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For the Love of a Leica

**...a Polish Jewish Family is Exiled
to Kazakhstan**

A New Play By
Cindy Dettelbach

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For the Love of a Leica

by Cindy Dettelbach

CHARACTERS

MOISHE ROSE – *Professional photographer, owner of photography studio and service shop in Brest, Eastern Poland*

ESTHER ROSE – *His wife*

CHAIM (HARRY) ROSE – *Their 12-year-old son*

LEONID SPASSKII – *Colonel of State Security, NKVD, Brest; top NKVD official in Kirovka*

FEDOR PAVLOVICH KOZLOV – *Senior accountant, Commerce Cooperative, Kirovka, Kazakhstan*

GRISHKA – *Attendant at main store*

PYTOR IVANOVICH – *Village store attendant*

STEPKA – *Worker in Kozlov's office*

NOTE

MOISHE and ADULT CHAIM can be played by the same actor, with the Adult Chaim wearing a contemporary sport coat and Moishe a shopworn wool cardigan sweater.

Kozlov, Grishka, Stepka and Store attendant can be played by the same actor.

SETTING

The events recounted here take place some 70 years ago. The story begins in September, 1940 in the Polish town of Brest (Now Brest-Litovsk, Belarus) and then continuing on to Kirovka, Kazakhstan.

For the Love of a Leica
by Cindy Dettelbach

PRELUDE

AT RISE: *SPOTLIGHT ON CHAIM* who is dressed
in a sport jacket.

CHAIM

The events recounted here took place over 70 years ago. That's when my parents, Esther and Moishe Rose, were in the prime of their lives and I, Chaim, their only child, was on the cusp of becoming a man – Talmudicly-speaking and otherwise. This part of our story begins in September, 1940 in the Polish town of Brest, now Brest-Litovsk, Belarus.

SCENE 1

SETTING: *September, 1940; the Polish town of Brest; the Rose family's photography studio. To the left of the studio is the Rose family's residence. Painted on one wall of the studio is a faux outdoor scene for use in wedding or family portraits. Against another wall is shelving holding film, other camera accessories. On a third wall is a chest of drawers. MOISHE's Leica camera rests on a shoulder-high tripod.*

AT RISE: *MOISHE is doing paper work at his counter when Esther enters carrying two small bags of groceries.*

Let me take the bags. MOISHE

They're not heavy. ESTHER

You're back early. MOISHE

ESTHER

Nothing much to buy anymore. So it doesn't take long.

MOISHE

Chaim go with you?

ESTHER

He's getting too old to tag along with his mama, he tells me. He's probably with Solly or Nate. Playing ball. Getting into some mischief...

MOISHE

That's what boys do.

ESTHER

What have you been doing?

MOISHE

Checking the week's receipts... Not much there either.

CHAIM enters.

CHAIM

I'm starving. Any cake left?

ESTHER

Say hello first to your papa. He hasn't seen you all day.

CHAIM

(Giving MOISHE a hug) Hello, Papa. What can I have to eat Mama?

ESTHER

I just bought a loaf of bread. Cut a slice and there are some cherry preserves. But mind. Not too much. Dinner is soon.

MOISHE

A growing boy needs food.

ESTHER

Too bad the roubles you take in from your new Russian clientele don't help pay for it.

CHAIM

Why is that Papa?

MOISHE

Their currency is just paper. Not even worth wiping your...

ESTHER

The boy...

MOISHE

Worthless to them and to us.

CHAIM

Didn't you tell me that once the Russians took over, things would be better?

MOISHE

Better than the Nazis, may they rot in hell. But not like before.

CHAIM

Some of the Russians seem friendly.

MOISHE

And eager to buy everything they can get their hands on. (*Feigning the accent of a Russian speaking to a shopkeeper*) "Have you a camera? Film? A tripod? *U nas vsyo est.* We have everything.

CHAIM

I don't understand.

MOISHE

U nas vsyo est. That's probably what they were brainwashed to say so the "dumb" locals wouldn't know the Soviet Union was even worse off than Poland....From these guys I never had so much "business" in my life.

ESTHER

Paid with money as phony as the stuff that goes for butter around here.

MOISHE

And just as bitter on the tongue.

ESTHER

(*In a whisper*) That's why I'm taking whatever jewelry I have and hiding it. Sewing it into my skirts.

MOISHE

Isn't that going a bit far?

ESTHER

For when we might need some real money. Leah, Avrum's wife, says he's doing the same with most of his watch inventory from the store.

MOISHE

I never knew Avrum wore skirts.

CHAIM

What are you hiding Papa?

MOISHE

I have no real inventory to hide. Film. Photography paper. Chemicals for developing which you love to mess around with when you think I'm not looking... Doesn't amount to much.

ESTHER

There is your Leica.

MOISHE

That's NOT inventory. That's my third arm.

ESTHER

So keep that arm close to you... At least hide it when you close the shop.... Things are disappearing...all around town.

CHAIM

Any of our things disappear?

ESTHER

No, thank God—but you can't be too careful.

MOISHE

Your Mama's right.

ESTHER

(Hearing the sound of boots) I think one of your *U nas vsyo est* customers is at the door. ...Come, Chaim. Let's see if we can fix you something to keep you from starving in the next 30 minutes.

CHAIM and ESTHER exit to darkened kitchen area at left.

LEONID SPASSKI enters right. He is meticulously dressed in his tailored colonel's uniform and soft leather boots. He is a tall, handsome man, not yet 40.

SPASSKII

(Genial, friendly) Good afternoon, Mr. Rose.

MOISHE

Good afternoon, colonel.

SPASSKII

How is your good wife today? And your smart young son...umm...?

MOISHE

Chaim. *(Pause)* They're fine, thank you.

SPASSKII

Business?

MOISHE

Fine.

SPASSKII

(Eyeing the camera on its tripod) And how is your beautiful Leica?

MOISHE

No complaints.

SPASSKII

This is for you. Some good vodka.

MOISHE

(Polite but unenthusiastic) Thank you, colonel.

SPASSKII

I am anxious to see the results of our little experiment yesterday.

MOISHE

I have them right here.

He spreads out photographs randomly on the counter.

SPASSKII

(Examining the display quickly and then focusing in on each, one at a time) It takes my breath away.

