

“It was a dark day,” Papa told us, “when the Romanovs fell.”

Aleksandr and I listened, enthralled, as Papa’s words seemed to circle the room. We had heard the same story many times, but always asked for it to be told when Mama was out. She feared Papa telling us such tales, saying the walls had ears and should someone hear us, the consequences were unimaginable. Papa had always waved her off, insisting there was no harm in us learning the truth, but we had the unspoken agreement to hear the story when it was just the three of us at home.

“The Bolsheviks had taken the Imperial family to Ipatiev House to be held, so the Whites couldn’t reach them.”

“Were you a White Papa?” Aleksandr asked, even though we already knew the answer.

“Why yes, my boy, I was, but I was young, barely in my twenties.”

“That’s not young! Is it Anni?”

“Alek!” I giggled. “Let Papa tell the story.”

Papa tickled Aleksandr under the chin. “Listen to your sister Alek, and hush, otherwise I won’t finish my tale.”

Aleksandr was subdued, and rested his head against Papa’s chest, the fire in the hearth giving his face a gentle glow.

“As I was saying, the Romanov family were in Ipatiev House, awaiting their fate. The White Army was approaching Ekaterinburg, and we believed we could liberate the Romanovs.”

“But the Bolsheviks didn’t want that to happen.”

“Yes Alek, they didn’t. When they saw how close we were, how much support we had, they took the coward’s way out. In the early morning one day in late July, twenty years ago, the Imperial family were woken from their slumber.”

Aleksandr squirmed in Papa’s lap. He didn’t like the next part of the story, even if we both possessed a morbid curiosity for it.

“The Bolsheviks had issued a death sentence, and the family was shot. The children, however we believe, had vast amounts of jewels sewn into their clothes, so were not killed by the gunfire. Instead the soldiers...”

The front door opened, and Mama stepped into the apartment. She had clearly caught the end of Papa’s sentence, and I could see her hands trembling in frustration. “Ivan! I thought we discussed this.”

Papa turned his head to face Mama. “Natalya, the children have a right to know.”

“But they are just that Ivan, children!”

Aleksandr slid off Papa’s lap, and sat crossed legged on the rug. Mama looked down at him, then at me, as if just remembering we were still there.

“Aleksandr, Annika, to your room.”

“But Mama...”

“Go.”

I took Aleksandr’s small hand in mine, and pulled him through the door to our shared room.

Tears welled up in his eyes as he sat on his bed. “Anni, I don’t like it when Mama gets angry at Papa.”

“I know Alek, but hush now so I can hear what they are saying.”

Aleksandr wiped his eyes and sniffed several times, before composing himself enough to come and sit beside me by the door. I held a finger to my lips, and he nodded. Together, we pressed our ears to the wood.

“It is ridiculous Ivan, to tell them such tales. I have said this many times!”

“They want to hear Natalya.”

“They are children! They should not be exposed to the graphic nature of your stories.”

“Lenin and now Stalin stand behind a podium of lies Natalya, lies that I shall not allow Alek and Anni to believe.”

“You don’t know what happened to the Romanovs. No one does!”

Aleksandr and I exchanged a look. This was a part of the tale that we had not been told.

“The rumours, they dance through the streets. The Mladorossi...”

My mind stumbled over the unfamiliar word. I rose up on my knees to peer through the keyhole, and saw Mama’s face in a contortion of pain and disbelief.

“I cannot believe you Ivan.”

“The Grand Duke Kirill Vladimirovich is the rightful heir to the Romanov House.”

“You said you would put your monarchist obsession behind you when we had the children. That is why we left Leningrad!”

“It’s not right Natalya, royal blood should be on the throne, not the communists.”

“Saying things like that is what gets people killed!”

Aleksandr gasped, and I slapped my hand over his mouth, but it was too late. Mama’s footsteps thudded towards us and the door swung open. I craned my head around her dress, praying to see Papa behind her so he could explain what had been said. Instead, I saw him pull his coat off the hook, place his hat out his head and storm out of the front door. I looked up at Mama, and watched as her expression softened.

“My dears, you were not supposed to be listening to that.”

