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My life began with a crime. Of course I don't mean the moment of my birth, nor my early years. It's better to know nothing of life as a serf, a "soul," than to know but a little. The German souls—*nemtsy*, property of the Russian church—were more wretched than you can ever imagine. The godforsaken place in which I grew up is lost in the vast plains of Livonia: a village, and country, that no longer exist. Do its *izby*—the shabby huts—still stand? I neither know nor care. When I was young, though, the *izby* that lined the red earth of the village street in rows, like beads on a monk's rosary, were my world. We used the same word for both: *mir*. Ours looked just like many other small villages in Swedish Livonia, one of the Baltic provinces under the rule of Stockholm, where Poles, Latvians, Russians, Swedes, and Germans mingled and lived together more or less peacefully—in those days.

Throughout the year, the road through the village held our lives together like the belt on a loose *sarafan*, the wide gowns we wore. After the spring thaw, or the first heavy rains of autumn, we would wade knee-deep in ox-blood-colored slush from our *izba* to the fields and down to the Dvina river. In summer, it turned into clouds of red dust that ate their way into the cracked skin of our heels. Then, in winter, we would sink up to our thighs in snow with every step, or slide home on ice as slick as a mirror. Chickens and pigs roamed the streets, filth clinging to their feathers and bristles. Children with matted, lice-infested hair played there before they came of working age, when the boys stood in the fields, chasing away the wild birds with rattles, stones, and sticks; the

girls worked the monastery's looms, their little fingers making the finest fabrics. I myself helped in the kitchens, since I was nine years old. From time to time a loaded cart, pulled by horses with long manes and heavy hooves, would rumble through the village to unload goods at the monastery and take other wares to market. Apart from that, very little happened.

One day in April, shortly before Easter—the year 1699, according to the new calendar the tsar had ordered his subjects to use—my younger sister, Christina, and I were walking down this road, heading down through the fields toward the river. The pure air was scented with the greatest wonder of our Baltic lands: the *ottepel*, the thaw. Christina was dancing: she spun round in circles, clapping her hands, her relief at the end of the darkness and cold of the winter palpable. I clumsily tried to catch her without dropping the bundle of washing I was carrying, but she dodged away.

Through winter, life in the *mir* was on hold, like a bear's shallow breathing as he lives off the fat beneath his fur until spring. In the long season, the leaden light dazed our minds; we sank into a listless gloom, soaked with *kvass*. No one could afford vodka, and the bitter, yeasty drink fermented from old bread was just as intoxicating. We lived on grains—oats, rye, barley, wheat, and spelt, which we baked into unleavened flatbreads or made into pastry on feast days, rolling it thin and thinner before filling it with pickled vegetables and mushrooms. Our *kasha*, the gruel, was sweetened with honey and dried berries, or salted with bacon rinds and cabbage; the cabbage of which we prepared vast amounts every autumn, chopping, salting, and pulping it, before we would eat it every day. Every winter I thought I'd be sick if I had to eat sauerkraut one more time, but we also owed our lives to it. It helped us withstand a cold that would freeze the phlegm in your throat before you could hawk it up.

Just as the snow and frost were becoming unbearable, they would slowly fade away. First, it might stay light for a moment longer, the time it takes a rooster to crow, or the twigs straightened with the lighter load of the snow. Then, at night, we woke to the deafening crack of the ice breaking on the Dvina, the water spurting up, free, wild, and tearing huge slabs of ice downstream. Nothing could withstand its power; even the smallest brooks would swell and burst their banks, and the strong, scaly fish of the Dvina leaped into our nets of their own accord. After a brief,

scented spring, feverish summer months followed and our world was drunk with fertility and vigor. Leaves on the trees were thick and succulent, butterflies reeled through the air, bees were drowsy on nectar, their legs heavy with pollen, and yet too much in a hurry to linger on any one blossom. No one slept through the white nights; even the birds sang throughout, not wanting to miss any of the fun.

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“Do you think there’s still ice on the river, Marta?” asked Christina anxiously, calling me by the name I was known by back then. How many times had she asked me this since we’d left the house? The spring fair was tomorrow and just like her I longed to scrub the stench of smoke, food, and the dull winter months off our skins for what was the highlight of the year. There would be amazing sights, delicious foods of which we might afford some, and all the people from the neighboring *mir*, as well as the odd handsome stranger, a thought that was never far from Christina’s mind. “Shall we race each other?” she asked, giggling. Before I could answer, she set off, but I tripped her up and just managed to catch her before she stumbled and fell. She shrieked and clung to me like a boy riding a bull at the fairground, pummeling me with her fists; I lost my balance and we fell onto the embankment, where primroses and rock cress were already blooming. The sharp young grass tickled my bare arms and legs as I struggled to my feet. Oh, wonderful—the clothes were strewn all over the dusty road. Now we really had good reason to wash them. At least we could work by the river: only a few weeks ago, I’d had to smash the ice on the tub behind the *izba* with a club and push the icy lumps aside as I scrubbed. My hands had frozen blue with cold, and chilblains are painful and slow to heal.

