

The Women Debrowska

Chapter One

Anatola

Once again before the faint pink streaks of a new dawn crest the San Gabriel Mountains in the distance, Anatola Debrowska lies wide awake next to her luxuriously snoring husband, her mind whirling, taking inventory – the same dreadful unchanging inventory that forces her awake before first light, the relentless inventory that burrows its spiky claws into her subconscious, awakening her first at 3 A.M, and not allowing sleep to return. The findings, as always, are dismal, an amorphous morass that continually threatens to sink her without a trace, a looming shadow that hovers unfed and unsatisfied, an unforgiving litany of things not done, undone, and never to be done.

Beside her Michael Halat, her husband, mumbles unintelligibly in his sleep, snores sharply and flips over, like a carp snared open-mouthed at the end of a hook. What had she dreamed last night? Oh, yes – now the night's vision clangs into her consciousness with the sudden deathly power of a migraine. Shit. Last night her dreams

had been full of shit. Piles of brown excrement covering the floor, the rugs, the newly laid golden oak Pergo laminate. Oh, God. Shit.

Rising stiffly, she makes her way down the newly re-done staircase to the kitchen, her Beagles, Bodean and Sophie, baying and yapping at her feet. Empty the dishwasher, stack the dirty dishes (that no one had bothered to do the night before) rinse the coffeepot, make coffee, feed the dogs, giving each its daily regiment of pills, retrieve the morning newspaper. Same routine, day after day, part of the growing quagmire of sameness and boredom that tugs at her subconscious at night, and saps her energy by day. Having to her continued astonishment passed the half-century mark, she is healthy and fit, if not as trim as she would like to be, tending more to the roundness of her grandmother than the sleekness of Michael's genes – still blonde with monthly support, endowed with crystalline blue eyes, the eyes of her father and a legion of Polish ancestors that perhaps were mixed along the way with stout Swedish stock.

On the way toward retrieving the morning news, Anatola notes that her daughter Rachel's car is not parked in front of the house. There would be a call on the machine, another late night, staying with friends, love you, see you later. Rachel was never home anymore. She'd left high school early, tested out and enrolled in college at sixteen. Anatola had hoped this would make Rachel happy; she had been so miserable in high school. But it wasn't a particularly cheerful Rachel that Michael and Anatola saw about the house. And despite all Anatola had done to give her home a warm, inviting atmosphere, including remodeling Rachel's room to make her home a place to bring friends, Rachel had no interest in doing so. "I don't even like being here, why would I want to subject my friends to this place," she had said once, cleaving Anatola's heart yet

again in two. Pieces of Anatola's heart like pieces of her soul are disappearing. Anatola believes she might never be able to find them.

Well, she'd done the same thing, she tries to comfort herself, as she opens the can of prescription dog food KD Canine for Sophie who yaps and dances at her feet; Bodean waits quietly for his kibble.. At seventeen, come the weekend, from Friday night to Sunday late, Anatola would be far from home, leaving a mother dying of cancer alone. Of course, no one had bothered to tell her that her mother was dying of cancer, only that she was ill, some mysterious feminine illness, pills by her nightstand, pills stacked on the TV tray in the living room in front of the small black and white television. Her father often away on business. Her sister Clarisse far away safely ensconced in college in upper state New York. Anatola and her father fighting over who would stay home with her mother. Anatola and her mother fighting over everything else. Bitterly estranged, never reunited, her mother's death in the midst of adolescent rebellion and estrangement, creating a wound...She sighs. She does not want to revisit those haunted years. Wanting never to repeat that ache, Anatola had been determined to create a life vivid and rich and deeply entwined with her spouse, with her children, to create a life that could never succumb to the sudden crippling yawning void of loss. Well. One child had been lost to the void a thousand years ago. The other, Rachel, was lost to the void now. And Michael? Slip-sliding away. All of it. All she had built. Slip-sliding away.

Sipping her morning coffee, Anatola reads every inch of the LA Times, avoiding for the time being any further delving into the pit of her disappointments. Michael is already at work in his shop – Rustic Designs by Halat. (Anatola never did take his name. She came of age in the 60's, was an artist- she did dare to call herself that once- in her

own right, determined to see her blood heritage immortalized) There was a time she would have eagerly entered his studio, perched on the end of a bar stool or workspace counter top and talked, a million things to say suddenly, or simply sat in comfortable silence watching him work, admiring the way his biceps rippled as he wielded the soldering iron or chiseled wood. His work is rustic, unpolished, with a simplicity and beauty wrested from the natural beauty of wood. Once upon a time, his pieces sold furiously, enough for them to make a nice living off of his work alone. But that was a time ago, growing longer and more vanishing seemingly by the hour. Public whim turned. Michael, stubborn, determined, assured that that fickle tide would once again turn in his favor, kept soldering and burning, chiseling and sculpting, refusing to branch out or away, refusing to look for that day job regularity that could assure a sense of stability, stocking the pieces, ever- broadening his inventory, waiting and ready. The problem was the bills were waiting and ready, too.

In the family room where she rests awaiting the spark that will propel her into her day, she can hear strains of country music drifting from the shop into the house. Her irritation, unbidden, grows. Looking about her, Anatola sees the place is a mess. The family room rugs are covered with dog hair, newspapers stray across the floor, ink pens tossed atop the pile of crossword and sudoku puzzles Michael rips from the pages. Rachel's' school books, bindings unbroken never cracked, pile atop the coffee table and around the corner chair. Afghans trail from the family room to the living room – dragged by canine or human it was impossible to tell. Last night's dishes sit crusting over jammed around the sink, not scraped, for God's sake at least rinse and pile them neatly in the sink. All she asked was for them to pick up after themselves! Throwing her newspaper aside,

Anatola rises, imagining this is the way an oyster must feel. Only by the end of the day, the oyster has made a pearl; Anatola has only accomplished acid reflux.

Four nights a week from four P.M. until ten, Anatola works as an Assistant Professor of Community and Continuing Education at a community college. Before leaving for work, unable to abandon her role of homemaker and caretaker, she diligently prepares an evening meal, making sure her family is fed properly. All she asked of them was that they do up the dishes, straighten up the house before she comes home tired, grumpy, and spent. But they spin in their own orbits, these two, her family, at one time her sanctuary and salve against the wounds of the world. Anatola, now, often imagines the three of them spinning off each in his own direction, a world unto themselves with no more connection than the ether that drifts lazily around them like whiffs of smoke, the pattern of her childhood doggedly returning to spurn her, to prove once and for all there is no escape from aloneness.

