



THE BEAR
AND THE
NIGHTINGALE

KATHERINE ARDEN

a novel



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*The Bear and
the Nightingale*



A NOVEL

Katherine Arden



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*By the shore of the sea stands a green oak tree;
Upon the tree is a golden chain:
And day and night a learned cat
Walks around and around on the chain;
When he goes to the right he sings a song,
When he goes to the left he tells a tale.*

—A. S. PUSHKIN

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Part One





FROST

It was late winter in northern Rus', the air sullen with wet that was neither rain nor snow. The brilliant February landscape had given way to the dreary gray of March, and the household of Pyotr Vladimirovich were all sniffing from the damp and thin from six weeks' fasting on black bread and fermented cabbage. But no one was thinking of chilblains or runny noses, or even, wistfully, of porridge and roast meats, for Dunya was to tell a story.

That evening, the old lady sat in the best place for talking: in the kitchen, on the wooden bench beside the oven. This oven was a massive affair built of fired clay, taller than a man and large enough that all four of Pyotr Vladimirovich's children could have fit easily inside. The flat top served as a sleeping platform; its innards cooked their food, heated their kitchen, and made steam-baths for the sick.

"What tale will you have tonight?" Dunya inquired, enjoying the fire at her back. Pyotr's children sat before her, perched on stools. They all loved stories, even the second son, Sasha, who was a self-consciously devout child, and would have insisted—had anyone asked him—that he preferred to pass the evening in prayer. But the church was cold, the sleet outside unrelenting. Sasha had thrust his head out-of-doors, gotten a faceful of wet, and retired, vanquished, to a stool a little apart from the others, where he sat affecting an expression of pious indifference.

The others set up a clamor on hearing Dunya's question:

"Finist the Falcon!"

"Ivan and the Gray Wolf!"

"Firebird! Firebird!"

Little Alyosha stood on his stool and waved his arms, the better to be heard over his bigger siblings, and Pyotr's boarhound raised its big, scarred head at the commotion.

But before Dunya could answer, the outer door clattered open and there came a roar from the storm without. A woman appeared in the doorway, shaking the wet from her long hair. Her face glowed with the chill, but she was thinner than even her children; the fire cast shadows in the hollows of cheek and throat and temple. Her deep-set eyes threw back the firelight. She stooped and seized Alyosha in her arms.

The child squealed in delight. "Mother!" he cried. "Matyushka!"

Marina Ivanovna sank onto her stool, drawing it nearer the blaze. Alyosha, still clasped in her arms, wound both fists around her braid. She trembled, though it was not obvious under her heavy clothes. "Pray the wretched ewe delivers tonight," she said. "Otherwise I fear we shall never see your father again. Are you telling stories, Dunya?"

"If we might have quiet," said the old lady tartly. She had been Marina's nurse, too, long ago.

"I'll have a story," said Marina at once. Her tone was light, but her eyes were dark. Dunya gave her a sharp glance. The wind sobbed outside. "Tell the story of Frost, Dunyashka. Tell us of the frost-demon, the winter-king Karachun. He is abroad tonight, and angry at the thaw."

Dunya hesitated. The elder children looked at each other. In Russian, Frost was called Morozko, the demon of winter. But long ago, the people called him Karachun, the death-god. Under that name, he was king of black midwinter who came for bad children and froze them in the night. It was an ill-omened word, and unlucky to speak it while he still held the land in his grip. Marina was holding her son very tightly. Alyosha squirmed and tugged his mother's braid.

"Very well," said Dunya after a moment's hesitation. "I shall tell the story of Morozko, of his kindness and his cruelty." She put a slight emphasis on this name: the safe name that could not bring them ill luck. Marina smiled sardonically and untangled her son's hands. None of the others made any protest, though the story of Frost was an old tale, and they had all heard it many times before. In Dunya's rich, precise voice it could not fail to delight.

"In a certain principedom—" began Dunya. She paused and fixed a quelling eye upon Alyosha, who was squealing like a bat and bouncing in

his mother's arms.

"Hush," said Marina, and handed him the end of her braid again to play with.

"In a certain principedom," the old lady repeated, with dignity, "there lived a peasant who had a beautiful daughter."

"Whasser name?" mumbled Alyosha. He was old enough to test the authenticity of fairy tales by seeking precise details from the tellers.

