



ON THE RAILS

A NOVEL

CHAPTER I

**“Wonderful...terrifically crafted,
evocatively written. Powerful.”**

— Roy MacGregor, columnist and author of *A Life in the Bush*

JOHN OWENS

Author of *The Sixth String*

On The Rails a Novel by John Owens

**ON THE
RAILS**
A N O V E L

by John Owens

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For my father

...but he that endureth to the end shall be saved.

- Matthew 10:22

In the meantime

In between time

Ain't we got fun?

- Raymond Egan/Gus Kabn

Chapter 1

George Shymchuk's axes were always sharp.

Michael was fascinated by his father's honing ritual. The curiously smooth grindstone, pierced in the centre by a heavily greased axle, hung suspended on a frame, connected by gears and a rubber belt to a foot treadle. Sitting, Michael's father would step up and down on the treadle, slowly at first as the stone wheel began turning, barely moving, rumbling to overcome its inertia. Then his foot pumping would become faster and faster until the wheel sped up, revolving easily, whirring now, its speckled surface blurred to a hazy grey.

Content with the speed, George would tilt the axe blade to a practiced angle and ease it against the spinning wheel. Michael would wait with anticipation for the groan of friction which brought a shower of yellow white sparks, streaks of straight light spraying his father's pant leg, never burning, harmlessly extinguished in the air and against rough denim. And his foot pumped and pumped until his father was pleased with the sharp, silver edge he had made.

It seemed always so that his brother was stronger than him. A year and a half younger, always shorter, Peter was powerful and moved easily into the chores at the farm where Michael felt awkward, uninvolved.

In winter, they took turns using the axe to split the wood brought in by sleigh from the stand of trees near the back boundary of the farm. Their father would spend the day on the crosscut saw cutting up the trees he had felled the year before, sawing them into two-foot lengths which his boys would wrestle into stacks on the sleigh.

"Neat. Make the piles neat!" their father admonished them in Ukrainian.

"Why?" Michael asked, knowing that his question would bring exasperation, asking it not to learn but because he couldn't see a reason for it.

"More wood, fewer trips back and forth, that's why," answered his father, obviously irritated that his flow, his rhythm on the saw, had been interrupted.

The huge Percherons had no difficulty pulling the sleigh through the packed snow. Peter drove the team. Michael sat on the wood, staring back at the ruts which the runners had created, watching his father disappear into the distance.

Although barehanded, the boys looked forward to the messy unloading as they pitched log after log near the wood shed while the workhorses stamped their huge hooves and snorted, puffs of warm breath made visible in the cold, and the logs clacked crisply off each other.

After two trips, Michael was reluctant to return to the woodlot. The house, the warm house, was so close. He was petulant as the light-blue sky darkened into the rapid winter dusk.

“Why do we have to do this in the cold, papa?”

“It’s a better time.”

“Why?”

His father, steam rising off his reddened face and head, stopped the smooth rasping of the saw. He looked at Michael with genuine anger.

“Because the wood has dried since the summer so it weighs less and is easier to cut! That’s why! Now be quiet and work!”

So Michael became silent and remained silent on the last ride back to the house. Even at that age, Michael saw that Peter could feel the cold, invisible wall between his brother and his father, tried to chip at that wall with a torrent of conversation – about the weather, about the amount of wood, about the horses. And even at that time, Michael understood and his father seemed to understand what Peter was doing, knew that it only served to mark out so clearly the division between them.

The next morning was, again, clear. And Michael could not wait to be outside with the axe, splitting the wood.

He carefully set up each round log on a flat board, turning it so the faint splits of dryness pointing into the centre were directly in front of him. Hoisting the axe, Michael felt at his fullness when he reached back and brought down the axe, in a split second sensed the initial resistance then the blade drove the pieces apart, sent them spinning into the snow.

From his youngest days to his last days, the smell of baking bread made Michael smile. The aroma, heavy, fresh, intrusive, was the aroma of the farmhouse kitchen every day. It was the scent of his mother who seemed so happy to have him by her side as she rolled and pinched and kneaded the dough on the countertop sprinkled with flour. The fine white dust covered the backs of her hands, lay on and pronounced the light hair of her slender arms, sometimes blotched her face when she dabbed sweat which came from the job and from the huge wood stove Michael had stoked and kept fired up.

