

Overview

This tale concerns two countries in Eastern Europe. One, Zlaimperia, is very large. The other country, Xoraina, is much smaller and is situated on Zlaimperia's southern border. In times past, Zlaimperia was the core of a fearsome empire which, among many other countries, included Xoraina.

Now, also in times past – within the span of a lifetime ago – the Zlaimperian Empire was much weakened because of its struggle with the United States of America and her allies. Although still considered to be an empire by some, many of the vassal states, resentful of their Zlaimperian overlord, chose to go their own way, Xoraina being among them.

In the ensuing years, the divide between these two countries grew ever wider. Grasped in the iron fist of a dictator, Zlaimperia returned to its authoritarian roots. This dictator was known for his ruthless determination to cling to power, as well as his corruption. Xoraina, on the other hand, turned away from its past with Zlaimperia. Instead, they turned toward the western form of government that gave power to the people. In due course it began to prosper.

Now, the all-powerful Zlaimperian dictator lamented the lessening of what his country had once been and swore to regain those glories of the past. He also noticed that Xoraina had repudiated that past and embraced their old enemies in the West. Duly enraged by it, but he was also alarmed to have yet another democratic country on his border, especially a prosperous one, and *this* one most of all. To some degree, many in Zlaimperia and Xoraina shared a similar language and culture. Also, many people in Xoraina had friends and family in Zlaimperia, and vice versa. How long would it be, he wondered, before his own people, relating to life across the border, saw the benefits of democracy and wanted it for themselves? If such an unspeakable thing should occur, not only would it would be the end of all his dreams of returning Zlaimperia to its former glory,⁹ it would be the end of the dictator himself. Clearly, the status quo could not be tolerated. Therefore, girding the country in a blanket of lies, of how the erstwhile vassal state had now fallen victim to deplorable Nazis, he ordered his formidable military to invade Xoraina with two objectives in mind: to eradicate Xorainian democracy, and to absorb the country within a new Zlaimperian Empire.

However, having once tasted freedom, Xorainians were reluctant to surrender to the will of their old master.

Instead, they chose to resist.¹⁰

PART ONE

Chapter One

On the western edge of Xoraina lies a remote valley bordering the Carpathian Mountains to the west and hemmed in by an immense forest to the east. Access to the rest of the country is gained via a single road cut through the forest. It had once been a fine road with a newly paved surface, but the years had taken their toll, until the pavement was potholed and riddled with cracks from neglect. However, not many people noticed or complained, because this was a region where few people came, and even fewer people left.

In this sliver of land lies the remote village of Homstood. Life is simple there, much slower than the hectic pace of the larger cities. In fact, it hasn't changed much since time out of mind.

As in many other rural communities, people went to church on the Sabbath. Largely, their prayers were dominated by pleas for good weather for their crops; for as anyone who has ever made a living from the land will tell you, the weather and the farmer have ever had an uneasy alliance. Afterward, they would often meet at the market square, to socialize and share the latest news, or gossip, as the case may be. The rest of the week was either spent tending their farms or working at stalls in the market to sell the produce thereof.

Year after year, this was their life with very little deviation. The rains usually arrived when moisture was needed, and the sun usually shone when it wasn't. Still, 'usually' should not be mistaken for 'always.' Growing crops was by no means a certainty. That was why whenever two or more of the villagers met at the square the conversation inevitably turned to the weather. Oftentimes they hearkened back to yesteryear with hyperbolic tales of the summer-of-the-knee-high-grasshoppers, or the winter-of-the-blue-snow. Sage heads would wag at the mention that Hans Gromp had cut his hay too early, or that I I Vasily Pomkin had left his pumpkin harvest too late. To be sure, they would talk of other subjects, too, like rust in the wheat, or blight in the potatoes, or if the rains would fill out the heads of the barley, or if the plants were already too mature. The gist of it all, of course, was that the very real problems they faced were centred around husbandry of land that their fathers and forefathers had tilled before them, and their sons looked to inherit when they themselves were gone. If any mention was ever made of the world outside their valley, it was to do with the market price of their produce set in the far distant Capital, and to gleefully damn the politicians there, regardless of the party involved.

