

THE QUARRY

Swarna Pinto

Swan Lake

If you keep walking west along the Woodend Road, passing newly built double story houses with double garages and flower pots at the front, you will come to Blue Gum Tree Lake Reserve without noticing my house. It is the last house on the street and is hidden behind large weeping willows. Overgrown apple, plum and apricot trees surround my house. It is a weatherboard with curly peels of white paint hanging onto timber slats. My front and back yards are big and get overgrown with weeds and grass until a council gardener turns up. My old Holden Sunbird, covered in dust, sits on the driveway.

I like to sit on the porch at dusk to watch people coming back from walks in the reserve or picnics near the lake and to hear them talking. Sometimes I hear them talking

about me. *You know there's an old woman who lives there all alone. Gives me the creeps.* I like my solitary existence and I like my house. The best thing about my place is that I can see swans gliding on the lake from the backyard. Before coming here, I lived in a few different places with different people. Now they are all but fading memories except for my memories of Sasha and Jana.

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I met Jana when I was a scholarship student in Soviet Russia. My university was in Astrakhan, a city by the Volga River in southern Russia. I lived on campus in Hostel Number 7. After classes, I hung out with three other girls from my tutorial group—Jana, Anu and Meena—who came from Sri Lanka like me. Jana had a boyfriend in Sri Lanka who wrote long letters to her. He was called Saman. Anu, Meena and Jana were classy and beautiful. Jana was the most beautiful. I was plain and awkward. My left hand was useless. It hung limp. It had been like that since I was about ten, after I fell off my bicycle while trying no-hands down a steep slope.

All three of them went out a lot and usually missed morning lectures. Jana even missed tutorials. But it didn't get them in trouble because I let them copy my lecture notes. I let Jana copy my assignments.

We liked to talk about boys. We all agreed that Sasha was the cutest. We saw him at morning math lectures. He came in at the last moment and hurried out just as the lecture finished. He sat in the back row where guys usually sat, but two or three seats away from them. Jana was very keen on Sasha although she was dating Arun, a mature PhD student from India who looked like a movie star. She also had Saman waiting for her back in Sri Lanka.

Once, Jana said that Sasha looked like a Greek god.

'He's not Greek, he's Russian,' I blurted out.

The moment those words went out of my mouth, I knew I had made a big misake. Jana rolled her eyes.

'What does it matter to *you*?'

She left the rest to hang in the air: *you who are ugly.*

Jana was like that. She would hurt me but later would make it up to me.

A week or so prior, Jana asked Meena and Anu if they wanted to go to a party on Saturday. Both declined as they had dates.

‘I’ll come,’ I piped up.

‘You can’t dance. I’ll ask Oumou, she’s terrific.’

Two days later Jana followed me into the stolovaya. She put her tray on my table and sat across me. I finished eating my lunch and got up.

‘Sit down and eat this. Please.’ She pushed a plate with two pieces of cake towards me. By the time we were descending the stairs, I was laughing with her. She stroked my hair and said she wished her hair was smooth like mine.

‘Have you done your Chemistry yet?’ I asked, knowing that she had not. Then I let her copy my assignment.

But when Jana implied that I was not worthy even to talk about Sasha, I detested her. I liked Sasha very much and felt that he liked me as well. At the lectures, I would feel a thrilling tingle on my nape, encouraging me to turn around. Sasha would smile and my heart would leap, shooting an exciting warmth inside my whole body. I was sure that he was going to talk to me soon. Then Jana came to a morning lecture.

After the break that morning, Sasha did not return to his seat. I was secretly happy because I knew that Jana came to strike up a conversation with him. Jana fidgeted beside me for a while, then abruptly went out. I thought she was going back to catch up on her sleep.

The next day in math class Jana was glowing. She told us how she had met Sasha in the stolovaya the previous morning. While Sasha ate his kasha, Jana had sipped a hot chocolate. Then they had gone out for a walk along the Volga. It had been cold and Sasha had draped his jacket over Jana. He had bought hot savoury piroshkies from a roadside vendor to eat while walking.

‘Did he kiss you?’ Meena asked.

