

“Four Sisters at Sunset”

A play concerning the Romanov Grand Duchesses

By M.L.E.Brown

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Cast of Characters

THE GRAND DUCHESES: Daughters of Tsar Nicholas II & the Tsarina Alexandra and sisters to the Tsarevich Crown Prince Alexei

OLGA NICOLAEVNA ROMANOVA, aged 22. Nickname - **OLYA**. Light brown/ chestnut hair, average height, spare build. Olya has been a pretty young woman but her character has taken imprisonment hardest of all the family and aged accordingly. Dreamy and romantic, she loves books and poetry. Fragile, reserved, intense, and prone to depression and bouts of temper.

TATIANA NICOLAEVNA ROMANOVA, aged 21. Nicknames – **TANYA** or **TATIANUSCHKA**. Light brown/ chestnut hair, average height, slender, the classic aristocratic beauty. Tanya is the organiser of the group and her mother's favourite. She is a trained nurse and a natural leader. Energetic, enthusiastic, and kind-hearted.

MARIE NICOLAEVNA ROMANOVA, aged 19. Nickname – **MASHKA**. Slightly taller than her other sisters, slender but more luscious and with darker brown hair than the others. A gorgeous smile and big eyes, very jolly and good-natured. An earth-mother type, she is an innocent at heart but naturally flirtatious. The warmest and most open of the sisters and the most curious about all those around her.

ANASTASIA NICOLAEVNA ROMANOVA, aged 17. Nicknames – **NASTASYA** or **NASTYA**. Shorter than her sisters and a bit dumpier with golden brown hair. A tomboy and a natural comedienne, she is the least educated but probably the most naturally intelligent and observant sister. Outspoken, brave, quirky, defiant, and blunt - but also very loving. Precocious and often lewd sense of humour.

THE SOVIET GUARDS AND OFFICIALS

IVAN ANDREIEVICH SKOROKHODOV, aged 20. A guard, in love with Marie. Formerly an uneducated worker at the stone-cutting factory, the son of a widow, who has joined the local guard for the money. Tall, well-built, dark-haired and very handsome, with a scar on one cheek.

KOSTYA, aged 26. A fellow guard and family friend of Ivan's. Older and a lot more street-wise, he tries to look after Ivan.

GOLESCHEKIN, aged 42. Senior Executive Official of the Ural Soviet. Known as the Eye of the Kremlin, an associate of Lenin and survivor of Schlüsselburg Fortress, an infamous Russian prison. A ruthless energetic party man

BELOBORODOV, aged 27. Official of the Ural Soviet. Young fit, a keen party man.

Other guards for background activity

Synopsis

“Four Sisters At Sunset” explores the themes of sisterhood; the homogeneity of family; the state vs the individual; and how even the strongest family loyalties can be tested by changing times. The author became intrigued by scanty but firm eye-witness details of a dispute between the Romanov sisters near the end of their captivity as recounted in Helen Rappaport’s biographies, “Ekaterinburg” and “The Romanov Sisters”.

June 1918. The family of the deposed Tsar Nicholas II of Russia is imprisoned in a house in Ekaterinburg in the stifling heat of a Siberian summer. Unbeknownst to them, the family only have one month before they will be executed by their Bolshevik captors. The four attractive daughters of the Tsar have up until their captivity been the most photographed and speculated-over young women in the world.

Regarded outside their family as a glamorous collectivity and diminished in status by the long-awaited birth of their brother, the Crown Prince, the Imperial sisters have been raised together in a cloistered isolation in accordance with their exalted position and with the wishes of their domineering and deeply religious mother. Amid the growing dangers of imprisonment, they draw together for strength as usual.

However, when the lonely and romantic Marie falls in love with one of their guards, she creates a rift with her deeply autocratic eldest sister, Olga, which threatens the four’s seemingly inviolable bond. This conflict is simultaneously mirrored in the relationship between Marie’s hapless lover, Ivan, and his fellow guards, the latter of whom regard the ill-fated romance with equal dismay.

Against a backdrop of war and changing political and social mores, the author hopes to recreate four very distinctive voices behind the demure group photographs which represent but also strangely obfuscate the memory of the doomed Grand Duchesses. Her second aim is to evoke a celebration of sisterhood with all its joys and tensions, which transcends culture, class, and time.

