



ADULT FICTION
WRITING CONTEST
2016 ANTHOLOGY

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Sub-Zero

Yuri Turgenev stepped off the train at his destination feeling more exiled than liberated from Moscow. Hard-packed snow, an endless expanse as hospitable as concrete, greeted him. Reminding himself that misgivings after an accomplished act were useless, Yuri folded a creased copy of *The Siberian Times* under his arm and hefted his duffel bag over his aching shoulder.

A figure emerged from the train station and strode toward him.

“Yuri.” The voice was deep, commanding.

“So, Mikhail. You are my welcoming committee?”

“Oh, sorry. Did you miss the parade?”

Breathing air that seemed to form ice crystals in his lungs, Yuri gave thanks for his thermal underwear. He dropped his duffel bag onto the snow. The two men embraced then Mikhail scrutinized Yuri’s face. “So like your father. The same cleft in the chin, the strong jaw and the penetrating blue eyes. I don’t know about the hair though. It could use a trim.”

“Always regulations, even in this remote outpost.”

“We’ll discuss regulations later.” Then, always in charge, Mikhail nodded toward a compound of single story buildings near the forest’s edge. “Come along. You’ll bunk with me

tonight. Then at first light we'll pay a visit to a cabin in the forest to discuss our most perplexing inquiry of the moment."

As they settled in comfortably before the blazing fireplace, a glass of vodka in each man's hand, Yuri said, "Tell me more about the inquiry you mentioned."

"Ivan Toltoov, a trapper, disappeared six weeks ago after a particularly nasty snowstorm. His wife, Raina, refuses to return to town because she's sure he'll turn up."

"What do *you* think?"

Mikhail sighed. "The worst naturally. Ivan's in his late fifties, still thinks he's a young sprout. The old fool probably misjudged his stamina. His dog, a husky, made it back to the cabin, but Ivan didn't."

"You've searched?"

"Of course. Nothing."

"No question of foul play?"

Mikhail chuckled. "Life in the big cities has warped your viewpoint, I'm afraid. We're mostly a peace loving community. You'll see."

*

Ivan Toltoov's wife, Raina, greeted Yuri and Mikhail at the cabin door. A pleasant faced middle-aged woman with bright inquiring eyes, she asked, "Is there news?" A black and white husky lounging in a patch of sunlight on the porch raised his head and eyed the two men suspiciously and then looked to Raina for a signal she approved of their visitors. "Don't worry about Boris. He's really very sociable when he gets to know you."

Mikhail took the lead. “Sorry to raise your hopes, Raina. This visit is simply to introduce you to my successor. I’m retiring soon and Yuri Turgenev, my colleague, will take over my duties, such as they are.”

Raina clasped Mikhail’s hand. “Don’t belittle what you do for our little community. You know how we all depend on you.” She moved through the doorway and motioned them to follow.

As the trio moved further into the warmth of the room, Yuri had to duck his head to avoid strange plant-like protrusions hanging upside down from the low ceiling.

Raina laughed. “Mind my herbs. I gather them at the end of the season and hang them up to dry. Nothing goes to waste out here.”

The faint aroma of mixed spices overhead blended with the pungent scent rising from the cooking pot and permeated the room. Raina said, “Time for sustenance after your journey. The pot is always simmering so I’ll be ready for Ivan’s return. Sit down and I’ll serve up the stew.”

Even had they considered a polite refusal, there was time enough to discuss Ivan’s disappearance after a hearty meal. And it was. Accompanied by freshly baked bread and strong hot tea, the two bachelors soon felt replete. Unfortunately, however, nothing new surfaced concerning Ivan’s departure.

Before taking their leave, Mikhail grasped Raina’s hand and said, “You really must return to town. It’s been six weeks after all ...”

Raina expressed her alarm. “Oh, no. I couldn’t. Ivan might return at any moment with a wild tale of his survival in the wilderness. I must be here to greet him.”

Mikhail knew when her obstinacy trumped his persuasive powers and relented. “At least assure me that you plan to visit the Medical Train when it arrives next month.”

Raina nodded. “Of course. It’s not often that we have the opportunity. I promise you, I’ll be there.”

“Well, just to be sure, we’ll ask Yuri to escort you in case Ivan hasn’t returned.” Mikhail gave Yuri a meaningful look.”

Yuri had no idea what the medical train was but since it seemed like a reasonable request, he replied, “It would be my pleasure.”

“That’s settled then. I won’t have to worry about you while I’m restoring my energy at Lake Baikal.”

“Ah, a well-deserved rest, my friend. Enjoy yourself, but don’t stay away too long.”

“Don’t worry. I’m leaving you in good hands.”

*

Over the next few weeks under Mikhail’s tutelage, Yuri became acquainted with the small town of Brym and its local inhabitants. Not much to speak of in the way of crime turned up largely due to the severity of the winter. Most folks contented themselves by staying indoors and minding their own business. When breaks occurred in the weather the two law enforcement officers made their way through the woods to Raina’s cabin. Mikhail confided to Yuri that regardless of outward appearances, Raina’s health was in question. He reminded Yuri to escort Raina to the Medical Train during his absence.

Yuri agreed and said, “I’ll try to convince her to return to her apartment in town.”

Mikhail grimaced. “Good luck! Raina seems more determined than ever to continue her vigil at the cabin.”

Left to his own devices after Mikhail’s departure to Lake Baikal, Yuri found that he looked forward to the unexpected patches of sunlight in the usually grim sky that signaled a

reprieve from the weather. On these occasions he journeyed to the cabin in the woods usually armed with a bag of onions, or a few rabbits he'd hunted during his off-duty hours.