MOISHE

Can you tell which is from your camera, which from mine?

SPASSKII

(Excitedly) Like night and day. The clarity. The depth. The brilliant optics... *(Pause)* I don't have to tell you my friend what you already know and can see with your own eyes. *(Beat)* I must have one.

MOISHE

All the pictures are yours. No charge.

SPASSKII

A Leica. Where can I buy one?

MOISHE

I'm afraid you can't. Not in Brest.

SPASSKII

You cornered the market?

MOISHE

I bought mine, used, from Warsaw. Just before the war.

SPASSKII

Some people here must also own Leicas.

MOISHE

Street photographers, perhaps.

SPASSKII

Where can I find these people?

MOISHE

Don't know. They haven't worked the streets ever since one had his camera "confiscated temporarily"....

SPASSKI

(Growing frustrated) If we can't find any other Leicas *(Pause)* how about selling me yours?

MOISHE

But...

SPASSKII

I will give you two FED cameras and 500 roubles.

MOISHE

(Shaking his head) I...

SPASSKII

700 roubles.

MOISHE

(Trying to stay calm) Colonel, I make my living with this camera....I...I cannot part with it.

SPASSKII

(More authoritatively) Maybe you need to think about it. Talk it over with Mrs. Rose.

ESTHER

(Emerging from the kitchen; Chaim sitting and chewing his bread, listens from the darkened kitchen) Did I just hear my name mentioned?... *(In a flat voice)* Oh. Hello, colonel.

SPASSKII

I was just praising your marvelous cooking to your husband.

ESTHER

Thank you.

SPASSKII

Anytime you'd like to invite me to supper again...

ESTHER looks warily at MOISHE who nods back.

ESTHER

Yes...Sure.

SPASSKII

I'm free tomorrow.

ESTHER

Tomorrow then. Seven?

SPASSKII

Seven it is. And have a good evening.

SPASSKII exits.

ESTHER

What did he want this time?

MOISHE

In addition to your good cooking?

ESTHER

(Eyeing the bottle on the counter) And why does he always bring vodka? Doesn't he know we don't drink that poison?

MOISHE

He wants my Leica. In return for inferior Russian cameras and worthless rubles.

ESTHER

You can't do that...

MOISHE

Of course not.

ESTHER

I don't trust that man. He even looks like a Nazi. *(Pause)* Always so neatly dressed and groomed. Not like the other Russians stationed here...

MOISHE

So now we have a face and fashion assessment of a man's inner character. Let's write a letter in praise...or is it in condemnation... of him to French European Vogue. Maybe even send a picture.

ESTHER

Enough already. I don't need your joking on top of other bad news.

MOISHE

What other?

ESTHER

I was at one of those official Soviet shops earlier today, the one that replaced Margolies, the greengrocer. Nothing worth buying there. Just wilted brown cabbage and some sick-looking potatoes.

MOISHE

That's no news.

ESTHER

I saw Rivke at the shop. She told me that her neighbors, the Schwartzes, disappeared in the middle of the night last night.

MOISHE

Mendel Schwartz is just a postman. What could the Russian authorities possibly want with him?

ESTHER

What would they want with the Rosefskys, or the Kleins, who also disappeared?

MOISHE

Benny Klein is no loss. He still owes me money for his daughter's wedding portrait. Maybe the Soviet police will collect it for me.

ESTHER

I'm serious.

MOISHE

And you know I'm just kidding.

ESTHER

I'm also worried.

MOISHE

About the Kleins?

ESTHER

About us. And Spasskii. About his wanting your Leica and you not about to sell it to him.

MOISHE

Let me worry about Spasskii. You've got rotten potatoes to worry about.

ESTHER

You always make light of things.

MOISHE

And you're happiest when you cloak everything in a shroud...Come, it's a beautiful day. Let's sit on the back porch for a while. Before the sun disappears. And the starving one calls for more food.

SCENE 2

SETTING:

The next night; The Roses' kitchen/dining room. Filling the small area are a table and four chairs. The table is set with an ecru lace cloth and simple white china. Two Sabbath brass candlesticks sit atop the buffet. Hanging on the wall are the Roses' wedding portrait and a recent picture of Chaim.

AT RISE: The ROSE FAMILY and SPASSKII are finishing their dinner. An open bottle of vodka and a shot glass are at SPASSKII's place. He drinks liberally.

SPASSKII

That was delicious, Mrs. Rose. Reminds me of my own mama's cooking.

ESTHER

Glad you liked it.

SPASSKII

Her specialty also was stuffed cabbage. Rice mixed with ground pork, cardamom, cinnamon, other spices...It was always our Christmas dinner.

ESTHER

Mine has no pork. And very little ground beef. *(Pause)* There is almost no meat to buy anymore.

SPASSKII

Yes, yes. And the taste is all the more remarkable...considering.

MOISHE

As you have said colonel, my wife is a very good cook.

SPASSKII

You are a very lucky man, Rose, as are you....

CHAIM

Chaim. My name is Chaim.

SPASSKII

Yes. Kai...im.

ESTHER

Do you have a wife, colonel?

SPASSKII

Yes. Ludmilla.

ESTHER

Any children?

SPASSKII

Two. Vladimir and Zina. Let me show you.

He fishes a couple of photos out of his wallet and proudly passes them around.

ESTHER

Very nice.

MOISHE

A handsome family.

SPASSKII

I think so.

CHAIM

How old are they?

SPASSKII

Vladimir is 7, Zina 3. No, wait. Zina will be 4 this week... How time goes by...

CHAIM

I'm 12. I'll be bar mitzvah next year.

SPASSKII

Bar mitts...?

MOISHE

It's a religious ceremony. A coming of age.

SPASSKII

Hmm.

MOISHE

When did you last see your family, colonel?

SPASSKII

It's been over a year.

MOISHE

A long time.

CHAIM

Are you worried that they'll disappear?

SPASSKII

What, son?

CHAIM

Disappear. Like some of the Jews in Brest. The Kleins. The Rosef...

ESTHER

Chaim!

MOISHE

Little pishers have big ears...

SPASSKII

I think the boy is stepping into....

