

The Immortal Folly

Natasha swore she had been seeing the same person for the past three centuries.

They were short and a woman, but not much else consistently. Natasha first spotted them during the beheadings of the French Revolution, then at Napoleon's crowning, and, most recently, fleeing from the Nazis during World War II. Sometimes, in the deepest hours of summer night, when loneliness ceased to be a lukewarm blanket and became a suffocating vice, Natasha saw her out of the corner of her eye. A grimace or a twitch. When she looked harder, she disappeared like a wraith. Natasha wanted to dismiss it as a trick of a mind worn down by centuries. She was reminded of that every time she looked at her fireplace and the empty, empty mantle above it. There was just this odd *tug* whenever she saw the woman. Like a bed of old coals stirred up by wind. The urge to leap.

Natasha did not fear spirits, but, erring on the side of caution, she hung wards of beeswax and goat horn. When the woman appeared during her noontime foraging, sunlight dappling her like a saint, Natasha could take it no longer. It had been so long since she had considered the possibility of another person like her – another immortal – that Natasha had resigned herself to hermithood. She had become a sort of legend to the local townsfolk: the witch in the woods. It was not a bad life by any means, and being around people felt like digging a blade into rot anyways. But, if this truly was what she believed it, then everything must change. Natasha packed her bags – clothes, an old camera, common remedies, a boar hairbrush, various rations for two weeks, and her favorite books. Only halfway through flinging feverously through her pantry (the woman might be hungry!) did she stop to realize that she had *no idea* where to start.

The children gaped when Natasha emerged from the woods. Girls and boys alike wore strange pants that only went down to their knees or midthighs, odd shirts with no coat, and formless bags that they called 'hoodies'. They said they had been told the stories but never believed them, and Natasha smiled politely. When asked where to find people, they pointed her in the direction of Jarosław.

"But stay away from Ukraine. It isn't safe there."

Natasha laughed, voice cracking like chopped wood. She had grown up with muskets and barricades. "Little ones, what do you know of gunpowder?"

A girl shook her head. "It's not just gunpowder anymore. You know drones? War can be conducted by people outside the trench."

"Drones?"

"Yes. Start at Jarosław and go west. I don't know who you're looking for, but you won't find them here."

Natasha borrowed an up-to-date map and an old car from the children and departed the village at midnight. Along the way, she passed by the black church that had been built long before she was born, bulbous as a fly's bottom. She wondered if God had forsaken her. Her foot slipped off the gas pedal. Travel, Natasha decided, was doing something strange to her.

After two hours of driving, she arrived at the bustling city of Jarosław. Watching the people go by, all of them wearing short, thin clothes, Natasha felt woefully out of place with her polonaise and apron. She found an empty space on the street, locked the car, approached a fat, blonde man and asked him where to find people. He shrugged her off.

“Excuse me? Excuse me?” She tapped hesitantly on the shoulders of strangers and was met with confusion or feigned ignorance.

She spotted a kindly looking old woman sitting alone at a café. Her voice was hoarse with embarrassment as she asked, “Pardon me, miss?”

Her eyes told Natasha that she was afraid, but her mouth smiled and told her to go to the Public Procurement Department on the third floor of the Starostwo Powiatowe on Jana Pawla II street. Natasha thanked her and hurried back to the car, only to find it missing. Some poor drunkard shoved past her, crying out as a group of young men hounded him down the street with stones and bottles. Ducking into an alleyway, her petticoat was swallowed by darkness like a dying flower.

The outside world had grown unfamiliar and frightening. Natasha supposed most of this was her own fault; she slept all the time, like a cat eking out the last lazy drops of afternoon sun. But had *that much* happened? It felt as if her whole awareness had been dormant for a very long time, and now, she perpetually existed in the soft, dull subconscious pulsing of dawn, unable to grasp wakefulness. Tired of the noise and people, she sat down in the darkening alley and ate a bit of cheese and bread as life passed her by. Eventually, she fell asleep.

She was awakened by the biting cold. Natasha groaned, pressing a numb hand to her forehead. The summer stars winked at her from the night sky as if to say, “Get up, old fool!” Someone drove by on a motorcycle, engines roaring, and Natasha’s heart jumped.

Suddenly, overtaken by the certainty of a magnet called by its opposite, Natasha flew from the alley, breath coming in quick, furious mists, leather shoes pounding stone as she gave pursuit, choking on the urgency of centuries rising in her chest. The motorcycle guttered to a

stop, and its rider jumped off and ran towards her, short hair spread behind her like crow wings. The woman stopped sharply four feet away, dark eyes roving over Natasha. Natasha's cheeks burned as the woman examined her, for she had given so little care to her appearance; her own face was an incoherent smudge in ash-buried memories.

"Is it you?" The woman's voice was surprisingly rich.

Natasha's voice seized as she whispered, "Yes. Yes, it's me."

