

# The Keeper of the Belt: Exploring Objects, Family, and the Russian Diaspora

By Carina Kohn

## Abstract:

My project consists of a collection of short stories which explore material culture through the lens of the Russian diaspora. Each piece gives voice to Russian immigrants who have experienced what it feels like to uproot one's entire life and leave almost everything behind. My focus is on the items they have held on to. In preparation to tell these stories, I have examined historical texts and memoirs discussing the cultural and political structures of the Soviet Union. I have also interviewed Russian family members and friends—many of whom are represented as protagonists in their respective stories. Throughout my first of set interviews, it became evident that these individuals were deeply attached to the items they presented, and were able to tap into a reservoir of memories associated with them. I have my own set of Russian objects, which have been passed down to me by my mother, and this project has helped me pay attention to them in new ways. It has also given me the opportunity to contextualize my mother's immigration and view it as a part of a larger experience. I am currently in the process of adding to my pool of interviews. With every story that I write, I gain a deeper understanding of what it means to have a relationship to places where you live, and the people who you love. If a photograph is known to speak a thousand words, then how many can a preserved candy wrapper say, or a loved one's wallet?

## Key Words:

English: Creative Writing, Russian Diaspora, Material Culture, Objects, Family, Fiction, Creative Nonfiction, Memoir

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By Carina Kohn

*For the memory of Mira Armel*

“I will never understand the spirit of my ancestors, but I know it. I know it lives in me.”

-Jericho Brown

“I realise how much I care about how this hard-and-soft, losable object has survived. I need to find a way of unravelling its story.”

-Edmund De Waal

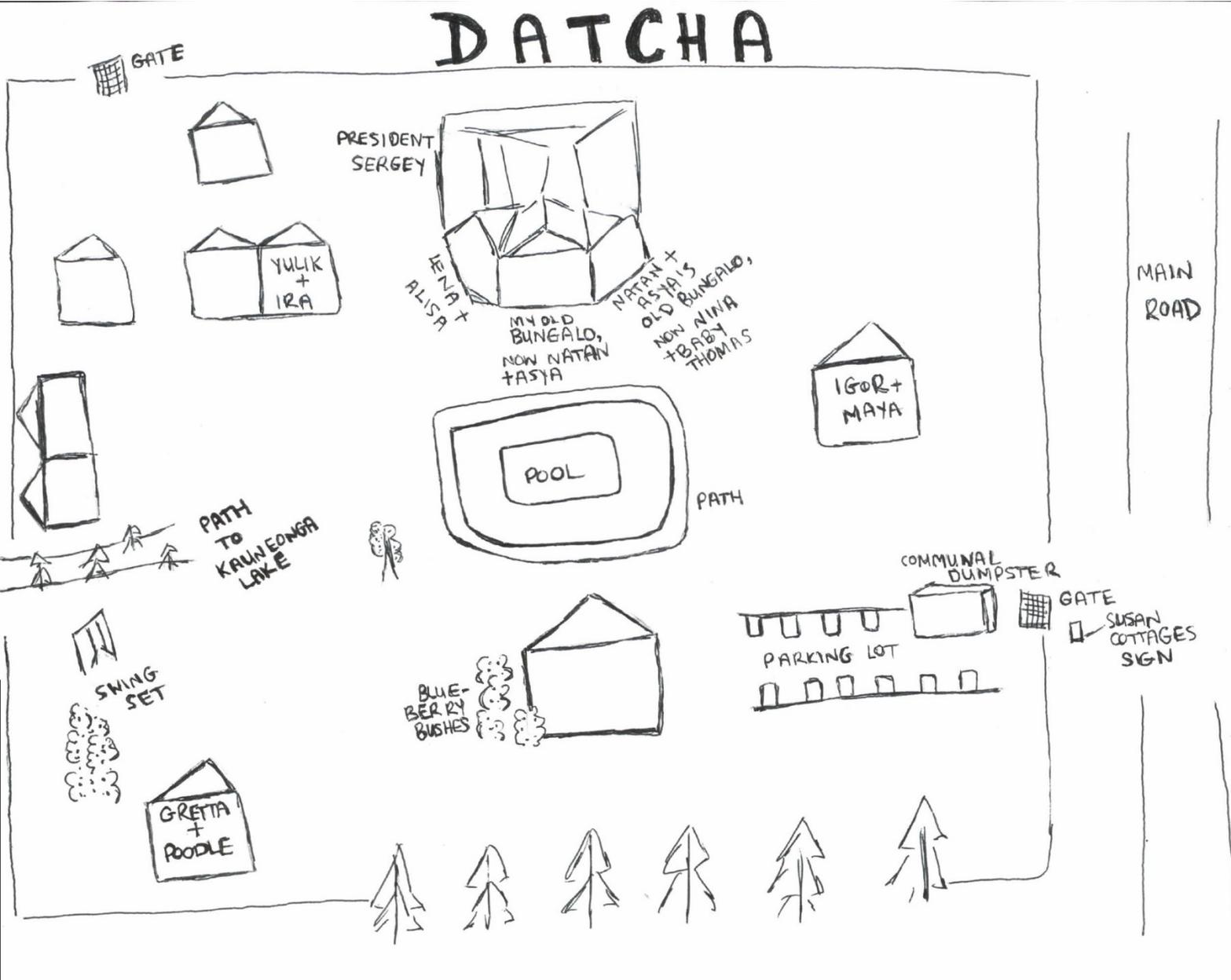
“I had to go back...talk to people, walk around, and reconstruct something resembling a past.”

-Lev Golinkin

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Map of Datcha



## Preface

Imagine that the subjects you have learned in school were not limited to the academic color wheel—English, math, science, history, etc. That we could learn about the world by taking a look around us in a whole new way. Notice what shares your space: objects, stuff, possessions, thing-a-mabobs. What do these things say about you?

I was first introduced to the study of material culture, sometimes called “thing theory,” in an undergraduate course titled, “The Materials of History, Thought, and Art.” In it, we learned about the different kinds of relationships people around the globe have with their objects. We were asked to discover how things were made and where, what they looked like, what their uses were, and most importantly, what they could tell us about the society they came from, or human nature.

Anthropologist Daniel Miller, expresses in his book, *Stuff*, that many societies have a tendency to view attachment to objects as something superficial. He proposes that we consider the opposite, and see objects as indicative of the deep connections we have made in our lives. With this in mind, if I were to choose any one item at this point in time—to play a game of show-and-tell—it would be my grandfather’s belt.

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Introduction: *Remen*

Belts are ordinary objects, the invisible kind. They hide under our t-shirts and hug our waists, forgotten. It is only on occasion that we notice the studs, braids, or the shredded skin of one which has been worn and adored.

