

# THE REUNION

*K. Gorcheva-Newberry*

In my mother's family, we never talk about love or March weather. We never talk about death, illness, or money either because, as Russians who lost twenty-six million people in WWII and survived Stalin, Brezhnev, Gorbachev, and Yeltsin, such trivial things or notions seem irrelevant to us as a nation.

When I first see my mother—after years of forced separation—leaning against the wall in Roanoke Airport, next to her two suitcases with a pet-carrier positioned on top, she seems small and fragile, bearing only a distant resemblance to the stoic, recalcitrant woman who raised me. I rush to hug her, squeezing her in my arms ever so gently, afraid that she might crumble inside her sheep coat, too long and cumbersome and outdated for the American milieu. Her skin is so pale and fine, like my husband's family china, worn by the years of service.

“You're huge,” she says, pulling back and staring at my hump of a belly. “Only six months. You're eating too much. When I was eight-months pregnant, men still asked me out. I looked that good.”

“Maybe you looked slutty,” I say, regretting it immediately because she drills me with her eyes for a long minute before bending toward the pet-carrier and addressing her fifteen-year-old cat.

Neither of us says another word as we navigate toward the exit, where my husband waits in the car, ready to pull over by the door and ferry us home.

I’ve been married and living in the States for five years when my mother is finally granted her visa and allowed to cross the ocean and visit her one and only daughter. Needless to say, my husband and I are at once frustrated and delighted by her presence. We aim to please and coddle her with the best possible care since she plans to stay for a long time, to help with the baby and the house, even though I don’t work, not according to my mother. “Writing isn’t a profession,” she often tells me, “but a hobby.”

Neither my husband nor I attend church; we don’t pray, seek eternity or salvation. We believe in evolution and peace and the imminence of global warming. But for my mother, each day starts with lighting a candle and frying eggs. When she enters the house, she doesn’t comment on my new kitchen cabinets with antique-brass knobs, or the heavy oak beams and trim, or the gleaming hardwood floors we refinished just a month ago. Instead, she opens her carry-on bag and delves inside, producing a small, framed icon and a tin candleholder. She positions both on the counter, next to the microwave, and inserts a long, scrawny church candle into the tin opening, then touches a burning match to the wick. She doesn’t pray but crosses the air three times and asks, “What’s for dinner?”

My mother doesn’t speak English or drive, so she tags along everywhere I go and gabs for hours. She informs me about her sister—“the bitch”—who refused to take care of my grandpa in his final hours, the sight of his soiled sheets breathing nightmares into her dreams, as well as offending her intelligence. “As though she has any,” my mother adds. She tells me about my childhood friend Nina and her alcoholic

husband who fell out the window and broke his both hands, and now he can neither drink nor hit his wife and children. She tattles about my cousin Manya, who cheats on her husband just to prove to him that someone else wants her. “Now, is that dumb or is that dumb?” my mother asks, peering into the side of my face. I shrug and continue to steer the car and embrace the solemn beauty of the world around me. The sky is laden with clouds. They drag low, skimming the tree tops. Stripped of foliage, the mountains stoop in the distance, their jagged shoulders disappearing into the fog.

My mother rants about my friends, her friends, and our neighbors, interchanging her bold statements with no-less bald opinions and commentaries. She marvels at how smooth the roads are and complains about the lack of people on the streets. Before she came, I had warned her about the minuscule size of the place I live now, compared to Moscow, which is like New York City, only with posh Metro stations as opposed to the dingy, piss-reeking American subway. My mother asks about everything she sees—houses, creeks, mountains, birds, cars, stores, food—and a few hours later, I can’t wait to get home and for her to retire to her room, so I can ease onto the couch, next to my husband and enjoy the semblance of solitude.

My husband is my Quiet American, as I’ve dubbed him, although he hasn’t read the Graham Greene novel and doesn’t regard literature the way I do—an escape into the ineffable. He says, “Best stories are about the people you know.” And I say, “Best has not been written yet.” He knows two words in Russian—‘yes’ and ‘no’—but he agrees with everything my mother says, nodding and smiling out of respect. He’s honest and hard-working and easy to please, and unlike my mother, he never complains, so I’m grateful for his silent presence by my side, his shoulder supporting mine while I stare into the TV, my head still swarming with my mother’s catty remarks.

Dinnertime is awkward as it is quiet, punctuated by the sounds of silverware scraping against the family china. To avoid unpleasantness or confrontation, I try to oblige both—my husband and my mother—by alternating American and Russian dishes or cooking two dishes at once. When it comes to my mother, everything is a test: how I sit, how I serve, how I cook, how I hold myself in public.