On his most recent visit Yuri's offer to chop wood to replenish Raina's dwindling supply met with resistance.

Raina scoffed. "I'm quite capable of doing it myself."

"Yes, I know. But do this as a favor to me. An old injury to my shoulder often bothers me. The exercise will get the blood flowing again ... reduce the pain." Yuri's discomfort troubled him intermittingly. Radiating waves of pain, no doubt encouraged the frigid temperatures and the general malaise of the winter months, were increasingly troublesome.

"A kind of therapy, you mean?"

Yuri nodded. "It would do me a world of good."

Raina considered this for a moment, nodded her head and smiled shyly. "Very well then. Work up an appetite. I have a lovely soup simmering. "I expect you to eat two bowls."

Yuri hefted the axe and soon developed a rhythm broken only by the removal of his outer jacket and pauses to wipe the sweat from his brow. The physical activity became a meditation. He felt a release of the tension in his shoulder and a sense of calm that had eluded him since the accident that ended all hope of continuing his former career. This new direction in his life agreed with him.

*

As promised Yuri escorted Raina to the line of locals awaiting a doctor's visit at the Medical Train's designated stop. Her energy flagged at times. When this occurred Yuri wondered about the underlying health problem that Raina chose not to discuss. Mikhail avoided the subject whenever Yuri brought it up. This only increased Yuri's curiosity.

As the weeks passed Yuri noted no change in Raina's unflagging optimism. She waited patiently for Ivan's return and only agreed to come into town for the occasional festival or community gathering. She tired easily but always put on a brave face and managed to hide her own worries while eagerly discussing the lives of the locals, a new baby, a marriage, the outrageous price of butter. Boris remained by her side but occasionally Yuri coaxed him outside for a little roughhousing in the snow. Every mindful of his duty, Boris usually terminated these sessions after a playful half-hour and sought out his charge. Then, once again, Raina returned to the cabin.

*

Snow fell relentlessly over the last week. Confined in his quarters Yuri's restlessness grew and that's probably why he misinterpreted a brief glimpse of sunshine as he made preparations for a trip to the woods. The weather held for the first hour. Then, just as he rounded the curve to the cabin, the sky grew molten and snow began to fall heavily.

"Come in out of this awful weather!" Raina clasped Yuri's hands and led him to the table. "We will have a meal but first I must ask a favor."

Yuri laughed. "For you Raina, anything."

"Don't be rash. You haven't heard what I have to say."

"This sounds serious."

"Yes. This is my moment of truth. It's long overdue. I'm ashamed that I've misled you."

The implication of Raina's words nudged Yuri's thought processes into high gear. "Have you misled me about Ivan's disappearance?"

“Oh, he’s gone.” Raina rubbed her hand on her apron then smoothed her skirt, her eyes averted.

“I don’t understand. Explain what you mean.”

“I’ll show you.” Raina indicated his usual chair at the table where’s he’d enjoyed so many conversations with the small, enigmatic woman.

“Sit. I have something to show you.” Without another word Raina left the room but returned moments later carrying a large beautifully decorated box. She placed it on the table in front of Yuri.

“Open it.”

Yuri reached toward the box, then hesitated. He caught Raina’s eyes and held her gaze. “Are you sure?” In fact, Yuri wasn’t sure he wanted to look inside the box. Surely, it was too small and too light to hold a body. The body of Ivan Turnov who went missing months ago. But, then, what might it contain?

Raina shrugged, placed her hands on top of the box and sighed. She sat down in a chair opposite Yuri. “I will tell you a story. Then you will decide where to place blame. Isn’t that your job after all? Parceling out the good from the bad.”

A somber question leaving no loopholes for Yuri to grasp. “Good? Bad?” Yuri stroked Boris pensively when the dog curled up by his chair. “And then consider extenuating circumstances. Is that what’s on your mind?”

Raina laughed, once again her light-hearted self. “Ah, yes. Extenuating circumstances. There were so many, it’s hard to know where to begin.”

“Just make a start. Boris and I will listen attentively.” Boris’s ears perked up at the mention of his name but otherwise he seemed content to lie at Yuri’s feet.

Raina's eyes took on a faraway look as she settled more comfortably in her chair. "Ivan was a proud man."

Yuri considered Raina's use of the past tense when she mentioned Ivan's name. This left little doubt in his mind about Ivan's fate. What remained were the circumstances surrounding his demise.

"We were making preparations for another hard winter. It was mostly a happy time. Hard work. Sustaining food. A little wine and candle light on the dark nights. Ivan's memory wasn't what it used to be. And there were other signs. I tried to ignore them at first, find some excuse to explain them away but in my heart, I knew. His mind was slipping away, going somewhere I couldn't reach."

"Why didn't you move back into town? At least you'd be around people who could help."

Raina gave Yuri a pitying look as if to say *how little you know*.

"As I said, Ivan was a proud man. A man who had accomplished his own small dreams and he couldn't face aging, losing his mental faculties, becoming frailer, not able to do what he once was."

Yuri thought of his own father, also a proud man. He wondered if time was taking its toll on him, as well. He made a mental note to be kinder to his father on his next visit to Moscow.

Raina continued, "Ivan no longer went into town. He couldn't play chess anymore. His cronies tried to tempt him but rather than let them in on his secret, Ivan put on a false front. Berated them for wasting time and brushed off his old friends. It was a relief for him to stay out here in the wilderness where probing eyes couldn't witness his deterioration. His hermit-like

existence suited him for a time but then he'd grow restless, angry with himself when he believed he wasn't the man he once was."

"How did you cope with his behavior?"

