

THE RUSSIAN CHILDREN ARE NOT HAPPY...

a short story by ELLEN SLEZAK

... **AND WHO CAN BLAME THEM?** Their mom, my cousin Margie, is fuzzy with gin. When I offer to take the kids to the arcade on the Santa Monica Pier, she almost leaps to her purse and throws me her car keys, her money: "Oh, would you? I really want some time alone. Would you, Julie, really?"

Yes, I would. My car is on the fritz, and I need to scope out a guy from my method-acting class who tends bar at Jimbo's on the pier. He's *so* cute. I want to get something going with this guy. I really do. Margie rubs her eyes, puffy from tears spent. Last night she stuffed fifteen tranquilizers into a hot dog and forced it down her dog Boo Boo's throat. "I killed Boo Boo." Her words dribble out. "The vet said I had to, but the kids and I are still upset about it."

She's told me this four times — once for each drink — since I came over for Sunday breakfast two hours ago. But Boo Boo, her snarly, mental cockapoo, had often snapped at Anna (who is, I think, the five-year-old), nipped at Dmitri, the six-year-old boy, and backed the big sister, Tanya (or is that one Anna? Jesus, I've got to get these girls straight), seven sullen years old, into a corner since they arrived in the United States two months ago. So I doubt Boo Boo is the cause of the Russian children's depression.

Margie plops back into her stuffed rocker, and I hand her another gin and tonic, knowing this is something else she really wants. Something she's convinced she's earned. And maybe she has. It's been a tough two months, I'll give her that.

The children sit close together on the couch, lined up like throw pillows. I tell them that we're going for a ride, and they stare at me as if I'm inviting them to the Bataan Death March, their faces pasty white, their eyes and mouths turned down in what I've come to see as genetic disapproval for this place they've been sucked into.

Don't ask me exactly where in Russia the children are from, because Margie's husband, Peter, isn't around anymore to give details, and Margie, with the booze, and the dead dog, and Peter gone, isn't exactly a credible source. And don't ask me exactly how Margie and Peter happened to adopt three children, because they went to Russia planning to come home with just one — the five-year-old — and stepped off the plane with



three instead, the two sisters and their brother. Probably just a snafu; plenty of those in Russia. I mean, the reports of bad stuff happening in Russia are not just the normal U.S.A. jingoism. There's that, sure, but the Russian people really are screwed. We all are. Wouldn't it help if we just admitted that?

But back to the Russian children. See, I'm studying acting. I'm taking this Meisner method workshop, and really I think it's mostly bullshit, or maybe I'm just too young to get it. I'm only twenty-one, by the way, and I'm really pretty, too. I have this thick red hair and huge green eyes and large breasts, and my skin is flawless, even for a twenty-one-year-old. Plus, I like being the center of attention. My friends and relatives in Chicago, where I'm from, always said, "Julie, you could be in the movies," so when I got sick of waiting tables I decided to try Hollywood. I'm not completely naive. I don't expect to be the next Julia Roberts. Me? I'd be happy to be featured in a Tums commercial. Anyway, when I got to LA eighteen months ago, Margie and Peter insisted I take the apartment over their garage for free, and I didn't argue.

But last week, something in my method workshop finally made sense to me. It was when my teacher told us that human behavior changes when it's observed. She said to remember this when we're on stage, in character, doing a scene where we're "alone." Of course, in the workshop, we've got our audience of fellow students breathing ill will at us, but that's not

the point. The point is, when we're acting alone on stage, we have to remember the character will reveal traits she wouldn't reveal in company. Truth can't help but flicker and flow when we're unobserved, my method teacher said. And I thought, *Oh, wow, that is so true.* But when it was my turn to go up on stage and be "alone," I didn't feel any different than usual. Plus my crush was sitting in the front row watching me, and that made me nervous, so I sort of snort-laughed when I was supposed to be feeling "blue."

And *that's* the thing about the Russian children. You'd expect them to be just the littlest bit happy to be here together in America and not in some Russian orphanage, like I guess they were, or split apart among three different families. You'd expect at least to see them smiling or looking less miserable when they didn't know you were watching. But if you expected that, you'd be wrong. Those sisters and brother have not displayed one millimeter of anything but stoic misery and gloom. Honestly? When I stop to think about it, the Russian children sort of give me the creeps.

But I'm busy, so I don't think about it often. I'm always dropping off copies of my head shot somewhere. Plus I work fifteen hours a week at *Insomnia*. They give the wait staff free espresso, and that helps me give excellent, attentive service, which I firmly believe in. The customer, after all, is my source of income, and a living, breathing person like me. There is no

reason to wait tables unless you treat the customer with respect. And I'm busy trying to improve my mind, too. I read the dictionary for twenty minutes every day. I want to sound smart, because in LA, young and beautiful, no college, and wants to be an actress — well, I need ammunition against any idiot who treats me like I'm stupid. I also read the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal* every day. Go ahead, ask me about Gaza, weapons inspectors, the IMF, the stock market, the Dodgers. I'll tell you. So all in all, I really am busy. Thank God. I say thank God because otherwise I'd have to invent some reason to keep my distance from the Russian children. And I'd feel bad if I did that.

