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'The Girl From the Hermitage'

Author Molly Gartland gives readers a compelling addition to St. Petersburg fiction.

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Author Molly Gartland

Tens of thousands of nameless older women inhabit St. Petersburg, picking their way amongst the pockmarked sidewalks and treacherous cobblestones, dressed in clean but shabby clothes, their shoulders stooped with decades of carrying heavy burdens. They are as integral to the city as the elaborate facades and the noonday gun from Peter and Paul Fortress, but these women attract less attention with the city's many visitors, and rarely — if ever — do they find themselves the heroines of novels set in St. Petersburg.

Not so in Molly Gartland's debut novel, "The Girl from the Hermitage," which gives a name to one such woman and places her at the heart of a multi-generational family saga, set in the waning years of the Soviet Union and the messy transition to Vladimir Putin's Russia.

We meet Gartland's protagonist, Galina, as a child during one of St. Petersburg's darkest hours, the 900-day siege of Leningrad by the Nazi army which lasted from 1941 to 1945. Galina and her artist father, Mikhail, join their neighbors Anna and Vera in seeking shelter in the Hermitage during the relentless Nazi bombardment. Mikhail's commission to paint a family portrait for a senior military officer saves this beleaguered foursome from the slow starvation that was the fate of millions of the besieged city's inhabitants. Gartland has marshalled details of life in that period into vibrant and moving scenes of the macabre pathos of frozen corpses, the gnawing hunger pangs that wallpaper glue soup cannot assuage, and the ghostly half-existence without light or heat during those harrowing years.

We then follow Galina and her family and friends into Brezhnev's stagnation period, through the messy 1990s, and into the present. Gartland's time as an expatriate in Russia during this period serves her well, and she is as comfortable with her post-war social history as she is with the siege, creating scenes, which artfully evoke Stagnation era privations, the pared-down, bucolic life of a Russian dacha, and the garish nascent capitalism of the 1990s. The scene detailing the contents of an expat's apartment from the point of view of her cleaning woman may cause foreign veterans of that era to wince, and justifiably so.

Galina emerges as a sympathetic heroine, behind whom we easily rally, hoping that the end of her story will be less tumultuous than its beginning and middle. Gartland pits the richly drawn Galina against a constantly changing society and chaotic economy, forcing her to find novel ways to survive and thrive, while pursuing her passion for painting.

Other characters are understandably more two-dimensional, though the character of Masha who transitions from mousey Soviet student to a textbook 1990s Russian "dyev" complete with lacquered talons, a Mary Kay sales kit, and the obligatory foreign boyfriend is pitch perfect.

I did, however, find myself craving more time with Galina, Vera, and their affable guardian Boris in the girls' post-war adolescent years and wanting to know what happened to several characters, including Galina's grandson Igor, who got entangled in an all-too familiar web of Russian corporate intrigue. And I wished that Gartland had done more with the Hermitage itself, which features only episodically.

But wanting more is a sign of compelling characters. "The Girl from the Hermitage" is a commendable debut novel by an author who has a clear talent for parlaying careful research into a credible sense of time and place. In choosing to craft a likable and memorable heroine from one of the nameless older women of St. Petersburg and set her at the heart of one of the city's most turbulent centuries, Molly Gartland has provided a fine addition to the rich genre of historical fiction set in St. Petersburg.

December 1941

Mikhail scrapes a knife against the wall and a strip of yellowing floral wallpaper curls on the metal edge, peeling away from the plaster. Cradling it in his palms, glue side up, he returns to the kitchen. He holds the paper over a pot of water and scratches the knife across the brittle surface. Flakes of paste drop into the liquid. Hissing gas fuels a flame. Mikhail clasps his hands around the warm pot. Heat grows, pricking his palms and fingers. He lingers another fraction of a second before pulling them away. Pressing his warm hands to his cold cheeks,

heat transfers through his skin, disappearing into his core.

Using a wooden spoon, he stirs and the flakes disintegrate. The smell, papier mâché, reminds him of his student years at Leningrad Academy of Art. As he waits for it to boil, rubbing his hands together in the warm steam, he thinks of his daughter, Galya. This stale old glue is not enough nourishment for her. He scrapes another strip from the corridor wall and scratches more paste into the pot. Holding it in the steam, the paper softens. The water begins to boil. It is not enough. He is useless.