ACT ONE

Act One, SCENE 1:

Russian Music. The curtain is closed. We hear the heavy tread of boots across wooden floorboards. A door squeaks open. Pistols are cocked. A single bloodcurdling scream is followed by a burst of gunfire and bodies falling. Tatiana's disembodied voice floats out of the darkness.

TATIANA:

Ask any child in the dark. The longest shadows are the horrors we imagine and the horrors we can't. Time brings distance. Blood dries, words only echo so long. But, however the story starts, one thing is sure. It will end.

Balalaika music.

The curtain rises upon the kitchen in the Ipatiev House in Ekaterinburg. It is extraordinarily hot, the middle of a Siberian summer. Throughout the entire play, the characters look tired and dishevelled with the heat.

OLGA and ANASTASIA are seated at the kitchen table. Enter TATIANA and MARIE through the outside kitchen door, each carrying a basket full of laundry. All four girls are dressed in dark skirts and light-coloured summer blouses.

OLGA

If the Emperor Paul had not introduced Salic Law none of it would have happened. He did it because he hated his mother, of course, and he didn't want another woman ever to rule Russia again. But if it hadn't been for Salic law, it could all have been finished the day I was born. Can you imagine? Am I boring you, Nastya?

ANASTASIA

I do know all this, you know. *(Putting on a ponderous voice)* "If it weren't for Salic Law, life for the Romanov family would have been very different." *(Normal voice)* And you could have ended up being Empress of All the Russias and Mamma wouldn't have had to wreck her health having lots of babies trying to produce a male heir. And I'm sure the world would have been a much better place.

OLGA

It isn't a question of my wanting to be Empress. I was simply making a point, Nastasya.

ANASTASIA

In ever more fascinating detail.

OLGA

What a pleasure you are to teach.

TATIANA

Give it up, Olya. You are never going to interest that one in history. Or any lessons.

MARIE

Think of the hard time she used to give Monsieur Gilliard and Mr Gibbes.

OLGA

Who could forget. *(To Anastasia)* And when they were trying to help, you little monster. They followed us into captivity to keep teaching us, risked their lives. Who knows if they are even still alive -

MARIE

Oh no, Olya – !

TATIANA:

For heaven's sake, don't say that, Olya.

}
(together)
}

OLGA:

Well, how would we know? We've had no mail in weeks. And that girl should be ashamed of the way she behaved.

ANASTASIA:

(Briefly abashed but still defiant) I'm not proud of it, when you put it like that. But I only meant to joke with them – and they knew that. You know bored I get cooped up inside.

MARIE:

And we know how mean you get when you're bored.

ANASTASIA

I seem to recall, Madame *Professor*, that you didn't like lessons either. And at least I understood them. Unlike you.

TATIANA

Excuse me. Don't be so spiteful.

ANASTASIA

What? It's true. She was as dense as a plank.

MARIE

There, you see? Bored and mean!

TATIANA

Stop it, Nastya. And you wonder why none of our cousins ever wanted to play with you.

OLGA

You should apologise for being rude to Mashka.

ANASTASIA

Oh, that's rich, coming from the one who invented the nickname "Fat Little Bow-Wow" Shall we ask if THAT ever hurt Mashka's feelings? No? Oh I forgot. Princess Perfect has always been above reproach.

TATIANA

Please stop, Anastasia. You make my head ache.

OLGA:

Ignore her. No doubt she's over-heated from being stuck in here and it's going to what's left of her brain.

MARIE:

Anyway, I don't mind, its true. I was never much good at school-work.

TATIANA

**Mashka, you're too soft. Don't make excuses for her. We're all too hot. *(To Anastasia)*
You, Miss, are a brat.**

ANASTASIA

T'uh. Anyway, Olya. How boring for Mamma and Papa if they hadn't had the rest of us. As it is they've got a poet in you, a nurse in Tanya, and an artist in Mashka. You see, I can be nice! And now he's not going to be Tsar, Alexei will be a philosopher -

MARIE

Alexei wants to be a soldier.

ANASTASIA:

I hate to point this out but -

TATIANA:

Then don't. He's always had his heart set on it. It's in his blood. When he was born they made the entire Russian Army his collective god-father.