ESTHER

You must excuse my son, colonel. I think he overhears schoolmates, gossip in the neighborhood... You know how things get twisted.

SPASSKII

Twisted, yes.

MOISHE

But maybe you do know something about the Kleins and Rosefskys. These are decent, plain people. Hardly a threat to the great Soviet Empire.

SPASSKII

Official business is not something one can discuss. Certainly not around the dinner table.

MOISHE

I see.

ESTHER

Can I get you anything else, colonel? Some more bread? Another helping of potatoes?

SPASSKII

Thank you. I'm quite full.

BEAT.

MOISHE

Tell us more about your family. Your children...

SPASSKII

Before I left home I gave my son my old officer's cap and my wristwatch. Told him he was the man of the house until I returned.

CHAIM

That's a nice watch you're wearing now.

SPASSKII

You've a good eye, son. It's Patek Philippe. Swiss. A watch worn by kings and queens.

CHAIM

Gee...

SPASSKII

Not bad for someone who didn't even have a pair of shoes to call his own when he was your age.

CHAIM

You went barefoot? ...In winter, too?

SPASSKII

I only had worn-out hand-me-downs. Never fit right.

CHAIM

You must have been very poor.

ESTHER

Chaim!

SPASSKII

That's OK. We *were* poor.

CHAIM

My papa tells a joke about a poor Jew...

ESTHER

Enough for one night, Chaim.

MOISHE

Esther, let the boy...

SPASSKII

Yes, let him. Go ahead.

CHAIM

My papa says when a poor Jew has chicken for supper, either he's sick...or the chicken is.

SPASSKII

(Laughing) That's a good one... *(Pause)* I don't even remember having chicken as a boy. We were just peasants.

CHAIM

Your papa was a farmer?

SPASSKII

More like a farmer's hired hand... When he was sober.

CHAIM

Oh.

SPASSKII

The army saved me. From peasant life. From the poverty that drives you to drink...bad stuff.

CHAIM

Now you have a nice uniform, shiny boots, a fancy watch...

SPASSKII

All I'm missing is... a first-rate camera.

CHAIM

You mean a Leica?

ESTHER

(Scowling) Chaim...

SPASSKII

Of course a Leica. A camera fit for royalty. And for good Russian officers who love photography.

MOISHE

I've told you, colonel...

SPASSKII

What wonderful portraits I could take of my children, of nature, with a camera like yours.

MOISHE

You're a good photographer already. You know how to frame a scene, work with the light...

SPASSKII

But I keep thinking how much better I could be with... Anyway, enough for tonight.

MOISHE

(Breathing a sigh of relief) A little more vodka, colonel?

SPASSKII

Don't mind if I do. *(MOISHE fills SPASSKII's glass)* Your people don't drink, do they?

MOISHE

My stomach. It's not been good lately. And Esther, Mrs. Rose, never drank...Just some sweet wine at holidays and occasionally on the Sabbath.

SPASSKII

Vodka, good vodka, is one of life's small pleasures. *(MOISHE raises his glass)* To everyone's health.

MOISHE, ESTHER and CHAIM

L' Chaim.

SPASSKII

To the boy...and to my children.

MOISHE

To war's end.

LIGHT DOWN: A SPOTLIGHT ON ESTHER.

ESTHER

The toasts seemed to come from the heart that evening, but one week later, no one's health was any better and the war was still very far from over.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 3

SETTING: *The Rose Family home; night.*

AT RISE: *There is insistent knocking on the door of the studio. The LIGHTS go on in back.*

CHAIM (*Offstage*)

Mama? Papa?

MOISHE (*Offstage*)

I hear it. I'm coming. Chaim stay in bed. (*Softer*) You too, Esther.

ESTHER

We're in this together. (*Louder*) Chaim, stay in bed.

CHAIM

I'm coming too, Mama...

CHAIM is first to reach the door. Sees it's COL. SPASSKII. Following on his heels are MOISHE and ESTHER fastening their robes. ESTHER instinctively shields CHAIM behind her. The Leica is no longer on its tripod.

MOISHE

Col. Spasskii? This time of night?

SPASSKII

Moishe Rose. You are under arrest.

MOISHE

Me? What for?

ESTHER

This is some kind of mistake...a terrible mistake.

MOISHE

(*Admonishingly*) *Sha*, Esther. *Sha*.

SPASSKII

Everything must proceed in accordance with the law. We are, after all, a lawful people.

MOISHE

What law have I supposedly broken?

SPASSKII

Charges will be laid at NKVD headquarters. Now I advise you to get dressed. Two armed officers are waiting outside.

MOISHE, visibly shaken, retreats to the bedroom.

SPASSKII

(Calling after MOISHE's retreating figure) Pack a change of underwear, a bar of soap.

CHAIM

(Bursting into tears) You can't take my papa....You can't. You can't.

ESTHER

(In tears herself) Col. Spasskii. You have been a guest in our home. Brought us vodka. Shared pictures of your family...Talked photography with Moishe...I don't understand...

CHAIM

I...I thought you liked us.

SPASSKII

(Coldly) Mrs. Rose, I advise you and your boy to remain silent.

MOISHE returns, dressed.

ESTHER

Where are you taking him?... Oh Moishe...

She flings herself into his arms as MOISHE envelops her and then CHAIM, showering kisses and tears on both their heads.

SPASSKII

(Visibly moved, momentarily, but then reverts to his official stance) We haven't got all night.

MOISHE

It's no use Esther. Remember our neighbors? Benny Klein...?

ESTHER

But...but... *(Frantic)* I'll pack warm clothing. Some bread, cheese. An apple...Something to drink...

SPASSKII

Don't bother yourself Mrs. Rose. Mr. Rose will be warm and have what to eat...We are a civilized people.

ESTHER

Civilized people don't come knocking at your door in the middle of the night...

MOISHE

Enough, Estee. This isn't helping.

SPASSKII

Wise advice, Mr. Rose. I also suggest that while you are being detained, you advise Mrs. Rose to cooperate with us. You don't want to worry that something could happen to her...or the boy.

MOISHE

Do not threaten my family, colonel. Whatever you think I have done, they are innocent.

SPASSKII

If they cooperate, no harm will come to them.

CHAIM

Papa, I'm not afraid.

