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Grandma's Prigrimage

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Grandma was miniature. She had the tiniest waist and the smallest foot in St. Petersburg, if not in all of Holy Russia. She moved through her house with tiny steps, a doll in lavender, with a cameo at her throat, her silver hair piled up high, framing a delicate face so rosy that people on the street used to gaze at her. Grandma said it was the first snow each morning with which she washed her face that kept it rosy and free from wrinkles.

As Grandma sat with Grandfather at table, she never talked. He sat at the head of the table in high leather boots and his favorite retriever at his feet. She was there in her lavender dress to grace his table like a bunch of violets, not sharing his mind, plans, or ideas. She smiled quietly throughout the meal because Grandfather liked a cheerful face, and she always said yes because Grandfather disliked a negative answer.

Grandfather was a judge, and when the court sessions would drag out late into the night, two peasants arguing over a cow, Grandma sat quietly embroidering in her niche. When he came home after a tiresome day, she had a boiling samovar ready for him, a small plate of his favorite jam, and a smile.

Grandma talked French and danced the minuet because it was fashionable and because Grandfather liked it. When Grandma danced the minuet, Grandfather felt he owned a live Dresden figurine, and he was so touched that his beard shook with emotion. He liked her that way, small and submissive, because (very few people knew it) Grandfather was afraid of tall women. Thus the months of the year went peacefully by, with Grandma embroidering and talking French.

One day, about the time the pussy willows appeared on the sunny side of the garden, masquerading in their shiny little furs, Grandfather roared, “I cannot understand what has possessed her!”

The servants scattered to their quarters and whispered.

Grandma was dressed in black. The cameo was gone from her throat, and so was her smile. The pink glow on her high cheekbones
looked deeper now, almost a dark rose. Her hands were covered with attic dust.

"She is out of her mind," Grandfather roared again, and stepping out of her way, "I forbid you!"

But all this was totally ignored by one usually so willing to obey, and a firm step was heard throughout the house of the judge. Grandma was packing.

When Grandfather tried to think what had caused it this time, he could not recollect—something trivial, no doubt; an undelivered message, a thoughtless word. A conscientious husband, he never took his vigilant eye off his wife. Grandma never left the house without him, for wasn’t he a judge and a just man, and the one to protect her as he had promised to do at the altar?

A coach at the door, a hired coach of all things, a cumbersome leather bag on top of it, and Grandma inside. It was unbelievable.

Grandfather stood helpless, watching the coach pull away, God knows where, into a world where china figurines get broken.

Inside the coach, Grandma rode with a silk cord drawn tightly round her small wrist, not looking back, and with a very serious face.

You see, Grandma liked the mazurka instead of the minuet, she liked geography instead of embroidery, and loved to talk Russian instead of French, even though it was not fashionable to do so, and stroll down unfamiliar paths.

The mist obscured the view, and there was slush on the road. Up in the sky the birds were returning . . . the birds, they always came back, thought Grandma.

Grandma loosened the cord, slipped her hand into the velvet bag, and ran the small coins through her fingers, the coins with the bust of the Tsar on them. It had taken her eleven months to get these coins, put aside carefully from the household money. The copper days, the silver weeks, the gold months. There was no money shortage in the house of the Judge, but money was a weapon and was guarded carefully.

Grandma was not going home to mother. That would be leaving one confinement for another. Her destination was the holy city of Tsarist Russia, seat of princes, the great city of Kiev.

The bursting of buds, the roar of the rivers freed from winter’s ice, but above all, the Resurrection of Our Lord filled Grandma with a longing for freedom. Not merely physical freedom, but that freedom of the soul that makes us endure any confinement and bondage.
As she climbed out of the coach, delicate and dressed in black, men stood aside to let her pass. Grandma wound her way through the crowds of Kiev, soon finding the desired paths leading to the holy shrines. She never stopped to ask for directions. The white and gold Byzantine cupolas and gold crosses were her landmarks, and as she lit her candle and knelt in front of her God, there were tears in her eyes and a contrite heart in her bosom. To the One who takes the human soul without embellishment, regardless of whether it is an asset to His Kingdom or not, she offered her prayers and her own self with all of its desire for freedom; geography, and the vernacular of her people.

The small gold coins were spent as the various paths to the holy shrines were trod by another pilgrim, and the edge of Grandma's black dress was covered with dust. There was no smile on her face as she touched the holy relics with her lips or stood listening to the ancient chants.

At these shrines Grandma prayed not for her daily bread, or health and happiness, but for forgiveness for staging a fight, for wanting to be neither woman nor wife, but herself, and especially for intending to do it again when the pussy willows would appear on the sunny side of the garden the following year; when again she would shed her lavender and descend from the attic with a dusty trunk. Then she would again be willing to wait on dark and lonely nights with a samovar for him to whom she was wed until death parted them, and where she meant to stay.

Grandma had one more great passion, and that was the Fair of Novgorod. Arriving late, she went directly to the ballet, one of the chief attractions at the Fair. When Grandfather took her to the ballet in St. Petersburg, she had to sit in a box with him, protected and fragile in her lavender and her cameo. Now, in Novgorod, she sat in the peanut gallery, her black dress adorned only with a heavy silver cross and the hem still dusty from the journey.

All through the next day Grandma picked wildly and foolishly among colored pottery at the Fair, stood listening to accordion players in front of tea houses, sniffed at exotic spices and bargained for a funny little red and yellow cock with real feathers. Here it was that Russia joined hands with the rest of the world. Asiatic and European merchants had landed on the Volga and Oka river banks with their cargoes. Here Grandma saw with her own eyes a geography that books could not describe, heard the throaty language of those that ride on camels and the soft singing of Norsemen.
Thus a fortnight of prayer and amusement ended for Grandma in Novgorod. She rode home and resumed her place at the table of the Judge. The smile that Grandfather liked so well was a happy smile, not merely one of resignation.

Grandfather, who had paced the floor and made no headway with the servants during her absence, was lord and master again. Pleased with his own forgiving heart, he once more called Grandma his obedient wife and gave her a pat on the cheek as she sat through long hours of unparticipated discussion.

In the months that followed he never knew that the little velvet bag grew heavier by the week; against the time of the Resurrection of Our Lord, when the pussy willows would appear on the sunny side of the garden.

When I was a small child I saw Grandma in her coffin. It was so small that it could have been the coffin of a child. She had made a black taffeta dress for her last pilgrimage, and she wore that heavy silver cross. But on her face there was a faint suggestion of a rosebud that Grandfather liked so well, although the snow on the sill of her bedroom window was untouched for the first time in many years.