

Triple Axel

by Yelena Furman

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THE ONE GOOD THING about having arrhythmia, Lina kept thinking, was that she could claim watching her beloved figure skating was a stress-reducing medical necessity.

In her living room suffused with warm southern California light, she lay back against the oversized couch pillows with her legs wrapped in a blanket, watching the women skaters spin, glide, and jump in the gleaming whiteness of the Moscow arena. Containers of medication sat on the polished surface of the coffee table awaiting their next scheduled intake.

“Have the Russians won everything yet?”

She hadn't heard her daughter come in, and Mara's question, in English, brought her back from Moscow. When Lina and Vadim immigrated to the U.S. from the Soviet Union, their daughter had just turned three. Although they spoke to her in Russian and read her Marshak fairy tales and Barto poems at bedtime, Mara's Russian-language skills got stuck at the level where managing something beyond “I'm fine, how are you?” or “Yes, thank you, I'd like some more” was as difficult as performing jump combinations.

“The competition isn't over,” Lina answered in Russian, “and this is

women's singles, so there are strong skaters from the U.S. and Japan." Mara was twelve when Lina and Vadim got divorced, and Lina had been too worn out to resist her daughter's clear preference for English. Nowadays, Mara attempted to speak Russian only to Lina's parents, *babushka* Tania and *dedushka* Boria, and, when the necessity arose, to Irina and other Russian friends of Lina's, although since they all spoke English to differing degrees, she would invariably switch after a few phrases. But Lina had never stopped speaking Russian to her daughter. She often yielded to Mara's American insanities, like the fat-free food that had no taste and the natural cleaning products that didn't clean, but the Russian was too important to give in on.

Mara threw her book bag on the floor and came around the side of the sofa. Lina took in her daughter's outfit – a button-down shirt with shorts over tights, all of it black – and had to restrain herself from making her customary "Going to a funeral?" remark. She also avoided commenting on Mara's hair, which had recently transformed from long and wavy into short and straight, although, as Lina had pointed out to her parents, at least she'd left it as its natural brown rather than opting for something more colorful. Mara saw her mother appraising her but said nothing, picking up Lina's blanket-wrapped feet and placing them in her lap as she sat down.

When Lina was diagnosed with arrhythmia the previous spring, her daughter

insisted on moving out of her dorm and back in with Lina to take care of her. Lina protested that there was no need for Mara to radically disrupt her life, but she was touched. She hadn't expected this from the girl who only a few weeks prior was often too busy to have a normal conversation in person or via any electronic medium. Yet she also found her daughter's presence burdensome. Mara walked on eggshells, making a conspicuous effort not to argue or upset her; it was like saying Lina was too frail for real life and all its battles. The one amusing aspect was Mara's attempts to feign interest in figure skating.

The final group of skaters was warming up on the ice. "Did you watch the pairs?"

Lina did her best to stifle the laughter in her voice. "Yes, they were on earlier in the week."

"Good. I know they're your favorite."

Lina had a sudden urge to beg her daughter to stop living out a Turgenev plot of female self-sacrifice, but knew Mara wouldn't get the reference. She reminded herself yet again not to be so dismissive. Mara was trying, and she was right: pairs were Lina's favorite. In post-Soviet Russia, singles skaters had gained in popularity, but pair skaters were the pride of the Soviet skating world. Soviet pairs had a very distinctive look, classically elegant, with long lines and

meticulously synchronized skating elements that set them apart from the others. Until that judging scandal in Salt Lake City, when the Canadians ultimately received the gold medal along with the Russians in an unprecedented tie, Soviet and then Russian pair skaters dominated the podium for ten straight Olympics. Rodnina and Zaitsev's back-to-back Olympic titles filled Lina with a sense of national pride completely absent at all other times. Of course, Soviet skaters were cherry-picked for both ability and ideological soundness, which in Rodnina's case meant hiding that she was part Jewish (Lina now wished the woman would hide her political career under Putin), but at least her country's domination in this context didn't involve the military.

One of the many differences Lina discovered when she came to the United States was that Americans didn't hold figure skating in nearly as high regard and that pair skating was the least popular type. Aside from Babilonia and Gardner, who would have gone head-to-head with Rodnina and Zaitsev at the 1980 Olympics if his injury hadn't made them withdraw, there was barely any pair skating tradition. In one more example of the individual vs. collective principle that distinguished her new home from her old one, the focus here was on singles skaters. But they were great to watch too; they did all those jumps.

