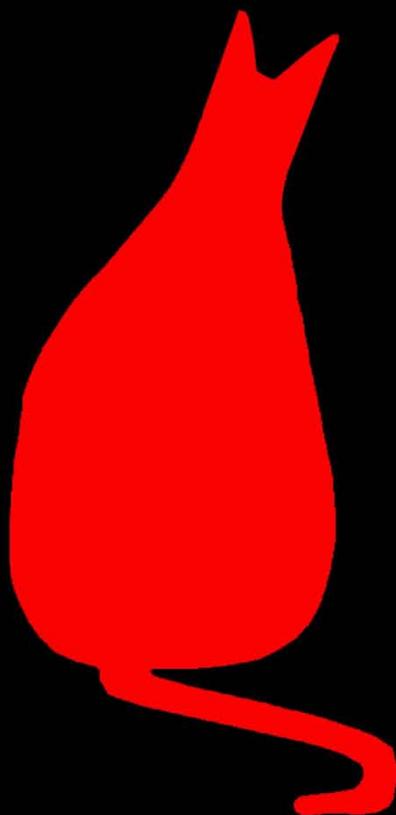


SHERRY MARIE
GALLAGHER

DANCING SPOONS
AND
KHACHAPURI

A RUSSIAN TALE



AISLING BOOKS

Copyright © 2009 by Sherry Marie Gallagher

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Aisling Books is a subsidiary of Mediator Media. Aislingbooks.nl is registered with the Stichting Internet Domeinregistratie Nederland, Arnhem, The Netherlands.

For information:
MEDIATOR MEDIA.
R. SCHUMANLAAN 73
4463 BD GOES
ZEELAND
THE NETHERLANDS
www.mediatormedia.com
info@mediatormedia.nl

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING-IN PUBLICATION DATA
TXu-1-179-204
Gallagher, Sherry Marie
Dancing Spoons and Khachapuri - a Russian Tale
© Sherry Marie Gallagher 2007

ISBN 978-0-9661518-6-2
Second Edition: First printing
Cover design by Rob Bitter, Mediator Media

PREFACE

My Russian experience has left me with a strong impression of a culture viewing the world from inside out - where the most trivial experience becomes important in and of itself - and the world is easily turned into a magical place. The soul of such a people is a raw mix of natural beauty and talent often gone overlooked or neglected, if not underrated and underpaid. As an outsider looking in, I could never ignore the juxtaposition of beauty and beast: the beauty seen in wizards posing as individuals hunched over caldrons of discordant and harmonious compositions as they stir a clever note together that resonates, as if by witchery; the beast rests like a gargoyle atop the predominately Stalinesque architecture and waits as time stands still to swallow up its burgeoning crowds.

The beauty of the State orchestra conducts in moving symphonies of Shostikovich, Tchaikovsky and Rochmaninov only blocks from a Red Square that once was filled to brimming with marching soldiers and rulers turned spy. While nearer to Lenin's Tomb looms a building of neo-classic design: its red-carpeted interior and crystal chandeliers coming straight off the set of *Dr Zhivago*. It is the Bolshoi – or Big Theatre – of opera and ballets ranging from affordable pedestrian prices to those of the better paid elite. All join as one at intermission to toast with champagne and red and black caviar.

It is a surreal place, yet practically so. Come feed the pigeon that does tricks for kopeks on the bottom of a gilded floor, and I shall speak with you of Baltika Number 9 and how it was a good year for eclectic blends and playful souls. Yet, no one dare dance till a woman grabs a partner and, together, do an improvised tango as the local is heard whispering to the one refilling her glass: "I wish I could find a man to play for me while I dance with another."

This is the Russian I know and love - and I laugh and raise my glass to them all.

ONE

She paused from adjusting her telescope when she thought she heard footsteps. Hearing nothing further, she slipped the long, black neck of the scope across a painted white sill of 20 centimeters of space between inner and outer windows. Both were made of thick glass in sturdy wooden frames, the inner was opened wide but the outer was left barely ajar. The girl opened it a crack more and shivered reflexively. A sudden gust of wind tore through her pink flannel gown, but she remained focused on star clusters. To her they gleamed like finely cut glass in the cloudless night, and she perched her slim body on the ledge and took the apparatus off its stand to get a better look.

