4,610 Words

The Treasure of Katerina Szotchka

A SHORT STORY

* * * * * * *

Charley Miller knew right away it was Mrs. Szotchka. He knelt down and touched her arm. The skin was already cold even with the late day August sun still beaming its warmth from just above the treetops. She must have been lying beside the highway a couple of hours to be this cool. Not much traffic on old Highway 70—Charley had to be the first to find her. He stared a long minute at her deep leathery wrinkles. She had the weathered and worn face of an old seaman. There were a thousand stories carved into those deep wrinkles. A more peaceful look seemed to be emerging now—and maybe even a little air of satisfaction—as if the unspoken scars of her life were suddenly healed.

It would have been a perfect evening for fishing but Charley had to stop his truck to see what all the fuss was about. There were untethered goats standing at the side of the

road looking saddened and confused. The smallest one was frantically pacing. These must be the goats she so often spoke of. They were her children—her treasures, as she called them. She had names for every one of them, but they all escaped Charley's mind for now.

As Charley approached, her tribe hesitantly allowed him through their protective circle. He immediately recognized the high top Redwing work shoes she was wearing. They looked just like the badly worn ones he had thrown out a year ago. The broken laces were knotted and re-knotted to hold them secure. Her left arm was clutched tightly to her chest. Her pitchfork had fallen by her side. She must have been gathering up the tall grass that the road crew had recently cut.

Most, including Charley didn't even know her first name. Everybody just called her "Ol' Lady Szotchka." She was simply an unsolved mystery.

A passing car was a welcome sight on this lonely highway. It stopped. It was the Baker brothers. They saw Charley's old truck on the side of the road and thought he might need help.

Jesse jumped out from the passenger side, "That's that Ol' Lady Szotchka ain't it?" he asked as he stared down at her lifeless body. Jesse, the oldest was thought by many to be the smartest of the three brothers. He was the one that finished high school, so he usually did most of the talking. John the designated driver this evening was the biggest. He could handle twice the beer that the others could, so he was always the driver. Joey the youngest stuttered and the more he drank or the more nervous he got, the more he stuttered. They had been out bar-hopping. It was Friday night. Their work week was done. Most people thought they were good boys—a little rough around the

edges, calloused hands from the chain saws and axes they wielded all week. They were always willing to lend a hand to someone in need, but never shied away from a confrontation either. They were the lead suspects in more than one Halloween out-house tipping. Maybe they were loose and undisciplined, but they never hurt anybody.

Jesse agreed that they would drive into town to call the sheriff, but not before he probed Charley to see if he knew anything about that money she had socked away—everybody knew about it he insisted—probably buried up there somewhere. "She pertects it with that double barreled twelve-gauge," Jesse claimed adamantly.

Charley admitted he had heard the stories, but never believed any of them. Charley and everyone else he knew of never saw her carry anything more menacing then her pitchfork. Jesse finally assured Charley he would call the sheriff from the payphone at Bob's Filling Station. He needed to be careful, so the sheriff could not see that they had been drinking. They didn't want their Friday night carousing cut short. Charley would stay behind and wait.

Tom Peltz was just about to close up the sheriff's office, "Is that the poor old lady that I sometimes see walking along the highway?" he asked.

"Yeah, that's the one. It's Ol' Lady Szotchka," Jesse confirmed. "She's stone cold dead."

"Okay, I'm just closing up here," Tom said. "I'll see Charley out there in five minutes. I'll need to fill out some paperwork."

* * *

When she was alive, she looked like she was a hundred years old, maybe five feet tall if she straightened her stooping shoulders. No one knew for sure, but Charley pegged her closer to seventy-five, maybe eighty. Those old Redwings she was wearing had to be at least five sizes too big for her.

As near as any of the locals could recall, she had been on that forty acres what seemed like forever. She would walk the half mile into town every week. She didn't drive; she walked everywhere and always came into Charley's general store.

The neighborhood children were frightened by her. They would mock her and giggle from a safe distance. Her glaring dark eyes would burn holes through them, but they didn't care—they had the strength of their numbers and distance as their security. She would soon silently turn away and go on about her business. The kids were just being kids—but to tell the truth, she frightened some of the adults too.

