EGG
&
SPOON
GREGORY MAGUIRE
BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF WICKED

EGG & SPOON

a novel by

GREGORY MAGUIRE

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either
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"Society . . . has taken upon itself the general arrangement of the whole system of spoons."

— Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

"Tell Polly she shall have half my egg."

— Jane Gardam, "The Tribute"

Was there ever a time when all of us had enough to eat?

Well, honeybucket, that depends on what you mean by “us.”

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

Part One

Untimely Thunder

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

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.

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

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.

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

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.

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.

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."

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."

"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

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."

"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.

Farther Afield

Look again, before things go wrong.

Ha. As if they're all that right to start out with.

What do we have so far?

Here's a girl running through this place. What kind of a place is it? An old-fashioned one. Some distance away in custom and in geography, too. Examine it as you would a stage set when the curtains open. The larches near the village well, the tumbledown farm buildings empty of livestock, the stubbly fields and the pale ravaged pastures and the woods all around.

The world had gone upside down. Midwinter, and the snow already melting off, draining away. Elena didn't even need her mittens. And above the ridge of hills, beyond the known neighborhood, cloud armies bumbled and massed.

She hurtled along the track to find her big brother. Mama demanded it. Elena could resent Luka and rely on him at the same time. With Papa dead and Alexei in Moscow, Luka was her

touchstone. As for this unpeopling village, its alleys and stricken yards — it was like running through a bad dream.

Then, past these trees and those, she saw her brother. His sack was tied at his belt, slapping too freely. Little or no weight in it. No food. No supper. "Luka," she called.

He looked beaten, but he straightened at her voice. A show of strength, anyway. "Have you checked for eggs?"

She didn't want to admit that the last black hen was missing, presumed dead. A raw chicken dinner for some lucky fox. So she replied, "The doctor came. He thinks Mama is not getting better yet."

Luka sneered. "He couldn't diagnose a wart on a warthog. He's a big fake." But he stopped as he and his sister became aware of another sound, unearthly but of the earth: at ground level. They shouldn't have paused —

But children have a hard time imagining dangers they've never met before. They turned, with that curiosity to know. An instinct that betrays children and their elders every day of the universe's long life. Lot's salty wife on her road, Pandora's itchy imagination.

Upon them, around them, a drumming of horseshoes on frozen ground. Seven, eight, ten angry mares, cropped to the task by their riders. One of the horses reared and whinnied, a rumbustious *hnbree-eee-eee.* Elena thought she and Luka would be stamped off balance and trampled to death.

"Whoever they are, they won't get my catch," muttered Luka. "I won't let them." He stood his ground.

The commander of this sortie took off his cap. "Another gosling to join the few we found in the fields," he said, not to the children but to his men. Then, to Luka: "Lad, is your father out with

the other village men who were felling dead trees for firewood? And if not, where will we find him?"

Luka replied, "You will find my father in his unmarked grave. If you can."

"Your brother, your uncle, your grandfather, then?"

"I am my family's man."

The commander paused, and might have passed on. But an underling said, "Sir, shall we leave him be? He's just a boy. . . ."

At this, the commander flinched. No enlisted man criticizes a superior officer. "We were told to bring fifteen men from each estate, and we have fourteen," declared the commander. "Take him."

From the chapel of Saint Veronika across the way, two women came running. Their scolding roused the doctor in his study. Peter Petrovich Penkin saw disaster through his window. He roared from his doorway, "You can't—he's a child." The flopping pocket of his big coat caught on his door latch. He worked to free it. "I'll come in his stead." His voice confident and false.

"You're too ancient to be useful," said the commander.

"I'm a doctor; doctors are always useful. Take me. Besides, that boy has infections that will bring down a battalion." Lies, lies, kindly but useless. The doctor shook his cane in the air, ripped his pocket stitches, and almost fell off his doorstep onto his face.

"We take fifteen men from this village," shouted the commander. "That's our charge, and I require it. Company, onward."

The women began to understand that their men were being impressed into service. They shrieked to raise their sisters. They rushed at the horses to scare them away. In the flurry of their whipping skirts and aprons, Elena couldn't quite see what happened.

Luka's feet were lifting off the ground. He was being slung like a saddlebag on the back of a horse, behind a horseman with a pistol in his hand.