The mother and child would speak little, and Michael liked that. He could watch her then, study her intentness, her precision and care, her dark, warm eyes measuring, guiding her sure and quick hands. And she was aware of his gaze and connected to him because, from time to time, without breaking her rhythm, she would scrape and ball up a bit of soft dough, slide it to him, and smile as he popped it into his mouth.

The boys had been sent out to kill gophers and they worked well together. Peter would make the trips from the slough to the holes they had found, water sloshing in the tin pail which bumped heavily off his hip. He would pour bucket after bucket into the burrow and Michael would wait with a length of two-by-four for the animal's wet, furry head to pop up. Usually one swing was all he needed to kill. Michael would never confess to the pang of sadness and regret he would feel as he pulled the dead gopher from his hole, cut the animal's tail off for the two-cent bounty the government would pay.

Peter could not watch the blow, never asked to swing the club, and Michael wondered if that made him the better or the worse for it.

Michael did not question but always envied his father's absence from Sunday Mass. By buckboard in summer, cutter in winter, he would drive his family to the simple white church, deposit them at the lane's entrance, turn the workhorses around, and retreat into the distance, away from St. John the Baptist.

Michael would watch him disappear, always aware of the stares of parishioners. The boy knew they were thinking something unkind, something critical as they filed into the church to be blessed. He sometimes cringed at the silent disapproval, and sometimes was proud of his father who, for his own reasons, did as he pleased on Sundays when the bell of the steeple would ring and be heard for miles.

Anne was the director of her younger brothers' behaviour. It was her job to stand, sit and kneel between them, warding off their pokes at each other, calming their fidgets with silent pinches painfully applied just so to their thighs or their arms, all without taking her eyes off the front.

Father Kashimsky was striking in a gold, heavily embroidered robe, white lace alb underneath, lightly brushing the tops of his old, heavy boots. He stood out from the church with its whitewashed walls, dirt floor, and crude altar. And he stood out from the people who, though dressed in their finest, remained so plainly farmers and farmers' wives. Michael and everyone else had trouble associating this solemn, graceful figure with the shy and clumsy man, stocky and unimposing in the schoolyard, at Smygawaty's store.

On Sunday, with his hands scrubbed pink, the priest tended to the ministrations, mixing unseen ingredients in the gold chalice, falling to a knee, crossing himself, with a practiced seriousness and calm.

And then the priest would open his mouth to sing the Mass and the hair on Michael's neck would stand up. Deep, strong and clear, he'd chant, one man opening his arms and spreading his gold cloak as if he were winged.

"Hospody pomeloy."

Michael would brace for the sung response from the congregation. He would glance around the people and never fail to be astonished by them, by the ordinary people, the adults and children he knew who, on that day, on every seventh day, could together make that loud, ringing chorus, mournful or joyous.

And he would stare at his mother in profile, her long, slender neck, her chin and at her red lips, so fearlessly casting her song.

Then the silence when the bell was wrung three times and the smell of the incense, shaken rhythmically from a silver container swung from a chain, rolled invisibly through the church, reaching every corner with its pungency and strangeness.

Michael had been taught confession and penance but it was never a clean, natural thing for him and did not bring peace or relief because, every time, he would lie about the frequency and nature of his sins, and then never confess the lie.

He always felt awkward at communion, knowing his mouth was open too wide or too early to receive the body and blood. But there was a moment, as he walked back to his seat, hands folded in front of him, when the wine-soaked cube of bread began to melt in his mouth that he sometimes was bathed in comfort.

When Mass was over and the parishioners filed out into daylight, Michael saw a change back to the ordinary, as the men smoked, the children ran as they did in the school yard and the women talked quietly in groups. Whatever had just occurred in that building seemed to stay trapped in that building.

And his father was always there, expressionless, waiting to take the family home.

The coop was dark and full of the stinging smell of chicken shit. The jerking lantern which Michael held created bouncing shadows on the whitewashed walls and the thin, tiered logs where the hens slept. The birds clucked nervously, ruffling their feathers, shifting from one claw to the other, their heads twitching under the lamplight.

Michael's father reached out and grabbed a large, old hen, pinned her wings to her sides. The squawking grew louder.

"And that one," said George Shymchuk, pointing with the chicken in his hands at another one on a beam. Michael set the lantern down and slowly approached it.

