



THE NINTH LEAF

(An excerpt)

BIRUTĖ PŪKELEVIČIŪTĖ

Victor was already carrying my suitcases when I saw the mailman coming. He was still young and a pleasant kind of black guy. With the letters in my hand, I jumped in the car and left Chicago. I couldn't wait to get to my friends' place. Victor and Gene are my close friends. They live in Indiana by the lake in a very peaceful spot called Oak Springs. I plan to spend a week of my vacation there.

I was talking to Victor on the way and totally forgot about my mail. But I didn't open it as soon as I got there either. There was Gene to talk to, cool drinks in tall glasses of clattering ice to drink, and Gene's noisy kids to confront. Finally after dinner when Gene started making my bed, I emptied the contents of my purse onto the table. I do that at home too because I never know what could end up in my bag during the course of the day.

I emptied my purse and my letters came flying out. Through the ripped cellophane window of the telephone bill, I was reminded of how much I had gossiped with my friends in the suburbs. Another was a familiar letter from the Trappists who sent suggestions for novenas. I didn't even bother to open that one. The last letter was from Rima in Toronto. Wedding pictures fell out of her letter — Rima's daughter had married a week ago. Rima wrote that Elvyra and her husband flew in for the wedding all the way from Honolulu. They brought the young bride some rare orchids. In the pictures, Rima appeared kind of haughty and pretentious, stiff and ill at ease. But her legs were still short and chubby; we used to tease her about them. Suddenly I felt sorry for those legs — girls with such legs should never grow up. They should never have to throw weddings for their daughters. They should just run around bare-footed, chasing butterflies in the fields.

Elvyra was a different story. Her hair was fashionably swept to one side, and she wore a light, breezy, ash-muted rose outfit that was definitely in. Obviously an American, a sophisticated lady. As a child, she had grown up with the best of things.

An American? Why, I still remember those hands. They're now lavishly pampered, but once they were hanging out of a stretched-out sweater. They looked so miserable and frail — like those of a beggar.

It seemed to me that Elvyra always fantasized about going to America. Her most precious possession was an English dictionary. That was hard to believe because the war wasn't even over, fire and sulphur surrounded us, we were aimlessly wandering around in the fields of Pomerania while Elvyra passionately clasped her English dictionary. Even when faced with horror, fear, and confusion she wouldn't let go of it. She managed to bring it to Berlin with her, clutching it with her feeble hands which hung from a worn, faded, ragged sweater.

Elvyra's sweater was a real clown's outfit, sad and quite funny. Elvyra's behavior was as changeable as a clown's: from a lovable child to a conceited person. Only now do I understand. That English dictionary gave Elvyra confidence. She, a future American, was superior to all. Superior not only to the dense soldiers of the Red Army, but also to Rima and me. As she lifted her eyes from the dictionary after each new word she learned, she felt smarter. And she was three years younger than us! The little devil!

"But you don't have a lot in common with her," said Gene, looking at the pictures. "The Maciūnas family hid her from the Germans and baptized her; they're almost like family. She's just a stranger to you."

"I don't care who hid her, nor who baptized her! That was during the German occupation. Our friendship started in Danzig under the Russians. And that's an entirely different story."

"Oh!" Gene motioned with her hand. "That story isn't long at all."

She's just possessive of me and doesn't want to share me with others. And Gene is a very possessive woman. She likes to keep a tab on her belongings and hold them under lock and key. She acted as if she were to lose everything — Victor, the kids, her home, her friends — because of some uncontrollable force.

"You don't have a lot in common," repeated Gene. "After all, what is the bond between you two?"

The past began to ripple before my eyes. The vision slowly became clearer and more vivid: clay fields still hidden in the barren spring. The sun. A clear but cold day, and somewhere in the sky the song of a lone skylark. On the dusty road, ruined by the tanks, a Russian cart, a *tacianka*, flew like the wind. As we were speeding down the hill from camp to the town of Deutsch Eylau, only the tin roof of the tower remained visible.

The cart bounced over the holes like a big match box. Elvyra and I were the ones flying in that box. She was sick, dying, she was unconscious, and I was taking her to the hospital. She was covered with a ripped blanket, her head was sliding around on my lap. Her eyes were shut, her lips were blue, and her face was splotchy. The Russian driver shouted, "heh, heh," hitting his fast paced horses with a whip. The fields were deserted, not a soul, nor a bird, nor an animal in sight. We were approaching what seemed like a half-empty town of white frightful-looking houses.