Now, just outside of this remote village was a farm at the foot of the mountain the village was named for, consisting of a

few acres of rocky soil. It's current owner, Yuri Zavlov, was typical of that area, although even more typical than most. To Yuri, it was the farm that mattered, everything else was superfluous. One of the results of that philosophy was that he had never travelled more than a few kilometres from the village in his entire life. Certainly, he had never set foot on the dilapidated road that led through the forest.

A craggy faced man of perhaps fifty years of age, Yuri seemed to be a timeless figure carved from the land itself. Evidence of a lifetime spent tilling the soil was ingrained under his nails, and in the crevices around his eyes, so much so that it was difficult to tell where his features ended, and his homespun peasant garb began. If any of his fellow villagers was asked to describe him, they would universally mention his singularity of purpose. Whenever something – an issue, a problem, or what have you – became lodged in his mind, they declared that a crowbar couldn't pry it out until it had been resolved. They also declared that it was both his greatest and weakest personality trait, which was true, as we shall see.

A widower for some thirty years, Yuri lived with his mother-in-law, Oksana, two dogs, Pyotr and Borys, and Svetlana, the cat, all under the roof of the cottage his great grandsire had built many years before. As a household, they got along well. From sunup to sundown, Yuri and the dogs would be out working the fields, while Oksana busied herself about the house. At the supper table they would discuss the day's events in their quiet way, often damning the government out of habit, dating back to the days when Xoraina belonged to the Zlaimperian Empire. Of an evening they would sit by the fire, Yuri engrossed in a copy of the Farmers' Almanac, while Oksana, in her old rocking chair, peered short-sightedly at her knitting. Meanwhile, Pyotr and Borys would lie at one or the other's feet, while Svetlana daintily assumed the most privileged place of all on the hearth, closest to the glowing coals. As for their outlook on life, both Oksana and Yuri viewed virtually everything through the lens of what was, or wasn't, good for the farm. If it was good for the farm, then it was good, if it wasn't, then it was bad, or at best, unimportant. Given the arduous nature of their existence, everything they owned had a purpose – even the dogs and Svetlana had to earn their keep – while luxuries were virtually unheard of. This included any of those modern electronic devices that were such the rage these days, or even a television. They did, however, own a radio that Yuri had been meaning to take to the repair shop for the last decade but constantly forgot. Homestead was not a terribly prosperous community, and

Yuri's farm exemplified that fact, which is to say that it was not prosperous at all. The reasons vary, depending upon whom you ask. Some say it was appallingly bad luck, which, given the nature of farming, is easy to believe. Others say that Yuri's obstinate streak was his own undoing, which is also easy to believe, as it could not be denied that there was a certain stubbornness to his nature. However, all agreed that the rocky land and thin topsoil might also be the culprits. The long and the short of it was that, while the land produced enough for them to subsist on, it did not allow the household to prosper. So it was that, one rainy evening in February, instead of sitting by the fire, we find Yuri at the kitchen table with a dog-eared sheet of paper in front of him while, with furrowed brow, he laboriously entered figures in a column with the broken end of a pencil. It¹³ was a chore he performed at this time every year and was of the gravest importance. He was planning for the coming growing season by deciding which crops should be sown, and where. Upon such momentous decisions the dubious fortune of Casa Zavlov would be made or lost.

