

An excerpt from
Philomena
by Kate Seredy

Chapter 1

Philomena was a little girl who lived in a village near Prague, in Bohemia. The little village sat on the slope of a mountain, with its head in the clouds and its feet in the Moldau River. The head of the village was the small white house where Philomena lived with her grandmother, Babushka. The feet of the village were the long green pastures where, on sunny days, she watched her grandmother's sheep. The heart of the village was the church, where Philomena and Babushka went every Sunday.

Everybody else in the village went to church every Sunday. First they listened to Father Matthias. Father Matthias was a wise priest who knew all about the weather, the sheep, and the chickens. He told the men of the village when to plant potatoes and corn. He told them what to do when animals got sick. He knew all about God and Heaven, of course, but he also knew that people must have enough to eat to be happy, and therefore good, so he taught them to be good farmers. Good farmers have so much to do that there simply isn't enough time left over for them to do anything that would make God angry with them. The good priest told them about Heaven, to be sure but he just took it for granted that all his people would go there. He didn't have to bother to tell them about the other place. He was a very wise man.

Every Sunday the church was filled because people liked to listen to him. He made them happy. After he had finished talking to them, they all sang beautiful good songs; then, all together, they left the heart of the village and went to the inn. There everyone—including Father Matthias, who worked in the fields three days out of seven—ate a lot of fine food they had all helped to raise, and they sang some rousing good songs. Father Matthias played the fiddle and Babushka played the guitar. They all—including Father Matthias—danced, too.

Philomena and Father Matthias were friends—extra-special friends. He taught her to read and to write and he told her about places outside the village. He told her about her own father and mother, too, whom she had never known; all the family she had was Babushka. She had relations, but they were all too far away to do her any good—like her father and mother, for instance, who were in Heaven. The others were not quite so far away, but there was something else wrong with them. Father Matthias told her—he had to, because Babushka would never talk about it—that she had an aunt who lived in Prague. Father Matthias said that the aunt used to be a very beautiful girl who was good and kind too, but after she went to Prague, she seemed to have forgotten to be kind. It was because of this aunt that Father Matthias took pains to tell Philomena about Prague, and the things that she would have to guard against when she herself got there.

When a girl of the village got to be twelve years old she had to begin to think for herself and work for herself. So Babushka had been sent to Prague to go into service. This was

the way that she had learned all the things that made her so knowing about fine food and clean houses. She had worked as a servant girl from the time she was twelve years old until she was sixteen. That was the right age for girls of the village to come home and get married. The men in the village always waited for a girl to come home from service. Then they all courted her because such girls made very fine wives. They were frugal and humble. They were clean and they were good cooks. They were good, too, because working for other people all day long doesn't leave any time over to be anything but good.

It was expected of a girl to come home when she was sixteen and to use all the things she had learned to make her own people happier and wiser. But Philomena's aunt hadn't come back, not even later, when Philomena's father and mother went to Heaven, and Father Matthias had written her please to come back because she was needed. Babushka was old and Philomena very little, and, Father Matthias said, it's always best to have someone between the very old and the very young. It's God's will, like putting spring between winter and summer.

The aunt refused to come back. She wrote to Father Matthias and said she was happy where she was and would soon be married to a rich man. After she was married, she said, she would send for Babushka and little Philomena.

But she never did. Father Matthias had written many letters over a long, long time, and every week Babushka had come to ask whether he had received an answer. But, when Philomena was five years old, Babushka stopped asking. From then on she never mentioned her daughter in Prague.

The more often she heard this story, the more Philomena loved Babushka—partly to make up for the aunt. Babushka was the finest grandmother any little girl could have. The only trouble was that, by the time Philomena got to be eleven years old, Babushka had grown very, very old and tired.

She must have become lonesome, too, for her daughter—the one in Heaven, of course. She still didn't speak of the other. One day she said to Philomena, "Child, I think I'd like to go to your mother, Anna. I think it's time for me to have a nice visit with her and tell her that you've been a good child."

"Thank you, Babushka," Philomena said with a polite curtsy. She looked out through the window then, out to the little patch of sky she could see between the snowdrifts. She sighed. "I wish you could wait until spring, Babushka. Then we could send flowers with you to Heaven. Couldn't you wait just a little while? It's almost March now; in a month or so we might find enough snowdrops and violets to make a nice bunch for you to take."

Babushka sighed too. "I don't know, child. Go fetch Father Matthias; maybe he can find a way to keep me here until spring."

Father Matthias did find a way. He brought Babushka a dark-brown brew he had made out of herbs and tree bark. It tasted very bitter, but Babushka felt stronger after taking it. Once again, one Sunday in March, she played her guitar. Once again she laid it aside to dance a dance with Father Matthias. Maybe that was too much, or maybe she had waited long enough for her visit with her daughter in Heaven; anyway, after she went to bed that night she called Philomena and told her to fetch Father Matthias again.

He came and sat by her bed. He talked to her for a long time, in a low gentle voice. Then they called Philomena from the kitchen. Babushka was smiling; she looked very happy. Her hand smoothed the coverlet, beckoning Philomena to sit close to her. She said, “Child, I’ve waited long enough the flowers have come.”

“Yes, Babushka, it was kind of you to wait,” Philomena said. “The hillside is blue with violets—enough to make a coverlet for you—so you won’t grow cold on the way.”

“That will be nice.” Babushka smiled at her. “Now, child, I want you to listen carefully. After I have gone, you pack your clothes into the red shawl, the one with the picture of our village woven into it. Then you go to Father Matthias and stay with him until next market day. On that day Janko, the innkeeper, will take you to Prague in the wagon, behind the horses. When you get to Prague, you will thank Janko for his kindness, and then you will walk from the market place and walk across the humpbacked bridge over the Moldau River. Walk two hundred paces straight ahead after you have crossed the bridge. There you will see a marvelous big house. The policemen of Prague live in that house. Go in—never fear. Just go in and ask them where you can find the house where your aunt lives.”

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