“Mama?” Aleksandr’s bottom lip trembled. “Is Papa going to be killed?”

Mama’s face crumbled. “I don’t know my sweet. I don’t know.” She engulfed us both in a tight hug, and there we sat all through the night, our tears running together as one. That was the last time Aleksandr and I requested the story of the Romanovs.

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Papa returned the next morning, with a small bouquet of flowers for Mama and some chocolate squares for me and Aleksandr. He hugged us tightly, and promised that he and Mama had just got carried away with their argument last night, and that there was nothing for us to worry about. I was unconvinced, but the chocolate had swayed Aleksandr. I wondered where Papa had been all night, but from the looks Mama and Papa were exchanging, I knew that it was best not to ask. As the day went on, their stilted temperaments and awkward gazes gave way to small smiles and fleeting kisses. It seemed that they were happy again. Aleksandr ploughed his way through his homework as I helped Mama with the household chores, watching Papa as he came in and out of his office. The day retained no traces of the argument the night before.

At dinner, Papa was all smiles. He made a funny face out of the wilted lettuce on Aleksandr's plate and gave me his helping of potatoes. It was strange how much the atmosphere had changed in such a short amount of time.

"Now Annika." Mama regarded me with a warm gaze. "After we finish eating, you must go to your bedroom and not come out until tomorrow. We need some time to get your surprises ready." I nodded, gulping down the final potato.

Aleksandr bounced in his seat. "Do I get to help you get ready for Anni's birthday?"

"Of course you do Alek, but first..." Papa suddenly grabbed me under the arms and lifted me out of my chair, swinging me around to face my bedroom doorway. "Off you go, until tomorrow not-so-little Anni." He planted a kiss on my head before pushing me gently into my room, shutting the door behind me. I giggled and changed into my pyjamas, washing my face in the sink by the wall. Aleksandr's laughs seeped through the door as I heard pots being moved and the scratch of crayons against card. My bed creaked as I climbed into it and I laid my head on the pillow, my stomach doing circles in excited anticipation. The voices outside the bedroom quietened, and the door opened to reveal Aleksandr padding in to go to bed. I squeezed my eyes shut as Aleksandr leaned down to see if I was asleep, his breath warm on my face. He seemed to be satisfied, and climbed into his bed and quickly dozed off. Eventually, I fell asleep to his steady breaths.

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"Happy Birthday Anni!" Aleksandr jumped on my bed, jerking me awake.

"Alek!" I swatted my hand at him and he rolled off the bed, running out of the room. Laughing, I got out of bed and followed him. Mama was standing by the dining table, an envelope in her hands and three tulips bursting out of a small glass vase. She looked on edge, and her smile was slightly strained. Aleksandr ran up to her and took the envelope out of her hands, presenting it to me with a flourish. "This is what I did for you."

"Thank you Alek." As I started to peel open the envelope, I looked into the kitchen. "Where's Papa?"

Mama wouldn't look me in the eye. "He's just popped out, he'll be back soon." I pulled back the flap of the envelope and slid the card out. Aleksandr had drawn fireworks and a pink cake, a large 12 scrawled in purple crayon. "It's lovely Alek." I placed the card on the mantelpiece and went in to hug Aleksandr, but he darted away and ducked behind a chair. Mama looked like she was about to reprimand him, but Papa flung open the front door and bounded inside. "Happy birthday Anni!" He picked me up and swung me around the room, and I squealed in excitement. Aleksandr ran up to him for a turn, and Papa complied happily. Mama looked on, worry evident in her face.

"Ivan? You seem awfully enthusiastic."

"Of course he is Mama!" Aleksandr almost shouted from where he was being swung around.

"It's Anni's birthday!"

Papa placed Aleksandr down on the floor, and pivoted to face Mama. "It's happening Natalya. It's finally happening."

“Papa?” Aleksandr looked confused. Mama looked like she was about to explode. “Ivan, what have you done?”

“It’s not what I’ve done, it’s what is going to be done!” Papa picked Aleksandr back up and held him in the air. “All will be right in Russia again!”

Mama pulled Aleksandr from Papa, fuming. “What. Have. You. Done?!”

