

NADIA'S HEART
by
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She'd dance no more. Alas, there waited
a different morrow; she was fated,
she, heiress of the celebrated
Gudál, she lively freedom's own nursling,
to grim incarceration,
vowed to a strange expatriation
and to a family unknown.

Mikhail Lermontov
- The Demon, VIII, 1-7

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CHAPTER I
THE STRANGER

There was a young girl named Nadia, who thought she had been born without a heart. She was twelve years old, and she lived in the midst of an ordinary village, with an old man and an old woman who had taken her in long before she could remember. They lived on a farm with goat herds, which she tended, amongst rolling hills of green. It was a quiet life, one of work and simple pleasures.

The surrounding hills were great green mounds, and there were fields of gold and other tended fields of crop. At the outskirts of the town, there were rows of trees which extended into a thick forest, into which no one ventured. It was said to be enchanted.

The hills were great fun in wintertime, when they were packed with snow the children would coast down on old, altered saddles. But for now, in the height of the summer, there was much work to be done.

Nadia was a bit of a tomboy who liked to organize games, look for adventure, or make adventures up. She was a fiesty person, and often questioned the way things were done and the reasons why people did things. This annoyed the old man and old woman, the townspeople, and her classmates.

It certainly annoyed Mr. Tonkin at the general store. One day Nadia wondered what was so magic about Mr. Tonkin's magic tonic, and why he was charging such a pretty penny for a bottle of it. When she picked up a box to

examine the ingredients – ingredients she could easily mix at home - Mr. Tonkin snatched it out of her hand and asked her not to touch things. On their way home, the old man tried to explain to Nadia things such as overhead and packaging expenses. But she still thought it was a scam.

She also felt like an outsider in the town because she was the only person with light hair and green eyes. There were a few other blond people in the town, but Nadia's hair was a different color, practically yellow, like straw, and thick in texture. She was pretty, but not overly so, and was glad of the fact, for she might be expected to act girly, when she much preferred to run up and down the hills, ride the horses on the farm, and compete in sports. She was a fast runner and often beat some of the boys her own age. When she wasn't running around she spent a lot of time on her own just wandering through the fields.

And, no one knew that Nadia was obsessed with hearts.

She didn't know why she was obsessed, or why she thought she did not have one, but she could scarcely detect a heartbeat in herself when she sat very quietly listening for it. Even the doctor, when she went in to see him for a physical for school, kept moving his stethoscope around and tapping on it to see if it was working properly. Finally, he threw it into the trash bin and held her wrist with his fingertips. He had very thick eyebrows, which he stressfully massaged, eventually sending Nadia on her way and telling her that she was perfectly fine.

Nadia was fascinated by the beating hearts of others. Like an auditory voyeur, she would often listen for their

thumpety thump sound, like in the cat lying on the hearth that she startled when she put her ear to its stomach, or in Mrs. Schafler, the large woman in the town who always gave children that she knew big hugs.

When going to the library for school, Nadia would wander away from her friends, telling them she had a 'research project' to do, and find her way to the section of medical books. Once there, she studied the diagrams of all the heart's vessels and the detailed descriptions of all its functions and various pathologies.

"A disease of the heart would certainly be better than no heart at all," Nadia reasoned.

Sometimes, she felt downright gloomy for no cause whatsoever, and would stare off into space or down at the ground, or to the wood floor of their humble cabin, or to the smooth stone floor of the school, or to the plank floor at the market, which was always littered with sawdust. She would go into a kind of trance, until someone would tap her to see if she were okay.

Then one day, while playing after school, something terrible happened. One of the boys asked Nadia what had happened to her parents.

It was strange, but the question did not register in her brain at first. When it did, her face flushed, her stomach sank, and her chest caved in, because she realized that she had never asked herself that very personal question, and now some boy at school was asking her to give him the information. Information she should have had.

"Don't pay him any mind," said her friend Erin, shuffling her away. "He's just a nosy nobody."

Erin was a good friend. She never asked Nadia probing questions. In a way, she was very similar to Nadia herself, not finding it necessary to talk about or dissect personal things all the time. They walked home together, and Nadia was grateful that Erin did not say much right away, and then Erin began to talk excitedly about the science project they were working on together for school. Erin was an only child, and her parents seemed very nice when Nadia had visited for dinner: intelligent, and interested in the sciences. But Nadia didn't envy their family, or feel sorry for what she had. She had never questioned why she lived with the old man and the old woman. It was as if a cloud of amnesia hung over the cabin they lived in, and as she looked at it in the distance, Erin ran up the pathway to her own house. Nadia continued to stare at the cabin as Erin turned and smiled.

"See you tomorrow, then!"

Nadia waved absent mindedly. No, she hadn't thought about parents of her own. Why was that? Why *hadn't* she? What was *wrong* with her? Now that she thought about it, she recollected that there were often times that she was overcome by a feeling that she didn't belong. But she couldn't explain such a feeling to anyone, and it seemed an ungrateful thing. At such times, she would stare at the forest over the hill and ponder what forbidden thing was within the trees.

