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The Day the Roads Ran Red

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My knees burned as they hit the snow, ripples of shock ran all over me. I stared after the shadowy figures in disbelief as they turned away from each other. My eyes ached and dried tears clung to my cheeks, refusing to fall any further. My throat hurt from the piercing winter air that clawed at my neck. I tried to scream after them, but my words had frozen. I traced their respective footprints with each of my arms, clutching the only piece of them that I had left. My Papa and Mama knelt in front of me, their frantic footsteps stirring up the calm snow.

I lifted my head up to face theirs. They had not cried or screamed after them; but in that moment both looked as if they had been tasked to bear the brunt of the universe. Neither Papa nor Mama spoke but I knew. We had lost them.

The January air bit at my feet and clawed at my arms and neck. I wrapped my arms around my stomach that growled with hunger, it tended not to do much else nowadays. Papa watched the door eagerly, waiting for Pavel to arrive back from his outing with workers in the Putilov Iron Works plant.

Pavel and Papa shared a bond that Igor and I were not privy to. They both had a similar mindset. It had been drilled into Papa that when the opportunity to work arose, he should seize it. Manual work was that which Papa admired the most, the physical act of working hard. No matter how little his wages were, if he felt he had worked well he would endure it. He never cared particularly for intellectuals or politics, although he had better sense than to dare to admit that aloud. Igor scoffed when he saw him. The opposite of his twin, Igor loved thought-provoking questions and was always preaching to me about the power of words. Despite this, he worked at the same factory as Papa further up the river Neva, although I knew that he loathed it there. He would come back covered in dirt, his lungs filled with some substance or the other that gave him a chronic cough. His light brown hair would take on a greyish tinge after a day's work and no matter how much he washed it. The grey seemed to have embedded into his roots by now, making him look like a shadow in dim lighting. Papa did not display any of these symptoms, he would come back as healthy as he ever was. Pavel and I would joke that Papa came out of the womb ready to handle a furnace. The only person that Igor truly felt akin to was Mama, the two of them had their own unwavering bond.

"What's for dinner my love?" Papa asked finally

"Same as always, Shchi."

I had grown to become grateful for the watery cabbage that was placed before me for my meals, it was not a lot by any means but at least for a moment it stopped the pain in my stomach.

"Any bread today?" Igor said, peering around Mama to search for the bread.

"No."

Igor looked disappointed but I had grown to expect that by now. There never seemed to be enough bread to go around in St Petersburg anymore, and this time we were the ones that were cut off.

"Do not worry my dear." Mama said sensing our disappointment, "I will go even earlier tomorrow, then we will be bound to have bread."

She had promised us that yesterday.

The evening dragged on and the cold continued to burrow its way into my body determined to reach my bones, and Pavel had still not returned. Papa had allowed us to begin without him and now an awkward silence hung in the air. He had never missed a meal before. I helped Mama clear the table and his was the only bowl remaining. A thin, gelatinous film had begun to form on top of his meal, the soup now as cold and the air around us. Mama looked out of the window, then touched her neck, then looked at Papa and back out of the window again. She had been doing this for 10 minutes before she finally dropped down into a chair and looked across at Papa, her eyes swimming in worry.

"Where is he?"

"He mentioned he would be around the Narva Gate." Papa frowned.

"He is probably enjoying himself." Igor sighed, but I could see that even he was worried too. Pavel liked to have fun, but he was always back in time for meals, this was the first mealtime he had ever missed.

"He is not in trouble, is he?"

"No, no, Pavel is a good, obedient boy." Papa reassured her, but by now anything could be a possibility.

We sat around for a few more minutes in silence. It was agony, I swung my legs back and forth, calming myself. I dug my nails into my palms and stared straight ahead of me, I would do anything to get those fearful thoughts out of my head, thoughts that everyone shared. Why has Pavel not come home yet? Was he hur-

Papa jerked out of his chair, interrupting my train of thought.

"I am going to find him." He threw his coat back on and headed for the door, but he did not get far when a shadowy figure stood in the doorway. Papa enveloped him in a warm embrace and beckoned him to his chair, throwing his own coat over Pavel's thin shoulders. "Eat, eat my boy, you must be exhausted."

But Pavel refused to lift the spoon.

"What's wrong darling?" Mama touched his arm concerned.

Slowly and timidly, Pavel raised his arms onto the table and extended his hands. They had flecks of metallic red on them that had dried and hardened. I squinted to see what it could be but my Mama's gasp I became certain. Pavel hands were speckled with blood.

"What did you do?" Igor questioned aghast.

