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The Parrot Abramka, and Other Stories

Masha Udensiva-Brenner

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine
Arts of the City College of the City University of New York

Table of Contents

The Parrot Abramka.....2
He is My Age.....120
The Girl and My Wife.....140

Excerpt from a novel in Progress: “The Parrot Abramka”

Moscow, November 1988

Chapter 1

I was in my room drawing desk objects—a thin little lamp with a wire base, a stack of books piled on top of one another, and a ball of crumpled notebook paper sitting next to them. I was trying to figure out why the shapes made so much sense when I looked at them but didn’t transfer to the page; the lamp didn’t curve right, the books weren’t straight enough, and the crumpled ball didn’t look like paper at all, just a smudge, a two-dimensional circle scribbled smack in the middle of the page.

I wrapped myself tighter in my sweater and drew the curtains closer together, wondering if people on the street could see me through the fabric the way I could sometimes see others through their windows, silhouettes behind thin cloth, illuminated by cozy apartment lights.

Our apartment was quiet. My mother had gone to the dentist’s office and my father was still in the archives researching Peter the Great and the building of St. Petersburg. He was writing a paper comparing the exploitation of the serfs in 1703 to the exploitation of the GULAG prisoners who revived the trans-Siberian railroad in the late 1930s.

“Four years ago, it would be unheard of to write about this. Unheard of! You’re very lucky Valya, you’re growing up during a different time,” he’d been saying to me for weeks.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I didn't feel lucky. I was still forced to do things I didn't want to do, even if they were letting my dad write about GULAG prisoners—I was still sitting in class with my forearms folded on top of one another, listening to my teacher Alexandra Vladimirovna ramble on about Lenin's greatness, although according to my dad, Lenin was the one who started putting people in the GULAG in the first place.

Also, my mother walked around somber all the time, ready to explode any minute. She didn't understand me, not the way I wanted to be understood. Just that morning she'd walked in on my dad and me laughing over breakfast, and instead of joining us, finding out what we were laughing about, she'd slammed the fridge shut and yelled at my father for forgetting to buy milk.

She didn't used to be so volatile. She'd come with my dad and me on our long Sunday afternoon walks. Hold my dad's hand and talk our ears off.

"Petyka, remember when we tried to sneak through that fence over there? Because you wanted to get a closer look at the moldings on that building, the ones you thought were imported from Paris?"

"When I tried to climb it and slipped and fell with my legs in the air?"

"And you were lying there and that nasty old lady saw you and started waving her cane, saying how if we hadn't been trying to trespass, none of it would have happened. She didn't even care that your arm was bleeding!"

I'd heard that story countless times. Each time they alternated who told which parts, where my dad thought the moldings came from (sometimes it was Italy), whether the old lady threatened to call the police or just hobbled away, and if

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. it was my dad's arm that was bleeding or his knee, showing through the rip in his pants.

There were other stories too, depending on which route we took—the streets and buildings, monuments, storefronts, parks, there were memories behind all of them, if not theirs, then ones from their parents.

I'd squeeze in the middle, pry their hands open and grab them, swinging back and forth between their legs. My mom would kiss the top of my head back then, and smile, and appreciate the buildings, and the trees, and the Moscow River that stretched before us and wound through the city.

But those days were gone. My mom had stopped coming with us, and it was just my dad and I walking on Sundays, walking and imagining things, while she stayed in the house smoking endless cigarettes, cooking, cleaning out the cabinets, and her new hobby—writing furiously, words that she never allowed me to see.

I'd always try to peek over her shoulder when she sat at the kitchen table scribbling away, but she'd slouch over the page in such a way that I couldn't see a thing.

Usually, at the end, she tore the sheets from her notebook and crumpled them. I'd know it was a good day if she kept the pages intact, closing her book and taking it to my parents' room, hiding it somewhere.

That morning had been full of tearing and crumpling. Mounds of paper lay next to her on the kitchen table as she sipped her tea. As usual, she took the balled-up sheets with her when she got up. I still couldn't figure out where it was that she finally threw them away. Maybe she didn't, maybe she kept them all in a bag or

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
some secret hiding place. Or maybe she took them somewhere and tore them to shreds.

On her way out, she nearly tripped over our hedgehog, Kyesha, the balls of paper falling from her arms and rolling all over the kitchen floor.

She managed to blame me for it.

“Oh Valya your *stupid* pet just nearly killed me! If it weren’t for you and your ridiculous ideas. Are we living in a circus? A freak show?” she’d yelled.

While she was screaming, I stole one of the crumpled paper balls—kicked it under the table behind me and stood in front of it so she didn’t see.

Now it sat on my desk. I hadn’t opened it yet; I was building up my anticipation, testing my discipline, waiting for the perfect moment to find out what was in my mother’s thoughts. Or maybe I was just scared, nervous about what I might find.

The one time I’d tried to ask her what she was writing about she’d glared at me, shut her book, and said, “Mind your own business Valentina. There are some things that are just for adults.”

But my dad was an adult, and I don’t think he knew what she was writing either. When I asked him, he’d said, “Who knows Valichka, your mother is a very private woman. You should stop bothering her. If she wants to, she will tell you.”

My anticipation was starting to overcome my anxiety (and any desire to test my discipline.) I was just about ready to un-crumple the paper when I heard Kyesha pushing through the crack I’d left in my door.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I turned around and watched him skitter in. Set the unopened paper aside and held out my hands, letting him sniff them before I picked him up.

He trusted me now, always put his needles down. I lifted him and looked right into his little eyes, noticing the drop of milk hovering on the tip of his nose, wiping it and rubbing his belly until he stretched out his paws.

“Well, well, well, look who it is,” I said.

I hadn’t seen Kyesha since my mom had nearly tripped over him. We kept his bed under a chair in the corner of our kitchen, and closed the kitchen door at night so his movements wouldn’t wake her—she made us do it. During the day though, we let him roam the apartment, never knowing where he’d end up. Often, I wouldn’t see him for hours on end.

My mom always got nervous about him wandering around, “He’s going to eat through all my shoes!” she’d whine and I’d shrug her away, Kyesha never ate anything, just drank from the bowl of milk we left for him on the yellow linoleum.

When it was almost his bedtime and we had to find him and bring him to the kitchen, I would investigate his disappearances with the magnifying glass I got from my grandmother, Baba Anya, searching the floor for the outlines of his little claws.

Sometimes he’d be in the oddest places. Once I found him burrowed in a box of old photographs, lying under a picture of my mom and some friend of hers when they were teenagers, hugging and looking into each other’s eyes like they both knew a secret. It was beautiful, the picture, I could feel the emotion just by looking at it. I asked my mom who that friend was, why I’d never met her and she grabbed the picture and shooed me away.

The windowpanes rattled a little, I parted the curtains and saw that it was sleeting. The tree by my window trembled and I held Kyesha close to my chest.

I heard the echo of a key turning, the squeaking of the door hinges, and light footsteps on the wood of the corridor. Then came the rustling of my mom's coat; I pictured her leaning with one hand against the doorframe and prying off her wet shoe with the other.

I was waiting to hear her walk towards the kitchen, to plop down and light a cigarette, sit with her feet up and look blankly at the kitchen window.

Instead there was a knock on my door.

I barely had enough time to push her crumpled paper from my desk with my elbow as she was turning the knob. It fell on the floor and I kicked it under my desk.

My mother stepped in, the tips of her hair wet from the sleet. She smiled and walked towards me, not even noticing the hedgehog in my arms, dragging her bare feet along the parquet in a dreamy sort of way.

Her face looked softer than it had that morning, like someone had taken the end of a pencil and erased the unnecessary lines. She looked beautiful, the way she always had when I was younger—her hair up in a ponytail instead of her usual bun, and her brown skirt hitting right below her knees and showing the muscles in her calves.

She sat on the corner of my bed, leaned towards me, placing her forearms on her thighs. Her green eyes almost sparkled against her cheeks.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“You look happy for someone who just came from the dentist’s office.” I said, and handed her my failed drawing of the books and the lamp, hoping that it would distract her from the paper I’d thrown on the floor. Thinking, only after it was in her hands, that the drawing contained her crumpled paper too, but that my rendering of it was probably too obscure for her to put it together.

It didn’t matter. She didn’t even look. “Very nice Valentina,” she said, laying my sketch on the blanket next to her and taking a cigarette from the pocket of her skirt.

She lit the tip, and for a long time inhaled, letting the smoke stream from the side of her mouth. Then she parted her lips like she was about to speak and closed them again, shaking her head.

“What, what is it?”

She narrowed her eyes, inhaling more smoke, squeezing the filter with her lips, as if the motion would keep the words inside. With her exhale the words came, slowly at first, then quicker, culminating in a final burst.

“You know...when you meet someone new, and they invigorate you?” she paused for a second. “Charge you like an electrical outlet? Put all the force back in, the force you forgot you ever even had?”

Before I could answer that I had, that there was a girl in my class that energized me every time we talked (which was hardly ever), she kept going.

“Because I’d been feeling only the opposite lately, so weighed down by everyone I’ve been meeting, like there’s nothing interesting to say anymore.”

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I watched and listened, saw the ash of her cigarette grow, hover like it was about to fall and scatter on the floor. She took no notice, readjusted her shirt as I shoved an empty tea cup under her hand, catching her falling ash. She glanced at the cup and stretched her feet.

Kyesha sat in my lap, his retracted needles tickling me through my cotton shirt. My mom continued to ignore him. (Normally she would have made me get him out of there, tell me he was annoying her, that he smelled bad or something.)

I kept an eye on the ball of paper on the floor, but after a few minutes, I relaxed, it was clear that she was in her own world. That whatever it was that happened to her at the dentist's office had put everything else out of her mind.

She'd stopped talking. Just sat there thinking about something. Smiling to herself, remembering maybe.

It was true, what she'd said, I hadn't seen her meet anyone she liked in a while. She always had her old friends over, but she hadn't made a new one since she'd started her book keeping job. It was around then, right before she'd quit her history professorship, that she'd become withdrawn, agitated with my dad and me.

Before then my mom used to come home and find my dad at his typewriter, pull over our little wooden stool and sit across from him telling him about her day. But not anymore; she just shouted a hello to him and me when she walked in and went to her smoking—she'd smoke at least two or three cigarettes in a row—then start fussing around with the pots and pans, shouting out to us over her shoulder if she couldn't find something, if we'd run out of sugar, or if Kyesha spilled milk on the floor.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“All these people, they are just so boring...it’s painful to look at them,” she told us during her first week working there.

I don’t think it was just the lack of interesting people in book keeping, I think she missed history.

“I just can’t do it anymore, research a history composed of lies!” she’d said to my dad and me in the kitchen the day she quit. “They don’t give us access to the archives we need, don’t let us publish anything that’s important! Manipulate the things we *do* publish so that they fit the history they want to portray.”

She’d started all the writing right before she quit—writing and crumpling, writing, crumpling, smoking and drinking cup after cup of black tea.

When I complained about my moody, disconnected mom to her mother, my Baba Anya, she said: “Your mother’s stubborn as a mule, she wishes she could go back, but she’s got too much pride, so now she’s taking it all out on you and your dad. ...”

Well, now my mom was sitting in front of me, still looking withdrawn, but in a different way. This time it was induced by excitement, and she wasn’t telling me why.

“What is it mom? Go on, what is it, did you meet someone new that didn’t bore you?”

She ignored my question, just smiled, ruffled my hair, kissed the top of my head and said: “Oh Valya, you’ve got to keep your room in order, look at that garbage you have lying around.”

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Bending down, she scooped the ball of paper I'd been dying to open in one swoop, putting it in the pocket of her skirt.

My stomach sunk. She hadn't realized yet that it was one of hers, but she would, I knew she would. And I'd never know what it was she was writing.

Then the phone rang, a loud forceful ring that ricocheted off the hallway walls.

"I have to get that! I'm expecting a call." my mom exclaimed, jumping from my bed and running out of my room.

I listened to her feet slap against the parquet, heard them come to a stop right in front of the phone.

"*Alo?* Oh I was hoping that would be you, I didn't actually think you'd call...I know, I know you said you would, but...yes, yes, of course, oh Galya, it is, it really is wonderful!"

At dinner my mom was giddy, smoking cigarettes even while we ate—ground beef patties and potato that she pushed around her plate with a fork. She was smiling, staring into space while my dad and I talked to each other. It was like she was about to bounce from her chair.

I was telling my dad about the book that my teacher was making us read for class, *How the Steel Was Tempered* by Nikolai Ostrovsky.

"Bullshit, complete bullshit. What a waste of everybody's time! But that's how it is Valya, they'll make you read this socialist realist crap until your eyes give out. All of my youth I had to read it. Didn't learn a thing, the writing is pure shit. But

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. things are changing, they are. You'll see. I bet you won't be reading stuff like that in university. That's where the real change is happening."

Suddenly my mother jumped in, as if she'd just woken up.

"Speaking of university, I was wondering..." she bit her lip and played with the end of her hair. "I was wondering if you know this woman I met, this student, she's just finishing up her dissertation, the same topic I was working on when I'd quit. Galya Udashina, Galina Petrovna rather, she probably goes by her patronymic..."

My dad looked up at the ceiling, scratched his chin, squished his lips together. "Hmm, same topic as you, really? I didn't know that anyone was working on the same topic. Fascinating! I'm glad that someone's doing it. Such a shame that *you'd* dropped it."

My mom pulled out a cigarette and crossed her arms, I could tell she was on the brink of explosion, she hated when my dad nagged her about having left history. She absolutely despised it.

Then, something remarkable happened, she lit her cigarette and changed her mind, her expression went from fury to indifference and then right back to excitement.

"So, do you know her? Have you heard of her, of Galya?" she moved to the edge of her seat, placing her elbows on the table and leaning on her hands, like a little girl, her cigarette dangling to the side, smoke drifting above our dinner plates.

My dad looked as surprised as I did, his eyebrows permanently raised, he widened his eyes and looked over at me.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

She didn't even notice.

"Galya Udashkina...I can't say I do, doesn't sound familiar, but I can ask around. What is she doing? What part of your topic?"

"She's writing about Alexander I's democratic reforms, how much he admired the goals of the French Revolution, and how betrayed he'd felt by Napoleon for abandoning them. Pretty much exactly what I was doing, but narrower, more specific, it is a dissertation after all..."

"Fascinating, truly fascinating."

"She said she'd tried to find me through the department, but they told her that I'd be really pissed off if she tried to get in touch with me." my mother laughed.

"They know your shenanigans all too well Tanichka. All too well."

"So how'd you meet her anyway, this Galya?"

My mom smiled, bit her lip again, inhaled, let out a puff of smoke, and said:
"At the dentist's. I met her at the dentist's."

This time my dad and I *really* looked at each other. My mother hated the dentist. She was always in such a bad mood when she had to go there that it was hard to believe that she would actually *talk* to someone.

She must have read our minds.

"You know how much I hate the dentist. I was sitting in there all pissed off, there was a crowd as usual, and it wasn't only me, *everyone* seemed ticked off at each other. We all just wanted to get in there and get it over with...there were the old ladies moaning and bitching to each other about the pains in their mouths, it was mostly old ladies. Talking, talking, talking, they wouldn't shut up. I was cursing the

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. universe of course, all I really wanted was to be at home. Was dreading getting back here in this shitty weather...”

She pulled her cigarette again, her eyes directed at a point past my head.

“Then I kept hearing the rustling of these pages, rustle rustle rustle, next to me, like someone was leafing a magazine so quickly they weren’t even reading,” she squinted her eyes and smiled, shaking her head a little. “I was getting very annoyed by it, it was like when you guys chew too loud, and I can’t really say anything, but each time you chew I just clench my jaw tighter and tighter until I can’t take it anymore. The rustling was like that, repetitive, loud and grating to the ear.”

But she *did*, I thought, she always said something about our chewing. Out of nowhere she’d start yelling, telling me to shove the carrot, or whatever it is in my mouth, and stop bothering her with the endless repetitive sound...

“Tanya, what are you talking about, you’re always yelling at us,” my dad said it aloud, exactly what I was thinking.

She waved him away, “bullshit, I never say a thing. But damn do I want to, oh how I want to. Anyway...” she kept going. “Finally I turned, turned to see who it was—I was imagining an old man, maybe because of the smells in the waiting room, body odor mixed with stale cigarettes—I was ready to give a really dirty look, but next to me, one empty chair between us, was this woman shaking her left foot and turning pages in a frenzy.” Instead of anger, my mother felt pity. “The poor woman just seemed so nervous, man she was nervous, and instantly there was this feeling of kinship, a spark—the warmth just *poured* out of her.” my mom gestured with her

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
hands (to emphasize the pouring.) “Warmth and fear poured out in a combination
that melted my heart.”

I tried as hard as I could, but could not imagine a combination that could melt
my mother’s heart.

“Well, I must have been staring at her for a little while, because she could feel
my eyes and she looked up, peered at me over the magazine pages, her giant doe
eyes wide and scared. So I asked her what was the matter, why she was all freaked
out, and we started talking. It was then that she realized I looked familiar, who I was
(she’d seen me in photos) and, well, that was that, we instantly bonded.”

My mom was glowing. She had even invited Galina Petrovna over for dinner.
“You’ll get to meet her, she’s going to some conference, but then she’ll come over
and you’ll see for yourself.”

My dad crossed his ankle over his knee and reached for his own cigarette,
shaking his head as he took it out of the box.

“I don’t get you Tanya, I really don’t. You’re in a grump all the damn time,
then you meet some woman at the dentist’s office and you’re all elated. What is it,
your own family can’t make you happy? You need to meet some Galina Petrovna?”

I glared at him, what was he doing, who cared? Mom was happy, isn’t that all
that mattered? My mom’s expression was darkening again. I had to do something.

“So what was it, what was it that she was so scared of? You never said.”

She kept squinting her eyes at my dad, clenching her jaw, but then, then it
worked, I’d distracted her! She stuck out her tongue at him and kept going. I scowled

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. in his direction to make sure he didn't misbehave again. He rolled his eyes and kept smoking while she finished the rest of the story.

“Oh yes, I forgot to mention that part, didn't I? Well, the whole time we were talking I noticed that she'd kept her mouth pursed shut a little, talking through her lips, barely moving them. But, as our conversation warmed up, as we were learning how parallel our lives were, she gave me a real smile. And her teeth Valentina...”

My mom pulled out another cigarette, her words hovering in the air as she lit it, pulled on it, and widened her eyes. “Her teeth were crooked as the steps to our dacha, and the color,” she placed her hand over her left breast, “the color was like rotting wood.”

Galina Petrovna had been waiting to replace her teeth.

Chapter 2

The next morning at school I was still thinking about the peculiar evening at home. My mother's wild excitement, the stupid paper that I'd never opened, my dad trying to start a fight when my mother was finally acting happy. None of it made sense and I felt so dumb for not having opened that ball of paper. *Discipline?* I'd chosen that night to work on my discipline? What was wrong with me? Since when did I even care about discipline? And why did the paper give me so much anxiety, what had I been afraid of, what was I scared of finding?

It was the first chance I'd had to look at one of the things that my mother had written (she'd been writing in that notebook for over *two years*) and I'd blown it. I probably wouldn't have another one for a long time (unless she threw that paper in the trash, which I had already checked the night before with no success).

Although, she did seem awfully preoccupied with that Galya woman she'd met, maybe that would continue, then she'd become more careless...

It made me uncomfortable that she hadn't thrown it out yet. What if she'd unfolded it herself? Figured out that I'd stolen it from her? But if she was going to do it, she certainly hadn't done it yet, because there hadn't been any screaming this morning...

I stood by the door to our classroom with my friend Kiril, telling him all of this as the other kids filed past. Their feet tapping against the wood floors and their backpacks flopping against their bodies as they giggled and rough housed—boys tugging girls' braids, girls pushing boys away. No one even looked at Kiril and me.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Well, you say she was distracted, all excited about that Galina Petrovna lady, I bet she was distracted enough that she forgot to throw it away, it’s probably still sitting in her pocket. And if she does find it later she probably won’t remember that she’d found it on your floor, most likely she’ll think that she’d put it there herself.”

Kiril reassured me.

He was probably right. He was always so practical about things.

Aside from being worried about the paper, last night had left me pretty excited. It felt like a breakthrough, like maybe things were going to be changing—my mom hadn’t been that open with us in a long time, hadn’t sat on my bed, or been excited, *kissed my head*. In fact, she’d been pretty angry and depressed for almost two years now.

Baba Anya kept telling me to give her time, that she’d seen her go through phases like this before, when she was younger. That my mother always came out of it.

I didn’t want to give her time. My dad was always working. And Baba Anya lived all the way on the other side of the city. So it was mostly just my mom and me, and I hated coming home and having to tip toe around her, worrying that she’d feel like exploding.

But, maybe the time had come, maybe I was getting my old mother back.

“It was so weird,” I told Kiril. “She was glowing. When is the last time you’ve seen my mother glow?”

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

When we were younger, back when we first started school, my mother used to run around with us in the park, taking part in our games. That was probably the last time.

“I don’t know, whenever I see her lately she’s kind of mean.” Kiril scratched his nose with the back of his hand, quickly moving it back and forth, making it red. “I still love her, I do, but I don’t really want to be around her much.”

About a week ago, my mother had screamed at us because we were giggling too loud. Kiril was doing an impression of my desk-mate Vera, blowing out his cheeks to make them even fatter, fatter and tighter, like they’d explode. He always had the ability to transform into the person he was imitating, like a chameleon, and I’d nearly fallen from my bed in laughter

Then my mother stormed into my room. I could hear her feet pounding on the floor as she approached but I was laughing too hard to stop.

“Can’t I have any peace around here? In my own damn house? I work all day, I hear those stupid clerks giggling and chatting endlessly, and then I come home to my house, my safe space, and you guys won’t even let me relax!”

Kiril hadn’t come over since. He kept making excuses, inviting me to his house instead. I knew it was because his mother never had outbursts like that.

“Kiril’s as good as part of the family, he’s used to it.” my mom snapped when I confronted her about yelling at us. She barely looked up, went right back to scribbling in her notebook.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Do you think it’ll last? This new sense of excitement?” he asked, his shirt had come un-tucked and he was fixing it, stretching it over his belly and shoving it into his black pants.

“I have no idea. But I’m dying to meet this woman. What could it be? What is it about her?”

“Maybe she’s got magical powers, put a spell on your mother like a witch...” he laughed and wiggled his pudgy fingers in my face.

“She’s even studying the same topic my mom was doing. Alexander I and Napoleon.”

“Hmmm. Napoleon who squashed any hopes established by the French Revolution. A worthy topic!”

I could never believe how much Kiril knew. He was always shoving his nose in a book and turning the pages so quickly I didn’t even have time to blink. And it was *my* dad who was the historian.

