

SVETLANA KITTO

We Never Liked Her

It's summer at the Baltic sea and the day is muggy and overcast. We find a parking spot as close to the boardwalk as possible because Grandma can't walk far. Grandpa shoves the handicapped placard plainly onto the rearview mirror.

"In-va-lid," says Grandma, tapping a nail on each syllable. "That is me."

"I know, Grandma," I say, "but it's an American sign, why would they care about it in Latvia? It's in English."

Grandpa shrugs. "In case of ticket, it's better than nothing."

It's the third day of my visit to this small Eastern-European country, where my grandparents grew up and now spend their summers. I am here for two weeks, which my grandmother keeps saying is not enough time to see everything they want me to see. On the itinerary: the Jewish ghetto where my grandfather lived with his sister before she was killed at the beginning of World War II; Rumbala and Solchrosti, the forests that hold the mass graves where his and my grandmother's families were stripped naked and killed in the first and second Jewish massacres of the Holocaust in Latvia; the Jewish museum where his picture hangs for fighting the Nazis in the Russian resistance; and the World War II memorial and museum.

But we have not reached the Holocaust segment of my trip quite yet. That will come next week, Grandpa tells me. Today, we've driven to Jurmala, a beach town on the Baltic, where my mom and grandparents used to go for the summers and rent a *dasha*—a summer home.

Once we're on the boardwalk, Grandma pushes her walker slowly along the cobblestones as Grandpa walks ahead, his hands in the pockets of his brown slacks. "Souvenirs," Grandma says, looking at a store with strings of amber and woolen socks and caps in the window. "Here is where you could buy Latvian souvenirs for your friends." The last time they came to Latvia they brought me home a pair of grey winter socks. They looked nice, but the thick wool thread had no stretch, so I could only pull them on over my toes.

"Maybe later," I say. I link my arm through hers and try to be interested in the stores and the people eating at all the sidewalk cafés. But I want to be charging ahead with Grandpa and getting this excursion over with.

Every ten steps, Grandma flips the black leather seat of her walker down and collapses into it, resting between its red poles. "You cannot get such a walker here," she says to me, shading her watery brown eyes from the sun's glare. "Only in United States." She clutches the handles and pulls herself back up. My stomach growls as I fiddle with the charm on my necklace, a gift from my girlfriend back in Los Angeles. It's a gold dolphin with a small green gem for an eye, which I rub with my index finger when I'm anxious. She got it for me for two reasons: one, dolphins have gay tendencies, and two, I have taut, thick-feeling skin which, we like to joke, acts like a marine layer—I'm always the last one out of the ocean when we go to the beach.

“He is a cute one,” my grandmother says, and points her chin towards my dolphin. I wrap my fingers around it tightly and turn away from her, as if she might gauge the charm’s meaning by looking at it for too long.

Since arriving in Latvia, I have seen no outwardly gay couples or queer people. And I read that the last time they tried to have a gay pride parade here, it was mobbed by an angry crowd, armed with human feces.

Grandpa shakes me out of this thought as he storms back to us. “It’s an Armenian restaurant up here. You like *shashlik*?” he asks me.

“What is it?”

“*What is it?*” He looks at Grandma and throws his hands up. “Bel-la?”

“You like it, you like it,” she says, squeezing my arm. “It is meat on a stick.”

“As long as I can get vegetables on a stick, I like it.”

We sit at a table on the restaurant’s deck. Every other wooden chair has a thick, wool blanket draped over it. The tables are too big and high, and my feet barely touch the ground when I sit down. Grandma sits at the head, and sucks in her breath every time one of the waitresses passes by. “It shakes,” she says, gripping the sides of the table like she’s in danger. “My chair. I want to sit somewhere else.” But she seems to give up the idea once she’s said it.

She squints at the Christmas-sweater blankets. “They are for the wind,” she says, as if responding to the bright, muggy day. “It can be cold. You don’t know.”

The wasps are all over us. Grandma orders *solyanka*, a Hungarian soup, from the soft-spoken pouty waitress. She trots around the restau-

rant in her American sneakers and stretch pants like it’s an aerobics class. Grandpa eyes her suspiciously.

“A Russian girl,” Grandma says when she leaves the table. “There are too many Russians in Jurmala! They should go back to Russia. They take all the good *dashas*!”

Grandpa leans in, “Why is she so happy? She is *too* happy.”

“You guys are crazy. Three years ago we were Russian, the next day you hate Russians. One day you’re Latvian, then you are talking about how bad they are too. I can’t keep up!”

“We are always Jewish,” Grandma says. “Every day!”

“Well, can you be Jewish and happy? Why can’t you be happy too?”

“What is there to be happy about? Everyone we know dies. Last week, Elvira died. This week it will be someone else.”

When her soup comes, she says, “Oh, Lana, eat some it is delicious.” She nods at my tiny coffee spoon.

“Is there meat in it?”

“No,” she says. I scoop around the pink strips of meat, into the wells of orange oil, and sip from my miniature spoon.

“That is delicious,” I say, scooping more quickly.

Grandpa studies me. “Why ve-gua-tarian?” he says. Picking up a fork of breaded meat, he aims it into my mouth.

“Yes. Why you do it?” Grandma says, furrowing her brow like she does when she thinks something is so absurd it’s hardly worth talking about.

