by Daryl Keating

Baba's Farm

The blue dry-docked sailboat at the side of Airport Road, just north of Caledon East, has a new coat of paint. The last time you drove by it showed marks of needy resolution. Now it looks more like the sunny picture of warm wind, lapping waves and fluttering sails. Your spirit is buoyed for a moment, but you are melancholic. The boat has been sitting there since the first time you made the trip up to Baba's Farm three years ago.

Airport Road has this effect on you. It is a getaway artery that runs north from the city. Alongside of it, the rolling hills, forests and farmhouses are a refreshing contrast to the big-city concrete. But the sport utility vehicles speeding up behind you impatiently, waiting to pass between hills, are worrisome. You grip the wheel tightly as they veer into the oncoming traffic. You have not escaped everything.

It is further up Airport Road that you arrive. Stepping out of the car you covet the cool and fresh farm air. It smells of such clarity: four parts impending winter mixed with a two parts wood stove and a two parts chicken-coop. The garden has been turned up and the pumpkins are gone. You imagine for a moment the garden flourishing during the summer months. It is as if there were some kind of secret energy field beneath it recharging. You imagine that only its gardeners Baba and Jadz knew of its existence.

> *Existence. She was born a twin in what was once Poland but is now Russia. Her father died of alcohol poisoning while her mother was in her third trimester. Her twin sister did not survive birth. Her mother barely survived her delivery. Three months later her mother died of the winter's cold while riding in a horse-drawn carriage.*

Stumbling through the front door, you breathe in the warm air meshed with cooking onions. Baba greets you with a strong hug. There are loud helicopter and machine gun noises blaring from the television. Someone has hung tinsel and other plastic Christmas decorations from the beam across the ceiling. Jadz is sitting at the kitchen table eating kilbassa while counting coins piled high beside his plate. He nods at you severely through the door in what is at most vague recognition. You stand at the door sheepishly, nodding your head and kicking off your running shoes.

Baba comments on your stupidity for wearing running shoes when it is so cold outside. She walks back into the kitchen and you follow her and sit down across the table from Jadz. You feel calmed by the atmosphere—the warm temperature, the old furniture, the white noise of violence coming from the television, Baba's hyperactivity. She is continually moving around the house doing things. You will soon feel lethargic.

> *Lethargy. After her mother's death, she fell into the care of her four older sisters. Her brother had left home. Her oldest sister, age seventeen, died a few years later after being struck by lightning. A second sister was burned to death in a house fire. The two remaining sisters were not able to look after her. At age six, she was given to a farmer down the road.*

There are plants everywhere. In the kitchen. On every coffee table. On the windowsills. On most areas of the floor that are off the beaten track. There are many types that you do not recognize so you ask Baba about them.

"I don't know what they are," she responds. She explains that one was picked up yesterday on Highway 10 on her way to Orangeville. Another came from the garden outside. Another was a gift. You do recognize the ivy. Apparently the whole constellation came from one single plant. It grows everywhere throughout the house as a dominant feature.

Across from you, Jadz concentrates on his possessions. Behind Jadz's spot at the table is a cupboard where he keeps them: his boxes of cookies, his dinner rolls, his combs, his wristwatch, his pill bottles, his handkerchiefs, his resin, his gloves, his knife, his chocolates, his transistor radio. No one else touches these things. No one else sits in his chair.

Jadz fusses with the tuner on his transistor radio. You are startled as he turns the volume up to offset the sound of the television in the other room. Jadz listens briefly to a rendition of local news, then a polka. He gives the visitor no sign that he is pleased with what he hears. "Argh, I don't care," he says. He turns it off with impatience.

> *Impatience. The farmer down the road allowed her to live in the barn so long as she worked the fields. There she drank milk from the udders of cows when she got hungry at night. There, on cold nights, she soaked her feet in the warmth of the yellow pools beneath them.*

Opposite page: Untitled, by Tema Sarick

Jadz looks up across the table and comments on the weather. It is getting cooler, but it is not as cool as it should be. The birds are confused. There should be snow by now. You sense from experience that Jadz is leading you into a conversation about the amount of work he's done that week. You guess right. He's chopped a great deal of wood. He's sold all three of his turkeys in Stayner. He's bought new insulated rubber boots. "Argh, all I do is work, every day," he says.

