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Child 44

Tom Rob Smith

Soviet Union

Ukraine

Village of Chervoy

25 January 1933

Since Maria had decided to die, her cat would have to fend for itself. She'd already cared for it far beyond the point where keeping a pet made any sense. Rats and mice had long since been trapped and eaten by the villagers. Domestic animals had disappeared shortly after that. All except for one, this cat, her companion which she'd kept hidden. Why hadn't she killed it? She needed something to live for; something to protect and love – something to survive for. She'd made a promise to continue feeding it up until the day she could no longer feed herself. That day was today. She'd already cut her leather boots into thin strips, boiled them with nettles and beetroot seeds. She'd already dug for earthworms, sucked on bark. This morning in a feverish delirium she'd gnawed the leg of her kitchen stool, chewed and chewed until there were splinters jutting out of her gums. Upon seeing her the cat had run away, hiding under the bed, refusing to show itself even as she'd knelt down, calling its name, trying to coax it out. That had been the moment Maria decided to die, with nothing to eat and nothing to love.

Maria waited until nightfall before opening her front door. She reckoned that under the cover of darkness her cat stood a better chance of reaching the woods unseen. If anyone in the village caught sight of it they'd hunt it. Even this close to her own death, the thought of her cat being killed upset her. She comforted herself with the knowledge that surprise was on its side. In a community where grown men chewed clods of earth in the hope of finding ants or insect eggs, where children picked through horse shit in the hope of finding undigested husks of grain and women fought over the ownership of bones, Maria was sure no one believed that a cat could still be alive.

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Pavel couldn't believe his eyes. It was awkward, thin, with green eyes and black speckled fur. It was unmistakably a cat. He'd been collecting firewood when he saw the animal dart from Maria Antonovna's house, cross the snow-covered road and head towards the woods. Holding his breath, he glanced around. No one else had spotted it. There was no one else about; no lights at the windows. Wisps of smoke, the only sign of life, rose from less than half the chimney stacks. It was as though his village had been snuffed out by the heavy snowfall, all signs of life extinguished. Much of the snow lay undisturbed: there were hardly any footprints and not a single path had been dug. Days were as quiet as the nights. No one got up to work. None of his friends played, staying in their houses where they lay with their families huddled in beds, rows of enormous sunken eyes staring up at the ceiling. Adults had begun to look like children, children like adults. Most had given up scavenging for food. In these circumstances the appearance of a cat was nothing short of miraculous – the re-emergence of a creature long since considered extinct.

Pavel closed his eyes and tried to remember the last time he'd eaten meat. When he opened his eyes he was salivating. Spit ran down the side of his face in thick streams. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. Excited, he dropped his pile of sticks and ran home. He had to tell his mother, Oksana, the remarkable news.

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Oksana sat wrapped in a woollen blanket staring at the floor. She remained perfectly still, conserving energy as she devised ways of keeping her family alive, thoughts which occupied her every waking hour and every fretful dream. She was one of the few who'd not given up. She would never give up. Not as long as she had her sons. But determination itself wasn't enough, she had to be careful: a misjudged endeavour could mean exhaustion and exhaustion invariably meant death. Some months ago Nikolai Ivanovich, a neighbour and friend, had embarked on a desperate raid upon a State granary. He had not returned. The next morning Nikolai's wife and Oksana had gone looking for him. They'd found his body by the roadside, lying on his back – a skeletal body with an arched, stretched stomach, his belly pregnant with the uncooked grain he'd swallowed in his dying moments. The wife had wept while Oksana had removed the remaining grain from his pockets, dividing it between them. On their return to the village Nikolai's wife had told everyone the news. Instead of being pitied she'd been envied, all anyone could think about were the handfuls of grain she possessed. Oksana had thought her an honest fool – she'd put them both in danger.

Her recollections were interrupted by the sound of someone running. No one ran unless there was important news. She stood up, fearful. Pavel burst into the room and breathlessly announced:

– Mother, I saw a cat.

