The Hoppers Romanov

(An American Love Story)

a novel

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I

Growing up in the Old part of New Delhi is hard enough when you have two legs, and so when little Raaj Nehru was born with just one, his parents wondered which of the seventy-two-thousand Hindu gods they had made unhappy.

"Perhaps it was Ganesha," said the father as he inspected his newborn son's stump.

"No, it must have been Krishna," the mother said as she wondered if the leg had perhaps fallen off and would come out of her later.

"It is actually just simple biology," said Doctor Ganesh Krishna Murthy.

"Is that a new god?" the innocent, under-educated mother asked.

"You can say that," said the doctor.

"He is joking," said the father.

"Yes, and I am sorry," said the doctor. "But it is just a coding error, and your son is healthy like a cow."

"A cow with only three legs," said the father sadly.

"Technically it would be a cow with two legs because one leg is fifty percent of a human's leg-endowment," said the doctor, "and two legs is the equivalent ratio of the cow's leggage."

At this everyone was silent as the two men did the mathematics and the woman smiled at her little one-legged baby and tickled his Ganesha-belly and scratched his Krishna-chin.

"My son is one hundred percent," she said, "and we will raise him that way."

And so little Raaj Nehru was raised as a one hundred percent human, and as simple biology will tell you, if you repeat things to the baby enough times as the brain is forming, once the brain has formed those things can get locked inside the brain-kernels and become so entwined that other things like logic and empirical evidence cannot do much to reverse the coilings that have taken place.

One hundred percent means normal, and so if one-legged Raaj was normal, the two-legged others were freaks. Freaks that moved slowly from side to side as they were forced to use that extra leg which undoubtedly made walking at least fifty percent more cumbersome. Raaj did not have that freakish extra leg, and so instead of the lumbering left-right movement he employed a buoyant up-down motion.

It was a hop, and Raaj learned it early, and he never asked for crutches, and his parents never offered him any.

"Two-legged freaks. Look at them."

"Yes, *Beta*."

"Mama."

"Yes, *Beta?*"

"Watch me hop."

"Very nice, *Beta.*"

"Watch me hop, Mama."

2

Thankfully Raaj's parents died in a terrible auto-rickshaw accident in the New part of New Delhi, and they were spared from the heartbreak of the first day little Raaj was told in no uncertain terms that he was the freak and not the others. But the heartbreak would have come not from seeing young Raaj's illusion of the one-hundred-percentness of one-leggedness being shattered, but from the indication that perhaps this illusion could not in fact be shattered. And what mother deserves to live her life imagining the hardships and struggles of a son that refuses to accept reality?

Raaj was living with his aunt in the Oldest part of Old Delhi at the time, and although the aunt was a horrible woman who beat her own children with shoes and sandals, Raaj was never struck, and Raaj was the only one who was told that he had to finish school and go on to college no matter what.

"Because you will need to earn a living with your brain," she would tell him as she whipped her own boys with shoelaces and spatulas. "Whereas these bastards will push handcarts up the hilly areas of Delhi in the hot dry sun until they become wrinkled like raisins and shriveled like walnuts."

Raaj loved dried fruits and nuts, and he always laughed at this statement. He did not like to see his brothers get whipped, but much of the time they deserved it, and life can be tough for people in the Oldest part of Old Delhi so it is best not to judge the poor woman.

But it was the schoolteacher that brought home the judgment that day. She had young Raaj by the arm, and he was hopping away and she was scurrying to stay with him and also hold on to the rough pieces of paper with multi-colored marks on them.

"You need to explain some basic things to your son," said the teacher.

The aunt, although she was a horrible woman, had no problem with people calling Raaj her son. And so she put down her spatula (she had been cooking at the time) and stared at the strange teacher who wanted her, an uneducated and horrible woman, to teach something to someone.

"See what he has done." The teacher flung the papers all over the dirt floor of the small hovel. "See it."

The aunt looked at the pages, expecting them to be full of words (she could not read), but they were instead full of pictures. Drawings, in fact; drawings of people. One-legged people. Many pages of so-so drawings of one-legged people.

"What is the problem?" the aunt said. "This is not an art school, is it? Can a boy not produce bad drawings? And these are not so bad. They look like people. He is just a boy, not

an artist. Delhi has many fine boy-artists, and he is not one of them, and so what? What is your problem?"

"My problem is that your boy has a problem and he does not know he has a problem and that is a big problem and I blame you for it."

Now Raaj's aunt eyed the oil-soaked spatula but then thought better of it. "I repeat my question," she said. "And so, please tell me, Teacherji, what is this problem?"

"One-leggedness," the teacher shouted. "Can you not see?"

"So he has one leg. So what? He hops about just fine with it. And this has nothing to do with art and drawings, so I still do not see the problem."

"The problem," the teacher said as she picked up one of the fallen drawings, "is that all these drawings are of one-leggers. When I ask the class to draw some normal people like farmers or terrorists or something, they all draw people with two legs. The different children may draw different-different things like colored shirts and beards or long hair or earrings or other non-essential and inconsistent things about persons, but they all draw two-leggers. Your Raaj only draws one-leggers."

The horrible aunt looked over at little Raaj, who was standing patiently near the two women. He was bobbing gently on his one leg as if in preparation to embark on a hop, but the aunt knew that the gentle bob was Raaj's at-rest stance.

