

**Women Like Us: A Critical and Creative Examination
Of a 'Mail-Order Bride' Experience**

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines issues related to “mail-order brides” as these pertain to my mother, Svitlana O’Brien, who emigrated from Ukraine as a “mail-order bride” in August of 1998. This thesis incorporates both critical and creative analyze of the topic of “mail-order brides” and international dating industries.

The problematic term “mail-order bride” implies a specific ‘type’ of woman who is often represented as domestic, subservient and affectionate. The consumers of the “mail-order” industry are fed images that are essentializations of the Eastern European woman and her habits. By ‘selling’ traditional values to Western male consumers, mail-order sites reinforce stereotypes associated with Eastern European women and create an unrealistic image of a hyper-feminine woman that is problematic to both “mail-order brides” and to the men that seek them. In this critical and creative essay, I examine my mother’s letters as testaments to the unrealistic expectations placed on her through the stereotypes created by the “mail-order” industries.

This thesis also examines the so-called “mail-order brides” in light of Western feminism and problematizes the perceived lack of agency associated with “mail-order brides.” Furthermore, I will analyze the commoditization of the female body as is seen through the international dating agencies. This thesis argues that it is through the capitalist mentality projected by the “mail-order” agencies that the female body becomes trafficable and accessible to the Western male consumer.

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1. Introduction

As an immigrant from Ukraine I am often asked why I chose to come here. For years, my answer was always the same – rehearsed and overused – “I moved here because my mother married a Canadian.” Now, however, that question is filled with many undertones that my simple and naïve reply failed to reflect. Likewise, my answer to this question is embedded in my mother’s identity: my mother, who immigrated to Canada as a “mail-order bride.” “Identity,” Stuart Hall writes “is a multifaceted production that is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222). The subject positions and identities of so-called “mail-order brides” are often misrepresented and misunderstood. Framed by recent scholarship (i.e. Johnson, Visson, and Constable), this thesis, as a critical and creative hybrid text, challenges widely accepted views of “mail-order brides” as passive and vulnerable. In challenging these preconceptions, I hope to encourage a multidimensional portrayal of Eastern European women and defy the two-dimensional caricature portrayed by international dating agencies that play to the particular Western consumer who is in search of a more “traditional” wife.

1.1. Historic overview of post-structuralist and materialist feminist theories

The multi-dimensional approach which I employ throughout this thesis requires a consideration of recent debates which have been important to understanding and defining gender studies: post-structuralism and materialism. Post-structuralism argues that the gender dichotomy is hegemonic. Under the influence of Michel Foucault, “a school of gender research has studied how discourses ranging from medicine to fashion have classified, represented and helped control human bodies” (Connell 19-20), thus,

emphasizing how a system of knowledge functions as an apparatus of power. Post-structuralism also argues that diverse uses of language and discourse can create a plurality of gender identities. As a result, discourse becomes the defining factor in constructing gender dichotomies and maintaining the perception of power; this is especially evident in regards to the “mail-order bride” industry. By propagating discourses of “tradition” and nostalgic notions of femininity, international dating agencies are able to market their “product” to specific North American men in search of a partner from a different culture.

Echoing Michel de Certeau, Sidonie Smith writes that the “autobiographical subject adjusts, redeploys, resists, transforms discourses of autobiographical identity” (111). The creative portion of this thesis grapples with issues of identity and resistance in order to subvert discourse that is situated around so-called “mail-order brides.” As, Judith Butler argues, “the power of discourse... produce[s] effects through reiteration” (in Smith 109). Using Smith’s notion of the discursive field of autobiography as engaged in the individual defiance of collective power structures, the creative portion of this thesis links theory associated with online international dating with personal narrative and subverts notions of passivity that are associated with female participants in this industry. Thus, using post-structuralist notions of discourse as the production of power, the creative portion of this thesis subverts and exposes the existing notions of passivity that are associated with so-called “mail-order brides.”

Materialist feminists, similar to post-structuralists, view societal influence (i.e. education and consumer culture) as important to the perception of gender and dominance. Materialists have extended Karl Marx’s critique of the social elite, based on their

ownership as a means of production, into a history and explanation of the economic subordination of women. Thus, the main focus of Socialist and Marxist feminism is the way in which the institution of the family and women's domestic labour reinforces and reproduces the sexual division between genders. In other words, the critique of materialists is aimed at patriarchy's protection of the gendered interests of men at the expense of women's unpaid or underpaid labour. For some materialist theorists (i.e. Connell, Holter), femininity and masculinity are not polar opposites but an "expression of the whole relationship between spheres of production and reproduction. Industrial capitalism itself 'engendered' its opposites, the world of domesticity as against the world of wage work, and women as the other of men" (Holter in Connell 21). As a result, this view does not see gender as difference in biology but as a consequence of social organization and particularly of capitalist modes of production.

Stemming out of second and third wave feminism (second: 1950s-1980s, third: 1990s to present), post-structuralist and materialist feminists' debates focus primarily on the notion of difference and the conception of identity as social formation. Third wave feminism, as is widely known, is a reaction to second wave feminism. The name of the movement implies continuity and acknowledgment of the successes of the second wave. However, from the early 1980s, feminist anthropologists began to question "the common identity of women as subordinate to male dominance" and they believe that this "could not be upheld in the face of proliferation of cultural, gender, class and race differences" (Pels and Nencel, 11). For example, Chandra Mohanty (1988) comes to the following conclusion in her landmark essay that studies western feminism's constructions of third world women:

feminists writings I analyze here discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular ‘third-world woman’ – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of western humanist discourse. (63)

While Ukraine and Russia, two cultures primarily discussed in this thesis with respect to ‘mail-order brides,’ are not considered to be “Third World,”¹ it is important to examine the notions of feminism as these are seen in Eastern European cultures (former Soviet bloc).

1.2. Women’s status in Eastern Europe

In her book, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian American Internet Romance*, Erica Johnson (2007) states, “Russia is a good place [to find a] nonfeminist wife. Even linguistically, the Russian concept of marriage fits with a patriarchal understanding of the institution. The Russian term for getting married, *vyiti zamuzh*, means ‘to follow man’” (28). As a result, a Russian woman would be expected to “follow” a man into marriage, thus enforcing a patriarchal hierarchy not unlike the Western tradition. According to Johnson and others (i.e. Vission, Constable), North American men see Western women as “damaged by the ideas of feminism” (28) and

¹ As “Second World” citizens, Eastern European women occupy a middle ground of femininity. Essentialized, fetishized and stereotyped, women from Eastern Europe still negotiate the space of the other in comparison to Western European and North American women. However, women from Eastern Europe are not traditionally viewed as colonized subjects, thus creating a strong divide between them and Third World femininity. It could, however, be argued that former Soviet countries such as Ukraine, that have been continually conquered and occupied by neighboring nations, share similar subject status as their Third World counterparts.

Russian women themselves believe that womanhood should be “tightly coupled with domesticity and appearance of subservience” (29). With this in mind, it is important to unpack the patriarchal power structures that are in play here which further divide Western feminist thought from Eastern European notions of femininity.

During the Soviet rule (1922-1991), women’s social status in Russia and Ukraine improved, albeit slightly. Lenin’s socialism bettered the civil status of women by “allowing them to keep their nationality after marriage, legalizing divorce and abortion, and creating day care centers” (Johnson 29). Yet the demand on women to be both ‘good’ workers and ‘good’ mothers continued to reinforce gender norms. The Stalinist era, however, brought about a change to the gender politics within the Soviet Union. These changes included the tightening of divorce laws, the criminalization of abortion and the institution of “medals for women’s special achievements in motherhood ... most famously the Mother Heroine award (*mat’ geroinia*), which was given to women who bore ten children” (Johnson 30). Thus, the importance of family and traditional notion of womanhood were reinforced and women were rewarded for performing their “duties.”

Between the 1950s and the fall of the Soviet Union, gender politics oscillated between increasing women’s rights and encouraging their domesticity. Photos of women driving tractors and wearing hardhats were regularly published in newspapers and magazines; however, as feminists such as Valentina Dobrokhotova state, “equality is not simply giving women the right to shovel manure” (in Johnson 30). Here Dobrokhotova is addressing the shortcomings of Soviet women’s liberation from the home, what Rochelle Ruthchild in her “Sisterhood and Socialism: The Soviet Feminist Movement” suggests would involve, “freeing them from their traditional domestic responsibilities to

participate equally in work outside the home” (4). Feminist criticisms of the socialist regime went against the self-proclaimed governmental emancipation of women, and feminists’ demand for equal treatment earned them a negative reputation in the eyes of the public, a reputation fed by government-controlled media. According to theorists in this field (i.e. Johnson, Visson, etc.), there exists a disparity in Eastern Europe between the term “feminist” and the notion of “women’s solidarity.” While many women from the former Soviet Union view feminists as “unfeminine in their biological being” (Johnson 36), most women from Russia and Ukraine express strong solidarity with other women and the need to continue to fight for women’s rights and freedoms. Thus, the stereotype that women from Russia and Ukraine have not been “changed” by feminism is not entirely accurate. While the term “feminism” may not be widely accepted in Russian and Ukrainian societies, many of the tenants of feminism, with respect to equality in both private and public spheres, are advocated for by women in these cultures.

1.3. The notion of the ‘ideal’ woman

The stereotypes of Eastern European women in North America are dichotomized between the old *baba* and the young, sexualized woman that becomes the epitome of femininity. During the Cold War era especially, Russian women were seen as “gorgeous KGB spies or dumpy middle aged females à la Nina Khrushchev” (Visson 5). This stereotype in North American media was entrenched by films such as *From Russia with Love* (1963) where the young and attractive spy, Tatiana Romanova, is set in direct opposition to the cold, ugly and unfeminine colonel, Rosa Klebb. Laura Mulvey’s article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) describes the images of women, in the context of Hollywood films: “as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (1173). This insight also

applies to images seen on the internet sites of international dating agencies that promote a version of femininity that recalls the well-known “Bond girls”: sexually assertive and self-confident, yet in need of rescue and, ultimately, naïve. In fact, the rescue narrative is very dominant in the “mail-order” industry.

The widespread belief that Russian and Ukrainian men are constantly drunk and “only care about themselves and their problems” (Visson 218) is offset by the notion that North American men are kinder, gentler and “more family-oriented” (*hotrussianbrides.com*). Russian and Ukrainian women are bestowed with hyper-femininity in both photographic depictions and personal descriptions on the international dating sites. As a result, the image of a feminine, ‘traditional’ woman – a heteronormative “ideal”² – in economically devastated countries such as Russia and Ukraine is further emphasized by her need for rescue from the pressures of bare survival from Eastern European men.

The question that begs to be explored is the following: to whose ideals do the Internet dating agencies cater? For the male consumers of brides, it appears that the

² The notion of an “ideal” woman is explored in Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s novel *Tomorrow’s Eve* (1886). Here, engineer-magician Thomas Edison builds an artificial woman for his friend Lord Ewald. Designed in the likeness of Emma-Alicia Clary, an astonishing beauty, with whom Lord Ewald is unhappily in love, the novel foregrounds the search for the perfect woman. This is similar to the cyberspace identity created (or fashioned) for the so-called “mail-order brides” by the industry. Edison promises Ewald that the “new” Emma-Alicia “will no longer be a woman, but an angel; no longer a mistress but a lover; no longer reality, but the *ideal!*” (l’Isle-Adam 80-81 emphasis original). Edison names his creation Hadalay, which the readers are told is “Iranian for ideal” (76). This creation becomes more human than Emma-Alicia, she becomes “the perfect mirror, both a product and an object of male fantasy which her user can turn on and off at will” (Paasonen 48). At the end of the novel, both Emma-Alicia and Hadalay drown but it is only for Hadalay that Ewald grieves.

women on “mail-order bride” sites balance precariously on the iconic line between virgin and whore. Ericka Johnson in her book *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance* (2007) describes the representation of one woman on such a site. She writes,

I remember one image of a woman in a long pink floral dress with a button-front, puffy sleeves, and a white lace collar, a dress that would be appropriate at a Sunday service in any conservative church in the American Midwest. But in this picture, the dress happened to be unbuttoned from the hem to the upper thigh, with two shapely calves seductively peeking out of the slit, displaying legs and stiletto heels that would be more appropriate for Saturday night. (11)

This construction of iconic femininity as both demure and hypersexual, to quote Mulvey, produces “an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary” (1175), that is to say, an image that is created and re-created in the mind of the observer. The woman in the image cannot speak for herself and is acted upon within the masculine imagination.

In international dating agencies, potential brides are “arranged for a photo session at a professional studio, where the women will be made-up, dressed-up, have their hair done, and instructed how to stand, how to tilt their head in a coy way, and how to smile the inviting smile they need to solicit a response from the men who will surf their page” (Johnson 51). Thus, the commodification of bodies seen in “mail-order bride” agencies lends itself to a kind of striptease for the male consumer, who becomes the voyeur. The so-called “mail-order brides” are represented in contrast to Western feminine bodies, which have been viewed as “damaged” by feminism, and are seen as exotic objects of

masculine fantasies. In both cases, however, the feminine body is objectified by a patriarchal society that sees women as “Other” to the male “self” and, thus not privy to the same type of power available to men. The woman, as this applies to both Western and non-Western women, is overshadowed by the masculine and, as a result, the relationship between women and silence, whether embodied or historical, is pronounced in the effect it has on the subject/object position.

1.4. “Mail-order brides” subjectivity and masculine fantasies

Silent and beautiful, the women in online catalogues construct their cyber identities in accordance with the fantasies they are meant to perpetuate. According to Judith Butler,

to claim that this is what I *am* is to suggest a provisional totalizing of this ‘I.’ If the I can so determine itself, then that which it excludes in order to make that determination remains constitutive of the determination itself. In other words, such a statement presupposes that the ‘I’ exceeds its determination, and even produces that very excess in and by the act which seeks to exhaust the semantic field of that ‘I.’ (1709, emphasis original)

To explain, the subject position created for, and reinforced by, “mail-order brides” within the cyberspace provided to them by the industry is an extension of the fantasy of domination that drives Western men to participate in this exchange. The international dating industry encourages a voyeuristic objectification of women, which promotes male dominance and insinuates women’s perceived lack of agency. Research suggests that the woman’s sense of self is undermined by this masculine fantasy (i.e. Wilson, Villapando).

By showcasing women's sexuality, international dating sites bring the privacy of sex into the public domain – the political, cultural and economical “sphere for men” (Rosaldo in Rose 2). Images on these sites show scantily-dressed women in provocative poses that occupy this public space, which, based on patriarchal ideals, is reserved for the masculine imagination. Mulvey argues, “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (1175). Thus, through international dating sites, female bodies become “always *in view* and *on view*” (Oyewumi 2). In other words, they invite the gaze through the desire to receive responses to their profiles. It is this invitation that gives women agency; however, through the gaze, which they cannot control, the female body becomes powerlessly entwined in masculinised fantasies.

According to Mila Glodava and Richard Onizuka in *Mail-Order Brides: Women for Sale* (1994), “those [men] who have used the mail-order bride route to find a mate have control in mind more than an enduring and loving relationship” (26). Thus, it could be assumed that the desire for control in both leisure and family life fuels both the sex industry and the “mail-order” industry. Men's desire for “traditional” women as marriage partners could – perhaps must – also be seen as a form of dominance. In her book *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (1995), Jessica Benjamin writes of the notion of fantasies and their relationship to the other. She states, “the self engaged in identification takes the other as fantasy object, not as an equivalent centre of being [...] By this logic, in loving the other as an ideal ‘love object’ the self may take a position quite inimical to intersubjective recognition” (8). So for Benjamin, who sees “love” as the dominance of one (i.e. the masculine) over the other (i.e. the

feminine), “loving” the other as an ideal of womanhood is to objectify her, to erode female subjectivity and agency and, once again, to further entrench the divide between the self and other, male and female. The women as still images in the photographs cannot speak for themselves, which, in turn, creates a deeper divide between their subjectivity and their agency.

Populated by pictures of potential brides, online catalogues exemplify what Nicole Constable terms “the cartographies of desire” (28) – travel becomes no longer an encounter, but an adventure for the Western male consumer of the “mail-order” industry. As a result, women become “goods” by implication to be consumed by, and for, masculine desire. As such, “cartographies of desire” not only represent cultural mappings of imaginable relationships but also suggest the ways in which political and economic advantages are mapped onto the process. These “sites of desire,” writes Constable, “are formed by confluences of culture and involve border crossings and fluid terra in the exchange of desire rather than simple unidirectional flow of power” (28). In other words, for men travelling to Russia and Ukraine in search of a bride, the cartographies of their desire are exemplified by their power and ability to choose who they want for a partner. For women from Russia and Ukraine, on the other hand, cartographies of desire suggest their wish to leave their country and an association of economic power with “happiness.”

As mentioned previously, masculine notions of leisure, luxury and consumption intertwine with “mail-order,” consumer-driven industries. The mission statement for *hotrussianbrides.com*, for example, states,

we aim to seek out the finest Russian women, and excel at providing them with a variety of venues for corresponding with Western men of like mind and ambition. We maintain a ‘competitive edge’ in our industry by continuing to introduce unique services and we remain devoted to satisfying our most important resource, YOU! (*hotrussianbrides.com*)

The name of the website itself, *hotrussianbrides.com*, suggests dominance and a binary opposition between men and women. The women, in their description as “hot” and “fine,” become the objects of masculine lust and thus deprived of agency, they become “products” to be bought. Through these adjectives, the female is represented as lacking in agency and, thus, objectified. It is precisely this objectification of women that links the international dating industry, and its consumer-driven mentality, with sex trafficking.

1.5. International dating as business

According to Audrey Macklin of University of Toronto, “[a] global demand exists for labour whose core component consists of “women’s work,” in other words, “sex, childcare and housework” (464). She states, “this demand exceeds the supply of female citizens in the First World countries willing to do the job. As a result, women from poor countries are recruited “to top up the deficit at low cost” (464). The job distribution involves sex-trade workers to supply sex, live-in caregivers to perform child-care and housework, and so-called “mail-order brides” to furnish all three. Hence it is not surprising to see that the “mail-order” industry attempts to reinforce “traditional” values as presented by the women advertised in these agencies. In this sense, the perpetuation of the image of the “traditional” woman, in websites and in catalogues, enacts a form of disempowerment that, within a globalized context, insinuates a woman’s ability to

perform stereotypically gendered tasks (i.e. housework and child bearing) and reduces her to the embodiment of those tasks alone.

Some “mail-order” sites function fraudulently in Eastern Europe with the sole purpose of obtaining women and trafficking them across the world, including places like Canada. Audrey Macklin outlines in her article the definition of trafficking as presented at the convention against transnational organized crime,³

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, or abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (474)

Thus, while women who, whether willingly or otherwise, become sex-trade workers are classified as prostitutes, “mail-order brides” are not formally designated as forced workers, insofar as their labour is unpaid⁴. However, these two enterprises become parallel in the fact that these migrations occur within a commercialized context.

³ Macklin’s presentation outlines “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime” (2000: Article 2).

⁴ Here I mean their domestic labor, as they may choose to seek gainful employment. However, many men chose to marry a “mail-order bride” with the understanding that these women are more ‘traditional’ and would choose to stay home and take care of the family. Thus, it is important to emphasize that lack of income means complete dependence on the husband.

Moreover, critics of the “mail-order” industry such as Yu Kojima (2001) state that women who participate in the “mail-order” industry become “reproductive workers” (199) both in the sense of bearing children and performing domestic labour. Kojima agrees with Macklin and sees the popularity of the international dating agencies as a direct result of the labour shortage within this line of “women’s work” that cannot be filled by the women within the host culture. However, unlike other female migrant workers (i.e. sex workers), “mail-order brides” are also seen as reproducers of culture through the institution of marriage.

Describing exciting tour packages and marital bliss, internet pages such as *Anastasia.com* entice Western men to participate in the “mail-order” industry and offer cyber-forums where men and women can give each other advice, ask questions and participate in cultural exchange. For example, *Russianwomendiscussion.com* has this advice to give on the matter of age:

It is very easy to get into searching for a young hottie on the agency sites. You may start out looking at women your age or a few years younger, but end up studying the fine details of a profile for a woman your son should be dating. Of course the agencies will encourage this to a point. Ever wonder why? Maybe it is because their target market for men is 20 years older than their target market for women? Of course they will encourage the women to push the upper limits of their age requirements and tell the men what they want to hear: ‘Russian women love older guys.’

The power dynamic between “mail-order brides” and the men who seek them within these discussion forums is extremely prominent. The aim of these forums is often to foster discussion among men with regards to common problems/concerns that are involved in international dating. Women also participate in these discussions; however, these occurrences are very limited. It can be argued, however, that these forums center on a unidirectional flow of power and exemplify the Western man as the active “speaker” and the Eastern European woman as a passive “listener.” In response to the question, “[w]hy are y’all really looking for RW [Russian Women],” one such exemplifying post offers:

[w]ell for one thing FSU [Former Soviet Union] women prefer older established well endowed man. So that means age gaps of 20 plus years are acceptable for them. They prefer the traditional housewife role that was once common in America. Cooking, cleaning, taking care of the kids etc. etc. But if asked they will pull their own weight and get a job without complaint. Another reason is that they go to great lengths to please their man by always looking their best. Plus they believe the man is head of the family and final authority in decision making and will not argue about the decisions he makes. (*russianwomendiscussion.com*)

This post showcases the power dynamic between North American men and Eastern European women. This male speaker has outlined what he expects his bride to be. She, however, does not speak for herself and does not actively participate in this exchange. As a result, being females and foreigners, “mail-order brides” occupy a doubly-othered space, one that disrupts their potential for agency.

