

Cursed Wood

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PROLOGUE

On the first day of spring I arrive in the Siberian city of Yekaterinburg, in the heart of the Urals, where almost a century before, in 1918, the last Russian tsar and his family were shot dead.

I hear the ice on the rivers breaking like crystal.

Tsar Nicholas was an out-of-touch eccentric. His wife was far from popular with the xenophobic Russians, as she was of German descent. Their four daughters were elegant recluses. The only son, the successor to the throne, was a sickly boy, always dressed in a sailor suit. He suffered from haemophilia: if he had a minor wound, he might bleed to death. A half-witted monk, Rasputin, was employing mystical methods to heal the boy. By the time of the execution, Rasputin had already been dispatched. It was the age of the great murders.

The tsar's family was slaughtered at night by drunken soldiers following the orders of the Communist revolutionary Lenin, because a new time had come, the time of the Soviet Union, and there was no place for aristocrats in this new world.

I drive along a forest road to the place where the bodies were dumped in a mineshaft. The shaft is still there, but the mortal remains – or what was left of them after being drenched with nitric acid – were dug up and transferred to a church in Saint Petersburg. Russians are very fond of reburials. Around the shaft, the dumping ground of almost a thousand years of European history, there now stands a monastery complex of wooden churches and neat little guesthouses for pilgrims. At the entrance to the shaft are seven trees, one for each member of the family.

I stopped believing in gods long ago. I believe that humankind creates its god or gods itself, not the other way around, but there, almost two thousand kilometres from Moscow, more than four thousand kilometres from my home and loved ones, on the border of Europe and Asia, doubt about my scepticism begins to rise. The air ripples in the first sunshine of the day, already hot. The icy soil crackles beneath my feet. I enter the wooden church. It is like descending into a crypt. I know that death reigns here. No one is about to tap me on the shoulder, but still I gasp for breath.

Father Fyodor, a young monk – young enough to be my son, but Russian monks happen to be called Father – is a handsome young man with the waist of a dancer and the face of a model. His cheeks are flushed. On his chin he is cultivating a reddish beard.

Christos voskrese,' he says. Literally, 'Christ is risen' in Old Russian. It is what monks say instead of hello. He is wearing the raven-black robe of his order, and he is coughing nervously. I learn that he is a historian by education.

I follow him, my legs shaking, as I attempt to imagine the clumsy execution of the tsar's family, in the early hours of 17 July. The soldiers were so drunk that they could not shoot straight; they had to finish their work with bayonets. The room where it happened was flooded with blood. The people meanwhile believed that the tsar and his family had fled abroad, far from the revolution, the war and the typhus. The last words written by Tsar Nicholas were about the overwhelming scent of the surrounding orchards. I can smell them now too, almost a century later, in the thawing earth.

'Do you like icons?' asks Father Fyodor.

I tell him that I think icons are the most beautiful paintings imaginable, and that I cannot take my eyes off them.

'You are mistaken,' says Father Fyodor. 'Icons are not paintings; they have nothing to do with art. They are not a depiction of an individual. They actually are that individual.'

I nod.

'Secondly, people do not look at icons. Icons look at people. Come with me.'

I stop in front of the iconostasis, the wall of icons that, for Russian believers, is the gateway between heaven and earth, the door to the other side.

Father Fyodor drums his fingers on my shoulder. 'I know of something much more interesting,' he says. He leads me to a corner of the church, next to the main entrance. On a lectern, there is an icon that I find hard to make out at first.

'This,' says Father Fyodor, 'is sure to interest you.'

My eyes have to get used to the darkness. Finally I see what it is: a woman, no doubt Mary, the mother of Jesus, a magnificent young woman, perfect in every way, sensual, tangible. I look more closely. I was right: Mary's eyes are closed.

'Why are her eyes shut?' I ask. As I say it, I have my doubts: has she closed her eyes, or is she simply looking down?

He grins, as if he himself does not believe what he is about to say. 'Only true believers will see her eyes open.'

I look at the woman again, and then at the monk. 'Have you ever...?'

Father Fyodor's face creases. 'No,' he says. 'It might take a hundred years, or a thousand, but one day...'

We stand gazing at the icon for minutes, until my eyelids start twitching. Doesn't she want to look at me? Or doesn't she dare to? Is she gazing inward? Or is it modesty that is preventing her from looking at me? In that case, there is still hope. I briefly touch the icon. My fingertips glow.

We head outside. I smell the orchards. The forest. Autumn leaves thawing after seven months. The riotous green. The early fish in the lake. Mythical Siberia.

I thank Fyodor with a handshake.

'Rendezvous in a hundred years' time,' he says, 'or a thousand.'

