



POD

CHMIR

TORO!
Toro!

outs

DOL

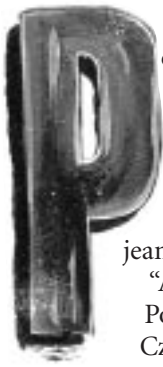
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DRY GO

EL FRANKO

Dola's Chicken

by André Rodrigues



Pod Stocki dug his boot heels in the dust, teeth grinding, cheeks like puffed wheat. Czeslaw, larger than Pod, gripped him by the elbow in support.

"Pod?" Czeslaw said.

Pod, clutching at his shirt, kicking in his jeans, stomping up dirt.

"Are you hoe kay?"

Pod, mouth like a fish.

Czeslaw leaned back from Pod's halitosis, that is, bad, evil, no good for nothing breath. The ancient imprint of vodka-soaked garlic cloves wafting out.

"Pod?"

Pod, spinning, stomping and spitting, started turning in circles.

"Can you hair?"

They looked like they were dancing.

"Does it huret?"

A box trot, grab yer pardner, round and round, sending dust higher and higher.

"Pod? Pod?"

Engulfing.

Hannah stormed out from the door, down the porch, her pear-shaped body shuffling, shuffling, leaving miniature tornadoes in her wake, pulling in quick jerks at her dress, pushed through the haze, separated and settled them.

"What's the matter?" she said.

Pod, eyes like eggs.

"I—I donut know?" said Czeslaw, pain on his oversized cranium.

"What did you do now?" she said to Pod, slapped in the chest.

Wheezing.

"Did you choke on something?"

Pod nodding his head, no.

"He stopped," said Czeslaw. "Went like this." Arms waving, legs stomping. Dust.

Hannah stared at Pod's eyes. "Temperature," she said, back hand to forehead.

Pod stumbled back, hunched over his shadow, dropped to knees, managed, "Nie móc. Oddychać."

"In English!" scolded Hannah.

"I. Count," dust in his eyes and nose and, "Breat."

"Why not?!!"

Pod slipped and twisted, slapping the ground with his back, gasping and grasping. Hannah caught his callused paw between her hands.

"Breathe. Breathe!" she said.

Dola, no bigger than a doll, sitting in the kitchen sink, drumming his small feet, his papa's cowboy hat resting on his shoulders, watched through the window as Pod's back bridged, Hannah dug nails into Pod's hand. "Uncle Grotto!" Pod cried and collapsed, pushing out a last breath of blueberries.

Hannah, after 13 hours, pushed a baby the size of a fat chicken, wet, gooey, purple, into Pod's oven mitts.

UNCLE GROTTO PUSHED POD, in stiff Polish uniform, thick belt and rogatywka, the soft four-cornered hat, through throngs of welded bodies, yelling, moving in confused unison, to the barricade of guards with guns. Pod managed to secure the uniform and proper papers from Urban Szewc by arranging for him an evening with Anieli Ciesla, which he was able to do by promising her a hand-knit sweater with dandelions along the wrist and waist, which was knitted by Boleslaw Krawiec as a favour owed for hiding Boleslaw's friend, the man with the yellow kerchief, in Uncle Grotto's cellar.

A soldier, small in oversized clothes, standing on a crate, sabre at his side. Looked at the papers. Looked down at Pod. Papers again. Made an indiscernible noise and the guards let Pod through.

Fifteen others and Pod in the peace between barricade and train. Duffel bag over his shoulder. Two thousand

one hundred and thirty-three dead in the Warsaw riots.

"Dola," Pod said and stepped on to the train, leaving Poland behind.

POD ARRIVED IN EDMONTON, looking weathered. All around him, the landscape, the buildings, the people milling about, covered in snow. The wind raced red across his cheeks. A tug at his elbow.

"Workers! Workers!" said a man drowned in a fur coat, the hood pulled tight, moustache poking out.

"Owszem," said Pod, his breath spilling out in a mist of rotting leaves. The hood leaned back.

"Powita," thrust hand. "Harry Polanski."

Harry found Pod work as a hand on a wheat farm, and introduced him to Hannah Kaminski, who taught many of the Polish immigrants, for a fee, English.

"Bêdzie wola," said Pod one Tuesday in March. "¿Enicie siê mnie?" "Will hue merry me?"

Pod, an attentive student.

Pod followed her cursive of "cat" and "dog," gripped words—"farm," "house"—as she marked them on the board, motions of clover hands, wiggle of rainbow hips.

Hannah, frustrated, "You're not paying attention!"

"Dola," Pod said. "Dola."

Pod persevered, saved wages, paid for lesson after lesson, until he was her only student. He learned basic, enough to speak. He learned to write simple sentences. They practised in letters. He learned Hannah ate oats for snacks, chopped wood when angry, laughed like a pig.

"Bêdzie wola," said Pod one Tuesday in March.

