



The Wild Children by Felice Holman

Subjects: Survival—Fiction; Orphans—Fiction; Soviet Union—History—Revolution, 1917–1921—Juvenile Fiction
Book Lists: Europe

Props: Chair

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(*Overturn a chair*) 12-year-old Alex knew something was wrong when he saw the chair overturned in the front hall. His mother was a very neat woman. She would never have allowed a chair to be out of place for more than a few minutes. Where was she and why was the house so quiet? He straightened the chair (*straighten chair*) and called out, “Mama? Papa?” No answer. He called again, “Nadya? Grandmother?” The cool house echoed the cold feeling that was creeping up into his chest, it tightened and took hold. It had happened to them. For years people had been disappearing. They were being arrested, taken away, shot. Where? Why? No one knew. There were many guesses, but no answers. Since the civil war and the revolution, life should have been better. The Czar had been overthrown, and a “people’s government” now ruled Russia. But life was not better. Hundreds, thousands streamed along the roads at the edge of town, going anywhere, nowhere, made homeless by the people’s government. There were months at a time when the town had no meat, no milk, no bread. And the civil war had made “enemies” of very ordinary people who had no idea why they had become enemies. Whole families were being arrested and carried off in vans.

Is that what had happened to his family? For a while, a shocked and frightened Alex walked around and around the house as if he might be able to find his family if he just kept walking long enough. But finally he had to admit it—his family was gone. They must have been taken in the middle of the night. While he slept comfortably, his family had been forced from their beds. He realized that it was his crazy room

that had saved him. He was safe because his bedroom was really just a storage closet. Although he had always disliked it heartily because he had to go through his parent’s room and then push through all the stored things to get to his bed, he was now grateful. But with gratitude, came fear and the knowledge that he was still in danger. If they found him, he would be taken away.

At first he didn’t know what to do or where to go. The church could not help him. Years ago it had been turned into a granary and the old priest shot. He didn’t trust his neighbors or friends. But his school teacher, she would help him. And she did. She gave him money and instructions on how to find his uncle in Moscow. As they parted, she whispered a few soft words of encouragement. “Dasvedanya, Alex,” she said. “Not good-bye, but until we meet again.”

Alex left on his journey to Moscow filled with hope. But his hope turned to fear when his money and clothes were stolen and he learned that his uncle had also been taken away. With no money, no shelter, no family or friends Alex is lost until he encounters the bezprizorni—the wild children. Children whose parents have been taken away, perhaps shot, who are homeless, desperate, criminal, living in cellars and caves, running in packs throughout the city and country, terrorizing and pillaging. Alex has no choice; to survive, he must join them. Read this story of fear, survival, and rebirth based on true events in Russia in the early 1900s. (*Hold up book*) *The Wild Children* by Felice Holman.