

# A race for the feet

*“Bravo! Bravo!”*

Claudia tried to smile as she listened to the chanting getting louder and merrier as the voices grew closer. She leaned forward and peeked out into the street, jamming her hands into her pockets for warmth. The celebrating crowd would be here any second now. Almost everyone in the town of Tambok had gone off to watch the race, leaving behind empty, ghostly streets. Even though the race was for primary school children between the ages of 10 and 13, grown-ups and even old folk had left their daily dealings to show their love and support for the ever-glowing youngsters. That was something Claudia loved about her hometown; everyone was so caring and friendly. Generosity and politeness were abundant everywhere, as were jolly faces followed by jovial laughter.

The cold autumn wind blew her brown curls across her face and she lifted a hand to adjust her headscarf. It was just October but the wind seemed to think otherwise. The constant winds and lack of sunlight made it seem like as if winter were about to begin, even though that had to be at least a month and a half away.

*“For he’s a jolly good fellow...”*

The singing had started. There he was. Claudia could finally see a tiny figure emerging slowly from the bend at the end of the street. Her son, Artem, although very small for his age, was a very energetic walker. And an energetic talker, too, as some would say. But today he seemed to be dragging his feet along, a look of disappointment on his face. He looked up and saw his mother and started shaking his head slowly, almost regrettably, as if he did not want to be the one to give her the news.

She knew what that look meant. Claudia knew. She knew just like any mother would know. Dmitri hadn't won the race.

Winning or losing a silly little race wasn't a big deal at all, of course. But remembering the events of the past 2 weeks, made Claudia's heart sink as she thought of how heartbroken and full of guilt her eldest child, Dmitri must be feeling right now.....

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It had all started one day, somewhere at the end of September. The schools were closed and the boys were home. They had gone out to perform some chores for the household. Claudia was very busy that day; Baby Seesi was still very sick from the pneumonia, and had kept Claudia awake all night. That had led to a late start in the morning and now she was in a big hurry. There were lots of ordered goods that needed to be baked and she was already behind schedule because she had been short of money to buy ingredients last week. So everything kept getting delayed. And any extra money went behind doctors' fees and medication for baby Seesi. And her landlord was continuously pestering her to pay the rent. It was not that they always delayed the rent, sometimes it just took a while to get the money together. Especially when the money was always needed for other things. The bakery business was a very bad place to be delayed. People ordered freshly baked bread, scones, and other goods, but were very reluctant to call you again if you delayed their orders even once. So she had sent the boys out with a list of things to do, to get them out of the way while she got to work in an empty house.

The day was a very hectic one and during the late evening, Claudia eagerly called the boys to dinner, so that she could call it a day and go to bed. They sat down quietly and ate in silence. Even Seesi wasn't fidgeting. She seemed to have lost all her energy from the pneumonia. The doctors had said that she would start to get better soon. Hopefully within a couple of days.

Maybe it was mother's instinct or maybe it was just too obvious, but something was wrong. The boys were very quiet. Too quiet.

"What's the matter?" asked Claudia.

"Nothing," was Dmitri's sharp reply.

She looked at Artem, who glared at his elder brother.

"Aren't you going to tell her?" he cried.

"Tell me what? Is anything wrong?"

"Mitri lost my shoes!" accused Artem.

Dmitri slowly told her the whole story. They had gone out to run the errands given to them, carrying along with them the old wooden cart. They paid a visit to the basket mender, bought tomatoes from the grocer, and done all the other tasks before heading for the roadside cobbler. He was supposed to fix Artem's school shoes. And he had fixed them. So they paid him and were carrying the cart back home along with a tote bag which was in Artem's hand. Somewhere along the trip, Dmitri saw a couple of friends and stopped to chat. Artem protested, saying that it was getting late. Dmitri insisted he would be done in a minute. He had left the cart unattended, which fell over, spilling all its contents into a dim and dark alley. Dmitri hurriedly put all the contents back into the cart

and bade farewell to his friends. When they got home, the shoes were nowhere to be found. They had sneaked a run back to the alley and searched everywhere but no luck.

“He lost my shoes!” Artem started to cry.

“I didn’t lose them...I just don’t know what happened. I looked everywhere in that alley. Someone must have taken them. I’m very sorry.”

“It’s ok Dmitri. Artem don’t worry, we’ll get you new shoes...” but even as she said the words, Claudia felt dreadful. She knew they couldn’t afford a new pair of shoes. Not for a while anyway. And sales for second-hand goods wouldn’t occur until the end of the year. Till then Artem needed shoes for school. His only pair of sandals would not be allowed. She had told Dmitri his mistake was alright but that was partially a lie. Even though she knew it wasn’t his fault, but what was she to do now? It was then that Dmitri spoke up.