He could be a dancer, divine, worshipped by all, but he returns to his study, his cell, where he paints icons and, for relaxation, listens to rock bands on his mobile phone. Too late, I realise that I forgot to take a photograph of the icon.

I look at my hands and return to my room in a country cottage.

I also forgot to ask my cool monk how an icon can look at a person if the eyes of the individual depicted, which is not in fact a depiction but the actual individual, are closed. Or lowered.

I'll go back again one day to ask.

That night, there is a huge storm. Fires break out everywhere. A morning downpour extinguishes all of the flames.

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CHAPTER ONE

*about a damaged young mother,
the House of Bread,*

*the Place of the Skull,
and a big splinter*

For the duration of the rape, I look at her eyes. They have chased her up the mountain, the hill I have stood upon all my life, in the heart of the desert. They roll up the flaps of their uniform tunics and throw themselves on her, one after another. Their helmets slip down, askew.

Her name is Maryam, as I later find out. Her mouth is open wide, but I do not hear her screaming, because I am paying attention only to her gaze, to her pupils shattering, all her youth and innocence turning to dust. Tears well up in the cracks in her beauty, as if the icy surface of a frozen pond is breaking to reveal the water that hides beneath. They spasm as they come. Bold warriors on leave, children in men's bodies. They piss the names their mothers gave them into the sand. They piss on me, because trees are for pissing on, and they piss on Maryam. They spit on her and return to their encampments, to their bunks and their little wars.

Since then, Maryam's face has had an old look. Hair can turn grey overnight. The mirror of the soul can skip an entire human life in a single moment. She is barely thirteen. A mother-to-be has become an old woman.

Later she keeps coming back to the place beneath my crown. She returns to the spot where the soldiers dragged her by the hair, because she was 'a little Jewish rat', as they told her. Here, high up between heaven and earth, she can mourn without being disturbed. I do all that I am capable of: I give her my shade.

The desert is my mother. For years I have stood with my roots deep in her belly, immovable in the blazing wind, destined to remain standing here forever, because that is simply my nature. I live on the rain, which comes a few merciful times a year, and on the minerals hidden deep in the sand. I am fated to be silent, as that too is my nature, but I constantly talk to myself, even though I know no one can hear me. I also talk to Maryam, without interruption, in the pitiful silence.

I too have changed after the incident on the mountain. I often feel captive, inside my bark, in the ground. I cannot move from my spot, so I stretch my branches to the skies, I am not large, but I stretch, so far, until all my twigs hurt, in the hope that it will bring some consolation. I have even seen humans do it: stretching to the sky, spreading non-existent wings. Strange, because, after all, they can move. For what pain are they seeking consolation? For their short life, and for their inability to make something of it, and if they have made something of it, then for their horror of death.

I do not yet know that Maryam's motherhood will change not only me, but also the fate of the world.

She cannot talk to anyone about what has happened, not her parents, the elderly Anne and Joachim, who were childless for a long time and who worship their only daughter, and not her betrothed, Yosef, who apparently (I have never seen him, I just heard it from her) already has one foot in the grave.

When Maryam is with me, she lies on her back, with her eyes closed. Her skin has the perfection of a child's and gleams like wet, red earth. Her nose is like a ramp, a steep, jubilant line. Her eyebrows form a single unbroken arch. Her lips often tremble, and she always seems to be smiling, even when she is full of sorrow, and she is always full of sorrow.

One day, when her belly is already large, she says that she does not want it.

What does she not want?

She pouts. 'But my lord has commanded it.'

'Where is your lord?' I ask. 'What has he commanded? You humans insist on having a lord. You invent your lord. You call your fate your lord.'

She sits up and looks around with her old eyes, as if someone has just put her most sinful thoughts into words, thoughts for which she will have to beg forgiveness on her knees at night, forgiveness from the angels who fill her dreams and whisper obscure tasks in her ear.

'You cannot deny your lord,' she says. 'Denying him is as bad as killing him. Killing him is killing yourself.' She thinks for a long time. 'He is the branch upon which you sit. Saw through that branch, and you will fall.'

She has a sharp mind, this unfortunate, broken young mother-to-be. Now she is furious. She hits out with her fists, as if she is wrestling with an angel.

Has she already forgotten what happened? She reeks of the lowest of crimes, committed at her lord's command – she says so herself – in order to save humankind, would you believe? She does not want it, but she is resigned to it.

'I have been given a terrible task,' she says, squeezing her belly, 'a task that will never end,' she continues, beating her bulging navel, 'not even with my death.'

She staggers towards her fate.

When her waters break, soon, she will say that she, the chosen one, is proud.