Anyway, here's another problem: Like I said, Peter is gone. It's been a month now since we've seen him. He split almost right after the Russian children arrived. I know, I know. Hard to believe. I can barely believe it myself. Everybody in my family always liked him better than they did Margie, even though she's the one we're related to. "He's a rock," they said, "a saint." "What a nice guy," they said. "Why'd he marry her?" they wondered. So you can imagine how stunned they all were when, one month after he and Margie step off the plane with these children, Peter does a Roman Polanski and fucks a teenage girl and has to leave the country because her parents are trying to have him arrested. And Margie, hearing nothing from any of our relatives, just bolts to the bottle, knowing they don't expect her to handle any of this well, so at least she won't disappoint them in that, too.

Now she's rocking back and forth, back and forth in her padded rocker, holding a pillow to her stomach with one hand, bringing her drink to her mouth with the other, and moaning every now and then, "How did this happen? How did this happen?" And I don't know if she means Boo Boo, her three Russian children, her outlaw pedophile husband, or her drinking, but I feel sorry for her. God, just one of those things could sink you for a while.

With Margie's blessing, car keys, and money, I herd the kids out the door using pantomime and a little force. They'll appreciate this break from their new mother — never mind that it helps me too. But as I'm pulling out of the driveway, Margie comes running out the front door, drink in one hand, sandals in the other, yelling, "Stop, stop! I've changed my mind. I want to go to the arcade, too." And I'm not sure, but I think I hear the littlest sigh from the youngest, Anna (oh, let's just assume I've got that right), the one who would have had to endure all this alone had the adoption plans unfolded instead of unraveled.

MARGIE AND PETER HAVE BEEN GOOD TO ME. The apartment I live in over the garage of their Hancock Park home is sweet. By the way, when I say "home," I mean mansion. Eight bedrooms, six bathrooms, and all these extra rooms you're supposed to live in so you don't get the main rooms messy, even though a cleaning woman comes every day. There are rooms for listening to music, reading, watching TV, surfing the Internet. Even a room for screwing a fifteen-year-old, as it turns out. That is

one versatile room, too, because you can also use it every evening to get slowly and steadily faced. Ask Margie.

I got to know Margie and Peter when we all lived in Chicago, almost ten years ago. I was in junior high; they were in their twenties. At the time, I thought they were *so* romantic. Peter was a writer, Margie a painter. Every night they'd cook dinner, even if it was just ramen, and they'd light a candle and sit together and eat and drink cheap wine, just the two of them, even on a plain old weekday. Margie told me so. Imagine that. In junior high, I barely could.

They really loved each other. Once — I think it was the third time Margie miscarried — I went to visit her at Northwestern Hospital in Chicago, where they kept her for a couple of days because she was such a wreck. Or maybe they just finally agreed to survey her insides, her inhospitable uterus or whatever it was going on down there that made her lose three babies. Anyway, it was December, pitch-dark by five, and as I came east on Superior after school that day, all excited because I had snuck downtown on my own to visit, I looked up at the glass-enclosed, steel-strutted bridge that spanned the street, connecting two parts of the hospital. And wouldn't you know it, there was Margie, on that hospital bridge, wearing a bathrobe, staring out at nothing.

She didn't see me. She looked bad. Her shoulders drooped; her hips were slack; her whole posture said that she'd been clobbered, thwarted, squashed, canceled. Again. I murmured, "Please, don't jump." Never mind the glass; I was scared she'd find a way. But then Peter walked up behind her and put his arm around her waist and whispered something in her ear. And then he turned her ever so slowly and walked her away from the glassed-in bridge, matching his steps to her sad little shuffle.

It was only fifteen degrees out, but I walked around the block five times — no mittens; I guess I'd left them on the bus — before I went up to Margie's hospital room that day. I held out the daisies I'd brought for her. They were almost dead from the cold, but they remembered being alive. You could see it in their petals, which were limp with the sudden change from winter freeze to hospital heat, but still bright white, like untouched paper.

After Margie and Peter moved to LA, I didn't keep in touch. I was just a kid, after all. But a couple of years later, I heard from my mom that Peter had started a software company, and then my little brother told me that Peter had created this new video game called *Terminus* that every kid had to have. And then my mom said that Margie was doing all these expensive uterine things trying to have a baby. So I knew they were doing OK — financially, I mean. And that's important. After I moved to LA, I learned that Peter didn't write anymore, and Margie didn't paint anymore. But she still drank cheap wine.

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