
EVGENIYA DAME

Turandot

HER FIRST DAY IN MOSCOW, Vera went to see the changing of the guard at the Kremlin Wall. The three young soldiers marched past her with rifles at their shoulders, faces dripping with wet, clingy August heat. Their army boots slapped against the dark red porphyry of the platform, a dull, flat sound. “If you don’t leave this place now, soon you won’t hear the music,” her mother had said of their hometown, a speck on the map.

Vera walked home to Basmannaya Street, climbed the stairs to her apartment, a Stalin-period relic with ceilings so high her footsteps echoed inside. There, she sat among the bags that still held all her clothes—summer dresses rolled and tied with their own belts, balled-up socks stuffed into shoes. A large black case, mailed separately and marked *FRAGILE*, was missing. A note from the postal station explained how to initiate an inquiry. Vera’s uniform, a baroque dress of pink satin, had been delivered earlier, along with a gray Madame de Pompadour wig.

She took the uniform to work. Changing trains at Revolution Square, she dodged the crowds and wrapped her hands protectively around the dress. On the escalator she held it high, so the hem wouldn’t get caught between the moving parts. The dress hovered above her like a ghost.

Work was at the restaurant Turandot where Vera sat on a circular revolving stage and played harp for three hours on weekend nights. Besides Vera, the stage held a golden tree with a peacock in its branches and the rest of the quartet—a harpsichord and two violins, one of them a pale young man with soft hands and thick eyelashes. The stage was so small the man risked tangling his bow in the gray curls of Vera’s wig. At dinner hour, when the waiters rushed by, Vera smelled venison and truffle on plates that passed under her nose. Turandot was a repurposed eighteenth-century mansion masquerading as a Chinese palace. Everywhere Vera looked, she saw gold plate and fine silk, marble columns and intricate iron latticework. Sometimes, she hid a phone in the folds of her dress and took photos of celebrities chewing alfalfa salads and caviar-filled blinis. She sent those to her

mother. “Are you making friends?” her mother texted. It wasn’t clear if she meant the celebrities, other musicians, or anyone at all.

Her mother asked if Vera was looking for a seat with the real orchestra. She sent daily reminders to find a second job. “It’s the capital. Work is everywhere,” she said in phone conversations. “They make it out of thin air.” She wasn’t wrong. Skinny Uzbek men sold phone cards on every corner. On Arbat, teenage girls on roller skates handed out flyers for tattoo parlors. Lenin and Stalin look-alikes roamed Red Square. That’s it, she told Vera. Put the dress on, go pose for a photo. Tell them you are Catherine II. “You have so much time,” her mother said. “Every hour in Moscow is worth two here.”

“And vice versa,” Vera said. “I left only two weeks ago, but it feels like months.”

After work, she snuck into the men’s restroom with the pale, soft-handed Violin and smoked among round porcelain urinals. Painted lapis lazuli, they resembled traditional Gzhel ceramics. “They advertise this as a place where a Chinese princess and a French king could enjoy an entrée,” Violin said, “but all you see are the bureaucrats, the same sovok who thirty years ago wrote five-year plans and theorized about the future of socialism. That, and criminals. They are our elite now.” He tapped his knuckles on the urinal and the bowl responded with a melodious chime.

“Are we supposed to get tips?” Vera said.

Violin cracked a window open and blew smoke into the chilly night air. “If you have to ask . . .”

Vera checked with the local orchestras, but they were touring. She typed a classified ad with a fringe of phone numbers at the bottom. The ad described her as a professional harpist. She typed another ad offering harp lessons, any level. “Develop a fine sense of music,” the ad said. “Bonus: impeccable posture.” At the bottom she scribbled in pencil, “Must own instrument.”

She went to the postal station and gave the number of the missing package. The clerk stared at the description for a long time.

“A harp?” she said. “How’d you lose something big as that?”

“Exactly,” Vera said.

Her mother told her to picture life back home every morning as motivation. The dullness of it, the monotony. “Remember how lazy everyone is here,” she said. Their town’s idea of entertainment was concerts from aging rock bands like Limp Bizkit or Nazareth.

