

A Glass of Fresh, Clean Water from Lake Baikal

The fog of alcohol consumed Svetlana's senses. No Russian from the land of the little sticks dared to push Jesus on Svetlana. Aunt Varvara came dangerously close when she tried to push some water on the woman. A glass of fresh, clean water from Lake Baikal.

“Get that shit away from me, Varva,” yelled Svetlana from the porch of a modest Russian home. “It ain't your salvation I need.”

“Your son is watching you, Svetlana,” Aunt Varvara warned her, nodding her head from left to right in disapproval, tying and untying her plaid babushka under her chin, with mechanistic hand gestures. “Watching, thinking, and crying his life away, misguided by broken dreams,” insisted the old woman.

“Broken dreams...wings... Ha! Hahahaaaa,” the drunk woman's laughter pierced through the grey atmosphere of that strange territory called porch, a territory half owned by her Soviet style kitchen and the other half owned by a small yard leading to a patch of cobblestone street connecting Svetlana's little world to the town of Palatka.

As a young gal, Svetlana never left her small town. As a married woman, she packed her family's small belongings once and headed north for a forest adventure that ended in real Russian drama, not like the one brought to life by a TV screen.

Svetlana was born here, in Palatka, during times when reindeer herding was still a proud occupation, one that conferred character and revitalization of an otherwise dead culture for about 4000 souls

dwelling in this prophetic town whose name in Russian stood for a military style, simplistic and manly tent. Small, green, and triangle-shaped, *palatka* was perfect for a camp-out experience.

Aunt Varvara's forewarnings rang in Svetlana's tired ears with the strength of a male hammer tapping a rusty nine-inch nail. Her nostrils at once awakened to a familiar smell. Little Svetlana would pass that strange territory to run into the same Soviet kitchen while the smell of *drojji* (yeast) penetrated the air of her childhood. Her father was one of the village masters at brewing *samagon*, proud symbol of "to make itself" in Russian. For centuries, this local spirit has been the heart and soul of *magaritch* for the town dwellers of Palatka: amiable debts, returning favors, friendly bargains, it all centered around a glass bottle of samagon brewed in modest Russian kitchens.

Meanwhile, big Russian cities drowned, slowly and quietly, in shiny liquor stores. They would pop open, first across main city boulevards, then in residential neighborhoods, replacing family-owned food markets. It was up to small towns like Palatka to fight these big changes, and Svetlana's father was no exception. He fought and fought, the smell of *drojji* stubbornly filling the kitchen air year-round, until he drew his last breath, in the same room, his soul leaving behind a body too old for carrying forward. He left his young Svetlana in the care of a husband he chose wisely, Igor.

Svetlana's nostrils cried for her father. Cried for the reindeer herds which were the pride and joy of all Palatka families. Cried for the samagon which connected friends, saved those in need of a bargain, kept families dancing, and brought strangers together to discuss ideas on how to move forward. All of it was replaced by cheap, plastic vodka bottles.

The town dwellers have started their lifelong romance with vodka lately, when at last, it flooded the Russian market in those remote, unconnected villages of the subarctic Russian regions. Because the devilish liquor was introduced so recently in their fragile culture, the town dwellers of small towns such as Palatka haven't had a chance to process it efficiently yet. Overnight, they woke up drunk, unproductive, each living off of grandma's pension. They drank, fought in bars, looked for death at every corner or committed suicide.

Their hope for redemption nested in reindeer herding. The system took this hope away from the village dwellers. They got stripped of this rich culture at the hands of a greedy government, hungry for collectivizing the family herds. All they were left with was a river of vodka, connecting them all with that strange pull into the vortex from which there was no escape.

Now, the village dwellers, those whose dreams were not broken just yet, would go into the forest to sober up as part of the rehab process. Misha, Svetlana's son, a young lad of only 9 years old, would dream of getting away from Zombieland to live somewhere sunny and shiny, with the reindeer herders. He would dream of creating a source of pride out of every living day.

In those hot and humid summer days, Misha would beg his mother, "when will you take me to summer camp, mama? I wanna be a herder. I don't want to drink like the men in the village."

Svetlana kept silent, acknowledging the deep connection felt with one of the first domesticated animals of her land. She knew Misha was wired for that lifestyle. His dopamine receptors screamed it at full force. She knew that reindeer training was Misha's hope for a better life, a ticket to success. That smell of cheap, plastic vodka bottles invaded the kitchens of Palatka, the bedrooms of all newly-weds, and the play areas of all innocent beams of light.