She is feeling strangely jittery today. Out of sorts. That damn shit dream! Well, thank God at least it was Friday. At least today she did not have to make the twenty mile commute to Glendale. Tonight at least she wouldn't have to decide between fast food or her own leftovers, wolfed down in her car in the parking structure beneath the campus, NPR or one of the local talk radio hosts that made her laugh and actually (finally on the AM radio dial) bolstered her progressive politics comforting her in her isolation. She wonders when Rachel will return, if Rachel will return, or will she spend one more night out there somewhere with the friends she never brings home.

There was a prescience surrounding her, a mood she couldn't shake. She needed a change. She needed to find a new direction, a course of action, something to latch onto, to

throw herself wholeheartedly into before her life force was dissipated and drained one agonizing droplet at a time. Anatola needs a miracle.

She gazes out into the backyard. There it was again. Shit. Piles of dog shit humping underneath the glass-topped round table, curling around the sturdy legs of the wrought-iron chairs, leaning up against the wooden gazebo like toy soldiers at attention, mingling like pieces of rotting bark among the Chinese elm leaves from the backyard neighbor's tree that begin falling in September and never really stop. The one thing she had asked him to take care of. The one chore she pleaded to be taken off her plate. And there he was whistling away in his shop, she could hear him now, Pat Green, she thought, his robust whistle carrying over the soldering of the wooden sculptures no one would buy, while the residual of every day life piled up, and no one cared and no one saw but her. If she mentioned it to him, he would retort, his steel blue eyes smoldering to the grey of the Lake Superior winter storm sky he so loved, "What about Rachel? Rachel does nothing around here." This, of course, was true enough. But Michael, stepping up the cold war would never approach Rachel directly. In his exasperating passive-aggressive way, thoroughly righteous in his refusal to perform the chore he deemed Rachel should be doing, he would place Anatola squarely in the middle of the silent hostilities.

The path of least resistance, the path of sustaining sanity was for Anatola, as in all things, to clean up the shit herself. Anatola heads to the side yard where the gardening tools sloppily hang, and takes up a small garden spade and several plastic bags grimly. Shit. So. She was prescient. She begins picking up the shit, her anger prickling, uncomfortable, threatening, a wild horse pressing against the barn door of her heaving chest. She cannot let it gallop loose. Where will it go? She talks to herself like an old

woman, a bag woman, both of which she feels she is becoming. The rhythm of the cleaning, the gathering of the dirty brown lumps, the sanitizing of the flagstone eventually begins to calm her. The beast at her breast whinnies to silence.

Now from the street, winding through the trees on top of the Pat Green whistled tune, she hears a car pull up, Rachel's. How angry with these two, how separate, how attuned to them she is. The car door slams. A moment. The light in Rachel's room pops on. No "Hi, I'm Home." No, "Mom? Where are you?"

Anatola remembers coming home from school, slamming the front door behind her and crying out, "Mom?" The first thing she always did coming home, was to look for her mom, to check in, to say hello, to tell her about her day, which her mother was always eager and excited to hear about. Anatola would find Helen downstairs in the basement laundry room, where she'd perch atop the humming dryer, or join her mother in folding the freshly laundered sheets or towels or tee shirts; or in the backyard if the weather was nice, snapping wet clothes as she lifted them from the basket, placing the wooden clothespin atop them on the line with a satisfying squeech; or in the kitchen, filling the house with the mouth-watering aromas of her cooking, spaghetti sauce that had been simmering all day that Anatola greedily wolfed down in bowlful after bowlful, baked veal with thick slices of onion and paprika, or a pot roast rich with thick gravy.

Often Anatola would sit with her mother at the dining room table over a pot of orange pekoe tea, talking until the last rays of light were swallowed up by the night, the tea growing cold; Anatola never wanted the conversation to end. She chatted about friends, school, lessons, books, her mother's liquid brown eyes sparkling with admiration, her crooked smile flashing, her high-pitched laughter erupting in musical bursts that felt

like an award, a special gift just for her. There was always so much to talk about, until...until she was just shy of Rachel's age now, fifteen or sixteen, and entering into a world foreign and estranged to her mother, a world of stubborn will and defiance, no longer satisfied to live by rules, a world of "going out," and "hanging out," and Volkswagen vans with shaded windows.

Now, Rachel proceeds directly to her room, boots up her laptop, plugs into her iPod, and plunges deep within her meticulously constructed world of one in a house of three.

Anatola's sadness grows. Should she have had more children? They tried, she had even conceived in a relatively short amount of time, but that pregnancy ended in a torturous miscarriage and an emergency room visit. By the time Rachel was two, unbeknownst to Anatola, her womb had grown no longer hospitable for children. Fibroids crowded the space where an embryo should have attached, their shadowy spider-webbed curtain leading eventually to surgical early menopause. They could have adopted. Michael, surprisingly, really wanted to adopt, as did the three and four year old Rachel. But Anatola, beginning to glimpse autonomy as Rachel grew, was finished with babies. Now she wonders if that was her mistake. Was that the decision that has cost her Rachel's presence?

Her face set in a grimace, Anatola carries her newly minted bag of shit back to the side yard, flipping open the black garbage container, and heaving the bag forcefully. The shit hits the side of the container, the bag splits and its contents fly up, tumbling over the edge, splattering onto to the concrete below. Perfect. Inside her chest, the horse awakens, stomps its foot and whinnies. Anatola, with the might of an Olympian goddess, shoves

the rising scream down her throat clear to her belly, bends down, and picks up the shit. When she is finished, she realizes that the front doorbell has been ringing, the dogs yapping stridently. Michael, whistling and soldering, Rachel cocooning with her technology, have not heard a sound.

Anatola enters the kitchen through the side door, vigorously scrubs her hands with anti-bacterial soap, and strides to the door. Salespeople, most likely. Who else rings a door bell unbidden? Probably those pitiful sales children who are unleashed onto neighborhoods with their boxes of candy and useless knickknacks and magazine subscriptions pleading their hard luck cases of combating drug addiction and need to stay in school. Anatola pushes the dogs aside with her foot, scolding them to be quiet for God's sake already, and locks them into the den where they yap unrelentingly. By the time Anatola reaches the front door, she is loaded for bear.

Anatola yanks the door open.

She is staring into her own face. Golden blonde curly hair, piercing sky blue eyes, Paul Newman eyes – her father's eyes. Anatola is staring into her father's face -- her father as a young man somewhere in his mid twenties.

“Ms. Debrowska?”

He pronounces her name as it would be pronounced in Polish. Dam- brov'-ska. Suddenly, her heart is thundering in her chest, skipping beats, pounding against its chest cavity like a prisoner awakened hammering for release. Blood whooshes so loudly in her ears, she cannot hear anything else.

“Ms. Debrowska?”

The brick porch suddenly pitches, rising from its foundation to crush her. From out of the whooshing of her blood a shrill screech pierces.