Kiril would come over and pump him for information, asking about all the things he’d read. Sometimes I felt like my dad wished he had Kiril as his kid instead of me. He’d put aside his book, cross one leg over the other, and talk to him for hours, telling him about every great battle, who won what city and why, I would zone out, go to my room and draw or read something, I only paid attention when my dad talked about the Silver Age in St. Petersburg.

“Well she’s coming over for dinner in a couple of weeks, so I guess we’ll see then.” I told him. Then I noticed that he was getting that look on his face—narrowing

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
his already tiny blue eyes and looking past me, his perpetually flushed cheeks
growing even redder.

I knew that Olya Bodryushina must be near. He wouldn't admit his crush to anyone, but it was as obvious as if he'd shouted it to the entire class. Every time she walked by he got all fidgety and I could tell he wasn't listening to a word I said. I didn't make fun of him though, because the one time I had, he'd denied it and got all weird about it for days.

Olya seemed nice enough, one of the few people in the class I'd actually like to be friends with. She was pretty—gaunt and elfin looking with silky hair that she always wore in braided loops by her ears. She laughed a lot, which I liked. But, part of me felt like she was a little snobby, always caught up in her own world so much that she never noticed us at all.

Her best friend Zhenya was more intriguing. Zhenya Petrushevskaya was not related to the eccentric playwright Lyudmila, but might have been just as crazy. She had always been in my class. She sat across the room and always walked around with Olya.

I admired Zhenya because she had serious guts—the only one out of all of us who dared to talk back to Alexandra Vladimirovna, the mean old *baba Yaga* who'd been our teacher since the first grade.

Alexandra Vladimirovna barked at her and Olya every day, narrowing her eyes and flaring her big nostrils, her hands firmly on her hips.

In the first grade the two girls had started out in adjacent rows, but as time went on Alexandra Vladimirovna kept moving them farther and farther apart. They

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. always found a way to communicate though. They used to crumple their notes and roll them to each other across the floor. But then they invented a sign language—gesturing to each other with their hands when Alexandra Vladimirova’s back was turned.

I tried and tried to decipher what they were saying as I watched them from across the room. Zhenya would tap her right elbow, brush her fingers over her right forearm and grab her wrist in a swift motion, in response to which Olya would tap her nose three times, pat her left ear (although sometimes it would be her right and then it must have meant something completely different because Zhenya’s reactions would vary drastically depending on which side it was.) There were endless combinations of movements, and each year they got more and more complicated—by our fourth they’d moved so quickly I had trouble seeing the separate gestures, and now I’d given up altogether.

“Why do you keep staring over there?” Vera (the desk-mate Kiril liked to imitate) always asked me, tapping me on the head with her ruler, her glasses magnifying her bug eyes.

Right then, Kiril was the one staring, and I didn’t even have to turn around to know that Olya was there.

“Hey, wake up Kiril, waaaake up!” I nudged him with the sharp end of my pencil and he swatted me away.

“Ow! That hurts Valya, what are you doing?!”

Zhenya rushed by alongside Olya, long black braids trailing behind her. I was surprised to see her in class so early, usually she was the last one in.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Can you believe it?” she was saying. “Katya was on the phone for FOUR hours last night. Four entire hours. It was torture, we could hear her from every corner of the apartment, yelling and crying. I think she was talking to her boyfriend, but I bet he won’t be her boyfriend much longer. I mean would you be?” her hands waved all around her, accentuating every word.

I knew that if Kiril and I became friends with her we’d have a lot more fun (also it would be nice to have a girl friend.) I could just feel it. She seemed different from the other kids in our class, more mature, and much more alive. I knew she wasn’t a lemming, and these days, that wasn’t so easy to find.

That afternoon Baba Anya picked me up. She was waiting by the school gates in the same furry coat she’d always had—long and greenish, stopping right above her ankles. It was the first time she’d worn it that season, which meant it was only going to get colder. I was still wearing my fall jacket—a bright orange coat with a white zipper and a floppy hood. The sleeves were getting too short, but my mittens covered my wrists, and my mom insisted that I didn’t need a new coat yet.

My grandma looked elegant as usual, her arms at her sides, one ankle in front of the other, she was reading a book, leaning her shoulder against a tree.

“Want to come to Baba Anya’s with me?” I asked Kiril, who walked behind me lost in thought.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind playing Dyeda Viktor in chess...” he stroked his chin. He always played chess with my grandfather. I played him too, but I wasn’t nearly as good, so when Kiril came over I let him go instead of me and sat with my grandma in

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. the kitchen while she cooked dinner. I wasn't in the mood to play chess that night, I wanted to talk about my mom's constant writing (of course I wouldn't mention that I'd tried to steal part of it) and about Galina Petrovna and the effect she'd had on my mother. I figured that having Kiril over would be a good distraction. Dyeda Viktor always wanted to play chess with me because Baba Anya didn't like it and he had no one to play with. He took advantage of my being over. And usually, I enjoyed it, it was the only way we really spent time together, but tonight I wanted to talk to my Baba, and he liked playing with Kiril even more than he liked playing with me.

"Maybe," Kiril tilted his head. "depends if my mom can pick me up later."

"You can stay on the fold out couch and I'll sleep on the *raskladushka*," I offered.

"What are you having for dinner?"

"Carp."

I loved when we had carp, Dyeda Viktor would throw them in the bath tub first and they'd float around until we were ready to cook them. They were wise looking fish, with whiskers that put their big lips into a perpetual frown. Where they frowning because they knew their fate? I always wondered...

I knew that Kiril loved carp as much as I did, so once I said it, he agreed.

Baba Anya loved Kiril, so I didn't even have to ask her, she invited him over as soon as she saw him. He was good with adults, always found something to talk to them about, asked tons of questions.

My grandmother kissed the top of my head, ruffled the top of his, and walked between us, one arm around each of our shoulders.

By the time we rode up the escalator out of the metro it was dark and the moon shone above us, just a sliver of it missing. People shuffled about and the market by the train station was closing down. I could smell the yeasty *kvas* that had spilled out of the big wooden vats onto the sidewalk throughout the day, the old produce that was being thrown into bins.

Boxy white buildings towered all around, their windows glowing in grid-like patterns. Clothes flapped over balconies.

We walked through the playground, along the cement path that led to my grandmother's building, a big ten-story apartment complex, dirty and gray just like the rest of the buildings around it.

Baba Anya's lobby always smelled like cigarettes and paint. I hadn't actually seen anyone paint there in years, but the smell of past jobs kept lingering.

"They don't care about our health Valichka, they never have, and they certainly never will. The chemicals they use, they'll stay forever..." my grandmother told me when I asked her about it.

We squeezed into the elevator and the door slid shut, squeaking at us in slow motion.

"Baba Anya, I have to tell you something depressing," Kiril said, biting his lip like he always did when he was about to break bad news. He called her Baba Anya too, instead of Anya Evgenina, as if she were his own grandmother. I liked that, how much he was a part of our family. It made me feel less lonely, like having a brother. I

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. wondered what news he would break. He hadn't told me anything depressing that day. Sometimes he told my grandparents things before he told me.

"You have to keep this a secret Baba Anya, I'm serious." he looked at her gravely, his blue eyes burning into hers. "But I trust you, I know you'll keep it. You too Valya," he pinched my shoulder. He knew I wouldn't spill, but he liked to feel important, like he was older than me or something.

We walked out of the elevator and my grandma fumbled for her keys, which she kept tied together with a frayed white string. She reached for the longest one and slid it inside the door. The lights were off. The apartment was empty.

"Your Dyeda's gone over to Vadim Akimovich's house," Baba Anya explained. "He'll be back for dinner. Now Kirilochka, what was it you wanted to tell us? I promise I won't leak a word. Won't even tell Dyeda Viktor if you don't want me to."

Lapa, their cat, slid by our feet in the dark, her tail momentarily wrapping around my leg.

"Well, this is probably going to break your heart, since your sister's children suffered so much after Chernobyl." Kiril took a deep breath.

I remembered how Tyetya Vika and her family stayed in our house two years ago, after the nuclear plant exploded. All of them pale and lost with nowhere to go—my second cousin and her kids piling into my room while I stayed on a *raskladuska* by my parents' bed. They stayed for weeks and I wished that they would leave. Go back to Kiev. It took me a while to feel bad about it, it had to sink in, what had actually happened out there.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I looked intently at Kiril, waiting for the secret he had to tell us. What could it have to do with Chernobyl? His dad was a nuclear physicist, so he always knew ahead of everyone what was going to happen.

Kiril stood under the lamp in the foyer, taking off his shoes. His feet stunk and I scrunched my nose. Why couldn't he just change his socks? It would be even worse tomorrow, since he hadn't known he'd be staying at Baba Anya's house, he certainly wouldn't have a change of clothes...

"I overheard my dad tell my mom that they're testing nuclear weapons Kazakhstan, in Semipalatinsk. People are getting sick everywhere. They just started last week. If anyone knows I told you about it I'm dead. My dad doesn't even know that I know, but I just can't keep it in anymore."

Baba Anya sighed, put her book on the front table and leaned the backs of her hands against the wood. I watched through the mirror, her skin reminding me of a plastic bag held taught—crinkling as she forced a smile.

"Go fill the tea kettle. I'm right behind you."

I walked with Kiril, slid my feet against the parquet and hopped onto the black and white linoleum tiles in the kitchen. When no one was around, I'd always use the tiles as a game board, hopping between them, assigning each one different point values. I think I learned it from Kiril—this ability to make a game out of anything, or maybe that's why we became friends, because we could both do it.

Kiril started pacing back and forth, I sat on one of the kitchen chairs and put my feet up on another one.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“I knew it would upset her, but I have no one to talk to about it with...” Kiril trailed off. “My dad could really get in trouble you know, if anyone found out that I was telling people. But it just got so lonely, knowing and not being able to say.”

“You know we won’t say a word, cross my heart.”

“I know, I know. It’s not that. It’s just...it’s hard. I feel like I can’t talk to my parents...they’re bearing this huge weight, knowing about this and not being able to tell anyone...they’re trying to protect *me*. I bet my dad wishes he never became a physicist in the first place. Only reason I overheard about any of it was because they thought I was still sleeping. Were talking about it in hushed voices in the kitchen and hadn’t noticed me come out of my room. I didn’t want to make them any more squeamish, so I waited until they were done, pretended like I’d heard nothing.”

He stopped pacing and leaned against the windowsill, absent mindedly toying with the ends of a plant.

“Hey, you’re gonna break the leaves off and Baba Anya will get mad! She loves that plant.”

He hadn’t even realized he was doing it.

“Sorry...”

Baba Anya walked in. I’d heard her go into the bathroom and splash water on her face. She looked fresh now, more composed.

“It’s such a shame...things seem to be changing, everyone’s excited about the borders loosening up a little...Gorbachev this, Gorbachev that, it’s all the intellectuals will talk about. But nothing’s really changed. They’ll never care about us, about human life. It’s all words. Empty words. Khrushchev once said things too,

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. and look where that got us...Oh Kirilochka, I'm so sorry you have to know about all of it. That you have no one you can talk to. You shouldn't have to be thinking about this at your age And you know the worst part? They'll know about this in the West before we do. They did about Chernobyl.."

Right then the teapot started hissing.

"Valichka get the lemon out, will you?"

I ran the lemon under hot water, my mother always told me to, she said it would be easier to cut that way. Then I sliced it into wedges on the cutting board, which still carried the smell of onions and the purple of beets, seeping deep into the crevices of the wood.

I heard the key turn and Dyeda Viktor's heavy footsteps on the creaking floor. I'd always been told that I had heavy footsteps too, even Kiril said it.

"Why do you walk so heavy, you're so small?"

My mom didn't have them, neither did my dad or Baba Anya, just Dyeda Viktor and I, we walked with such force that everyone always knew when we were entering a room.

My mom liked to explode about it, my heavy walking, especially if she had a headache. She'd turn on me and hiss worse than that tea pot, telling me I needed to get it under control, that it wasn't graceful or ladylike to stomp so hard, announce myself like I was beating a drum. I was giving her a headache, she said. Everything always gave her a headache.

No one yelled at Dyeda Viktor though, it was expected of him, to walk so heavy.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

My grandmother ran to the door and I heard her kiss his cheeks and throw her arms around his neck.

“Oh Anichka, what is it? I missed you too, but what did I do to deserve all this?”

“Shhh Viktor, shhh,” she said and covered his cheeks with more kisses, leading him into the kitchen.

Dyeda Viktor wasn't my mother's father, but I always thought of him as my grandfather. My mom's dad lived in St. Petersburg and I had only met him a few times when we went there for holidays. My mom didn't think of Dyeda Viktor as her father though, she liked him, but she treated him cordially, and I hardly saw them spend any time alone together.

I didn't spend much time alone with him either though, only when we played chess. Otherwise he was usually sitting in his chair quietly, his glasses on the tip of his nose, reading the paper or listening to the radio with his eyes shut, his glasses next to him on the little side table.

“*Privet Dyeda Viktor*,” Kiril said, and bowed his head. My grandfather smiled and the tops of his cheeks folded into thirds above his white beard.

“Glad to have you for dinner,” he nodded back at Kiril and then looked over at me, his blue eyes bulging from his face and his gigantic eyelids hovering over them half way, like they always did. “Excuse me while I go deal with the carp.”

I watched his long corduroyed legs as he strode towards the bathroom.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Over dinner Kiril told him what he'd told my grandmother and me about Semipalatinsk. Dyeda Viktor continued as he had been—separating the bones with his fork and moving them to the side of his plate. I noticed that there was a piece of fish caught in the whiskers above his lips but figured it wasn't the right time to tell him.

"It doesn't surprise me. The Cold War isn't over, and until it is, they'll keep testing. Kazakhstan is far away, they aren't our people, not that the government would care if they were, but the Slavs don't care what happens to the Asians. Even when they do find out, I guarantee you they won't even flinch about it."

His fork was making a scraping sound along the sides of the plate and he was looking down at his food.

Kiril pushed his potatoes around, soaking up the butter and spreading it on the porcelain. I think I was the only one actually chewing. I didn't know what to say. It was terrible, the whole thing, but it also felt removed, and there was nothing that any of us could do about it, so I didn't see the point of being depressed about it all night. I wanted to change the subject, but I knew that I'd look like I was being insensitive, so I just chewed and let my mind wander. Then it dawned on me that maybe I was one of those non-caring Slavs that Dyeda Viktor was talking about. It wasn't because they were Kazakhs though, that I didn't want to dwell on it, it was because I had trouble conceptualizing it, trouble understanding that somewhere these people were suffering and that it was for no reason at all.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Dyeda Viktor took Kiril straight to the chessboard after dinner and stayed with Baba Anya in the kitchen like I'd wanted. She stacked the plates one on top of the other, they made dinging noises in her arms, and I gathered the silverware, throwing it all in the sink, and listened to my grandmother hum an old song about a young girl waiting for her lover to come back from war. The tea pot was back on the stove and I watched the flames dancing below it and reflecting off the steel, their heat fogging up the bottom.

"Have you talked to mom lately?" I asked.

"Not in a few days."

"Well she met some woman at the dentist's office and she won't stop talking about her. Galina Petrovna, another historian. She's studying Napoleon and Alexander I!"

"Wow, the same topic, huh? Your mother must've gotten so frustrated. I'm sorry Valichka...she's so sensitive about that stuff...but I promise, she'll come out of this, it might take her a while, but she will."

"No Babulya, that's just it, she's not angry at all. She actually seems...happy. I haven't seen her like this in years. She's excited, she's been singing in the kitchen even! Also, she opened up to me, sat on my bed for over an hour telling me every detail about this woman. She's supposed to come over for dinner soon."

My grandmother paused for a second, letting the hot water run over her hands and the plate she was holding, looking at the faucet like she was concentrating. Then she went back to scrubbing the remnants of fish from the plate.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“She gets like that. Excited about people. Fascinated. It can get her going for a while. She was that way when she was younger, would get infatuated with new friends in school, this light would come into her eyes. But I’m surprised, someone with her topic, and she’s excited? Maybe she’s more ready to go back to history than we think.”

“But it wasn’t just about history Baba, it was this woman, there must be something magical about this woman the way she described her. You should’ve seen it, the amount of detail that went into her description. It was like she’d memorized everything about her.”

Baba Anya turned around and handed me a white dish towel, frayed and stained with the greens, reds and oranges of past vegetables. I took it and started wiping plates, watching the water streaks fade against the porcelain.

“She used to come home as a teenager and go on like that, detail after detail about strangers, new friends she’d made. It happened once every couple of years, she’d come in, plop down at the kitchen table, lean forward and talk and talk and talk. She talked about Yulichka like that, you know Yulichka Baltayeva, they’re friends to this day. Well your mother was just in love with her when they met. They hardly separated for years after. Sometimes that’s all it takes to get you out of a funk, just meeting someone you’re excited to be around. She might be older now, no longer a school girl, but she’s been holed up in that stupid book keeping job for two years now, she never meets anyone new, and to finally meet someone she’s excited to talk to, oh I can see how that would just about transform her.”

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

My grandmother had finished all the plates now and she turned around and leaned her back against the sink, crossing her arms in front of her and smiling softly, looking down at me, as I sat there at the kitchen table drying the plates and stacking them. I hoped she was right. That this was something that would transform her, not just for a few days, not a week, but transform her into the mother I used to have.

My grandmother had finished all the plates now and she turned around and leaned her back against the sink, crossing her arms in front of her and smiling softly, looking down at me, as I sat there at the kitchen table drying the plates and stacking them. I hoped she was right. That this was something that would transform her, not just for a few days, not a week, but transform her into the mother I used to have.

Chapter 3

The first snow had fallen overnight, and I looked out the window to see soft powder covering the sidewalks.

“Hoorah!” I yelled, raising my arms.

“What’s there to hoorah about?” my mother snapped. “It’s all just downhill from here, we’ll never see the ground again, not until March or April.”

“Oh Tanya, you should be happy our kid is an optimist.” my dad gave her a look that I didn’t quite understand and bit into an apple as he sat down at the kitchen table.

My mom poured tea and brought it over to us with sugar cubes.

“I’m just being a realist. The snow might be all pretty now, but in a month it’ll overtake everything in shades of gray, she needs to understand that hopeful beginnings don’t usually have promising outcomes.”

“Tanyush, come on, you’re killing us! Sit down and relax. Why don’t you come on our walk?”

To our surprise, she agreed, didn’t even ask where we were going, just said “ok,” as she plopped sugar cubes into her tea.

I walked between them, holding my dad’s hand, letting go of it from time to time so I could run ahead and slide on the snow. My mom had her hands tucked inside faded leather gloves, one resting in the pocket of her long gray coat, the other holding a cigarette, smoke trailing behind her as we walked.

We traveled along small side streets, heading to Tverskoy Boulevard. I loved Tverskoy under snow, stretching into the distance all white between rows of green

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
benches. Hardly anyone was out that day. The sky hung over our heads and my
parents' voices bounced from the walls of archways.

"So has she come to see you yet, at work?"

My mom had already talked to Galina Petrovna twice on the phone since she
met her on Wednesday. She sat on the little stool in the hallway, smoking and
twirling the long cord around her fingers, slouching a little, her legs crossed one
over the other. She nodded a lot, and threw her head back laughing from time to
time, her bun bouncing behind her.

She told Galina to seek out my father.

"I've been in the archives a lot the past two days, so if she did come, I
probably wasn't in my office," my dad said, lighting a cigarette too, striking the
match swiftly and setting the end in flames before it calmed into softly glowing
embers.

He had seen Galina Petrovna before, but he hadn't worked with her directly.

"How's your paper coming?" my mother asked.

I hadn't heard her ask about my dad's work in a long time. He took a long
drag before he answered, taking his hand away from mine and stuffing it in the front
pocket of his jeans.

"Honestly, I'm in a slump." he turned to face my mom. "I've written the first
half, and then realized that I'm going about it all wrong."

"How so?"

"I've delved too far into the GULAG prisoners—taken the personal narratives
that I could find and used them, but I don't have nearly as many narratives from the

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. serfs, most of them couldn't write, there weren't many people who cared enough to interview them—but the paper's supposed to be about building St. Petersburg, with the GULAG merely accenting it.”

“Petya, you're over-thinking it, the GULAG's more pertinent anyway, why not shift the weight over, if you find yourself naturally gravitating towards it?”

I was bored and ran ahead of them again. I was glad they were having a normal conversation, without my mom snapping or yelling, but it was a lot more fun when I had my dad's undivided attention. Now they barely paid attention to me at all.

I ran down the middle of Tverskoy and spread my arms out to the sides, like I was flying, I screamed “whooooo” as I ran and listened to the sound of it scatter in the air.

Then I heard it, a laughter I'd heard so many times during class. Two sets of giggles mingling together in the atmosphere.

Zhenya and Olya stood just paces ahead.

They were giggling uncontrollably because they'd caught me running alone with my arms spread, screaming “whoooo!”

I was mortified.

“Having fun Valya?” Olya asked me, waving her hand, and stifling the rest of her laughter.

“Uh, sure am.” I crossed one foot over the other.

Zhenya hit Olya on the arm. “It's ok, we do stupid stuff too,” she said. “Aren't you glad it finally snowed?”

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I nodded. Then a tall woman who looked like a young version of the poet Anna Akhmatova—bridged nose, long face, straight across bangs right above a pair of serious and expressive eyes—walked up behind them and put a hand on each girl’s shoulder. I’d seen her walking with Zhenya before, she was probably her mom.

“Girls we should get going, the showing starts in under an hour,” she said, and glanced up at me, nodding her head and smiling as they started to walk away.

“See you around Valya,” Zhenya said. Olya just waved her hand again.

In the meantime my parents caught up to me and I heard they were yelling. Well my mom was yelling, my dad was looking down at the ground and shaking his head.

“We should’ve never done it Petya, never.”

“But Tanichka, you know we couldn’t have afforded it, and think about what our life would have been like?”

I saw my dad put his hand on my mom’s shoulder when he noticed me, whisper something in her ear, she looked up, saw me, and stormed ahead.

“What was that all about?” I asked my dad.

He shook his head, “don’t worry about it, just some financial decision your mother regrets. She can be such a pain.”

For the rest of the walk it was just my dad and I, like it usually was. Us walking, and him pointing out different historical landmarks around us, telling me what each statue represented, what important person lived in what building.

