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1

GOD

IRINA TOOK A sip of her hot tea and peered out the frosty window. “Is it snowing?” she asked.

Papa was marking his Bible with one of the pencils he had found at the college where he worked. He looked over at Irina. “It was snowing when I came in from the barn. The sky looked like it could snow all night.”

“I hope it does,” Irina said. “I wish it would snow lots and lots like it did last year. Remember how the snow piled so high that when people walked on it, we could see only their feet from the kitchen window?”

Mama smiled. Her busy knitting needles never stopped clicking. “I remember, *kindye*.¹ And I’m so thankful for our

¹ Kindye (KIHND yuh): German; a small child.

cozy house. The first winter after we were deported, we had no warm beds, and we had no wool clothes either. We were so cold!”

Irina shivered as she often did when Mama talked about the winter her family had been taken from their big warm house in Georgia and sent to Kazakhstan. Being deported sounded cold and scary. “I’m glad we have a stove and blankets,” she said.

“Some people’s houses are really cold tonight,” Papa said. “I heard that in town the hot water pipes going to some of the apartments broke. The families who depended on those pipes for heat go to bed in their coats and boots.”

Mama shook her head and knitted a bit faster. “The poor babies! How can their mamas keep them warm? God be thanked for our warm house.”

Irina smiled. She liked their house. Mama’s red and gold rugs hanging on the walls made the room cheerful. The woodstove, burning in the kitchen, was toasty warm. She set down her teacup and hopped off her chair.

“Teacups in the kitchen,” Mama reminded her.

Irina picked up her cup and took it to the kitchen. The newly painted floor felt smooth under her knitted

wollsocken.² She knew just the spot where Mama wanted her to put her cup.

Vaskya,³ the big orange tomcat, rubbed his back against Irina's leg. Irina picked him up and carried him back into the living room.

"There. Those *wollsocken* are finished," Mama was saying. "Now Nadzya⁴ will have warm feet."

Nadzya was Irina's niece. Nadzya's mother Rosa was Irina's big sister. Rosa, Lena, and Lidia were Irina's three married sisters. Irina had a brother too, but he had been away with the army for so long that Irina could hardly remember him. "Will we take the *wollsocken* to Rosa tomorrow?" she asked. "I want to play with Nadzya and Andreas."⁵

Mama sighed. "Tomorrow is washday, so I'll be busy. Papa, do you have something for our fire in the morning?"

² Wollsocken (VUHL zahk uhn): German; thickly knitted ankle-high socks worn in the house for warmth.

³ Vaskya (VAHS kyuh): Russian; most tomcats in Kazakhstan were named Vaskya.

⁴ Nadzya (NAD zyuh)

⁵ Andreas (uhn DRAY uhs)

“Yes, it’s on the porch. We don’t want our *goldbrekelye*⁶ to get cold.” Papa’s blue eyes twinkled at Irina. Papa used coal to keep the house warm. He gathered wood and cow dung too. Papa liked to keep a bucket of fuel ready for the stove.

“Come, *kindye*,” Mama said. “Let’s say your prayers. Then you can get ready for bed.”

Irina checked to make sure the curtains were pulled together tightly. She did not want anyone to see her praying. But Papa was reading his Bible, and he would never have forgotten to cover the windows before he took the Bible from its hiding place.

Irina knelt on the wooden floor beside Mama’s knee. She held her folded hands close to her face.

“Now I lay me down to sleep,” Mama said.

“Now I lay me down to sleep,” Irina repeated.

“I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep.”

“I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep,” Irina said.

Irina finished the prayer. Then she hopped up and ran to tell Papa good night. “I’m so glad Mama’s teaching you to pray.” Papa hugged her. “When I was a boy and lived in the orphanage, everyone told me that God wasn’t alive. But

⁶Goldbrekelye (GOLD brehk uhl yuh): Swabian German; a piece of gold; an affectionate term for a small child.

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I prayed when nobody was watching. I knew God could hear me, and I wanted to know Him.”

