

TheBeat



Carpathian Spruce, digital painting, boy Roland

Carpathian Spruce

By Adrian Lysenko

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Cochenour-Willans Mine,
Northwestern Ontario

Yuri wakes in the fetal position under the coarse wool blanket. The fire has long gone out in the bunkhouse the 12 miners occupy. He sits up and rubs his arms, still sore from using the jackleg drill the previous shift.

Despite having just turned 30, he takes longer to recover since he started at the mine five years ago.

Maybe it's the cold winters in Canada, Yuri thinks. Lviv would go just below the freezing mark in December. He peers outside the

frosted window. The snow reflects the few lights around the gold mine; darkness otherwise swallows the surface world.

The shortest day of the year. He hasn't seen daylight in a week. But tomorrow he'll loll in the sunshine.

After a breakfast consisting of a pickled egg, stale bread, and some lukewarm coffee, Yuri stands in the cage with the other miners as they descend more than half a kilometre down to their assigned drift. Soon the chill is replaced with the humidity of the underground. Along with the operator, six men have crammed into the

lift the size of a twin mattress. He breathes from his mouth, avoiding the must, body odour, and wafts of booze. The men will replenish the latter at the end of the shift. It is the second Friday after all, payday. He calculated his hours and knows he'll receive exactly \$50.

Every time he ventures underground, he returns to the cave in Romania where he and his family hid more than seven years ago.

Hand trembling, Yuri brought the lit match to the small pile of wet tinder he'd collected. Katya clutched Ivan and watched on the

opposite side; both shook uncontrollably. Their five-year-old's cheeks were bright red.

The match went out, failing to catch.

"Kurva," Yuri muttered and moved his violin case to the side to get closer to the sticks.

They'd travelled in rain for the last four days and everything was drenched. The only solace was finding the mossy cave by the waterfall. He guessed it was already September because the days were getting colder, especially during the night.

Yuri opened the box of matches in the cave. Only

two remained. He sighed.

Ivan continued to shake as Katya kissed the top of his small head.

At lunch, Yuri sits on a box of dynamite near the blasting wall. His electric cap lamp illuminates the thin cheese sandwich in his black hands. Beside him crouches Hugo, a young Métis. Among the mine's ragtag mix of Swedes, Finns, Poles, the two formed a close comradeship.

"Take a look at this," Hugo says, handing him a torn page from a magazine. "Should be ready to pick up at the general store tonight."

In the clipping, a young

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man wears a suit and a bowtie while holding a violin.

Gervais Brothers' Viols, learn to play at home! Be your own music teacher with the Sears Study Book... it's easy!

"I sure do miss the music back home." Hugo exhales.

Yuri's gaze slips down to the bottom of the clipping.

Only \$50!

"Do you play anything?" Hugo asks, rolling a cigarette.

"I used to play the violin. I was in the orchestra back in Lviv."

Hugo's lamp moves to Yuri, blinding him. "That's great! I'll teach you the 'Red River Jig!'"

For a moment, Yuri thinks he sees something scuttle on the wall—a fire salamander by its black and yellow skin colouring. He searches the rock, using his headlamp like a spotlight. It reveals wiring hanging down from one of the many holes drilled in the blasting face.

"What is it?" Hugo asks.

"Nothing." Yuri shakes his head and hands his companion back the wrinkled magazine page. "Come on, let's finish loading."

As Yuri changes in the bunkhouse, the other miners huddle in the corner, pouring whiskey, lighting cigarettes, or shuffling cards.

"Have a drink with us, Georgiel!" Duke, the mine's mechanic, says to Yuri.

"No, thanks." Yuri grabs the cross-country skis from

under his bunk.

"One drink and one hand. I thought Russians liked to drink?" Duke offers a chipped enamel mug.

"He's Ukrainian," Hugo says, putting on his coat.

"Same difference." Duke chuckles and picks up his hand.

Yuri ties up his laces and leaves with Hugo.