(Another new plot development that will be revealed much later, but has to be further worked into the text—Tanya was pregnant before Valya. She

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

had the child and it was developmentally challenged. The hospital staff convinced her to give it up. This was common during the USSR—developmentally challenged children were not seen as human and thrown into homes where they were neglected, abused, basically left to rot. Tanya and Petya were very young, they made a rash decision, gave up the child. Tanya didn't think about it much until two years before the narrative, she started reading about these homes, was reading a lot about Marina Tsvetaeva (a famous Russian poet who also selfishly gave up her daughter) and started to feel incredibly guilty. She gave up history and fell into depression. All of these crumpled up balls of paper are about this child she gave up, letters, thoughts, poems, stories, all about her feelings on giving up the child. She meets Galina Petrovna and falls in love, they have an affair. This also parallels Marina Tsvetaeva, who was bisexual and had an had a famous affair with the opera librettist Sophia Parnok. In the end Galina ends up betraying her and running off with Petya. It won't be quite so melodramatic, played out much more slowly and agonizing to watch. I hope. Everything will be told through Valya's observations. The sexual tension between the women is something that I haven't quite worked into the text yet (it's there in some parts but not others, so bear with me, and I'd appreciate feedback on where it's apparent and where it isn't, what works what doesn't), I only just decided that they would have an affair).

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

By the time Galina Petrovna actually came for dinner my mother returned to her normal ways, the “invigoration” slipping away and the blank stare returning to her eyes. But, in the hours right before Galina showed up, my mom was back to how she’d been that afternoon after the dentist—talking quickly, with a light in her eye.

My dad raised his eyebrow at me when we wandered into the kitchen and saw my mother, cigarette in hand, belting out the tune to an old Soviet song I was pretty sure she hated, and scrubbing the outsides of our white cabinets.

“Tanya, you’re getting ash on the floor,” my father said.

She hardly noticed, just kept singing and scrubbing.

Then she had me help her make a salad Olivier, making me chop up boiled potatoes and hard boiled eggs.

Galina never did manage to catch my dad at the office—she’d been away at a couple of conferences the past few weeks and finally she was back and on her way to our house for dinner. I think my dad was just as curious as I was to meet her.

The bell rang when my mother and I had just finished chopping everything and she ran down the hallway to answer it. My dad was in their room finishing up something on the typewriter, and I stayed in the kitchen transferring the last bits of the vegetables into the big salad bowl.

I heard my mother’s giggles rolling down the hallway, and the lovely peals of laughter coming from another woman, drifting down melodiously as she neared the kitchen with my mother.

“Well how nice to finally meet you Valinka, can I call you Valinka? Your mother’s raved so much about you, I’ve been dying to see your face!”

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

My mother? ...raved? She must be embellishing. But then I looked up and Galina's smooth skin was glowing under the light of the sharp overhead lamp, a lamp we never turned on unless we were cooking (my mom ran to flip the switch), and her teeth looked so white and smooth (I thought my mother must have been lying about the tooth replacement—they looked so natural), and she seemed so gentle and kind, that I knew my mother really had raved about me (which was very strange) and immediately I said: "I've heard a lot about you too," and gave her a hug.

My dad's typing could be heard even in the kitchen, and my mom yelled: "Petya! Get out here, put your work down, we have a guest!"

He came in not long after her calls and stuck out his hand, the sleeve of his sweater hanging all the way to the middle of his palm, and Galina smiled, her auburn hair brushing her olive cheeks.

She was glowing, as if she had an aura, and everything about her seemed elegant and elongated. I immediately admired all of it, down to the brown mole on her left cheek—it looked chocolaty and added mystery to her face. Her turquoise eyes were the same color that sea water must be and her long eye lashes hung over them like tassels.

Next to her my mother looked a little faded. She'd always been pretty, but since she quit history she'd stopped taking care of herself, allowing her skin to become ashen and porous, her hair to grow dull, and forgetting that greens and oranges were the colors that made her eyes stand out like emeralds.

"What a kitchen you have, all this space, just for your family of three? You guys are a lucky family!" Galina said, pacing around and admiring the semi-abstract

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
painting of the apples and pears, hanging above the stove. She walked over to the table and sat in one of the wooden chairs, gesturing for me to come sit next to her.

“Valinka, tell me everything! How are you liking school?”

“Oh I don’t like it at all, I hardly have any friends, and my teacher is a monster. A real monster.”

“Most of them are Valinka, my teacher was very stern, and I don’t think she cared about kids at all. For eight years I had her, peering over our shoulders every day, telling us what ‘good for nothings’ we were...”

“Oh Galina Petrovna, you have no idea, she terrifies all of us...just one look from her, it can freeze you in your tracks, she’s worse than...I don’t know...worse than the Snow Queen herself!”

“Oh please Valya, none of this Galina Petrovna stuff, call me Galya, I beg you. You’re making me feel old.”

My dad’s black-rimmed glasses slid down to the tip of his nose as he watched us talking, a smile slipping across his face.

My mom was bringing the salad and the smoked fish over to the table, telling my dad to go get the vodka and the pickles.

“Petya, Galya is doing some very interesting research, do tell him Galinka, tell him what you’re writing about Alexander I!”

Galya wrinkled her nose and shook her head, her hair flying about her face as she did it. “Do you really want me to? I mean doesn’t Petya think enough about work as it is?”

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“I’d love to hear about it, Tanya hasn’t stopped talking about you since you’ve met, she’s very excited that you’ve taken on the Napoleon, Alexander I topic after she left.”

My dad poured a small glass of vodka for each of them, taking a sip as he sat down.

That’s when Kyesha scampered across the linoleum and my mother nearly dropped the plate of black bread she was holding in her hand.

“Oh! Damn him! Damn that little beast!” She yelled, then checking herself in front of Galya, she smiled and brought the plate of bread down in front of us.

“What is this? I’ve never seen anything like it! A hedgehog in your kitchen? How wonderful!” Galya exclaimed and kneeled down to the floor, trying to touch Kyesha, as he ran to his bowl of milk.

So then, instead of talking about her research, my dad was telling Galina the story of the hedgehog, and my mom was chiming in with how she never thought it was a good idea, but how the mice really had disappeared since...

Kyesha was wild once. After years and years of my begging him for a pet, my dad caught him in the forest with his bare hands.

I never liked the idea of buying an animal at the store. I wanted something that was plucked from its natural habitat. Those animals seemed like they’d have more personality. They were born with another purpose and could only be brought into my hands via fate ...

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Disgusting as it may sound, I even preferred one of the mice that haunted our Moscow apartment to a pet from the store. When I was younger I asked my dad to catch me one, and, he agreed. Now I realize it came too easily, his agreement, that he never actually had any intention of doing it, just wanted to see what I would do if he said yes.

I'd gotten a big glass pickle jar from under the kitchen sink and made it into a cage, preparing a little bed by stuffing a sock with cotton balls and sewing it shut. I would look lovingly at the empty jar, waiting for the mouse that would fill it.

My dad kept making excuses: the mice were too quick, they were hiding too much, the ones he did see were too scrawny and wouldn't make good pets...Then one day my mother (who is deathly afraid of mice) had a fit, grabbing the pickle jar and ripping my handmade bed to shreds.

I didn't throw a tantrum, just watched her quietly with my arms crossed and stomped to my room. With my mom you have to know when to yell and when to keep your mouth shut.

She'd wanted a reaction and all she got was silence. I didn't talk to her for days. It made her crazy at first, she paced around the kitchen, smoking even more than she usually does. I swear there was never a moment when cigarettes left her fingers. The skin between her pointer and index finger had long turned yellow and that week it just got brighter and brighter.

Eventually she started to feel bad for what she'd done. Offered to take me to the store and pick out a kitten. That made me more angry. She paid no attention to what I wanted.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I didn't give up; in the summer I'd sit on the crooked steps of our dacha trying to catch squirrels. I'd squint and watch them, mapping out the quickest routes through our overgrown garden. When I spotted a slow one I'd jump up and charge with ready hands. The squirrels always got away. The hedgehog was not so fast. My dad barely had to run, grabbing him under the stomach and lifting him in the air. Kyesha trembled in his arms and my dad walked over to me proudly, the sunlight catching on his curling red hair and reflecting from the lenses of his crooked glasses.

I was thrilled. This was much better than a mouse or a squirrel.

My mother hated it from the beginning. To her, the idea of a hedgehog living inside a cluttered Moscow apartment sounded like hell. She despised rodents.

"*Petya!* He'll get in our way, and he'll spread germs. Think of all the noise he'll make, skittering about!" She shrieked. "And, where will he go to the bathroom? It'll smell like piss. Do you want a house full of piss?"

"Tanichka, where do the mice go?" My dad asked, raising his orange eyebrow, and smiling so the gap between his front teeth showed as he plopped Kyesha on the floor.

The hedgehog, looking confused, scurried under the bed. My mother dashed after him, wanting to catch him and throw him outside. He was too fast though, disappeared without a trace.

She stormed about the house looking for him all day, but the hedgehog was good as gone.

When night came, I tossed and turned in the attic, where my room was. Tried to count the logs lining the ceiling, hoping it would make me go to sleep.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

But all I wanted was for Kyesha to come back. I also wanted him to stay hidden from my mother. If she got her hands on him that would be the end, he'd be back in the wild in no time.

I snuck downstairs—each step creaking as I hit it with my bare toes—and looked for him using the flashlight we keep by the front door.

The house was eerie at night, full of indistinguishable sounds and shapes. I could hear an owl hooting through the window.

Hoot. Hoot.

I shone the light under counters, tables, chairs, the book cases in the study...Kyesha was nowhere. But the owl was still hooting. I hoped it wouldn't wake my parents.

I sat on the little cot in the dining area and listened. The house was settling. Like it was breathing.

Then I thought I could hear a whimper, a chirping almost...

It was coming from the kitchen. I tip toed over to the stove, bent down and shone the light under it. At first I saw nothing, just darkness and dust dancing in the beam of my light. But then I got to the corner, and there it was, a little lump of needles.

I knew that I couldn't just reach out and grab him, so I crouched there with my hands out, not making any sudden movements. Then I thought that he was probably hungry. I was hesitant to leave him, in case he ran away, but I went over to the fridge and poured a little bit of milk into a bowl. Cats liked milk, so I figured hedgehogs might too...

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

He was still there, rolled up into that same ball. I put the milk close to me, he'd have to come out to get it.

Finally he lifted his head and my light reflected from the beads of his eyes. I could tell that he was sniffing, that he smelled the milk. Slowly he hobbled over to the bowl. I let him drink, didn't try to catch him or anything. I wanted to gain his trust.

I put out my index finger in case he wanted to smell it. He did, after he finished with the milk he came over to me and put the tip of his nose against it. I kept it there for a while, then, slowly, I put my hands under his belly and carried him up the stairs.

The next morning I told my dad that I'd found him, whispered in his ear while my mom was outside weeding the garden.

He said he would handle her.

She must have been in a better mood that day, because after a lot of persuasion, my mother compromised—if Kyesha behaved at the dacha for the rest of the week, we could bring him to Moscow.

After he stayed out of our way and scared off all the mice in our two-story wooden house, my mother begrudgingly allowed his passage to Moscow, telling us that if he misbehaved, she would "snap his little neck." The hedgehog didn't really have a neck—his head just turned into his body right away—but I guess that was beside the point.

Until I was five we'd shared our apartment with Gregoryi Alexandrovich, an old man who kept to himself. I only saw him when he hobbled to the bathroom, his

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. shoulders hunched as he gripped a hooked wooden cane and his body wafting a sweet, rotten smell. He never spoke, just grunted at me to let him pass, his tiny blue eyes peering through the sprawling hairs of his eyebrows.

One day, Gregoryi Alexandrovich was gone. Died in the middle of the night and an ambulance carried him away. His door stayed shut and no one came to replace him. My mother reasoned that news of the vacancy fell through the cracks in the bureaucracy at the housing department.

“Don’t you dare mention it to anyone Valentina, people like to talk, and if they find out they’ll probably report us and the room will be gone!” she warned me countless times, pulling on a cigarette as she did it and blowing out her words with the smoke. “Thank god we can finally breathe around here.”

Even though we never used his room, the apartment did feel more spacious with Gregoryi Alexandrovich gone. That’s why we let Kyesha loose, leaving his bowl of milk on our yellow kitchen floor. My mother still complained about him, yelling at me if he scurried under her feet or splattered droplets of milk on the floor, but she never did snap his neck. Once we brought him to Moscow, she never had to scream and scramble up the kitchen chairs at the sight of a mouse.

“Well what a story!” Galina exclaimed. “I’d heard of people keeping hedgehogs outside the city, but never in Moscow. This is really something!” **(please excuse this, I plan to have a few more paragraphs in the kitchen.)**

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

That night I lay in bed watching the shadows of tree branches float along my ceiling, bending at the moldings and wavering slightly against the white walls, glowing from the lampposts outside my window.

I was melting into my mattress, dissolving under my blanket, warm, cozy, and elated. I kept replaying the evening in my mind, how we all sat around the table, how my mother was laughing, and my father telling stories, talking about his paper (not anxiously like he had been on that Sunday walk we took, but with excitement) and both my mom and Galina Petrovna were giving him advice about what to do with it.

He'd been smiling, at both of them, and Galina laughed—oh how she laughed! Always she was laughing, throwing her head back and laughing so hard the table shook, making my mother and father laugh too. They laughed like they used to when I was a little girl.

And the best was, that when my parents got distracted from her even for a second (which didn't happen very often), and started doing something to prepare the kitchen—getting out dishes, or tea, or opening another bottle of alcohol—Galina would turn her head towards me, smiling, her cheeks dimpling just below the corners of her eyes, and ask me questions, questions about myself. Ones that no one in my family ever really asked.

“Who's your best friend Valya, what's she like?” Galya wanted to know during one such pause. I had to tell her that my best friend was a he, that Kiril was more like my brother than anything, that we even fought like siblings, and that he always thought he knew better than me, but that he probably did, and I loved him anyway.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Then I brought up Zhenya, spilled all of it, how I'd always wanted to be her friend, and how she hardly paid me any attention at all. How I'd gotten so red when I ran into her and Olya as I ran down Tverskoy Boulevard with my arms spread.

"Oh Valya, your age, it's so tough. When I was twelve I also had few friends. I was shy and mostly, mostly I just read. I wasn't even lucky to have someone like Kiril. All I had were a couple of girl acquaintances, but I didn't even like them very much. They were just people to talk to, but not people I cared about. I didn't meet my real friends until I was older, fourteen maybe. That's when I really came out of my shell."

I had trouble picturing Galina Petrovna with no friends. She was so pretty and lovely, magnetic really. Why wouldn't the whole world be rushing into her arms? I could see exactly what it was about her that had charmed my mother—everything.

The way she sat—one leg tucked under her and the other crossed over her knee, her elbow on the table, her chin leaning in her hands as she watched everything with her big brown eyes. The way she talked—there was always a ring of excitement in her voice, excitement, and maybe a little mischief. She'd lean over and look into your eyes, like you were in on something together, like you were the only person in the room. And of course, the way she moved—like a cat, slid out of the room without making any noise, her hips swinging, just slightly enough that it was like she was part of a very subtle dance.

I rolled over on my side, feeling the pillow against my cheek, and hearing the faint footsteps of someone walking, a woman's high heels maybe, clonking outside

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
my window, walking off into nothingness, echoing in the distance as I drifted into
sleep.

Chapter 4

“So, how’d it go? What’s she like, this eagerly anticipated Galina Petrovna?”

Kiril asked me during lunch that Monday.

On my walk to school, I’d been dying to tell him all about it, about how wonderful she was. But once he asked, I realized that I wasn’t really sure how to convey her, how to tell him about the enchanting evening without sounding like my mother had after she’d come from the dentist’s.

I bit into my lunch—black bread with butter and sliced cucumber, and watched Kiril as he chewed his, slowly processing each bite, dabbing at his lips with a red and white handkerchief that he’d tucked into his collar like a bib. I thought he looked ridiculous.

My mother always praised his good manners.

“Look Valya how he holds his knife and fork. Learn from it! Why can’t you cut your pieces into small bites the way he’s doing, instead of shoveling big ones down your throat and forgetting to chew?” she’d say and click her tongue.

She always pestered me about my eating—I chewed too fast, smacked my lips too loudly, talked with my mouth full...

“Kirilochka, what did your mother do to make you so well-mannered? And what did I do to have raised such a heathen?”

I wondered how he was able to do it, stay so well-behaved even during school lunches, when no adults were around, raising his kerchief to his lips if he needed to say something.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Loud laughter echoed from the recess-room walls. Girl laughter both squeaky and high, rising in pitch with each burst of it and jabbing me in the ears. I knew without looking that it was coming from one of three girls—only Anya, Masha or Tanya laughed that way, so loud that the entire class had to stop what they were doing and pay attention to them, watch as one boy or another teased them, tickled them, squeezed their sides, stole the bows from their hair, untied their aprons...

This time it was Tanya, she was squirming away from Sasha, a big loud bully of a boy who liked to pick on the smaller, less popular kids to show off in front of the girls.

I rolled my eyes. We didn't interact with them, they probably didn't even know we existed (though our class was only thirty kids), but their presence annoyed me. They were so unaware of anything outside of themselves (unless it amused them somehow), so stuck inside this little bubble of a world that they had created.

"So Galina Petrovna, what's she like?" Kiril insisted after I'd stayed quiet for a minute. "You can't go on and on anticipating this meeting for what, an entire month? And then not tell me anything about it!"

"I know, I know, you're right. It's just, she's hard for me to explain." I told him. "My mom wasn't exaggerating, not one bit, she's everything she said she was, more even. She's really...she's charming, most charming person I've ever met. I see exactly what it was that captivated my mother, but I don't think it's possible to get it across with words..."

"I mean, ok, so people are difficult to explain, but you can at least describe the basics—how she looks, how she sounds, what kind of personality she has."

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

So I did my best, I told him how she'd asked me lots of questions, and how my parents both laughed a lot when they were around her, I told him that she'd been keen on Keysha, laughed when he scurried past her feet, and that my mom had started to complain about him but managed to bite her tongue midway...

"She has an interesting life too, really independent. She's been living alone, without parents, since she turned sixteen. Used to live with her mother by the Beliaevo stop, just the two of them. Then her dad died and left her this apartment in the center, not far from us, just as her mom started dating a guy she couldn't stand, so she moved out and he moved in, and she's lived alone ever since."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-five."

"Wow, no parents since she was sixteen? She's been living alone since she was only four years older than us. Could you imagine living alone in *four* years?"

"Wouldn't that be cool? No one telling you what to do..."

"I dunno, sometimes I think it would be cool. But, don't you think it would get kinda lonely? And think about it, you'd have to make dinner and breakfast and everything all by yourself, no company."

I shrugged. I thought that I might kind of like it. I always loved when everyone was out of the house and I had the place to myself. If I got lonely, I'd just have my grandma come over and keep me company. Maybe if I didn't see my mother every day, I wouldn't annoy her so much and she'd stop yelling. And my dad, I knew we'd spend a ton of time together anyway, and it would be quality time. We'd

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. probably go on a lot more walks, not just once a week, and of course I'd get to keep Kyesha.

"I think you'd get lonely Valya." Kiril said, wiping the corners of his mouth. That's when Zhenya and Olya walked by, laughing and linking arms. Zhenya pulled Olya towards us. Were they really coming over?

"Hey Valya," she said, crossing one skinny leg in front of the other, knobby knee in front of knobby knee, smiling and showing the little gap between her two front teeth. "It was funny to run into you in Tverskoy, sorry we couldn't talk longer, my mom was rushing us to catch a movie."

I couldn't believe it, I'd been so embarrassed after our run in, and here she was, saying that she was sorry we hadn't been able to chat. Olya didn't look too happy about it, she kind of just stood there next to Zehnya, playing with the end of her braid.

Kiril tugged at his shoe lace and avoided looking at them altogether. He was done eating but the handkerchief still dangled from his neck, he must have forgotten it was there.

"What *is* that? I mean I know what it is, a handkerchief, but why are you wearing it?" Zhenya asked him.

He got so red that the tips of his ears colored and pulled the kerchief from his collar, shoving it in his pocket.

I laughed, laughed along with Zhenya. Olya was starting to giggle.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“I always tell him it looks like a bib, but he insists. He’s a very well-mannered boy.” I said, and punched him lightly on the shoulder. That’s when Olya really laughed.

“My grandpa does that, maybe you guys can be friends,” she said through giggles. “My grandma makes him, otherwise he gets food all down his shirt, and it leaves stains.”

“No, no, Kirilochka would never stain his shirt, his handkerchiefs stay clean, he just does it because his mother taught him to. He’s very respectful of elders.”

Then the bell rang.

“See you guys,” Zhenya said. Olya waved, and they walked away.

I was smiling, walking back into the classroom, excited that we’d talked to them.

“Don’t they seem cool,” I turned to Kiril, but he wasn’t there, he wasn’t next to me anymore, he was walking quickly ahead, not looking back at me at all.

“Come on, don’t be mad, I was only poking fun,” I walked after him. He didn’t answer, raced to his desk and took his seat.

Alexandra Vladimirovna was in an especially bad mood that day. She was angry with how long we all took getting back into the classroom after lunch, and how much whispering there’d been that morning. Zhenya and Olya were two primary culprits, but they weren’t the only ones. According to her we were all bad.

She clenched her jaw, the bottoms of her cheeks moving back and forth, and paced in front of the room holding a ruler, tapping it into the palm of her hand as she lectured the class.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“I’ve never seen such a badly behaved group of children,” she said, her voice so shrill I wouldn’t have been surprised if the windows cracked right then and there. Her bun looked especially tight that morning, and the overhead light was reflecting from the metal tooth on the left side of her mouth.

“I don’t know what to do with you anymore, but something’s got to change.”

Her heels, big square heels that came out of faded beige shoes like hooves, clonked against the classroom floor and she tapped the ruler to their beat.

Clonk. Clonk. Clonk.

“For starters, I am instituting a new rule.”

I could hear the gasps of my classmates coming from all over the room in waves.

Looked over to see Zhenya rolling her eyes and folding her arms in front of her chest.

Alexandra Vladimirovna spun towards her abruptly—nothing ever escaped this woman—and pointed the ruler at her.

“Zhenya Petrushevskaya, arms on the desk in front of you right now! Don’t you dare fold your arms at me like that.”

Zhenya’s arms fell against the desk in a loud thump. She was glowering.

I tried to catch Kiril’s eye, we were always looking at each other during times like this, we were supposed to be allies. He wouldn’t look at me. All I could see was his profile. Straight and focused, the corners of his mouth still, his arms in front of him, unmoving, not even fazed by what Alexandra Vladimirovna was about to do.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I couldn't believe that my comment had made him so mad. I felt bad, I shouldn't have made fun of him in front of Olya, but, I didn't really say anything so bad, nothing I wouldn't normally say. And it's not like he'd admitted to me that he had a crush on her. Why was he getting so sensitive all of a sudden? And how long was he going to alienate me for, anyway? Who was he going to talk to instead?