“Come on, I’ll help you,” said Christina, glancing toward the village. We were out of sight of the *izba*.

“You don’t need to help me,” I said, though the laundry was heavy on my arm.

“Don’t be silly. The quicker we wash it all, the sooner we can bathe.” She took half the washing from the crook of my arm. We didn’t usually split the chores, because Christina was the daughter of Tanya, my father’s wife. I’d been born to him nine months after the summer solstice to a girl in the neighboring village. He was already engaged to Tanya

when my mother fell pregnant and he was not forced to marry her: the monks had the final say in such matters, and they, of course, preferred to marry my father to one of their girls. When my mother died giving birth to me, Tanya took me in. She had little choice: my mother's family had stood on the threshold of the *izba* and held my bundle of life toward her. They would have left me on the edge of the forest as fodder for the wolves if she had refused. Tanya didn't really treat me badly, all things considered. We all had to work hard, and I got my share of our provisions, such as they were. But she was often spiteful, pulling my hair and pinching my arm over the slightest mistake. "You've got bad blood. Your mother would spread her legs for anyone. Who knows where you really come from?" she'd say if she was feeling malicious. "Look at you, with your green, slanted eyes and your hair as black as a raven's wing. You'd better watch your step." If my father heard her, he wouldn't say anything, but just look even sadder than usual, his back hunched from working in the monastery fields. He could only laugh his toothless chuckle when he'd had a few mugs of *kvass*, which brought a dull light to his sunken eyes.

Before we walked on, Christina took my arm and turned me toward the sun. "One, two, and three—who can look at the sun the longest?" she said breathlessly. "Do it. Even if it scorches your eyelids! Between the spots that dance in front of your eyes you'll see the man you're going to marry."

How eager we were to know him then: at midnight, we'd light three precious candles around a bowl of water and surround them with a circle of coals; we'd stare and stare, but the surface of the water never reflected any faces but our own. No midsummer ever went by without us plucking seven types of wildflower and placing the spray beneath our pillows to lure our future husbands to our dreams. I felt the afternoon sun warm on my face and spots danced senselessly golden on the inside of my eyelids, so I kissed Christina on the cheek. "Let's go," I said, longing for the warm rocks on the bank. "I want to dry off when we finish bathing."

In the fields, souls were bent double at their work and I spotted my father among them. Only part of the land was cultivated in spring, for the first harvest. In summer, turnips, beets, and cabbage were planted in the second part: all crops that could be harvested even in winter,

when the earth was frozen solid. The last third of the ground lay fallow until the following year. The time we had to make provision for the rest of the year was short, and a few squandered days could mean famine. In August my father might easily spend eighteen hours in the fields. No, we didn't love the earth that fed us: she was a merciless mistress, punishing us for the slightest mistake. Six days of the week belonged to the monastery, the seventh to us. God gave no day of rest for us souls. The monks walked back and forth between the workers in their long, dark robes, keeping a sharp eye on their property, both the land as well as the people working it.

"What do you think is underneath a monk's robes?" Christina asked me now, saucily.

I shrugged. "Can't be much, or you'd see it through the cloth."

"Especially when they see you," she answered.

Her words reminded me of Tanya's insults. "What do you mean by that?" I asked tersely.

"Aren't you meant to be older than me, Marta? Don't say you haven't noticed the way men look at you. They'll all want to dance with you at the fair and no one will pay me any attention."

"Nonsense! You look like an angel. An angel in dire need of a bath. Come on!"

Down by the river we settled at our shallow spot from the previous year. A little path wound down through a birch grove and some low bushes. Early buds were on all the twigs; wild iris and bedstraw would bloom here soon. Down on the riverbank I sorted the laundry, putting all the men's good linen shirts and trousers on one side and the *sarafans* and linen blouses we women wore on feast days on the other. We had spent some of the long winter evenings embroidering colorful, floral motifs on the flat collars and tucks; the patterns were like a secret language and passed on within families and villages. Perhaps we could swap some of Father's woodcarvings—small pipes and cups—for new thread at the fair tomorrow? I wound my hair into a loose knot, so it wouldn't dangle in the dirty foam, and folded my faded headscarf to shield me from the sun. Then I knotted the hem of my *sarafan*, even though it was quilted and lined against the cold, and tugged at the long ribbons threaded through the seams of the sleeves of my blouse, gathering the cloth into countless pleats. From afar I must have looked like a cloud on long, bare legs.

