

HOW I ALMOST MARRIED A RUSSIAN



JOHN GINSBURG



How I Almost Married A Russian

"What do you do after your friend drives off a bear, breaks up with your sister, gets you an autographed stick from the Soviet team, and then leaves town with your girlfriend? I'm glad you asked. The answer? You travel halfway across the country to help the guy with a legal problem. Of course you do."

Beginning with a tense and emotional defection from Russia in 1975, and ending with a strange disappearance a decade later, this is the story of Gorodya Shapirnikov; Gordy, as he's known. Gordy is in his twenties when he first arrives in Winnipeg, accompanied by his parents, his sister and his niece. A natural businessman, he quickly establishes himself in a TV-repair shop in Winnipeg's north end. There he meets a woman named Ronda Fieldman and her brother David, with whom he becomes close friends. Soon after, Gordy jumps at an opportunity to own and operate a jewellery store on Hugo Street in the Corydon area of the city. From then on, David finds himself involved in one unusual incident after another with his Russian friend. From robberies on Hugo Street, to a fateful trip to a used-car dealership in Regina, to a problem with customs in Ottawa, life with Gordy is anything but ordinary. Events like these follow Gordy around, events that are always much funnier than they are unfortunate. The short and burly, round-faced Russian could never be confused with Don Juan. Yet somehow we find him in a continuous series of romances, involved with one exceptional woman after another, including a brilliant young film student, a stunning fashion model and a petite and sultry lounge singer. In 1978, the friendship between Gordy and David takes a dramatic turn. David falls in love with a beautiful woman named Klara, the translator for the Soviet hockey team, who has defected with Gordy's help.

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by

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From Chapter 3 Gordy And His Family:

...There was little time for sleep for any of the four adults that night. When they did take to bed, with heavy hearts, sleep was impossible anyway. They were filled with anticipation and apprehension for what might lie ahead. Would they make it past naval security? How long would they stay in Helsinki? Where would they go in America? What would they do when they arrived there? Where would they live? How would they support themselves? How would Galina react to the news of her father's death tomorrow? How would she accept such monumental changes in her life?

Boarding the ship at Tallinn was not without a substantial amount of tension and drama. The travel permits were accepted, but questions were asked about Andrei. Aliona's husband was an officer in the engineering division, wasn't he? Hadn't he applied for the permits on behalf of the others? And why was he not accompanying them? Aliona had prepared for this question. But she had not thought to explain to Galina why she might have to lie to the boarding officials and to answer their questions about her father in a way that was entirely different from the explanation Galina had already been given. Aliona told the officials that her husband was ill and couldn't join them. On hearing this, Gordy quickly and intuitively moved to prevent Galina from blurting out anything to the contrary. He whispered to Galina that they really shouldn't be allowed to travel without her father, so her mother had to make up a little lie.

When the officials seemed skeptical, Aliona offered her home phone number for them to check. They called the number with no answer. At that point, two of the officials conferred and a decision was made to search all five of the passengers. Just as Aliona had predicted, the men were much more thoroughly searched than the women. All of the luggage was searched. The women's jackets were patted down as they stood, front and back, but not at the sides. The women were also asked to empty their pockets. Somehow, everyone was able to appear calm on the outside, even though their heart-beats were racing and tensions were high.

A search that lasted only five or ten minutes seemed to last forever. Finally, the officials were satisfied that the five passengers were simply carrying luggage for a two-day stay in Helsinki. The wife and daughter and the in-laws of Special Officer Andrei Greshkov were ushered on board. Clear skies and a cold wind accompanied the Soviet ship *Dolinka* on the passage across the Gulf of Finland.

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From Chapter 2 Robberies on Hugo Street and Knives from Regina:

...The Hugo Street store was a typical, small-scale jewellery store. Gordy sold new rings, necklaces, earrings, bracelets, clocks and watches. He also repaired and refashioned jewellery and by April of 1977, he was just beginning to make his own rings and offer them for sale. And just as he'd done on Selkirk Avenue, in no time Gordy was doing all kinds of other things for his customers - from changing a car battery to repairing a piece of screen to replacing a purse strap.

