

MIDSUMMER NIGHT

by

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Alexandra's fingers were covered in small sores and blisters. She had spent the last 30 minutes braiding twigs, leaves and flowers into a midsummer wreath and had so far only done half of it. She sat hunched over her work, the white dress folded under her and birch leaves laid haphazardly thrown around her. Just a few metres away sat her family and friends talking loudly but Alexandra heard none of it, she was far too focused on her work. She had to be done before it was time to go to the midsummer pole.

A shadow suddenly covered Alexandra's work and she lifted her head to inspect who dared disturb her. She brought her hand up over her eyes to take cover from the blinding sun rays and saw a girl of the same age in front of her. The girl moved so her head covered the sun and instead brightened her sun bleached hair. Her dress swayed gently in the wind and in her hand was a midsummer wreath with a variety of white flowers. Alexandra thought she looked like an angel, if it weren't for the cocky smile that immediately spread across her face.

“Aren’t you done yet?” said Vera with laughter in her voice. She pointedly looked down at Alexandra's half finished wreath and put her own on her head. Alexandra rolled her eyes and brought her attention back to her work. Vera bent down and waved a hand in front of her face.

“Hello, Earth to Alex! Didn’t you hear me?” she said.

“Yeah I heard you. Now leave me alone,” answered Alexandra and ignored how her heart skipped a beat when she heard Vera say her name. Vera took away her hand and sighed loudly. After a while she sat down next to Alexandra and started to gather up the birch leaves. Alexandra forced herself not to move a single muscle every time their knees bumped against each other.

The problem with Vera was that she was so loved by everybody and Vera knew very well about it. She was the most popular girl in school, no, the whole village. All the boys adored her and all the parents wished that their kids were more like her. Even if you wanted to hate her, you couldn't. Alexandra was no exception. However much she tried to ignore Vera she simply couldn't get rid of her. She came over with baked goods for her parents, always played with her younger brother, took notes for her everytime she was sick and even offered to give her a ride on her bike when Alexandra had broken her leg. This however only happened when they were alone. In school, Vera ignored Alexandra and hung out with her popular friends. It was why Alexandra couldn't understand why Vera had decided on today to sit next to her while multiple people from the village could see them.

“Are you going to the midsummer pole later?” asked Vera after a while.

“Why do you think I'm sitting here frantically braiding a wreath?”

“Come on Alex, it's midsummer. Cheer up!”

“Do you want to die?”

“No, it would be very sad if I died before knowing you”

“You know me.”

“Not enough! I don’t know the happy Alex. I know she’s in there somewhere. Come on, just a little smile,” said Vera and turned her head sideways and put it between Alexandras face and the flower wreath. She couldn’t stop the smile that spread across her lips and quickly turned her face away with a huff. Vera pulled her face away and smiled as if she had won first prize.

“Ha! I knew she existed. Besides, red really suits you,” she said cheerfully and lightly poked her own cheek. Alexandra furrowed her brows and quickly brought her hand up to her cheek. It was hot to the touch. She glared at Vera who grinned back at her.

“Be quiet now, or else I won’t finish on time and in that case I’m not going,” said Alexandra and continued working on her wreath. Vera didn’t answer and simply continued picking at the birch leaves.

After some time Alexandra had finally finished. A mixture of cornflowers, red trefoils and daisies that she put on her head and looked expectantly at Vera. Vera dramatically clapped

her hands slowly and shook her head. Alexandra shoved her so she fell over and stood up. Her dress was covered in grass stains but it didn't matter, she would have outgrown it soon anyway. Without looking to see if Vera was okay, Alexandra started to walk towards her parents. Alexandra's father had his arm around her mother who was leaning her head against him. They both had rose red cheeks and were laughing at something that had been said at the table. Alexandra got all warm from seeing them together, so much love radiated from them. Behind her she could hear Vera jogging up to them. Alexandra turned her face towards her and was met with a smile instead of an irritated grimace she had expected from someone who had just been abandoned. Alexandra knew they could never be like her parents. How could someone who burned so brightly with passion and positivity love someone who would inevitably dampen their light with their darkness. Someone who would taint their character. Alexandra tore herself away from Vera's big questioning eyes.

"Should we get going? It's starting soon," said Vera loudly to the rest of the table. Everyone agreed clamorously, rose from their chairs and started gathering their things. After a lot of hassle, searching for possessions and sweeps from beer cans the group started to move towards the meadow where the midsummer pole would stand. Most of the people had already gathered and the pole was already raised when they arrived. The music started and several people immediately ran into the circle to join the dance. Vera grabbed Alexandra's hand and dragged her while simultaneously ignoring her protests. Alexandra could feel the eyes from her classmates in the back of her neck and tried to pull her hand out of Vera's grasp. Vera only pulled her closer and smiled. She followed the dance moves

with only one hand and Alexandra copied her since she didn't have a choice, if she didn't dance it would look even worse.

