

TULUBAIKAPORTIA



by VANECHKA

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Episode 12: about meeting strange cats in birch groves

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“In these wanderings of ours, more often than not, you look for one thing and find another.” — “Don Quixote” by Miguel de Cervantes

Wunst in a birch grove, I chanced upon a cat. It was autumn — everything golden, t’air heavy with t’scent of fallen leaves and mouldy dampness. Not a livinn soul ‘round — just me trugginn along in me boots and cardigan, with a basket in hand for mushrooms. I’ve always been a mushroom picker, still am. I’m proper fond of mushrooms: porcini, birch boletes, honey fungus, and all sorts, **coughs** even t’cheeky lil’fly agarics. They’re rather soothinn, tha knows. But not a word to Marfa — she’d boot me out if she knew. So there tha are, strollinn through t’woods, bendinn over, and suddenly, there’s a mushroom. Quick as a flash, tha whips it out with thy knife and pops it in t’basket. Here’s t’thing, though — ‘tis crucial to leave t’mycelium untouched, else next year, tha’ll come back and find nowt at all. Where would that leave me? Clanginn shots with Petrovich? Marfa would boot me out for sure then. I love a wander in t’woods, ‘tis calminn, like

t'mushrooms. Tha strolls along at thy own pace, breathinn in all sorts of scents, scratchinn thy beard, listeninn to t'birds — in summer, mainly, 'cause come autumn, they all flit off south, away from all this beauty! Not hearinn a cuckoo these days either, not a peep, and as for 'em fly agarics, no need to boil 'em up, just don't overdo it. I knew this chap, oh what poor soul he was, had t'golden touch he did, only tractor driver in t'village back then. See, in t'old days, every village had a znakhar¹ or a volkhv, a healer of sorts or some wise man or a woman, thus would wander that volkhv into t'woods, gather all sorts: various mushrooms, poisonous berries, different kinds of bark, a sack of pinecones, bits of grass, leaves, even tap some birch sap, then come back to t'village, process all that, brew up summat, have a swig himself, and then dish it out to folks in just t'right amounts, dependinn on what ailed 'em — be it liver troubles, stomach pains, a sore throat, kidney or heart issues, or sometimes, even matters of t'soul. See, t'soul aches, especially when tha's an old-timer like meself. So there tha is, walkinn among t'birches, leaves above and below shimmerinn like gold; tha's ponderinn life, t'past, lost in nostalgia, a bit of regret, always with a smile, mind thee, but where would tha be without a bit of magic potion — and that's where 'em fly agarics come in, right in that department. Me granddad used to tell me that t'volkhv, see, t'volkhv'd always scoff down those fly agarics for his own self, never let another soul touch 'em, for he took t'brunt, as they say, for that were his part to play, then he'd process that mushroom mash in his belly, toddle off to take a wee, and pour t'potion into bottles, but now, what? Volkhvs are scarce as hen's teeth, and 'tis all down to oneself to take t'hit, but mind thee, don't overdo it, or tha'll be

pushinn up daisies... but get it just right, and tha'll see life clear as day, t'whole shebang: past, present, future — all un and t'same, like me Marfushka would say — thy chakra opens up... See, she's daft 'bout all that Eastern malarkey, talks 'bout wantinn to be reborn as a bloom, a lil'pink orchid, and why not, right, no point in her rottinn in t'ground with me; better to be a flower, I reckon. That summer, we had rain aplenty, t'air was thick with damp, and come September-October, mushrooms sprouted like nobody's business, everywhere tha turned, trippinn over them, couldn't escape — like t'Germans surroundinn Leningrad. I lugged 'round up to two or three baskets a day, I could've carried another, but me legs won't carry me any more. Marfa pickled eleven jars of honey fungus, seven of chanterelles, eight of porcini, and blimey, I can't even remember all of it, dried a sackful, sent three parcels to Kolya and Nastya, our son and his wife, oh, and how many we've gobbled up, in stews with spuds, fried up nicely, for mushrooms, see, they're whatever tha fancies, like meat but without runninn 'round, and no brains, though some say they do, like I saw a programme on t'telly, and they were sayinn, mushrooms have this underground thinkinn network, chattinn away like on thy internets — proper magic, they are, like summat from another planet, but folk these days, they aren't bothered, nobody goes mushroominn except me, 'tis like goinn to work, I get up in t'morninn, have a cuppa with me Marfa, nibble on a biscuit, throw on me cardigan, cap on head, boots on feet, basket in hand, and off I toddle, ponderinn life, reminiscinn 'bout t'old days, lost in nostalgia, sometimes even humminn a tune, nibblinn on a dried mushroom, rustlinn leaves with t'wind, it — above in t'tree tops, and

