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GYPSIES ON THE BRIDGE

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Laura and her roommate Karen tramped along the frozen mud road that led through the university, past a wall with *OGNEOPASNO!* painted on it in huge red letters. An icy wind blew off the Neva River. It was January in Leningrad.

“Flammable,” Karen mumbled, reflexively translating. Somewhere nearby, invisible to the naked eye, there was, apparently, a fire hazard.

“There’s nothing to eat,” Laura complained.

“What are you talking about, comrade?” Karen put on an exaggerated Russian accent. “The Soviet Union produces much food that is tasty. If you don’t like fish head soup or unidentified gray meat, that is your problem. The gristle is the best part! Only four and a half months to go.”

Laura’s laugh was hollow. Two weeks in the Soviet Union and she was already anxious to go home. Five months of bitter

cold, inedible food, filthy dorms, boring classes . . . how would she survive it?

“I wouldn’t mind a little deprivation if everything wasn’t so dull and *gray*. Where is the passion?” Laura moaned as the wind bit at her nose. “Where is the soul?” All she saw around her was ugliness and a depressing conformity. “Where is the beauty?”

“Is that what you came here for? I came for the wild punk-rock scene. You think *you’re* disappointed. . . .” Karen stopped just outside the university gate. “I’m going to find a bakery or something. Loaf of black bread?”

“And some cheese, please,” Laura requested.

“If I can find some.”

On their second day in Leningrad, Karen and Laura had walked into a bakery and asked — in their careful classroom Russian — for two rolls. “Can’t you see we’re busy?” the stout woman behind the counter barked. She wore a white apron dusted with flour and a white kerchief in her hair. No one else was in the store except for a skinny, sullen teenage boy who slouched against the empty bread shelves.

“But . . . we are the only people here,” Laura pointed out.

“Do you have any black bread?” Karen asked.

“We’re busy!” the woman snapped.

Baffled, the two Americans left empty-handed. A few days later, when Laura had stopped in a meat shop to ask for some *kolbasa*, the butcher replied, “We’re busy! Any idiot can see that!”

Again, she was the only customer in the store, but as she glanced around she realized that they had nothing in stock but a gray pile of ground pork.

“Shoo!” the butcher said. “I’ve got work to do.” He snatched up a penknife and started picking his teeth with it. Laura left.

He was clearly — defiantly — not busy. The real problem seemed to be that he was out of sausage.

Ever hopeful, Karen turned right on her quest for black bread, toward the Palace Bridge, which led to Nevsky Prospekt and the center of the city. Laura turned left, walking down the University Embankment to the Builders’ Bridge that led to Dormitory Number Six. She had to write a paper for Grammar class on “A Typical Day at My American University.”

Leningrad State University dominated Vasilievsky Island, which sat in the middle of the Neva River like an iceberg, dividing it into the Big Neva and the Little Neva. Karen was headed over the Big Neva toward the main part of the city, where most of the major tourist attractions — Nevsky Prospekt, the Hermitage, fancy hotels, other museums and monuments — glittered in the winter sun. Laura prepared to cross the Little Neva to Petrovsky Island, where their dorm — a special dorm for foreigners — stood apart from the main university campus, keeping the foreign students and their bad Western influence safely isolated from the rest of the kids.

At the midpoint of the bridge, when it was too late to turn back, there they were: two gypsy women carrying baby-shaped

bundles, their black scarves flapping like crows' wings, posted like Scylla and Charybdis to assault anyone who tried to pass. There were always at least two gypsy women on the bridge, and they always carried what looked like bundled infants. Laura had yet to see a baby's face in those bundles, or hear a cry. It struck her as strange that all the gypsy women should have babies exactly the same age, and none older than six months. Where were the gypsy toddlers?

She took a deep breath and charged forward. She had to get across the bridge somehow. It was by far the shortest way back to the dorm, and walking farther than necessary in the bitter cold was not appealing.

"Daitye kopeiki! Daitye! Daitye!" The women swarmed Laura, sweeping the baby bundles under her nose just fast enough so that she couldn't see inside. "Give us kopecks for the babies!"

At orientation, Laura's American professor chaperones, the husband-and-wife team of Dr. Stein (wife) and Dr. Durant (husband), had warned the students not to give money to the gypsies, for once you did, they'd never leave you alone. Laura dreaded this confrontation on the bridge every day, twice a day, and even though she suspected that there were no babies — not in those bundles, anyway — she could hardly keep herself from reaching into her pocket for a few thin brown coins. Karen had always stopped her before, but now Karen wasn't here, and Laura's resistance was low. If those babies were hungry, she knew how they felt.