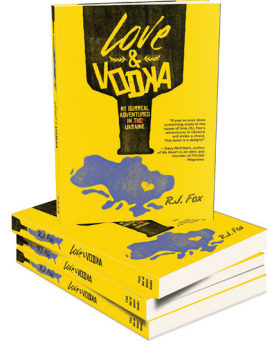


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“Chicken Man!” — an excerpt from the chapter “Dacha”

Sergei turned off the main road, onto a very narrow, pothole-laden dirt road that seemed barely wide enough for a bike—let alone a car. Yet somehow Sergei managed to make the car fit, even if it meant scraping against a tree from time to time. The car rocked from side to side as we drove from one pothole to the next. I then noticed a car approaching from the opposite direction. *This is going to be interesting*, I thought to myself. Sergei continued to rumble down the bumpy road without slowing down. If anything, he seemed to pick up speed. As the two cars drew closer, neither driver seemed willing to pull off to the side let the other pass. *Something in this game of automobile-chicken eventually has to give, right?*

As the gap between both cars closed, I grabbed tightly onto Katya’s hand and braced myself. Katya didn’t seem fazed by our impending head-on collision in the least; and neither did Elena nor Babushka.

As the other car drew nearer, I realized that it was a mirror image of Sergei’s, both in terms of make, age, and color. My heart began to race as it seemed less and likely that either driver was going to stop. I closed my eyes and hoped for the best. At the very last moment, both drivers slammed on their brakes. By some divine miracle, a head-on impact was avoided by mere inches as the game of chicken reached an impasse. Sergei uttered some kind of Russian expletive so loudly that it shook the car. He threw open the car door and stepped out. His “adversary” did the same. All that was missing now was the spaghetti western theme music.

The other driver was a shirtless, unshaven slob of a man in his mid-forties, wearing nothing but a pair of dirty, white boxers and holding a half-eaten chicken leg in his hand. Both men unleashed a flood of what were clearly obscenities, punctuated with matching hand gestures.

I could make out a couple of words that were being repeated and asked Katya what “*Eblan*” and “*Dolboyob*” meant.

“Bobby!” Katya replied, shocked, putting her finger to her mouth as if to say “quiet,” as though I were the one out of order. Babushka simply shook her head and glared at me, muttering an obvious insult under her breath. Katya glanced over toward Babushka and narrowed her eyebrows—but refrained from saying anything. She knew better.

Meanwhile, the shirtless man wildly waved his chicken leg in the air for added emphasis. The tirade went on for close to five minutes, as both men stood their ground, refusing to budge. Finally, the shirtless man decided that enough was enough and threw the chicken leg at Sergei’s head. Sergei ducked out of the way and the flying drumstick landed on our windshield, before sliding down slowly, leaving a greasy trail.

Seemingly happy with his parting gesture, and now out of options ... and chicken ... the man stumbled clumsily back into his car, backing away from us at speed, and pulling over as far off the road as possible.

Sergei got back into the car and, with a big smile on his face, proudly proclaimed: “*Sila, Bobby! Sila!*”

“*Da! Sila!*” I replied, as Sergei proceeded to drive forward.

There still wasn’t quite enough space to pass, but that wasn’t going to slow Sergei down. As we passed, Sergei’s car scraped against the side of other driver’s car. The driver shook his fist in anger. In his hand was another chicken leg, which he had already started to devour.

And just like that, we were back on our way—the forest-splintered sun glistening through the chicken grease on our windshield.