My grandfather's belt is handmade, and feels like plastic, or possibly rubber. Strands of brown, beige, and orange are entwined like the stitching of a basket. It is too small to fit around my waist; I am not sure how a belt that small could have ever fit around a grown man. "Marlen was in great shape," my grandmother, Baba Inna, explained over the phone. I had called her to learn more. My mother had given it to me when I was in high school, and despite having owned it for over four years now, I did not know a lot about it. I did not know a lot about my grandfather, either. "He had a small stomach," Baba Inna continued. There was pride in her voice.

I shrugged to myself and took her word for it. I had never met Marlen; he had passed away when my mother and her family still lived in Kiev. My mother was only five-years-old, and her memories of him were vague. Everything I knew about him was based on a laminated black and white photograph that she had attached to one of herself with scotch tape, an unfinished still life that hung in our kitchen, and a few family anecdotes from Baba Inna that I could have lived without (*he used to slap my ass to be silly around the house, but I never liked that*).

"Marlen wore it all the time," Baba Inna remembered. "It was his favorite."

I imagine my grandfather speeding down the streets of his hometown, Odessa, on a bicycle, making loops on gymnasium bars, and walking tightropes in the Ukraine National

Circus. He, of course, did none of these things—to my knowledge—but I don't know what sporty men did in Russia to get in shape.

When my mother had given me the belt, she had said, in Russian: “This was your grandfather's belt. Don't throw it out.” Just like that, with no other explanation, the belt was mine to keep. My mother did not appear to be very ill those days—she had several years of malignant breast cancer ahead of her—but she must of known what nobody in my family wanted to admit; she was not going to survive. During those years, I tucked the belt was tucked away in my closet, and I forgot it.

“When did you give Mamma the belt?” I asked.

“Right after we immigrated to America. We were unpacking in our tiny apartment in Brooklyn, and I decided she should have it. She did not know Marlen for as long as Lena did.” Lena is my mother's sister, and is older by three years. “So I gave her the belt,” Baba Inna said, “and I told her in Russian: ‘this was your father's belt. Don't throw it out.’” Her words echoed with familiarity. That was the moment I realized my mother had been reenacting something when she gave me the belt. She had been repeating—pushing for a continuing.

I hung up the phone with Baba Inna and placed the belt on a shelf in my dormitory closet where I could see it.

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But the story of the belt was not going to end there. I did not want it to become a sentimental decoration in my closet. I wanted to find out if there were more people like me, who hold on to objects they hadn't actively thought about in years. There might even be objects people use on a daily basis that are so loved it would be hard for them to think of themselves as separate from the object at all. I wondered what kinds of relationships my friends and family

might have to the things they have brought to America from Russia and what kinds of memories or associations they might have.

Growing up, my mother did not tell me a lot about Russia; there is something about escaping, leaving one home for a better one that made her not want to mentally revisit her sixteen years in Kiev. But as much as she tried to move forward, her homeland always called out to her. She used to sing Russian lullabies to me when I was little. She would teach me how to pronounce the between *mishka* (bear) and *mishka* (mouse)—it's almost the same word, but the first has a short "i" sound and the second has a long "i" sound. Most importantly, she made sure I spent every summer of my youth surrounded by a community of Russian immigrants. It was her way of staying connected to her past and the closest she could get to sharing it with me.

*Datcha*

While my friends spent summers at sleepaway camp or eating Doritos by their backyard pools, I spent mine barefoot in the Catskills, running over roots in a small Russian Colony called Susan Cottages. The colony is thinly fenced and one of many along a wide, paved road. A singular white sign hangs on a gate by its communal dumpster, naming it in English with small, red letters. The people who live in the colony—most of whom come from Brooklyn, Manhattan, or Long Island—know it as Upstate or *Datcha*. “Susan Cottages” is too neat and processed, like stacks of fat-free cottage cheese in Costco’s freezer section.

A *datcha* is a collection of seasonal or second homes common to Russia and parts of the former Soviet Union. They are getaways from everyday life, where people can spend their time gardening, fishing, and the like. In America, *datchas* are also a way of re-creating a sense of home.

Ours has clusters of connected bungalows that stand like bonfire heaps—they are poorly wired and pointy with nails; the hand-painted swing set has dandruff and the seats, when not falling off, give splinters; the pool is buggy, the tea is buggy, it is common to confuse a beetle for a blueberry. For breakfast, we eat homemade *blinchiki*, which are flat crepes that go well with sour cream, jam, or honey. Kids play imaginary games in the woods, adults watch Russian cable and read the paper, and everyone spends all day swimming in our allotted portion of Kauneonga Lake (the pool is too American). Russian is the preferred language to speak in, but occasionally our language would morph into Frankensteinian combination of Russian and English.

My cousins and I have always agreed that our *datcha* was the biggest and the best. We never ventured into neighboring colonies to find out though; we didn’t feel like we had the right. Alisa, my first cousin on my mother’s side, owns the bungalow to the left of mine. The Levins, a

family of five girls related to Alisa by marriage, used to rent out the bungalow to the right. I lived in the middle, and if we weren't weaving between porches, we communicated by knocking on the walls.

Over time, residents would move in and out—my family included—but when I come back to visit once or twice a summer, some of the most memorable people are still there, making moonshine and weeding out poison ivy. Yulik, who lives in the bungalow cluster next to mine, is a fit man in his late eighties who wakes up at 5 a.m. to go fishing every morning. He is a Holocaust survivor and used to kick at my prissy Bichon Frises through my veranda fence like he was playing Whac-A-Mole; they reminded him of German Shepherds. His domestic partner, Ira, has red hair and always offers me candy—maybe to even things out. Igor and Maya hold “adults-only” dinner parties, and spend their evenings smoking cigars and drinking liquor. Gretta, the ex-president of the colony, used to paint her poodle's toenails a bright red. Sergey, the current president, owns half the bungalows. We are still haunted by his mother, Fanya, a Baba Yaga sort, who terrified everyone including her own grandson.

From the age of two to seventeen, I lived with my mother and whoever my live-in nanny was at the time. My father would drive up in his white Firebird and stay over on the weekends. He was probably the only American who owned real estate in the colony, and the only one who spent time there, for that matter. Alisa still spends her summers in the colony with her mother, Lena. It was Lena's idea, along with my mother's, to find a *datcha* and give their children an opportunity to grow up alongside each other, even if it was for a few months at a time. The Levin children live with Natasha, their live-in nanny, and their parents, Asya and Natan; they work during the week, also visited on weekends.

After my mother passed away, my father rented out our middle bungalow. I started spending my summers working and in backyard pools, and whenever I visited I had to stay with my cousins. I was able to go inside my old bungalow only once, a year after I first moved out, to collect a few abandoned items: invented recipes written in washable marker on printer paper, a photograph of my dad holding me when I was six years old, and a jewelry box and stone turtle that belonged to my mother.