"Her name was Marfa," said the old lady. "Little Marfa. And she was beautiful as sunshine in June, and brave and good-hearted besides. But Marfa had no mother; her own had died when she was an infant. Although her father had remarried, Marfa was still as motherless as any orphan could be. For while Marfa's stepmother was quite a handsome woman, they say, and she made delicious cakes, wove fine cloth, and brewed rich kvas, her heart was cold and cruel. She hated Marfa for the girl's beauty and goodness, favoring instead her own ugly, lazy daughter in all things. First the woman tried to make Marfa ugly in turn by giving her all the hardest work in the house, so that her hands would be twisted, her back bent, and her face lined. But Marfa was a strong girl, and perhaps possessed a bit of magic, for she did all her work uncomplainingly and went on growing lovelier and lovelier as the years passed.

"So the stepmother—" seeing Alyosha's open mouth, Dunya added, "—Darya Nikolaevna was her name—finding she could not make Marfa hard or ugly, schemed to rid herself of the girl once and for all. Thus, one day at midwinter, Darya turned to her husband and said, 'Husband, I believe it is time for our Marfa to be wed.'

"Marfa was in the izba cooking pancakes. She looked at her stepmother with astonished joy, for the lady had never taken an interest in her, except to find fault. But her delight quickly turned to dismay.

"—And I have just the husband for her. Load her into the sledge and take her into the forest. We shall wed her to Morozko, the lord of winter. Can any maiden ask for a finer or richer bridegroom? Why, he is master of the white snow, the black firs, and the silver frost!"

"The husband—his name was Boris Borisovich—stared in horror at his wife. Boris loved his daughter, after all, and the cold embrace of the winter god is not for mortal maidens. But perhaps Darya had a bit of magic of her own, for her husband could refuse her nothing. Weeping, he loaded his daughter into the sledge, drove her deep into the forest, and left her at the

foot of a fir tree.

“Long the girl sat alone, and she shivered and shook and grew colder and colder. At length, she heard a great clattering and snapping. She looked up to behold Frost himself coming toward her, leaping among the trees and snapping his fingers.”

“But what did he look like?” Olga demanded.

Dunya shrugged. “As to that, no two tellers agree. Some say he is naught but a cold, crackling breeze whispering among the firs. Others say he is an old man in a sledge, with bright eyes and cold hands. Others say he is like a warrior in his prime, but robed all in white, with weapons of ice. No one knows. But something came to Marfa as she sat there; an icy blast whipped around her face, and she grew colder than ever. And then Frost spoke to her, in the voice of the winter wind and the falling snow:

“‘Are you quite warm, my beauty?’

“Marfa was a well-brought-up girl who bore her troubles uncomplainingly, so she replied, ‘Quite warm, thank you, dear Lord Frost.’ At this, the demon laughed, and as he did, the wind blew harder than ever. All the trees groaned above their heads. Frost asked again, ‘And now? Warm enough, sweetheart?’ Marfa, though she could barely speak from the cold, again replied, ‘Warm, I am warm, thank you.’ Now it was a storm that raged overhead; the wind howled and gnashed its teeth until poor Marfa was certain it would tear the skin from her bones. But Frost was not laughing now, and when he asked a third time: ‘Warm, my darling?’ she answered, forcing the words between frozen lips as blackness danced before her eyes, ‘Yes...warm. I am warm, my Lord Frost.’

“Then he was filled with admiration for her courage and took pity on her plight. He wrapped her in his own robe of blue brocade and laid her in his sledge. When he drove out of the forest and left the girl by her own front door, she was still wrapped in the magnificent robe and bore also a chest of gems and gold and silver ornaments. Marfa’s father wept with joy to see the girl once more, but Darya and her daughter were furious to see Marfa so richly clad and radiant, with a prince’s ransom at her side. So Darya turned to her husband and said, ‘Husband, quickly! Take my daughter Liza up in your sledge. The gifts that Frost has given Marfa are nothing to what he will give *my* girl!’

“Though in his heart Boris protested all this folly, he took Liza up in his sledge. The girl was wearing her finest gown and wrapped in heavy fur

robes. Her father took her deep into the woods and left her beneath the same fir tree. Liza in turn sat a long time. She had begun to grow very cold, despite her furs, when at last Frost came through the trees, cracking his fingers and laughing to himself. He danced right up to Liza and breathed into her face, and his breath was the wind out of the north that freezes skin to bone. He smiled and asked, 'Warm enough, darling?' Liza, shuddering, answered, 'Of course not, you fool! Can you not see that I am near perished with cold?'

