

One Day You'll Be Marta

By Heather Nawara

To keep his son and daughter happy, Dmitri made *syrniki* for breakfast that morning. His kids loved food from the old country despite the fact that they'd been born in America. These cottage cheese dumplings, served with strawberry jam, reminded them of fun-filled weekends spent at their grandparents' house, where they were spoiled rotten with the finest delicacies Russia had to offer. Usually, Dmitri opted for quick meals, like Cheerios or Eggo Waffles. But he knew food from a box wouldn't make them forget the fact that they hadn't seen their mother since yesterday morning.

Still, the questions came.

"Daddy, where's Mommy?" Anya asked. She hadn't finished chewing completely and spewed some crumbs onto her father's collared shirt.

"Anya, chew your food thirty-two times and swallow before you speak," Dmitri said, hiding his face behind the morning newspaper.

"Dad, I wanna read the funnies!" Vlad exclaimed, reaching and tearing the paper out of Dmitri's hands.

"Vlad, those only come on Sundays." Dmitri looked down. He never could discipline the kids quite like his wife, Marta. "And you don't just grab things out of Daddy's hands. Remember how 'please' and 'thank you' are the magic words?"

Vlad threw the newspaper on the floor, the pages scattering everywhere like giant wads of confetti. "Is Mom up?"

A crooked smile touched Dmitri's face. "I don't think Mommy's ever going to wake up."

The kids stared at Dmitri. He sighed, knowing his humor was once again lost on them.

“But she’s picking us up today?” Vlad asked.

“You betcha, Vladdy.” Dmitri rose from the table and ruffled his son’s hair. “Now let’s get you kids bundled up and out the door. It’s cold and foggy out. You don’t want to be late.”

Ten minutes later, Dmitri pulled Marta’s minivan back into the two-car garage. He stared at his rusty, old 1995 Buick for a moment. He was glad he’d gotten something safe for Marta and the kids. But he found his car a little embarrassing, especially since he sold cars for a living. Business would turn around soon, though. He’d go into work later this week. He’d make sales so his boss, McNulty, wouldn’t be all over his ass.

In the meantime, he’d call in sick. Dmitri made his way back into the kitchen, picking up the landline and dialing.

After a few rings, McNulty himself picked up the phone. “McNulty Nissan.”

Dmitri swallowed hard. “Hey, Mr. McNulty. It’s Dmitri. Listen, I hate to do this, but—”

“—What?” McNulty interrupted. “Yesterday you take a half-day, and today you can’t bother to come in?” Dmitri could imagine McNulty’s thick furrowed brow from over the phone. He’d seen that disgusted look every time he let somebody walk away from a sale. “If you don’t come in and sell me a car *today*, then don’t bother coming in tomorrow. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Dmitri hung up without ceremony. He knew he should have cared, but he couldn’t bring himself to. No, what really worried him was getting Marta to pick up Vlad and Anya from school today.

Parting from the kitchen, which was still a disaster thanks to the newspaper-littered floor and dirty dishes, Dmitri went upstairs to the master bedroom. He prayed for a miracle.

“Marta? Honey?” Dmitri asked as he stepped into the room. “It’s still early, but you have to get up.”

The woman lied on her back in bed, head propped up on a couple of pillows. A thick blanket and flannel sheets cocooned her body, making only her head and neck visible. She showed no signs of awareness. Dmitri had found Marta stiff as a statue yesterday afternoon when he came home for lunch.

He wanted to believe she only slept. Her skin started to blue because of how drafty their damn room was. The change in pigment wasn’t because she was dead. She couldn’t be dead. She was thirty-three; he was thirty-five. They were supposed to see Vlad and Anya grow up, become the successes they could never be, and have kids of their own. They were supposed to grow old together. But he was supposed to die first. That much Dmitri knew. That was why Marta couldn’t be dead.

Dmitri took a seat on his side of the bed. He forced a smile as he made eye contact with his listless wife. Her closed eyes looked sunken underneath her waxy skin. “*Brrr!* It’s freezing! You were always right about the window. Soon as we have the money, I’m going to get it replaced. Hell, maybe we’ll get all new windows in the house. Don’t want Vlad and Anya to freeze like they’re in the old country.” He let out a hollow laugh.

Marta made no reply.

“It’s not good to sleep so tense.” He gave Marta’s stiff shoulder a nudge. “Just wake up for a minute. You have to eat something. The kids got a kick out of my *syrniki*. Can you believe that?”

Marta made no reply.