Michael grasped at it but it wriggled free, its powerful wings beating furiously, the bird now screaming in fear, small white feathers shook from her body, floated lazily in the acrid air.

“Oy yoy, oy yoy,” Michael’s father clucked in disapproval, as Michael scurried around after the chicken scurrying around.

Michael cornered it and reached out, but the hen flapped up the wall, almost cleared his shoulder. The boy grasped at the bird, caught a leg and held it tight, finally able to still the beating wings. With one hand pressing the chicken against his chest, Michael’s father retrieved the lantern and backed out of the coop.

In the barn, George Shymchuk hung the light on a peg and rested the chicken’s head on a log block. The face of the block was scarred with axe marks and stained dark brown.

“Do I have to, dad?” Michael heard himself protest.

“Yes. It is your time. Now watch.” And his father picked up a small axe. “First, you wait while the chicken becomes quiet.”

The bird, indeed, became calm.

“And then once. Very hard.”

The axe came down quickly passing through bone and ending with a ‘thock’ in the wood. The chicken convulsed one or two times as Michael’s father held it upside down. Blood flowed then dripped, a deep red in the lantern light.

“Now, you.”

But Michael’s small hand could not pinion both wings. One wing beat against the side of the log. His father had to kneel down, clutching the chicken, its neck resting on the block.

After a few moments, the bird was still and soundless.

“Now,” hissed George Shymchuk.

With the axe poised, Michael hesitated.

“Now!” said his father, loudly and impatiently.

But the chicken was wriggling again and Michael, fearful of cutting into his father’s hand so close to the block, faded away with his swing. The axe descended and cut into the chicken’s head just behind the beak, Michael feeling the skull’s resistance to his half-hearted stroke. The bird was alive and thrashing.

“Shit!”

George grabbed the axe Michael had let fall and swung forcefully and the bird was dead.

Michael wanted to cry and would not, knowing his father would be maddened further.

He was shaking as father and son walked back to the house and the summer kitchen where his mother had a large pot of boiling water waiting for the birds and the stink of their feathers and scalded, stubbled skin soon filled the house.

Michael accompanied his father to Gimli on the shore of Lake Winnipeg to buy a thresher which, his father heard, could be had for a good price from the Swede who owned it. The trip in George Shymchuk's Model T truck had taken most of the day as they became lost several times.

Finally on the only road to Gimli, his father seemed to relax, his grip on the steering wheel loosened and he would look from side to side and even at Michael from time to time.

Michael kept his nose against the window staring at the countryside as it became more uneven, more treed. In the distance, he saw an imposing structure, a huge skeleton of girders and beams supporting an undulating roof.

"What's that?" he asked.

"It's to amuse the lazy, rich people," answered his father while Michael craned his neck at the roller coaster disappearing behind them.

At last, they found the man's home on a small hill overlooking a huge expanse of blue. Nine-year old Michael was enchanted with the sight of such an unlimited volume of water. His father, not wanting the boy, never wanting the boy, to be near any discussions of money, sent Michael to the lake.

The Swede with keen blue eyes had been watching.

"Go ahead, boy. Go to the water. It won't bite," he said in singsong English, that day the language of business. Then to his father: "You bohunks must have wheat fields. I must have water, big water. It is the way it has always been, no?"

Happy to escape the bargaining of men, Michael walked then ran to the water's edge.

By the sun, Michael knew he was staring north at this blue swath which had no end until it met the sky which, in that light, seemed farther away, the edge of a great dome.

He rolled up his pant legs and removed his boots and rough socks and timidly stepped onto a rock barely submerged in the water. The cold was like the cold of Cooper's Creek in the spring when the ice had gone. Startled at the frigid sharpness, Michael lost his balance, and rather than fall among the rocks in the shallow water, he pitched himself forward, naturally lunging into deeper water.

Under it now, the water was no longer blue, but transparent with a brown depth. He opened his eyes, saw the white bubbles and his still whiter hands before him. The cold seemed colder than

anything Michael had felt during the Prairie winter. On frozen, wind-whipped land, only his face or hands or feet would be cold but in this water which seeped through clothing he was instantly and completely cold.

He broke the surface, gasping and thrashing, his thick clothes now heavier. Extending his feet, he could not feel the lake bottom and panicked but did not cry out as the cold water flowed into his mouth.

