

This story's heroine is given the nickname Fish, because of her cold, insensitive personality. In fact, this woman is replete with love and compassion and has a gift for bringing warmth and support to people who have lost hope. Fleeing with her family from Tadjikistan to Russia after the fall of the USSR, she endures a number of difficult trials. Her unloving drunk of a husband finds religion and leaves for a monastery; her youngest son dies from a drug overdose. She does not get along with her oldest son and his bride, so she attempts to start a new life in the wilderness (whence the excerpt below). Yet, in the end, fate brings her to Moscow, to new friends and new experiences.

Fish: History of a Migration

Peter Aleshkovsky

I got up from the stool, lowered my face into the water bucket and felt it cool off. I put on man's pants and boots, threw a padded coat over my shoulders, tossed into my knapsack potatoes, onions, a loaf of bread, matches and salt, a handful of candy, camping pot and a pocket knife. I stepped out onto the porch. Quietly, I crossed the clearing; Karai, Leida's husky, came out of his doghouse, shook off his sleep, rocked a little on his front legs, and yawned, but didn't bark – we were friends. I walked across the empty, long-untilled field towards the woods. Where, why – those things did not matter. It was necessary to walk, and so I walked, put one foot in front of the other. Soon I was in the forest, reached the first and the second clearing where I used to pick mushrooms, crossed the creek, thick with wild roses and odiferous currant bushes. Taking the creek as my reference point, I set course for its source. The ground rose. My feet sank in soft, wet moss; silently as a fish moving through water, I was putting distance between myself and Karmanovo, which had sheltered me and where I had my official *propiska*.*

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For a whole day, I walked. The creek soon ended – it fed from a long marsh. I walked around it and intuitively turned right. Whenever I

* The Soviet institution of registering individuals according to their place of residence. Post-Soviet law hasn't entirely done away with it.

wanted, I stopped, found a dry spot, usually under a large fir tree with widely spread branches, and sat down to rest. Several times, broods of partridge exploded from branches ahead of me. They made so much noise with their wings it was as if they were not small birds but flying elephants. Yet when a grouse suddenly lifted out of a blueberry patch to my side, the racket made me fall to the ground in fright. He flew across the undergrowth, a shadow, and I calmed down and even laughed – he was a big bastard and I probably scared him more than he did me. If birds can give one chills, what about animals? I felt unsettled, but I was too ashamed to turn back; I couldn't imagine explaining my foolish actions to aunt Leida. I sighed heavily and set out again. At times, it was almost fun, as if I were just out on a stroll and not running away from point A to some point whose name I didn't even know.

Heavy rain that had been pouring for several days stopped the night before; the weather front moved on, and the sun came out. In the cut timber clearings I crossed I was almost hot. Then I would take off my padded coat and carry it in my hands. The forest around me was mixed – birch and aspen – the pine and fir trees were systematically and greedily destroyed by just about everyone, from peasants, the *kolkhoz* and the forest farm, to the main predators: roaming bandit brigades. These plundered wherever they wished, breaking a path with heavy machinery, cutting a temporary road, and then carving out the most valuable hundred-year-old mast trees, lopping off six meter trunks at the root, sometimes even getting two standard lengths, then leaving behind the rest – branches, tops – strewn around, not even caring to bulldoze it into piles. Of course, no one planted saplings on these plundered patches, and they became impassable, dead spots. The criminals gave a cut to the authorities, so there was little chance of stopping their marauding. Kupryan, the main forest-killer, was said to be an aide to an important elected official; policemen on the road nearly bowed at the sight of his maroon Pajero SUV. In this plundered land, where factories and plants closed, farmland shrank, and tractors vanished without a trace, sawmills sprang up like mushrooms after a rain. The forest was the only thing that could provide some sustenance, and so it did. Monstrous trucks ground up already broken roads; day and night they pulled lumber to the asphalt where it was loaded on second-hand Finnish “fiskras” and rushed to the St. Petersburg

port to be shipped abroad. And yet the forest fed only a few; most people got by on potatoes washed down with hydrolytic alcohol* and, having forgotten how to work, stole whatever wasn't locked up.