MOISHE

(Hugging his son close and then meeting his eyes) You must promise not to give the colonel here any trouble; You don't want anything bad to happen to you or your mama if you do something foolish....Do you understand?

CHAIM nods miserably.

MOISHE

(To ESTHER) Pack me a little suitcase, sweetheart. And a picture or two. Of you. And Chaim.

ESTHER exits.

MOISHE

(To SPASSKII) I think I know the reason for this charade.

CHAIM

It's the Leica, isn't it Papa? Col. Spasskii wants your camera.

SPASSKII

In my experience it is best not to speculate on these matters. It will all be made clear in the documents served to you.

MOISHE

(Cynical) I have no doubt.

ESTHER reappears with a small valise.

ESTHER

I put in whatever I could think of...whatever fit.

MOISHE

I'm sure it's fine... Til I get back.

ESTHER

(Rushing to Moishe and embracing him) Dear God in heaven, may it be soon.

CHAIM

(Joining the embrace) Maybe tomorrow, Papa? Or by the end of the week? I'm in the science program at school... and you promised...

SPASSKII

Enough of these long goodbyes, Mr. Rose. Please step outside. I have some business to clear up with Mrs. Rose.

CHAIM

Don't go, Papa. Stay here. With us.

MOISHE

I'll be back as soon as I can. I promise.... Do as your mama says. And you do as the colonel asks, Esther...Colonel, I trust you will abide by your promise.

MOISHE exits as ESTHER and CHAIM continue to weep.

SPASSKII

The hour is late, Mrs. Rose, and I have much business yet to conclude.

ESTHER

It seems you've done your business here, colonel.

SPASSKII

(In his flat, official voice) I have a warrant to search the apartment and studio. Please sit on chairs against the wall.

SPASSKII, almost violently, starts emptying drawers, throwing things off shelves not turning up what he's looking for. He then turns to ESTHER.

SPASSKII

(Menacingly) Where is the Leica?

CHAIM and ESTHER look at each other helplessly.

SPASSKII

I repeat, where is the Leica?

ESTHER

Did you ask my husband that question when I was out the room?

CHAIM

He didn't mama.

SPASSKII

You promised your husband you would cooperate. Or suffer the consequences. You and the boy.

ESTHER

(Resignedly) Chaim, get the camera for the colonel.

CHAIM

But mama...

ESTHER

Do as I say.

CHAIM

But...

ESTHER

Now!

CHAIM goes to the chest of drawers where the Leica is hidden inside a cleverly concealed recess. He hands it slowly to the COLONEL.

SPASSKII

(A smile brightening his grim face as he handles the camera) Smooth and sleek as a pistol. A beauty. *(Switching back to his official voice)* I shall write you a receipt. We are not thieves.

ESTHER

(Mumbling) Gonifs, maybe. But not thieves.

SPASSKII

Excuse me. I didn't...

ESTHER

Nothing, colonel... I suspect this finally finishes your business here.

SPASSKI

One more item, Mrs. Rose.

He takes a document from his bag and proceeds to read from it.

“In accordance with order #40592 ...issued March, 1940...I inform you...due to requirements of Frontier security...undesirable elements...transportation into the Soviet Union...permitted baggage allowance, 100 kg per person...effective immediately.”

CHAIM

Baggage? Does that mean...?

ESTHER breaks into sobs.

SPASSKII

Resettlement.

CHAIM

To where? Where are we going?

SPASSKII

A truck will be here in an hour to take you to the railway station. I suggest you pack what you can... *(Pause)* And dress warm.

CHAIM

(Addressing SPASSKII) That’s not fair. We didn’t do anything. Papa didn’t do anything. Why are you making us leave?

SPASSKII

Your son has spirit, Mrs. Rose. I like that in a boy. But I have my orders. And you have yours. My deputy will be waiting for you outside. *(Exits)*

CHAIM

I don’t want to go, Mama. I want to stay here. With my friends...my school...papa’s darkroom.

ESTHER

I want to stay too, but we have no choice.

CHAIM

Where are we going?

ESTHER

Maybe it's closer to where Papa is. That would be good, wouldn't it?

CHAIM

I guess.

ESTHER

Now hurry. There are lots to do and we haven't much time.

LIGHTS DOWN.

SPOTLIGHT ON CHAIM.

CHAIM

Mama and I were deported to Kirovka, Kazakhstan where it was colder than it ever was in Brest, and food that I liked even harder to come by. But somehow, we survived. Mama gradually sold the odd pieces of jewelry she had sewn into her clothing before leaving Brest. She also took in mending from other exiles, while I ran occasional errands for area shopkeepers. A highlight was the occasional letter we received from Papa, postmarked Unzha Corrective Labour Camp. Then one evening, on one of the coldest, darkest days of our second winter in Kirovka, a knock came at our door.

SPOTLIGHT OUT.

SCENE 4

SETTING:

The Roses' cottage in Kirovka. A drafty, spartanly decorated, all-purpose front room; the focal point a wood burning stove.

AT RISE:

CHAIM and ESTHER at home. A knock on the door.

CHAIM

(Frightened) Who could it be, Mama?

ESTHER

(She speaks through the closed door) Yes, who is it?

MOISHE

It's me, Esther. Moishe.

Oh my God. ESTHER

Maybe it's a trick. CHAIM

I'd know his voice anywhere. ESTHER

She rushes to open the door and stares disbelieving at the ragged, snow-covered apparition in front of her. She even forgets to close the door against the raging elements.

Papa, is it really you? CHAIM

Let me look at you both. MOISHE

CHAIM closes the door as MOISHE tentatively hugs ESTHER and then CHAIM to him.

Take off your wet...rags. Before you catch pneumonia. ESTHER

Mama brought some of your clothes with us. From Brest. *(Shyly)* I fit into them now. CHAIM

I left you a little boy....Now, now you'reyou're almost a man...Unless my eyes play tricks. MOISHE

Talk later. First get into something dry. ESTHER

MOISHE scrambles out of his clothes, gratefully taking the shirt and pants CHAIM has quickly retrieved for him. With evident pain he pulls off his ragged felt boots and stands as close as he can to the wood burning stove.

ESTHER

And you, Moishe. You're so thin. Probably don't weigh much more than Chaim here.

