



SUNSET OF OUR WORLD

Nikolai Klassen' s last Memoire



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The Sunset of our World

In The Name of God, Stop a moment, cease your work,
Look around you

Leo Tolstoy

A Day Like any Other

As I trudged through the knee-deep snow, my boots crunching on the frozen ground, the world around me lay in tranquil whiteness. The sun, still a distant friend back then, painted the landscape in shades of soft pastels as it hung low on the horizon, casting long shadows across the snow-covered plains of Kazakhstan. The chill in the air was biting, a reminder that winter here was no joke, with snow drifts often exceeding three meters. My breath formed wispy clouds in the frigid morning air, and I pulled my scarf tighter around my neck, trying to keep the cold at bay. The village, a collection of modest homes and the occasional small shop, lay nestled in the embrace of the frozen steppe. The buildings, their roofs laden with heavy blankets of snow, looked like something out of a storybook, quaint and picturesque. Approaching the school, I couldn't help but notice the old oak tree that stood sentinel in the courtyard, its gnarled branches covered in frost.

The school's red brick façade, though unremarkable in the grand scheme of things, had seen generations of students pass through its doors. It was a place of both learning and hardship for me. As I drew nearer, the faint strains of music reached my ears. It was the school's radio, playing a cheerful tune that stood in stark contrast to the harsh winter morning. The song's melody, accompanied by the distant laughter of my peers, was a bittersweet reminder of the world we knew before it all unravelled. I could see the other students gathering, their breath forming misty plumes as they chatted and played in the snow. Some carried backpacks slung over their shoulders, while others engaged in playful snowball fights. They seemed so carefree, oblivious to the impending cataclysm that would soon change our lives forever. I approached the school's entrance, a wooden door weathered by years of harsh winters and relentless winds. As I pulled it open and stepped inside, the warmth of the building enveloped me, a stark contrast to the icy world outside. The hallway bustled with activity as students hurried to their classrooms, the sounds of footsteps echoing off the linoleum floor.

I couldn't help but wonder what the future held. Little did I know that by this time tomorrow, the world as we knew it would be a distant memory, and the sun that now hung low in the sky would become our greatest enemy. But on that cold December morning, life went on as usual, and for a brief moment, I was just a teenager walking to school, lost in the melodies of a fading world. The school day unfolded like many others before it, a mixture of routine and the relentless spectre of bullying that haunted me. My classmates, as always, wasted no time in targeting me for their cruel taunts and jibes. To them, I was an easy target, an outsider who never quite fit in. My friends, few but fiercely loyal, offered a refuge from the storm. Among them was Amir, a fellow bookworm who shared my love for the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Amir was a quiet soul, his kindness shining through the timid smile he often wore. Together, we found solace in the pages of Dostoevsky's novels, discussing the complexities of human nature and the struggles of the characters who felt as lost as we did in this world. Then there was Lana, a girl with a fiery spirit and a sharp wit.

Lana had a talent for seeing through people's facades, and she was never one to shy away from defending her friends. With her by my side, I felt a bit braver, a bit more capable of weathering the daily storms that raged in our school. As the day progressed, we moved from one class to another, absorbing the lessons our teachers imparted. The Kazakh school system demanded discipline and hard work, but it was a welcome distraction from the harsh realities outside these walls. I clung to my copy of Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment" like a lifeline, finding solace in the troubled mind of Raskolnikov, a character who grappled with guilt and redemption in a world that often felt unforgiving. The novel's yellowed pages were dog-eared and worn from countless readings, a testament to the comfort it provided. Lunchtime was both a respite and a battlefield. In the school cafeteria, I sat with Amir and Lana, our small circle a sanctuary from the cruel stares and whispers that followed me like shadows. We talked about our dreams, our hopes for a better future, and the world beyond the snow-covered plains of Kazakhstan. After lunch, as the winter sun hung low in the sky, we attended our last classes of the day.

The classroom was a sea of faces, some familiar and others indifferent to my existence. The teacher's words were a distant murmur as my mind drifted back to the world of Dostoevsky, where characters grappled with the weight of their actions. As the final bell rang, signalling the end of the school day, Amir, Lana, and I gathered our belongings. We made plans to meet at our secret spot, a small grove of trees on the outskirts of the village. It was a place where we could escape the prying eyes of our tormentors, if only for a little while. But as we stepped outside, the world had changed. The sky, once a canvas of muted pastels, had transformed into a fiery spectacle. The sun, our constant companion, had grown larger and more menacing, casting an eerie red glow across the landscape. Its heat was palpable, even in the midst of winter. Amid the chaos and confusion that erupted among the students and teachers, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of foreboding. The world as we knew it was unravelling before our eyes, and no amount of Dostoevsky's wisdom could prepare us for what lay ahead.