She stepped forward and gripped her son's hands. She had to be sure he wasn't imagining things: hunger could play tricks. But his face showed no sign of delirium. His eyes were sharp, his expression serious. He was only ten years old and already he was a man. Circumstances demanded that he forgo his childhood. His father was

almost certainly dead, if not dead then dead to them. He'd set off towards the city of Kiev in the hope of bringing back food. He'd never returned and Pavel understood, without needing to be told or consoled, that his father would never return. Now Oksana depended upon her son as much as he depended upon her. They were partners and Pavel had sworn aloud that he'd succeed where his father had failed: he'd make sure his family stayed alive.

Oksana touched her son's cheek.

– Can you catch it?

He smiled, proud.

– If I had a bone.

The pond was frozen. Oksana rooted through the snow to find a rock. Concerned that the sound would attract attention she wrapped the rock in her shawl, muffling the noise as she punctured a small hole in the ice. She put the rock down. Bracing herself for the black, freezing water she reached in, gasping at the cold. With only seconds before her arm became numb she moved quickly. Her hand touched the bottom and clutched nothing but silt. Where was it? Panicking, she leant down, submerging all of her arm, searching left and right, losing all feeling in her hand. Her fingers brushed glass. Relieved, she took hold of the bottle and pulled it out. Her skin had turned shades of blue, as though she'd been punched. That didn't concern her, she'd found what she was looking for – a bottle sealed with tar. She wiped away the layer of silt on the side and peered at the contents. Inside was a collection of small bones.

Returning to the house, she found Pavel had stoked the fire. She warmed the seal over the flames, tar dripping onto the embers in sticky globs. While they waited, Pavel noticed her bluish skin and rubbed her arm, restoring the circulation, ever attentive to her needs. With the tar melted, she tipped the bottle upside down and shook. Several bones snagged on the rim. She pulled them free, offering them to her son. Pavel studied them carefully, scratching the surface, smelling each one. Having made his selection he was ready to leave. She stopped him.

– Take your brother.

Pavel thought this a mistake. His younger brother was clumsy and slow. And anyway the cat belonged to him. He'd seen it, he'd catch it. It would be his victory. His mother pressed a second bone into his hand.

– Take Andrei.

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Andrei was nearly eight years old and he loved his older brother very much. Rarely going outside, he spent most of his time in the back room, where the three of them slept, playing with a pack of cards. The cards had been made by his father from

sheets of paper sliced into squares and pasted together, a parting gift before he'd set off for Kiev. Andrei was still waiting for him to come home. No one had told Andrei to expect anything different. Whenever he missed his father, which was often, he'd deal the cards out on the floor, sorting them by suits and numbers. He was sure if he could just finish the pack then his father would come back. Isn't that why he'd given him the cards before he'd left? Of course, Andrei preferred playing with his brother but Pavel no longer had time for games. He was always busy helping their mother and only ever played at night just before they got into bed.

Pavel entered the room. Andrei smiled, hoping he was ready to play a hand, but his brother crouched down and swept the cards together.

– Put these away. We're going out. Where are your laptys?

Understanding the question as an order, Andrei crawled under the bed retrieving his laptys: two strips cut from a tractor tyre and a pile of rags which, when bound together with string, served as a pair of makeshift boots. Pavel helped tie them tightly, explaining that tonight they had a chance of eating meat as long as Andrei did exactly as he was told.

– Is Father coming back?

– He isn't coming back.

– Is he lost?

– Yes, he's lost.

– Who's bringing us meat?

– We're going to catch it ourselves.

Andrei knew his brother was a skilful hunter. He'd trapped more rats than any other boy in the village. This was the first time Andrei had been invited to accompany him on such an important mission.

Outside in the snow Andrei paid special care not to fall over. He often stumbled and tripped, for the world appeared blurred to him. The only things he could see clearly were objects he held very close to his face. If someone was able to make out a person in the distance – while all Andrei could see was a blur – he put it down to intelligence or experience or some attribute he'd yet to acquire. Tonight he wouldn't fall over and make a fool of himself. He'd make his brother proud. This was more important to him than the prospect of eating meat.

