

TWO HILLS DAIRY SUMMER 1975

Gardens are in full bloom. The Ukrainian garden: even in bad years it is a prodigy of plant, whether the bushy potato or the thickly-clustered pea and bean or fruit-heavy tomato. I take my broken sandal into the Shoe Hospital, a frame shack open for business when the shoemaker feels like it. He says “maybe” he can fix it. “When should I come for it?” “When do you want to come?”

The train whistle. Great yardfuls of farm machinery: what do these fantastical volumes of metal actually do? Machine repair shops. The astonishing ages-old clutter in the heating and plumbing shop. A sign says that hail and crop insurance is sold here. A Native man asks me if there’s an auction today. I don’t know. Farm auction signs on the street side bulletin board have mouldered in the rain.

I’m sitting outside my motel room looking straight across to the old people’s home. There are a bunch of them, mostly women, sitting on chairs. Hands folded in their laps, kerchiefs covering their heads. To think they started off in some rustic village in Galicia, dressed in embroidered blouses, a thick, linen overskirt wrapped around their hips and tied close with a hand-woven belt (to judge from old photos of a family group in the Old Country). They ran barefoot after the geese to the village pond, after the sheep to the upland meadow, bent at right angles over the stooks of barley, scythe in hand. And they end their days in housecoats, dozing in the sun a couple of hundred yards away from the junction of highways 36 and 45 that traverse the Ukrainian bloc settlement from Edmonton east to the Saskatchewan border. I can make out an old man playing the accordion. I can see his wheezing and squeezing but only a few notes make it over to my side of the road. Some women sing, their voices feeble and quavering, “She’ll be comin’ ‘round the mountain.”

Gladys picked me up at 9 a.m. and we went to the arena to setup the concession booth for the agricultural fair. It was a cold, windy and cloudy day – where are the searingly hot August summers of my childhood? – and we didn’t expect many people. Unwrapped the hamburger patties and chopped onions, plopped the wieners in the boiling water, spread out the potato chips and chocolate bars, pop and coffee. This junk food - in the middle of an agricultural region full of wonderful cooks.

There was an interlude of Ukrainian dancing outside. Very young kids dancing in the parking lot, little arms and legs jerking and flailing in a prototype of a Cossack dance, proud parents and grandparents looking on in delight. It didn’t actually seem all that incongruous to me but maybe it would be to an outsider: hot dogs and hopaks in the same space. This congruence of incongruities – boys in blow-dried hair-does and ballooning Cossack pants, girls in make-up and beribboned wreaths on their heads, electric synthesizers belting out the *oom pah pah* of a kolomeya, garlic sausage in a hot dog bun, the hodgepodge of English and Ukrainian chatter –

“Ya mushu fiksovaty fents zavtra” – seems so normal. It *is* normal. This is Ukrainian-Canadian culture, sprung up from the soil of here. It may be vulgar, sentimental, even uncouth, but it’s ours. A kind of visible record of how we got from Galicia to Two Hills and what happened to us along the way, traces of the whole adventure in what we say and how we act together.

The displays at the fair were pretty meagre. Samples from people’s gardens, sheaves of wheat, baking, decorated cakes, embroidered cushions, pysanky, photographs of flowerbeds. Funny how at one point of our history, some seventy-five years ago, all these objects were still part of day-to-day survival, absolutely necessary accomplishments – without then you simply couldn’t go on- and, where life was decorative, it was still reverential, connected with the church calendar and old customs. But when life becomes materially easier, women had more time on their hands, and now you have fancy cakes instead of braided bread, elaborate cross-stich embroidery up and down a polyester shirt instead of a few perfunctory stitches at the neck and cuffs of a homespun shirt, and red ribbons tied around a winning cabbage that used to represent something to eat, as sauerkraut in a barrel, to fend off hunger.

This heat wave isn’t going to break. Flies buzz insolently around my head. The pavement outside the post office is spongy. I hear that a ninety-year-old man died in the old people’s home yesterday.

Myrna Kostash
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