

The First Song

An excerpt from “My Life at First Try”

By Mark Budman

It's 1954. I am four. My mother in her black fur coat and *valenkies*, felt boots, pulls me in a sled over the crisp Siberian snow. Fur is still cheap at this latitude. My two-year-old brother sits behind me. His mitten hands are clutching my sleeves.

I am a reindeer driver. I sing a song about what I see. I sing about a tractor pulling a wooden pole behind it to clear the road of snow. I sing about the general store where a giant poster the color of squished strawberries shows a worker and peasant hammering enemies of the state. I sing about a man lying on the sidewalk with his face down. He's probably drunk, but I sing that the enemies shot him for defending the village. I sing about two men hitting each other in the face. They must be boxers in training, ready to defend my country. I sing about a policeman in his squirrel hat, its earflaps down, in his greatcoat made of deerskin, criss-crossed by shiny leather belts. A rifle is slung over his back. He says, “Move along, folks, move along,” to the people who watch the boxers. He is one great-looking warrior. If I were in charge, I would give him a medal. I sing about a girl in another sled, who lifts the scarf from the bottom of her face momentarily to stick her tongue out at me. I think it's a girl because she wears a red coat while my brother's and mine are black. I also have a scarf over my mouth. My words come out garbled, as if I am a foreigner, which I am not yet.

When I learn the alphabet, I'll write this song down.

We live in a wooden house. One room is for my family, and the second is for the Petrovs. There is a rug that hangs from the wall, above my pillow, with rabbits, squirrels and hedgehogs. I wish them goodnight before I fall asleep. On the other wall, there is a poster of a grinning soldier playing an accordion. His teeth are white, as if he's a kid.

Comrade Petrov is a butcher. That's what my grandmother says. But butchers cut meat. The Petrovs eat only potatoes, lentil soup, bread and garlic. Their son Mishka is my age.

“What's your name?” he said when we first met.

“Sasha.”

“That's a girl's name.”

“No. It's Alexander. Like the great king.”

“What the hell is king?”

“King is a foreign tsar.”

“You're named after a tsar?”

Mishka told me that his dad killed five men in a fight. He can bend a horseshoe with his fingers, carries a big knife, and he has tattoos all over. Mishka also told me that his sister Masha couldn't piss on the wall. I pity her. Even my two-year-old brother can do that, and Masha is already ten.

In the evenings, my mother reads us Longfellow in Bunin's translation while we all drink tea imported from India. I don't know what India is, except that everyone calls it our friend. I like Hiawatha. He could pass for a Russian.

I ask my father how many people he killed. He says that he shot at the Germans during the war, but he doesn't know if he got any.

Last summer, two prisoners, released after Stalin's death, tried to grab me while I was playing in my backyard. My grandma saved me. She just took an ax, and they ran away. She is so strong. She has no rifle, but she can split a log with one blow. Her name is Annie. It's the nicest girl name in the world.

My grandpa is even stronger. He could grab a bear by its paw, spin it over his head, and throw it all the way to the taiga's edge. My father is a teacher. He knows everything.

Stalin sent my grandparents here to chop wood, and my parents volunteered to live with them. That's how we got here. I don't know this yet, and I already forgot about the two prisoners. Mishka doesn't like Stalin either. He says that he's a mothersucker. When I asked what it means, Mishka said that it's a grown-up who still sucks his mother's titties.

When I see Stalin's portraits, I whisper, mothersucker. He's got a big mustachio, so he probably tickles his mother's tits. I've never seen her portraits, but she deserves it because she raised a son like that. She probably has tits like the witches in Macbeth. My mother says it's too early for me to read the book, but I saw the pictures already. Now, my breath settles on my scarf and turns to ice as fast as I exhale. My song streams wide and fast, like a Siberian river in the summer. I am a happy reindeer driver.

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