Baba Sophia knocked once then peered into the room to see if the girl had ignored her warnings. No one worried more than the babushka when it concerned her Tonia, and lingering beside open, drafty windows was no less than sinful, to the elder's thinking. This old crone was the mother of all hens. Yet, no one but a fool would dare cross her when it came to running the household. Sophia had been nanny to the girl's mother, Svetlana. She had remained on and adopted as Grandmother after her charge grew up and had a family of her own.

"Too many cooks spoil the broth," is all Sveta would later say to her own daughter if Anastasiya spoke contrary to the curious ways of their babushka. Like most Russian children, the girl learnt early on to respect her elders and rarely whined or complained.

Tonight, sitting on the sill, she did not intend to make a show of disregard for her grandmother's wishes. It was just that she was in her element. Where astronomy was concerned, all other rules flew out of the window, and she'd been caught more times than not either viewing with windows wide open or in a desperate act of pressing her telescope snug against the ice-glazed windowpane while it mirrored more frost than the scope of the visible universe.

Baba Sophia had sewn by hand all the well-padded bedroom curtains, and they looked like patchquilt more than drapery. It was the strong and biting northerly winds that made the old woman fret so, and she pulled them tightly together as soon as the midday sun crept over the edge of the last onion domed church steeple. Anastasiya would invariably reopen the draperies to drive away the gloom and let in the moonlight she thought beautiful in its translucency. Yet, the girl was not a lone culprit in letting in the cold. The Arctic's frozen gusts were just as insistent to contradict the babushka's wishes. Cold air leaked through and deposited icicles in the narrowest of cracks while the flat's water-heated pipes pumped furiously throughout the day and into the night to fight against seasonal chill. Anastasiya did her best not to agitate the old woman, even attempting to press the refractive lens against the glass itself but seeing nothing more than blurs from dust marks left on the panes.

Always she'd end up opening the window; and, if caught, a woeful tale of Sophia's would follow, a tale of herself as a young girl selling matchboxes. Anastasiya knew Russian days were poorer then, and it was quite possible that the old grandmother could have done this. But the young girl couldn't shake the comical image of Baba standing in girl clothes on street corners, scolding people into buying matches for household coal. She supposed she'd also heard the story one too many times to no longer be saddened and shocked by it. Plus, she noticed that each telling added an embellishment that wasn't there the time before. With a

chuckle, she wondered how it would all pan out when her grandmother took her last breath to give one more telling. Perhaps she'd be selling matchboxes to the family of Tsar Nicholas.

"Tonia?" Baba Sophia beckoned, interrupting the girl's thoughts.

Anastasiya winced ever so slightly at the sound of the aged voice speaking her name, and she tore herself from the telescope like adhesive from a bandage.

"Are you still awake, my dove?"

"Dah, Baba. I can't sleep." Eyes dark as evening sky focused on the figure filling up soft folds of a faded blue dress. It was the selfsame garment worn like a daily laundered uniform beneath an apron stiff from bleaching.

The white apron now had sugar beet stains smeared across its bodice, and the sheer bulk of the old woman kept the hallway light from penetrating the room until she leaned against the door's threshold and let it stream its way through. "Why must you let in all of Moscow night air? Oi, oi, oi." The woman sighed, long and low, adding a clucking sound with her tongue. "Pazhálsta, tell me, please, why so careless with heat? I was only poor girl selling matches on street corners at your age."

Anastasiya bit her tongue and nodded dolefully, trying not to snicker.

"And what is such energy waste costing your father? You must think ruble falls from trees. Tak? "

"Papa doesn't really mind." The girl spoke softly, her tone of voice deep for her age and carrying with it an air of gentle respectability. "After all, he did buy me this Celestron telescope for my fourteenth birthday, and just last week he helped me discover Jupiter's biggest moon." She patted the space on the windowsill beside her, motioning the woman over. It was a mere gesture, knowing full well that the stocky grandmother would never fit. "What do you know about the North Star, Babushka?" She turned and directed her to a bright light, the brightest light in the sky.

The woman sighed again. "Pavtaríti pazhálsta. Ya ni panimáyu. You are good to confuse me with your clever distractions. I scold you for wasting heat, and you answer only with questions of stars." She shook her head. "Nyet, I know nothing of stars. How to make bread rise and pastry batter fall, this I know. I know special herbs for toothache and fever. I know knitting and sewing, helping to birth babies. This I know. Other than this, I am simple peasant woman. I know nothing."