"Raaj, please go outside and tell your brothers that food will be ready in ten minutes and so they must wash their hands and come inside or I will beat them like how I beat them yesterday," the aunt said.

"But Aunty," said little Raaj with a smile, "yesterday you

beat them even though they came inside on time and after washing their hands. So I do not want to give them the impression that they will not be beaten if they come on time. In fact, I may tell them they might as well play as long as they desire and only then come inside, because the beatings will happen anyway, and this way they will at least get their play-time."

"You are a smart and honest boy," said the aunt. "Go now, quickly, while I talk to your teacher."

Raaj hopped away, and it looked like the teacher wanted to stop him and insist that he be present for the conversation, but Raaj was too quick and the aunt was too horrible to be left unwatched, and so the teacher just continued to stare at the aunt and the oily spatula.

"Please sit down," said the aunt, "while I stir my frying-oil with this spatula."

The teacher sat down on the bamboo-and-rope cot and waited as the aunt stirred the bubbling broth.

"See," said the aunt. "Raaj is like my son, but he is in fact my sister's son."

"Ah, so you are passing the blame on to your sister."

"No. My sister is dead and there is no blame to pass. Raaj is a well-raised boy and he is very smart. He will do well in this world and he will not need to push hand-carts around like my other two bastard sons will no doubt be confined to doing for the rest of their horrible lives."

"It is not good to call your sons bastards," said the teacher thoughtfully. "It is bad for this thing called self-esteem."

"But they are bastards," said the aunt. "And they should know it, no?"

"Bastard is a harsh word. You can instead use other words like rascal or devil or mischief-maker. No need to use abusive language like bastard."

"But they *are* bastards," the aunt insisted. "Because my husband was never married to me."

"Then he is not your husband," said the teacher.

"True. That is true. I cannot call someone a husband if he is not married to me. See, I am not a schooled person, so I do not remember these details. All I know is that the man is dead and his sons are alive and those two rascals are bastards. And they should know the truth, correct?"

"Correct. And so why do you not tell Raaj the truth?"

"About what?"

"About his deficiency. His one-leggedness is a handicap and it makes him different from all others. He is a freak and he should know this." The teacher shook her head and some oil from her hair flew out and landed near the horrible aunt, who quickly dabbed up the oil and added it to her oily stovetop preparation. "But that is not the biggest problem. The biggest problem is that he is constantly making fun of the two-leggers for having two legs. He is calling them freaks and showing them how well he can hop and he tells them again and again that they are freaks. Two-legged freaks, he calls them, and then he draws these pictures of one-leggers and he laughs at the pictures of two-leggers and this is affecting the thing called self-esteem."

"I do not fully understand that thing due to my lack of education," said the aunt. "But if it is what I think it is, then I do not think it is a problem for Raaj. He seems quite con-

fident and happy with his one-leggedness. See, it is not like he ever had two legs, you know. He was born a one-legger, so he never misses the leg. And so I do not think his self-esteem is in danger."

"No," said the teacher. "It is causing trouble with the other children. They have been going home and asking their parents why it is that they are two-legged freaks. And now many of the other children's parents are coming in to me and asking why I am teaching children that the natural state of humans is one-leggedness."

"Ah, I see now. So it is your problem, and not the problem of anyone else."The oil had reached smoking-point and the ten minutes were up, and so the horrible aunt shouted for her two bastard sons to come in for their beatings and she glared at the teacher and raised the spatula. "Now get out before I whip you with this spatula and slash your face with my shoelaces."

3

The teacher indeed left with her problem unsolved, but not without a solution. Sometimes when you say your problem out loud the solution presents itself, and this was precisely what had happened this time. So the teacher cackled to herself and settled her oily hair back into an evil bun and prepared her master plan to destroy the self-esteem of one-legged Raaj.

Now, although Raaj was a spry boy and a buoyant hopper, the truth was that he was a small thing. Even at that young age you could see that he would grow up to be a little shorter and a little narrower than the others, and this would be quite suitable for hopping about on one leg, but perhaps not so suitable if you are to be placed in physical competitions where two legs are a benefit. And so the teacher planned precisely such competitions.

The next two weeks were filled with individual and team games ranging from simple running to complex two-foot tap-dancing (Indian style), and the boys and girls had great fun playing in the red dirt on the hot Delhi afternoons. At first Raaj kept up with the others, but soon his one leg wore down and his spirit followed suit. By the end of the third day of play, he was regularly losing to the two-leggers, and by the start of the second week, no team wanted to have little Raaj on it for fear of losing.

The other children did not laugh at him at first, partly because they were too caught up in their own competitiveness and since there were so many other children to compete with they were not too worried about picking on Raaj. But the teacher (who seemed to be cut from another type of horrible cloth) was quick to encourage the others to laugh and point and laugh some more as Raaj fell in the red dirt trying to kick a soccer ball or when Raaj could not gain the balance and leverage to swing a cricket bat with much force.

And fourteen days later, Raaj was a broken and defeated boy, unsure of himself and his one-leggedness, covered in red dirt and the shame of loss. The laughter of the children went home with him every evening, and although it was not particularly malicious laughter (except for that of the teacher), it weighed on the young boy heavily.

"Ay," said the horrible aunt one day during dinner, "why are you not eating your food? You need it to gain strength."