But in the last year, my family sold our bungalow to the Levins, and my mother's best friend, Nina, also an immigrant but from Moscow, moved into their old place with her baby, Thomas. Following the trend, her husband is now the only American in the colony who pops his head in on weekends.

I can now go back to a home that used to be mine, touch the familiar wallpaper, and spend my nights on the veranda with my cousins. The mosquitos still buzz to the sound of children laughing and Russian cable from old TV sets. The morning sun is still white, and shines through moist air. I have entered a place, half-insider, half-outsider, where I am part of the spirit, but still have plenty to ask.

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Datcha, 2017

It has been four years since I have been able to enter my old bungalow. I feel lost in time, but I cannot tell if I am the ghost or if the whole colony spins with spirits. Only small things have changed. A tree by the pool fence is now a stump. The children are slightly older (some are learning to curse) and they follow me around because I have become "the cool college kid" who stopped spending summers here because I have a job or a boyfriend or better school friends, etc. I go hunting for frogs with them for about an hour. If you look closely enough

between the grass blades and *podorozhnik* leaves on the ground, you can usually find some. We keep our eyes tuned for croaks like we are expecting to get text message notifications—the kids these days run around with their I-phones. We spot two frogs before I tell them I have to get going. I'm interviewing Dalia's father, I say. Dalia is always the leader of *datcha* "safaris." She doesn't question me because she is busy trying to decide if it is wrong to capture a frog in a plastic container. I say "bye" and promise I will be at *koster* later tonight if they collect enough sticks to have one. I spent many nights collecting fallen branches to make small campfires when I was their age too.

I grab my notepad, pen, and voice recorder from my backpack and press them to my chest as I approach the steps to my old bungalow. It feels good to have a purpose. I step onto the porch and wave at Natan, who has been waiting on one of the outside couches.

"You're my first interview," I say.

We smile, and go inside.

*Bumazhnik*

Natan

Datcha, 2017.

Natan hides his “Box of Precious Things” in his attic, behind boxes of pink baby clothes and Disney VHS tapes. It is where he keeps things from Russia that he did not ended up needing--silly things, he explains, like pencils, calendars, and drafting equipment. The box is made of cardboard, and is beat up around the corners. It is also from Russia, and once he packed its contents in, he almost never took them out.

Over the phone, he spoke to me of a wallet and a mezuzah, and I had expected him to bring one, if not both of those items to the bungalow colony, or at the very least, a picture of them, but we have begun the interview object-less.

“My box of precious things is far away in the farthest place,” he says, making an attic in a two-story Connecticut home sound like an unexplored corner of a map. “I rarely open it up. I don’t even know if I would have been able to find the box in time.”

We are sitting at the kitchen table in my old bungalow on cushioned metal stools. The tablecloth is spotted with pink, orange, and blue flowers reminiscent of spring-time. I came ready to speak about the objects that belong to Natan and his family, but I cannot help but notice everything in the room that once belonged to me: the pale yellow flower pot that rests on a glass shelf next to my mother’s CD player, magnets of the Rugrats characters--my favorite childhood cartoon--on the aging, yellow refrigerator, the sink that floods when the washing machine is running.

“I did want to bring the wallet to you,” Natan says, slowly, each word a rotation of its own. “But there were too many things in the way.”

“That’s an attic for you.” I chuckle.

“Yes.” The sun beams down on us through the sliding glass doors. Natan squints and does not say anything for several minutes. I shift my body to the right, in case the sun is in his eyes. He adjusts his glasses, and finally, he begins to speak. “So—an object of memory—something that has stayed with me.” He looks at the voice recorder resting between us, strokes his stubby beard, and clears his throat. “Yes, my father’s wallet. It is made of leather, and there is an imprint of the Kremlin on it—the Red Square, in Moscow—with the tall buildings and their tops that look like zephyr. You know, the marshmallow candy.”

I nod, remembering the dessert fondly, more so for its strangeness than its taste. My aunt, Lena, and occasionally other Russian friends and relatives, would bring a plastic bag filled with zephyr, fresh from the Russian market or bakery, when they would come to visit my house in Long Island. Zephyr look like marshmallows that have been twisted to a thin point almost like a Hershey Kiss. They are about the size of an apple and crunch like they have been dehydrated. I never liked them, but I always scraped a bit off the top with my front two teeth in the hopes that I would change my mind.

“I was twenty-two when I left Georgia, which is now the Republic of Georgia. My father passed away when I was six years old, and my brother and I wanted to bring something with us that belonged to him.” He takes his glasses off and folds them neatly on the table. “It might be interesting for you to know that he was a war hero—World War II and he had some medals that he was awarded, but we weren’t allowed to take them. There was a law that you couldn’t take anything issued by the Soviet government after a certain year—I don’t remember exactly which.”

I think of a man, about twenty years younger than Natan, who is in his fifties, with the same brown hair, oval face, and childish cheeks. He was gifted appreciation and respect for his role in the war, and Natan, a father of his own now, had to give it all back.

“We went to his office in Tbilisi,” Natan continues. “He was a contractor—but, of course, all his things had been cleared out except for his desk. The government must have thought it had some value. We found my father’s empty wallet in one of the drawers, and took it.” He puts his glasses back on. There are tears in his eyes. “I hope my little story will be the first chapter in your book. Like I said, I wanted to bring it to you, but it was so far, and I do not usually open up my Box of Precious Things.”

We sit quietly, thinking. I try to picture how he handles the wallet when he does visit his box. Does he open it the way I lift the covers of a freshly printed book—gingerly, and with a reverence for determined fragility?

“But there have been a few times when I did open it,” Natan says. “It’s been so long that sometimes I need to try to remember where I come from. I’ve put souvenirs in it from when I took my family to visit Georgia, and the wallet, that’s part of my memorabilia, too. So, I’ll go to that place. It’s amazing because my father used to hold the wallet in his hands, and now I can hold it in mine. It’s a kind of continuity. I was talking with my wife the other day about it, and I had this strange thought. If something ever happens to me and a criminal investigator or something comes in to search our house...if they found my father’s wallet...they will probably find his fingerprints.”

There is laughing and stomping as Dalia and Yalana, Natan’s youngest daughters, trickle into the kitchen. They slide the glass door behind them without shutting it all the way, and run toward the bin of Barbies on the floor by the kitchen sink. Natan kisses Yalana on the forehead

as she zips by. They freeze, arms deep in plastic, and looking past me. Dalia begins to giggle maniacally. I glance over my shoulder and see Asya, standing on the front porch. She is glaring at the girls through the glass, and motions for them to come back outside with a fierceness that only a mother of five daughters and a dog can have. “Hi, Pappa! Bye, Pappa!” Dalia says. Asya winks at me, and the girls run out, holding their dolls by the hair. Natan and I are alone once more with nothing but our memories to fill up the room.