Where was everybody? The only sign of life was the Russian soldier whose fur cap caught my eye. Death was tailgating us as we were flying to Deutsch Eylau. I didn't know its form, but felt that somewhere over the dust clouds of the road it was after us, it was chasing us. What if Elvyra stops breathing? The gray cart will pass the terrifying city and will take us to an unknown land. A place without wars, without frozen skylarks, and without girls dying from typhus. But there will be no one to love either. The ultimate wasteland will meet our path.

"Heh, faster," the Russian soldier yelled at his half-dead horses. I was afraid even to glance at that man's pockmarked face. There was nothing dearer in this cold, barren land than holding Elvyra to my bosom. The ghostly cart! We must have become like ghosts, too, and we flew without life to the town of Deutsch Eylau. But Elvyra was breathing, she was still breathing! And that was the only thing that really mattered in that whole absurdity.

"Now you see," I finished telling Gene. "Now you see the bond between us."

"She had typhus?" "Two."

"Two?" shrugging her shoulders in disbelief. "What do you mean?"

"Well yeah, she had typhus and spotted fever . . ."

I had been waiting in the corridor for a long time when I looked through the glass doors at Elvyra. She was lying on a stretcher in the office. It was a German hospital with German signs, yet only Russian Army doctors and nurses were around. The nurses were big and husky, they were built more like wrestlers. Of course, there was a war, people were roaming around, but I wondered where we really were.

Then they told me they were going to cut Elvyra's hair. Her hair was long and gorgeous, she wore it up with ivory combs, but now it just lay on the stretcher like black rain. They were going to cut her hair and shave her head. "It's all right," I was saying in Lithuanian, while looking through the glass doors. As long as she got well.

Behind the door, it seemed as though everything froze and turned into glass. The glass orderlies lifted the glass stretcher and passed by me. I got to see Elvyra one more time. She looked as frozen as glass. The orderlies walked down the long corridor, straight to the shiny, shrinking window where the glass sky began. My tears also froze like glass, they froze on my lashes.

And then they gave me Elvyra's ivory combs.

It was getting dark when Gene and I went for a walk. It wasn't the first time I was vacationing at my friends', so I knew the woods around there pretty well. The path curved and suddenly between the trees a new house was emerging. It crawled out of the earth, stretching its beams and supporting itself on red bricks.

I always loved to look at a new house being built. That's when I start thinking about the people that will live there. I think that soon the house will be filled with voices, footsteps, light and laughter. Furniture will fill it, pictures and mirrors. Furniture that had been scattered throughout different stores and was waiting for a lucky meeting. Little things like tea pots, ice skates, pepper mills, pin cushions, and nut crackers would be collected. And all these things would become friendly and they would all love each other under the same roof. A certain mood would saturate all of the details of the house, a unique fragrance of the family.

I think it should be forbidden to move into a stranger's house. Everybody should build a house of their own. And an empty, abandoned, sold house should immediately be destroyed. Maybe that's why my life with Saul fell apart. We bought a stranger's house, and I just couldn't get used to the smells: a mixture of peppermint, carrot juice, and rose soap. It was a bad house, as bad as the smells.

"The house wasn't the problem," said Gene when we slowly started walking. "You know perfectly well why your life with Saul fell apart."

(I do? It seemed to me that I really didn't know.)

Gene bent down and picked a long piece of grass which she placed between her thumbs. She tried to make it whistle the way we used to when we were kids. But it didn't work. I tried, too, but it didn't work for me, either. But isn't it said that each day you learn something new?

"Someday I'll write a book like that and then you'll understand how sometimes a house can chase people away. It can actually spit them out."

"We reached the birch growth which belonged to the Mackevičiuses. Dara Mackevičius was sitting on the wide balcony wearing a green knit shawl. She was pretty and now looked like a mermaid caught in a net. From the path we waved at each other and exchanged "hellos."

"What's new in Chicago?" Dara yelled.

She asked if I wanted to join them in a game of bridge. I told her that there was nothing new in Chicago and that I didn't feel like playing bridge because I had brought some writing to do. Actually, I hadn't brought anything with me.

Now it was entirely dark.

We walked even further past the bushes full of red berries like those on Christmas cards. Gene always brought a bunch home to me for Christmas. The bushes were now clashing about in total disarray, the tendrils of the wild grape vines were intertwined. The path began to lead to a hill, and a painful white light suddenly beamed through the trees. Two boys were playing tennis on the court with all of the lights on.

I really don't like naked projector lights. They remind me of the barracks and the camps. A blinding light would always shine there. In reality, the Russians never called those barren spots camps. When the war ended, they coined a horrendous name for them, "The Unit for the Collection and Transfer of Citizens of the Soviet Republic."

And there I was in the first division not far from Danzig. I'm guessing that I was north of the city because I always walked toward the sun. Where were my parents, the Maciunases, Rima and Elvyra? Only God knew.