On the screen, a skater from Japan was getting ready to do her long program, gliding around the outer edge of the arena before settling in the center, arms bent at

the elbows stretched over her head, wrists touching. “She has a triple axel planned,” one of the commentators said excitedly.

“That’s that really hard jump, right?”

“Yes.” Lina looked at her daughter with surprise. Once, in a seriously misguided attempt to bond with fifteen-year-old Mara, who happened to be around while Lina was watching the World Figure Skating Championships, she had tried to explain about the different jumps. The hardest one, she had said, was the axel. Unlike the others, which Lina often couldn’t identify without the announcers telling her which one it was, the axel had a very distinct forward take-off, which constituted its difficulty: a single axel required not one, but one-and-a-half revolutions to complete. Triple axels were originally the exclusive province of male skaters; pair and female skaters did doubles. Now, all disciplines had raised their jump difficulty, with men doing various quads and triple axels increasingly making their appearance in women’s routines. For a while, Mara alternated between staring vacantly at her mother and the T.V., saved at last by the sound of the ringing landline, which despite her disdain for an immobile phone, she ran to answer with worrying speed. Lina couldn’t imagine her daughter had retained anything of their conversation from four years prior. Had she now Googled “figure skating facts”? Was that one of the links you got directed to from “how to cope with a loved one’s arrhythmia”?

As the music began – Russian, of course, so many skaters used it regardless of where they were from – Lina looked over at Mara, who seemed to be following the performance. “Starting off with the triple axel,” the commentator announced in a voice full of anticipation. With her eyes on the screen, Mara said, “The first woman who did a triple axel in competition was also from Japan. Midori Ito. Back in the 80s, when you were still in Moscow.”

Elki-palki, she really did Google it. “Marochka, honest, I’m going to live. No need to put in this much effort.”

“And you don’t need to keep making fun of me.” Lina automatically tensed as she heard the annoyance in her daughter’s voice but then Mara added sheepishly, “I just thought it was something we could talk about that wouldn’t end up in a fight.”

Lina edged closer and kissed her daughter, brushing her lips against Mara’s hair. “For that you’ll need to learn the names of the other female skaters who landed this jump. Google it later.”

“Hilarious, mama. Should we actually look to see if this one manages it?”

They watched as the skater, through a series of twists, moved out to the edge of the ice and began coming in a circular fashion toward the middle to set up for the jump. And suddenly there it was: skating on one leg, she changed direction,

readying her body for the forward take-off, surveyed the space around her, and jumped, becoming a pinkish-orange whirl of three-and-a-half dizzying rotations before landing on the thin blade of her skate, the other leg stretched in the air behind her, arms off to the sides, in these seconds achieving something few would ever do.

“*Molodets!*” Lina exhaled appreciatively, as the audience roared its applause.

“Yeah, good job!”

Lina looked at her daughter and laughed. Mara rolled her eyes with a facial expression between grimace and smile. They both leaned farther into the couch. It wasn't a companionable silence, exactly, but Lina was reasonably certain that, if any phones went off, Mara would at least hesitate before answering.

The older Lina got, the more she felt that life hadn't gone as she'd expected. In the Soviet Union, with its ritual of daily obstacles and anti-Semitism, the U.S. had seemed a haven, a far-away hope of her life's opposite. She was young when the exodus of Jewish refugees, as they were officially called, started in the 1970s, mostly to North America and Israel. Suddenly, everyone knew someone, or was someone, who was leaving. Her mother's coworker. Her father's cousin. The girl who sat behind her in school. Lina's parents talked about leaving too, but the

prospect of an unknown life proved too daunting and they stayed, and then a few years later, the Soviet regime stopped letting Jews out. It fell to Lina to undertake the move as an adult, with her parents in tow, after the political landscape had changed with Gorbachev's reforms and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. She left a post-Soviet Russia in economic turmoil, with rising nationalism and anti-Semitism, a part of the largest contingent of over a million and a half of former Soviet Jews, following those who went before them on the immigrant journey into the unknown. Her best friend, Irina, had left years previously for Los Angeles. From Irina's letters, that city emerged as so wildly exotic, so unlike anywhere else – palm trees and millionaires' mansions and something called *freevei*, imagine that, so many people had their own cars – that Lina instinctively felt that this was where their new life should begin. They left behind Moscow and parts of themselves and arrived in their new home on the warmest December day any of them had ever experienced.

