

# The Women at the Banya

by

Jane Downing

© JANE DOWNING, 2018  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

≈

You do not understand the cold. Tolstoy understood. Solzhenitsyn of course understood the cold. Not your shiver as you pull on your jacket. Cold, that if you stand still too long becomes a cannibal. Frost taking a bite from you. Even your words don't fully understand. A bite yes, but then he gnaws through your flesh and breaks his teeth on your bones.

No, that is not why I left. There are some things colder than a Moscow winter.

≈

Yes, of course it was cold that day. It is in all my memories. Where did all the summer memories go? I look at this photograph of us sown across the banks of the Moscow River up from Novodevichy Convent and wonder who that young woman is, the one in the raspberry coloured bathers, her white legs arched to better show off the right curves. The truck drivers on the highway heading out of our town have this pose in silhouette on their doors, as if it is some internationally accepted shape for a woman. I was nineteen in the photograph. When forced, I remember how proud I was of those bathers and then I remember how ashamed I was of them on the beach at Bondi with all the beautiful brown Australian women. That day, the day I went to the banya – not just a sauna, a banya is more; listen – that day I had a new season of hair on my legs, and layers of thick tights, thick skirt, and long boots to protect them from the winter. Not ice bubble weather yet, though we all knew it too would come again, that time when the cold for one briefest moment, becomes magic.

You used to blow bubbles as a baby. It is harder when you get older and it took us a lot of practise. I could rarely get it quite right but Galina, she could do things with her mouth. If it was very, very cold, we'd race into the park between our apartment blocks, squelch our

cheeks and pucker our mouths and blow – yes, like blowing chewing gum. On the brittle frozen days the bubbles broke free and turned instantly to ice. They fall on the snow: I watch them now as if I am there. And they crack, maybe like an egg, or sometimes, those miracle times, one sits there, a perfect globe of fragile ice containing my hot breath.

But we should get in out of the cold. I was meeting Galina that day at the banya as usual, as was our weekly ritual. I came from the university on the trolley-bus and got off in Gorky Street and pushed through the grey crowds wondering if each shut face was hiding the flames of passion and fury or were their lives really as pallid as the meat on the cold shelf at the *Universam* shop. I was cold and grey and my fury was muted still by the numbness of faint hope so I took the shortcut, first down a side street and then ducking through a hole in the corrugated fence into the alley until I was within sight of the inconspicuous sign at the women's entrance.

There were three foreigners on the corner. Believe me, I could tell just by looking at them. Their coats, their scarves, their boots: not something you could buy back then even with hard currency. Then, of course, their Russian was woeful.

'*Ya ne govoryú po-rússki,*' said the shortest of the trio, a redundant statement as her accent made it perfectly clear she couldn't speak Russian. Then she gabbled out a string of words, the only one remotely Russian being *banya*.

I pointed to the doorway not two metres from where we stood and they all laughed and I joined in for the sheer unexpectedness of this sound on a Moscow street on a dull Wednesday afternoon. We left the clouds of our icy breath on the street and their laughs metamorphosed into gasps. I had forgotten how beautiful our banya was. Galina and I would meet here every week to sweat ourselves clean but we dragged ourselves up the wide staircase without seeing. Now I had new eyes in front of me. The banya was from a time before the Revolution. It must have been built for a rich merchant, minor aristocrats perhaps. The ceilings were high, the walls and cornices decorated with pink and blue plaster cherubs and grapes and all the symbols of plenty. The central chandelier was long gone, and one light bulb hanging down on a long chord, showed the way.

You will study your history at school but remember the Communists let all of us get into that decadent building for less than a ruble – twenty kopeks to the old woman at the top of the stairs, seventy kopeks for a sheet. The foreign women were still gasping and laughing when I left them there fishing into leather purses for stray coins. In the first room Galina waved at me from the far corner.

Do you believe it, that she is the woman beside me on the banks of the Moscow River? Look carefully, can you see your Aunty in that face? This small square of paper holds our past and we broke free and now you see only matrons; you can more easily imagine us *babushka* than teenagers with peroxide hair and long, long legs. She was already down to her underwear in the warm anti-chamber of the banya. Her lush underarm hair flashed as she waved, half-moons of breast poked out from under her bra cups. We kissed three times, cheek to cheek, mine still raw from the cold.

‘Quickly, you’re late,’ she chastised as she plucked my hat from my head and grasped one end of my scarf.

Something was preoccupying her. I knew because she didn’t ask why I was late. Not that I could have told her. She was my oldest friend, one of the crowd who’d scattered out of the tiny apartments along Leninsky Prospect on Saturdays and played on the monkey bars and pushed each other off the swings. We started school together, we finished school together, then I wanted to study the biological sciences and she’d always had a knack with the peroxide and the scissors and was beautiful enough – but not too intimidatingly so – to inspire other women to want to look beautiful too. Neither of us understood the details of each other’s new life. And when he told me I wasn’t to tell anyone, I instinctively obeyed.