“Mama!”

Rachel? Where did she come from? Anatola snaps back from a brittle fog. She lies sprawled awkwardly on the brick porch. Michael, also having appeared out of the ether, stares open-mouthed (there was that carp again) concern crinkling the corners of his Baltic blue eyes. Rachel, now speechless, stands open-mouthed and carp-like herself beside him.

“Lo...” Michael calls.

“Oh, my God. My God.” The visitor was repeating. He was still there, then, his face blanched. Not an apparition. Not a specter.

“Michael... Rachel... Oh...”

A tidal wave sluices over her, pinching her throat in icy splinter.

“Oh, my God... My God...”

“This is... “ Oh, my God, my God. “This is my son.”

San Francisco. Mid seventies. The year before she moved back to the East Coast. Her mother dead. Her father vanished to the Philippines. Anatola alone and pregnant.

A flurry of hands reaches for her, gripping her, helping her up, guiding her to the living room. Rachel still knocked speechless, in shock, her face bleached white with splotches of red peppering the porcelain. Michael wary, uncertain, watchful. Oh, God. Rachel.

Now, he was seated opposite her, his handsome face creased with emotion.

“I should have telephoned. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come.”

“No, no it’s all right.”

“Mama?” Rachel’s voice small, quivering.

”Lo?”

“I was afraid to telephone.”

Telephone. Not call. There was a strangely alien air about him. A stiltedness

“Afraid? To phone?”

“I could hang up. It would be too easy to disconnect. I am so sorry.” He was rising.

“No, please. Wait.”

“This was a mistake.”

“No, Please...”

He was striding towards the door. Long purposeful strides. Long strong legs, his calves beautifully delineated beneath his neatly pressed khakis.

Now, Anatola was rising, following behind him, running to catch up, to close the distance between the living room and the foyer.

“Wait! Please.”

He stops momentarily, a skittish gazelle arrested in mid-flight.

“Where are you staying? You’re staying somewhere?”

He reaches into his pants pocket, long elegant fingers, thin, tapering; again her father springs to mind. Surgeon’s hands. That’s what her mother used to say. “Your father has the hands of a surgeon.” He holds out a card from the hotel where he has miraculously landed.

“I’ll call you.”

“Are you sure?”

“I want to see you.”

He nods woodenly, emotions playing across his finely featured face too numerous, too changing to name.

“I don’t even know your name.”

“Pyotr. Pyotr Czarynski.”

She tries the name out on her tongue, as if sampling an exotic delicacy. “Pyotr. Czarynski.”

“I’ll wait, then. For you to call.”

Pyotr walks out the front door. Anatola grasps the card in her hand.

“Mama?”

“Oh. Rachel.”

Michael sighs. “Jesus.”

“You had a baby?”

“I was young, Rache... Twenty-four...”

“A baby?”

“A son. Pyotr.”

“And you never told me!”

“Sweetheart. It was a closed adoption. I never thought...”

“How could you not tell me!”

“Rachel...”

“I don’t believe you!” Flummoxed, incensed in the way only a seventeen year old girl learning of a mother’s betrayal for the first time can be, she flounces out of the room.

“Rachel!”

Doors slam in her wake, shattering, echoing, accusing.

In the aftermath of Rachel’s rage, a yawning silence trembles.

“Are you going to call him?”

Anatola, fuzzy, surreal, turns from the foyer, returning to the living room, where Michael stands like a centurion.

“Lo?”

“Yes?”

“Are you going to see him?”

“Yes.”

“Yes? That’s it? Yes”.

“He’s my son.”

“That’s what he said.” Ah. There it is. Michael’s suspicion, ever present, floating just beneath the surface of his life

“Did you look at him, Michael?”

“You don’t know anything about him.”

“I’ll demand papers. I’ll meet him in a public place.”

Michael explodes. “This is nuts!”

Why was he so angry? Was he seething at the sudden, messy appearance of a son long thought to be gone for good? Or was it the existence of that son in the first place? A pregnancy years before she’d met him. Had he ever forgiven her that?

“What do you expect me to do?”

“What about Rachel?”

“Rachel.”

“What a mess.”

“A mess. That’s an interesting way to put it.”

“Christ. I’m going to the shop.”

“You’re going to the shop? Now?” He doesn’t answer. Instead, he vanishes. In his leaving, silence. From Rachel’s room down the hall, silence. Anatola writhes with anguish, remorse, guilt, and blame, unable to navigate the rollicking waters, left in teeming solitude, alone, alone, alone.

Alone and pregnant in San Francisco.

Having a home no longer, her mother dead, her father long since abandoned his daughters for the Philippines, Anatola moved across the country to San Francisco when she graduated from the small college in New England she had attended. She knew some people there, some of her classmates had made the trek before her. When she’d arrived, she’d slept on the couch in the four bedroom flat, drawing on the largess of the people she knew, not really friends, she would later find out when after several weeks they asked her to leave. She found a job, found an apartment with roommates, and began finding a life among the hills and heart-piercing beauty that would alternately soothe her soul and tear it apart in its wonder and strangeness.

She had graduated from college a humanities major, but in San Francisco the vibrant theatre culture-- political, guerilla, street, dangerous and disruptive, brash, demanding, beckoned her like a siren. Anatola liked the shock; she liked knocking people out of their complacency. She had always been politically minded. In high school she led the student body as president of the student council in her junior and senior years.

This was the middle 60's and protest politics had just begun to wind its way east from the hotbed of Haight Ashbury to the sleepy town of Chicopee in the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts. Anatola led the parade. As president she organized walk-outs, protesting arcane rules against the length of hair, school dress codes (no bell-bottoms for boy, no pants of any kind for girls) restrictive rules against smoking, leaving campus, school rings. Within these issues of the day, Anatola found her voice—it was the essence of freedom that so impassioned her, that enthralled and infused her being with clarity and purpose.

A stark line of demarcation cleaved the class of 1967 from the class of 1968, a historical passage from the age of authoritarianism expressed in suit coats and buttoned down white shirts and ties and girls in skirts, bobby socks and saddle shoes, to the age of the Aquarian counter-culture of long-hair and bell bottoms and children of love and flowers and political protest, from the age of starched repression to the age of bold experimentation. The Viet Nam War blared over television screens, beaming its swath of destruction, dehumanization, brutality, and shock into safe and tidy middle class living rooms, and exploded across the front page of America, the death toll inexorable, awakening the children of Aquarius to the hypocrisy and duplicity of a government and a generation. The mellow feel-good harmony of the California surfing Beach Boys gave way to the psychedelic thrum of the Beatles, the soothing simplicity of the Carpenters to the raucous cacophony of Joe Cocker, the primal power of Credence Clearwater, and the sly irony of Country Joe and the Fish.