Wrenching himself and pulling at the water, Michael was able to feel a rock. His hand slipped off it and slipped again, his lungs burned and he kicked and finally could lift himself out. Panting and heaving on the rocks, his first thought was of his father.

Had he been watching?

The boy could not put his socks and shoes on, walked barefoot over the new, soft shoots of grass and flowers. His clothes felt like heavy sacks of grain, his trousers soon chafing between his legs, as he trudged up the hill to the Swede's house, the anger at himself slowly dissipating with the warmth of the early May sun.

The men were shaking hands and laughing. At him? Michael did not often hear his father laugh and knew this to be a surface laugh, one he manufactured in his throat when others around him were feeling something deep within themselves while he seemed to feel only bemusement or boredom or polite contempt.

The laughing stopped when Michael drew up to them and then the Swede began laughing again.

"Maybe the water, it bite after all!"

Head hung in embarrassment, Michael fought off shame and shyly smiled at the easy, loud way the Swede had, at the joke which meant no harm. His father reddened and stared at Michael with something almost like hate in his liquid blue eyes. He slapped Michael hard behind his head.

"Stupit boy!" he hissed in English. "Go to the truck."

The sun was setting as George Shymchuk and the Swede concluded the deal and lashed the thresher to the rear axle of the pick-up. Outside Gimli, Michael looked past his father driving so carefully, the truck swaying from the weight of the farm machine, and saw the roller coaster again in the distance, this time lit by flashing lights, the whole area glowing with a halo fading into the black sky.

The trip back to Cooper's Creek was long and quiet in the dark, slowly pulling the thresher.

Michael's father said only: "Stupit Swede is bad with money."

"He's from Iceland; just about everybody around there is from Iceland."

"Same thing."

“No, it isn’t,” Michael insisted.

“Same thing, I said!”

So silence again.

And later, as the yellow orange-lit windows of the farmhouse came into view: “You must want to be a man soon, not a boy.”

Michael Shymchuk learned to skate when he was eleven. He was a late starter as his father had thought it silly and told him, in English, that he would ‘brek ya goddamn nik’.

But Michael wanted to slide along the frozen creek the way his friends did while he sat impotently on the bank watching them.

It was trading time. Bill Czerenko had let it be known that, for the right price, he’d part with a pair of skates he had outgrown. The leather was cracked and soft as a glove, the laces mismatched and the blades rusted and nicked. Michael had seen them and had to have them.

But what to trade? Obviously, it had to be chewing tobacco, his father’s chewing tobacco. Michael had seen Bill chewing secretly at church dances and openly with his friends in front of Smygawaty’s store. The older boy was expert at working up a huge gob of tobacco and spit deep in his throat, rolling it around noisily in his mouth then letting fly a brown string. Old man Smygawaty was always after him to stop plastering the whitewashed side of the building with trickle upon trickle of brown slime which had dried over time and stood as his mark on the world.

Michael weighed the elements of the trade, particularly the theft which had to take place. His father, so careful with his possessions, would immediately discover the loss and, just as quickly, know who did it for Anne and Peter were incapable of such trespass. Michael decided that one tin of Skoal and one terrific beating were worth one pair of very used skates.

In a corner of the living room was a solid, dark oak cabinet. Squat and unadorned, it contained George Shymchuk’s male paraphernalia: a long hunting knife with an ivory handle, a rifle and shotgun standing up, bullets for the .22 and shells on a shelf beside them. There was a bottle of brandy and several carved pipes, a cribbage board which Michael never saw used, and bundles of papers which constituted the written record of everything to do with the family and farm. And there were small packets of rolling papers, a can of loose tobacco and a flat tin of Skoal.

George Shymchuk never locked his tabernacle, didn’t have to and, in fact, had gathered the children around one night to tell them that he wasn’t ever going to lock it. As near as Michael could tell, his brother and sister took it as a commandment, while he understood it to be a dare.

Usually, there was someone in the house, his mother and sister in the day, joined by his father and brother in the evening.

But sometimes, the house was empty when the women were berry picking and Michael had volunteered to fetch something or other. Michael would head straight to the cabinet, open its creaking doors and rummage around, after first memorizing the placement of things.

