

Skiing to Africa in a Single Day

Valerii Shevchuk

Kolia poked the map with his finger and said that was Africa.

“What do you mean, Africa?” said Joanna.

Kolia ran up to his mother, who was combing her hair at the mirror. Tugging at her dress, he said, “She doesn’t believe the map shows Africa!”

“It does,” said Mother.

“See!” said Kolia, victorious.

Mother stopped combing her hair—she was acting strange today. She sat down and let her raised hands fall on her head.

“What’s she doing?” asked Joanna.

Kolia replied that Mother was in a bad mood today.

Then they started to look over the supplies they kept in the old suitcase. Kolia called it their gunnysack, but Father said, “Gunnysack—that’s not what it is at all!”

“It is too!” said Kolia. His father just laughed.

The gunnysack held various things: a coffee substitute called “Baltica,” a half-opened packet of salt, some oatmeal, flour, and matches. Outside the window there was also a piece of dried sausage. It had been spotted by a couple of great tits, who pecked away at it. When Kolia saw what they were doing, he wrapped the sausage in wire netting. The birds kept coming and pecking, but they couldn’t grab anything. Kolia stood at the window and laughed.

“So why are you laughing?” asked Joanna.

“Now they can’t get at it!” said Kolia.

Joanna looked through the window and wrinkled her small nose.

“They’re hungry, those poor tits!” she said.

Kolia just shrugged, and that offended Joanna. When he went out to play, she opened the window and made a small hole in the netting.

“What do you think this is, summer?” said Mother, coming up behind her. Joanna replied that she needed some fresh air. Mother, surprised, allowed her to go out and play.

Joanna got up on her skis and skied down a hill. At the bottom she fell,

legs askew. Vic, the neighbor boy, guffawed loudly and pointed his finger at her; his friend Alex laughed too.

Joanna got up.

"So why are you looking?" she said.

She went off a ways but didn't ski down again. Vic yawned and turned around to go back to his own yard. Alex yawned too and followed him.

Kolia ran up.

"Want to go to Africa on Sunday?" he asked.

"How?" said Joanna.

"Why, on skis," said Kolia. "But if you don't want to go, you don't have to. I'm not really asking you—except then there'd be nobody to do the cooking."

Joanna, dismayed, announced that she did want to go. When they were back indoors, she started thinking about Africa. When Mother came in, Joanna asked, "Can you really get to Africa in a day?"

"Of course," said Mother, laughing. "But it's very far."

Then Father came in, and he and Mother began to talk about something incomprehensible. Kolia opened the gunnysack and carefully looked through the supplies.

Mother bent over him and said, "When you grow up, this will all seem foolishness."

"Why are you in a bad mood today?" asked Kolia, and Mother, amazed, exchanged looks with Father.

"What do you know about being in a bad mood?" said Mother.

Kolia replied that he wasn't a little kid any more.

The next day Kolia went over to take a look at the sausage. The tits had nibbled it through the hole.

Kolia cried, "Get lost!" He opened the window and patched the hole carefully.

"They're hungry," said Joanna.

"I don't care about that old sausage," said Kolia. "But if they eat it, then what'll we have for the road?"

Then Father came in and said, "What do you think this is, summer?"

Kolia quickly shut the window. A man had come with Father and together they began to talk about beams, boards, and floor measurements—things of no interest at all. Kolia bent over his gunnysack, studying something. His face, with eyebrows knitted together, was a study in concentration, as his lips muttered calculations he alone understood. Joanna went up to him, and they began talking about Africa.

On Sunday they got into their ski outfits. Kolia shouldered the knapsack and said, "*They* don't have to know. We'll go, and when we get back, we'll tell them all about it." They put on their skis and off they went.

The snow dazzled and sparkled. Kolia was cheerful and started to tell Joanna about Africa. It's a very interesting place, he said, and everything

there is different than it is here—in Africa there are hippos, giraffes, and zebras. And the people there are so completely black, from head to toe, that they're called negroes, and since they're almost completely black, they walk around with almost no clothes on.

The silvery snow glistened, blinding them. Going to Africa was grand. Kolia kept laughing, and his laughter was wonderful. Later they skied down a hill and Joanna didn't fall. The snow was packed and smooth, their faces were rosy and bright—everything was perfect. They skied for a long time. All around stretched enormous fields, and woods shimmered in a blue daze in the distance as their skis glided on and on, swooshing merrily. Then, after a while, Joanna said that she was tired. Kolia turned around and glared at her.

"I knew this would happen! How can anybody get anywhere with someone like you?! I'll never get anywhere with someone like you!"

Joanna looked at him, dismayed.

"But I ... but I didn't mean anything!"

The woods lay ahead. Finally they reached them and skied in among the trees. The rustling of the pines made a soft, low sound, and snow lay on the branches like fluffy baseball caps. An enchanted silence took your breath away. Kolia stood on his tip-toes and shouted, "A-hoy-y-y!"

The woods replied, echoes reverberating into the distance.

Then Joanna said she had a blister on her foot and couldn't go any farther. Kolia turned around again, ready to scold. But a scared, wide-eyed little face was looking up at him. Her teeth were biting her lower lip and strands of hair were sticking to her sweaty forehead. Kolia felt a strange warmth inside. He recognized that this small person was doing everything he asked, and that he was the older one here.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go home."

Relieved, Joanna tucked a strand of hair under her scarf. They took off their skis and started walking through the snow. Then they chanced on a path, and the way became easy.

"Want to stop and eat?" asked Kolia.

They sat down under a pine tree and ate their bread and dried sausage.

"Pretty good, isn't it?" he said.

"Uh-huh," said Joanna, her mouth full.

They were getting cold, so they began to run. But the cold still bothered them, so they put their skis back on. They skied down a slope—it wasn't really a slope, just a slanting incline, so all you had to do was set your poles once in a while and you'd make it down. The snow swooshed noisily under their skis, and a sweet, delicious tiredness filled them through and through.

"We'll probably get yelled at when we get home," said Kolia.

"That doesn't matter," said Joanna. "They'll yell, but then they'll stop."

They walked into the house with heads bowed low, Kolia hiding the knapsack behind his back and Joanna crunching her wet gloves.

"Where were you?"

"We went to Africa," said Joanna.

"So!" said Mother, bursting with mirth. "They went to Africa! Skied to Africa—and got there in a single day! Now go change, you two!"

But Mother didn't sound angry at all. The smile on her face lingered as Kolia and Joanna darted off into the next room.

"Imagine that!" she said to their father. "They went to Africa! Skied to Africa in a single day!"

"We go to Africa too, sometimes," he replied with a grin.

"What'd he say?" Joanna was asking Kolia.

"He said that they go to Africa too sometimes," said Kolia.

Joanna shrugged her small shoulders. They looked at each other and plopped down on the couch happily.

Translated by Uliana Pasicznyk

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