One constantly felt the presence of people in these woods – dead-end roads patched over with new growth like the scars of bed-sores on Genady's back; plastic cones for collecting *zhivitsa* – fir sap that was used to make stinging turpentine; cast iron skeletons of tractors peeking out of their mossy lairs, ready to hook and mangle a carelessly placed foot. You also stumbled across axe-hewn posts – block markers, an original forest compass. Their chemically penciled signs bled and faded, turning letters and numbers into forest spirit scrawls. After the sunset, the bubbling, guttural voice of the forest, filled with sobs and moans, rolled far and wide, mixing with the peat-aged, rich aromas of the marsh; it rose like a wind-blown scent, as if from nowhere, and fell without a trace – not even a secret language, but a broken line of call-and-response, a chorus of ancient forces that kept watch over the strangers who stole their ancient wealth. Holes pierced in the forest by human greed were overgrown with raspberries and small bushes and turned into winter pastures for the moose – they learned to walk over the fallen debris, biting off the juicy tops of brush and saplings.

I stuck to the edges of such clearings. Stumps stood festooned with over-ripe, lifeless honey agarics; morels poked through here and there – faded, washed out with cold rains like threadbare linens, colorless like globs of carpenters' glue. In the blueberry patches on the edges, there hung a few leftover berries, ones the grouse had missed; scarlet ash berries and elderberries, dangerous as small shot, burned in the bushes, and on the mossy marsh tussocks lay strings of cranberries, big and tough, like coral necklaces on the bosoms of elderly Turkmen women.

I liked walking in the forest: I had no purpose, didn't need to gather things, find things, preserve them for the winter, as aunt Leida had always made me do. Here, in this half-decimated forest, one could feel special strength, as if in a wounded but quickly recovering man. Quietly but steadily, the gaping sores were closing; trees, mushrooms, moss and grass, thorny raspberry bushes, birds, bumblebees, caterpillars and wood-borers did their

* Made from wood processing waste.

job, lived for each other, eating and sustaining each other. I walked past this life, shared in its fragrant air, infused with heady aromas, and the feeling of raucous freedom overflowed in me like champagne spilling over the edge of a glass. Where was I going, why did I turn first right, then left, why did I cross the looping stream twice and then not a third time, instead climbing its tall bank and turning my back on it, cutting my path with a stick in the tall nettle? I realized I could not possibly become lost – there were twenty, at most thirty square kilometers of thick growth, no more; everywhere somebody was living, and eventually I just had to arrive someplace.

And yet I became lost.

I spent the night under a fir tree. I made a fire, boiled some tea, and slept fitfully through the darkness. Woke up with dawn and set out again, and again did not reach any human dwelling by nightfall. Even the old roads that I had stumbled across at first disappeared. I made the most unforgivable mistake: I began changing my course. It was as if the *leshny*, the forest trickster spirit, was spinning me around. Sometimes it would appear that I had already stood by this little marsh or that one, and hadn't crossed it, but then again, it could have been any other marsh and I found no human tracks, but plenty left by wild pigs.

On the third night, I distinctly heard their squealing and grunting; wild pigs were rumbling about in the marsh. Andrei Mamoshkin, who brought groups of hunters from Moscow to Karmanovo and always made sure to spend the night at aunt Leida's, told horror stories about those pigs. I kept telling myself that at least I hadn't wounded any of them, hadn't done any harm, but every new squeal, every rustle and crack of a broken twig sent shivers down my spine. I stared into the night but could not see anything: the tops of the trees swayed in the wind, back and forth, and the breeze dangled the brushes of leaves on the bushes; the owl screeched, but that seemed to be it. I fed the fire and drank more of my watery tea – I started saving my potatoes, and had already finished the bread.

The feelings of vigor and elation had left me a while ago, and I was tired. My body – so accustomed to the hollowed-out bed in the village and the spiking springs of its mattress, which I padded with rags – was not well adapted to lying on branches and cold ground. My skin itched with dirt and sweat; muscles went numb and hurt, and it did not matter how long I rested – I only became more tired.

On the fourth day, the rain began. I was drenched right away and decided to return to my camp from the night before, which at least had a bed and a big tree that could shelter me from the rain. But the rain brought the wind with it, the air cooled off; I was chilled to the bone and started to cough. Soon there was sweat on my forehead – I managed to catch a cold and was running a fever. At that point, as soon as the night became grey and the early birds raised their voices, I got up and went forth. I walked straight, without turning; I swore to myself that I would walk until I dropped. On that day, I learned that “when bones hurt” was not an exaggeration.