“In America, women don’t serve dinners to their husbands. It’s such a patriarchal cliché,” I tell her.

“Maybe that’s why American men go for Russian brides,” she answers.

“That’s ridiculous, mother.”

“No more ridiculous than not wanting to start your husband’s day with a hot, nutritious breakfast as opposed to that horrible oatmeal he dilutes with water and cooks in a microwave.”

My mother still throws her wise, motherly advice in my face the way she did when I was a baby, in need of her vigil and care. She means no harm, yet she makes me feel as though I’m just a little girl seeking her approval, her indispensable guidance through the black, billowing waters of the ocean I had to cross—ON MY OWN, I want to shout, ON MY OWN.

“He likes his time alone in the morning,” I say and begin to stack up dishes.

“Of course, he does—he has no one to share it with. He’s a good man. I still wonder why he married you.”

“Maybe you should ask him,” I bark, disappearing into the kitchen.

I know she reads well into the dawn hours every single night. She’s done it all her life—read while the rest of the world slept, while the laundry hung drying in the bathroom and on the radiators and my school projects lay finished on the kitchen table.

I wake up at 3 a.m. and hear her shuffle about her room. She stumbles on something, and it crashes to the floor. I lie still, listening to my mother’s hushed movements and her bare feet fidgeting on the hardwood. The baby wrestles, hard, administering a fury of small punches to my womb. I get up, holding my hand to my belly, and saunter down the hallway, toward the guest bedroom. As I reach the door, all the movement ceases, and I stand for a breathless minute, straining my ears, listening for the signs of life behind the oak frame. She must have gone to bed, I

think, and turn around to leave when I hear my mother's muffled moan and then another one.

She doesn't admit it at first but sits on her bed, staring into nothingness. She says she's okay, it's just a cramp in her belly, it will go away. I sit down beside her, our bare feet dangling off the bed. The cat purrs on the floor, begins to lick and bite my big toe. The window is cracked open, the curtains are pulled apart. I look at the moon's pale, swelled body teetering in the foamy clouds. My mother has another cramp and bends forward and presses at her side as hard as she can.

"It will go away. It always does," she says, her tone apologetic.

"How long have you had this pain?" I ask but somehow already know the answer.

As fortunate as we Russians never get, someone cancels her appointment, and my mother has her ultrasound performed right after mine. First we observe my unborn son floating like a giant tadpole inside my womb, submerged in the amniotic fluid. We listen to his fearless heart hammer next to mine and smile in unison. Then we switch places and examine my mother's shifted, low-positioned uterus and dark, elongated spots the doctor refers to as ovaries and the mass around them. I stand next to my mother's head and try to interpret as the doctor roams inside her with a penis-like doppler gloved in a condom. Her eyes are open and raised to the ceiling, to a colorful print of a baby girl asleep in a flower bed. My mother's expression is serene, nonchalant, as though she's in the Russian countryside, at our dacha, lying in the field of tall grass and staring at the summer sky with herds of wispy clouds passing overhead.

The doctor presses on her belly, and she trembles and groans, and I recall my cousin's words when she compared my mother to a cat capable of tolerating any amount of pain.

"Does it hurt when I push here?" the doctor asks, and I interpret.

"Just a little," she says, and I know just how much she's lying.

After the laparoscopy, after the biopsies come back and confirm our worst fears—ovarian cancer, stage III—we sit at the dinner table passing in silence my mother’s favorite cabbage pie. I’m about to cry, but my husband, as if reading my eyes, squeezes my knee under the table. The baby begins to kick, demanding food and nutrients, the comfort of his mother’s hand patting her stomach and lulling him back to sleep. I feel like a mountain, just as big and gawky, and my uterus presses on my bladder and my kidneys and my liver and the rest of my organs. My feet are like those of an elephant, and when I walk, I hold my belly in my hands, afraid to let go, afraid that it might become detached and pull me to the ground.

I’m not hungry, but I force myself to eat, dough crumbs falling on my plate, and I gather them with my fingers and put them back in my mouth. My mother talks first, and her words are loud, traced by an echo, as though shouted from a cave. She says the pie is quite good but not salty enough and reaches for the salt shaker. She begins to sprinkle salt on her plate—vigorously—her lips folded, her fingers clutching the dull pewter.

“Mom, stop it,” I say and grab her hand. “It doesn’t need that much salt.”

“That’s what your Armenian father used to tell me when I cooked, and then he left, said the other woman cooked better. With Armenians, it’s all about food. Food and land.”

“I thought you left him,” I say, letting go of her wrist, noting the white imprints of my fingers on her delicate skin.