“I don’t know. I just can’t eat it anymore.” I peer at his plate. “What is that, pork?”

He smiles at me, his eyes warming. “No. Eets veal.”

I order another coffee from the waitress. Grandpa swats at the wasps with his army fatigue cap. We watch as one wasp climbs into Grandma's *solyanka* and drowns.

"He wanted suicide," Grandma says. She lifts him out with her spoon and with the same spoon goes right on eating.

My vegetable *shashlik* finally arrives after everyone is almost done. A roasted peeled tomato, a strange pale green eggplant and a melted bell pepper. It all tastes like smoke. I have more of Grandma's soup and a lot of dry *lavash*.

"*Vat*, this is Armenian bread?" Grandpa says. "Why isn't it hot?" He shoves the basket of bread into the waitress's hands like a football the next time she walks by, ordering her to warm it up.

"Grandpa has an Armenian cousin," Grandma says with her mouth full. "His dad's brother married an Armenian woman."

"Yeah," I say, "I remember that. What happened to him?"

"*Nu*, he lives there." She shrugs chewing some pork.

"But do you talk to him?"

Grandma sets her spoon down to tell the story. "He had one girlfriend. But we never, never liked her. She was a dancer, a ballerina. But she was not a woman of the house." Grandma laughs, embarrassed for her. "No cooking, no cleaning, she could do nothing."

"Well?" I interrupt. "Could he?" She looks at me like I'm crazy. Grandpa laughs and swats.

"Then he married her. We never liked her. They came to see us in Los Angeles. Did he ever invite us to seeing him? No! Then she died. Maybe it was her heart, I can't remember. Then he had a new girlfriend. Who we never met her. But he had daughters too. He wrote me, asking

me, 'Can you help me find her an American husband?'" Grandma pauses, her face bewildered. "How could I do this? I didn't have any way to do this."

"Of course not," I say. "You can't even get your own granddaughter a husband, right?" I look at Grandpa for a laugh, but he's scowling at the Russian waitress, trying to get her attention.

"No, Lana, not you," Grandma says. "You are something else. You are old maid. Do you know what is old maid?"

"Yes," I say laughing.

Grandpa slams his hand on the table. "*Nu*, where's Grandma's *shashlik*?" he says, almost yelling.

"It's right there! She's eating it."

"Oh." He sits up straight and puts his hat back on.

Grandma ignores him. "So then, Lana, do you know what he did?" She narrowed her eyes. "He—"

"Svetlana!" Grandpa interrupts her and turns to me. "Can I ask you something? You know it is in the Jewish tradition to name after a dead relative. But we have no dead relative named Svetlana. So, why your parents named you this?" he demands.

"Because they liked it."

"And why you don't speak Russian language?"

"Because you never taught it to me!"

"*Booska! Perestan!*" Grandma shrieks. He looks away and crosses his arms.

She turns back to me. "Lanka, listen to me," she says, her voice back to its normal pitch. "So, Grandpa's cousin, he changed his name. I heard about it. He didn't want to have the same name as Grandpa, his fa-

ther's name—it was too Jewish for him. So he changed it to his mother's last name. Can you believe it?"

"Huh," I say. "I like the name Shenkman."

"Giving man, it means," Grandpa says, smiling deliriously.

"Can you believe it?" Grandma says again, shaking her head with a solemn expression. "Then he wrote me asking me for help for his daughter to move to Israel." She pulls her head back in disbelief. "I wrote back now you want help from the Jews? Now, after you changed your name? This I could not forgive," she says, wagging her wrinkled finger.

"You wrote him that?"

"Yes!" she says. "And then he never wrote us again."

"Well, of course he didn't, Grandma. What business was it of yours to do that? He's not even your relative. He's Grandpa's."

Grandpa's face is hunched near his plate, his eyes wide. He shakes his head. "I didn't know she wrote that to him. This is the first time I hear it." He puts his hand over his mouth, "Oh, Bella!"

"Grandma! You can't go around doings things like that. Your business is only as far as your nose," and I pinch her small nose. "You are not the judge of the whole world." Grandpa laughs and Grandma smiles. "*Mamonya*," she says.

"Really, Bella," Grandpa says shrugging his shoulders, "with family it is something else." But his gaze is back on the young Russian waitress. He waves her down for the bill, and she nods and smiles.

"Well," I say, continuing the Armenian theme, "I have two Armenian friends. One is named Mary. And one is named Ada—"

"Mary shmmary," Grandpa flings his hand at me, his eyes becoming urgent. "What about Joe or Jack. Only girl's names you say, only!

Something is wrong," he puts his hands back in his lap and looks into the distance again. "Something's not right." I look at Grandma, holding my sweaty hands under the table.

She sighs as if on cue. "They just don't like her," she says. "I don't know how it is possible. Men just don't like her." She shakes her head and peers at me for less than a second.

"What makes you so sure? Maybe I just don't like them. Anyway, you want me to be with just anybody?" I lick my teaspoon, making sure to only look at Grandma. "There's more to life than marriage and kids, you know."

Grandma squints at me again. "No, there is not more. This is the most important thing in life, Lana." She says this calmly, as if confident she is telling me something I already know.

Grandpa laughs, tossing his hat on the table.