“Royalty will be on the throne again in Russia.”

“That’s treason Ivan.” Her voice was dangerously low.

“Treason or not, it is what is right.”

Mama finally burst. “He has passed a decree Ivan!”

“What?”

“Stalin! It’s not just you who can be punished for treason now! He’ll punish children from the age of twelve for their parents’ actions!”

Realisation dawned on Papa’s face, and he very slowly turned to look at me. I felt like I was about to be sick.

“But they wouldn’t…”

There was a loud cry from outside down on the street. Aleksandr shot straight to the window and peered downwards. Footsteps thundered on the stairs of our apartment building as Mama pulled Aleksandr back. Her face was ghostly pale. She grabbed my hand and ushered me and Aleksandr quickly into our bedroom. “Under the bed.” Her voice was sharp and clipped, stripped of all the warmth usually in it.

“What’s going on?” I had an awful pit at the bottom of my stomach, my heart thumping alongside the noise of military boots echoing in the hallway. Mama kissed Aleksandr on his forehead, then pushed him under my bed frame. She turned to me and held my face in her hands, her eyes wet with tears. “Do not come out, unless it is I telling you to. You have to promise me.”

“But what about Papa?”

“Annika, promise me.”

I swallowed, a long hard swallow that stayed with me for far longer than it should have.”I promise.”

“Good girl.” Mama kissed me on the nose, then pushed me under the bed so I was lying beside Aleksandr. I took his hand as Mama yanked down the blanket so it touched the floor, obscuring us from view. I shifted forwards, just enough to see out into the living room. Mama had barely stood up when the front door was kicked off its hinges, and three men with huge black guns slung across their bodies marched in.

“Ivan Kuznetsov,” The men stood in a perfect line blocking the front doorway. “You are under arrest for treason against the Soviet Union and our great leader.”

Papa spat on the floor. “Great leader my behind.”

One of the men slapped him across the face.

Papa staggered backwards clutching his cheek. Mama rushed to his side and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, tears pouring freely down her face. “Please, he doesn’t know what he is saying.”

The man who had struck Papa seemed to be the one in charge. He indicated to the soldier beside him, who suddenly cocked his gun, and rose the barrel upwards to point at Mama and Papa. Papa stepped in front of the Mama as the man in charge began to walk around the living room. He ran a finger along the windowsill tauntingly, and came to a stop in front of the mantelpiece, where my birthday card stood out defiantly among the chipped ornaments. He picked it up between two fingers, and twirled it lazily in the air. "Twelve is such a fragile age, is it not?" His eyes slid over my parents, and seemed to find me in the darkness under the bed. He smiled, a cunning, unpleasant smile, before ripping the birthday card into shreds.

Mama made a strangled sound and clutched onto Papa's arm. The man let the pieces of coloured card waft to the ground before taking his eyes away from me. "Take them outside." The man strode towards the door as the other two soldiers stood either side of Mama and Papa and grabbed their arms. Mama shook her head frantically. "Please, please have mercy, we have children, they are so young..." One of the soldiers holstered his gun and held it under Mama's chin. "Not another word. We are the NKVD, we will be obeyed without protest." His voice had a chilling edge to it. Aleksandr squirmed in horror behind me and I rolled over, wrapping my arms tight around him and pulling him close to me. We listened together as Papa's soft leather soles and Mama's heeled shoes joined the sound of the military boots on the staircase. The noise slowly lessened until the door at the bottom of the flight was swung open, and the soldiers came out onto the street. Every voice that we had previously heard went quiet. I strained my ears as I heard mumbles of voices, the words flitting in through the crack in our bedroom window. A small seed of hope blossomed inside of me as I no longer heard the sound of boots, and prayed that that meant Mama and Papa were going to be let go.

"ON YOUR KNEES." The thunderous voice made me jump, and Aleksandr pressed himself closer to my chest. He must have been able to hear my heartbeat as I could in my ears, a constant thump, thump, thump.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Mama screamed. Her begging and sobs turned into hyperventilations, her voice nothing but a piercing wail.

Bang.

There was silence. Aleksandr started to cry.