see-em's. The transcutaneous probe turned Ginty's face into a pincushion. Pediatric experts studied his chart and visage.

"Your son's paralysis is becoming more severe," a radiologist confided to Rasa.

"Vat dis mean?"

"Nothing serious. It just means the seventh cranial nerve which controls your son's facial muscles is almost irreversibly damaged."

"Dis mean he dyink?"

"No, Mrs. Bonavicius. Nothing that bad."

"Tanks God. I be so vorried."

"He'll have difficulty pronouncing fricatives such as 'f' sounds. Make sure he never learns four letter words. If you wish, a nerve transplant operation may ..."

"No! No!" I no trust doctors! You see vat doctors do his arm?"

"Mrs. Bonavicius, the war is over."

"Everytink over."

"No, not everything. You have your son to begin with. Look at him this way. It takes thirty-five muscles to frown, and only ten to smile. Give us a smile there, sport," the doctor grazed Ginty's jaw with his knuckles.

Ginty did a smileybird.

"Buy him sponge ball and make sure he throws it every day," the doctor recommended. "It'll be good therapy for his arm. Who knows? He might even become another Dizzy Dean."

"Dizzy Dean? Dis be disease?"

"If you're prone to pennant fever."

"Doctors talk smart. Do notink."

"Biology is destiny, Mrs. Bonavicius. Your son has been given an exceptional life to lead. He'll have to be strong."

"I buy ball. We see."

So Ginty played baseball alone, shorthanded, dodging the disabled list. With the accuracy of a pitching machine, he acquired the knack of firing perfect strikes at brassieres on clotheslines. He grabbed decapitated chicken heads out of the crates behind Primo's grocery and tossed the bloody wattles at windows of houses and cars. Old man Primo chased him away with a meat cleaver. Ciao ciao bambino. Southpaw or dexter, his lateral and medial muscles enjoyed pelting adult moving targets with stones.

"Ouch!" A victim exclaimed, doing a double take, as Ginty squeezed his red-white-and-blue sponge ball, wrinkled his forehead, larruped his eyelashes, and bared his teeth to invigorate his facial muscles.

Doctor's orders.

Ginty would have preferred catching girls in his arms and squeezing them — like his father. On the kitchen table, Vaclovas left snapshots of himself in bed with one, two, sometimes three mademoiselles. Rasa tore up the nudies like porno playing cards and dumped them into the waste-basket. She advised her adulterer and bread loser of a husband to tattoo numbers on the bums of his floozies.

Otherwise, Vaclovas was godlessly clean. *Tsik-tsuk*. Ginty happened to stray into the toilet one evening when his father's pants were down. With a virile smile, Vaclovas unsheathed his penis, a swelling kolbasa sausage. Ginty's wee-wee hung nowhere as big as his father's dong. Vaclovas encouraged his son to feel his erection. Ginty was too afraid to touch the baby maker with his wrong hand. He ran out faster than ball lightning. It was the one time his father's voice had erupted into raving laughter instead of anger.

Following his do-wrong daddy's example, Ginty became known as "the kissing monster." He crossed over the white dodge ball line (which segregated the girls from the boys side in Holy Cross Elementary) to kiss Maria Dulcino on both her lips. The kiss had only been a paschal peck, but Sister Superior was livid. There would be no pre-puberty sex in her schoolyard! The sand-blind sister shaded her eyes and whipped Ginty front and behind as thoroughly as a rug. She nudged her bifocals back up her nose with every whap of the strap. After that incident, Ginty avoided home and school as if they were adjoining torture chambers.

Only Angele Bonnetterre did not resist Ginty's osculatory pursuits. She chortled every time he laid a Euclidean kiss square on her embouchure. She let him roll his baseball up and down her chest. Angele was bouncy and precocious and French. She spoke so gently, she could talk you to a whisper. To aid Ginty's pronunciation, she would shoot his baseball at him alliteratively: "Fling me your four mile per hour fastball!" Ginty would blooper back: "Fling me your four flower pastball!"

Angele did not regard Ginty as an ugly duckling. She saw him as a swan. Her eyes were two deep blue lakes with monsters in them. They sparkled as Ginty ravaged the air with lip-smacking puckers. She taught him how to whistle "Listen to the Mockingbird." Proud as puffins, they swaggered down Jolicoeur street with goody-Gouda-cheesey smiles — or at least Ginty attempted a reasonable facsimile, propping up his flubby lip with his wrong hand. The pair doodled smileybirds all over each other's cheeks and arms, or slid drawings of the peregrine grin through letterslots.

Come autumn, Ginty and Angele bellyflopped off fences into bushels of fallen leaves. They blanketed themselves with dead foliage, then sprung forth shouting as if out of a tomb. Or they daydreamed upon the season's decay, spellbound by the russet resolution of October. "Foof!" Angele blew an autumn leaf off her lips. "Foof!" Ginty blew it back. He pressed an ear against her chest. Her lungs wheezed as she inhaled and exhaled. Angele said it was the sound of her soul. Ginty lay befuddled. The same susurrus did not emanate from his inside. Different again. Ginty's soul was as silent as the dead leaves. Sister Felicia solved the mystery in catechism class. She confided that the wispy-wind in Angele's lungs was pulmonary tuberculosis.