MOISHE

Hard work and little food. Courtesy of the gulag.

CHAIM

You never said in your letters exactly what work you...

ESTHER

(Seeing MOISHE's scowl) Later, Chaim. *(To MOISHE)* I've got some cabbage and potato soup. Still warm from supper.

MOISHE

Yes, yes, please.

ESTHER ladles out the soup as MOISHE falls upon it hungrily. Between gulps he tears at the bread set alongside his bowl. ESTHER and CHAIM watch in astonishment at the unaccustomed ravenous and silent way in which MOISHE consumes his food, unconsciously shielding the bowl with his free hand.

ESTHER

I have more. I just have to cut up some...

MOISHE

I ate too much already.

CHAIM

It didn't look like that much.

MOISHE

When we got our portion of bread each morning, I made sure to eat only half. Saved the rest for later. Otherwise...

ESTHER

My poor husband. You never let on...

MOISHE

Some things, most things, you can't write.

Of course. ESTHER

Papa, tell me about the camps... CHAIM

(Impatiently) Enough, Chaim. Not now. MOISHE

(Hurt) I was only asking... CHAIM

Can't you see Papa is exhausted? No more questions for tonight. ESTHER

I didn't mean to.... I missed both of you so much. MOISHE

We missed you too, papa... CHAIM

I know. MOISHE

Did you get any of the food packages we sent? CHAIM

It was the best I could do ...from here. ESTHER

I bet you liked the sugar cubes. We learned to drink tea without it. Sent ours to you. CHAIM

I did enjoy them. The others did, too. MOISHE

There was hardly enough for one person in those parcels... ESTHER

(Impatient) Sharing was the way of the camps, let's say...and be done with it. MOISHE

(Abashed and confused) Yes, Papa. CHAIM

ESTHER

(Beat) Chaim, tell Papa how your school work is going.

CHAIM

It's fine.

ESTHER

He's way ahead of the other boys. And with very little homework, he spends most of his time making experiments. Stuff he gets from shopkeepers who he helps out from time to time. And the few kopeks he gets he always brings to me.

CHAIM

I miss the chemicals I used in your photography studio, Papa.

MOISHE

I've missed lots of things. Especially you and Mama.

ESTHER

But now we're a family again.

MOISHE

The men in my work gang. Those guys are like family to me, too.

BEAT.

ESTHER

Tea? A new sugar shipment is supposedly due in tomorrow. Tonight we'll have to do without.

CHAIM

I'll have some too, Mama.

ESTHER.

School's tomorrow and you have to be up early.

CHAIM

But, Mama...

MOISHE

(Angrily) Let him be, Esther. Let him be.

ESTHER

But...

MOISHE

I spent two years doing everything by the clock. Ten minutes for breakfast and toilet. Five for lunch. Five for dinner. Out for work. Everything timed, checked. Like machines, not people. (*Then more apologetic*) It won't hurt the boy to stay up. I just like looking at him...and you, Estee.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 5

SETTING: *The Roses' cottage; one month later.*

AT RISE: *ESTHER is doing some mending; CHAIM is bouncing a ball against the wall. MOISHE enters, shivering with cold, his outer garments grimy. After shrugging off his wet things, he huddles near the store.*

ESTHER

Tea is hot. Can I pour you a glass?

MOISHE

Um.

ESTHER

Another bad day?

MOISHE

Sometimes I think I'm still in the gulag. Same hard, dirty work. Same unfeeling bosses.

ESTHER

But at least you come home to us each night. To a bath. To something hot to eat and drink.

MOISHE

(*Coughing*) Stop bouncing that ball, Chaim. It's driving me crazy.

CHAIM

Sorry, Papa.

ESTHER

The boy is just bored. And restless. It's too cold to do anything outside.

MOISHE

I should make him come to the construction site with me some morning. Then he'd see what cold and boredom as well as hard work really are.

CHAIM

I'll go papa. I'm learning nothing new in school anyway.

MOISHE

No son of mine is going to work like a dray horse... Like me. *(Starts coughing again)*

ESTHER

I wish you could find inside work. This outdoor labor is killing you.

CHAIM

Mischa the chemist. His brother-in-law is some kind of foreman or something in the Commerce Cooperative. I could ask him if...

MOISHE

I don't need my son begging for his father.

ESTHER

It's not begging, Moishe. It's surviving. What Chaim and I learned to do those...years you were away from us.

MOISHE

So now my wife has to beg for me, too. Next thing you know she'll be wearing the pants and I'll...I'll be doing the mending.

ESTHER

Soup is ready. And the bread is cut. You'll feel better once you wash up and get something warm in your stomach.

LIGHTS DOWN; SPOT ON ESTHER.

ESTHER

Chaim, who I secretly encouraged, did go to the chemist who then spoke to his brother who, by some miracle, had a job opening in his department. Moishe swallowed his pride, went for the interview, and was hired. Once settled in his new desk job, and appreciated for being a quick study as well as a hard worker, Moishe began to return to his old, pre-Gulag self. Even to the point of asking sensitive questions of his boss.

SPOT OUT.

SCENE 6

SETTING: *The Commerce Cooperative: A sterile room with desks looking as if they'd been uprooted from a condemned high school building and metal folding chairs. In the center is a wood burning stove draped with various bits of soggy outer apparel.*

AT RISE: *MOISHE comes in, takes off his sodden boots, puts them near the stove. Already at his desk and awaiting MOISHE is his boss, FEDOR PAVLOVICH KOZLOV, senior account executive.*

MOISHE

Good morning, Fedor Pavlovich.

KOZLOV

How is my assistant on this chilly morning?

MOISHE

Beginning to thaw out.

KOZLOV

Very good. We can't have frozen workers. Especially smart, industrious ones like yourself.

MOISHE

Thank you for the kind words.

KOZLOV

Nothing you don't deserve.

MOISHE

Did you find everything in order regarding the month-end report I submitted yesterday?

KOZLOV

Not a single error. Not like some of the assistants I've had. Their brains more frozen than Kirovka streets in January.

MOISHE

(Emboldened) If you don't mind, Fedor Pavlovich, I have a question.

KOZLOV

Good. How else can you grow in your job?

