

Red Subterfuge

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Marya, I have it here!" the old man whispered exultantly. "I had to give a double ration of bread for it this time, so we'll have no supper tonight."

The girl was rubbing ashes into her blue-black hair. "The door, Papatchka," she whispered; "be sure there is no one at the door."

He hobbled to the door and peered through a crack. There was no lock, of course. No lock survived long when the Russians were around. Other wretches in the house lived ten and twelve to a room; but so far Marya and her father had been able to keep for themselves the small, cold, unfurnished room which they shared. It was because Karl, whom the Russians had placed in charge of the building, had been the janitor at the beautiful country home Marya's family had owned before the war. For the time being, Karl still remembered old kindnesses.

How rapidly events had occurred since those former happy days: the Nazi Occupation, the Liberation, the Russian Occupation; the concentration camp, the displaced persons camp,

and now the forced labor brigades for Marya and the old man. "No, Marya, my child, there is no one outside," murmured the father. "Here, here it is; take it quickly." She grasped the treasure eagerly—a broken stub of red pencil.

"The lines, Father, make the lines," she urged, giving him a stick of burnt wood. He traced deep furrows on her youthful brow and cheeks. He remembered when she had longed to make herself prettier, somewhere in the lost and forgotten past. But now he must make her look old and ugly; that was the only way. She had sworn that she would kill herself if ever . . .

The clamor of drunken laughter burst through the corridor. There was a thump of heavy boots, the sound of a door being battered, and a woman's scream. The footsteps drew closer, closer.

"Maybe they'll pass by this time. Perhaps they won't come here," Marya prayed. She crouched beneath a pile of rags in the corner, and clutched the precious red pencil stub in her hand.

A vicious kick sent the door flying open and two Russian soldiers staggered in.

"Where is the woman?" they shouted. "You have a woman here." The tall one crushed his hands around the old man's throat.

"There she is," squealed the other. "Ho! The little bird waits for us in her little nest. Ha! Ha! Ha!" He dragged the girl to her feet and ripped the shawl from her shoulders.

"She is sick," cried her father. "She is old and sick!"

"Swallow your tongue, old dog," growled the one who held him prisoner. He struck a heavy blow on the old man's jaw and kicked him as he sank to the ground.

"Well, Ivan, can't you handle the spitfire by yourself?" the big Russian guffawed. "I'll help you, comrade." He strode across the room and pulled Marya to him.

She was coughing—a raucous, hacking cough. She spat in his face. A stream of red stain trickled from her mouth. He jumped back with a start and wiped his face with the back of his hand; it was stained red.

"The filthy slut!" he screamed. "She's consumptive!" He struck her across the face and screamed again, "Consumptive! Consumptive!" Both men scrambled for the door. Their cries of terror echoed back through the corridor.

The old man dragged himself to his feet and shut the door. "God be praised," he murmured. "We've fooled them again.

Marya huddled, silent, where she had fallen. She clutched the red pencil stub in her hand and shuddered uncontrollably.