"The new rule is as follows." Alexandra Vladimirovna barked. "From now on, you will all sit with your hands clasped behind your back. When you are writing you will write with your right hand and keep the left one behind you. The same when you are raising your hand. Understood?"

Seriously? This was like prison. I'd never heard of such a thing. This woman was ridiculous. I looked up at Kiril again, he was sure to look at me now, this was possibly the craziest thing our teacher had done. But, it was like he hadn't even heard her at all, he was still looking at the same spot in front of him. His expression hadn't changed one bit.

After class, when we were getting our coats, I tried again.

"Can you believe it? Hands behind our backs? This is madness, insanity, unbelievable! Do you think our parents can talk to her? Maybe we should have them write a letter. We can tell the head of the school."

"I have to go Valya," Kiril said without looking at me. "My mom and I are going to my grandma's." He grabbed his coat and ran out of the classroom without giving me the chance to say anything more.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I felt terrible. But then, as I was walking out of the building Zhenya ran up behind me and said, “this is unbelievable! My mother is going to be so mad. We have to do something, she can’t get away with this!”

“I know,” I said. “I was just telling Kiril that our parents should write a letter or something.”

“Yeah, like ten letters. Where is Kiril, anyway. I thought you guys usually walk home together?”

“He had to rush out, going to his grandma’s.”

“Yeah, Olya had to go quickly too. Anyway, I turn up here,” she gestured left with her hand, gave me a quick wave and ran off.

My mom didn’t work on Tuesdays and I’d heard her on the phone the night before, making plans to take a walk with Galina Petrovna. She was getting ready for her when I was leaving for school. I was excited that they were going to meet again so soon, thinking that Galya would probably be there when I got home, laughing in the kitchen, telling stories.

No one was in the kitchen though; it was just my mother in my parents’ room, lying on their bed with her feet crossed, rubbing one foot against the other, a faint smile on her face, holding a crochet hook and a ball of yarn.

I hadn’t seen her crochet since I was small. Back then I used to sit on her bed, watching her weave the hook in and out of the wool, making intricate circles that somehow materialized into scarves or hats or sometimes little sweaters for me. I would crawl up to her leg and try to play with the string dangling from her hands

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. and she'd swat me away. Then my dad would come and scoop me from the bed, putting me on his knee and shaking me up and down as I leaned back and absorbed the aroma of cigarettes from his beard and hands.

We had a record player on the floor; we still have it, in the corner to the left of the windowsill. I would sit and listen to the melody of the soothing voice coming from that corner, wafting to my ears by the breeze from our open windows, and watch the dust dancing through the rays of our old lamps. Now I know that this melody that rushed over me so often was Procol Harum, a *Whiter Shade of Pale*, but back then it was just a melody, a scratchy recording that filled the room as I watched my mother from my father's lap, his arms around my belly, and his bearded chin leaning on my head.

"Are you really playing that again Petyka, can't we hear something else?" she would whine, raising her eyebrows and looking up at him.

"Just once more Tanyush, once, ok?"

My mother would sigh and shake her head. Her hair wasn't graying yet, and she would wear it down so it landed on her shoulders and flowed with her movements.

She wore it down now too, I hadn't seen her do that in years. No matter how many times my father asked her to let it loose, she'd always make some excuse and throw it back into that bun, or, once in a while, a ponytail.

I watched her from the doorway; she didn't notice me right away. She'd started a line but didn't seem to be doing anything with the yarn now, it just lay there in her lap as she looked through the window and moved her lips a little, tilting

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. her head, raising her eyebrows and gesturing slightly with her hands. I'd seen her do this many times before, when she was replaying a conversation, or practicing for one. Right then, I could tell that it was a conversation she'd already had, she looked...satisfied, content, like it was a conversation she wanted to have over and over again.

Sensing my presence, she turned towards me and flushed.

"Oh, Valya, hi," she said, reaching for the pack of cigarettes next to her, lighting it, making a noise as she put her lips to it and inhaled. *Puh*.

"You just missed Galya, she had to go meet with her working group. She sends her love."

"I thought she'd be here. Was hoping I'd get to see her again, she really is great. I was trying to explain her to Kiril today and words were escaping me."

My mom just smiled, smoothing her hair with her free hand.

"Yeah, she's very fond of you too. Says that you remind her of herself when she was your age."

"Really?" I was smiling, to be reminded of Galina Petrovna, well that was something...although it would mean more coming from an outsider, if it was someone else who thought I was like her...

I wanted to tell my mom about the fight I'd had with Kiril, about Zhenya, and the terrible new rule at school, but she said, "Valya, I'm awfully tired, do you mind going to your room for a little while? I'll start cooking once your dad gets home, but right now I just need to lie here alone for a bit..."

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

She squeezed my shoulder, dug her cigarette butt into the ashtray next to the bed and lay her head back against a pillow, closing her eyes, that smile still playing on her lips.

I closed her door gently and walked over to the phone that hung in our corridor, took the receiver, untangling the muddled cord, and stuck my finger in the rotary. Click, click, click...I pushed it and it bounced back after each digit.

I called Baba Anya, told her about the rule, asked her if there was anything I could do, if she could write a letter.

“Oh Valya, we could write thousands of letters, it wouldn’t change anything. The principle would probably commend her for instilling discipline. It used to be common for teachers to do this, make students sit with their hands behind their backs, I had a teacher do it, luckily she got sick and stopped teaching our class after third grade. I’m sorry darling, I was hoping they’d loosened up a little since then. How’s your mother?”

“Oh she’s good. Galina Petrovna really is changing her. Mama already saw her again today, she looks happy and calm. I’ve just left her so she could take a nap. She was even wearing her hair down!”

I heard my grandmother sighing on the other end of the line, a long, slow, even sigh.

“Aren’t you happy that mom seems level again? Why are you sighing about it?”

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Oh nothing Valichka, I’m not sighing, just tired that’s all. Why don’t we talk tomorrow? Dyeda Viktor’s about to come home, and I’m just finishing up some laundry.”

No one was making any sense anymore. Kiril was angry, my grandma wasn’t happy that my mom was happy, and my mom was under a strange spell.

Baba Anya took me for a walk the next day after school Kiril was still acting strangely. He was talking to me, but it wasn’t the same, he was mad, he only ate lunch with me because otherwise he’d have to sit alone. Didn’t talk much and answered abruptly. I was telling Baba Anya about it as we walked down Ulitsa Gorkova.

The sky was dimming, it wasn’t quite dusk yet, but Moscow sat under a layer of gray, the colors muted, and the clouds hanging low over our heads, like thick blankets.

“You should have been more sensitive about his feelings,” Baba Anywa said, he rarm around my shoulder. “You know how he gets, he’s very emotional. I understand that you want to fit in with Zhenya, but you shouldn’t do it at the expense of your best friend. You need to treat it like a serious matter, show him that you’re genuine, that you’re truly sorry. Put your defences aside Valichka, and grovel. Then he’ll forgive you, once he knows how important he is to you.”

I wasn’t even planning on telling her about the fight because I’d known that she’d react this way, taking Kiril’s side. Also I knew that I was in the wrong. That I shouldn’t have made fun of him in front of Olya like that. I wasn’t planning to tell

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. her, but she'd asked me herself: "What's wrong with Kiril? He barely even looked at me, rushed by with a quick nod. Grew all red when he walked past me. Does he think I told someone about the nuclear testing in Semipoliatinsk?"

So I had to tell her, and now I was shrinking away from her in shame, practically dissolving right there on the sidewalk because I could see the disappointment cast over her face like a shadow.

"There, there, it will be okay. We all make mistakes." She ruffled my hair and squeezed the back of my neck.

"So your mother, is she still all dreamy?" I told her that she seemed to have flown far away during dinner with my dad and me last night. Wasn't really engaging with us. Not even when my dad ranted and raved about how much he liked Galina Petrovna.

"So your dad liked her too?"

"Oh yeah, they made plans to have lunch together over at the history department. He told her he'd introduce her to Lyosha and some of his other colleagues."

Baba Anya nodded slowly, inhaled, and took me under my arm, almost like she needed support.

She came over that night, after our walk.

"So tell me about your new friend Tanichka." she said right as she walked into the kitchen, squeezing my mother tightly on the shoulders, and it seemed to me almost as if she sounded stern.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

My dad wasn't back yet from the library and my mom was just starting to make dinner.

"Go do your homework Valya, we'll call you when your dad gets home, when it's time for dinner." my mom said, waving me away with her hand. My grandma sat in one of the kitchen chairs with her arms perched on the back of it, her legs crossed and her eyebrows knit tightly together.

Chapter 5

I stood in the kitchen dicing vegetables. My hands were all red from the beets, and my mother chopped onions next to me, tears running down her cheeks. She kept sniffing and wiping her eyes with the back of her hand and I wondered why I wasn't tearing from the onions too, like I usually did. I watched a pigeon sitting on the ledge by our window as I diced, bobbing his head and brushing little drops from his feathers.

Galina Petrovna was coming over again and we were making *vinigret*. I kept calling her that, Galina Petrovna, and she kept correcting me, but for some reason I just couldn't bring myself to call her Galya out loud. She seemed regal to me somehow, even though she wasn't formal at all, the opposite actually. But, though I called all of my parents friends by their first names, I always wanted to refer to her as Galina Petrovna. Maybe I just liked the sound of it...

I was excited for the *vinigret*, it was my favorite and we hardly ever made it.

"It just takes too long Valentina, all that boiling and dicing and everything gets red from the beets..." my mom always complained. Well tonight we were having it and it wasn't even my idea, it was hers. I loved the smell of the eggs and the onions and the potatoes all mixing together just waiting for the beets and the mayonnaise...

I'd begged my mom to add apples. She didn't want to, told me that the beets already made the salad sweet enough, that apples belonged in Olivier, but I argued that the apples weren't sweet, they were tart and the combination was perfect because of it.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Oh fine Valentina, fine, fine, fine. But I hope you know that the salad doesn’t usually have beets. I hope you remember that when you grow up and you’re feeding your husband.”

She sighed and stared through the window. I wondered if she was looking at the pigeon too. Then I wondered why Galina Petrovna didn’t have a husband. She was younger than my parents, but not that much younger and every other woman her age I knew had a husband. Had she had one before? She certainly must have, or many husbands even. She was so beautiful.

The record player started skipping, I could hear it from my parents’ room, three English words repeating over and over again, three words that I didn’t understand.

“Petya!” My mother hollered. Her voice rolled through her throat and bounced into the hallway. “Petyaaaaa! Turn that damn thing off, it’s giving me a migraine!”

My father never answered and I thought I could make out the sounds of running water. My eyes let go of the grooming pigeon and I rinsed the beet juice from my hands, walking towards the bathroom. Sure enough, my dad was in the shower, and I think he was singing.

I switched the record myself.

Back in the kitchen the Beatles’ “Yesterday” drifted in and my mother, who’d put aside the onions, sat in a chair with her feet up, holding a cigarette with one hand and wiping the other with her apron.

“Dad’s showering” I told her.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Showering? Why is he showering? He never showers at night.” She inhaled and crossed her arms. I shrugged my shoulders, wondering the same thing.

The doorbell rang, buzzed really, flying into the kitchen with the sounds of the Beatles. I ran down the corridor, my mom yelling behind me, “Don’t get beets on the furniture!”

There was nothing in our hallway except some shoes and a coat rack. The wallpaper bubbled with age and water damage.

I clicked the heavy brass lock, twisted the long metal key, and swung open the door to see Galya standing at the threshold in a green wool hat, her cheeks glowing from the cold, that chestnut hair framing them.

“*Privet* Galya!” I went to hug her, then noticed something huge next to her on the floor—a rounded cage draped with a pink sheet.

“For you Valichka,” she said and her words rang like bells. They always sounded like that, chimes signaling something magical.

She pulled the sheet into the air so swiftly it flapped, and lifted the cage with both hands.

“This is Abramka,” she smiled, the dim hallway light reflecting from the smooth enamel of her fake teeth.

There he was, a parrot, a big green one with blue wings and tufts of red under his chin. I couldn’t believe it. I’d never even seen a parrot!

“For me? Seriously?” I jumped up and down squealing, kissing both of Galya’s cool cheeks and grabbing the cage.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Careful, it’s heavy. I had to hail a car just to bring him here.”

It really was heavy, the cage and the bird inside of it. He was the length of my forearm and kind of fat. I lowered Abramka the floor and squatted.

The parrot stared at me silently, his neck quivering.

“Where did you find him?”

“He’s the product of my mother’s fleeting affair with a naval officer,” Galina told me. “Not long before I was born, maybe a year or two, she fell madly in love. He got the parrot in Madagascar, gave it to her as a parting gift.” Galina rolled her eyes a little, and I got the impression that she’d heard the story a lot.

Ma-da-gas-car. I sounded it out. I liked the way it rolled from my tongue.

“It’s in Africa.” Galina clarified and I widened my eyes. Africa? Africa!

“Abramka’s lived in my mother’s apartment for the past twenty-seven years, was a permanent fixture of my childhood.”

“So why are you giving him to me?”

“Well, funny you ask. I’m not sure really. With my mother you can never be sure of anything. One minute she loved the parrot, not just a minute, twenty-seven years, twenty-seven years she was crazy about this parrot. Then suddenly she grew tired of him. Told me to take him. Gave no explanation.” Galya sighed and shrugged her shoulders. “Well, I have no room in my place, and honestly I don’t really want the bird. Reminds me too much of the past, growing up in that stuffy apartment, just my mom and this silly bird. But, you guys have space, and I know you’ll love him!” she laughed, probably thinking about our taste for interesting pets, and Kyesha scurried past her feet, which made her throw back her head and laugh even harder.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I couldn't believe my luck.

"Abrraaamka! Abrrraaamochka! Abrrramka!" I sang, looking him square in his beady eyes. The parrot stared at me blankly. Then started pacing around the cage.

"Shouldn't he be repeating what I say?"

"Oh no, not this one. He used to talk all the time, when mom first got him, that's what she said anyway. Then she trained him to stop."

Right then my mother ran down the hallway to see what the fuss was about, stopping short in front of the cage.

I expected her to yell, like she had about Kyesha, but she cooed instead, widening her eyes and circling the parrot with fascination.

"Oh Galichka, you shouldn't have! What a gift! Look Valya, look at how she spoils us."

The smoke from her cigarette wrapped around the three of us standing in the hallway and through it I could see my dad emerging from their room, his hair wet and matted to his head.

"Well, well, well. Here I was, Valya's hero, the hedgehog catcher, and here you are outshining me with an exotic bird. What are you trying to do here Galina Petrovna?"

Galina giggled.

The parrot was silent, the green feathers on top of his skull pointing up, his neck quivering.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Galya gave my parents each a kiss on the cheek and we headed to the kitchen, my mother grabbing the cage. Putting it on the yellow linoleum, right in the way of Kyesha's milk.

My dad pulled a chair up to one of the cabinets and stood on it, rifling through bottles on the top shelf until he found the right one. It was brown and rectangular with a square black top and Latin lettering on the gold label: DISARONNO.

"Oh Petya, I forgot we had that! How perfect. Have you tried this before Galya? Amaretto? It's Italian, almond liquor. Supposed to be delicious. Goes great with milk."

My mom ran to the fridge and got a big glass bottle of milk for the table, and my dad found three little glasses.

"No, I haven't. Almond, huh? Where did you get it?"

"Petya bought it through a friend of a friend who'd gone to Italy. He'd read about it somewhere and specially requested it. We were dying to try it, but saved it for a special occasion. Then I think we just forgot about it. It's been sitting in the cabinet for a few months now. But I can't think of a better time! Now that we're welcoming a new member to our family."

My mom looked lovingly at Abramka. I couldn't believe it.

They even ended up getting another glass and letting me try it, the liqueur. Just a splash. Galina convinced my mother after she tasted it.

"Oh Tanichka, you have to let her have some," she said. My mother protested.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“It’s like dessert,” Galina said. “A little won’t harm her. Plus she’s twelve years old, that’s old enough for a taste. She may never have another chance, how often is it that we get something like this around here? Oh and it’s so delicious...”

“Come on Tanyush, let her try it.” my dad chimed in, and my mother, sighing loudly, poured a few drops into my glass.

It really was delicious, all creamy with the milk, and it made me feel warm inside. Warm and happy.

My parents and Galya chatted away and I crept up to the parrot’s cage and watched him observe his new surroundings. I wondered what it was like for him, to live in one place for twenty-seven years and then all of a sudden be somewhere else. I figured it would be stranger for him once Galya left, then there wouldn’t be anything familiar, not even her voice to fall back on.

I felt bad for him. Trapped in that tiny space, unable to fly or walk around. He’d probably be jealous of Kyesha who got to go anywhere he wanted. Would they be friends? Had Kyesha even realized we had a new pet?

When Galya left I helped my mom clear the table. My dad was playing *Whiter Shade of Pale* again. My mom was humming and moving her hips a little as she wiped the plates.

Then I nearly stumbled over Kyesha and broke a dish. A saucer that my mother loved—she’d had it since childhood—fell out of my hands and shattered into bits all over the floor.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“You little brat!” she screamed. “You nasty little brat! That was my grandmother’s saucer!”

Kyesha ran under his chair and curled up into a ball. My mother lifted her hands, the dish towel flapping as she waved her arms.

“I can’t believe this, what am I going to tell Baba Anya? I’ve been using that saucer since I was a little girl and you, you careless girl, and that dumb pet of yours, always getting in the way!”

I felt tears coming to my eyes. Tears of anger and frustration. I liked the saucer too and I felt bad about breaking it, but mostly it was because our night, which had been so perfect and warm, was broken now too.

My dad ran in, hearing all then noise.

“What is it, what’s going on?”

“Your stupid hedgehog, it was your daughter and that stupid hedgehog!” my mother shouted.

“Rrraaaappaaa!” an angry voice shouted from the cage. The parrot was screaming too, imitating my mother’s intonations perfectly. It was like having two mother’s yell at once.

Chapter 6

All weekend I'd been stuck inside watching raindrops drip from the naked branches. I sat on the windowsill trying to sketch the trees and the umbrellas of lonely passerbys floating by on the sidewalk.

It was finally sunny and I had nothing to look forward to but hours and hours of class, with Kiril all mad at me, and sitting with my hands behind my back while Alexandra Vladimirovna's nasal voice lectured us, probably telling me that my hair was messy or that I needed to iron my uniform. It didn't help that as I sat at the kitchen table swirling my spoon in my oatmeal and watching my mother clean Abramka's cage, a big glop spilled over the side of my bowl and fell onto the black apron of my school uniform. This did not go unnoticed by my mother, as soon as she looked up from the cage, she saw the white smudge on my left thigh and yelled and yelled about having just washed and ironed everything.

"That's it Valentina." she growled. "You're washing it yourself next time."

"Does that mean I can spill things and you won't yell at me? Because in that case I would *love* to wash it myself," I said as I walked to rinse my bowl and spoon, making sure to clang them as loudly as I could.

"Cut the racket Valentina, I mean it!"

"Rrrrrappaa!"

Even a clean cage didn't stop Abramka from chiming in.

"I am *sick* of this bird!" I yelled over my shoulder and headed towards the door. I was nearly out, white stain and all, when my mother trapped me. Running after me, wiping her hands on her apron, and reaching to grab the big floral

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. umbrella that was leaning against our hallway wall. “Take this. It might rain.” she said, shoving the umbrella in my hand. “And you better not leave it at school!”

The umbrella was up to my waist. Bigger than any umbrella in Moscow. My father’s friend Lyosha Bernstein brought it back from Paris in March. My father found out that he was going over the phone; he threw it in its cradle and ran over to me, picking me up, twirling me around the room, and dancing as he hummed *A Whiter Shade of Pale*.

“Things are changing Valyush! It’s really happening!”

“What’s changing papa? Who was that on the phone?”

“Lyoshka, he’s going to Paris! People are starting to leave the country! Can you imagine, Paris?”

He was leaving for three weeks with two other historians for a conference on the *Ballet Russes*—Paris! None of the faculty had ever gone abroad. Not from the history department anyway. When Lyoshka came back, my parents invited friends, and we all sat around the kitchen table with tea, wine, and vodka, nibbling cookies from a yellow tin. Lyosha brought the tin for us too—a painted rectangular box with white buildings (one of them domed, another with a triangular black roof), and painters with their easels dotting a cobblestoned city square. The sky was bright blue, trees burned in oranges and yellows, and people everywhere—brightly colored scarves and hats—walking, talking, gesturing with their hands. *Montmartre* it said on top, *Montmartre*.

The buttery cookies dissolved in my mouth. We each had one that night, and after that, my mom rationed them out to my dad and me for weeks, until there were

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
only crumbs. Then she washed the tin and we kept it to store the regular Soviet cookies, which always tasted stale, and came in boring paper or plastic packaging.

When he'd first walked in, Lyosha proudly handed us the blue umbrella, decorated all over with red, purple and yellow flowers.

"Can you believe it?" he beamed, "And look at all the coverage!"

He tapped its long metallic point against the parquet, ran his hand along the length of it, grabbed the hooked handle, arched like Abramka's beak, and leaned against it, reminding me of Charlie Chaplin. Then he opened it in the hallway and we watched in awe as the sides nearly touched our two walls. Lyosha grinned, stretching his mustached lips, showing big teeth, and twirled the umbrella around his head.

I thought it was pretty great then, but not for long. My mom made me walk everywhere with it, the huge, heavy Parisian umbrella. I don't know why she forced it on me and not my dad. I was the smallest, and the most likely to lose it. But for some reason my dad always took the collapsible blue one, my mom took the faded red one, and I ended up walking to school with the big, hooked Parisian umbrella. The first day it rained I was excited to bring it, but when my classmates saw it, they laughed at me.

"What is that? It's so big and awkward!" Larisa, a pointy-nosed, freckly girl with crooked teeth, said to the entire class. The week before my classmates had made fun of Larisa for the purple backpack that her dad's diplomat friend brought back from London. Everyone else had the plain leather knapsacks that sat on our backs like boxes.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Now it was my turn with the umbrella. My mom's logic for why I had to take it had do with my health. "You're the only one in the family who always gets sick Valentina. This way you won't get cold and wet."

She never understood how I managed to get soaked even if I carried an umbrella. (I'd get lazy and let it sink below my head as I walked). Well, with this one, you couldn't let it sink, you had to carry it upright or it would hurt your wrist. But, on this very sunny day, I was more opposed to carrying it than ever.

"What? Rain later? There isn't a cloud. The sky is *bright blue*."

"Valentina, it's been raining and sleeting for weeks. April is deceiving. Maybe it won't rain, but if it does, and you get caught in it, you will get sick. If you're sick, then you will be lying here for days, weeks maybe, and I'll have one more thing to worry about."

"I am *not* taking that thing with me!" I stomped my foot.