The question that inevitably rises from these communications (i.e. chat rooms, letters, video dates) is why do Western men (North American in this context) search for relationships outside of their culture? The Internet is littered with the answers to this question claiming to encompass all men within the North American society. One such website is *goodwife.com* which has gained considerable popularity by acting as a gateway for many informational forums on the topic of a “mail-order” industry. Here the authors state,

[w]e, as men, are more and more wanting to step back from the types of women we meet now. With many women taking on the ‘me first’ feminist agenda and the man continuing to take a back seat to her desire for power and control many men are turned off by this and look back to having a more traditional woman as a partner. (*goodwife.com*)

Thus, it seems that Western women are seen as “contaminated” by feminism and a binary opposition – between being a woman and being a feminist – is created. Following this logic, feminists cannot be “real women” and “real women” cannot be feminists. As a result, a “real woman,” in this context, is reduced to an emotional and physical nurturer. Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* states, “[t]he rules for this construction of femininity (and I speak here in a language both symbolic and literal) require that women learn to feed others, not the self, and to construe any desire for self-nurturance and self-feeding as greedy and excessive. Thus, women must develop a totally other-oriented emotional economy” (2367). By purchasing access to potential “mail-order brides,” men invest in a caregiver and an object of sexual desire,

rather than in an equal partner. The women, in turn, participate in a form of autobiographical self-fashioning that caters to men's desires.

In the creative portion of my thesis I describe how my mother fashioned her identity in hopes of soliciting a response:

“In her curvy handwriting, Natasha set out to write an introductory letter. The plump, blond woman from the agency told her that she should be as honest as she could, without being too revealing.

“Don't spill all the beans, dear,” she said kindly, but with a telling glint in her eyes that told Natasha that she *should know* exactly what to keep secret. So, with that advice in mind, Natasha set out to reduce her life to three most important things about herself: (1) she was thirty-two and petite; (2) she had a daughter, and (3) she was a teacher. She left out the fact that she has not had a serious relationship since her husband left her twelve years ago. Also, she did not mention that her desperation to leave this country was growing more powerful by the minute. And, she forgot to include that her mother was driving her crazy and if this letter-writing thing failed, she might have to jump from the balcony to escape the constant nagging and complaining that was her mother's daily discourse. She wrote,

Hello,

My name is Natasha. I am living in Ukraine in Odessa city. I am 32 years old. I had husband. I have dark hair, height – 160sm, weight – 51kg. I am now teaching of physics, and I had university. I love sport. I like horseback ride. I like to moving fast life. I love childrens. I have daughter 12 years old. Her name Olena. I am temper cheerful. I love good men. I have a good in cook foods.

If you like me you can write on this ad.”

As with my mother’s letter, women’s self-descriptions on international dating sites are often reduced to a love of cooking, a desire to have children and wanting to be taken care of. These aspects are perceived as desirable by Western men and are implemented as marketing tools by “mail-order brides.” It could be said that through this self-fashioning women derive agency and actively participate in the matchmaking process. However, profile writing is a creative process and at times women omit or reinvent parts of themselves or their circumstances.

The search for the “perfect” someone can be frustrating for some. Articles on the internet warn men against “scammer” mail-order sites and individuals falsely claiming to be mail-order brides. According to William Livingston, an immigration attorney and a cofounder of *goodwife.com*, there are much more difficult hurdles in the search for the ‘perfect’ woman than “scammers” alone. He states,

[n]ow, we [men participating in the industry] all know that looks and attraction are important but so is personality, sense of humour, intelligence, and emotional balance. So a 10 in looks could be a 2 or 3 in other categories and average out to a 4 overall. A girl who is a 7 in looks but a 10 in other categories rates out as 9+. Come NFL draft day who gets picked first – a receiver who runs like the wind but can’t catch a cold or the slower guy that can catch anything within ten yards of him each and every time? So if [...] you find a 7 that speaks perfect English, can run the 40 in under 4.1 seconds and has good hands, draft her. (*goodwife.com*)

This football analogy is reminiscent of what Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the principles for scouting (i.e. Boy Scouts), wrote in the early 1900s of the search for the

“right girl.” Here, he states that the search requires the same skilful “maneuvering that a Boy Scout learned to employ when paddling his canoe through the rapids” (Enloe 51). According to Baden-Powell, “[y]ou (the men) will, I hope, have gathered from what I have said about this Rock, [called the] ‘Woman,’ that it has its dangers for the woman as well as for the man. But it has also its very bright side if you only maneuver your canoe aright. The paddle to use for this job is CHIVALRY...” (in Enloe 51). Thus, it appears that for some the search for the “perfect” (and might I add “traditional”) woman has not changed over the years.

The image projected on Eastern European women by the “mail-order” industry echoes Western notions of the passive, traditional stereotype of a wife reminiscent of June Cleaver. Eastern European “mail-order brides” are advertised as the epitome of traditional values, beauty and grace. The Russian Women 1000 agency, for example, states,

[i]f you want to enjoy the future together with a real nice woman, you must marry a Russian beauty! Don’t ask us why – the answer is obvious: only a Russian lady with her commitment to traditional values can make a perfect wife – affectionate, caring and faithful. If you begin to communicate with a Russian lady, you will discover she has the femininity and most loving nature that completes her as a perfect image of all a Woman was ever meant to be. (*russian-women-1000.net*)

However, this portrait is not entirely accurate. According to Tatyana Tolstaya, writer of “Notes from the Underground,” “[s]trong [Russian] women run family life through control over everything, power at times extending to tyranny – all this is the Russian

woman, who both frightens and attracts, enchants and oppresses” (in Visson 48). Russian men, on the other hand, under Soviet rule, were taught to be “devious rather than bold, servile rather than proud, conformist rather than independent” (Kon in Visson 49). As a result, women took on the responsibility for the family, both in traditional (caregiver) and non-traditional (breadwinner) terms. North American men who may be expecting a more docile and submissive partner may be surprised to find a strong-willed woman running their household.

Today, post-communist societies in Eastern Europe are attempting to (re)create a more “traditional” woman. With the falling birth rate and severe unemployment, women are increasingly encouraged to stay at home. However, not all women can afford this luxury and must participate in the work force. Some women turn to the ‘mail-order industry’ as a way of searching for a better life⁵. However, it is important to acknowledge that the experiences of the so-called “mail-order brides” vary. It would be unfair to assign the same attributes to all of the women who choose to participate in this

⁵ Desiring to inform immigrant women of their rights, the University of Alberta in partnership with “Changing Together,” a center for Immigrant women in Edmonton, created a website designated to “help so-called mail-order brides navigate their new lives” (Ileiren Poon). This site uses very simple language in explaining immigration, marriage, citizenship laws, and laws concerning landed immigrants. The site, lawforforeignbrides.ca, was designed to address issues “facing foreign brides and [women who] wish to enter Canada via sponsorship in the family class” (www.lawforforeignbrides.ca). While this is a positive attempt to provide information to immigrant women, the site is not explicit about where they might turn in case of abuse. Moreover, this site relies on the new immigrant’s ability to understand (as well as read) English, ignoring the fact that language classes may be unavailable to some women. The companion site, rosenet.com, provides basic facts for female abuse and a search engine equipped to answer some questions posed by the female victims. It, however, suffers from some of the same problems as lawforforeignbrides.ca listed above.

industry; to do so, one risks enacting the same cultural essentialism perpetuated by so many “mail-order” industries in an attempt to “sell” their “product.”

1.6. Review of scholarship on “mail-order brides”

“Mail-order” catalogues, whether online or otherwise, provide a window into the construction of images and power presented by international dating industries. Kathryn Robinson, for example, points to the way in which catalogues present “mail-order brides” “as a site of fantasy for men in an era when they feel that ‘traditional’ values of male pre-eminence in the family are being undermined” (53). Roland Tolentino, in examining “mail-order brides” from the Philippines, discusses how “the discourse of mail-order brides is situated in the historical positioning of Filipina bodies into a transnational space inscribed in colonial⁶, militarist, and capitalist histories” (49). Tolentino situates Filipina “mail-order bride” bodies within a colonial context, which further insinuates the power dynamic between men and women, west and east, active and passive. Likewise, Rona Halualani argues that “mail-order bride” catalogues create a “collage of economic, sexual, and racial hegemonic discourses [that] celebrate dominant Anglo patriarchal capitalist ideologies by fashioning an ideal product” (in Constable 14). Most studies of these catalogues, however, admit the limitations of their research. Research states that the male gaze encountered in the “mail-order” catalogues must be examined beyond the representations set up by the “mail-order” industries. Robinson, for example, observes that the images and texts leave us wondering about the “real people” behind the listings (in Constable 14). Assumed to be a voyeuristic enterprise, the catalogues present the

⁶ The colonial aspect does not apply to Eastern European women (at least historically); however, this notion may be applied to the post-socialist phase of new capitalism in Eastern European countries.

images of female bodies/identities as two-dimensional caricatures. Nicole Constable in her work, *Romance on a Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography and "Mail Order" Marriages* (2003), states, "there have been few studies that focus on the women themselves: their motivations and aspirations, how they come to advertise on the web sites, or what their experiences are once marriages have been contracted" (16). Thus, while studies of the catalogues have provided valuable critiques of the industry's underlying perpetuation of gender ideologies and its commodification of a specific and limited femininity, it is essential to point out the existence of an un-theorized and poorly understood gap between scholarly interpretations of catalogues and lived personal experiences of the women and men participating in this practice. As a result, through the creative semi-autoethnographic approach, this thesis looks beyond and behind the catalogue listing, at real life experience and one family's decision to partake in this process. Through letters, diaries and memories, the creative portion of this thesis showcases the drive (familial, political and economical) behind one woman's decision to participate in the "mail-order" industry.

Currently, scholarship regarding the 'mail-order' industry mainly concentrates on the power relationship between men and the women they seek. In the words of Felicity Schaeffer-Grabiel (2005), "[i]n feminist writing on mail-order brides, women's and men's voices remain absent. Instead, this scholarship assumes a one-to-one correspondence between the male gaze on the Web sites and women's exploitation as domestic laborers in the home" (332). It seems that existing research drastically overlooks active female participation in this industry. Likewise, Ericka Johnson, author of *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband*, writes that in the West "mail-order brides" are

described as victims trapped in horrible marriages with lonely, imbalanced men. Sometimes they are portrayed as gold diggers looking for economic stability and a green card [...] Rarely, however, are they allowed an active role in these portrayals. The women are contracted, courted, married, imported, abused, or cared for by men. Seldom are they allowed to be the subject of their own activities. (1)

Thus, it is important to stress that most women on these dating sites willingly become “mail-order brides.” However, not acknowledging the power structures that drive international dating agencies (i.e. west/east, male/female) would be to overlook some of the most important issues that women are presented with in their desire to seek a partner outside of their cultures. Through my creative work, I give an alternative to the scholarly field that has relied heavily on catalogue studies which, while crucial to our understanding of the problems associated with “mail-order” industry, do not showcase the people behind the photographs. Aside from a handful of scholars who have conducted interviews with ‘mail-order industry’ participants (i.e. Johnson, Constable and Visson), this field is populated by silent shadows and misrepresentations of ‘brides’ themselves. Thus, new research that emerges with regards to this field must focus on personal accounts, interviews and autobiographical retellings.

The analytic component of this thesis defines the power structures that surround the issue of “mail-order brides.” Through patriarchal representations of “mail-order brides” on the web, we are able to see how stereotypes are formed and maintained. International dating industries are corporations that attempt to make money and, as a result, play on and reinforce the social constructions associated with Eastern European

women. “Despite their class, and educational backgrounds (which vary greatly), and despite the wider global political economic power structures in which these relationships take place,” writes Nicole Constable, “these women [mail-order brides] nonetheless demonstrate a degree of power, creativity, and initiative in their choices regarding correspondence, and their relationships as well” (30). Through the use of an autobiographical account the creative portion of this thesis is a way to situate one family within this process – and within the “mail-order” industry – and to subvert the construction of the “mail-order bride” identity as subservient and passive to the process.

1.7. The aim of this thesis

Scholarship has primarily focused on men and women who choose to participate in international dating, yet, it overlooks children and other family members as active participants. With this thesis I will contribute to the ever-growing body of scholarship on so-called “mail-order brides” by presenting a new way to look at this issue. Increasingly popular, vanity press stories of people who have participated in this industry are starting to come forth. Research in this field has tended to focus on silent representations of femininity and active domination of “mail-order brides” by Western men. It is only recently that scholars have begun to put emphasis on interviews and qualitative analysis. Thus, by engaging with personal experience, this thesis contributes to the field of qualitative scholarship. However, often research overlooks other family members who are also impacted by the process of international dating. To date, for example, there is very little scholarship that concentrates on children of “mail-order brides.” As a result, through the use of diaries and personal recollection, the autobiographical portion of this thesis offers insights into the mind of a child as her mother participates in this

matchmaking process. This perspective highlights the importance of family within the “mail-order” industry. Moving to a different country must be seen as a family affair, even if most of the family does not participate in the move itself. The creative portion of this thesis will explore other aspects of “mail-order brides” and present them as people who leave a family behind in order to better their situation and that of the people they love.

There is also a personal aim to this project. As a child I understood little of what was happening around me with respect to letters and phone calls that came to my mother from men overseas. As I was leaving Ukraine, I believed that this trip was temporary and that I would return in a few weeks. This created tension between my new identity as a new immigrant to Canada and the identity that I was supposed to leave behind. The creative part of this project is a way to navigate and reconcile this problematic space within myself. In *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), Paul John Eakin quotes Carolyn Kay Steedman who states that her mother’s self and her story provide the key to her own. She writes, “[c]hildren are always episodes in someone else’s narrative not their own people, but rather brought into being for particular purpose” (in Eakin 53). Thus, my mother’s story becomes a way for me to re-signify myself. The creative portion of this thesis is an attempt to situate myself, and my identity, in relation to my mother’s narrative and her choices.

In the creative part of this thesis, I have selected fragments of letters that my mother wrote in order to demonstrate the humanity and the texture of my family members’ lives. Inspired by such authors as Hiromi Goto, Milan Kundera, Marina Lewyka and Wayson Choy, I tried to tell the story in as engaging a way as possible. While the first two parts of this story could be situated in the field of autobiography with

autoethnographic elements, the third part, which follows a Western man in search of his “mail-order bride,” complicates such a categorization.

According to Lisa Appignanesi, in her book titled *Losing the Dead: A Family Memoir* (2001), “[w]riting has to entail some kind of order, even if the voyage into the past is always coloured by invention. Memory is also a form of negotiation” (7). The writing of my mother’s and my own story forced me to grapple with issues within my family that would be otherwise left unexamined. In questioning my mother about past events, I often received a stiff response or an unwelcome look. Writing this and researching theory concerning the “mail-order bride” issue helped me put these events into perspective and allowed me to engage with the family history in my own way. Examining the story of our migration, which is marked by anxieties and familial separation, allowed me to deal with uncomfortable events in my familial history. By adopting the narrative voice of the third person in this work, I distance myself from the “I” of representation. In this way, I attempt to observe the characters of “Olena” and her family from a more objective stance. As a result, this work would fit into the genre of creative non-fiction and would best be situated among such works as *The Doomed Bridegroom* (1999), *Natasha and Other Stories* (2004), and *Honey and Ashes* (2005).

2. Women like us

2.1. Part I: Natasha

Dear James,

My name is Natasha. I received⁷ your address from an Introductory Agency. I hope what we shall be friends.

Some words about myself. I am 32 years old. My height is 5'4, weights is 115lbs.

I am divorced, because a broken relation-shep and I with my daughter live together. My daughter of 12 her name is Olena, she is a pupil of the 6-rd grade.

I graduated from University of Odessa, phisic faculty. I am phisic and math teacher. I very like children and therefore I work at scool. I have different interests: good literature, music and dancing. In summer I like to go to beach. In bad weather evenings I help to fulfil my daughter's homework.

I like your photo and description. I am closing for now I look very forward to your response.

If you don't want to ansver my letter, send my photo back, please.

Sincerely yours, Natasha

Natasha awoke with a strange and uncertain feeling. Whether it was caused by a dream or a lingering thought from last night, she was unsure. What she knew was that she no longer wanted to date the men in this city. Natasha shuddered at the thought as she

⁷ The spelling and grammatical errors in both Natasha's and James' letters are not typographical errors. These letters are transcribed directly from originals and I have kept grammar and spelling unaltered.

swung her legs off the side of her bed. She stood and stretched before folding the bed back into a couch. A grunt came from behind her and Natasha looked to see if she had woken her daughter. Olena stirred and moved closer to the corner where her little cot was wedged, but did not wake. Natasha smiled. She had not always been a big part of Olena's life and she regretted that.

The room where the two slept doubled as the family room. Pulling a cigarette from the pack on the TV stand, Natasha went out onto the adjoining balcony. From the fifth-story apartment, she looked out on the small field that separated their apartment block from the next. She could hear the murmur of men talking under the cover of the chestnut trees – the neighbourhood drunks. It was always hard to tell if they were just starting in for the day or finishing off from last night, especially on a Saturday morning such as this one.

Natasha took a few drags, but the thought of last night made her shudder with embarrassment.

“Men,” She said flicking her unfinished cigarette towards the voices. She left the balcony and tiptoed from the family room into the hallway. Natasha entered the kitchen and found her mother stirring a large pot on the old, white stove.

“Are you're making borsch?” Natasha asked disturbing the silence and startling her mother: a tall, relatively large, fifty-two-year-old tornado.

“Oh, *Bozhe!* Natasha, what are you doing sneaking around this early?” Her mother said, brandishing the soup ladle.

Natasha looked at the analog clock that was built into the stove. It was a little past six. "I was up," Natasha said, not wanting to let her hypochondriac mother know that she didn't sleep well. "Didn't you hear me on the balcony?"

"No. My heart is pounding in my ears. I can't hear anything. You can't scare an old woman like that. You know my blood pressure won't take it."

"Mother, you are fine."

"What do you know about fine? You came in so late last night. I thought you were dead! You know how much I worry? Where did you go?"

"I was out," Natasha said taking a cup from the counter. "Is there water for tea?"

"There's water in the kettle," Baba said shaking her head. "Why is it never a straight answer with you?"

"I had a date."

"A date? You haven't said anything about a date. Who are you dating?"

"It was just one date," Natasha said. "He wasn't my type."

"What? Not your type? Was he breathing?"

"Mother!"

"What, he didn't have money?"

"He was a higher up in the military. He had money."

"Then what's the problem?"

“He was married, Mom. He wanted me to be his mistress,” Natasha cringed and waited for her mother to do the same.

“Oh,” Her mother said, “Is there money in that?”

“Would you please stop?” Natasha said, “This is why I never tell you anything.”

“Mom? What’s wrong?” Olena said. She was in the doorway rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“Nothing. Baba and I were just talking,” Natasha said. Since she was very little, Olena chose to shorten the word *Babushka* (Russian for grandma) to *Baba* (Russian for an old, stubborn and argumentative woman). This suited her grandma so much that everyone in the apartment referred to Baba that way.

“Come Olenushka, let’s go watch television, I think there are *mul’tiky* on,” Natasha’s father had appeared in the doorway alongside his granddaughter and, as quietly as he had arrived, led Olena into the room that he and his wife shared.

Natasha finished her tea in silence while her mother went about her morning chores. In the foyer, Natasha put on her shoes, grabbed her purse and left the apartment without a word. She had descended the first set of stairs when she heard her mother diligently set about locking each of the six bolts behind her. It was a ritual of fear and today it just pissed Natasha off all the more.

Natasha walked to the first floor and knocked on Katya’s door. Katya was a professor of English language at the University of Odessa. Like Natasha, Katya was a

single parent; her husband had died in a car accident leaving her to take care of her three-year-old daughter, Nadia, on her own.

“I should have done it,” Natasha said having updated Katya on her date and the conversation she just had with her mother.

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Katya replied.

“Why not? Don’t you always say it’s the honest ones that tell you they’re married?”

“Yeah, but I’m not advocating for adultery. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Right? What’s right? I’m supporting the four of us on a teacher’s salary.”

“What, you would rather be some guy’s plaything? Hoping he’ll leave his wife for you? That’s no way to live. You know you couldn’t do that to another woman, especially what happened with you, Pavel and that floozy.” Pavel had been Natasha’s first husband. He left her and her infant daughter twelve years prior for his secretary.

“Did I tell you they now have three kids?”

“Really? Your mom must have her spies working hard.”

“She does have a large network.” Natasha laughed. The thought of Baba’s “spies” was a little comical to Natasha considering they were all very large women. Baba had worked in a textiles factory sewing undergarments for plus-sized women – women who held considerable power in the community and who could afford certain luxuries. She

imagined them sneaking around in the shadows doing her mother's bidding and laughed again.

"With all of her connections couldn't she just have, you know," Katya's voice dropped to a whisper as her eye darted to the old Soviet radio on the wall, "had him bumped off?"

"Katya! You're as bad as my mother, looking over your shoulder for the KGB. It's a radio," Natasha said shaking her head. "I'm sure she thought of doing it for Olena. I *know* she considered doing it for her, especially when he stopped sending child care cheques. She still blames me for 'not being much of a lady' after we got married and not settling down with a guy right away so that Olena could grow-up with a father that wasn't mine."

"Sounds just like my mom. She won't stop until Nadia has a new father figure in her life."

"At least, they don't live with you."