Pavel paused by the edge of the woods, bending down to examine the cat's tracks in the snow. Andrei considered his skill in finding them remarkable. In awe, he crouched down, watching as his brother touched one of the paw prints. Andrei knew nothing about tracking or hunting.

– Is this where the cat walked?

Pavel nodded and looked into the woods.

– The tracks are faint.

Copying his brother, Andrei traced his finger around the paw print, asking:

– What does that mean?

– The cat isn't heavy, which means there'll be less food for us. But if it's hungry then it's more likely to go for the bait.

Andrei tried to absorb this information but his mind drifted.

– Brother, if you were a playing card what card would you be? Would you be an ace or a king, a spade or a heart?

Pavel sighed and Andrei, stung by his disapproval, felt tears beginning to form:

– If I answer do you promise not to talk any more?

– I promise.

– We won't catch this cat if you talk and scare it away.

– I'll be quiet.

– I'd be a knave, a knight, the one with a sword. Now you promised – not a word.

Andrei nodded. Pavel stood up. They entered the woods.

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They'd walked for a long time – it felt like many hours, although Andrei's sense of time, like his sight, wasn't sharp. With the moonlight and the reflective layer of snow his older brother seemed to have little difficulty following tracks. They were deep into the woods, further than Andrei had ever gone before. He frequently ran in order to keep pace. His legs ached, his stomach ached. He was cold, hungry and although there was no food at home at least his feet didn't hurt. The string binding the rags to the tyre strips had come loose and he could feel snow edging under the soles of his feet. He didn't dare ask his brother to stop and re-tie them. He'd promised – not a word. Soon the snow would melt, the rags would become sodden and his feet would become numb. To take his mind off the discomfort he snapped a twig from a sapling and chewed the bark, grinding it down into a coarse paste which felt rough on his teeth and tongue. People had told him bark paste sated feelings of hunger. He believed them; it was a useful thing to believe.

Suddenly Pavel gestured for him to remain still. Andrei stopped mid-step, his teeth brown with bits of bark. Pavel crouched down. Andrei copied him, searching the forest for whatever his brother had seen. He squinted, trying to bring the trees into focus.

Pavel stared at the cat and the cat seemed to be staring at him with its two small green eyes. What was it thinking? Why wasn't it running away? Hidden in Maria's house, perhaps it hadn't learnt to fear humans yet. Pavel drew his knife, cutting the top of his finger and daubing with blood the chicken bone his mother had given him. He did the same with Andrei's bait, a broken rat skull – using his own blood since he didn't trust his brother not to yelp and startle the cat. Without saying a word the brothers parted, heading in opposite directions. Back at the house Pavel had given Andrei detailed instructions so there was no need to talk. Once they were some distance apart, on either side of the cat, they'd place the bones in the snow. Pavel glanced at his brother, to check that he wasn't mucking up.

Doing precisely as he'd been instructed, Andrei took the length of string from his pocket. Pavel had already tied the end into a noose. All Andrei had to do was position it around the rat's skull. He did this and then stepped back as far as the string would allow, getting down onto his stomach, crunching and compressing the snow. He lay in wait. Only now, on the ground, did he realize that he could barely see his own bait. It was a blur. Suddenly afraid, he hoped the cat would go towards his brother. Pavel wouldn't make a mistake, he'd catch it and they could go home and eat. Nervous and cold, his hands began to shake. He tried to steady them. He could see something: a black shape moving towards him.

Andrei's breath began to melt the snow in front of his face; cold trickles of water ran towards him and down his clothes. He wanted the cat to go the other way, to his brother's trap, but as the blur got closer there was no denying that the cat had chosen him. Of course, if he caught the cat then Pavel would love him, play cards with him and never get cross again. The prospect pleased him and his mood changed from dread to anticipation. Yes, he'd be the one to catch this cat. He'd kill it. He'd prove himself. What had his brother said? He'd warned against pulling the snare too early. If the cat was startled all would be lost. For this reason and the fact that he couldn't be sure exactly where the cat was standing Andrei decided to wait, just to be sure. He could almost bring the black fur and four legs into focus. He'd wait a little longer, a little longer... He heard his brother hiss:

– Now!

