

## A Winter Song

By Connor Wilson

The light escaping the dense trees danced on the snow in a way that made Misha pause her trudging to witness. Their twinkling reminded her of the light festival from the village. Her attention broke from the coo of her brother Oleg, who gave her a toothless smile. It was his first winter and Misha wished she could be the one wrapped to mother's back in the dry bear furs. Hers were wet in the boots and chest from her fogged breath.

An extended hand from Nikita broke her attention again. Misha's eyes followed the hand as it slowly pointed to a grand elk in the distance. Nikita turned to her daughter with a smile as large as Misha's. "Are you ready," she asked. Misha nodded her head, shaking her cap, causing it to fall onto her face. Nikita lifted the cap and handed her the rifle. She took the rifle carefully, and tip-toed in front of Nikita. Nikita neared Misha's ear and whispered, "Remember: Knee down, stock in the shoulder. Put the elk on the sight and aim just to the side of the shoulder." Misha reflected her mother's words but paused and turned back to her mother, who shared the same excitement as her daughter.

"Mother. Oleg."

"Oh! Yes."

Nikita folded a flap over Oleg's head and nodded at Misha. She took a deep breath and repositioned the sight. With a crack, the elk bolted some yards, churning glistening red surges from the wound and fell to the ground. Misha threw her arms in excitement and Nikita gave a

fur-muffled applause. The three approached the creature, its blood steaming and coating the snow. Misha's excited eyes scanned the elk and the wound.

"You did excellent! I'm so proud," Nikita said. She pulled her daughter close and kissed her on the forehead. She unsheathed a skinning knife from under her furs and handed it to Misha.

"The bend of the leg, right," Misha asked. Nikita nodded and pulled Oleg to the front, unfolded the fur to reveal his smiling face. Nikita watched Misha's focused face unfurl the beast's hide while she distracted Oleg with her fingers. She admired her daughter's concentration, but a feeling of melancholy came over her. She reached to her chest and unveiled a locket.

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Evgeni kicked his boots on the doorstep, placed his bag on the floor, and quickly removed his coat. Misha ran to him with open arms, laughing with each step. He scooped her up, laughed, and kissed her forehead.

"My dear, what are you so excited about," Nikita asked, "I've seen elk nearby when I came from the village," Evgeni said, throwing a thumb over his shoulder. Nikita's smile slightly faded, but it returned at Misha's giggling. "I also couldn't wait to see my little wolf." He poked Misha's nose, and she giggled again. He placed her on the ground and crouched beside her. "I brought you something from the village," he said, uncinching the bag. Nikita crouched down next to Misha and both shared sounds of innocent awe.

"I know we couldn't go to the village for the festival this year, so I brought you this," Evgeni said, removing a small white candle, "We'll light it when the sun sets and have our own festival. What do you think?" Misha nodded happily. "Oh, and one more thing for my wolf: A

wolf of your own,” Evgeni chuckled, removing a small wolf doll from the bag. He handed it to Misha, who snatched it, held it close in her arms, and nuzzled its face.

Evgeni looked to his wife, who rolled her eyes jokingly. “Oh! And, of course, for my beautiful wife, a gift for you,” he said, kissing his wife, and clicking a necklace around her.

“What is this,” Nikita asked.

“Look inside,” Evgeni replied with a gentle smirk. Nikita clicked the button atop the heart-shaped locket. It opened to their wedding photograph. “I took the photo before I left. It’s something I thought would look nice on you. And, when I’m gone, you can always have me near.”

“It’s beautiful,” She replied and hugged her husband, warming his frost and her own heart. Later that night, they shared a warm soup and when they were finished, they donned their furs and went outside. Evgeni took the candle and stuck it in the snow. Nikita helped Misha strike her own match and lit the candle. They sang songs together until the moon rose and Misha began rubbing her eyes. Nikita lifted Misha into her arms and she dozed off, snuggled in the fur.

Evgeni rose, and breathed heavily. “I saw your face when I mentioned the elk.”

“Must you leave so soon?”

“Nikita...we only have food for soup, and if the elk are here, we can feast and have food for the rest of the year.”

“You have a daughter who thinks the world of you. Can you try to stay home more often? We don’t need to store away food like a bear. We’ll just have soup more often.”

Evgeni paused and pondered. “I understand,” he said with a finger wrapped around his chin, “But, I want to hunt just one. So, we can go through the winter without only eating soup,”

he said with a wink. He placed his hand on Nikita's stomach with a smile, "And if this little one comes out a boy, he can help me bring more food for us when he's big and strong."