"Izvíníti, you know a lot! Now, let me show you how brilliant Polaris is tonight. Did you know the North Star appears earlier and higher in the Eastern Hemisphere than in the West?"

Baba Sophia waddled further into the room. "What do I know of such things, Tonia?"

"It has to do with the North Celestial pole," said the girl. "Polaris is at its centre. This is why it doesn't appear to move like the rest of the stars."

A shrugging of shoulders was the elder's answer. "I cannot follow your stars. Again I disappoint, and it grows late, Tonia."

The girl glimpsed her dresser drawer and all the books and papers arranged in a scattered mess atop it. "I left my star chart in Papa's study. He's got another of his own that he's stuffed inside a very heavy but beautiful encyclopaedia of the universe. I was just comparing my map to his this morning."

"And tomorrow is another day."

"Babushka? Do you ever think I'll be good enough at astronomical navigation that I won't even need star charts to guide me?"

"I think you must be cautious with what you learn." The elder paused to cross herself in the manner of the Russian Orthodox, genuflecting from right to left. "So many questions, and you may find for yourself more trouble than answers. Soon you will be like curious Varvara whose nose was torn off. Dah, you will soon be like this poor devushka if you are not careful." She waved a hand in the air. "You are not like curious cat with nine lives. You only have one."

Anastasiya brushed a mop full of curls from her face. "That's an odd expression, isn't it?"

Her grandmother puzzled.

The girl was thinking of their own housecats. "Misha, for example, is so lazy. Nothing curious about him."

"Except over my stew," laughed the elder.

Anastasiya laughed back. "Some mouse catcher he is. He'd let them scamper throughout the house before budging an inch to catch them, if even then.."

The elder had been resting her weight atop the girl's wooden bed bedecked in a mountain of quilts. She rose and kissed her forehead. "Dobraj nóchi, Tonia. Sleep well." Then she exited the room.

As silvery reflections danced across the room, Anastasiya slowly turned her head back to the window. She rose again, ever so quietly and onto creaking floorboards with woollen stocking feet. She reached for the thickly woven shawl draped across a chair tucked into the vanity table and threw it across her shoulders before setting the telescope back on the stand. This time she pointed the lens toward the Orion constellation, counting afterward its belt of three bright stars. She thought wistfully of the clever hunter escaping the Scorpion's sting and longed for adventure, her skin prickling with Goosebumps at the thought of cloudless skies and far off places.

Only a month ago, Anastasiya was walking through a park by the university campus and found an old amber brooch filigreed with silver. She dusted it off and saw it was a beautiful old thing with a broken clasp. What was its story? She wondered. And why it had been discarded? Perhaps it had fallen from a woman's jacket when the clasp broke. 'Or, rather,' she thought, 'perhaps the clasp broke because the woman had been kidnapped or mishandled.' Whatever had occurred, the piece was now hers. It was a treasure with a past that had inspired her to write a crime story over it, one about an unravelling secret with the brooch as focal point. "Always a Bad Time to Die", she'd entitled it, remembering how silly her story really was even though her father seemed delighted when she'd read it to him. And the girl's restlessness seemed to grow with each and every centimetre of marked height. Except for accompanying her father on infrequent visits to the state astronomical institute, Anastasiya felt her life at fifteen was no more eventful than her travelling different routes home from school. Other than exploring abandoned buildings with a schoolmate, Anastasiya's taste for adventure she could only satisfy vicariously through library books or by gazing with her lens into the universe, wondering what her hero cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had been able to see up close.

The grandmother was too set in her old ways to contemplate such things, appearing to her granddaughter to meet everything and everyone with suspicion. Neither was she an educated woman, which would have been a rarity in her day. And the elder had no further leanings than to travel the parameters of her own neighbourhood shopping street. Setting foot outside the door and walking the distance to the local market was enough of a journey to satisfy her for several days. Even then she was never able to return without grumbling about the rough and unlevelled terrain of dangerously slippery walkways. Arriving home safely was an experience in itself, and she had little patience for her granddaughter's endless curiosity about life, which she herself found tiresome.