Who am I? she thought.

As she approached the cabin, the old woman was closing the door and tying a scarf around her head. She smiled at Nadia.

"I'm going to the market," said the old woman. "We'll have duck roast tonight."

The only thing that Nadia liked about duck roast was its smell cooking with onions, and she much preferred to eat only the greens and vegetables: broccoli with butter and onions, and potatoes mashed and mixed with cream and pepper. The old man had gone to a neighboring town to meet some old friends with whom he used to trade goods.

Thursday was chore day. Today Nadia needed to brush the goats and wash the cabin floor clean. In a way, she looked forward to the occasional quiet, solitude and gratification gained from physical work.

It was a short walk to the well, where she retrieved water. While there, she heard a rustle in the grass, and expected to see an animal when she turned, but there was nothing there.

Back at the cabin, she filled the cast iron pot and set it over the fire and waited for it to hiss before mixing the soap. She sat by the fire and looked out at the forest over the hills, wondering how she could get hold of an x-ray machine, when she turned around with a start. Someone was behind her.

But there was no one there.

Though she saw and heard no one, still she perceived that someone was there, watching her from inside the cabin. Her cat, Mr. Smithers, was sitting on the hearth looking at something intently and swishing his tail.

The water began to hiss, and Nadia retrieved the pot and began her work of washing and scrubbing, all the while perceiving that she was being watched.

That night, she lay in bed, smelling the clean airy scent of soap all around the cabin. Rising out of bed, she again stared out the window. She saw the hill, the little town down the road lit up by the moon, and all of the familiar buildings. Looking at the bell tower on the church, she surprised herself when she spontaneously uttered a prayer.

"Please, let me know about my heart."

In the distance she noticed the forest had taken on an unearthly glow.

Again Nadia felt that she was being watched in her room. Shrugging this off, she went to get some apricot juice from the pantry to quench her parched throat. When she returned to her room and closed the door, she perceived that the someone was standing by the door. She had an impression of him in her mind's eye: a young man, perhaps fifteen, who stood very still, staring at her. She pondered a name. His name. *Georgeonus*. It sounded like 'George' with 'onus' at the end.

Tired from the day's work, she hid herself under the blankets and fell asleep.

She awoke, and perceived that the young man was still there by the door. Only now, she could see the outline of a shape, like a fine silvery line that someone had drawn in the air, of shoulders and arms. But being tired, she dozed back to sleep.

Then Nadia awoke with a start. She was sitting up in her bed, feeling the cold move through her white night clothes. She breathed in, hearing only the sound of her breath like the wind. It must have been midnight. The

window had been opened, the shutter shifted slightly in the wind, and now she could see him, standing by the window, waiting for her.

He was dressed in silvery metal which covered his torso, upper arms and thighs. His hair shone the lightest wavy brown, and his skin was powder white. Underneath, he wore linen of deep magenta, and though he had not moved, she thought that he beckoned her with his thoughts.

He had. She heard a voice, but it was more like an echo in her mind.

Arise.

When she looked at his eyes for an explanation, she turned away quickly, for they glowed white and strange like the moon. Like searchlights, they knew her, spoke to her, and waited for her to rise. She felt suddenly challenged, as if her prayer had been answered.

Who was he? Nadia peeked over the bed, staring at his feet, which were encased in silver boots with tiny wheels. He hovered over the floor, and now he held his white hand out to her. She hid behind her hair, which had come undone from all its braids, afraid to take his hand. The young man Georgeonus – if indeed that was his name – turned and looked out the window. And she, staring at the smooth silvery metal, rose ever so quietly, and stood barefooted on the wood floor in her cotton pantaloons and ruffled night shirt. The metal was polished, shiny, yet soft looking, like sterling. It glistened like the moon, was smooth like water. She reached out her hand, fascinated, to touch the plate of his back. And before knowing it, they were outside, in the cool night air, hovering over her open

window, shutter in view, then moving, rising above the cabin and through the night air. She felt her fingertips attached to the metal like a magnet. It was charged, cold and hot at the same time, but it did not hurt her. She saw her bare feet dangling below, the ruffle of her night pants around her calves, and the man's wheels under his feet which turned swiftly and created an almost inaudible whirling sound of movement. His hair blew slightly in the wind while Nadia pulled hers close around her.

It was hard to tell if the green grass and glints of the town were lit by the moon or by the man's eyes, so bright was the radiance coming from his gaze. She felt light, suddenly ethereal and free.

The night sky was black, littered with tiny gleams of stars so numerous that they did not look real. They seemed close, touchable, but then far away when they blinked in places one would not expect them to. They traveled past the town, further and higher in the air, further than Nadia had ever traveled. She did not know the expanse of the world and where they were going, and for a moment, was afraid. Georgeonus turned his head, as if he had heard her thoughts, as if reading her mind. Perhaps her prayer *had* been granted.

She didn't know where she was going, but she knew she could not turn back