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Before.

THE HEELS OF MILITARY BOOTS, STRIKING MARBLE FLOORS, made a sound like thrown stones. The old man knew that agents were hunting for him. He capped the inkwell and shook his pen. In his haste, he splattered the pale French wallpaper around his desk. That will look like spots of dried blood, he thought, my blood.

He wrapped sheets of paper around his forearms, then pulled down the sleeves of his monk's robe. He threw on his greatcoat against the cold. He put his steel-nibbed pen in his breast pocket. Were he lucky enough to survive, he might leave record of how he had come to this.

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This is where I am inclined to start, with my own abduction. You will think me overly interested in myself. Or worse, melodramatic. I can't help that. If *you're* ever dragged from your chambers at midnight, blindfolded and gagged, without being told whether you're off to a firing squad or a surprise birthday party, you'll find that you turn and return to that pivotal moment. If you survive the surprise.

Sooner or later you realize that everything you experience, especially something like being arrested, is never only about *you*. Your life story is really about how the hands of history caught you up, played with you, and you with them. History plays for keeps; individuals play for time.

When soldiers broke down the door to my palace apartments, I thought I was headed for a rendezvous with death. The men were rough, the way young men frightened of their own strength can be. Their mutters, their coded syllables, I couldn't understand them.

I was rushed down a back staircase, I was hustled toward a carriage. Before they knotted a blindfold about my bleeding head, I saw ravens fighting over the corpse of a rat. Ravens aren't usually nocturnal, but hunger can be.

I wasn't shot. Instead, I was locked in a tower on the outskirts of the empire.

At first I scraped the wall with a sharp stone to mark the days. I bunched the scratches in sevens. Then I fell sick, and lost count while in a fever, and when I recovered, I was too discouraged to begin again.

But this story is not about me.

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I should explain about living in custody.

From the start, food and medicine came up to me daily, in a bucket tied to a hoist. Right away, I began to send letters by return bucket. One letter a day, for several years. Begging the Tsar to forgive me my part in the plot, to release me. Explaining to him, as I do to you now, how it all came to pass. It was a gamble. Tsars resent insubordination. I was imprisoned for helping a prisoner escape from prison. Ironic, isn't it.

I didn't know if, at the bottom of the rope, my letters were laughed at and thrown away. Or if my entreaties were sent to the court of the Tsar. Now and then, however, more writing supplies arrived.

I was afraid that one day the Tsar might become tired of hearing from me and order me killed. I tried to keep my letters vivid so he would wait for each one daily. The Scheherazade strategy. Though I may only have been entertaining my anonymous sentries below.

In those years I didn't see a human soul, except through the gaze of my memory or my imagination.

I had a single narrow window. I could identify anything viewed from a distance: the celestial parade, the windswept barrens. Nothing near.

With my good eye, I saw birds and landscape, landscape and birds. The birds came close at first — larks, curious wrens, stupid pigeons, as I thought then. They soon learned that I wouldn't spread crumbs for them on my window ledge. I didn't have enough to spare. They stopped visiting.

At first I watched the birds against the sky, their shadows

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against the ground. Then I followed birds in my mind. I thought of it as peering with my blind eye: seeing what the birds could see, or had seen in the past, about what had happened to bring me to this prison tower. I put together what I knew for certain with what my visions now told me. I wrote what I saw to the Tsar.

Take, for instance, those birds. Everywhere, birds. Have you stopped to think that on a sunny day, almost every bird casts a shadow?

It's true. When an eagle floats over the icy peaks, his shadow slides upslope and down, a blue cloth. The hawk and the hummingbird: big shadow and small. Even the duck in a millpond drags her ducky umbrage in the mud.

The sparrow in cities, on a spree with her thousand cousins. Have you noticed? As sparrows wheel over the basilica, they scatter shadows like handprints on the spiral wooden ribs and ribbons of those turnip domes. Sparrows even come between the sun and the high windows of the Winter Palace of the Tsar. How dare they, the Tsar said once. He had a headache.

I know this because he told me so. I once had the ear of the Tsar.

Anyway.

Yes, all birds cast shadows on bright days. Except for one. The Firebird, bright soul of all the Russias, casts no shadow.

You can't be surprised at that. What, after all, could the shadow of light be? No such thing. It is a trick, a paradox. It hurts to think about it.

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However, they say any mortal boy or girl who can snatch a tail feather of this bird . . . well, that child can make a wish that will come true. Why a child and not, say, a robber-baron industrialist or a society dame? Or even some goofy naturalist collecting specimens in the badlands? I don't know. The stories are always about children.

Now, in his line of work, a monk meets few children. If any of them ever made wishes that came true, they didn't tell me about it. Why should they? I might not have believed them anyway. Not back then.

