

Nothing But White Ash

by Boni Wagner Stafford

It didn't matter how hard Florian tried, his eyes could not keep up with the images whizzing past outside the passenger window. Gone the same instant they arrived. The silver Haas Construction building. The Chicken Little Drive Inn restaurant, the buildings and land in between, shrinking to tiny specs in the mirror. Just like Caroline, and Lili, and the other people in his life. They'd become specs so tiny he could not make them out.

He squeezed his eyes to give them a break from the rapid left-right movement and took a shallow breath. He was going home. Home, where he'd cleared and broken the land; cut wood and built the barn; birthed, fed, and buried horses; planted and seeded and harvested; and raised a family. Home wasn't St. Ann's long-term care facility in Saskatoon, where he'd been these last three years. And home certainly wasn't the hospital where he'd been this last week, and where his sons would return him after this afternoon's tour. Home was where he'd discovered devastating secrets, where he'd almost lost everything, and where he'd nearly forgiven himself.

They drove north. At Skipton's corner, they turned right onto the gravel road slicing through farmland, neat squares of mud-brown summer fallow, daffodil-yellow canola fields, and undulating fields of wheat and barley and oats unfolding on either side. They were on their way to the old farm. Home.

Florian's eyes misted, and his throat closed as he drank in the infinite flatness of the prairie. Dust swirled behind the car, the August heat billowing in through the open window. Voices from the past tugged at the stiff fabric of his brain. Clem? He strained to hear what his older brother might be trying to tell him from beyond the grave.

"Dad, we're almost there."

Not Clem. It was his son Richard, sixty-five already, driving. Another son, Allan, was in the back.

They made the last turn toward the old farmyard, the narrow-rutted pathway framed by the summer growth of underbrush. Low-hanging branches from the quaking aspen, paper birch, and black cottonwood trees brushed the sides of the car. "Hello old friend, welcome back," Florian imagined them saying. The faded wagon wheel, perched at the base of a scrawny jack pine as though it was propping up the tree, sat right where he'd put it in '36. That was when he'd dismantled the covered wagon that his brother Gottfried had driven when he moved forty head of cattle and ten horses here after the Kisbey cyclone of '33 destroyed their first farm. *Nearly destroyed me too.*

Richard pulled the car right up to the farmhouse. Allan hopped out of the back seat and came around to open Florian's door. Florian swung his feet to the ground and accepted Allan's arm, grunting with the effort of pulling his 110-pound frame up to a shaky stand on the grassy soil to which he owed his life. He wanted to walk in the yard, to go into the barn he and Caroline had built together more than six decades ago, now dressed only in the smoke-colored planks that they'd hewn by hand from trees felled just over there. *here.* He heard the horses neighing and shook his head. There hadn't been horses living here since the late '40s, their usefulness displaced by tractor and car.

But he wouldn't be going to the barn today. He wasn't strong enough to take more than a few steps on his own. So he stood, braced by the car, thrilled he was here and forlorn that this might be as far as he was going to get. More voices. This time the laughter and screech of little boys playing with sticks.

"Are you all right, Dad?" It was Allan, no longer the young child Florian had just heard playing.

He took in the familiar farmhouse in front of him, the ancient cladding the colour of clouds before a summer storm. His heart thudded in his chest as he smelled smoke. He scanned the roof looking for signs of the fire. It was suddenly 1917 and he was a boy of twelve, watching the Bolshevik soldiers drag Father Adam out of the classroom before setting fire to the school back home in the German village of Graf, east of the Volga River. *Get them out.* But he hadn't been able to. *Get them out!* He had failed to save them, any of them, just like he had failed to save his brother Franz. He could still feel the black boot pressing his upper back, his

cheek pinned against the cold ground, the Cheka dragging Franz away after catching them trying to sell black market tobacco. Then he was seventeen, the Novorossiysk harbor on the Black Sea aglow as he threw buckets of water uselessly into the roaring flames, screams from the horses and the children trapped inside reaching, taunting. It was futile.

“Get them out!” He squeezed Allan’s forearm tighter.

“Get who out, Dad?” Richard was now holding his other arm, both boys leading him toward the house.

Florian couldn’t think of what to say to his boys as the smoke and flames and the Cheka and Russia receded into the wrinkles of his memory. How could he describe that his life was flashing before his eyes? How could he tell them he felt as though yesterday was today, that his young and beautiful bride Caroline would walk out of the farmhouse any second? That his mother and father were still alive and living in the two-room shack that used to stand right over there? Florian looked past the old outhouses and the 1930 model McCormick Deering 15-30 he’d bought in 1942, overgrown with weeds and shrubs, jarred back to today because the shack wasn’t there any longer. How could he tell them that seventy-five years after he left Russia, he still felt the stabbing guilt of what he’d done to Lili? How could he explain how leaving her behind—leaving them all behind on the Volga steppes—haunted him still?