The rider aimed it at the doctor, and then turned to menace the emboldened women, who fell back.

From the porch of the shop tumbled Grandmother Onna, wobbling under the weight of a rifle. She raised it to her face. "My aim is unsteady and I don't intend to kill anyone, but I might," she cried. "Let the boy go."

"Grandmother Onna is loose," announced the doctor. The ruse of nonsense. "Usually we tie her to the chair for her own safety. Don't mind her, she left her mind along with her youth in the back alleys of Novgorod. Onna, give me that thing, no one is after your virtue anymore." He swiveled her way.

The frisky horses shied and were cropped with hard *thunks.* The commander said, "Put down that rifle or I'll arrest you."

The doctor's bad leg slowed his approach. Elena was nearer the mad old pepperpot. Without thinking, she grabbed Grandmother Onna's gun out of her hands. A shot cracked out, more whip-snap than musical zing. Elena didn't think it was from the old woman's rifle, but she tossed the weapon in the well just in case.

The gunshot was the commander's, firing into the air to frighten everyone.

The horses capered and nickered. The only human sound was Grandmother Onna grumping. "That was my best husband. Now he's drowned. You little stinker." Her other remarks were lost in the pummel of horse hooves as the company wheeled about.

Before he disappeared, Luka managed to wrench his sack off

his belt and toss it on the ground. After the party of ambush cantered away, Elena snatched it up. Inside she found the carcass of a baby hare. One of the horses must have stamped on it, for the creature now was a handful of bloody guts, fur, fractured bones.

That evening Elena scraped two mouthfuls of meat from the remains. She added the stewed acorns and scrappy flesh to the onion broth, and fed a cup to Mama. She couldn't bring herself to taste even a sip of it. She was a child of stone that night.

Now: Remember the curse? The doctor's wish for Luka to go farther abroad to find food? Farther he was going, farther every moment, abducted, on the back of a horse. What good might come of it, if any, we shall see.

There was a blessing, though, of sorts. By sundown Mama was too lost in fever to be able to count the people in the room. She didn't take in anything: that Alexei was gone away into domestic service, that the soup was horrid, that Luka was missing, too. Elena sat at her bedside holding the matryoshka baby.

I always think a weeping child makes a sweet picture, don't you? I see this in a dim, crepuscular light, a little greenish. A fiddle playing a long note, heavy on the vibrato, would punch the effect up a little. But I have no idea if anyone in Miersk can play so much as a squeezebox. You'll have to add the melody yourself.

Tea Brewed from Salt Tears

The good doctor came by just before dawn to look in on Elena's mother. "I couldn't sleep, so why should you?" he demanded of Elena. He brought some tinder and banked up the fire, and he clucked over Mama and rubbed her hands to warm them. That was the only medicine he had to offer today.

Natasha Rudina didn't stir under his attentions. He stood back. "So have you made a decision, then?" he said to Elena's mother. "Come now. You have to *want* to live your life."

He nodded Elena out of the house to confer. They stepped off the threshold and began to stroll, keeping their voices low. The world was darkness, inside Elena and out.

"How is she taking the abduction of her luckless boychik?" asked the doctor.

"I haven't told her about it."

The doctor glanced at her. "And she hasn't asked? Child, you shouldn't carry all this on your own shoulders."

"Who is going to help? Who is left to ask? Saint Nicholas? Saint Nobody."

"Don't be withering. Grandmother Onna might pitch in, and it might do her some good, too. I'll ask her."

"I heard more carts going by last evening. What's left of the Rudetsky household was clustered around the shafts of their wagon, pulling it themselves."

"So the wives of the conscripted men are leaving to harbor with relatives elsewhere. Can you blame them? First their daughters taken, now their husbands."

"Are you going, too?" The girl's voice was cold.

"And leave you all alone with a bed-bound mother? What kind of doctor would I be if I abandoned those who need me most?"

You're not much of a doctor to begin with, thought Elena, but she kept that to herself. "Why did that commander scoop up Luka and our other men, too?"

The doctor held up his hands, palms out, as if he were on trial. "Who can say? There isn't any military need. No Crimea in the offing. I'd have heard. A doctor can make out quite well during a war. I'd have sent back rations from the front, anyway."

"What are we going to do? Such a bad harvest last summer and too little snow now to irrigate the fields come spring . . ."