In her junior year in May of 1969 Anatola's leadership culminated in her greatest triumph, a walk-out that led to the principal's reluctant agreement to allow the students of

Chicopee High School to participate in a nation-wide Moratorium held as a formal protest to the war in Viet Nam. What had begun as a quiet protest during the lunch period had erupted into a passionate demonstration that closed the school down. Television crews arrived on the heels of the city police and the Superintendent of Schools. An ad hoc meeting was held in the student council room. The footage ran on the evening news, documenting the fledgling rise of student power rattling the warping gates of the establishment. The principal, a rigid authoritarian who believed in corporal punishment and blind adherence to school policy and rules, resigned quietly that summer. He was replaced by the vice principal, a former Marine, whose ramrod posture belied in the rights of students to have a voice in their own affairs.

That summer Anatola rode the crest of the wave of radical politics. Far too indoctrinated as the good Catholic girl to prescribe to free love, much to the frustration of the wild young stallions that galloped beside her, she, however, could find nothing restricted against rock n roll or cannabis and lysergic acid in either venial sins or mortal ones. Anatola threw herself into the heightened surrealism of acid rock and psychedelics. Though many of her friends scoffed, Anatola protested it wasn't just the high she was seeking. She burned with new vision, a freshly-pricked passion bursting to detonate the solid stone mountain of lock-step conformity and drudgery, of steel-trapped mind-set to free emerging depths of alternate perception and consciousness. Anatola wanted to change the world

That summer, however, was also the summer of her mother's illness. A chronic condition, the illness, the cancer, had been present for many years, attacking and retreating. But that summer the condition turned terminal, claiming her mother's life the

following April. The night of her mother's death, Anatola and her father had been embroiled in yet another ugly battle over whose responsibility it was to stay home. Her sister Clarisse was away at college. The argument ended with both of them storming out of the house, leaving her mother once again alone. That night, Anatola had plans to participate in a Native American cleansing and consciousness-raising ritual at a sweat lodge constructed in the Berkshire foothills that included the ceremonial smoking of peyote. She was still high when she returned home. Her mother, suddenly in distress, had to be rushed to Springfield Hospital, Anatola still tripping at her side.

Anatola's cousin, Lana, worked as a nurse at the hospital, and was immediately at their side, caring for Helen, administering to their fright. Amid the bleeping monitors and starched white nurses squeaking rubber-soled shoes against gleaming linoleum, Lana was at her most efficient and comforting best. In the hallway, her father, Edwin, unaware of Anatola's heightened state of awareness, grasped her hand, telling her that her mother would be staying the night, that everything would be all right, that Lana would take great care of her, that that her mother would be safely at home the next morning. They left the hospital in the dark of a moonless night, returning to the house on Carter Drive that sat as empty and cold as the fathomless midnight sky.

The next morning the phone rang at six a.m. Her mother was dead.

The sudden death plunged Anatola into a murky night that skittered along the edges of madness for a decade. An entire decade, it was true, the clutches of blackness from which Anatola only began to emerge when she met Michael in New York City and married him two years later.

Though still partially submerged in her grief and confusion, the fervor of guerilla theatre in San Francisco in the mid 70's reclaimed her activist soul. As she did with everything, Anatola threw herself into the intriguing new art form, studying every aspect from production to performance, designing costumes, make-up and hair, writing plays and performing in them. That summer she met Dimitri Kolcheck at the Theatre of the Magic Eye, a street theatre group that had found a home in a small performance space at the corner of Clement St. and Sixth Avenue in the Richmond District of San Francisco. The space had been donated to the troupe by an expatriate Hollywood director/producer who had seen his star rise and crash and now lived to recapture the fire in the belly that had propelled him to Hollywood only to be drowned in the rivers of greed, frivolity, and excess that coursed through Bel Air.

The Theatre of the Magic Eye was presenting the West Coast Premiere of a new David Mamet play, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. Anatola had been cast as Deborah, the young Jewish art student who discovers love and lust far from the art institute in the arms of white-collar clerk Danny. Dimitri had been cast as Danny. Something had happened to Anatola the moment she laid eyes on Dimitri, something that through all her forays into schoolgirl crushes, puppy love, and fledgling relationships had never happened to her before, a tingling and a tension that drove her mad and senseless. Dimitri was tall and blonde and broad-shouldered with green eyes that could crinkle with laughter and pierce like a shiv to the heart with scorn. The magnetic force between them was palpable. Like opposite poles they violently repelled, even as they savagely attracted. Anatola, still knocked off course by sorrow and bewilderment, was vulnerable prey to the power Dimitri wielded magnificently.

Oddly, all that power and force dissipated as soon as Dimitri found himself alone with Anatola in the bedroom. There was a coolness about him, an icy vein of indifference that trickled beneath the white hot crust of his exterior passion, a frigid wind that try as she might, Anatola could not fan into tropic embers with any regularity. Stranger still was the key she unwittingly discovered one day that unlocked the passions of Dimitri. They did not live together, though Anatola spent more nights than not with him in his one bedroom apartment adjacent to the Tenderloin. His parents had come down from Eugene, Oregon to visit him and see the play. Over the protestations of Anatola, Dimitri insisted that she stay with him during the visit. That night, with his parents camped out on the lumpy sofa bed in the living room half a breath away, Dimitri couldn't keep his hands off her.

The magnetized affair ran its course in three months. Dimitri told her he never could quite get over the size of her thighs and the un-dainty explosion of her often unwarranted (in his view) laughter. Anatola was in shock. Six weeks later, she discovered she was pregnant. The play, a huge success, was still running. Every night Anatola became Deborah who made love to Dimitri as Danny on stage. Every night Anatola's despair grew. She prayed that the power of her real love would rekindle the spark that had once ignited so ferociously. But every night the cold wind that was Dimitri blew past her, shattering her prayer into icy bits. When she told him she was pregnant, his marble-esque green eyes turned reptilian. "Are you sure its mine?" Anatola, still in love, chaste in that love, was crushed. "If it's mine, I'll help you pay for the abortion. But I want a receipt."

The day of her appointment at Planned Parenthood, Anatola, pale and nauseous sat aboard the bus that lumbered its way from the outskirts of the Sunset district toward downtown, the magnificent beauty of San Francisco sweeping past the sunshine-filled bus windows, her unflappable friend Marc, gay and debonair holding her hand beside her. As the breaks squealed against the steel trolley tracks of California Street, the passengers fighting the downward forceful pull of gravity, Anatola pondered how she could have been so stupid and so careless -- not only with her heart, but with her body. Outside the window, a row of motorcycles stood smug and secure parked against the curb. Anatola imagined rising suddenly, sharply pulling the bell, disembarking and marching across California Street, knocking over every one of those shining metallic monsters. When he wasn't driving his cab, or playing Danny at the Theatre of the Magic Eye, Dimitri rode a motorcycle.