"Well now, let's see," he murmured to himself. "I planted sunflowers in the north field last year, so I should plant wheat there this year, and there is still enough excess left in the granary to use for seed. I can do the same with the south field where I grew wheat the year before, using excess barley for seed. The west field has had crops grown on it for the last three years, so I'll leave it fallow this season to recuperate." At this point he paused, the pencil end poised over a square on the paper marked The East Field. Still murmuring, he said, "I would very much like to grow sunflowers here. The last time Mother Oksana went to the village, the farmers in the square told her that the price was through the roof – almost fifty lakons per demlo! The east field has the richest soil with the fewest rocks. If God is good, and the harvest is rich, I should be able to sell it for a fortune. If that were to be the case, then it would be possible to make repairs to the barn." Belatedly noticing the steady 'pat, pat, pat' of water dripping from the ceiling into the pot at his elbow, he added, "And, who knows, there might even be enough left over to re-thatch the roof of the cottage." Caught up in the thought, to Yuri, the future began to look bright ... until a shadow cast a pall over his dream. The problem was that the granary where he had kept his sunflowers had been swept clean months ago to pay for repairs to his truck, and he hadn't any left to replace them.

Frowning, he opened his booklet from the National Bank to check his balance and noted the hundred and sixty-five lakons penned neatly at the bottom. Then, laboriously calculating, he

reckoned that he would need five demlos of sunflowers for seed, which, at eight hundred and thirty lakons per demlo, would cost two hundred and fifty lakons, leaving him eighty-five lakons short. Yuri sighed, and sat back in his chair, watching his fledgling dreams of riches dissipate into thin air ... but wait! 14 “My friend, Vasily Pomkin, has some leftover sunflowers. Perhaps he will be able to spare some for me at a reduced price. I will go to see him tomorrow with my proposition. The worst he can do is say no.”

True to his word, Yuri caught up with Vasily the next day. He was forking manure onto a sledge but, of course, like any good Homstoder, ceased his exertions out of courtesy. After they exchanged the usual pleasantries, coupled with gloomy predictions about the weather, Vasily leaned on his fork, and said, “I know you are a busy man, my friend, as busy as I am myself. If you were to tell me the purpose of your visit, then we can both get back to our chores.”

So, Yuri related his thoughts about planting sunflowers in his east field, and his lack of seeds. He went on further to recall that Vasily himself had mentioned that he had an excess of sunflower seeds, and would he be willing to part with five demlos of them, at fair market value, of course?

Yuri had mentioned fair market value only as a matter of pride and etiquette. It was no less than what was expected, just as he knew he could expect Vasily’s counteroffer to be *less* than fair market value. The two men had been friends for many years and had often helped one another when times were hard, which they very often were. He saw no reason why that should not continue. As it turned out, he was partially right, but also partially wrong.

“Well now,” said Vasily, his chin resting on the butt end of his fork, “it is true that I have an excess of sunflower seeds, and I will happily part with five demlos, and at a discounted price at that.” Calculating quickly, he said, “What do you say to forty-five lakons per demlo?”

Yuri was careful to keep his features impassive – to show otherwise would not have been polite – but inside, his hopes for a field of sunflowers plummeted a second time. According to Vasily’s offer, five demlos of seed would cost two hundred and twenty-five lakons. It would be a discounted price as his friend had promised, but it was still sixty lakons more than he could afford. 15

Forcing a smile, he said, “That is very generous of you, my friend.”

However, Vasily was no fool. He could see through Yuri’s polite smile and guessed that his offer was less than what

he had hoped for, so he decided to explain.

“Look you, neighbour,” he said, “I would happily sell it for even less, for I want the best for you and yours. But, you see, my oldest son will be leaving for university in the autumn and will need money for such things as clothes and tuition and books and such. So, I am afraid that I cannot go any lower than forty-five lakons per demlo.” Somewhat defensively, he added, “Even then I would be taking a loss, for I could get fifty lakons at the market.”

Yuri hastened to reassure his friend that his offer was more than generous, and that he would go home and ponder over it before deciding. “After all,” he said, “two hundred and twenty-five lakons is a great deal of money.”

Vasily readily agreed. It wasn’t the custom of such folk to make precipitate decisions concerning the world of finance, so Yuri’s vacillating came as no surprise. Therefore, after verifying that Yuri would not stay to share a glass of nalivka, Vasily wished his friend a good day before carrying on with his work.

