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Story Knife

The door slams and the guard we call Dog Eyes shoves into the barracks with a blast of wind and snow. His sharp, high cheekbones stretch his face and thin his lips.

"Tenko!" Dog Eyes yells.

We shift on our thin tatami mats and stand, but not fast enough. Never fast enough.

"Tenko!" screams Dog Eyes.

Joseph reaches down to help me up. I squeeze his hand in thanks when I'm standing. My belly is not so big, but I feel clumsy. Still, I don't want to cause problems for everyone else because I am too slow. We stagger into line as Dog Eyes fumes. We stand in order of the numbers on our armbands, as we have done every morning of the one year, seven months, three weeks, and six days since we were taken. We are numbers one through forty-four, but there are three empty spots.

Other figures appear behind the guard. I recognize the slim doctor with his earnest face framed by eyeglasses. And there's the interpreter with his eye-patch who translates Japanese into Russian. There's someone else I can't see, but I don't strain to look. Best not to draw attention. I want to lean into the strength of Joseph beside me, but I draw myself up instead. The doctor faces Joseph, because he is our Chief here as he was on Attu. As the doctor speaks, then waits for the translator, the children rub sleep from their eyes. I listen to the translator speak in Russian.

“Tuberculosis,” Innokenty translates into Aleut, and the word squalls in my chest. The doctor steps forward, bows to Joseph, then gestures to the shadowy person just inside the door. When the man steps forward, I see he wears dark robes and holds three boxes stacked one atop the other. I smell pine. Joseph stares at the doctor, then at the boxes. We all stare at the boxes. I feel as if I am falling.

“Nicholas, Alexi and,” Innokenty’s voice breaks, “Old Chernokoff,” His father. He clears his throat. “The doctor regrets their deaths. Please accept their remains.”

But these boxes are so small. The man in the robes offers the pine rectangles to Joseph. My husband’s arms stretch automatically. In the moment before he accepts the boxes he staggers as if he’s standing in a boat caught by waves. I reach out, but he steadies himself and takes the boxes. The doctor bends again, but Joseph does not return the bow.

I dart a look at Dog Eyes, with his falcon eyes and calloused fingers that curl around the top of his wooden staff. But the doctor seems genuinely regretful, and he is the superior in the room. Dog Eyes won’t move to correct the discourtesy. Not yet.

After the doctor, the translator, and the robed-man leave, Dog Eyes stays. We hold the line. Innokenty’s breathing sounds ragged. Beside me Lena’s tears leave tracks on her clay-dusted cheeks. Joseph holds the boxes as we all ache with the desecration. Cremation erases the possibility of a wake, a vigil, a burial. There is squiggly writing on the boxes. I wonder who is who, until I realize the squiggles are numbers written vertically.

Dog Eyes moves toward Joseph and for a moment I am sure he will hit him as a reprimand for not bowing to the doctor. Instead, the guard pushes past me. I have left it on my mat—a small, hand-woven basket. When I was sure that I was pregnant—that I was likely to stay pregnant—I began weaving grass I collected on our walks to and from the

dolomite mine. Grandmother upon grandmother revived my tired fingers at night as I bent the blades together. Joseph watched as I wove the eyes of the chippee bird along the outer edges. The foreign grass formed a brittle weave and there was no colorful thread for embroidered designs, but it was something of home. Now Dog Eyes shoves past me, plucks up the basket and rolls it in his chiseled hand. He is the kind who can scavenge from a bleached bone.

I step out of the line.

Dog Eyes turns with a slow, sure motion, as if he had hoped for exactly this. The back of his hand smacks my cheek. Lena is quick to catch me before I fall. Big Ivan rears to his full height, but Joseph barks out, "Stop!"

My husband grips the edges of the pine boxes as if they are anchors. Dog Eyes takes his time as he scans the room for more resistance. He walks out with measured steps, the basket in his hand. The door whaps shut behind him.

Joseph hands the boxes to Innokenty. When he turns to me I expect him to check my face, make sure that I am not badly hurt. Instead, he stares at me with black eyes. *That basket was for our baby*, I try to say. But there is a grief in the room that overshadows my own, so I understand when Joseph turns away. The tribe needs its leader. Lena begins to chant the Kontakion. Innokenty, who leads the prayers, who keeps the Orthodox calendar, who insists we buy candles for Sunday services from our precious weekly yen allotment, carries the remains of his father and our friends to the sanctuary. I listen as the others join Lena's song, one by one. I do not hear Joseph's voice. In this moment I swear that our baby will be born. Our baby will live.