"Don't your folks have pensions?" Katya asked.

"Yeah but it's still hardly enough to buy groceries."

"The economy."

"The economy," Natasha said before letting out a frustrated moan, "Why can't we find decent guys in this town?"

"There really aren't any good men left in Ukraine are there?" Katya replied.

“That aren’t married.”

“Or drunk.”

“Or both.”

Natasha left Katya’s with no real desire to go home. She got on the bus with an idea of travelling to the sea port near Hotel Odessa. She had travelled two stops before a seat became free across from her. When she sat she saw an advertisement she had never paid much attention to before. “Tired of living with Baba? Find your prince today!” That is how she found herself on a bus heading for the office of the international dating agency, aptly called *Introductory Agency*.

Katya had said that there were no good men left in Ukraine, Natasha thought to herself. Most of the men she met in the shady Odessa nightclubs tended to be shady themselves. She did not want to be offered a drink in exchange for a promise of “good times,” which would likely end later that night, and she did not want to be someone’s mistress. She wanted romance, she wanted to be courted and most of all she wanted it now. *Why not broaden my search?*

Her thoughts had wondered, as had she, and now Natasha found herself on the corner of Deribasovskaya and Pushkin Street in the heart of Odessa standing in front of *Introductory Agency*. A little bell signalled her arrival as she opened and closed the old heavy door.

“Can I help you?” A plump blond woman, seated behind the receptionist’s desk, asked.

“I’m... just looking,” Natasha said immediately realizing how silly that sounded in a business without merchandise.

“Oh, I know what you are looking for, my dear,” The blond said, she was used to this kind of behaviour from her “girls.” “Please sit down. I’ll bring you a catalogue.”

Then, as soon as she had sat down, there they were, laminated and spread in front of Natasha, pages and pages of men looking to settle down with a more “traditional” woman. There was a balding accountant from Florida, a middle-aged farmer from New Zealand, a young military officer from France, and a Canadian contractor who owned his own house and a car. Natasha was overwhelmed. These photographs offered her a ticket out. She saw each picture as an opportunity, not only for herself, but also for her daughter. Olena could finish school and go to a great university anywhere in the world. She could meet someone special, marry and not make the same mistakes as her mother. Olena could turn out different and all Natasha had to do was pick out some of these men and start a dialogue.

“What exactly are you looking for, dear?” The plump blond, whose name Natasha found out was Zhanna, asked with a kind smile.

“I don’t know. He looks nice,” Natasha said pointing to a man with dark features.”

“Emmanuel. Good choice. He’s from Italy. You’d have to learn Italian.”

“Oh, maybe not him. I was hoping for someone who spoke English.”

“Yeah, don’t you all,” Zhanna said.

“What does that mean?”

“It’s okay. Everyone wants an English speaking guy these days – someone like Jean Claude Van Damme or Bruce Willis. Do you want a Bruce Willis? I think I got one here,” She said flipping through her catalogue.

“No, no. That’s okay. It’s just that I know a little English, it would be easier to correspond with a guy from over there.” Where “there” was, of course, was unclear to Natasha. She just knew that anyone from *there* would be much better than someone from *here*. At least, that was the impression she got from Western movies.

By the end of the session she had picked four English-speaking men and was happy to pay the forty *grivna* – a fair sum – to have their information.

On the way home, Natasha was thoughtful. She daydreamed on the bus about a perfect man – her own prince – who would take her away from this depressing atmosphere. *He will love me, he will protect me*, and when Natasha’s cynical mind tried to question these affirmative statements – *Why will he?* – Natasha simply thought, *Because he has to*.

She watched as stop after stop, people got on and off the bus. She watched old women swaddled in their winter clothes, even though it was summer, and old men carrying heavy bags. She saw young university students and could not help picturing Olena in a few years. She would be one of them, riding the overcrowded bus to and from school. *If I stay here*, Natasha thought, *Olena will never learn to drive a car, she will never get a proper education and she will most likely end up living with me. If I stay in*

Ukraine, Olena will turn out to be like me. The thought was too ugly to bear and Natasha quickly turned her focus back to daydreaming.

The moment Natasha stepped through the door of the apartment Baba – the domestic goddess wielding a rolling pin in one hand and a dirty rag in the other – poked her head out of the kitchen door.

“Where did you go?” Baba said.

“I went to Katya’s.”

“You lie. I sent Olena to get you and you weren’t there.”

“I was there, and then I went downtown, not that it’s any of your business. I’m a grown woman, mother, and I will come and go as I please.”

“Well, while you were out gallivanting around town, your daughter Olena – in case you had forgotten – needed to be fed, washed and dressed.”

“Mother, she is twelve-years-old, she doesn’t need you to fuss over her.”

“Well, I could have used some help with all the cooking and cleaning. I have such a bad headache from this morning and my blood pressure is very high today. The newspaper said that there’s a cosmic storm going on and you know how bad it is for my health.”

Frustrated with where this conversation was going, Natasha simply walked out of the room and slammed the door behind her. Natasha did not know how to deal with her mother. Since she was little, Baba deemed her to be “not like other girls,” and this

proclamation caused Natasha to be uncomfortable in her own skin. One effective way to cope with her mother's accusations was to run away from them which is exactly what she did. In Baba's old, wise eyes, however, this proved Natasha to be *angry, stubborn, and unmanageable*.

Natasha went to the balcony of their fifth story apartment and lit a cigarette. It was already one in the afternoon and Olena was playing outside as she did every Saturday. Natasha smoked and listened to the sounds of the August afternoon: a piercing screech of the swallows swooping above in the deep blue sky; children laughing in the courtyard; a baby crying somewhere in her building. Besides the soothing smell of nicotine, she could smell the sweet aroma of her neighbours' cooking and the fresh, leafy scent of the giant chestnut tree that draped its canopy right over her balcony. Through the open kitchen window, Natasha smelled Baba's borsch and heard her mother complain,

"There she goes again, smoking like a bloody chimney. Even her face has hair on it. She looks like a bloody monkey."

"Ma, I can hear you!" Natasha said.

"I know," Baba said and continued to mumble.

After standing outside for sometime, Natasha put out her cigarette on the balcony railing and went inside to look at her suitors. She took the large manila envelope out of her purse and laid out its contents on the floor. Four pictures lay in front of her, four men who had never met her or each other were tied together with one connection – she chose them. There was Allen from New York, who was a city worker – Natasha didn't know what a city worker was, but it sounded like stable enough employment. Then there was

Robert, a geography teacher from a small town in England. Chris from L.A. was an aspiring actor who worked part-time at a department store. Finally, there was James from British Columbia, Canada. James had his own company, which specialized in building and repairing bridges. He had a very charming smile and smoky blue eyes that looked out into the world with sad innocence. He stood in front of a small house surrounded by mountain ash and Canadian maples. Natasha was smitten.

What can you tell about a person from a photograph? Could Natasha tell, for example, that James had three failed marriages and two children of his own? Could she tell that James grew up with six siblings and as a result developed agoraphobic tendencies? Or could she tell that James was extremely superstitious and consulted his horoscope on a daily basis? No, none of these things were listed in his profile. Instead, under his picture were written three little phrases: *family oriented, peaceful, and trusting*.

Natasha once read somewhere that when we write about ourselves we inadvertently reinvent our existence. In writing, anonymity lets us create fictional characters for our own personalities. We never re-tell things exactly how they happened and in the same way, we never completely describe ourselves – we edit. Natasha *wanted* to tell the absolute truth. She wanted someone to love *her* not an invention of *Introductory Agency* or of her mother. As a result, she decided to stick to absolute facts.

In her curvy handwriting, Natasha set out to write an introductory letter to James. The plump, blond woman from the agency told her that she should be as honest as she could, without being too revealing.

“Don’t spill all the beans, dear,” she said kindly, but with a telling glint in her eyes that told Natasha that she *should know* exactly what to keep secret. So, with that advice in mind, Natasha set out to reduce her life to the three most important things about herself: (1) she was thirty-two and petite; (2) she had a daughter, and (3) she was a teacher. She left out the fact that she has not had a serious relationship since her husband left her twelve years before. Also, she did not mention that her desperation to leave this country was growing more powerful by the minute. Her mother was driving her crazy and if this letter-writing thing failed, she might have to jump from the balcony to escape the constant nagging and complaining that was her mother’s daily discourse. She wrote,

Hello,

My name is Natasha. I am living in Ukraine in Odessa city. I am 32 years old. I had husband. I have dark hair, height – 160sm, weight – 51kg. I am now teaching of physics, and I had university. I love sport. I like horseback ride. I like to moving fast life. I love childrens. I have daughter 12 years old. Her name Olena. I am temper cheerful. I love good men. I have a good in cook foods.

If you like me you can write on this ad.

Natasha was so wrapped up in her writing and translating that she did not notice Olena standing beside her.

“What are you doing, Mama?” Olena asked loudly, which made Natasha jump and smudge the last word she was writing. Natasha looked at her daughter’s frizzy dark blond, bordering on red hair, scabbed knees and dirty elbows and was filled with love. There was one thing that Baba could *never* claim – Olena – she was the exact replica of

Natasha when she was twelve. Lying to Olena would be like lying to herself and Natasha did not want to lie to her daughter. After all this was her future too.

“Olena, come sit,” Natasha said patting the place on the couch next to her. When Olena had obliged Natasha fanned the pictures that she had picked from *Introductory Agency*. Candidly and without pretention, Natasha asked, “Olena, which of these men do you like best?” Without hesitation the girl pointed to Robert from England. Natasha was a little disappointed.

“What about him?” asked Natasha showing Olena James’ picture. “Do you like him?”

“No,” Olena said right away. “He seems too happy.” Natasha did not understand why looking *too* happy was a problem, but Olena explained with child-like innocence that people who looked too happy were either simple or spoiled, and she did not like people like that. Nonetheless, Natasha liked James’ innocent blue eyes and continued to write her letter despite her daughter’s advice.

During dinner, Natasha, Olena, Baba and Grandpa sat at a small kitchen table. No one spoke for some time, until Olena, while chewing her meatball asked,

“So, Baba, which one of Mama’s men do *you* like?” Silence descended on the kitchen. Everyone stopped in various stages of eating and looked over at Natasha, who gradually was turning red. Of course Natasha was going to tell her mother about the catalogue of men and about *Introductory Agency*, but after she got her first reply (or maybe even after she left the country).

Baba's cheeks were turning blotchy red and with every breath she took puffed out a little so that she looked like a blowfish ready to attack her offender. Natasha's dad, on the other hand, continued to eat his mashed potatoes without making any eye contact with his wife, daughter or granddaughter. A long time ago, Natasha's father learned that in a house full of women, the best strategy for a peaceful existence was to stay out of the way. For this simple, non-violent tactic Baba labelled him "useless," and never asked his opinion on anything. So in a way, Natasha's father reached the ultimate state of peace, but at the cost of letting Baba run the household.

Ah, yes! Finally, Baba had something *valid* to complain about. Her high blood pressure could now be fully justified. At last, *everyone* would have to listen to her. She puffed out her enormous belly, readying herself for a rant of a lifetime, but Natasha interrupted.

"Mama, don't start, the neighbours will hear," she said, staring right into the eyes of her mother. Baba's belly deflated, but her cheeks remained blotchy and swollen. If there was one thing that Baba revered more than her own opinion it was the opinions of her neighbours. Since she was a little girl, she knew how the world worked and that to *get* places you had to *know* people. Because of that simple philosophy, Baba was an extremely good neighbour. She gossiped with the *right* people and only about *acceptable* people, and never let the contents of her private life be known to anyone. So when Natasha urged her to stay quiet, Baba understood immediately that the topic of her daughter's *men* could prove disastrous within her social network.

Lowering her voice to a whisper, Baba hissed with malice:

“Since when does a daughter of mine have *men*?”

“Since she *bought* them at the dating agency,” Natasha answered mimicking her mother’s tone.

“What sort of *men* did you *buy*?”

“Imported ones, *mother*,” Natasha answered through her teeth. At this Natasha’s father looked up from his food and stared at his daughter.

“Natashka, you mean like the ones you can get to bring you to America?” He asked timidly, without looking at his wife.

“Yes, the very same,” Natasha replied still looking at her mother.

Baba was at a loss for words. Despite everything that she said to her daughter and her daughter said to her, she loved Natasha and Olena and would hate to see them leave. However, Baba understood that there was no hope for Natasha here and that Olena was better off elsewhere as well. Quietly, Baba lowered her fork into her mound of potatoes and calmly asked,

“Can I see them?”

Natasha brought the manila envelope into the kitchen and laid out the photos of her four men onto the table. She pointed to each photograph and described her potential suitors: Allen from New York, Chris from L.A., Robert from England and James from Canada. When Natasha pointed to the last one, she could not help, but smile a little. The corners of her mouth lifted involuntarily and for one fraction of a second, Baba saw that her daughter had already made her choice.

Baba picked up James' photograph. She studied it intently and then looked at Olena.

"Olena, who do you like?" Baba asked and without hesitation Olena pointed to Robert from England.

"Do you like this man?" Baba asked Olena again and to this the girl simply shook her head. "Why?" Was Baba's follow-up question.

"He looks *too* happy," Olena replied and stuffed another meatball into her mouth.

"I agree," Baba said, placing the photograph back in the pile with a dismissive gesture. "If he is *so* happy, than what does he need a wife for?"

"What is wrong with being happy?" Natasha asked. Baba did not reply. In truth, there was nothing wrong with being happy, but Baba worried that if this man was as happy as he seemed he might not *need* Natasha. Baba knew *happy* people in her lifetime and the basic fact about happy people was that they did not need anything, they were *happy* with what they had. If the man in the photograph was this happy while he was single, than when Natasha came into his life he might not change and simply discard her as the obstacle to his happiness.

"I like this one," Baba said picking up the photograph of surly-looking Allen from New York. "Look at him, he looks solid, dependable. What's wrong with him?"

"He looks like a barrel!"

"Better a barrel, than a useless mute," Baba said nodding her head in her husband's direction. Natasha's father did not say anything, but Natasha knew that he

heard Baba perfectly. Natasha felt bad for her father, but she also felt that it was not her place to stick up for him. She, of course did not believe in hitting women, but sometimes Natasha felt that if her father gave Baba one good, well-deserved smack, than the old woman would show him a little more respect. In reality, however, Natasha knew very well that if her father ever hit Baba, even unintentionally, she would hit him back ten times harder and his scrawny physique might not survive the blow.

After dinner, Natasha copied the letter she wrote three times and put the names of the other men on the top. She included two pictures that she had of herself: one in a short summer dress with Olena walking by the seaport, and another of her in a bikini while she was on a beach with a friend this summer. She stamped all four envelopes, neatly wrote out all four addresses and her own, and the next morning mailed the letters away with thoughts of James on her mind.

Baba had business to attend to the following morning. Ever since she learned about her daughter's desire to leave, she had been worried about Natasha's and Olena's futures. She had a restless sleep, during which she dreamed about her daughter and granddaughter being *very* happy with this *James* from Canada. Baba woke up from this dream drenched in cold sweat, because everyone knows that it is a very bad omen to dream that your loved ones are happy. So in the morning she fussed over her little jar of holy water that she kept in the fridge. She sprinkled a little of it on a branch of basil leaves and started blessing the house. First, she blessed the doorway, so that no evil spirits could enter; then she blessed the room where Natasha and Olena slept, so that nothing could harm them; and lastly, she blessed her own room so that she and her husband remained safe and healthy in order to help their children.

In the afternoon, Baba went to see a fortune-teller. She took the men's photographs out of the manila envelope and some *pirogy* filled with cottage cheese – a small token for the fortune-teller – and left the house under the pretence of going to the market.

When Olena came home in the evening she discovered that she was home alone. Baba had left a short note on the kitchen table saying that she had gone to the market and would be back shortly. Of course, the market closed at 6 p.m. and it was now 7:30 p.m., so naturally, Olena started to worry. Olena's greatest fear was that some day she would be abandoned. She was terrified of being alone. When she was very little, she made her grandparents swear to her that they would not die while she lived with them, and even though both of them explained that her fears were unfounded, Olena was still terrified that one day she would discover one of her grandparents dead. Once, Olena saw a movie where the main character, a little boy, found his grandmother dead in her rocking chair, and instead of calling someone for help, he crawled into her lap and started putting makeup on her pasty, white face. This film disturbed Olena to such an extent that the girl threw away all of Baba's makeup, for which she was severely punished.

So, when Olena came home to find the house empty and her grandmother an hour and a half late, she immediately started to cry. She walked from room to room wailing, which she was fully aware she should *not* be doing at 12 years of age. Olena cried as she walked the hallway of the small apartment back and forth, occasionally peeking into the peephole looking out onto the apartment landing. Through violent sobs, she pleaded under her breath, "Oh, please let someone come home, please!" Being a very complicated little person, on the verge of teenage-hood, Olena listened intently for someone on the

landing. The second she heard the key turning in the door, she quickly wiped her tears, ran into the living room and pretended to read a book. When her mother came into the door and said, "I am home," Olena peaked her head into the hallway and nonchalantly replied,

"Whatever."

No one spoke about the men or Natasha's letter for a few weeks. Olena was under strict orders from Baba not to tell anyone anything about this and, being terrified of her, Olena never said a word about James or Robert to any of her friends. Soon, a reply came from James. In a small, long, white envelope, James' small handwriting told Natasha that the future of her dreams was possible. Upon receiving the letter, she set out to carefully translate it into Russian. She tried to not leave out any innuendos or idioms. After she translated the letter, she read it out aloud to her family. It read:

To: Natasha Guseva

460086, Odessa-86

Geydara st., ap.56

Ukraine, Russia

Dear Natasha,

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is James Travin. I am a average man of 35 y.o. soon to be 36 y.o. the 30 of APRIL. I am 5feet 10 inches tall with blue eyes and brown hair. My weight is 195lbs. I am a quite man that enjoys the simple pleasures in

life. I like children, animals, long slow walks, camping, country and classical music. I am always eager to learn about others country, customs, and cultures.

I do not drink nor do drugs. I do smoke cigarettes, but trying to stop. I am learning to speak the Russian language. It is a dream of mine to some day visit your country. I live in a small town in northern British Columbia, Canada, but I travel a lot. I build bridges for a living and work all over the country. I have some understanding of the hardships and the economy in your country, and if I can ever be of assistance do not hesitate to ask me.

If you do not wish to write me anylonger, I will understand. It would be a pleasure for me if you continued to write and I would be happy to send you a better photo of myself in my next letter. I look forward to your response.

Sincerly yours, James

Natasha was delighted. James did not sound conceited or pretentious; he did not shun the fact that Natasha was a single mother, and he even offered to help if she asked for it. Baba, however, was suspicious,

“Canada? Why go to Canada when you can go to America? What’s in Canada?”

“Mama,” Natasha protested. “Don’t be ridiculous!” Natasha was hurt. Baba, as usual, chose to reduce someone’s qualities to superficial characteristics, like their place of origin. Natasha’s father remained quiet, and Olena sat on the couch with a pained expression that said she would rather be anywhere but here with her super *uncool* family.

“Don’t be stupid, Natasha,” Baba went on. “Canada is practically wild! What are you going to do there, huh? Farm? Milk cows? Ride dogsleds?”

“Yes, mother,” Natasha replied angrily. “I am going to milk cows, while riding dogsleds in the Canadian wilderness. At this point, that kind of future doesn’t sound that bad!”

“Lower your voice, for Christ-sake.” Baba whispered. She was so fearful of her neighbours finding out the truth that she failed to notice that the entire apartment building was whispering about Natasha behind Baba’s back. Everyone knew that something was going on, but no one knew exactly what.

As if strategically, the first floor of the apartment building was occupied by the worst gossip known to mankind. Her name was Larisa Semyonovna and she lived in a small three-bedroom apartment with her husband, daughter and her daughter’s four children. Needless to say, since all seven people in that family could not possibly fit comfortably into an apartment that size, Larisa spent most of her time sitting on a little bench outside and watched as people came in and out of the building. Soon, Larisa became a permanent fixture to the entrance and accumulated friends who would sit with her, munch on sunflower seeds and gossip about everyone who went in and out of the building.

Larisa disliked Baba and Baba’s family. Even though Baba was a simple seamstress, she always carried herself as if she was part of the intelligentsia or the upper class. She hated the fact that even though the Soviet Union had collapsed a little more than four years ago, Baba still managed to find work for herself and her husband, while

Larisa and her daughter lay restless at night trying to think what to cook for their children. Larisa had no prospects of finding work. A woman of fifty years of age with a hunched back and bad knees, she relied solely on her pension, which was a meagre one hundred *grivnas* a month. Her daughter, Olya, worked at a rope factory, which was surviving on life support, and rarely paid their workers at all.

So, when Larisa started to suspect that something was happening in Natasha's life, which Baba tried to keep secret, Larisa became extremely happy. Her imagination ran wild. Rumours started to surface all over the complex – Natasha Guseva was pregnant, Natasha had an abortion, Natasha had a new lover who dumped her after finding out that she was pregnant, and, Natasha's personal favourite, Natasha was now prostituting her body outside of Hotel Odessa to rich foreigners.

Katya heard the rumours as she returned to her first-storey apartment. She considered herself to be above gossip but, of course, rumours like these piqued her interest, especially after what Natasha had told her about not wanting to date anymore.

“So, is there any truth to what Larisa's been saying? Are you pregnant?” Katya asked when she next saw Natasha. They were sitting in the little park outside of the apartment block, nibbling on ice cream cones.

“Katya! You know better than to believe a thing that Larisa tells you.”