John Rivers warned Charley about Ol' Lady Szotchka when he bought the little store from him fourteen years ago. She even scared Charley a little the first time he saw her come in, but he soon grew to find her harmless and sometimes even a bit amusing. She had yellowish-gray hair which was mostly covered by a shabby scarf tied under her chin—a "*babushka*" she called it. Winter or summer, she was never seen without it.

She would search through the shelves and find a damaged or dented can of beans, fruit, or something with a torn label. Sometimes Charley would even put a dented can where she could easily find it, knowing that her tattered and faded apron would transport that find along with any other newly found treasures up to the check-out counter.

It was a little game they played that she always won. She reminded Charley a bit of his own grandmother. Even with her raspy broken English Mrs. Szotchka could argue and negotiate like a Philadelphia lawyer.

"Meesta' Milla," she would say—she always called him Mr. Miller, and he always called her Mrs. Szotchka.

"Meesta Milla, szhu know you can't sell 'dees—you have to tro' dem out," was always her opening argument.

If she had teeth, she didn't bring them into town with her. She would miserly pluck a few pennies and nickels from her leather coin purse as an offering for her findings. If she had an old Indian head penny, she would offer that first, taking greater care to hold onto the shiny newer ones. That worn purse looked like it was as old as she was. Charley saw the corner of a dollar bill sticking out once—she deftly pushed it back to safety.

There was the time she found a leaking five pound bag of flour. Charley taped it up and told her to take it if she could make use of it—he'd have to throw it away anyway. He couldn't help but feel sorry for her. Mrs. Szotchka nodded what could have been perceived as a thank you, and she promptly strode from his store looking certain she was doing him a favor.

One day Charley asked her about her limp. Without even looking up at him she simply said, "Gout."

Charley knew she played the same routine over at Glen's Market down the street. He and Glen talked about her often. There were some of the folks around town that suspected her husband may have left behind a little money when he supposedly died from

the pox thirty years ago—or maybe it was an accident of some kind. The mysterious bounty compounded itself as the whispers passed from person to person and barstool to barstool.

The word was that the Szotchkas had come up from Chicago in the early thirties. He had some kind of business dealings down there but it was never exactly clear what kind of commerce was involved, or why they needed the quiet solace of Coolidge Springs. They bought forty acres with a house and a barn just outside of town, paid cash and kept pretty much to themselves.

There were some reports of him buried up there on a hillside. No one knew for sure. All anybody knew for certain was that there was no stone for him in the town cemetery. One or two of the older townsfolk thought they heard stories of someone saying they had seen a fancy black sedan with whitewall tires going into the Szotchka's property about the time he disappeared. One school of thought was convinced it was a Packard—another school of thought was positive it was a Cadillac. The only agreement was that it was black and it was not a basic Ford or Chevy. Yet, another rumor had him simply sneaking off to town one day for tobacco and he just caught the southbound train never to be heard from again.

In the summer Mrs. Szotchka could sometimes be seen walking along the highway toting home the treasures she had found in the dump—a dish, a couple of magazines or even a chair. Or, after the town crew would mow the tall roadside grass she could be spotted with a pitchfork gathering up the freshly cut fodder for her goats. She carried the hay up her dirt path to a small barn near her shack forkful by forkful.

There were some accounts that she had been seen petting and coddling—and even kissing her goats when the naked winter trees allowed some sight into her property. No one ever attempted to approach her. No family. No friends. No visitors. The fear of the unknown outweighed the curiosity. Even the adventurous Baker boys didn't go near her.

There was a son, Ludvik, believed to be in Chicago now, about four-hundred miles to the south. He didn't stick around the sleepy little village of Coolidge Springs long—he must have been fifteen or sixteen when he left.

He started calling himself Louis, and did some odd jobs around town to earn a little money. Most figured he probably caught the next train or bus out of town as soon as he could save up the fare. No one claimed to know for sure.

Mrs. Szotchka never mentioned him to Charley or to anyone else. Louis never returned to Coolidge Springs, the locally proclaimed vacationland of the north. Not much activity there—not enough to hold the young man's attention.