Raina shook her head and sighed. "With gentleness and kindness, I hope. Most of the time. It wasn't always easy."

Yuri nodded, but made no comment.

"Then I sensed a change in Ivan. A determination. That's when he made me promise..."

"What did he ask of you?"

"He wanted to be part of the community again. Part of the everyday give and take, part of the troubles and good times he'd left behind. He asked to be buried near the old church next to the train station so the thunder from the train tracks would rattle his old bones every time it passed. Come summer, he made me promise to do this for him. But I'm afraid I've run out of time."

Yuri's mind flitted from thought to thought never holding on to one long enough to form a reasonable response.

Raina recognized his confusion and nodded toward the box etched with colorful designs sitting between them on the table.

"Open it," she said quietly.

With a trembling hand Yuri reached toward the lid, but his grasp was firm when he pried the top off the box. A human skull, fully intact, lay on top of a jumble of detached bones that nestled compactly in the, for lack of a better word, casket.

Silence engulfed the two as they viewed the remains of Ivan Tolto. Then Yuri said, "The first question that comes to mind, Raina, is how did Ivan die?"

“It happened just after the second big storm of the season. Ivan and I were tucked in safely, nice and warm, in the cabin. We’d had a full day of work and sleep came easily to me. I slept very soundly but shortly before dawn Boris became quite restless and wanted to go out. Not out the front door. He insisted only the back door would do. He seemed so agitated that I lit a lantern and followed him outside. Ivan lay sprawled in the snow not far from the cabin.”

“Dead?”

“Without question. I don’t know when he left our bed but he was quite frozen by the time I found him.”

“And then?”

Raina smiled benevolently. “Why then, of course, I followed Ivan’s wishes.”

“And how did you do that?”

Quite calmly with the same sweet smile on her face Raina replied, “I dismembered Ivan’s body. I’m my father’s daughter, after all. He was a butcher in Irkutsk.”

Yuri was stunned. None of his fanciful imaginings had revealed this as a possibility.

“Convince me that that was Ivan’s wish, Raina.”

“Not to put too fine a point on your argument, I have to say that Ivan gave me little choice. After forty years of marriage, Ivan left me on my own to carry out his wishes.”

“You didn’t ask for help. Instead you created the fiction of his disappearance. You counted on our concern for your well-being... and all the time you knew the truth.”

“The truth? That Ivan wandered out into the snow a few feet from the cabin and froze to death. Not a fit ending for a proud man who only imagined a hopeless future.”

Once again Yuri's thoughts reached out to his father. Strange that Raina's revelations were somehow impacting and lessening the old resentments he'd harbored for so long. Fatigue overwhelmed him and the familiar ache searched out his shoulder. "What was your plan?"

"No plan at first. I was exhausted after dealing with Ivan. I spent a lot of time here at this very table trying to decide what to do. The answer was right here in front of me, or to be more precise, right above my head."

Her words directed Yuri's eyes to the bunches of dried herbs hanging from the ceiling, the same ones he ducked below when he stood up in the small room.

Raina nodded. "My cooking inspires compliments from everyone who samples my dishes, including you."

Yuri's stomach clenched. The implications of Raina's words became clear. "You cooked Ivan?"

"Joint by joint. And you'll remember my pozhe at the town festival. It was a hit. Not a dumpling left."

"That was your way of bringing Ivan back into the community?"

"Exactly! I knew you would understand."

A strong wind rose and buffeted the cabin walls. "Another storm," murmured Raina. "The thought of more snow makes me so weary."

Yuri raised his eyes to Raina's face. For the first time he noticed lines there that he didn't remember. Her fatigue mingled with sadness touched him in a way he couldn't deny. The strengthening storm reprieved him from a hasty decision.

"May I impose on your hospitality until the weather clears?"

“Of course.” Raina smiled. “Even if it lasts until the spring thaw. Make yourself comfortable. It’s time for me to take a nap. Come along, Boris.”

The husky nuzzled Raina’s hand and followed her into her bedroom. Over her shoulder Raina said, “If you get hungry, help yourself to the soup. You’ll be happy to know it’s a *fish* chowder.”

Yuri remained seated at the table staring at Ivan’s casket. After worrying over various scenarios involving justice for Ivan Tolto’s grisly departure from the world, Yuri considered his options. They were limited. He was on his own now. Mikhail was vacationing at Lake Baikal and wouldn’t return for some time. The townspeople couldn’t be told that Ivan was coursing through their digestive tracts and had been over the long winter. Although the thought did give a certain credence to Raina’s reasoning. Ivan was, once again, part of the community. With a mirthless laugh he realized he was in a position very similar to the one Raina had faced all those months ago. Frustrated, Yuri put the lid back on the box of bones and spoke out loud, “Are you happy now, Ivan? Look at the position you’ve put me in.”

*

A solution to the problem evaded Yuri. Finally, he stretched out on the couch and tried to clear his mind. Sometime during the evening the howling wind let up and the ensuing silence allowed him to drift into a troubled sleep. Sometime later, still in the dark of night, he felt a nudging at his side. He looked over his shoulder and into the face of Boris who put his cold nose in Yuri’s hand, then turned and performed a little circular dance.

“You want to go outside, boy?”

Yuri threw off his blanket and stood up. He reached over to the table to grab the softly glowing lantern so he’d have enough light to proceed.

Boris started walking toward Raina's bedroom. Then he paused and turned his head as if motioning Yuri to follow.

The darkened room was silent. Yuri raised the lantern as he moved behind Boris through the doorway. Golden glints of light revealed Raina sleeping peacefully, her face serene. Over her clothing she'd put on the colorfully embroidered jacket that she only wore on her trips into town. Boris whimpered at his side. Yuri stepped closer and placed two fingers on her throat searching for a pulse. Raina's flesh was cold. Her mission accomplished, the life force had released her.