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The Japs weren't stupid, I will tell our child. They came from behind the storm on Easter Sunday morning in June of 1942. I will tell our child how we heard gunfire and how Joseph wrenched open our door. I will describe how the hill behind him writhed as hundreds upon hundreds of them spilled down the rocky slopes, sank into the muskeg, shot into the air. Our neighbor Alice jerked and fell, clutching her bloody leg. They were upon us that fast. Easter eggs fell lopsided. Rolled on the floor. Joseph stepped out and spread his arms wide. Bayonet blade tips—cold with oil and fear—quivered in his face. The men who held the weapons looked like us, but screamed commands in words none of us understood.

Soldiers tore apart our homes and scattered the icons of the creation, Annunciation and crucifixion. They draped fox furs across their shoulders and posed for photographs. The flag of stars and stripes was thrown into the oily bilge of the bay as fire burned our homes to the ground. Acrid smoke burned our eyes and soured our throats. We were forced from Chichagof into the hull of the *Osada Maru*, black with coal, vomit and Alice's burial at sea. When we landed, Innokenty whispered that we were in a place called Otaru, on the island of Hokkaido—the northernmost island of Japan.

I will even tell our child that some muttered against Joseph, who was our leader. It was he who decided not to evacuate when the American military men offered to take us all off island. The Kiskan Chief followed the advice to evacuate, but not my husband.

The williwaw won't blow forever. Grandmother always hugged me when she said those words, but the williwaw winds that rushed off the Bering Sea, roared down the tundra and thudded against our house sounded as if they could howl forever. I was a child,

and when the storm raged, I cried and cried. Grandmother would take down her story knife, curve the carved seal tusk into the firepit and swirl designs in the ashes. She told stories of seals and tomcod. After days and nights of storytelling, the keening winds softened to whimpers, until finally quiet rang in our ears.

Now Grandmother lies dead across a churning sea. Hunger twists my guts, so I chew on the edge of my *tatami*. While the rest of my people sleep, I feel my baby flip and turn deep inside me. I curve my fingers into seal tusks. I draw the full-moon face of my child who will be. I whisper stories into seashell ears of dirt and dust.

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Snow falls in clumps from the gray sky and mounds high on the window frames, as if burying us. Big Ivan grunts in his sleep, then shouts, "Oogruk!" He is hunting seal in his dreams. I try to stop the memory of waiting, club in hand, for the slick-furred, dark-eyed seal to break through black water. I want to forget the flap of tomcod, herring, and chum, but already my mouth is watering. Today I will tell Joseph I need more food.

When Dog Eyes marches in he does not yell as loud. We scramble to line up and we bow low. When we are assembled, he turns to the door and bows, which can only mean that Superintendent Kawada is here. He usually inspects us once a month, delivers a speech about how we should work harder, and reminds us how fortunate we are. His face is wrinkled, and he reminds me of my grandfather, but he walks with a bounce, as if he is half his age. Today he bobs across the floor twice as fast as usual, and stops in front of Joseph. The eye-patched interpreter, who balances a covered tray with one hand, works harder than usual to keep up with the superintendent.

“This is a good day,” Kawada announces, pausing for the interpreter to repeat a few lines in Russian, and for Innokenty to render them in Aleut. “You have worked hard. You are self-sufficient. You no longer require rations support because you can buy all you need with what you earn. You are now Japanese citizens. In recognition of your effort the Emperor rewards you all with a one day paid holiday and this special food.”

Kawada points to the tray. The interpreter fumbles with a white cloth. Exposes balls of rice, which he sets on the floor. Salt stings the air. *Herring*. My mouth slicks with saliva. Superintendent Kawada flashes a genial smile around the room.

“Congratulations.”

We bow.

He rounds on his heel and disappears outside, the interpreter trotting behind him. Dog Eyes takes his time. No one looks at him, or speaks a word. Even when he leaves with a handful of food.

The mood starts off celebratory. Joseph sits with the men, and eats the least. But the food is gone sooner than anyone expected. And even though we have had more, no one feels satisfied.

“What does it mean?” Big Ivan asks. “Will we get more herring?”

“It means if any of us gets sick, there will be less money,” says Joseph.

“We’re already starving,” muttered Big Ivan. The other men murmur agreement.

“Still,” says Innokenty softly, “it’s good news.” Everyone looks at him, even the children. We always speak in whispers, even though none of the Japanese speak Aleut. “Because it means that the war is not going well for them.”

I repeat his words over and over in my mind the rest of the day. If the Japanese lose the war, the Americans will come. Even if my baby is born here, a prisoner, on foreign soil, still we could go home again.

I wait until nighttime, when we stretch out next to each other on separate mats.

"The extra food was good," I whisper, wanting to reach for his hand, but restraining myself. He does not answer. "Joseph..."