* * *

The sheriff was there in five minutes like he said he would be. Tom Peltz squeezed his bloated midsection out from behind the squad car's steering wheel. Twenty-five years with Mrs. Peltz kept him well fed, but he still had a twice daily habit of jelly-filled donuts. He removed his hat and looked down on Mrs. Szotchka. He admitted that he'd never actually spoken to her in his twenty years as the county sheriff and didn't know much about her other than what he heard. He didn't get out that way

much. Ol' Lady Szotchka never bothered anybody. He had called Doc Ferguson, and then he called Bruce Carole at the funeral home before leaving his office.

Doc was there two minutes after the sheriff. He parked his shiny new blue Mustang right next to Charley's old faded '37 Chevy pickup. It made Charley's old pickup look even shabbier. I was just something Charley used for fishing and for hauling stuff to the dump. Maybe he would give it a good washing tomorrow. Doc was the first in the county to get that sporty new Ford. He was the envy of every teen-age boy in town. It had to be sent up from Milwaukee. The local dealer only had one black hardtop. That was too plain for Doc. Doc got out of his convertible, shooed the goats away and knelt down beside Mrs. Szotchka. He touched her cold neck as if he were checking for a pulse but her pale face offered the immediate truth. He quickly but gently closed her eyes and said, "Yup, she's dead."

Doc was all business this evening. He needed to get out to the Putnam farm—three kids were down with the chicken pox. He looked up at the sheriff eyeing his girth and said, "Tom, aren't you a couple of months behind on your physical? You better call my nurse first chance you get—come in and see me." He signed something, gave it to the sheriff and said his work was done here.

Tom responded with a grunt.

Bruce Carole pulled up with his black hearse just as Doc was leaving, and was almost as quick with his job as was Doc Ferguson.

Tom said since Charley was an "On Call" deputy and probably knew Mrs. Szotchka as well as anyone, he asked him to go along up to her home as a witness. They herded the goats up the trail, through the aspens and alder overgrowth into the rickety old

barn. Five chickens scattered upon their arrival. The summer vegetation kept the house and barn totally secluded from the highway. The goats kept the grass neatly trimmed.

It was just after eight p.m. but the setting sun was still good for another hour of light. It was a nice evening. Plenty of time left for a quick check of the place.

The well was out the front door twenty paces to the left. The outhouse was twenty paces to the right. Her garden was halfway between. It was safely protected from her goats and other predators by a rusty chicken wire fence. The snap beans and sweet peas were flourishing and much of it was ready for picking. The sweetcorn was a robust shoulder high.

Tom led the way as they cautiously ventured into her tiny four room farmhouse. No lock on the door. No electricity. The faded red trim on the window frames and the peeling white paint on the siding had seen better days. It was now just a drafty shack that offered little protection from the mosquitoes that were beginning to mount their evening assault.

The furnishings were sparse—a kerosene lamp on the wooden kitchen table accompanied by three mismatched chairs. There was a calendar from Miller's General Store and an unframed picture of John Kennedy hanging on the wall. It was the carefully snipped cover of *Life Magazine* from August 4, 1961. Stacks of magazines that had been rescued from the town dump were neatly stacked along one wall—a stack for *Look*, one for *Life* and another one for the *Saturday Evening Post.*

There was a pot of stew on the stove. Tom removed the cover and gave an approving nod. The alluring aroma filled the little house. The fire had nearly gone out—just a couple of smoldering coals still in the firebox. The old pine floor boards creaked

over the dugout root cellar below. Tom asked Charley to check it out. It was murky and dank—but nothing more than cobwebs and a few mason jars of sauerkraut and something that appeared to be raspberry preserves on unstable wooden shelves. Charley thought about it for a moment but he left them down there.

Tom lifted the lid of an old steamer trunk that was at the foot of her wrought iron bed. It too was not locked. In the trunk were some of her winter clothes, a heavy brown woolen shawl, a faded white wedding dress, a pair of brown lace-up baby shoes and one pair of knitted pink baby booties.

Tom found a tin box under the old clothes. It looked like at one time it may have been a bright red. That wasn't locked either. He shouted for Charley to get back up there—he found something.

Being aware of all the stories, the sheriff smiled at the thought of what he might find. He motioned Charley over. "Let's have a look," Tom said. "This might put to rest all those rumors."

Inside were two gold wedding bands, along with some old photographs that were neatly bound by string. The largest was an eight by ten wedding portrait of a handsome young couple taken at Lakeside Studio, Chicago, dated 1914. It looked like the wedding dress in the trunk matched the one in the photo.

