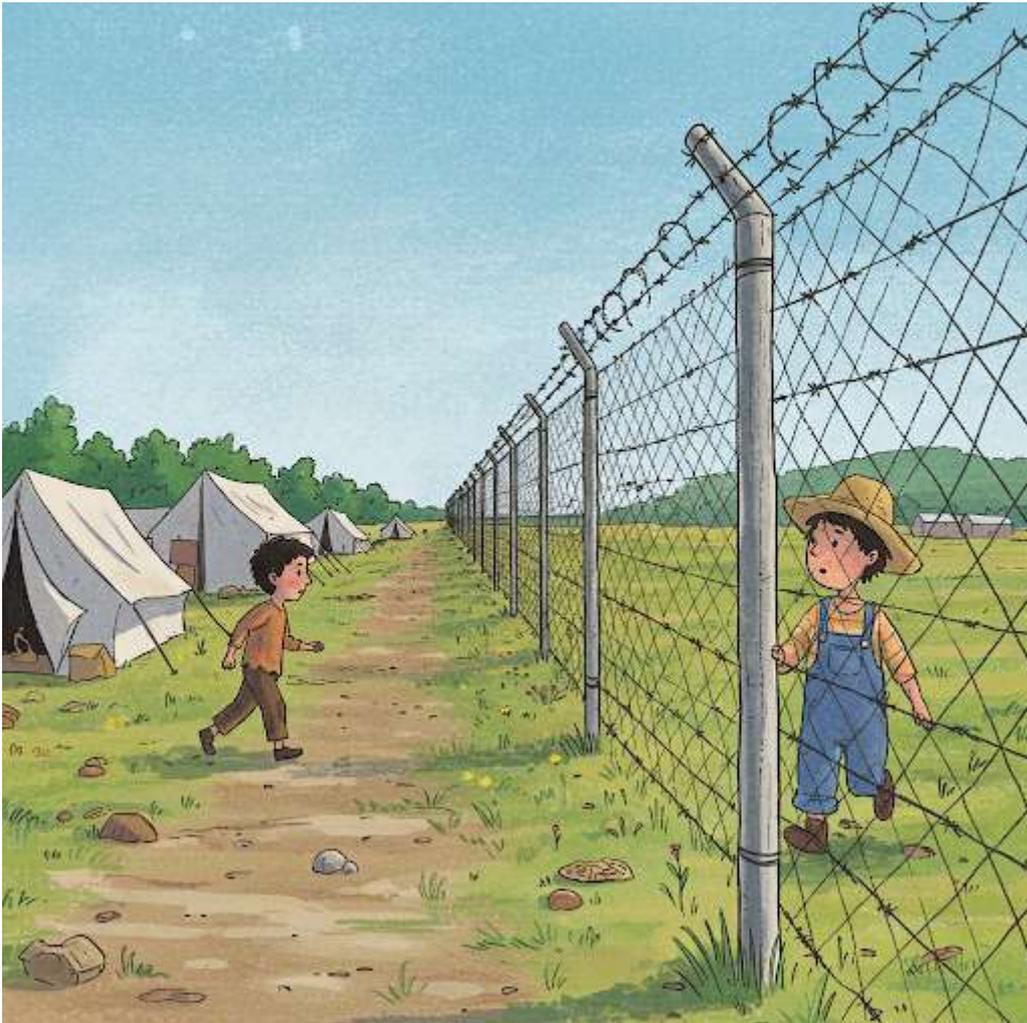


## THE REFUGEE

(Excerpt)



In a farmhouse beyond the strip of parched land through which the barbed-wire fence marked the border between the two countries, lived Vasil—a restless boy, spirited as a colt, with a peculiar talent for getting into trouble.

One of his problems was dozing right above his head at that very moment: a goose. The animal woke from its stupor with a resentful honk when Vasil swatted it away from his pillow.

“Enough!” he exclaimed, sitting up.

It was one thing to share his pillow with the adorable chick of the early days and quite another with the sturdy goose it had become after two months of careful feeding on corn, worms, and snails.

The first light of day streamed through his window, facing the vegetable patch. He yearned to sneak out and see if anyone had managed to jump the fence, but leaving unnoticed was impossible now that the goose entered his life. Whether he left her in the room or took her outside, she'd trumpet like a broken alarm clock—rousing a poultry pandemonium that sent his parents leaping from bed, rifles in hand, their eternal fear of an immigrant attack snapping into focus.

The incident that made him father of such a noisy, possessive creature occurred one morning in early spring. Like all local boys, he helped with farm chores, one of which was tending the goose eggs during incubation. He'd mastered turning them, maintaining perfect warmth and humidity, and spotting the duds. That day, he had taken two adult geese to the shed so that, with their loving protective instinct, they would take charge of the goslings about to hatch. But as he was moving the eggs, one slipped from his hands and rolled downhill with exasperating ease. A heap of endless chores kept him from going down to fetch it until over an hour had passed.

The gosling had begun breaking its shell but given up. With no mother goose to encourage it—no shadow of her plump body, no chorus of siblings waging the same battle—its surrender was only natural. Vasil's heart ached imagining the terror of

that lonely struggle. He knew that kind of loneliness too well—the way it gnawed at your courage. His fingers hovered over the fragile shell.

Luckily, the creature was merely pausing. Perhaps stirred by Vasil’s shadow filtering through the eggshell, it rallied and began pecking weakly again. The boy couldn’t resist helping.

The gosling was born into the cradle of his hands. He named her Dana and hid her in his room for four days—until her relentless peeping gave him away. His parents intended to move her to the yard, but their resolve melted when they saw the yellow puffball toddled after Vasil like a shadow.

He dressed hurriedly and glared at Dana, now blocking the door, impatient to leave. Then his eyes lit up: he remembered birds calmed down when their eyes were covered.

He grabbed the first handkerchief to hand, yanked it with a quick snap to straighten it, and flopped it over her head. Without pause, he tucked her under his arm and marched out.

“Don’t be mad,” he whispered. “Once we’re past the fields, you can honk all you want.”

He sprinted down the rocky slope to the arid plain where the farmland ended and set her free. The goose spun wildly, like a top, and Vasil burst into laughter. After the dizzying display, she shook her feathers with dignity and trailed after him with the ceremonial devotion of a disciple following a star.

A strange, thick fog hung in the air, but Vasil pressed on, confident he’d slip back into bed before his mother woke him for school.

But things don’t always go as planned.