A certain attraction propelled Ginty and Angele to chase each other around as magnetically as the moon and sun. Angele did not laugh whenever Ginty would small talk to his haunted hands. Within the theatre in the round of his palms, she too saw smileybirds, and heard German doctors on special duty whimpering "*es tut mir leid, es tut mir leid.*"

The next summer, Angele perished in a highway accident. The canoe fastenings on top of her father's Buick had snapped and sent the entire family hurtling off a sandstone cliff in Prince Edward Island. When is death every timely? Ginty stood

old enough to know that Angele was not buried under Tinkerbell dust.

So he created his own requiem — not the type where you pay at the presbytery to soothe a month's mind — but his own little Song of Songs. He built an altar out of bricks and scrap-wood from under the proch. His mother's finest tablecloth served as altar linen. An egg cup became a chalice. Pictures of smileybirds that he and Angele had sketched together were borne aloft as altarpieces. Ginty crayoned a white cross on the back of Dahlia's sky-blue nightgown as an alb. Vaclovas' silk scarf doubled as a patriarchal stole. A Davy Crockett coonskin cap replaced a biretta. Rosary beads, black for boys, jangled around his neck like a noose. A hockey stick substituted for a bishop's crozier. Instead of a fisherman's ring, Ginty's index finger brandished a plastic NHL ring free inside packages of Sheriff's potato chips. Peppermint lozenges and strawberry Kool-Aid dissolved into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Light one saved birthday candle, et voila! A Mass for Angele! His congregation of one cat snubbed the collection plate with a magnificat meow. As the sun held up the day and sustained life, so Ginty elevated his long and short arm in blessing, so people would never die.

Home had backslid into a hell worse than the damnation scenes in MGM biblical epics at the Savoy—to where Dahlia and Ginty would escape. Rasa had been laid off from her job at RBI. But Vaclovas, the Old World rat, continued to snooze all day and carouse all night with his *pjokų* gange, DP's, drunken perverts.

One evening, there was nothing to eat. So Vaclovas took a Mazola corn oil bottle out of the empty cupboard, filled four shot glasses to the brim with the cooking oil, then passed the glasses around to drink. That was supper.

Conventional household hostilities had re-zoned every inch of space into a warpath. Separate beds were not separate enough. Rasa could not bear to sit in a seat still warm from his behind. Her relentless complaints grated on his-nerves like a squeaky shopping cart. Then Vaclovas would launch into another high tar harangue. Rasa was no longer a refugee, but the family atmosphere had degenerated into one of fight or flight. She froze. Her priest urged her to go tell the police. The police advised her to go see a chaplain. Nobody wanted to step into a family war of attrition. Bertha, the next-door neighbor, finally called the cops after Vaclovas had unleashed one of his bluebeard specials. He had locked Ginty and Dahlia in the basement, then tied Rasa's skirt up over her head and shopped her. Rasa broke loos. Vaclovas kicked his "*kurvah*" of a wife out into the street. Bertha demanded that assault charges be laid against him. The bastard could go live with his belching buddy Sukis. Sukis owned a restaurant and could cook him his meals and clean his shitty underwear. Both men were one worm cut in two.

After Sunday choir practice, Rasa would visit the homes of her church chums: orthodox, anti-Semitic, Catholic alcoholics. The upstarts gabbled about money, money, money, war, war, war. They were all newcomers, *dypukai*, imported fat. Yet, Rasa did not feel accepted on a par value. One wagtail conducted her through a maplewood bedroom suite with wall-to-wall broadloom, plus a kitchen with a Westinghouse refrigerator, and a living room you could almost wear decorated with embroidery and Čiurlionis castles. Vaclovas, the eternal critic, dismissed Rasa's crotchetwork as fishnets; sew up her vagina instead. Her cooking was *shuda* shit. She was a useless "*shluveya*" broom pusher.

Rasa's friends drove her home in Fords and Bel Airs with more

leg room than her kitchen. Her upwardly mobile compatriots were turning into landlords on the ascendant, pikers, every penny as greedy as the seni *kanadiečiai*, the senior Canucks, the First World War generation who had crossed over in steerage, master misers who had eaten sardines every meal and slept with their moneybelts and worn the same clothes all year round the way a tree wears bark. Now the old guard sat with ruined eyes and diseased hearts and hardened livers protecting their property, as if their houses were built out of gold brick. Even that *nudnik* Kazys, who had tripped of the gangplank in Halifax with three hats on his head and nothing else to declare, had just purchased a Chrysler Imperial four door all to himself. The floors of his apartment shined with American and Canadian silver dollars, British shillings, French francs, German marks, Spanish pesetas, Saudi Arabian riyals, Greek drachmas, Japanese yen, Indian rupees, Brazilian milreis, and Russian rubles like conscience money imprinted on linoleum in every room!