"The wind blew harder than ever, howling about them in great, tearing gusts. Over the din he asked, 'And now? Quite warm?' The girl shrieked back, 'But no, idiot! I am frozen! I have never been colder in my life! I am waiting for my bridegroom Frost, but the oaf hasn't come.' Hearing this, Frost's eyes grew hard as adamant; he laid his fingers on her throat, leaned forward, and whispered into the girl's ear, 'Warm now, my pigeon?' But the girl could not answer, for she had died when he touched her and lay frozen in the snow.

"At home, Darya waited, pacing back and forth. 'Two chests of gold at least,' she said, rubbing her hands. 'A wedding-dress of silk velvet and bridal-blankets of the finest wool.' Her husband said nothing. The shadows began to lengthen and there was still no sign of her daughter. At length, Darya sent her husband out to retrieve the girl, admonishing him to have care with the chests of treasure. But when Boris reached the tree where he had left his daughter that morning, there was no treasure at all: only the girl herself, lying dead in the snow.

"With a heavy heart, the man lifted her in his arms and bore her back home. The mother ran out to meet them. 'Liza,' she called. 'My love!'

"Then she saw the corpse of her child, huddled up in the bottom of the sledge. At that moment, the finger of Frost touched Darya's heart, too, and she fell dead on the spot."

There was a small, appreciative silence.

Then Olga spoke up plaintively. "But what happened to Marfa? Did she marry him? King Frost?"

"Cold embrace, indeed," Kolya muttered to no one in particular, grinning.

Dunya gave him an austere look, but did not deign to reply.

"Well, no, Olya," she said to the girl. "I shouldn't think so. What use does Winter have for a mortal maiden? More likely she married a rich peasant,

and brought him the largest dowry in all Rus'."

Olga looked ready to protest this unromantic conclusion, but Dunya had already risen with a creaking of bones, eager to retire. The top of the oven was large as a great bed, and the old and the young and the sick slept upon it. Dunya made her bed there with Alyosha.

The others kissed their mother and slipped away. At last Marina herself rose. Despite her winter clothes, Dunya saw anew how thin she had grown, and it smote the old lady's heart. *It will soon be spring, she comforted herself. The woods will turn green and the beasts give rich milk. I will make her pie with eggs and curds and pheasant, and the sun will make her well again.*

But the look in Marina's eyes filled the old nurse with foreboding.

THE WITCH-WOMAN'S GRANDDAUGHTER

The lamb came forth at last, draggled and spindly, black as a dead tree in the rain. The ewe began licking the little thing in a peremptory way, and before long the tiny creature stood, swaying on minute hooves. "Molodets," said Pyotr Vladimirovich to the ewe, and stood up himself. His aching back protested when he drew it straight. "But you could have chosen a better night." The wind outside ground its teeth. The sheep flapped her tail nonchalantly. Pyotr grinned and left them. A fine ram, born in the jaws of a late-winter storm. It was a good omen.

Pyotr Vladimirovich was a great lord: a boyar, with rich lands and many men to do his bidding. It was only by choice that he passed his nights with his laboring stock. But always he was present when a new creature came to enrich his herds, and often he drew it to the light with his own bloody hands.

The sleet had stopped and the night was clearing. A few valiant stars showed between the clouds when Pyotr came into the dooryard and pulled the barn door shut behind him. Despite the wet, his house was buried nearly to the eaves in a winter's worth of snow. Only the pitched roof and chimneys had escaped, and the space around the door, which the men of Pyotr's household laboriously kept clear.

The summer half of the great house had wide windows and an open hearth. But that wing was shut when winter came, and it had a deserted look now, entombed in snow and sealed up in frost. The winter half of the house boasted huge ovens and small, high windows. A perpetual smoke trickled from its chimneys, and at the first hard freeze, Pyotr fitted its window-frames with slabs of ice, to block the cold but let in the light. Now firelight

from his wife's room threw a flickering bar of gold onto the snow.

Pyotr thought of his wife and hurried on. Marina would be pleased about the lamb.

The walks between the outbuildings were roofed and floored with logs, defense against rain and snow and mud. But the sleet had come with the dawn, and the slanting wet had soaked the wood and frozen solid. The footing was treacherous, and the damp drifts loomed head-high, pockmarked with sleet. But Pyotr's felt-and-fur boots were sure on the ice. He paused in the drowsing kitchen to ladle water over his slimy hands. Atop the oven, Alyosha turned over and whimpered in his sleep.

His wife's room was small—in deference to the frost—but it was bright, and by the standards of the north, luxurious. Swaths of woven fabric covered the wooden walls. The beautiful carpet—part of Marina's dowry—had come by long and circuitous roads from Tsargrad itself. Fantastic carving adorned the wooden stools, and blankets of wolf and rabbit skin lay scattered in downy heaps.