Anastasiya felt an increasing chill in the air. She hugged her shawl more tightly and brought her hands to her mouth, blowing in warm air to keep from shivering. It was an exceptionally clear evening as outside temperatures swiftly plummeted. She readjusted her scope in search of Saturn and squinted through its powerful lens to see if she could locate the luminous body's blurry rings. The planets, she thought, were always more interesting to look at than the tinier star formations. She pointed the tube in an upward direction but frowned at the sudden cloud formation moving in and obscuring her view. She would have to bide her time until it passed over but would wait out the unexpected haze under the thick covers of her comfortable quilts. She dove under the covers, curling up and allowing sleepy thoughts to drift into Cumulus hazes till falling asleep.

TWO

Vivaldi was playing in the background, the surround sound absorbing into a room dominated by heavy oak and tanned leather. Anastasiya's father took out a bottle of sherry from a cupboard with leaded and bevelled glass doors. The drink, he believed, would aid his digestion of grilled sturgeon eaten earlier at dinner. He swilled his glass, grunted comfortably and sank into a buttoned-down Chesterfield easy chair, one of the remnants he had brought with him from a recent visit to England. His daughter sat on the adjacent couch beside him, and she had buried herself in a mountain of bed quilts. It was a contented atmosphere, relaxing by the fireplace after such a satisfying meal. He pushed back a tousled mop of thinning brown curls and chuckled at the site of his daughter in flannel gown and rainbow-coloured thermal tights. He took a drink from the wide-mouthed goblet and savoured the nutty taste before resting the glass on the coffee table and eyeing her again. Anastasiya was growing up before his eyes, he sadly noticed. Yet she was still so young, her skin dewy pink and unmarred by age. Only her long, gangly limbs were budding with the first signs of womanhood, but a young woman she would soon become, and no longer his little girl. He reached for his pipe and lit a match to the tobacco he was packing in, fitting it snug in its dark brown bowl. Sucking in twice, he breathed out and watched the fire crackle into the leaves. He inhaled again, more slowly this time, letting the pungent aroma linger in his mouth before puffing out the curling, weedy smoke. "They're a dying breed, Baba Sophia and her lot," he spoke out suddenly, thinking of her grandmother and knowing that the old woman couldn't hear him over her washing up in the kitchen.

Anastasiya roused herself from her thoughts. She'd been engrossed in Vivaldi's Four Seasons concerto, allowing the music to softly guide her into unknown but not unpleasant realms. "What is that, Papa?"

"I'm speaking of these old Communists who fear the newer generations."

"Oh," she said, smiling at him, her thoughts still elsewhere.

"They fear the Novy-Rusky, in particular, who are taking on too much too fast."

"You mean those Mafia men I always see driving around in smoky-windowed Mercedes and BMW's?"

He drew on his pipe. "Not everyone driving around in smoky-windowed luxury cars are Mafia, Anna."

She wrinkled her brow. "But Babushka said that..."

He shook his head, disagreeing with her unfinished sentence. "Baba Sophia may be partly right, but this age group of your babushka's, whom we've mostly surpassed and lain to rest..."

She interrupted. "I think she'll outlive them all, Papa."

He laughed at that. "She may do just that."

"She does complain a lot, about what she calls 'today's youth', though. She says we only live to go to Disco dancing. I've never been to one myself. Not that I wouldn't like going. Perhaps next summer when I turn sixteen? I think that'd be a super birthday present."

"Mm-hum, yes." She had distracted him. "But our elderly often feel that in the embracing of the new we may be throwing out old traditions, all that they feel they've suffered for, meaning Eastern culture."

“Baba calls it ‘our Mother Russia’.”

The father drew on his pipe again.

“Babushka might actually like Disco music,” Anastasiya went on. “I mean, if she heard it, which I don’t think she ever has. She just says this because she doesn’t know what it is, and it scares her.”

“Change can be threatening, especially to the old guard who treats everything and everyone with suspicion. They’re still clinging to old, trite and often dead ideas. Some very learnt and respected men and women have even given their lives, in fact, to hold onto their ideals.”

Anastasiya closed one eye and opened another, squinting at him through one of her blankets. “Why DO people change, Papa? Why even bother?”

“I guess to readjust to the times presented them but, in the process, ideas and ideals change. Regardless, no one succession is really so radically different from another.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “It all seems silly when you put it that way.”