The Russians were making noise in the barracks, lounging around on the bunk beds after hanging up their ragged clothes and boots to dry. They would play cards and make unending ringlets of smoke. The women would crouch around the iron stove stirring some kind of burning stew. What was I doing here with my dark brown coat daintily gathered at the waist, sewn to the latest styles of the Kaunas fashion magazines? They showed me a bed, gave me a tin bowl and spoon, and directed me to the kitchen where I could get some soup.

I was walking in a trance between the barracks on the wide path where throngs were already promenading. The outdoor party was flowing in two currents — one side was heading in the direction of the gates, while the other side was flowing back. The teased girls were shrieking, the men loudly laughing. For a while it was real bedlam. All were laughing and teasing each other under the sun of Slavic brotherhood. Soon the future of the gathered residents was to be determined, but now — Harmonica!

Quilted jackets, flowered scarves, shiny combs, soldiers' caps pushed back, the girls' bare feet in men's boots, the old men's shirts tied around the waist, the sheepskin vests of little old ladies, German Army overcoats with missing buttons. Heh, music! The sun was shining, everybody pushed some slop down their throats, and nobody chased them back to work. What more did they need? The inhabitants of the division poured out of their barracks to socialize as if somebody had brought them to a carnival where they could find all kinds of luck.

I was walking in a daze with my tin bowl in hand, and the fact that it was Easter kept bothering me. I was scared to even think about it because I couldn't smash my bowl and start crying like a kid, "I want to go home, I want home!" Because then the Russians would surround me on all sides. They would put a cap with tiny bells on my head, and I would become the carnival clown — a Russian punching clown. They would punch me down to the ground. "That's what she deserves," everybody would laugh. "She's not one of us!" No! I have to flow with the masses and behave myself. I have to forget that today is Easter.

We were heading for the gate, while others were returning from it. Suddenly among those who were coming my way, I saw two familiar faces. Rima and Elvyra were coming toward me. Now they saw me, too, but they didn't wave, nor shout, nor

even smile happily. We hugged each other without words — like spirits in the middle of the throng. Ghosts probably meet each other in a similar way, coming from a foggy, dreamy cemetery.

Elvyra was in bad shape, she had dark circles under her eyes, and her blue coat hung from her shoulders as if from a hanger. Rima's face was all yellow just like the scarf on her head. Oh, it wasn't a scarf — it was a Lithuanian girl-scout tie. Where did she get that tie? Rima was never a scout. The most insane thing going through my head at the moment was where Rima got that tie!

We stood and looked at each other as the masses paraded by us.

"Let's go," Rima finally said. "Let's go to our place." Their barrack was half-empty. There I, too, made my bed, right next to Rima and Elvyra. We moved slowly and awkwardly like wooden toys. We hardly even exchanged any words, as if we were half-dead. Only later when we sat around on Rima's bed, we slowly started to recuperate. I started telling them how I left Danzig, dressed in rags like a vagabond. I repeated that several times, as if nothing else had happened — just my leaving the city, and the fact that I always turned around to catch a glimpse of the fleeting Danzig.

Elvyra was still silent, but Rima now started telling us how the two of them ended up here. Her scenes weren't in chronological order: a night at Danzig headquarters . . . the soldiers of the Red Army hurriedly rushing them out of the basement . . . two days spent in the division . . . Mrs. Maciunas left in the basement with Johnny and my mom . . . they weren't allowed to say good-bye before leaving . . . Elvyra added a couple of words: they chased the men out earlier, don't you remember that?

"Yes, I do remember."

The more we talked, the happier we were that we met. It was a miracle, a real miracle! Finally Rima said, "Everything's okay, but now we have to pray and thank God."

Sitting on the bed there, we started to pray. It didn't even seem to matter that we ended up in a Soviet Division. Our parents, the future? We didn't dare think about that at the moment. How nice it was just to be together!

Only one thought still bothered me. Rima and I were now uplifted to a spiritual plane. Delighting in that ecstasy, maybe we were trying to show Elvyra subtly: you chose the right God — see, He's performing miracles!

But Elvyra didn't even try to disagree. She pulled out a medallion, a scapular, and a rosary through the collar of her sweater (I was surprised at all those holy things she was wearing). She carefully kissed the cross and began to pray. I didn't know why I felt so uncomfortable. Maybe I was waiting for Elvyra to start screaming "Great is the God of Israel! He breaks bows and shatters arrows!" But she didn't scream any of those things. The frightened pale girl who lived through thousands of fears from the day she took off her yellow star and stayed at the Maciunas' house was now praying as a Christian. I saw how her lips moved, and I felt very sorry for her. Her real name was Rebecca.