The smell was oily and heavy with tobacco and gun grease. He would feel the heft of the knife in his hand, count the .22 bullets, sniff the brandy cap and let his eyes wander and absorb.

But this day there was no time for languor. He had asked Czerenko to be at the store for two o'clock. Feigning a sore stomach, Michael did not go out to fields with Peter and his father after lunch. As he had guessed, his mother and sister were gone to gather Saskatoons.

With shaking hands, Michael pulled the stubborn door of the cabinet, was sure its opening creak could be heard by his father hundreds of yards away in the fields. He dashed out of the house and down the road, the nearly-full tin of Skoal tucked under his shirt.

Bill was waiting for him as arranged. They swapped quickly and Czerenko smiled.

"Thanks, kid. Hope you enjoy the skates."

Then he laughed as he balled up a wad of tobacco and popped it in his mouth. The skates didn't seem like such a great deal anymore. Their boots flopped limply in his hands as Michael walked slowly home, anticipating the final part of bargain.

He stashed the skates under his bed and lay down, waiting silently upstairs for his father's return. The women had come back but did not know Michael was in the house so he was able to read uninterrupted. He poured over his favourite part of the only book he had ever finished, the part in *The Count of Monte Cristo* where Edmond Dantès, pretending to be a corpse, is wrapped and weighted and thrown off the cliffs of Chateau d'If, only to cut his way out and struggle to the surface, gasping but free.

"Michael, get down here! Now!" came his father's shout.

Michael swung his legs to the floor, sighed deeply and took out his skates to look at them, convincing himself somehow that they were, indeed, truly wonderful. He descended the thirteen narrow steps.

His father stood like a statue beside the open cabinet door.

"Did you steal?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come here." And the raised cane.

Michael tried not to flinch. He took the blows with his arms at his side and his body stiff. His father was red-faced and tight-lipped, wordless as he lifted the cane for another humming blow. The sting was something Michael had never felt before, at least double the usual. He cried, as he knew he would. But he did not beg for mercy as his father became watery and indistinct through his tears.

Finally, the blows stopped. The boy stared at his father only long enough to see a glare, an anger or a hatred which cut as deeply as the cane.

He hobbled upstairs, knowing that he was to go without supper and because he didn't want his siblings to see him.

It took considerable time for him to find a comfortable position. In the dark, he experimentally prodded the long red welts which he half-expected to see glow.

Sometime later, his mother entered his room and knelt beside the bed. With the light from the hallway, Michael could see that she too had tears in her eyes.

"Why, oh why, Michael, do you do these things? Why do you make him hurt you?" she whispered.

"I don't know, momma."

And he didn't.

The second week of November 1931 brought a quick, sharp cold to the land. The wind from the northwest swept over the flat ground, whipping the trees, tearing the last brittle leaves from their holds. But there was no snow. Not yet. The earthen furrows had turned to rock in the fields, with white ice veins in the valleys between.

There was no snow for almost three weeks, well into December. Cooper's Creek, low at the end of the dry summer, had frozen solid.

With little work to be done on the farm, Michael skated every day. Hunched low, his arms swinging wildly, he would practice.

While he easily got the notion of moving himself forward, he had great difficulty in learning to stop. At times, he tried pointing his toes inward, snowploughing until he halted. Other times, he would throw his legs in front of him like baseball players he had seen sliding into second. Either method required time going by and he felt silly sliding along, waiting, almost detached, for the negligible friction to bring him to a stop.

He longed to be able to more expertly control his direction, his speed. He longed to be able to turn sideways, dig his blades into the ice and send up a shower of ice chips the way the bigger boys could, accelerating at a terrific rate then stopping almost instantly, their bodies parallel to the ice as the sharp edges caught and held, bringing their bodies vertical and posed in front of a girl, methodically tying her white skates, who would be covered by their ice spray. Michael wanted to do that.

So he tested himself, over and over. He would stand by one bank of the frozen stream, rear back and fling himself at the opposite shore. He could only take five or six frantic strides then twist his

body, his skates parallel with each other and dig in. At first and for a long while, he achieved one of two results. His body would either be too straight so that his feet stopped but the rest of him pitched forward sliding head first into the bank or, sensing that he was jamming his skates too hard into the ice, he would ease up and thus coast helplessly until he ploughed into the steep embankment.

Always he would pick himself up and try again. His body would ache.

