

Stanley's Grandfather

Stanley's great-great-grandfather was named Elya Yelnats. He was born in Latvia. When he was fifteen years old he fell in love with Myra Menke.

(He didn't know he was Stanley's great-great-grandfather.)

Myra Menke was fourteen. She would turn fifteen in two months, at which time her father had decided she should be married.

Elya went to her father to ask for her hand, but so did Igor Barkov, the pig farmer. Igor was fifty-seven years old. He had a red nose and fat puffy cheeks.

"I will trade you my fattest pig for your daughter," Igor offered. "And what have you got?" Myra's father asked Elya.

"A heart full of love," said Elya.

"I'd rather have a fat pig," said Myra's father.

Desperate, Elya went to see Madame Zeroni, an old Egyptian woman who lived on the edge of town. He had become friends with her, though she was quite a bit older than him. She was even older than Igor Barkov.

The other boys of his village liked to mud wrestle. Elya preferred visiting Madame Zeroni and listening to her many stories.

Madame Zeroni had dark skin and a very wide mouth. When she looked at you, her eyes seemed to expand, and you felt like she was looking right through you.

"Elya, what's wrong?" she asked, before he even told her he was upset. She was sitting in a homemade wheelchair. She had no left foot. Her leg stopped at her ankle.

"I'm in love with Myra Menke," Elya confessed. "But Igor Barkov has offered to

trade his fattest pig for her. I can't compete with that."

"Good," said Madame Zeroni. "You're too young to get married. You've got your

whole life ahead of you."

"But I love Myra."

"Myra's head is as empty as a flowerpot."

"But she's beautiful."

"So is a flowerpot. Can she push a plow? Can she milk a goat? No, she is too

delicate. Can she have an intelligent conversation? No, she is silly and foolish. Will she take care of you when you are sick? No, she is spoiled and will only want you to take care of her. So, she is beautiful. So what? Ptuui!"

Madame Zeroni spat on the dirt.

She told Elya that he should go to America. "Like my son. That's where your future lies. Not with Myra Menke."

But Elya would hear none of that. He was fifteen, and all he could see was Myra's shallow beauty.

Madame Zeroni hated to see Elya so forlorn. Against her better judgment, she agreed to help him.

"It just so happens, my sow gave birth to a litter of piglets yesterday," she said. "There is one little runt whom she won't suckle. You may have him. He would die anyway."

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Madame Zeroni led Elya around the back of her house where she kept her pigs.

Elya took the tiny piglet, but he didn't see what good it would do him. It wasn't much bigger than a rat.

"He'll grow," Madame Zeroni assured him. "Do you see that mountain on the edge of the forest?"

"Yes," said Elya.

"On the top of the mountain there is a stream where the water runs uphill. You must carry the piglet every day to the top of the mountain and let it drink from the stream. As it drinks, you are to sing to him."

She taught Elya a special song to sing to the pig.

"On the day of Myra's fifteenth birthday, you should carry the pig up the mountain for the last time. Then take it directly to Myra's father. It will be fatter than any of Igor's pigs."

"If it is that big and fat," asked Elya, "how will I be able to carry it up the mountain?"

"The piglet is not too heavy for you now, is it?" asked Madame Zeroni. "Of course not," said Elya.

"Do you think it will be too heavy for you tomorrow?"

"No."

"Every day you will carry the pig up the mountain. It will get a little bigger, but you will get a little stronger. After you give the pig to Myra's father, I want you to do one more thing for me."

"Anything," said Elya.

"I want you to carry me up the mountain. I want to drink from the stream, and I want you to sing the song to me."

Elya promised he would.

Madame Zeroni warned that if he failed to do this, he and his descendants would be doomed for all of eternity.

At the time, Elya thought nothing of the curse. He was just a fifteen-year-old kid, and "eternity" didn't seem much longer than a week from Tuesday. Besides, he liked Madame Zeroni and would be glad to carry her up the mountain. He would have done it right then and there, but he wasn't yet strong enough.

Every day Elya carried the little piglet up the mountain and sang to it as it drank from the stream. As the pig grew fatter, Elya grew stronger.

On the day of Myra's fifteenth birthday, Elya's pig weighed over fifty stones. Madame Zeroni had told him to carry the pig up the mountain on that day as well, but Elya didn't want to present himself to Myra smelling like a pig.

Instead, he took a bath. It was his second bath in less than a week. Then he led the pig to Myra's.

Igor Barkov was there with his pig as well.

"These are two of the finest pigs I've ever seen," Myra's father declared.

He was also impressed with Elya, who seemed to have grown bigger and stronger in

the last two months. "I used to think you were a good-for-nothing book reader," he said. "But I see now you could be an excellent mud wrestler."

"May I marry your daughter?" Elya boldly asked.

"First, I must weigh the pigs."

Alas, poor Elya should have carried his pig up the mountain one last time. The two pigs weighed exactly the same.

Myra's father got down on his hands and knees and closely examined each pig, tail to snout.

"Those are two of the finest pigs I have ever seen," he said at last. "How am I to decide? I have only one daughter."

"Why not let Myra decide?" suggested Elya.

"That's preposterous!" exclaimed Igor, expelling saliva as he spoke.

"Myra is just an empty-headed girl," said her father. "How can she possibly decide,

when I, her father, can't?"

"She knows how she feels in her heart," said Elya.

Myra's father rubbed his chin. Then he laughed and said, "Why not?" He slapped

Elya on the back. "It doesn't matter to me. A pig is a pig."

He summoned his daughter.

Elya blushed when Myra entered the room. "Good afternoon, Myra," he said. She looked at him. "You're Elya, right?" she asked.

"Myra," said her father. "Elya and Igor have each offered a pig for your hand in

marriage. It doesn't matter to me. A pig is a pig. So I will let you make the choice. Whom do you wish to marry?"

Myra looked confused. "You want me to decide?"

"That's right, my blossom," said her father.

"Gee, I don't know," said Myra. "Which pig weighs more?"

"They both weigh the same," said her father.

"Golly," said Myra, "I guess I choose Elya— No, Igor. No, Elya. No, Igor. Oh, I

know! I'll think of a number between one and ten. I'll marry whoever guesses the closest number. Okay, I'm ready."

"Ten," guessed Igor.

Elya said nothing.

"Elya?" said Myra. "What number do you guess?"

Elya didn't pick a number. "Marry Igor," he muttered. "You can keep my pig as a wedding present."

After leaving Myra's house, Elya wandered aimlessly through the town, until he found himself down by the wharf. He sat on the edge of a pier and stared down into the cold, black water. He could not understand how Myra had trouble deciding between him and Igor. He thought she loved him. Even if she didn't love him, couldn't she see what a foul person Igor was?

It was like Madame Zeroni had said. Her head was as empty as a flowerpot.

Some men were gathering on another dock, and he went to see what was going on. A sign read:

DECK HANDS WANTED FREE PASSAGE TO AMERICA

He had no sailing experience, but the ship's captain signed him aboard. The captain could see that Elya was a man of great strength. Not everybody could carry a full-grown pig up the side of a mountain.

It wasn't until the ship had cleared the harbor and was heading out across the Atlantic that he suddenly remembered his promise to carry Madame Zeroni up the mountain. He felt terrible.

He wasn't afraid of the curse. He thought that was a lot of nonsense. He felt bad because he knew Madame Zeroni had wanted to drink from the stream before she died.