

The Month Brothers

a traditional folk tale from Russia

as told by Peter Amidon

Once upon a time there was a young woman named Marushka who lived with her sister Helena and their mother. Marushka did all the work: she swept the floor, she chopped the wood, she kept the fires going, she set the table, she made and served the meals, she cleared the table and washed the dishes, she washed the clothes; she did everything. While Marushka did all the work in the house, Helena and her mother spent their time trying to make Helena look beautiful: Helena would do her face while her mother did her hair, and Helena would try on different gowns. Helena and her mother wanted to find Helena a fine young man to marry.

Since they lived out in the country there were not many opportunities to meet eligible young men, so Helena and her mother would invite young men to dinner. But every time a man came to dinner the same thing happened:

For example: one day in January Helena and her mother invited a young man to dinner. At the table were Helena, the young man, and the mother. Helena and the young man were having a lovely conversation. Helena was thrilled and the mother was hopeful and happy. Then Marushka, who had been in the kitchen cooking the meal, came out with their dinner. Marushka laid down a plate for the young man, she laid down a plate for their mother, but when she laid down a plate for Helena the young man saw Marushka for the first time. He was struck silent, and, as if in a daze, watched Marushka all the way back into the kitchen. When Marushka was out of the room the young man turned back to the table. Helena asked him, "What were you saying?" The young man did not answer right away, and then he said, "Uh, I forget." And Helena and her mother knew that it had happened once again.

That night, after Marushka had gone to bed, Helena and her mother stayed up late, talking and planning. "I'll never get married as long as Marushka is around," said Helena; "We'll have to get rid of her!" So they made plan. They called it Plan A.

The next day Helena said to Marushka: "It is so dreary around here in January; Marushka, go pick me some violets."

"Violets do not grow in January," said Marushka.

"Don't talk back to me! Go pick me some violets now!"

And Helena pushed Marushka out the door. The mother opened the window and yelled: "And don't come back till you've got some violets." The mother slammed the window and Helena slammed the door leaving Marushka out in the cold snow without any winter clothes, no coat, no hat, no mittens, just her house shoes in the snow. She was terribly cold. She kicked through the snow. "There are no violets out here. What are they trying to do, get rid of me?" Marushka walked through the frigid snow. She came to the bottom of a hill; it was starting to get dark. She said "Maybe I'll just lie down in this snow and, I don't know, maybe never get up again." And so

she lay down in the snow. And when she did, she looked up, and she saw a light at the top of the hill. “What could that be?” she wondered, and Marushka got up and climbed the hill.

At the top of the hill she saw a big fire. Around the fire were sitting twelve men. One of the men was sitting in the highest stone seat; he was an old man with a great long white beard and a great long white cloak, and he held a long wooden staff in his hand. Next to him was another old man, but next to that was a very young man dressed all in brown, and next another young man, a bit older, dressed in brown with flecks of green, and as Marushka looked around the circle the men got older and more colorful, and then older and dressed more in browns, and then the oldest man again, on the great stone seat. There were twelve of them; they were the Month Brothers. January sat in the highest seat with the staff, for it *was* January.

Marushka didn't know any of this. All she knew was that she was cold, and scared, but mostly cold, so she walked up to them and said to January: “Excuse me, may I warm myself by your fire?” January nodded, and Marushka sat down between January and February. January looked down at her and said: “Who are you, and why have you come here?”

“My name is Marushka, I've come for violets.”

“Violets don't grow in January.”

“I know, but my mother and sister won't let me come home till I've got some violets.”

“Oh,” said January. And he stood up and walked behind February and March and April and he handed the staff to May, saying “Do you sit in the highest place.”

And May took the staff and walked back behind April, March and February. May stood before January's high stone seat and he waved the staff slowly across the flames.

The flames of the fire leaped up into the air and it got so warm that the snow melted and the grass grew, and you'll never guess what grew all around them in the grass.

“Violets!” said Marushka, “Violets! Thank you!” and she picked a whole apron full of violets and ran back down the hill to her house.

Marushka knocked on the door. Helena answered the door and was surprised to see her sister standing there with all those violets. “Where did you get those violets!” asked Helena. “From the Month Brothers, up on the hill,” said Marushka.

“Never mind,” said Helena, “give them to me.” And Helena took all the violets and spread them all through the house. That night, after Marushka had gone to bed, Helena and the mother stayed up late making another plan. They called it Plan B.

The next day Helena said to Marushka, “I am tired of eating the same old things every day. Marushka, go pick some nice fresh strawberries.”

“Strawberries don’t grow in January.”

“Don’t talk back to me! Go pick me some strawberries!”

And Helena pushed Marushka out the door. Mother opened the window and yelled: “Don’t come back till you’ve got some strawberries,” and the mother slammed the window and Helena slammed the door leaving Marushka out in the cold in nothing but her thin house dress and kitchen shoes.

Marushka climbed the hill and there was the fire and there were the Month Brothers. Marushka sat between January and February to warm herself by the fire. January looked down: “Marushka, why have you come back?”

“I’ve come for strawberries.”

“But strawberries don’t grow in . . .”

“I know, but my mother and sister . . .”

“Oh,” said January, and he walked behind February, March, April, and May, and he handed the staff to June, saying: “Do you sit in the highest place.”

