

The Downtrodden

Using my knuckles, I tap the pole. *Tappa-tap-tap*. The street sign jiggles. *Tappa-tap-tap*.

The guy will be tall, a beanpole like you, Patrik.

Tappa-tap-tap.

Overhead, the Communist banners flap their hammers and sickles in the breeze. The clock in the square says three minutes before noon. Three minutes left.

I look around. But casually. Not like it's any big deal. Not like I'm waiting for anyone.

The clock hand moves. Two minutes left. Small clouds run across the sky.

The others lean against the wall. Emil, his sandy hair cowlicked along the forehead; Karel, with his little, awkward shape; and Danika, who's wearing the

bell-bottom pants she had to sew herself. Above them, the Czech and Russian flags fly side by side, bright against the gray buildings.

I, the tallest, was chosen.

This could turn bad. A person's doing a deal and a cop arrives instead. Or the other guy is really a cop. And thirteen-year-olds who make black-market deals? I don't want to know. *Tappa-tap-tap*.

I think of Adam Uherco, just a little older than us. Look at what happened to him. But, surely, buying off the black market isn't as bad as becoming a full-blown counterrevolutionary.

I hope not, anyway.

One minute.

A woman wearing a flowery hat passes. Not her. An old man struggles along with a cane. Not him, either. Five soldiers prance by, chatting and laughing. Definitely not them.

Maybe it's no one. No one is coming.

Emil's cousin lied.

Then a guy weaves in close. Tall, like Emil's cousin said. In a black leather jacket and black cap. Zero minutes. Our eyes meet.

He swerves, knocks into my shoulder. Says nothing.

I hand him the bills. He thrusts over a thin brown package.

Done. He's gone. Mingling in. We never met.

I wait by the pole, my hand sweating onto the wrapping paper.

After the clock hand moves twice more, I stroll over to the others.

"Make sure he gave you the right thing," says Emil. "Make sure you haven't been duped by a piece of cardboard. Make sure we didn't give over our allowances for nothing."

"Not here. We can't open it here. What if someone sees?"

Danika is leaning down, tugging on her bell-bottoms. As if she had nothing to do with this. As if she doesn't want this thing just as much as we do.

Karel whistles softly.

"Let's get out of here," I say.

Riding back on the bus, Danika refuses to sit with us. She sits up front, close to the driver. She's right to be freaked. What if a cop gets on? Could we make it out the back door? I will be the main one caught.

I feel through the wrapping paper. I find the hole, large enough for my thumb.

When we get to Emil's building, I'm not sure Danika will stick with us. But she does, mounting step after step. We're all a little breathless at the top.

Thankfully, Emil's parents are off working at their steel-mill jobs, and the place is wide-open free to us. His room smells like dirty laundry mixed with the smoke of the cigarettes he sneaks, but I'll get used to it.

"Now, give it to me," says Emil, reaching out. "After all, it was my cousin who arranged this."

We gather close and he peels off the brown paper. Inside, oh, yes, there's a record jacket with the Beatles' faces. Staring at us in black-and-white. And inside that, the shiny black disc.

"Hurray!" says Danika, giving one little clap. "Put it on, Emil. Let's listen."

Emil pops a plastic circle into the center hole so the single will fit the spindle. He flips the switch on the record player, and the light glows green. He turns the volume high.

The sound explodes out.

Of course we've heard this song before. Mostly on the radio, on the forbidden broadcast of the Voice of America. But now it's all ours. Here in Emil's room, we finally have it.

At the end of the song, the needle lifts itself up, moves back, then touches down again.

We lie on Emil's bed, listening and listening. The music is red and juicy with possibilities. It penetrates me everywhere. I want . . . I want . . . I want . . .

Pretty soon, a *knock-knock-knock* comes from underneath us.

"Damn," says Emil, lifting the needle. "It's Mrs. Zeman. She's beating her ceiling with a broomstick. Warning us to shut up."

We grow silent.

It's bad enough for this neighbor to complain about our noise. Much worse if she complains about our forbidden Western music. Black-market music.

"Couldn't we just listen quietly?" Danika asks.

Emil shakes his head. "Can't risk it."

Our fun is over.

Leaning up on one elbow, I page through a comic about Janosik. Janosik the legendary Slovak hero who stole from the rich and gave to the poor.

"You're way too old to be reading that," Danika says, lying back, teasing.

"Come on, Danika. How about the way Janosik defended the downtrodden?" Emil asks.

“And we’re the downtrodden,” I chip in. “We had to break the law just to get music.”

“I didn’t say that *Janosik* was babyish, only the comic.”

“How can you not like this?” I open to a page, hold it up. “Janosik was resistant to arrows because of an herb he carried in his pocket. See—right here, the green flakes. He could move from place to place quicker than anyone else. *Whoosh!* And when he pressed his palm against a slab of stone, his hand left an impression.”

“Mmm,” Danika says.

The artist didn’t do a great job of drawing the hand in the stone. In the margin, I sketch my own version.

“Hey!” Emil protests. “Don’t vandalize my stuff!”