Then there were no more words. Just the terrible, undying warmth of the woman who embraced her with a bear's strength. Natasha's eyes were wide as she froze stiffly, stunned and scared.

"I thought it was just me," Natasha managed from within her hold. "I thought I was alone."

"As did I." The woman tightened her embrace.

Natasha felt the first salty tear roll down her cheek. "How?"

"I have been wondering the same, old friend." The woman stepped back, gripping her hands like she was trying to memorize the marrow of Natasha's bones.

"I am Natasha. But you misunderstand. How do you do it?" Natasha was vaguely aware that she did not even know the woman's name, that the woman did not know about the pictures.

The woman somehow gripped her hands even harder, trembling. "Do what?"

"Live." Centuries of dormant thoughts stirred suddenly like an endless flock of sparrows alighting on a summer wind, and even though Natasha had not prepared anything to say, the

words spilled from her mouth like bile. “For I have done something awful, friend. I have committed a sin like no other, and I must tell you now or else surely be damned!”

“The winter of 1889 was bitterly cold. I was in Rownia, where I live now, and had been caught unawares on my way back from my last soul sister’s funeral by a vicious storm. My nose and eyes had all but frozen over by the time I made it back home. Hail bigger than my head came crashing through my roof and windows. All my dishes were shattered, and my stools were upended and smashed. I was helpless and could do nothing but keep my fireplace ablaze, which, by some miracle of God, had not been covered in snow. I first threw my quilts in the fire, and those satisfied it for a while. The quick blaze warmed me enough to think to take apart what was left of the table legs and stools. When it was laid low by the wind, I threw those into the fire. Those lasted longer, but I could tell it would not be enough. And, as if to spite me, darkness had begun to settle, a dreadful, ink-black nothingness, so I pulled down the rugs that lined the walls and what was left of my tattered curtains and gave them to the flame. In the worst hours of night, I paced before the dying fire, half mad with cold. Then, amid the frostbite, came a moment of terrible, frozen clarity: If I did not find something else to burn, I would die. The only things left were the clothes on my back and the pictures on the mantle. What could I do? Weeping afresh, I took them out of their frames. I couldn’t feel the photographs against my fingers or my lips as I kissed them goodbye. Yet, the most miraculous thing happened when I put the first photograph into the fire. The flames leapt so far up the chimney I saw them through the holes in my roof, sticking out hungry tongues to catch the fat, flurrying snowflakes. I quickly put another one in, and the fire jumped twice as high. Ah, how the cold had made an animal of me... I watched those photographs blacken and shrivel and felt a great nothing.”

Her voice broke like river ice as she continued, “God forgive me for I – I burned away the only remnants of my friends. What was I thinking? I cannot remember their names, or what they looked like. It is all *gone*. And *I* am still here. Why? What purpose is there in living if everyone I love is dead?”

The woman looked into Natasha’s eyes as if she was finding God in them. “Listen with care to my next words. I understand your pain. I, too, have lost friends. Family.”

“So many!” Natasha cried out, “Mother and father and my sisters and brothers!”

“Yes, far too many.” The woman’s voice was as bitter as vodka. “And you wonder if you will ever stop hurting.”

“Yes!” Natasha’s heart ached, an overused muscle.

“The burden you carry will never lighten. It is made of the bodies of your loved ones, and it is a halter shaped only for the shoulders of a woman named Natasha. You must heft its weight and learn to walk.”

Natasha shuddered. “How can you bear it?”

The woman shrugged, and she truly meant it. “Sometimes, I am able to. Sometimes, I recall their voices and stumble. One never truly stops hurting.”

“Natasha, we have the gift of time. In living, it becomes easy to forget the ones we have loved and lost. God knows I have tried. But you *must* convince yourself the suffering we endure now is worth the time we spent with them; otherwise, everything truly was for naught in the end, if there really is such a thing. Keep them in your heart, Natasha. Their memory lives on through you, and you will live forever.”

Something shifted in Natasha then. A slow, soul-deep giving of way, like glaciers melting into burbling springtime creeks. She wept openly, shamelessly, in the arms of a stranger.

“God,” Natasha whispered. “Thank you. Truly, thank you. What is your name?”

The woman smiled. “My name also happens to be Natasha.”

When dawn broke and the people of Jarosław began to rise, Natasha and Natasha went their separate ways. Natasha returned to her home in America and Natasha returned to her home in the woods of Poland, waving at all she passed. She left a blurry picture on the mantle before she left. With all her pots and pans, she moved to Jarosław, where the folk knew her only as *babcinka*, and she would go on to care for the grandchildren of many of her new friends. The villagers still tell their children bedtime stories about her, their little chins nodding as the night grows deep, and they always say something like this:

“Once upon a time, there was an immortal witch named Natasha. She was old and wise, kept a terrible, dark secret in the ashes of her fireplace, and she swore she had been seeing the same person for the past three centuries...”