ANASTASIA

And we seriously think that a life of exercising at full tilt, fighting, drinking, and whoring will work well for someone with the bleeding disease?

OLGA

Hush - how dare you mention such things? *(To Tatiana)* This is what comes of her hanging about with those guards.

MARIE:

Not all soldiers do the same work. Alexei will be a soldier if he wants to, but he will have to be a staff officer - like Papa.

ANASTASIA

Oh a pen-pusher. He'll love that - NOT. Alexei will be the only soldier in the world who goes about wrapped in feather mattresses to prevent himself from being bumped or bruised. And he will be holier than a priest.

MARIE:

Well, at least he will be wearing a uniform and in the company of other men and that will make him happy. And what about you, Nastya? What about you?

TATIANA

Yes, do tell us what purpose you serve. At this point I for one certainly can't think of what your purpose on this earth can possibly be!

ANASTASIA

I am the family tonic, obviously. I cheer everyone up. *(collective groan from the others)* You know, I was meant to be a star on the stage. Not stuck in a palace all day.

OLGA

Lucky for you we're in prison then and not a palace. Go on. I've had enough of trying to tutor you. Make yourself useful and help with the folding.

OLGA piles up her books. ANASTASIA gets up and saunters over to help. Picking up a towel she starts to vamp like a dancer.

ANASTASIA

You'll see. I might be the shortest, fattest, and ugliest but I have talent. You'll all be so jealous when I am the best remembered.

TATIANA

Oh yes, madly jealous

MARIE

Stop fishing for compliments, you've never been ugly.

ANASTASIA

Thank you, Daaahhlink.

OLGA

Just loud. And a pest.

(ANASTASIA pulls a face)

MARIE

She's right about you though, Tanya. You were meant to be a nurse.

OLGA

Yes, Tanya. Just think - if the war had never happened, you may never have discovered your vocation.

TATIANA

You nursed too, Olya

OLGA:

Not like you, I didn't. I never had your ambition in that direction. Or your patience. Or your tolerance for all the different stinks you get on on a hospital ward.

ANASTASIA

Blech! Vomit and stools and sweaty armpits!

TATIANA

Oh, and the long long hours, the sore back and feet. But I do miss it all. Being on the wards and learning from the doctors and the sisters. And the soldiers we looked after. I never felt so - so free. And really grown up for the first time.

OLGA

That's funny considering we have always called you The Governess. You were always the most grown-up and the best organised.

MARIE:

We used to call you The General behind your back too, did you know?

TATIANA:

Did you? Really? How rude. I'm not that bossy. *(General guffaw from the others)* Am I?

ANASTASIA

It's Mamma's German blood coming out in you.

TATIANA:

It is not!

ANASTASIA

Well, we're all half German. Are you ashamed of Mamma's blood now?

TATIANA:

Mamma's blood is neither here nor there. In her heart Mamma is Russian through and through and so am I.

OLGA

And that's what counts. Ignore her, she's trying to get a rise out of you. *(to ANASTASIA)* I'll tell Mamma and Papa you've been sneaking cigarettes from that Khazhnov, if you don't stop your nonsense. Yes, that's right, I saw you.

TATIANA:

Nastasya!

ANASTASIA

(Sulkily) Papa lets us smoke his cigarettes. Everyone knows it's good for our health and we need all the help we can get in here.

OLGA:

Papa is Papa, not one of the guards. How many times do I have to tell you? We don't take things from the guards.

ANASTASIA:

It was only one.

OLGA

Whatever – and the rest. Try explaining it to Mamma.

ANASTASIA

Are you going to tell her?

OLGA

I don't know yet. Are you going to stop trying to provoke everybody?

MARIE:

Do you remember how much happier and healthier Mamma was when we were working at the hospitals? You must get your nursing talent from her, Tanya. She loved it just like you did. Even when she talks about it now - she becomes so energetic. She sparkles. It made her so happy to have a chance to really do something for the people.

OLGA

Not that the people proved very grateful in the end.

TATIANA

(briskly) The people Mamma nursed were all very grateful.

OLGA

Clearly not grateful enough.

TATIANA

It wasn't they who brought about the revolution.