"It is no use," said little Raaj. "I am a one-legger, and perhaps it is I who am the freak, and perhaps two-leggers are indeed better than one-leggers, and maybe I will always be weaker than the two-leggers."

The horrible aunt had known something was wrong (she had sensed the teacher's innate horribleness and so had been subconsciously on the lookout for a horrible master plan), and so she sent her two bastards out into the dark Delhi streets to play with the rats and she went and sat close to little Raaj and hugged him and listened to everything that had gone on over the past two weeks. Soon the teacher's master plan was clear, and the aunt, without even needing to say things out loud, had a solution.

"Come in here, you two bastards," she shouted. "Your brother needs your help."

The two bastards were both a little older than Raaj, and they were always happy to help their younger brother. (Raaj never made fun of his brothers' two-leggedness.) When the aunt explained her plan, they smiled and laughed and wondered why they had never played that game before when it seemed so obvious post-mention.

4

"Langdi," Raaj repeated to the cluster of kids gathered around him and his two bastard brothers. "It is a game the older children play, and they will teach us and will also play with us."

It was lunchtime in the red dirty schoolyard, and Raaj had used the cachet of hanging with the older kids to draw his classmates to a prime spot in the playground. It was a spot that was visible from all points of the school, and it was the arena in which Raaj would once-and-for-all prove that one-leggers were better than two-leggers.

The two older brothers and a few of their friends explained the rules of the game, and the younger kids quickly understood and were excited because they had seen the older kids play it at times.

Langdi, taken from the Indian word for lame (a *langda* is one who limps or hobbles), is a variation on the classic game

of tag, and the person who is "it" is required to hop on one foot and chase the others (who get to use all their feet). It is typically played with two teams, with each team taking a turn chasing the other team. The chasing team sends out its hoppers one at a time, and each hopper chases and tags as many opponents as he or she can before he can no longer hop. Once the hopper is too tired to hop, he is replaced by the next hopper from his team.

Although it is a team game, like many team games there are opportunities for individuals to shine and be looked upon as heroes. The hero and champion in *langdi* is the hopper who can tag the most opponents.

Raaj expected to be that champion, and indeed, his brothers had spent the last few days teaching him the basics of chasing opponents (but not the basics of hopping, of course).

The two brothers put themselves on Raaj's team so there could be no accusation that they allowed themselves to be caught by Raaj, and soon the game was on. The contest drew loud cheers from watchers and squeals of delight from the breathless competitors as the hopping teams sent out their hoppers one by one to perform in the arena. There were a handful of older kids playing, and they were certainly a bit stronger and faster, but Raaj and his brothers knew that few could compete on the merits of pure hoppery. And so there had been no schemes of match-fixing or secret plans to let Raaj win. The horrible aunt had made that an explicit rule, because although the word self-esteem was not familiar to her, she seemed to understand that Raaj needed to win fair-and-square.

There was enough time for two full rounds of chasing for each team, and Raaj had attracted the attention of the crowd by narrowly beating out an older and stronger-looking hopper. Raaj had tagged thirteen opponents, and the other kid had picked up eleven. In comparison, the next best hopper had tagged just four, and so the second round of the game quickly became an individual matchup from the point of view of the fans.

But one in the crowd was not a fan, and it was the teacher (who had come out onto the verandah of the teachers' room so she could chew her tobacco-chew and dribble the brownish-red juice down onto the playground). When she saw what was transpiring, she quickly understood what was at stake and immediately made her way down. She knew she could not stop the game because it would leave Raaj as a champion, but it would be even worse to allow Raaj to better his opponent in the second round. And so she did what any corrupt person in power would do. She stepped in and changed the rules of the game.

"You," she said to a large boy on Raaj's team. "And you, you, you, and you. You two go to that team, and the three of you come to this team. Okay, good. Now continue."

The shuffling activity undid what the children's sense of fairness and balance had done instinctively, and now the distribution of the older and stronger kids was skewed to the point where Raaj's opponents were *all* older and stronger and hence would be much harder to catch. The flip side of it, of course, was that Raaj's chief competitor would have an easier time since his own opponents were younger and smaller

and almost unilaterally slower. A compounding effect, it was, and the odds were stacked against little Raaj, and although he knew it and his brothers knew it and the crowd knew it, they were all children and once the game was afoot they all forgot about the lopsidedness of the battle and simply went back to squealing and squeaking as if it were a fair contest.

And so when Raaj lost in a landslide (he only tagged five of the big kids whereas his opponent picked up twenty-three), the horrible teacher chewed her tobacco-chew and led the pointing and laughing and jeering, and what had started off as a fair contest and one that would have brought glory to the little one-legger turned into a power-play engineered by the forces of corruption and horribleness and one that left poor Raaj on the sidelines covered once again in the stinking red dirty shame of defeat.

But even though this defeat did the trick and Raaj never made fun of two-leggers in school again and the two-leggers continued to laugh at Raaj (not out of spite but habit, because when a teacher encourages you to do something you tend to do it without question), that first round of the match had served its purpose, and deep inside his below-average one-legged frame Raaj knew that he was better than the two-leggers. He had lost in public, no doubt about it, but in private there still burned that little fire that told him he had been cheated out of his due and would someday prove that one-leggers were better than two-leggers.

5

And as Raaj grew taller and wider (although still shorter than average and narrower than normal), this little fire continued to push him and pull him and coax him and even taunt him sometimes, and soon he had finished school (an achievement in those days for a kid from the Oldest part of Old Delhi) and was on his way to university.

