

Vanya

by Alex M. Pruteanu

Uncle Miki wasn't my real uncle but ever since I could remember he was called Uncle Miki. And so. That spring the war still moved north but we did not go to it any longer. Uncle Miki took me away from the city one night with his sputtering Trabant. You want to play 007? he said. Keep quiet, we're going into hiding. And Uncle Miki drove the little car with the hole in the floor very fast. During the getaway I pretended we were in Fred Flintstone's car and in order to stop we'd have to shove our feet down the hole in the floor and onto the pavement. On the way we saw an overturned buggy with a dead horse. The wind was strong enough to spin the upturned wooden wheel.

We were given a room in the back of a peasant's house in a village by the seaside. The room backed to the outhouse. It didn't smell. There were pictures on the wall of a funeral and of an open casket with mourners standing all around. The deceased was a boy about my age. Framed on another wall was a letter in pristine calligraphy. It's Russian Uncle Miki said. Everything in that room was written in Russian. Uncle Miki said the boy's name was Vanya and that he had been run over by a fuel truck just in front of this house. I think the peasant is the boy's father, Uncle Miki said as he pulled out nose hairs with his fingernails while looking in the mirror. When he said that, he didn't move his lips. It's weird living in a room with a dead boy all over the walls, I said. Uncle Miki laughed. What does it matter? He's dead.

In the summer Uncle Miki taught me how to play backgammon. And the peasant's wife made cow's tongue for us every Friday evening. One day Uncle Miki told me that there was no Saint Nicholas and that it was grown ups who left candies and gifts inside your boots at night, while you were sleeping. He also said that sheep weren't really fallen clouds. That night I dreamed that donkeys pulling peasants' carts could parallel park in the city.

In the fall Uncle Miki told me I'd have to move away from the country. He told me I was a Jew and that he'd arranged to have me taken on a Turkish cargo ship waiting in the Adriatic, to Izmir. What does it matter that I'm a Jew, I asked him. They're killing Muslims. Why do I have to be taken to another country? And he said Jews were a bonus. They've always killed Jews, he said. And they'll always kill them.

The night we left Vanya to his own room again, the house dog—a German Shepherd—had gotten loose from his chain. The peasant and his wife went out into the street whistling, and Uncle Miki shushed them while he tried to start the Trabant from third gear. The peasant went inside his kitchen and came out with two knives, which he rubbed together instead of whistling. He always comes to this, he whispered. He thinks he's getting meat for dinner.

I looked back through the dirty glass while Uncle Miki grinded the gears and cursed and spat out the window. We were moving fast and it didn't make any sense to me why he was so mad. For a moment, as we left the peasant's house buried in the darkness, I thought I saw the dog run after our car. This bloody fucking century...began and ended in Yugoslavia, Uncle Miki said.

But it wasn't the German Shepherd. It wasn't a dog at all.