The small stove in the corner threw off a fiery glow. Marina had not gone to bed; she sat near the fire, wrapped in a robe of white wool, combing her hair. Even after four children, her hair was still thick and dark and fell nearly to her knee. In the forgiving firelight, she looked very like the bride that Pyotr had brought to his house so long ago.

"Is it done?" asked Marina. She laid her comb aside and began to plait her hair. Her eyes never left the oven.

"Yes," said Pyotr, distractedly. He was stripping off his kaftan in the grateful warmth. "A handsome ram. And its mother is well, too—a good omen."

Marina smiled.

"I am glad of it, for we shall need one," she said. "I am with child."

Pyotr started, caught with his shirt half off. He opened his mouth and closed it again. It was, of course, possible. She was old for it, though, and she had grown so thin that winter...

"Another one?" he asked. He straightened up and put his shirt aside.

Marina heard the distress in his tone, and a sad smile touched her mouth. She bound the end of her hair with a leather cord before replying. "Yes," she said, flicking the plait over her shoulder. "A girl. She will be born in the autumn."

“Marina...”

His wife heard the silent question. “I wanted her,” she said. “I want her still.” And then, lower: “I want a daughter like my mother was.”

Pyotr frowned. Marina never spoke of her mother. Dunya, who had been with Marina in Moscow, referred to her only rarely.

In the reign of Ivan I, or so said the stories, a ragged girl rode through the kremlin-gates, alone except for her tall gray horse. Despite filth and hunger and weariness, rumors dogged her footsteps. She had such grace, the people said, and eyes like the swan-maiden in a fairy tale. At length, the rumors reached the ear of the Grand Prince. “Bring her to me,” Ivan said, thinly amused. “I have never seen a swan-maiden.”

Ivan Kalita was a hard prince, eaten with ambition, cold and clever and grasping. He would not have survived otherwise: Moscow killed her princes quickly. And yet, the boyars said afterward, when Ivan first saw this girl, he sat unmoving for a full ten minutes. Some of the more fanciful swore that his eyes were wet when he went to her and took her hand.

Ivan was twice widowed by then, his eldest son older than his young lover, and yet a year later he married the mysterious girl. However, even the Grand Prince of Moscow could not silence the whispers. The princess would not say where she had come from: not then and not ever. The serving-women muttered that she could tame animals, dream the future, and summon rain.



PYOTR COLLECTED HIS OUTER CLOTHES and hung them near the oven. A practical man, he had always shrugged at rumors. But his wife sat so very still, looking into the fire. Only the flames moved, gilding her hand and throat. She made Pyotr uneasy. He paced the wooden floor.

Rus' had been Christian ever since Vladimir baptized all of Kiev in the Dneiper and dragged the old gods through the streets. Still, the land was vast and changed slowly. Five hundred years after the monks came to Kiev, Rus' still teemed with unknown powers, and some of them had lain reflected in the strange princess's knowing eyes. The Church did not like it.

At the bishops' insistence, Marina, her only child, was married off to a boyar in the howling wilderness, many days' travel from Moscow.

Pyotr often blessed his good fortune. His wife was wise as she was beautiful; he loved her and she him. But Marina never talked about her mother. Pyotr never asked. Their daughter, Olga, was an ordinary girl, pretty and obliging. They had no need for another, certainly not an heir to the rumored powers of a strange grandmother.

"You are sure you have the strength for it?" Pyotr said finally. "Even Alyosha was a surprise, and that was three years ago."

"Yes," said Marina, turning to look at him. Her hand clenched slowly into a fist, but he did not see. "I will see her born."

There was a pause.

"Marina, what your mother was..."

His wife took his hand and stood. He wound an arm around her waist and felt her stiff under his touch.

"I do not know," said Marina. "She had gifts that I have not; I remember how in Moscow the noblewomen whispered. But power is a birthright to the women of her bloodline. Olga is your daughter more than mine, but this one"—Marina's free hand slipped up, shaping a cradle to hold a baby—"this one will be different."

Pyotr drew his wife closer. She clung to him, suddenly fierce. Her heart beat against his breast. She was warm in his arms. He smelled the scent of her hair, washed clean in the bathhouse. *It is late*, Pyotr thought. *Why borrow trouble?* The work of women was to bear children. His wife had already given him four, but surely she would manage another. If the infant proved strange in some way—well, that bridge could be crossed when necessary.