“People aren’t lazy,” Vera said. “They just run out of things to do faster.”

Their summer tours done, the philharmonic orchestras returned to Moscow and resumed their programs. All of them already had a harp.

In September, Vera took a tutoring job. Kirill was seven, his sister Polina just turned ten. Their father had seen Vera’s ad in the conservatory. Not music, he explained on the phone. Russian, algebra, history. “But I play harp,” Vera said. Then corrected herself, “I teach harp.” It would come in handy, the father said, but for now let’s focus on orthography and equations. He said he preferred to work with musicians—they had a sense of tact other people lacked. The father taught music theory and conducted a student orchestra. His wife, a concert pianist, was touring South Korea.

On the first day, Vera learned Kirill and Polina could list Rachmaninoff’s concertos in chronological order but failed to conjugate a noun. Fractions sent them into a frenzy.

“On the other hand,” Polina said, “I’m the only one in my class who knows Brahms. How can you live to be ten and not know Brahms?” She paused over an equation, bit into her pencil.

“A crime!” Vera said. “So, what’s the value of x ?”

The brother and sister were tall, with wild curls and long, slender fingers. They slept on bedsheets printed with music notes and kept their pens in trombone-shaped pencil cases. Their laughter was like the sound of a musical triangle. It spread silently through their face and eyes, and when the laugh came it was a single note, high and clear.

Their rooms were a mirror image of each other, wallpaper the only difference. Kirill kept a picture of himself conducting an orchestra on his desk. In the photo, the boy stood on a chair with a little black bow tie around his neck, the father beaming in the background.

“How old are you here?” Vera asked.

“Five.” He added, “It wasn’t a long piece. And Papa told me the secret.”

“What is the secret?”

“You pretend the musicians hid the music from you and you need to coax it out.”

Vera rarely saw the father. He stayed late at the conservatory rehearsing. At the apartment, his face looked out from framed photos. He was old, much older than the children’s mother who appeared next to him, a petite, severe looking woman,

no trace of a smile. Stacks of concert posters sat on the living room piano, under the dining table, and in each child's bedroom. The father posed with his hands raised in the air, the same curly hair that both children inherited, but pearly white, a nimbus around his head. He never used a baton. His name, Denis Gurov, arched across the top in block letters. The posters made wonderful draft paper because they were large and Vera could draw x and y axes, explaining algebra. "It's all right, we have too many anyway," Polina said. Afterward, while the girl worked out a problem on her own, Vera turned the poster over and doodled, filling in objects between the conductor's spread fingers. She penciled in handkerchiefs, goblets, butterfly nets, quills. The drawings always came home with her. She didn't want the great Gurov to reach for a poster to autograph and see a photo where his fingers clasped the fleshy leg of a goose.

Her mornings free, Vera walked the alleys of Bauman Garden down the street, bought bite-size pies at a church kiosk. The pies had been blessed during the service, but Vera couldn't taste any difference. Other days, she stayed home, made lists of pieces to play once the harp found its way back to Moscow. Schubert's "Ave Maria," "Solweig's Dreams" by Agopov. Her apartment came furnished and full of antiquities—a floor clock, a turntable. The bathroom had a large window, a luxury from the past. She took long baths watching the clouds compete for the last uncovered patch of sky. She dipped her hands in the foamy water and waited for the bubbles to pop. Each time, she was surprised to see her own hands emerge underneath. The same blue veins, double-jointed fingers, useless pinkies.

In October, Kirill and Polina's mother called to say her tour had been extended. There was talk of teaching jobs, guest lectures. Gurov began rehearsing Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony. He asked if Vera would mind staying later, maybe take the children on a walk some days. She didn't, she said.