That first night at Irina's house, Mara and Zhenia, Irina and Oleg's son, ran around until nearly midnight, over-stimulated by the adults' excitement and the masses of desserts purchased for the occasion. Despite their exhaustion, Vadim and Lina stayed up for hours talking to Irina and Oleg, catching up on years of each others' absence. They exchanged stories of life in Moscow: "Is it true that you can now read Pasternak?"; life in Los Angeles: "Is it true that no one walks here?"; the

lives of mutual friends: “But they seemed like such a great couple. Is it true that Dina left Andrei for their neighbor?” “Only after Andrei left her for a woman he met at a Pasternak poetry reading.” As Lina fell asleep that night on a couch that didn’t fold out, tightly pressed against Vadim’s body in the small space, her exhausted mind conjured up an image from the last figure skating championship she’d seen before leaving Moscow of a Russian pair team doing their side-by-side jumps. In the morning, this image was the only thing she remembered from a night of dreamless sleep: two skaters setting up, taking off, traveling through the air and landing in perfect unison.

Lina was prepared to do everything to succeed in their American life. She knew lots of people who were doctors and engineers and teachers in the Soviet Union and drove cabs or worked behind counters in the U.S. She became a medical technician, working in x-ray labs and as a pharmacist’s aide, over-qualified but with bad English, nevertheless determined to get her American medical license. For years, she took English classes and courses to prepare for the medical boards, which she’d passed, as she proudly said, along with people much younger than she was who spoke English from birth. Now she was a doctor again, with her own patients, mostly Russian ones, but some Americans, too. She and Vadim bought a house, her parents were in relatively good health, and Mara had lots of friends and was doing well in school. Aside from her daughter’s disappearing Russian, Lina

couldn't complain. Each day, as she confidently navigated the freeway to her office building, she felt she had conquered the years of struggling and sacrificing and feeling helpless and scared.

"There were too many good things, so of course the bad had to happen" she said to Irina when Vadim left.

"That's an overly Russian point of view. It happens."

"Not to everyone."

"Dina and Andrei are both on their second marriage by now, and he also seems to be having an affair."

"We're not all trying to emulate Pasternak."

She always thought she and Vadim started out promisingly enough, certainly no worse than most. Meeting in a specialized math high school in Moscow, part of the Jewish crowd with Irina and Oleg, all of them sticking together because it was safer that way, just in case, you never knew when one of their non-Jewish classmates might come out with some anti-Semitic statement. They dated, reciting Akhmatova and Esenin and playing guitar and singing Vysotsky to each other. They got married, had a daughter, and watched in jubilant disbelief images of the crowds at the barricades, a defiant Yeltsin on top of the tank, the regime crumbling. They immigrated to the U.S., braving the lack of language skills,

money, and any certainty about the future. They started a new life.

“And nine years later, the idiot decides he wants a newer one.”

“He’s a complete idiot. Oleg and I aren’t speaking to him.”

“Apparently, we spent all the time working and he wants to live before it’s too late. If we didn’t work, we’d starve. I have no idea what ‘wanting to live’ means.”

“Ask uncle Vania. How is Mara with all this?”

“Hard to say. She cries a lot, and then behaves as though nothing has happened. She doesn’t really talk to me about it.”

“It’s that age,” Irina sighed. “Twelve is just the beginning. Zhenia also stopped talking to us around then. We’re still waiting.”

“*Chudno.*”

Suddenly Lina laughed. Irina looked at her questioningly.

“I have a good job, my husband and I are getting divorced, and my child won’t talk to me. Finally, I’m a real *amerikanka.*”

She laughed until she began to cry.