He reaches his top arm around me. Our fingers entwine on top of my swollen belly, beneath my breasts. He tucks his head into my neck, speaks into my hair, his breath warm on my neck.

"Vera, I am sorry." Before I can answer the baby rolls beneath our hands. Joseph startles away.

"I need more food," I say loud enough for him to hear, but not loud enough for the others. When he doesn't answer I turn away from him, onto my side.

He settles his hand on my shoulder. I want to shift the weight of his hand off of me, but I don't move.

* * *

Joseph is awake beside me. He pretends I am asleep, so I keep my breath even. I hear a dry rustle as he rubs tobacco between his fingers. He lights his pipe, draws breath, and exhales smoke. Nausea roils through me. I am sick with the shiver of this strange land, and the blood whooshing in my ears reminds me of the effort it takes to live for two. It is shopping day. I will do what I have to do.

We women boil water and listen as the children share dreams and roll up their sleeping mats. The men form a circle in the sanctuary corner. Innokenty takes the coin jar from the shelf and empties every single yen into the center of the circle. Each man already knows how many coins lay on the barracks floor. We each earn a single yen for every day spent in the mines, digging and carrying and coughing. The men stare at the coins. Each has already calculated how many coins lay on the floor, how much food we women will be able to buy, how long their children's hungry pleas might be appeased.

"Half for food, half for tobacco," Joseph says, as he does every week. It took months to find the balance between food and smokes; we all know the mean-tempered cost of no tobacco.

It is a formality, but all the men have to agree to the spending choices. Beside him Big Ivan nods assent. Men murmur agreement. My fingers cup the bulge at my waist, which should be bigger.

I walk forward, leaving the women. They become still and quiet behind me.

As I approach, Innokenty glances at me. I pause. All the men look up at me, except one. Joseph stares at the coins. None of the men move to make room for me. I feel the baby roll.

"Can we buy extra condensed milk?"

Joseph slowly raises his gaze to mine, but does not answer.

"Even one can?"

Someone coughs.

Joseph looks at me as every other man looks away. His eyes are sad. "No."

“This baby is alive,” I say. I want them to understand that this baby will *live*. I want to tell them that I see their dark thoughts. I see that they don't want to waste food on someone they already consider dead. I see them consult the other two who were born too soon, from bodies too thin. They would have been boys, those too-soon, too-small babies. But my throat is choked and my eyes are blind with tears. I feel Lena's hand on my shoulder. She guides me back to the women, wraps a thin blanket around my shoulders. She will be the only one beside me when my time comes. The men will honor the spirit of this little one with funeral ceremonies and song, but it will be Lena who holds me when I rock the still body against my chest.

* * *

After Sunday prayer services the men gather in a circle. The children, who play with some of the soldiers and guards, have learned some Japanese. They overhear the guards muttering about their hungry families, about lost battles, about blackouts. They translate for the rest of us. Two of them, whip-thin and otter-eyed at twelve and thirteen, hold themselves with the hunter-trapper balance of their grandfathers. I watch young Peter and Alexi whisper to each other. Because I stay awake long after the rest of my people are asleep, whispering stories to the dirt, I know where they have been. I know their secret. I bend to Alexi and whisper, “Tell them.” His eyes shine and he pulls on young Peter's arm. The boys press against the circle of men.

Joseph makes a parting gesture between Big Ivan and Vassili, who shift aside to make room.

“We can get out,” says Alexi, pointing down at the floorboards. “There’s a way beneath the barracks. We went last night. Through the town. We found heaps of garbage with food. There aren’t any guards. It wasn’t hard.”

Beside him Peter nods eagerly. None of the men register surprise or anger, although all of us remember Dog Eye’s red face as he screamed, “It is forbidden to leave this place!” on the first day of our arrival. No one leaves the barracks without an escort. Once a week we are led to the public baths. We are guarded on our way to and from the mines. Guarded when we shop. Once Dog Eyes pretended to behead one of the men with his bamboo baton to make his point. “Forbidden!”

Innokenty, glancing at the Orthodox cross in the sanctuary murmurs, “Theft is a sin.”

“Can it be theft if the food is thrown away?” asks Big Ivan.

The circle considers. Big Ivan looks down the length of the barracks at the closed door. Joseph lights his pipe. Across the room we women make noise to mask our attentiveness.

“There were fish scraps,” Alexi says softly. “Enough to make broth.”

Innokenty repeats: “It is theft.”

The men hear Innokenty, but their eyes shift from their pipes to Joseph. Joseph closes his eyes and sucks hard on a dark burst of smoke. He takes his time, as if he is a man who has choices. When he opens his eyes. “We will set a watch.”