That moment we decided never to part. It was getting dark, they were trying to calm me down — the night won't be so bad. There's security in this Division, women aren't raped here. It's the other way around, from time to time guards walk by shining their portable flashlights, throwing out the guys that girls themselves had invited over.

I tried to fall asleep. I turned to the wall because a projector light was beaming through the window. Like the eye of the Cyclops. Suddenly Elvyra sat down on the edge of my bed.

"Tomorrow I will show you something," she secretly whispered to me. "You'll see what I have!"

"Good, show me," I mumbled. My lids were getting heavy.

The next morning the three of us left through the camp gate (the Division residents were able to walk around freely). We left and turned on a small path in the woods. When the camp was out of sight, Elvyra stopped.

"Here," she said. "This spot will be fine."

We sat in a ditch. Elvyra took a black silk bag embroidered with colored beads out of her pocket. It was full of jewels: extravagant rings set with rubies and emeralds, cufflinks with diamonds, earrings, bracelets, pendants and broaches. Some of the pieces were so large that they looked gaudy. The rings were fat, the bracelets were like heavy chains. They were more like lumps of gold than jewelry.

"My parents never intended to use them," Elvyra said. "They felt the war approaching, that's why they converted some of their valuables into gold. "Do you know the relative value of these things?" Her eyes brightly beaming. "About fifty thousand."

So! It seemed these were the same jewels which Elvyra's parents offered the Maciunas for saving their only daughter. But the Maciunas didn't want any compensation. Rima's mother took Elvyra in under one condition — that she be

baptized. Maybe that's an even higher price than money? I couldn't get that thought out of my mind — it was the price of one's soul.

Elvyra was a brave girl. She was lucky that a fellow Jew, a decorated colonel, questioned her in the Danzig unit. Being sympathetic to Elvyra's story, the next day he provided her with a soldier for security, and she returned to that basement to look for the hidden valuables. She left the soldier to guard the door while she went behind the cauldron. She found the pouch of jewels hidden among the coals; she also found her English dictionary.

If I were in her shoes I would have never returned to that awful basement — let the jewels and the dictionary vanish. But Elvyra dared to return; she went behind the scary cauldron where the drunk Russian soldier had tried to rape her. She found everything, and that's why she now has her little pouch.

How nicely all of the gold things glittered in the sun when Elvyra slowly started putting the pieces back in the bag.

"See!" she would say as she slowly turned each piece in the sun. "Just look at that, see?"

I felt her joy and triumph. Suddenly I remembered I had something in my pocket. I pulled out some pearls which I had found in the basement in Danzig. I had prayed the rosary in them and eventually broke a strand. But there were two strands left, joined by a small diamond clasp.

"The pearls probably belong to you, too? Right?"

"Ah!" rejoiced Elvyra. "Yes! I had lost them . . . But wait, there were three strands."

"I accidentally broke one."

"And you didn't pick them up?"

"No," I shook my head. "I didn't."

"What a shame! Do you know how much a strand like that costs? At least five hundred."

Money, money, money.

* * *

The projector lights on the tennis courts suddenly went out. The boys who were playing tennis must have finished their game. Gene and I stood for a moment until our eyes got used to the darkness.

When the lights went out I lost the vision of the first Russian camp. I tried hard to remember how we got out of there. But Gene nudged me to come along. Then I briefly saw the early spring morning, the train maneuvering itself somewhere by the station; it was getting lighter but the sun had not yet risen. We awoke on the open platform, white like sugared candy. While we were sleeping, we didn't feel the frost fall upon us at dawn. The platforms were wooden, painted in brick color. There were a lot of white-sugary people sleeping around us. Where were they taking us?

"Let's go, Birute," Gene nagged. "I still have to put the kids to bed. I know that Victor won't do it."

The path leading back to Gene's house was decorated with small lanterns. They remind me of the gas lamps that were used in the old days. It's so pretty when those lanterns shine between the bushes and when the bugs fly around them. You can hear their wings hit the glass. Actually that's all you can hear. It's so quiet. So quiet and peaceful.

Victor was sitting outside and smoking. I sat down next to him while Gene went to put the kids to bed. A light was shining from the second floor, but it didn't reach the flower garden full of salvia. They burn like fire during the day, but at night they look almost black. And the lighted path resembled a miniature bridge from my direction. It seemed to stretch through the darkness to an unknown land.

"If I had been born here," I said, "I would love this country." "What's stopping you from loving it?" chuckled Victor. "Love it!"

I love Victor, he always has an easy answer for everything.

Victor, love is like faith — either you have it or you don't. And there's nothing, absolutely nothing you can do if you don't.

— Translated by Dana Račiūnas