"My dear son," the horrible aunt said to him on his last day at home, "you have achieved what no one else in this family has achieved."

Raaj smiled and shrugged, but deep down he knew that he had not achieved anything that could prove that one-leggers were better than two-leggers. "But I would have achieved nothing without your support and sacrifice," he told his aunt with genuine gratitude, "and so perhaps you are not such a horrible woman."

She laughed and waved the spatula as if to swipe away the

compliment, but a dollop of oil flew through the thick Delhi air and landed on a mosquito, and the mosquito sizzled and was dead even before it hit the dirt floor of the hovel.

"No," she said, "I am indeed a horrible woman. But I have done one or two decent things, and perhaps Yama, the God of Death, will be kind to me when it is my time."

"You have done many decent things. My two brothers have finished school also, and now they will not need to push hand-carts in the Delhi sun. And only now do I understand that when you beat them and scared them by saying they would turn into raisins and walnuts on the dry hills of North Delhi, it was so that they would study a bit more and play in the sun a bit less."

"Yes," said the horrible aunt. "I did not even know I was doing that, but I did it, so it must have been my doing. But still, although I am proud of those two bastards as well, they did not finish in the top ten of national board exam takers."

"Number ten is not so good," said Raaj. "In fact, it would have been number eleven, but that one child got killed by a train and they removed him from the list. So technically I am not even in the top ten."

"People get killed by trains all the time. It is part and parcel of the risk of life, and we must all accept the dangers and benefits that may or may not come from train attacks."

"True," said Raaj, but inside he knew that top ten meant nothing when there were nine two-leggers who had done better.

The next morning Raaj took the train from Delhi to Kanpur, where he was to attend university. He had secured admission to the great university known as the Indian Insti-

tute of Technology (IIT), and the Kanpur branch was one of the top five branches of that great system of scientific schools founded by Raaj's namesake: Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of free India.

Of course, Nehru is a reasonably common Indian last name, and Raaj was almost certainly not related to the late great prime minister, but he had liked the association-by-name, and it had prompted him to take some interest in Nehru's interests.

One of those interests was the establishment of a world class system of education that focused on science and technology, something Nehru thought would be helpful to a country that owned ninety-three percent of all superstitions known to civilization. The IIT system was the starting point of that interest, and Raaj was pleased to be part of the system.

The second great interest harbored by Jawaharlal Nehru was Russia. Nehru loved all things Russian, and in the early days of Indian independence he spent much time studying the economic system of socialism (a system that has seduced many great idealists). India, although a democracy from the moment of its birth in 1947, had many elements of socialism built into its economic policies, and Nehru was the driver of most of them, and the dialogue with Russia (USSR, really) continued past his death, and if the Cold War had ever turned into a Real War, it is likely that India (which always claimed non-alignment during that time) would have come down on the Russian side of that icy line.

Of course, Raaj knew little about Russia apart from those one or two things just mentioned, but his association with it would grow. We have just not come to that part of the story yet.

6

Mirkha Romanov was born to a Russian family in Kiev (Ukraine) and raised there for almost a year, but she did not remember any of it because after her parents were murdered during those times of great turmoil in the eastern parts of Europe, her big older brothers packaged her up and took whatever valuables they could find and got on a ship (airship) and made their way across the seas and into the open arms of the great country of the United States of America.

They settled in the western parts of that country of free men and brave women because it was nice and sunny and warm and it is a myth that people from icy places always want to live in icy places when they emigrate away from that first icy place (although one might point to the Scandinavian flavor of the US state of Minnesota as a counterpoint, but that is a different story).

The two Russian brothers, Igor and Ivan, were highly intelligent and well-trained mathematicians and scientists, but alas they had left all their school records and training certificates and what-not in a little box under the bed in Kiev, and when they finally had a chance to visit Kiev ten years later, the box was gone. But it did not matter so much at that point, because the Romanov brothers had obtained good union-backed jobs in California, and they were making good money and they had good health insurance and the work-hours were reasonable enough that both brothers got to spend a good amount of time at home with little Mirkha.

They taught her mathematics and the sciences at home, because they quickly realized (after spending two full weeks—their entire paid vacation time—sitting at the back of Mirkha's second-grade public schoolroom and making the children laugh while causing much trepidation in the small male teacher) that such things were not taught in the appropriate detail to American children.

And as Mirkha grew from a tiny baby-girl into a small child-girl, her fluency in mathematics and sciences grew along with her, as did her brothers' pride in their little baby sister.

"You remember why your parents died?" Igor would ask her at the dinner table.

"So we could be free and live a free life," little Mirkha would say. (She was still a child and she did not remember her parents and so the answers were the ones taught to her by the brothers.)

"Good," Ivan would add. "You are a smart little girl, Mirkha. You will make their sacrifice worth it."

And Mirkha would nod vigorously and smile and say nothing, partly because she did not understand what Ivan and Igor were talking about (she was a child, for heaven's sake) and partly because when you are a child you are sometimes just happy to be alive and so you will nod vigorously anytime someone says something.

So yes, the Romanov brothers were overbearing and overprotective and overeducated, but they spared neither time nor expense to make sure Mirkha was educated and healthy and ready to do great things, and they were kind and gentle with her, and they played with her in the California sunshine, and they had birthday parties for her, and all three of them celebrated all the American holidays and even one or two Russian holidays.