Anu squealed, ‘She’s blushing.’ Then she whispered, ‘Arun will kill you’.

‘He doesn’t need to know.’

Meena said that they made a smashing couple and Anu agreed. They said the same thing when Jana hitched up with Arun.

‘Congrats,’ I heard myself say in a strange voice.

Jana wouldn’t stop talking about Sasha. I tried to switch off but heard that they were going to the movies that night.

‘You should find somebody and have some fun,’ Jana advised me, while pointedly looking at my limp and useless left hand.

Meena and Anu looked at me and then at each other.

‘She likes Sasha,’ Jana explained. ‘Haven’t you two seen how she turns back in class to look at him every five minutes?’

Then she looked straight at me.

‘Sasha is mine.’

I did not hear anything after that. At the end of the class Jana wanted to talk to me. I ignored her and gathered my books.

‘Are you upset over Sasha?’

My pencil case slipped and landed near Jana’s feet. I thought she would pick it up for me as I was holding books with my right hand.

‘Are you?’ Jana insisted.

I placed my books back on the desk and bent down to get my pencil case.

‘Pathetic. He knows about you.’

I picked up my pencil case and rushed to my hostel.

Pathetic? Sasha knows about me? Am I pathetic? Did everyone think I was pathetic? How could Jana hurt me like that just after copying my math assignment? I decided not to let her do this to me anymore.

I remember coming into my room and wishing there was somewhere I could go, for Jana was sure to come and see me as she always did on her date nights. She would chassé into my room ostensibly to check her make up in my mirror but in fact to show off and to hear my compliments. After she left, her perfume would linger and torture me well into the night.

I threw my books on my bed and went out. I walked on Tatischeva Street, turning my back on the direction to the cinema and Volga. I pictured Jana and Sasha walking: Jana on Sasha’s arm, the way Russian couples walked. Jana would be leaning on Sasha. He would bend his blond head and kiss her glossy lipsticked mouth.

A sudden rush of warm air threw me backwards and I landed on my useless left hand. A goods train thundered past me. My heart pounded. Two more steps and that train would have killed me.

Tears came unbidden as I lay there. I cried until I was spent. Then I got up and looked around. I knew that the station was only a half an hour walk from my hostel, but I did not know which way the station was. The railway line disappeared into birch trees in both directions. If I walked the wrong way I would be lost and frozen to death.

It was getting dark and the cold was seeping right into my bones. My wristwatch had stopped at 2.30, the time the math class had finished. I guessed it was around six by then.

I started walking along the railway, making sure to keep a few feet distance. If I didn't see any lights in about half an hour, I would turn back and walk the opposite way. I was thinking whether to go further or to turn back when I heard a bird flapping its wings above me. I shivered as a huge dark shape disappeared into the night. It's only a bat, I told myself. A sliver of a pale moon peeked from behind grey clouds calming me a little. I kept walking. Under my boots and gloves my feet and my fingers were numb from cold.

A dog howled from somewhere far away. It was a mournful howl. My teeth chattered when I spotted two yellow eyes in the distance. The eyes belonged to animal much bigger than a dog. It advanced, keeping its gleaming yellow eyes trained on me. It was a wolf. Quickly, I hid behind the closest tree. The wolf came closer but stopped about ten yards away from me.

It bent its head and sniffed at something on the ground which looked like one of my gloves. I looked at my hands and saw that the left glove was missing.

Take it and go. But it left my glove and continued to come towards me. *Could it hear my teeth chattering and my heart thumping?* I closed my eyes and clamped my teeth together and stayed rigid despite the shivering. The wolf padded around my tree and stopped right behind me. Prey in sight, it was waiting for me to make the first move.

I don't know how long I had stayed that way when I felt a tingle on my nape and heard a familiar voice say, 'Priviet.' (Hello.)

I spun around.

'Sasha?'

'Vsio normalna?' (Everything okay?) he asked.

I whimpered, 'There's a wolf.'

'Mmm?' Sasha looked around. 'I don't see a wolf.'

'Pashli,' (Let's go) he extended his hand.

He picked up my glove from the ground and put it on gently. Then he placed my left hand on the crook of his right elbow and covered my hand with his other one. We started walking and Sasha suggested crossing Swan Lake.