As we made our way to our secret grove, Amir, Lana, and I held tight to each other, our friendship a source of strength in these uncertain times. The sun, now a harbinger of destruction, loomed ominously in the sky, casting long shadows that seemed to reach out and touch our very souls. Little did we know that by this time tomorrow, the world would be a different place, and the bonds of friendship that had sustained us would be put to the ultimate test. But for now, in the dying light of a world on the brink of catastrophe, we clung to each other, our hearts filled with both fear and hope. We reached our secret grove on the outskirts of the village, a place where the tall trees provided some much-needed shade from the scorching sun. The air was thick with tension, and the red hue of the sky cast an eerie glow on everything around us. It felt like the world was holding its breath, waiting for something we couldn't yet comprehend. Amir, Lana, and I spread out a blanket on the ground and sat down, our faces reflecting a mix of unease and curiosity. We talked about the strange events of the day, trying to make sense of the sun's ominous transformation.

Lana, ever the realist, suggested that we should listen to the news or talk to our parents to find out what was happening. But deep down, I had a sinking feeling that this was something beyond our understanding. We decided to stay put for a while longer, seeking solace in each other's company. Amir took out his worn copy of "The Brothers Karamazov," another Dostoevsky masterpiece, and began to read aloud. The words flowed like a river of introspection and philosophy, transporting us to a world far removed from the chaos unfolding around us. As Amir read, Lana and I listened intently, our minds temporarily freed from the weight of impending doom. We lost ourselves in the complexities of Dostoevsky's characters, finding comfort in their struggles and searching for meaning in their journeys. Hours passed in this way, with the sun descending toward the horizon, casting long, dark shadows. It was a day unlike any other, a day when the bonds of friendship felt stronger than ever. But as the sun dipped below the horizon, we knew it was time to go home. We folded up the blanket and made our way back to the village, the sky now a deep crimson that seemed to reflect the turmoil within our hearts.

We parted ways with heavy hearts, promising to meet again tomorrow, unsure of what that day would bring. Little did we know that tomorrow would mark the beginning of the end. The walk back home through the deep snow was a quiet one. The sun had now dipped below the horizon, and the world was bathed in a cold, ethereal light. Our footsteps left deep impressions in the snow, a reminder of our passage through the winter landscape. Amir, Lana, and I parted ways at the edge of the village, each of us lost in our own thoughts. The red-tinted sky cast an eerie glow over the village, making it seem both beautiful and foreboding. I arrived home to a cozy little house nestled in the heart of the village. It was a modest dwelling, but it was filled with warmth and the comforting aroma of home-cooked meals. I lived here with my grandmother, my mother, and my two sisters, Ira and Olga. Grandmother, a stern but loving presence in our lives, was always at home, tending to the fields that surrounded our house. She often complained about my sisters, who, in her eyes, were too lazy and inattentive to their duties.

Ira, the youngest, was usually glued to her phone, seemingly oblivious to the chores that needed to be done. Olga, the elder of the two, preferred spending time at her friends' houses, leaving much of the household work to Grandmother and me. Today was different, though. Mother had a rare day off from her job at the village bakery. She usually worked long hours there, kneading dough and baking bread to support our family, and the whole village with bread. Tomorrow, she & grandma were planning to visit her sister and some friends out of town. As I entered our warm and welcoming home, the aroma of freshly cooked Manti, my favourite meal, greeted me. Grandmother had spent hours preparing the dumplings, filling them with a Savory mixture of minced meat and spices. The table was set, and the dimly lit room felt like a haven from the strangeness that had taken hold of the world. "Ah, Nikolai, you're home," Grandmother exclaimed as I entered. Her voice was a mix of relief and annoyance, a constant companion in our household. "You're just in time for dinner. Sit down, sit down." Ira and Olga, who had been lazing around in their respective corners of the room, finally stirred at the prospect of a meal.

They joined us at the table, and we all sat down together, a rare moment of family unity. The Manti, steaming hot and perfectly cooked, were a testament to Grandmother's culinary skills. As we dug into our meal, the Flavours filled our mouths, and for a brief moment, we forgot about the impending catastrophe that loomed outside. Grandmother, ever the matriarch, couldn't resist the opportunity to voice her grievances. "Nikolai, you should talk to your sisters," she chided between bites. "They spend all their time on their phones or with their friends. No sense of responsibility at all." Ira rolled her eyes and mumbled something under her breath, a not-so-subtle sign of teenage rebellion. Olga, who was more diplomatic, shot me an apologetic look before returning to her plate. I glanced at Mother, who had been unusually quiet. Her face held a mix of worry and determination. It was clear that she had something important to share with us, something that weighed heavily on her mind. As we finished our meal, the room fell into a contemplative silence. The red glow of the setting sun outside seemed to seep into the room, casting long shadows on the walls.