This was ridiculous; my mother was being completely unreasonable. She was always fabricating problems out of thin air. I wouldn't hear the end of it if I showed up in school with that giant, embarrassing umbrella on the first sunny day. Never mind the discomfort of lugging it around. I let out a loud groan. So did Abramka, and then I grabbed the umbrella by the hooked handle and slammed the door.

So, I walked down Ustuzhva Ulitsa with the stupid thing in my hand, sometimes using it as a cane, other times turning it over and pretending the hook was the bottom of a hockey stick, aiming it at bits of ice and watching them bounce

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
from the sooty buildings, shattering into bits. The rain we'd had that weekend had made all the snow melt and it was running in little streams under my feet.

I thought about Kiril, about having to apologize, that I would do it that day, that I'd be genuine, because I missed him and I really felt truly sorry for making him feel bad.

"Devotchka, are you out of your mind? You almost hit me with that ice! Didn't your mother teach you any manners?"

A loud scratchy voice interrupted my thoughts.

I looked in front of me and there was no one, just the sidewalk and murky footsteps weaving through the sludge, making paths, going this way and that, some little, some small, others blending so much that I couldn't tell what size they were. I turned my head to the left and saw an old lady raising her cane across the street. She was wrapped tightly in her coat, a scarf tied over her head, a big fur hat sitting over the scarf.

"Where do you think you are? Throwing ice like that? What is this city turning into? Hooligans! It's filled with hooligans!"

I hadn't even been close to hitting her, she was across the street, but I said "Sorry," and she mumbled something about how I was too small to be causing this much trouble, and kept walking, tsking her tongue and shaking her head, looking back at the ground, muttering something.

I was getting closer to School 112 and already felt that weight in my stomach, the same weight I always got on Monday mornings, and sometimes even on Tuesdays, when I knew that I had an entire week of sitting inside the prison of a

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. building with my hands folded in front of me on my desk, writing out math problems, and composing essays about Lenin, Stalin and the great Soviet people, in cursive. I hated cursive. I kept hitting the ice, harder now, watching it go farther and farther. Who did that *starushka* think she was anyway? Why did everyone always find it their business to tell me what to do? My backpack jumped on my back each time I hit a new piece of ice and my body felt sweaty and itchy under my big black furry coat.

“What’s the umbrella for? I see you’re making good use out of it, but what’s it for? I mean, the sun’s out, the snow’s melting, why the umbrella?”

I turned around, and there was Zhenya Petrushevskaya, her cheeks red from walking, the ends of her braids poking out under her floppy crimson hat.

I hoped I wouldn’t sound stupid. Wished that I wasn’t one of those people who was so painfully awkward that every feeling they had reflected right from their face.

“I dunno, my mom, she’s overbearing, she made me.” I hoped she didn’t see my hands shaking—that’s what happened when I got nervous, my hands would shake and there was nothing I could do about it, even if I made the rest of me stay calm.

“I saw that stupid old lady yell at you. They love to interfere with everything, don’t they? Does your grandma do that? Cause mine does, she stops kids all the time, telling them what to do.”

I pulled at the straps of my bag, hooking my thumbs through the bottom, running them up and down, the umbrella now dangling from my forearm.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“My grandma’s pretty sweet, she doesn’t really yell, certainly not at strangers. My mom though...she’ll do it, she’ll yell at anyone.”

Zhenya laughed and her hat fell down her forehead a little, and her black eyebrows looked even thicker and darker than usual next to the red of her hat.

“My mom’s the opposite, she stays out of people’s business, she’s pretty laid back.” Zhenya’s voice was simultaneously smooth and rough, I’m not sure how, but it had that quality, like it was being stretched in different directions.

We were walking together now, towards the faded red doors. Tall, boring lampposts stood on either side, and the parts of the building that had probably been white once, were grey with soot. Katyusha sat at the desk as usual, greeting us right when the musty warmth of our school hit my face.

“Don’t you hate that? The smell of this place? How it feels so stale, like no one’s ever opened a window, even though there are windows everywhere?”

“I always wonder about that too,” I said, and it was true, I always did, because no matter the time of year the school always smelled like the inside of a coat closet—mothballs, old coats and dusty shoes.

Katyusha grunted at us, her greasy bangs sticking to her forehead and her white blouse wrinkled and wedged inside her armpits.

“Late again, Zhenya, late again. And, Valya, this is unlike you, you hurry up.” She clicked her tongue, the skin under her chin jiggled, and she waved her pudgy fingers, signaling for us to pass.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“What a beast,” said Zhenya, and rolled her eyes. I giggled. Katyusha had always been there, and no one ever knew how old she was, or why it was that we could call her Katyusha instead of Ekaterina Platonovna.

I scanned the room, Kiril’s chair was empty, he must have been out sick, which was strange, because he was never out sick. I was slightly relieved because I wouldn’t have to deal with his sour looks, but I did want to apologize...Olya’s chair was empty too, my heart sped up a little, maybe Zhenya and I would eat lunch together...

Everyone in the classroom was already hunched over their desks in rows of brown and black, writing in cursive as Alexandra Vladimirovna dictated sentences. “Throughout the glorious history of the Soviet Union, there were several heroic figures who paved the way...”

She looked up at us, the rims of her glasses sliding down her nose and hovering on the tip. I squirmed, I’d seen her do it so many times, give that awfully penetrating look when kids walked in late. I usually wasn’t late because my mother kicked me out the door right at seven-thirty, but that day we’d had the fight and I was so preoccupied with being mad at her, and then with talking to Zhenya, that I’d forgotten all about the time. I looked up at the ticking clock on the wall, its ticks buzzing in my ears, echoing as the minute arrow approached fifteen. It was 8:15 and school started at 8:05. Ten minutes! Not even in my nightmares was I ever that late to Alexandra Vladimirovna’s class. And Zhenya, who was never on time, was usually only late by five. We were in for it, I could tell.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Zhenya sauntered over to the closet, hung her coat, and plopped down in her chair.

“Zhenya, Zhenya, Zhenya” Alexandra Vladimirovna said slowly, tapping her pencil against the edge of her desk. Tap, tap, tap. It was suspiciously in synch with ticks of the clock and my head was spinning with nerves and with excitement from my conversation with Zhenya Petrushevskaya. As Alexandra Vladimirovna continued to stare at my new...friend?...I crept over to the coat rack, hung my coat, leaned the umbrella against the wall behind the rows of winter boots—thank god my classmates were too busy looking at Alexandra Vladimirovna to notice it, and slid to my seat. “This is bad even for you Zhenya, ten minutes? Who do you think you are? Coming in and disrupting class like this? You both get a zero for this dictation!”

Alexandra Vladimirovna spun around, and pointed the pencil directly at my face. “Valentina, I expected this from Zhenya, I did, but you?”

She folded her hands over her chest and leaned against the blackboard, getting chalk on her brown sweater. “Both of you will be staying in the room during lunch, today and tomorrow, writing me compositions about why you will never be late for class again.”

Zhenya and I weren’t allowed to sit next to each other while we wrote our compositions; we couldn’t even look at one another because Alexandra Vladimirovna was sitting at the front of the room peering at us over the pages of her book. “I will never be late to class because by coming in late I am interfering with my own education and the education of my classmates. If Lenin had been late to class he would have never become smart enough to plan the Red Revolution...” I was writing

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. in cursive on a piece of graph paper. I tapped my foot on the floor. Noticed a piece of balled up paper under my desk and rested my foot on it, hearing it crunch. My classmates were laughing and yelling on the other side of the door. Probably playing tag or sitting in the black chairs that lined the periphery of our recess room, eating their lunch. Kiril was sick that day and so was Olya, I'd noticed she was gone from the beginning and thought that I'd heard Alexandra Vladimirovna murmur something about bronchitis. "If Lenin had never planned the Red Revolution, then we would not have the wonderful country that we live in today..."

Our time was up, I'd written on both sides of the graph paper, but I'd been so deep in my own thoughts that I wasn't even sure what I'd said. Everyone came back to the room and Vera sat down next to me. "Why were you late anyway? You missed a very interesting dictation," she said, pushing her glasses further onto her nose with her index finger. I shrugged and mumbled something about spilling the oatmeal, then realized I still had the white stain on my apron, and that I'd actually been sort of lucky that I didn't have to get up for lunch because otherwise Alexandra Vladimirovna would have noticed that I was a mess.

Math was our last subject. We were doing long division, $5,789/34$...Vera was working away, biting her lip, fiercely moving her pencil up and down the page. Then I thought I heard someone hiss my name across the room, but it was so faint that I figured I was imagining it. Who would it be anyway? Kiril wasn't there...

"Valya, Valyka!" I heard it again. I looked up but Alexandra Vladimirovna was busy writing our next problem on the black board. It was Zhenya calling me! Calling me and pointing towards the window. It was raining and I had my umbrella. Zhenya

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. was making two fingers walk across her desk and holding her other hand over them, then pointing at me. I was confused...then I realized, she was asking if she could walk home with me under the umbrella.

“That witch, she must have been in a bad mood today. She hasn’t made me miss lunch in a while, and never for two days!” Zhenya said to me as we ran down the stairs. “Good call on the umbrella though on your mom’s part.”

She grabbed it from me and looked it over. “Where’d you get this anyway, it’s so odd, I’d never seen one this big. And the colors, wow.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty weird, isn’t it?” I said, remembering how red I’d turned when Larisa pointed it out to everyone weeks ago.

“I kinda like it, there’s a lot you can do with that hooked handle. And all that coverage, you can fit an army under there. Where’s it from?”

“My dad’s friend got it in Paris.”

“Paris? Ooh la la, I’ve always wanted to go to Paris. My mom always plays Edith Piaf and Patricia Kaas and she tells me about the literary salons they had, Gertrude Stein’s house, how all the artists would go there, how Picasso was there before anyone knew who Picasso was, and she had all those paintings up on her walls...Oh I would *kill* to go back in time and be in Paris, experience it! Miro, Picasso, Akhmatova, they were all there!—don’t you love that Modigliani of her?”

I didn’t know Modigliani or Gertrude Stein, but my dad had told me all about the Silver Age, all of our poets that traveled between St. Petersburg and Paris, how they came back to Russia and got sent to the camps.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

When we came out it was pouring. We stood under the awning by the doorway as I struggled to open the Parisian umbrella. The lampposts glistened with drops and Zhenya said that they reminded her of lonely prisoners awaiting their food rations and I didn't know how to respond to that, except to say that she had an interesting way of thinking.

"Hey, since you're being nice enough to let me share your umbrella, you wanna come over to my house for dinner? My mom's making *pilmeni*. But chances are, so is yours."

"Nope she's making beef patties. We had *pilmeni* last night."

My mom had bought a piece of meat at the store on Saturday and spent Sunday morning grinding it up in our kitchen. We'd had the fight in the morning and I wasn't sure if she'd be happy to have me out of the house, or angry that I was having fun somewhere else.

"I can probably come, but I'll have to call my mom from your apartment. Where do you live?"

I couldn't believe it, going over to Zhenya Petrushevskaya's! I'd always wondered what her life could possibly be like outside of Alexandra Vladimirovna's classroom. I imagined her apartment warm and cluttered with a teapot that was always boiling, books everywhere and parents who came home happy to see each other. She was laughing all the time, and confident, and I figured that surely she came from a family of love.

"I'm over on Bronnaya, on the other side of Patriarchi. How about you?"

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

We were walking down Ustuzhova, cutting left to a sandy playground with a red swing set and a yellow sandbox. One of the swings was still swinging, someone must have pushed it as they walked by, so it swung, the hinges creaked, and the seat was spraying raindrops as it moved. Pieces of brown grass from last season peaked through patches of grey snow, and the sand inside the sandbox towered in a big heap. Zhenya bounced next to me, grabbing the handle of the umbrella, because she was taller, and spinning it above us so the drops flew off all around and collided with streams of rain.

“I’m on this side of the pond, right by that little park next to Sadovoe Koltso” I answered her.

We walked past the playground and under the archway of a beige building, our voices echoing against the walls.

“You’re close! It’s odd, isn’t it, that we’ve never hung out?”

I opened my mouth to say something, but I didn’t know what exactly I wanted to say. I’d seen her around the neighborhood, sometimes skipping alongside her mom.

Zhenya kept talking. She was still rotating the umbrella, slowly now, her reddened fingers emerging from the sleeves of a wool grey coat.

“I hardly know anyone in school, really. Amazing how alienating these classrooms can feel. I have nothing to say to these kids—Anya, Tanya, Masha—they’re all just clones of each other.”

Clones, that’s how I’d thought of them too. They walked to school linking arms, always the three of them, sometimes other girls joined—Sasha, Ksenya,

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. Natasha—and they whispered and giggled, and made fun of everyone who wasn't them. They were the ones who teased Larisa about the purple backpack (though she deserved it, she was always wishing they would accept her). They giggled a lot, but never during class. In class they always sat with their arms folded in front of them, raising their hands, answering questions, their pioneer ties perfectly ironed and starched. They actually liked *How the Steel was Tempered*.

The girls who weren't clones of one another, wanted to be or they were just too straight, like Vera Malyushina, sucking up to Alexandra Vladimirovna all the time and getting all the math problems right. That's why I spent most of my time with Kiril, at least he played chess and told me about Roman history, and was just as in love with *The Master and Margarita* as I was. And for the same reason I was fascinated by Olya and Zhenya; they seemed different somehow, more intelligent. I could tell they actually read books and thought about the same stuff that Kiril and I probably thought about.

"And the boys are all idiots, such loudmouths, and they think they're better than everyone..." Zhenya trailed off.

"Did you and Olya know each other before we started school?" I asked. I could tell that they probably did.

"Oh yeah, I've known her since I was born, practically. My mom and her mom used to walk our strollers around the pond together. Olyka is my oldest friend. There's a group of us actually, a group of us that are friends through our moms, but the other two went to another school.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I'd seen them before, the four of them; they were always together playing by the pond. Olya and Zhenya and two boys. I figured that they must have been the other two she was talking about. I remembered them most vividly from last spring, when I was sitting by the water reading a book, I can't remember which one. The swans were out, sliding along the reflection of the yellow and white pavilion and I recognized Zhenya's laughter. They were up a ways, and didn't see me. One of the boys wore blue, all blue; blue pants, blue jacket, blue shirt, and his ears stuck out, like elephant ears, a little blue elephant, I'd thought as I watched him pulling on Zhenya's braid. The other boy was taller, and not as skinny, with bright orange hair and freckles all over his pale face. I remember thinking that I liked his smile, and the quiet presence he had as he watched the other three goofing around.

Zhenya and I walked along Malyi Kozhinskyi Pereulok until we hit the Patriarch's Pond Park, and entered it, passing the wooden benches. The rain was letting down and the drizzle tapped above our heads. Mud was sticking to my shoes and I thought about my mother, how she'd be sure to get angry about it.

"I have a piece of bread left over from lunch; wanna throw it to the swans?" Zhenya was already swinging her bag over her shoulder and unclasping it. The swans looked cold, there were three of them and they huddled along the edge.

"Sure," I followed her as she hopped over the little black fence to the water. The drizzle fell on my head and my hair stuck to my forehead. We stood to the left of the pavilion where they play movies and rent out the ice skates. That winter I'd gone skating almost every day after school, Kiril and I liked to race each other along the circumference of the rink, and I'd gotten so fast I usually beat him. I felt peaceful ice

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. skating, the soft glow of the lampposts washing over the ice and sounds of the swishing blades and children's screams buzzing around me. Sometimes I went without Kiril and practiced skating backwards, listening to the old Soviet classics blaring from the loudspeakers.

"I'm so glad we live by this pond. I don't know what I'd do without it. I always feel like I can come here to escape, really be with my thoughts, you know?" I said to Zhenya as she ripped a piece of black bread and threw it into the water, the surface rippling and a swan sliding over and gobbling it up with his orange beak.

"I come a lot too. Always have. My mom reads from *The Master and Margarita* to me before bed, and I can't help picturing Berlioz's head rolling down the intersection at Bronnaya each time I cross it."

I told her how after I'd read the book, I dreamt of the Master and Margarita flying into my window and it was so real—the image of their pale bodies drifting through my white curtains—that I awoke, sitting upright, reaching for them.

Zhenya handed me a piece of bread to throw and it crumbled in my palm. I tossed it, amazed at how the swans picked out even the tiniest morsels. My mom never let me waste bread; she'd caught me trying to feed a squirrel once and screamed at me, right in front of a couple cuddling on a bench. The girl whispered something in her boyfriend's ear and I knew they were talking about us. "There's barely any food in the stores as it is, and you want to feed the city's squirrel population?" The squat little guy, who had a crumb caught in his brown beard, laughed at whatever she had said to him and his Adam's apple bobbed on his neck.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“So, how’d you become friends with Kiril?” Zhenya asked me, balancing the hook of my umbrella over her shoulder so that it hung behind her, as she ripped another piece of bread. “Did you always know him?”

Kiril and I had been friends from the first week of school. I’d been sitting on the benches by the Krylov statue, drawing the kids climbing it, draping across his knee, when I saw him kicking a ball around. He had clearly devised some sort of game for himself because he was aiming it at various objects—the statue, the trees, different benches—and then counting off points on his fingers. I recognized him from class and watched him over my notebook, trying to figure out the rules of what he was playing. He was so immersed that he didn’t notice me at all—puffed his cheeks, raised his arms victoriously when he hit the right object, in his own world completely. He was running after the ball, his stomach bouncing and his shirt coming untucked, when he tripped over a twig that had fallen from one of the branches. I laughed at first but then he wasn’t getting up so I ran over to him and helped him up.

“Ow! Ow! Ow!” He’d screamed, his voice was higher than mine, “Owwww!” (For the first two years of school all the boys in our class made fun of him about his high voice. Then it grew lower and lower until it was lower than all of theirs.) Kiril hobbled a couple of steps but his foot hurt too much. Turned out he had twisted his ankle. I helped him get home, and we’d been friends ever since.

“He’s funny, Kiril,” I told Zhenya. “Has a unique way of seeing things. Always creating little worlds for himself, or solving some sort of puzzle.”

It was starting to get dark. The lampposts reflected from the water, windows

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
lit up, and I heard laughter coming from the pavilion.

“I should probably call my mom,” I told Zhenya as she threw the last piece of bread. “She’ll have a fit if she doesn’t hear from me soon.”

Zhenya’s apartment was on the fifth floor of a big pink building with white moldings. She stuck her key into a tall double door lined with a maroon padding.

“They did it to sound-proof the doors,” she explained, and we walked into a dim hallway that was a lot wider than ours. The floorboards creaked under our muddy feet and I made to take off my shoes, but Zhenya pulled me forward by the sleeve of my coat before I could untie my laces.

A tiny girl in blue overalls wheeled past us on a red tricycle.

“Anyutka! Don’t ride too fast or Lyena Mikhailovna will have your head!” Zhenya yelled to her.

“Lyena Mikhailovna is the old bat who lives at the end of the hall. She gave me a lot of grief when I was Anya’s age,” Zhenya whispered to me. Anya looked to be five or six years old. “The woman still tries to make my life miserable, but I’ve learned how to handle her. Anyuta will learn soon enough.”

The air smelled like a mixture of sweet bread pudding and sauteed onions. I could hear pots and pans rattling somewhere in the distance. A gray-haired woman in curlers wandered out of the bathroom holding a pocket mirror, dabbing under her eyes with a cotton ball, and humming something. She walked right into Zhenya, and looked very surprised.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Oh, I’m sorry dear,” she said in a voice so light it sounded it would flutter away, and returned her eyes to the mirror in front of her. “Lev Nikolaevich kicked me out of the bathroom and I’m only half ready!”

She shook her head and kept shuffling down the hallway, her slippers sliding against the wood. A balding, round-bellied man appeared from one of the doors lining the hallway and disappeared into the bathroom, his towel trailing behind him.

“Anna Gregoryevna just started seeing someone and it seems like she’s always getting ready!” Zhenya muttered. “Good for her though. Her husband dropped dead in our kitchen last year. Over his breakfast one day, slumped down in a pile of blintzes, his beard drenched in sour cream, his cigarette still burning between his fingers.”

Zhenya sighed, and I stopped short, raising my eyebrows, my eyes widening.

“Did you see him?”

“Oh yeah, it was a whole big commotion, I was getting ready for school. They wonder why I’m always late, but you try getting anything done around here. If someone isn’t falling dead over their breakfast, there’s something else.”

She shook her head. “It gave us all quite a scare, and Anna Gregoryevna was in a fit, pacing the apartment like a ghost for days. I sure hope I never have to see anything like it again.” she continued. I was suddenly very glad to be living where I was, just me and my family and Gregoryi Alexandrovich’s empty room.

“Can I call my mom?”

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Oh sure, the phone is right over to the...” She pointed to the right, where a teenage girl sat on the floor with her feet stretched in front of her, her fingers twirling the white phone cord.

“I know Stasyinka, I know I should wait, my mind tells me to wait, but my heart Stasyinka, my heart tells me that I can’t wait even a minute more!” She had big blue eyes and puffy lips, like a fish, and she bit the bottom one, nodding her head as she listened to Stasyinka’s response on the other end of the line.

“I’m just so sick of this feeling in my stomach Stasyinka, every time the phone rings I run over to it and it’s someone for Anna Gregoryevna, Marina, or my parents, or it’s you calling me, and it’s never him. And the feeling in my stomach, it’s like I’d swallowed a giant pigeon, and he’s trapped, waving his wings inside of me, devouring my insides! I don’t know how much longer I can take this.” She sighed a loud sigh and leaned back, hitting her head against the wall. “You don’t even *know* half the things he was saying to me,” she continued. “Half the things, even a fraction of the things, Stasyinka, and now, no word from him at all, and it’s been *three* days. Oh I could just die!”

Zhenya looked at me, rolling her eyes. “This does not look good,” she said. “Not good at all. She’s gonna be here for hours talking about this. And if I try to get her off, she’ll just groan at me and turn her head.”

This must have been the Katya she’d been telling Olya about in school when I overheard them the other day...

My stomach was sinking. I knew that there was absolutely no way that I was leaving Zhenya Petrushevskaya’s house, this was the chance of a lifetime, we were

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. actually becoming friends! But I also knew, that if my mom didn't hear from me in the next few minutes, I would never hear the end of it. And I would probably never be allowed to go to Zhenya's house again.

Zhenya threw her backpack and coat to the side and motioned for me to do the same. Then she marched down the never-ending hallway. As I walked behind her I noticed the toys scattered everywhere, the shoes lying in every which place, and the radically different doors—some white, others of plain unpainted wood, or with chipping paint, and crooked doorknobs, some wider than others, some longer, the whole place thrown together in the most erratic way. Zhenya opened a long white door and the muted hallway filled with light.

"How many families live in this place?" I asked Zhenya.

"Six," She responded over her shoulder, and I followed her through the doorway.