The counselors at Planned Parenthood were compassionate and kind. One woman, a former nun, zeroed in on Anatola's Catholicism. "Sweetheart, Adam did not become a man until God breathed the breath of life into him." Not a sin, then. Neither venial nor mortal. Anatola took the valium offered, undressed, and lay down upon the table, her feet encased in the cold leather stirrups. The doctor came in, business-like, brusque but not rude, and took her quivering hand in his warm soft grip. Surgeon's hands, she thought. "You won't feel much," he promised. "Perhaps a pinch. In about twenty minutes, it'll all be over." She looked into his eyes, grey, confidant. The nurse began inserting the tube that would begin the procedure. Suddenly, Anatola sat up. "Wait." The doctor looked at her, his patience unruffled. They stood, unhurried, waiting, the doctor, the nurse, the nun, all waiting for her. "I... I think I've changed my mind."

“Are you sure, dear?” The nun asked gently.

“Yes. Yes, please. I’m sorry...I...”

“No need to apologize.” she responded sweetly, without anger or recrimination.

The nurse removed the tube. Anatola returned to the dressing room. She put her clothes back on, and left. She didn’t get her money back. She never thought to ask for a receipt.

The next weekend the play mercifully closed. Marc agreed to sell her furniture, and helped her pack up her life in San Francisco, promising to send out the calico cat Tasha they had adopted together shortly after they had met in acting class across the bay in Oakland, as soon as she was settled. Anatola was going home.

Anatola arrived at Bradley Air Field in Hartford, Connecticut as night was chasing dusk from the skies, leaving a mournful trail of violet and magenta fingers grasping at the clouds as if reluctant to let go and fade into oblivion. It was the middle of March, and a blanket of new snow had just fallen. Across the low hills speckled with oak and elm and sugar maple stripped of their foliage in the grip of winter, the streaks of violet reflected against the powdery cover raising a weight of inexorable sadness in Anatola. After her mother died, alone in the house, her father away, her sister back at school, Anatola would sit in the tiny room that had been converted to her bedroom, her back against the burnt umber wall, gazing out towards the end of the street where Carter drive abutted Granby Road. There was a house there, across the road, shades drawn against the approaching night, a maple in front, its branches still barren from the passing winter. The sun brushed the horizon behind the tree, wrapping the desolate branches in a

fierce orange-tinged glow as the darkness pressed in all around. Anatola, alone, watched until the last dying ember burned into the blackness, paralyzing sorrow overtaking her.

Outside the airport, her bags gathered at her feet, Anatola saw her Aunt Alka swing her Cadillac Deville into the No Parking Zone. Alka lowered the power window, her smartly sculpted red head enwreathed in the perennial cloud of smoke that followed wherever she led. “Hello, darling. Right on time.” Alka hopped out of the caddy and helped Anatola stow her luggage into the mafia-sized trunk. “Is this all?” “Yes,” Anatola replied. The two women got back into the car and headed west into the dying sun and night and darkness and beseeching maple tree that was Massachusetts.

Since her mother’s death five years ago, Anatola had avoided coming home to the house on Carter Drive. Those first few ghastly weeks after her death, their small family, her father, Clarisse and herself, slept away from home as much as possible, bunking at Alka’s house, or her with her father’s other sister, Eva, or even down the street at her grandmother’s house. Her father remarked, “We’d sleep on a picket fence if it meant we wouldn’t have to go back to that house.” Her mother’s death tore a hole in the family, an abyss of pain like an abscess weeping and pus-filled with recrimination and sorrow, guilt and loss.

Once she’d left San Francisco, Anatola was unsure where she would land. She had told no one about the pregnancy. She had no idea what to expect – shame, shock, recrimination. Alka drove through the gently rolling hills to her elegant Colonial in the upscale town of Longmeadow where she lived with her husband (Anatola’s uncle) Milos and their sixteen year old daughter Lydia. Alka asked no questions of her returning niece but chirped mindlessly away, a steady stream of dreary consciousness about Milos and

Lydia, her sister Eva and her husband John and cousins Lana and Richard and Keith, all blending seamlessly with the rhythm of the tires against the black strip of highway and the metronomic windshield wipers as they pushed aside fat flakes of newly falling slushy snow. Anatola was grateful that nothing was required of her.

Anatola remained in Longmeadow those first few days, nauseous and sea sick. She could barely eat, and Alka, fearing the flu, plied her gently with tea and toast and her watery, bland chicken soup. Lydia, a high school sophomore came and went sullenly. Milos, a businessman like her father was away often, like her father. Anatola gladly free-floated, thinking neither of future nor past, and would have easily remained there indefinitely, when one day Alka announced that she was having a family dinner – a family reunion, really, since Anatola had been away now for nearly five years. Even Clarisse would be coming down from New York to be there. Anatola's free-floating bubble of seclusion popped into panic.

When Anatola's mother died, her world collapsed. In June she dutifully attended her senior prom, and later that week, graduation. But she moved through life as if underwater, as if a hole had been sprung through her psyche that left her life slowly leeching away. One day soon, there would be no life left. That September she went off to Boston University, and came home the following week, ashamed and defeated. She could no longer function in the world. She could no longer pretend to function in the world. The loss of her mother hovered over everything like an apparition that refused to be appeased. At night she prayed fervently for the return of her sanity. By day she struggled through a bleak breakfast of burnt toast and instant coffee, glued to the same black and white portable television that had kept her mother company all those months while she

struggled with her cancer alone. Now, Anatola struggled with her sanity alone. Clarisse was back at Ithaca; her father was away, away, on business, at bars, with companions, running running running from his own crushing guilt and crippling loss.

Not only had Helen's death ripped a hole in Anatola, the loss slashed through the fabric of the entire family. They gamely retained the tradition of family dinners, but Anatola found she could not attend. To be gathered there, as if...as if life continued on without missing a step. As if at any moment Helen would appear around the corner, her crooked smile lighting up her soft brown eyes, offering up to her beloved family the gift of one of her magical pies. Far from comfort, the presence of her family without the presence of her mother seared the loss like a chasm into her soul.

Anatola hid. From school. From life. From family. The psychiatrist her father arranged for her to see diagnosed her with disassociate stress, and prescribed Valium, which soon became the magic bullet, the one and only thing that could safely guide her through her waking hours. She grew dependent for awhile, not on the physical need for the drug, but on the psychological. If she had her magic pill, she could make it through the day to the safe harbor of sleep which came crashing down upon her with the aid of Demerol. If not... She didn't dare contemplate if not. If not what remained of her life would leech away for good, finally. She would be lost to the ether – her body present on earth, her mind shattered.