They went to the Moskva river and waved at the boats passing under the Luzhkov Bridge. They counted newlywed couples who came to the bridge to clip inscribed locks on the branches of fake metal trees: one, two, five. Kirill ran between the trees, rattling the locks with both hands. "Now they can rustle in the wind, just like real leaves," he said. They each picked a tree and looked at the dates. Kirill found a couple who got married the day he was born. Polina found a couple who got married the day their mother left on her tour. Afterward, they walked to Red Square and stood on the Kilometre Zero. "Make a wish," Vera said, handing the children two-ruble coins. They tossed the coins high in the air and listened to them

clink as they hit the ground. Vera made a wish, too. She closed her eyes, but when she opened them she was still in Moscow and the Kremlin Clock was ringing the quarter hour.

Gurov's orchestra played Haydn, then Brahms. They staged a successful rendition of Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony. After each concert the apartment drowned in roses. Before going home, Vera filled a bathtub with cold water and left the roses there for the night.

She got a call from the post office. "Your instrument is in Arkhangelsk," the clerk said. "We are rerouting it back to Moscow."

"When will it be here?" Vera asked.

"When, when," the clerk mused. "This year. If it gets out before the ice settles."

"I should never have left," Vera told her mother on the phone later. "If I hadn't gone to Moscow, we wouldn't have lost the harp."

"You didn't mix up the shipping documents," her mother said. "You didn't confuse our capital with a city a thousand kilometers north. You are not guilty of anything."

If they finished homework early, Vera and the children sat in the kitchen and drank tea. Their mother loved tea, Polina said. She brought boxes from each tour, all loose leaf. Polina boiled the water, filled a small teapot, rinsed it and filled it again. The flavors were so delicate she could only distinguish them on an empty stomach. Some teas came in little knots that opened into a flower at the bottom of a cup. Others smelled like fish.

"It's not your sense of music I worry about," Vera's mother said on the phone. "It's the calluses. What will you do when they go?"

Vera and the children took the yellow line to the university Botanical Gardens and looked at the small round turtles in the fountain. They followed the boulevard ring—not a street and not a park, something in between—that ran like a thin green ribbon between lanes of traffic. When they passed Tverskoy Boulevard, Vera pointed out her restaurant, Turandot.

"Can we come see you play?" Polina asked.

"That's a negative," Vera said.

On the nights she played at the restaurant the slow continuous rotation of the stage made her dizzy. The wig scratched her bare shoulders. She began to see Violin after work, sometimes making out with him in the backrooms, surrounded by painted silk, tapestry, and mirrors.

Later, Vera and the children played quiet dominoes. In quiet dominoes, players

couldn't slap tiles against the table. The winner couldn't scream "Ryba!" at the top of her lungs, the way Vera had been taught. They played quiet dice, which Vera chose to make Kirill add numbers. In quiet dice, there was no rolling cup. Instead, the children cupped their hands and shook the dice before letting them fall onto a soft tablecloth.

"Papa is sensitive to sounds, anything loud and not in rhythm," Kirill said.

"And our mother has migraines," Polina said.

Vera said, "But they're not here."

Kirill gathered the dice and dropped them, quietly, into his sister's palm.

"It's a habit," Polina said.

The next day they played charades. Kirill mimed Moonlight Sonata. He hit the imaginary piano keys, then joined the tips of his fingers to form a hollow circle. Polina curtsied, then dropped to the floor. Kirill guessed Lady Di, which was correct, but he was still upset.

"No princesses, that's the rule," he said.

The children fell asleep on the couch watching cartoons. Vera opened the glass cabinet and pulled out some records. Ravel, *La Valse*, transcribed for piano; Debussy, Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* in the original 1938 recording; Puccini, *Turandot*.

Turandot was a fairy tale about a cold princess who deters her suitors by giving them riddles and beheading them when they fail. Even after a beautiful prince falls in love with Turandot and passes her test, she refuses to marry him. Instead, she invents new trials. If you love someone and they don't love you back—give up, the opera urged. Puccini died before he finished *Turandot*. His student, Franco Alfano, buried his teacher, then slapped a happy ending on his work.

Vera tucked the children into bed, put the opera on low, and made another cup of tea. She fell asleep at the kitchen table waiting for Gurov to come home. When she woke, she saw him eating cottage cheese out of a plastic container, still dressed in a white tuxedo.