"The world is protesting. It feels like a summer cloudburst coming, yet the hymns of the high holidays still ring in our ears. Can the calendar turn inside out? Can a year run backward?" But the doctor could never stay down-spirited for long. "We could break into the báryn's big empty dacha and chip the plaster angels off the ceiling. Roast putti *du jour.*"

"Is starvation making you mad?"

"We are together," said Peter Petrovich. "When we have nothing left, we'll divide it in half and each take a portion. We'll fill the samovar with tea brewed from our salt tears. Grief is hard to swallow; you have to take it slowly. I declare this One Sip at a Time Day."

"That's not enough." They had reached the place in the path where the old combine had broken down, never to stir again, and was rusting into eternity. "You should go to the Tsar and find out why he has stolen Luka and the others." She spoke as she thought Luka might, with nerve. "Maybe the Tsar plans to send them to war against some country that had a better harvest last year."

"With my bad leg, I'd be dead of exhaustion before I reached the first crossroads. And anyhow, which way should I turn? Who knows the way to the door of the Tsar? Ambition without direction is like milk without a cup." He shrugged. "But if I got there, I would bring him a flask of our tea of salt tears and say, 'Try a sip, dear Tsar: it is One Sip at a Time Day.' " He laughed at his own conceit, laughed until salt tears came out of his eyes.

He almost didn't hear Elena say, "Then I'll have to go see the Tsar myself." But little by little, he stopped laughing.

"Very well. And for directions, you will ask whom? The spirit of your dead father, maybe? Don't look at me like that, child. I'm trying to make a point —"

Though a tender nonsense of the doctor's, and meant without malice, this hit like a slap. "I'll ask Baba Yaga, the old witch of the woods, if I have to," she cried. "Don't think I won't."

Chastened, he pawed the air toward her with one hand, and she reached out and found his hand in the dark. They walked in silence for a few moments. "I hope you don't leave," said the doctor.

Was this another curse? Pay attention now.

"If you *should* go," he said at last, "I'd look after your mother until you get back. As best I could. But you are a better helpmeet to her than I could be. I can't easily trot through muddy woods finding wild turnips or berries, if they even choose to come back this year. My bad leg is made of concrete. And my good leg gets tired of dragging the bad leg after it."

She knew the doctor was apologizing for teasing her. She said, neutrally, "With all those stars in the sky, why isn't there enough light for us to see by? We stumble like blinded sheep."

"As you can see, it is clouding over. The stars can't pierce that gloom; they just wait it out. That isn't the stars' fault. It is their custom to stay heavenly."

"They should come down closer to the earth."

"Well, ask them politely."

He was humoring her. He thought her simple, a younger version of Grandmother Onna. He didn't think she would ever have the courage to leave. She'd prove him wrong.

"Ah, now you're not talking to me," he said. "That's all right. Sometimes there's nothing left to say."

Double Lightning

They got as far as the fields of rotten rye. There they turned and, starting back, looked down on what was left of life. Miersk huddled under onrushing clouds. Miersk in an uncertain dawn.

In the center squatted the chapel. A pagoda in stained timber.

To one side, along the edge of the settlement, the station where trains had once stopped, long ago, but no longer bothered. A study in the science of decay.

The doctor's house, with no more medicine. The schoolhouse where no one studied since there was no teacher. The shop where no goods waited to be bought. The henhouse where no hens clucked. Abandoned homes. Isn't this depressing?

The clouds parted on cue, a certain stage business of the deity. A wedge of solar blue between scoops of cloud. Then a crack of thunder. The air felt green and filigreed with grit, plates of atmosphere scraping together.

As if the overlord of the heavens had a campaign against Miersk, the lightning that had threatened for days finally snipped across the clouds. It started out crosswise but arced earthward, to the north. Lord save the Rudetskys, out on that road, thought Elena.

"Run," said the doctor companionably, and swatted her on the behind. She wouldn't let go of his hand, and dragged at him to hurry, even with his bad leg.

Another sickle of lightning was readying itself. You can feel that kind of thing. This one meant business, as if there really is no such thing as mercy in the universe.

They were almost to the doctor's house when the second bolt struck the top of the chapel steeple. A scorched note, a sound of wood ripping like paper. The bell in its wooden wheel dropped through the belfry, bringing with it most of the timber cladding of the front wall.