Nikita held a breath. With a sigh, she looked to the candle. Returning her gaze to her husband, she looked into his warm eyes and her worries washed away. Evgeni leaned down and kissed her tenderly. He took hold of Nikita's hand and lifted her from the snowy floor. They returned inside their home and tucked Misha under her blanket. She rubbed her eyes, waking up slightly, but the rich hum of her father's lullaby returned the girl to sleep. They closed her door, went to their room and nestled into their bed.

"I do this for her. I don't want to be a lacking father," Evgeni said with a low and gentle voice.

"You are anything but that," Nikita said, holding onto him. His arm wrapped around her, giving her a sense of safety and warmth as she fell asleep. Nikita awoke sooner than she had hoped. She rolled over, searching for the warmth of her husband, but found he had already risen with the sun. She searched her room to find him getting dressed, failing his attempts at silence.

"I didn't mean to wake you just yet," Evgeni chuckled, securing the knot of his bootlace.

"Must you go? I'm cold," Nikita muttered and approached her husband, placing a hand on his head and intertwining her fingers in his hair.

Evgeni rose and took his wife's hand to his lips and whispered, "It will only be for a while, my dear. I will be home before the evening. I promise." Nikita stared longingly at the mountain pass through the window of their room, but the twinkle in her husband's eye caught her. Their softness comforted her. She reached out her arms for a hug. Evgeni chuckled and pulled her close, squeezing her into his furs as tightly as he could. "Be sure to say goodbye to Misha, my love."

“I will. I love you, Evgen,” Nikita said, adjusting her gown. Evgeni left the room, looked back at Nikita sinking beneath the covers, and caught a flash of her deep brown eyes before closing the door. When he entered Misha’s room, he saw her sound asleep, holding the wolf doll tightly between her arms. He sat beside her on the bed and pet her hair. He leaned over to her ear and whispered, “Little wolf. Wake up.” The girl yawned and stared at her father with tired eyes. “I have to go so I can get us some food,” he said.

“But you just got home,” she said while rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“I know. But, if I get this food, I can make stew for you.”

Misha gave a yawn-filled, “Hooray,” and scooted under the covers. Evgeni tucked the blanket under Misha, sang his lullaby again, and waited for her to return to sleep. He stepped out from Misha’s room and saw Nikita sitting on a bench beside the door with a solemn smile.

She rose from the bench and placed her hand on Evgeni’s bearded cheek. “Please. Be safe. With this many elk around, you can’t be the only hunter,” she said.

Evgeni kissed the soft lips of his wife. “I will, my dear. And like I said, I’ll be home before the evening.”

“I will see you then. I missed you long enough and I’ll miss you more, Evgeni,” Nikita said. She felt Evgeni’s beard slip through her hand. She wanted the door to stay closed with Evgeni inside. But he was outside. Her thoughts were paused by the tugging of Misha, who was back to rubbing her eyes.

“Mama, Dad said he was going to make stew,” she said with sleepy excitement. The light in her eyes twinkled like a candle. Nikita smiled and picked her up.

“Did he now,” She asked. Misha nodded. “Well, maybe we can surprise him with his favorite vatrushka buns,” Nikita chuckled, tapping Misha on her nose.

The two spent their day gathering the ingredients for the buns and prepping them. When they were ready, they set the buns in a beautiful array, ready to be popped in the oven. As the sun started to fall, the two waited anxiously for the boots stomping in the door. A gentle crack echoed from the air.

“I guess your father finally got his elk! A little late, but that’s okay.”

“Yay! Stew,” Misha shouted with a giggle. Nikita and Misha sat on the floor singing songs and teaching the wolf doll new tricks. Nikita slowly became more and more distant from Misha’s play as the day went on. She wrapped herself up in furs and went into the cold snow, but the darker the day became, the louder the silence was. She called for Evgeni for hours, her eyes darting for any sign of her husband before returning inside. She dropped her furs on the bench and meandered past the living room where Misha was still playing with her wolf.

“Where’s Dad,” Misha asked. Nikita said nothing, continuing her slow steps to the bedroom. She crawled under her covers and instinctively reached for the Evgeni she wanted beside her but found nothing. Clenching the furs to her face, she laid there, with the vacancy of Evgeni.

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A pattern of frost crept over the photo from where her tear had fallen. She wiped the frost from the locket and from her face. She looked up at Misha to find her placing the bound fur on her back and tying the legs of the elk. Misha looked at the locket her mother held and said nothing.

“Oh, Misha. Well done. Your cleanest cut yet,” Nikita said with a quiet snuffle. Before Misha could reply, a loud crunch echoed through the trees. Beyond the steam of the body and blood, Misha could see a brown shape meandering through the forest.

