

## **A Farmhouse By The Sea**

The winter of '97-98 brought fierce cold as Pacific storms hurdled down the Alaskan coast, delivering freezing rain and black ice to Washington and Oregon. White sheathed trees fell across roads so slick that cars slid backwards as they struggled to climb the evergreen covered hills.

They talked once or twice a week and Katrina told Buzz, “Russians view ourselves as a special, and much like you Americans, we were chosen to rule the world and bring enlightenment to the heathens.” Their expansion to the east was similar to America spreading west. “The Communist vision is similar to the American Dream: We seek freedom and justice for all, but our definition of freedom is practical. We want freedom from inequality, from material want, and from greed.” The communist youth party taught trustworthiness, being physically fit, courage, and forbearance like The Boy Scouts.

“Can I take you to dinner?”

“Nyet, I must study – you can’t understand how busy I am.”

The weather cleared and Buzz took another teacher out a few times. She was weird, so he avoided her. She went to his principal, alleging Buzz was sexually harassing her because she wouldn’t date him.

Fortunately, the principal knew the woman’s history and didn’t write him up, but it scared the holy-be-geezers out of him. He wore blisters on his knees, thanking the Lord.

His coaching buddies talked about how easy it was to pick up a streetwalker in downtown Portland. Buzz fought the idea of paying for sex but Randy argued, “It’s safer than dating power-hungry women, and financially it’s a hell-of-a-lot smarter than marriage.”

“It’s a crime and I could lose my license.”

“Sex work is legal in Canada, just take a trip up to Vancouver, B.C. and enjoy a nice girlfriend experience.”

Buzz wrestled with the idea. Should he check out British Columbia or get a quickie in Portland? Certainly, it would be a high from the sin and thrill of it.

Randy kept encouraging him. “Hell, go for it. Your church teaches that if you lust after a woman in your heart, you’ve already committed sin.” He laughed, “I know you’re thinking about that blonde, blue-eyed Russian teacher, and I can’t blame you.”

Buzz felt that having sex with Katrina would be walking on black ice. He’d fall and break his heart again. *Ain’t gonna do it.*

Katerina and Buzz talked for hours, feeling superior in their insights as historians from opposite sides of the ocean, representatives of two great imperial powers, destined to rule the world, and they, only they, had the intellectual capacity to understand and analyze the patterns and problems of conquest.

“Why won’t you go out with me? I just want to be friends and you’re interesting to talk to.”

“It’s too complicated.” Katerina said, “Nyet, I simply have no time for a man.”

As the weeks traveled on, Buzz prayed to be liberated from the lust in his heart. On Sundays, asking forgiveness from the Lord, he sang and played guitar on the church worship team. He laughed at himself, *I just want to play my guitar and sing.* He was scared to date a church

woman, scared he'd fall in love, and scared he'd end up married to another woman with no imagination or had mental problems. His thoughts kept circling back to Katerina because they could talk about everything.

He and Randy met this incredible lead guitar player from Nashville and formed a country-blues band. They started doing shows around the metro area. Randy was all over the bar girls, and after taking them home, bragged about his exploits.

Buzz was terrified, not of God, but of getting his bone marrow torn out again since he was divorced a second time – even if it'd make a great country song.

His housemate was a former fundamentalist pastor who got on his pulpit several times a week to give Buzz an unasked for lesson on Christian living. He approached Preacher Dan's lectures like Katerina did her Jewish landlords – listening politely without comment. They emailed each other, laughed how they ignored them, and realized they shared a common cynicism. "Want to go for a walk at Cannon Beach next Saturday afternoon? That's not a date, it's just a walk by the sea."

"No, I have to participate in Shabbat dinner. It celebrates the Jew's liberation from Egyptian slavery and is very important to my landlady."

"How about Sunday afternoon? The weather is calling for sunbreaks."

If Katerina hadn't been so bored, she would *not* have gone. But Buzz didn't look at her chest like other men. He had asked her to do something with him for months. What could it hurt? They worked together at Wy'east Middle School, so he wouldn't try anything with her. Twice divorced with a teenage son, Buzz was a bad risk. *Nyet!* She didn't consider him a candidate.

At twenty-eight, she had a four-year-old child and her husband lived with a nineteen-year-old. He hadn't seen their daughter for over a year. She was from Russia and she had no idea how

divorce worked in Oregon. It didn't matter, she had neither the time, money, or desire to follow up.

She refused to ride with Buzz. She didn't want to be abandoned at Cannon Beach after she told him she was still married. The drive gave her time to rehearse her speech. It would end their relationship because Buzz had made it clear he'd never date a married woman. She also hadn't told him how poor she was, living in the basement of this physician and woman who was a family lawyer.

Lots of money, they were founding members of a synagogue and insisted Katerina and her child, Sofia, light candles, listen to verses from the Talmud, and participate in the Jewish supper that begins Friday evening and ends Saturday night. She owed them thousands. Buzz would run like a scared housecat. Perhaps it's better and she wouldn't be playing these silly games with such a nice man.

She always enjoyed their conversations about the difference between the American and Russian experiences. A former history teacher, the man had a doctoral degree but was a farm boy. He played in a country band and had never been to the opera, the symphony, or a musical. She'd just string him along for entertainment.

Besides, an educator couldn't have the assets she desired. Not that she was materialistic, but if she ever remarried, she wanted a big home and a housecleaner. She wanted to take international trips like her landlady.