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### Mezuzah

Stanford, 2012.

The Judaica store is bigger than Natan remembers. Ceramic hand-washing cups and stained dishware sparkle from behind the window, and inside, various menorahs, candle holders, and books line the walls. A religious man is standing behind the counter, wearing a white button down shirt, black pants, and a navy yarmulke. His name tag reads “Yitzy” and is clipped on the left side of his chest.

Natan shuffles over in his plaid shirt and clears his throat. “Hi, would you mind looking at this...” He takes his grandfather’s mezuzah out of his pants pocket, places it on the counter, and smiles, nervously. “Can you tell me if it’s any good?”

“Of course,” Yitzy says. He picks up the mezuzah and tilts his head as he studies it. The mezuzah’s outer casing is handmade, but the details of its design have been lost. Many years ago, back in Tbilisi, Natan had painted over it in white. He had been helping his grandfather redo the walls in his apartment, and he did not pay any attention to the little box that hung on the right side of his grandfather’s door frame. His grandfather was raised more religious than Natan was, though not very. Still, Natan could have asked his grandfather to explain its significance, if he

had noticed it. Only, Natan did not; he painted over it, and now it looks like a sample box of toothpaste.

Yitzy removes the yellowed parchment scroll from the casing, almost surgically, and scans its miniscule Hebrew letters. Natan feels like he is waiting to know his fortune from a cookie. “Wow, this is very old,” Yitzy says.

“Yes, it was my grandfather's.”

Yitzy bites his lip and looks at Natan directly in the eyes. Natan shifts his eyes to the shelves behind the counter. There is a section with Tefillin straps, which he has seen men wrap around their arms in temples and airports. There are cards with Jewish puns, and a large display of mezuzahs almost like his own.

“I’m sorry, friend,” Yitzy says, “but this is not a proper mezuzah. It cannot be used.”

“Why not?”

“For a mezuzah to be kosher and fulfill the commandment, all the letters in the prayer inside—the Shema—must be correct and fully intact. But yours has a splotch of paint on one of the letters. Unfortunately, I don’t think I can scrape it off without damaging the ink underneath.”

Natan’s heart sinks. “So there is nothing that can be done? I was hoping to put it on the door in front my house.” Natan already has one in the front of his house, and in the doorway of every room, but he had been hoping to put up this one specifically; it has spent enough time tucked away in his Box of Precious Things.

“No, I’m sorry. You can’t put it on the door. The best you can do is replace the scroll and put the new one in the casing.”

Before Natan had left Georgia, he had discovered from a friend who was also Jewish, that a mezuzah works as a prayer for God’s protection of the home. When it came time to immigrate,

Natan went to his grandfather's apartment and stripped it off the door from the entrance. He wished more than anything now that he had not painted over it unknowingly. He mutters a "thank you," and drives home. When he arrives, he looks straight past his doorway, and climbs into his attic. He places the mezuzah back in his Box of Precious Things. Perhaps, on another day, he will buy a new scroll.

*Podstakannik*

Asya

Datcha, 2017.

Asya and I are sitting in the kitchen. Natan is standing in the back, hanging a still life of a bowl of fruit onto the wall. They are trying to make the place their own.

Asya plops a short, metal object on the table. It looks like the exoskeleton of a cup, but with loops, leaves, and open spaces. The top rises and falls like a crown, and everything about it curves except for the handle, which juts out from its side in sharp, rectangular segments. It is probably made of silver, but the metal is so rusted it appears to be gold. Perhaps it had been painted, but lost its color to the scratches and chips of time.

“What is it?” I ask.

“A *podstakannik*.”

I try to translate the word. “*Pod*” means “under,” and “*stakan*” means “glass,”—so this is an under-glass, a prototype to insulated mugs.

“It’s called a tea glass holder,” she explains. The English sounds clunky in her mouth. “We all drank tea. We practically ate it. It was our savior during the war. There was nothing to eat a lot of the time, but we always had hot water.”

“And sugar,” Natan adds. He joins us at the table, slowly. He is a man of small words and movements. “Sometimes we would just drink water and sugar.”

“Everybody had these,” Asya continues. “You never knew when you were going to have guests over.”

“We didn’t have cell phones back then.”

“Right, and tea is a quick thing to put together. Add a little bread with butter, or cookies, if you have any. Boom, boom, boom. Good to go. ”

She picks up a plastic bag from underneath the table and unwraps a large glass from the packing paper inside. It is so tall it reminds me of a shaker pint.

“There was only one type of cup—standard and plain for everyone,” Natan says.

Asya flips the cup on its head. There is a faint design that swoops around the body of the glass like a string of script i’s. “This one is not the real thing. ‘Manufactured from Czechoslovakia.’” she reads. “My family got this cup when we around the time we Moscow, so that was in 1973. We probably bought it at a yard sale. I don’t remember now. It was hard to find something that fit.” She slides it into the metal, and the glass shines through like bits of sky between branches.

“We have this picture—where my grandma is sitting.” She looks at the *podstakannik* as if it will give her the approval to go on. “It’s a homey atmosphere. She isn’t wearing anything fancy in the picture—just her eye glasses—and she is drinking from this. *This*.” She clanks the *podstakannik* on the table. “It comes so detailed, but people really had very little. My grandmother never had expensive jewelry, so this is, like, *the thing*. And when I touch it, I think, how is this possible? That my mother touched this. My grandmother touched this.” I watch as she wraps her index, middle, and ring finger around its handle. She lifts it into the air. “You have to hold it with three fingers—like this.”

I try to imagine plump Russian men with gray beards guzzling tea like it’s liquor on an overnight train. The men crack jokes between gulps and peek their noses out of newspapers, *Pravda*, or *Izvestia*. An attendant comes down the aisle selling hot tea for two or three *kopecs*.

Many passengers are asleep on the cushioned, wooden beds. A mother hums a lullaby to her child, a businessman is handed a steaming glass of tea. He wraps his inner three fingers around the *podstakannik* and nods.

Asya passes the *podstakannik* to me and I am caught off-guard by how heavy it is. I've handled many mugs in my lifetime, and have even shown off with an occasional "pinkies out" gesture, but it didn't feel practical, holding it this way. If everyone in Russia can do it, why was it so difficult for me? What piece of knowledge or mutual experience was I locked out of?

Asya removes the cup from its holder and I breathe out, grateful that she took back the weight. I wonder if she stores the objects together back at her home in Connecticut, and if she ever drinks from them. When the house is empty, I can see her picking up the *podstakannik* in the kitchen. It must fit so naturally in her grip.

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### *Dukhi*

Monticello, 2013.