“Mother...Bear...” Misha whispered. Nikita’s eyes widened.

“Don’t move,” Nikita muttered. Her eyes were locked to the bear as she moved Oleg to her back. Her heartbeat shook through the fur. The bear raised its head, sniffing the air. It turned to the steaming elk and started walking towards it. As it grew closer, its pace became quicker, each step booming and crushing in the snow. Misha raised the rifle and loaded another round, keeping her body still. Misha’s trembling hands struggled to hold the gun steady. With the marker lined up, Misha fired and struck the bear. It had fallen just ahead of them, just as the elk. Nikita stood up slowly as the bear groaned, motionless. She looked at the bear and noticed a small patch of scarred tissue on its shoulder.

“You,” Nikita screamed, roaring like a beast of her own. Her nose crinkled, her teeth snarled in rage as she ripped the rifle from Misha’s hands. She loaded the gun again and fired at the beast with a vicious yell. The bear thrust itself from the ground and roared back, charging at her. Nikita grabbed Misha by the arm and looked her in the eyes. “Run,” she commanded, pushing her daughter by the arm toward their home. Misha ran just ahead of her mother as the bear gained on them.

“Mother, give me the gun, you focus on Oleg,” she panted. Nikita handed the rifle back. Misha fired at the beast, slowing it, but it continued after them. They came across a boulder and hid behind it, quieting their breaths. The bear whipped around the boulder, revealing only its snout to Misha and her mother. It stomped around the boulder, its nose twisting and turning as it crunched in the snow. They shifted around the boulder to hide from its sight with every step the beast too.

The bear paused and sniffed where Misha and Nikita first hid. The two crept away from the boulder, wincing with every subtle crunch and after gaining some distance, Misha reloaded

the rifle. The bear looked at the glistening barrel she held and charged once more, belting out a rageful roar. Misha fired into the first wound and the bear toppled and slid. Nikita could make out the house in the distance and turned to her daughter.

“Misha, I see the house,” she called through desperate breaths. They both continued their sprint, but their crunches were flushed out by the thundering pounding of the bear who had risen again, thrusting its claws into the cold earth with adrenaline filled hatred. The house was getting closer and closer, but so was the raging brown behemoth. Misha attempted to reload the rifle but found it was empty.

“Mother, I need a bullet,” she gasped. Nikita reached into her pouch to find she had no bullets either.

“I’m out too! Just keep running, we’ll make it!”

The house was just before them, and Nikita extended her hand to open the door. The bear’s steps rumbled just behind them, the steam from its breath passing beyond their backs. With a flick, the door was open and with immense strength, Nikita thrust Misha inside and slammed the door.

Misha heard a booming thud and a shriek as she saw her mother slam into the front door. Her mother’s shadow through the curtain faded quickly and all was silent. Misha finally took note of her heart pounding in her ears and the vignette that surrounded her vision from the adrenaline. After a few moments and deep breaths, Misha’s trembling legs lifted her. She crept to the window of the door and shifted the curtain. There just before her, she found the bear dragging Nikita through the snow, her coat, like a brush, painting her blood in the snow. Misha gripped the gun and threw open the door and screamed at the bear. It let go of Nikita, who fell with a dull thud facedown in the snow. The beast stared into Misha, who returned its glare with flaming



ferocity. With another war cry, she shook the gun and the bear flinched. The bear stood on its hind legs for a moment. Misha roared and shook her gun, dashing a bit closer. The bear quickly fell back on all fours and turned away, disappearing into the forest. Misha dropped her guard and released a deep steaming breath. The sound of her heartbeat continued to blare in her ears and face. Shaking the stun away, she found herself back in the world and saw her mother laying still.

She walked slowly to Nikita, the warmed crimson snow slushing beneath her boots. Steam billowed from the wounds that wrapped around her side and the pool that grew just beneath them. Misha collapsed beside her and held her. She looked down at the face of agony that her mother wore. With a small flicker she noticed her eyes lock on hers for a brief moment. Her pupils dilated, and the small tuft of her last breath dissipated into the air as her tears froze to her face. Misha's eyes welled and an angry despair bottled in her neck, bursting out in a shriek that expelled every creature nearby.

A gentle whine came from just under the snow, bringing Misha back from her visceral dirge. Misha laid her mother down and lifted the flap on her pack to find Oleg crying under the fur. She removed him and held him under her coat. She put her mother's head in her other arm, and sang the lullaby of her father. As Oleg quieted to listen, so did the trees.