The bell thudded six feet away from their heels. They felt the vibration of overtones into their skulls. The roof of Saint Veronika's began sparking, and the lightning crackled backward along the roof beam. Then the tortured javelin dove earthward and finished in the graveyard, turning the ground over as a giant mole might. Coffins and rot and sulfurous smells burst through the nap of ground-level pinks and whites.

Elena grabbed the doctor's lapels. The sweat on his eyebrows was like jelly. In a moment Peter Petrovich opened his eyes.

"Is this heaven or hell?" he managed to say.

"You're still alive," she said.

"Hell," he replied.

"And so am I," she answered.

“Well, nearer to heaven, then, so I might as well sit up.” He tried to. “This is Second Chance Day, and I didn’t see it coming.”

“Second Chance Day? Good, another chance to suffer.”

Day after day in the season of disaster, it can be hard to recognize a change in fortune when it comes. Elena was untried at hope. Still, the doctor was right. It was Second Chance Day, and the chance was coming.

Thunder on the Rails

What a worthless trade, thought Elena. All those clouds brashing down the sky, bellowing their opinions and knocking down church steeples. And the only thing that matters to the people of Miersk? A sensible snowfall befitting the season?

Not a flake of it. Full of static and sizzle, the clouds swagger on toward the Urals. They drag the dry tails of their purple greatcoats behind them.

She spent that day hunting through the cupboards of the Rudestkys and the Popovs and other departing families, hoping to find something left behind by mistake. Only crumbs between floorboards, dust in the larder.

With nothing to offer her mother for supper, she stopped in to see how Peter Petrovich was faring.

His light was low. Conservation of lamp oil. The old man lay flat in his bed, raking his beard with a broken comb. Grandmother Onna was heating towels over his tiled stove and then trying to push them under his lower back with a poker. He had twisted the ropes of muscle that supported his spine. His hip wasn't much better. His mood was nasty. "Doctors are supposed to help the sick, not lie around like women in the birthing bed," he snarled.

Grandmother Onna replied, "They say a shoemaker has no shoes for himself. Doctor, you can't help the sick until you recover. Lie still or this poker will do some interesting damage."

"You're trying to finish the job the lightning couldn't manage. Oh, Elena, you're here. Good. Hit that old woman over the head with a shovel."

"Tell him to stop flirting," said Grandmother Onna.

"Are you alive?" Elena asked the doctor.

"Do not ask for whom the bell tolls," he replied. "The bell is broken. With no bell to chime the holy hours, we're unclocked. Time itself can't tell what time it is."

"It's time to eat," said Elena, hoping they would have something to spare. The doctor spread both his hands, meaning empty left, empty right.

"Is that the rain I hear?" asked Grandmother Onna.

They stilled themselves to listen. This noise was more orderly than wind. More like muffled drums. "Our men come back, and all turned into soldiers already?" wondered the doctor.

"No." Grandmother Onna wagged her forefinger, thinking. "I do believe it might be a train."

A train. In all of Elena's living memory, no train had ever come through. The Miersk line wasn't much more than a siding.

A little-used byway of the great Moscow–Saint Petersburg rail network, serving dachas and grain dispensaries on a capricious schedule. It was often abandoned for years at a time: Miersk wasn't exactly a holiday destination.

"Help has come," said the girl, though I think she had little reason to expect largesse from the world. "Food, maybe, and milk." She ignored their protests, she bolted outside.

"A nice world you imagine. It's fun to believe in magic, but help doesn't travel by train," called the doctor. "If I'm wrong, I'll take five fresh eggs."

Elena joined the few remaining village women, who had gathered in hope or curiosity as sounds grew distinct. A percussive huffing. A shrieking of metal upon metal. Then a steam whistle, which can sound like a piccolo being tortured unto death.

The engine emerged from behind fir trees. It drove ahead of it a tumble of saplings and bracken plowed down by its cowcatcher.

The older women remembered the train from their childhoods. They brassed up a high-pitched traditional greeting. They thought their folklore hello might be heard above the noise of industrial advance. They had no potatoes to sell or fresh baked bread, not like in the old days. They waved junk. Wooden spoons, nearly clean shawls, tin ikons torn from the holy corners of their huts. Anything for a trade, for a few pieces of fruit, for oats or black bread or maybe a wedge of bacon.

