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From the story “On the Way to Red Square”

A Portuguese in Moscow, I woke up that Sunday morning to find that Keith was not in bed with me. When I opened the curtains in the nearby window, slowly measuring my gestures, a feeling of impending doom spread over my body. I was from a sunny country, to catch a glimpse of the weather was a vital need. My fear of a cold, bitter winter was instinctive that Sunday in late October. After all, Moscow was as far north as I had ever lived.

I had reason for concern. In the last few days the temperature had fallen well below freezing, and a few orphan snowflakes had swirled here and there. But the true sign of the approaching winter had been a steady wind, a glacial blast that froze the very marrow of my bones. On Friday evening, the weather forecast had predicted heavy snow for the following days. As I peered out my bedroom window, I felt alone, forsaken.

Crows flapped restlessly in the square below making shrill, awful noises. When the square was empty—as it always was on weekends—the crows assembled there. I had no sympathy for those birds: black, repulsive, unfriendly. They filled the square in clusters of five or six, gathered mostly towards the left corner near the sidewalk. Only God knew why they chose that spot; my guess was that it provided shelter from the inclement weather.

When the birds were not there, the square was almost pleasing. I enjoyed the quaint, old-fashioned aura of the faded cream and yellow facades on the other side of the street. The few, solitary trees were stripped naked, their frail limbs reaching for the sky. That early in the season, the narrow pedestrian paths leading to the *gastronom* on the ground floor were still open. Customers continued to stop and buy provisions at the store since various items, such as dried foods, remained available.

I made my way to our small kitchen to prepare coffee, avoiding Keith, who was listening to music through his earphones in the living room. To reach the kitchen I had to cross the far end of the room. I did not greet Keith, and he might not have seen me. The large, dark-green lampshade topping the brass lamp near his armchair blocked me from his view. Besides, he had not turned in my direction.

The kitchen was scarcely more than a corridor and, as soon as I came in, I shied away from the window that stood opposite the door. I needed time to get used to the wire fence that enclosed the courtyard on that side of the building. The Soviets said the fence was there to protect us, the foreigners. But protect us from what?

Keith and I had arrived only a few months before, and I still had not fully adjusted to my new environment. Keith, an American, had been assigned to the American

Embassy, his first diplomatic post. Moscow, capital of the USSR, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, had become, thus, our first home as recent newlyweds. Friends had warned me of the difficulties that lay ahead, but somehow, I had been oblivious to them. Now the fence reminded me, ominously, of a concentration camp. By a stroke of luck, I could not see the booth of the *militционер*, the uniformed police officer who stood day and night by the entrance to the building's parking lot.

Quickly, however, I had become fond of our kitchen. The mixture of light brown tiles and matching cupboards had appealed to me from the day we arrived. The stove was almost new, the refrigerator was in the right place, and it was easy to move around; easy, that is, if only one of us was there.

I made my coffee and sat on a small bench to drink it. Its sensuous smell and the warm cup in my hands filled my heart. Seated, I found comfort that the wire fence was not visible anymore. I could see only the low building across the way, where the three perpetually shaded windows proved that Keith and I were not unaccompanied. Watching eyes inspected us, how many we did not know.

As I stared out the window, snow started to fall. First slowly, but soon larger and larger flakes appeared before my eyes. It was magical, cotton balls were floating down from the sky, a manna from the gods. Standing up, I realized that the courtyard's ground was turning, little by little, into a mantle of thick, white, powdered sugar. The snow seemed a blessing intended for me personally, and my mood, miraculously, started to improve. I stood still for long minutes, noticing, in awe, how my coffee tasted even better.

I thought a walk in the snow might be a good idea, so I rushed to the living room and shouted over the earphones, "Keith! Good morning! Do you want to go for a walk? Look, it's snowing!"

Removing the earphones uneasily, Keith replied, "Good morning, Laura. What did you say?"

"It's snowing," I repeated excitedly, pointing at the window. "It's so beautiful! The first winter snow might be the best moment for the next six months." And, again, "Do you want to go for a walk?"

"I want to finish this piece of music. We can go afterwards."

"Why can't you finish it later?"

"I want to finish it now."

"But we don't know how long the snow will last."

I paused for a second, but then persisted, trying to sound casual, "What're you listening to?"

"It's Mahler."

"Again? Which piece?"

"It's the 'Songs on the Death of Children' in *Kindertotenlieder*."

"I wish you'd stop listening to those songs, they're so sad," I said, coming closer to him.

Barely looking at me, Keith answered apologetically, "I like them, you know that."

Before, Keith had loved the snow, truly enjoyed it. At the moment, however, not even the virgin white carpet spread outside could seduce him. Nothing could, for that matter. Once more, I wondered about the dispirited quality of the songs he kept listening to. They seemed almost subversive under our present circumstances. A coincidence was unlikely: could the songs be a factor in sustaining Keith's emotional freeze?

I looked at my husband intently but, unable to reply, I thought it best to go into the bedroom to dress. The task required effort, it might take as long as twenty minutes to prepare for the first winter snow. The embassy had cautioned us that certain procedures needed to be followed. Rule number one, dress warmly, seemed simple enough. Rule number two, dress in layers—several thin sweaters rather than one or two heavy ones—seemed reasonable and better for body flexibility. Rule number three, make sure the extremities—toes, fingers, ears—are warm at all times, was not exactly news to me. It reminded me of my Washington neighbor, dear old Dr. Altschuler, and how his dream of becoming a surgeon had died one day in the Moscow of his youth, together with his frozen fingers. Rule number four was the best of all—never, ever, face the Russian winter without a hat covering your head!

As I put on one layer after another, I recalled the instructions carefully. First came a bra and pantyhose. Then came thermal underwear, top and bottoms, as thin as a sheet of paper. Next was a light turtleneck sweater, long sleeved, plus two or three thicker ones. Lastly, I needed woolen pants, woolen socks, and leg warmers.

My sheepskin coat hung in the closet, and next to it were my woolen scarf and gloves. The coat came down to my ankles and had gorgeous bone buttons. When I put it on, somehow it always felt like the embrace of an old friend. My knee-high boots were fur-lined as well. Near them stood the amusing detail – my *shapka*.

I had bought the elegant fur hat in Helsinki on our way to Moscow. Dark brown, it had a layer of sable around the rim which covered my ears snugly. A stylish fur ball on an embroidered cord hung from the top. Looking into the mirror that first snowy day, I placed the ball on the left side, between my eye and ear. The hat felt so good, I could not help smiling.

Surprisingly, Keith was ready to go by the time I finished dressing. "You didn't want to wait for me but, in the end, I was ready first," he said.

"How did you do that? You're so cunning, I can't believe it."

"You think so?"

"Yes, I do. First you sat listening to that lugubrious music. Then you got ready, it seemed, while I was adjusting my hat. I didn't even hear you."

"Is that my fault?"

"No, but it's as if you're blaming me for taking time to wear the *shapka* the way I want it. I needed the perfect angle."

"Did I question you?"

"No, you didn't. But you could have complimented me."

"About what?"

"My *shapka*, the way I'm wearing it, how I look."

"This conversation is going nowhere. Why don't we just stop talking and get out?"

Happy in my *shapka*, compliments or not, I swung the fur ball with my hand as I looked up at Keith. He looked back at me momentarily. His eyes sparkled but remained, somehow, cold. He then gestured for me to go ahead of him and, after passing through the apartment's front door, we exited the building together.