There is a church on Rt. 17 B that has a flea market every Saturday. People rent spots along its circular driveway and bring foldable tables and umbrellas. The shaded ones are always the first to go. A table with turquoise china catches Asya's eye, but she is not here for the junk; she's here to spend a Saturday afternoon with all of her girls and maybe go to the lake after. The church is only ten minutes away from *Datcha*, and the first of a few flea markets that they are planning to go to. It reminds her of day-time bar hopping, only everyone is drunk on bargains.

Asya's youngest, Dalia and Yalana, are rescuing nude Barbies from a basket. Simona and Gesela are hackling for an unexpected pair of designer sunglasses to share, and Shayna, her oldest, is off somewhere to the side, talking on the phone to her new boyfriend. Asya wants to

reel them in like a bouquet of flowers. Instead, she smiles at Natasha, who is dressed for the occasion in a floral blouse, pink lipstick, and prominent green eyeshadow. She is surveying a stand of fake jewelry.

“Let me know if you find any good *dukhi*,” Natasha calls. “Nothing more than five dollars.” Natasha is always looking for perfume.

Asya walks around the driveway and notices collection of yellowing bottles on a table beside a collection of porcelain knick-knacks and random CDs. She picks up a bottle shaped like a horse, and smiles. She has a soft spot for horse trinkets. They reminds her of wind, and the feeling of moving fast.

“You should buy it,” Shayna says, approaching her mother from behind with her cell phone still in hand.

“I’ve bought enough horses to last a lifetime. Anyway, it’s used. I don’t see the appeal.”

“But it might make you irresistible.” She whips her dyed blonde hair behind her shoulders. It looks just like Asya’s, only longer.

Asya laughs. “Maybe I should buy it and spray it on your schoolwork.”

“Cute, mom. But it’s summer.”

The woman behind the table smiles at Asya and Shayna. “They don’t make it anymore,” she interrupts. Her hair is gray and frayed like sprouts. Everything about her, from her arm-pit stained t-shirt to her copper-orange visor looks older than the perfume she is selling.

“It’s a nice horse,” Asya says, “but I was just looking.”

“Go ahead, smell it.” The woman uncaps the perfume.

Asya takes in deep breath and suddenly she is seven-years-old again in Minsk, where her lived before moving to Moscow. It smells just like her. Asya remembers all the times she gently

open the perfume bottle that sat on her grandmother's night stand. She would sniff quickly, and then put it back so that it looked like she had never touched it. It was a scent of hugs, good talks, and boiled potatoes, but to anyone else it would probably smell like flowers.

“How much,” Asya asks.

“Ten dollars,” the woman. “You won't find it anywhere else.”

Asya glances over at Natasha, who is still combing through jewelry. “Five dollars and I'll buy your two of your other bottles.”

“Deal.”

“Shayna, go pick out two more,” Asya says, and opens her wallet to buy a half-used bottle of someone else's scent.

*Kresla*

Lena

Kiev, 1979.

It is October of 1979, and Lena has achieved Head of Family and Criminality by age twenty-two. She sits on the floor of her family's only bedroom and scoops little amber stones into a pile by the base of her armchair. She has a chunk of cushioning to remove.

"*Suka!*" she hears Marik yell from the apartment next door.

The Grinsbergs are arguing again. "*Babnik,*" his wife, Anya, yips back. Lena wonders how anyone can stick it out with a man who has more mouth than face. A beard can only cover so much. "What do you mean we are Refused?" Anya asks.

Lena has heard fights like these before—thin walls make for sad radio stations. As she listens, she feels grateful for every piece of amber that she plans to stash within the foam of her pull-out armchair. She is not a Grinsberg.

"You did something wrong," Anya says. Her voice is as shrill as a tea kettle left to boil. "Those *duraki*, did they think you were someone else? I know of a Grinsberg who lives on Shevchenko—a Misha Grinsberg. Well—it could be a Sasha."

"Anya, we are Refused," Marik repeats.

"Not if there isn't a 'we,'" she tells him. "You are Refused."

"What would that change? *Anichka, Chto s toboy?*"

"Everything. Nothing." she says. For a second it is quiet.

Before being allowed to apply for a visa, applicants are required to quit their jobs. Lena and her younger sister, Mira, have already dropped out of school for a similar reason. Their mother has left her accounting job. But a Refusal is a stain, and even if the decision made on the

Grinsbergs was arbitrary, no one will hire them now. It is hard enough for Jews to get a job the first time around.

A plate crashes next door, like radio static. Lena looks over at her grandmother, Baba Busha, who is wheezing, undisturbed, into a futon a few feet away. The lights still are on—as any good chair surgeon requires—and Lena can hear her sister, Mira, coughing in the adjacent kitchen. The sharp juts of her voice echo into the pots she is sorting. Lena envies her Baba Busha for being able to sleep through it all. In one week, all of their nights will be spent on overnight trains. Chop, Chernivtsi, Bretislav, Venice, Rome; she has the destinations memorized.

Lena and her family were hoping to fly directly to Italy, but the flights were booked and could not accommodate four travelers. The “Brave Four Girls of Three Generations,” as their neighbors have begun to call them, will have to take the railroad. She plans to bring a pack of cigarettes with her. Rumor was you could bribe the conductors to turn on the heat.

Their first stop will be the customs house at the Czechoslovakia border, which is known for refusing immigration on the basis of an undeclared silver spoon. Amber was legal to transport only three months ago, but now she will have to smuggle it. Lena had imagined she would spit on the Ukrainian landscape from outside of the train window—that she would chew on something bitter right before, like ginger, or coffee beans. But now, she fears her spit might swing back.

Lena looks down at her short mountain of yellowish stones. They seem frozen, as if plucked straight from the honeycomb.

Feeling the urge to walk around, she heads into the kitchen to check in on Mira. Her sister's eyes are watery, and pots are scattered on the floor around her. She is supposed to be

separating them into two piles, but instead they surround her in many sizes like a disassembled *matryoshka* doll.

“Can I have a knife?” Lena asks. “Also, it’s late. Where’s Mamma?”

Mira puts an iron pot down without strategy. “I don’t know. Ask the Grinsbergs. Aren’t they fighting?”

“They are, but not about her this time.”

“Oh. What then?”

“Visas.”

Mira stands up and pushes a few pots to the side with her feet to help clear a path to the counter. She opens their silverware drawer, and the few items that are left rattle in the emptiness. Most of their things have been sold to friends and strangers looking for a bargain. There was no point in charging high prices; they cannot leave the country with more than 120 Rubles each. Mira pulls out a bread knife with curled ridges, and hands it to Lena. In a strange way, the bends of the knife match her sister’s brown, puffy curls. Lena’s own hair is much darker--almost black--and ruler straight.