Her relationship with Mara kept deteriorating. By fourteen, her daughter was spending hours behind a closed bedroom door, playing music that reminded Lina

of growling animals at a volume that gave her headaches; by sixteen, she wore all black and wrote poetry whose subject matter, as far as Lina could gather from reading the pages accidentally left on the kitchen table, vacillated between the death of the human soul and the embarrassment brought on by one's parents. They fought more and more frequently, Lina yelling in Russian, Mara deliberately making the situation worse by claiming not to understand her. Even in times of relative peace, their conversations were empty, as Lina's attempts to engage with her daughter were met with monosyllabic resistance. For her part, Mara treated Lina with a singular lack of interest sliding into incomprehension: her mother was literally from a different world, one of figure skating and books in a language she could barely read. Lina's countless suggestions over the years that Mara attempt one of them with her help became a bad running joke, with Mara, in one particularly aggressive mood, declaring that if Pushkin weren't already dead, she'd kill him herself. Things got better after Mara started college, although Lina was still baffled by her daughter, who, while now occasionally telling her about her life, talked about things like taking a class on feminist theory and possibly becoming vegetarian.

And then Lina discovered that her heart wasn't beating properly. The first time she felt the rapid pulsations she attributed them to the phone conversation she'd just had with Mara in which her daughter had informed her that she wanted

to take a year off from school to backpack in New Zealand. Then she began feeling them at other times: at dinner with Oleg and Irina, at a classical music concert that was her Sunday night ritual with her parents, while seeing patients. She told herself that she was overworked and stressed, all the while feeling her heart thrashing against her ribcage. The episode that finally convinced her to see the cardiologist was the sudden pounding as she was rereading *Diadia Vania*, when after normal rhythm was restored, her first thought was that she did not want to end up like Chekhov, a doctor who ignored his own symptoms of tuberculosis until it was too late. The cardiologist ran tests, which showed that she had to be monitored but that her condition was manageable with medication. As thankful as she was that she didn't have something incurable, Lina couldn't help thinking that her improperly working heart was another one of her life's failures.

“Mama, do you want me to boil the water for the *pel'meni* before I go?”

Lina looked up at her daughter walking into the living room from her bedroom. Mara was wearing fishnet stockings underneath denim shorts with rows of hanging thread and an oversized black t-shirt with some musician's face on it, an ensemble accentuated by black nail polish and lipstick. Lina knew the final item would be the pair of black boots by the front door that were good for going on

forced marches or if you really needed to stomp something into the ground. She let out a sigh. Before she could stop herself, Mara let out one of her own in parody. Lina shook her head and then buried it in her hands in exaggerated mock despair. Mara burst out laughing. “The water?” she prompted. “Or I can always bring you back your favorite from the restaurant I’m going to.”

“You mean the raw fish? *Ogromnoe spasibo.*”

“It’s called sushi, *mamochka*, and you’re welcome.”

“It’s called raw fish and don’t boil the water. I’m not hungry.”

Mara started to say, “But you have to eat,” saw Lina’s look, and closed her mouth. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“Which of them are you going with? Is the one who worked as a cartoon character in Disneyland last summer still in the picture?”

Mara rolled her eyes. “He was earning money for school, and enough with my private life already. I told you, I’m going with Kristin.”

“Has her hair grown back or is she still bald?”

“Lots of people shave their heads.” Mara paused, then added, “I’ve cut so much of mine off already that I’m considering it,” and winked at her mother.

“Careful, Marochka, I have a weak heart,” Lina winked back. They were

both smiling, and she was glad that Mara seemed less afraid in her presence and she herself less guarded in her daughter's.

She held the front door open for Mara, giving her a kiss on the cheek as her daughter passed her. Closing it, she walked back into the living room, and turned on the T.V. There was no figure skating. She left the set on some film, went to the kitchen, and surveyed the contents of the refrigerator. Neither she nor Mara had gone shopping yet, and most of the space was taken up by the enormous white enamel pot, brought by her parents for God knows what reason from Moscow, that contained her mother's homemade borsch. She attempted to motivate herself to eat, gave up, took the bottle of Sauvignon Blanc out of the side door, and sipped the wine leaning on the kitchen counter, watching droplets of moisture fall from the glass onto the gray marble-top.

It was in this kind of early evening haze, when the light was fading but hadn't quite gone, that she felt Vadim's absence the most. Not missed him anymore, exactly, but registered that he was no longer here. He was living in Chicago now, and she mainly heard his news, what there was of it, from Mara. She took a sip of wine. California wines were something she and Vadim liked to discover together, after they'd been in the U.S. long enough to have money that did not have to be spent on rent, food, or their child. Now she recalled that a year after he left, he tried to come back, and because she was terrified to be on her own, she

considered letting him. She knew Irina was right when she said that “there are plenty of successful single mothers, no, it doesn’t hurt the kids” and that “a person who suddenly decided you don’t fit into his life shouldn’t be in yours,” but she still hesitated.