ANASTASIA

No. But they didn't stop it either. *(Falters at a look from TATIANA)* Well, it's true - or it would've been stopped in its tracks.

MARIE:

Maybe Mamma should've nursed more people ...

OLGA

Or left a few more of them to die.

TATIANA

You don't mean that, Olya.

OLGA

Don't I? I wish those damned Bolsheviks could have seen her in that infirmary. I wish they could have seen her slaving for all her charities. It makes me angry (*Slaps hand down on table in frustration*) If they knew her at all, even in the slightest, they would never even think to talk about her the way they do, the way they always have. Sneering behind her back, calling her vile names –

TATIANA

(Gently) Olya. Spilt milk isn't worth crying over.

OLGA

Crying? Me, I'm well beyond tears.

The other girls exchange glances, recognising that OLGA is having one of her mood swings.

MARIE:

At least this weather has been good for the washing.

TATIANA:

Yes, it has.

ANASTASIA:

(tries to make up for earlier by jollying things along) So come on - what else does your history book say? Olya?

OLGA:

We're finished for the day.

ANASTASIA:

No, come on - I'll be good. You were telling me about Salic Law? (*OLGA does not respond*) If it weren't for Salic Law then you could have inherited the throne. And Alexei's bleeding disease wouldn't have been so important. Well, I mean, it would have been important to us of course, But not so much to the country. Right? Olya?

OLGA:

Yes. It doesn't really matter now though, does it? T-uh. Oh well. I suppose it's all spilt milk. It's all the will of God.

Lengthy pause

TATIANA:

Perhaps it's time to go up and check on Mamma and Alexei. Olya? (*Silence. The others look at one another*) Olya?

OLGA:

What?

TATIANA:

Mamma and Alexei, darling. I don't think either of them will be able to come down this morning. It's your turn to go and see if they need anything. Some tea perhaps - or just some company?

OLGA:

(heavily) **Yes. Of course.**

Exit OIGA. TATIANA returns to her folding. The three sisters exchange glances again, and then continue folding in silence for a while.

TATIANA:

Saints preserve us, it's so hot. Once these are done we can put them away and go and get some fresh air in the garden before we have to come in for good. Papa is still talking to the guards. Thank heavens they still let us send the bed-linen out to be laundered.

MARIE:

Is Ivan here today?

TATIANA:

Mashka -

MARIE:

What? I'm just asking.

ANASTASIA:

Mashka can't manage without her crush.

MARIE:

Shut up.

TATIANA:

I'm sorry to disappoint you, Little Sister. Apparently Ivan and that friend of his - what's-his-name? - Kostya! - have been sent out to get stove wood from the forest today.

ANASTASIA:

(teasing) Oh, wook at dat widdle face - all upset!

MARIE:

Get off!

ANASTASIA:

(Sliding her way around MARIE like a cat) **What will she do if her lovey-dovey isn't here tomorrow for her birthday?**

MARIE:

Shut up, I said! *(Pushes ANASTASIA away)*

ANASTASIA:

Oooooh! I think I touched a nerve. Our Mashka is very sensitive when it comes to Ivan.
(Runs her hands suggestively down her own body) **Very sensitive.**

MARIE:

Tanya, make her stop!

TATIANA:

Leave her alone, Nastasya.

ANASTASIA:

I can't help it if she's on heat.

TATIANA:

Don't use that farmyard expression. You sound like that revolting Sergei.

ANASTASIA:

But she is - aren't you, Mashka? Have you kissed him yet? What? I can't hear you.

MARIE:

Oh, God save me!

ANASTASIA:

Ooh, look, she's blushing. Come on, Mashka, it's just the three of us. Has he shown you the butt of his rifle yet?

MARIE'S lips twitch despite herself.

MARIE:

You are really disgusting.

ANASTASIA:

Ah-haaa! So he has!

MARIE:

Don't be vulgar. And keep your voice down

ANASTASIA:

Alright, alright. No rifle butts. But tell me - not even a little peck here and there?

MARIE:

Oh yes, out in the yard while Papa takes his walk with the guard commander. And then again on the stairs just as Mamma comes down for supper. I certainly wouldn't tell you in any case even if we had - if we had -

ANASTASIA:

Ye-es?

MARIE:

Nothing. And besides - we haven't. Kissed, I mean. Ivan's shy.

