

My Favourite Poison

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Chapter One

Unexplained deaths weren't such a big deal in those days. Come to think of it, they're not such a big deal nowadays either. But back then Russians, who are bleak at the best of times, were in a shortage-of-everything-fuelled pit of despair and most of them felt that death was probably the easiest way out. You can imagine the shrugs of the old ladies, muttering under their cheap fur hats, their hands purple and swollen from the cleaning and the hauling of string bags, saying that she was probably drunk, she always was, that that boyfriend of hers was one of the bandits flogging black-market food aid and, anyway, hadn't she been into prostitution? None of this, as it turned out, was true.

The tests showed that she'd been as sober as a judge (not a Russian one). How they can tell this after a grizzly exhumation I have no idea. But they were pretty clear about it and who am I to be arguing? Especially now. And there was zero evidence that she had ever been desperate enough to go on the game. Then the teachers at her son's nursery said she'd been a doting mother who always turned up on time, was friendly with some of the other mothers and gave

thoughtful, but not lavish, presents to the staff before the New Year holidays. When questioned (by self), the neighbours in her block who were unlucky enough still to be alive denied ever having seen strange men entering or leaving her apartment. They also denied, untruthfully, spreading rumours to the contrary. As far as they were aware, they now said, the little boy's father was the man who'd shared the flat with pretty Katiusha, though he was often away.

Katiusha, *kudryavaya*, with the blonde curly hair, who was found at the bottom of the stairs next to the mail boxes in a sea of her own blood. It was the *makalatura* collector, the waste-paper man, who found her and dropped his sack in horror. He was immediately arrested and roughed up at the police station. In typical Russian weirdness he was more pissed off about not getting his sack back than about being wrongfully arrested and brutalised. They kept the hessian sack as evidence. Though as evidence of what never quite became clear.

Her boyfriend was arrested too, obviously. Well, it always does turn out to be the husband or boyfriend. Like that woman they dragged out of Coniston Water thirty years after she'd disappeared and it took another eight years for them to actually pin it on her glaringly guilty murderer of a husband.

But actually the guy had not been around when she fell. There were no head wounds or blunt instrument wounds or any wounds at all really, apart from those inflicted by the fall itself. In the end, nothing seemed to suggest foul play (I love this use of 'foul'). Only the incredible amount of blood, seeping into the lift shaft according to the cleaner, pointed to something darker. Even her clothes, cut from the body by pathologists, were drenched. The coroner concluded that the most likely cause of death was a sudden brain haemorrhage (an *infarkt*) followed by a dramatic, and unusually

violent, fall down the stairs. The bleeding remained unexplained but there were euphemistic references to ‘women’s affairs’ which suggested that a miscarriage might have been precipitated by the accident.

The boyfriend must have taken the poor kid straight to a home because he was never seen again, apparently – left to grow up in care. The word ‘care’ here used in its loosest possible sense. In fact, in no sense that in any way relates to the generally accepted meaning of the word. Russian orphanages are not nice places. But you already know that. I was tempted, at the time, to try and find the boy, assuming his name hadn’t been changed. But, instead, I allowed myself the fantasy that a childless couple from Kentucky had come over and adopted him and that he was, this minute, eating cookies and drinking milk at his kitchen table, getting ready to go out into the garden to kick a ball around with his dad before tucking into a delicious mom-made supper of cornbread and chicken wings or whatever it is they eat in Kentucky. Never mind that he was more likely to be sniffing glue in a Petersburg cellar and being pimped out by a vint addict.