He sighed and puffed away on his pipe. “It does, doesn’t it? To be honest, Anna love, this age shares many of the selfsame qualities. Yet there is a modern twist to it, allowing us to assume that history never truly repeats itself.” Pausing to mull over his thoughts, the father laid down his pipe to retrieve his sherry. “Somehow, through it all, we try to make our personal mark so as not to be forgotten.”

She began to giggle. “I’m sorry, Papa, but you make it sound like dogs peeing on trees.”

He raised a brow. “And who is really remembered throughout our short human history? Not you and me, surely.” He shook his head slowly, taking to his pipe again. “Whether we pass ourselves on through our genes or make our names known through research, art or science, we are all in a constant fight against our inevitable invisibility.”

Anastasiya watched her father whom she believed to have been striking in his youth. He was still handsome, she thought, meaning for someone as old as he was, having turned 41 just a few weeks ago. In many ways she resembled him in looks, and in other ways not. His enormous eyes were just as light and round as hers were dark and almond. Her lids with their hint of upward curve appeared to draw in a person’s gaze and linger like a smouldering fire. Lids that slightly drooped framed his, giving him a look of vulnerability. She imagined such a look might make a woman closer to his selfsame age feel protective of him. Yet his physique emanated strength, strength that reminded her of a lone wolf. And wolves, she knew, rarely needed anyone else’s protection. The girl smiled a pleasing smile at her own keen observation and youthful savvy.

“My philosophy teacher,” she said, “believes that life is a moving train that makes short stops along its track to pick up history as its passenger. ‘Points of destination’, she calls it. She used a felt board to diagram it all. A bit childish, I know, but I like her. She’s young and pretty with big white teeth. She’s my advisor, as well. Perhaps I should invite her over for tea sometime, Papa.” She lifted a brow demurely. “Would you like that?”

He nodded somewhat distracted, as he too seemed to get caught up in the music’s shift in momentum. “Such a pretty piece, Vivaldi,” he said.

“Miss Tanyeyeva is unmarried, by the way, and she told me that life simply transcends.” Anastasiya stuck out her stocking feet from under the covers to grab hold of the mug on the coffee table in front of her and sip the strongly sugared tea within it.

Richard Hollings looked to his daughter, appreciating her purity of thought, weighing his words while not wanting to take anything away from her own. “There are others who see life as a flowing river. Unlike your teacher’s train, it flows more evenly in a deceptively smooth stream. If dammed up, it will reroute itself. If the dam is not strong enough, it will break through and continue on its steady course, as if never interrupted. It simply carves out a new path. In that way it is unstoppable.

“But what if the river dries up?”

“Then, it has either sunk into the earth or evaporated. Yet it has lived out its course, as all things do until they die. The old ones have lived through times different from our own. They must often feel like dried up spirits, don’t you think?”

She nodded her head. “Living ghosts of their own country.”

He puffed away on his pipe, eyeing his daughter appreciatively. “But, to me, life is neither like a river nor a train. I liken it more to a song, its music never dying as sound is a constant that only alters form. Truth itself is a constant, as it is by nature absolute. Otherwise, it cannot be called ‘truth’. Yet it too is sought in its own fashion.”

Anastasiya stifled a yawn and spread out her feet, letting the heat from the log fire in the hearth warm them. She loved the smell of its crackling birch and breathed in deep.

Her father continued puffing away on his pipe. “And how can one destroy truth, eh?”

She shrugged. “Once I helped Babushka fold bed sheets out of the dryer, and she told me that we were nursed on the milk of Lenin. I said that was simply not so. How is it possible for a man with man’s breasts to nurse like a woman? No, Lenin never had any milk to give us. Well, except, that is, if he secretly got it from a cow.”

Her father broke into laughter.

She laughed along with him. “When I asked her why believe in such an old liar, she only crossed herself and said no more about it.”

“‘Nursed on the milk of Lenin’ is an expression children had to say in school. It was like a pledge of allegiance said till even just a few years ago. I’ll bet that even your Miss Tanyeyeva had to repeat it.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “I don’t think so, Papa. She’s too smart to fall for that one.”

“Such notions were once used to condition people into believing that everyone should absorb the same ideals.”

“I doubt if Miss Tanyeyeva would have been so willing.”

“Baba Sophia wasn’t much older than you when she no doubt heard the philosophers of her time call independent thought an ‘opiate’ to a healthy society and workers’ state.”