Mama sighed. “When you go to school, *kindye*, the teachers will tell you that there’s no God, but don’t you believe them! God made the world, and He sees how we live. You must never lie or steal! When you’re grown-up, you’ll be responsible for yourself, and you must choose right.”

“The Bible will tell you what God wants you to do,” Papa said. Then his face saddened. “But how will you learn to read our Bible if you don’t know German? You will learn to read only Russian in school.”

“I understand why my children can’t read German,” Papa went on. “But why don’t they even speak it? I don’t understand that.”

It’s because my sisters’ friends laughed at them when they spoke German at school, Irina thought. That’s why they stopped talking German, and that’s why they made sure I learned Russian. But she didn’t say anything. Instead, she peered over Papa’s arm at his Bible. Squiggly lines marched over the pages. She touched the mark that Papa had made beside a verse. Then she found another spot that Papa had underlined with his pencil.

“When I was a little girl,” Mama was saying, “I learned to read German from Uncle Adam’s Bible.” She smiled, and Irina knew she was remembering how Uncle Adam had

taken care of her because her papa had died, and Russian soldiers had taken her mama away to a work camp.

“How did you learn?” Irina asked. A story about Uncle Adam would be better than going to bed.

“Uncle Adam loved God like your papa does. He read his Bible every day. I begged and begged him to let me read it too, but he said I was too little. One day I found the biggest letter on the page he was reading. It was this letter.” Mama showed Irina a letter in Papa’s Bible. “I asked Uncle Adam what it was. He said it was a G. Then I asked him about the next letter and the next one. That day I learned to read my first word. Can you guess what word I had found in Uncle Adam’s Bible?”

Irina shook her head.

“It was *God*,” Mama said. “Every day after that, I learned more letters until I could read Uncle Adam’s Bible.”

“But German’s too hard.” Irina frowned. She knew Papa and Mama liked speaking German, but she didn’t. She liked Russian.

“Go with Mama now, my *goldbrekelye*,” Papa said. “God sent me a Bible when I was thirty-nine years old. He’ll make a way, even for my Irina, to read His Word.”

Irina followed Mama to the kitchen and got out the basin. Mama took the kettle from the stove and filled the basin with warm water. Then she helped Irina wash her feet.

Back to the living room they went to get Irina's bed ready. Mama took the cover off the couch. There, underneath, was Irina's thick duvet.⁷ Mama pulled the duvet back, and Irina hopped in. Mama tucked the duvet under her chin and smoothed her pillow. Then Mama went back to the kitchen.

Irina lay snug in her bed, listening to Mama filling the big tub with water. Mama would soak their dirty clothes overnight so they would be ready to wash in the morning.

Papa was still reading his Bible. He read it for hours every day. Papa prayed a lot too. He went to his room to pray every morning before he went to work and every afternoon when he came home for lunch. In the evening he went to his room again.

Papa prayed for his children. He prayed for his grown-up daughters who couldn't read his Bible and were living in sin. He prayed for his only son Victor who was serving in the army. He prayed for his little Irina. And when Papa prayed, he cried. If only his children could all grow up to love and serve God!

⁷ Duvet (doo VAY): a large quilt, often stuffed with down, commonly used in Europe in place of a top sheet and blankets. Like pillows, duvets have cases that can be taken off to wash.

2

THE ORANGE

“*KINDYE*, DO YOU think you could do the dishes?” Mama asked after breakfast the next morning. “I must start the wash right away.” She began filling the washing machine with water.

“Washing dishes takes a long time.” Irina sighed.

“If you keep at it, you’ll soon be done,” Mama said. “That’s how you learn to be diligent.”

Irina sighed again. She did not like to wash dishes! She did not like the slimy wash water or the cold rinse water. She would rather hold the heating stick in the washing machine’s big barrel to heat up the water, and she would much rather watch the agitator beat the clothes.

Mama poured hot water from the kettle into a dishpan. “There you are,” she said. “Now try to hurry so you can help me wring out the first load.”