‘Can you keep a secret?’ she whispered. I had one foot on the stuffed couch, unzipping my boot. I remember steadying myself against the shock of the question – could she read my mind – and looked over my shoulder. We were alone in the compartment. It felt like a train carriage, mainly because the high-backed seats and the overhead luggage racks had been stripped from obsolete trains to furnish the changing room. All the other compartments were buzzing with conversation and movement and flesh because I *was* late and it was almost time to go in. The stones in the furnace would be hot enough and ready.

Before my friend could share her secret, the three foreigners arrived. They hesitated beside the left-hand couch of our compartment. ‘*Pozhaluysta*, please?’ They looked hot already, bolstered in their overcoats at this room temperature. Galina knew more English than I did, then, and invited them to sit, undress. She piled her clothes in the netting above our heads to make extra room. She nudged me and translated, ‘would you believe it, they are from Australia. It is fate.’

When we were children we were told not to speak to foreigners. Gorbachev and Yeltsin changed all that, indeed Anton was just now back from a conference in West Germany. Anton, the reason I was late, the secret I was desperately wanting to share with my best friend, if only I had permission.

The red-haired of the Australians picked up the string that must have fallen from my coat pocket. She handed the unravelled length of it back, a puzzled look written in her eyes. Galina explained with hands as well as words.

≈

I see I must explain my string to you too. You do not understand the cold so how can you understand this, a girl who has never wanted for anything. Want, need, you know what I mean child.

Running out of toilet paper was to be avoided at all costs, you agree, so should it appear on the shelves of any *Universam* or other shop, you had to buy as many rolls as you possibly could, and what better way to carry them than in a huge chain around your neck, each roll strung together, for which you need your string. So you must always have your string. You would see a captain or a general on the street with a necklace more precious than pearls, and you must stop him and ask him, where, and hope you get there in time, before all the toilet paper is sold.

There was only one rule in those days. If you should see a queue, you must join it. Then, and only then, do you find out what the queue is for. Galina's bra was too small, the one I took off that late afternoon was too big, because we took what came. In my purse I had the measurements and sizes of all my female relatives, a did my father and my brother, in case it was them who ended up in the right queue. And even then, we took what we could.

So it should not have been of any surprise, this secret Galina wanted to tell me. But no, this was not my reason to leave Russia. I thought she was mad when she finally said she planned to. We were used to not having much. Your grandmother had a favourite saying she pushed out more often than I do my stories to you. *Living is not like crossing a meadow*. One of our Prime Ministers said the same thing, translated from the poetry: *life is not meant to be easy*. Then, it must be said, at that moment I'd thought I was deep in wild flowers and swaying grasses. I had Anton. A man paying me attention, a professor who said I was brilliant and beautiful – when it was Galina who'd always been the beautiful one. I was naked at the banya remembering his hands on me. After the sex in his office on the sixth floor he'd told me about West Germany and the conference; forgot himself, said his *wife* had loved the shops.

Some deprivations are worse than material scarcity.



The doors to the pre-steam room swung open and the women all around us leapt up and padded naked, except for their plastic shoes, through.

The Australians draped themselves in their seventy kopek sheets but Galina set them straight. The sheets were piled on the seats, and they were very funny, not knowing where to put their hand as they walked, breasts, pubes, jelly bottoms set free. I could see them trying to not look, especially when we all came to a halt in the queue. Yes, there is always some kind of queue.

Galina stood behind me and rested her chin on my shoulder. ‘My secret...’

‘Your secret?’ I whispered as I turned to face her.

‘I have been to an agency.’

I didn’t recognise the word she used. You wouldn’t either. It is all done on the internet now, but then we were called mail-order brides. The order really did come in the mail. Maybe some child has the stamp from your father’s envelope in his collection. An Australian stamp, bright and cheerful and smelling of sunshine if you put your nose close enough.

‘There are many Australian men wanting us. Us. Natasha, Anna, Lara, Lyudmila, you and me, any of us.’ Her hands swept generously left and right, the wings of some saving angel; or a lost sparrow.

I looked around this huge room and the women lined between the shower cubicles and bathtubs waiting patiently with breasts alert, breasts drooping, tiny froglet muscles jittering in thighs, varicose veins etching hieroglyphs up calves, chins doubling themselves and ribs sucking skin against themselves. Fat women, thin women, old, young, waiting women.

‘Australian men are mad,’ I laughed.

Galina looked petulant. I was supposed to mirror her suppressed excitement. She dragged her grey woolly hat over her hair and pouted and swallowed whatever she was going to say next.

