

Alexei's Tree

Once, many years ago, a forester lived with his wife and three children in a remote part of Upper Silesia. The children's names were Nicolai, Katya, and Alexei. The forester and his wife loved all their children very much, but most of all they loved the youngest, little Alexei. Alexei was not strong and well as the other children were. They had rosy cheeks, but his skin was snowy white. When he tried to run about as they did, he would have to stop and gasp for breath. But he never complained, and his disposition was so sweet and loving that the forester and his wife clasped him to their hearts. Nicolai and Katya were also very fond of their little brother, and did not tease him in the way that children will often tease one of their number who is less able to defend himself.

When Alexei was seven years old the illness became worse and he had to stay in bed all the time. He would gaze longingly out of the window, but still he never complained. His mother looked after him and his father went to the town to try to find a doctor who could treat him. Several doctors came, but all shook their heads and left. Still the father persisted, and as he was leaving the town after yet another fruitless visit, his heart heavy and his eyes cast down, he came across an old man selling books by the side of the road. He picked up a book and thought that Alexei would like it to help him pass the boring days in bed.

"How much for this book, old man?" he asked.

"To you, respected sir, I offer it for just two groschen," the man replied.

"Here," said the father, "take fifty groschen for the book, for what use is money to a man whose cherished child is so deathly ill?"

"Thank you, sir, a thousand times thanks," said the old man, and raised his head. Although his face was like creased leather, his eyes were a brilliant blue. He looked deep into the forester's eyes and said: "And may it be for a blessing with you".

When the father gave the book to Alexei, his pale, wan features shone with pleasure. He loved the book, turning its pages again and again, and he held it close to his chest when he fell asleep that night and every night after.

One month later, on the twenty-first day of November, Alexei died, fading peacefully away before their grief-stricken eyes.

The father made preparations for burying his dead boy. With tears streaming down his ruddy cheeks he felled a strong pine tree. He hollowed out a section of trunk as if he were making a boat, and fashioned a rough-hewn lid. They laid Alexei's small body in the hollow of the trunk, and he looked like a fairy of the forest, curled up to go to sleep. In his lifeless hands, clutched close to his chest, was the favourite book.

Winter passed, and Spring, but the edge of their grief was still keen as they remembered all the happiness and love little Alexei had brought into their lives. Each day they placed fresh flowers on the grave. And then, one day, they noticed a strong shoot growing there.

"Should we not take it out?" the mother asked. "It is growing directly over his grave."

"No, we will leave it there. Life renews. It shall stand as a living memorial to him."

Although the father knew all about trees, this one was strange to him. The shoot grew and grew more quickly than he had ever seen a tree grow before, and in one season it had reached fifty feet. Yet strangely no leaves had unfurled from its branches.

The following year it continued to grow and as it soared ever higher it drained the grief and the sorrow from them, so that they smiled again and the forester remembered the old man's blessing. And Nicolai and Katya played games of chase around the tree that all of them now called "Alexei's tree" and brought their friends too, and the sound of their laughter gladdened the hearts of the forester and his wife once more.

In May, leaves appeared all along the branches. The leaves were the size of a boy's hand, and were a beautiful pale green in colour. But most remarkable of all were the leaves at the ends of the branches, for these were large and snowy white.

People heard about the tree and came from far away to see it. Some collectors offered the forester money to save the seed for them. But he replied: "This tree will never grow anywhere else in the world, for its seed was a lovely boy and it was nurtured by all the love that died with him."

When the autumn came, the leaves fell, except for the white leaves. The tree stood tall and stark with the white leaves fluttering like flags on the ends of the branches and the sight of it was truly amazing. The old leaves around the base of the tree turned brown, yet still the white leaves remained on the branches. And then, on the morning of the twenty-first of November, the forester looked out of his window and saw that every white leaf had fallen to the ground.

He hurried out to find the ground thick with the white leaves, and as he looked more closely he rubbed his eyes in disbelief, for each leaf was a page, with writing on it. He gathered all the pages together and took them into the house.

It was winter now, and snow soon covered the ground and it was too cold to go outside. The forester spent many hours putting the pages together in their proper sequence. When he had finished, he bound them carefully as a book, and showed it to his wife. She opened the book and read from the first page. Then she gasped and sat down suddenly, her hand to her chest. For it was the book that her husband had bought for Alexei, and that he had treasured so much in the last months of his short life. It started:

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