Alexandra relaxed after a while and started singing along with everyone else. She danced, laughed and sang until her throat hurt and her legs ached. She and Vera pulled out from the dance circle and laid down in the grass right next to it. They laughed breathlessly and Alexandra's cheeks started to hurt. Vera was still holding her hand. Alexandra gently pulled her hand away so she could sit upright. She fixed her gaze on her parents who were still dancing with her younger brother.

"See, that wasn't so bad now was it?" Vera panted from the ground. Alexandra shook her head and laughed lightly. She stood up but this time she didn't walk away immediately, and instead turned around and offered a hand to Vera. Vera looked at her hand and raised her eyebrows. She took it as that well known grin spread across her face and Alexandra ignored how her heart fluttered.

"If I didn't know any better I would say you're starting to like me Alex."

"Shut up Vera."

They made their way over to the table where the rest of the company were seated. The afternoon went by fast, filled with laughter and strawberry cake. Only when the afternoon sun was hanging low and the little ones had fallen asleep in their parents arms did

Alexandra feel the tiredness as well. She hid a yawn behind her hand and wrapped a blanket over her shoulders. Vera poked her arm.

“Hey, do you wanna go pick flowers? You know, the ones you put under your pillow?” she said. Alexandra realised she had completely forgotten to do that, so she nodded and stood up. She went up to her father and told him about her plans and patted the head of her younger brother, who had fallen asleep in her fathers arms. She looked around and furrowed her brows when she realised she couldn’t see her mom anywhere. Alexandra assumed she had already headed off to bed and went over to Vera who was standing a bit off, waiting for her. They slowly started moving closer and closer towards the forests while picking up different flowers along the way.

“So, who are you hoping to see in your dreams?” asked Vera as soon they got out of earshot from the others. “A celebrity? A teacher? A classmate? Me?”

“In your dreams Vera.”

“Yes exactly!”

“Focus on the picking so that we can head back, I’m tired and-”

“Shhh!” Vera interrupted and grabbed Alexandra's arm.

“What is it? There’s nobody-”

“I said quiet. Look.” Vera whispered and pointed ahead of them. Alexandra followed her finger and squinted her eyes. A bit ahead of them were the shapes of two humanoid figures. Vera crouched down and started to slowly move forward them, all the while dragging Alexandra along. When they came closer they could see that it was a man and a woman who were kissing. Alexandra recognised the man, he owned the pet store in the village. The woman felt familiar, however she could only see the back of her head. They pulled away from each other and the woman giggled. Alexandra knew that laugh. She couldn’t breathe. The woman shifted and Alexandra could see her whole face. There was no question about it. Her heart was beating so fast it felt like it was gonna explode out of her chest. She was gonna throw up. She had to get out of there. Vera let go off her arm and it was all she needed to run away. She didn’t care if they heard her or not, she just had to get away. She ran until the forest ended and stood with her hands on her knees, panting. In the distance she could hear her dad laugh and Alexandra held back a gag. After what felt like eternity, Vera showed up. She was laughing. Why was she laughing? Was this a joke? Was she just as confused as Alexandra?

“I knew it! I knew it was him and not the pastor! Ida owes me 5 bucks,” she exclaimed. Alexandra couldn’t believe her own ears. She didn’t know how to breathe anymore.

“What did you say,” she said in a deadpan voice.

“What? Did you also think it was the priest? I thought it was quite obvious that it wasn’t him.”

“What the fuck do you mean.”

“Huh?” Vera said and gave Alexandra a confused look. “You don’t mean, you didn’t know?”

“You knew?”

“Of course I knew, everyone knew!”

“Everyone?”

“Yeah. I mean last winter it was just rumours but then during easter a bunch of kids at school had seen them. The pastor and him are brothers so I get that it’s easy to mix them up but-” Vera didn’t have time to finish the sentence because Alexandra went up to her and gave her arm a deathgrip. Her heart was breathing frenetically, her body was shaking and her mouth tasted bitter. She had to focus to not let tears fall from her burning eyes.

“Let me see if I got this right. You mean you, and everybody else at school, knew my mom was cheating? And none of you told me?” Alexandra asked.

“More like everyone in the village. You seriously didn’t know? You’re even more blind than your father, at least he knows something is going on and overcompensates. It’s almost sad to see actually,” Vera replied nonchalantly, as if she hadn’t just turned Alexandras whole world upside down.

Alexandra let go of Vera and backed away from her. She knew. Everyone knew. Vera had laid bets with others about who the man was. Alexandra felt too much and absolutely nothing at the same time. It was as if someone had ripped the heart out of her chest and left a rotting shell that could barely keep upright. She looked up at Vera, her Vera. Her Vera, who had always been there no matter if she wanted to or not. Her Vera, who had been hers for the whole day in front of everybody. Behind Vera she could see her mom walking out of the forest with a big smile on her face. Their eyes met and her smile faded as another person came out of the forest. Alexandra turned around and started walking back to the others while warm tears fell down her cheeks and multiple voices yelled after her. She ignored them all.