She couldn't find parking near the beach and meandered past storefronts: candy and ice cream shops smelling of chocolate and vanilla, hot popcorn, a cafe grilling shrimp, and thick hot sausages as if they were a man's...

*Where is he? He said to meet at the seawall.*

She saw him coming in his tight coaching shorts and T-shirt. *Darn, he's too handsome to be an educator.*

With a crooked grin, he said, "Hey, Katerina. Great to see you. I took a jog on the beach."

She caught a waft of his faint vanilla scent and inhaled. His blue eyes were bright, happy, and very sexy.

She couldn't control herself, her hand went around his bicep as they strolled down the beach. It was chilly. She let him put his arm around her shoulder. *He is so warm, no, make that hot.* She felt his muscular chest brush against her shoulder. It had been far too long.

He saw the kites. He said with a slight western drawl, "Look at that one. Wow! A Chinese dragon. Isn't it exotic and beautiful?" He glanced at her. "Like you."

The sea smells assaulted her nose: fish, salt, and cone-shaped limpets. Black oystercatchers, sandpipers, and common Murres foraged along the shore. The soft ocean breeze massaged her body under his massive arm. They fit together like the beach and these pulsating waves.

Near Haystack rock, they waded into the colorful tide pools filled with fascinating marine life and intertidal rocks encrusted with propagating mussels, snails, and sea stars. An ocean wave slapped her face and she nearly swallowed, then it came out her nose as if she had... She caught his eyes.

Mouth gaping, his cheeks turned pink and he looked away. He pointed at the sea. "Hey look! It's a pod of gray whales headed to their breeding grounds."

She scanned his chiseled body as he talked, his smooth voice resonating in her ears.

“They mate in the cold waters around Alaska. The female is pregnant for over thirteen months. Females synchronize their estrus within the pod and they mate with several males. It’s quite the party I’m told.”

“What are those cute, funny-looking birds?” She pointed at the rock cliffs.

“They’re puffins. Cool bird aren’t they? This is a rare breeding ground.”

*God, if we didn’t work together, I’d drag him into a cove and...*

As they strolled along the Susan Beach, Katerina was curious, yet afraid. She didn’t want to lead him on but also didn’t want to tell him she was still married. A Catholic, he stated that he’d never again make love to another married woman. “It’s not right. Someone always gets hurt.”

She studied Buzz with a curious objectivity. She felt sorry for him, straining so hard to get her to want him, and completely unaware of her desire to make love with him.

There was an old farmhouse hanging precariously on one of the sandstone cliffs.

Buzz said, “Look at that. Probably an original homestead. The cliff is trying to checkmate the ocean but the ocean will win. Someday it will tumble into the sea.”

She wanted to avoid romance. “Since we got the Spanish-speaking into my ESL class and special education, do you have a fresh understanding of how a second language interacts with a learning disability?”

“Yes, and I sure appreciate you helping me get him into special education.”

They talked about the process and the criteria. His quick grasp of the educational issues surprised her. Walking down the beach, dodging waves that periodically lapped over bare feet, they had an animated conversation. She had never had such a deep conversation with anyone. He was warm, compassionate, and didn’t look at her chest. If Buzz was a little younger and they didn’t

work together, she'd let him take her home for the night. She laughed to herself. *Maybe more than one night, no obligation, no commitment.*

He tried to take her hand but she pulled away, anxiously rehearsing her speech, knowing it may hurt him, and he might be angry that she hadn't told him earlier. She crossed her arms under her breasts and began explaining her situation as she dodged waves licking her feet.

Buzz listened, asked questions, clarified, and empathized; his compassion and insights amazed her. His brilliant blue eyes stayed on hers. "Why don't you simply file for divorce in Oregon?"

"I don't know how and it takes money for lawyers."

"Actually, you can get a divorce kit at any office supply store and file it yourself. It's fairly simple if it isn't contested. You don't have any assets and your husband isn't interested in your daughter. Shoot, I'll help you."

She fell in awe of this fascinating man. Katerina found herself holding his hand as they strolled through the gathering fog. She wanted to walk away from him but could not. It was Marxist determinism. Buzz was her destiny. She slid her arm around his waist. *My God, I am so naïve and inexperienced. What do I know about American men or relationships with them?* She was a featherweight grappling with a heavyweight wrestler. Despite being sixteen years older than her, Buzz had seduced her.

She was helpless against his delightful charm, his intellect, and those muscles. It shocked her, this wasn't her plan at all! Her lips offered the ghost of a smile, then she worried he would suddenly, wildly kiss her. She felt breathless as he gazed at her, so obvious with desire.

He didn't. Disappointment in his eyes, he said, "Katerina, although you're still married, I'd like to get to know you as a friend. I was taught Russians were our enemies. I'd like to understand you, your people, and your culture if you're willing to teach me."

"Our countries suffer the disease of lust. Your country, like mine, is a beast, craving conquest and domination while claiming the higher moral ground. Both our countries are sick with lechery."

A contagion of desire spun the sands on the Oregon coast, never-ending, floating with the rhythm of seaweed. Terrified of falling in love with this man, she pushed away. She felt like the old farmhouse built on the Susan Cliffs of Oregon's fractal coast, rugged with a sensual soul, his waves crashing to bring it down, drawing her remains out to sea and home to Russia.