Now, five years later, long relieved of daily dependence on a magic bullet, Anatola faced a fear more crippling than she had faced since her mother's death. The family would gather, all together – except for her father who was safely ensconced far away in the Philippines – without her mother, and she with child. What if her madness

returned? What if her disassociate stress thundered like an unleashed raging behemoth from the corners of her mind, gripped her in iron paws and stole her away, this time for good.

As doomsday approached unabated, Anatola's panic rose. Clarisse called incessantly from New York, chattering excitedly about the upcoming reunion with her recently un-exiled sister. The two had never been close and, panic rising, Anatola wondered often to whom Clarisse thought she was speaking. Perhaps there was another sister Anatola never knew about. Perhaps it was this sister with whom Clarisse thought she was about to reunite. Lana, too, called and cooed, prattling on about little Lolita returned from the West. Lana in her brassy indomitable way insisting upon using the childhood name that had heaped such scorn and flames of shame upon the young Anatola from her peers whenever they heard its utterance, the name Anatola with uncharacteristic hysteria, blonde hair spiking and blue eyes sparking wet with impotent tears, demanded be expunged from the family lexicon – her hysterics only so much more fodder for the family mill to grind with great glee and not a whit of compassion. Lolita. Lolo. The blonde bombshell.

As the day approached, Anatola felt pushed ever down, encompassed by a glob-like liquid, thick, viscous, forced under glass, unhearing, unheard. Her world was shrinking, once again, growing out-sized and surreal as it had after her mother's death, Anatola morphing into the stranger, again, walking upon an Earth unknown, unknowable, about to, at any moment, slide permanently beneath the glass, entombed. Nowhere to run, no choice but to face her demise.

Anatola's fears of consuming panic, however, proved to be writ large and inconsequential. Far from producing immutable pain, the gathering of the clan, from the first doorbell ring, wrapped her in a cloak of such boisterous welcome that she sank gratefully, giving herself over completely to their affection. There were Milos and John, enter arguing as always, over the best way to prepare the upcoming Holiday (Easter) bird. There was Eva, laughter trilling, holding her tightly, rolling off to the kitchen to help Alka. There was her handsome cousin Keith, BFF from carefree childhood days, looking as handsome as ever, despite the pot belly he managed to accumulate during her self-imposed banishment and his little brother Richard, little no more, tall and straight as his father, an air force lieutenant as John had once been. Lana and Clarisse and her grandmother Frances, all there, all speaking at once, Polish mingled freely with English, Alka summoning them to her elegant table, passing the welcoming feast which she had made just for Anatola that included all her favorites: roast chicken with gravy and sage and onion stuffing, mashed potatoes, capusta (cabbage cooked with vinegar and caraway seeds), and pickled beets.

The food looked sumptuous, but Anatola could barely touch it. After dinner, Milos and John with the boys Richard and Keith retired to the den, Lydia slumped off to her bedroom, and the women gathered in the gold-toned living room for tea and lemon cake – another of Anatola's favorites, another exquisite tidbit she could hardly nibble about the edges before, blanching and setting her fork down beside the golden trimmed plate. The sharp-eyed women, these Debrowskas knew immediately that something was amiss. Anatola, never a picky eater, was known for a voracious appetite that belied her

smallish stature. This Anatola, newly returned from the wild west, was pale and drawn, listless and weepy. This was not the flu.

“Darling,” Eva said, wrapping her arm about Anatola’s shoulders, “tell us what’s wrong.”

The dam burst. Anatola told. She told a fabulous tale of a lost love, a young man handsome and noble and brave, her love, struck horribly down in the prime of his life – a motorcycle accident along the twisting Pacific Coast Highway. The details of the accident were particularly vivid as Anatola warmed to this part of the tale. She had often envisioned just such a bloody end to the duplicitous Dimitri. They were about to be married. She was having his baby.

The Debrowska women closed ranks about her, murmuring and petting her – even Lana, even Clarisse, who shied away from physical affection. Anatola felt like the center of a flower, a daisy or a black-eyed Susan, warmed and nourished by a protective circle of petals, soft as warm butter, tough as nails. As Anatola cuddled at the heart of the flower that was the Debrowska women, it was decided that the best course of action was for her to move in with her grandmother to await the birth. Frances’s husband Ted, elegant but as duplicitous as Dimitri, had died in the early 70’s. Frances, approaching eighty, though visited everyday by the faithful Alka, her house cleaned meticulously once a week by Sophie the housekeeper Frances had shared with Helen, was in great need of more steady companionship. Spring was here, the tomatoes needed planting, the cabbages needed tending, and it was high time Anatola learned how to make the dough for pierogi from scratch..

And so it was decided that Anatola would return to Carter Drive just two houses down the street from the home she had grown up in and where her mother had died. No one broached the subject of what would happen once the baby was born.

If the recrimination had not come as expected from the petal-like Debrowska women, Anatola had enough guilt, remorse, and shame for the whole clan rolled into one. Returning to Chicopee, to her home town, pregnant and unmarried was a source of almost unbearable shame. Moving into her grandmother's house, Anatola hunkered down against the onslaught of self-inflicted ignominy.

Frances said nothing about the baby, but hummed softly and sang sweetly in Polish in her high girlish voice as she worked in her garden, or rolled pierogi dough, Anatola dusted with flour beside her, her small belly just beginning to protrude beneath the stretch of white starched apron.

"You should go out, *kochanie*." Frances would tell her. "See your friends. You always had so many friends *Lolaczka*."

But most of Anatola's high school chums were no longer in Chicopee. Her best friend Joyce was living in Kentucky with her husband, Bev in Florida with hers. Long since evolved away from her heady days of psychedelic mind expansion exploration, Anatola had no desire to hook up with that lost tribe of 60's hippies. Many of them, from what she heard from Joyce or Bev, had not survived the experiment, dying young of drug overdoses, jailed for possession or selling, brain-damaged from too many trips on that spinning wheel.

Anatola was a stranger here now, living in a strange landscape that, only two doors down, had once held a mother and a father and two sisters. The father was far

flung, vanished against the terrors of a shredded life on the other side of the world. The mother dead. Only Clarisse, the sister, remained, and she lived amongst the concrete and steel of New York City.