Above the stained sink, three teacups hang from hooks. He scoops a cup into the broth and envelops his hands around it. The warmth seeps through the thin porcelain. Just as the heat starts to bite, he sets the cup on the kitchen table. He unwraps a newspaper parcel and cuts three pieces of bread, each about the size of a die, and places them in a shallow bowl. He folds paper around the remaining bread, which is smaller than his palm, and sets it aside. Hunger stabs at his stomach.

Taking the broth and bread, Mikhail walks down the *kommunalka*'s dark corridor. As he passes the door of the Kamerovs' room to his left, Vera's eyes meet his. The little girl, covered in several blankets, wears a pink knitted hat. She waves to him.

'Can I get up, Mikhail Tarasovich?' she asks.

'Stay nice and warm in bed, Vera. You must rest. Conserve your energy.'

'I'm bored.'

'Your mother will be home soon, don't worry.'

'Can't I play with Galya?'

'Not now. She's not well. We don't want you to get ill too.'

Vera sighs and her lower lip pouts. Her head, which looks too big for her tiny frame, drops.

Mikhail continues down the hall, past the flat's main entrance on his right, and enters his room at the end of the corridor, leaving the door open behind him. Galya, buried under wool blankets, lies in her bed at the foot of his mattress. Only her brown hair is visible. He sets the cup and bread on a table beside her and presses his hand to her forehead and cheeks. She shivers from his touch.

'Drink this slowly,' he says, propping up her pillow and pulling the blankets around her. He hands her the cup, which has already cooled in the chilly flat.

Galya purses her chapped lips and takes a sip. Limp hair frames her gaunt face. Mikhail pinches one of the pieces of bread in half and gives it to Galya. She puts it in her mouth, leaving it on her tongue; she does not chew. She waits for it to dissolve slowly, making it last. Her hands, streaked with blue veins, cradle the porcelain cup. They look smaller but Mikhail knows this is impossible. Her bones cannot be shrinking.

He stands, walks to the window and pulls back the black fabric covering the glass. Although it

is only one o'clock, the light is growing dim.

'Galya, I have to go for more water. It's getting dark.'

She takes another sip and nods.

'Anna Petrovna should be back soon. I don't like to leave you but we need water.' He knows it is dangerous to procrastinate; tomorrow brings uncertainty. It can, and probably will, be worse.

Setting the cup on the table, Galya sinks beneath the blankets and closes her eyes.

Mikhail looks again at the snowy street below, hoping to see Anna. She has been out longer than he expected.

'I'll be as fast as I can.' But he knows he will move slowly along the icy road.

He kisses her cheek and she smiles.

'Don't worry. I'll look after Vera,' she whispers.

'Stay in bed and rest. And finish your soup.'

He returns to the kitchen, collects a pail and the kettle, and he walks down the corridor.

'I heard you,' calls Vera.

Mikhail stops at the Kamerovs' door.

'Will Mama be back soon?' she asks.

He nods. 'Don't be afraid. Galya is in our room.'

He puts on his heavy coat. His scarf is draped over the radiator, which has not worked in weeks. The wool is still damp and will quickly turn icy cold in the wind. His wife's loosely knit angora shawl hangs on the peg beside his coat. He winds the cloud of creamy soft fibres around his neck, immediately feeling its warmth. The scent of her hair and lilac perfume makes his throat tighten.

How long will Elena's scent linger now that she is gone?

'Don't open the door to anyone. Anna Petrovna has a key. I'll be right back,' he says, fastening his buttons.

The wind slaps Mikhail's cheeks as he steps out of the building. Few people are out on Mokhovaya Street. Across the road, a fresh layer of snow covers the crumbling remains of a bombed-out building. He looks right and then left, hoping to see the familiar flash of Anna's red scarf. She is not there. He takes a breath and dry, frigid air crystallises deep in his lungs. He pulls Roza's shawl closer to his skin. Head down, he shuffles along the snow-covered road.

The day is slipping away quickly and Mikhail must hurry and return before temperatures drop

and the bombs fall. He must not leave Galya for long. His gaze does not linger on the snow-covered corpses along the road. He ignores the pain in his back and his weak muscles. At the end of Mokhovaya Street, he turns right onto Belinskogo Street where a handful of people, dark against the white snow, congregate around a water pump. Carefully stepping across the ice, he joins the queue.

A figure pumps the metal handle, which cries with every stroke. A stream of water fills her bucket and she picks it up. Shuffling on the ice, she slips. Mikhail grabs her, holding her steady, preventing her fall. She pulls her arm away sharply and glares at him.

'Why aren't you at the front, like a real man?'

Her comment stings.

The next woman in the queue approaches the pump. She grasps the handle and water cascades from the tap, upending her pail. Mikhail steps forward.