Inevitably, Mirkha excelled in junior and middle school, and soon she was in high school and had grown into a fine teenager, normal enough to make fun of her non-traditional family and considerate and caring enough to never let her brothers know that she knew their family was non-traditional.

Of course, Ivan and Igor were nice men, albeit a little bit gruff after fifteen or sixteen years working in the underground factories of the San Francisco Bay Area, where they purified fresh pumice-stone and fashioned it into knives and other usables that would be sold into the homes of the various Silicon Valley millionaires. They still worked hard, but they had never once shirked the responsibility of raising

Mirkha to be a perfect child, the legacy of their once-great Russian Romanov family.

Romanov, of course, is the name of a famous Russian dynasty, but it is a common enough Russian name and these Romanovs were almost certainly not related to the others. But the name-association had often been cited by the father in the old days around the dinner table in Kiev when Ivan and Igor were young boys studying mathematics and the sciences, and the young boys early on learned words like "dynasty" and "legacy" (Russian equivalents, of course, but also amongst the first English words they learned).

Dynasties and legacies are all about continuity, and to continue things on this earth a dynasty must have new generations crop up. In the old world the male heirs are expected to take the lead in such matters, but both Igor and Ivan had spent too much time at the underground radiation factories in the Kiev suburbs, and the usability of their family jewels had been reduced to that of kitchen utensils made from pumice-stone (not very useful) and were no longer suitable for creating dynasties or legacies. They had realized all this shortly before the turmoil in Kiev, and had carried the burden with them across the seas and continents.

Generally speaking, the nature of the radiation damage had been such that it did not affect desire or physical capability, and the Romanovs did have a few enjoyable liaisons with the brave and free women of the California coastline. But given the impossibility of having children of their own and the responsibility of raising little Mirkha, the two brothers swore to each other one night that they would never marry

because their attention and time and money should all be spent towards the upbringing of little Mirkha, their baby sister and the last hope for the Romanov dynasty (Kiev branch).

But when little Mirkha, at age thirteen, asked to go out on a date with a boy (her friends had been dating for a while already), the two big brothers found themselves unprepared for the situation. After cycling through the classic fatherly stages of manic depression, homicidal anger, and pathetic whimpering, the Romanov brothers agreed to it but only if they could interview the boy.

The boy was also thirteen, and he was quite confident and well-spoken, but when Ivan began to ask him about diseases in the family or whether his mother had ever miscarried and then Igor followed up by demanding to know if any of his siblings had succumbed to the pox or the plague, the little boy asked to go to the bathroom and simply took off via the back door and never spoke to young Mirkha again.

He was a fairly considerate boy, but young teenagers still talk about all kinds of things, and when things get passed on around a group, the fourth person does not hear the same story the first person told, and that fourth person rarely even passes on the same words that he himself might have heard (this is why one should be careful when reading the history books).

And by the time little thirteen-year-old Mirkha turned into a slightly taller and slightly more filled-out (but still skinny like a twig) seventeen-year-old, it was a running joke that any potential suitor would have to undergo an intense interrogation and so they'd better have their papers ready.

"Or it's off to the *gulag* for you," was the common punch-line.

"Siberian prison camp," some of them said.

"Pumice mines," a few of the kids cried. (Although this was not so popular because some of the other kids had parents who worked in those same pumice mines.)

Now, any free and brave young American girl would have fussed and screamed and cried and disowned her guardians for causing such humiliation (it is a medical fact that humiliation at age seventeen is the worst kind of humiliation), but as Mirkha had grown up she had been well aware of the sacrifices her brothers had made for her, and she had never used a harsh word against them, and she knew she never would. She was a sweet girl, and she ignored the jokes most of the time, and she laughed at them herself sometimes, but mostly she ignored them and simply smiled sweetly and went on with her life.

And so, through no real fault of anyone's, Mirkha graduated school as a highly intelligent, extremely sweet young woman, but one that counselors worried was perhaps too sweet for her own good and maybe a little bit meek and quiet. These counselors had met Ivan and Igor many times (usually at the insistence of Ivan and Igor), and they understood that the Romanov brothers were caring but overbearing, kind-hearted but crusty, good listeners but very loud talkers. Still, in the end those counselors had no doubt that Mirkha had been blessed with better guardians than many other California children, and so the counseling sessions often turned into some form of reminding the Romanovs that

they were doing a good enough job and their little sister was the sweetest girl in the school, if a bit reserved.

"But she'll open up once she gets to college," the first counselor had promised.

"Yes, she will come out of her shell when the time is right," the second counselor would say.

"The quiet ones bloom like flowers in the right environment," the third counselor often gushed.

But these metaphors only made the Romanov brothers uneasy, and they decided that young Mirkha would either need to attend college in their hometown or they would have to move to the town where Mirkha went to college so they could all still live together and the Romanov brothers could continue to interview all potential enablers of the Romanov legacy.

When Mirkha heard this, she smiled sweetly and hugged her big old brothers and thanked them for being so considerate, but inside she felt just a tiny bit disappointed. She loved her brothers deeply and truly, and although she was happy to go to a California school, she indeed was hoping she'd have a little more space to blossom (in the sweetest possible sense of the word). Still, her sweetness easily overwhelmed the disappointment, and she made a short list of colleges and applied to them and got accepted to all of them and simply handed the list over to her brothers because, after all, they had jobs and they would be paying for everything and so they had the right to choose.