“You have to admit mine is better.”

“A little,” he says. Then he stares down at the floor, saying, “Damn Mrs. Zeman. She’s probably phoning up some stupid party member right now. Saying that juvenile delinquents live upstairs from her.”

“Even worse than juvenile delinquents,” says Danika. “Counterrevolutionaries.”

Karel raises a fist. Then he holds up the cover of the single, the Beatles’ four faces staring back at us. “Wish I could at least have a copy of this.”

I take up my East German EXA, which goes with me everywhere, and snap a photo. “I’ll print this shot, and we can all have a copy.”

“Better than nothing,” says Karel.

With that, Emil slaps a whole stack of Janosik comics onto the bed. Each of us picks one, and even Danika starts reading about the adventures of the ancient Slovak hero.

The S and the R

In the shed out back of our apartment building, Danika and I search the shelves with a flashlight. The beam flicks. Here. There. But not on what we want. Old rags, old newspapers, garden tools. “Here we go,” I whisper as the beam lands on a bucket of paintbrushes. I pick one out.

“And here,” Danika says, guiding my wrist, aiming the light on the pots of paint.

I reach for the white.

“Oh, no,” she says. “Green would look much worse.”

“Yes, green. Too bad there’s no pink. . . .” I hold open a paper bag, and Danika plunks in the brush and paint.

We head out of the shed, through the parking lot, lit with its pale, down-focused lights.

I clutch the bag to my chest, to where my heart is drumming. I'm like Janosik steeling himself for a raid. Janosik preparing to steal from the rich for the sake of the downtrodden. And Danika . . . Danika is . . . I can't think of whom to compare her to. Janosik had a sweetheart. At the thought of that word, my heart's steady drumming falters.

Danika and I have always been friends. As kids, we played gypsies with a painted box. Danika wore her mother's skirts, gypsy-long on her. We used brooms for horses. When the real gypsy caravans came into our neighborhood, we spied on them. They threw back their heads and laughed, their gold teeth glinting in the light from their campfires. Their huge hoop earrings glinted. *Stolen gold*, one of us would whisper, and I shuddered at the thrill. Late into the night, I heard their wild music, music that didn't care who was in bed wanting to sleep. I knew the gypsies were dancing, so lost in happiness that they forgot they lived in a gloomy Communist state.

Though Danika and I don't play gypsy games anymore, we're still good friends. Just that. Not sweethearts.

Tonight we walk in and out of pools of light, under the looming trees. There are not a lot of ways we can

strike back at all that pens us in. Things like Mrs. Zeman pounding on her ceiling. There's only little, stupid stuff.

Still, even the stupid stuff—getting away with stupid stuff—feels good.

We arrive at our big, blocky school, where the statue of the dictator Vladimir Lenin hovers over everyone. The building is pitch-dark. Even the janitors have gone home.

Long ago, the new moon set, leaving the whole night black. The distant streetlight barely illuminates the English words **LONG LIVE THE USSR!** The initials stand for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. They were painted last year when an important guy from England visited. Seeing that slogan, I've always imagined cleverly altering those initials. A simple change would do wonders. Now we're about to make that change.

I unscrew the lid of the paint. The night fills with a turpentiney smell, as if a whole forest has been squeezed into the pot.

Danika dips in the brush and stirs the paint, glancing over her shoulder.

I glance, too. Is someone lurking in the shadows? Could there really be someone? Is there really ever anyone?

After fifteen years of Communist rule, Adam Uherco's father escaped to America. He had to go, just couldn't stand this place anymore. Afterward, the party punished Adam's mother. Even though she was a lawyer, they sent her to do janitorial work at the car factory. Because she worked a long night shift, Adam hardly saw her. Even though he was a few years older than me—a stocky guy with close-cut hair—I remember Adam's anger well. I remember the way he painted anti-Soviet slogans on the school walls. He wouldn't stop, just wouldn't. In school he refused to wear his red scarf. He spoke out. He wouldn't stop speaking out. That is, until he got sent to the insane asylum.

And tonight I'm about to act like Adam. This could all go really wrong. But now that Adam's locked up, someone has to carry on. This is my own revolution.

“Let's do it,” I urge Danika. “Get it over with.”

Her hand shaking, she dabs out the *S*, dabs again, then gives the brush to me.

I look around once more. I check in with the drum-beat of my heart. All is well. With a quick swipe, I obliterate the *R*.

Danika giggles.

I stand back, the brush dripping. Now the

slogan reads: **LONG LIVE THE US!** A big splotch of green replaces the missing letters.

All the closed gates open now. The fences fall. It's like stepping into a wide green field of freedom. It's like being Gypsies all over again. Squiggles of joy dance through me.

Stepping farther back, I aim my camera. I focus, holding steady, while the lens gathers the little bit of light.

“Let's go!” Danika says. “Someone's coming.”

“Just a minute.”

“I hear them—I hear footsteps.”

But I keep calm until the flash bursts and the image is safely inside.