'Hold it,' he says, pointing at her bucket.

A distrustful scowl flashes, partially hidden by her fur hat and scarf.

'I'll pump,' he insists.

She holds the pail while he pushes and pulls the stiff handle. His back and arm muscles ache and warm under his coat. Cold seeps from the metal through his gloves.

'*Spasibo*,' she mumbles without looking up. She takes it, gingerly shuffling along the ice.

Mikhail motions for the next figure to step up and hands her his kettle. She steadies it below the tap and he begins to draw. She places his pail beneath the tap and then fills her own bucket. Mikhail slows as his muscles cramp and tire. The next woman steps forward, placing her vessel beneath the pump, but he steps away, taking his pail and kettle with him.

'Can't you do one more?' she mumbles.

Unable to continue, he shakes his head and walks away, leaving the pump's lonesome whine behind him.

He heads down Belinskogo Street. The woman's question – 'Why aren't you at the front?' – lingers in his mind. She is right, he should be defending his city. But he cannot leave Galya, especially now.

The heavy load pulls his arms as he shuffles along. Unable to go on, he stops, setting the pail on the snow. He stomps his feet, waking up his numb toes. The shawl, icy from his breath, is frozen to his beard. Forcing himself to carry on, he edges closer to home.

Mikhail stops at the archway which leads to his building's courtyard. A pile of corpses is peacefully silhouetted in the evening haze. He takes a deep breath. Pressing his nose into the soft angora scarf, he holds Roza's scent deep in his lungs. No snow has fallen to blanket her. It has been too cold. He exhales and studies the dusky sky, wishing for heavy snowfall. A warm

tear slides down his cheek and quickly cools in the frosty air. He shivers, forcing himself to return to Galya.

Anna's scarf is draped on the cold radiator and her boots are beside it. Melted snow puddles beneath her boots.

'I'm back here,' she calls from the kitchen.

He strips off his layers, puts on his slippers and quickly checks on Galya, who is fast asleep. He takes the water to the kitchen and finds Anna sitting at the table. Her dry, papery face is covered with a layer of powder and rouge, and lipstick seeps into the wrinkles around her lips. She seems much older, as if she has aged many years in just a few months.

'I went for water,' Mikhail says, placing the pail beside the sink.

'I saw Director Orbelli at the Hermitage.'

'Oh?' Mikhail sits on the stool opposite Anna.

He has not bothered going to the museum since they finished packing away all the artefacts.

'Many of our colleagues are living in the museum, Misha. Orbelli said we should join them.'

'I don't want to leave the flat. Everything will be stolen.'

Her brow furrows as she scans the empty shelves. 'Roza wanted Galya to live. More than anything.' She reaches across the table and squeezes his hand. 'We'll die here, Misha. We can't survive on our own. There's food at the Hermitage.' She opens a canvas bag and places a newspaper parcel on the table. Patches of moisture seep through the paper. 'Orbelli gave me this.'

The newspaper is still cold from her journey home. Mikhail peels back the layers of damp paper, revealing a dead rat. He does not waste time. Picking up a knife, he slides the rat closer, makes a shallow cut from the chest to the belly and pulls the fur away.

'There is even a school, Misha, for the girls.' She waits for him to respond but he is silent. 'Director Orbelli is sending a car tomorrow. We have to take our mattresses.'

The first time Mikhail skinned a rat, the result was messy. Patches of fur stubbornly clung to the carcass and pieces of hair floated in the soup. Now he makes incisions lengthwise along the rat's body and pulls the fur in strips. It comes away easily, leaving a neat, naked carcass. Cutting deeper, he reveals the rat's organs. He pulls out the guts and collects them on the newspaper. Firmly pressing on the knife, he cuts off the head and drops it beside the organs. The bright red liver and pale intestines quiver on the rickety table. The knife hovers over the tail, which is still intact. He pinches it, wondering how much nourishment could be found in the long, naked tail.

'Misha, what do you think?'

Standing, Mikhail nods and adds more water to the pot on the stove. He lights the gas ring and

drops the rat in the pot.

‘Misha, there’s another thing.’ She puts her hand on his shoulder. ‘He needs you to do some work. Someone, I don’t know who, has asked Orbelli for a portrait artist.’

‘I’m not a portrait artist. I haven’t painted in years.’

As the steam rises from the pot, his stomach groans.

Who the hell would think about having a portrait painted at a time like this?

‘Misha, if we go to the Hermitage, you must paint a portrait.’

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