That evening at the dinner table, Yuri idly swirled his spoon through his borscht, obviously deep in thought. At both knees, Pyotr and Borys stared with all the diligence of dogs willing table scraps to fall to the floor. Over by the old woodstove, Svetlana lapped contentedly at her saucer of milk. Observing her son-in-law, Oksana, said, “What ails you, my boy? You have scarcely touched your food.”

Roused from his thoughts, Yuri had no wish to cause Oksana to worry. So, stressing how insignificant it was, he confessed his seemingly forlorn hopes for the east field, and ended by saying, “It is nothing, really, Mother. I will plant the east field with potatoes, instead, and any dreams of wealth will have to wait for a better year.”¹⁶

Few words were spoken for the rest of the meal, aside from Oksana insisting that his borscht not go to waste, but she never stopped thinking about the problem until they were settled by the fire – her with her knitting, and Yuri with his ever-present almanac.

“Did you know,” she began, “that I went into the village today?”

“Hmmm, yes?” said Yuri, without looking up from his book.

“Yes,” she affirmed, “and guess who I ran into at the market?”

Still not looking up, Yuri said, “I have no idea, Mother Oksana.” Then, dutifully, he added, “Who did you run into at the market today?”

“Hans Gromp,” was her pert reply. “And guess what he told me.”

Closing his book at last, Yuri looked at his mother-in-law, and smiled. “What is this, Mother? Are we playing A Hundred Questions? I have no idea what Hans Gromp told you. Perhaps you could enlighten me?”

Not wishing to string out the suspense any further, she said, “He told me that pigs are selling for two lakons per kilo.” Yuri regarded his mother-in-law with sudden interest, while a flurry of calculations progressed inside his head.

If Mother Oksana said that she had received the information from Hans Gromp, then he was inclined to believe it; for Hans Gromp was known as a virtuous man. Now, given that the old price was one lakon per kilo, a pig ripe for market of, say, fifty kilos for easy figuring, the profit would be fifty lakons. Obviously, this would still not be enough to purchase the sunflower seeds from Vasily Pomkin. However, with this new price of two lakons per kilo (a price never before heard of), his profit would be more than enough to purchase the seed, and still have some money left over.

It was a very attractive notion, for Yuri possessed two pigs, a young sow and a boar. It had been his intention to make his fortune raising pork, but the sow had been the runt of the litter and was still a shade under the ideal weight. Clearly, he could not send her to market. The boar on the other hand ...

“There was something else,” Mother Oksana ventured, not wishing to dash her son-in-law’s hopes, but she knew it was best to put everything on the table from the start.

Recognising her tone, Yuri looked at his mother-in-law through guarded eyes.

“Yes?”

“Hans Gromp told me that the price of two lakons per kilo can only be paid by the Central Market in Lofstov. Which means, of course, that the pig would have to be shipped there on the train, and the National Railroad charges a shipping fee.”

Yuri did his best not to heave a sigh of relief, for that would not have been becoming. He had shipped livestock in the past and knew that the travel fee was reasonable – possibly only ten centiems (one tenth of a lakon) per animal to reach the Central Market in Lofstov, which was easily affordable.

Of greater concern was that, having deprived himself of his boar, his pig-raising scheme would have to be put temporarily on hold. However, at fifty lakons per demlo, with the money he received for a sunflower crop, he would be able to purchase any boar he chose, possibly even one with papers. He smiled at the mere thought. If he had a boar with papers, the

offspring would be worth double, or even ten times more than the market price. Not only that, he would also be able to charge stud fees from other farmers who wished to have their own sows serviced. With that in mind, selling his current, unregistered boar now, in order to realise sizeable profits in the future, appeared to be the obvious choice.

“That is very interesting news, Mother Oksana,” he said, and the old woman flushed with pleasure at his praise.

“Tomorrow I will go to the market myself and seek out Hans Gromp, to see if there is anything more he can tell me.”

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Early the next morning, Yuri found Hans Gromp at his market stall selling turnips. The conversation they had was short and confirmed what Oksana had said the night before. However, Hans Gromp didn't seem to be terribly engrossed in the subject but was otherwise so preoccupied with something that he completely failed to mention the weather at all.