"My wife called," he said. "She decided to stay in South Korea. She said an artist can live on only roses and applause for so long. She said *there* they know the true value of talent."

"Oh," Vera said. And then: "I'm sorry."

Out of the speakers, the prince pleaded with Turandot to love him. In the dim kitchen light Gurov looked tired, like someone who would like to eschew the podium and, instead, sit in the back, a drummer or a percussionist, following directions instead of giving them, maybe napping between his parts.

“Please don’t tell Kirill and Polina yet,” Gurov said. “We’re working out the details.”

Vera rinsed her teacup and went home.

She took the children to the Museum of Cosmonautics. Kirill climbed into a *Mir* core module. Polina walked around the moon globe, feeling its ridges. They stopped to see the space dogs. The dogs, smaller than Vera expected and really just mutts, sat on their haunches inside clear glass boxes, pointy taxidermied muzzles shining under the museum lights. Belka was white with black ears. Strelka had black spots around her eyes, like a mask. Polina read the plaque that said Secretary Khrushchev gave one of Strelka’s puppies to President Kennedy. “Imagine that,” Vera said. “What a slap.” At a café, they bought mashed potatoes in space packaging and squeezed it from a tube into their mouths. On the way out, they saw an exhibit on the messages sent into space. Kirill poked the interactive screen that played music fragments from the *Voyager* Golden Records. They listened to the opening notes of the second Brandenburg Concerto, the Azerbaijani bagpipes.

“Terrible choice,” Polina said. “Since when does a bagpipe sum up what we are to other intelligent life forms? I would have sent Tchaikovsky’s First Concerto.” Kirill said, “I would have sent a circus calliope.”

They turned to Vera. On the screen, Jimmy Carter’s letter to as-yet-undiscovered civilizations floated upward, with a Russian translation underneath. “This is a present from a small, distant world, a token of our sounds . . .”

“You,” Vera said. “I would have sent you.”

In November, Moscow turned dark. The sun didn’t rise until nine. Most days it didn’t show at all, the sky covered with thick lead clouds. Vera began to lose the padding on her fingers where the harp strings cut into her skin. The postal clerk didn’t call anymore. On the website, Vera’s package appeared “in transit.” She stole *Turandot* and rearranged other records around the empty spot on the shelf.

“Moscow has eighty-two sunny days on average,” Vera’s mother texted, “least of those in November.” She told Vera to eat egg yolks, liver, and mackerel for vitamin D.

Vera dusted the turntable and moved it into her bedroom. She played *Turandot* for hours, watching the record turn, the needle bobbing like a float. She lifted the needle and moved it back to the point when the princess first appears in an avalanche of sound. She called her mother and held the phone close.

“Listen!” Vera said. “Isn’t this beautiful?”

"You've heard of CDs, right?" her mother said. "What time is it? Moscow never sleeps, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't either."

The restaurant shifts ran late into the night. On the metro home, Vera was among the last passengers. Each station she passed was empty and so quiet she could hear the NO BOARDING sign creak as it swung on two derelict chains. The air smelled of dust, rubber, and creosote.

"Turandot is my worst nightmare," she told her mother.

"The opera?"

"The restaurant. I can play, but I don't choose the pieces. The harp's the wrong size. The tension in the strings is off. I feel like I'm playing in gloves."

"Now you're just whining," her mother said. "Moscow does not believe in that."

"Moscow does not believe in tears," Vera said, quoting the old film title. "Whining's acceptable."

Kirill and Polina came down with a cold, and soon Vera had it too. Now when the homework was done, they drank tea with raspberry jam and honey. Gurov brought home bags of lemons which he cut into thick quarters, sprinkled with sugar, and made them eat. Vera looked for teachable moments. "Imagine you ate one lemon," she told Kirill, "and your sister ate twice as many as you, and I ate twice as many lemons as your sister. How many lemons did we all eat?" Kirill folded and unfolded his fingers, counting. "Not enough," he said, sniffing.

Gurov had not told the children about their mother's decision. She called every week, talking to Kirill and Polina in a strange, shrill voice. She told them she couldn't leave yet. She said everyone loved her takes on Stravinsky.