This time, we run, our own footsteps pounding into the night. The camera knocks against my chest, where those squiggles still dance. We've left behind the paint, the brush, and our shocking new slogan.

In the morning before school, a crowd mills around the wall. Danika and I pretend to stare like everyone else. Mr. Babicak, our principal, stands nearby, his arms folded, his thick glasses set firmly on his nose.

I glance down at my shoes. There is one tiny drop of green paint on the left toe. Damn. I should have worn

the other pair. I sense Danika breathing beside me, giving off a scent of mint and flowery shampoo. I check to see that her shoes are clean.

Mr. Babicak is watching each boy's face. He thinks a girl would never do such a thing. He's looking for guilt. I try to look surprised. I try to look outraged.

Behind me, Karel and Emil giggle. One of them pokes me in the ribs.

Just as Miss Komar is writing an equation on the blackboard, someone clomps down the hallway. Pretty Miss Komar stops writing, her hand hovering, the chalk trembling ever so slightly.

Mr. Babicak enters the classroom. He stands for a moment, his eyes roving back and forth.

I slump down, push a pencil up the desk, let it roll back down. I push it . . .

At last Mr. Babicak says, "Comrades, my dear comrades, someone has betrayed the revolution." He pauses to let the words settle. I peek up to see his eyes landing on one face after another.

Miss Komar sits down behind her desk, sheltering behind a pile of books.

I wonder if Mr. Babicak has visited Danika's classroom. But then again, he's not looking for a girl. I stare

at the kids in front of me, at the way the Young Pioneer scarves make neat red triangles down their backs. Like it or not, we all have to put up with being Young Pioneers.

I tuck my shoes under the chair. The spot of paint is so small. And yet it's the exact color. . . . Mr. Babicak's eyes meet mine. His stare lingers. I hold my eyes steady while my insides riot. For I am Janosik, eternally courageous, hero of the oppressed.

He comes over to my desk, looks under the chair.

Silence. A long moment.

Then he stands, points with his finger like the barrel of a tiny gun. "You," he says, pointing. "To my office."

As I walk down the hall behind Mr. Babicak, I try to guess where his invisible footprints are landing. I want to put my own feet exactly there. And only there.

Mr. Babicak slams the door and sits down at his desk. Behind him, the window glows with nice yellow springtime light. Yellow isn't right for my mood, but the window can't help it.

I take a seat in the straight-backed chair.

Mr. Babicak's thick glasses magnify his eyes. He says, "You have betrayed the people."

"Yes, sir," I say. When Janosik got caught robbing

the rich, he was chained to the wall of a dark cell to await trial.

Mr. Babicak touches his fingertips together, making a steeple with his hands.

I do the same with my own hands. Dust motes swirl in the light falling from the window.

Danika, it seems, will not be brought into this. Blessedly not.

“For the revolution to succeed, Patrik, all of us need to pull together. If one comrade pulls in the opposite direction”—he jerks his hands apart—“the chain breaks.”

I hang my head. For all I know, I’ll be demoted to a lower grade. I’ll be sent away. I’ll become the new Adam Uherco. Or maybe I’ll only get suspended. If I get kicked out, at least I won’t have to do schoolwork.

At least Danika has no paint on her shoes.

Mr. Babicak gets to his feet. Leaning on the knuckles of both hands, he hovers over me. “Just where do you and your family stand, Patrik?” He asks as if he’s genuinely curious, but trouble creeps beneath the words.

The room grows still. Even the dust motes hang suspended. “We’re strong party supporters, sir. I was just playing a prank.”

Mr. Babicak sits back down. He swivels in his chair, twirling a fountain pen between his fingers. He pins me with his gaze.

I swallow hard. My parents are not party supporters. Not at all. Though only close friends know that about them.

“I certainly hope it was just a prank,” Mr. Babicak says, then swivels some more.

“I will never do such a thing again, sir.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Your punishment,” Mr. Babicak says, tossing the pen onto the desk, where it clatters, then reaches a dead stop, “will be to stay after school for a week. Every day you will copy *The Communist Manifesto*. You will start tomorrow.”

Janosik was tortured on the rack.

“Before you go home today,” Mr. Babicak goes on, “come back to pick up a note to your father. You must return it with his signature.”

Janosik was then hanged on the gallows.

Coming out of school, in the shadow of Lenin’s statue, I whisper to Danika, “I got caught.”

Her eyes widen. Eyes as blue as the sky behind them. “Now what?”

“Imprisonment. The Gulag.”

“No . . .”

“Almost. Forced labor. Copying Karl Marx for five days.”

“Oh, you poor thing.”

The *S* and the *R* have both been painted back on, the wet paint shining, the oily smell stinking up the air. Hand drawn, the letters look clumsy.

“The slogan is so stupid now,” Danika says, gazing away as if she has no interest.

In my bedroom, I slit open Mr. Babicak’s letter to Tati. It explains that I vandalized a Communist Party slogan at school. That I am to be punished.

I want to hold a flame to this note. I want to burn it into just a black smudge. Instead, I uncap my fountain pen and forge my father’s signature.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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