The cold hits him as he opens the door. Stepping outside, Yuri wraps his scarf tightly around his head, leaving little exposed skin. Near the bunkhouse, the beetle-like blue Bombardier B12 snowcat idles loudly.

"You sure you don't want to give them weary bones a rest?" Hugo asks. "Just a dollar for the ride across the lake."

Clicking into his skis, Yuri shakes his head. "No. I'll meet you in town so I can see your new violin."

Hugo smiles and scurries into the snowcat, packed with eleven other miners.

As the B12 disappears onto the expansive lake, Yuri grabs his ski poles and follows its tracks.

A slight tailwind gives him a push. Despite the soreness, he keeps a steady rhythm.

You only feel the cold once you stop moving.

Away from the mine, the stars shine as aurora glows like wisps of jade-coloured smoke. Swishing over the snowy surface of the lake, Yuri imagines he's gliding on

the moon. The only telltale difference is the thousands of trees around the lake. Spruce similar to those in the Carpathian Mountains.

His mind drifts back to the cave, back to the Carpathian spruce violin.

Yuri struck another match to the wet sticks in the cave, so close that the sulphur tickled his running nose. Slowly the small flame disappeared into smoke.

He glanced up at Katya; her eyes were shiny with tears while Ivan's teeth chattered.

They can't die here, Yuri thought. Not after coming so far already.

He leaned back, put a hand on his violin case, and pulled out the instrument.

"Do you know that this was your grandfather's before it was mine?" Yuri asked his son.

Coughing, Ivan shook his head.

"He told me once that it was made from Carpathian spruce that had been struck by lightning." The fading daylight spilled in from the cave's mouth and illuminated the light brown instrument, showcasing its various scratches. "That's what makes it magical."

With his left hand, Yuri rested the violin on his collarbone and shoulder. Grabbing the bow, he proceeded to play the second movement of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto.

Yuri closed his eyes and

shut out the rest of the world, as he would often do while playing. Gone were the retreating Nazis, the advancing Soviets, and the Ukrainians caught in the middle. His father had taught him the piece while they were staying at their dacha in the foothills of the mountains.

He finished, opened his eyes, and noticed Ivan staring up. Yuri followed his son's gaze to a fire salamander that clung to the cave wall. The amphibian's black body was barely visible in the dying light but its yellow spots glowed like stars.

Gripping the neck of the violin, Yuri brandished the instrument and smashed it against the rock. Ivan and Katya jumped. Fragments flew around them. The salamander darted away. Yuri kept hammering until it was reduced to splinters. Moving the wet tinder aside, he piled the pieces of the violin into a small teepee. Yuri struck the last match and placed it at the base of the pile. The dry Carpathian spruce caught and crackled.

He moved closer to his wife and son so the three of them could warm themselves by the fire as the smoke drifted out the mouth of the cave.

Yuri emerges from the Lizbeth General Store with two paper bags in his arms. He peers inside to make sure he hasn't forgotten anything: eggs, milk, bacon, sugar, oil,

flour, and a frozen chicken.

Shifting the bags in his hands, he picks up his skis leaning outside the store beside a sign in the window.

Not too late! Still taking orders from Sears Catalogue for Christmas!

As Yuri heads further down Howey Street, he hears a violin. Hugo jigs around a barrel fire and plays the instrument while two other miners pass around a wine jug.

"Yuri!" Hugo calls out. "Come play us a tune!"

"No, thanks. I'm worried I'd break it." Yuri smiles and continues down the street.

As the music fades behind him, Yuri walks up to a small shanty. Inside the light glows, revealing two silhouettes waiting for him.

"Carpathian Spruce" is the winner of the Shevchenko Foundation 2021 Emerging Writers Short Prose Competition. The prize is awarded annually to a Canadian writer for the best piece of unpublished prose of up to 1,500 words in the English language on a topic with a tangible connection to the Ukrainian Canadian experience.

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