Vera had seen Gurov in the kitchen one night. He stood in front of the fridge, his hand smoothing the edges of a faded family photo, pinned by a clef-shaped magnet. She backed out, quietly.

"Did you know honey has memory?" Kirill said to Vera.

He turned a teaspoon over his dessert plate. Coming down, honey looked solid like a glass pipe.

"Real honey has memory, fake honey doesn't," Polina said. "It's a test. That's how you tell them apart."

She picked up a pitcher of water and tipped it over her brother's plate. When water covered the honey, she lifted the plate, resting it on her index fingers, and tilted it slowly left and right. "There!" She extended the plate to Vera. Underwater, the honey shifted and stretched, forming perfect hexagons.

"Genetic memory," Kirill said. "Honey remembers honeycomb."

The first snow came and disappeared overnight. Kirill put a mark on the calendar, a number forty, and counted down from it each day. “In forty days, we’ll have the real snow,” he said.

“If all you wanted was a couple of kids,” Vera’s mother said on the phone, “then you should have stayed where you were.”

“These kids are different,” Vera said. She thought about Kirill and Polina pressing garlic to their wrists for a toothache. They munched on Hematogen nutrition bars made of cow’s blood. They wore mittens tied together with a string that ran up one sleeve and out the other.

“They’re like a time capsule,” she said.

“You were supposed to have a better life,” her mother said. “A better audience. You’ve loved the harp since you were five. All I’m asking is that you respect your trade.”

Vera had quit the restaurant job a week earlier. The quartet had started getting song requests. A young man with tattooed knuckles kept asking her to play “Vladimir Central.” He sat close to the stage, so close Vera could touch his shoulder.

“What’s the matter?” the man asked when the stage made another turn and Vera glided past. “Don’t you know it?”

“Oh, I know it,” Vera said. She was tired and hot under her wig. The man, his table, his company slipped by. Vera waited while the stage turned. She told the man no one could transcribe a prison song of three chords into a baroque orchestra piece. The next time the stage rotated, he threw a glass of wine in her face. Vera changed into her sweater and jeans and brought the dress to the restaurant manager, along with her resignation note. “Use milk on the wine stains,” Vera told the manager, but she knew he’d just order a new dress.

In December, it grew so cold that Gurov installed a second radiator in each bedroom. While he worked, Vera and Polina sat on the bed and composed a report on ancient Sparta. “In all its history sparta didn’t give the world not a single artist,” Polina wrote. Vera followed with a pencil, capitalizing names and crossing out double negatives. She stole glances at Gurov, crouched under a windowsill with a pair of pliers, twisting old rusted bolts. The great Gurov with a pair of pliers! Poor old Gurov, so in love with his young wife. Outside, snow blew in the late sun and settled on the windows like gold dust.

“Do you remember riding the tram with me to the music school?” Vera asked

her mother on the phone. "It made that sound, like a cicada. At the crossing, the driver had to get out and pry the rails to change direction."

"The past isn't romantic," her mother said. "It's inefficient."

At last two men in blue uniforms delivered the harp to Vera's door. "Sign," one of them said, handing Vera a small yellow slip.

"That's it?" Vera said.

The man said, "That's it."

When they left, Vera stroked the hard black case covered in mud. She cried because she was afraid to look inside.

She met Violin at an anti-café. The place didn't serve any food and charged by the minute. They brought their own dessert and Violin brought a thermos of tea. As a bonus, the café had cats that customers could pet. A fat Persian plopped on Vera's lap and she scratched it behind the ear. Violin was saying they should stop seeing each other.

"You're in love with the past," he said. "The harp? That instrument is frozen, it hasn't changed in centuries. You need to evolve. The violin reinvented itself, went electric. There are new sounds, just listen to Vanessa-Mae."

"Vanessa-Mae hasn't had an album in years," Vera said.

She was late to work the next day. She rang the intercom and stood in front of the door so the children knew it was her.

"Sorry I'm late," she said.

"We have no homework anyway," Kirill said. "It's the end of the year. We are supposed to be revising."