The room was spacious and elegant. Weightless red curtains hung on either side of the expansive window, each tied at the middle with a sash. Through the glass you could see the naked trees, the benches and the still pond, illuminated by the silver moon, the lights from the windows and the lonely lampposts.

"This is home," Zhenya said, and yelled "Moooooom! Where are you? We need your help!"

A gold-colored lampshade with long tassels hung over an overhead lamp in the middle of the ceiling. Framed paintings decorated the white walls—one with bright buildings, winding streets, outdoor cafes, and a cloudy gray sky, another of a nude stretched out on a maroon sofa, her arms above her head, and her face

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
elongated and flat, her mouth just a tiny line—where had I seen a face like that
before?

“I’m right here, Zhenychka, one second!” A smooth, calm voice floated
through the wall.

I looked around and noticed a door to the right, next to a mahogany shelf
filled from top to bottom with books, some sticking out, because they’d been
squeezed together too tight, and others lined horizontally on top of the vertical ones.

There was an unmade bed facing the window, a brown armchair at its foot,
and another shelf, filled with various knickknacks and even more books. A black
statuette of Don Quixote drawing his sword caught my eye and I was walking over
to look at it when the door swung open and a tall woman in a flowing green dress
walked out—the same tall, Akhmatova-like woman that I’d seen with Zhenya on the
street.

She walked over to Zhenya and kissed the top of her forehead, tugging at her
braids, and stretched out a slim hand to me.

“Hello, I don’t think we’ve met, I’m Marina.” Her hand felt warm against mine.

“I’m Valya, Zhenya and I are in the same class.”

“Oh, well how nice, Zhenya’s always complaining that she doesn’t have any
friends from school.” She smiled and her cheeks dimpled at the top, right under the
outer corners of her eyes.

“Mom, we need your help,” Zhenya told her, putting her hands on her hips.

“Stupid Katya is on the phone again, and she never listens to me when I need her to

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. get off, and Valya desperately needs to call her mom. Can you please tell her we need to use the phone?"

"Oh Katya," Marina said, exhaling slowly and twisting her mouth to the side. "All week she's been agonizing over that boy. I don't suppose he's called yet? She didn't eat a thing during breakfast."

Walking over to the door, Zhenya's mother unfastened the clip in her dark hair and shook it out so it fell to the middle of her back in a straight, shiny mass.

"Your parents have a nice room," I told Zhenya as we waited for her mom to return.

"It's just my mom and I," she said. "I don't really have a dad. It was just some guy my mother was seeing, they were in love, she got pregnant, and decided to have me—she couldn't handle another abortion. Then it didn't work out. He's in Leningrad now. Was always kind of a wandering soul."

"Oh," I said, it was all I could muster. Her mother talked to her about *abortions?*

"There are boyfriends of course, this one guy, Pasha, lived with us for a couple of years, but mom's very particular and that didn't work out either. She's seeing a poet now, and boy is he making her misera..."

"Thanks Zhenya, I sure do love it when you air out my personal business to people I've just had the pleasure to meet," Marina shook her head, but she didn't look like she really cared that much, and Zhenya giggled.

"Sorry mom. But I do think he's a bastard."

"Why don't we talk about this later, kitten. Phone's free."

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

My mother grumbled when I called, she'd already started worrying about where I was and had just called Kiril's parents.

"When his mother told me he was home sick and you were nowhere to be found, my heart just about stopped, Valya. Are you trying to give me even more gray hairs? Well anyway, I guess it's good that you have a new friend. You do need some girls to go around with. I hope you didn't lose that umbrella."

I was surprised, I'd expected her to yell. Then I found out that Galina Petrovna was sitting in our kitchen.

Marina refused our offer to help her make *pilmeni*, saying that the kitchen was crowded enough as it was without Zhenya and I standing over her. Zhenya took me into the little room that her mother had come out of earlier.

"This is where I sleep, and where my mother writes. She's a literature professor."

There was a small wooden desk facing the wall, with a lamp, an unlit candle, and a type writer that sat amidst a pile of scattered papers.

"She's writing a paper about *The Bronze Horseman*. Not sure what about it exactly, but it's a creepy poem, isn't it?"

I agreed. "My dad told me that Pushkin was holed up in the country writing it, he had writers' block and the entire time he was so jealous of his wife, who was in Petersburg, going to balls and stuff. He wrote her all these angry letters, meanwhile he wasn't getting a word written. Then he thought of *The Bronze Horseman* and it came out all at once."

"I wonder if my mom's writing about that?"

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Zhenya's bed was narrow and also unmade. A book was lying open on top of her sheets next to her pajamas.

I sat in the desk chair and she plopped on the edge of her mattress, throwing off her shoes and lying back.

"Olya's got bronchitis, she's been real sick all weekend. My mom won't let me go over there yet though, she doesn't want me to catch it. She could be out of school for days...ugh school is so boring without her." She paused, looking up at the ceiling, which had a big spot of chipping white paint. "But, maybe it won't be so boring now that I know you."

Zhenya Petrushevskaya wants to be my friend! I thought, my heart racing with the prospect that school might actually become interesting. Aloud, I commented on the odd coincidence—our best friends were out sick at the same time.

"Kiril's not usually sick for long though, he's built like an ox. You'll really like him I think," I said, rubbing my hands on my stockings. If only he'd stop being mad at me...

Zhenya's mother yelled for us to help her bring in the food. The kitchen was at the end of the hallway like in our apartment, but it was much bigger, and way more cluttered. Pots and pans hung on hooks, covering most of the wall space, nets of onions, bags of potatoes, heads of cabbage all crowded the counters, and each burner had something boiling, frying or sautéing.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

In the middle there was a big round table and the balding middle-aged man I'd seen rushing into the bathroom when we first walked in sat with his feet up on a chair eating pickles one after the other, crunching loudly and staring into space.

A large woman in a floral house dress hovered over one of the pots, stirring something and waving away the steam with the lid.

"Oh stop it! Quit the crunching, you've been crunching for ten minutes and my head's spinning!" she snapped without turning her head. "How many pickles do you have to eat? You're gonna chomp through the entire month's worth, think about the rest of us. Last month you ate them all in the first week. And close your mouth for god's sake, I don't need to hear you smacking all the time."

"Well if you cooked faster then maybe I wouldn't have to eat pickles. What does a man have to do to have his dinner on time?"

His voice was deep and gruff, and you could tell that he smoked his share, because it was also gravelly.

Marina poured sour cherry juice into three glasses and hummed a song I didn't recognize, her voice flowing melodiously, the wide sleeves of her dress flailing to the rhythm.

"Zhenka, you get the silverware," she said, in between notes. "Valyka, you take the *pilmeni*."

The couple continued to yell.

"*Cooked faster?* How do you expect me to cook faster when all the burners are taken? If Katya helped me out a little then maybe I could cook faster, but she's too busy talking on the phone! *Bozhe moy*. I get no appreciation around here."

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

The large woman wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and slammed the lid on top of the pot.

The man poured himself a shot of vodka and kept at the pickles. The little hair he had left was still wet from his shower and his red face glistened under the glaring light of the kitchen lamp.

Taking the plates and forks, Zhenya gestured for me to grab the steaming dumplings. I felt the heat on my face as I gripped the sides of the bowl, praying that I wouldn't drop our dinner. On our way out, an old woman with a cane limped past us into the kitchen and I caught the glimmer of her gold teeth. Zhenya told me that she was Lyena Mikhailovna, the old bat she'd warned Anya to watch out for.

We went to Marina's room and I was happy that we didn't have to sit with the strangers in the kitchen. Vyssotsky's deep voice rang from the record player on Marina's dresser, and a candle wavered in the middle of her round table, shining through the red juice in our cups.

Zhenya ran her finger through the flame, then shoved a dumpling in her mouth.

"Will they ever stop yelling at each other?" she asked her mom, the words coming out muffled through the *pilmeni*. "Almost makes me feel bad for Katya, annoying as she is, for having such awful parents."

"They've been doing it ever since I've known them, even back when they were both young and thin. Can you believe it? I've known them since they were thin!"

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Marina slumped in her chair, scrunching her face at the thought and raising the juice to her lips.

“I know mom, you always say that...”

“I just can’t even fathom where the time goes. How much older we all look, but still here in this same apartment, the same people, the same arguments...”

She looked wistful, her eyes staring beyond us, as if into the past. “Sometimes I catch my reflection in the mirror and I just want to smash it, you know? The wrinkles, the gray hairs, all of it. Enjoy being young girls, because getting old is terrible, no matter which way you look at it.”

I looked at Marina and thought how she didn’t look old at all, I couldn’t see the gray hairs or any wrinkles.

“Mom get over it, you’re only thirty-three.” Zhenya waved her fork in her mother’s face, and then turned to me. “She’s in one of her moods, talk to her tomorrow and she’ll tell you how much she appreciates the maturity that comes with age, how mentally she’s a million times wiser, and physically, she feels no different at all.”

Marina thought about it for a second, then giggled, her hair shaking behind her and laughter coming from the back of her throat in delightful bursts. She hit Zhenya’s shoulder, pulling her arm around her neck and kissing her on the cheek.

“What would I do without her? She’s got me all figured out! It’s just about perspective. Some days you feel like there’s nothing holding you back from jumping off a cliff, others, the world is stretching before you in a giant meadow, the sunlight warming you and the birds chirping.” She sighed and sipped more juice, turning

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
back to her daughter. “You’re right Zhenya, he is making me miserable. In some
ways, I’m no better than Katya.

Chapter 7

Galya was coming over for dinner for the third time that week and I sat in the kitchen with my legs twisted under me trying to finish my math homework. Kyesha slurped the milk from his bowl and the parrot looked at him blankly from his cage, his head twitching and cocked to one side. I wondered if Kyesha took any notice of Abramka at all. If he could even see the bird, since his eyes were always so low to the floor. Abramka towered over him, but the parrot's presence never seemed to have any affect on Kyesha.

The cabbage sizzled in the pan and my mother stirred in chunks of already cooked ground beef. I loved the smell of it cooking in the vegetable oil and my stomach growled as I tried to divide 897 by 32. My dad wandered in whistling something, scratching the top of his head and looking over my mother's shoulder.

"Stop whistling Petya! You'll whistle the money out of the house," my mom said, sprinkling salt on the meat and cabbage. "Not that we have much money to begin with..." She sighed. "And tuck your shirt in! You look like a slob." She reached out and tugged at the corner of his blue and green flannel as he was walking away, towards me, tucking it in.

He ruffled my hair and I swatted him away with my hand, feeling my hair cling with static to his palm.

"What are you doing over there Valya? Long division?"

"Yes, I'm nearly done. Did you see that Kyesha finished his milk? I'd been worried, he wasn't drinking it yesterday."

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

My dad crouched down and scooped the hedgehog in his hands, lifting him in the air. Kyesha had started to let his needles down for us months ago and my dad brought him over to his chest, petting him on the head.

“Any luck with the parrot? That bird sure is something.”

“Still won’t say a word,” I told him. “Not one.”

“I don’t understand why you’re spending all that time on the bird Valya, he doesn’t talk, so what?” My mother grumbled over her shoulder. “Maybe Galya’s mom trained him that way for a reason. It’s probably irritating, his talking.”

“Or maybe he has a secret!” I was certain he must know something we didn’t know.

I was convinced that the parrot knew things, that Galya’s mother had shut him up because he was taunting her with the officer’s words, or intimate details from their affair. I was dying to meet Galya’s mother and get some answers and Galya promised that she’d take me.

“What garbage, the parrot doesn’t hold any secrets.” my mother dismissed me with the wave of her hand. “You’re just confusing the bird. Leave him be...”

She pulled out a cigarette and lit it over the sizzling pan.

My dad had checked out of our conversation as soon as it started, he was sitting across from me, looking at the paper, looking but not actually reading, just folding and unfolding the pages and staring blankly at the words, smiling to himself.

“*You* think the parrot knows things dad, don’t you?” I said, and he blinked his eyes, widening them, as if coming to, and continued to smile.

“We all know things Valichka, we all do...”

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

My mom was humming, she never hummed, and fixing her hair with the sides of her hands as she cooked.

“Galya, Galya! She’s my friend now! I went to her house and everything! Met her mother even, her crazy neighbors!” I ran over to the door and flooded her with words.

To my great disappointment, Zhenya had been out sick the next two days after I went to her house. She’d probably caught Olya’s bronchitis. Luckily Kiril was back though, and somehow his sickness had made him forget that he was mad at him. He got back to school and acted normal, like nothing had happened. I decided not to mention it.

I told him all about my night at Zhenya’s house. He didn’t act too impressed, but I did see a hidden gleam of excitement in his eyes. He would never admit to it, but he was thrilled I was becoming friends with Zhenya because that meant he could talk to Olya.

Now Galya was over and I knew that she’d share my excitement.

“Stop accosting her! Let her settle!” my mother yelled from the kitchen.

“Oh, she’s not accosting me Tanichka, don’t worry. She has *wonderful* news!”

Galya turned to me and handed me her coat. I smelled the rose petals wafting from its collar and wanted to bring it to my nose. I’d already grown accustomed to that smell.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“This is Zhenya you’re talking about, right? Your mother was telling me you were over the other day when I was here for dinner, she couldn’t remember the name but right away I knew it was Zhenya.”

She brushed a hair from my forehead with her thumb and put her arm on my shoulder. “Tell me everything, I want to hear every detail!”

I was careful in hanging her coat, putting one shoulder over each side of the hanger and smoothing it over.

“Well she’s just as funny as I thought she would be, and just as much of a free spirit. And her mother, her mother’s even more of one...she just...she...”

I couldn’t think of the words to describe Zhenya’s mother...she was nearly as difficult to describe as Galina Petrovna.

“Well, she looks like a young Akhmatova for one, but she acts nothing like her, she’s not as severe. At least I don’t think she is...”

Galya was nodding her head, stroking my hair as we walked slowly down the hallway.

“And she talks to Zhenya about *everything*, I mean, even...” and for this part I leaned in and whispered in Galya’s ear, “she even talks to her about abortions!”

Galya laughed, but not her usual kind of laughter, not the kind where she lets everything go and throws back her head, this time her mouth stayed closed, her head upright, and she hardly made any noise, but her shoulders shook and you could tell she was stifling it, shaking faster and faster until finally she burst out into peals of it.

“Oh Valya, you are too funny!”

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Well, it was strange, that’s all, I mean the only reason I even knew what an abortion is because I’d overheard my mom talking about it once on the phone and then I’d asked Kiril what it was.” I paused for a second, we were close to the kitchen, but my mom hadn’t heard me. I leaned in again, standing on my tip toes and moving towards Galya’s ear. “Don’t tell my mom I told you, ok?”

She shook her head and put her fingers to her mouth, locking her lips, throwing away the imaginary key.

“And Zhenya, what was she like? And the house?”

“Well Zhenya, she’s just incredibly wise, like she’s much older than she really is. But not like Kiril, not so much because of what she reads, although she does read a lot, but because she’s capable of thinking like an adult or something. She gives her mother *relationship* advice, and good advice too. At least I thought so. Her mother did too.”

My mom was just about done with the cabbage. She was shaking salt into the pan and giving it a final stir.

“Galya, come over here, hug me,” she yelled down the hall.

Hadn’t they just seen each other two days ago?

“*Okay* Tanichka, okay,” Galya rushed over and put her arms around my mother’s neck, kissing her on the cheek.

My dad was getting up from his paper now, walking over to her, smiling, and looking focused for the first time all evening. He put a hand on her shoulder and leaned in, hugging her for a second and holding his nose to her neck.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Isn’t it great? Seems like your daughter is on her way to making a very good friend!” Galya said to my parents, putting her arms on both their shoulders.

My dad nodded, giving me a squeeze on the back of my neck. “Not that we don’t love Kiril, but it will be nice to see some new faces around here. Our Valichka’s been in a bit of a routine for years now, it’s always good to change things up a little. A girl friend will be good for her.”

“But Petya, think of all the giggling they’ll do. It’s bad enough with her and Kiril—he’s not even much of a giggler, he just causes her to do it, but two girls, I can only imagine the headaches they’ll give me...” my mom preemptively put her hand on her forehead. Then she looked at Galya, who was frowning a little and broke into a smile. “It’s good though, it’s good, maybe it’ll be worth the headache for Valya to get some new stimulation, new energy. I haven’t met this...what was it? Ksenya? This Ksenya character yet, but she certainly sounds...”

“Zhenya mom, *Zhenya*, I’ve told you a million times.”

“Right, Zhenya, sorry, Zhenya Petrushevskaya, right? Like the playwright?”

“Yes, like the playwright, but not related.”

“Well it would be better if they were related, you know how hard it is to get tickets to her plays?” my mom laughed. “So anyway, Galinka, how’s your week going? How’s the project?”

And that was it, we didn’t mention Zhenya again. Not until Galya was leaving hours later, she told me I’d have to tell her the rest next time, that she was dying to hear about it, that maybe we should make a date just the two of us, so we could really chat.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“How about I take you to meet my mother? You still interested? You’d been so curious about her and that parrot, well, how about this weekend you can ask her yourself? I’m planning to go there on Saturday.”

So it was set, she would come pick me up that Saturday morning and we would go to Beliaevo, just the two of us.

By the time Zhenya was back in school, so was Olya.

I’d been hoping for some sort of upheaval, a complete change in dynamic, but, though Zhenya had a bigger smile when she saw me now, and our waves were a whole lot more enthusiastic, nothing really seemed to change.

“I thought you guys were like, great friends now?” Kiril said to me, rolling his eyes as he looked at Olya and Zhenya, eating lunch just the two of them like always, sitting on the windowsill in the far right corner of the recess room.

I felt a weight in my stomach, I’d thought we were great friends too, but I wasn’t about to let him see it.

“Let’s go sit with them, you’ll see.” I said, nudging Kiril.

“Why would we do that?”

“Because Zhenya’s pretty great, you’ll like her, let’s go.”

My heart was pounding, but I knew that if I didn’t go over then, if I didn’t assert our new friendship, then Zhenya might be lost to me forever. I also knew that I couldn’t look like the fool in front of Kiril. I couldn’t stand it when he scorned me like this. He was always doubting me. Like I was some little kid or something, the little sister he never had, the one he always wanted to boss around.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“It just I dunno. You went on and on about her, and she’s hardly acknowledged you. Her and her evil twin are still just as wrapped up in each other as they ever were. I doubt they’ll welcome the interruption if we just go over there.”

Kiril was getting red, I could tell he was scared. That he’d rather charge into Alexandra Vladimirovna than have to exist in front of Olya. I swore I could see his hand shaking a little. He put it in his pocket and scratched his ear with the other one.

“Come on, I think you’ll really like her, and Olya seems cool too!”

“You always tell me you think that Olya seems like a snob.” he was biting his lip and stepping from one foot to the other.

“Do you have to pee or something?” I grabbed him by the sleeve.

“No, why? Let go of me, what are you doing?”

“You’re fidgeting an awful lot. Let’s go!”

And with that I started dragging him over to where Zhenya and Olya were sitting, leaning into each other on the windowsill. I guess sometimes I treated him like a little sibling too...

Olya was eating a piece of black bread with cheese on it, breaking off pieces and putting them into her mouth as she listened to Zhenya, who was waving her arms around as usual, telling some story.

“So, my mom sees Lev Nikolaevich just asleep at the kitchen table, I’m not even kidding, conked out, his head to the side, snoring, and a cigarette smoking away in his left hand, about to fall out and light the house on fire.”

Olya noticed us first, she looked up, catching my eye, and studied me, slowly chewing her sandwich.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I was still holding Kiril by the sleeve and I could tell he was trying to pull away, to turn around altogether. I held his sleeve tighter, gripped it in my fist and gave Olya a big smile.

“My mom runs to the sink, fills a teacup with water, one of those dainty, floral teacups, and dumps the water smack into Lev Nicholaevich’s face. So he feels the water, feels it trickling down his face and he starts swatting at it with his hands, still asleep, swatting at the water drops!”

It was clear that Olya wasn’t listening to her anymore, she was still staring at us, staring like we were these intruders, wondering what the hell we were doing there, standing above them, interrupting her and Zhenya’s lunch time.

And then it hit me, here I was talking Kiril’s ear off about the wonderful time Zhenya and I had when I came over to her house, and Zhenya, why Zhenya might not have even mentioned it to Olya at all!

At this point Kiril’s tugs were getting stronger, his arm was just jerking away from me. But at the same time, Zhenya was finally realizing that something was off. I could see her looking at Olya’s face, waiting for Olya to laugh, and then following Olya’s eyes over to us.

She looked up at me confused. Like those two days at home sick had completely erased me from her memory. The sunlight from the window reflected from her blue eyes and the little hairs that were sticking out from her braids, she scrunched her forehead, right between her eyebrows, and looked at us.

Then, suddenly, she started to smile, a big, wide, toothy smile, pointed directly at me.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Hey Valya! Did you catch that story? Did you hear the end? About Lev Nikolaevich?” she looked over at Olya, “Valya, she’s met him, she’s met Lev Nikolaevich.”

“Is that the balding guy who was getting chewed out by his wife for crunching on the pickles?”

“The very one!”

Olya was looking back and forth from me to Zhenya, looking confused. It was clear that Zhenya hadn’t told her about our dinner, but at the same time, Zhenya looked excited to see me...

“Anna Simyonovna was screaming her head off, Olya, as usual. Valya got to witness the whole thing. Then my mom started freaking out about aging, because she’s known them since they were young and thin...blah blah blah, you’ve heard it before...”

Olya was nodding, still ripping off pieces of bread and cheese. Kiril was just standing there looking out the window.

It was raining that day too, the day I met Galya’s mom. Pouring down buckets and buckets and Kyesha was running around the apartment like mad, while all I wanted was to curl back into bed. Had it been a school day I would have feigned sick, but it was a Saturday and Galya was coming in the morning to take me to her mother’s. I’d whined and whined when my mom woke me—the room still dark as night and the rain smacking against the windowpanes.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“You’ve been begging to meet this woman, and now you’re refusing to get out of bed?”

I crawled out, begrudgingly, untangling from the sheets, and dragged myself to the bathroom.

Galya showed up minutes after I was dressed, drops perched on the collar of her long black trench-coat like tiny bubbles waiting to burst. She gave me her umbrella and shook out her auburn hair. I thought of how fierce the rain must be if she was still so wet—for once I was glad we’d have the big Parisian umbrella.

“Oy Valya, it’s really something out there.” Her eyes twinkled and her cheeks glistened from walking in the rain.

“Galyusha, have a cup of tea before the two of you go off, it’ll warm you up a little.” my mother yelled down the corridor. I was about to protest, to tell her that we’d better get going, that Galya’s mom was probably waiting for us, but Galya’s face broke into a smile and she said, “I’d love that Tanichka, I’ve just been dying for a cup since I got out of bed.”