“Yes, I did, although not when I found out that he had been sleeping and eating someplace else for almost a year. But when he had the audacity of giving HER daughter your new baby shoes, the shoes I’d bought just before you were born, standing in lines at GUM.”

She sets the salt shaker back in place and begins to eat while I study her face—her impervious blue eyes and pinched mouth—thinking of how much I don’t know about her, how much I’ve missed.

That night she doesn't burn the candle, and I sleep with her, in her bed, which baffles my husband, but he obliges, polite as always, disappearing in the master suite, a Sudoku book in hand. "It's a Russian thing," I try to tell him when he has difficulty understanding my expatriate world. "Many of us don't have our own beds until well into adolescence or until we marry. Of course, then you're still sharing a bed with someone." I smile, half-apologizing, half-excusing myself.

My mother, her cat, and I, we all lie together, stretched on our backs—I, because it's the only position in which I can get comfortable enough to sleep; the cat, because it's sandwiched between us; my mother, because this way she feels less pain, less pelvic pressure. Her eyes are closed, but I know she isn't asleep, measuring interminable minutes with her shallow breaths. I reminisce about the time when I was little and fell under a metal swing that hit me in the face, my mother carrying me through streets and intersections, pressing a towel to my bloody cheek until we reached the ER, where she held me down while they gave me a shot and stitched up the hole above my lip. How I kicked and cried and begged her to let go. But she did not.

"Mom," I whisper.

"What?" she whispers back.

"What did you feel that time when I fell under the swing?"

She keeps silent for a moment, and I hear the cat inch closer to my mother's head, purring.

"I had tickets to Bolshoi," she finally says, "and I thought damn if I was going to let that little incident of yours keep me from attending *Carmen*."

I hold my breath before letting out a shy chuckle and then laugh out loud.

"You aren't going to die," I keep telling her as we sign the DNR form, among other papers before the surgery.

She gives me a wary smile, lying on a gurney with an IV needle sticking in her hand.

“I’m afraid one has no choice,” she says.

“Of course, there’s a choice, there’s always a choice,” I say, not sure whether I’m trying to convince her or myself.

She wraps her fingers around the metal railing and scrutinizes the wall. I turn my head and stare at the wall, too, at a framed print of a rushing river and fat fish jumping out of the water.

“A beautiful river. Where is it?” my mother asks.

“Spokane, Washington,” I answer, skimming the title.

“How far?”

“Very far.”

“Looks like our Russian salmon.” She points at the fish.

“It is salmon. Not that there’s much left. The dams killed all the native species.”

“They should import our salmon, from Russia. We still have plenty.” She laughs, and I think of the time when I dropped my gold fish in the toilet bowl while changing water in the aquarium. I cried because I was convinced that none of my wishes would ever come true until my mother reached inside the toilet with her bare hand and pulled the fish out.

My husband has gone to find food but also to give us privacy, so we can converse in Russian and for me not to feel the need to interpret.

I remember my husband telling me that his father died when he was ten, his mother when he was eighteen and while his older brother and sister-in-law were expecting their first child. Soon after, his brother’s in-laws died, two months apart.

“It was a sad year,” my husband said. “I was afraid to pick up the phone. My niece lost all three of her grandparents while still in her mother’s womb.”

Now, as I stand in the hospital room, staring at the paper river rushing between the paper rocks, I think that it must be a family curse: the babies losing their grandparents before even seeing them. I have four weeks to go, but I want to call my doctor and ask him to induce, to start my labor, to let this child see his only grandmother, to let this woman, who’s about to undergo a complete hysterectomy, hold a bloody, squirming infant in her arms.



The surgeon comes and goes, then my husband, then the nurse. She begins to wheel the gurney down the corridor. I stop her and bend down to give my mother another hug.

“Watch where you place this precious globe of yours,” she snaps in her usual offhand manner. I stand straight and embrace her dour face. She’s grinning, but her eyes say what her lips won’t, what they said when I told her I was going to America and getting married and possibly staying for good, and she laughed and answered: “Wonderful. At least your children won’t have to share a pair of jeans with their friends and neighbors.” Her eyes said it then, and they are saying it now—crying is not an option.

She’s forbidden me to call Russia, to inform the relatives. “Don’t waste your money,” she said. “There’s nothing they can do to help.” But as the hours drag on and the baby begins to wrestle again, inconsolable, determined to punch a hole through my flesh, I ask my husband for the car keys and walk outside, wobbling through the parking lot.

I shiver and drape the sides of my husband’s coat—the only thing that fits—over my belly, the size of a beach ball. It’s mid March. The weather is moody. It rains one day and dusts snow the next, and then the sun melts it away in less than an hour.