“You have to admit, something's different about you. I've seen it. The last few weeks, in fact ever since you told me you were off men, you've been acting funny.”

“Well, if I tell you, will you promise to keep it a secret?”

“Of course. Tell me.”

“You know that rumour about me prostituting myself to wealthy foreigners?”

Natasha said sheepishly. “It’s not too far off.”

“What? Tell me everything.”

“You should try it too!” Natasha said after filling Katya in on her plan for epistolary romance. “It would be great to have someone to do it with, and your English is so much better than mine.”

It was decided, that day Natasha and Katya went to *Introductory Agency* together and Katya bought some addresses. They came back and wrote letters together, while drinking imported cognac in Katya’s apartment.

Natasha found that it was easier having Katya on her side. Not only was Katya a fun and dependable friend, she was very good at English and could proofread Natasha’s letters. Her next letter to James read:

Dear James,

I received you letter and I was very-very glad! Thanks a very mach, James!

Last week, I was in Nikolaev on Friday with my ~~students~~ pupil in zoo. I don’t like zoo because there animals are look like prisoner so as there is cages. In Odessa zoo very bad and small. I show you it if you come. But in Nikolaev the zoo is very nice. The children were happy.

James, I hope one day you can visit me. I will be very happy and excited to meet you. I think will be so excited and so happy and I may forget all English words, but I will be try a very much.

James, I think about you very-very often during the day and I look at your photo very often too.

My parents and Olena says to you "Hello!" Please write me soon. I look forward to your next letter.

Sincerely yours, Natasha

When Natasha told Baba about the rumours, Baba once again went to the fortune-teller. Baba was a huge believer in the evil eye and thought that Larisa Semyonovna's gossip could hurt Natasha's chances at happiness. So, once again she blessed the apartment with holy water and made Natasha take a bath in rosemary to thwart that jealous gaze of her neighbours. When she came home, she sat Natasha at the kitchen table, poured her some vodka into a mug with roses on it and asked,

"How much do you trust Katya?"

"Plenty. Why?" Natasha asked downing her vodka in one swig.

"Don't do that," Baba complained with a sour expression on her face. "You are not a bar wench, but a sophisticated young woman. The reason I am asking is that the fortune-teller said that there is someone close to you who will betray you."

"Well, whoever it is, I am sure it's not Katya," Natasha said. Yet, Baba did not trust Katya – a woman who drank imported cognac was sure to be trouble. So, Baba gave

detailed instructions to Olena to watch for the mailman and get the letters before they had a chance to enter the mailbox. That way, no one would suspect anything and these rumours would die out on their own.

Olena hung out outside and spied on the woman who delivered the mail from a tall cherry tree, where the previous summer she built a tree fort with her friends. The minute she spotted the round mailwoman wobbling down the street, she jumped down from the tree right in front of her and asked if there was any mail for apartment 56. At first, the only mail was Grandpa's newspaper and Baba's *Burda Moda* – a fashion magazine that Baba subscribed to religiously. Later, however, letters for Natasha started to arrive in strange long, white envelopes with stickers that said “par avion” on them.

Soon came a letter from Robert, in which he included not only photos of his dogs and his house, but also the very particular characteristics he was looking for in a woman, “*what I'm looking for is a gal who is attractive and petite, has a down-to-earth personality, who is easy-going, open and honest, sincere, caring and loving, funny and/or cheerful, supportive, likes animals, knows how to cook (and hopefully sews too).” Then a letter came from Allen who asked many questions such as, “*would you able to visit New York for a vacation with your daughter? Would you be willing to relocate to America? What do you prefer?, a city setting or a country setting?*” And finally, a letter came from Chris who complained about his life, “*I went to the dentist and they redid my fillings, I must have been to the dentist at least five times. The last filling, they had to drill the whole filling out and then start over. I don't like cold weather. The weather in Ukraine sounds too depressing for me, I don't like to be cold. When the temperature gets below 50, I don't like to be outside. I like to be warm in bed too (especially when you have**

someone to snuggle up to). Next letter can you send me more pictures of you, I can't find the ones you sent before."

Natasha looked at these letters as her own personal treasures, her own personal tickets out of this country and out of Baba's apartment. Baba saw these letters through a skeptical lens, because she could not understand why anyone would want to start a relationship with someone so far away. Olena never saw the men themselves she saw the places. Her imagination was overcrowded with images of U.S., Canada and England that she saw on TV and in picture books. Grandpa never said anything but he thought that, just like everything the women in this household ever planned, this too would blow over and be forgotten in no time.

Of course, this was one thing that Natasha was not likely to forget and soon another letter from James came – this one a little more intimate.

Dear Natasha,

It was so good to get your letter today! I was about to give up hope that you would write back. I was going to write you a short note just to make sure you got my first letter. I think we should have an agreement not to quit writing without letting the other person know first. If you don't hear from me for a long time assume my letter was lost and I will do the same.

The mail takes so long. I got your first letter almost 5 weeks ago. At the rate we are going now, by the time we get together we will be too old to care! Maybe we could write to each other 1 time a week without waiting for answers.

Your handwriting is beautiful. Your English is a little clumsy but not hard to understand. We are so conceited and lazy, expecting the whole world to learn our language. It's a good thing I don't have to write to you in Russian!

I am looking for someone to love and accept me for who I am. Someone I can trust not to hurt me like I've been hurt so badly in the past. Can we be sure we can find that special person thru letters so many miles apart?

What is life like for you and your family? We are always seeing news reports here about difficult times now for Russia. If you ever want to try to call me, here is my number (250) 448-4432. I don't know what the time difference is, call after 5:00pm my time. Tell the operator to charge the call to me.

Thanks for the picture, I really like that dress. Forgive me for not sending another of myself. I keep meaning to buy a new camera, the last photo of me in the agency was taken with a disposable. I assure you that I haven't gotten my nose pierced or anything.

I'll get this in the mail first thing in the morning. Give my regards to your parents and Olena.

Affectionately yours, James.

Natasha and Katya drank in Katya's apartment again after translating James' last letter.

"Do you know that *they* have a name for women like us?" Katya said, now pleasantly buzzed.

"Who are *they*?" Natasha said.

“Well, you know, the Americans,” Katya said in a whisper. “They call people like us, ‘mail-order brides.’”

“Really? That sounds romantic.”

“Well, this is coming from the English instructor at the school – the one from Washington. I told him what we were doing and that’s what he called us.”

“Hm,” Natasha said.

“He also said that some people think it’s degrading and scandalous.”

“Well, that’s reassuring. I guess there is nothing we can do. *Na zdorovje*. To men and all the other things that make us drink.” With this the two women clinked their glasses and downed their drinks.

Sometime after, Olena came home from school and found both of her grandparents on the balcony leaning dangerously over the railing. Baba was standing on a short stool; the upper half of her body was completely outside of the balcony. Olena’s grandpa had one hand over Baba’s waist but just like his wife he was almost entirely over the railing himself.

“What the hell are you doing?” Olena screamed and rushed to the balcony.

“Helping your mother,” Baba replied and Olena got a distinct image in her mind of her mother dangling over the balcony, while Baba and Grandpa were trying to help her up. Finally, Olena’s worst fears were coming true! When Olena looked over the railing with fearful eyes, however, she did not see her mother dangling listlessly and begging her parents to let her die; instead, Olena saw Baba and grandpa destroying a pigeon’s nest.

“Grab that other clothes stick and help us bring this up,” Baba said to Olena. “We need to get a stick from the nest for your mother.”

“What?” Of all the strange things Baba did or said this one was the most ridiculous. “Why?” asked Olena.

“The fortune-teller told me to get a stick from a pigeon’s nest and get your mother to wash her face with it in hot water. That way, she will be lucky in love,” Baba replied while shooing away a very disgruntled pigeon. Now that Olena was close to her grandparents, she saw that Baba was armed with a meter-long wooden ruler and grandpa wielded a broomstick. Together, they tried to pinch a tiny stick from a pigeon’s nest between the respective ends of their weapons and bring it up. Olena did not know if she should laugh or cry, or maybe call the fire department, because it would seem that at this rate, her grandparents were likely to end up in the chestnut tree growing outside of the balcony. Her fears, however, soon subsided as Baba managed to hook the entire nest onto the end of her ruler. Baba picked a few choice branches from it while the obviously livid bird flew over her head making terrible squawking noises. With the nest placed back where it was and the pigeon calmed with a few pieces of bread, Baba looked at Olena and in a very serious voice said, “not a word about this to your mother.”

Later that evening, Baba boiled the small stick from the pigeon’s nest in hot water and gave it to Natasha with a request that she not ask any questions but simply rinse her face. There were some instances when it was best to not argue with Baba, and in this case, Natasha obeyed.

The leaves were turning from green to gold, and falling gracefully to the ground. Odessa, dressed in reds, yellows and golds seemed festive, even under the constant cover of a rain cloud. Women dressed in light fur coats and high-heeled boots hurried through the streets stepping into puddles and leaving dainty footprints on the asphalt. Men donned in stylish overcoats and carrying black umbrellas waited at the bus stations for their morning commutes. Natasha and Olena stood among the commuters at the bus stop. They were going to the notary office downtown. Natasha was making a visit permit for James, who wanted to visit Odessa in the next few months and Olena wanted to come because this way she got to miss school.

Things were getting serious between Natasha and James. They talked to each other on the phone once a week. Natasha did not have a phone in her mother's apartment, so she made an arrangement with a kind, elderly widow who lived on the second floor. This particular woman did not bother with rumours and did not particularly care to whom Natasha talked. In exchange, Natasha gave the woman fifty *grivnas* a month, which was very much appreciated by the widow, who had a tough time to make ends meet on her meagre pension.

James was very enthusiastic about coming to Odessa. He said that he would have to work quite a lot to afford a ticket, but he was coming regardless and he could not wait to meet Natasha and her family in person. Baba, of course, had to make the apartment ready for the foreigner. Because the place had not been remodelled since Olena's birth, Baba set out to put up new wallpaper, repaint the floors and the ceiling and put in new carpets. Needless to say, the best place for both Natasha and Olena was somewhere other than in the apartment. Natasha tried to tell her mother that going to such extremes was

not necessary, that James wanted to see the way Natasha's family lived; however, Baba, proud to the core, chanted a mantra as she swept, washed and painted – “it's small, but clean... small, but clean.”

Natasha worked long hours at school and Olena stayed with her and did homework. When they came home in late evenings, Baba would be laying on the couch in the living room with a wet cloth on her forehead complaining about her blood pressure. Natasha's father also went out early in the morning and did not come home until very late at night. No one knew where he was going, but both Natasha and Olena understood that sometimes he just needed to get away. Baba, on the other hand, suspected that her sixty-year-old husband was having an affair.

“Oh, how I've be mistreated by that man during my life.” She said one night to Natasha as the two were peeling potatoes on the newly painted kitchen stools. “Why God? What have I done to deserve such a “useless” husband,” She said throwing her hands towards the sky.

“Mom, he lives in a house full of women. Why would he need another one?”

“Bah,” She said dismissively, “Two men were after me. One was a captain on a cruise ship, tall, handsome ... and then there was your father. Of course, I had to pick the funny one. Look at me now – laughing.” Natasha sat quietly, listening to her mother complain with one question on her mind. *What am I supposed to do about it?*

Because she wanted to learn English as quickly as possible, Natasha started to write letters to James everyday, as if he were a diary. Some of them she sent and some

she kept to show to him in person. However, even though she sent letters to him very often, his replies still took weeks and Natasha was starting to get impatient.

Dear James,

How are you? I do hope all is okay? Your letters take such a long time to get here. Today, I received your letter and it made me very glad. Your letters are always surprase for me. Thanks!

Your photos are beautiful always. The Peace river is very beautiful and I so want to see it and Hudson's Hope, too. And I so want to see you and to hear you. We with Olena look at your photos and we are thinking about you. Where are you? What are you doing?

I know it is strange for you, but I miss you and the time go very slowly and letters take long time (about 2 weeks). I do invitation for you and you can visit me. It will be nice to meet you.

We are alright. And we with Olena go to our school everyday. She says to you "Hello!" The weather is cool but it is nice because it is autumn. We with Olena sometimes go to the park near my home. I miss your letters very much. James, please write to me very often. My parents say to you "Hello!"

Please write to me very soon. I look forward to your next letter.

Sincerely yours, Natasha

Everything was set. James sent Natasha a letter telling her that he was coming on January 20th and would stay until February 3rd. Natasha was very excited and very scared.

She was not afraid that James might not like *her*, she was terrified that after meeting her mother, he might run for the hills. The morning before James' arrival, Natasha sat at the kitchen table and had her tea, while her mother was stirring something by the stove.

"Mom," Natasha interrupted the silence. "Where is dad?" She asked timidly, trying to build up to the part of the conversation where she would tell Baba not to embarrass her in front of James.

"I sent him to buy some chicken at the market," Baba said without looking at her daughter.

"Mom," Natasha started again. "Can you promise something to me? Can you try to be normal for a change?" Baba turned around to look at Natasha, her stirring spoon dripping some red liquid on the newly painted floor. Baba did not know what to say. She always suspected that her daughter was embarrassed of her, but Natasha had never said it outright. Baba was not angry, but hurt. Natasha saw that, but it was too late to take back what she said. Instead, the two women looked at each other in silence until Olena came in to the kitchen for a piece of toast.

Olena was very cheerful this morning. She was excited for James' arrival - not because she finally would get to meet him but because the arrival of the foreigner meant presents, good food and a family gathering. Olena loved family gatherings because they were so entertaining. Baba would refrain from drinking because of her blood pressure; meanwhile, Natasha and Grandpa would get completely drunk and would start arguing about politics and repeat phrases like, "listen, listen to me" and "what do you know, you

are drunk.” The whole evening would end when Baba would pry away the bottle of vodka from her husband’s hands and call it a night.

Natasha’s father came home in a few hours carrying a large burlap sack. Baba eyed the bag apprehensively.

“What did you buy? A whole chicken?”

“Well... yes,” Her husband said. He opened the bag out of which popped a chicken’s head, surveying the kitchen with its beady yellow eyes. It took a second for the idea of a live chicken to sink into everyone’s minds.

“You are going to ruin me!” Natasha ran out of the kitchen in tears. Olena looked at the chicken with amusement and tried to pet it.

Baba looked at her husband with utmost hatred and through her gritted teeth hissed, “Take it back!”

Unfortunately for both Natasha and her father, the man who sold the hen to Olena’s grandpa did not want to take her back. So when he came back home carrying the same burlap sack with the same chicken in it, Baba ordered her husband to take the hen to the balcony and kill it. While he grew up on a farm and watched his father kill many chickens as a little boy, the thought of killing something made Natasha’s father uneasy and in the end, the chicken was allowed to live on the balcony until the family figured out what to do with it. Olena was ecstatic. A foreigner with presents and a new pet all in one day!

Day 2

The time change gets to me. I don't know whether I am coming or going. It's 9pm in Vienna time, but noon back home. They tell me to sleep, I have no other choice, but to listen, so I sleep – or fake doing it.

My remote for my own personal television on the back of the seat in front of me is broken – a button is missing and the scroll pad is stuck. So, whenever I come to a screen the cursor randomly decides what it is I want to do. I find this lack of independence insulting and question the European sense of pride, or craftsmanship. I finally give up the fight and attempt to put the remote back in its rightful place, but find that it won't go into its home. The retract function is also broken. I succumb to the corporate media pressure and play Russian roulette with the programming. The gods of chaos want me to listen to jazz, so I comply.

The little screen shows the little plane cruising along the neatly placed dotted red lines. Soon the view disappears and is replaced with a view of Austrian countryside. Instead of being in a patchwork patterns, like their Canadian cousins, these strips of farmland are laid out more like sectors of conjoined football fields. I look around and see that everyone is fixated on these little screens. Even those travelers in window seats are drawn to the glow of the box.

We off-load into the round terminal, where a plume of smoke and a wave of humidity hit us like a volatile hybrid mixture. I'm nearly sick right then and there. The round room spins and I ask to get off. This place is gonzo and I'm there.

Where's the washroom? I pace up and down this screwy place, while making frantic "have-to-shit" gestures. No one here speaks English!!! Finally, some woman dressed in red fur, pulls me down a twisting-spiralling hall and pushes me under a sign labelled "WC." The washrooms leave nothing to the imagination. Tiled from floor to ceiling, it is incredibly hot and smells like shit. The toilet itself is a simple hole in the floor over which you are supposed to squat and hope that everything you excrete misses your trousers. I hope that Natasha's place is a little more comforting.

The minute James stepped off the plane in Odessa, he regretted the trip. How well did he really know this woman? He should have made his trip shorter. Two weeks was a little too long to spend with strangers. How would he even recognize Natasha? Sure he has seen her photos, but can you really trust a photograph? Luckily, Natasha was able to recognize him. She stood by the arrival gate wearing a luxurious fur coat and an elegant red hat. Clutching her small black purse with both hands, she stood on her toes and peeked over the heads of other people awaiting new arrivals. She saw him going through customs. It was unmistakably him – the short brown hair, the blue innocent eyes, the Canadian flag on his shoulder bag. She really wanted to meet him, but now that he was here, standing in front of her, she was not sure what to do. They hugged awkwardly and Natasha, in her broken English, asked James about his flight. They caught a cab back to Natasha's apartment. During the car ride, Natasha and James did not speak, but Natasha firmly held his hand as if worried that he would disappear.

James kept an extensive journal about his trip. He viewed this journey as very important and did not want to make a mistake regarding his feelings towards Natasha. He wrote about everything – what he ate, what he drank, where they went. He wrote so much

that by the end of his two week stay he filled up an entire one hundred and ninety two-page Blueline notebook. When he arrived at Natasha's apartment block, he wrote:

Natasha's apartment block has seven separate entrances, which have three apartments per floor and reach five floors high. The building is a dirty cream colour, with the odd patches of bare and patched surfaces. Balconies extend out in sets of two and span all five stories. They have mostly been enclosed with whatever material is available.

We walk up a narrow set of stairs to the first floor. The paint on the walls is peeling and a dank smell seems to emanate from the barricaded basement. No elevators? How are we going to get up my heavy bags up to the fifth floor? The answer comes terribly fast, as Natasha starts to walk up the stairs and beckons me to follow. Finally, after I am about a second away from collapsing, we reach Natasha's landing. There are three apartments – three doors. Natasha walks up to door number 2 and pulls out the keys from her purse. There must be about 15 keys on that one little keychain. She fiddles with them until she finds the right key and unlocks the first lock, the second and the third. She opens the door and I am about to walk through, but wait, what should be a doorway is another door! "For robbers," Natasha says as if reading my mind. Three more keys and locks later and we are finally through the second door...

When they came through the door of Natasha's tiny apartment, James was instantly greeted with hugs and kisses from Natasha's mother and father. He was lost in embraces and incomprehensible babble. A little way away stood a girl, who James assumed was Olena – "*she is so very small,*" James wrote later in his journal. He was led

to a small room where there stood a giant table filled with food. He tried to explain that the only thing he wanted right now was to sleep, that he ate on the plane, but no one understood him and so he was forced to sit down at the head of the table and had food piled on his plate by Natasha's mother. When James looked up from his food towards the balcony, he saw a large chicken standing by the glass door and looking into the room with an empty stare. James could not help but stare as well and when Natasha noticed his gaze, her face went cherry-red. She said that the chicken was her father's mistake and that she was sorry.

Natasha's daughter sat by her mother and ate quietly. She would lift her head from her plate once in a while and look at James with curiosity. Yet James could tell that this was not how Olena usually acted; he could tell that she felt uncomfortable. Because of that feeling, James felt an instant connection with Olena. He too felt horribly uncomfortable and, just like her, he did not say a word but only nodded in agreement, while his hosts carried on the conversation. More than anything right at that very moment James wished to be a child like Olena. If he were a child, nothing would be expected of him. Natasha would not have to translate the incomprehensible conversation that her parents were engaged in, he would not be expected to down every shot of vodka to keep up with Natasha's father, and he would not have to eat everything Natasha's mother placed on his plate.

That night, James and Natasha shared a bed, while Olena, Baba and Natasha's father slept in the other room. James felt extremely uncomfortable. Luckily, however, he was very tired and fell asleep within minutes. Natasha laid awake and listened to James' deep breathing and light snoring. She was not sure how she felt about this man. She

wanted him to come; she loved him when he was away, but now... Natasha was no longer sure of her feelings. Since the first time she wrote to this man, James felt like a stranger. She had to try, however; she had to try for herself, for her daughter. She had to make herself fall in love with him.

In the middle of the night, Natasha noiselessly got up and went to the bathroom. When she opened the bathroom door, she let out a loud shriek. James woke up startled and went to see what was going on. He found Natasha sitting in the hallway with the bathroom light illuminating her slender body in her white nightgown. She looked terrified but amused. Breathing hard she looked at James and smiled.

“I forgot about the chicken,” she said with a heavy accent and pointed towards the bathtub.

Now James remembered that because it was getting cold, the chicken had to be moved inside and since Natasha’s mother did not want the bird roaming free in the house, the hen was moved into the bathtub where it now slept with its head under its wing. Natasha and James laughed – she out of embarrassment and he because he only now truly appreciated how ridiculous the whole situation was.

That first laughter together started a chain reaction. James started to feel more comfortable with Natasha, and Natasha started to realize that instead of cultivating a romance, she should start with friendship. So, for the next two weeks they went to all of Natasha’s favourite places and to all the places James wanted to see. Natasha taught him about Ukraine and about Odessa.