The Romanov brothers were happy and proud of their little sister, and although they chose the college, they made

sure all three of them visited each of the schools so Mirkha could look around and the brothers could interview a random sample of male students.

In the end they picked Stanford University out in Palo Alto, and although it's hard to go wrong with Stanford, little Mirkha secretly wondered if she'd have more fun at the University of California at Berkeley. Still, she saw the pride in her two brothers' eyes when the name of Stanford came up, and her secret second-thoughts were easily washed away by her sweetness, and she hugged her brothers and thanked them, and they all prepared to pack because they would need to move closer to Palo Alto and find a place that was still reasonable driving distance from the underground pumice factories of California.

7

In the end the brothers decided it would be best to choose a house in Palo Alto because they did not want Mirkha to have to drive long distances in the evenings or at night. But when they saw the Palo Alto prices (Stanford professors are rich, and even they can't afford the best houses in Palo Alto), they settled for a two-bedroom rental apartment in the worst part of Palo Alto (which is still pretty clean and safe).

"We will sleep in the big room," said Ivan.

"And you will have the little room," said Igor.

And that was that, and the Romanovs had moved to Palo Alto. Little Mirkha hugged her brothers again and she went to her little room. The room seemed just right for her, she thought, and perhaps this would turn out for the best after all, and so she came back out of her room and sweetly thanked her brothers again and hugged them each once more as she reminded herself of all that they had sacrificed for her.

It wasn't so much that Igor and Ivan were the type of men who like to remind people of their own sacrifices (although they did do it sometimes) as much as it was that Mirkha was the type of young lady who could see such things, and then, once seen, those things would get exaggerated by her own internal sweetness and stored away deep down inside near that place where emotions are so raw that they do not even have names yet. And so she worked hard at Stanford and she was home at sunset every night, and soon she became accustomed to interviewing potential suitors herself, which meant only a few of them made it to the final round of interrogation.

Igor and Ivan wondered about this sometimes, but they were gruff old men who were once mathematicians and scientists but were now making useless things out of a crumbly volcanic rock, and so discussions about delicate matters like dating and marriage and what-not did not come up regularly at the Romanov dinner table.

Such topics did, however, come up time and again at the vodka-drinking table (same table, but different time of the evening).

Ivan and Igor were not drunks by any measure, but like many good Russians (and Ukrainian Russians) they enjoyed some vodka now and then. Their vodka was stored in the freezer and it was served cold, so cold that it poured out of the bottle like thick colorless syrup and went down smooth and silky and it is amazing how something so cold can warm a body from the inside out.

Mirkha rarely joined them, and if she did it was only for a single shot and then she would leave her two brothers (after giving each a sweet smile and a quick hug). The brothers

would usually go on for a few more shots and a few more hours and end the night with some Polish sausage and some California cheese. Their conversations usually started with day-to-day items and then moved on to some talk of the old days in the old country and finally a little bit of (typically upbeat) talk of Mirkha and how proud they were of her. When they did bring up the topic of her and marriage and those sorts of things, it was usually in the context of something that would happen in time, and there was plenty of time for it.

But when her sophomore year was coming to an end and the Romanovs had only seen one or two potential boys stop by to take their sister out, their vodka-table conversations began to focus more on the topic.

"Maybe we need to help her," said Ivan one night.

"Like how?" said Igor.

"Introduce her to some Russian boys."

"You think she will like that?"

"I don't know."

"Why do they have to be Russian?"

"I don't know."

"I don't think they have to be Russian."

"Okay. No Russians then."

"Oh, but they can be Russian, yah?"

"Of course. I don't see why not." Ivan scratched his stubble and poured them each another shot.

"But," said Igor as he reached for his little glass. "It is not our choice. We should not pressure her. It is her life."

"Of course it is, but it is our family. So we have some choice in the matter, yah?"

"Yes. Some choice. Like the power of interrogation and

then the power of veto based on the interrogation results. That is fair, I think."

"Yes. It is fair." Ivan downed his shot and looked up at the dark green ceiling. He was quiet for some time, and finally Igor noticed.

"What is it?" Igor said.

"What if she does not want children?"

"How could that be?"

"It could be."

"But all women want children. It is a natural thing for a woman to want a child." Igor shook his head.

"Here it is different. Women here do not think like other women. Some women may not want children."

"Like who?"

"Like Meredith. She works on the pumice-spoon line. She says she never wanted children, and she does not have any."

Igor nodded thoughtfully. "I have met her. She is a nice woman. Good worker."

"Yes."

Igor nodded again, this time quizzically. "She really does not want children?"

Ivan shook his head.

"Maybe she has a problem. You know, with the machinery."

Ivan shook his head again. "No. She can make babies fine."

"How do you know?"

"She has been pregnant two times, she told me. Once when she was very young before she got married, and once just last year from her husband."

"And? What happened?" Igor looked at Ivan wide-eyed.

"What do you think? They went to Planned Parenthood

and took care of things. Because she did not want to have children. As simple as that. It is a choice."

Igor nodded some more and he looked once again at Ivan and his stare was wider. "So, what if our Mirkha is like that? What if she does not want to have children?"

"That was my question to begin with, you fool. You have been breathing too much of that pumice-dust and it has made you slow and stupid."