ANASTASIA:

Shy? No experience, then?

MARIE:

I wouldn't know about that. Out of practice, maybe.

ANASTASIA:

Rusty?

TATIANA:

His butt just needs a good polish.

All collapse together in giggles at their own naughtiness. Enter OLGA carrying an empty carafe.

OLGA:

Mamma wants some water ... what's the joke?

TATIANA:

Nothing. Nastya was just being silly. I'll fill that for you, shall I?

OLGA:

No I can get it. What were you being silly about, Nastya?

ANASTASIA:

Nothing. I was just teasing Mashka.

OLGA:

Oh? About what?

ANASTASIA:

Nothing.

TATIANA:

Is Mamma's head still bad, Olya?

OLGA:

Still a bit achey but better she says. The cold flannel helps. She wants me to read to her when I go back. Alexei is asleep at last.

TATIANA:

Oh, that's good.

OLGA:

Yes. So. Is anyone going to share why you're laughing? What was it about? Something that happened today perhaps? Something the guards did or said?

MARIE:

Why would you presume that?

OLGA:

Well, for one thing, you all seem terribly reluctant to share. And for another you're blushing, Mashka. And from that I conclude the others have been teasing you about your Bolshevik friends -

TATIANA:

Olya ...

OLGA:

And maybe one in particular? Ivan Andreyevich for example? (*Uncomfortable silence*)
Really Mashka. Mamma has spoken to you about this. Making eyes as if he were the prince and you a lovelorn milkmaid.

ANASTASIA:

Oh. Here we go

TATIANA:

Olya, it was just –

OLGA:

And you! I'm surprised. Encouraging the younger ones to flirt and laughing about it. As though these brigands were our friends.

ANASTASIA:

Excuse me. I haven't been flirting, thank you.

OLGA:

No. You just sneak around the bonfire smoking, and swearing, and behaving like a street urchin.

TATIANA:

You're making too much of this.

OLGA:

Am I?

TATIANA:

We were having a chortle amongst ourselves. That's all

OLGA:

Oh. Well, while you're having your chortle, bear in mind that those guards are put here by people that overthrew Papa and rejected his rule. People who called Mamma Rasputin's whore and The German Traitor. Chortle at that!

MARIE:

Ivan has never believed those things

OLGA:

Oh - so you have been talking to him then. Oh Mashka. So, if he doesn't believe in all the Bolshevik rhetoric, how does he come to be here standing over us with guns in the hallway, whenever we go to the toilet.

ANASTASIA:

(muttering) Oh for God's sake.

OLGA:

What was that, Nastya?

TATIANA:

(Aside, warning) Nastya –

ANASTASIA:

(Taking the hint) **Nothing.**

OLGA:

No - she said something. I want to know what she said.

TATIANA:

Olya. For pity's sake. Nastya told us some jokes before, that's all. We laughed. End of story. There's little enough laughter in this place. We're just enjoying some fun where we can.

OLGA:

I'm glad you can find any amusement here. After everything Mamma and Papa have done for us, and after everything we have been through to see you throw it all back in their faces by encouraging the advances of a pack of revolutionaries -

MARIE:

There's nothing wrong with us talking, Olya. You do it yourself. Papa himself is quite happy to talk to the guards.

OLGA:

There's talking and there's talking. Papa is a man and he is the Emperor. He can do as he pleases. We are the daughters of an empress. We can't make ourselves available to be gawped at and coveted by every man who wanders across our path.

ANASTASIA:

Well, I'm not going to stop being civil to the only company we have. How would we do it anyway? It's completely impractical.

OLGA:

They aren't company - they're our captors. And there are ways of keeping a respectable distance. Mamma manages to do it.

MARIE:

Mamma is haughty.

OLGA:

Careful what you say about Mamma! If you mean, she behaves like an empress then, yes, she does and so she ought.

ANASTASIA:

The guards hate her.

OLGA:

I don't give a damn for what the guards think. Those ignorant peasants hated Mamma long before they even met her. And why should she - or we for that matter - concern ourselves with their opinions? If anything their attitude to her is even more reason why we should be –

ANASTASIA:

Unrealistic?

OLGA

Circumspect. Yes, you have to exchange words with them from day to day. But you don't have to behave like - like camp followers!