They went to the beach where the cold, Black sea beat against the shore. Natasha sat on a piece of driftwood, and looked out towards the horizon, while James walked around the deserted beach.

“What are you doing?” Natasha asked.

“I am looking for shells and rocks.” James replied. James was a collector. He searched relentlessly for beautiful things. His collection at home was extensive and he always added to it. Whenever he went to work, he would go for walks by the river and collect bits of glass, rocks, shells, bleached out bones and water-weathered pieces of driftwood. Natasha did not understand the desire to collect “junk.” To her, these things belonged to nature and, as a result, should stay outdoors.

She showed him where she worked and Olena studied, she took him to her parents’ *dacha* (summer home) by the sea, where James, kneeling on one knee, asked Natasha to marry him and move with her daughter to Canada. He did not have a ring, because he was not planning on proposing. However, at that very moment, he knew that he wanted to marry Natasha. That night they made love and the following morning, James went back to Canada.

On the last day before his departure, he wrote:

Day 13

I take the morning to visit with Natasha’s parents. They want me to tell them something. It’s bad that even in English I can’t find any words. They insist that I eat, eat, eat. And try handing off food for the planes. Its more of the infinite kindness I’ve been

taking for granted. Like the shower, which apparently costs 12 grivnas in water each use. I just hope I didn't break them. Earlier, I slipped some money into their 'secret' hiding spot, its not much really but at least its something.

At noon Natasha's dad goes to get his noble red steed (a red Lada that hardly runs). We talk for a while longer with Natasha's mom, who feeds us some more. When Natasha's dad returns, I say goodbye to the apartment and take my even heavier suitcases down the 10 flights of stairs.

As we drive, the streets seem somehow wider, cleaner, less alien, less frightening. When we hit the street that the airport is on, it's six lanes of agoraphobia. Unlike the other streets this one is not packed with traffic, its too open. Natasha is sitting with me at the airport and waiting for my flight. I proposed to her and she said "yes." I am certain that she is the one. She is teary eyed and tells me that she will miss me. She asks to write to her every day and to phone her often. Olena is with us and she doesn't say anything. God, she is so small! I say goodbye with a heavy soul. I will really miss my future family.

As the clouds part over my head, I look down at the patchwork that is the Ukrainian countryside. Is it bad I want to go back? The entire time, I felt caged, but isn't there a study done with a little white mouse? First he is caged and begins to test the limits of his cage, which shocks him with electricity. Eventually, he comes to except his state of helplessness and when the cage door is open he makes no attempt to flee.

2.2. Part II: Olena

Dear Olena,

How is my future daughter today? Miss you very much. This is just a quick note to say hello. I dream each day that your mother and your self will come to me. I am very proud that you study so hard in school. I hope you do the same in Canada. Education is very important for your future.

Say hello to your grandmother and grandfather for me. Give them a big hug mother must get a hug also!!! You take care of yourself for me. I'll see you soon,

Love, James

Olena hated receiving letters from James. She dreaded when her mother handed her a neatly folded note with Olena's name on it. She hated to see that James already considered her to be *his daughter*. Most of all, she hated that she never got a choice. She wanted to move, she wanted her mother to be happy, but she was also twelve and believed herself fully capable of making her own decisions. James' letters, written in short, simple sentences telling her to study hard and thanking her for some piece of art that Natasha snuck into the envelope without Olena's permission, irritated the girl. She did not want to be babied and she did not want a father. Each Sunday, Olena had to be home by five in the evening so that she could go over with her mother to the elderly woman's apartment on the second floor and talk to James on the phone. While Natasha poured her heart out to James, Olena had to make small talk with the elderly widow.

Her name was Maya Goldberg and because of her name Baba was incredibly suspicious of her. Maya was a sweet old woman, who sat around drinking tea and reminisced about her dead husband, but Baba believed that somehow Maya Goldberg was conspiring against Natasha. Since Maya happened to be of Jewish descent, she proved automatically, in Baba's eyes, as dangerous and untrustworthy. Baba begged Natasha to stop going over to Maya's apartment, but Natasha really liked Maya and often helped her with simple things like shopping or laundry.

Olena found Maya Goldberg really boring. Every Sunday, Olena had to come back from hanging out with her friends early so that she could spend two hours listening to Maya prattle on about how her dear, departed Sasha used to be in the war. Then Olena would talk to James in her broken English. Their conversation only lasted about a minute and mainly consisted of James asking Olena questions to which she her reply was always, "fine." At the end of their conversation, James would say, "I love you," to which Olena would simply reply, "fine" and handed the phone receiver back to her mother.

Each person experiences memories differently. James, for example, saw dream-like flashes of his mother, father and siblings. His memories were full of chaos and were categorized by "dark" times and "light" times. Baba's memories looked like an old black and white film that had excellent picture, but no sound. Words, in Baba's memories, were jumbled up or forgotten, which at times made the images in Baba's memories make no sense. Natasha's memories were full of color. She viewed her childhood in terms of yellows, her teenage years in purples and her adulthood in greens. Sometimes, certain events would bleed color, such as Olena's birth: it produced a large pink splotch on her otherwise green existence.

Olena was terrified to lose her memories so she felt a constant need to write them down. She wrote down everything that happened to her, down to what she ate and what she wore that day. Her diaries became the window into her past and a way for her to deal with the world. By the time she was twelve, she had written volumes about her own life.

26 October, Sunday.

Today was a terrible day. I think my mother went a little crazy. Today she went out and actually bought some men's addresses. They are from America or something and she is going to write to them and see if she can marry one of them. Why does she never ask me what I want? Later that day, our doorbell rings at about 10 at night and some drunk blond woman stumbles in through the doorway demanding that my mom goes for a ride with her. My mother knows this woman and calls her Ira. This Ira said,

"I need you to go for a drive with me and some of my friends." Mom looks a little dumbfounded and says, "Your friends?"

"Yeah," the woman replies. "But it's not what you think. See my friend needs someone for his friend who is a captain on this ship, so he asked me if I had any friends."

Baba was livid. She called this Ira a "floozy" and told her to get the hell out of her house. Mom started to protest, telling Baba to stay out of her business, but Baba insisted that this woman leave. In the end, I was grateful to Baba for stopping mom from going.

My life seems a little muddled right now. There is a boy that I like at school, but I am sure that he doesn't care about me that way. Vika and I keep teasing him and he

teases us back, but I am sure that he likes Vika more. Anyway, nothing exciting ever happens in my life.

Olena's diaries were written in thin books that she disguised as notebooks for math or science. She hid them behind a loose panel in Baba's sewing machine. What Olena did not know was that Baba found her hiding place a long time ago, while replacing a bolt on her sewing pedal. However, Baba never read them and simply pretended that she did not know anything about them.

Once, her grandpa found one of Olena's books and used the paper to line the cage of a budgie that Olena briefly had when she was little. Olena was furious and ever since kept an ever vigilant eye on her books. She was disappointed that she had lost the memory written on that piece of paper and was not able to recover it. Natasha's letters, gave the girl new things to write about, yet, somehow she felt that writing about it was wrong. It was as if she were stealing her mother's memories.

November 3

Mom got another letter today. This one was very brief. The letter said, "my name is Xavier, I am from California. I have a little daughter and when can you come to L.A.?" Mama seemed happy, but troubled. I don't know what she is hesitating about, its what she wants, isn't it? To see Los Angeles would be amazing! Actually, anywhere would be more interesting than here.

School is dreadful, as usual. I am the only person in my class that's failing Russian grammar. Today, my teacher read out my paper aloud to class as an example of what not to do. Everyone laughed at me and I wanted to sink through the floor. It started

so innocent too. She always makes fun of students' mistakes and today was no different. She never says the names, so everyone laughs. I was laughing too until I found out that the paper was mine. Why does she do that? Because I failed, she said my name as the owner of the paper. She said it was my punishment. God, right now, I really want to leave! I don't even care where!

Olena's family always had a sick love affair with the mailbox. Every time Olena brought back a letter from the plump mailwoman that she would stack outside, Natasha and Baba acted like it was Christmas. Sometimes, these long, white envelopes included pictures of men with dogs, men with children, men at work, and men on the beach. These fat, skinny, built and weedy men poured their hearts out onto the page so that at the end the words were filled with tiny, insignificant moments of truth in the lives of these tiny, insignificant testaments of humanity. Baba was often weary. She would look at a photograph, listen to Olena's mother's description of a particular man and say, "*Vot tokoy krasivey*, he is so handsome. And rich too. Why can't he find a woman where he lives?" Grandpa often had something to say to that, but the look from Baba would usually shut him up and he would only snicker under his moustache.

Baba was the only one who told Olena stories. She told Olena about her childhood, about Natasha's childhood, about the time after the war, and about her village. The latter kinds of stories were always disturbing. In them you could always find monsters or dark forests, even if the story seemingly told the events of real life. Her stories were always funny, always sad, but never happy. As a little kid, Olena used to lie on her grandmother's enormous stomach and listen to her voice echo in her belly. The faint whisper of sounds gave an illusion of birth, as if every word she said was born from

her heart and with every “lub” was sent out into the world and with every “dub” was regretted.

There is an expression in Russian, *babiney scazky* – grandma’s stories – the kind of tale that you are never supposed to take at face value. Tales that are meant to entertain and caution, but are never true. These tales are told in a way that only a woman can tell and Baba told them well. Sitting at her sewing machine, spinning thread onto a spool she softly told her tale as Olena watched, mesmerized by the moving fibres. Always hearing the phrase “once upon a time,” Olena imagined a time before stories, a time before Baba and her spool of thread. With her words, Baba weaves worlds that had magic, dragons, princesses in trouble and knights to rescue them.

To Olena, Baba was magical. Somehow, out of scraps of fabric, she could create wonderful and beautiful things. Baba always managed to survive despite her circumstances. Olena did not know about Baba’s philosophy – “It’s not what you know, but who you know” – and saw this ability as uncanny. Whenever things looked particularly bad, one of Baba’s friends would ring the doorbell and give Baba food or money. On more than one occasion, Baba had found her husband a job. When Baba and Grandpa were applying for pension, it turned out that Olena’s grandpa would not be getting that much because he did not work in one place for at least twenty years. Baba knew someone at the government office who forged the documents and got Baba’s husband quite a large pension. Olena’s perception of her grandma never changed. Since she was a little girl, Olena respected and feared her grandmother.

As is the case in most Ukrainian households, children were often left with their grandparents while their parents went to look for work to support them. So when Natasha left for work, Olena was left with her Baba, who did everything with her. When Baba worked at the textile factory, Olena went with her and played with bits of fabric on the floor at her grandmother's feet; when Olena was in a play at school, Baba would stay up all night finishing Olena's costume; and when Olena had a cold, Baba took time off work to look after her. Natasha seemed to Olena more like a sister than a mother. Yet, when Olena was angry at Baba, she loudly proclaimed, "You are not my mother! I want to live with my mother!" Now, however, Olena's mom lived with her and Baba. It had only been five years since Natasha moved back in to her family's apartment and Olena never fully accepted Natasha's authority. So, when Natasha started to write letters to men overseas, Olena disregarded this as another one of her mother's plans that never worked out.

Olena went along with Natasha's whims – indulging her like she would a *little* sister or a sick person. However, when her mother asked if she liked the man from Canada, Olena saw something in Natasha's eyes that told her that *this* time Natasha was not going to give up. Olena got scared and told Natasha that the man in the photograph looked *too* happy. She only said that because at that particular moment Olena was sad and to her the man did look overjoyed, which did not reflect her own emotions. Olena saw in that photograph a white house surrounded by mountain ash and Canadian maple trees and got scared that in that world – that is in the world of the photograph – there would only be Natasha, that man and Olena. There would be no Baba, no Grandpa and no friends. She wrote in her journal that "*today was a terrible day,*" because it was on this day that she saw her world without the things she knew. Today was a terrible day,

because for Olena, the world broke in half and created a deep gorge between *here* and *there*.

One day, Olena came home and Natasha informed her that she had made an arrangement with Maya Goldberg from the second floor to use her phone, so that *they* could talk to James. Natasha emphasized the pronoun *they* and added that she needed Olena to do this for her. She then said that she was aware of how much Olena disliked talking to strange people, but if Olena wanted to make Natasha happy then she would do this for her. Of course, Olena wanted to see her mother happy, yet no matter how much her mother pleaded, Olena refused to go to the first three conversations with James at Maya Goldberg's house. The fourth time, her mother finally guilted Olena into it.

When it was her turn to talk with James, Olena picked up the receiver and said, "Hello?"

"Hi, Olena. How are you?" James said.

"Fine." Olena replied.

"How did you like the postcard I sent you?"

"It was fine."

Looking for a more than one syllable answers, James probed further by asking, "How's school?"

"School is fine."

Taking this for a sign of shyness and bad English, James was amused and failed to see that Olena simply did not want to talk to him.

Convinced that a way to win a man's heart is through showing him familial affection, Natasha wrote James gushing letters that told him how much she missed him and how she could not wait to be with him. Natasha also felt that she needed to show James that Olena was in support of their relationship and so she made Olena write letters to James as well. This endeavour did not go over well with a temperamental twelve-year-old and Natasha wrote the letters for her daughter. The only thing she asked Olena to do was to copy the letters into her own handwriting.

Hello James,

I with mother to decide writing to you letter. I miss you and we with mother always look your photos and think about you.

I study good at school. Next week I to resive test at physics, algebra, English, Ukrainian literature and history. We to received letter from you yesterday.

We think about you every day and very miss you. Pleas to write often and soon, because we waiting your letter very much!

Kiss, Olena

Olena never exactly knew what these letters said. Her English was very poor and the only word that she actually understood was “kiss.” When she saw that word on the piece of paper she was supposed to copy she objected. She told her mother that she was not sure that she wanted to “kiss” this guy, but Natasha insisted that her letter needed to

sound affectionate and that the word “kiss” had the right feel to it. “Besides,” Natasha said nonchalantly, “not everything you write has to be true.” This made Olena wonder about the content of Natasha’s letters and, more importantly, about the content of James’.

Like Natasha, Olena wondered about the men that her mother was writing to. She wondered about the anonymity inadvertently created in the process of writing. Masked by the sheets of white paper, these men seemed enigmatic to Olena and she did not trust anything these letters contained. Her mother, on the other hand, was excited by what these letters said and would appear to trust them one hundred percent. Olena did not understand. She knew that when people fall in love, they become blind and gullible (or rather hopeful that their lover will not deceive them). However, her mother was not in love. She did not have anything *to* love. Falling in love with a photograph seemed stupid to Olena and she did not believe her mother to be that naïve. However, what the girl failed to see was that Natasha was in love. She loved the letters she received and the photographs concealed within them. She loved the descriptions of far away places and the idea of living there. She trusted the letters and was hopeful that, unlike fickle lovers, they would not deceive her.

When Olena was little, she once told a lie to her class. She said that she had won a Barbie doll on a TV show. The truth was that she did, in fact, win a prize on the TV show, but it most certainly was not a Barbie. Olena was given a backpack and a VHS tape of “Show White and the Seven Dwarves.” When her friends at school said that they watched the show, but only saw Olena get the backpack and the VHS tape, Olena said that the Barbie doll was given to her after the show, so that it would not upset the other contestants. Needless to say, her teacher suspected Olena of lying and suggested that they

organize a doll parade for a free period, which they had in a few days. Olena went home devastated and told Baba everything. Baba listened and shook her head. Baba knew when Olena had learned a lesson. The girl was a stubborn and at times a slow child, but the lessons that she learned on her own stuck. So, feeling sorry for the girl, Baba went out and bought a cheap knock-off Barbie doll called “Cindy” and placed it on the girl’s bed for her to find. Olena never lied again.

When Olena looked through James’ photos and postcards, she had a sudden urge to go to Canada. The snow, the mountains, the lakes and rivers were just so foreign and luxurious. The farthest place Olena had travelled was to her great-grandma’s place near Kiev. She went there every summer, until Baba had an argument with her younger sister who took care of the place. After that, Olena spent her summers in dusty, muggy Odessa. She hung out with her best friend, Masha, who stayed home for most of the summer, because her grandfather taught summer classes at the university.

When Masha found out that Larisa Semyonovna was spreading rumours about Olena’s mother, Masha started a rumour that Larisa’s eldest granddaughter, who was sixteen, had given up her illegitimate child to the orphanage. Larisa was furious and swore that if she ever found out who was starting that rumour, she would give them the most violent death imaginable. Both Masha and Olena had a good laugh and continued to evolve the rumour to the point that Larisa’s granddaughter could not find dates among any boys in the courtyard. Olena really wanted to tell Masha about Natasha’s letters. Olena kept dropping hints like, “my mom might get married,” and “we might be moving soon,” but after a while these hints stopped shocking Masha and she simply nodded her head in agreement.

Hello Olena,

How is my little girl? How are your studies? Your mother tells me that you are getting good grades and that makes me very proud.

Olena, how do you feel about living in Canada? Would you miss your friends?

The weather here is very cold. It is almost November and it has already snowed. In the winter, children in Canada build snowmen. Do you make snowmen in Ukraine too?

I was very happy to talk to you on the phone last week. Hearing your voice makes me miss you even more.

Take care of yourself and I will talk to you soon.

Love, James

Olena tried to have as little contact with James as possible, but when your mother has virtually no contact with her boyfriend, aside from letters and phone calls, a little means a lot. Baba told Olena that this was good for her, that she needed a father and James seemed like a nice guy. In the end, however, Baba was secretly hoping to persuade Natasha to let Olena stay with her until Natasha and James got better acquainted. Natasha knew her mother's plan, but was not willing to give up her daughter without a fight. Olena would be coming with her.

January 10th, Sunday

In ten days I get to meet James. When I think about him, I realize how little I know him. Mom is very excited and Baba has gone nuts with remodelling the apartment. I feel

kind of glad that most of the time James will be here, I will be going to school. I am supposed to tell anyone who asks that James is my mom's cousin from England. Baba doesn't want rumours to start up again, but I think everyone will know when he gets here that he is not related to my family in any way.

Mom says that I have to be nice to him and show him affection, but I don't even know him. How can I be affectionate to someone I just met? When I asked, mom just said to pretend. I don't know if I can lie like that. It doesn't seem right. I know that life in Canada would be better than here, but its kind of scary. Mom bought me and herself new clothes for his arrival. At least I now have a new pair of boots. What if he gets here and turns out to be a complete jerk, would I still have to be nice to him? Anyway, it's getting late and I have school tomorrow.

When ten days later Grandpa brought home a live chicken, Olena did not know that it would be this particular chicken which would change her life. Olena sometimes thought about the incident and came to the conclusion that if the chicken had not existed, Natasha and James would have never met at night in the darkened hallway and laughed together for the first time. Likewise, if that chicken was not there, they would never have realized that they were not in love with each other, but that they were really good friends and wanted to continue that friendship at all costs. However, the chicken did exist and Olena, at the time, was delighted to have a new pet.

The chicken did not have a name. Everyone referred to it simply as "the chicken." Baba said that it was pointless to name something they were just going to eat one day. She would just have to find a "real" man to kill it. As if listening to Baba's threats, the

chicken decided to prove itself useful in order to live longer, so it laid one egg every day and was thusly promoted to “the hen.” When, months later, the hen got sick and stopped laying eggs. Baba took the bird to the market and sold it “as is” for twice its original price. Olena was devastated when the hen left, but Baba simply said, “chickens are not meant to live in bathtubs.” Baba tried to calm Olena by saying that the man who bought the bird had a farm and was going to nurse it back to health. Olena knew it was a lie.

James’ bags were incredibly heavy. He was carrying a shoulder bag and two suitcases. When he first walked into the apartment, Baba said, “Is he moving in?” But of course, James did not understand and simply said “Hello.” His heavy suitcases were put aside and he was showered with embraces as is customary to make the guest feel welcome. Olena could see that James found these signs of affection strange. The more Baba hugged him, the closer he moved to the door, as if he was going to flee at any moment.

When Natasha pointed to Olena and said, “this is Olena,” in English, James walked over to the girl and said, “Hello, Olena,” to which the girl smiled and walked away. James brought presents for the girl: a watch that changed faces depending if it was day or night, he had also given her the teddy bear with the big red bow and some chocolate. For Natasha he had brought a pale white nightgown covered in lace and a white teddy bear holding a big red heart that read, “Hug me.” For Grandpa and Baba he brought a bottle of imported cognac, which Baba would not drink because of her blood pressure. Grandpa was delighted; he was no longer the only man in the house. Even if James could not speak Russian, they would find a way to communicate. Olena’s mother

seemed unnaturally coy and accommodating, one of her ways to show emotion, Olena thought, watching her mother – a shining beacon of femininity.

Olena watched James as he ate. He cut everything: perogies, cold cuts, cheese and even salad. He examined everything before he put it in his mouth and if something looked suspicious, he would lean over to Natasha and ask, “Is this spicy?” When James caught Olena looking at him, a strange feeling passed through James’ eyes. Olena did not understand it; she had never seen that look before in grownups – it was a look of commiseration. She knew that just then both of them understood how strange the entire situation was. Both of them knew that one felt sorry for the other and both of them could sympathize with each other’s awkwardness. At this point, however, Olena (unlike James) started to dislike him. She was ambivalent about him before, but now she saw that his letters were, in fact, deceptions. He never meant what he said about love, about living together in Canada. His answers were never “Yes” to the questions “Do you love me?” “Do you want us to live with you?”: they were “Maybe.” At this point, Olena thought that Xavier, the man who invited Natasha to California in his first letter, was a much better choice. At least he knew what he wanted.