“Now that I believe because she always tells me to stop asking so many questions. She says it’s just buying trouble.”

“Back in her day, love, people just weren’t into sharing personal thoughts and opinions. It was dangerous.”

“How so?”

“Independent thought was once considered contrary to group consensus, and to openly question could mean to jeopardise one’s very life.”

Anastasiya wriggled out of the blankets and set her mug atop an end table fashioned from the same wood as the liquor cabinet. It was one of a set of two, their clawed feet reminding her of lion paws. She looked again to her father. “It’s all in the past now. She should know that. Nobody’s going to jail you for your questions.”

“I know our Baba can be difficult, but she’s a good woman who both loves and looks out for us.”

Anastasiya watched her father swirl and swallow the remainder in his goblet. Now that she thought about it, she really didn’t understand him much either. Some of the things he told her she understood very well and resolved not to take her babushka’s folkways too awfully serious. She was keenly aware that the old woman wore her heart on her sleeve, her worrisome chiding seen to be more quaint than offensive.

Richard Hollings now stimulated by a head full of wine, ended his thoughts. “It was glasnost that set the stage for the type of thinking that could have once got you killed or your family disgraced and sent to Siberia.”

Anastasiya yawned. “I thought that was perestroika.”

“Perestroika opened the doors to the West by encouraging economists to help Russia solve her problems that have never before been so candidly discussed.” He smiled warmly at her. “You see why the elderly doubt and are confused by this new life that no longer holds

back, my Anna. It is literally bursting at the seam - music, poetry and art." Dramatically, her father threw his hands up in the air. "Closets opening everywhere and letting out artistic skeletons that will no longer stay hidden in some dusty old attic."

She only smiled at his passions, her head drowsy from the warm tea and crackling fire. It wasn't too long after that she kissed his cheek and left for bed.

It was another night, and not too long after Baba Sophia made her rounds, that Anastasiya was drawn back to her window unable to sleep. She rechecked the magnified image through the telescopic lens but dropped back on the bed with a sigh, abandoning all hope that the stratospheric haze would lift anytime soon. She sometimes thought of different professions, wondering what it would be like to teach or write crime stories. Maybe she could even study anthropology and, perhaps, unmask old bones instead of stars? The fleeting thought of having to shovel hard earth for a living took that idea swiftly from her mind. She thought it a nasty scene, clawing the earth for bits of pottery and dead people's remains. Shaking her head, she knew her preference would always be for a nice relaxing seat in an observatory where she could gaze at the expanding universe without anyone reminding her of something as annoying as a bedtime schedule. Her yawning betrayed her tiredness, but she found it difficult to tear away from the icy heavens that still winked, she blinking back sleepy-eyed. Anastasiya finally gave in and capped the telescopic lens. She shut the outer and inner windows, closed the tapestry of curtains and crawled into her mountains of covers piled atop her bed. Another yawn and her half-shut eyes rested on the candle she'd lit in front of her mother's framed photograph, its flame illuminating the picture in shadowy strips. Anastasiya wiped a straying tear. She was not so young that she could no longer remember what her mother looked like, her smiling face and focused look of artistic precision. The passionate scent of her perfume still lingered – a sultry aroma always reminding the girl of clinking glasses and mysterious far off places. Her warmth still sometimes heard in rare video recordings of her singsong voice that rose up and down like a great concerto. Her music, her piano playing, that once coloured their lives in richly wordless melodies before ending too soon. Anastasiya was ten when she died. Already five years ago now? It seemed to the girl that time had stood still after her mother died. She, herself, was growing older and, yet, somehow she felt stunted and deformed – growing inward instead of outward. She sighed.

Last year's epidemic of walking pneumonia almost took her father away from her too. The cough he'd first brushed off so lightly had begun to settle in his lungs, and he'd fainted at the dinner table before knowing what hit him. Anastasiya screamed at the sight of him falling to the floor. She was soon coddled and hushed as she saw him taken away. Her father was bedbound for weeks after coming home from hospital, and Baba Sophia never left his side till she was assured he'd be all right again. Anastasiya could never put into words the relief she felt at such news. With her grandmother's good care, Richard Hollings had recovered and was back to his old self in no time. Emotionally, Anastasiya didn't even want to think what it would have been like to lose both parents. She wouldn't have been left to grow up on her own, as she had her father's sister in England whom she'd no doubt be shipped off to. Still, it wouldn't be the same. How she would have dreaded that. Just having to face her mother's sudden death had already shattered her heart into what felt like a thousand shards of bleeding glass and she was still picking up pieces, feeling as raw and tender as if it had happened yesterday. She recognized her father's way of coping, which was to hide behind his busy work schedule. Perhaps this was what exhausted him into getting sick in the first place. She knew that his sherry laden talks were also buffers to keep private emotions at bay. She indulged him in this, enjoying his musing for the most part. More than anything, she was just glad to see him alive and well.