MARIE

What are you talking about?

OLGA

Oh, don't play the innocent, Mashka, You of all people should know exactly what I'm talking about.

MARIE

Oh, me of all people. What's that supposed to mean?

TATIANA

Please don't, Olga.

MARIE

What are you accusing me of? Go on, just say it - whatever you're thinking. Do you want me to cease being courteous - forget my manners altogether?

OLGA

You should be polite to everyone you meet. But not everyone is our true friend. And that lot out there. Hardly fit company for a Grand Duchess.

MARIE

An ex-Grand Duchess. And Ivan and Kostya and several of the others have manners as good as and better than some of our sailors on the Standardt.

OLGA

But they're not our sailors from The Standardt. Their loyalties lie elsewhere, don't they, Mashka? Carrying on the way you do - don't deny it. We all have eyes, my dear girl. Every day you encourage their familiarity. And as for favouring that boy over the others, languishing around him like a puppy... Really, I am so glad Grandmama and the rest of the family aren't here to see you making such an exhibition of yourself!

MARIE

How dare you, Olga!

OLGA

How dare I? How dare you comport yourself like a tavern wench. -

TATIANA

Stop it, Olga.

OLGA

Why? Someone has to say it... Or are we supposed to just let her forget everything she was taught, throw away every last scrap of propriety. What's so funny, Nastya?

ANASTASIA

You.

OLGA

Me?

ANASTASIA

Yes, you, Empress Olga. Here we are - stuck in the middle of nowhere, crammed into a box. And you want us to start being fussy about who we talk to. As if we have a choice about the company we keep.

OLGA

Consorting with an enemy isn't just talking. It's admitting defeat. It's saying their way of doing things is right and ours was wrong. It's spitting on Mamma and Papa

ANASTASIA

Oh, for heaven's sake. No one is spitting on Mamma and Papa - least of all Mashka.

OLGA:

Mamma has said what she expects. Disobeying is disloyal.

MARIE:

Disloyal?

ANASTASIA

You talk about me - but if anyone should apologise to Mashka it's you. Who spends the most time inside with Mamma looking after her when she's ill? Who carries Alexei around when Papa and the servants aren't free? Mashka, that's who.

TATIANA

Don't use that tone, please.

ANASTASIA

Well, she's talking nonsense.

TATIANA

Quiet, Nastya. But Olya, I do think you're over-reacting. The Little Ones would never deliberately do any harm.

ANASTASIA

Oh God, "the Little Ones", still. Marie and I are not babies any more, Tanya! She is nearly nineteen, I am seventeen, and neither of us needs you to speak for us.

TATIANA

You know I didn't mean it like that. Can everyone just calm down. I only meant - we need to stick together. We're sisters. We're all in this together.

OLGA

Yes - we are. And it strikes me that some of us see very clearly what is happening here and some do not.

MARIE

Well, we can agree on that!

Silence

OLGA

You know, one day - perhaps very soon - we will return -if not to our old life, then at least to our family. Even if we are in exile, we will have to remember who we are. We won't be cuddling up to these traitors forever. We are who we are.

Exit OLGA

ANASTASIA

Bitch

TATIANA

(Genuinely shocked) Anastasia!

ANASTASIA

Well she is.

TATIANA

She's our sister. And she's not well. You know that Dr Botkin is very worried about her. She isn't coping at all with all of this.

ANASTASIA

Coping? Which of us are? Is Mamma? Or Alexei? Or Papa for that matter - even though he puts on a good face ... the only thing wrong with Olya is her self-importance. And her refusal to accept our situation.

MARIE

Tanya - you don't think I'm too forward with Ivan do you?

Anastasia rolls her eyes.

TANYA:

You have been a little -

MARIE:

What?

TANYA:

Well, perhaps a little - *eager?*

ANASTASIA:

Pay no attention, Mashka. Olya's jealous of you and your crush -

MARIE:

(exasperated) Will you please stop calling him that.

ANASTASIA:

(Continuing on regardless) - **She's remembering her days of looking after the wounded ... and one in particular who, as I recall, she liked to cuddle up to very much**

-

TATIANA

Quiet, Nastya –

ANASTASIA

- and as I recall he looked quite a lot like Ivan.