That night, Olena slept on a pullout sofa between Baba and Grandpa the way she had when she was very little. She was hot, because (just like when Olena was little) Baba insisted on hugging her the entire night. When the girl needed to get up and get some air, Baba’s arm proved to be too heavy and the girl had to poke her grandmother in the ribs several times before Baba groggily moved her arm. Going to the kitchen to get a drink of water, Olena paused at the darkened kitchen window and watched the night winter sky populated with stars. She did not think of anything in particular, she was just hoping to

see a shooting star so that she could make a wish. She was about to walk back to bed when she heard her mother in her new white nightgown walking down the hallway into the bathroom like a spectre. She heard her mother scream when she found the chicken in the bathtub and she heard James running to help her. Afraid to be labelled an eavesdropper, Olena stayed hidden in the kitchen and listened as Natasha and James laughed and then talked in the hallway. They talked for such a long time that Olena fell asleep on the short bench by the kitchen window. The sound of the incomprehensible language proved soothing, and Olena, despite sleeping on the hard bench, rested peacefully.

Natasha and James were gone a lot. Everyday when Olena came home from school, Natasha was away and a short note waited for Olena on the kitchen table:

Olena,

James and I will be home soon. Baba is at the market and I am not sure where Grandpa is. I left you food in the fridge, you just have to heat it up on the stove.

Love, Mom and James

Olena was never sure why James' name appeared on the notes from her mother. Maybe Natasha wanted to make Olena get used to the idea of having a father or maybe it was the other way around and the appearance of James' name was for his own benefit. Regardless of the intention, Natasha failed to account for one thing: Olena hated the gas stove that occupied her Baba's kitchen and would never use it. Whenever she would light a match and bring it close to the thirty-year-old behemoth, Olena imagined the whole apartment building going up in a spectacular explosion. When Olena was little and once

lit a match for fun, Baba slapped the girl's hands and told her to never light a match in front of the stove because it was very old and there could be a gas leak. When the girl asked what happens where there is a gas leak, Baba simply said, "Everyone dies." So, coupled with her fear of abandonment, the gas stove became Olena's worst enemy and the girl never so much as boiled water in all of her twelve years.

One day Olena came home from school and found her mother crying on the sofa in the living room. When Olena asked her what was wrong, Natasha replied, "James left." At first, Olena thought that James left forever and that he and her mother had a big fight, but Natasha explained that when she got home from work, James was gone and there was a note saying that he was out for a walk and would return shortly. Olena did not understand what the big deal was, but Natasha, who was raised on Baba's paranoia, wailed louder and through sobs said, "He is a foreigner, he could get mugged or kidnapped or killed. He doesn't have his passport on him he could get arrested and then killed in jail!" What Natasha did not say to her daughter was that she was also worried that James could go see other women.

Olena was sent out looking for James. No one listened to Grandpa when he said that James probably just needed to get away for a while. Olena walked around the block and then walked to the nearest store, which was three blocks away. As she was looking for him, Olena realized just how backwards this situation really was. She was a child and was out looking for an adult. The girl realized that James, because he was a foreigner, was deemed helpless and needed someone to be with him, even if that someone was a twelve-year-old girl.

Olena found James at the store trying to buy bourbon. Evidently, James was tired of vodka and wanted to show grandpa that whiskey was just as good. The woman behind the counter did not understand what James wanted. With his lack of language, James could only point and say the words “bourbon” and “whiskey” over and over. When Olena came up to him, James was very glad. In as simple English as he could possibly manage, James told Olena what he wanted to buy. Afterwards they walked back in silence. Olena was embarrassed because she was a twelve-year-old supervising an adult and James was embarrassed that he needed a twelve-year-old’s supervision.

When they got home and James saw Natasha in tears, he got very angry.

“Natasha, I am a grown man. I don’t need a child to go looking after me! That was so disrespectful. If you and your family don’t stop treating me like a child, I am going to leave.”

“No, don’t leave,” Natasha said between sobs. “You don’t know Ukraine. Odessa, especially, is very dangerous for a foreigner. You could have been hurt.”

“Well, I certainly could not have used the protection of a twelve-year-old girl.”

“I’m sorry. That was...,” Natasha searched for words. “Wrong.” Later, Natasha admitted that sending Olena was a little foolish and promised to send someone more experienced next time. James did not go wandering off by himself again.

Olena was happy when James left. She watched as her mother and James kissed passionately and Natasha said that she would miss him. Olena heard how Natasha promised to start immigration documents on her end and James promised to do the same

in Canada. On the way home, Natasha asked Olena to call James “Dad” from now on when she is talking to him on the phone. Olena knew that she would never be able to do that, but instead of fighting with her mother she said nothing.

That night, Olena slept in her own bed. She missed the feel of her sheets against her cheeks. She missed the smell of her musty mattress and she was so very happy that James went back to Canada. Olena did not completely believe her mother when she promised James to start immigration papers and fell asleep with a clear mind, forgetting about James’ visit in a few hours. She slept dreamlessly and the next morning was surprised to find her mother moping over her coffee. Natasha missed James, but Olena could not understand why.

A few weeks after, Natasha started to worry. It would appear that she was late and Baba automatically assumed that Natasha was pregnant.

“So, when he asked you to marry him did he have a ring?” Baba asked.

“Mama, don’t start!” Natasha said.

“He didn’t have a ring and you slept with him anyway.” Even though Baba’s voice was raised, it was not a question. “You know the old saying, ‘why buy the cow?’”

“Mama, stop,” Natasha was starting to cry.

“There is no use for tears! Tears can’t wash away what has happened,” Baba said in a more gentle tone. “I know a woman. She can help us *take care* of things.”

“Mama! That’s enough! It’s probably nothing.”

“*Donya*,” Baba said. “*Daughter*, I want you to go to church and pray for the souls of the other babies that didn’t make it,” she said kindly as she held her daughter in her arms and rocked her. Baba was extremely religious, but Natasha always did what she felt right with regard to her own body, and Baba had no choice but to support her.

Olena listened to the two women and was secretly happy that she might have a little brother or sister, although she did not understand why her mother had to pray for other children. Being the only child, Olena often imagined what it would be like to have a sibling. Unlike James who hated his parents for having so many children, Olena hated her mother for having only one. Olena was so happy that she told Masha about this and Masha, who had a little brother, told Olena that having little siblings was “a huge pain in the ass.” Still, Olena was excited.

Unfortunately for Olena, Natasha’s period started a few days later and both Baba and Olena’s mom had a celebratory drink. Natasha told James that Baba was suspicious of his proposal and James sent Natasha money to go out and buy herself a ring. Natasha took Olena for a second opinion and the two ended up buying a simple gold band with a tiny diamond in it. The rest of the money went toward winter boots for Olena and Baba’s blood pressure medication. James was furious when he found out. He told Natasha that if she needed money, she should have told him, but Natasha was too proud to ever ask for help and from that moment on, James transferred one hundred Canadian dollars into Natasha’s account every month.

Every time a letter came from James, Natasha would start fantasizing about living in Canada. Olena, however, would start to fear being away from Baba and her friends.

Olena wanted to leave, but to her this trip did not seem permanent. She was excited to see new places and new people, but she was just as excited to come back afterwards and tell Masha about it. However, Natasha's letters written on Olena's behalf did not reflect Olena's feeling about Canada.

Dear James,

How are you? Today I had talk with you on the phone and I'm very happy because mother and I love you! I was very sad when you go from Odessa and I was worried about you. I'm miss you very-very much.

Yesterday came my English teacher. She is very good teacher. This week we will be study 8 days because the 15th of February we will be having holiday. It is too hard study 8 days.

I with mother miss you and love you. We very want to see you. Please wride often and soon. Grandmother and grandfather say to you "Hello!"

Kiss, Olena

In the first month of spring, Natasha and Olena went to Kiev to start a fiancé visa at the Canadian embassy. While they were waiting in line for the embassy to open, they met an elderly man who told them that he was from Canada himself. He said that he moved to Ukraine because he fell in love, but his marriage did not work out and now he wanted to go back. The man said that he was from Whitehorse. Olena thought that name was very strange and said it over and over in her mind. The man said that the strange thing about Whitehorse is that there is no dust. He told Natasha that dust mites did not

live in Whitehorse, because it was so cold and Olena automatically pictured snow-capped mountains and people riding dogsleds. When Olena and Natasha got home a week later and Baba asked Olena to dust the apartment, Olena told her that when she moved to Canada she would never have to dust again, because there was no dust.

“How can there be no dust?” Baba asked, shocked.

“Because it’s so cold,” Olena said and Baba immediately seized Olena into a hug and started rocking her back and forth like she had done when Olena was little.

“You have to promise me, *detka*, promise that you will dress warm!”

“I will, Baba,” Olena said while trying to get out of Baba’s muscular arms.

Olena’s favorite show was “Candy Candy.” It was a Japanese anime roughly based on “Anne of Green Gables.” In it, an orphan girl, Candy, was adopted by a rich family and was courted by three boys. Olena imagined Canada like that show. In her diary she wrote:

20th March, Saturday.

Nothing interesting happened today. Mom went out 3 or 4 times and I was home alone. I didn’t play with Masha because it is raining outside.

Today in my horoscope it was written that someone would fall in love with me, but of course nothing like that has happened. Nothing like that ever happens to me.

So the day pretty much sucked and if it wasn’t for Candy then I would probably die from boredom. Today, Eliza lied that Candy has stolen something from Eliza’s

mother and the family decided to send Candy to Mexico. But Candy escaped and Stear, Archie and Anthony were looking for her. Candy found her way back to Anthony's house on her own and found out that Anthony's family was going to adopt her. Eliza and Neal were very angry, because Candy was now their social superior!

If only my life was like Candy's and I had friends like Stear, Archie and Anthony, then I would never be bored! Maybe when I go to Canada I can finally meet my Anthony

James' letters reflected Olena's fear of moving to Canada forever. In his letters he would write about Canadian school, about his little house and about buying a dog if Olena ever wanted. Olena was terrified of dogs. When she was little, she was attacked by a German shepherd and since then avoided contact with all dogs. Natasha, however, took this a little too far and told James in her next letter disguised as Olena's that a little Rottweiler puppy would be great. Natasha always wanted a Rottweiler, but their apartment was too small for a dog that size. In his next letter James wrote:

Hello Olena,

How are you? How are your studies? It makes me very proud to hear that you are doing good in school.

I have a friend who will have a litter of Rottweiler puppies in the summer and he promised to save one for you. Until then, however, you have to promise to study hard and to listen to your mother. I miss you very much and I can't wait to see you both here in Canada.

It's going to be Easter holiday soon. We celebrate Easter in April, how about you? When do you celebrate Easter? What do you do for Easter? Maybe when you come here, you can show me how to paint traditional Ukrainian eggs.

I miss you very much. Write often.

Love, James

Olena did not know how to make traditional Ukrainian eggs. She had seen them in a museum and occasionally someone would bring one to school. When Olena was in the third grade her great-grandmother made a *pysanka* for her. It had an oak leaf on one side and an acorn on the other. The egg was so beautiful that Olena refused to eat it. Baba put the egg in the fridge where it still stood, right behind Baba's small jar of holy water. Because it had been in the fridge for over three years, the egg became a ticking time bomb. Whenever anyone opened the fridge, they would work very hard to not jostle the egg too much so that it would not accidentally fall. Many times Baba wanted to throw the egg out of the window, but it reminded her too much of her own mother.

Olena could feel that change was coming. James' letters became more frequent and Natasha was now talking to James twice a week. Also, Natasha installed a telephone in her parents' apartment so that she could call them from Canada. Because Baba was paranoid, Natasha had to get a special phone that had a caller ID. This was the first phone with caller ID available in Ukraine in 1994 and it was not entirely legal. Whenever someone called, the phone would scream out in a mechanized female voice the caller's phone number and based on whether Baba knew the number or not she would either let it

ring or pick it up. When James phoned the apartment, the phone screamed “unidentified number!” and flashed red warning signs on its little red screen.

Olena could not find Hudson’s Hope on the map and was very worried. Natasha said that the town was very small and that it was somewhere along Peace River. So instead of looking into it further, Olena picked a place on the map that did not have any towns on it and imagined Hudson’s Hope to be there. When she told Masha where she was going, she pointed to the empty spot on the map and told her that there was a very small town there that no one could see. Masha did not believe her. She said, “if there really was a town there, than it would be on the map.” Olena got angry and told Masha that just because something is not there, it does not mean that it does not exist. The two girls got angry at each other and the next day, Olena left for Hudson’s Hope, B.C.

July 10, Friday

We are leaving for Canada in two days. I am very excited to go there. Mom hasn’t told me when we are coming back, but I am sure I’ll be back for September. I want to finish watching Candy, but I will be in Canada. It really sucks! I want to know if her and Terry end up getting married.

I didn’t tell Masha that I am leaving. I am still mad at her! She can be so stupid sometimes, but I will bring back pictures from Hudson’s Hope to show that the town does exist! Mom said that we are going to spend only a few days there anyway. She said that James is going to work in a town called Smithers and we are going with him.

Mom bought me new clothes, but I don’t see why. We will be in Canada and can buy clothes there, but oh well. Baba keeps crying almost every time she looks at me. It’s

really annoying! It's not like I am going away forever or dying or something. I wish she would just stop. I know that everything will be okay, but I am still a little worried about flying. What if I get sick on a plane? I get sick in a car all the time. I hate that feeling like you are about to throw up and there is nothing you can do about it.

Anyway, mom has been packing practically the entire house. We are traveling with two GIANT suitcases and we still have more to pack tomorrow. I don't understand why we are taking so much with us.

2.3. Part III: James

James was a Taurus. His element was earth, his ruling planet was Venus and his symbol was a bull. His secret desire was to achieve a secure and happy married life and everyday he read his horoscope and acted according to its advice. When James decided to place his photo with the Introductory Agency, his horoscope read:

An intuitive sense of just how to handle your emotions in your close relationships are more than likely for you today. Knowing in your deepest self just where you are going without having to explain things can let you advance farther along with less energy wasted.

Following its advice, he phoned the ad at the back of the Maxim magazine and the next day sent a cheque made out to Introductory Agency and his photograph. The ad read, “meet single Russian and Ukrainian women to marry! Sexy, sweet and single women are waiting for you. Meet your Russian bride today!” When he told his best friend Tom about the ad, Tom laughed and told him that it was likely to be a scam. James, however, had already sent his cheque and at that moment really hoped that it was not a scam and he would some day meet his “Russian bride.” He did not know what to expect or what to do, but the agency promised to take care of their clients *completely*.

James had been married three times and had two children. His first marriage failed because she cheated on him. His second marriage failed because he cheated on her, and his third marriage failed because his wife would not shut up and he hit her. His oldest son was fifteen and his youngest twelve. Both of the boys came from his second marriage and James hated paying child support. His second wife would not let him see

his children and James did not see why he should pay if his second wife chose to erase him from the lives of his kids.

When James was a young man – before his first marriage – his best friend died in a car accident. A month before the accident, James and his friend were planning to drive to Alaska on their motorbikes. After his friend died, James wanted to honour his friend’s memory and drove to Alaska by himself. Before he was even out of the city limits of Hudson’s Hope, James had an accident and ended up breaking his leg, arm and a few ribs and he suffered from a brain injury. Since then, James had impulse control issues and had to work very hard to maintain any of his relationships. He did not mean to cheat on his second wife and he did not mean to hit his third, but something inside of him took over. James did not consider himself to be a bad person. He believed that the right woman would understand him and would help him accept himself. James phoned his father and told him about the ad that he had sent a cheque to. His father was delighted.

“Oh, a Russian broad! That’s the spirit!” James was not sure that he knew what his father meant, but he was glad that his plan was met with such enthusiasm. His father was a very simple man. He ran a motel/gas station near Fox Creek. No one ever stopped at the motel, so James’ father stopped maintaining it. Eventually, the motel became so rundown that most people did not even stop for gas. The business stayed afloat only due to the local patronage.

James’ father was fascinated with worms. In the woods behind his motel, he dug a large hole where he cultivated worms and later sold them as bait. When his wife was alive, the motel was covered with roses, but James’ father hacked and burned the flowers

when his wife left without a word to her children or her husband. It was then that James' father dug a huge hole in the woods behind his motel and filled it with worms. Whenever one of his six children asked about their mother, he would beat them with whatever he had in his hands. Soon, the word "mother" became a taboo and no one dared to speak it around the house.

When James' grandparents filed a missing person's report about their daughter, the police came looking around the motel. Although they did not find anything, the entire community suspected foul play and no one dared to buy worms from James' father for some time. James and his brothers were ostracized in school and soon the entire community has turned their faces away from the family. It is not until the police found James' mother's car in the nearby woods that the community realized their mistake. It would appear that James' mother had been in a car accident. The police said that, from what they could see, her death was instantaneous and she did not suffer. James always questioned that judgment. How could they possibly know what her last moments were like? James thought that a minute in agony could feel like hours. Even if his mother died "instantaneously," she could have still suffered in her last seconds.

When James was seventeen, he ran away from home and did not return until his mid-twenties. What James did not know was that his father admired him for that. He too wanted to run away many times, but he was never brave enough to start all over. When his wife died, James' father never remarried, but when he heard his son talk about a mail-order bride he thought it a fantastic idea. He never felt old and was not attracted to women his own age. Of course, younger women saw him as a joke and never paid any attention to him. A mail-order bride, however, could be as young as he wanted and she

would *have* to do what he wanted if she wanted to stay in this country. So, he took out an ad too. For his preferences, he listed women between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five and specified that they had to be “petite with no children.”

James’ older brother was a manager at a bank in Kamloops, B.C. Pat had a house, a wife and a young son. When James told him that he was looking for a mail-order bride, Pat reminded James that it sounded suspiciously like something their father might do. Of course James said that his dad had not put him up to it; however, he also said that once he told his father about it, he jumped at the idea. James could feel his brother’s disapproval over the phone. Pat was always the responsible one, and while James respected that quality in his older brother, he also hated him for it. James resented Pat for having a family, a stable life and a good job. Pat was always someone James could turn to in times of need, and James valued Pat’s opinion. However, when Pat disapproved of James’ actions, James automatically rebelled against him.

When James received his first letter, his horoscope read: *A great burst of energy propels you today. This suggests a transformation in your love life with someone from far away. This distance between you could prove beneficial. Although fleeting, this could prove to be a very rewarding relationship for the time being.*

Her name was Natasha and she lived in Odessa, Ukraine. She had a daughter – twelve-year-old named Olena. Natasha was exceptionally beautiful. She was thirty-two with dark auburn hair and hazel eyes. She was extremely petite with a beautiful figure. James wanted this woman the minute he looked at her photo. Later, he received letters from Nadia in Moscow, Polina from Kiev and Ira from Irkutsk. While all of these women

were very beautiful, none fascinated him as much as Natasha. He wanted to know her favourite food – *I like chocolates and ice-cream*. He asked her if she liked skiing – *I don't like when there is very cold, so I enjoy in warm room*. Then he asked her about Olena – *Olena is a good student and she says to you "Hello!"* James wanted to see what Olena looked like, so Natasha sent him a picture. Olena was a little blond girl with giant green eyes. In fact her eyes were so big that they hardly fit on her small heart-shaped face. She was also incredibly skinny and James mentioned that to Natasha in a letter. Natasha protested saying that Olena was exactly how she was when she was Olena's age. James felt a tone of resentment in Natasha's response and never brought up Olena's health again.

James was not sure that he wanted an entire family; however, Natasha seemed so very perfect. Her photos were beautiful – Natasha on a beach in a red bikini, laughing; Natasha by the seaport in a short summer dress holding Olena's hand. James wanted to see more photos of this woman, so Natasha sent him a photo of herself in a zoo standing by the tiger's cage with her class. She also sent him a photo of herself and her parents on New Years' Eve. She looked so happy sitting in between her round-faced mother and her obviously tipsy father.

James wanted to show Natasha what Hudson's Hope looked like, so he took his camera and went on a hike. The fall was changing this little town into beautiful golden colors. He took pictures of the trees, of the mountains, of the river and of the dinosaur fossils in the museum. He wrote a letter to Natasha that said,

Dear Natasha,

How are you? I keep thinking about you everyday. Do you truly think that we can get to know each other and grow to love each other through our words on paper that take weeks to arrive? I very much hope so, but after 3 letters you are still a mystery to me.

I can tell that you are very proud of your city and your country, but I want to show you that Canada is very beautiful too. I am sending you pictures of the town where I live. It's a very small place, only about 1200 people or so. Hudson's Hope is the third oldest community in British Columbia. We are also known for one of the largest dinosaur fossil sites. This town is even has a dinosaur named after it called Hudsonelpidia and a town mascot is a dinosaur too, called Dudley Dinosaur.

Natasha, you give me hope and the promise of a happy future. You said many kind things about me in your letter. For you I will try to be all of these things. Do you think that we can make a book from our letters? I hope it is not as long as "War and Peace."

We have 2 things in common already. We are both divorced parents. My two sons do not live with me, and their mother does not want me to see them, but I still have to pay child support. I find this a little backwards. I enjoy many of the same things you mentioned except for dancing. I must tell you that I am not sociable as you say you are. I am very shy and withdrawn especially with women. I guess that is why I'm trying to find someone through correspondence. I have much love to give to the right person though. I really hope that we can become very close friends. For now, I must end this letter and go to bed. I have to wake up very early in the morning and go to work. I hope to hear from you soon,

Sincerely yours, James

When James went away to work, Natasha's picture was clipped to the visor of his truck. That way, Natasha was always with him. When he showed her picture to his father, the old man said, "what a fox! Does she have any baggage?" James knew that his dad was asking if Natasha had any children, and James told him about Olena. His father frowned and said that a child of twelve is not likely to call James "Daddy" anytime soon. In other words, he said that Olena might have difficulties adjusting. Of course, James knew that his father was right, but Natasha occupied these thoughts and he felt that Olena would get used to him as well.