And so, we walked to the kitchen, me dragging my feet, and Galya (who’d taken off her rain boots, leaning her hands against the wall, and pushing them off first with one foot, then with the other) springing ahead, graceful and catlike, her bare feet silently hitting the parquet.

Galya and I rode the metro to Beliaevo, a quiet neighborhood next to a huge park in the outskirts of Moscow. We sat there playing a game—one of us would start

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. telling a story about an interesting looking person in the car with us and the other would continue the thread.

There was a woman across from us, a young, beautiful woman with shiny curls that ended just above her chin, sitting with her legs crossed, reading a detective novel. She wasn't really reading it though, her eyes kept wandering off the page and settling on a point in front of her, or off to the side. Then her mouth would start turning into a smile, but each time she'd catch herself and bite her lip. She kept going like that—almost smiling and catching herself.

“Look at her, it's like she's bursting with happiness, but something's holding her back? What could it be?” I asked Galya after we'd finished telling a story about a fat man with little brown stains scattered over his beige shirt, and crumbs stuck to his whiskers. He was rubbing his thighs and looking around anxiously. We'd decided that he'd had a fight with his wife, stuffed his face, and run out of the house looking for her after she stormed out.

Galya looked at the woman who was biting her lip, then at me, and it seemed like she knew something I didn't. She started telling the story: “Karina Ogniyushina woke up in someone else's bed this morning,” She smiled and twirled the tip of her auburn hair, brushing the ends of it against her lip as she spoke. “It was a man's bed. A man she liked very much. A man she hadn't wanted to leave at all. She'd had to leave him though, because his wife was coming home. His wife Mila, the same Mila whom Karina'd been friends with since she was in the seventh grade.”

I put my hand over my mouth. How terrible! Then I wondered if Galya had been in the beds of many men...

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I was about to pick up, but Galya kept going. “She left his house and walked down the street. In bed she’d been happy, blissful even, she hadn’t allowed herself to think of poor Mila, she’d just lain there enjoying his scent. Sandalwood mixed with sweat, sweat and the smell of his scalp—everything about him was human, raw. She twirled the hairs on his chest between her pointer and index fingers, rubbed her moustache with her thumb, she couldn’t believe that he was hers, in this bed, but that he was also someone else’s...She walked down the street and the birds seemed to be chirping. She felt like she was hearing music, like the sun was out just for her. She felt all that, but just for one moment, just for a fleeting wonderful moment, because next she realized that it wasn’t sunny at all, that there were no birds—not ones that chirped anyway, just dirty, grimy pigeons and silent sparrows, hovering on the sooty moldings of buildings in the middle of the droll Moscow winter. Oh what had she done? Oh poor Milochka! Her Milochka! How had she done this to her Milochka? And why had it felt so good?”

Galya was becoming more and more animated with each sentence, moving to the edge of her seat, gripping the ripped brown plastic of it with her hands. I wondered if the woman, this “Karina,” had noticed that she’d become the focus of a story.

I glanced at “Karina” and saw that she hadn’t realized anything at all, she was still following the same routine, still not reading her book, still trying not to smile. I studied her pretty gray eyes, how they seemed to glisten, as if they were filled with tears, yet at the same time she looked so joyful...I looked at Galina, who was

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. watching her too, and floating into the distance, like she'd forgotten that I was about to tell the rest of the story...

I thought that Galina must be right, her words, they had truth to them. The woman certainly looked guilty, but also happy, and devastated all at the same time. I guess there could be other explanations, but now that I had this one in my mind I couldn't possibly think of what else could be tormenting this pretty little woman. How had Galina picked up on it so fast? And how could I continue? I'd never even kissed anyone, what would I contribute?

Then Galya grabbed my arm, "It's our stop Valichka, we have to get off." She pulled me along by the sleeve of my coat, and I stole one last glance at "Karina," who'd just uncrossed her legs and closed the book in her lap, reaching for her purse so she could put the book in it. We stepped from the car onto the marble of the metro station and our footsteps echoed as we moved towards the escalators, which stretched and stretched up and out of the tunnel.

When we emerged, Galina held the umbrella over us and the rain and the sleet smacked against it forcefully as she struggled to hold it still. "Unbelievable! It's really November, isn't it? Oh how I hate November, makes me want to crawl into bed and stay there until April." she said, and I realized that I was off the hook, that I wouldn't have to continue "Karina's" story...

I'd never been to Beliaevo but it reminded me of Molodezhnaya, where Baba Anya lived—rows and rows of block buildings, trees, playgrounds, old women hobbling around, their noses poking out from beneath floral scarves. Not many

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. people were out. The sidewalks were so wet they showed our reflections, and those of the trees, bare and angry, like they were pointing fingers.

I wondered what Galya's mother could possibly like, I knew that she wasn't anything like what I imagined her to be, because I pictured her sweet and quiet and, smelling like roses, drinking out of small floral tea cups and talking in a soft, smooth voice that floated out of her mouth like chimes—that's what I pictured after looking at Galya and imagining where she would have come from. But, what Galya had told me about her mother didn't sound like that at all. From her stories her mother wasn't meek or calm, she was willful, aggressive and definitely not quiet. She trained parrots to stop talking though, and she liked to tell fortunes by dropping candle wax into water and analyzing the shapes...

"Get ready for her to be a little overwhelming, okay Valya? She can be a bit much at first, you probably haven't met many people like her. I think the two of you will get along though, I think you'll get along well. She's difficult, that's all. But I've told you all this already, I'm just repeating myself."

Galya seemed nervous, like she was anticipating my reaction, getting defensive ahead of time. I found this strange—if anyone had to feel nervous about their mom and the first impression she would make, it was me, and Galya knew my mom very well, so what was she getting so worked up about?

She led me into a lobby that was also much like my grandmother's—same smell of old paint, rows and rows of mailboxes, scummy gray floors, tiny elevator, brown apartment doors. She pressed the button with her finger and leaned against the umbrella.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

The elevator descended, hitting the bottom with a soft thud. Galya pulled open the door and like all little elevators, it smelled of cigarettes, and maybe salami, or some other meat that had wafted from someone's grocery bag and lingered, mixing with the smell of stale smoke.

"The elevator of my childhood." Galina said. "Just her and me in this tiny place, this tiny, gloomy little place." she fixed her coat, patting it down with her free hand, and brushed the hair out of her eyes. Then the door slid open, we pushed through the one in front of it and walked into a small hallway.

"Oh come in darlings, come on in!" Galya's mother swung open the door and we entered an apartment that seemed awfully dim. The woman held a cigarette between two very long fingers and puffed on it as she stretched out her arms, her red fingernails flickering as she did it.

"It's not very often that I get to see my daughter," she said, sighing and making an exaggerated pout with her pale, dried out lips. "Not often at all. My Galichka never makes it out here to see me, just lets her poor mother rot away all by herself in the outskirts of Moscow."

She had a purple silk scarf wrapped around white hair, and wore a flowing blue dress that reached all the way down to her ankles. She still hadn't made any verbal introduction, just winked at me as she escorted us through the hallway into a room filled with books and trinkets and colorful fabrics.

"Mom, stop trying to make yourself seem like a charity case. You know very well that I come see you as often as I can. And that you're by no means rotting away in here, don't give Valya the wrong idea." Galya turned to me and said, "On the

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. contrary, she has tons of friends, just two days ago she had thirty people in here for a piano recital.” Galya gestured over to the corner of the room where a black piano with yellowed keys stood under the sprawling leaves of a hanging plant.

“Not thirty Galichka, only twenty-five showed up. Oh, but what a wonderful recital it was! Grisha really can play. He’s always been able to make magic with the piano keys.” She motioned with her pasty hands (so white that I think they might have actually been covered in powder) towards a fraying brown couch and Galya and I sat down. I could not imagine twenty-five people fitting into that tiny room.

“Well how rude of me and how rude of my daughter really, we haven’t been formally introduced. But Galya’s been telling me about you and your family for *weeks*. Hello Valichka, I am Lyudmila.” she reached out her long white hand and slipped it into mine. It was smooth as silk; as if the skin of it had been used so much that it had worn away, leaving only the softest parts.

“How are you enjoying my parrot?” she pointed a red fingernail towards an empty spot near the piano. There was a faint outline of a circle in the dust that covered the floor. “That was his home for twenty-seven years. Twenty-seven years. Can you imagine? That parrot is more than double your age!”

“Well why’d you give him up? Don’t you miss him?”

She dismissed the thought with a wave of her hand.

“Would you like some juice? Galichka, why don’t you go make yourselves some juice.” she pressed her lips together and the lines on her face deepened. I didn’t understand, she was the one who brought him up, yet she didn’t seem to want to talk about the parrot at all. I followed Galya to the kitchen.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“You see Valya, she is a strange bird, my mother. A strange bird. She doesn’t like answering questions, if you want to get answers out of her you have to let her do the talking, while you do the answering.”

I looked around me. The kitchen was cramped, with pots and pans sticking out of every which place and plants all along the windowsill, some of them yellowed and withering away, others green and vibrant, and others not even plants at all, just stubs, brown stubs where the plants had once been.

Galya got two small glasses and poured sour cherry juice for each of us.

“Doesn’t your mother want some?”

“Oh no, she doesn’t like to drink juice, says that it dyes her teeth red. She keeps this around for the guests.”

When we walked back in Galya’s mother was asleep, lying with her head on a brown pillow and the purple scarf in a halo around her. She snored softly through her nose, her arms crossed over her chest in front of her.

“Oh no. She does this sometimes. Just falls asleep in the middle of things. Once she’s out there’s no waking her. I’m so sorry Valinka. I’m afraid we’re going to have to come back another time.”

I sipped my cherry juice as Galya walked over to her sleeping mother, grazed her forehead with her lips and covered her with a blanket. We walked quietly towards the door, the floor creaking beneath our feet and her mother’s snores drifting behind us.

PART II

SHORT STORY COMPONENT OF THESIS

He is My Age!

As Lyonya walked from his apartment building onto the narrow street where parked cars clumped together like crooked teeth, he thought about making love to his wife. People rushed by, their shoes clonking against the sidewalk, their looks seeming desultory and sullen even under the brightness of Moscow's July sun, and Lyonya wrung his hands and wondered why it was that he had been drifting during sex.

It's not that he was thinking about other women per se, although they did excite him, it was that small things preoccupied him, like thoughts of his office, reminders to call his mother, or items he needed at the grocery store. He would clutch Anya's waist, her soft sides, run his fingers along the ripples of her ribs, grabbing handfuls of breast, but the things that used to instantaneously arouse him, now felt mechanic, and although he usually came, he no longer felt the intensity that had once existed between them.

He was passionate at other times, when they were out of bed, talking or walking or reading by each other's side on the couch or in a cafe, then he couldn't keep his hands off her, couldn't stop kissing her face or smoothing her hair with his palm, but this was affection, not arousal. In bed, no matter how hard he tried to bring himself back to the moment, he felt detached from the body in front of him.

Lyonya was surprised to find himself stirred by the sight of other, often less attractive women. There was the finance manager at work who had bad teeth and

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. whose hair was thin and dull compared to Anya's, but who had a way of looking at him, squinting her small brown eyes while resting her chin on her hands and her elbow on the desk, that made him feel like she was pushing him against a wall. There was also Katya, the twenty-something Ukrainian blond who came over to clean their house once a week. She wore tight jeans and Lyonya found her makeup over the top, but she was feline somehow, and sensual. More than once, he had imagined propping her on the bathroom sink and ripping her clothes off. But these were all fleeting thoughts, he never allowed himself to think them while in bed with Anya, and he didn't expect to act on them.

As he was about to turn and cut through the small green square behind his building towards *Sadovoe Kol'tso* where he would catch the metro to the main train station, his phone rang and disrupted his thoughts. It was Anya, and when he heard her lisp and the laughter that always shook behind her voice, his eyes stung. He felt frustrated and wanted so badly to tell her that he was floating away so that she could bring him back, but of course, he could not.

She called to tell him that the weather was beautiful at their dacha, that she had gone swimming with Vanya and a friend of his from St. Petersburg, that she missed kissing his round, bearded cheeks, and that he needed to hurry up and get there already. He told her that he was on his way to catch the four o'clock train and would be there by half past five.

As he hung up he grew anxious to escape the oppressive smell of the city's hot pavement and gasoline, and to be with his wife, outdoors, away from the stress

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. of his office, and hopefully his thoughts. He shook his head, and decided that after ten years of marriage it was normal to feel bored in bed.

Reaching into his breast pocket for a cigarette, he noticed something to his right and dropped his hand. At the intersection of Zheltovskaya and Malaya Bronnaya, just in front of the Patriarch's Pond Park, a silver BMW stood with its driver door ajar, a green lump discarded at its side. Behind the vehicle there was a line of three police cars, and several officers leaning against them, talking to one another.

Lyonya approached, wondering if there had been an accident. Before him the lump took form— a corpse draped with a green sheet, lying there between the car and the sidewalk. It was alone, unattended, in the street, as passerbys rushed past, some glancing in its direction, others moving along unconcerned.

It was not unusual for a hit and run or an auto accident to leave a body or two on the Moscow streets, and the police always handled it just this way, slumped against their cars, smoking cigarettes as the body lay on the scene. Yet there was something different about this discarded man who had obviously died at the wheel, who judging by his build, and the slightly graying hair peaking through a gap in the sheet, had probably been no older than his forties.

He is my age! thought Lyonya.

There was no accident, no damage to the car; it appeared that the man had just died, suddenly, collapsed in his seat while driving his SUV. *We are so fragile; there one minute, the next, discarded beneath a green sheet.* Lyonya felt his heart

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. race, thinking of his father, who had dropped suddenly at the age of fifty-four, his grandfather who had gone the same way.

Trembling, his hand crept towards his pocket again, grabbing for a *Gauloise*. He was hot, pulled his shirt from his chest as he imagined the airless metro car. Lighting his cigarette with a match he turned in the opposite direction of the train station and headed into Patriarch's Pond Park.

Drinkers, most of them in their work clothes, crowded the green benches along the park's periphery, sipping beer, laughing, and smoking. Their faces floated by Lyonya as he walked briskly, breathing heavily, exhaling smoke. He approached the sculptures of the scenes from Krylov's children's stories—bronze reliefs of festive, mischievous animals—and leaned on the protruding arm of a bronze wolf.

In his late twenties and early thirties he would picture his future kids climbing these sculptures as he had seen other people's children do so many times before. At forty-two, those imaginary children still hadn't come to life.

A lot of his wishes hadn't materialized, Lyonya admitted to himself as images of the corpse flickered through his mind. If he were to die today, if he were suddenly taken away, would he feel fulfilled? His cigarette was almost to the filter and with it he lit the next one, walking to step over a black barrier, setting himself by the water. Swans slid along the pond's surface, over the shaky reflection of an ornate yellow building that had once been a bank. The ground felt cold through his jeans. He imagined Anya's reaction to his sitting on cold stone. *Lyonichka, what are you doing, you'll damage your kidneys!* Even when the temperature rose, Moscow's core stayed cold—there was a constant, inescapable chill floating about the city.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Lyonya worked for a bank. He'd graduated with a degree in political economy right after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, during Glasnost, hoping to travel abroad, settle in another country. Instead he was managing Russian money. He lived in the same apartment where he had always lived, traveled abroad only for short vacations with his wife. Had he pictured this while he was earning his degree? Hadn't he always imagined that he'd be an academic, writing books and traveling the world like his father and grandfather had?

It's not that Lyonya was unhappy, how could he be, when he was in love, when everything he'd done over the past ten years had been for his wife? He had chosen to settle down and take the banking job because Anya's life was here, and he didn't want to be like his grandfather, who left his grandmother in Moscow for months on end while he travelled the world. Anya would not settle for that and also, he wouldn't want to be away from her. He'd happily chosen love over a fulfilling career, but that was then.

Anya was his second wife. He'd been married for a short time in his twenties to a girl he dated in University, but the girl left him for another, older man, telling him that he wasn't aggressive enough, that he didn't ever go after what he really wanted. He spent the next two years trying to figure out what she meant, analyzing where he'd gone wrong. Then he met Anya. She was prettier, younger than his first wife by five years. Every time he looked at her he felt unremarkable, like he didn't deserve her.

Anya laughed a lot, she was a poet, a lover of the Russian language, passionate about life and friends and literature. She didn't want kids and she

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. refused to move out of Russia, claiming that her poetry would starve anywhere else. As badly as he wanted to leave, he'd never *really* tried to convince her. Backing down when she rationalized away his desires, tracing her words with her hands, raising her voice. She was a poet, an editor for a small poetry magazine, tied into the Moscow literary community, constantly publishing poems and going to readings.

"How can I move somewhere where they don't speak my language?" she would ask forcefully. "My words make *music*. The rhythm says one thing, the words another. They are dissonant. They harmonize. They bounce off of one each other. I can't find music in a language I don't know!"

The memory of her words roused him from his thoughts. He looked at his watch, its face scratched with use, the green band fraying at the edges. Anya was always telling him to get a new one. They had the money. But this one was still running, and he was accustomed to the mild ticking of its arrows and the feel of the band on his wrist. It was four. The train he'd intended to take was leaving in five minutes, but there would be another one in an hour.

He took out his third cigarette, rolling the tobacco between his thumb and index finger, listening to the crinkling of the paper. Inhaling deeply he walked to the northeast exit of the park, the famous intersection where a tram had severed Berlioz's head in Bulgakhov's *Master and Margarita*

As the train approached Zvinigorod Lyonya felt himself relaxing a bit, letting go of his earlier panic, and the frantic walk around the park. He was glad to leave the city—he'd just finished a project at the bank, and after days of being inside and

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. several nights of sleeplessness, a week in the fresh air would do him good. Anya had been at the dacha without him for days working on a new compilation, and he longed for her, longed to discard all of his earlier doubts. He looked forward to their morning run to the pine forest, and to lounging on the riverbank with his legs stretched out on the grass, brushing hers, his heels sinking into the warm mud by the water.

Their dacha had belonged to his family since the late forties, when Stalin made a gift to Russia's most influential academics, presenting them with the village of Mozhinka. His grandfather earned the gift for his contributions to geophysics. The dacha was two hours south of the city, past Rublyovka and its mansions, past the onion domes of Zvinigorod's churches.

In his childhood the houses stood around a mile-long loop; buried in large leafy yards, set behind flimsy wooden fences. He'd spend all the summers of his youth there, running barefoot from one yard to another with a pack of kids, walking through the cornfields to the river *Moscvarica* and playing along its banks. Now the houses spread beyond the loop, into the cornfields, the pine forests, and the formerly empty spaces. The fences weren't so flimsy anymore—some were so large you couldn't see what the houses behind them looked like.

Anya met him at the Zvinigorod stop, running up to the platform, throwing her arms around his neck, kissing his cheeks and his lips. Seeing her he smiled, thinking that he didn't need kids or life abroad when he had her, that with Anya he could be happy anywhere.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

They drove to the house with their windows down, her right hand on his thigh, the left one on the wheel. They passed the market and the wafting smell of overheated raw meat drifted into their car from the butcher shop. The stench lingered until they got into Mozhinka, where the linden trees overtook it. He inhaled, savoring it in his nasal passages. It was nearly seven and the sun was still high in the sky, beating down on his arm, which rested on the open window.

Anya asked for a cigarette and he handed it to her, grabbing one also. Hers dangled from her mouth unlit until he sparked it and she drew in the smoke, bunching her lips and flaring her nostrils like she always did. Her tan skin radiated, bringing out red hues in her auburn hair, and he immediately longed to touch it, lifting the back of his hand to her cheek, moving it up and down.

In all their years of marriage he hadn't ceased to admire the natural carelessness of her beauty, her refusal to wear makeup, her messy ponytails, red lips—bottom slightly bigger than the top, and the small gap between her two front teeth.

"I'm sorry I missed the first train," He said, and told her about the corpse, spilling details—it could have just as easily been him, it forced him to question certain turns in their life, maybe it wasn't too late for them to live abroad for a few years, and that thirty-five was not too old for her to have kids.

"But you know we couldn't take care of children," she said to him calmly, "my mother is in Piter, your mother is unstable, you're always working, and my writing would fall into complete upheaval!" She was still looking at him lovingly and lifted her hand from his thigh to caress the space behind his right ear. "And we can always

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. go abroad for a few months, but *years*? What about your job, my poetry, the apartment, it simply wouldn't work."

In the same breath, she changed the subject. She'd invited some friends for a barbeque—the Karinovs would be there, and their friend Vanya was bringing his family friend from St. Petersburg, the one Anya went swimming with earlier in the afternoon.

Lyonya sighed, this always happened, she was forever explaining away the things he wanted to do. It had been going on their entire marriage. He always saw her point and backed off, because it was true that Anya's career would suffer, that they would have trouble taking care of a child because he had to stay in the office many nights a week, and their mothers were not there to take care of the baby like most Russian grandmothers would be. He understood that living in another country would be a disaster to Anya's magazine. But what about what he wanted? Why hadn't he ever had the guts to convince her?

They parked in the pebbled driveway and walked on the narrow dirt path that led up to the house through their overgrown yard. Lyonya noticed that the red wooden door of their tool shed was slightly off its hinge and he walked up to it, lifting it forcefully and setting it in place, causing the entire wooden structure to shake.

The house smelled of old wood and neglected mold, but the combination was welcoming somehow. They hadn't redone the wallpaper in years and some of it bubbled where the wall met the ceiling and Lyonya figured the mold must have accumulated there.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Maybe I’ll work on getting us some new wallpaper this week,” he told his wife and she craned her neck and, standing on her tiptoes, kissed the tip of his nose. She walked to the bathroom, telling him to go take a nap before the guests arrived.

He climbed the creaking wooden steps past the suspended bookshelves and the large blue maps of oceanic floors that covered the walls. His grandfather had spent his life traveling the world, mapping oceans, now they haunted him as he ascended, reminding him of the academic life he had not fulfilled.

Anya’s underwear and some clothing was strewn about their bedroom when he walked in. He shook his head; she’d always been a mess. Plopping himself onto the bed, he removed his brown sandals, putting them by the bedside table.

The sun crept in from the round window above him. A maple tree scratched softly against the glass, and he lay back, folding his arms under his head, looking at the peeling white ceiling, stained yellow by water leaks. Closing his eyes he shuddered as the image of the corpse haunted him once again, lying under the green sheet between the sidewalk and the silver BMW. He could feel the blood pulsing through his hands. Rolling onto his side, he stretched his arm towards the wall and stumbled into a disturbed sleep.