Another picture—a souvenir postal taken in the same Chicago studio; same couple, but now the young lady is holding a baby. A boy about three or four years old is standing in front of the adults. The boy must be Ludvik. The four of them looked like a proud little family—very well dressed. She was much shorter than the man.

There were a few other pictures that looked even older of other unidentified people—her parents or other relatives Tom surmised. Other than the deed to the forty acres, there were no insurance papers or any other valuables. No birth certificates. No death certificates. Along with the neatly bundled pictures was a folded hand written paper. The language was simple; humble—the penmanship was shaky but stylish.

"To whom it may concern:

"When I die I want the portrait of my husband Joseph, to be buried with me. That is the most important. I want the casket to be a simple pine box. There is some money in a jar in the woodbox. Take that and the rings for the expenses. Please give my goats and chickens to Charley Miller for his farm on the edge of town. He was always good to me. The goats are Bessie, Martha, Francis, Hank, and Little Billy, he's the youngest. They are my treasures. They all know who they are. The chickens don't have names. I had to eat one last year. To me it don't seem right to eat something that has been given a name. All my other belongings and land can go to Ludvik to do with as he wishes. He is in Chicago. He has a telephone but I don't know the number. I think the operator can get it for you. Call him collect."

Signed – Katerina Szotchka: dated May 2, 1965

"So—Katerina was her first name," Charley said. "Nice name."

"Looks like she had written that only a few months ago," Tom said. "I wonder whatever happened to the baby girl that was in the picture. I'll bet she knitted those booties herself."

The sheriff had to move some kindling wood, but the jar was where she said it would be. Inside were thirty-two well traveled one dollar bills. They looked like they

may have been there a long time—hardly the much ballyhooed fortune whispered over clotheslines and between Saturday-night barstools.

Her leather coin purse was hanging on a nail by the door. Tom opened it and found two one dollar bills and loose change amounting to forty-one cents. The change was pennies, nickels and one dime. Most of the pennies were shiny.

Charley spoke up shaking his head from side to side, "As for me, I never believed any of those so-called treasure stories of mysterious money being brought up from Chicago."

Tom replied, "Me neither Charley."

The requested portrait of Joseph—a handsome man, the same man that was in the wedding portrait was hanging above the bed. The large gold-leaf oval frame was elegant. "Somebody must have paid a pretty penny for that," Charley said. "I would have been proud to own that myself."

The sheriff had done his duty and made the collect call to Ludvik that evening. Tom was reminded that he was called Louis now, and although he wouldn't be able make it for the funeral, asked that the sheriff let him know if there was anything he needed to do. He wasn't interested in the old pictures or any other stuff.

* * *

The sheriff and Charley returned to Mrs. Szotchka's place the next morning. The nannies would need to be milked. The chickens most likely left a few eggs to be gathered. Tom generously offered to share his jelly donuts with Charley. Charley

remembered Doc observing Tom's swollen middle and cautioning him to make an appointment. Charley hadn't gained more than five pounds since he was discharged twenty years ago. He took one.

"What are you going to do with those goats and chickens?" Tom asked.

"I don't know. I suppose she had no way of knowing I sold that farm last spring."

Tom steered the squad car up the rough path to the barn. "There weren't any tracks in this path last night, were there Charley?"

"No, I didn't remember seeing any."

"Look over there." Tom pointed toward the well. "Somebody's been digging up here." There were eight holes around the well, eleven more in the garden, two behind the outhouse and five more by the little barn. Most of the beans and peas were trampled and half the corn was bent and broken. Tom entered the house to find the kitchen stove partly dismantled, the stovepipe disconnected leaving piles of soot on the floor, and floorboards pulled up. The neatly piled stacks of magazines had been scattered. The bed had been torn up and holes ripped in the mattress. Everything that had been left in the trunk was strewn on the floor. The stew pot was empty and a quick look in the cellar revealed that the jars of sauerkraut and preserves were gone.

