



Also by Kat Meads

The Invented Life of Kitty Duncan

Little Pockets of Alarm

Not Waving (Livingston Press)

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Sleep (Livingston Press)

When the Dust Finally Settles

**FOR YOU,
MADAM
LENIN**

Kat Meads

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For E. Willis Brooks

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All art is propaganda (but) not all propaganda is art.
—George Orwell

The Gossip in Russia

It was said that Yelizaveta Vasilevna Krupskaya thought her daughter, Nadya, unmarriedable.

It was said that Fanya Kaplan dreamed primarily of hawks and monkfish.

It was said that Inessa Armand believed behind every man there would always be another, and another.

It was said that Maria Ilyinichna Ulyanova was the first to call her brother's wife "fish," a description further refined to "herring" by elder sister Anna—neither the original remark nor its refinement intended as compliment.

It was said that even before her eyes popped, her stomach pooched, her rear broadened, her ankles swelled, her hair grayed and her chin doubled, Comrade Fish was no fan of mirrors.

It was said that, introduced to her prospective son-in-law, Yelizaveta Vasilevna asked whether the future Bolshevik leader was a better conspirator than his brother, the captured, hanged Alexander.

It was said that the man questioned screwed up his eyes, cocked his head and sized up his inquisitor before answering: "Indubitably."

It was said that Yelizaveta Vasilevna had her doubts about that brag—then, later, doubts on a more or less continuous basis.

Those were the rumors. Now: the fiction.



IN POLAND AND PITER



Forecasts

When the tsar's government ordered us from Poland in the spring of 1874, my daughter, Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, was forced to leave behind her dog.

A mongrel dog with a limp and copious fleas.

Did such defects and disadvantages lessen my Nadya's love for the beast?

Not in the slightest. Very likely such misfortunes made my daughter cherish her pet all the more. When the two were together, it was my Nadya, not the animal, who served as protector, my Nadya who chased away his enemies, who carried him and his injured paw across river stones, who would not consent to eat until her dog had been fed.

Nadya was five years old when we left Poland to return to Piter. A sturdy, healthy, curious, joyous child of five with dark red hair that escaped her braids no matter how tightly I plaited, her chubby knees accustomed to the joys of dirt and grass.

Five is an impressionable age.

To break the news of our leaving, her father, my husband, Konstantin, led her beyond the verandah of our home into the wilder profusions of that Polish spring. From the window, I watched them settle side by side on a yard bench. Greenery twined above them. Branches of blooms crisscrossed behind their backs.

I could not hear their conversation; I could only chart its effects. With his arm around her shoulders, Konstantin spoke. Thrilled by her father's undivided attention, Nadya looked up with eager pleasure. And then, from one heartbeat to the next, pleasure turned to grief. Tears streaming, she ran toward the corner bushes and stopped, back to us, body heaving.

I stepped out onto the porch, but Konstantin motioned for me to remain where I was.

He would attempt the consolation of our daughter.

Consolation?

There would be none of that for any of us, either in our last weeks in Poland or in Piter, where the defamation of my Konstantin's character would accelerate.

Beside the bushes and Nadya, Konstantin once again began to speak. Briefly, briefly, she turned an anguished face toward him, then away. She had been beating her fists against her thighs in protest. That now ceased.

Again I started in their direction; again Konstantin discouraged me. A moment later Nadya wiped her nose on the sleeve of her dress. And then, with the gravity of a seasoned mourner, our daughter squared her shoulders.

Nonsense! you will say. A child of five? Squaring her shoulders? Romantic revisionism!

Do you imagine it pleases me to report the squaring? The necessity of it? To admit my powerlessness in preventing the wrenching that occasioned that squaring?

Konstantin kissed the top of Nadya's head and left her. The dog approached, ears quivering.

"What did you tell her? How did you explain it?"

"I said that a Polish dog that had enjoyed the run of a yard would not be happy in an apartment in Piter. I said that she must think of the dog and the dog's happiness before her own."

In the yard, our child had planted her cheek against what she must abandon. She chewed her lip but there were no more tears.

"May the tsar and his generals dream of vultures! May they toss and turn and cry for mercy in their sleep!"

"Yelizaveta! Your tongue!"

Perhaps you believe that losing a dog is of little consequence in a world of war and slaughter, hunger and neglect, inequity and oppression. In the larger sense, certainly you are correct.