“Yes, that's right,” he confirmed, “two lakons per kilo, payable at the Central Market in Lofstov.” Then, revealing why he was otherwise preoccupied, he said, “But, that is a risky proposition now that the country is at war.”

However, having had the good news confirmed, Yuri, with his singularity of purpose, was unwilling to pay much heed to Hans Gromp's warning. Too many things had fallen into place to make this anything other than a rare opportunity that mustn't be missed. Instead, he made an offhand remark, thanked Hans Gromp for his help, and returned to his farm, determined to get his pig to the station bright and early the next morning.

With his dreams finally within his grasp, Yuri slept more soundly, and peacefully, than he could ever remember, so soundly, in fact, that he never heard the distant rumble that might have been thunder but, tragically, wasn't.

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As the pig snoozed contentedly in the ooze of the sty, he reckoned that he was the happiest pig in the world. The mud on the farm was of the highest quality, especially after it rained, making it just right for a good wallow. The swill was exceptional, too, for the squire never threw out any leftovers from his own table but saved the scraps for himself and the sow the next morning. The sow, who was the kindest, most beautiful sow in all the world, was equally contented, and had mentioned as much to him only a minute ago. She said that she was especially contented whenever he was near.

He wallowed deeper into the slime, relishing the memory. Then, as the grey light of dawn began to creep above the horizon, he thought that yes, it was a good life here on the

farm, and he could see no reason why it shouldn't continue so for the rest of his days.

Just then, the door to the cottage swung open and the squire emerged carrying a fresh pail of swill. The pig grunted with pleasure and dove into the treasure as soon as it was¹⁹ poured into his trough. He was so engrossed that he never even noticed when the simple collar made of twine was slipped over his head.²⁰

Chapter Two

Yuri stood at the shipping agent's kiosk. In his pocket jingled the few coins needed to ship his pig to the Central Market in Lofstov. The pig in question stood obediently at his heel, snuffling contentedly through the grass.

Curiously, the shipping agent seemed as preoccupied as Hans Gromp had been the day before. However, just like his customers, he was first and foremost a Homstoder, which meant that several years spent at his occupation had ingrained a certain civility to avoid being rude.

"That is a fine hog," he said, although he was glancing nervously at the sky rather than at Yuri's pig. "Perhaps you could take him to the scale for me, please."

Obediently, Yuri took the pig to the scale beside the kiosk, and the pig, just as obediently, stood on it to be weighed.

"Fifty point four three kilos," the shipping agent nodded approvingly. Then, checking a table on a chart, he said, "That will be twenty-three centiems for shipping." As Yuri dug around in his pocket for the correct change, his hand froze when the shipping agent added, "And fifteen lakons for insurance."

Aghast, Yuri asked, "What did you say?" hoping against hope that he hadn't heard correctly.

More preoccupied than ever now, the shipping agent had paused with his head atilt, as if listening for something, but Yuri's response dragged his attention back to his duty, albeit only partially.

"What? Oh yes, that was just introduced. A new tax, they said, to cover the insurance of your cargo in transit." In a weak effort to ameliorate the shock, he added, "But you can continue to ship livestock on the same policy for one year before you are required to renew it."

"What other livestock?" an aggrieved Yuri asked. "I only want to ship one pig!"

"I am sorry, Yuri Yurivich," the shipping agent replied with a dramatic shrug, "but my hands are tied. It is the law."²¹

"So, a new law, eh?" Yuri asked, expecting the shipping agent to share a knowing look with him, one that those of the village reserved exclusively for conversations concerning the

government and taxes. However, the shipping agent had slipped away once more, staring at nothing in particular that Yuri could see, with his head tilted to one side as it had before. In the distance, the faraway drone of a jet engine drew rapidly nearer. Diving beneath the kiosk, the shipping agent cried, "GET DOWN!"