“Let’s begin.” I reached out for the first linen and Christina handed me the precious bar of soap. I dipped the washboard in the clear water and painstakingly rubbed the soap over its sharp ribs until they were thickly coated with a slippery layer. Making soap was hard work; your whole body ached afterward. Mostly Tanya gave me this task in autumn, when the monks had been slaughtering to pickle, smoke, and salt meat for the winter larder and had bones to spare, or in spring, using ashes gathered throughout the winter. All the women would help mix rainwater and ash with pig or cow fat and the ground bones of animals to make a caustic lye, which they boiled for hours in great cauldrons. The gray, slimy brew—its big, hot bubbles bursting on the surface with a loud splash—thickened but slowly from one hour to the next. We had to stir it constantly until it felt as if your arms were about to fall off. In the evening we poured the goo into wooden molds. If we could afford to add salt to it, we ended up with a solid lump of soap. But mostly we needed the salt for the animals, or to pickle meat and cabbage for the winter: the soap remained more of a slime that you added to the washing water.

The river glittered and Christina and I worked fast: the prospect of bathing spurred us on as we dipped the clothes in the water, scrubbed them hard, beat them on the flat stones—“Imagine it’s the abbot,” I said, goading Christina to beat them harder. She threw her head back and laughed, her blond hair slipping out of her bun. We wrung them out, and hung them to dry on low-hanging branches along the shore. “On your marks, get set, go!” Christina shouted suddenly, as I was still straightening and smoothing the last of the shirts. She undid the lacing of her dress, pulling the simple *sarafan* and rough tunic over her head as she ran, and then she stood naked in the spring sunshine. How different she looked from me. Christina’s skin was as pale as skimmed milk, her body slim, with narrow hips and high, budding breasts that looked as if they fit just so in the hollow of her hand. Her nipples were like little raspberries. She was already able to bear a child: her blood had started to flow the previous year. I, on the other hand—well, Tanya was probably right about me looking like my mother. My hair was thick and black and my skin was the color of wild honey—or dried snot, as Tanya used to say. My hips were wide, my legs long and strong, and my bosom large and firm.

Christina was splashing about in the shallow stream close to the

bank. Her head bobbed up and down between the rocks where water gathered in pools. The sand of the riverbed shone white between her feet when she rose. “Come on, what are you waiting for?” She laughed, then dove headfirst into the waves, allowing the current to sweep her off into the deep. I undressed as fast as I could, loosened my hair, and hurried after her. We splashed and dived and—deliciously forbidden!—scrubbed our bodies with the precious soap. I opened my eyes underwater, grabbed at water snails, broke off sharp reeds from the riverbank trying to spear an eel, and tweaked Christina’s toes, pretending to be a fish—anything to have a laugh after the dreary winter months! The water was still icy and when I was the first to get out, goose bumps instantly rose on my skin. I shook my hair and watched the flying drops sparkle in the sun before I wound it into a bun.

“Better than the bathhouse,” gurgled Christina, still drifting in the shallows. “At least you don’t get whipped with twigs till you’re all sore and almost bleeding.”

“Oh, I can see to that,” I said, snapping a twig off a bush. Christina squealed and had just ducked underwater when I heard sounds from the road: horses neighing, stones crunching under cart wheels, men’s voices. “Stay in the water,” I ordered Christina, and looked up at the road. Three riders encircled a cart decked with pale canvas while the man on the coach box was still holding the reins. In spite of the distance I felt him scrutinizing me, and I desperately wished I could reach my *sarafan*.

“Who is it?” Christina whispered, drifting back and forth in the shallow water.

“Shh! I don’t know! Stay where you are!”

To my alarm I saw the man get down from the coach box and throw the reins to one of the other riders. I counted three armed men while he turned down the little path toward our riverbank. I ran to the bush where my clean blouse was drying. It was still damp, but I slipped it on nonetheless. I had just managed to pull it down over my thighs when the man stood before me. He must have been the same age as my father, but he had certainly never worked as hard in his life. His long Russian coat had a dark fur collar and his breeches were cut from soft leather and held by a richly embroidered belt. His high boots were spattered with mud and dirt. I shielded my eyes with my hand. Sweat glistened on his forehead, although his face was shaded by a flat beaver fur hat.

He had a full beard, as all Russians did in those days. He looked me up and down, judging me, then took off his gloves. He wore several rings with bright stones on his short, thick fingers. I'd never seen anything like it: not even the abbot wore this much jewelry. I took a step back yet, to my dread, he followed.