Dmitri's eyes welled up with tears. He turned slightly and put both hands on Marta's shoulders. He shook her with every ounce of his strength. "Marta, I know you're a heavy sleeper, but this is getting ridiculous! Wake up!" he begged. "Dammit! Wake! Up!"

Marta made no reply.

Dmitri dropped Marta's body back on the pillows and burst into tears. He lied on the bed, burying his face against Marta's chest as he sobbed.

"You're not dead," Dmitri murmured, voice hoarse from the yells and violent sobs. He turned his head, putting his ear on her chest. "If you were dead, I wouldn't hear your heartbeat." He wanted to hear it so bad. On especially rough nights, he used to rest his head on her chest. She'd stroke his hair, and he'd fall asleep to the sound of her heartbeat—a primal comfort that nobody could ever take away from him. "I can still hear it. Listen. *Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.*" He stifled a sob. "*Ba-du—I'm dumb.*"

He squeezed his eyes shut tight. He prayed. Where was his miracle? Why had God done this? What did he do to deserve this? "What am I supposed to do, Marty? You have to tell me."

Marta made no reply.

Dmitri got out of bed and returned with a bottle of Smirnoff. He poured a glass for Marta and set it on the nightstand, but he refused to submit to the Russian funerary tradition of putting a piece of bread over the glass. He nursed the bottle like a baby would. He'd been saving it to celebrate a promotion. Emergency. Whatever. Did it really matter anymore? Nothing felt like it mattered.

When Dmitri awoke, Marta was still dead and the room swayed. Half the bottle was gone, and he still wasn't dead. Groaning, he forced himself to sit up, looking over Marta's body to check the clock.

2:45 PM.

Vlad and Anya expected their mother to pick them up in fifteen minutes. Dmitri stumbled out of bed and to the closet he once shared with Marta. His hands shook as they pushed open the doors. If he left everything as it was, it could become a time capsule. If he took something out, maybe he'd become Marta. He pulled out a gray turtleneck sweater dress and sighed. The dress smelled more like Marta than the corpse in the bed. Time made the corpse look less and less like Marta. All of Marta's possessions were more Marta than Marta.

He went over to the dresser and pulled open the bottom drawer, finding a pair of Marta's black leggings. They would fit. She was almost as tall as Dmitri. He stripped out of his stained shirt and slacks, replacing them with Marta's clothes. With her warm woolen dress on, he imagined Marta hugging him.

"I'm gonna pick the kids up," Dmitri slurred, looking in the mirror instead of at the corpse in bed. "We'll all have dinner tonight. Together."

Dmitri made his way downstairs and pulled on his snow boots. He didn't bother with a coat. At the very least, he had enough sense left to walk to the elementary school.

Mrs. Whalen, Anya's teacher, waited outside with Anya and Vlad. Most teachers had the kids wait in the front office when parents were late, but Mrs. Whalen wasn't most teachers. The middle-aged woman treated her students as her own children.

"I'm sure your mother will be along any minute," she said.

Anya was in tears. “Where’s Mommy? I wanna see Mommy!”

Vlad rolled his eyes. “Dad said she’ll be here. Stop crying.”

“Daddy’s a liar!” Anya sobbed.

Mrs. Whalen patted Anya’s back. “I’m sure your father told the truth. There wasn’t any answer at home, so your mom must be on her way.”

“I dunno, teacher,” Vlad said. But then his eyes were greeted with a tall figure from across the street. “Mom?” The fog made the details difficult to distinguish.

“Mommy!” Anya lit up like a Christmas tree. She broke free from Mrs. Whalen, ignoring how the sign said: DONT WALK.

Fortunately, there was no oncoming traffic. She pressed her face against the familiar dress.

Dmitri’s arms embraced his daughter and scooped her up. “My little An. Mommy’s here.”

Anya tensed in her father’s arms. She let out a blood-curdling scream.

Mrs. Whalen was about to spring into action, but Dmitri had already crossed the street and arrived at the school’s drop-off zone. “I’m here for my kids, Mrs. Whalen.”

“M-Mr. Vagin?!”

“Mrs. Vagin,” Dmitri corrected.

For once Vlad had nothing to say. He stared at his father, turning pale. Finally, he began to ask, “Is Mom—”

“—I am Mom,” Dmitri interrupted. “Mommy’s not going anywhere, Vladdy.”

In the distance, the sound of sirens could be heard. Someone must have saw Dmitri’s bizarre behavior and called the police. They’d find Marta; they’d probably think he killed her.

Later, they'd find out Marta died from a major blood clot that cut off the flow to her heart.

They'd hear Dmitri, in a fit of grief, tell them one day they'd all be Marta.