Andrei panicked. He'd heard that tone many times before. It meant he'd done something wrong. He squinted hard and saw the cat was standing in the middle of his snare. He pulled the string. But too late, the cat had leapt away. The noose missed. Even so, Andrei pulled the lank string towards him, pathetically hoping that somehow there might be a cat on the end of it. An empty noose arrived in his hand and he felt his face go red with shame. Overcome with anger, he was ready to stand up and chase the cat and catch it and strangle it and smash its skull. But he didn't move: he saw that his brother remained flat on the ground. And Andrei, who'd learnt to always follow his brother's lead, did exactly the same. He squinted,

straining his eyes to discover that the blurred black outline was now moving towards his brother's trap.

The anger at his little brother's incompetence had given way to excitement at the cat's imprudence. The muscles in Pavel's back went tight. No doubt the cat had tasted blood, and hunger was stronger than caution. He watched as the cat stopped mid-step, one paw in the air, staring straight at him. He held his breath: his fingers clenched around the string and waited, silently urging the cat on.

Please. Please. Please.

The cat sprang forward, opened its mouth and grabbed the bone. Timing it perfectly he tugged the string. The noose caught around the cat's paw, the front leg was snared. Pavel leapt up, yanking the string, tightening the noose. The cat tried to run but the string held fast. He pulled the cat to the ground. Screeching filled the forest, as though a creature far larger was fighting for its life, thrashing in the snow, arching its body, snapping at the string. Pavel was afraid the knot would break. The string was thin, frayed. As he tried to edge closer the cat pulled away, keeping out of reach. He cried out to his brother:

– Kill it!

Andrei still hadn't moved, not wishing to make another mistake. But now he was being given instructions. He jumped up, ran forward, immediately tripping and falling face down. Lifting his nose out of the snow, he could see the cat up ahead hissing and spitting and twisting. If the string broke, the cat would be free and his brother would hate him for ever. Pavel shouted, his voice hoarse, frantic:

– Kill it! Kill it! Kill it!

Andrei staggered up and without any clear idea of what he was doing bounded forward and threw himself on top of the cat's thrashing body. Perhaps he'd hoped the impact would kill it. But now, lying on the animal, he could feel the cat was alive and wriggling underneath his stomach, scratching at the grain sacks that had been stitched together to make his jacket. Keeping himself flat on the cat to stop it escaping, Andrei looked behind him, his eyes pleading with Pavel to take charge.

– It's still alive!

Pavel ran forward and dropped to his knees, reaching under his younger brother's body only to come in contact with the cat's snapping mouth. He was bitten. He jerked his hands out. Ignoring his bleeding finger he clambered to the other side and slid his hands under again, this time arriving at the tail. His fingers began creeping up the cat's back. From this line of attack the animal had no defence.

Andrei remained motionless, feeling the struggle play out underneath him, feeling his brother's hands nearing the cat's head, closer and closer. The cat knew this meant death and began biting at anything – his jacket, the snow – crazed with fear, fear

which Andrei could feel as vibrations in his stomach. Imitating his brother Andrei cried out:

– Kill it! Kill it! Kill it!

Pavel snapped the animal's neck. Neither of them did anything for a moment, just lying still, breathing deeply. Pavel rested his head on Andrei's back, his hands still tight around the cat's neck. Finally he pulled his hands out from underneath his brother and stood up. Andrei remained in the snow, not daring to move.

– You can stand up now.

He could stand up now. He could stand side by side with his brother. He could stand proud. Andrei hadn't disappointed. He hadn't failed. He reached up, took his brother's hand and got to his feet. Pavel couldn't have caught the cat without him. The string would've broken. The cat would've escaped. Andrei smiled and then laughed, clapping his hands and dancing on the spot. He felt as happy as he'd ever felt in his entire life. They were a team. His brother hugged him and the two of them looked down at their prize: a scrawny dead cat pressed into the snow.