But in the forming of my daughter's character?

A child of five who gives up a pet for the greater good will either grow into an adult determined to make those responsible for her loss pay or become so accustomed to sacrifice she will cease to define her behavior as such.

In my daughter's case, the result was not one or the other; the result was both.

City of Tsars

I would prefer to be thought of as the mother, but preferences count so little in times such as ours. If you recognize my name, Yelizaveta Vasilevna Krupskaya, very likely it is because you worship or detest my son-in-law, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, known to history as Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

About that relation by marriage, there is more to be said and will be said, but not instantly.

We had a life, my Nadya and I, before the Simbirsk native arrived in Piter and began issuing directives, and I will not slight who we were before by colluding with the legend that our contributions began only after the great Ilyich crossed our threshold. The balding redhead revealed to us no injustice in our city or in Russia about which we were not long aware, nor was he the first male in the household to undertake reforms. That honor belongs to my late husband, Konstantin.

Before you hear more about Vladimir Ilyich, you will hear more about Konstantin Krupsky.

Konstantin and I met in Piter, both of us orphans reliant upon ourselves and only ourselves. After receiving a diploma from the Pavlovsky Institute, I was employable as a governess and as a governess I earned my living. Although by no means content with my situation, I was far from desperate. Compared to the women and girls forced to sell themselves on the streets in the snows of winter, the mud of spring and the endless nights of summer, my exploitation proved quite genteel. Nonetheless, a governess is viewed as a servant and treated as such.

“Yelizaveta, we are shorthanded today. After lessons, you are to help Alena polish the silver.”

“I have misplaced my embroidery, Yelizaveta. Search for it in the children’s rooms. Perhaps I left it there.”

Never was I allowed to forget that the luxuries and comforts of my surroundings—the plump pillows, the plush carpets, the crisp table linens, the lovely lilacs spilling from crystal vases—existed neither for my benefit nor my enjoyment. Never was I allowed to object to the interruption of my pupils’ lessons, even when the cause of those interruptions sprung from capricious and fleeting parental whim. I was expected to accept, to accede, to acquiesce and to hold my tongue. Of the various skills I have been forced to acquire, I am least expert at holding my tongue. As a governess, a wife, a mother and the mother-in-law of the founder of the Bolshevik Party, I have been accused of lacking verbal restraint.

Do you imagine such criticism haunts me?

It does not.

My Konstantin possessed a less excitable nature and more charitable heart than his bride. A man who said little but felt deeply, he sheltered his family as best he could from his own escalating despair. I sometimes think our Nadya, through no fault of her own, inherited the unlucky mix of her mother’s unbridled temper and her father’s silent stoicism.

A painful pairing for a woman.

For a revolutionary? Quite useful.

Konstantin first served his country as an infantry officer in the tsar’s army. Unlike the majority sent to Poland to crush the insurrection of 1863, he grew fond of the Polish people and sympathized with their grievances. Appointed military governor, the *nachal’nik*, of the Grojec district of Warsaw, he returned with his wife and child to a country he cherished, eager to institute reform. Immediately he set about regulating labor practices. He oversaw the construction of a hospital and a school. He refused to tolerate the persecution of Jews. A progressive Russian civil servant, my Konstantin, with every reason to feel confident of the future and his family’s modest place within it. I shared his optimism, but our happiness and good fortune were of short duration. A general from Piter arrived to conduct a tour of inspection. What he observed displeased him. Our family’s camaraderie with the Poles? “Distasteful.” Our conduct in public? “Un-Russian.” Charged with “exceeding his authority,” Konstantin was ordered back to Piter to stand trial. In that travesty of a courtroom, he was mocked and browbeaten. Why did he speak Polish and dance the Mazurka? Why had his wife published a children’s book in Polish? Why was his daughter fluent in the language of her new home? With eloquence and great dignity he explained himself. In turn,

he was stripped of his rank and status, discarded by the very government that had launched his career, and treated as if he were no more valuable than yesterday's rubbish. When he lost his position, our family lost its livelihood. To put food on the table, Konstantin accepted a series of demoralizing positions. For a time he worked as an insurance agent, then as a clerk. When he came home, discouraged and fatigued, his daughter climbed into his lap and asked for her favorite Polish songs. He never refused the request, my Konstantin, but I could not remain in the room while he sang those ballads with such tenderness. I could not.