‘Anastasia?’ The oldest of the foreigners, judging by her sparse pubic hair and sagging belly button, opened by time and gravity into a wide upside-down smile, was trying to get Galina’s attention without touching her. It was as if she’d never touched a naked woman before, and probably she had not. Her hand fluttered near Galina, hovered, retreated. ‘Anastasia, should we, do we have to cover our hair?’ The woman’s hands were talking too, an international baby-talk. She bowled them together and pushed them down in her hair.

Galina reassured the three of them that hats were not compulsory except in terms of vanity – to protect the hair – and pointedly ignored me when the end door then opened and the dark of the steam room sucked us forward. She acted like a tour guide in Red Square. She bent at her waist before it was our turn to show them the entrance was low, she pointed at the furnace at the door, at the height of the steam room, she ushered and herded and we slip-slapped in, plastic spanking wood on the eight steps up to the benches. The heat smacked back. It was a wall, it was a weight we all had to push through on our own.

With thirty women crowding into the small steaming room, Galina had no choice but to lead her tour flock onto the same bench as me.

‘So who the fuck’s Anastasia?’ I hissed at her.

‘Sshh, silence,’ shouted at least three voices. It was always the way: Stalin’s bitches keeping us in line every moment of our lives.

≈

It was difficult to talk. You don’t understand the heat, not the real heat of the banya, so don’t tell me about Australian Christmases. This is not the temperature that takes you to the beach and strips you to your bikini and fries your skin like *blini* in the pan. Double that heat, add some more, and then throw a paddle of water over it. The humidity steam-trains down your throat, crushes your chest, squeezes the moisture out of you: sweat from your face to pool in the dip between your nose and lip, the crevice between the bottom lip and chin; sweat from your neck to pool on the ledge of your collar bones; sweat from your belly to glue your breasts down. I hadn’t cried in my professor’s office. Not once, about his wife or anything. Sweat to purge his smell off you. Sweat and tears.

Yet we all know hell is hotter than this.

≈

The Australians didn’t last long. One mad old woman was insisting on pouring more water on the stones in the furnace, another stood to open the tiny window high at the back. Squabbles broke out. I don’t know where the *babushkas* hid their reserves of energy for this because the heat always sucked any resistance out of me. I watched the foreigners feeling their way out, near-blinded by the scalding heat, retreating from anything too uncomfortable.

Galina followed them. Bus driver Irene, who always came on Wednesdays too, handed me her *venik* and I beat my shoulders, but without much motivation.

I could hear other birch twigs thrashing against flesh in the gloom. It opened the pores in the skin even further. It also spread a smell through the room, pungent, and good. I closed my eyes. The air was so heavy it felt like I'd never be able to open them again. I remembered Anton's lips on my eyelids, those heavy kisses he bestowed as he groped his way into me.

That day I'd rushed out to the Sparrow Hills, eager, hopeful, an ache of need already between my legs. I know you do not want to hear this, but listen, keep listening child. The University towers gleamed in the sun – light off ice. It was so grand, it could take your breath away; Galina's foreigners would surely gasp if she took the guided tour out there. But the admiration was only pure if you forgot it was built by slave labour after the last war. I walked up to the sixth floor because the lifts were out. Anton was in his office. Anton had said he was estranged from his wife. That day it slipped out that estranged wives go with you on trips to the West and spend too much money on shoes.

The humidity did not dampen the smoldering fury I'd carried hidden down each flight of stairs, along the path, in the trolley bus. It bloomed as anger toward Galina who was already two feet on the road to becoming Anastasia, your Aunty Anastasia. How could she be talking about leaving me? Life was easier when the Iron Curtain was firmly down. No Australia to tempt anyone. No West German conferences.

A woman on a lower bench dragged her shower cap off her dyed bronze hair, whipped it above her head to stir up the heat even more. The masochism of some women. But then, I stayed too. I stayed too long, because the torture was in my mind, not my body. The man I'd trusted had betrayed me.

When I was young we were told you can boil a live frog without it jumping out of the pot. We were told the frog didn't notice the small increments in temperature as the water got gradually hotter and hotter, not even when it was too hot, fatally hot. Hence their failure to make the leap to safety. Biologists know this is not true. If in some cases they don't jump, it's because the heat has crippled them. They know what is happening but their muscles won't allow them to do anything about it. The squabbling *babushkas* retreated into silent warfare: paddles of water on the stones in the furnace against recalcitrant, jamming open of the tiny window. I did *want* to get up and leave.

The door cracked open and Galina came back in. She sat next to me silently for another ten minutes. She only spoke after she dragged me away from the steaming room and the hellish furnace.

‘You can come too,’ she said.