James' father showed him pictures of the "girls" he had been writing to. *Girls*, quite literally. All of these women could pass for the old man's granddaughters. There was Julie who was twenty and lived in Odessa; there was Lena, a twenty-one-year-old from Yalta; Nadia was nineteen and lived in Sherbinka near Moscow. James was disturbed at these women's age and told his dad that he thought he might not be able to handle a nineteen-year-old girl. His father ignored James and instead started to show him pictures of these women in bikinis, saying things like "that one has a nice rack," and "look at those thighs." James' youngest brother was twenty-five years old and James worried what his brother might think if his father brought over nineteen-year-old Nadia as his stepmother. James felt that he should bring this up and said,

"Dad, think about Mikey. He is only twenty-five, what would he think about a nineteen-year-old stepmother?"

“What, Mikey? He is old enough to change his own diaper. I am sixty-three years old. I need to have some fun!”

James did not say anything more to his father. He looked the old man up and down and simply shook his head. When his father got an idea in his head, he ran with it and no one could stop him. James thought himself different than his dad. In fact, he strived to be different. He did not want Natasha for “fun”: he wanted to take care of her. James had made some mistakes in his life, but he knew that somehow things with Natasha would be different. It would not be like his first three marriages. He would change – she would change him.

James wanted to phone Natasha. He wanted to learn what her voice sounded like, felt like. So he wrote his phone number in one of his letters. One day she phoned him. When he picked up the receiver, he did not expect a voice with a broken accent that said,

“Hello? This is Natasha. Are you James?”

“Yes,” he said. “I did not expect that you would call me.”

“I call, why would I not call?”

“No, it was just unexpected,” he laughed at her defensiveness. They talked for a while and Natasha told him that she was using the phone of her neighbour because she did not have a phone in her apartment. She said that in the Soviet Union, you had to get on lists to get things, but now that it ceased to exist, so did the lists. If she wanted to get a phone in her apartment, she would have to bribe a lot of people and she just did not have that kind of money. When James said that he could send her money, Natasha declined

and said that she had managed to get by without him so far and she could do it on her own still. That's when James knew that *this* was for real.

Looking through the ad agencies, he read many articles that stated in big bold letters to “**WATCH OUT FOR SCAMMERS!**” Up until that moment, James did not know what to make of Natasha. The offer for cash was a test and Natasha passed with flying colors. She rejected his help, and now he felt compelled to help her. Now he wanted her and *now* he wanted to take care of her and Olena.

He fantasized about what kind of father he would make. What would he say if Olena had a fight with a boy? What would he do if Olena had trouble with school? He pictured her smiling at him and calling him “Dad,” but in his heart he knew that all of these images were simply fantasies. Even though Natasha included letters from Olena with her own, James felt that somehow the emotions expressed in these letters were fake. He asked Natasha on the phone, “How does Olena feel about us?” Natasha replied,

“Oh, she loves you very, very much!”

James was skeptical. How could Olena love him? The next time he talked to Natasha, Olena was there. Natasha handed her daughter the receiver and James heard a gloomy teenaged voice say, “Hello.” He asked her the usual questions you would expect to ask a twelve-year-old: questions about school, about the weather. To all of his questions the girl simply replied, “Fine.” This discouraged James a little, but he thought that Olena was probably shy and did not speak English that well. He thought that because this was Olena's first time talking to him that she might not have anything to say. The next time, however, Olena was the same way and said “Fine” to all of James' attempts at

conversation. It was then that James realized that while he already had Natasha's heart, it was Olena's heart that he still had to win. From that day on, he started to dream more about becoming a father to Olena than a loving husband to Natasha.

When James first moved to Hudson's Hope, he met an elderly couple. Everyone knows everyone else in a town that size and this particular couple knew absolutely everyone there was to know. Their names were George and Nancy Hillworth and they really liked James. When James was away at work, Nancy watered his plants and picked up his mail. Soon she noticed the strange envelopes that came to James and she had to ask about them.

"Who have you been writing to, James?" Nancy asked in a maternal tone.

"Oh, they're from my... girlfriend and her daughter. They're from Ukraine." He retrieved a photo of them from his wallet and showed her.

"She looks pretty, but that daughter of hers, she looks so thin."

"They are great. I'm thinking about bringing them over."

"For a visit?"

"No, to live with me."

"Oh, I see," said Nancy. "We are doing something similar. We are sponsoring an Ethiopian child through Vision Quest. Such an adorable child, but so poor."

"That's not exactly the same," James tried to explain, but Nancy did not see the difference. James explained to her that he wanted to marry Natasha and adopt Olena. To

this Nancy said, “It feels really good when you help other people, doesn’t it? Especially, when they are from poor countries.”

James never thought of Natasha that way, but now that Nancy has said it, he could not get it out of his head. Suddenly, this was no longer simply a quest for love but a rescue mission as well. He saw Olena’s skinny form cradled against Natasha’s and felt sorry for them. At that moment, he loved them even more. Saving a woman and her daughter from poverty-stricken Ukraine made him feel noble and just. He was not like his father looking for a sure fuck, he was saving this woman – he was giving her a chance. In his next letter he wrote,

Dear Natasha,

How are you? How is Olena? This month has been a little hard on me because I have caught a little cold and because I can’t stop thinking about you. It seems that every time I turn on my TV I hear horrible news about Russia. Last week, the news said that the Russian military personnel have not been paid regularly and some of them have committed suicide to help their families get compensation. How sad when a government cannot pay their own people for the work they had already done. It must be really hard on a person that works for the Russian government to make ends meet and support a family. I can see why so many people from your country wants to get out.

I know you said that you did not need any help from me, but I once again offer it. If you need any help just let me know. I have decided to travel to Ukraine in the winter. I understand that special arrangements have to be made from your end and I was wondering if you could start them. Of course, I will compensate you for anything you

need application fees, room and board, etc. I am really looking forward to meeting your family.

I will call you again next Sunday and we will discuss travel arrangements. By the time you will get this letter, of course, I will be purchasing my plane tickets. I cannot wait to see you. Odessa looks so beautiful I really want to go to all of your favorite places. I miss you very much,

Lots of Love, James

James noticed that in her letters, Natasha started to sign her name in almost the same way as him. He felt that their relationship progressed steadily through “sincerely yours” to “affectionately yours” to “lots of love.” However, it would seem that Natasha had misread James’ writing and was now signing her name under “hots of love.” James found this cute and did not say anything. He loved the way Natasha wrote her letters. He enjoyed that when she said “hello” from her parents it sounded as if they were shouting at him – “Hello!” He liked that she called him “kind” and “a wonderful man.” When he read that the first time, he realized that not one of his three wives ever called him kind or wonderful. James really wanted to see Natasha and meet Olena. Letters took too long and James was eager to start his new life.

James went to a travel agent to book his flight. The skinny woman with short brown hair told him that she could not book his flight until he received an invitation. James did not understand. The woman explained that even though the Soviet Union had collapsed, many laws and regulations remained the same. So, in order for James to travel to Ukraine, someone from there had to *officially* invite him. Only then could James apply

for a traveler's visa and only then could he book his tickets. This was very new to James. Since childhood he knew that his passport was his ticket to everywhere in the world. When he told this to Natasha, she did not sound surprised.

“What did you expect?” she said as if this was obvious knowledge. James told her what he, as a Canadian, expected and Natasha asked, “You mean all you need is a passport and a visa to go somewhere?”

“No,” said James. “Just a passport.”

“Just a passport? Are you sure?” She sounded skeptical. Natasha could not imagine a world where the only thing a person required for travel was their passport. In her world, when someone wanted to go on vacation, they had to fill out forms that said when they were leaving, why they were going there, how much they were going to bring back and when were they coming back. Sometimes these forms also told them what they could or could not bring back from their vacation. Often, in Natasha's world, whole families could not go on vacation together. If a man went to France, he would have to leave his wife and children behind, a sort of collateral that guaranteed his return. If he did not return, his family would be questioned and he would be proclaimed a deserter and charged with treason if he ever showed up again. This is what travel meant to Natasha and James' carefree attitude about coming to Ukraine was surprising to her.

The day before he received his official invitation from Natasha, his horoscope read,

Dear Taurus, you are lucky in love right now. If you already with someone, you can make it deeper today. If you are not and want to be, take a chance on love today, the odds are

with you. Love is always a gamble at best, but the odds are in your favor when love is in your stars.

First, James was flying with his father to England, where the old man was meeting his Russian bride. His father made arrangements with nineteen-year-old Nadia to meet in London. When James asked if he was planning to bring Nadia to Canada, his father replied, “and be the laughing stock of the entire town? Not on your life.” Knowing that Nadia probably only agreed to meet with his sixty-three-year-old father in hopes of leaving the country, James felt a little sorry for the girl and disgusted with his father. Nonetheless, the two men set out for London in early January 1994.

While going through security, James’ father complained about how much he hated Canada and its “stupid little Canadian laws.” Flying reminded the old man about the war. James’ father was an American draft dodger and fled to Canada in the early 1940s. Eventually, he received his citizenship, but he missed his home in Virginia. He was afraid to go back and had resigned to his fate of never seeing his home again.

On the plane, James saw as his father ordered a scotch and took out a brown leather book.

“Take a look at this,” his father whispered conspiratorially. It would seem that the old man asked Nadia to send him “more sexy” photos and now, James was looking at photographs of this young girl in various provocative poses and wearing a black nightgown that barely covered anything.

“Dad, that has to be illegal,” James said turning away, but he started thinking about Natasha.

“What did you bring for your woman?” His dad said.

“I... I bought Natasha a stuffed teddy bear and some chocolates.”

“Well, she ain’t going to put out for toys and sweets. If you want my opinion, you should have brought her some lingerie. Chicks love that sort of thing.”

James refused, but when they were in London, his father bought a “tasteful” white nightgown. It had lace on the top and huge slits running down both sides. When his dad walked out of the store and showed him what he had bought for Natasha, James went cherry-red, but took the nightgown anyway. As his hand brushed the soft silk, he imagined this same silk caressing Natasha’s body.

James had to leave London in a few days, but not before he would meet Nadia. James expected a timid young girl, but instead, he saw a “glamazon.” Riding the escalator at the London International Airport was a *woman* dressed entirely in designer clothes. Nadia was already 5’10”, but she insisted on wearing stilettos. She said that the heels gave her figure a seductive allure, but what she failed to realize was that the height made her incredibly intimidating. James’ father was ecstatic when he saw her. Like a little kid receiving his favourite toy for Christmas, he ran to meet his Russian “bride.” Later, he told James that he was falling in love and wanted to bring Nadia back. James listened to his father and then in as serious a tone as he could muster said,

“I don’t think she is going to fit in at Fox Creek.”

At dinner, Nadia smoked her long, cherry flavoured cigarettes (James heard these being called ‘bitch sticks’ by his coworkers) and talked about life in Russia. She said that

times were hard and that many people wanted to get out. James asked Nadia why a girl like her wanted to be with his sixty-three-year-old father. Nadia did not give a clear answer, but said that in Russia most men are drunk and abusive and she did not find any of them attractive. James had to laugh at the thought that Nadia was escaping drunk and abusive men from Russia only to end up with his father who was all of those things and more. James' father jabbed him hard in the ribs and told James to stay quiet.

James showed Nadia a picture of Natasha and Olena. He said that he was leaving for Ukraine in the morning. Nadia looked at the photo and shook her head. In her broken English she said, "Be careful, some of these women only want money." James, however, knew that Natasha was different. She was not like Nadia dressed in designer labels and she did not think only about herself. Natasha, unlike Nadia, had class.

James left for Odessa the next morning. On the plane, he looked at Natasha's picture and rehearsed their conversations in his head. He imagined what she would look like when he met her at the airport. He imagined how Olena would greet him when they got home. James was looking forward to his visit and the only thing he dreaded was meeting Natasha's parents. Natasha told him about her mother and what he might expect. She said, "You are lucky you don't speak Russian and will not be able to understand her." She promised that she would translate everything that her mother had said, but he knew that she would try to edit.

The flight to Ukraine was long and James was getting antsy. Normally, he would order a glass of scotch and fall asleep, but he did not want to smell of alcohol when he got off the plane. He knew that Natasha did not like men who drank. When in one of his

letters he mentioned that he liked “to have a few now and then,” Natasha in all seriousness asked, “*James, how often do you drink and how much?*” At first he thought that the question was kind of rude and personal, but he believed that Natasha might not understand the concept of “social drinking.” What he failed to see was that Natasha understood “social drinking” in a different way. To her, “social drinking” meant either drinking with your friends on a weekend, which was okay, or drinking with your friends behind her apartment complex everyday and then yelling obscenities at women as they passed by. What Natasha wanted to know was which “social drinking” James participated in. James never gave her a clear answer and Natasha was somewhat worried.

When James finally met Natasha, he had nothing to say to her. They hugged, he kissed her and then they drove silently to her apartment. She asked him about his flight and he asked her about the weather. James felt awkward and for the first time realized that he really did not know this woman. He spoke to her on the phone and wrote her letters, but he never really knew her. It was not until she discovered a chicken in the bathtub and they met in the hallway of her apartment at midnight that they finally connected. She said, “A key to a happy relationship is laughter.” He asked, “Do we have a relationship?” and she coyly replied, “We’ll see.”

Nadia was wrong, James thought as Natasha took him around Odessa. Natasha refused all of his attempts to buy her things. He was only allowed to buy presents for Olena and Natasha’s parents. He bought Olena a pair of jeans and Natasha’s mother a new housecoat – the old one left very little to imagination. He bought her father a new set of tools and for his own father he bought a cherry-wood pipe. He joked that now his father and Nadia could smoke similar brands. Natasha asked James about Nadia and

when he told her about his father, Natasha said that she thought it sad how Russian girls left their country and practically prostituted themselves for old foreign men for the sake of security. Natasha said that she felt sorry for Nadia. James asked why Natasha decided to start writing to men overseas and Natasha said, “For Olena.”

Olena was very difficult to deal with. She hardly said one word to James and their relationship worsened when Olena was sent to look for James. He read in the girl’s eyes apprehension. She was afraid of him – afraid of the unknown that he represented. He asked Olena about her friends, but she did not say anything to him. Natasha briefly told James about Masha and how the two girls had been inseparable since they were very young. James said that if Olena moved to Canada she would miss Masha very much, but Natasha said that Olena would just have to make “new friends.” At this, Olena stormed out of the room.

When there were only three days left in his visit, Natasha took James to her parents’ summer home. It was quiet in the little cottage surrounded by snow-covered trees. It was so quiet that James for the first time was able to be himself. Natasha noticed the change in him and liked it. She said that he became gentler and more serene. When she told him that, he was certain that she was the one. He did not have a ring nor had he planned on proposing. However, the fact that Natasha saw how he truly was and liked it made him realize that she was right for him. His other wives called him dull or boring when the only thing he wanted to do was stay at home and read his paper or flip through magazines. Natasha, on the other hand, said that she liked that side of him – the quiet side. So, he kneeled down on one knee and proposed. That night, he finally felt what the silk nightie was like against her smooth skin.

When James returned to Canada, he immediately started procedures to bring Natasha and Olena over. His father told him he was crazy to bring over “that woman and her child,” but James did not listen. Apparently, things with Nadia did not work out, but James’ father was still looking for a mail-order bride. James’ brother, Pat, was not happy about James bringing a strange woman from Ukraine and her daughter to Canada. He believed that James was making a huge mistake for which he would have to pay for the rest of his life. He said that it was hard to take care of a family to begin with, but what he was going to do was twice as hard because Natasha would not be able to work for a while. Pat asked, “Can you really support a wife and a daughter on your paycheque?” Of course, James was not exactly rich, but he had some savings and he was sure that Natasha would not be content sitting around the house for long.

In his letters, James told Natasha how much he missed her:

Dear Natasha/Olena,

How is my beautiful family today? Thank you for the picture. I have it in out bedroom. Olena is a good artist. I miss you both very, very much. The wait is long. I miss you and need my Natasha. Please give a big hello to you parents. My father says hello too. I will finish tomorrow, very tired now and must sleep.

Hello my family,

Just got home again and making dinner. It is 10:00pm and I am making kraft dinner. Quick macaroni and cheese. I have had an egg sandwich, can of beans and a can of corn. I think I need my beautiful wife to take better care of me. I live from a can. At least I do eat.

I hope you all enjoyed the pictures I have sent. I miss you both very, very much. I need my family and my Natasha. Each day is long to wait. I dream each day. Please a big hug to all. My father and George and Nancy say a big hello. I now must shower. Love you lots. Hello to all.

Lots of love, James

The procedures to bring Natasha and her daughter to Canada were extremely tedious. In her letters, Natasha said that getting married in Ukraine might be better. She wrote, *“if you want get married in Odessa you must take from Canada document about your family now in Hudson’s Hope and documents that you are not married now. You must bring documents after your divorced and copy your passport. And you must have permission for get married in my country from your country or embassy in Kiev. Then you take all these documents and come to Ottawa in embassy in Ukraine and there you must translate them into Ukrainian and all these documents must be legalized in your country (Canada) and embassy in Ukraine.”* James did not think that getting married in Ukraine was a better way, so he organized a fiancée visa for Natasha. Her visa expired in thirty days upon her arrival and if they did not get married she would have to go back to Ukraine.

Natasha was worried. On the phone she asked James, “what if you no married me? I would have to go back.” The last part was not a question and James could tell that Natasha was worried. He did not know what to say to her that would make her believe in him again. However, she went along with his plan and in early August of 1994 she and Olena were scheduled to arrive in Canada. Natasha did not want to travel by herself. She

said that she has never been outside of Ukraine, so James said that he would meet her in Frankfurt and they would travel back together.

He was excited and terrified. He made everything ready for his new family to arrive. He repainted the house and put in new carpets. He painted Olena's room, which was going to be in the basement so that she could have some privacy. He bought two new beds – one for the master bedroom and one for Olena's room. He did not know how to decorate Olena's room, so he bought two large teddy bears and placed them on her bed. He bought a new dresser for Olena's room and he also bought her a TV and placed a private phone line in her room, because he knew that teenaged girls like to talk on the phone. Of course, Olena never had a phone and always saw it more as a luxury that was very expensive and not meant to be used by teenaged girls to talk to their friends. He also got a good long distance plan with excellent rates to Ukraine so that Natasha could talk to her mother.

Even though all of these actions were trivial, they helped James feel more connected to Natasha and Olena. When he painted Olena's room, he would think about the girl's reaction to having her own room and bathroom. When he picked out his and Natasha's new bed, he thought about Natasha's soft touch and her slender body. The Introductory Agency sent James a book that explained how to make his new bride feel welcome in Canada. It said what he should do when she got here – “show her how to operate the stove and the dishwasher” – and what to do before she arrived – “stock the cupboards full of food so that your new bride will not have to go shopping for the first few weeks.” The book also broke down step by step how to deal with the issues that might arise out of married life (i.e. how to talk about children; how to request sexual

relations; how to tell her what you want for dinner; and on the same note, teaching her how to cook *your* favourite meals).

James was looking forward to married life. He had been married three times but was never happy. He felt that now, with Natasha, he would finally reach that level – the level of *bliss*. However, James was worried about Olena. When he talked to the girl on the phone, she sounded morose, but her letters showed affection and a desire to have him in her life. They read,

Dear James,

I received your nice letter and your nice present for me. It is so nice! James I with my mother very miss you. I so want to see you. We both with my mother very want to come to you. Soon will be summer holiday and I will have rest for a big time but I will be have study an English at home and I will be know English best.

We with my mother miss you and want to see you. Grandpa and Grandma say “Hello!” and also miss you very much. I can not wait to come to Canada.

Kiss, Olena

James asked Natasha about Olena’s letters and she said that Olena was a very quiet girl who best expressed herself on paper than in person. At that moment, James knew that he and Olena had at least one thing in common. Just like James, Olena was awkward in person; just like James, she was quiet and reserved; just like James, she expressed herself better when no one was around. However, Olena was not like James, and Natasha knew that one day she would have to tell the truth about Olena’s letters.

A month before James left for Frankfurt he bought a monthly horoscope. It read,

The Lunar Eclipse on August 5 takes place in the house of everyday communication and you might feel a touch of déjà vu. If you are with your same partner, whether financial or romantic, the conversation could be much the same as it was a year ago, but this year there is a decision. On August 19, Jupiter will form a quincunx with Saturn. Communication with an authority figure could bring rewards your way and it appears as though fate has taken a hand in this new understanding. The New Moon on August 20 is in the area of legal contracts and whatever new agreement is reached, it is binding.

Natasha told James that they were busy packing. The only problem was that she could not be sure what to pack. She did not know how much clothes she would need or how many books to pack. He told her to pack only what she could not live without. He said that women dressed differently in Canada so he would have to take her shopping. Natasha understood, but she was still overwhelmed. She said that she had lived in the same house since she was born and it seemed that *everything* in that house was important to her. James sympathized, but told her that everything could be replaced – Natasha was not convinced. In the end, she packed her favourite novels, her favourite dresses and jewellery, but forgot to take any of the photo albums. When Natasha and Olena came to Canada, they did not have anything to show for their past. It was as if they were newborns and the pages of the photo albums would have to be filled all over again.