me, well, me down below; 'tis ever so nice, stops t'itch in thy soul — nowt much needed for an old pensioner like meself. So here I am, traipsinn through again, me boots scrapinn against t'leaves, and lo and behold — there's fur, as sure as eggs is eggs! And straight away methinks, 'tis gotta be a bear, or some stray dog — there's loads of 'em roaminn 'bout these days, they're puttinn 'em down, nowt to be done 'bout it, poor old Petrovich got bitten wunst, spent half a year on jabs, he did, but he's alright now, limps a bit, but still gets 'bout, though, more often than not, he's just sittinn there, clinkinn his glass against a bottle, what else is there for t'poor sod to do, he's not fond of mushroominn, and doesn't seem too fond of me either. I gets closer to this birch tree, and in its burrs (that's what I call 'em, knotty parts), there's clumps of fur stickinn out every which way, not just any clumps, mind thee, but proper tufts, ten, mayhap twenty centimetres, spread out like rays from a bulb, all soft and fluffy, definitely not people's hair. So I picked up a tuft of fur, and tried to remember all t'ginger critters I knew, but me old brain ain't what it used to be, just like me legs, and when they do work, they don't work right, so I could only think of a fox, but t'fur weren't fox-like, too soft and fluffy, and too long, thus methinks, mayhap 'tis some woodland spirit, a leshy, or a flaminn red bear, though there's no such thing as red bears, but then I sees it — tracks, t'leaves all flattened, and a couple of metres away in t'muck, a cat's paw print, as big as a car tyre, I knew it for sure, cat's paws, I love cats, I can spot 'em a mile off — our cat, Yevsey, Yevseyka, black as pitch, like a demon from t'depths, found him by t'river un night, barely saw him, heard summat squealinn, turns out it were Yevseyka; he lived

with us for a good ten years, till he passed away two years back — missed him, I did. Well, methinks, this is it — a tiger's on t'loose, though where in blazes would a tiger come from 'round here — we're not by t'Amur nor in India, are we? But then methinks, mayhap a lynx, but then again, t'paws seemed too big for a lynx, a lynx is more like a kitty cat, just a bit bigger, like a doggy, but these were proper huge paw prints. So off I went followinn t'tracks, what else were there to do in such a situation, a gigantic cat in t'birch woods, I had to go and see, didn't I? Wanderinn t'woods every day for nowt? Marfa would've said I'm actinn like a bairn, I swear, like a wee lad, old geezer like me fancyinn meself a young'un, but I'm an old man, a pensioner, everything's interestinn again, with time on me hands — loads of it, strollinn 'round, readinn books, watchinn t'telly now and then, ponderinn life and Istina, sometimes gettinn a bit nostalgic — all as un does. So I poked at t'cat-like print again with me stick — I were usinn a cane by then, see, 'tis handier if tha gets a bit dizzy and there's no birch tree nearby — to make darn sure I weren't seeinn things, and off I went, followinn un print and then another, every couple of metres, some just pressed leaves, others indentations in t'soil, and in some even water had collected, it had rained that night, had pelted down hail as big as peas, they were still lyinn 'round, though most had melted away by then. Walkinn I were, either through a tunnel or a labyrinth, I'd bet me head on it — 'tis El Dorado, no less, all aglow with gold, nowt but birches, like rafters, juttinn out from t'golden floor, proppinn up a golden ceilinn overhead, 'round me, a flurry of leaves, zigzagginn down as if they've lost their way in t'air and can't figure where to land; then, a cool draft catches me