Anya woke him with a kiss to his clammy forehead and he pulled her into bed and hugged her. The window let in a breeze and he felt chilled. Anya lay with him and caressed his scalp and his beard with her fingertips—he found himself growing anxious at the thought that her body felt nice, but didn’t turn him on.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Then, to his relief, she bounced up and told him that the guests would be coming soon and he needed to start the grill. He rose and followed her out of the room, watching her butt as it swayed with her hips, wrapped snugly in faded blue jeans, and agonizing over the lack of sexual energy that he felt.

The Karinovs were first to arrive, carrying a bottle of Cabernet and some Salad Olivier packed into a large glass bowl. Lenchka, their gangly seven-year-old daughter, buck toothed with round eyes, skipped up and down their front steps, humming the theme to the children's show Chiburashka.

Lyonya watched affectionately as their pudgy friend Karinova opened the wine bottle. Her blond curls shook as she struggled to lift the cork and her top teeth pressed over her bottom lip. She caught him watching, blushed, and lowered her eyes. He felt a flutter in his stomach and looked away, was even *Karinova* able to excite him?

He pictured Karinova as she was during the last months of her pregnancy, grunting when she walked up their front steps, her forehead beading with sweat. He couldn't believe that over seven years had passed, and the Karinovs' daughter was a real person now. When the child was first born, her tiny hands had fascinated Anya, and Lyonya would observe his wife extend her finger towards the infant as Lenchka clapped it between her pink palms. He used to get giddy during those moments, imagining Anya with her own child, their child.

A lot had changed since then; the Karinovs had torn down their old two-story wooden house and built a brick one with three floors, a basement, large bay windows, and a two-car parking garage. A tall, impenetrable fence shielded their

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. yard. Everyone was building fences now, there was no more running in and out of neighbors' yards, the old academic community was quickly dissolving as New Russians bought up Mozhinka's property and built mansions. They were the ones to start with the fences, and now, with so many strangers around, the original residents were also creating barriers. Lyonya and Anya protested—they kept their house as it was and silently scorned their friends for giving in.

Lyonya stood outside flipping the meat on their slightly rusted metal grill when Vanya emerged through the trees holding a bottle of Smirnoff. He sprung from the ground jerkily, sending his wiry extremities to flop about his frame. His hair was messy and unwashed, his face stubbly, and he held a burning cigarette in his right hand. The leaves moved behind him and a petite black-haired girl in her twenties appeared by his side.

"Lyonka!" Vanya growled, "Good to see you in the fresh air! Anya tells me you've been holed up in that office of yours."

Lyonya reached over the grill and hugged his old friend, taking the vodka and putting it on the grass. He and Vanya had run around Mozhinka together since he could remember. They had cooked countless meals on the very grill that stood between them.

"This is Alyona, she's visiting from Peter, I've known her since she was a hairy little infant."

Alyona giggled and smacked Vanya on his shoulder. Her eyes were almost black, coffee beans bouncing on her face.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“Seriously, she had this dark hair all over her when she came out. Her mother was ready to disown her.” Vanya’s laughter rolled from his chest in chaotic bursts. “Keep an eye on my drinking today buddy,” Vanya said in a more serious tone, “I’ve gotta drive this lady to Zvinigorod. She’s going to Moscow on the midnight train.”

“Oh *I’ll* keep an eye on it, don’t you worry,” Alyona shook her head then turned to Lyonya, “I went swimming with your wife this morning, it is really beautiful here.” Her small arms gestured at their surroundings. The expansive yard was a luscious mid-summer green, overgrown with weeds, and lit by the fireflies weaving in and out of the bushes of red and black currant, dangling from the branches like jewels. Alyona’s voice was calming and she maintained eye contact with Lyonya as she spoke, “It’s places like this that will make me miss Russia.”

“Our Alyonochka is deserting us,” Vanya explained, raising his eyebrows and curling his lips into a half smile, “betraying her motherland for the glitter and glory of New York City.”

Lyonya cleared his throat; “It used to be even more beautiful here, before they built all this nonsense, when we had the cornfields to ourselves, right there past those pines.” He looked over at Vanya, who nodded in agreement and patted him on the back.

“Lyonya liked to run through the fields with his hands spread open and collide with the haystacks. Now it’s all private property, you’ll get a shotgun to your face for tress passing.”

Anya’s voice sounded from the kitchen, “Is the meat almost done? We’re starving!”

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

It was and the three of them made their way to the rectangular dining table in the back of the house.

Anya loved having guests and she was chattering throughout the meal, pouring everyone vodka or wine, never allowing an empty glass. Lenka got bored and went upstairs to watch *Sherlock Holmes* and the adults slumped lazily in their chairs, their eyes glassy. Lyonya noticed Karinova's big teeth, tinted purple from the wine, laughing to himself at the brief attraction he had felt towards her in the kitchen. The atmosphere was reminding him of the old days, when they were all young, when their lives still felt like unpainted canvases. It was only Alyona, whose canvas was still unpainted.

Everyone was asking Alyona questions about New York, why she had decided to go, what she was going to do once she got there.

"It's the faces here," she said, taking a deep breath through her narrow nostrils and putting her index finger to her lip, "the unsmiling faces that I see everyday on the metro, on the street, in the stores. The miserable old women who always stand too close to you in the supermarkets, the clerks at the post office who roll their eyes when you ask them a question." She laughed a little, lightening the tone, "I love my friends of course, my relatives, St. Petersburg, but the first time I went abroad—it was to Paris with my mother in the nineties—I was just so shocked to see people smiling, walking down the streets with their heads up, their faces relaxed, not frozen into this horrible mask, I didn't know it could be like that. So I thought, I have to get out of here. I will not raise my children like this."

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Lyonya drummed his fingers against the arm of his wooden chair, remembering the first time he had gone abroad, when he had felt that way. He was about Alyona's age, twenty-five maybe, he'd gone to a conference in London, and on the second day he found himself sitting in Covent Garden. It was October, but the air was warm and he sat on stone steps in just a sweater with a light scarf, in October! People covered the surfaces around him, chatting, smiling, eating, as a saxophonist played "Strangers in the Night." He'd felt so overwhelmed, by his happiness, by the energy of the city, by the lack of stiffness on people's faces as they milled about, enjoying their Sunday afternoon. It was exactly what Alyona described, shock, and then relief. Relief because there existed an out, because he realized that there was another way to live.

New York was a city that Lyonya had only seen in movies, his friends' photographs and through the eyes of writers. He had attempted to go with Anya but their visas were denied, and Anya, feeling scornful towards America to begin with, had refused to try again. He was angry with himself for not working harder to convince her. The thought of the skyscrapers and the never-ending action still aroused him.

Alyona revealed that she hadn't been to New York either, nor did she know what she would be doing once she got there. Her best friend had moved to the city three years ago and by some miracle managed to get Alyona an invitation from an American friend, low in the New York political scene, but influential enough to finagle a tourist visa. The US government usually refused applications of single Russian women.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Alyona planned to stay there, to find someone who would sponsor her for a job. She had graduated from Moscow State University's psychology department and hoped to get her PhD at an American school.

She is so brave, Lyonya thought, a twenty-five year old girl with more balls than me—a forty-two year old man.

"What are you going to find there that you can't have here?" Karinov's voice shot across the table at Alyona. Lyonya noticed how Karinov's curly black hair had grayed at the temples, and how the lines around the corners of his eyes stuck out more clearly than ever before. "Do you really think that people are happier? We are all human, we all have the same problems!"

Vanya raised his vodka glass and toasted Karinov. "To our Motherland! To Happiness!" He said and they laughed, throwing the vodka to the backs of their throats.

Lyonya wasn't sure what happiness was anymore. He'd thought that it was his life. That it was all about being with the person he loved. Maybe it was. He looked over at Anya, who sat across from him with her legs to her chest, cradling her wine glass and looking out the window, smiling to herself.

But what if happiness was to travel, to discover new places? What if he died without doing any of it?

Alyona seemed more amused than offended by Karinov's comments. "I'm not trying to find happiness," she said, "I am happy already, now I need to take my happiness in the right direction."

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

Then she cleared her throat and looked at her watch, "Vanya, you *bastard*, you're drunk as all hell! What about my ride to the train?"

Vanya smiled so wide his eyes turned into slits. "I'm *fine* Alyonka, really!" He slurred.

"I'll drive you," Lyonya said, "I've only had wine tonight."

Vanya slumped in his chair, grinning, and patted Lyonya on the back, "Thatta boy, he's always been my boy."

"You be careful Lyonka." Anya asked, lifting her face towards him.

He looked at her and smiled, "Yes baby, you keep entertaining our guests."

She stuck her thumbs up and Lyonya kissed her on the top of the head on his way out.

The air was much cooler and, noticing the goose bumps on Alyona's arms, Lyonya rolled up the windows, leaving only the moon roof cracked. It was just past eleven and the sky had turned puce, the setting sun casting streaks of pink, orange, and purple across the clouds. He loved the feeling of never ending Moscow summer nights.

"I will miss that about Piter, the white nights. New York gets dark by nine in the summer."

"Nine? I can't imagine."

Alyona sat in the passenger seat, reclining lazily, playing with the ends of her chin length black hair. He was giddy around her, this young girl who was about to disappear into a city of which he had only dreamed.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

She suddenly sat upright. "I'm scared to death, you know?" Her eyes widened. "I've been having night terrors, even. Seeing things crouching by my bed, waking up screaming, tearing at my sheets."

"You're young, you can always come back. There's nothing to lose."

"My pride, I have my pride. I don't want to be that girl who talked big and then, didn't make it."

Lyonya smiled a little, thinking how young she was, when was the last time he'd had something to prove?

Alyona folded her arms across her chest, her full breasts sitting on top of them, her shoulders hunching a bit and the straps of her red tank top sliding down.

He stopped the car; they were in front of the station now. He killed the ignition and she took a deep breath, not moving towards the door.

"I envy you Lyonya; you've managed to make a good life of it here," she said, "great friends, a dacha, good career. You haven't let it all get to you the way I have."

Then she reached over and hugged him. He stiffened at first, but gradually moved his arms around her too. Her head on his shoulder, her fingers clutching his flannel shirt, she started to sob, her body shaking in his arms.

He felt a sudden impulse to push her away. And then she kissed him, forcefully, her tears seeping into his beard. He kissed her back, started to pull her towards him, but she jerked her body towards the door, grabbed her bag from the back seat, and ran out of the car, slamming the door, waving to him through the window. He watched her on the platform just as the train rolled up. She crossed one

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
foot over the other, her hands wrapped around her chest, looking lost, and very
much alone.

He drove back slowly, with the windows open, letting the sweet smell of the
linden trees wash over him and the night air cool his arms. He wasn't sure what he
felt exactly, months of fantasizing and he wasn't even aroused, just puzzled, warm
then cold, and...relieved.

Anya would be waiting for him to come into bed, she would have her hair
down and her white nightgown draping over her tan skin. She would kiss him and
they would head upstairs, laughing about Vanya's slurring sentences, Karinov's
unbridled patriotism, and Lyonya's over-romanticized visions of foreign countries.
He felt a stirring, a sense of excitement, and realized he was growing an erection.

The Girl and My Wife

Our town is not big and she would often pass me in stores, movie theaters, sometimes in the park. She was always alone, carrying a small bag and studying everyone around her with sad eyes that seemed older than she seemed. I would watch her, from a bench or from behind a vegetable aisle as she examined tomatoes, gripping the skin with her calloused fingers, which she must use to do some sort of manual craft.

She knew that I watched because sometimes she would raise her sad eyes and catch me, but I was no coward and I would keep her gaze until her soft green irises grew even sadder and slid to the floor.

I would go home to my wife and think about the curly-haired girl with the coral lips and the wistful smile, her thick eyebrows hovering above her sadness. My thoughts about her got so intense that when my wife would moan in bed I would imagine that I was touching her, that girl in the shadows whom I liked to watch.

I loved my wife. It was not about that. Although we had been together for a very long time I never felt bored or lonely or very sad with her and always wanted to come home to her soft body and her warm voice.

At first I didn't feel guilty about the sad girl that took up so many of my thoughts. It felt ok have another sexual interest as long as it didn't get out of hand, and that seemed impossible because the sad girl was too lost in her own gloom.

Then one day I was walking by the racetracks away from the town center, just needing to clear my head and smell the warm air because spring had finally

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories. come. The sun beat down on my bare shoulders and the grass was moist from the rain that had passed through our town violently the night before. The riders were mounting their horses and a crowd gathered outside, bets would be placed soon, and I was glad that I was not in there in the claustrophobic space watching the horses race.

Right by the tracks there was a small wood and I walked towards the trees clustered together on a hill like elongated cones and found a pine-covered path that I could follow away from the yells.

The pines and twigs crunched under my feet and soft needles brushed my arms as I walked because the path was not quite wide enough for a person my size. I hadn't spent much time in that wood since childhood. I felt peaceful and alone and I thought about my wife and not the girl during that walk.

I came to a clearing by a small brook where I used to sit and read books a long time ago and I used my hands to climb atop a boulder where I could watch over the water and the tall weeds gathered on the bank. The water ran in zigzags over the rocks and I could see the pebbles on the bottom. Small lizards ran over the stones next to me and I caught one and let it run over my hand and up my arm until it fell off and scampered up a rock.

I'm not sure for how long I sat there because my mind wandered and I didn't wear a watch, but I must not have heard the rustling behind me or the crunching of the pine needles because a voice startled me and I nearly fell off the boulder into the brook. I didn't recognize the voice and I almost slipped again when I turned and saw

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
the sad face of so many of my thoughts looking at me with her lips pressed together
in a thin line.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to scare you,” she said to me. “I am usually the only
one out here; I like to come and sit on this rock and do my work.” Her voice was
sharper and more pronounced than I expected from someone who seemed so quiet
and sad.

“What sort of work do you do?” I asked, still not believing that I was standing
here in the woods, talking to the sad girl who always floated by me in our small
town and so often occupied my mind.

She reached for the bag she always wore, which was brown and made of soft
leather, worn and scuffed. Her fingers struggled with the sash and I could see up-
close the blisters on her hands and the shortness of her nails. She took out a piece of
wood the size of my palm with the beginnings of a small figurine sitting atop
something that was not yet finished, its chin leaning on its hand, its elbow leaning
on its knee.

The face was unfinished, framed by thick curls, with wide eyes half-covered
by their lids, gazing down, looking eternally sad. It was beautiful and somehow
familiar and I wondered if she had been carving her own self, sitting on that boulder
where she came to do her work.

“That’s very nice,” I said to the girl, I couldn’t think of anything better to say
because I felt my heart picking up speed, and wondered if she could hear it through
my chest.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

She shrugged and looked away from me, her wild hair covering her eyes, and she put the unfinished carving back inside her bag, slowly closing the sash.

“Can I buy one?” I asked the girl. She looked back at me, the green pools of her eyes locking into the brown pools of mine and told me that they were not for sale.

I was relieved because I did not think the question through. If I had bought a carving, what would I do with it? I couldn’t give it to my wife, or have it in our house staring at me, reminding me of this girl.

“The rock is big enough for two,” she said to me, “can I sit with you a while?”

I gestured for her to come up. She handed me her bag, which was heavier than it looked, and rose up next to me.

“This brook reminds me of where I am from, that’s why I come here so much.”

I asked her where that may be, but she kept staring ahead.

“It’s not important,” she said after some thought, “All that matters is that it looks like this.”

We sat there for some time and I can’t say that we talked much, or even that I learned her name. Our shoulders brushed together here and there and with every brush I felt a forceful jolt and by her breathing I could tell she felt it too.

The sun was lower now, hovering above the tips of the pines, and I remembered that my wife had asked me to buy cucumbers and the store would probably close soon so I forced myself to leave.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

“It was nice to sit with you like this,” I said to the girl who seemed to me somewhere far away, perhaps back where she was from.

She nodded and smiled her tight smile, and touched me with her eyes.

I walked away, back through the pines, and towards the yells where all the betters were.

The cucumbers were cold and fresh when I gave them to my wife, she brushed her warm lips against my cheek and when I closed my eyes I pictured the girl, sitting on that boulder, and for the first time I felt a little bit of guilt.

I roamed the town in the next few days, and even returned to the spot at the clearing of the wood where I had hardly gone since I was a child. She was not there carving wood, only the empty boulder by the babbling brook, and even though I sat there for a while she never came. I did not see her at the movie theater or the park or the vegetable aisles. Nor on the small cobblestone street with the café or by the fountain under the clock tower.

It was only the following week, when my constant yearning for her subsided, that I saw her from across the square, walking with her little bag and her black hair tied back in a colorful scarf.

I ran to her, my footsteps echoing against the cobblestone, my newspaper crumpled under my arm and my hair flying in my face.

“Hi,” my voice came out breathless and it might have cracked.

She looked back at me and didn’t quite smile.

“Hello,” her voice was distant, like we had never met.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

The more removed she seemed the more I wanted her. The more I didn't think about my wife and thought only about her calloused hands touching me and my hands touching her.

"Will you take a walk with me?" I asked, and to my surprise she nodded her head and her curls went over her eyes again, like they had on the boulder the week before.

She was tall and her hips were wide and her breasts large, but not too big. Her hands swung at her sides as we walked and I noticed that we were heading towards that same spot, past the racetracks where the people were and where the horses clomped their hooves.

Again we didn't talk, and that felt fine, because with her I could just walk and wait for her arm to brush against my own.

At the rock she climbed up first and this time it was my newspaper that she held as I rose to join her. We sat again in silence and I was aware of even the slightest movement of her leg or arm.

"What made you come here the other day?" She asked me without turning her head. "In all my time here I had never seen anyone come by this rock."

"Really? Not anyone?" I asked. Then paused, inhaling the scent of pines. "I came to welcome spring."

She reverted to her silence, smoothing the wrinkles on her wide pants with her hands.

I was about to turn to her and grab her face when she slid off the rock and told me she had to go. She gave a slight wave and I watched her disappear through

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
the pines, the reds and yellows of her scarf bouncing through the needles into my eyes.

That night I made love to my wife but I pictured the girl from the boulder and my orgasm was louder than it had been since we first met. I lay crying after she fell asleep, curled up on my side, the light of the moon shining through our curtains and hurting my head.

I didn't go into town the following day. I sat in our yard and looked at the roses blooming like fire on the bushes under the orange flowers of the pomegranate tree.

My wife, who could always tell when something was wrong, put a cool hand on my neck and scratched it with her nails. I felt calm when she did this and was so grateful to have her there so I took her in our room and threw her on the white blankets of our bed, kissing her and parting her legs until we both screamed and I cried again but this time because I thought only about my wife and not about the sad girl with her small leather bag.

For weeks we did not meet. I no longer looked for her face along the streets, her fleeting hair, or the traces of her flowing pants. In fact I felt like I barely remembered her at all.

It was only by the citrus tree in the communal garden where I sometimes went to pick up flowers for my wife, that I saw her reading a book. She looked up when I came in through the rusty gate and her coral lips parted a bit so I could see the white of her teeth.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

It was enough to arouse me but I still had willpower and was about to turn around when she called for me to come over and sit by her. My legs were heavy as if pulled by weights and I had trouble walking over to the place where she sat. It was a narrow wooden bench with only room enough for two and I felt my left leg brush against her right.

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” she said, and her voice was like the citrus above us. “I’ve looked for you around town; I wanted to show you the collection in my house.”

I took her arm and told her to lead me where she wanted.

Her stone house was behind the square on a small tree-lined street where I felt like I had never been. It stood behind a green wood fence, the windows square, white shutters and a burgundy door.

“Do you live alone?” I asked.

She told me no, that she lived with an old woman who rented her the room, but the woman went down by the sea to improve her health.

The house was dusty. The light was scarce, pouring in stripes over rows of books.

“I am up here,” she said and took my hand.

I followed her up the narrow creaking stairs and all this time I felt that I could barely breathe. I wondered if she felt the pulsing through my wrist.

My wife was not in my thoughts. It was like everything had been erased except for me and the girl and the dusty house.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

In her room the shutters were open and the sunlight shone on her small white bed. All along her shelves and the heavy oak desk stood the wooden figurines she had carved. I was too fired up to look at them and she was about to speak as I turned and pressed my lips against hers.

I threw her against the bed and she moaned softly as I stripped her clothes. I licked her nipples, which were dark brown, darker and smaller than my wife's. I slid against her and she lay still as I ran my tongue down her body, parting her legs and putting my mouth over her, feeling myself getting so hard it hurt.

I kept my mouth on her until she moaned and quivered so hard her whole body shook. Then she lowered her eyes from mine and lay completely still. I slid around her and tried to put her hand on me, but she took it away and placed it on her forehead, sighing sadly and rolling away from me.

I waited for her to return, but she only got further and further away. The farther she got the angrier I was and the jerkier my movements became against the bed.

When I knew for sure that she wasn't going to budge, my heart beat against my chest and my eyes wandered towards the wooden figurines. I slid my clothed body from her bed, away from her naked form, which lay there, still and silent as a dead fish, and walked over to her desk.

With a forceful lurch I swept my arm across it and the wood rattled together as the figures collapsed, some of them bouncing when they landed on the floor. The girl remained completely still.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.

I crumpled to the ground and sat with my knees to my chest, surrounded by the figures strewn on the floor. None of them larger than the palm of my hand, all of them carved in detail out of wood. I ran my fingers along their rough shapes. Their faces were all different and I narrowed my eyes and peered into theirs, lifting the figures one by one and bringing them to my face.

The first one I held was the grocer from the vegetable stand, his eyebrows scrunching together like they always did when he searched the fruit for defects, except he wasn't looking down; he was looking at me, his mouth twisted and angry. The next was the woman in the park who always sat on the benches and fed the pigeons breadcrumbs from a crumpled plastic bag, my wife liked to sit with her sometimes and help her feed them, the woman glared at me from behind her bag of crumbs. There was the little boy who rode his red bicycle through the square every afternoon and rang the bell; his tongue stuck out from between his lips. The pregnant woman who had waited so long for a child and finally grew fertile at the age of forty-two cocked her head to one side and looked at me in disapproval. I felt dizzy and threw the figures aside, moving to get up. Then my eye landed on another figurine that had rolled away from the rest. It was that same one she had shown me on the boulder, but it was finished now.

I picked it up between my thumb and index finger noticing the sad beautiful face that gazed into the distance; she wasn't looking at me like the others but beyond me. Curly hair framed her face and her wide eyes were half covered by her heavy lids. She sat on a set of steps, her knees in front of her, her elbows leaning against them, her chin leaning on her hands. I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed it

Masha Udensiva-Brenner MFA Thesis, Fall 2010 *The Parrot Abramka*, and other stories.
before. The woman sitting on those steps wasn't the sad girl like I had thought. It
wasn't the sad girl at all, but my wife. Sitting on the steps in the town square where
she often liked to sit. Looking into the distance, past me. Past me because she could
no longer look at me, at what I have become.