"Can you tell me the way to the monastery, girl?" he asked in harsh German. He still had all his teeth, but his gums were stained dark red from chewing tobacco, and he smelled of sweat from the long ride. It would have been rude of me to make a face, and an offense to a traveling stranger, so I stood there uneasily while he looked me up and down. I sensed that the outline of my breasts was visible beneath the thin, wet linen. Feeling my hair slipping its knot, I instinctively reached up to tighten it, and the blouse slipped, baring my shoulder.

His tongue darted across his lips, which made me think of the snake my brother Fyodor and I had spotted the previous summer in the undergrowth of our vegetable patch. It was pale green and we could almost see its intestines shining dark beneath the skin. It had slithered toward us, slowly at first. Although he was smaller than me, Fyodor pushed me behind him. The snake looked poisonous, and deadly, but my brother bent down and picked up a heavy stone. At the very moment when the snake shot forward, jaw agape, he smashed its head in. The nerves in the reptile's dead body made it go on twitching and wriggling.

The man took another step toward me, and from the water Christina screamed: "Marta, watch out!"

He turned his head and I bent to grab a mossy stone. I may have been a virgin, but I knew all too well what he wanted. We had a cock and hens in the backyard, after all, and my father had to hold the mares for the stallions in the monastery stables. Besides, in the *izby*, where families all slept together on the flat oven, bodies and breaths mingling, there was little room for secrets. I knew what he wanted and I wasn't going to let him have it.

"The monastery's straight ahead, just down the road. You'll be there soon if you hurry!" I said curtly, even though my shaking voice gave me away.

He didn't respond, but took another step toward me. "Your eyes are the same color as the river. What else is there to discover about you?" he asked. There was little more than a breath separating us.

I stood firm and hissed, “If you come any closer, I’ll smash your skull in and bake a pie of your brain. Get back to your coach and go to the damned monks.” I weighed the stone threateningly in my hand. Out of the corner of my eye I saw his three companions dismounting, shaking out their limbs after the long ride and allowing their horses to graze. I bit my lip. One skull I could smash, but we didn’t stand a chance against four men. My heart pounded in my breast as I tried not to give in to the fear of what might happen. The first of the men seemed to head down the path. The stranger smirked, sure of an easy victory. Christina sobbed in the water and the sound made me furious: an anger laced with strength and courage. “Get out of here, Russian!” I snarled at him, and he hesitated; then, all of a sudden, he held up his hand, stopping the other man in his tracks.

“By God, girl, you amuse me. We’ll see each other again, and then you’ll be kinder to me.” He stretched out his hand as if to touch my hair. Christina screamed. I spat at his feet. His face grew hard. “Just you wait,” he threatened. “Marta, eh? That’s what she called you, the little minx in the water?”

I was mute with fear as he turned and walked back up the embankment. Only when he had urged on his horses with a flick of his whip, and the clapping of hooves and the clattering of wheels had died away, did I breathe and let the stone slip from my sweaty, sticky fingers. My knees buckled and I fell onto the rough, gray sand, shivering. Christina waded out of the water; she wrapped her arms around me and we held each other tight, until I was only shaking with cold and not fear anymore. She stroked my hair and whispered: “Marta, you’re so brave. I’d never have dared to threaten him with a silly little stone.” I glanced down at the stone at my feet. It really did look silly and little.

“Do you think we’ll see him again?” she asked, while I struggled to my feet. I bit my lip in worry. He’d asked the way to the monastery to which all of us belonged—our *izba*, our land, the shirt on my back, we ourselves.

I chased the thought away. “Nonsense,” I said, hoping I sounded surer than I felt. “We’ll never see that tub of lard again. Let’s hope he falls off his coach box and breaks his neck.” I tried to laugh, but couldn’t. Christina didn’t look convinced either. Clouds covered the sun, veiling the daylight with the first blue of dusk. I was shivering in my damp

shirt, which was covered in dirt. What a nuisance: I would have to wash it again tomorrow, early in the morning before the feast. I brushed sand and pebbles off my shins. “Let’s go.” Silently, we slipped into our old clothes and gathered up the still damp washing to hang it over the flat oven at home to dry, though it would make the air in the hut even more humid and worsen Fyodor’s cough.

“Let’s not tell anyone about this, shall we?” I asked Christina, hoping I could pretend the meeting by the river had never happened. But in my heart I knew this wouldn’t be the end of it. Nothing in this world happens without a reason. That afternoon my life changed course, like the weathervane on the monastery roof spinning in the first blast of a sudden storm.