I didn't understand the business about Firebirds and children and wishes. I guessed the Tsar didn't either. So in this chamber haunted only by myself, I let my mind unspool. I suppose you might think I was going mad. Think what you like. In my raveling thoughts I flew away, as if my spirit were nestled in the breast feathers of some passing hornbill or waxwing.

I flew to observe children, their dark secrets, so I might better understand the origin of my own darkness. I also flew to understand my young accomplices in crime, to put myself in their shoes. In one case, felted peasant boots laced with rawhide cord. In the other, fine French slippers suitable to wear to a ball.

I flew to have something to write to the Tsar, to extend the number of my own days in light.

Those pages are now lost, along with so much else. Here is my effort to re-create them, before the darkness finishes its claim upon me.

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Part One

Untimely Thunder

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The World in Curtains

The girl has never gone into a theater. But the doctor once told her what it was like, so the girl thinks she knows.

She thinks a theater is like this room in their home. This one room. There was another room once, a kind of shed, and that was for goats. But the last remaining goat was hungry and ate the rope that tied the door shut, and got out. Then something ate the goat. When the shed fell down because it was mostly sticks to start with, the family burned it for heat. So now they live in a one-room house. Simple, but it has a stage at the far end. So it is a theater.

Yes, it is, the girl insists to her two brothers. The nook *could* be a stage. Why not? Everybody thinks it's only a bed built into the wall, with curtains you can draw together to keep the warmth in. But you can make a world of the bedclothes. When the curtain

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opens, a stone can be a pig, a feather can stand for a whole bird. A crumb: a feast. Whatever you can think of — there it can be.

"Sit down, the show is about to start," says Elena. Luka and Alexei, the brothers, are older, and practice skepticism. "Shhh. The performance can't start if the people aren't paying attention." Maybe a magpie is perched on a windowsill, looking in. Trust me. It's possible.

"This is the best show I ever saw," says Luka, the firstborn. He has attended no shows but hers. "Look at those bed curtains. I'd pay good money to see these bed curtains four times a week. Look at those moth holes. Such drama." He makes a retching noise.

"I hope there's a dragon," says Alexei. He's the middle child, and more prone to tenderness.

Luka agrees. "A dragon diving at coaches on the high road to Warsaw. Terrifying the horses. He especially likes to eat fat rich old countesses. First he burns their double chins off with his breath, one at a time . . ."

"If you don't quiet down, there will be no show," says Elena. So her brothers settle. She pulls the curtains back to show them the world she has made.

Usually it's a world of brown hills, a blanket mounded around pillows. An edge of the sheet shows from underneath, and that can be the shore of the sea. The blue stripes on the mattress ticking, waves coming in.

Now and then Elena makes some old familiar folktale happen here. More often, Mama's magic nesting doll stands in a valley. Nearly round on the bottom, like a pear, and softly narrower on top. The shape of a slow teardrop: that's a mother for you.

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The trick about this doll, the magic part? She opens in halves, and inside her is another mama doll just like the first, except smaller. Inside that one is a third, and if you keep opening mamas, you find a fourth and a fifth and a sixth. The seventh doll is a painted baby. It keeps its own counsel and doesn't open.

Sometimes the play is about six mamas searching for their lost baby in the mountains. They take turns climbing the hills and rolling down the slopes, calling, "Baby, baby," until one of them finds the infant in a cave of wrinkling blanket. The wooden chinking sound as they collide is chiding, kissing, scolding. It means the family can be put back together again.

Putting families back together again. Perhaps an impossible exercise. We shall see.

When the play is over, the boys clap nicely enough. Alexei admits, "I'd rather there were a dragon."

"Here's your dragon," says Luka. He's found an old sock that belonged to their father, back when he was alive and needed socks. Through the holes in the toe, Luka sticks his two fingers. The dragon flies above the world, snapping its two-fingered mouth and crying in a spooky Luka voice. It dives to snip at Alexei's nose. *Hard.* Alexei yelps and swears.

"Show's over," declares Elena, upstaged, and flicks the curtains closed. Annoyed. She doesn't like the story to get away from her. Luka stomps off to check his traps and snares. Alexei changes his clothes; he has a job as a houseboy.

That's what it used to be like. Once upon a time. Today, however, the boys aren't in the little hut. Elena has just come in from the village well. The room has a stillness that seems potent, if

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tentative. The winter light on the bare floorboards is splotchy from the grime on the windows. It looks like residue, something having been washed away. Well. Much *has* been washed away.

The motherly nesting doll, called the matryoshka, watches from the shelf with the holy ikon and the cold unlit candles.