"Bear her in good health, then, Marina Ivanovna," he said. His wife smiled. Her back was to the fire, so he did not see her eyelashes wet. He tilted her chin up and kissed her. Her pulse beat in her throat. But she was so thin, fragile as a bird beneath her heavy robe. "Come to bed," he said. "There will be milk tomorrow; the ewe can spare a little. Dunya will bake it for you. You must think of the babe."

Marina pressed her body to his. He picked her up as in the days of their courting and spun her around. She laughed and wound her arms around his neck. But her eyes looked an instant past him, staring into the fire as though she could read the future in the flames.



“GET RID OF IT,” said Dunya the next day. “I don’t care if you’re carrying a girl or a prince or a prophet of old.” The sleet had crept back with the dawn and thundered again without. The two women huddled near the oven, for warmth and for its light on their mending. Dunya stabbed her needle home with particular vehemence. “The sooner the better. You’ve neither the weight nor the strength to carry a child, and if by a miracle you did, the bearing would kill you. You’ve given three sons to your husband, and you have your girl—what need of another?” Dunya had been Marina’s nurse in Moscow, had followed her to her husband’s house and nursed all of her four children in turn. She spoke as she pleased.

Marina smiled with a hint of mockery. “Such talk, Dunyashka,” she said. “What would Father Semyon say?”

“Father Semyon is not likely to die in childbed, is he? Whereas you, Marushka...”

Marina looked down at her work and said nothing. But when she met her nurse’s narrowed eyes, her face was pale as water, so that Dunya fancied she could see the blood creeping down her throat. Dunya felt a chill. “Child, what have you seen?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Marina.

“Get rid of it,” said Dunya, almost pleading.

“Dunya, I must have this one; she will be like my mother.”

“Your mother! The ragged maiden who rode alone out of the forest? Who faded to a dim shadow of herself because she could not bear to live her life behind Byzantine screens? Have you forgotten that gray crone she became? Stumbling veiled to church? Hiding in her rooms, eating until she was round and greasy with her eyes all blank? Your mother. Would you wish that on any child of yours?”

Dunya’s voice creaked like a calling raven, for she remembered, to her grief, the girl who had come to Ivan Kalita’s halls, lost and frail and achingly beautiful, trailing miracles behind her. Ivan was besotted. The princess—well, perhaps she had found peace with him, at least for a little. But they housed her in the women’s quarters, dressed her in heavy

brocades, gave her icons and servants and rich meats. Little by little that fiery glow, the light to take one's breath, had faded. Dunya had mourned her passing long before they put her in the ground.

Marina smiled bitterly and shook her head. "No. But remember before? You used to tell me stories."

"A lot of good magic or miracles did her," growled Dunya.

"I have only a little of her gift," Marina went on, ignoring her old nurse. Dunya knew her lady well enough to hear the regret. "But my daughter will have more."

"And that is reason enough to leave the other four motherless?"

Marina looked at her lap. "I—no. Yes. If need be." Her voice was barely audible. "But I might live." She raised her head. "You will give me your word to care for them, will you not?"

"Marushka, I am old. I can give my promise, but when I die..."

"They will be all right. They—they will have to be. Dunya, I cannot see the future, but I will live to see her born."

Dunya crossed herself and said no more.



THE BEGGAR AND THE STRANGER

The first screaming winds of November rattled the bare trees on the day Marina's pains came on her, and the child's first cry mingled with their howl. Marina laughed to see her daughter born. "Her name is Vasilisa," she said to Pyotr. "My Vasya."

The wind dropped at dawn. In the silence, Marina breathed out once, gently, and died.

The snow hurried down like tears the day a stone-faced Pyotr laid his wife in the earth. His infant daughter screamed all through the funeral: a demon wail like the absent wind.

All that winter, the house echoed with the child's cries. More than once, Dunya and Olga despaired of her, for she was a scrawny, pallid infant, all eyes and flailing limbs. More than once Kolya threatened, half in earnest, to pitch her out of the house.

But the winter passed and the child lived. She ceased screaming and throve on the milk of peasant women.

The years slipped by like leaves.

On a day much like the one that brought her into the world, on the steely cusp of winter, Marina's black-haired girl-child crept into the winter kitchen. She put her hands on the hearthstone and craned to see over the edge. Her eyes glistened. Dunya was scooping cakes from the ashes. The whole house smelled of honey. "Are the cakes ready, Dunyashka?" she said, poking her head into the oven.

"Nearly," said Dunya, hauling the child back before she could set her hair on fire. "If you will sit quiet on your stool, Vasochnka, and mend your blouse, then you will have one all to yourself."