"I will show you slow and stupid," Igor said, and he pulled his brother to the ground and they began to wrestle on the carpet, but then quickly stopped when they remembered what time it was.

"Anyway," said Ivan as he caught his breath. "Maybe it is time to eat some cheese."

"I agree."

Igor went to the fridge and pulled out a block of California Cheddar, and as he turned to come back out to the dining table, he stopped and shrugged and turned back again and went to the freezer and pulled out a new bottle of chilled Russian vodka.

"Ah," Ivan said when he saw his brother come into the room with full hands. "I was just noticing that our bottle is empty, but I am too awake to sleep yet."

"I am not so stupid then, am I now?"

This drew small gruff laughing noises from each of the large men, and they took their places at the vodka-table and went on with the night.

"Perhaps we should tell her," said Igor. "She is old enough."

Ivan nodded slowly and tilted his head back to pour down the sweet Russian syrup. He smacked his lips and glanced

at his brother with a faraway look and nodded slowly again. "And so are we."

The Romanovs had grown up as strong and powerful men, and while it was hard to find out that they would be unable to sire children, it was even harder to talk about it with anyone. And they never had. No one except their own father (who was a doctor and had arranged for the tests in secret) and the two Romanov brothers knew the truth, and to the brothers it had always been clear that no one, least of all Mirkha, needed to know.

But now with the paranoia that perhaps Mirkha would be a person who might choose not to have children, the two big, old, gruff, overprotective and overbearing brothers understood at deep emotional levels that perhaps if their little sister knew the responsibility that lay with her, she would choose not to become such a person.

"If we tell her," said Ivan, "we should tell her sooner and not later."

Igor shrugged. "We can tell her anytime. Later is not a problem. We can wait two more years until she finishes college. Maybe we can wait even longer."

"But what if she already makes up her mind before that?"

"Then this will change her mind. She will change her mind. It will not be a difficult thing. She is a sweet girl."

"Yes, but she may get upset once she is a grown-up woman and has made such decisions. What if she gets upset?"

"Then we will get upset too," said Igor. He was on his feet now. "We all make sacrifices and we all do things for our families and the people we love. The continuation of the Romanov line is of utmost importance. It is the natural

biological yearning of any living thing to replicate, and we both know that it is the Romanov gene that must replicate, and that will justify the lives and deaths of all the Romanovs. There can be no argument about it."

Ivan nodded vigorously and poured out another round. "Have some cheese," he said. "And sit down."

Igor sat down and calmed himself.

Ivan smiled. "Okay, we will wait. There is no need to tell her anything just now. She is still young, and she will most likely meet someone soon, and he will be a suitable boy, and things will be as we hope."

8

Although Mirkha had briefly been awoken by the wrestling bout in the living room, she had quickly fallen back to sleep (the Romanov brothers often wrestled on vodka-table nights) and had not heard the details of what had transpired that night. But when the same discussion occurred two nights later (and at a significantly higher volume and intensity level), the sweet young sophomore crept to her bedroom door and stood there listening to her brothers talk of responsibility and replication and radiation and sacrifice and suitable boys, and although she had at some level known (most of) those things, to hear her brothers speak of them with such emotion made her shiver and tremble, and she stood there in the doorway feeling like a little girl who had walked in on her parents' first fight and assumed it was all her own fault.

But her sweetness took over once again, and she controlled her shivers, and once she was sure she could walk, she raced into the living room and hugged her two brothers and told them that she understood everything they were saying and feeling, and she assured them that even though she doubted she would have been someone that might have chosen to stay unmarried or childless, now that she understood her duty, she would certainly never choose to be such a woman.

"And of course I will find a suitable boy," she said with a smile and a giggle as all three of them wiped away some tears from their own cheeks. "I already know what questions to ask."

9

By the end of her junior year, Mirkha had developed the interesting reputation of being a Russian Ice Queen, but in the nicest possible sense of the term. Although she was striking in appearance, no one who crossed paths with her could have doubted her approachability. The Ice Queen name had only come about because it had become notoriously hard to secure a meaningful date with Mirkha. When a guy asked her out, she would suggest they eat lunch together at the Stanford cafeteria and "take it from there."

At lunch Mirkha would sweetly converse, and by the time they got to their organic sugar-free Palo Alto dessert, she had extracted the answers to all the questions pertinent to the Romanov legacy, and nine times out of ten the clueless Stanford man would have tripped up on some of the questions. She was so good at working the questions into the

conversation and so crafty at getting the answers she needed by asking different questions to different people, that none of the boys figured out what she was doing, and soon enough Mirkha herself lost track of it and the questions simply became things that were interesting and important to her and she no longer had to remember why.

Nine out of ten did not make it to the second round, but one out of ten did, and since many tens of men asked her out during her time at Stanford, a handful of hopefuls got to come home to meet the Romanov brothers.

One such man was young Nicholas Graysnoot. Despite the last name, he was a down-to-earth person from a working-class family. Mirkha liked him a fair amount, but certainly not as much as he liked her.

The day after he passed the Cafeteria Test, young Graysnoot eagerly asked if the young Russian maiden would accompany him to a restaurant and perhaps a drink after dinner. Mirkha said she'd think about it, and she thought about it for a day or two and then accepted. It was not that she liked the idea of him waiting for her answer. It was just that in her sweetness she could see that the poor lad liked her more than she liked him, and it didn't seem like a good thing to lead him on if she suspected she wouldn't be interested in him.

