

## *The Coal Bucket Cradle*

By Daniel Ruefman

As the death throes of winter descended upon the Appalachian foothills, a team of mules struggled to find their footing, dragging a Hoover wagon through the mud. Atop the wagon, where the windshield of the stripped Model-A once was, Stanislaw snapped and pulled the reins in a futile attempt to find the nearly impassable lane that, like the freshly plowed fields surrounding him, seemed erased by the late spring snowfall.

“*Cholera jasna!*” Stanislaw’s Polish curse ascended over the sloppy, suctioning sound of rubber parting the muck and snow scraping against the bottom of the truck’s frame. “Up! Up!”

With a lurch, the rig pulled onto a steep drive, shored up with field stones. It rocked, and finally came to a rest between a gray-shingled farmhouse and barn, partially imbedded in an adjacent hillside. The driver leapt down from his place and opened the door. Without a word, Richter swept from cab of the old truck and entered through the back door of the house where he was greeted by an entryway piled with boots and stained clothes inundated with the aroma of aged manure. Old coats lined the walls, some on pegs, others knotted over the rest. He stomped and scraped his boots, but did not remove them before pushing through the door and into the main house.

As he crossed the threshold, he encountered the flitting fingers of 8 children huddled around the dinner table, busy with games and needlepoint. Many of the older children paused to watch as he

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removed his coat and cradled it in the crook of his elbow, before breezing by instinct through the bedroom door to his right.

The moth-eaten curtains were drawn and the wick of the kerosene lamp bedside held a blue flame that was all but swallowed by the dark. Richter covered the room in three strides, found the lamp's knob and raised the wick to push the shadows back from the bed, revealing a woman in her thirties. Her breathing was labored, but hushed. As the light washed over her pale face, she squinted up at him.

He bent over her, peeling back the quilt and covers leaving only the single, white sheet draped over her. There, between the twin peaks of her knees, a copious amount of blood soaked the sheet. Lifting the final cover, the crimson stain grew wider, soaking into the feather mattress that cradled her distended hips.

Wide-eyed, he repressed a gasp and glanced up at the woman's face. Eyes closed, her head had fallen limp against her pillow, but her chest continued to rise and fall intermittently. He grabbed for his bag, retrieved a small bottle of alcohol and moved to sterilize a blade over a ceramic basin on the dresser. Across her mouth and nose, Richter placed a rag laced with chloroform and cut the nightdress, exposing the woman's bulbous belly. With a sigh he leaned in and slowly, irreversibly, dragged the blade across her exposed skin.

On the other side of the closed door, the children huddled around the table and listened to the pendulum of the wall clock pushing the seconds. No sound escaped the room. Joasia, the eldest daughter, busied herself with dinner, rolling the biscuit dough out on cookie sheets, pausing occasionally to feed the iron stove in the corner. Between tasks, she bent over her sisters' needlework, raising her eyes cautiously in the direction of the bedroom where Richter was tending to her mother.

At last, Richter emerged from the darkened bedroom, clutching a bloody bundle of rags, his shirt drenched, his arms still glistening with coalescing human fluids. Without raising his eyes to the children, he proceeded to the side of the stove in the corner. There, wedged between the wall and iron belly was an empty galvanized

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bucket, its bottom glittering black with coal-dust. He paused to consider the bundle before kneeling in the corner and with an air of finality, deposited the bundle inside the cold steel.

All eyes in the room watched, but Richter gave no acknowledgement that anyone else was there. Raising a shoulder, he dabbed his eye and wiped his nose on the one clean spot on the shoulder of his shirt. With a half-grunt, half-sigh, he pressed his hands against his knees, stood slowly, and breathed as a soldier might during a ceasefire, before vanishing once more through the bedroom door.

The younger children returned to their tasks, while a few of the older ones remained in their chairs, trading glances with one another and eyeing the bucket with mingled curiosity and fear of whatever now lay within. Joasia tried to distract them, setting the table for dinner, placing a plate of hot biscuits at its center. One-by-one, the children reached for the plate and quietly began nibbling—all except five-year-old Bertie. She placed her toy on the table, toddled across the room, and bent over the bucket to get a better look at the bundle that Richter had placed there.

Joasia, drew breath as if to scold, sweeping to her sister's side, but paused at a flicker of movement. Something poked at the fabric. Joasia knelt next to her sister then, and they considered the bucket together. Just as she had convinced herself it was a trick of the light cast by the kerosene lamps on the wall, the fabric offered up another twitch and emerging from a loose seam of folds, five tiny fingers flexed and stretched.

**Daniel Ruefman's** short fiction and poetry has appeared widely in periodicals, including the Barely South Review, Burningword, Clapboard House, DIALOGIST, Gravel Magazine, Red Earth Review, Sheepshead Review, and Temenos, among others. He currently teaches writing at the University of Wisconsin—Stout.