And now there was this recent economic crisis to worry about as well. Though Anastasiya saw Russia's economy to always be in a state of flux, she sensed something different in the air this time – it was more of a public apathy than desperation and something she just could not put her finger on. It made her uneasy. But being a motherless child and recently almost losing her father had caused her to grow up too quickly, awakening her senses and leaving her with *simpatico*. Yet what brought her to her feet, and she couldn't ignore, was the fear she saw registered in everyone's eyes - raw, unbridled fear. Never before had she seen it so stabbing as now. And she tasted its bile that reeked of despair. She witnessed it in the streets too many times to cover her ears against all the wailing old women lacking bread and begging for it. Beside them were threadbare waifs who cried out for kopeks. More than bread, they were addicted to what their pimps warmed their bodies with, even if it gave little warmth to their soul. Alongside were the quiet yet insistent pleas of young soldiers with no benefits, veterans without pension, having lost more than limb to serve and protect a country abandoning them to the degrading posts of hustling cigarettes in alleyways or selling plastic Metro maps to vacationing tourists in the underground subway.

Poverty, starvation, homelessness, sickness, death – the pure terror of living and dying in discarded isolation – these impressions are what also haunted her. This checked though distinctive soul of the post-Communist lower classes, spreading and splitting at the social fabric of modernism. Its ever-present visual scream could neither be denied nor deafened. It was edgy. And the people once used to depending on communal control for their daily bread were panicking. Oppressive though it may have been, this interdependent way of life was understood and now all but erased. Lingering Communists still pulled a few strings at the Duma, Russia's parliament, but the dominant Red Party system was a thing of the past. It had been all but wiped out with the collapse of the Eastern wall. As bad as it once was, many still cried out that they wanted it back. Veterans wanted their pensions, old people demanded bread rations, widows wailed against poverty and orphans cried out because no one soothed their tears. It was pure misery, all this begging. And Anastasiya would often shed a few tears for all the social devastation and loss of welfare.

Anastasiya's own family was not poor. They lived in a two-story flat in a posh but older section of Arbatskaya, a street once inhabited by an elite though alternative group of individuals. The quarter was filled with both romantic and controversial history, as during the rise of Communism all poets, artists and intellectuals were viewed as dangerous to Party ambitions. Most of them, having preferred to take up residence in the colourful Arbat, were in that period simply scooped up and annihilated. The celebrated rich and famous were soon reduced to names on numbered lists. They were once so important and now long forgotten. In better times, Alexander Pushkin, Russia's nationally celebrated poet had lived there. So had Mikhail Bulgakov, a well known 1920's playwright and author of *The Master and Margarita*, an eastern twist on the German legend of Dr. Faustus. Like the self-indulgent man selling his soul to the devil for knowledge and power, Bugakov's citizens of Moscow had allowed an evil master's cat to trick them into trading pleasantries for chaos.

These days it was not unusual to see a few walking relics of the past still residing in the Arbat. They solicited personal histories to unsuspecting tourists while engaging them in brief historical walking tours. This too could be done with panache and a flash of self-importance. The tours were quite successfully carried out, but only after the old cons had wielded their charms into the foreigners' graces and purse strings. As for Anastasiya, she only knew the Arbat as home, a safe and secure dwelling place that included her father, Baba Sophia and their two housecats: Misha who appeared a fat Yeti from the Himalayan mountains, and Masha, from the popular breed of Russian Blue.