“I don’t know if this will work,” Lena says, studying the knife.

“There isn’t a lot to choose from.” Mira reaches into her pants pocket for a soggy handkerchief.

“Fine.”

“Just make sure you hand it back to me directly,” Mira says. “I don’t want there to be a wound in our relationship.”

Lena rolls her eyes and grabs a white rag and a sewing kit from a nearby shelf.

“Say ‘yes,’” Mira demands.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to fit so many pots in the storage box. We only get one of those, you know.”

Lena leaves the kitchen and returns to her armchair. She begins to slice out a small square in the material with the knife. She feels like she’s back in primary school, drawing shapes. As she cuts, she imagines a colorful market place in Venice. No one in the Soviet Union wants amber anymore, but whispers behind tea cups have told her that people in Italy will buy it.

She takes out a block of spongy material, grabs the kitchen rag, and begins to wrap up the stones. Tying the end of the fabric with string, she places the bundle inside the box-shaped hole. The extra foam covers the amber perfectly once she slices off a bit of the bottom. After sewing it up, she takes a look at her work. You cannot tell the chair has been tampered with. The stones are safe and secure, lodged like a plastic heart inside a teddy bear.

Lena wonders if they will all be arrested if the government officials find the amber. She listens to Baba Busha sleep, and they are kinder to women. If not, Lena is prepared to take the blame.

Mira joins Lena in the bedroom, and holds out her hand. “*Nozh.*”

“Your superstitions are stupid,” Lena says, but gives back the knife anyway. It is past eleven o’clock now, and it might be another one of those nights when her mother does not come home. She turns off the lights, climbs onto armchair-now-bed, and pulls a blanket over her body.

“Do you feel like the princess and the *garoshine*?” Mira asks.

“No, all I feel is weight.”

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*Sanki*

Kiev, 1965.

Lena skips down the tall, stone steps of her primary school, and counts each one out loud. Last week she counted thirty-five, but she wants to be sure. When she gets to the bottom she waves to Maria. “*Proshchay, Mariotcka!*”

Maria smiles and runs home in the opposite direction. Her two braids swish against the bottom of her back, and Lena considers growing out her hair. She reaches the bottom of the steps and settles on thirty-five.

“Lenotcka!” she hears her mother call from the school gates.

Lena looks at her with surprise. Her mother is holding a rope that attaches to a sled, and on it, Baby Mira is wrapped in a blanket tight as gauze, crying into the icy wind. Lena walks over to them.

“Were you singing?” her mother asks

“No, I was counting.”

“Oh, well, you should try sometime. It’s such a wonderful talent. I used to sing you know.”

Lena shrugs her shoulders. “I think Mira has the lungs for it.”

They set out homeward and the city centre begins to bleed into a large farmland, where the *katoliki* are allowed to grow crops. That’s her least favorite part to walk through because there usually aren’t many people to say “hello” to by the time she gets out of school.

Houses and apartment buildings empty from an otherwise wide sky, and it is dark by the time they reach the farmland. No one is outside, and all that can be heard is Mira’s persistent screaming from the sled behind them. Lena’s boots are deep in snow.

“Mira, enough,” her mother pleads.

“Is she cold?” Lena asks, but she is unsure whether her had mother heard her. The wind is rushing loudly, and Mira, though small, is the competitive sort. “Did she nap today?”

“I don’t know.”

“We’re almost home, right?” her mother asks.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Lena takes a deep breath. “Mamma, why did you come get me today?”

“What do you mean?” Her mother’s blue eyes crumple. “I pick you up from school all the time.”

“No, you don’t. Is anything wrong?”

“I think I was lonely.”

Lena does not respond and her mother grips the rope of the sled a little tighter. Lena watches the trail of the sled for a while. She loves the way their metal blades make crisp patterns in the snow, keeping track of their travels. This one has a small wooden top just like the one from *Morosko*, only that sled was enchanted and could slide on its own.

Her hair keeps sticking to her face, but she thinks of the tea she can make for herself when she gets home. She’ll sit on her armchair and read *Neznaika*, or maybe practice her math. Buildings begin to reappear. She closes her eyes and listens to the sound of the sled breaking away snow. That’s all there is—a natural kind of white noise.

Lena stops. She tugs on her mother’s arm and looks at the empty sled behind her. Somewhere along the way, on ground of the deserted farmland, Mira is wailing into the unforgiving cold. Lena turns around, and her mother follows.

*Mishka Kosolapy*

## Evelina

Brooklyn, 2017.

Evelina's marriage contract looks like it has been drawn with magic marker. The Hebrew word, *Ketubah*, heads the page in orange bubble letters, but the rest of the text is small and meticulously inked above penciled lines. This is not the work of a child. It has been drawn by a hand who has mastered symmetry in speed. Somewhere in Tbilisi, in 1965, a Rabbi had sat in the secrecy of his bedroom or study, drawing borders with little blue birds, Jewish stars, and oval suns for Jewish couples, like Evelina and her husband, Gesel, who were denied the right to a religious wedding.

There are gaps in the writing, left blank for names, dates, and signatures. Evelina's are filled in with a blue pen. It interrupts the black, block letters in a way that is reminiscent of fill-in-the-blank homework assignments.

Evelina puts on her reading glasses and pulls the marriage contract close to her chest. She studies it carefully, and then laughs. "I don't know what any of it says," Evelina admits. "I just knew that I needed to sign it. Where—I don't know."

We are in the living room of her small, one-bedroom apartment. Lena, and her daughter, Alisa, have come over to visit, as well. They are sitting on the couch, listening, and eating Georgian-style layered honey cake. Evelina is Alisa's grandmother on her father's side. She is not my grandmother directly, but I like to think of her as one. Her hair is fluffy and white. She is caring, but blunt, and within the first ten minutes of my visit, she has already offered me soup, vinaigrette, peppers, carrots, peaches, oranges, and the honey cake, the last of which I happily agreed to have, along with a cup of black tea.

Evelina closes her eyes and smiles to herself. I notice she has dimples. “My wedding took place at home. It was a secret in that way. All my friends and family were squeezed into one room, and when the Chuppah was put up, I walked around it and laughed. At first, I didn’t understand what it was for. I had never seen one before.” There is a youthfulness in Evelina’s voice as she speaks, a tinge of romance. She scoots her chair back and stands up from the living room table. “Can I get you more tea? Cake? Fruit? Anything--just tell me what you want.” She is already halfway to the kitchen.

“Baba, show her the candy wrapper,” Alisa says, after swallowing a forkful of sponge and cream.

Evelina stops in her path. “Alisa, why did you tell her?” She giggles like a child.

“Because it’s interesting.”

“It’s interesting?”

“Yeah, we all want to hear.”

Evelina turns to me. “Cherries? Strawberries? What do you want? What do you like?”