Yuri's dilemma no longer seemed complicated. They would all return to Brym. When the weather abated Ivan and Raina would rest together, side by side, in the cemetery behind the old church near the train station. He and Boris would think of them every time the trains rumbled by.

JOURNEY BY TRAIN

1984, China. Twelve hours on the midnight train from Changsha to Guangzhou. Side by side on the cheek-numbing, hard seat. They wouldn't be sleeping. They were crammed like cattle on to the train, but being foreigners, at least their conversation wouldn't be understood, if not exactly private.

No time like the present, Kim thought. She shifted sideways to look at Michael and plunged in. "What do you think about us adopting a baby?"

"Whoa, where did that come from?" Michael moved his head backward like he was dodging a fly, the movement cut short by the stiff backboard of the seat.

"I don't know," She shrugged. "I've been thinking about it a lot. I mean, we've been trying for three years..."

"Yeah, but we're gonna get checked out, right?"

"Of course! I want to have our own kids too, but I don't know, I've always thought it would be really great to adopt a baby."

"You never told me that."

Sounded like an accusation, she thought. "I know. I guess it's just been simmering on the back burner."

"Well, why don't you just leave it there? Isn't life in China challenging enough?"

She winced. "No, Michael, I want us to talk about it."

“Why now?”

Just then the woman across the way held her baby in the air between her legs, his bottom fully exposed by his split-crotch pants. She whistled softly and, right on cue, the baby peed into the aisle, splattering Michael’s tennis shoes. He shifted his feet away. The old man next to Michael, wanting a refill from the train attendant coming down the aisle with her thermos of boiling water, tossed the dregs of his tea, complete with leaves, right at Michael’s feet, mixing little brown spots with the little yellow ones.

“Nice,” commented Michael.

Kim wasn’t going to be distracted from the conversation. “Well, why not now? Here we are in China—”

“That’s for sure,” Michael interrupted.

“We can’t seem to get pregnant,” Kim continued on as though she hadn’t even heard him. “All these poor baby girls are being abandoned. We could—”

“Come on, Kim, you make it sound like it’s easy. You just walk into an orphanage and walk out with a baby?”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe it could be that easy—”

“Nothing’s easy in China,” Mike interrupted. “Haven’t you learned that yet? It’s like lesson number one.”

“Well, we’ll never know unless we try.” Kim turned away and leaned her head against the open window frame, desperate for relief from the cigarette smoke and the clinging odor of dead feet from the man sitting across from her who had propped his stocking feet up on the

cloth-bound bundle he'd carried in on his back. Instead of fresh air, she got a face full of coal fumes. "No way to get a breath on this train," she muttered. She turned back toward Michael.

"What do you think?"

"I don't know what I think. I've never thought about it before this minute. What if the kid has a handicap? Or maybe the parents are insane or psychopaths or something, and we'd never know."

"I know there could be some risks to it, but it's just as likely we could have a wonderful, perfectly normal, sweet baby girl. I'm willing to take the risk." It came out of her like a gauntlet thrown down.

He picked it up. "Well, I'm not! I just don't think I could love an adopted kid like my own, okay?"

He folded his arms across his chest. Closed. The train started to slow down.

"But, Michael, I think when you see—"

"I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"Fine." She slumped down.

"Fine."

The train stopped. A nasally voice from the loudspeakers brutalized the quiet of the night.

She listened carefully. *A whole semester of language school, and all I understand is*

"train." Kim stood up.

"I'm going out for some fresh air."

* * *

Kim stood outside on the platform, watching the people washing their faces, their dishes, their clothes, their hair in the row of spigots and basins illuminated by one lonely 60-watt light bulb hanging from a wire thrown over the branch of a tree. She watched as they slowly gyrated their hips, their knees, their wrists, their necks, gently working out the kinks from so many hours sitting, standing, shifting, rocking with the rhythm of the train. She watched as they bought chicken feet, tea eggs, greasy buns, plastic bags of soup that looked like dishwater from the opportunistic hawkers who met the train in the middle of the night. She watched as they chewed their food, then spewed it out into their hands to feed their little ones. She watched the old men, squatting together for a chat and another smoke. A laugh. A brown-toothed smile. A slap on the back. A wad of mucus horked up and spat among them.

Life seems so simple for them. She sighed.

A bell sounded and everyone began stirring. Kim figured it was the “all aboard” signal.

She moved along with the crowd. A young woman with a bundle tied on her back struggled to carry another parcel and a swaddled baby toward the narrow stairs of Kim’s train car. An old woman pushed past her, elbows pointed and forceful, causing the young woman to drop her parcel. As she bent to retrieve it, a man trampled on it and another kicked it into the midst of the sea of arms and legs. The young woman called out, “*Eh! Eh! Wo de bao. Wo de bao!*” *My bag!*

Kim lurched toward it and raised it up high for the woman to see. They made their way toward each other through the crowd.

“*Xie xie, xie xie,*” she said breathlessly. *Thank you.*

“*Wo bang ni,*” *I’ll help you,* said Kim slowly, pleased that she knew the words.

The woman nodded and they proceeded together up the stairs and into the train car, the last to shove into the overcrowded place.

Kim had been on buses here before where the ticket lady had mercilessly harangued the sitting patrons to give up their seats when a woman carrying an infant boarded, but there was no ticket lady here to harangue anyone. With four hours to go to Guangzhou, Kim doubted anybody would budge, even if God Himself harangued them.