Elena sets down the pail of water. She draws near to the curtained side of the room. She pauses and she says a prayer, and then she opens the two sides of the drapes as quietly as she can.

Here is the world she sees. It looks a lot like the world she plays. A rolling landscape of upland meadows, sudden woolen cliffs. The world steams, and it smells of camphor medicine. It groans and turns in its bed.

"How are you feeling today, Mama?" whispers Elena.

The world does not answer.

"Would you like the matryoshka to hold?" asks the girl.

The world does not answer.

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The World in a Graveyard

So Elena goes out. Can you see her? Over there, on the path by the fence made of wire and disoriented wooden rails. Now in the shadows of the juniper, now coming into the light. There.

She's about this tall. Her faded scarf is slipping backwards off her snarly hair because she's been running.

A few crows lift out of her way, but not far. A girl is no threat to them.

She pauses for breath. Her hand is at her side, she has a stitch. She leans against a stone wall that supports a rusty gate — the way to the land of the dead.

Two churchyard rooks look at her sideways, considering.

A red squirrel in a rotting tree scolds her. The creature is mangy, and it probably has rabies. Still, she mutters, "Please," and then, "Forgive me," and then she puts her hand in a hole in the tree. She takes out two acorns and sets one back on the wall. One

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for him and one for her. "Sorry, sorry," she murmurs. Three more, and she drops them all in her apron pocket. It's stealing. It isn't fair, but she's bigger.

Then she swings the gate open.

The churchyard is dank. What small snow there was this winter has been reduced to translucent mush. Last year's grass lies exposed, wetted down and combed all in one direction. The girl pinches a fistful of tatty pinks and whites hardly out of the ground. Then she walks past the few carven stones and worn obelisks to the meadow beyond, where the poor are buried.

She doesn't know how to find her father here, for there are no markers. Still, she has a game she plays with him. She closes her eyes and spins around and lets the blossoms scatter in a wheel about her. "Have I found you, Papa?" she calls. She doesn't bawl, for this is an old game by now, she is used to it. She hopes that, sometimes, some flowers fall on his grave. That's all she hopes.

Today, though, before she leaves, she drives her hand into her apron pocket. She grips a few acorns. "Look, Papa," she says. "I promised to help take care of Mama, but this is all I have to bring home. There's nothing else for us."

If the spirit of her father has an opinion about this, she can't make it out.

Any cemetery is already a ghost village, but this one is a ghost village planted within a ghost village. Outside the graveyard gates, there's too little sound of human bustle. The child just stands there amidst the silence of phantoms, fists clenched, in a wheel of scattered pinks. From up above it would make a pretty enough sight, peasant girl in a circle of torn blossoms. One might do a painting. Some colors and a brush, a square of flawless white.

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Lifting away, the rooks drag their shadows across her upturned face. She sees them but she doesn't see them. She is thinking of her father and of her mother, and how hunger is like a shadow that makes everything wobble in its outlines.

I do not mean to make her seem pathetic. She is only a common child. Perhaps you already think a peasant child not worth your time and attention. Perhaps you are right. I shall lay it out for you, and you can decide.

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The Doctor's Curse

That's how it is, that's how it was, that's how it was going. Every day was pretty much the same, until the day of the doctor's curse. That child's life and mine began to go awry on the same day.

Things can start happening anytime, anywhere. Prisons, gardens, palaces, woods. This particular stumble of fools began outside Elena's hutch of a house.

The doctor was shivering on the step, his back to the closed door. He was really a doctor for horses and sheep, but last fall the báryn, that local lord fancypants, had given up. He with his big house and his big mattress stuffed, it was said, with big cash — he had decided to move his flocks off the estate. Get out while he could. So work for an animal doctor, for everyone, grew scarce. "Too sad," said the báryn. "We'll meet again in happier days, if they ever come. Good-bye."

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There'd been few people to reply. Some wives, several farm-workers, toddlers and teenage boys, old men and older women. Alexei, on one of the departing carts, had not waved farewell to Elena and Luka. He'd stared at the sky with his chin up to keep anything from showing.

Dr. Peter Petrovich Penkin saw humans now. He insisted that he wasn't qualified, but the remaining villagers of Miersk had no other doctor to trust, and Peter Petrovich was a kind man and a good one. Yes, a good man, despite his breath, which smelled as if he had inhaled all the animal and human germs he had ever met, and kept samples in the twin cabinets of his lungs.

The horse doctor was just leaving Elena's hut. He shook his cane at her. "Where have you been, with your mother so poorly?"

"I was looking for the last of the hens," replied the girl, "though I think the foxes got there first."