You're careful with your response. You encourage his stories, but with Baba present you know better than to let them get out of hand. You know that Baba does the majority of work around the farm. You know that she would laugh at him mockingly, undermining his attempt to boast to you. Even so, you know of no eighty-two year old that is as capable of such hard physical labour. You are in no position to pass judgement about Jadz's work ethic.

Work ethic. She did not spend a single day in a formal school setting.

Baba intervenes further and describes the feebleness of Jadz's efforts to keep up the farm. In the decrepit barn there were rats that she killed with a two-by-four. The chicken Jadz tried to kill remained alive until Baba broke its neck with her bare hands. She was the one who cleaned it. She cut the huge lawn one last time before winter.

"School good?" Baba asks, changing the subject. But words escape you. Explaining your week's accomplishments seems dauntingly convoluted at this point. You know you have done much work, but without a way of showing its relevance to Baba, you are sure to be met with a worried gaze. "Good," you say in response.

Unexpectedly, Jadz grumbles something in Baba's direction. Your presence, it seems, has stirred something in Jadz. Perhaps he too is sensitive to Baba's line of inquiry. Baba yells back at him in Polish. The two eye each other fiercely. Uncle Bob, who appears in the doorway, is laughing. He walks in looking at Baba, then at you. He does not acknowledge Jadz. He translates, "He called her a bedsheet, and she called him a broken dick."

Ever since Jadz's accident while working at Moffat twenty-five years earlier, Baba has referred to him as a "broken dick." A two-ton bail had dropped on his lap. Since then, Baba explains, "he don't touch me."

Bob's delivery is meant to be funny. He knows their anger will not spill over toward him or you. They have been together for 53 years. They are indifferent to the interventions of outsiders.

Interventions. The Nazis arrived in 1938 when she was sixteen years old. They burned her village. They shot her brother in the back for acting mischievously. They shuffled her onto a train to Germany and put a "P" on her lapel.

Baba is now looking at you and laughing. Jadz does not laugh and storms out of the kitchen. Baba snickers at his back. Without turning around, Jadz waves his hand indifferently.

She tells you stories about Jadz's week. Apparently the boots he purchased cost fifty-nine ninety-five. Worse, he owned a pair already. Baba gives you a backhanded poke and a smile as she explains to you Jadz's ignorance. Jadz was caught driving the pick-up truck again. Pausing, she waits for you to acknowledge that Jadz has once again been irresponsible. Instead you gaze ahead, remembering when Jadz lost his licence.

Two years ago, Jadz went for a mandatory licence renewal test. He had been embarrassed about having to go. He had also been afraid. In his truck, Jadz went visiting friends and neighbours. He especially liked to buy or trade for various meats and animals in the area. He loved everything about meat, especially eating it. He would buy kilbassa from the Jew in Stayner. He would find an Italian in Duntroon to buy his rabbits. He had once sold his chickens to a Negro in Shelbourne. This is what seemed to make Jadz happy. Now his family was hiding the keys from him.

You imagine that Jadz regrets opening the letter that came from the Ministry of Transportation that day. Bob had found the opened letter on the kitchen table and informed the rest of the family that Jadz was going for a test. A week later Jadz went to the ministry office in Collingwood. He had not filled out his forms because he could not read English and had not wanted Baba or Bob to intervene. You imagine in his experience that the clerk had been rude and impatient. The clerk had sent Jadz home to get help from his family.

With help from Bob, Jadz returned a week later with the forms completed. But he only got as far as the eye test. The ministry used a large machine to do the test. Bob had recounted to the family the fear in Jadz's face when he had put his eye up to the machine to see the numbers flashing. His voice had staggered as he read them out loud, some in Polish, some in English, at times reading numbers out before any had appeared. Bob made a gallant effort in his translation to make Jadz seem capable. Jadz, in the mean time, claimed he'd brought the wrong spectacles. His efforts were in vain. The confusion was as blinding as Jadz's aging eyes. Jadz lost his license.