She guided me away from the bathtubs – we both knew I was too weak to get back out of one with any honour. A large girl was molded into the limits of one tub, like a salmon mousse; with her eyes closed and a beatific smile across her face. Another woman lay on a high table like a mortuary slab, the masseuse kneading the doughy flesh on her back and legs. Galina pushed me under a shower. She leaned against the wall of the adjoining cubicle and talked as endlessly as the water pouring down my face and over my nipples and seaweeding the hair on my legs. She spoke about hope and chances, that she wasn’t leaving me, but didn’t we all deserve to get away, that she’d said her name was Anastasia because of course an Australian man wanted a Romanov princess not a Soviet workhorse, and that it was time to get out from under the shower now.

I rolled my wet hair into a towel like a turban and could still hear her through soused eardrums and cloth. ‘Come to the agency, look if nothing else.’ If I’d been able to tell her about Anton she’d know she was asking the impossible.

The anti-chamber was by then alive with chatter and picnicking, any squabbles in life temporarily forgotten. Half-dressed women lounged across the couches sipping tea from thermoses, or water, a meager feast laid out on the floor between the benches in each of our mimic-carriages. The high windows down the street-side of the building had fogged over. We were totally cut off from the world: we could have been miles underground.

The foreigners had heard about this part of the ritual. They’d come prepared with water crackers, double brie, sundried tomatoes, kalamata olives. Galina translated as we dressed and laughed that everything must possess its very own adjective in the West. They insisted on sharing and thanked me for my sour pickled gherkins in return and crunched their teeth on our day-old bread, sliced thin. The food did its job and revived us from our stupor and delivered us into a state of perfect relaxation.

Galina made a good translator. The older Australian was the wife of the Elders representative, the other two had husbands at the Embassy. They insisted there were indeed kangaroos in the streets of their capital, sometimes. As Galina translated back and forth, I watched the silky cloth of the skinny one’s bra ride across her flesh as she moved. She had a tiny pink rose sewn at the midpoint, where her breasts met. When she picked up her bag to find a brush she had to sift through layers of little things, satin tissue holder, golden perfume



in a delicate bottle, leather purse, sunglasses with a name down one arm to show they were expensive, nail polish, a driver's license, because of course they all had cars.

The redhead must have been watching all of us as much as I was watching them. She poked her head out of our carriage and sighed. 'This feels like a Sultan's harem.'

I made a pretense at smiling as their Anastasia translated. Nodded, *da, da*, and to Galina: 'without any chance of sex obviously.'

'You old misery, have some more cheese,' Galina chastised. She pinned me against the back of the couch and squeezed a wedge of soft brie between my pursed lips.

≈

You are glad I became a mail-order bride. You imagine the Australian women were just what I needed to persuade me. But no, it was not the lure of luxury that made me go with the newly minted Anastasia to the agency. When you have lived on little you know your strengths and you know a gourmet deli down the road is not going to open the door to heaven. Which does not mean there aren't this very moment French cheeses in the fridge for after dinner, nor that we left the three Australian women at the banya any leftovers to pack up when it was time to leave.

Not luxury: it was not as simple as that. I have other photographs, saved along with the one of Galina and me on the banks of the Moscow River. In one, Anton looks straight down the lens at the photographer. It was taken for the back of his book, *A Brief History of Polyploid Hybrids*. Even now when I take it out, it is as if he is looking into my soul.

Every thought took me back to Anton then. At the banya I tortured myself with the idea he had not just a wife but a whole harem of willing students. And still I stayed and lived for the hours alone in his office where even the carpet was piled with books. I read their spines afterwards, when he talked, his arrogance and self-importance undiminished by the little deaths in each others' arms.

You sit there now with your ears closed and are glad I became a mail-order bride. You imagine it was me who came to my senses. With Galina's help you think I jumped from the boiling pot. Came here to meet your father. But you are seeing parallels too and that is why you are squirming and want me to put away my photographs and memories. You think I left the married man to his wife and you think I am telling you what you should do. But your

situation is your situation. And nothing is simple. He rid himself of me, you see. At the end of the academic year just as your Aunty Anastasia was packing to leave. I was going to be twenty-two and alone. The pain, the pain is not the cold, it is not the heat. It is.

No, I am not giving you advice. I am telling you a story.

≈

It was dark when we left the banya. We were all warm friends by then, woven into each other's lives with small confessions and the memory of naked bodies. Our talk raced us all the way down the grand staircase and out into the street where suddenly we realised we had to say goodbye. The temperature had dropped further and the moisture in my nostrils instantly crystallized. The foreigners looked just like us, with tiny diamonds of ice in their eyelashes.

'God likes a trinity,' Galina declared, as if He'd sent the three of them as a good luck charm. We kissed, five women, three kisses each on rosy cheeks, in every combination. Yellow headlights put us in a spotlight. We were made twice our normal size by our coats. They were made different again by the superiority of their materials.

This I remembered as I was herded with the rest of the cattle onto the *Aeroflot* flight: above the muted evening roar of the traffic, the redhead, though who would know with us all buried in woollen hats, shouted good words. 'I feel like a new woman.'

They all looked so very happy.