"What's wrong with your eyes?" Polina said.

"Nothing," Vera said. "It's windy."

Together, they finished decorating the tree. Kirill hung the ornaments and Polina moved them to different, higher branches. Vera stood on a kitchen stool and attached the star topper. A family photo in a glossy red frame dangled from the thickest branch. The mother had her slender arm around Polina's shoulders. The father held baby Kirill in his arms.

Later that night, Gurov asked Vera to sit with him in the kitchen. His wife was coming back after New Year's to file for divorce. He said he was sorry. He said he would give her good recommendations. He said, "Kirill and Polina love you, but we are heading into a difficult time. It's best if you look for a new job."

"I will," Vera said.

She spent the weekend fixing the harp. Months of traveling left it dry and out of tune, but the body and the soundboard appeared undamaged. She replaced and cleaned the strings, tried to get used to the weight of the instrument. She trimmed her already short fingernails. She raised her hands and drew the first cascade of sounds from the harp. They echoed from the high ceiling.

"It's back?" Polina said. "Where was it?"

"Here and there," Vera said.

They rode the blue line into Moscow City and went to the observation deck on the eighty-ninth floor of the Federation Tower. They looked down on the green turrets of the Kremlin, the river's gray curve, the buildings receding into mist and fumes in the distance.

"I'm dizzy," Kirill said.

The observation deck had its own ice cream factory with a conveyor belt that carried small, perfectly shaped ice cream cones. Kirill touched his finger to the window each time a cone passed. "I'll eat this one, and this one, and this one," he said. Polina said, "You can't!" Kirill said, "Who'll stop me?"

Down in the metro Vera held both children by the hand, but the train wasn't crowded so far from the center. They found three seats and watched the cables outside the window merge as the train gained speed. A man's voice, deep and resonant, announced the stops.

"Have you noticed that we always get a male announcer on the trips back?" Vera asked.

"That is because we are centripetal," Polina said. She stumbled on the word. "They told us at school. When you are cen-tri-petal, it's a man's voice. When you are cen-tri-fugal, it's a woman." She yawned, leaned her head against Vera's shoulder. "It's for the blind. So they know which way they are going."

Vera texted her mother, "I want to come home."

"For the holidays?" her mother asked.

"For good."

To celebrate the end of the school year, she took the children skating at Gorky Park. All of the park became a skating rink overnight. Boys whizzed along the main alley, couples detoured into the shadows of narrow side lanes. Under the lights, the ice shone sapphire. Kirill and Polina hooked their arms under Vera's elbows and together they circled the frozen fountain in the center. When they got cold, they went inside a heated pavilion and drank hot chocolate.

"Can we skate some more?" Kirill asked Vera.

“It’s late,” she said.

“Ten more minutes.”

“No.”

“Five,” he said.

They staggered toward the ice in their skates. Polina zigzagged past the boys playing hockey. Vera held out her arms for balance. Kirill raced after his sister. He tripped on a puck and went face forward. When Vera got to him, he was already crying. She said, “Where does it hurt?” He pulled off his mittens. One palm was dark and bruised, swelling with blood. He cried harder.

“What’s wrong?” Polina said.

“He’ll be fine,” Vera said.

She sat down on the ice and hugged him. He screamed, “I don’t want you!”

Polina said, “Kirill!”

She removed his hat and tousled his hair.

“He doesn’t mean it,” she said to Vera. To her brother she said, “It’s just a scratch.”

People stopped to see what the noise was all about. The hockey players skated in circles looking for their puck. Kirill pushed his sister’s hand away. “You are not my mother!” he screamed. He looked up at Vera. “And *you* are not my mother!” His nose began to run.

Polina said, “You think you’re the only one—”

Vera said, “Please get up. It’s cold.”

Kirill kicked his feet, leaving long, white blade marks on the ice.

Vera gathered his hands in hers and brought them to her mouth. She drew a deep breath and exhaled. She did it again. She did this until the air leaving her body no longer felt warm. She said, “I wish I were.” She said, “She’s coming home. I promise.”