And June took the staff and walked behind May, April, March and February. June waved the staff slowly across the fire, and the flames leaped up even higher than before. It got so warm that the snow melted, the grass grew, and strawberries grew all around. “Strawberries!” said Marushka, “Thank you.” And she picked a whole apron full of strawberries, and ran back down the hill to her house and knocked on the door.

Helena opened the door: “Marushka, where did you get those strawberries?”

“From the Month Brothers up on the hill.”

“Never mind, give them to me.” And Helena took all those strawberries. She gave some of the strawberries to her mother and kept all the rest for herself. Marushka did not get even one. That night after Marushka had gone to bed, Helena and her mother stayed up late making yet another plan. They called it Plan C.

The next day Helena said to Marushka: “I am tired of eating those old dried apples strung up in the attic. Marushka, go pick some nice fresh apples.

“Helena, apples don’t grow in January.”

“Don’t talk back to me! Go pick me some apples!”

And Helena pushed Marushka out the door. Mother opened the window and yelled: “And don’t come back till you’ve got some apples,” and the mother slammed the window and Helena slammed the door leaving Marushka out in the cold again.

Marushka climbed the hill and sat down between January and February.

“Why have you . . .”

“Apples . . .”

“But apples don’t.”

“I know but my mo . . .”

“Oh,” said January. And January got up and walked behind February, March, April, May, June, July and August. January gave the staff to September, saying: “Do you sit in the highest place.” And September took the staff and walked back behind August, July, June, May, April March, and February. September stood in front of the high stone seat, and September waved the staff slowly across the fire. The flames leaped up as high as the trees; the snow melted and the grass grew all around. But Marushka was looking at none of that. Marushka was looking at an apple tree that was across from her and the month brothers. That apple tree was completely bare, with not even a leaf. But before her eyes she watched that apple tree grow leaves, and then little buds which grew bigger into small green apples and kept getting bigger and bigger and suddenly all of them turned from green to red. “Apples! Thank you!” said Marushka and she ran to the tree. But the apples were too high, Marushka could not reach them. She looked back at September. “Shake the tree,” said September. “Oh, yes, of course,” and Marushka shook the tree. An apple fell, and she caught it in her hand. Marushka shook the tree again, and another apple fell, and she caught it in her hand. Marushka shook the tree again, but September said, “Enough.”

“But September, I have only two apples.”

“ENOUGH!” Said September.

“Oh, yes, of course, I’m sorry, thank you, September, for these two apples.” And Marushka walked down the hill.

When Helena opened the door she said, “Marushka, where did you get those apples.”

“From the Month Brothers up on the hill.” said Marushka.

“Where are the rest of the apples?”

“Oh, September only let me take two,” said Marushka.

“You’re lying!” said Helena. “I know what you did Marushka! You knew we would not let you keep any apples, so you ate all the other apples while you were up with the Month Brothers, and you have brought only two down to us.”

“I did not lie! It is true, September only let me take two!”

“Never mind,” said Helena, “Just give them to me.” And Helena took the two apples. She gave one to her mother and kept the other for herself. Helena bit into her apple. The mother bit into her apple. Ooooh, they tasted so wonderful. Helena finished her apple all up, even the core. “Marushka, you have to go get more apples,” said Helena, “I have to have more apples, go get some more . . . no, no, I can’t trust you, you’ll just eat them all up like you did before; I will go get them myself.” And Helena put on her cloak and she put on her boots and her hat and Helena put on her scarf and her mittens and Helena went out into the snow and she climbed up the hill to the month brothers. Helena said to January “Move over old man, I’m cold,” and she sat down between January and February. Then Helena looked around at all those month brothers and she said, “OK, which one of you guys is January? I want some more apples.”

January looked down at Helena. January stood up. January took his staff and waved it slowly across the flames of the fire. A huge black cloud rolled across the sky and started snowing a blizzard of snow. The fire went out and the Month Brothers disappeared, leaving Helena alone in a pitch black blowing blizzard of snow.

Back home the mother had finished her apple and was waiting for Helena to return with more. “Where is she, where is she, I have to have an apple! Oh wait! She is probably up there eating all the apples herself. I will go out and get my own apples!” And the mother put on her cloak and her boots and her scarf and her hat and her mittens and the mother went out into the raging storm, leaving Marushka alone at home.

Marushka waited and waited. She waited all night long until the next morning. When her mother and sister didn’t come back, Marushka made herself a little breakfast, and then, later on, a little lunch, and, of course, a lovely little dinner. Days went by, Marushka did all of the work around the house, but there wasn’t as much of it: it was just for her. The months went by, winter passed, spring came, and Marushka planted herself a little garden. In the summer and autumn she enjoyed the fresh vegetables from her garden, winter came, and then it was spring again. Marushka had not seen another soul for over a year.

One day Marushka was weeding in the garden, when, for the first time in over a year, she saw a human being, a man walking up the hill. “Who is that?” she thought, and then “Woooh,” she recognized him. It was the man who had come to dinner. The man walked right up to Marushka, who was kneeling down doing her weeding. “Hello,” said the man. “Hello,” said Marushka. The man stood there for a while. Then the man said, “Would you like some help?”

“Yes, that would be nice.”

So the man helped Marushka in the garden. A little later he helped her make dinner. The next day he helped her chop wood and sweep the floor, and so the weeks went by, and the months, and the years, and Marushka and the man lived together in their little cottage, happily ever after.

* THE END *