"I didn't do this, they did!" He trembled, "They did all of this."

"Who did?"

Pavel gulped and clenched his fists the way I do when I am nervous. "The Cossacks." He whispered.

I stared ahead, confused. The Cossacks had no reason to, why would they harm some workers having fun.

They had no motive. "Why?" I asked

"Why what?" Pavel replied confused

"You were with your friends, so why would they harm you? You were just having some fun."

This got me a glare across the table from Pavel to make me to keep quiet.

"You were just having some fun, right?" I squeaked.

He bowed his head and shut his eyes, his hair drooping in front of his forehead. From there he spoke, "Not exactly. I was...at a protest."

My feet had begun to lose all movement from the chill, but my eyes could still stare ahead at him in disbelief.

"It...it...it was peaceful. My fellow workers and I went to a peaceful protest led by Father Gapon. We wanted to deliver a petition calling for better rights for industrial workers, you know what it's like in the factories, Papa." He looked at our father for guidance, "The conditions are deplorable, and we do not earn nearly enough to live on, we just wanted to make the Tsar aware of our plight. We weren't trying to overthrow him! But...but they shot at us. The roads ran red with blood."

"It's alright my boy. Sit down. It is over now."

"Alright?!" Igor now rose to meet Pavel too. "How is this alright? He went to a protest Papa, and a protest is still a protest, peaceful or not."

"Igor, watch your tongue! Your brother has been through a lot today."

"Of course, you believe that! You always side with Pavel."

"This isn't about who Papa sides with Igor." Pavel interjected, "The Cossacks shouldn't have fired on the civilians when they were being peaceful."

"How were the Cossacks supposed to know?" Igor shouted back "They saw a large group heading towards them chanting the name of the Tsar, they were trying to protect their king and do their duty to their motherland."

"How...how were they supposed to know? Because we were carrying *no* weapons! That's how they were supposed to know," Pavel slammed his hand down on the table, flicking his Shchi onto the floor, "and aren't you talking like a sympathiser!" At the mention of that word my eyes locked into Igor's. That one word that could make or break you in society. Igor thought the same as me and narrowed his eyes, contemplating whether it should make or break him.

"We live in a country where he rules us, so I should hope that I am and that are not betraying him."

"Is it truly a crime to demand better rights? Communism states that we deserve equality. The revolution is coming Igor."

"Yes, it is a crime when there are other ways to go about it!"

"How so?" Pavel leaned across the table, his grey eyes daring his brother to challenge him.

"You didn't have to protest for a start!" Igor grabbed Pavel by his shirt, shaking him vigorously. I covered my head in my arms and ran to Mama who held me tightly.

"Boys, stop fighting, you are scaring Olga."

"You have been in the factories to Igor, you have seen how we are treated. Why should that not get better for us?"

"The Tsar designed the factories to be fair, what he says is the law."

"What if the law is wrong?"

Igor scoffed at this and grabbed his coat.

"Where are you going?" Mama asked following him.

Igor did not reply but continued to march towards the door and out of the house. From the window I could hear their raised voices and the way in which Igor turns to leave but Mama keeps pulling him back. Back inside. Back to the table. Back to us. The arguing outside seemed to never end, my heart pounded in my chest. After listening to Mama's pleas, Pavel too threw on his coat and ran down the stairs, followed by Papa. He shouted at Igor for picking a fight. Mama shouted at Pavel for retaliating. Papa and Mama shouted at each other for letting this happen. Everyone shouted at everyone. I stood and watched by the window, allowing a tear to drip down my face but it froze before it could fall.

I wanted it all to be over, the arguing, the protests, the choosing sides. I did not want us to be Tsarists or Communists, I wanted us to be a family. Those two words that could determine the outcome of this argument, the outcome of how that protest will be perceived, the outcome of our country. I shivered as I realised that it would not be physical fights that would stir the revolution, it would be words. Words like Tsarist, reform and equality, words that until now had not been uttered in our home. A stiffness rose in my throat as I watched my family tear at each other below, each word ripping the fabric of our life even further. Then it broke. The road below seemed to run red as my brothers began to walk away. The once pristine snow now an upturned mess. I tore down the stairs as fast as my sore legs would carry me, out into the bitter air that scraped my lungs. I turned to see Igor's shadowy figure pull away. I spun around again to see Pavel's shadowy outline march into the distance. I turned around in the snow, until I could turn no more.

My knees burned as they hit the snow, ripples of shock ran all over me. The revolution was coming. But it would come at the price of my family. I wanted so desperately for it all to be over. I wanted that day end. The day the roads ran red.