Tom shook his head, "Those damn Baker boys! Besides you, Doc, Bruce and Me, they're the only ones that knew she died last night. I knew Jesse had been drinking when he called, but I didn't say anything. I should have. I've heard them talk about the treasure everybody thought she had. They must have gone straight home and got their shovels." Tom paused, "I'll have a little talk with them. I don't care what flimsy excuses they come up with. I'll get Joey alone—he'll spill. I'll get them to come back up here

and fill in all these holes and put those floorboards back. I know they'd rather do that than have the judge throw the book at them and get locked up for the rest of the summer. I'll have them taking care of the goats too—at least until we can figure out what you're going to do with them."

Charley nodded his approval and went out to the barn and milked the goats and collected two eggs from the hens. Tom took down the portrait of Joseph and put it in the back seat of his squad car for delivery to Bruce at the funeral home.

* * *

It seemed a simple request.

"We've done it before," boasted Bruce. "Sometimes people are buried with some of their jewelry, Bible, favorite books, even a deck of cards, so the portrait of her husband is easy. A lot of the ladies like to be buried with their rosary. One time this old guy wanted a map of the stars." Bruce grinned. "I suppose he thought it would help him find his way around up there."

Father Francis came and said a few kind and inspirational words, but besides Bruce and his wife, there was only the sheriff, Charley and Mrs. Miller there to hear them. Bruce whispered to Charley that when he removed her shoes there was a bunch of old newspapers stuffed in them because they were too large for her.

In accordance with her last requests of simplicity, Bruce arranged for a pauper's funeral. Her tiny stature allowed for her to be placed in the smallest of the adult pine coffins Bruce had in his stockroom. Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Carole chatted with Father

Francis about how sad it was that she had no family, no friends, no money and how she lived such a shabby existence. They all nodded in sad agreement. Their discussion then shifted to the Father's plans for his youth center. Donations were going nicely but a lot more was needed. It will have a small working farm—already a cow and three chickens had been donated. The ladies promised to help with some bake sales and any other collection efforts they could devise—maybe even a rummage sale.

When the women and Father Francis left the room, Bruce carefully placed the portrait of Joseph in the coffin with Mrs. Szotchka—but the lid wouldn't close. The portrait with that elegant frame was too large for the tiny coffin.

After a brief discussion with Tom and Charley, Bruce dialed the operator and made a person-to-person collect call to Louis. They all agreed he should be the one to decide what to do about this dilemma.

It didn't matter to Louis. He suggested that they take the picture out of the frame. Throw it away if they wanted to. What difference could it make? He would call someone when he got the chance and would arrange to sell the property. He was very busy.

Bruce looked at Charley and said, "Charley, you want this frame?" He knew Charley liked the frame.

"Take it Charley," Tom said. "You earned it. If you don't want it, I'll take it. We already know Louis doesn't want it."

"I'd be glad to have it but I still don't know what I'm going to do with those goats and chickens," Charley said.

Bruce carefully laid the portrait of Joseph on his work table face side down. The paper backing on the frame was old and brittle and had loosened over the years. Tom and Charley watched intently as if Bruce were performing a delicate operation. Charley said jokingly, "Be careful with my frame." Bruce cautiously began to separate the backing from the frame and uncovered the corner of a fifty dollar bill. Not just any fifty dollar bill—it was a gold certificate with a 1913 date.

He nearly choked when he found more neatly pressed bills; fives, tens, twenties and more fifties dating as far back as the 1880's. Most were common silver certificates, but there were more gold certificates, some red seals and a two dollar Union Note from 1862.

Charley couldn't believe what he was witnessing after her unabashed negotiations with him all these years *[two cents for an old can of beans—a penny for a dented can of peaches!]*.

Charley suggested to Bruce that they call an old army buddy of his—a numismatist in Milwaukee. They sorted through the treasure and gave Charley's friend a detailed inventory of the find. It didn't take him long; he was familiar with most of these bills. He speculated that they could easily bring forty to fifty thousand dollars at an auction.

Bruce could only shake his head, "Don't that beat all? That old lady lived like a beggar and thought she was going to take it all with her when she died. I've never seen anything like it."

Father Francis looked in to say his goodbyes and saw the shocked faces, "Is there anything I can do?"

Charley looked at Tom, Tom looked at Bruce, and Bruce looked at Charley. They all looked at Father Francis. Finally Charley said, “We should call Louis again.”

It must have rung a dozen times. The operator finally said, “I’m sorry sir, but your party does not wish to accept the charges.”

END