MOISHE

I keep coming across some strange invoices.

KOZLOV

Strange?

MOISHE

For Siberian salmon. Chocolate. American canned bacon and a mysterious item called SPAM...

KOZLOV

(Nervously drumming his fingers) Continue.

MOISHE

The kinds of items never seen in village shops.

KOZLOV

Yes?

MOISHE

They're all ridiculously cheap and they're transferred to a Shop Three. *(Pause)* We have no Shop Three.

KOZLOV

(In low, conspiratorial voice) Come, sit here and we can talk. *(Pause)* Tell me, comrade Rose, how would you describe the trousers you're wearing?

MOISHE

(Embarrassed and confused) My trousers?

KOZLOV

Just answer the question.

MOISHE

Well, they're patched in places. A bit threadbare. Just work pants.

KOZLOV

Exactly. Now would you expect Comrade Stalin to wear pants like that?

MOISHE

(Laughing) Of course not.

KOZLOV

Another question: What did you and your family have for dinner last night?

MOISHE

That's easy. Cabbage soup with potatoes. Or was it potato soup with cabbage? Brown bread. Tea, with one lump of sugar shared by the three of us. What we have almost every night.

KOZLOV

And would you have Comrade Stalin rule his vast empire, as well as conduct a war against the hated Nazis, if he dined only on meatless soup, peasant bread and bitter tea?

MOISHE

Of course not.

KOZLOV

Well, the local party secretaries and the regional chiefs represent Comrade Stalin here. They're responsible to him for the performance of the region.

MOISHE

Yes, sir.

KOZLOV

So they, too, deserve special consideration.

MOISHE

Of course.

KOZLOV

You need not worry about such things, Comrade Rose. Nor should you talk about them in the village. Some may interpret it as harmful propaganda.

MOISHE

I understand.

KOZLOV

Meanwhile, there's much work to do. I need some information about this sale made yesterday. (*Hands MOISHE several papers*)

MOISHE

I'll have this back to you as quickly as I can.

KOZLOV

That's what I like to hear. (*Notices MOISHE's ragged quilted boots drying near the stove*)
The winter is getting to your feet, I see.

MOISHE

Yes, sir.

KOZLOV

You should save up for a good pair of Valenki.

MOISHE

I'd like that. But even a resoled pair would cost half a month's salary...and my family and I also have to eat. Keep a roof over our heads.

KOZLOV

The war has been hard on everyone.

MOISHE

(Trying not to gaze at Kozlov's fancy footwear) Anything else sir?

KOZLOV

Now that I think of it, yes. Once you finish with the current documents, take a note to Grishka down at the Main Store.

MOISHE

(Casting a forlorn glance at his dripping boots) I shouldn't be very long.

LIGHTS DOWN as MOISHE struggles into his boots again.

SCENE 7

SETTING: *The Main Store. A barren looking office with a counter and a couple of chairs. All the inventory is in the back, safely hidden from the view of passersby.*

AT RISE: *MOISHE enters with a sealed note in hand.*

GRISHKA

Yes, comrade, what can I do for you?

MOISHE

Kozlov, at Commerce, asked me to deliver this.

GRISHKA

(Quickly reading the note) Sit down, Comrade Rose, is it? And remove your boots, please.

MOISHE

I'm sorry to have tracked in some snow, but the damage is done I'm afraid.

GRISHKE

Take off your boots.

MOISHE

But I'm going right back outside.

GRISHKE

And your outerwear. This may take a few minutes.

MOISHE

I don't understand.

GRISHKA

The footcloths as well.

MOISHE

(Painfully unwrapping his feet) I'm not sure I...

GRISHKA

A bit of frostbite, I see.

MOISHE

Mostly from the camps.

GRISHKA

Of course. And a size...44, I estimate. Wide.

MOISHE

Yes, but...

GRISHKA

Sit here. I'll be right back.

MOISHE waits, puzzled, as GRISHKE returns with a brand new pair of boots.

GRISHKA

Valenkis, Comrade Rose. Soft leather on top. Hard felt soles. Guaranteed to survive even a Kirovka winter or two.

MOISHE

They're beautiful...but...

GRISHKA

Try them on. And here are some new, dry footcloths to go first.

MOISHE

Try them on?

GRISHKA

To see if they fit you, of course. I know the kind of boots they supply political prisoners in the camps. Inferior, shoddy workmanship. Spring leaks faster than a rotted out rowboat. And they never, ever fit.

MOISHE

You describe them perfectly.

GRISHKA

So go ahead, already.

MOISHE eagerly tries on the new boots.

GRISHKA

Just as I suspected. A perfect fit.

MOISHE

If these are meant for me, I can't possibly pay the price of...

GRISHKA

35 Roubles. Kozlov has indicated the price here in the note.

MOISHE

(Disbelieving) Thirty-five? No zeroes attached to that sum?

GRISHKA

Do you doubt Kozlov's mathematics?

MOISHE

No, comrade, no.

GRISHKA

Good. I can collect.

MOISHE

(Digging eagerly into his pants pocket) Here. 35 roubles exactly. And thank you. More than I can say.

GRISHKA

One more thing: You are to make out an invoice recording the transfer of a pair of Valenki boots, price 35 roubles, from our main store to Shop Three.

MOISHE

Shop Three.

GRISHKA

Correct.

MOISHE

I will do so. As soon as I return.

GRISHKA

Enjoy your new boots, and say hello to Comrade Kozlov for me.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 8

SETTING: Late Evening, 2 weeks later. The Roses' cottage.

AT RISE: A relaxed family tableau despite the sound of strong wintry wind and all three wearing warm clothing. *ESTHER* sits with her mending basket, *CHAIM* is sprawled out reading and *MOISHE* dozes under his newspaper. A knock at the door.

ESTHER

Who could that be at such a late hour *and* the snow already up to the windows?

MOISHE

I have no idea.

CHAIM

I'll get it.

He opens the door to see an unfamiliar face.

MOISHE

Stepka, come in. Out of the storm.

STEPKA

Thank you, comrade.

MOISHE

Meet my family. My wife Esther, my son Chaim.

STEPKA

Good evening.

MOISHE

Stepka's the day manager at the Commerce Cooperative.

ESTHER

Would you like some tea....?