After an hour or hour and a half of pushing myself forward, I came upon an old road, and in another half hour, weed-choked fields began to appear. The woods ended suddenly – the road took me to their edge and an endless uncut field. Animal paths ran through its rain-beaten and wind-tussled grass; the road hadn’t been traveled on for a long time, and its ruts were deep and almost everywhere full of water. I walked on the dense turf between the ruts and felt sure that I would get somewhere; this gave me energy. Finally, I came to it.

In the grey skies, thickly woven with clouds, there was movement; invisible bellows began pumping, tearing woolly shreds from looms of loose grey and blowing them away. It grew lighter. Far ahead, the underbellies of the clouds filled with purple. And then, like thunder, a thick, tragic sound spilled above the fields. *Bom-m-m!* I stood still, all ears. The hum poured over the earth like melted pewter, unhurried; it wrapped itself around things like the rich aroma of a waking garden just before the sunrise at home in Pedjikent. Just when it seemed that I was hallucinating from exhaustion, when the last threads of this mournful voice thinned, tore, and were lost in the still, tense air, the sound came back. *Bom-m-m!* It reached out again, it called, it had such wonderful power that my eyes filled with involuntary tears. *Bom-m-m!* It struck sooner, chasing and overtaking the previous wave as if it had lain itself down to smooth the way and was pulling the new sound after itself, to the light from its invisible source – just as the wolf tenderly pulls her first seeing pup out of the lair. *Bom-m-m!* – it spilled again, seeming sooner still, and stronger, happier. I did not doubt that somewhere, someone was sounding a bell, not to call for help, but in measured, mighty strokes, as if tuning the new day

to its sound. *Bom-m-m! Bom-m-m! Bom-m-m!* A new rhythm appeared. It was still unhurried, not the quick canticle like in a Dushanbe church at Easter, where I had gone once with the kids to see the procession, mostly to spite Gennady. Still the bell grew stronger, drawn by an experienced hand that swung it with certain amplitude, making the tongue hit the dome every time a bit sooner, a bit stronger: one-two-three, one and one, and one-and-two, and one, and one-two-three. I came back to my senses and ran towards the sound. This was not a coincidence – someone was letting me know that rescue was at hand; bells had served as beacons to lost travelers since time immemorial.

The field rolled down to a river. On its far shore, uphill, stood dark shapes of buildings – barns, a house – the wind carried the dogs' barking. Another half an hour straight, then across the river, on the stones. I misstepped and fell waist-deep into the icy, burning water, but I did not fear any more. The bell kept ringing, urging me on. I walked up the hill – on this side, someone had cut the grass. Here was the house, the bath, two barns, and an orchard – a homestead, like Leida Yanovna's. Behind the house were the woods severed by the road that had saved me. Then the sound stopped, as if it had never been, and only its echoes rang around my head for a little longer.

Straight ahead the sun was rising from behind the forest. It took my breath away; I stood still and finally noticed that, next to the house, beside a simple bell-tower – a crossbar on tall posts with a simple shingled roof to protect the bell from the weather – stood a tall old man in a quilted jacket, his back to me, his face to the sun. He raised his hands as if in greeting, as I used to do on the remains of the Pedjikent fortress, not paying attention to the dog who was barking madly, lunging after me on its chain. I couldn't help it anymore; I hollered, "Ogo-go-go!" and ran towards him.

Finally the old man turned and saw me, but did not move. Tall, strong, with a long grey beard, he was looking at me, holding a hand to his forehead as if he had a pair of binoculars. I tripped suddenly; the ground spun away from my feet, rose up to my face.

I came to inside the house. Somehow, the old man had managed to drag me inside. I was lying on a bed. Next to me a stove was burning, a radio burred, and the old man was sitting on a chair just as I had sat so

many times next to an ill person, waiting for their eyes to open. I opened my eyes. The old man had a kind face. I smiled at him and closed my eyes again, falling into blissful sleep. I was growing feverish – it hurt to look at the light. My body felt like it was on fire, and it seemed to me that the fire from the books in Karmanovo had leapt onto me from the stove and was branding its revenge into my face, arms, shoulders and chest. I was breathing fast but not getting any air, and again I lost consciousness.

First published in Russian: 2006

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