



Before the Russian Revolution, a skilled dollmaker named Dmitri lived in the remote town of Kazan. He was highly respected among the townspeople for his remarkable woodworking skills. His specialty was meticulously handcrafting exquisite Russian nesting dolls, known as *matryoshkas*. Each doll was a perfect replica of the one nestled inside, with diminishing size.

Unknown to many, including Dmitri, his own life was reflected in his dolls.

Dmitri had formed layer upon layer of emotional shells to protect his vulnerabilities, each shell concealing a fragile fragment of his life. The Dmitri that others knew was not the same person that Dmitri knew himself to be.

Some emotional layers were formed instinctively to protect his fragile heart. Growing up in a cold, loveless home, he often felt like an unwelcome stranger among his peers, drifting through school as if invisible. As he toiled as an apprentice under a relentless and unforgiving master, the weight of self-doubt pressed down heavily upon him. Each heartache added another layer of protection, reminiscent of the intricately designed dolls he spent every waking hour carving in his workshop. Each doll mirrored his own struggles, crafted with painstaking precision to hide the chasms of vulnerability within.

Yet, other layers emerged from a deep yearning for admiration and validation from the townsfolk.

With a fierce determination, Dmitri poured his soul into his work, aiming to be the unrivaled dollmaker in his region. His workshop was a sanctuary where creativity flowed like rich paint on canvas. The thrill of unveiling a new doll brought an exhilarating rush as he displayed it in the shop window. Passersby would pause in wonder, their eyes lighting up with admiration as they marveled at the exquisite craftsmanship. Each compliment was like a shell, fortifying another layer he had built around himself. The more accolades he received, the more irresistible the urge to create became, driving him to carve yet another masterpiece, all in the pursuit of recognition and respect.

Dmitri projected an image of unshakeable strength, embodying confidence, grace, and flawlessness. Yet concealed beneath layer upon layer of shells were more unsettled versions of Dmitri, hiding his inner doubts, fears, and regrets. Each layer concealed a different Dmitri—one who was fraught with insecurities, uncertainties, and a deep fear of insignificance. With each added layer, the inner Dmitri faded further into obscurity until the fragile man beneath the layers was scarcely recognizable.

One day, a child from the town came into Dmitri's workshop, asking to see the smallest doll in his collection. No one had ever made such a request before. His normal clientele would come seeking to purchase the most ornate dolls, the ones with the most beautiful shells. The request from the little girl did not sit well with him.

Dmitri offered the little girl the chance to see his latest work, which was quite exquisite. But all she wanted was to see the smallest doll he had. He looked towards a dusty corner of his workshop. Sitting on a shelf was the first matryoshka doll he had ever carved. Covered in dust, it was far from impressive. To Dmitri, this doll was the work of someone who was barely even a novice carver.

He hesitantly handed the girl the doll, fearing that nothing of value would remain once she had removed the outer shells. With innocent curiosity, the child delicately removed each doll, leaving only the simplest, unadorned wooden figure.

The child beamed and remarked, *"This one is the best of all. It's the truest."*

Dmitri's heart began to pound. He felt lightheaded. He hadn't seen that tiny doll in years. Now, it was being adored in the hand of a little girl.

Years of protected and imprisoned emotions surged within him, clawing their way to the surface like a storm threatening to break. Overwhelmed by the tidal wave of feelings, he felt himself teetering on the brink of collapse. Desperately, he stumbled toward a nearby chair, the world around him blurring. As he sank into the seat, the shells he had carved around his heart finally gave way, and he couldn't hold back any longer. Sobs wracked his body as tears streamed down his cheeks, releasing all the weight he had carried for so long.

The little girl, seemingly unfazed, decided not to say a word and just let Dmitri weep in his chair. Were Dmitri's tears a result of sadness, pain, or joy? Perhaps they were a blend of all three. She turned her attention back to the tiniest doll.

Glancing upward toward the ceiling for just a moment, the little girl smiled. She knew she had accomplished what she had been sent to do.