“She hates to talk about it,” Alisa says.

I accept another cup of tea, and Evelina smiles. She boils more water in the kitchen, and when she returns and pours me a cup, she looks as though she is about to sit down, but then she changes her mind and walks to a dresser behind me that is holding up her TV. She opens the top drawer, pulls out Tefillin, and puts it on the table beside the marriage contract. Its brown, leather straps are clumped around its small, black box like an oversized bow. “This was Gesel’s,” she says, and sits down.

“Was he religious?” I ask, tentatively. Gesel had died sometime before 1982, which was the year when Evelina immigrated with her two sons, Natan, and Samuel, Alisa’s father.

Evelina waves her hand like she is brushing my question out of the air. “No, there was no such thing. Practicing Judaism was illegal, so most people did not continue their family’s customs. I don’t know if he ever used it or knew what it was.”

I take a few more sips of my tea and hear a familiar scratching of wood on wood. Evelina has moved out of her chair again. She cannot sit with an object for too long. “What else can I give you? What else do you want?”

“It’s not really about giving, Baba,” Alisa explains. “You have to be willing to really talk about it.”

“Can you show me the candy wrapper that Alisa mentioned?” I ask.

Evelina thinks for a moment and laughs. “I have never showed it to anyone before, and now I am showing it to you.” She heads into her bedroom. There is rustling, and then Evelina is back in the living room with a Ziploc bag in her hand. She opens the bag and takes out a faded blue candy wrapper. It has been folded into a perfect square about the size of a quarter, and each side is perfectly creased and without tear. The wrapper is spotted with little brown bears. To my surprise, I recognize the design immediately; it’s a *Mishka Kosolapy*, or, a Clumsy Bear.

I am hit with a remembered smell of rich chocolate and walnuts, and the memory of my mother coming home from day trips to Brighton Beach. She would bring me back a bag of these *Mishkas*, or Bears, —as they are called for short—from the Russian market. American candy never compared.

Evelina places the wrapper down on an open space of table in between the marriage contract and Gesel’s Tefillin. I stare at these three objects, relics from a lover’s past. We all look, even Lena, who has barely said a word throughout the entire visit. There are tears in Evelina’s eyes.

“Gesel gave that candy to her on the very first day they met,” Alisa says. “Baba was telling me all about it yesterday. He gave it to you right before he left on a train back to St. Petersburg, right?” Alisa’s smile takes over her entire face.

Evelina nods, and smiles, too, but hers is subtle—a small lift of the lip. “He was going back to Leningrad—where he lived at the time. I went with him to say goodbye.”

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### *Rama*

Brighton Beach, 2015.

Evelina likes that she can walk to Brighton for her oranges and the Russian newspaper. Her shopping endeavors are not limited to these items—sometimes she wants cake, thread, or ingredients for borscht and *olivier*. She is thankful she is fit enough to still do so much on her own. It doesn’t matter how many times Natan offers to buy her groceries and bring them to Brooklyn. He lives in Connecticut—what is he going to do that nonsense for?

Three elderly Russian women are huddled together on the narrow street. She catches them mid-gossip.

“Masha brings her children over when I ask,” says a woman with spindly black hair that keeps falling into her face. “They are as much mine as they are hers, after all.”

“That’s not exactly true, Fanya,” says another, dressed in a winter coat to shield herself from the light spring breeze. Their Russian accents are pleasantly heavy. The third woman does not contribute to the conversation. She is trying to balance several blue plastic bags on her doughy arms.

The first woman smirks. “Well, without me, there wouldn’t be a Masha, and if I didn’t move us here, then there wouldn’t be an Alex to marry my Masha. So, Olya and Jonathan are

mine, first and foremost. I do not see how you can disagree. You are just upset your Lili never had any children.”

Evelina steps off the curb and onto the dusty, black road, thinking of her own two boys and her six grandchildren. She feels sad for Fanya with the coat, who did not get to have the experience of receiving crayon scribbles and school photographs in the mail. Maybe she will let Natan to bring her groceries if he brings the whole family.

Evelina approaches the grocery store where she buys her Russian newspapers from Igor, the flirty cashier, who is younger than Evelina, but too old to sound romantic.

*“Previet, Solnishka.”*

“Hi, Ivan. How is Irina?” she asks, in reference to his tabby.

“At home. She had an off day with the fish.” He points to the stand under ice in front of his shop, and laughs. Evelina has never seen Irina in the store, but Ivan talks about her daily. There are many bald men with white whiskers who work on the block, but none are quite like him. Ivan hands Evelina a newspaper, and she pulls out two dollars from her wallet.

Ivan smiles and pockets one of the bills. “You are stunning. Your blue blouse really makes you stand out.”

Evelina smiles back and replies curtly, “I am happy you can tell the difference between me and the plastic bags rolling around on the street.”

They say their goodbyes and Evelina begins walking toward a cleaner store to buy her produce. As she scans the shops, she notices an antique shop she had never paid attention to before. In the window, there is a silver frame—her silver frame, or at least, an identical replica of the one she had left in Tbilisi.

Evelina forgets about her oranges and walks inside the store. Bells jingle above. She makes shy eye contact with the store owner, and picks up the frame from the the window ledge. It has the same metallic arch with circular etchings running up the sides. The gem-shaped picture case rests right in the middle of the frame, like an oversized pendant. She used to keep a photograph of her mother in the frame, and the bend of the glass had a magnifying effect. It seems that the only difference between this frame and her own is that this one holds a picture of a bird.

Natan and Samuel used to play with the frame when they were little boys. Sometimes they would make planes out of paper and paint them, but it was often the case that they would pick up this frame instead, and thrash it through the air. Frozen in the unexpected feeling of loss, she reminds herself that her boys were already adults by the time they left Georgia. It would not have been practical to bring the frame. It would have taken up space, and immigrants could not take more than one suitcase out of the country. Her thoughts float to Gesel, a mental action she normally resists, and she wishes that he had not fallen ill, that he had survived and moved to America with them.

Evelina feels like the frame is hers even though she hasn't bought it. She wants to take it home, put her mother's picture in it, and put it on her dresser. Maybe her younger grandchildren will pretend it is a plane for their dolls if she suggests it. Without looking at the price tag, Evelina carries the frame to the store owner.

Natasha

*Fotografiya*

Datcha, 2017.

Natasha is sitting on the porch in Mira's old rocking chair, watching TV, and sipping raspberry tea. Christmas lights hang along the porch roof, a small touch to make the place her own. It is after nine-thirty, and Dalia and Yalana are already pretending to sleep. She cannot hear them over the Russian TV, which is blasting embarrassingly due to an uncooperating volume button, but she knows they are camped in one of their tiny bedrooms, cackling over their toys and iPads. Natasha plans to send one of the girls to walk along the path that circles the colony tomorrow to see how far the sound reaches. Everyone must think she is deaf or, at the very least, inconsiderate. She peers over her shoulder to see if she is disrupting anyone from their sleep, as if she can see through the spongy, wooden shingles of the other bungalows.

