All together would begin a new life

by Santosha

Summary

Dounia always dreamed of a foursome marriage, but that was before her brother was convicted of murder. No one’s going to marry the two of them now.

Notes

The italicized passages are direct quotes from the Constance Garnett translation of Crime and Punishment, free to read here: http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2554

The marriage Dounia wants is a sedoretu: http://fanlore.org/wiki/Sedoretu

Dostoevsky’s characters refer to one another by nickname, first name, first name + patronymic, or last name, depending. In the narration, male characters are referred to by last name, but female characters by nickname. To be less sexist, I decided to call everyone by first name or nickname. Got all that? Here’s how all the names match up:

(Rodya) Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov
(Dounia) Avdotya Romanovna Raskolnikov
Dmitri Prokofich Razumihin
(Sonia) Sofya Semyonovna Marmeladov
Maybe Dounia once dreamed of a four-cornered marriage. What young girl didn’t? Maybe she once dreamed of spouses who would marry both her and her brother, so that they could stay together forever. But that was before Rodya was convicted of murder.

There’s nothing wrong with a twosome marriage. Dounia is thrilled that someone like Dmitri loves her. She won’t ask for more.

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*Her face was always more serious and thoughtful than gay; but how well smiles, how well youthful, lighthearted, irresponsible, laughter suited her face! It was natural enough that a warm, open, simple-hearted, honest giant like Razumihin, who had never seen anyone like her and was not quite sober at the time, should lose his head immediately. Besides, as chance would have it, he saw Dounia for the first time transfigured by her love for her brother and her joy at meeting him. Afterwards he saw her lower lip quiver with indignation at her brother’s insolent, cruel and ungrateful words—and his fate was sealed.*

“Was that really how it was?” Dounia is amused. “Love at first sight?” Her mother has tactfully left them alone for a few minutes’ conversation on the sofa, the privilege of being formally engaged.

“I am afraid so,” Dmitri says. “I can hardly expect you to say the same about me, since I was such a drunken fool that night.”

“Oh no,” she protests. “At least, it didn’t take me long to begin to see your virtues.” She smiles, and they share a kiss, before she continues. “You took such good care of Rodya. Mamma and I were so grateful.”

Dmitri shrugs this off, but Dounia remembers arriving in St. Petersburg to find Rodya seriously ill. The first thing she’d learned about Dmitri was that he had spent days at the bedside of her delirious brother. She had been impressed with Dmitri’s devotion. Even when healthy, Rodya is irritable and moody enough that not everyone wants to spend days on end in his company. She loves her brother, but she is perfectly familiar with how difficult he can be. Dmitri is the only friend who has stuck with Rodya, even when he is distant, even when he is outright rude.

A stubborn spark of hope reawakens in Dounia. Carefully, she says, “You care for my brother very much.”
"I have known Rodion for a year and a half; he is morose, gloomy, proud and haughty, and of late - and perhaps for a long time before - he has been suspicious and fanciful. He has a noble nature and a kind heart. He does not like showing his feelings and would rather do a cruel thing than open his heart freely."

“I remember saying that to you,” Dmitri says. “I worried you’d think I was being too harsh.”

“Not at all. I know Rodya. I was glad to see that you did too.” Dounia slides closer and leans against him. “The last thing he needs is a friend who is uncritically devoted. I always knew he had a… dark side.” She turns her face into his shoulder. The whole world knows that about Rodya now.

Dmitri puts his arms around her. “I still can’t understand why...” His voice is soft and puzzled.

Explaining Rodya is always so difficult. His own explanations of his motives confused everyone at his trial. Dounia tries, “When he’s alone too much, he overthinks things. He gets cold.”

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"He loves no one and perhaps he never will," Razumihin declared decisively.

"You mean he is not capable of love?"

"Do you know, Avdotya Romanovna, you are awfully like your brother, in everything, indeed!"

Dmitri blushes. “You need not remind me of every foolish thing that ever came out of my mouth. Stop laughing. Here.” He leans over to kiss her.

“I’m sorry. You turned red just like you did that day.” Dounia controls her giggles, “That was quite a thing to say to the woman you supposedly love. Considering all that you’d just said about Rodya.”

“I did love you. I do love you.”
She prevents him from kissing her again. “And you think I am like my brother? Dmitri, do you love Rodya too?”

He doesn’t answer. She says, “You think he can’t love you back. You think he can’t love, but I know he can.”