* * *

The boys’ heads pop up in the gaps between the pried-up planks the way oogruk bob up from black water. Flushed with the victory of their first hunt, they hand over their

treasure: fish bones, rotted meat, wilted leaves. Lena starts a pot boiling in the back. The guards never stir. Innokenty whispers a blessing, thanking God and asking forgiveness. Everyone drinks the broth in the dark. Everyone but me. The first sips roil my belly and I begin to wretch. I am so hungry, but my body rebels.

Later, I hear groans all around me. First it is the young ones—Alexi and Peter and little Lena—vomiting and clutching their stomachs. Then the adults wake and join the misery. The room stinks of vomit and sweat and shit when the runs came too fast to reach the buckets.

* * *

When I jerk awake I know it is time. This is not fever, or illness. It is the baby.

“Lena,” I choke, “Lena.”

Joseph helps me up. Warm water runs down my thighs. Something grips deep between my hip bones. Pain radiates to my back.

“Lena!”

“Sick,” says Joseph. “Walk with me.”

Back on Attu, men were not allowed in the birthing hut, but here the men have witnessed two births.

I walk between spasms. Stop. Breathe. Try not to moan. Stop trying. The spasms become deeper. Last longer. The sounds of whimpering, crying and vomiting around me begin to dim. My moans turn to growls. I fall into the rhythmic, agonizing clutch of a pain I cannot stop, I cannot avoid, I cannot fathom. When I emerge Joseph is beside me. His eyes see me. “Why?” I say through clenched teeth. “Why did you wait?”

Then everything becomes the next step until I cannot walk. I sink down in the sanctuary, where candles flicker. Joseph speaks. I struggle to understand. Pain washes away my effort. I cannot stand. I kneel and shove my head against Joseph's hard stomach. My groans pivot to a keening cry and I feel the grind of my body opening. Joseph's voice is calm.

I do not know that Dog Eyes appears in a slab of dim morning light, takes in the chaos and stench and yells, "Sick! Sick and weak, all of you!" I do not know that his eyes widen when he hears me cry out, or that when he understands the situation he demands I be taken to the sanitorium.

What I know is that Joseph is gone. What I know is that this baby will be born. For a long, drawn out moment there is no pain. I stand and begin to walk to the light, the rectangle of light that is the open door. Then an oceanic force beyond measure surges through me and I am on my knees.

They tell me later that it was the smell of blood that did it, but I don't believe it. Because when Joseph left me he confronted Dog Eyes. Lifted his jaw. Squared his body. Dog Eyes squinted and his hand moved to his baton. Then Innokenty shoved himself between Joseph and Dog Eyes. The guard glared at Innokenty. Shifted his eyes beyond him. Big Ivan moved forward at Joseph's side. Old Andrei, the last of the elders, reached a trembling hand to Joseph's shoulder. The men formed a line, hand to shoulder, across the room. They would safeguard the birth of the already dead. The mourning. The burial.

All I heard was, "She must come with me!" And I knew he was right. That Dog Eyes, in the end, was the one who understood. That to bear witness to one more death was not

fair. I stood, and I walked. Through the line of men, past Joseph. Until a tearing, burning sensation drove me to my knees again.

The baby crowns and I taste iron-laced air. I saw Dog Eyes wince, gag, then spit, as if to clear pollution from his mouth. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He glared at me. And then I felt them. Joseph and Innokenty, at my side.

Dog Eyes turned, and left.

I lay panting. Even when I feel the weight of the babe on my belly I can't open my eyes. I don't know if it is alive or dead. Lena begins to croak—a high-pitched, grating sound. Then I hear a thin cry. Lena shifts the baby to my shoulder where it nestles like a burrowing creature. My eyes open. The naked, blood-and-white-paste smeared body feels as far away as Attu.

“Come,” Lena calls. “Come and greet your daughter.”

I do not see my husband, but I feel his calloused fingers brush the wet hair from my forehead. He kneels beside us. Our daughter's stiff fist rests against my breast. Her wail is a williwaw. Take her, I pray. Take her now.

“The wind is not a river, it will not blow forever,” Joseph whispers. The baby shifts her shut-eyed face toward my nipple, which leaks honey-colored drops. Joseph nudges her fist. Her tiny fingers stretch open, then clasp his finger.

“I will carve you a story knife,” he promises. And I see it. Joseph will curl the coastline of Attu, the rim of the chapel bell, and the eyes of the bearded seal along the flaring edges of the knife tip. I see the story knife in her fist, where it will twist, stab, lash and scratch. She will dash her truth to the ground, wherever she stands.