"Hello," they cried. They looked like what they were: starving peasants in the outback of an endless country.

Don't take my comment as criticism. Starving peasants can be attractive and well behaved. I believe they also sing nicely from time to time.

In any case, the train paid them no attention. As it passed, it spun black lace curtains of sooty exhaust.

"Five eggs," begged Elena, choking on indigestible hope. The younger children and the older women, expecting less, didn't waste their tears. They turned away, muttering about the good old days.

"I'm not surprised it passed by," said Peter Petrovich when Elena went back to tell him what had happened. "Though I do wonder why the service is being revived after all this time."

"We'll never know," said Grandmother Onna.

In this, she was wrong. The train — the very same train — returned about an hour later, slowly backing up until the lighted windows of the final carriage lined up with the platform of the abandoned train station.

Fuss from the engine — mechanical farts and groans, the like. I'm not technical.

Look at it there for a moment. Ever since I lost an eye, I've loved to picture things clearly when I can. Winter dusk in Miersk comes hard and fast even when the winter is being irresolute. The wheels are lost in shadows all plum and black, like rising water. The light from behind drapes, an alluring rosy tangerine. Brass fixtures on windows and doors. There are only four cars to this train. It is a private experiment in luxury, perhaps. Someone important may be on this train. The Tsar himself? We could look closer and see. Shall we?

The Accidental Guests

The doctor was the only man distinguished enough to greet travelers on the iron horse. But his back was a torment and his hip no better. So he wasn't going to make formal inquiries as to the reason for its visit. He couldn't get up.

Grandmother Onna had little interest in wrestling a train and trying to throw it down the well. She was too busy harrying the doctor.

At rest in the theater of the sickroom, behind the bed drapes of her own infirmary, Elena's mother, frail Natasha Rudina, never heard the train arrive. She couldn't forbid Elena to go find out what the commotion was about.

So the girl, alone of the villagers, ventured forth. As Elena drew nearer, she could see the train more clearly than I've described so far. Earlier, the iron-wheeled enterprise had been a smudge of speed and noise. Now, at rest, with steam clearing like mist on the

rise, Elena caught glimpses of greasy pistons and twisting valves that resembled the architecture of a trumpet. Above the massive wheels, four separate carriages. The last one was grandiose with shiny finials, ornamentation like shoe buckles. Every window was cloaked with drapes.

The train seemed like a creature on its own accord; Elena half expected it to speak. She had a fanciful side, given to drifting in and out of reason. But she also had a no-nonsense grip on things. What can I say, the child is not a symbol: she's a child with a messy mind.

A voice from the head of the train: "For the love of old Mother Russia! Is this place even alive?" Elena turned toward the sound, not sure if she should run away or stand her ground.

Before she could decide, a door swung open just behind her, and another man's voice replied, "Temper, temper, my good man. Let us greet adversity with manners."

The first speaker materialized in tendrils of steam. At the sight of Elena, he stood still. Shreds of steam clung and coiled to him. I imagine they looked like strips of detaching skin. At first Elena thought him a body exhumed from the bedeviled graveyard, or a ghost. The ghost she most wanted to see, were she ever to see one. He was the right shape and size. But his voice was too earthly and his accent not the local one. "A pint-pot of a girl, that's the ambassador they send?" He pointed at Elena and frowned.

"At least they haven't welcomed us with pitchforks and torches," said the other speaker, the calmer one. Elena pivoted to watch this second man step down from the elegant carriage. He was the tidiest man Elena had ever seen, cleaner even than the absent báryn. This fellow's beard wasn't long and dense, like the doctor's, but

trimmed to fit his chin as neatly as a stocking fits a foot. His hair was clipped and silvered. Against the starched whiteness of his shirt climbed a row of ivory studs.

Elena knew at once that the visitor was the Tsar of All the Russias. He could be no other. She gave a curtsey as best she could.

"Up from your knees, child," he ordered her. "Adoration only gives one splinters." His accent was softly bruised, perhaps from a lifetime at court. She could but obey.

The ghostly conductor came no nearer. "Do you think the wretched of this village might be sending a mere daughter as a decoy and a diversion while they summon an ambush?"