STEPKA

No thank you. I won't be here long.

MOISHE

What brings you out on a terrible night like this?...I don't think I left anything unfinished today.

STEPKA

I am sent by Kozlov's superior.

MOISHE

For what?

STEPKA

To deliver a message. From The Secretary of the District Committee of the Party.

ESTHER

Sit here. Close to the stove.

STEPKA

Thank you....It begins, "Comrades, fellow citizens, friends. The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet has just announced the launching of the second War Loan of the Great Patriotic War of our Motherland. I have no doubt that you will all wish to contribute to the limit..."

ESTHER

Am I hearing right?

MOISHE

Money. He's asking for money. For the Cause. The War. The wonderful People's Army.

ESTHER

I wouldn't give them a single kopek.

MOISHE

You must excuse my wife, Stepka...Now as you were saying...

STEPKA

There is a note, as well, from Kozlov's boss. He writes, "The Party Secretary requested we all give up 20% of our salaries. But we shall do better than that. We shall give 25. Yes all of us. 25%."

ESTHER

25%? We can barely live on what you make now, Moishe. How can we live on 25% less? We'll starve.

STEPKA

Are you telling me Comrade Rose you won't contribute? I must return with an answer.

MOISHE

(Scowling, first at his wife) Of course we will contribute. The 25% requested. You have done your job and done it well.

STEPKA

We all have to make that sacrifice, Mrs. Rose. Myself included.

MOISHE

Well said, Stepka. Now I suggest you hurry on your way before the roads get totally impassible.

STEPKA

Thank you Comrade, Rose. I will see you tomorrow at the Cooperative.

STEPKA exits.

CHAIM

Are you really going to give up a quarter of your salary for the Russian war effort, Papa?

ESTHER

I can't believe you agreed to that.

MOISHE

And you should not have said what you did. In front of Stepka.

ESTHER

The idea was so...so impossible that I guess I...

MOISHE

Stepka is just doing his job. But you can never tell if he's also reporting any bad comments he hears to the Party apparatchiks... It's a lesson I learned in the gulag.

ESTHER

You're right, and I'm sorry....Meanwhile, how are we to manage on your new, reduced salary?

MOISHE

The roubles I earn are practically worthless anyhow. So what's 25% deducted from worthless?

ESTHER

Those "worthless" roubles still buy a loaf of bread, cabbage, potatoes, the occasional apple. They also pay for the leaky roof over our head.

MOISHE

We'll get by bartering what little we have in return for the little someone else has.

ESTHER

(Looking around at the shoddy, minimalist furnishings in the room) Barter what? Except for my wedding ring, the jewelry is all gone.

MOISHE

That quilt you're making, for example. *(Pause)* Or maybe my new Valenkis.

ESTHER

Somehow I think you'd rather go hungry than give those up.

MOISHE

I'm done with hungry, thank you.

ESTHER

You still haven't answered my question.

MOISHE

Tomorrow, maybe, I'll have answers. Tonight all I can think of is a glass of hot tea and going to bed under a mountain of warm covers.

*LIGHTS DOWN. SPOTLIGHT ON
CHAIM.*

CHAIM

Summer eventually came, even to frozen Kirovka. And for a few short months, Kirovka residents, the rich and the 25% poorer, native and exile alike, enjoyed the sun's warmth and the pleasure of practically never ending daylight. The first summer Papa was finally with us again was also the summer I came of age....In at least two ways.... It all began with my special "find."

SCENE 9

SETTING: THE ROSE COTTAGE

AT RISE: CHAIM enters carrying a stack of packages. ROSE looks up from her cleaning.

ESTHER

What, my I ask, have you got there?

CHAIM

It's from the Kirovka General Store. I bought everyone I could.

ESTHER

Every what?

CHAIM

Amateur photo kits.

ESTHER

Photo kits? Have you lost your senses? You know we have no camera. What could we possibly do with photo kits?

CHAIM

Pytor Ivanovich let me have most of it on credit. Said I could pay it back a little each week.

ESTHER

That's all we need. Throwing away what little money we have on *narrishkeit*, nonsense.

CHAIM

The planners who distribute merchandise sent a stack of kits to the General Store. And since no one in Kirovka, except for Timofei in the passport office has a camera, Pytor Ivanovich sold them to me real cheap.

ESTHER

At least he's no fool.

CHAIM.

The kits contain potassium ferricyanide.

ESTHER

And this is supposed to make me clap my hands with glee?

CHAIM

Papa had some in his old darkroom. I remember that ferricyanide mixed with ferrous iron sulphate and dissolved in boiled water, made ink. A real dark blue ink.

ESTHER

So?

CHAIM

Pytor Ivanovich says there's been no ink in Kirovka since long before the war. He told me that people used to mix the lead in indelible purple pencils with hot water to make some kind of pale, ersatz ink. But now you can't even buy the pencils.

ESTHER

So all you do is mix the stuff in the photo kits with water and you get real ink?

CHAIM

The kit doesn't have the other chemical I need. Ferrous iron sulfate.

ESTHER

Small detail.

CHAIM

But the Agriculture office does. The last time I ran an errand for them I noticed a big bin of those pale green iron sulfate crystals. The officer in charge said I could help myself whenever I wanted.

ESTHER

Very kind of him. Now what?

CHAIM

It'll just take some experimenting to get the right proportions. Then I'll have my ink.

ESTHER

(Affectionately) Good luck, my little scientist.

CHAIM exits as LIGHTS FADE OUT.

SCENE 10

SETTING: The Roses' cottage. Several days later.

AT RISE: ESTHER is busy making soup and muttering to herself.

ESTHER

Mold on the cabbage and potatoes with more black eyes than victims of the KGB. In the old days they wouldn't even feed this to pigs. *(Calling out the open window)* Chaim. I need some more water from the well.

CHAIM

(From outside) I'm busy mama.

ESTHER

(Mumbling to herself) Always, he's busy. Even in summer. With no school. *(Calling out the window again)* So get yourself unbusy.

CHAIM

In a minute. I have a surprise.

CHAIM enters triumphantly holding a vial of blue liquid in one hand and a sheet of newspaper in the other.

Mama, look.

ESTHER

What am I looking at?