Do you think Nadya did not sense her father's misery? Do you imagine that when she grew too old for lap sitting she did not continue to search for remnants of her once strong, decisive father in the ill, defeated man gazing out the window, his face and its melancholy played upon by Piter's shower of lights?

Dead at 45, my Konstantin. He left behind a wife too young to be a widow, a daughter too young to lose a parent. Perhaps our Nadya would have become a somber, single-minded revolutionary whether or not she had seen her father ruined for his liberalism.

Perhaps.

Who now can say?

To support ourselves after Konstantin's death, Nadya and I both gave lessons: I, throughout the day; Nadya, after she had returned from her own schooling at the gymnasium. We taught where we lived, in small but completely adequate apartments on Znamenskaya Ulitsa and later on Staro-Nevisky. Before my Nadya called herself a Marxist she called herself a follower of Tolstoy, the count who preached education and, in her mother's opinion, sanctimonious self-denial. As a novice might pour over her scriptures, my Nadya studied "Luxuries and Labor."

"Mama," she announced one afternoon, the first of the season's icicles growing fatter on our window. "Starting tomorrow, I will take over the household's cooking and cleaning."

"In addition to your studies. In addition to your teaching," I said.

"Yes."

If I had tasted my daughter's cooking previous to that discussion, there would have been further reason to object.

"Come, Nadya. We are not so poor as that."

My daughter's brow, so like her father's, began to furrow.

"It is not a matter of poverty. It is a matter of duty," she said.

“And what of your duty to health? To youth?” I countered.

Nadya’s complexion is also like her father’s. Upset spots her cheeks, as it did during that hour’s wrangling.

When argument fails, I resort to teasing. Sarcasm rarely succeeds where logic falters, but I persist in its practice nevertheless. Familiar with accounts of my son-in-law’s penchant for vicious ridicule, you will perhaps conclude that I have, in this life, received my fair reward.

The afternoon of swelling icicles, I responded to my Nadya as was my wont.

“How very fortunate for the count, Nadya! When he tires of writing of duty in ‘Luxuries and Labor,’ he can write of Anna and Vronsky’s more craven appetites. The pleasures and perils of adultery. The temptations and satisfactions of the flesh.”

Many have called my Nadya prudish. Never was she prudish. But she was and is a very accomplished pouter. Very accomplished. Following that exchange, as I recall, she pouted throughout the evening and into the next morning.

If a mother cannot outwait a pout, she does not deserve to be a mother.

It was neither my sarcasm nor opinion that caused my daughter to turn her back on the tenets of Tolstoy, of course. It was her introduction to Marx, which led, ultimately, to her introduction to Ilyich.

Nadya met Ilyich when she was 25, he 24. His hair—what little remained of it, even then—was wispier and lighter in hue than my daughter’s, but also red. A significant bond, that shared hair color? I and the rest of the world can only speculate. In stocking feet, my Nadya stood taller, although in Ilyich’s presence, as time went on, she slouched to diminish the disparity. As soon as I noticed that accommodation, I hotly objected. To end my complaints, she improved her posture, but only for the moment it took to silence me.

As innumerable photographs and films reveal, it was Ilyich’s habit to stand and to walk with chest thrust forward. His habit of hooking his thumbs into the sleeves of his vest accentuated the thrust. He did not, as many assume, adopt that stance along with fame. Sneaking about Piter disguised as a shabbily attired Vyborg worker, he could not keep his thumbs from his armpits. When my Nadya grew famous, she was often photographed in hats. I wish they had been prettier ones. Unlike Inessa Armand, my daughter had no interest in appearing stylish. She

wore hats primarily to keep the hair out of her eyes. With her hair, she never showed the least forbearance. The assumption that my daughter learned impatience from the irascible Ilyich? Ridiculous. Impatience she had mastered long before meeting her future husband.

My daughter believed any act of subversion committed against the tsar and his regime, whether perpetrated by a selfless revolutionary or an opportunistic scamp, was an act to be applauded and, if at all possible, funded.

Did I agree?

I did not.

Did ever I believe that Ilyich and his ruthless, impatient kind would finally and fully succeed at what legions of others, including my Konstantin, had struggled and failed to accomplish by methods more diplomatic?

I did not.