After five years in Canada, Rasa had nothing to show but the ringrot of marriage, separation as to bed and board, no valuables save her two children. She was the last sheaf, the old boba of harvest legend at 27, the Drano DP. Pour a jugful of water over her head.

One Sunday, Rasa walked out on the gossip lips. The busybodies kept interfering in her private affairs. Do this, do that, divorce, re-marry, dig up a rich farmer. Who cares if you are Catholic? The only good book is the bank book. Rasa's problems were a belly laugh to them. She paced around her kitchen in diminishing circles. What was left of the Bonavicius family decided to go on a long long stroll. No more father, no more fault finder, no more quarrels.

There were many men Rasa could have had with a wink. The best and brightest and blondest had died in the trenches. She had to pick a hooligan as her partner for life. In Germany, Vaclovas had been so reliable, so cavalier, a man who could take charge with steely eyes and Mephisto moustache. He could sip Lowenbraus in the back of a filthy army truck and still wax aristocratic, one arm akimbo, debonair as a vampire. Other menfolk played basketball or volleyball against Latvians and Estonians as innocently as school boys, or nosed through rubble for jobs, or stood in line for black bread, coffee, egg powder, or Tilsit cheese infested with maggots. Vaclovas brought her American peanut butter that she loved so much, pearl necklaces, or high-heel shoes she donned as enchantingly as golden slippers. He escorted her on ski trips to the

heartland, or to alfresco lunches with schnapps and concertina beside the Danube. How could a maiden in a dashing dirndl resist such a giver?

Weddings restored joy to afterlife on earth following the war. Girls became women by having yearly babies like Holstein cows. Rasa's busy thumbs planted sunflowers and cucumbers in the camp garden. Maturing brides, charming as chatelaines, transformed the picric air of barracks into fragrant music boxes bursting with their pregnant songs.

On the morning of their marriage, Rasa had caught Vaclovas flirting with a Polish hussy. Rasa had just adorned their altar with daisies. The wedding was to take place inside an armory which had been converted into a chapel. Rasa forgave Vaclovas without weeping or gnashing of teeth. Bimba, an old maid, had brought her dog along to the ceremony. Yapping and objecting, the mutt had been the wisest party there. Rasa could see it all so clearly now through the glass coffin of the past.

The Sunday stroll elongated itself into a marathon walk. On the outskirts of the city, fields abounded with more dandelions than children to pick them. The sound of flipped horseshoes and kicked soccer balls mingled with Italian chatter: men from the bottom of the Italian boot. Rotund old dagos hung on to their pants after releasing bocci balls. They all talked at the same time with an animated air, as if conducting *Il Trovatore*. Rasa dropped on a bench to think. She upped herself again to re-think. This wasn't supposed to happen in a new country, a new leg to stand on. Wreckage.

Ginty and Dahlia drummed their buster browns across the footbridge of an aquaduct. They squealed in high-pitched tones that could shatter a Pepsi bottle. That week. Ginty had been caught stealing a Roy Roger's cap gun at Kresge's. He was escorted home in a police cruiser. Dahlia had bitten the cheek of a playmate, leaving her tooth marks. Rasa shushed them both up as they yammered through the terra firma of the Douglas Mental Hospital. The greenery was as tranquil as a golf course. One day, she might end up here.

The St. Lawrence river came into view, gray and swift. Wind tossed sailboats tacked motionlessly, Mount Bruno in the background. Gulls rafted at ease, posing for a painting. Rasa gazed at the water, blankly, a figurehead. She began to hum "*O dalele*," a song her father had taught her beside the Siesartis river, where he had once caught a carp with a wedding ring inside its belly, just like in the folk tales; the same melody she had been humming on a bicycle along Kiel Canal one nightfall, harbor light years ago. It was the night she had crashed into a suitcase belonging to Vaclovas. The drifter had just landed off a garbage scow. He stunk of coal and cognac. Yet he swept her back up on her feet as delicately as a porcelain figurine. After that, they stayed together throughout all the postwar whirlpools of relocation.

Now Rasa felt estranged all over. Break a dead branch, start again. The face of her mother who had died when she was six, the step-mother who had never fed her and goaded her like a workhorse, the voices of teenage boyfriends who had vanished with the spring runoff, the cold hands of the gypsy who had foretold that she would marry a scoundrel, the legless man who had shrieked for help as the Soviets advanced into Šakiai, the stares of all the corpses from the war all heaped into a giant X, all invaded her mind like sappers in the skullduggery of memory. Rasa was tired of the splitting headaches, tired of tearing her brain apart like cabbage leaves, tired of the coursing and discoursing. She grabbed Dahlia's hand, while Ginty tugged his away, swiping at the air with his fingerling of a fist.

Ginty, Ginty, quite contrary. In the endmost reaches of the back yard, where nobody looked, Ginty squiggled smileybirds on his palms, the right one and the wrong one, mumbling to them as if they were living creatures in the cup of his hands. The same way Ginty would talk to his word processor, years later, alone in a room. All he ever wanted to capture were those red flowers his mother, had tossed into the Elbe, with other homeless women, one displaced summer after the war. Red roses, and geraniums, and poinsettias carried in the arms of tributaries to the world.