Tomorrow, as Mother would reveal, our lives would change in ways we couldn't have imagined. But for now, we were a family gathered around the dinner table, united by the simple pleasure of a home-cooked meal and the love that bound us together. After our hearty meal of Manti, the evening settled into a familiar routine. Ira retreated to her room, her phone once again claiming her attention, while Olga decided to visit her friends, leaving Grandmother and me alone in the cozy living room. Grandmother, who always seemed to have boundless energy, continued her usual tasks. She began sorting through seeds for the next planting season, her fingers deftly moving through the pile as she separated the good from the bad. Her muttering about the laziness of my sisters never ceased, but it was a comfortingly familiar background noise. I helped with the chores, fetching water from the well and tending to the fire in the wood-burning stove. The crackling of the firewood and the warmth it radiated were a welcome contrast to the chilling world outside our walls. As the hours passed, I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease about the events of the day.

The sun's transformation weighed heavily on my mind, and the impending departure of my mother for her trip out of town added to my growing sense of foreboding. Mother had retreated to her bedroom, presumably to rest before her journey. Her room, with its simple furnishings and a small window that framed a view of the snow-covered fields, held an air of melancholy. I knew she had something important to discuss with us, and I hoped for a moment of quiet reflection before the storm. In the living room, Grandmother's grumbling continued, interspersed with stories of her youth, tales of hardships endured, and triumphs celebrated. Her stories were a testament to the resilience of our people, a reminder of the strength that ran through our veins. The evening grew darker, and the world outside our windows became an inky void. The red glow of the sun had long faded, replaced by a moonless sky. It was a night unlike any other, a night when the world held its breath in anticipation of an unknown fate. As I settled into my room, the thoughts of the day's events and the impending conversation with Mother swirled in my mind.

I couldn't shake the feeling that our lives were on the precipice of something monumental, something that would test the bonds of our family and the strength of our spirits. But for now, in the quiet of our home, I lay in my bed, listening to the familiar sounds of my family moving about, their presence a comforting reminder of the love and connection that bound us together. Tomorrow, as Mother & Babushka would go on Their journey, our family would face a new chapter in our story, one filled with uncertainty and challenges we could never have imagined.

Unlike any other day

The day started like any other. Mama and Babushka had left early in the morning, embarking on their journey to another city far away. It was a trip Mama had been planning for a while, a chance to visit her sister and friends, and she had promised to tell us something important when she returned. The four of us kids—Olga, Ira, and I—gathered around the kitchen table for breakfast. Olga, ever the responsible one, was already dressed for work at the village bakery. She gave us a quick smile before heading out the door, leaving the rest of us to finish our meal. As we ate, Mama's absence hung in the air like a silent question. We knew she had left to visit her sister, but there was something unspoken, something important she had yet to reveal to us. Babushka, who usually stayed home to tend to the fields, had gone with her on this trip. After breakfast, Ira and I got ready for school. We bundled up in our warmest coats, scarves, and mittens, preparing for the freezing cold that awaited us outside. The snow had piled up even higher since yesterday, and the world was a pristine canvas of white.

We set out on our walk to school, the familiar path lined with snow-covered trees and frozen fields stretching out as far as the eye could see. But as we walked, an unease settled over me, a sense that something was not quite right. Ira and I walked side by side, sharing a pair of headphones as we listened to music on my old portable player. The music, a blend of melodies and lyrics, provided a welcome distraction from the growing tension in the air. We didn't talk much, both lost in our thoughts, but the simple act of sharing the headphones felt like a silent bond between us. As we neared the halfway point to school, Ira turned to me, her eyes reflecting the same unease I felt. "Nikolai," she said softly, her voice barely audible over the music, "Do you ever get the feeling that something bad is going to happen?" I paused the music and looked at her, a lump forming in my throat. "Ira, I've been feeling the same way all morning," I admitted, my voice trembling slightly. "It's like there's something in the air, something we can't quite grasp." Ira nodded, her brow furrowed with worry. We walked in silence for a while, the weight of our unspoken fears pressing down on us.

The snow underfoot seemed to muffle our footsteps, creating an eerie hush in the winter landscape. As we continued our journey to school, the weather began to change. The cold, crisp air of the past few weeks gave way to an unseasonable warmth. The snow around us started to melt, creating slushy puddles that made our walk more challenging. The sun, still hanging low in the sky, seemed brighter and hotter than usual. It cast an intense, almost feverish glow over the world, turning the pristine white of the snow into a glistening, blinding canvas. The contrast between the fiery sun and the frigid landscape was disconcerting, like a riddle we couldn't solve. Ira and I shared worried glances, our thoughts mirroring each other's. Something was definitely wrong, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the feeling of impending doom that hung in the air. With heavy hearts and a sense of foreboding, we resumed our walk to school, each step taking us further into the unknown. The world around us had changed, and as we separated at our respective schools, I couldn't help but wonder what the rest of the day would bring. My walk to school continued, the unease growing with each step.