But I admired my son-in-law's trying, as I admired and admire my daughter's trying. Whatever else might be said of them, Nadya and Ilyich cannot be accused of giving short shrift to The Revolution. Before considerations of health, comfort and safety, before food, drink or sleep, came The Revolution.

I leave the scholars and pundits to decide on Ilyich's greatest contribution to The Revolution but here disclose my Nadya's greatest asset to her cause: tenacity. In ferocious tenacity, my daughter excels. In that aspect, she is not so unlike the much loathed tsarina.

I think back on a somnolent summer afternoon, mere months before Vladimir Ilyich entered our lives and brought with him round-the-clock intrigue. We had left our close apartment to stroll past peddlers of thread and pencils and shoelaces, bakeries and boot shops, kerosene vendors and card players, simply a mother and daughter walking the Nevsky arm-in-arm without hurry or set destination.

Block after block we ambled, savoring the free pleasures of Piter—the prism of afternoon light, the fragrance of linden trees. Its miseries and turbulence notwithstanding, Piter is a city that captures and recaptures the heart. Built on swamp and marsh by a tsar mad for all things European, populated by Romanovs and agitators, poets and proletarians, soldiers and ballerinas, a restless city on the edge of a vast, vast empire, it is also where my Nadya was conceived and born. As we walked that afternoon, Piter belonged to us, to anyone and everyone around us, until

the soon-to-be tsarina's carriage rolled from a side street onto Nevsky proper and with that appearance turned the lindens' creamy petals into a stage set, the citizens of Piter into an aristocrat's captive audience.

Others, many, the majority, rushed in for a closer look at Princess Alix of Hesse, fiancée of the tsarevich, but my Nadya stepped back, rigid with contempt.

The woman inside the carriage glanced neither to the right nor left, impervious to the street, indifferent to and unaffected by the adulation or derision of its denizens. On she went, Princess Alix, passing us and our insignificance. For who were we? Mere scenery that breathed.

"For the price of a single one of her Fabergé baubles, an entire village could be educated," Nadya hissed.

The statistics of inequity, inspiration to my daughter's ears, have always grated on mine. And because I longed to resume our lovely stroll, to lighten the mood, I said: "Come, Nadya. She is only another woman likely to prove stronger than the man she marries."

Do not misunderstand.

As time revealed, there was much to dislike about Alexandra Feodorovna and her regrettable character. Even for a tsarina, her prejudices and pettiness were legendary. She lacked insight. She lacked empathy. She owned too many strands of pearls. She liked too much to be obeyed and in disappointment turned too fanatically to her adopted God. But she was also a woman excessively devoted to a cause: the preservation of the monarchy. And like my Nadya, her enemy, she would, while she breathed, never quit the fight.

Shall I tell you something else my daughter and the haughty tsarina had in common, even if by doing so I risk redirecting Nadya's wrath upon myself?

As the tsarina loved her Nicky, so my Nadya came to love the sturdy fellow with the endless forehead and rasping laugh.

Again, do not misunderstand.

My daughter was devoted to The Revolution. If The Revolution required that she rise at dawn, she rose before dawn. If The Revolution required that she take on the work of two or four, she took on the work of ten. For the sake of The Revolution, she endured prison and exile. For the sake of The Revolution, she battled Mensheviks and forgave the man we knew as Lev Davidovich Bronstein and history calls Trotsky for his temporary lapse in loyalty. For the sake of The Revolution she submitted

to the tyranny of Comrade Stalin, that treacherous, inferior Georgian. But I tell you this as the woman in whose womb she started: of all my Nadya's hardships, none proved harder than the struggle to hold in check the *meshchanstvo* attraction, the petite-bourgeois tingling, she felt for the man who was her husband.

When Ilyich came into the room, my stern, unyielding daughter softened and warmed to the *man*—not to the leader, not to the strategist, to the man.

And Vladimir Ilyich? His feelings for my Nadya?

He admired her fierce commitment to the cause—he would have been a despicable hypocrite had he not. He relied on her; he confided in her. Never did he doubt her allegiance. He was immensely fond of her and of her company. Had he lived longer, he would have destroyed the crude usurper who dared treat her so vilely. He valued her; he trusted her—with his life and, more importantly to his way of thinking, with his revolution. But he did not love my Nadya as a woman, as a wife. He esteemed her as a comrade. And this my Nadya accepted. With this arrangement, she made do.