Just as he'd done on Selkirk Avenue, Gordy conducted all of the transactions at Stelnicki's Jewellers in cash. And as was his habit, he always kept a huge wad of cash in his pocket. But the thief who walked into the shop on Thursday, April 14, around 3pm, was after diamonds, not cash. His name was William Nelson.

Nelson told Gordy he wanted to buy his wife a beautiful diamond ring - something impressive. When they had married a few years earlier, he said, he hadn't been able to afford it. So Gordy showed him a number of rings, beginning with less expensive ones. After several minutes, there were five glittering and gleaming diamond rings on view on top of the case. They ranged in price from a hundred dollars to over a thousand dollars. Nelson asked Gordy if he could look at the rings through a magnifier. As Gordy reached into a drawer to accommodate the request, Nelson scooped up all five rings and ran out the door.

While this had been going on, Comet was quietly dozing away in the workshop. As soon as Nelson made his move, Gordy called out to the dog and opened the door to the workshop. Gordy quickly stepped out of the shop, with Comet at his side. He locked the door and set off, determined to catch the thief.

As we all know, dogs are amazing creatures. Especially in the way they understand humans. Gordy's expression of alarm was immediately picked up by Comet, and old though he was, he gamely joined Gordy in hot pursuit of the robber.

Nelson had fled south on Hugo, straight across Corydon Avenue - where there was a pedestrian crossing, and then west on Corydon. The flow of vehicles and people at that time of day was steady, but still fairly light. Nelson stood out among the people on the street, as he was the only one running. Gordy spotted him immediately and chased after him, shouting, with Comet at his side. "Bandit! Catch him!"

Once Gordy and Comet reached the south side of Corydon and turned west, the dog knew exactly who he was chasing, as Nelson was easily visible straight ahead, and was the only person running. The sidewalk was icy and slushy, which made it difficult for a man to run very fast. When Nelson looked back, he saw Gordy close behind - a few hundred feet away at most - and the dog running ahead of him, barking and gaining ground quickly. And then Nelson made a fatal mistake. He ducked into the first building that he could, a three-story apartment building called the Warwick.

When Nelson ran into the Warwick, he was immediately met by a stairway. There were two people walking down the stairs toward him, from the first floor, and so he elected to take the stairs that led down to the basement apartments. He must have run to the back of the building, where the outside door to the lane was locked. In his panic, he decided to hide in the laundry room on the basement floor. He entered the laundry room, closed the door behind him and hid behind the washing machines.

Meanwhile, out on the street, Comet had reached the door to the Warwick. His barking changed into a low-level growl. Gordy arrived on the scene a few seconds after Comet - he had picked up his speed after seeing the robber enter the apartment block. As Gordy reached the building and tried to stop, he lost his footing on the icy sidewalk. He toppled over backwards, landing on his side. He slid down the slushy sidewalk for several feet before coming to a stop.

It only took seconds - Nelson running into the building, rushing down the steps - the dog arriving and Gordy sliding through the slush. Just as Gordy went sliding past, the door to the apartment block opened. And out stepped the couple who had been walking down the stairs when Nelson rushed in. They were an older couple, in their sixties. They had stopped for just a moment when Nelson raced in and down the stairs, glanced down to the basement and then continued out the door.

Comet hadn't had so much excitement and action in a long time and he was only too willing to show his mettle. With Gordy sliding by, seemingly in peril, and not being at all sure of who he was chasing, Comet did the only sensible thing. He leapt up at the older man as he came out of the Warwick apartments. He bit at his leg and ripped his pants. The man threw up his arms and turned away from the dog in reaction and the woman with him starting yelling at the dog. Comet stood his ground and barked and growled. The couple made their way back inside the building - the woman shouting and the man clutching at his leg.

By that time, Gordy had gotten to his feet and had walked quickly over to the door of the building. The first thing he did was quiet the dog. And then, in an instant, he surveyed the effects of his slide. His shirt and slacks were covered in dirt and slush. And even though he was hardly a man of fashion, even though he had five identical blue polyester shirts at home, Gordy was incensed at the unfortunate change in his look. Especially after having just been robbed...