Sometime during all this, in an effort to temporarily shut out her problems, she’d watched a figure skating championship with a particularly competitive women’s long program. The women’s event, always the most popular in American figure skating, was even more eagerly anticipated than normal because two skaters had triple axels planned. Lina wished that American audiences would appreciate pairs more than they did. There were spectacular elements in pairs that singles skating by definition couldn’t have: the dizzying lifts, when the female skater, held up by her partner, rose above his head, changing positions several times or being spun for several revolutions, before he set her down; the gravity-defying throws, where holding her by the waist, he launched her upwards and she flew over the ice before coming down to nail the one-foot landing as they faced each other with outstretched arms. Two people skating as one, making an almost impossible task look effortless. But as she watched the young women attacking their jumps, including that insanely hard one, she thought about how a lack of unison was also freeing. You didn’t have to match anyone’s steps or worry that the smallest mistiming would make the entire element collapse. On your own, you could take

more risks, attempt the harder jumps. And you weren't actually ever alone. There was your coach, your choreographer, and some of the other skaters who, even though you competed against them, were your friends and training partners. Your solo performance contained pieces of others'. Lina sipped more wine, witnessing the sun disappear for the day. There were so many times she longed to have that one person to talk to, be loved by, cry with. But after all these years, she knew from experience that you didn't need them to help you sail through the air. She smiled, almost involuntarily. Maybe there was something to Mara's feminist thing after all.

She took several more sips, then set the glass on the counter and headed to her bedroom to find something to occupy herself. The door to Mara's room was open and as she passed it, she shook her head at its characteristic chaos, various articles of clothing spilling onto the floor from the chair, the piles of paper on the desk, the stack of books tangled up with more clothes on the bed. Telling herself that she could always defuse Mara's anger with the excuse that stressing about this mess was bad for her heart, Lina walked in to straighten it.

She was folding an enormous black sweater when she noticed what lay underneath on Mara's bed. Wondering whether she was seeing things, Lina picked up the two books in which Mara had marked her place by sticking ballpoint pens between the pages. One was Lina's own hardback copy of Pushkin, the pen placed

a few pages into *Baryshnia-krest'ianka*, his humorous, exuberant tale of a young noblewoman dressing up as a peasant to sneak a look at the handsome young nobleman who falls madly in love with her. The other book was a paperback English-language translation. Nearby, the partially visible spine of Lina's Russian-English dictionary was sticking out from under a green pillowcase with a beige stain.

Lina sat down on the small free space at the edge of the bed, holding the two opened books in her lap. Mara was in the early stages of the story: Liza and Aleksei's first meeting in the glade, Liza in peasant dress, holding a basket for mushroom picking, Aleksei addressing his dog in French and trying to kiss Liza, her repelling his advances while trying to stay in character, the flirty banter between two young people on a beautiful spring morning rendered in the narrator's tongue-in-cheek tone and Pushkin's elegantly ironic turns of phrase. How Lina loved this piece from a young age, had tried to get Mara to read it for years. And here, finally, was Mara, struggling through a language she hardly remembered, navigating her way through a nineteenth-century provincial Russia far removed from her own experience. As she had so many times since her diagnosis, Lina put her right hand over her left breast, but her heart was beating normally now. When Mara came home, she gave her mother a quizzical look as Lina hugged her wordlessly before going to bed. Mara's right stocking had developed a rather large

hole in the knee, but Lina found she didn't care.

The next afternoon on her lunch break, Lina went to a bookstore and bought a guidebook for New Zealand. No way she was letting Mara take a year off to backpack, but they could go on vacation. She'd never been to New Zealand, never even considered it, and that was reason enough to think about it now. New Zealand was the beginning, there would be more New Zealands, and she would stay open to them. She felt light, like when she and Irina were schoolgirls strolling down Staryi Arbat in the center of Moscow, *plombir* cones in their hands, braids with brightly colored ribbons swinging in rhythm with their steps. And for the first time in years, Lina felt prepared; she'd been practicing the triple axel and could do it now. She surveyed the space around her, readied her body for take-off, and jumped.