unawares, and I'm slapped in t'face with leaves — take that! Methinks, a leafy blizzard, if ever there were un — as long as I've been 'round, I've never seen owt like it, then t'wind gusts again, peltinn me old mug with leaves, I grew tired of squintinn, and those golden birch leaves, they find their way down me neck, cling to me beard, and sneak into me sleeves — a proper tempest of leaves, no doubt 'bout it, just me luck, methinks, hope it doesn't rain, left me umbrella at home, didn't hear owt 'bout rain forecast on t'telly that morninn, didn't see t'point in lugginn it 'round for nowt. T'wind seemed to die down, and I cleared me eyes to see — a cat's tail, right in front of me, mayhap twenty or thirty metres off, swishinn through t'forest, clearly a cat's, what other beast flicks its tail like that, but this tail's huge, like a shaggy boa, reminded me of those Chinese dragons, fiery red, golden, melded right into t'autumn splendour 'round me, had it not been for t'birches, I might not have spotted it at all, as it stood out well against them, coilinn 'round them, t'sneaky un, a Chinese dragon no less. Alright, I picked up t'pace, I did, walkinn, almost runninn, me knees creakinn like that old wooden horse I carved for our lad, Kolya, he's probably forgotten 'bout it, but 'tis still standinn in our house, where else would it be? Would I have thrown it out? Mayhap, but Marfa, she won't let me, says 'tis a memory, and I don't argue with her, if that wooden horse warms her soul, then it warms mine too. We've become almost un beinn over these fifty-odd years, I'm not even sure how much of me is Marfa and how much is still meself, but, tha knows, 'tis better that way — makes for a richer inner life, left alone, I'd be like Petrovich, half man, half samogón, but Marfa, she's a sight better than any samogón. So, there I were, chasinn after this

enormous cat, feelinn like a proper Apollo, no less, thought I'd found me second wind, I were so keen to see this beast, when else in life would tha get such a chance, then, t'cat just stopped, and I nearly jumped out of me skin, dropped me basket, tossed me cane aside, and leaned against a nearby birch tree, nearly had a heart attack, I did, me heart poundinn like a steam engine's piston — wouldn't be surprised if smoke started cominn out me ears. There she stood, this ginger cat, huge, beg pardon for sayinn, fuckin' huge, I can't describe it any other way, greenish eyes bulginn, silent, whiskers twitchinn, fur standinn on end, and me, I calmed down a bit, straightened up, took off me hat, tha knows, to greet her properly, held it to me heart and gave a lil'wave, but me hand were all bloody, must've scraped it on t'birch when I got a fright, so, I tucked me hand in me pocket, stood there in silence, catchinn me breath, me throat raspy, chest buzzed a carnival, and then, would tha believe it, t'cat up and spoke to me in a human voice:

— No mushrooms 'round here, old chap, nothing to be found in these parts.

— How's that? — says I, scratchinn me noggin.

— Just like that, none to be found, not a single one, — says t'cat, flickinn her tail. — You can search high and low, but you'll find nothing.

— But there were some for sure, plenty of 'em, — says I. — A golden autumn and all. Mushroom season, mind thee, cat.

— That may be, but you’re a goner, old chap, — says t’cat, narrowinn her eyes. — You’ll not be taking any more mushrooms back to Tulubaika.

Well, methinks, that’s it then. What’s this ‘bout, a goner? I scratched me head, pondered a bit, but nowt sprang to mind. I’m no chatterbox, mind thee, prefer listeninn over yappinn, like to soak in thoughts, tha knows, and t’cat, silent as a shadow, peers at me with those eyes green and bright as I know not what, as if I’m on stage under t’spotlight.

So, in a fit of foolishness, I ask:

— Can tha meow, then? Like a proper cat?

— I can, yes, — says she, lickinn her whiskers.

— Go on then, give us a meow, will tha? Let’s hear thy voice.

T’cat gazes at me silent — a long, ponderinn look — then lets out a meow, modest, but precise, very cat-like, then off she trots into t’forest, rubbinn ‘gainst t’birches, hugginn ‘em with her tail, leavinn her fur, rustlinn t’leaves, and suddenly, she starts purrinn like a tractor, I swear, just like a tractor, so it felt like t’whole forest trembled from it, and me? Me what? I just shrugged and followed her. Nowt else to do, were there?

Notes

1. A term derived from the Slavic root “znati” (to know), possibly meaning “the one who knows”. This is a name for a village folk healer in the pagan tradition.

Read next part

Episode 13: about buying strange cats from drunkards

<https://nova-nevedoma.com/buying-strange-cats-from-drunkards/>

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