The girls hardly saw each other the summer after their mother's death. Clarisse took up with her old high school boyfriend, a lanky red-haired tennis player, whom Anatola found to be excruciatingly dull. But his family was quiet and kind and non-turbulent, and Eric's mother made a place for Clarisse, feeling sorry for the orphaned young woman, even fixing up a spare bedroom just for her. Anatola tried to continue her life as if... as if nothing had happened, as if life continued rolling along unmarked. She tried to return to her wild galloping days, but her mind was splintering, her grip on the world slipping. That fall, when she entered Boston University, her mind shattered. Anatola was unable to remain at school, and so returned home, defeated. Vastly ashamed, she dutifully reported to the psychiatrist her father, during one of his infrequent trips home, found for her and took up a solitary residence in the house on Carter Drive. She saw few friends save for the boyfriend she'd had before she left for Boston, found a mindless part-time job, and painfully clawed her way back to a respectable form of sanity. In January she returned to Boston, working straight through summer and the following year to complete the two year program she had been enrolled in.

But something had been lost, something irretrievably taken from her. That smart confidant young woman who fearlessly led a strike against injustice, who forcefully demanded her voice, and the voice of those she represented, be heard, had vanished. After graduating from Ithaca College, Clarisse moved to the wild frontier of New York City. She worked as an editor at a hip magazine for teens, interviewing teen idols, not

hunkering anywhere, frightened of nothing it seemed to Anatola, who since that death, was frightened of everything. Now, she had been plunged back into this intimate, brutally familiar landscape that offered such comfort at times, yet more often twisted so cruelly, so horribly out of shape, beyond recognition, beyond knowing, weird, and surreal.

And the child, the child that was growing inside...

Those first few months, Anatola's seasickness remained. She slept often, a deep catatonic sleep from which she awakened heavy-limbed and groggy, at the edge of nausea. Everything hurt. Her breasts, tender and sensitive, hurt to touch; her fingers and toes puffed and reddened. She had headaches and backaches and indigestion and heartburn. At her grandmother's house, working alongside her in the garden in the early spring, cooking with her, helping Sophie with the dusting and cleaning, Anatola returned to a free-floating state, a burgeoning mother ship floating through unsteady seas, content to think of nothing.

Alka visited her mother everyday, sitting with her on the front porch, smoking her ubiquitous cigarette that made Anatola even more nauseous than usual. Alka had promised not to smoke in the house, for Anatola and the baby's sake. Once a week Alka would do her mother's hair, washing it in the kitchen sink, rolling it with squat brush rollers held tightly in place against the skull with hot pink stick pins. They would speak together in Polish, the lilting language of swishing sounds flowing over Anatola, eddying and whirling about her, carrying her back to her childhood and her mother and father speaking so that she would not understand what was said. Lying half-asleep in the back seat of the car, Clarisse sound asleep beside her, the language musical, contrapuntal to the rhythm of the windshield wipers and the ticking of the turn signal. The language seeped

into her. Often, she surprised her parents by repeating in English what they had tried to keep hidden in Polish.

Clarisse, with her little sister in trouble, blooming with child, took on the big sister role with a vengeance, calling often, urging Anatola to visit her in New York (which sent shivers of fear electrifying her spine), and driving down as often as possible to keep her company.

It was after a month and a half or so, when the seasickness began to fade, and her hormones leveled, that Anatola pinpointed the heaviest pain she bore was neither the physical discomforts of the pregnancy, nor the psychological torment of her predicament, but the unbearable weight of her broken heart. She still loved him.

Speaking to Marc one night long distance to California, Marc said, “Of course you’re still attached to him, Chooch.” They called each other chooch, something Marc had begun, only one of his many endearing qualities, this nicknaming thing that pulled her in tightly to him, making her feel special and unique in his universe. Marc was handsome and debonair, quick-witted and wise, with an air of the landed gentry gone elegantly to seed. His front tooth was charmingly chipped (even his agent said he should never fix it), his smile impish. His conversation was sprinkled liberally with literary references she missed more often than not, and his observations on life and love crackled with accuracy, dash, and humanity. Anatola often found herself astounded at his love for her. She never felt worthy that she could measure up to his urbanity. Often, she felt like a small town school marm, dull, mundane, slow-witted.

Once, after a particularly brutal argument with Dimitri, as she drank wine at Mark’s tidy apartment on California Street, she began to wonder if perhaps Marc might

not be adverse to switching teams. But he never played that game. He was clear from the beginning, presenting solid no nonsense boundaries. Sensing her thought, understanding the pain from which it sprang, he bundled her up in her coat, and trotted her off to his favorite Chinese restaurant, changing the setting, cutting off the intimacy of a man and a woman alone in a one bedroom apartment, making her laugh at his foolish stories, and eating way too much Chow Fun.

With the boundaries so firmly set, Anatola was free to love him fully with abandon.

“Of course you’re still in love with him,” Marc continued. “You are attached to him by the silver cord. He’s inside you. You won’t be able to break the psychic bond with him, until the baby is out of you.”

“Great. Only six and a half months to go.”

“You don’t have to wait that long, Chooch. Not if you don’t really want to.”

“I know. But I do.

“I know you do.”

She paused, grateful as always at his quiet, deep understanding of her. He would not judge this decision. Suddenly, a question arose. Her mouth went dry.

“Have you seen him?”

“Chooch.”

“Tell me.”

“No. What good would it do?”

“He’s seeing someone.”

“Chooch.”

“Is she pretty?”

“Chooch.”

“Tell me!”

“She’s fat.”

“Fat!”

“Big bosoms. Big butt. Even her hair is big.”

Of all things, big! Excruciatingly fastidious, Dimitri liked his women lean, as she remembered only too well, oh she, of the too thick thighs. Anatola began to giggle.

“She’s cheap. A floozy. Like him.”

Cheap. A floozy. Still in love with a cheap creep who could only get it up when his parents lay in the next room and who wanted a receipt for an abortion.

“What is wrong with me!”

“Nothing. You fell for a blackguard, that’s all. Like it has never happened before. Like the most beautiful, the smartest women in the history of the world and Hollywood, haven’t fallen victim to that kind of predator everyday.”

“Not me, chooch. I’m supposed to be too smart for that.”

“Ah, intellect and love, and never shall the twain twixt.”

Through the phone lightly came tiny mewling sounds, immediately recognizable.

“Tash” They intoned musically together.

“How is she?”

“She misses her mommy.”

“I’m sorry, Chooch. My grandmother has allergies...”

“No problem. Uncle Chooch is taking very good care of her. Once you are settled, off she will go.”

“I love you, Chooch.”

“I love you, too.”

Marc was the only one she could talk to, honestly talk to without prevarication about the pregnancy. She had told no one else in San Francisco, preferring to steal away from the city like a thief in the night, so overwhelmed by her circumstances. Here, at home in Massachusetts, the Debrowski clan was laboring under the romantic but false illusion of the Big Lie. Why had she done that? Why had she reacted the way she had, skulking away from San Francisco, burning with shame, compounding her isolation with the Big Lie of Dimitri’s demise, constructing an impenetrable wall she hid lonely behind. Hadn’t she learned anything from her years in therapy?