“You can wear my shoes, Artem.”

“What will you wear then?”

“You don’t start off for school until 12:30, but I end at 12:30. So as soon as classes end I’ll run as fast as I can to the lake near the orchard, where you must wait beforehand, and then I’ll give you my shoes. And then you must run to school, so that you are not late.”

Artem looked doubtful. But he agreed. Both of her children knew buying new shoes now was out of the question. They would have to wait until the end of November at least.

“I’m so sorry, Artem. We’ll buy new shoes for you soon. Don’t worry.”

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The shoe-swapping technique went well for a week. Everyday after class, Dmitri would sprint to the lake, where Artem would already be waiting. Then they would quickly exchange shoes. Artem would stuff cotton inside the shoes just to make them fit him. Then he would run as fast as he could to school.

But one day Artem tripped and fell during his run, and that made him late, causing a session with the cane. After that, he was reluctant to run with all his energy, scared of falling again. And his bruised knee prevented him from doing so. But the boys still continued with their roles, what else could they do? Their father had gone off to war before Seesi was born. He had kept in touch for the first year, but lately there had been no word from him. They had come to assume their worst fears- he was probably dead. News of the dead reached Tambok very late, sometimes even a year after the death. Their father's absence had made life very difficult for them. A struggle to make ends meet, literally. Luxuries like new shoes were seldom asked for. They were happy with hand-me-downs and second-half items from mid-yearly sales.

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It was a lovely day, the end of the summer weather becoming more and more enjoyable. Claudia was in the kitchen, trying to feed Seesi her oatmeal. Dmitri burst through the door, his face damp and red with perspiration, but smiling nevertheless.

“Mama, I passed the tryouts! I’m entering the annual primary race next week!”

The annual race for the primary school children took place on the outskirts of Tambok, where the land was wide and plain, free from any major obstructions. None of the boys had ever entered the race. Dmitri, who was always into outdoor activities, had wanted to attend tryouts last year but unfortunately he was met with a bad case of hay fever. Artem was the bookish type; he preferred spending his time in the garden with his picture books, rather than sweating and panting on dusty tracks.

It seemed that Dmitri hadn't finished.

"Guess what the prizes are."

"Well, last year the first prize went to the miller's second son..."

"No, no forget the first prize, that's a year's supply of books and stationary for school. The third prize is a pair of new running shoes! If I win those shoes, we can go to the shoe store and trade them for a pair of brand new shoes for Artem!"

That was the exciting news for the day. Claudia was uncertain about whether it would be wise for Dmitri to enter a race with his eyes on the prize. He would be very upset if he didn't win it at the end. But she kept her thoughts to herself; they were so excited with the prospect. When Artem came home, Dmitri conveyed the news to him. After that, the one or two other sessions with the cane didn't seem so bad. All they had to do was wait.

"How do you know that you'll be in third place?" Artem had once questioned Dmitri.

"I don't know, but I shall have to try."

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The big day had arrived. Claudia couldn't go along with the other town folk all the way to the race tracks, because of Seesi. But she anxiously laid waiting with the door open. The weather had started to cool down rapidly; there was barely anymore sunshine. Not a very great day for a race, but nevertheless the run would make Dmitri feel good. The race track went all the way around the woody area outside of Tambok, about a mile long. But the primary races were always shortened, maybe about 2 kilometres in length. She assumed it would take an hour at the least before everyone started to return back to town.

Then, at exactly five in the afternoon, Claudia stood at the door waiting for them. The chanting and singing had started. Soon she saw Artem walking towards her from the end of the street. She also saw the expression on his face. Oh well, it was a good idea. So what if Dmitri hadn't won the shoes; they would survive. She was proud of him; he was growing up and taking responsibility for his actions. And since Seesi had been getting better lately, Claudia was sure she would have enough money in a week for a pair of new shoes for Artem. She had secretly been trying to save up whenever she could. They could look for the rejected pairs in the stores.

Artem came up to her. "He was so fast! Like a speeding bullet you could say. He almost had it."

"Where is he? I hope he comes home soon, I don't want him to be hanging around there and sulking."

"No, he can't do that; the people are all around him, congratulating him and stuff. Oh look, they're bringing him back."

Claudia looked up to see a crowd of people emerging, and carrying what looked like Dmitri on their shoulders.

“Congratulating him? I thought you said he didn’t win the shoes.”

“No, he didn’t,” signed Artem. “He didn’t win the shoes. But I’m not mad at him anymore. He really tried. And it’s not his fault that he’s way too fast.”

“Way too fast?”

“Yes, he ended up winning the race. He won the first prize. And he won the little trophy. They’ll be presenting it to him after church on Sunday.”