*

[Rodya] suddenly held out his hand to his sister, smiling without a word. But in this smile there was a flash of real unfeigned feeling. Dounia caught it at once, and warmly pressed his hand, overjoyed and thankful. It was the first time he had addressed her since their dispute the previous day. The mother's face lighted up with ecstatic happiness at the sight of this conclusive unspoken reconciliation. "Yes, that is what I love him for,” Razumihin, exaggerating it all, muttered to himself, with a vigorous turn in his chair. “He has these movements.”

“Once in a while he forgets to hide, and you catch sight of who he really is.” Dmitri feels like an idiot, with his inadequate words, but he’s used to feeling inarticulate and foolish around Dounia. “When you looked at each other that day, you both had this glow.” He smiles and touches her face.

Dounia’s cheeks are pink, but she won’t be distracted. “Rodya has a good heart. When he has people around who love him, they remind him of that.”

“Love looks good on you,” Dmitri says, remembering how beautiful she’d been, when Rodya had taken her hand. “And on him,” he admits. “I couldn’t take my eyes off either of you. That’s when I knew I was wrong, when I said that Rodya loved no one. He loves you, if no one else.” Dmitri meets her eyes. “What is it you want, Dounia? Are you asking if I want to marry your brother as well as you? You can’t believe that he would.” He tries to sound stern, but ends up slightly wistful.

“You are one of the most important people in Rodya’s life. Who did he go to when he needed help, even if he couldn’t ask for it?”

Dmitri snorts. “He acted as if he’d been dragged to my apartment unwillingly.” Rodya had been ragged, starving, feverish, barely coherent, and not at all civil. Dmitri had offered help and asked questions, but Rodya had vanished without explanation. “I didn’t even know his address. I had to track him down.”
“Thank God you did.” Dounia kisses him. “And now when he is facing imprisonment and Siberia,” - her voice faltered over the words – “he’s been treating you like family.”

“He’s been acting as if he wished I would drop dead.”

“He’s pushing you away. Just as he’s treating me and Mamma.”

Dmitri takes a breath, feeling like she is cracking him open in order to let in this painful sliver of hope. He’s already amazed that even one of these stunning siblings wants him. It’s overwhelming to think about loving, and being loved by, both of them. But her face and voice are full of conviction. “You really think he would marry us.” Every day, he would get to see their faces light up when they saw each other.

“He needs us. I’ll make him see that.”

Looking at her face in that moment, Dmitri thinks that maybe she can make any impossible thing happen. “You know he will want the fourth person to be Sofya Semyonovna. Could you… care for her?”

Her self-assurance crumbles instantly. “I… I think about her often. I wish I could see her. But things are always so awkward between us. I don’t know how to talk to her. Oh.” She rubs her eyes. “This will never work.”

Dmitri laughs at her, with affection. “You aren’t worried about Rodya, but you are worried about convincing Sonia? Don’t be ridiculous.” He puts his arm around her. “Let’s go talk to her together. If we have her on our side, we have a much better chance with your awful brother. She already talked him into turning himself in for murder.”

* [Dounia] looked at Sonia almost with reverence and at first almost embarrassed her by it. Sonia was almost on the point of tears. She felt herself, on the contrary, hardly worthy to look at Dounia. Dounia's gracious image when she had bowed to her so attentively and respectfully at their first meeting in Raskolnikov's room had remained in her mind as one of the fairest visions of her life.

They go to see Sonia, and Dmitri realizes at once why Dounia always finds conversations with her awkward. Like her brother, Dounia can be overpowering. She seems to fill Sonia’s stark little room with her presence, just sitting next to Sonia on her bed, holding her hands, waiting for her answer. Sonia can’t stammer out a full sentence with those dark eyes fixed on her own.
“One of them at a time is bad enough, Sofya Semyonovna,” Dmitri commiserates. “Here we’ve come over to ask you to take both of them. It’s more than anyone could deal with.”

This startles a laugh out of Sonia, who looks at him gratefully. Dounia drops her hands and stands up. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I didn’t mean…”

Dmitri gets up from the room’s one chair and touches Dounia’s elbow. “You did nothing wrong. In fact, I’m surprised that Sofya Semyonovna can still be intimidated by those intense Raskolnikov eyes, after spending so much time with Rodya. Doesn’t one build up an immunity?”

“You haven’t,” Dounia teases.

Sonia recovers her balance while they focus on each other, and when they turn back to her, she asks, “Dmitri Prokofitch, Avdotya Romanovna, are you sure you want to marry me? Do you know… enough about me?”

Dmitri lets Dounia answer. It’s not that much of a scandal for him to marry a prostitute, but Dounia and Rodya come from a respectable, if impoverished, family.

“I know what you were forced into, in order to save your family from starvation,” Dounia says, gently. “I know you didn’t choose it.” She takes a step towards Sonia, and then stops, perhaps remembering Dmitri’s comment about being intimidating. “I also know what you’ve meant to Rodya, and I’m so grateful, Sofya Semyonovna, I’m so grateful that you were able to reach him.” Her voice trembles.


“Is he being horrible to you?” Dmitri asks. “It’s recently been suggested to me that Rodya is being horrible to all the people he loves the most.”

Sonia hunches on the bed and sniffs, trying not to cry in front of them.

Dounia tosses her head elegantly, eyes flashing, tall and proud in the tiny room. Apparently she is forgetting to try not to intimidate. “Rodya is horrible most of the time. Believe me, I’ve been
managing him all our lives. If he’s not being moody and distant, he’s being snappish and rude.”

“That is certainly true,” Dmitri says, sitting back down. “Did I tell you how he escaped from his room when he was delirious with fever? I had to hunt all over town for him, all the while thinking I’d find him dead in a gutter, and then there he is drinking tea in some restaurant. And all he said was to leave him alone, he was sick of me!”

Sonia speaks up quietly. “My father was killed in a street accident in front of him. They barely knew each other, but Rodya paid for the funeral. He gave my step-mother all the money he had. All of it. He didn’t keep enough to buy himself dinner that night.”

“Once in a while, he forgets to hide,” Dmitri says. He looks at Sonia with understanding. “Were you at his trial? Some story came out about a consumptive classmate at university that he supported financially for six months without telling a soul.”

“Another person testified that he rescued two children from a fire,” Sonia adds, eager to defend her beloved. “He got burned doing it.”

“He does good things on impulse,” Dounia says. “He does wrong when he theorizes too much. He has a kind heart, but he goes off on his own, and gets caught up in ideas. That’s when he gets dangerous.”

Sonia shivers, perhaps recognizing this for the truth. Dmitri looks from one woman to the other, realizing what they already seem to know. “This isn’t just about rescuing Rodya, is it? It’s also about rescuing the world from Rodya.”

Dounia meets his eyes, unflinching, in spite of her pain. “God knows what he will become if we leave him alone.”

“He won’t be alone,” Sonia says firmly.

“I know,” Dounia says, smiling at her. “But Rodya would wear any one spouse out. That’s the beauty of my idea. There would be three of us.” She looks shyly down at Sonia. “Let us help you with him?”

“Be my sister?” Dmitri asks.
Dounia gulps, and adds, “Be my wife?”

The Raskolnikov eyes are back up to full power, Dmitri notes. They aren’t aimed at him, but he sees the effect on poor stunned Sonia.

“Avdotya Romanovna,” she begins.

“Call me Dounia.”

Sonia swallows. “D-Dounia. If Rodya will… I will.”

Dounia touches her cheek, lightly, asking permission, and then leans in for a kiss.

Dmitri watches affectionately. When they pull apart, he says, “We’re counting on you to help persuade Rodya, you know, Sofya Semyonovna.”

“It’s Sonia,” she says, “if you’re going to be my brother-husband.”

Dounia is quiet for a moment more. Dmitri smiles, wondering if she is thinking about kissing Sonia again, but her sharp focus returns, and she says, “We need to make Rodya marry us before they send him to Siberia.”

“Then Sonia can follow him at once, just as she planned,” Dmitri says. He turns to Sonia. “Dounia and I have a plan to raise a little money, so we can move there in a few years and we can all start a new life together. If we put together enough, we could even take your half-brother and half-sisters out of the orphanages. They’d be better off with you – with us, wouldn’t you say?” He and Dounia had considered this on the way over.

Sonia breaks into sobs. “It’s more than I could have ever hoped for. If we can only persuade him.”

“He will say no,” Dmitri predicts. “He will think he’s being self-sacrificing and noble by pushing us away, not noticing that he is being a self-absorbed pig by ignoring our feelings. Of course that’s what he will do.”
Dounia looks at him with love. “I never thought I’d meet anyone else who understood my brother.”

*

*But why are they so fond of me if I don't deserve it? Oh, if only I were alone and no one loved me and I too had never loved anyone!*

“Don’t be absurd,” Rodya says, and “Go away, stop bothering me.”

“You're a pig,” Dmitri tells him.

They visit several more times, and the conversations go pretty much like that.

Finally, there is a visit when Rodya says, “You can’t be serious. You want your children to be raised by a murderer?”

Being irritable hasn’t driven them away, Dmitri thinks, so he’s trying a new tactic. “We’ve been clear enough about what we want, Rodya.”

Dounia reaches for her brother through the bars, but he doesn’t respond. “You’re trying to protect us, but it’s far too late,” she says, calmly. “We already love you. Please marry us.”