. . . From later in Chapter 2:

Finding a lawyer was not going to be a problem. Ronni and I have a lot of relatives in the city who practise law, including Aunt Cookie - our mom's brother's wife. The two of us agreed that we should call Aunt Cookie and get her advice. So I phoned my aunt and described the robbery to her as well as the notice of action against Gordy. She recommended a lawyer named Joel Itzkowitz who, she said, was very bright and wouldn't break the bank. As it happened, Joel was a cousin of Cookie's on her mother's side. Ronni passed on the recommendation to Gordy.

Gordy and I met with Joel Itzkowitz on Thursday, May 5 at 8:30am. Joel's office was on the sixteenth floor of a new building on Broadway Avenue, easy walking distance from my apartment at River and Donald.

On entering the outer office of Joel Itzkowitz, barrister and solicitor, we were met by a fine view of the river and the parliament buildings, and by stylish new furniture and a secretary at her desk. As the secretary went to inform Joel that we had arrived, Gordy was already estimating his costs. He leaned over to me and whispered 'I think it will be too much money. I told you, David.'

We were immediately ushered into Joel's inner office. The guy himself was seated behind his desk and rose to greet us. In his appearance, he reminded me of a comedian who was doing a parody of a variety show host. I made him out to be about 40 years old. He was quite short, and as he walked around his desk to shake hands with each of us, I could see he had on elevator shoes - built-up black boots with large Cuban heels - which made him all of five foot two or so. He was wearing a very fancy suit with a purple shirt, a black vest and a paisley tie. And his hair was a bit funny. Like everyone in those days, he was wearing his hair long, and he'd let his sideburns grow as well. But the thing was, he was very thin on top and so he combed his hair over from one side - way over - like Rene Levesque - parted below his ear on the left side, and greased to stay in place. To complete the look, he had a perfectly groomed moustache, gold cufflinks and a gold ring on his left hand with a big ruby set in it. A dapper little dude if ever there was one. Gordy must have been looking at Joel, looking around the room and wondering how much this was going to cost him. Poor Gordy...

Upon first meeting Joel, one had to get used to his nasal tone and how quickly he talked. Everything he said seemed as if it was rehearsed and was delivered in a high-pitched staccato burst, after which he would stop abruptly and smile.

Joel looked at me first. 'You are...?'

'David', I said, 'David Fieldman'.

'Ah, yes. Cookie Gershberg is your aunt, correct? She's my mother's cousin, Cookie is. I told her I hope she didn't expect a commission for sending me your case.' He uttered a rather long, nasal laugh after saying this, just to make sure we knew he was making a joke. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Gordy shifting uneasily as he stood opposite Joel.

I laughed politely at Joel's joke - I mean, why not? We were there anyway. We were going to be stuck with this guy in any event.

'And so you must be Mr. Shapirnikov' Joel said, looking at Gordy.

Joel invited us to sit down and retreated behind his enormous lacquered desk, where he rocked and swivelled as he talked to us.

I was starting to feel a bit alarmed at how quiet Gordy was. For a guy who was usually so boisterous and who loved to talk to absolutely anybody, Gordy hadn't so much as said a word. Joel picked up on that immediately.

'So Mr. Shapirnikov' Joel said, addressing Gordy, his tone more serious. 'It's nice to meet you.' Gordy still wasn't saying anything. After a short pause, Joel said with a chuckle 'I want you to know, you've come to the right guy. I'm the Jewish Perry Mason. I never lose a case.'

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From Chapter 5 Klara:

...Klara was a very capable artist, by the way. Her drawings were very impressive. Unfortunately, she threw away most of them. She'd fold them up and rip them in half. Then she'd rip them in half again, and into the garbage they went; sometimes after working for hours or even days on a drawing. Maybe that was just an artistic temperament. Not having any artistic talent myself, I have no idea about that. I often asked her if she couldn't just keep a drawing or give it to me, but she didn't want to. She would typically spend an afternoon or evening drawing, in pencil, and then discard the page.

I did manage to keep a few of her drawings. Three, to be exact. One is of me. One is a still life of books and dishes on the kitchen table. And one is of the little old man.