Mere daughter, thought Elena. But what else was she?

Mere is an interesting word. A safe one. One can never be less than *mere*. It is someplace to start. For instance, I am a mere storyteller. But who knows what I might accomplish from such a humble platform?

The Tsar inched white gloves off whiter fingers. "Ambush? That would be ambitious of them. I doubt them capable of such a strategy. Though I have not made a study of the subject, I believe peasants come in two varieties. Either they are pokingly direct, or they disappear because they can't find words to say what they want."

Elena found her words just fine. "We have no men left to protest your arrival." She curtseyed again to the Tsar and, for good measure, to the phantom conductor. "By your order, Your Highness, our men have all been hustled away like sheep to the cattle fair. Except for one smelly old man with a white beard."

"By my order." The Tsar, amused, was going to say more. The conductor interrupted him.

"Without help we'll be here at least a few days, maybe a week."

As the conductor stamped his foot on the ground to make his point, several other men appeared, massing upon ladders and ledges at the front of the train. "Sure, we're six able-bodied men. And we work as hard as any illiterate muzhiks. But it will take time."

"We have time," said the Tsar. "We have enough supplies to see us through. You will do whatever it takes."

"I wasn't hired on for this sort of labor," began the conductor. The other attendants began to murmur in agreement.

"You would like an interview with Madame?" The Tsar used a tone that came close to sweetness.

No one answered him.

The conductor spat on the ground. The last of the steam dissolved around him. He was no ghost, just a working man in a blue coat with a dirty yellow kerchief around his neck. He swiveled his jaw as if trying to loosen a wodge of tobacco from under his tongue. Then he spat again. "Very well. But there's nothing doing now, not till the sun is up. We'll get a better look at the size of the job tomorrow."

"It's a blessing that it was still daylight as we approached that trestle bridge," said the Tsar. "We'd all be dead at the bottom of the ravine if you hadn't spied the damage. What's a few days' work with your axes? You are still alive to use them. Celebrate through labor."

He twitched a finger without looking at Elena. "Bring us fresh water in the morning. If you're lying, and if the men in the district are lurking to attack us in our distress, tell them that the Madame in her apartments would not appreciate such an entertainment."

The Tsarina? "I couldn't lie to the Tsar," she told him.

"Admirable policy." With this he retreated into the elegant

carriage and pulled the door shut. Elena heard an ostentatious, well-oiled *click* and the turn of a key in the lock. A little bit of theater. She loved it.

The other men grumped among themselves. But now that the Tsar had given Elena a job for the morning, she knew that they wouldn't dare harm her.

So she wandered toward the conductor. He groused; she listened. After the train had passed through Miersk, it had traveled some versts out of town. Then, slowing down with the effort of climbing a knoll, it had come to a gorge. The conductor had seen how the track curved onto a trestle bridge reduced to a henge of blackened timbers.

The bridge had been hit by lightning. He'd stopped the train just in time.

"Oh, yes," said Elena. "That was this morning. That first bolt. I could tell it had struck something. You could feel the contact from here."

About a third of the trestle was compromised. The supports could give way under strain. The bridge would have to be examined and its bad limbs replaced with new.

"The work starts tomorrow," said the conductor. "If your village can supply a crew of woodsmen to fell trees and strip them, and oxen to haul them into place, we shall make easy work of it."

"If the Tsar hadn't already commandeered all our men, I'm sure they'd be happy to help," replied Elena. "As for oxen, they've moved on to starve elsewhere." This was as tart as she dared to be. The conductor spat once more, nearly in her direction.

The crew turned to caring for their halted iron steed. Elena

picked her way along the platform. The carriage to her left was near enough that she could draw tracks with her fingers in the frosty soot, the sooty frost.

Her hand ran across the window frame and onto the glass. She thought she saw another hand on the other side of the glass. Maybe it was just her reflection. But didn't the drape twitch, just now?

She ran to tell Grandmother Onna and Peter Petrovich that the Tsar and his retinue were spending the evening as their accidental guests.

Grandmother Onna wasn't impressed. She'd just come back from scouring the Rudetsky house by lamplight, and her old eyes were sharper than Elena's. She'd found a cupful of oat mash hidden in a tin matchbox, and she shared half with Elena. "The Tsar to his veal, and we to our meal," she said, smacking her lips.

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