“Watch the step here, Dad.”

He raised his foot to clear the lip, and the familiar smell of wood and dust and fresh bread and love washed over him. He let his eyes roam the kitchen, with its wood-burning stove, shelves still full of Caroline’s jars of long-ago dried dill and crusted sugar. Two more shuffling steps and he was through the kitchen and standing in the doorway to the only other main floor room. The paper peeling off the walls; a yellowed calendar, dangling from a nail, open to May 1972; the bare stairs to the boys’ bedroom sagging and unsafe. The old two-seater sofa squashed beside the tattered burgundy armchair where he used to listen to news from the war on their new radio, dread squeezing his throat as he worried about Lili and Cousin Peter and whether they would be safe. But Lili had never been safe. He’d been too proud, too stubborn, too easily believing she’d betrayed him.

“Your doctor made us promise we’d take it easy on you,” Allan said. “We’d best be getting you back.”

Florian took a last look around; the taste of fresh-picked raspberries smothered in cream and sprinkled with tiny diamonds of sugar dancing on his tongue. He shuffled back outside and was grateful for the help as he folded himself back into the front seat.

“Lloyd is on the swather on Fletcher’s,” Richard said, turning the wheel and pulling the car onto another narrow gravel road.

They still called it Fletcher’s, even though it had been in his family since he and Clem bought it from Fletcher more than half a century ago. He knew this land and the invisible boundaries between quarter sections, all 160 acres, by heart. He’d given seven decades—nine if you counted the first twenty years of his life growing up in a German farming family in Russia—to the land, living and breathing and surviving through the ups and downs, the bumper crops and the drought years, the dust storms and insect swarms, the freedom and the constraints.

A deep rumble reached across the field of mature yellow canola. In the distance Florian spotted the swather. He knew Lloyd, his fourth son—or was it his fifth—was inside the glassed-in cab of the swather, driving the grid, operating the controls for the eighteen-foot sickle bar, the slicing blades like a dozen hand scythes leaving familiar windrows behind, all cut stalks neatly pointed in the same direction.

How things had changed. Back in Russia, on the steppes east of the Volga River, they had still done much of the harvesting by hand, especially after their horses had been taken. Scything, slicing: breathe, up, down, across, whoosh, breathe, up, down, across. Absently, Florian raised a gnarled hand to his shoulder, the phantom ache from those manual harvests playing tricks with his mind, scar tissue from the burn still bumpy through his cotton shirt. The family had been happy on that land, until the Bolsheviks and their greedy

brutality and the resulting famine had destroyed everything.

Florian knew there was no time for Lloyd to stop his methodical back-and-forth crisscross, even if it was to allow a father to say goodbye to his son. *One must never despair*, he thought. You don't always get to see the ones you love to say goodbye to them before you go. *You don't always get the chance to make things right*.

Four days later, Florian lay exhausted and light-headed in his hospital bed, his daughter-in-law visiting as she did most days, her warm hand giving a brief squeeze to his—papery and brittle. She looked a little like Liliya's mother. Or maybe it was more the sound of her voice, smooth and firm at the same time. Liliya. Lili?

"Lloyd is on the combine today. He sends his love," Ruth said, her words dragging him back to today, to 2001. He knew exactly what Lloyd was doing on the combine: picking up the windrows, threshing the canola grain from the stem.

The sound of Ruth's voice receded into the background, like she'd moved into another room while talking. He felt his family all around him, on both sides of life's divide. His father and mother. Brother Clem. His uncles Sander and Anton, lost during the Mariental massacre of 1921 along with his oldest brother Jacob. His uncle Peter, shot in their yard in Graf.

And Liliya. The smell of lilacs and cinnamon from Liliya's kitchen in Graf. Swimming with Liliya and Peter in the Bolshoy Karaman—the Big Karaman river. Liliya at ten, huddled with him at the back of the school room before the raid when the church and school burned down. Liliya at fifteen, lying with him on the hay and looking at him with those eyes—eyes that he could disappear into. Liliya at nineteen, tears streaming down her face as he refused to listen, refused to believe, refused to bring her with him to Canada. Liliya, who disappeared after 1942 along with all remaining residents of Graf.

Lili, I'm sorry.

Faces. Caroline. Sweet, loyal, strong, incredible Caroline. The boys. All six of them. Faces, swirling and fading. Scenes and memories from life as a German living in Russia and Canada blending, Lili and Caroline together, waiting for him, beckoning but barely visible through the grey mist descending over him. He took a sharp inhale as he feared the grey would turn into the black shroud he'd been fighting against his whole life, trying to ward it off, to prevent it from blocking out all the light, from sucking the joy from him, from turning him into someone he didn't know and didn't like. But it didn't turn black, just stayed grey, and he relaxed as it enfolded him like a warm, soft blanket.

The blanket lifted and shape-shifted into a bright white eclipsing light, gently coaxing forth his last breath.