If asked what her father currently did for a living, like many of her schoolmates, Anastasiya couldn't exactly pin down what he did. She only knew him to make a good enough income for her not to worry about going without. She never asked, nor did she complain. What she did know was that she'd been set apart from the average Russian youth in that her father,

Professor Hollings, had spent most of his childhood growing up in Harwich, England. She herself spoke impeccable English, her parents having chosen to have her internationally schooled instead of enrolling her in one of the State schools like other Russian children. What else she knew about life was to her a mystery yet to unfold. And any information she'd got from her father about himself came, more often than not, through wistful musings let lose by the aperitif of sherry. It wasn't the social discussions but their own stories she loved hearing so much, especially anything having to do with her mother. Her favourite was the story of how her father had come to Russia as a visiting first year professor - falling in love with Svetlana Juravliova, pianist for the State Orchestra – and how he later determined to do anything he could to remain with her in Moscow. This later involved him turning down an offered fellowship at Cambridge. He'd never mentioned any regrets, but Anastasiya had difficulty imagining her father a young, impulsive romantic. So went the story, however; and she believed every word of it, wondering if she too could ever be so impassioned by anyone or anything.

The girl's present world was a practical one, her life filled up with things she deemed important such as exploring the recent building she and her classmate Rusty Benjamin had discovered one afternoon on an alternative route home from school. She smiled at the thought of her classmate, his bumbling antics and clownish laughter. Rusty had lived most of his life in Washington D.C. before his family were uprooted and his father transferred to the American embassy in Moscow. She'd known him almost four years now, and his Russian was abominable. Unlike herself, who grew up bilingual, Rusty struggled with Russian, a language he found difficult and frustrating. It was as if he had formed a mental block against it, refusing to apply what he'd learnt in school. At least he never attempted to speak anything but English unless forced to, and then he would complain that he just couldn't get his mouth to form the proper words. "And vowels? Forget about it," he'd confess to her. He'd shaken his head at all the many ways a Russian could describe something as simple as walking. Anastasiya found Rusty great company, that is, when she wasn't mad at him for being such a boyish oaf.

Once they were on a sort of treasure hunt together, which had been initiated by the boy's mother. Mrs Benjamin wanted to find unleavened bread that she thought she might be able to locate in a Jewish market. She explained to Anastasiya that this so-named bagel was quite popular in the States, being baked, sliced open and spread with cream cheese. Intrigued by this item, the girl followed her friend to a new specialty café in hopes of finding such an exotic loaf. They ended up close by the Tverskya war museum and completely forgot about the food item, their eyes catching site of the gated building that had once been used as a turn-of-the-century gentleman's club. They couldn't wait to investigate, and what they found there was breathtaking. Tucked away in such a beautiful but neglected mansion was a menagerie of propaganda extending from WW II and on into the Cold War era. Yet, at the exhibit's end they found a touch of modernism in the form of political puppets and giggled disrespectfully at such papier-mâché dolls of President Yeltsin and the new mayor, Yuri Luzhkov. Then they had to dodge the museum's attendant crones, who'd chased after them in a hopeless attempt to chide and curtail such youthful irreverence. The babushkas proved quite spry in their old age. As with Baba Sophia, they looked little more than flesh pulled tight over fragile, antiquated bones, but with a good pair of trainers they were almost unbeatable. The teens barely escaped with their lives and, afterward, laughed hysterically all the way home.

Anastasiya burrowed deeper into her blankets, laughing again at the thought of them being frightened off by such fierce little grandmothers. Still, she couldn't sleep. And, if it weren't for the chill in the night air and her own body heat warming her from within the quilts, she'd be tempted to spring out of bed for a last glimpse of starlight. She knew that the constellations would always be there, though. They were the one constant in her universe. Anastasiya rolled over and snuggled her head into a goose down pillow, admitting that it was warmth

that had won her over in the end. Yet, she startled suddenly as a small furry beast bumped into her, purring loudly. The sound was not unlike a soapbox car motor, loud and erratic. She looked into green eyes trimmed in black that stared back at her unabashedly. "Dobraj nóchi, Masha."

The feline yawned in reply, turning full circle before rubbing her head against her face.

Anastasiya laughed and scratched her knobby forehead. "Stay close tonight," she said, falling back to her pillow; "and we'll keep each other warm."

"Mahwrp," replied the cat, now digging her claws in and out of the quilt. It was an instinctive, half-conscious act, a futile but nonetheless comforting motion seen by kittens nursing their mother's milk. Masha appeared to be dancing a cha-cha to unknown music until satisfying herself and bedding down for the night. And it was not too long afterward that soft snoring was heard from both sides of the pillow.