And always he listened for human voices approaching, friends walking along the road or coming up the creek bed. At those times, he would quickly sit down and start unlacing his skates.

“Hey, Michael, come with us!”

“Naw. I just finished. I gotta go in now.”

He would wait until they had disappeared out of sight, retie his skates, and try again.

The children probably would not have laughed at him for his awkward movements on ice, but he didn't calculate it that way. He was sure they would ridicule him but, the fact of it was, they were slightly afraid of him. He could not conceive why, for he saw himself only as a tall, gawky kid.

The snow came and stayed. For a few weeks, he could shovel and practice, shovel and practice until he became confident in his stops, starts and turns. But almost a year must pass before he had a chance at the full course of the creek.

Now he was good enough, he thought, to join in. He had grown considerably in that time, was now almost a head taller than his friends from the same grade. He had put on little weight and, skinnier now, he ought to have been the target for nicknames but he wasn't. He was quiet and seemed older, and there was that temper which had been seen on rare occasions, but often enough to be a minor legend in the small community.

He had respect, not the way a good athlete had respect but because of the temper and he could get crazy angry sometimes and it didn't seem to matter to him at whom or for what.

“Michael, would you stay behind and get wood for the stove for school tomorrow?”

“I did that yesterday, sir.”

“But I am asking you to do it again.”

“But I'm telling you I don't want to do it again, sir.” The ‘sir’ strained through set teeth.

“You will kindly do as I ask, young man.”

“The hell I will.”

The slammed door and quiet classroom. Quiet except for the sputtering, muttering of a teacher, temporarily powerless and embarrassed by a tall, skinny twelve year-old.

Or sometime later that year:

“Hey, Shymchuk, you got stilts in those old pants?”

“What?!”

“You got stilts in tho—”

“Take that back, now!”

“What’s the matter...?”

“Take it back!”

“Geez, it was only a joke.”

“Take it back right now or, I swear ta God, I’ll kill you.” This said quietly, barely above a whisper, his dark eyes blazing and, to the name caller, fixed on murder.

Only a few times. Then the air of unpredictability in those brown-yellow eyes under bushy brows was known and Michael could feel from his classmates, even from his teacher, if not their fear, at least a wariness. He knew it was no strategy, only the effect of an anger which rose surprising and unbidden.

Again there was cold, but no snow. Again the creek was frozen. Its surface was imperfect glass. There were white tendrils of cracks running through it and lumps, transparent humps, pocking the plane. By the bank, Michael looked down and, through the ice, could see the dried prairie grass and reeds, still with a tinge of green, hanging suspended and trapped, pressed against the clear ice.

The day was sunny and cold, zero Fahrenheit.

Michael could not quickly decide which direction to go. Cooper’s Creek snaked from the southeast until it joined another creek and another until it flowed into the Red River. Heading upstream, it wandered around until it met Lake Winnipeg to the northwest.

Even at its most swollen, some springs ago, it had no appreciable current, sort of dozed along, had to be watched closely to see something floating to know its direction. But now, transfixed solid by the cold, it did not matter at all. The landscape was no consideration either. It was the same for miles and miles either way.

Michael had avoided the requests of friends to form a party and strike off for some undetermined time and distance. Today, at least, he would go alone.

For no apparent reason, he elected to head north.

The skating was effortless, almost without thought. Smooth stride followed smooth stride with no discernible goal in sight. His speed increased and he simply wanted to fly until he was tired. He did not consider that the trip out demanded a journey back and that some energy would be required to complete the circuit.

Around each bend he sailed, leaning into the turn, righting himself for the straight stretches. The air was soundless save for the occasional screech of a whiskey jack.

His breath would steam up in front of him then stream around his head, as he skated through the fog. His eyes watered from the cold and his nose ran. But he would not rest.

The north-south township concession roads were straight and even, dissected at right angles by east-west roads, creating perfect squares, a mile and a quarter by a mile and a quarter. Cooper's Creek had been diverted on the west side of his concession to follow the road then angled into farmland until it hit the north side and followed the road again.

He knew that the distance between his place and Onsowich's farm, their nearest neighbour, was about one mile by road, shorter as the creek ran. He came out on the north side and saw his first obstacle. Onsowich's bridge to the road cleared the creek by less than three feet.