The drawing of that little old man is remarkably true to life. He was a man who lived in the neighbourhood then, in one of those little three-story boxes down the street on River. He must have been in his late seventies, at least. Very small and very thin. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and had a rather odd face - a slightly protruding jaw that gave him kind of a permanent sneer. You couldn't say he was well dressed, but he certainly didn't look anything like a vagrant. In winter, he wore a long beige coat and a worn fur hat with drop-down sides over his ears. Up close, he looked a bit grizzled - he probably would have appeared scary to a small child. But he was a friendly enough old guy.

He must have been familiar to everyone in that neighbourhood; he certainly was to me and the tenants in my block. Every afternoon, rain or shine, cold or hot, he would walk down River Avenue, cross over to Donald and sit down at the wooden bench near the

bus-stop. He had a way of walking that was really quite unforgettable. He'd walk a few steps and then come to a complete stop, as if he'd just remembered something important. A look of concern would pass over his face and then he'd continue on a little farther. He'd stop and go like that all the way down River Avenue, until he finally reached the intersection at Donald. I don't think he ever actually took the bus; he would just sit quietly on the bench for a few minutes and then head back down River Avenue. It's a peculiar thing to remember, but I remember seeing him sitting on that bench and thinking that a person could have walked up behind him and just picked him up by the elbows. He just seemed so tiny.

And that was the extent of my knowledge of the man. Until Klara told me, I didn't even know his name. It was Sam. 'Sem' was the way Klara pronounced it. One day in February, when I returned home from the university, I found Klara looking out the window - sitting in the big chair, bathed in sunlight. But she hardly turned when I came in. She was crying softly and clutching tissues in her hand. I asked her what she was upset about. She pointed down at the wooden bench.

'This old man. He is very sad. Alone in this world.'

It took me a moment to understand whom she meant. When I looked down at the street, there were just random people coming and going. The old guy had apparently come and gone from the bench some time earlier.

'Oh' I answered. 'You mean the little old man with the fur hat? That always sits there?'

'Yes, David. Sam. His name is Sam. I was talking with him.'

'Oh. When? Today?'

'Yes, today. He is nice man. I ask him about his life.'

Klara was very sad, and she continued to wipe tears from her eyes as we talked. I wanted to comfort her, but I didn't quite know how. I was standing beside her as she sat in the big chair and I bent down to hug her, but she resisted.

'What did he say?' I asked Klara.

'He told me his wife died. She very sick for long time. Now he living by himself. Just doing nothing. But always he thinking about her.'

'Is he all right? Does he have a decent place to live?'

'I don't know this, David.'

I just remained silent for a moment and Klara caught her breath. 'I think it's very nice that you talked with him' I said. 'Did you talk to him for a long time?'

'Only one minute, David.'

She had been looking out on the street as we talked. Finally she turned and looked at me. She shook her head sadly. 'This little man. And whole world going around him, David. And what anybody can do?'

She began sketching Sam that day, and worked on it for several days afterwards. I had a chance to see the drawing several times, at various stages. It was such a true likeness, it took my breath away. By the middle of March, when Klara left, I had almost forgotten about it. I had assumed she'd thrown it away, like other drawings of hers that I'd thought were just as good. But she actually kept that one. She knew how much I liked that drawing. And today, it's one of my prized possessions - it sits in a black frame to the left

of the large window in our living room. Whenever I look at it, I see the sad look on his face. Other people don't notice it so much. I guess what I see is the way she told me *she* saw him, as much as anything.

... **...From later in Chapter 5:**

As it happened, Klara and I were the last to arrive. Not late, simply last. We walked in and I blurted out a brief introduction. As I did so, the Gershberg din, as I call it, briefly abated. I was beaming from ear to ear, walking in with this gorgeous woman on my arm.

'Hi everyone' I said. 'This is my new friend, Klara. She just arrived in Canada recently. She's Russian. She knows my good friend Gordy. That's how we met.'