But on the other hand, Graysnoot had indeed passed the Cafeteria Test, and this was one of those moments when Mirkha remembered why the Cafeteria Test was a test at all, and she thought of words like legacy and responsibility and duty and suitable boys, and she shrugged sweetly and figured that it might work out for the best. After all, she

wondered as she thought back to a book she had once read, love can blossom from the tiniest seed, can it not? And so she accepted Graysnoot's invitation and had him come by and pick her up from the Romanov garden.

Igor and Ivan were on their best behavior (not substantially different from their normal behavior), and they politely nodded when Mirkha shyly introduced Graysnoot.

"Hallo," said Graysnoot. "I've heard a lot about you both."

"And we have not heard enough about you," said Igor with a laugh.

Graysnoot looked worried, but Ivan smiled at him and made a face that reassured the boy that Igor was not to be feared. Mirkha gave both her brothers a look that, if translated by a machine that removed the effects of sweetness and reticence, would have made it clear that she was reminding her brothers that Graysnoot had obviously passed the preliminary background tests and so they only needed to ask him one or two more questions at most.

The brothers understood this, because even though they were old and gruff and overprotective and overbearing and loud-voiced and focused on their own deficiencies and mindful of the memories of all the dead Romanovs, they were also practical men of science and mathematics and pumice-stone technologies, and practical men do not need to ask any more questions than necessary.

"So," said Igor. "Graysnoot. What is that?"

"Well, it's just a name. English, I think. Maybe some German in it. Probably something else as well. You know, your standard American mutt. And proud of it."

The two brothers nodded in approval of his humility and as if to say this lineage seemed fine and the superficial aspects of lineage did not matter so much anyway.

"You are an only child?" asked Ivan. "No brothers? No sisters? Only child?"

"Oh, Jesus, no." Graysnoot almost fell off his chair. "I have eight brothers and three sisters. We grew up on a farm in New England, and you know how it is on a farm. You guys have farms in Russia, right?"

"Kiev is in Ukraine," said Igor, and he looked at Ivan.

"But we are Russian," said Ivan, and he looked at no one.

"We don't know much about farms and farming," said Igor. "Our father was a doctor, and we are both trained as mathematicians and scientists."

The conversation went on for a few more exchanges, but Mirkha could sense some tension in the room, and she wondered about it before remembering what her brothers had told her about the effects of multiple siblings:

"When there are many brothers and sisters in the family," Igor had explained, "the internal drive for any particular brother or sister to replicate is lowered."

"Because the drive to replicate is aggregated at the level of the individual gene," Ivan said wisely, "and not the individual human."

"And since members of a family share a genetic bond," concluded Igor, "if the individual human is assured that his family genes will be passed on through some other sibling, he or she does not feel the same urgency to replicate that an only child might feel."

"It is a natural thing," said Ivan.

"But not a conscious thing," said Igor (who had toyed with the idea of specializing in psychiatry after being given a book on Freud as a fifth birthday present). "Those drives and urges are buried deep."

And Mirkha thought about this as she watched her brothers interrogate Graysnoot, and she nodded sweetly as she subconsciously wondered what deep drives and urges she was burying and which other ones were being uncovered as this odd game of match-making unfolded.

But Mirkha learned how to use the game a little bit for her own purposes, and she realized this after the fall of young Graysnoot.

The date had gone well enough, and later that night when she talked to her brothers they reminded her of the unsuitability of a man with many siblings, but they also pointed out that this factor might be diminished in the children of farmers.

"Because farmers," said Ivan wisely, "need all siblings to replicate as much as possible so that there is no need to hire external labor for harvest season."

"And although now there are machines and Mexicans to help with harvest season," said Igor, "those drives and urges are buried down deep and it will take many generations for them to be eliminated from the gene-structure of the farmer."

"And so," said Ivan in conclusion, "your brother and I agree that even though there is some doubt about Graysnoot, we are willing to allow things to proceed a little further."

Mirkha went to her brothers and hugged them both and gave each one a kiss and then turned around and went to bed as she thought things over. In truth she did not like Graysnoot so much, but it was rare for her brothers to let one get through the gates, and so she wondered if it would not be wise for her to simply continue and see if there was a chance for love to blossom. And as she tossed and turned in her small single-bed, she wondered if on the other hand she should not worry so much about love anyway, because sometimes marriage and legacies and suitableness and duty have nothing to do with love, and perhaps love can even get in the way of those things.

Still, although Mirkha was one-hundred-percent Russian, she was also a proud American mutt and one of those free and brave women of the New World, and even though she was sweet and unassuming and quiet and gullible, she was not ready to let go of the idea of love just yet.

And so, two days later, she dumped poor Graysnoot (after letting him steal a kiss but nothing more) and told her two brothers that all of Graysnoot's siblings had given birth to multiple sets of babies, and the Graysnoots had sold the farms, and now it seemed that young Nicholas Graysnoot's suitability was in question and so his seed had no place in the Romanov garden. And when she went to bed that night in her little single-bed, she dreamed of some suitable boy who would show up someday and prove himself worthy of the approval of two gruff brothers and the love of one young Russian maiden.

And that boy would indeed show up. We just have not gotten to that part of the story yet.