

Black Swan

by Ruth H.

I picked up the small gold key and inserted it into the lock. The music box sprung open as I turned the key, and the notes of Swan Lake chimed out into the room.

I began to dance, my body swaying to the sound of the music, my feet moving of their own accord, having practiced the routine so often. The room was quiet; in the audience sat only the richest and most prominent of nobility, covered in lavish outfits and jewels, mesmerized by my performance. In the front row, Duke Alexei Nikolaievich nodded approvingly.

January 17th, 1905

Dear Diary,

Tonight at the dinner table, I told Mother that the Duke was seeking entertainers for his party the next week, and that my ballet teacher had recommended me.

Mother cried with joy and held my hands, repeating how proud she was. "You will need a new dress... and new shoes as well!" she exclaimed.

Anton had stayed silent.

Only a few years separated me from my brother and we had grown up close. Lately however, as the unrest between the people and the Tsar grew, and the Great War showed no signs of slowing down, Anton seemed to spend more and more time inside his own mind.

Later, he had gone out for a walk, which I knew meant he would be talking with the other boys from down the street who were also still too young to enlist. Mother forbids me from following him. She says it is unsafe for a young lady to wonder the streets so late. I followed him anyway, and eavesdropped from behind a tree a short distance away.

Anton was the first to speak.

"Eva has been 'summoned' by Nikolaievich to perform at his party next week." He said pronouncing "summoned" with a sort of hatred-filled sarcasm.

"He's having another party? Didn't he just have one last week?"

Anton spat. "Fitting, isn't it? We're out here starving, pawning off everything we own to make ends meet and he's partying."

"I met the Duke once. He seems nice enough," said a different voice.

Anton snorted. "They're the reason why people are starving in this country. Their sons never have enlist and they always have enough food. Have you seen the palace he lives in? These people are greedy and selfish, with no concern for anything besides their own interests. They are the enemy of the people." He seemed to hesitate for a second. "Long live the Revolution!"

Shocked silence. Several of the other boys seemed alarmed and impressed by Anton's boldness.

The one named Derrek spoke up. "I heard the Resistance killed a Grand Duke today, down in Moscow."

"Really? Good for them." Anton's voice was firm.

"One of the men were caught though."

"No, he let himself get caught. Killing is a sin unless you are willing to pay with your own life," Anton had explained. "It's principle."

More silence.

"I'd join up," Anton continued quietly. "I'd join the Resistance in a heartbeat if it weren't for Mother and Eva."

I had reached the middle of the dance now, my movements becoming faster as the White Swan became more and more frantic. My music box continued to tick away at the front of the stage.

January 19th, 1905

Dear Diary,

When we were younger, my brother went through a stage where he wanted to understand how everything worked. Anton had always been my idol, so I was his loyal assistant during every experiment. We got into frequent trouble for setting things on fire by accident and creating unwitting explosions.

One day, we opened the bottom of my music box and studied the gears. I remember being fascinated at how well everything worked together, like a group of dancers in a perfectly synchronized performance. That was what inspired me to become a dancer.

I miss those days.

The music box had been a gift from my father. The top contained a compartment meant for jewelry. Along with the box, my father had given me a necklace of pearls, which had been passed down in his family from generation to generation. My father died of pneumonia two years ago.

Anton says we'll have to pawn the necklace soon, to pay for food.

I understand why it must be done, of course. These are difficult times and we are at war. Luxuries cannot be afforded. I'll have to give up my ballet lessons soon too.

Still, it will be hard to say goodbye.

The music began to slow. I was reaching the end of the song. My movements slowed and I sank slowly to the ground, a dying swan at it's final breaths.

January 22, 1905

Dear Diary,

Anton pawned the necklace today.

I left the house in the middle of the morning for a walk. I thought the Palace Square, which was usually covered with snow at this time of year, could calm my nerves.

That day however, it was filled with thousands of young men, women, elderly citizens and children. Many waved religious banners and sang hymns. It was an organized demonstration, a protest against the Tsar. I had never seen anything like it before.

The crowd approached the Palace, and the energy in the air was palpable. Voices melded together as one, demanding an audience with the Tsar. Several of the guards lining the square joined in with the crowd and began to march alongside them. It was an incredible sight to behold.

I felt the desire to walk closer, to sing along with them. This was the way to make a difference.

Then the first shot rang out. The world seemed to slow down, and I saw the crowd slowly reacting to what had happened. Then the screaming started, followed by the panic as thousands ran for their lives. More gunshots exploded as the imperial guard opened fire on the unarmed protesters.

As I fled the square, the snow at my feet was splattered red.

The applause began, drowning out the last few notes of the music. The White Swan was dead.

I stood up, walked to the front of the stage and picked up my music box. The Duke rose from his seat, clapping his hands together, a satisfied smile on his face. He approached the stage, and nodded to me.

Killing is a sin unless you are willing to pay with your own life.

I clasped the music box closer to my chest and took a step toward the Duke.

"Thank you for the beautiful dance," he said, raising the glass of wine in his hand.

As the music box in my hand whirred to a stop, I felt the last gear click into place.

I nodded to him. "Long live the Revolution."

Then the bomb in the top compartment of the music box exploded.