TATIANA

I said, Quiet!. You know very well that was different. The men we nursed were real soldiers - not revolutionaries. And they were gentlemen - educated - not from the rabble ...

ANASTASIA

And now you sound just like her!

TATIANA

The point is, they were fighting for us - not against us. Nobody was holding us prisoner.

MARIE

Ivan isn't holding me prisoner. And he isn't rabble.

TATIANA

I wasn't referring to Ivan in particular,

MARIE

Well then why did you - ?

ANASTASIA

(impatiently) - Exactly. No one was holding us prisoner - and we had plenty of people to talk to. Everything is totally different now. Why shouldn't we enjoy some human contact? They have taken everything else - are we supposed to die of loneliness and boredom? These might be the last people we ever talk to.

TATIANA

Don't say that!

ANASTASIA

Why not? We all know they could turn around and shoot us any time. Surely we should live each day as if it was our last and grab what news - or fun - we can.

MARIE

They're not going to kill us. Ivan would never hurt us.

ANASTASIA

If you say so, Mashka - but that's not the point I'm trying to make. If Olya wants to live in the past, fine. I'm going to live each day as it comes.

TATIANA

But what if Olya's right? Maybe we should be keeping to ourselves and remembering we are -

ANASTASIA

Former royalty? Enemies of the new state?

TATIANA

We may eventually be restored, God willing.

MARIE:

Papa abdicated for himself and for Alexei. Even if the throne was restored, you know he wouldn't want it back now.

TATIANA:

Well, that's what he says now - but ... And even so - look at us. We weren't raised to marry pig-farmers and chimney-sweeps. Why pretend we were?

ANASTASIA

We're not talking about getting married. We're talking about making conversation with the only people available to talk to. Is that so very wrong?

MARIE

Nastya's right. We don't know if we'll ever dance again - let alone marry. We have to cross our bridges as we come to them. Oh - don't cry, Tanya.

TATIANA

I can stand it when we four argue.

ANASTASIA

Nonsense. We've always argued -

MARIE

- - and we always make up.

TATIANA

I know. But we must stick together. We only have each other now. You know? We're stuck in here and we've just got to stick together

ANASTASIA

Yes, dear General! We must be like the pictures they used to take of us, all chocolate-box-y. White organza and big floppy hats.

TATIANA

Don't mock me. I'm being serious,

ANASTASIA

I know. I'm only teasing.

TATIANA

Sometimes when I listen to you, Nastya, I don't recognise you ... you're so different now from the little sister I knew.

ANASTASIA

(patiently) Well, a lot has happened in these years. And I'm older.

TATIANA

It's not just that ... the past few months have changed us all. But Olga and you... She's become so strange and withdrawn. And you - you're so cynical. Sometimes I wonder if you even believe in God any more.

ANASTASIA

Of course, I still believe in God. I pray every day. It's just -

TATIANA

Just what?

ANASTASIA

I know now that God's plans won't necessarily match with what I ask for in my prayers.

TATIANA

Oh Nastya -

ANASTASIA

(forcefully) And do you know what? Accepting that actually makes everything easier. At least now I won't have to spend my last days - if they are my last days! - being driven mad by things I can't have. Unlike some people. I know that whatever happens really will be the will of God.

TATIANA blows her nose.

TATIANA

Please - will you just apologise to Olya?

ANASTASIA

No - but - *(relenting)* I might offer to massage her shoulders later. She said they were sore.

MARIE

And I'll try to be more ... reserved.

ANASTASIA

***(grinning)* You couldn't be reserved to save your own life!**

MARIE

***(with dignity)* I can try.**

ANASTASIA

Right. Until someone comes along with a nice shiny rifle butt, and -

MARIE and TATIANA laugh despite themselves

MARIE:

Shut up!

TATIANA

***(briskly)* Well, come on. Let's get this put away and go outside again before they make us all come in for the rest of the morning. It's too hot to breathe in here. That's half the trouble! It's alright, Mashka. I'm fine now.**

MARIE:

Good. You know, you are like our General, Tatyushka. If you cry then I feel as if the world must be coming to an end.

TATIANA:

Goodness - then I'd best not cry, had I? Come on. Let's get folding. We can do the ironing later. It's so hot ...