Opening the car and squeezing into the passenger’s seat, I stretch my legs as far as I can and pick up the phone from the charger. First I call my cousin Manya, who keeps silent on the other side of the phone while I recite the odds: the best-case scenario, the worst-case scenario, the absolute worst. I can hear the wall-clock in her kitchen counting stubborn minutes as I wait for her response and imagine her staring out the window, at the playground where we baked sand-cakes as kids and smoked cigarettes as teenagers, sneaking out late at night, when our mothers were long asleep. For a while she says nothing, and it occurs to me that she might be crying, pressing a sweater or a pillow against her face.

“My husband and I had a fight. My ribs are broken, and I can’t see out of one eye,” she says, whispers almost, and we fall silent again, waiting for the damn clock to strike noon and conk out.

My grandfather is dead, and my grandmother is deaf and refuses to wear hearing aids, says there’s nothing in this world that’s worth hearing about. After my mother left for America, she moved in with my aunt, whom I won’t phone because I know what she’ll say—go to church, light a candle, pray.

I want to call my friend Nina, but somehow I feel no strength to dump my sorrow into her life and wait for her to embrace it with courage and stoicism, like we’d been taught at school when *perestroika* started and Lenin’s portraits were torn from the walls.

The phone rings. I pick up. It’s my aunt. She’s yelling into my ear something about chicken broth and fresh-squeezed carrot juice and holy water.

“Care, food, prayer,” she says. “Equanimity. All the diseases come from frazzled nerves. Your mother was too worried about you being alone there, in a foreign country, married to a stranger. ”

“He isn’t a stranger,” I protest. “He’s my husband. He’s kind and loving and—” I don’t finish the sentence and hang up. I look out the window and feel tears gather at the back of my throat and surge to my eyes. The trees blur, the mountains sway, and the heavy, saturnine clouds stop moving and threaten to drop down and swallow the earth.

The scar doesn’t look as long and ugly as I’ve imagined, the two sides of her belly stapled together with metal pins. My mother is in a single room, and I’m at the hospital early next morning, delivering home-made food: pureed beets, mashed potatoes, turkey patties. She eats slowly, as if afraid for her mended belly to come loose and pull open, for the food to start falling out and staining the sheets.

I help the nurse sponge-bathe my mother, dipping a soft cloth into the small pan filled with soapy water and wiping under her armpits and pear-shaped breasts.

Her nipples are colorless, flat and smooth, like pebbles buffed by the sea. I navigate the wet cloth down her sides, along the tortuous scar and the metal ridges of the pins.

She tires quickly, and when she naps, I read, sitting in a chair and resting a book on the summit of my belly, dozing off too.

In the afternoon, my husband picks me up, and we stop at the mall, where we eat and shop for baby clothes even though Russians consider it bad luck to buy anything for infants in advance. We don't talk much—a few paltry sentences—as though not wishing to perturb the silence, to jinx the outcome.

At home, I feed her cat three times in one hour and lie down on my mother's bed because the cat refuses to come to mine, always escaping and returning to sleep on my mother's pillow.

In the morning, I take ridiculously small, cute outfits to the hospital and show them to my mother, shaking a pale-blue cap in the air and a striped onesie, pointing at a pair of silly monkeys crocheted on the front. She resurrects a smile and reaches out to touch the clothes, testing their softness then pulling the fabric at the seams as though doubting its strength.

“You know,” she says after a while, “Those baby shoes that your father gave away, they weren't really all that pretty.”

I reach out and stroke her matted hair that we'll soon need to cut and shave off.

At dawn, my water breaks, and my husband rushes me to the hospital, where my mother had her hysterectomy five days prior. The pain is mild at first, and I manage to joke both with the nurse and my husband, who's about to faint from the impending moment when he'll become a father for the first time in his forty-six-year-old life. In a few hours, the pain doubles and quadruples and gains control of my entire body; and all I can think about is my mother, who's waiting for me in the hospital room to bring her apple-stuffed crepes for breakfast. The doctor comes in

with a baseball mitt and says push, laughing, and all I want to do is to call my mother and ask: Is it me? Did you worry too much?

The baby announces his loud, angry presence to the world. It's a boy, red and wiggly, alive. My husband cuts the umbilical cord, and the doctor lays my son in my weak arms. I press the boy to my breasts and wonder whether he already wants to suckle, whether he already knows how.

My mother walks into the room; someone has taken the liberty to deliver the good news. She's pale and thin and holds her back straight, her hospital robe swaying around her as if around a wooden pole. She reaches to touch her grandson's head, his sticky cluster of hairs. Her face is serious, but her eyes are soft, saying what her lips won't: "It's only March—always fickle—always before April."