The drone of the jet engine grew steadily into a roar until it filled Yuri's senses, while all around the rail station suddenly burst into chaos. People were running hither and thither, with women screaming, children crying, and men bellowing for no apparent reason. One man ran past him, his eyes wild with terror, while a woman huddled against the station wall, clutching a child to her breast. As he slowly turned, everywhere he looked the crowded station was surging with panic.

"How curious," he thought.

Then, with the roar of the jet engine drowning out a multitude of screaming voices, a few hundred metres down the railroad tracks, he saw fountains of earth suddenly burst from the ground, intermingled with twisted rails hurtling through the air. Even as he was struggling to come to terms with that, the deafening explosion caused him to stagger and clamp his hands over his ears. At his feet, the pig uttered a surprised grunt, and tried to run away, but was held firm by the leash in Yuri's hand. After a long pause, when all the dust had settled, slowly, ever so cautiously, the shipping agent re-emerged from beneath the kiosk.

"I never had to pay a tax for insurance before," Yuri observed ruefully. "The government always covered the expense."

"What?" the shipping agent asked, in a distracted sort of way.

"The insurance," Yuri reiterated, "I have never had to pay for that before."

Still distracted, the shipping agent repeated, "What?"²²

After Yuri had morosely voiced his opinion of the new tax a third time, the shipping agent stared at him as if he had just grown horns.

"Well," he finally managed, "you have to pay it, it's the law. Now," he said, "I don't know about you, but I'm getting out of here before they return!" So saying, he began to close the kiosk.

Still ruminating about the new tax, Yuri absently asked, "Before who returns?"

On the verge of pulling down the shutters, the shipping agent cried, "The Zlaimperians, you fool!" Pointing a trembling finger to where the railroad tracks had so violently disappeared,

he said, "The bastards who are responsible for that!" Staring as one might at an imbecile, he added, "My God, man, haven't you heard there's a war on?"

"Hmm," Yuri replied, in a disinterested sort of way.

Then he said, "Well, it's not getting my pig any closer to market, now is it?" However, his words reached no one's ears but his own, for the shutter had already closed with a crash.

After glaring spitefully at where the shipping agent had been only a moment before, Yuri decided that there was nothing further to be done; so he left, with the pig trotting nervously at his heels.

He was still deep in thought twenty minutes later when the sound of a second jet engine roared into a crescendo, and having received a direct hit, the railway station erupted into a mountain of dust and debris behind him. Engrossed as he was in his single-minded way, he remained unaware of any of it.

Yuri's outlook on life was divided into two categories: things that could be explained, and things that just were. That sort of acceptance had served him well in the past, like, for instance, the time when he'd been about to harvest the wheat from his north field, and a sudden hailstorm had sprung from nowhere, flattening it to the ground. He hadn't cried out at his cruel fate, but had accepted that the hailstorm had happened, and doggedly set about preparing for the next growing season, instead. There was no use in complaining. After all, if anyone²³ was responsible, it was God Almighty, and who was Yuri to question His motives? But this time was different.

Along with his philosophy of acceptance, perhaps incongruently, Yuri also possessed a finely tuned notion of justice; and the more he thought about it, the more he felt that this new tax was not just. Of the Zlaimperians and the war the shipping agent had spoken of, he thought nothing at all. What mattered was that his plan to sow the east field to sunflowers would never see fruition unless he was first able to purchase the seeds from Vasily Pomkin, and for *that* to happen, he had to get his pig to the Central Market in Lofstov, which wouldn't be possible because of the new insurance tax he couldn't afford to pay. To Yuri's mind, the tax wasn't '*the way things were,*' but neither could it be explained. Conveniently, he ignored the fact that the track had just been obliterated by the bombing at any rate. Until it was repaired, no one was shipping anything to the Central Market in Lofstov or anywhere else.