He wanted to know what I was doing back there. I asked him where Jana was.

‘You must answer me first.’

As I struggled to compose myself, Sasha looked into my eyes with such tenderness I burst into tears. He let me cry on his shoulder. When I became quiet, he asked again.

‘To watch trains.’

‘Very funny. That’s a decommissioned line.’

I shivered uncontrollably and Sasha removed his winter coat and draped it over me. He would take me to his Babushka’s house to warm me up.

It was then I told Sasha about Jana’s hurtful remarks. I said that she had just finished copying my math assignment when she said those things.

‘Forget Jana. You are very sweet and very intelligent.’

Swan Lake was gleaming white right in front of us. Sasha glided around the lake holding me tightly to his warm body. The moon was out and stars twinkled in the dark purple sky. He sang a Russian folk song, *Moscow Nights*, in a beautiful baritone.

The wind picked up as we approached his Babushka’s house. It was an old weatherboard and stood among a few bare trees. There were no other houses near it. From the moonlight that fell on it I saw that the windows were boarded up. We climbed some wooden steps and Sasha opened the front door with his key. He then scooped me up and carried me into the lounge, while floorboards creaked all the way. He placed me gently on a sofa in front of an old log fire place and adjusted his coat over me. I saw cobwebs hanging from the ceiling and from framed portraits on the walls. In no time Sasha built a roaring fire. I felt deliciously warm and drowsy.

‘Ona budet v poryadke,’ I heard somebody saying from far away. I wanted to ask who was going to be fine but I could not talk. I could not even see who was talking. I knew I was sleeping, but had no idea where I was.

They said I was found lying on a bench near my hostel on a very cold morning. The temperature had been five degrees below zero during the night. I was barely breathing and they had rushed me to the hospital. I had been very ill for over two weeks.

‘I don’t know what happened,’ I told everyone who asked me, although I clearly remembered the night with Sasha. Anu and Meena came one morning to take me back to the hostel. I didn’t ask after Jana.

I was not allowed to go to classes for another two weeks and I mostly slept. A nurse from the campus *Medpunkt* visited me daily. She massaged my left hand which

was coming to life. One afternoon the Faculty Dean came to see me. He questioned me about the night I was found on a bench.

‘I went for a walk up to the station and got lost. I don’t know how I ended up on a bench.’

‘Jana was with you that night?’

‘No.’

Then he said that Jana hadn’t been seen since the day I was found on the bench. I lifted my eyebrows and kept quiet. But when he said that Jana had been sighted near Swan Lake an audible gasp escaped from me. He looked straight at me as he continued talking in his measured tone.

‘On that night, the ice on the lake would have cracked even if a small child were to step on it.’

He stayed a few more minutes, telling me how to catch up with the lessons.

‘Don’t worry. We’ll find her.’

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The next day my nurse had found me in a delirium. This time I stayed much longer in another hospital. More than a year had passed by the time I could attend classes.

The first thing I did was walk to Swan Lake. The morning was bright and crisp, the sun reflecting off the pure white snow. My boots made soft crunch ... crunch ... noises as they made imprints in the snow. The lake was a flat white sheet. Swans had already migrated to the other side of the world as they did each year. For a while I watched people skating on the lake. It was snowing when I walked back and my footprints disappeared under the falling snow.

I decided to immigrate. I would go wherever and do whatever. I applied to UK, Canada and Australia. Australia replied and within six months I was in Melbourne. Once in Melbourne I could not find a research position and ended up becoming a cleaner. I cleaned up other people’s messes. I learned to clean mine.

Now that I have all the time in the world to think, conflicting thoughts swirl in my mind. I know that I was very ill in Astrakhan all those years ago. I also know that severe hypothermia can cause hallucinations and confusion. But I would like to assure you that my night with Sasha, the most beautiful night I have ever had, was real.

I left Astrakhan and went to Moscow to forget Jana and Sasha. Then I came here to Melbourne for the same reason. I wanted to forget the past. But the mind is a tricky thing. It keeps all the memories I have wanted to forget. And I am glad to have those memories intact. That's all I have now.