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opening extract from

Blood Red, Snow White

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BLOOD RED SNOW WHITE

Кровь красная, Снег белый

Marcus Sedgwick



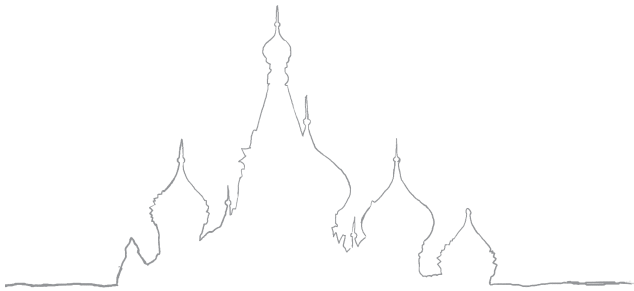
Orion Children's Books

Part One

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A Russian Fairy Tale

Русская Сказка



Once upon a time ...

Beyond the sunrise, half way to the moon, and so very far away it would make your feet weep to think about it, lies a land vast in size and deep in sadness. From where we sit, on the far edge of history, we can see across Time itself, and yet this land is so big we struggle to see all of it at once.

Nevertheless, here it is: here's a river as wide as a sea, and into it flows a stream as wide as a river. In summer salmon leap through the cool fresh water, in winter the ice is as thick as a house is tall.

There's a forest as large as a country, and in the heart of the forest is a single hut, from where we see a man, an old man with a great grey beard, staggering out in the winterdeep snow. He carries an axe slung on his back, for he's a woodcutter, and despite the snow, he has to keep his orphaned grandchildren warm. He doesn't see the bear padding through the snow just half a league away, but neither does the bear see him, and in the remote depths of the forest, half a league is as good as a thousand.

There! Away at the sunset edge of the land; soldiers!

Soldiers in their millions, fighting a great war which seems to be without end. We know that it will end, one day, when enough of them are dead, but the soldiers do not. They have fought for so long they have forgotten what it is they are dying for. Look! Another one is killed; the top of his head blown clean off by a bullet at close range. His hot red blood freezes before it even reaches the ground.

And there's a man, a young man, a stranger to the land, who is foolish enough to think he can walk across its endlessness.

Remember him. He carries a small leather suitcase in one hand and a strange but sturdy wooden box in the other. In his heart there is pain, but in his head there is wonder; wonder and a delightful tumble of words he has been trying to learn. Russian words.

For this is Russia.

A Magical Land

The woodcutter, having missed the bear, came home to his grandchildren, his little boy and girl, and, because nothing made them happier in the world, he told them a fairy tale.

As always, the moment he came through the door stamping the snow off his boots they jumped up and began to pester him for a story.

'All in good time, Little Pigeons,' he laughed, 'just as soon as we've had our soup!'

So they ate their steaming soup and thick black bread, and when they were done, Old Peter the woodcutter told his grandchildren a fairy tale. The tale he told them is the one I am telling you now, and it's the story of the Tsar, the man who ruled over the whole great country.

Just the word, Tsar, tells you how powerful he was, because of where it comes from. Some people spell it Tsar, others Czar, and if spelled that way you begin to see another word, the word from which it grew; Caesar. Those Roman Emperors ruled many lands, but our Tsar holds sway over one hundred and eighty million people. Imagine. One hundred

and eighty million people, maybe three times the number that Augustus or Marcus Aurelius ruled.

An Empire this large needs a powerful Tsar. That is what the Tsar's father told him when he was just a little boy, a little boy called Nicky. And when Nicky's father, Alexander, was little, that's exactly what his father had told him too. This is the truth and they know it, because God has told them so.

How else could you rule a land so very, very big? Only a sharp and decisive man, with a single vision, can keep hold of something as massive as Russia, and as magical. For it is not simply its size that makes it so cumbersome, but its superstition. Even the Imperial symbol is a mythical beast – a fabulous double-headed eagle, that looks both ways at once.

Up in the city, on the banks of the mighty river Neva, sits the Chamber of Wonders created by Peter the Great; a museum he founded in an attempt to dispel the superstitions of the peasants.

There, hidden in drawers and on display in glass-fronted cabinets, are hideous things. Monsters, freaks and ghouls. Stuffed and mounted, a sheep with two heads, and snakes with two tails. Monkeys with three arms, a stillborn lamb with eight legs. These are the stuff of nightmares and they are also the seed of fairy tale monsters, but they are nothing to what is in that final cabinet, the one in the corner of the room. You saw it from the edge of your eye as you came in, saw the crowds flocking around it, heard their awed silence. Even now you find your feet pulling you over to it unwillingly, your eyes refusing to shut though your heart is praying they will close for ever.

There in the case; dead things. Things that might have lived once, maybe for a year, maybe just for an hour, maybe born dead. Their skin bleached by preservative salts, their faces contorted as if shrieking in horror at themselves, screaming for all eternity as if they caught sight of their reflection in a looking glass. Their faces scream as the crowd should, but does not. Babies with two heads, like the sheep. Unborn Siamese twins, with two legs but two heads and four arms. A foetus with no head at all, but countless arms, like an octopus.

Peter, the Great, the moderniser, decreed that all these monstrosities should be brought to his city, to show they were natural, not magical. He wanted to show that in the vastness of his empire there was nothing but nature's law. He wanted science to spread light like the sun over the winter forest. But his efforts achieved exactly the opposite, and people gasped and crossed themselves and pressed their noses against the glass until it became opaque with grease.

He tried to take the magic from Russia, but the magic would not go. Even the names of places tell you that magic is as much a part of this land as the soil or the river water: Irkutsk. The Caspian Sea. The Sea of Okhotsk, the Sea of Japan. Kazan, Murmansk, Kharkov and Vladivostok.

There is magic in those words, just as there was tragedy in the blood of the Tsar and his family.

A tragedy that was a hundred years in the making.