Michael was half up out of his seat, craning his neck to spot Kim. He looked relieved when he glimpsed her blond head and plopped back down on his seat lest someone slither in underneath him and steal it away. When Kim arrived beside him, he was fending off a family of three who were trying to cram into Kim's half of the hard bench.

"*Wo de ai ren. Wo de ai ren,*" he kept repeating as he gestured toward Kim and then pointed to the seat. *My wife. My wife.*

"Ah, ah." The man nodded and stumbled on down the aisle with his family as the train jerked to a start and picked up speed.

Kim motioned the young woman over to her seat. "*Qing zuo.*" *Please sit.* She knew this was going to begin what their language class had coined a "*keqi war,*" a battle of politeness.

"*Bu, bu, bu, bu, bu,*" the young woman said. "*Ni zuo.*" *No, no, no, you sit.*

The baby had now begun to fuss.

"*Bu, bu, bu, ni zuo,*" said Kim as she gently pushed the woman toward the seat. "*Ni zuo.*" *You sit,* she repeated firmly.

The young woman capitulated and sank gratefully onto the seat, and Kim perched herself on Michael's knee.

His tight jaw let her know that he wasn't thrilled with the turn of things.

"Well, what was I going to do? You know nobody else was going to give her a seat."

"I know, I know," he said. "It's okay. We'll just switch off and try to grab another seat later."

Kim smiled at him. "I knew you still had a heart in there somewhere," she said as she pushed her hand to his chest.

Michael grinned. "Yeah, somewhere."

They both looked over toward the woman, who was huddled in the corner of the seat by the open window, as far away from them as she could get, totally absorbed in trying to quiet the baby. "Uh, uh, uh," she crooned softly as she patted the baby's back.

Kim watched her for a long while as she hovered and fussed and smiled over that little face, oblivious to any other thing happening around her. Every now and again a tear would slowly wind its way down the woman's cheek.

I want to love like that. It was a longing that seemed to pour from the very marrow of her bones, carried by every red blood cell to every other cell of her body. Michael watched her watching.

The woman held the bundle fiercely against her bosom, like someone was threatening to pry the baby away. She rocked forward and back, forward and back. Then she released her fierce embrace and sighed deeply, the air rushing out through her parted lips in a groan. Her head lolled backward, eyes closed. She inhaled sharply and Kim noticed tears begin trickling down her cheeks.

What's going on?

The tears became a torrent, and the woman bent over the baby on her lap as though in stabbing abdominal distress, her face ugly with agony. Her whole posture looked desperate to contain the enormous pain, but it would not be contained and burst out in great sobbing spasms that shook her body and in a wail that grew like a siren. The baby took up her mother's wail. She writhed in her swaddling, an arm escaping to raise a tiny, perfect fist.

"Michael!" Kim spoke his name like she expected him to act.

The man across the way with the stinking feet lowered them to his waiting black canvas shoes and stretched, with arms fully extended into the air, mouth gaping open in a deep yawn. He shrank back into his space, rubbed his face with his hands, and looked blankly over at the woman and baby.

The two old women opposite him began whispering and clucking their tongues, heads huddled closely together, eyes glancing toward the sobbing woman, chins flicking out now and again like fingers pointing toward her.

A little girl with two thick, black pigtailed mussed from the journey turned around and pushed her head over the back of her seat to stare. "Mama, *ni kan*," she said loudly, with the enthusiasm of a child watching a show. *Look*. Her mother turned around too and fixed her eyes on the scene.

A few curious others, who didn't have the luxury of seats, assembled at the end of the row with a bit of jostling and shuffling to clear each line of view. A murmuring rose from their midst and spread down the train car. "*Shenma shi? Shenma shi?*" *What's going on?*

"Michael!" Kim said again, alarmed. "Something's wrong. What should we do?"

“I don’t know, Kim. Why don’t you try to talk to her? Offer to hold the baby for a while or something.”

“I don’t know how to say all that.”

“She’ll understand your heart, Kim. Try.”

Kim rose stiffly from Michael’s lap and touched the shoulder of the young woman, prepared to mime her offer to hold the baby in case her simple Chinese failed.

“*Ni gei wo.*” *Give her to me.* Kim held her empty arms like a cradle, rocking, waiting.

“*Bu!*” the woman yelled, throat thick with mucus and tears. She sprang up, and with a shriek, hurled the baby out the open window of the train. She collapsed to the floor, slicing her skull on the metal edge of the seat, blood pulsing out of her breached defenses.

Michael leaped to his feet, arm stretched out like a demand that time reverse itself so he would be in time...but time had moved on, and his arm was too late. It dropped to his side.

The souls of every witness in the train car hung motionless and altogether silent in their collective gasp. The *cha-cha, cha-cha, cha-cha* rhythm of the train took them away, away, miles away before the reality of what had been done slammed into their consciousness.

The inhaled gasp of the witnesses gushed out all at once in a multitude of voices. Hearing the commotion, every last person seated rose and began to push and shove his way over to join the curious, eager mob around the scene. “*Shenme shi? Ta shi shui? Ta si le ma?*” *What happened? Who is she? Is she dead?* They all, every single one, with their questions and curiosity, stayed three feet out. Spectators ringside at the greatest show on Earth.

Kim turned to him then, wild, disoriented. "Michael?" she asked, eyes pleading. He barely shook his head. "No, Michael! No!" She stamped her foot. He pulled her to him, but she stood stiff in rage, fists clenched.