This was met by greetings all around. Aunt Cookie gave the official welcome, yelling from the next room as she was adding the last touches to the table: 'Klara! Welcome! Welcome, dear. You're Gordy's friend! It's a pleasure to meet you. Come in. Come in.' Then she came over and gave Klara a hug. 'Actually, I haven't met Gordy yet' my aunt said. 'But I know he's been doing his part to keep the lawyers busy in this city.'

This was everyone's cue to laugh, as my aunt retreated to the kitchen. Oh and by the way, as far as I know, she earned the nickname 'Cookie' as a very young woman, by virtue of her shape and stature. She was very round and very short, not quite five feet. But she could be just as shrill and just as loud as her kids. I mean, where do you think they got it from? Her real name is Helen, but I've never heard anyone call her Helen, not even once.

Klara reacted to my aunt's words with a smile but didn't quite get the joke about Gordy and lawyers and she looked at me for help.

'Gordy's robberies. He needed lawyers to help him...' I said.

'Oh yes. I understand' Klara said and smiled.

And then, for probably the only time that evening, there was just an instant of silence - lasting approximately one-hundredth of a second. And then everyone went back to their simultaneous conversations, crossing back and forth, each trying to talk before the other and talking over one another when that failed.

Vel-Vel, my aunt's father, quickly approached Klara and was one of the first to have a word with her. He was a small man, slightly stooped, and he wore the identical small, dark framed glasses that his daughter did. 'Lawyers', he said to Klara, with a dismissive gesture of his hand. 'I could still practise now. Sure I could. I'm eighty-eight, don't kid yourself. I'm old and I'm not as quick as a young man. But like I tell my daughter Cookie, how smart do you have to be to practise law?'

Vel-Vel delivered this statement with a flourish and with a twinkle in his eye. It was one of his standard lines - I'd heard it several times. As soon as he'd said it, the whole family laughed as one, interrupting their own vigorous conversations to do so. To an outsider meeting the family for the first time, like Klara, this was early but unmistakable evidence that any of these people - the Gershbergs, could listen to several conversations at the same time, while conducting their own, all at an orchestral level, and not only process all of those exchanges, but be able, at any instant, to quickly inject a cogent and witty remark into any of them and then return with force and precision to their own conversation.

'What do you think of my father, Klara?' yelled my aunt from the kitchen, 'Doesn't he look good for eighty-eight?'

Not giving Klara a chance to answer, Vel-Vel smiled and shook his head, looking at Klara. He was resigned. 'Like I tell Cookie. It's not that I don't want to look good. I just don't want to be eighty-eight. But what are you going to do?'

Klara smiled at Vel-Vel and then at me. I could see she got a kick out of the old guy.

Following Vel-Vel, my uncle extended his own personal welcome to Klara, in the form of a very, very long embrace. This did not go unnoticed by Aunt Cookie. Nothing went unnoticed by Aunt Cookie. She walked over quickly from the dining room table, looking slightly harried, her forehead damp from the vegetables on the stove. In one hand, she was brandishing a large serving fork and with the other, she adjusted her glasses on her nose. She loudly chided my uncle, looking him straight in the eye.

'Howard. What are you doing? You think she wants a hug from an old man like you?'

'She's a special guest' answered my uncle. 'And she's beautiful!' He laughed and only then, reluctantly let go of Klara.

My aunt continued her ribbing. 'Of course she's beautiful. She's young, she's thin, and she's blonde. What's not to like? Just ignore him, Klara. Come, everyone. Sit. Sit down.'

My aunt's tone may well have alarmed Klara - after all, Klara had never met any of those people before. Klara looked a bit concerned. She must have thought that she'd unwittingly played a role in causing friction between my aunt and uncle. I think she felt a bit guilty about it. And my uncle's playful response hadn't entirely convinced her otherwise. But as soon as everyone took their places around the table, my uncle turned to Klara and said to her with a laugh: 'You didn't think she was going to use that fork on me, did you?'

Klara was obviously thinking of how to answer, what to say. Some kind of little joke, perhaps. But she barely had time to issue a smile. My uncle didn't wait for a response and finished the matter, speaking to Klara and my aunt at the same time.

'Nah. She would never do that, would you Cookie? It's the only serving fork she has.'