License. On the way to work camp, the train crashed breaking both of her legs. She spent eleven months in a hospital somewhere between home and the camp. No longer a mobile person, they removed the "P" from her lapel. She was escorted to a different kind of train that was headed for a different kind of camp.

Baba continues with her stories. Jadz has been banned from the Zellers superstore for stealing. The tube of polygrip he slipped into his pocket set off the security alarms. When the manager came running out to apprehend him, Baba was ashamed and embarrassed. It was the second such encounter that month. The manager said that if he saw Jadz in the store again he would call the police.

Since Jadz had lost his licence they were both stranded on the farm except, of course, when the "dumb shit" found the hidden keys and snuck out for a while. When they did get a chance to go to town—Bob took them periodically—they were increasingly limited to where they could shop. Word of Jadz's stealing had spread as far as Shelbourne. Baba concludes, "He's a big pain in the ass!"

Baba's stories of going to town tell of a living past. For Jadz, you imagine the trip to town as an opportunity to resist boundaries in a rigid anglo society. For Baba, the trip to town represents a kind of frustration you have a harder time imagining. Baba's isolation has deeper roots.

Roots. Minutes before she was to board the new train, an officer pulled her by the arm to the side. He did not say a word. She was taken to the other side of the tracks and put on yet another train. She was reunited with the "P's."

Baba continues to smile at you and you begin to feel uncomfortable. She says with perfect sincerity, "When Jadzie dies, I be free!" You laugh with her nervously. You know she is being serious. At the same time you guess that she will never stop caring for Jadz. You surprise yourself hoping she'll find satisfaction in making Jadz feel small and useless in his few remaining years.

You remember the stories Bob once told you about Baba's past. You want to understand these stories but you fall short. You realize that making assumptions about Baba in this way is much like trying to envision a pumpkin patch by holding a ready-made pumpkin pie mix up to your face. Your understanding of Baba is limited because there is strength and gracefulness in her character you cannot know. At the same time you are grateful you've never had to scrape out the pumpkin seeds.

Apparently, Jadz was a stubborn man from a young age. While in WWII work camp he would sneak out to a nearby town donning stolen German fatigues. There, he would steal food and supplies to bring back to the workers in the camp. You've even heard Baba comment on Jadz's bravery. "Dumb but brave," she had said.

Bravery. Six years in a work camp somewhere in German-occupied Poland—there she smelled the pungent smoke of burning kilns coming from the other camp down the road. There she met Jad and became pregnant with Bob.

Although you don't imagine it was romance that brought Baba and Jadz together. Baba has also been heard commenting that the only reason she pursued Jadz was because of his determination to get out of Europe after the war. You guess Baba would have wanted nothing more than to join Jadz in his escape to anywhere.

You also remember what Bob had told you about their trip out of Germany. You've heard that the challenges they faced after coming to Canada were as treacherous as those of the war. To begin with, they spent two years in a northern Ontario version of a war-time work camp. It wasn't until the mid 1950s that Jadz got stable work in Toronto.

Stable work. Jadz took up fishing every weekend. He drank heavily and had a number of girlfriends on the side. Jadz sold the house in Toronto, telling her only when it was time for her to pack up. They moved to a country life that reminded her of her childhood. She skilfully worked the farm while Jadz took the pick-up truck to visit friends. She never got her driver's licence, though Jadz had owned two cars.

Baba is now staring at you. You recover from your thoughts and return her gaze. You are overwhelmed. You reach over and hug her with a powerful love from deep inside you. Baba is the grandmother of the person you love and depend on most in the world. And though she has been there for you for some time, it is only at this very moment that you know what that means.

What that means. Baba will carefully nurse Jadz until his dying breath. In that breath he will take credit for their lives.

The next morning you wake from a restful sleep and say your goodbyes. Walking to the car you take a deep breath. As you drive away, you honk three times goodbye. Onto Airport Road, busy as usual; a number of cars pass you by. You feel strong nonetheless, a heavier stone at the bottom of a rushing stream.