Michael tried to maneuver her to the seat, but she pushed away and knelt down by the side of the young woman. Kim grabbed her arm and began to shake her limp body. "Why? Why did you do that?" she yelled at her. She looked up, expecting to see her question mirrored in every face in the crowd, but it wasn't there. Kim felt suddenly confused. "I don't...I don't understand," she said, falling back. "I would have taken her." *Didn't you see my arms?* her soul whispered. She curled up in a ball on the floor beside the young woman and wept.

Michael spoke to the crowd. "Somebody get help!" They looked back at him, not comprehending. "You!" he made eye contact with a man in front. "Go, go, go!" he urged, jabbing his finger toward the door. "Get help!" They all looked at him like he was deranged. The man he had singled out turned around and worked his way through the crowd back to his seat. Others followed. The man with the stinking feet picked up his bundle, stepped over the spreading puddle of blood, and went to stand at the far end of the car. He lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall. Nobody took his place on the hard seat. Nobody remaining would make eye contact.

"Shoot," Michael said, shaking his head in disbelief. He bent down and felt for the young woman's pulse. He shifted his fingers from spot to spot on her wrist. "Shoot," he repeated. "Wait. There it is. She's still alive. Kim, she's alive. Kim."

Kim raised her head.

"Please help me, honey. We've got to try to help her."

She sat up, dazed, drained.

“What do you want me to do?” She spoke flatly.

“We can’t leave her on the floor. Help me lift her up here.” He pointed to the now-vacant seat opposite them.

Michael reached under her arms.

“You get her feet, Kim.”

They hoisted her up to the seat, head lolling backward, big, thick droplets of blood spattering the floor and Michael’s shoes. The woman did not even stir. Michael looked at the floor where she had been lying.

“Oh, my gosh, Kim, she’s lost a lot of blood. Quick, look in her bags. See if there’s something we could use as a bandage. We’ve got to try to stop the bleeding.”

While Kim rummaged around in the woman’s bag, Michael felt for her pulse again. It was beating...too fast. He put his cheek down near her mouth to feel her breath. She was breathing rapidly but hardly deep enough to inflate her lungs.

Kim found a small bundle of clean rags. *Diapers.*

Michael tried to get a look at the wound in the woman’s head.

“It doesn’t seem too severe, but it’s bleeding like crazy.”

Kim handed Michael the rags, which he gently wrapped around her head.

“I don’t know, Kim, I think she may be going into shock.”

Shock. Yes, shock. “I’ll look for a blanket to cover her.”

“Good. I have got to go find help.” Michael took her hand and looked directly into her eyes. “Will you be okay?”

Kim nodded. She smiled a very small smile and nodded, receiving his tenderness.

Kim watched Michael maneuver his way down the train and disappear beyond the door. She turned back to the young woman's bags. She dug deep and pulled out a small quilt. Handmade of soft cotton. When she pulled the quilt out of the bag, something fluttered to the seat. Kim's breath caught in her throat. It was a wisp of soft, black baby hair, tied in a red ribbon. She picked it up and held it cupped in both hands.

She took the quilt and gently laid it over the woman, brushing her arm. Cold. Clammy. She felt for her pulse but couldn't find it. She watched the quilt for a rise and fall of breath, but there was none. She was gone.

Michael and two train attendants carrying a rough, green army blanket came back to find Kim sitting, cradling the woman's head in her lap, rocking, tears slowly winding down her cheeks.

"Look Michael," she said, holding the baby's lock of hair in her open palm for him to see.

She saw the start of tears in his eyes as he bent over to look.

"*Lai, lai, lai,*" the gruff train attendant grumbled. *Come on, come on.* He pushed past Michael and motioned for Kim to get up out of the way. He pulled the dead woman up to a sitting position so Kim could move. Then the attendants struggled her into the blanket-stretcher and hauled her down the aisle, which cleared quickly, humanity drawing back from death.

"Wait," Kim called. They stopped and looked at her, startled to a standstill by her commanding tone rather than by comprehending her foreign words.

She hurried to the side of the young woman, opened her slack hand, and pressed the lock of hair into her palm, closing her fingers gently around it.

The train attendant jerked his head to Kim, a gesture to say *back off*. She returned to her seat. Michael sat down beside her, rested his elbows on his knees, face in his hands, shoes speckled with the life of China in view. Kim put her arm across his back and rested her head on his shoulder.

A disheveled train attendant in a slate-blue uniform made her way down the aisle, dirty, gray string mop in one hand, sloshing bucket of water in the other. She barked at the passengers to get out of the way. She plunked the bucket down, took out a rag, and washed the blood off the seat where the young woman had lain. Then she dipped the mop in the bucket, wringing it out with her bulbous, bare hands. Kim and Michael watched, huddled together and silent from their seat. She mopped at the blood on the floor, moving it, swirling it in wider and wider arcs, thinning it out until it was translucent. A quick rinse and wring. Another mopping. Gone. Just like that. She moved back down the aisle, grunting at those in her way.

Four people fought for the seat, voices loud, shoving and stumbling.

The train carried on. *Cha-cha, cha-cha, cha-cha.*

THE END

Tea Party

“And then what did you do, Lady Serena?” Rylie asks me, her eyes twinkling.

“I told the evil fairy, ‘Let’s put our swords down and make a tea party.’”

Rylie smiles. “A marvelous idea, Lady Serena. Did she do it? Did the evil fairy drink tea with you?”

“She did, and when she put the tea to her lips and drank a little bit, she grabbed at her throat and dropped down dead.”

“Poison?” Rylie asks.

“Poison,” I say.

“I would have never thought it of you, Lady Serena,” Rylie says with a wink in her eye and some cookie bits in her mouth.

“Oh, I didn’t do it! The Snake King’s trusted servant, Dewey the Dwarf, he’s the one who poisoned the drink secretly while the Evil Fairy and I were sword fighting.”