"¿Enicie siê mnie?"

"In English," she answered.

"Bêdzie wola," he said again, "¿enicie siê mnie?"

Hannah picked up a ruler.

Pod swallowed. "Will hue," shoulders at his ears. "Merry me?"

"Fine," said Hannah.

UNABLE TO AFFORD A BURIAL PLOT, Czeslaw and Robert, Sarah's husband, carried Pod, dressed in his Sunday best, under the sun, tangled in arms and legs, to the backyard.

Robert slipped grip, dropped Pod's head into the ground.

"He moved," said Robert.

"Wot?" struggling with legs.

"He moved."

"Come on. Pick up, pick up."

Robert stayed his post, pleading palms, fingers curled and bounced his Adam's apple.

"Idiot," said Hannah, Dola wrapped around her like a monkey. Hannah squatted and heaved awkwardly, hands under pits, Dola crawling. Sarah slapped Robert across

the top of his head as she passed him to help Hannah.

"He moved," repeated Robert as the three, with shuffling steps, reached the hole dug by Czeslaw earlier in the cool morning, dropped Pod in. Sarah, with quick hands, the holy trinity, forehead, chest, shoulder, shoulder, amen.

Czeslaw, red faced, pitched ground into the hole, swings of the spade. Hannah, Dola curled to her chest, up and down, watched Pod become earth, disappearing with every grunt, while the wind stung her eyes, dry as the landscape.

Then, shovel gripped, sleeves to elbows, Czeslaw finished the shallow grave, padded the dirt and stuck the spade beside, handle skewed to the sky. He took up a stance next to Hannah and removed his hat. Sarah wedged the marker made of chicken wire and a wood cutting board, engraved: "Here lies Pod Stocki."

"Dola," said Hannah under her breath, standing between Sarah and Czeslaw, Robert statted in the back, the sun heavy on their squinting brows.

POD WORKED HARD IN NORTHERN ALBERTA, digging deep in the mines. Already having lost two toes and recurring frost bite to his ears, and cheeks, and chin, he always said the most struggle he had was writing letters to Hannah in English. Pod spent only what was necessary, refused the booze and sent Hannah all his earnings saved.

Pod worked and worked and worked and worked.

Developed a cough, retching his throat, needles in his wrist, twisted knee, back spasms, and his breath worsened to the point where he had his own tent.

And then.

After waking from a dream, flopping off his mattress, he staggered out into the cold. Snow to knees and thighs and crotch. He stumbled further, dressed in red long underwear. Collapsed. Surrounded by white that sparkled from reflected moonlight. An elk stopped nearby. Stood still. Slowly, deliberate hooves moved closer and closer, until the white elk faced Pod, shallow breaths, the northern lights in its eyes.

Pod packed up a small sack, quit the mines and met Hannah, all their money in a turkey-sized bag under her arms, on a Friday in January, in the small city of Calgary.

A chinook melted the snow.

Pod and Hannah ate food from a Chinese restaurant, went to the theatre, then to bed. After Hannah fell asleep, up and down, Pod sneaked, wearing only his red long underwear, into the bar in their hotel.

There, he found the prospector Zeus Lee Williamson, snot-filled snout and brandy snifter, the accountant Edward Barnes, thick lenses in dark glasses resembling snakes' eyes, and the charming philanthropist Eli "Rabbit" Roli, ears like wagon wheels. He joined them in a game of schmir that lasted into the first beams of sunlight. After drinking and cigarettes, Hannah's shadow cast over money-stacked table, Pod, eyes dragging, looked and said to her, in a voice of syrup, "Dola! We have farm."

The farm boomed with the confidence of the market,

more than enough to go around. It was then Pod found Czeslaw stumbling, leaning against the DRY GOODS store, on a Wednesday morning in November, mumbling in Polish. Drunk. Pod dragged Czeslaw into his new Ford Model T and drove him to the Stocki farm. Bathed him in a tub of lemon water and roses, fed him raw oats to sober him up, gave him clean clothes and offered him a job. Czeslaw, a year younger than Hannah, accepted.

Czeslaw, with clumsy buffalo hands, sculpted a horse and plough that resembled a mountain range out of wood, using a kitchen knife, in thanks.

Robert and Sarah MacDonald were added to the Stocki farm soon after Czeslaw. "So you can practise your English," said Hannah to Pod. "And we need the help."

"COME WITH US," said Sarah, her hand resting on Hannah's, July sun through the window.

"No," said Hannah, hands withdrawn.

"The land's no good," pleaded Sarah. "Everyone else is moving. None of the farms can last."

"They are weak," Hannah said.

"The banks will foreclose," said Sarah, chin to her chest.

"This is our farm," Hannah said.

"There are jobs in the cities," Sarah biting her nails.

"Or the mines, if you."