"The only onions left on my shelf are running to jelly. So I declare this Onion Liberation Day. I made a broth, but broth is not enough. On onion broth, your mother will not improve." The doctor spoke with impatience, as if he had a dozen more appointments. "She is failing to thrive, Elena. Show me what you found."

The girl brought out the handful of acorns. The doctor shook his head. "Split the meat from the shells and boil them soft. You can add them to the onion broth. It's better than nothing. Unless it poisons her. Remember, I'm a horse doctor, not a chef."

"She's better, isn't she?" But Elena sounded dubious.

"She's too weak to do anything but pray, so she is praying for a better harvest this year than last. Are you sure all the chickens have been eaten? Maybe they were just hiding."

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"The last one was the black hen, and I'm afraid she's been carried off, too. Or run away. Doctor, what are we to do?"

He purred a finger against his lips. "Hmmm. It's too soon for cuckoo's eggs. I'm told that nothing has wintered over in the kitchen gardens of the big house. Miersk is barren. The soil is bankrupt. So sip away: it's Onion Liberation Day."

"We have nothing to pay you with." Elena fixed her gaze on the track that passed as a road. She couldn't look directly at him. In this she took after Alexei.

"No one in Miersk has a kopek to spare," said the doctor. "Once the serfs got their freedom, we earned the freedom to starve. Listen, my little chickadee: If your mother gets well enough to plant a squash seed, and if she waters it with her tears so it becomes a great golden turban, and then if she's strong enough to pick it and to bake it for me . . . well, then, I'll come and eat squash pie. That's a reward worth waiting for. Now: How about you, you fretful child? Are you eating enough?"

Elena didn't answer him. What answer was there?

The doctor observed, "Luka isn't much of a scavenger, is he."

Defending her brother, she muttered, "The world around Miersk is scavenged out."

The doctor licked his forefinger and stuck it out in the wind, to judge the direction of the cold. "May he go a bit farther abroad to find better pickings."

And that was the doctor's curse, though Elena didn't see it as such.

So the doctor pulled his tattered coat around him and left. He took with him his small climate of diseased breath. Elena could hear him puffing it out with each step. He was a big man, but like

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everyone else, he was thinning. While liberating his onions in their direction.

Maybe the doctor's presence had made Mama anxious. A doctor inside the izba usually means something is wrong. Mama turned her head on the pillow at the sound of Elena's footstep.

"Luka?"

Mama always asked for him first: he was her firstborn. And a boy. Elena knew that was not Luka's fault, just his luck. "Luka is checking his traps."

"And Alexei?"

Elena drew a breath. Alexei had been borrowed by the báryn. He wouldn't come back until the báryn's family returned to the district. Mama knew this. But just now Mama wasn't remembering. A sign of steeper decline?

Elena tried faking the truth. How easily lying comes to this one. Watch how she does it. "Alexei is busy with Grandmother Onna." Grandmother Onna was a childless old spinster, granny to no one and thus everyone. She lived in a room attached to the village shop, which did her no good now that the shelves were all empty. She was simple and she minded young children during the day, not for money but because they made her happy and kept her from throwing herself absentmindedly into the well.

Elena's mother should recall that Alexei wasn't with Grandmother Onna. But the lie worked, it calmed her mother, which both relieved and worried the girl.

"Where is Elena?" said Mama.

Now Elena smiled. This was a familiar game, not lying but make-believe. "Elena has gone to Moscow," she told her mother. "The Tsar invited her to a ball."

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"Ah, how will she know the way? She'd better bring my magic doll for advice."

"Elena will dance all night and eat everything in sight—" But here Elena stopped; talking about distant food was cruel when there was none to be eaten nearby.

"Ah. I hope she doesn't come home too grand for us," said Mama. Her eyes closed. "Elena?" she whispered. "If I die, will you children take care of one another?"

"You won't die, Mama."

"Promise me."

Elena sat still. She thought, My promises aren't worth a swear word scratched on birch bark.

Finally she thought of something peaceable to say—"Would you like me to bring you your doll, Mama? Mamenka?"—because recently when Mama was half asleep, she would hold the doll and it seemed to soothe her.

As Elena waited, a roll of thunder cleared its throat. Thunder is a summer sound, usually. It's all wrong for midwinter. Still, lightning was cooking in those clouds. Mama, startled from her thoughts, cried out, "Luka."

Elena slammed out the door. She was running to find her brother, this is true. But she was also running from the fact that, in a crisis, her mother called for her oldest child, for her first son. Luka, almost always for Luka. Rarely for Alexei. Never for Elena.

Perhaps I make her sound petulant. The girl was aggrieved, she was running. A coward, or a sensitive urchin? Draw your own conclusions. I'm just telling you what happened, not what it means. Perhaps it means nothing.

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