“What a tale, Lady Serena! You are very brave indeed! And clever, too.” Rylie raises her pinky and her eyebrows as she takes a sip from her tea cup. She winks at me over the top of the cup, like she always does, and I try to wink back. Only I’m not very good at it yet, so I just kind of scrunch up my eyes and wiggle my nose instead.

Rylie turns to Mother, “Don’t you think so, Kim?”

“Uh-huh,” Mother mutters, without looking up.

“Kim?” Rylie asks again.

“What?!” Mother snaps this time and looks up at her sister. Then she gets a bit softer and says, “Oh, yeah, yeah, it was good, honey, really great.” She never even looks at me. Her eyes are back on the computer.

Rylie sets her cup down and leans over the table like she’s gonna tell me a great secret. “Lady Serena,” she whispers really loudly, “I have a tale to tell you as well. It’s about an evil stepsister who never gets off her computer even to eat or drink or play. One day she turns into an old tree stump and the Queen’s best huntress, Rylie the Great, comes along to chop that old tree down for building a grand bonfire for the king’s...”

“Alright, alright,” Mother says. “I’m here, I’m doing it. Great tea, Serena, can I have some more?” Mother sounds impatient and looks over at me for the first time. When I had poured some of my best magical raspberry tea with chocolate bits and rainbow sprinkles into Mother’s tea cup earlier, she just drank it straight away and turned back to her phone. Now Mother’s face looks like it might crack, but I pour her some more tea anyway and give her another cookie even though she hasn’t touched the first two yet.

Mother doesn’t blow on it like Rylie always does, (even though it’s just water and it isn’t hot one bit.) She makes a loud slurping noise though.

“You sound like a hog drinking tea, Kim,” Rylie says. I cover my mouth and laugh.

Mother doesn’t lift her pinky and take dainty little sips like me and Rylie do either. And she’s completely ignored the little cookies that Rylie brought special for me---*biscuits*, she calls them, like real queens and princesses eat back in England---and she buys them from a special shop and always has some in her purse for when she comes over to visit. While Rylie and I tell

tall-tales back and forth to one another, Mother just says “Uh-huh” a lot and I don’t know if she’s talking to me or talking into that tooth-thingy in her ear.

Rylie’s the best for tea parties though. In real life, she’s my mother’s sister---Aunt Rylie Anne Lipton, like the tea---but I’ve always called her plain old Rylie and she calls me Lady Serena, even though I’m just Serena. She comes over a lot more these days, to help around, she says, since Mother is working longer hours.

Mother is Mother, and I have two brothers, too---Jesse and Frank. (Everyone thinks that’s funny that they are named Jesse and Frank. I don’t really get it.) They are upstairs most of the time, playing with Legos or something, so I have Rylie all to myself, which is fantastic. Daddy is at his apartment with his new puppy and we go and visit him every other weekend.

“Rylie, some of us have work to do. I can’t help it if...” There’s a buzzing sound and Mother looks down at the phone in her hand. “Oh, I’ve got to check that.”

“Mother, texting is not for tea parties,” I say in my best whiny voice.

“Yeah, Kim, no texting at the tea party,” Rylie mimics me. Mother looks up through her eyebrows, annoyed at Rylie, and I giggle again.

“You two fight like Jesse and Frank,” I say.

Rylie stands up, and begins stacking our empty plates and cups. “You better believe it, Serena. We could always fight like the best of them.” I look at Mother to hear her side of it, but she’s too busy with her thumbs on the phone.

“Is our tea party over, Rylie?”

“Well, ma’lady, I must get about me cooking now. Would you mind terribly joining me in the larder and I shall fetch us some things for a fine supper.”

“Wha-a-a-at?” I ask her. Now my face really is scrunched up.

“It means, dear Serena, let’s go to the kitchen. I’ve got some tuna sandwiches and lemonade to whip up for our lunch.”

I giggle at my favorite aunt. “O-kay,” I answer back in a silly voice.

She sticks out her elbow and I take a hold of it, hopping down from the bar stool. Rylie walks me, like a real princess, slowly around the bar and into the kitchen-half of the room. We have left mother alone at her side of the counter, but I don’t think she even notices that we’re gone. Her thumbs are still busy.

“So, Lady Serena,” Rylie asks as she pulls out a cutting board and a can of tuna, “you never did say: how are the cousins in Norway doing?”

“They’re good,” I say.

“And how are the kittens next door? Are they enjoying their new washing machine?” she says kinda loud because she’s using the electronic can opener and has to holler a bit over the noise of it.

“The kittens are good,” I holler back. “They like to play in the washing machine actually.”

“They do?” Rylie turns with surprise. She’s squeezing all the juice from the tuna can into the sink, and I know it will make her hands smell fishy. “I didn’t think cats enjoyed getting wet,” she says.

Rylie is so good at playing along with me. I like it.

“Dan, I know it’s *my* weekend.” Mother’s voice cuts through our play story about the kittens. “I was able to juggle some things around, but I had to give up an important...” She’s talking with Daddy. I try to ignore it.

The onion Rylie is cutting up makes her eyes water and she wipes them with the back of her arm. I pick up an apple from the fruit basket at the counter and pick at the sticker till it finally comes off.

“Well, *these* kittens love water actually,” I tell Rylie, getting back to my story, “and they take bubble baths in the washing machine right along with the socks and underwear.

Rylie laughs out loud as she waves a spoon of Miracle Whip in the air. “You mean Granny’s old socks and panties?”

Mother’s stern voice broke in, “What are you telling her, Rylie? Can you keep it down!”