CHAIM

Ink. Deep blue ink. I tried writing with it on newsprint. It ran a bit, but it still shows up!

ESTHER

(Putting down her knife and potato to examine it more closely) You made this? All by yourself?

CHAIM

I did.

ESTHER

Very impressive.

CHAIM

Thanks.

ESTHER

Now that you have magic ink to write with, you'll surely be the smartest boy in your class.

CHAIM

I'm that already, Mama.

ESTHER

(Laughing) Right. How soon I forget.

CHAIM

I have a better idea. Actually it's our landlady's. She saw me working with my measurements on the back step. Said all of her friends with school-age children would want to buy my ink, too.

ESTHER

So they can be as smart as you?

CHAIM

I could sell the ink for money. Or barter it for other things we need. I already told Pytor Ivanovich that I want to buy any extra photo kits he's sent. *(Pause)* He probably thinks I'm crazy.

ESTHER

(Admiringly) Crazy like a fox. Here, *mein kint*. I've got some roubles of my own saved. Go and buy what you need before someone else gets the same idea.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 11

SETTING: A few weeks later. Evening. The Roses' cottage.

AT RISE: ESTHER and MOISHE admiring their son, CHAIM.

ESTHER

Who would've thought...

MOISHE

I'm proud of you, son.

CHAIM

Thanks, papa.

ESTHER

Every day, people come bringing with them their small bottles and wrapped bundles. *(Looking at her scribbled notes on the back of a brown paper bag)* So much ink for a few eggs. So much for a litre of milk. This small container for a loaf of bread. This bigger one for a bit of meat. *(Pause)* We haven't eaten this well in a long time.

MOISHE

A regular entrepreneur we've got for ourselves.

CHAIM

I used only a portion of my ferricyanide for the five litres of ink I've already made. And the next village over also has a general store. Maybe they were sent amateur photo kits too.

MOISHE

No decent produce at any price. Barely enough sugar, flour or oil for sale. But amateur photo kits for a town with no cameras? Those we have all you want.

ESTHER

I think this business of Chaim's is bringing back some of the humor you lost in the camps, Moishe. It's good to see.

CHAIM

Yeah, papa.

There is a knock at the door.

Probably another customer.

CHAIM is taken aback at seeing the general store attendant, PYTOR IVANOVICH, at the door.

Uh, nice to see you, Pytor Ivanovich. Can I get you anything?

IVANOVICH

A message from the offices of NKVD. I was told to deliver it right away.

MOISHE gives ESTHER a worried glance.

(Importantly to CHAIM) The chief of police wants to see you. I'm deputized to bring you in.

MOISHE

What on earth for?

PYTOR

(As if he's memorized his lines) Chaim Rose, you are to come with me. Follow three steps behind me and do not stop for anything. I have the right to use a weapon without warning.

CHAIM

What did I do?

IVANOVICH

The NKVD asks questions. It does not answer them. And hurry. The chief does not like to be kept waiting.

MOISHE

(Waving a menacing fist at IVANOVICH) If you harm a single hair on this boy's head...I will find you and with my bare hands...

ESTHER

(Restraining MOISHE) It's not Pytor Ivanovich's fault.

MOISHE

Remember what I said, young man.

ESTHER

(To Chaim) Come, *mein zissen kint*. Let me wrap up some bread for you. A bit of cheese we just got...

CHAIM

No, mama....

MOISHE

(Resignation creeping back into his voice) Let him go, Esther. Let him go.

IVANOVICH

I saw this letter hanging out of your mailbox, Comrade Rose. I brought it in with me.

MOISHE absently pockets the letter as both he and ESTHER focus on CHAIM, hugging and kissing him and whispering reassurances before CHAIM exits, following three steps behind IVANOVICH.

ESTHER

Dear God in Heaven, spare my Chaim, my life...

MOISHE, weeping silently, enfolds his wife in his arms as the letter he carelessly tucked away drops to the floor.

ESTHER

What's that?

MOISHE

The letter Pytor Ivanovich brought in.

He picks it up, opens and reads it, his already pale countenance turning still more ashen.

Sit down, Esther.

ESTHER

What?

MOISHE

It's from Avrum, the watchmaker. Sit.

ESTHER

Yes?

MOISHE

He writes that shortly after you and Chaim were deported, he and his family fled to the remote mountain town where his brother lives.

ESTHER

Okay... But you look like you just saw a ghost.

MOISHE

Too many ghosts, I'm afraid. Avrum's main news is that on Oct 16, 1942, every last Jew in Brest – 30,000 in total – was killed.

ESTHER

Gut in himmel....

MOISHE

Exterminated by the Nazis.

ESTHER

Our friends? Our neighbors? Even the little children?

MOISHE

Everyone.

ESTHER

And now our Chaim. Our precious Chaim. Taken too. Oy Moishe. What's to become of us?

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 12

SETTING:

The office of the local chief of the NKVD. On the wall hang portraits of Josef Stalin and Lavrenty Beria. Carefully arranged on the desk are an inkstand, some pencils and other items, including a small bottle of familiar-looking blue ink. In the right-hand corner rests the police chief's revolver.

AT RISE:

CHAIM and IVANOVICH wait outside the door. The POLICE CHIEF sits at his desk with his back to them.

IVANOVICH

(*To CHAIM*) Stand opposite, facing the corridor wall.

IVANOVICH knocks and enters the office, coming back almost immediately.

The police chief will see you now. (*Whispers conspiratorially*) Good luck.

THE POLICE CHIEF checks a file behind him. He swivels his chair around. It is SPASSKII, much older looking, more worn out than when he last appeared. His cane is in plain sight. He speaks in his official voice.

SPASSKII

Come in, young man. Quickly.

CHAIM

(*Shocked*) Colonel? Col. Spasskii?. Remember me? From Brest?

SPASSKII

Police Chief Spasskii now. And no time for going over ancient history. We have present business to conduct.

CHAIM

(*Noticing the ink bottle and beginning to shake*) Ye-es?

SPASSKII

Sit.

CHAIM

Yee...es, sir.

SPASSKII

(*Holding up the ink bottle*) Is this something you made?

CHAIM

If it is ink...then I think it's mine.

SPASSKII

You *think* it's yours?

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes