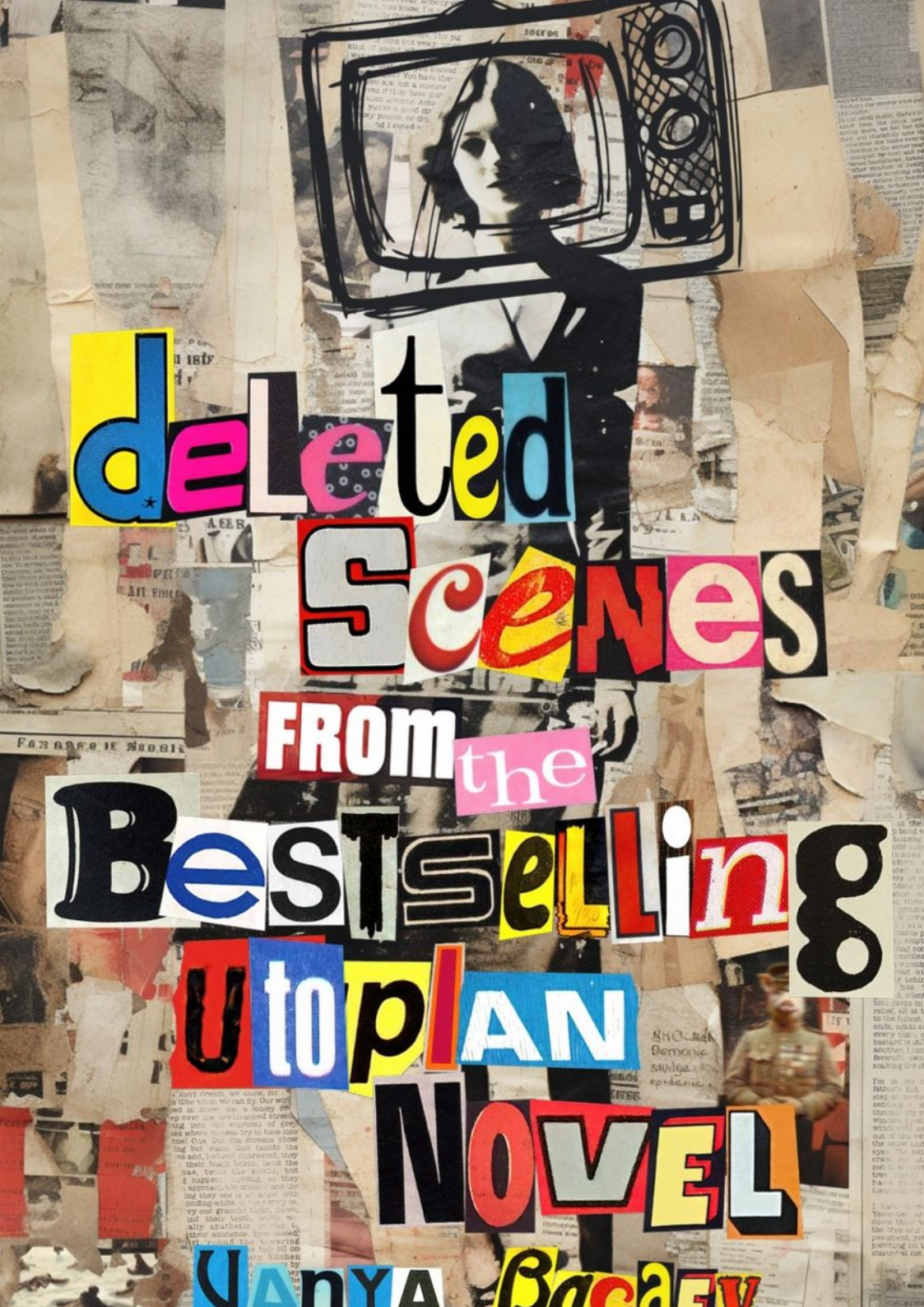

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Scenes
FROM the
Bestselling
Utopian
NOVEL
YANYA BAGLEY

# №7: Soon

nova-nevedoma.com/soon/

—You're allowed to cry only whilst cutting onions. I'll be back soon.

—When is "soon"?

—Sooner than you think.

Yet Myra's father still wasn't home. That careless, cherished-by-adults, and cryptic-to-the-child's-ear "soon" stretched into three hours and twenty-eight minutes, and the sound of the slammed door still haunted every glass item and each window in their cramped flat where they'd spent the past week. Myra and her mother followed all the instructions her father had given them: they found the darkest and thickest sheets they could in the wardrobe, covered all the windows in multiple layers, disconnected the telephone's wire from the socket, turned off the lights, lit candles, sat silently, and waited. The latter proved to be the hardest of all.

—The hand goes like this. The knife becomes part of your arm, so you can steer it safely, and it'll never swerve and cut your finger, see? Yes, and put your thumb here. Exactly. Hold tight. Now slice!—said Myra's mother, smiling.—And there you have it. Practice makes perfect.

Myra nodded nervously and, huffing and puffing, began transforming the pitiful onion into uneven, ugly slices. Her mother patted her head and moved to the other side of the kitchen.

The onion pieces that aspired to become an onion soup looked so miserable that tears welled in Myra's sore eyes. Yet she kept working with the knife ("Slice, slice, slice..."), striking it against the scuffed cutting board that reminded her of the stump on which her father chopped wood when they visited her grandparents in the village.

Little salty drops fell on the board, on the knife, on the onion pieces, which made Myra frustrated and angry. She tried to immerse herself in the process, hoping to distract herself from the tick-tocking of the enormous, eerie grandfather clock in the corner, but she still felt its presence, and the rhythm of the pendulum slicing the air in its wooden tomb matched the rhythm of her cutting onions, as if the clock itself were cutting something or someone.

—Do you know how to play hide-and-seek?

—Dad, I'm eight. Of course I know how to play hide-and-seek. But I like to play it at home,—Myra muttered.

—We can't...

—Because "dangerous people" would find us. I know that.

—See? You understand how important this is.

—Aren't they looking for you?

—They're looking for all of us.

—All of us?

—Yes.

—And me?

—And you, and your mum, yes.

—What did I do?

—You needn't worry about it.

—Now I'm worried, Papa.

—I'll be back as soon as I can.

—Where are you going?

—To check if we all can go. The news is good.

—I don't understand.

—You will, I promise.

—You promise too much. This way you'll run out of promises soon. And by soon, I mean the *real* soon.

Whether those were the same dangerous people who'd broken into her

father's performance when they were at the theatre, Myra didn't know. Who they were, nobody told her either. She overheard that they were policemen, but they didn't look like ones to her. Men in balaclavas materialised from nowhere and dragged the actors off stage. She later asked why they wore those knit helmets, and her father only joked that it was to hide their horns. She wasn't scared, unlike most of the audience, thinking it was all part of the act. Very immersive, she thought; Papa is talented. Only when her mother, who sat next to her, leaned over to cover Myra's eyes and whispered something unrecognisable did she think that maybe she didn't understand, and it wasn't a play anymore. Then her father with a few people approached them and led them both out of the circle through the emergency exit. After that "incident", as her father kept calling it, their life had turned into hide-and-seek of the highest order, and she didn't quite like it.

A brass cuckoo bird peeked from the clock's tower, and the inside bell banged. The knife slipped, scraped the board, and swept the onion pieces onto the floor. Myra dropped the knife, squeezed her eyes, afraid she had cut off all her fingers even though she felt no pain, and stood like that, frozen, listening to the clock's ringing. Ding-dong. Ding-dong. Ding—

—Let me pick that up,—Myra's mother said, approaching her.—Do you want me to finish it?

Myra gave no response. Her fingers were fine. Her mother put her hand on Myra's shoulder and leaned in.

—Go check what the news says. I'll sort this out.

Myra sat at the table, pulled the wee wooden radio with long and thin metal whiskers selfwards, put on the headphones, and began switching channels. All she heard was ear-grating white noise. She wondered why someone would broadcast a noise like that and why not just broadcast silence instead. But every channel responded only with hissing, some with a monotonous beep, and only one of them, on which she thought the news was supposed to run, all of a sudden, with music. It featured a smooth and sultry melody overlaid with hauntingly beautiful female vocals.

—_Eternal embrace, our hearts entwined_,—the woman sang.—*In the darkness, our love shines; though death may part us for a while, we'll reunite with a tender smile.*

Myra's mother looked at her inquiringly. Myra shook her head in response and continued listening to the song.

—_And as the shadows start to fall, I hear your voice, your distant call, a whisper carried on the wind, promising our love will never end._

The song was comforting despite its sad words. It was certainly more comforting than the news would be unless, interrupting the white noise, the reporter announced that her father was safe and sound.

If the rumours were right, the dictator was dead. She had overheard it whilst her mother and father were habitually whispering in the corridor.

What “the dictator” denoted, Myra didn’t definitively know. She thought it might be someone who had good diction, unlike herself, or someone who dictated something and other people had to transcribe it in orderly letters, avoiding any spelling mistakes, like in school. Maybe it was a code word for something, or maybe she just misheard it and it was “director”, like her father, the one who told actors what to do because, for some reason, despite being adults, they didn’t know what to do. In any case, she didn’t understand why that dictator’s death would make her parents excited. They weren’t like that when her grandpa died, or her grandma a few years before, which she barely remembered. They were sad and even cried a little bit, even when they were not cutting onions, but she felt nothing. She didn’t know what to feel because nobody told her how to act, not even her father, who, she thought, was supposed to do that by his profession yet consistently failed at it. She pretended that she was also sad but couldn’t force herself to cry despite all her attempts at squinting or not blinking. “When times change and you grow up, you’ll make a good actress,” her father told her once, “or a director”. Now, she no longer wanted to become an actress or a dictator, even if she had ever wanted to, for she didn’t want to be dragged off stage one day.

Distracted from cooking, Myra’s mother looked at the door. Myra put down the headphones and hushed. Someone, probably one person, was climbing up the stairs, and the footsteps grew louder and louder. It was unlikely to be her dad, Myra thought, because he would be quiet, as he had “directed” them. The room became silent except for the ticking

clocks, and the “Eternal Embrace” was hissing from the headphones in Myra’s hands. Her mother stepped closer to her and turned it off.

The footsteps stopped when they reached the door. Rustling of clothes. The jingle of keys against the concrete floor. A double knock. Myra’s mother approached the entrance, looked through the spyhole, and breathed out. She opened both latches and the chain, and then the door.

There, panting, stood Myra’s father in a snow-dusted overcoat. He was smiling and held a large white cardboard box in both hands. He bent down to pick up his keys and stumbled into the flat.

Myra jumped from her chair and ran to hug her father.

—Dead,—he declared.—The Tsar’s dead.

He ruffled Myra’s hair and handed her the box. She carried it to the table, opened it, and an alluring aroma wafted into her nostrils. It was a cake, a three-layered honey cake with a creamy filling hinting at orange zest, adorned with intricate golden leaf patterns radiating from the centre to the edges like sunbeams.

With the black sheets still over the windows, they spent the evening together, eating cake and drinking tea. Myra’s parents laughed and behaved as if the world outside the flat didn’t exist anymore. But Myra couldn’t help but feel a pang of confusion, wondering how soon she would learn how to feel happy about someone’s death.

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