Czeslaw and Robert could be heard packing pieces of luggage and knicks and knacks outside.

Sarah and Hannah sat at the table where years earlier,

on a Monday in March, grunting and spitting and bleeding, Hannah screamed in labour, flat on her back. Pod between her legs, oven mitts on his hands.

"Putch, putch!" he said. Doctor Abrahms stuck in the snow 18 miles away in the Ford with Robert.

Sarah mopped Hannah's forehead, Czeslaw leaned in too close and Hannah pulled his face tight into her neck, the space between the collar bone and chin. Suffocating. The house steamed in the blizzard that contained it.

"Putch!" said Pod. "Puuutch!!"

Hannah, after 13 hours, pushed a baby the size of a fat chicken, wet, gooey, purple, into Pod's oven mitts.

"Dola!" proclaimed Pod, recovering awkwardly the slippery baby still tugging at the cord. And that's what they named him.

"You've been so good to us," said Sarah.

"You're welcome," said Hannah.

"Well," said Robert in the doorway, dust filing in, hat in hand. They finished packing the Ford, which was tied to horses.

Sarah gathered herself up in a sigh. "We'll write," she said.

"We'll read," said Hannah and didn't get up while Dola played with a pot and a spoon.

Dola watched, having sneaked out of his bed, in red long underwear, onto the porch, the black of the night that sparked alive in a flash and the crack of a shotgun.

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Czeslaw led the last three horses, suffering from sleeping sickness, out to open fields, one by one, his hand petting and calming. Breathing and clip clopping. He continued to work on the Stocki farm, room and board. He helped Hannah with the cleaning of clothes and cooking of food. Side by side. Czeslaw taught Dola about horses and farming. Hannah taught Dola to read.

Flash, crack, echo.

Czeslaw and Hannah played cribbage on a board he carved. They told stories and talked and he made Hannah laugh her pig-laugh. In the winter, they lay in bed together for warmth.

One Thursday night in May, after a bottle of moonshine, Czeslaw professed his heart to Hannah.

"Will hue," he said on his knee.

And Hannah beat him out the house with a basket. He slept on the porch. Czeslaw would leave two days later, find work in Winnipeg, sending portions of his earnings back to Hannah and Dola. He would find love in the form of Mary Cummings, the stout firecracker, plead and devote his life to her, write her poems with his index finger tracing letters in the air, amongst clouds, marry her before he left, a soldier in World War Two, and died, shrapnel in his belly.

Flash, crack, echo.

The last horse, Pod Two, bolted away, Czeslaw could only follow with his ears and listen as Pod Two stumbled and collapsed. A trail of deep breaths.

Flash, crack, echo.

Czeslaw brought Dola back a horseshoe.

HANNAH, ARMS LAYERED, from the window in the kitchen, watched Dola play with his chicken, splotchy, skinny, feathers falling out. It was the last, survived chicken in the rotting coop. Dola took the chicken, giggling, hid her under the porch and nursed her in secret. He snuck portions of his food, stuffed pockets, to feed his chicken.

Dola spun and danced with his chicken.

"Cluck, cluck, cluck."

Dola waving a stick.

Hannah built a windmill in the yard. The windmill pro-

vided energy to the house, for the light bulbs and the radio. Hannah listened only to radio dramas on CFCN, and she would sit Dola on her lap with an Eaton's catalogue, pointing out all the things they would have and all the beautiful things they already had. And how lucky they were.

Hannah cried only in the outhouse, saving her tears in a jar to add to the limp, dry vegetables growing in the impossible soil. Hardly enough food for one.

Dola giggling. Playing bullfighter with his chicken.

"Toro! Toro!" he said.

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," said his chicken.

They raced back and forth, kicking up dirt.

Hannah also crafted miniature chickens, intricate craftings of wings and beaks and tongues, using pocket knives and sandpaper and homemade paint. She hunched, in her lap, tracing the lines in their feet. She found a small market for her chickens, able to trade for flour and rice.

"Chicken?" said Dola, dust settling, poking it with a stick.

HANNAH PADDED the small grave with her hand. Stood up and settled into her pear shape. Clouds shadowed and cooled the air, the smell of rust. Dola clutched her calves, tucked under her dress, pinching the fabric draped over his head.

Dola dug his toes into the ground.

"It's okay to cry," said Hannah. "You must keep the memories. But don't let the memories keep you."

Dola clutched tighter.

The wind picked up.

"To—" started Hannah, and down to Dola. "What did you name her?"

"Um," said Dola. He didn't name his chicken, a secret wish to grow the chicken big enough to feed his mum and him for over a year.

Hannah sighed, up and down.

"Let's go," she said and they returned to the house to find Dola a jar.

André Rodrigues was born in Nairobi, Kenya, grew up in Fort McMurray and now lives in Calgary. See *Eye on Alberta*, page 25, for a profile of Rodrigues.