As Yuri puzzled over his dilemma, he and the pig approached the village market square. His awareness of any activity around him was so vague as to be virtually non-existent. However, in actual fact, the chaos in the village mirrored that

which had been in the now equally non-existent rail station. People were running about in terror. Mothers scooped up their children, whisking them inside their homes, while the traffic in the streets – usually a trickle at this time of day – had suddenly grown to overflowing, with no resemblance to the sleepy crawl it had been in the past. The people inside their vehicles were as panicked as those running in the streets, with no thought to obeying the traffic signs whatsoever. Under such conditions, it was inevitable that a collision should occur at an intersection right in front of Yuri, when a car heading north ran into a truck (loaded with a household's worth of furniture, a crate of chickens, and a goat) heading west.

The sound of the collision directly in front of him penetrated Yuri's thoughts long enough to cause him to look up. A cacophony of aggrieved motorists, and equally aggrieved chickens, mingled with the panicked cries of everyone else. The goat, Yuri vaguely noted, appeared to accept the situation with stoic resignation. Stepping carefully, he (Yuri, not the goat) manoeuvred around the site of the crash and would have been on his way, but then he noticed that the driver in the vehicle behind the damaged truck was none other than the village administrator.

Without hesitation, he walked purposefully to the administrator's car, and ignoring the traumatised chicken on the bonnet, tapped on the driver's side window. Caught in the stalled traffic, unable to move in any direction, the administrator had little choice but to roll down the window.

Staring at Yuri in much the same manner as the shipping agent had, the administrator asked, "Yes, what is it?"

Peering inside the car, Yuri noted that the administrator's entire family was inside, all staring at him with varying shades of incredulity. Like any true Homstoder, he respectfully tugged the peak of his cap to them before returning his attention to the administrator.

"I want to speak to you about the new shipping tax for livestock," he said.

Glassy-eyed, the administrator asked, "What?"

"I think it's unjust," Yuri informed him, with a good deal of confidence.

From the back seat of the car, the administrator's daughter asked, "What does he want, Daddy?"

From the seat next to his, the administrator's agitated wife leaned over and touched his forearm to gain his attention.

"Come, Yevgeny, we must flee to the countryside! Think of our children!"

Exasperated, the administrator indicated all the traffic

filling the streets, which had now ground to a complete stop due to the collision. “How shall I accomplish that, my dear? We are hemmed in by that bastard truck in front of us and the bastard traffic backed up behind. We are unable to budge an inch!”

After advising him, in a dangerous tone, to be more careful with his language around their children, his wife shrilled,²⁵ “You are the village administrator! Have a party clear that truck off the road at once!”

Emitting a long-suffering sigh, the administrator reluctantly agreed. He got out of the car and walked toward the stalled truck in the intersection.

Trotting at his heels, with the pig in tow, Yuri reminded him, “About the shipping tax, sir ...”

Preoccupied, the administrator turned at the sound of his voice, grasping him by the arm.

“Good, come with me.” Then turning elsewhere, he said to some other men passing by, “You, you and you, help me get this thrice damned truck off the street.”

“But sir, the shipping tax ...”

Irritably, the administrator snapped, “Not now!” and led his party to the truck.

Coming around to the driver’s side, they found an old grey beard and his wife lamenting the loss of their chickens.

Pulling his hair, the old fellow cried, “What shall become of us without my truck and my chickens?”

Still perturbed, the administrator snapped, “Never mind that, can you get this old heap moving?”

The old man’s wife cried, “But our chickens, Your Honour, they won the blue ribbon at the Homstood County Fair last year, and I ...”

Past all patience, the administrator cried, “I don’t care if they won the Miss Universe Competition, can you get your truck off the street?”

Shocked by his callousness, the old man said, “There’s no need to shout, Your Honour, and I’ll thank you not to take that tone with my wife. After all,” he huffed, “they aren’t your chickens, are they?”

“But sir, about that shipping tax ...”

Ignoring Yuri completely, the administrator grated to the old man. “Just try it, damn you!”

The old man did as he was ordered, albeit with some truculence. The engine turned over but refused to fire. At which²⁶ point, everyone the administrator brought along to help chimed in with an opinion.