Sonia speaks up. “I will follow you to Siberia one way or the other, but I would wish not to be parted forever from Avdotya Romanovna.” She blushes.

“Will you call me Dounia, for heaven’s sake!”

The two women turn to one another for an intimate moment. Dounia is blindingly beautiful, as she always is when overcome with love. Dmitri leans conspiratorially on the bars of Rodya’s cell and says, “You see that you and your sister together are too much for anyone to resist, even sensible people like me and Sonia.”
Rodya looks startled, watching Sonia and his sister gaze into each others’ eyes. He’s used to being the center of their attention, Dmitri thinks with mingled annoyance and affection. Now he can’t take either Sonia or Dounia so much for granted.

He still doesn’t look very well. Hasn’t put on any weight and still looks too pale. Will Siberia be too much for him, like this? They have to get through to him, so that at least he doesn’t go away thinking he is alone. “I read your paper,” Dmitri says. “Your theory about great men.”

“Then you know I am not one,” Rodya says bitterly.

Dmitri studies him, feeling that they are approaching the heart of the problem. “You think a great man could kill and profit by it, and walk away untroubled.” That’s what the paper had said, that a great man, like Napoleon, could and should rise above considerations of morality.

Rodya pulls away, flushed, eyes flashing in his thin face. “You understand nothing. Why can’t you leave me alone?”

Struck the target there, Dmitri thinks. Dounia steps up next to him, and says, “Rodya, it’s just an idea. Look how this idea has led you astray! It has nearly ruined your whole life!” She wipes tears from her cheek. “I used to help you, until you went away to Petersburg. I hoped that the university would teach you how to have ideas without getting caught up in them.”

Dmitri, a university student himself, smiles ironically at this.

“You have a good heart, Rodya,” Dounia says. “I know you repent what you did.”

Dmitri is watching his face when she says this, and realizes, “You think that feeling guilt makes you a failure.” He turns away for a moment. Maybe Rodya can’t be reached.

But Sonia pushes between him and Dounia to reach the cell door. She’s crying silently, tears running down her cheeks, but she manages to say, “You feel guilt because you are a kind person. God is speaking in your heart, making you sorry for your sins.” She reaches through the bars.

Rodya takes her hand, but says, “I’m not a kind person.”
“You’re not Napoleon,” Dmitri says, bluntly. “You didn’t succeed in killing without remorse.” He thought of Rodya’s strained nerves after the murders, his days of fever, delirium, and irrational behavior. The doctor had suggested he might be going insane. “Feeling guilt doesn’t mean you are weak,” he says, gently, “it means you’re a good person. Good people regret the bad things they do.”

Rodya holds Sonia’s hand and looks lost.

“Marry us,” Dounia suggests, “and we’ll help you figure it out.”

*

Razumihin and Sonia saw him in prison as often as it was possible. At last the moment of separation came. Dounia swore to her brother that the separation should not be for ever. Razumihin did the same. Razumihin, in his youthful ardour, had firmly resolved to lay the foundations at least of a secure livelihood during the next three or four years, and saving up a certain sum, to emigrate to Siberia, a country rich in every natural resource and in need of workers, active men and capital. There they would settle in the town where Rodya was and all together would begin a new life. They all wept at parting.

When they get to Siberia, Sonia rushes out to meet them, wild to kiss her sisters and brother, to kiss Dounia, to tell them all how much she had missed them over the last few years, and to exclaim how tall her sister Polenka had grown! Dmitri holds his small son, content to let his wife and sister-wife talk, hug, and cry on each other’s shoulders.

Soon enough, Sonia turns to kiss his cheek, and the baby’s forehead. “Dmitri, I’m so glad you are all here. Come along.”

She has found a place for them all to stay. “It’s lovely, Sonia, but we’ve saved enough that we can get our own house as soon as we find one, or build one,” Dounia says.

“I’ll look around for what business I might go into here.” In St. Petersburg Dmitri’s been translating books into Russian. Maybe it’s time for something new though.

“I have an income,” Sonia volunteers, timidly. “I’ve been doing sewing for some people.” She blushes. “There isn’t a real seamstress in town.”
“I’ve been teaching the children,” Dounia says. “You’ll be amazed how much French Polenka has picked up already.” Sonia’s sister beams at this, trying to look grown-up as her two younger siblings chase one another around up and down the street.

“It’s less than five years before Rodya comes home,” Sonia says.

“It’ll be a busy household for him, compared to that tomb of an attic he used to live in.” Dounia makes a face, stepping neatly out of the way as her adoptive daughter and son charge past.

Dmitri says, “Good.”

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