Anatola did not know why she had stopped the procedure that day. How different her life would have been if she had simply allowed it to continue. She would still be in San Francisco, moving on now to the next play, the next venture. Still among her friends.

If her mother had been alive... well, if her mother had been alive, she would never have found herself in this position. Helen would have been mortified, would have imploded with the shame of her unmarried daughter with child. If her mother had been alive, Anatola would have remained steady and level-headed. She would have gone off to school to Wyoming or Hawaii or Budapest, roaming with abandon wherever she pleased, secure in the anchor of home and stability to which she could return at any moment, sure of comfort, of encouragement, of bottomless unconditional love. If her mother had been

alive, she would never have acted with such careless disregard. She would never have needed to be loved so desperately.

She still had not told her father, nor had anyone else – leaving the decision to her. He would cringe, too – out of shame – but not for her act, her father would turn her circumstances into his fault, would cast all the blame upon himself, for his abandonment, his neglect when her mother died and he could barely take care of himself, never mind tend to his daughter who was slowly shattering. He would beg her forgiveness, castigate himself, turning her need to his need, making her then to comfort him. But he wouldn't come home. Of that she was sure. He hadn't come home for his father's funeral, nor his brother's two years later. He would never come home again.

A few days after her phone call to Marc, Frances took her by the hand, and led her to the covered swing in the midst of the garden. It was a lovely soft spring morning, the sun still lay low in the Eastern sky, just beginning its rise, leaving the morning cool and bright. Dew clung to the short green grass; Anatola had just mowed the lawn yesterday. In the garden, Frances' tomatoes were budding, small hard green balls shimmering in the morning light. At the edge of the garden were Frances' apple and pear trees, their blossoms fading now in preparation for the growing of the fruit, petals lifted loose by a lazy breeze, floating delicately to the ground. Fat daffodils and roses lined the fences, their delicious fragrance mixing with the fragrance of jasmine and lilac, and the earthy scent of newly turned soil. Anatola reflected that despite her anguish, this spring, waiting as her baby grew, working alongside her grandmother in this garden, rolling pierogi dough and cabbage leaves stuffed with ground beef and rice set simmering in butter and

bacon fat, her grandmother singing in Polish in her high sweet voice, was one of the happiest springs she could remember.

“*Lolaczka*,” her grandmother began. “I spoke to the sisters at St. Stanislaus. They can arrange for you to have your baby at the Catholic Hospital there. You can start seeing a doctor next week, so the baby has the right care.”

“But Baci,” Anatola responded. “I have no money. No insurance... I can call Dad, but he you know he never has any money.”

“Don’t worry, *barzdo ladny dziwczynna*. It’s all taken care of.”

“But, you don’t have anything to spare...”

“*Lolaczka*... I was very good to the sisters after the war. The Communists took everything, then tried to give us money. Fffft!” She made a gesture of disgust, her whole face transforming with the anger still present after all these years. “Imagine those *slaby chlop!* Paying us for what was already ours. But my mother took the money – why not, it belonged to us. She sent me my share. And I was very good to the sisters. Everything is taken care of.”

She took Anatola’s hand in hers, her palm smooth and soft. “Now, *ukochana*, you must do some serious thinking.” Frances lifted Anatola’s chin, her dark honey eyes peering intently into Anatola’s light blue ones. “What do you want to do, after the baby is born?”

Suddenly, Anatola’s eyes filled with tears. She had not thought about this. She had not wanted to think about it, as if avoiding the question would make the problem disappear. Frances gently pulled Anatola’s head onto her ample bosom, stroking her long blonde hair.

“The sisters can arrange an adoption into a good family.” Anatola wept harder, all delusion shattered. She was pregnant. She was having a baby. She could not keep a baby. She would be giving the baby away.

“When I was a young girl like you, younger than you, I fell in love. Oh, so much in love with this boy, my heart ached every time I saw him. He was maybe a year or two older than me. My parents knew his family. They owned land that was right next to ours. The family would come to visit, and we would all have dinner together. And after dinner, the grown-ups would go into the parlor, and the men would smoke their cigars and drink their brandy, and the women would sit in a circle and do their needlepoint and gossip. The children would play games in another room, or in the summer when the light stayed until very late, we would ride horses across the fields. In the winter, our steward would arrange toboggan rides with big torches lighting up the snow. And so I would see this boy often, and we would play games together and sing, or ride horses side by side, or bundle closely in the toboggan or in the sleigh.

“When autumn came, I was sent to school outside of Krakow, a finishing school they called it, where proper young ladies learned how to keep their hands smooth and to pour tea and to engage in intelligent conversation. From school I would write him, and he would answer me with the most beautiful letters filled with love songs and poems.

“One day after I had been at school for several weeks, as the trees were turning shades of orange and red and gold, he arranged to come to see me in Krakow. He told me he had something very important to tell me. I arranged for permission to leave the school grounds and go into the city, where I was to meet him by Wawel Castle on the banks of the Vistula River. I was so excited all day, I couldn’t pay attention in class. I was a very

good student, *Lolaczka*, like you, and so my teachers knew something was up, because a young lady with plans so exciting that she couldn't sit still through her French lessons, could mean only one thing: she was in love and had a rendezvous with her beaux. With smiles, my teachers allowed me to leave before my final class.

“I raced to my room, brushed my hair until it shone, put on my prettiest dress, the one with the embroidered bodice I had stitched myself, and ran out to the driver who was waiting patiently in his buggy with two golden horses. We clattered off to the city, oh! So slow! So slow!

“When we reached the castle, I fled from the carriage, running down the steep grassy bank to the river. I was early, but my heart was singing with hope that he would be early, too.

“I reached the edge of the river, at the elbow of a long sweeping curve. There was a stone bridge that spanned across the river there, and under the bridge, lying among the weeds, was my beloved. And in his arms, was another girl.”

Anatola lifted her head, and looked at her grandmother.

“*Baci*. What did you do?”

“I cried and cried and cried, *moja niski Lolaczka*, what do you think? And then, I came to America.”

Frances laid Anatola's head to rest upon her bosom once more, and began to sing:

Twoje oczy sa jak maliny
Twoje oczy sa jak dwie gwiazdy
Oh moja dwiewczynno, moja jedyna
Twoje mysli sa moimi myslami

Anatola remembered the words of the lullaby from when she would visit her grandmother over night, and Frances would sing Anatola and Clarisse to sleep:

“Your eyes are like a berry.
Your eyes are like two stars.
Oh my girl, my one and only,
Your thoughts are my thoughts.”