Michael ran down his options. He could stop, climb up the steep bank and portage the bridge. He could stop and on his hands and knees crawl under the bridge. Or he could just keep skating.

A few feet from the bridge, going as fast as he could, Michael flung his feet forward and slid under the wooden beams. His momentum easily carried him the width of the bridge. But the ice under the bridge was different, lumpy then sharp and white and he rattled over it painfully until he emerged on the other side where the surface was once again smooth and translucent. There was darkness under the bridge and the sound of his low groans as he slithered.

Back on his feet, Michael resumed his trip, but something had changed in his stride. He ached; his knees hurt and moved more stiffly, less confidently. But on he went and the distances stretched out and his rhythm was set as he passed under other bridges and through culverts, following the meandering creek.

It was impossible for him to reckon the spaces covered. Five miles? Six miles? Ten? The route was new and not marked by roads. He saw things, the backs and sides of farm buildings in a way he hadn't before.

His pace slowed, slowed in pain and exhaustion and wonderment. He rested frequently. Sat and listened. He saw a family of raccoons skitter across the ice, their black sharp claws clicking, and watched rabbits, now a brazen white, tricked by the snowless cold.

He would still himself, not rustle at all and listened to his best loved sound, that of silence. Occasional peeps from small, unseen birds did not seem to count and he was not distracted by them. There was no roaring tractor, no sputtering Ford. No human voices which, from a distance, were indistinguishable from each other, be they laughing or crying.

Because there was no destination to be reached, there was also no simple way to determine when to turn and head back. The sun was dimming and its feeble warmth disappearing.

His feet ached like he had never known. Enclosed in the ill-fitting skates, they seemed as if they were being moulded, reshaped to fit the flat, narrow soles.

So often, the return is easier than the outward journey because the way is now known. But this time, his feet throbbing, each stride, no matter its lightness, stung sharply. No varying of pressure points helped. On his toes, on the balls of his feet or on their sides, nothing helped.

The temptation to remove the skates was enormous but he knew how stupid that would be. The cold would pass easily through his socks, bringing white and numbness to flesh. But yet. Numbness. That's what he wanted and that's where the danger lay. The removal of pain would be replaced with easy numbness.

"Just a little bit more," he said aloud and found comfort in his voice so seldom used alone. His pain had not subsided, telling him he was not yet frostbitten.

Onsowich's bridge and he was almost home. This time, he slowed and stopped, deliberately crawling on all fours, feeling each hard lump of ice on his knees.

It was almost dark now, so quickly dark in late November. That didn't concern him, as there was no path to search for. Just his bridge and the laneway to the house. His way was defined by the course of the stream and the confines of its banks.

At last, the orange lights of his house came to view, warm and beckoning, but maddening in their distance. He couldn't seem to catch up with them. And he knew the coldness and reproach which lay within those lights.

By his father's bridge, he searched for his boots but, in the darkness, could not find them. So close and now he had to remove the skates only to walk sock-footed, as the banks could not be climbed in blades.

With the laces fully undone, the boots resisted removal. His feet were burning in pain as he forced the skates off. He tried to walk and immediately collapsed on the ice. His toes seemed horribly twisted, malformed, his arches locked and sore.

At last, he could crawl up the embankment, right himself and begin the painful three hundred-foot hobble down the rutted, frozen laneway.

"Where have you been, my child?" his mother pleaded.

"Skating on the creek. Owwwwwww! It hurts, mama!"

"Come. Come to the stove. Warm up."

The big kitchen stove squatted and gave off its heavy heat. Sitting on a chair, Michael rested his legs on the woodpile, his feet almost touching the heated metal.

“So, you come back!” spat his father from behind him.

“Yes, sir.”

George Shymchuk fell back into Ukrainian as he scolded his son.

“You just disappear all day. Don’t tell your poor mother where you are going. Don’t come home for dinner and then, more than that, you leave your boots near the road where any gypsy son of a bitch could find them and take them for his own. Boots which cost good money. Money which takes hard work to earn. You don’t know about that, do you, my boy? But it’s time you started. That’s why I took them into the house. Let that be a good lesson for you.”

His father stopped and pointed at the boots standing neatly behind the door.

“I don’t know about you, my boy. I give up.”

Michael had heard that phrase more and more frequently. He wished his father would give up on him and leave him alone. He thought to himself that he could and would soon hit that man.