“It’s flooded,” said one.

“Take it out of gear,” another directed.

“Put it in gear,” said a third.

“The battery must be disconnected,” said a fourth, obviously forgetting that the engine had turned over.

“Let’s have a look under the bonnet,” suggested yet another, which was deemed by all to be a reasonable course of action.

The men traipsed around to the front of the vehicle, where one of them managed to raise the bonnet. They gathered around, staring at the oil-caked mysteries within, each one unwilling to admit to the others that they knew nothing whatsoever about internal combustion engines.

Finally, one of them said, “It’s no use, we’ll have to push it off the road.” It was then that Yuri elbowed his way to the fore.

Looking inside, he noticed that the engine was probably older than he was himself, and that a wire hung loose from the distributor. Pulling his Swiss Army knife from his pocket, he chose the pliers feature and soon had the wire tightened back onto its post.

Calling from under the bonnet, he cried, “Try it now!”

There was no response.

Looking up, Yuri, along with the rest of the men, peered through the windshield into the cab.

It was empty.

Frantically looking around, one of them finally pointed, and cried, “There they are!”

Following the direction indicated, Yuri saw the old grey beard with a chicken under his arm while he gave chase to another, with his wife following helpfully with the cage.

Taking hold of the man who had called out, he indicated the cab of the truck, and said, “Get in and give it a try.”²⁷

The man blinked at the simplicity of the solution. Then nodding, he climbed behind the wheel and turned the key. The engine fired immediately.

After the administrator directed the man to pull the truck over to the shoulder of the road, he walked back to his car with Yuri and his pig trailing after him; but before he could speak, the administrator turned to him, as if suddenly remembering his presence.

“Look, Yuri Yurivich,” he said in a harassed sort of way,

“I understand your feelings about the new shipping tax, but the law is the law. There’s nothing I can do.”

“But, sir,” Yuri insisted, “it’s a stupid law and ought to be repealed.”

The administrator uttered a dry, mirthless laugh. “Well, there it is, you see? I’m sorry, but I can’t help you. Now, if you

don't mind ..."

The administrator climbed in behind the wheel of his car. By now, the streets were filled with the sound of horns blowing and angry motorists demanding to know why the traffic wasn't moving. If the administrator had simply got in his car and driven away that would have been the end of a rather unremarkable story. Left with no other choice, Yuri and his pig would have returned to their home, and nothing further could have been said on the matter. But the administrator didn't simply drive away. Instead, he happened to glance up and caught Yuri still standing there, wearing the most morose expression he had ever seen ... and, of course, the pig standing beside him, looking even more morose than Yuri.

Reaching a decision, the administrator sighed, much as he had done with his wife earlier, and rolled the window down again.

"See here, Yuri, if it means that much to you, you can petition to have the law repealed."

With hope resurging by leaps and bounds, Yuri eagerly asked, "Who do I petition?"

"Why, the president, of course."

Yuri stared at him. "Do you mean to say ...?"²⁸

"Yes," the administrator confirmed. "The only place that can be done is at the Capital, five hundred kilometres away, so that is where you would have to travel." Then, gesturing into the distance at the current inferno that had been the train station, he said, "But I would advise against it. Good luck." So saying, he drove off before Yuri could reply.

Deep in thought, Yuri watched him go, while the traffic, no longer stagnant, passed by perilously close.

"The Capital, eh?" He murmured to himself. "Hmmm."

Then, absently, he tied the pig to a lamppost and went to help the old couple collect their chickens.

*

The pig had been troubled earlier because of the nasty noise he had heard at the station, and all the screaming people running about with no one looking as if they knew where they were going. He could tell that the squire had been troubled, too, although he had no idea why. However, his concern began to fade as they neared the sights and smells of the market. When the squire tethered him to that lamppost before running off to help those old grey hairs with their chickens, he wasn't troubled at all, for he had discovered that a table, once stacked high with vegetables, had been overturned in the general panic ... and all that toothsome bounty was easily within reach.²⁹