Transporting their prize back to the village unseen was a necessary precaution. People would fight, kill for such a catch, and the screeching might've alerted someone. Pavel refused to leave anything to chance. They'd brought no sack with which to conceal the cat. Improvising, he decided to hide it under a pile of sticks. If they encountered anyone on their way home it would appear as if they'd been collecting firewood and no questions would be asked. He picked the cat out of the snow.

– I'm going to carry it under a pile of sticks, so no one can see it. But if we were really collecting firewood you'd be carrying sticks too.

Andrei was impressed by his brother's logic – he would never have thought of that. He set about gathering wood. Since the ground was covered in snow it was difficult finding any loose sticks and he was forced to rake through with his bare hands. After each sweep he rubbed his fingers together, blowing on them. His nose had begun to run, snot collecting on his top lip. He didn't mind though, not tonight, not after their success, and he began to hum a song his father used to sing, sinking his fingers back into the snow.

Experiencing the same shortage of sticks, Pavel had moved away from his younger brother. They would have to separate. Some distance away he saw a fallen tree with branches protruding at all angles. He hurried towards it, placing the cat in the snow so that he was free to snap off all the dead wood from the trunk. There was plenty here, more than enough for both of them, and he glanced around, looking for Andrei. He was about to call out when he swallowed his words. There was a noise. He turned sharply, looking around. The woods were dense, dark. He shut his eyes, concentrating on that sound – a rhythm: the crunch, crunch, crunch of snow. It was getting faster, louder. Adrenaline shot through his body. He opened his eyes. There, in the darkness, was movement: a man, running. He was holding a thick, heavy

branch. His strides were wide. He was sprinting straight towards Pavel. He'd heard them kill the cat and now he was going to steal their prize. But Pavel wouldn't let him: he wouldn't let their mother starve. He wouldn't fail as his father had failed. He began kicking snow over the cat, trying to conceal it.

– We're collecting...

Pavel's voice trailed off as the man burst through the trees, raising the branch. Only now, seeing this man's gaunt face and wild eyes, did Pavel realize that he didn't want the cat. He wanted him.

Pavel's mouth fell open at more or less the same time as the branch arched down, the end slamming against the crown of his head. He didn't feel anything but he was aware that he was no longer standing. He was on one knee. Glancing up, head cocked at an angle, blood streaming into one of his eyes, he watched as the man lifted the branch for a second strike.

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Andrei stopped humming. Had Pavel called out? He hadn't found that many sticks, certainly not enough for their plan, and he didn't want to be told off, not after he'd done so well. He stood up, pulling his hands out of the snow. He stared into the forest, squinting, unable to see even the nearest of trees as anything more than a blur.

– Pavel?

There was no reply. He called again. Was this a game? No, Pavel didn't play games, not any more. Andrei walked in the direction he'd last seen his brother but he couldn't see anything. This was stupid. He wasn't the one who was meant to find Pavel, Pavel was meant to find him. Something was wrong. He called again, louder this time. Why wasn't his brother answering? Andrei wiped his nose on his coarse jacket sleeve and wondered if this was a test. What would his brother do in this situation? He'd follow the tracks in the snow. Andrei dropped his sticks and knelt down, searching the ground on his hands and knees. He found his own footsteps and traced them back to the point where he'd left his brother. Proud of himself he switched to his brother's footsteps. If he stood up he couldn't see the footprints so, crouching down, with his nose only an arm's length from the snow, he carried on, like a dog chasing a smell.

He arrived at a fallen tree, sticks scattered all around, footsteps everywhere – some deep and large. The snow was red. Andrei took a handful, crushing it between his fingers, squeezing it and watching it turn to blood.

– Pavel!

He didn't stop shouting until his throat hurt and his voice disappeared. Whimpering, he wanted to tell his brother that he could have his share of the cat. He just wanted him back. But it was no good. His brother had left him. And he was alone.