There is nothing she can do about it tonight, she decides. Natasha's two boys have been long married, but she feels like a tired parent, still. She never guessed that being a mother would mean she would have to mother other children in order to support her own. "I'm moving to America for two years," she remembers saying. "I'll work, and I'll come home." She wasn't making enough money teaching music to poor children in Georgia, and even as a politician, her husband, Alexi, had a similar fate. Natasha laughs to herself. She has lived in America for over twenty years now.

Natasha closes her eyes, and lets the sound drown out her thoughts until she can hear nothing but the roar of the "B" list Russian actors. The relief of memory is momentary, and she remembers the day her boy, Irakli, had a simple cold and she did not have the means to make

him a proper cup of tea. Hoping her movements will help her mind forget, Natalia shuts the TV off and walks to the bathroom. But it seems the walking only frees her thoughts further.

“Mama, my throat hurts. It hurts.” She remembers his high pitched voice and every snuffle. There was such a sweetness to him, and all she wanted to do at the time was wrap her arms around his little body, and spoil him with something reasonable. Cookies, cake—they didn’t have much of that—but a cup of tea? They had been out of sugar for weeks, and could not afford to buy any more. She poured him a cup, warm, but bitter. He scrunched his face with every sip.

Natasha’s work for Asya and Natan is hard, but she earns enough money to send home, and over the years, they have become her family. She thinks of the hours she has put in, teaching Gelesa, Dalia, and Yalana how to play the guitar and the piano. Shayna, and Simona, run to her for advice, and with gifts in hand from their college towns. She has been with these children from the moment they were born, and she is as much theirs as they are hers. “That’s my Nata,” Gesela used to say when she was younger. *My Nata*.

Natasha brushes her teeth and stares in the mirror. Lately she has begun to see her mother in the mirror. She never paid attention to their resemblance at nineteen, thirty, or even fifty. But now that Natasha is fifty-five, she can see it. Her plump arms, the arch of her nose, her hands and stubby fingers—her reflection has finally matched up with the photograph of her mother that she keeps between the pages of her Russian to English dictionary. Natasha hopes her boys have nice photographs of her, too, but she does not think about it for too long. She cannot bear to think about the possibility that she could die, unexpectedly, and seas apart, like her own mother did.

Natasha leaves the bathroom and stands in front of the door to Dalia’s room. The girls know what this means without her needing to say anything.

“Nata, Nata, no! Five more minutes,” Dalia pleads, without looking up from her iPad.

“Enough,” Natasha says sternly, but on the inside, she is feeling soft.

“But I just need to bring this one dog to the—”

“Puffy Pug isn’t sick anymore,” Yalana interrupts. Her eyes are wide with urgency. If we don’t bring him to the dog park, he’ll be lonely and he won’t feel good again.” They are playing some sort of virtual veterinarian game

“Five minutes,” Natasha says. She smiles once her back is turned, and walks into her bedroom, which is only a step away. The rooms have been constructed so closely that there are no hallways. Natasha sits on her bed, and pulls out the black and white photograph of her mother from her dictionary. Her mother is dressed in a long coat but you can only see the top half of it. She is outside, and her eyes are not quite looking forward. It seems like she is looking back at the house—waiting for Natasha or her brother to come outside maybe, or checking to make sure everything is calm and everyone is fine. Her smile is warm. Forgive me, Natasha thinks to herself, for leaving, for needing to, for nothing in particular.

Yalana enters the bedroom and Natasha fumbles to put the photograph away. Yalana yawns and crawls into the bed and Natasha lies down beside her. They sleep side-by-side as they do every night, even though there are enough beds to go around.

## Coda

Here marks the completion of my first version of a manuscript that I plan to continue to develop alongside further research. The objects and characters appearing thus far were selected based on geographical convenience, familial links, and mood (as opposed to muse). I have interviewed other family members and friends whose stories I plan to include in the future. I am also considering the possibility of interviewing Russian immigrants who I am not as closely connected to.

Going forward, I will delve deeper into the history of the Russian diaspora, as well as study of material culture. I will continue to work on my craft as a writer in graduate school, during which I plan to stay committed to my search for objects and my drive to share stories like these and do them the justice they deserve. I also hope that one day, I will have the privilege of publication.

## Translation of Objects and Other Russian Words

Objects:

*Bumazhnik* — wallet

*Dukhi* — perfume

*Fotografiya* — photograph

*Koster*— campfire

*Kresla* — armchair

Mezuzah — a scroll of parchment inscribed with a Jewish prayer which is protected by a case.

The case is hung on every doorpost in a Jewish home to provide protection from god and serve as a sign of faith.

*Mishka* (long ‘i’)— bear

*Mishka Kosolapy* — Clumsy Bear, a brand of chocolate candy

*Mishka* (short “i’)— mouse

*Podorozhnik*— small oval leaves that grow alongside grass and dandelions. In Russia, they are known to help with healing small cuts and are often used like bandages if none are available.

*Podstakannik* — a tea glass holder

*Rama* — frame

*Remen* — belt

*Sanki* — sled

Russian Words/Phrases:

*Baba Yaga*—an old and straggly looking witch in Slavic folklore, who lives deep in the forest, in a hut that has chicken legs and can walk.

*Babnik* — slang for “ladies’ man”

*Blinchiki* — flat crepes, like pancakes but much thinner.

*Chto s toboy*—what is with you?

*Datcha* — a nickname for Susan Cottages, the Russian bungalow colony in White Lake, NY, where I spent my summers. More generally, a *datcha* is collection of seasonal or second homes common to Russia and previous parts of the Soviet Union. They are getaways from everyday life, where people can spend their time gardening, fishing, and the like. In America, *datchas* are also a way of re-creating a sense of home.

*Garoshine*—pea

*Izvestia* — a high-circulation daily broadsheet newspaper for the Communist Party

*Katoliki* — Catholics

*Morozko* — *Jack Frost*, a Soviet film made in 1964 based on the traditional Russian fairy tale,

*Morozko*

*Neznaika* — a children’s book written by Soviet writer, Nikolay Nosov. The title of the book is the name of the main character, which translates to “Dunno,” “Know-nothing,” or “Ignoramus.”

*Nozh* — knife

*Olivier* — a traditional Russian salad made with potatoes, vegetables, eggs, meat, and mayonnaise

*Pravda*—formally official Russian broadsheet newspaper of the Communist Party

*Privet* — hello

*Proshchay* — goodbye

*Solnishka* — sunshine

*Suka* — bitch