

One Misstep

by Lisa Heidle

Katarina sits on the edge of the couch, close to the translator who listens to Tom and Sara as they speak in English, then translates their indecipherable words to her in Russian.

Tom has the translator tell Katarina and the social worker about the waterfall he saw in Iceland when he was Katarina's age. "The Skógafoss. It was so loud you could feel it in your bones."

"Are we going to Iceland?" Katarina asks the translator who laughs and says, "No, he was just reminiscing about his travels."

"There's one in Oregon I know you'll love," Tom says.

Sara says, "After four boys of our own, Tom decided he wants a daughter." Katarina wants to be that daughter. "We've heard good things about this Russian orphanage. We like that we can foster them in our home first. Make sure they're a good fit for an American family." Sara then changes Katarina's name to Katie. "People won't know how to pronounce it," she says when the social worker asks why.

The newly named Katie wills Sara to look at her and when she does, Katie smiles shyly. To stay, she has to win Sara over. That's what her brothers and sisters in the orphanage told her, the ones who'd been returned like unwanted purchases. "The woman chooses. Make her like you. If you don't like her, never let her see."

A week later, parroting the boys, she calls Sara, “Mom.” Sara shakes her head and points to her chest, repeating, “Sara”, until Katie says her name.

After that, at night, alone and unable to sleep in her too quiet room, Katie makes lists of all the things she can do to make Sara like her. When she wakes, her ideas float in front of her like her breath in the cold orphanage dorm, then dissolve.

Tom keeps his promise and takes her to the waterfall. The boys run up the path to the top of the falls, thrilling at the avalanche of water. Katie stays behind, holding tight to Tom’s hand. Sara walks ahead.

As they get closer, mist spatters Tom’s sunglasses. Katie and Tom laugh. Sara turns around, “Katie, go find the boys. We’ll be up in a minute.”

She reluctantly lets go of Tom’s hand. She looks back but can’t see Sara’s face. Tom’s drying his sunglasses on his shirt. He nods at Sara. He looks sad.

Katie watches the water plunge over the edge. Diamonds of sunlight hurt her eyes. She looks down, squinting to see the churning pool at the bottom. She can only see a heavy curtain of water, smooth as glass.

She feels the sting of water hitting her skin, the warm sun on her hair. Katie will tell the others, those who know her as Katarina and who wait for her return, about a long hike she took with her almost family to the top of a waterfall. With wide eyes, she’ll whisper that if you get too close the might of the water will pound into your skin and smash your bones on the water-polished stones. She’ll tell them, because she now knows that if you’re careless, make one misstep, it can even make you disappear.

Author Bio: Lisa Heidle writes flash, short and long form fiction, articles, essays, and book reviews. Her work has appeared in the Chattahoochee Review, Sabal Literary Journal, Second Hand Stories (podcast), Flash Fiction Magazine Anthology, and other literary journals. Her short story collection, *én•nēad*, was released in 2017. She is currently traveling in the US and overseas seeking new story ideas and meeting noteworthy people.