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Oksana had hidden a small bag of powdered cornstalks, pigweed and crushed potato peelings behind the bricks of her oven. During inspections she always kept a small fire burning. Collectors sent to check that she wasn't hoarding grain never looked beyond the flames. They mistrusted her – why was she healthy when the others were sick, as though to be alive was a crime. But they couldn't find food in her house, couldn't brand her a kulak, a rich peasant. Instead of executing her outright they left her to die. She'd already learnt that she couldn't beat them by force. Some years ago she had organized the village resistance after it was announced that men were on their way to collect the church bell. They wanted to melt it down. She and four other women had locked themselves in the bell tower, ringing it continuously, refusing to let them take it away. Oksana had shouted out that this bell belonged to God. She might have been shot that day but the man in charge of the collection decided to spare the women. After breaking down the door he'd said that his only orders were to collect the bell, explaining that metal was necessary for their country's industrial revolution. In response she'd spat on the ground. When the State began taking the villagers' food, arguing that it belonged to the country and not them, Oksana had learnt her lesson. Instead of strength she feigned obedience, her resistance remaining a secret.

Tonight the family would have a feast. She melted clumps of snow, bringing it to the boil and thickening it with the powdered cornstalks. She added the remaining bones from the bottle. Once cooked, she'd grind the bones down to flour. Of course she was getting ahead of herself. Pavel hadn't succeeded yet. But she felt sure he would. If God had given her hardship he'd also given her a son to help. All the same, if he didn't catch the cat she promised not to become angry. The woods were large, a cat was small, and anyway anger was a waste of energy. Even as she tried to brace herself for disappointment she couldn't help becoming giddy at the prospect of a meat and potato borscht.

Andrei stood in the doorway, his face cut, snow on his jacket, snot and blood running from his nose. His laptys had completely come apart and his toes were visible. Oksana ran over.

– Where's your brother?

– He left me.

Andrei started to cry. He didn't know where his brother was. He didn't understand what had happened. He couldn't explain. He knew his mother was going to hate him. He knew it was going to be his fault even though he'd done everything right, even though it was his brother who'd left him.

Oksana's breath was snatched from her. She brushed Andrei aside and hurried out of the house, looking to the woods. There was no sign of Pavel. Maybe he'd fallen and injured himself. Maybe he needed help. She ran back inside, desperate for answers only to see Andrei standing by the borscht with a spoon in his mouth. Caught red-handed, he looked at his mother sheepishly, a line of potato soup

dribbling from his lip. Overcome with anger – anger at her dead husband, her missing son – she ran forward, knocking Andrei to the ground and pushing the wooden spoon down his throat.

– When I pull this spoon out of your mouth tell me what happened.

But as soon as she pulled out the spoon all he could do was cough. Enraged, she shoved the spoon back down his throat.

– You useless, clumsy, stupid boy. Where is my son? Where is he?

She pulled the spoon out again but he was crying and choking. He couldn't talk. He just kept crying and coughing and so she hit him, pounding her hands on his tiny chest. Only when the borscht was in danger of boiling over did she stop. She stood up, moving the soup off the fire.

Andrei whimpered on the floor. Oksana looked down at him, her anger melting away. He was so small. He loved his older brother so much. She bent down, picked him up and sat him on a chair. She wrapped her blanket around him and poured him a bowl of borscht, a generous portion far larger than he'd ever had before. She tried to spoon-feed him but he wouldn't open his mouth. He didn't trust her. She offered him the spoon. He stopped crying and began to eat. He finished the borscht. She filled the bowl again. She told him to eat slowly. He ignored her, finishing a second bowl. Very quietly she asked what had happened and listened as he explained the blood in the snow, the dropped sticks, the disappearance and the heavy footprints. She closed her eyes.

– Your brother is dead. He's been taken for food. Do you understand? Just as you hunted that cat, someone was hunting you. Do you understand?

Andrei remained silent, staring at his mother's tears. In truth, he didn't understand. He watched as she stood up and left the house. Hearing his mother's voice, he ran to the door.

Oksana was on her knees in the snow, staring up at the full moon.

– Please, God, give me back my son.

Only God could bring him home now. It wasn't so much to ask. Did God have such a short memory? She'd risked her life to save his bell. All she wanted in return was her son, her reason to live.

Some of the neighbours appeared at their doors. They stared at Oksana. They listened to her cries. But there was nothing unusual about this kind of grief and people did not watch for long.