Olena, on the other hand, knew exactly what to take. She took her diaries from behind a loose board in Baba's sewing machine. Later, Olena's diaries would serve as

testaments of her experiences. They were little gems that legitimized her double existence. When she became so integrated into Canadian society that she lost her accent those diaries were her link to the past. And, just like before, they always remained hidden. In James' house she hid them in the last drawer of her new dresser and, later, she put them in a box labelled "*Kitchen*" and hid them under her bed. She added to her diaries, but the journals she kept in Canada were different. No longer written in thin notebooks disguised as math workbooks, Olena's diaries were beautifully bound in books that were decorated in flowers or fairies. The one downside to these books was that they were bulky and difficult to hide.

George and Nancy came to see James off at the airport. Nancy said to give her regards to Natasha and Olena. George said that he could not wait to meet James' new wife from Russia. Just like James, George was a collector. He collected all things "Communist." He had various badges and medals that depicted the hammer and sickle; he even had a uniform that once belonged to a Russian military officer. George really wanted to meet Natasha. Somehow, with Natasha in town, his collection would be complete. She could give him what no artefact or book could – personal experience. In a way, Nancy was a little jealous of Natasha. Nancy believed that George would find Natasha far more interesting than he ever found her. The only thing that Nancy was good at was her garden and baking. She was never an ambitious woman, but Natasha's arrival made Nancy want to learn something new – something George found interesting.

James had one day in Frankfurt by himself before Natasha and Olena arrived. On the day of their arrival, his horoscope read,

You struggle with change, yet you can't live without it. So, your greatest strength, your independence, can be your greatest weakness. If you have the ability to change you won't let your strengths become weaknesses, and you'll adapt so you can remain strong.

You need to get past your fear of success, so first you have to understand what it is you are afraid of. Success brings responsibilities and that's what probably frightens you. Today is a perfect day to realize that responsibility builds character.

On the day before Natasha left, Baba finally told her what the fortune-teller said to her a year ago. Baba said,

“*Detka*, take care of Olena. That girl is a very mature child, so don't disregard her feelings. Natasha, the fortune-teller said that you will leave overseas and get married. She said that your husband will try to be a good man, but you will have to help him. She said that Olena will help you cope, but you have to help her adjust. Natasha, you have to promise me that you will take care of Olena.”

That night, Baba, Natasha, Olena and Grandpa sat at the kitchen table and cried. Baba cried because her daughter was leaving, Olena cried because she was leaving Baba, Grandpa hated to see both Natasha and Olena leave and Natasha cried because she was very scared.

In Frankfurt, James was lying on the bed in his hotel room and read Natasha's last letter,

Dear James,

Today is Wednesday and I'm writing to you letter. Today I had talk with you on the phone and I'm very happy because I love you! Documents take such a long time, but what can I do? We can only be waiting again. Because people now are working in that department is slowly and they are bureaucrat. But everything will be O.K.! and very soon we will be together and we will be very-very happy! Oh James, Olena is so happy-happy! We always with her speak about you and look your photos and think how are you? Where are you? What are you doing?

We both look forward your letters and so want to see you each day and speak with you each day. But very soon we will be all together and we will be so happy! I so want be your wife and take care my lovely family I so love you and Olena both!

Parents says to you "Big and warm Hello!" They kiss you and hug you very-very much! They miss you very much! Mother always do worry about your food. James you must eat good because I will tell to mother that you don't eat now because you want be slim. That I'm must be slim because I women and you must be strong very-very much. I always want be in your strong arms and to feel warm you body. I look forward the time when we will be together. I will be listen your voice every day and you will kiss me every day. I love you!

We must be patient and soon we will be together. James, please write soon and often. I look forward to your letters.

Hots of Love, Natasha.

He looked at the photograph of Natasha and Olena and imagined seeing them. What would it be like to see them tomorrow? Would Natasha run into his open arms? Would Olena finally call him “Dad”? James was going to ask Olena if she wanted to be adopted. He knew that the girl was independent, so he wanted to give her as much choice as possible. He believed that Olena would thrive in Canada and Natasha would be able to put her education to better use than as a high school teacher. Reading Natasha’s letter, he wanted to help her now more than ever.

The day that Natasha was leaving, her horoscope read,
Today is a day of power. When the heavens speak of power they do not mean a force to dominate others. These speak of a personal power related to how you handle yourself. If you handle this power in certain ways it can affect the world for the better.

Natasha thought about “power.” She was never powerful. Today, however, she had the power to change her mind. She could cancel her tickets, but that would be taking a step back. So she said goodbye to her weeping parents and hand-in-hand with her daughter got on the plane bound for Frankfurt. Olena watched as the Ukrainian countryside was reduced to little squares and wondered about the people below. How many of them were prepared to leave their families? How many women down there were writing to foreign men in hopes of leaving Ukraine? And how many foreign men were down there visiting their potential wives?

As they stepped off the plane and headed to the arrivals gate, Natasha got a sense of finality and Olena, for the first time since her mother started corresponding with James, experienced a sense of hope. James waited for his new family at the arrivals gate.

He was growing impatient. He paced back and forth and read meaningless German advertisements. He saw as families were reunited and could hardly contain his excitement. From the window, he could see planes taking off and landing. The one he was looking for was an old Boeing 737 with the letters “Ukraine Air” written in yellow across the white body. He must have missed the plane’s arrival because suddenly he saw Natasha and Olena coming up the escalator.

Natasha held Olena’s hand as they rode the escalator up to the arrivals. She was excited and scared all at once. Her mind racing with thoughts of running away, but she owed her daughter a better future. She loved James, and James loved her: she repeated it over and over – a mantra to soothe her soul. Soon, they would be a family and Olena would be able to have a stable life. The sights and sound of the airport overwhelmed Olena. This was her first time flying and she was hungry for this new experience. As the two came up the escalator a panoramic shot of the arrivals gate was overshadowed by James’ figure looking at the two with excitement.

That day, Olena’s horoscope read,

Today is a day for change. If you keep the action going, change will come. This is when you have to really use your inner strength to make the changes positive. Once you’ve got things moving then you can channel the direction, but first they have to move.

2.4. Part IV: From Canada with love

Dear Mama and Papa,

How are you? How is your health? How are things in Ukraine? The news in Canada never say anything about Ukraine, only one in a while about Russia. Here everything is okay. James works long hours and Olena goes to school. Weather is also good as it is already spring.

I tried to find work, but the problem seems to be that I am an immigrant. Normally they let immigrants work, but my language is not that good. However, it would seem to me that even an idiot would understand that when you start work, your language improves as well. How am I suppose to learn the language to work, if I am stuck inside the house? I talked to an East Indian woman who wants to work at the bank. First they told her that she did not have the right math skills, so she took some courses. Then, they told her that they will put her on a list. She said that it was two years ago, when she asked them about it, they said that there was no list for her. This country is full of discrimination. But I am not worried. In any case, James does not want for me to work.

I talked to a woman at the college about taking a math course. At least numbers are the same anywhere you go. The course will start in a few weeks and I am really looking forward to it.

Soon we will be selling James' other house. He is now renting it out and he wants to renovate it before he sells it. I bought a computer program that teaches you how to type and now Olena and I are learning fast typing. So that's all our news. We miss you very much and James asked to say to you "hello." Love, Natasha.

Dear Baba and Grandpa,

How are you? Mama wants me to write and tell you exactly how things are. Things are okay with me. I made some friends at school, but my English is not very good so a lot of people make fun of me. A few days ago I hit a boy on the face because he told me to go back to my own country. I miss you very much. Have you seen Masha? How is she? I tried writing to her, but she does not write back.

Mama and James are doing fine, I guess. I don't see James very often, he works late hours and by the time he comes home, I am already in bed. At school I have to take another language and everybody takes French. Since I am not very good at English, the counselors thought that I should take upper Russian. I think it will be kind of fun.

Baba, mama will not want me to tell you this, but there is a woman that keeps calling the house. Every time mama picks up the phone, she hangs up and when I pick it up she asks for James. When I say that he is not home, the woman tells me to tell him to call her back. When mama asked James about it, he told her that she is just being paranoid, but this woman calls here A LOT. I don't think mama is paranoid, I think James just doesn't want to answer a question.

Mama really wants to find work. She says "just in case." I am not sure for what she is preparing, but so far, she can't get hired on even as a cashier at a grocery store because of her English. So she stays home and reads English books and watches English TV, but she has no one to talk to. So I started speaking English with her. My English is not very good, but I learn quick at school.

Hope your health is good. We worry about you. Love, Olena

Dear Children,

Things here are okay. We miss you terribly. Grandpa is gone all the time and I am home alone. My blood pressure is very high and once in a while I have heart problems. The other day I had such a big head ache that it put me out for three days. Grandpa called a doctor and he gave me some medicine to which I am allergic. I broke out in hives.

Natasha, Olena told me everything and I went to the fortune-teller. She said that there is someone in James life besides you. She said to be careful, but to NOT confront him about it. All will be revealed in due time. She said that hard times are ahead for you, but she said you will pull through and become stronger. She also said that sometime later, James will beg your forgiveness, but you must not forgive and let him back into your life. Do you understand, Natasha? This is for Olena's sake.

It is still really cold here. Its like spring is refusing to come. Soon, we are going to start planting our garden. We are thinking of planting new apple and cherry trees. We miss you very much. Grandpa can't stop talking about you. How are you? What are you doing? Children, you must listen and love each other, because so far away, you don't have anyone but one another to lean on. Try to be patient with each other, try to understand one another and may God watch over you.

Love you will all our hearts, Grandma and Grandpa.

Dear Mama and Papa,

Sometimes I wish I had written to Robert instead. James can be so unreasonable. Yesterday he came home from work and said that he was going to buy a new truck. His truck works perfectly fine, I said he did not need it. He told me that it was his money and if I wanted to control something, I should go out and get a job.

Mama, stop going to the fortune-teller, there is nothing wrong with me and James. Every family has problems. Olena started talking with me on English and it helps a little. I told James that I want to go to ESL classes, but he said that it was a waste of money. Sometimes I think he is keeping me shut in the house on purpose. I was looking for my passport yesterday, but could not find it. I asked James and he said that it was in the safety deposit box at the bank. I asked if I could have the key and he said “no” because he has some private papers there. So I asked if he could get it for me and he said no, because then I would not run away. Mama, I am not going to run away, why would he say that?

Olena is doing good at school. She is taking advanced Russian, which in Canada means learning the alphabet. She got 95% on one assignment, so she wrote a note back to her teacher in Russian and the teacher corrected the assignment to 100%. I guess she did not know that Olena was a native speaker. There is a boy that Olena likes. His name is Mike and he is a grade older. She phones him a lot and even gets mad at me when I am on the phone too long. I tell her to be careful all the time, but I know she is anyway.

Mama, I hope your health will improve. I am very worried about you and papa. The weather here is very nice. There are leaves on the trees and it makes me smile every

time I see a bird when I am digging in the garden. I know that times seem bad, but I know that everything will work out in the end. Just, Mama, promise you will not see a fortune-teller anymore. Somehow, it seems that knowing the future is bad luck. We miss you very much,

Love, Natasha.

Dear Mama,

I don't know what to do. I know I already called you, but somehow writing this makes me feel better. James served me with divorce papers two days ago. It was Ukrainian Easter too. I was making him a traditional feast and instead of him came a courier and told me to sign for these papers. I don't understand! It just happened to sudden. What did I do? We were happy the day before. He was going to work, he kissed me, told me he loved me and left. Now...

I did not tell Olena. I am not sure what is going to happen now. I have no money, no job. How will I provide for me and my daughter? Nancy said to not worry and just get a good lawyer. She said that what James did is not right and there would not be a judge who would not be lenient towards my situation. I never thought that I would be in a "situation." I would watch people on TV get divorced, but I never thought it would be me. It is just so unexpected. I don't know what to do or where to turn to.

George called James and asked him why he did this and James said that he did not feel it would be fair for me, because he no longer loved me. Mama, what have I done to deserve this? I clean and cook for him, I do everything he ask me. I never even went

out to look for a job because I knew he did not want me to work. How am I going to tell Olena? I miss you very much and I wish you were here.

Natasha

Dear Natasha,

I know you must be wondering why I served you with divorce papers. I wonder that myself. At the time, my impulses took over, but I don't regret my decision. You have changed. I have changed. You are no longer woman I fell in love with. When I look at you, I see a housewife with all the modern conveniences and not a young woman struggling to take care of her family.

You have taught me a lot about myself and I am grateful, but I think that when I look at you now, I see that you and Olena are becoming spoiled Western women that I am trying to run away from. When I look at you, I see my second wife.

I still love you and I don't think that will ever change, but I must leave so that I can find myself. I really hope that we can be friends and that someday you will forgive me. I must tell you that I have been seeing someone for a while now and I am planning on moving in with her. I wish you nothing but happiness. I hope that this divorce can go as quietly as possible; I am so tired of messy proceedings. You can stay in the house for as long as you want, but you will have to pay for utilities.

I am sorry again, Natasha. Give Olena my love,

James.

3. Conclusion

3.1. Life-writing and personal experience

In his book titled *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), Paul John Eakin states, “[autobiographies] defy the boundaries we try to establish between genres, for they are autobiographies that offer not only the autobiography of the self but the biography and the autobiography of the other” (58). The self-reflexive genres of life-writing ultimately question why writers undertake the task of writing, “Why now?” and “Why *this* story?” Such investigation further questions what the author has to gain by delving deep into family history – a history that might be better left unearthed – and whether the representation of the self and family is accurate. Although autobiography “promotes an illusion of self-determination” (Eakin 43), it is inevitable that we, as readers, see how in fact all life stories are relational. The autobiographical *I* determines how these relationships are represented but “the self is defined by – and lives in terms of – its relations with others” (43). The experience recounted in the creative portion of this project must be considered for its contribution to the scholarship on “mail-order brides” and the international dating industry.

The term “experience,” according to Raymond Williams, includes “(i) knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection; and (ii) a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from reason or knowledge” (in Scott 60). Joan Scott (1998) states that “experience” has helped feminist scholars “to legitimize a critique of the false claims to objectivity of traditional historical accounts” (63). Thus, part of the project for feminist scholars is to point out the shortcomings of “mainstream” history. The purpose of the

creative portion of this thesis is to present a different story from the “mainstream” narrative presented on international dating websites. In adding to the present scholarship on the issue of “mail-order brides,” the creative portion of this thesis examines a familial narrative. Aside from economic, gender, and societal structures that have been examined in previous works on international dating, the creative portion of this thesis puts emphasis on the familial pressures that impact decisions of “mail-order brides.”

Searching through the internet, it is difficult to pass by advertisements for mail-order agencies. Set against backgrounds to catch the eye, agencies advertise exotic beauties that can make all dreams possible. If you are struggling with your relationships at home, the solution seems to be a “mail-order bride.” These women are presented in such a way that they seem to radiate with sweetness, sexuality and domesticity. The twenty to fifty word space allocated to each woman for personal descriptions fails to represent a full range of their personality and further serves to promote a one-dimensional model of femininity. This thesis, in its use of my family as a case study, attempts to explore the real persons behind the photographs and the familial lives behind the letters.

Once, after her divorce, my mother dated a man who proposed to her after only one month of dating. She refused; in response, he astonishingly revealed that he thought that all women *like her* only wanted to get married. It seems that her rejection did not challenge his stereotyped thinking because this man, shortly after, went to Ukraine to find another woman who he believed would not refuse him. My hope is that this work will reveal a face behind the stereotype and, what is more, a narrative that has been affected by the presence of a child – often an unwelcome reminder of a previous life.

My mother could speak for herself. As someone who holds two university degrees (a doctorate in Physics and a B.A. in Social Work), she is more than capable of telling her own story. I often suggested that she should turn her letters into “something” – a narrative that would perhaps help others deal with similar situations, or help break the mould of the Eastern European “mail-order bride” stereotype. But she found little time and patience for writing and perusing through old letters and old memories. As a result, she passed her letters and memories onto me after I showed interest in both writing and writing about the subject of “mail-order brides.”

3.2. Challenges to the project

One of the challenges that I encountered through this project was my desire to see everything through a feminist lens. Growing up in the West, and situated as I am in academic circles – circles in which patriarchy is identified as the dominant power structure – it was difficult to imagine that feminist ideas might be identified differently in another cultural context. It is my hope that this work will reveal, if not a Western-identified feminist practice, a strong woman-centred desire towards agency and self-realization. I also hope it will produce an emotional reaction from its readers. I believe a purely critical and theoretical thesis would not communicate the full, rich and colourful tapestry of experience that informed my mother’s choices. How would I analyze my mother’s and my own life through frameworks laid out by scholars such as Johnson, Constable, Visson and others? The experiences of my family do not fit neatly into received narratives of the “mail-order bride,” nor the scholarship which addresses this phenomenon. For these reasons, I chose to examine this subject through a creative lens

that would reveal the complexities of the “mail-order bride” phenomenon and how it affects the lives of women and their families.

Many scholars undertake research in this field in the interest of analyzing the ever-growing industry, and a few attempt to showcase personalities through interviews. Since the “mail-order industry” is often tied to “trafficking” – a somewhat problematic link – the issues have recently started to gain more attention due to visual media such as *Sex Traffic* (2004), *CSI: NY* (2009) and *Eastern Promises* (2007). This thesis, however, concerns itself with the issue of international dating via the “mail-order” industry. Through the creative part of this thesis, I hoped to reconstruct personal experiences and to fill in the blanks in the lives of the people who participate in this process and thereby to undermine the stereotype of the “mail-order bride” as non-agentic.

3.3. Regulations on the “mail-order” industry and “mail-order brides” in the media

A few steps have been taken to regulate the ‘mail-order’ industry. In 2006, for example, the U.S. Congress passed the “International Marriage Broker Regulations Act,” or IMBRA. According to this legislation, men seeking to date or marry women overseas are required to undergo a criminal background check. Also, International Marriage Brokers have to provide potential “brides” with immigration information in their language, as well as resources available to female victims of domestic violence in the U.S. IMBRA’s presence has started a controversy within the online dating community. While many agree that IMBRA is a necessary step towards regulating a multi-billion dollar business that often goes unchecked, others state that this regulation goes against the fundamental freedom of speech act, as well as being a cause of identity theft.

IMBRA has sparked conversation throughout North America, yet no such regulation has been passed in Canada. This could be due to the fact that majority of International Marriage Brokers originate in the United States, even though they provide service to Canadian clientele. As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, a few attempts have been made to inform foreign women of their rights in Canada as new immigrants; however, this is not enough to ensure an informed decision by women participating in this industry.

Until recently (2001), Canadian immigration policy designated “mail-order brides” entrance into the country under “family class.” This largely applied to opposite sex relationships in which one partner (the one residing in Canada) became a sponsor for the other partner with the purpose of marriage. However, due to the clear discrimination against same-sex relationships, the immigration policy was completely revised in 2002. Now, Canadian law recognizes two types of relationships: common-law and conjugal partner. The majority of “mail-order brides” fall under the latter, which is identified as a

person residing outside Canada (that is, has, for legal purposes, a fixed, permanent and principal home outside Canada), and [with whom] you [i.e. the sponsor] have maintained a conjugal relationship with, for at least one year, that is you have been in a committed and mutually interdependent relationship of some permanence where you have combined your affairs to the extent possible.

(Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2010)

Once the application for sponsorship has been filed, support must be maintained for a minimum of three years. Thus, if a woman becomes a victim of abuse and reports it to the

authorities, or if, due to divorce, the sponsorship is terminated and if she is unable to find another sponsor, she will have to leave the country. Of course, she is able to apply for citizenship on the basis of humanitarian and compassionate grounds; however, “sponsorship may be an important factor if your ability to support yourself is in question” (*Citizenship and Immigration Canada* 2010). As a result, more accessible information, especially provided in translation, must be made available to women entering this country through the unregulated International Marriage Brokers.

“Mail-order brides” are receiving more and more attention in popular media. On January 13, 2010, for example, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* interviewed a “real, live mail-order bride” (*Oprah*) as a part of its “Marriage Around the World” theme. After the show, Oprah Winfrey admitted that the story might have painted Lera (the “mail-order bride”) in a somewhat negative light. The “poverty” showcased in the show (i.e. Lera’s small apartment that she shared with her mother), presented a one-dimensional image of Ukraine. As a result, more scholarship is needed to examine the “mail-order bride” portrayal in popular media. This type of examination will help to subvert and expose stereotypes created by the “mail-order” industry and the dominant North American imaginary. Likewise, more serious issues (i.e. abuse) need to be considered with respect to unregulated international dating agencies in Canada.

This thesis has crossed many borders – borders between the familial and the public, memory and reality, fiction and fact, Canada and Ukraine. Janice Kulyk Keefer writes, “borders take you under as well as over. Into places where the past is stored; into the present that’s made up of this past, in the way valleys are made up of the rivers that once rushed through them” (162). Armed with diaries, letters and anecdotes, I stand at the

border and, as if in a mirror, I see on the other side someone who was once me – a temperamental twelve-year-old with a mother who was once a “mail-order bride.” Perhaps this thesis was a way for me to deal with what has happened. The question “why did you come here?” has always seemed a hostile one to me, even if asked with the gentlest of intent. This thesis is a way to answer the question, a way for me to deal with the memories and the issues circling my mother’s and my own identities. My answer will no longer be a curt reply, “my mother married a Canadian,” said in a tone that implies that the conversation is over. This thesis has helped me open many more conversations – many more doors – into topics concerning “mail-order brides,” their potential husbands, and society’s view of “these people.”

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