



From Under the Russian Snow

By Michelle Carter

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I CLOSED THE DOOR, snapped the deadbolt and listened to the voices in the hall.

“Michelle, you must close windows when you leave or the wind will blow and the glass will break. And the drapes, Michelle. Close them to block the sun.”

Beyond the door, my landlady and her son were still chattering, in Russian, still reminding me to turn off the gas and set the safety lock when I left the building, still worrying about turning over their apartment to this American woman who had come to Moscow alone, without her family. I was only getting every third word or so, but they had repeated themselves often enough, complete with demonstrations, that I knew what they were saying.

Still I loved to hear them say my name. Russians pronounced “Michelle” with a soft, rolling “l” at the end, and it sounded much more elegant in Russian than it did in English. And as often as my landlady repeated it, she must have liked to pronounce it, too.

I shouted after them, “I will, I will,” — just about the limit of my Russian after more than twenty-four hours of travel.

Then the doors to the lift clanked shut, the voices ceased, and I really was alone. I turned around slowly. There, leaning against the cushioned Naugahyde of the door of my flat, I could see into all three rooms of the apartment.

I could see past the toilet (in a separate European-style “water closet”) and bathroom, through the tiny kitchen and out the tall double casement windows into the inky night. The kitchen, with its tiny table in the corner and Harvest Gold German refrigerator/freezer, looked cozy rather than cramped.

I could see the “western” double bed that all but filled the bedroom. With the addition of the free-standing wardrobe and a low cupboard that would serve as a dresser, moving-around space was limited. But again, those six-foot windows would bring the outside into the tiny room.

I could see to the left into the largest room where an exquisite Persian carpet in vibrant reds and blues lay over polished wood parquet. Beyond that, the stacks of packing boxes that had arrived with me filled every bit of free space.

So this would be the setting for my Great Adventure.

I had imagined this flat every night for the past two months, but this modest two-room apartment was far better than I had allowed myself to hope for. I walked into the living room and sat on one of the boxes.

High, ten-foot ceilings and the windows created a feeling of spaciousness, and double (inside and outside) doors led to a small balcony although now both doors were taped shut against the shrill winds that whipped off the Moscow River. I could tolerate the wallpaper; it was far too “prettified” for my taste with its rows of nosegays marching from floor to ceiling, but I had seen much worse.

The orange sateen drapes were an assault to the senses, but they were standard decorator items in every Russian apartment I’d been in. Muscovites bought them by the yard from state shops and the only variation in the cheap, synthetic fabric was in the color. The shiny gray ones in the bedroom were about as subdued as you could get. Perhaps I could take them down without upsetting the landlady.

However, even the drapes seemed trivial when I considered the one genuine treasure in the flat — a piano with “K. Oppenheimer, Petrograd” lettered in gold over the yellowing keyboard. The label served as a date stamp of sorts for the piano, an ebony upright, since St. Petersburg was called Petrograd only from 1914 (when “Petersburg” sounded too German for World War I sentiments) until the mid-20s when Leningrad took its place. An old-fashioned piano stool that twisted to the right height completed the ensemble.

There had been a piano in every place Laurie and I had lived after we moved out of the ant-ridden apartment in San Francisco near Golden Gate Park where we “camped” for the first three months of our married life. (From the bay window,

we could eavesdrop on the passing crowds of flower children on the street below us who would create the Summer of Love in just a few months.)

For the first few years the pianos were rented, but no matter. Laurie needed the outlet that music provided. He'd come from a musical family (his mother was an accomplished pianist and organist) and he had taken piano lessons on and off for most of his school years. After we were married, the piano provided the transition he seemed to need between work and family life. While I would make dinner, he would play — mostly popular or light classical pieces like Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue or Lara's Theme from Dr. Zhivago. Listening to him play while I put dinner on the table was as stress-releasing for me as it seemed to be for him.

In fact, the piano played a role in bringing us together as seniors at the University of Missouri in Columbia. Laurie lived in the Sigma Chi house on campus, a big red-brick, white-columned fraternity house and, after three years in residence halls, I had just moved into a little white stucco off-campus house on a lot that abutted the Sigma Chi parking lot. One hot, late summer day before classes started, Laurie knocked on the door of my house while my roommates and I were moving in.

"You wouldn't have an extra throw rug you don't need, would you? I'm living in the basement of the Sigma Chi house next door. It's pretty damp and I could really use a rug."

I didn't have one, but I thought that was a pretty original "opener" and accepted his invitation to a mixer at the house a few days later.

This tall, rumpled guy with bent glasses had gone to grade school and high school in Kansas City with another Missouri classmate of mine who had endless stories about Laurie's goofiness and wacky charm, about how he'd once pulled the bathroom sink out of the wall at her house by sitting on it and how he kept getting his glasses knocked off when he played varsity basketball so the coach choreographed specific plays so Laurie really would know where the ball was without having to "see" much.

I didn't expect anything more from the evening than a chance to peek inside this antebellum mansion across the parking lot from my new home. But as I wandered around the house, Laurie lumbered over to the grand piano in the living room, spun down the piano stool to accommodate his long body and began playing Beatles songs.

The party moved to the piano and, when I joined the crowd singing along, Laurie switched melodies and launched into "Michelle." I wasn't sure he even knew I was a "Michelle" since I'd been introduced as "Micki." (Of course, he later swore he did.) But I went home more than a little interested in this tall, slightly geeky piano guy from Kansas City who seemed to be a most unlikely Sigma Chi — so unlikely in fact that, when we got pinned on my birthday in December, he had to borrow a fraternity pin. He'd never bothered to buy one.

But we always had a piano.

I ran my fingers over the oiled surface of the piano and thought, yes, it will do just fine. Here I would make my home for most of the next year, 10,000 miles away from my family, my friends, from the newspaper where I had made my career for the past 28 years.

The agony of making the decision to come here was well behind me then. This was the first week in January; my husband and I had spent most of the previous fall talking over all the dimensions, all the implications, of such a watershed change in our lives.

"This won't be like other trips when I was part of a big, noisy group. I'll be alone for most of each day," I said.

"I'll be in Stockton working on the warehouse project so you'd be alone here too," he said. "And we've got Oleg and Tanya in Moscow. You'll be able to connect with them whenever you want."

"What if my Russian isn't good enough?"

"Think how good it will be when you get home."

"What if you need me?"

"We always need each other, but I'm a big boy. I may even learn to cook!"

As I replayed some of those discussions for still one more time, I walked into the kitchen, leaned against the wide windowsill and stared out into the night. The glowing street lights reflected on the ice of the river below me. My breath fogged up the window pane but it didn't matter. I wasn't looking in front of me; I was looking back.