“Yes,” I laugh, egging on Mother, “The polka dot panties and the socks with the holes in it.” We make the tale taller and taller. It’s always so funny to play like this with Rylie. I wish it would never stop.

“The ones she can poke her big toe right through and wave it at us from across the room?”

“Yes, those are the ones! The kittens play hide and seek in those socks.”

“I don’t care about that, Dan.” Mother’s voice has gotten so loud. She catches me looking at her and tries to smile at me, but her mouth is still moving to Daddy about something else. Then she lowers her head and her voice. I turn back to Rylie and Granny’s socks.

“Well, *I* heard that Lady Winthrop has holes in her panties, too, and she fills in the torn spots with something so no one will notice. What do you think she uses, Lady Serena?”

“Ummmm...peanut butter, I think.”

This cracks her up and Rylie shakes and laughs and tears come into her eyes. I love it when she laughs like that. I wish I could make Mother laugh like that. Nothing is better than a good belly laugh.

“Peanut butter in her panties! That’s what’s wrong with her then. It all makes sense now!” Rylie puts the top on three sandwiches and then hovers over them with her knife.

“Squares or triangles?” she asks me.

“Triangles!” I say.

“Triangles it is,” she says. “And would you get down the potato chips?”

“Sure.” I push the kitchen chair across the floor, which makes a terribly delicious racket, and climb up to get the bag of potato chips off the top of the fridge. It seems we’re out of the cheesy ones and only have the wavy ones left. No one’s favorite.

“Boys!” Rylie hollers, and Jesse and Frank hurtle downstairs with their flying Lego spaceships.

“Hi, Rylie, *lookit* my ship!”

“Mmm, this is very amazing, Jesse. Tell me about all this cool stuff you’ve got on here.”

“Well, these are the heat-seeking machine guns,” my little brother says, pointing at some red-colored blocks, “and these are where the gazillion bullets are stored for emergencies,” he says again, pointing at some gray-colored blocks.

“And these are my...”

“Let me have a chance,” Frank butts in. “I made a ship, too.” He points out all the guns and cannons and flaming nun chucks and other boy stuff that’s on his ship, and Rylie seems real interested.

“Here’s a bunch more stuff. There’s a mace, ninja stars, double-bladed swords, a sickle, an ax and a double-bladed ax, and bombs and grenade-throwers and rocket-launchers.”

“Sounds terribly exciting,” Rylie says, examining each thing as my big brother points it out.

Mother sighs from behind her computer screen, and Frank gets quiet all of a sudden.

Rylie passes his Lego ship back and ruffles his hair. “Go wash your hands, boys, and we’ll have lunch.” Both my brothers look like a balloon that just had all the air taken out at once.

“We have chips, too!” I say, even if they’re just the wavy ones.

The boys sound like elephants going up the stairs to the bathroom. Next thing you know, they’re fussing and jabbering and the water is running upstairs, so I know they’re feeling better again.

Rylie washes two apples and starts to chop them up.

“So, Lady Serena, you never did tell me what happened after your tea party with the evil fairy.”

Mother is still talking to Daddy. “I’m going to the gym during lunch, and my nails are at four, so I’ll be over with the kids after that.” I’m still ignoring her.

“The evil fairy was poisoned, so I hopped on a hot air balloon and flew back to the castle.”

Mother shouts, “Get off yourself, Dan!”

“I picked flowers for the royal banquet and passed them out to all the fairy princesses who came to the party.”

Rylie says, “That was nice of you.”

Mother says, “This is my life, too. Don’t I have a right to be happy?”

“Then I met a dragon who seemed real nice at first, but then…” my voice trails off.

“Then what?” Rylie asks.

“Then I suppose after all these years of sacrifice, I’m supposed to just lay down and…”

Mother shouts.

“Then I just laid down,” I say, “inside the dragon’s cave…”

“I think I need a break, Dan…”

“And the dragon leans over me with his big teeth and his drooling, bad breath…”

“Maybe you should have them for a while…”

“And I can see the stars twinkling out of the mouth of the cave...”

“Boys, come down and eat!” Rylie calls.

“Fine.” Mother says quietly. “I’ll make final arrangements with the lawyers and get back to you.”

“And I close my eyes...”

“Death to bad guys and pirates!” Frank shouts as he thunders down the stairs with Jesse behind him.

“Death to bad guys!” Jesse echoes.

“Bye.” Mother says

“And I die there in the cave...”

“Be careful with your cups, boys,” says Rylie.

“...with the dragon there crying over my dead body...”

Mother stands up to leave. “I’ll see you later, Rylie. I’ve got to get back to work. Give Mother a kiss, boys.”

“Yeah, okay, bye, Mom,” Frank says, distracted by the chips on his plate.

Mother leans over me and kisses the top of my forehead. “Thanks for the tea party, honey. I’ll see you later.”

“Uh-huh,” I say. I look down at my triangle tuna. The chips look even wavier through my tears. My hand shakes as I try to pick up my cup of lemonade. I just peer into the cup with waves of pink inside.

“...and no one knows whatever happened to me. The end.”

Rylie’s hand is on my back and her face comes close to mine. I can see her sad smile reflected in my lemonade. “It’ll be okay, honey. Your Mother loves you, your Daddy loves you, and I love you.

“I know,” I say quietly.

“And don’t forget, Lady Serena, you are a very brave young lady. If you can survive the evil fairy, you can survive anything.”

I smile over at her and squeeze her neck hard. “I love you, too, Rylie.” My words sound kinda choked up inside, and my throat feels tight.

She ruffles my hair. I take a bite of my tuna triangle. I feel a little better, but I don’t think Rylie’s tears are from the onions this time.