Svetlana heard the boy's cries at night, and one morning, she felt determined to escape the dark village. She packed her family's small belongings and headed north for that forest adventure which ended in real Russian drama. Her husband, Igor, led the way with her, holding her hand tenderly, followed by their two children, Misha and Olga. Olga was soon-to-be-married to a boy of a decent family in Palatka, one who actually organized summer camps for reindeer training. Misha was thrilled but Olga not quite so. She heard stories from recently married girls. Some were good stories; others, well, not so good. Sometimes Olga swore to her mother that her brain hurt from so much thinking. Nature was about to step in and extend a helping hand.

At first, the forest welcomed the family. The smell of borscht cooked on the wood stove by the teepee brought senses to a vibrant life. The storytelling soothed everyone's ears by the campfire. The sound of F-AM-I-L-Y rang in everyone's ears. There were no fights and no vodka bottles present to exacerbate the fits of anger. Only Olga's brain hurt sometimes with the thought of her soon-to-be married life. One month into the forest life experience, nature showed its true colors. A tree fell on Olga's head and bashed the girl's brains in. It surely intended well, with the girl's recent complaining of head pain.

Svetlana, Igor, and Misha returned to their small town defeated by the nomadic life. The couple started drinking heavily, day and night, and Misha watched. The more he watched, the more he clung to his hopes for summer camp, for reindeer herding, for escaping far north. A place where life could unfold naturally for him, where he could join the Evenki people and place reindeer herding at the center of life.

Igor began to take his drinking out into the town's pubs where Russian men, intoxicated and loud, became subjects and objects of drunken brawls. In one of those late-night discords, Igor got stabbed. Cut open with a piece of glass. The man recovered slowly, slurring promises of quitting the vodka when fevers would reach their highest points. Svetlana carried for his wounds with a gentleness that only she could be capable of.

Once on his feet, the strong strapping Russian man forgot those self-made promises. The next drunken brawl cost Igor his life. His body was transported to the only morgue that the town of Palatka could boast itself with. The freezer broke in the middle of a hot and humid summer and the decomposing, putrefying body was left on a table, patiently waiting for the police to open the investigation since Igor's death was ruled a murder. For 4 days, Svetlana had to keep Igor's body from falling apart. She stitched him up as his skin began to slip off. She stitched and stitched and took small breaths, small enough to keep her on her feet. A week later, she buried him without looking at the casket once, without shedding a tear even.

One year later, Svetlana remarried. Her heart was a stranger to love, but the man insisted. Dimitry seemed a good man, and Aunt Varvara thought the union would be best for Misha's wellbeing. The boy found Dimitry hanged, 5 months later, behind the tool shed. So much for Misha's wellbeing.

Aunt Varvara wiped the boy's tears before bedtime. You'd think she would read him a bedtime story like the one with the wise owl and the dancing, glowing dragonfly, but no, she would hold a boy tight to prevent him from falling apart like Rome once did, like all those great empires once did.

On her porch, Svetlana drank cheap vodka from plastic bottles. She drank and kept silent. Before dawn, Misha would approach her with timid steps, touching her shoulder and whispering, “mama, forget the reindeer herding. I will be a famous wrestler one day and I will fight all those people who did us wrong, mama. I will, mama!”

She drank and kept silent, understanding that what did them wrong were their own choices. Her father’ choice, her own choice, Igor’s choice, that fucking tree’s choice, Dimitry’s choice. She drank, kept silent, and waited for the sunrise.

That’s when Aunt Varvara stepped in and extended her a second glass of fresh, clean water from Lake Baikal.

“It is your salvation I need, Varva” whispered Svetlana tilting her head in Aunt Varvara’s direction, accepting the glass from her wrinkled and overworked hands. With small, interrupted sips, she drank for minutes at an end. Aunt Varvara watched with pleasing eyes. She meant well. She hydrated a parched body.

That was her last glass of fresh, clean water from Lake Baikal. Svetlana abandoned her clothing and laid completely naked in the snow. From that cold but burning spot, Svetlana looked up at the sky for a first time in a very long time. She tried to count a few stars but she was too drunk to continue on a logical path. She imagined Misha riding on a reindeer, standing proud and tall, her Misha revitalizing the dead culture of her ancestors. Her body was burning, yet she felt the cold air stabbing her small body in various parts. At once, she seemed comfortable.

Svetlana died in the snow that late evening. Misha found her naked body before sunrise. He crawled out of his small bed to tell mama that he was dead sure he wanted to become a wrestling champion. He shared his dreams with Aunt Varvara and she assured him that he could make a name in the world of wrestling if he truly wanted to.

Misha stared into his dead mother's blue and dreamy eyes. He lay by his mother's cold, lifeless prophetic right side for a little while, got up and made a choice.