

SOMETHING UNBELIEVABLE

**BOOK
CLUB
KIT**



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AUTHOR OF *OKSANA, BEHAVE!*

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

I wouldn't be writing to you if it weren't for my grandmother, Lana. When the Soviet Union collapsed when I was a child, she followed my family from Ukraine to America, and was even forced to share a tiny room with me for several years. She had lost everything: her country, her husband, and her daughter, and yet she maintained her good cheer, learned English in her mid-fifties, found a steady job, went on lots of dates, chain-smoked and drank cognac, and never failed to offer constructive criticism. She not only gave me a zest for life, but a desire to understand the place where I came from.

One thing that always fascinated me was that when she was a child during World War II, my grandmother and her family fled Ukraine and the Nazis and evacuated to the Ural Mountains, where her father's engineering institute had relocated to make military equipment for the war. The detail that her family was accompanied by and closely tied to the family of Evgeny Paton, the most well-known engineer in all of Ukraine, whose welding techniques helped the Soviets win the war, continued to pique my interest. This period included unlikely romantic liaisons, a cholera outbreak, and a tragic incident where my grandmother's own grandmother let go of her hand and jumped in front of a train. After hearing a story like that, I was destined to be a writer.

In 2019, my debut novel Oksana, Behave! explored Oksana's bond with her grandmother, but my new novel, Something Unbelievable, puts the grandmother-granddaughter relationship front and center. My novel is about Natasha, a struggling new mom and actress who puts on a play based on her grandmother's war story, which culminated in her grandmother marrying the wrong brother from a famous engineer family. As her grandmother tells her story over Skype—an all too familiar format these days—many parallels between her life and Natasha's are revealed. These parallels are later put to the test when the women reunite. My novel explores the questions I asked myself, especially after my grandmother passed away five years ago: What has the older generation passed down to me, willingly or not? Will I ever fully understand my elders or my native land? How can I pass my family's history and culture down to my American-born child?

I hope you enjoy the read as much as I enjoyed writing it.

*Warmly,
Maria Kuznetsova*

RECIPES

RUSSIAN BLINI

Ingredients

- 2 eggs
- 2 cups milk
- 1 tablespoon granulated sugar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons canola oil plus more for pan

For serving

- Sour cream or sweetened condensed milk
- Jam
- Red caviar

Instructions:

1. In a medium bowl, whisk together eggs, milk, sugar, and salt. Mix in flour, ¼ – ½ cup at a time, until a runny batter forms. Whisk in the oil and let rest for about 15 minutes.
2. Rub a little oil in a 10-inch skillet or pan, and heat over medium-low to medium. Once thoroughly heated, add ¼ – ⅓ cup batter to the center and immediately tilt the pan in a circle to coat the bottom in a thin layer. Cook until bubbles begin to form and the bottom turns golden, about 2 minutes. Flip and cook until the other side is golden, 30 seconds to 1 minute. Remove to plate. Rub the pan with more oil and repeat with remaining batter.

Source: tarasmulticulturaltable.com/blinchiki-russian-crepes

FRIED OYSTER MUSHROOMS

Ingredients

- 1 lb. oyster mushrooms
- 2 eggs
- Salt
- Pepper
- Flour

Instructions:

1. Whisk together the eggs, salt, and pepper.
2. Wash the oyster mushrooms, then dip them in flour on both sides.
3. Dip the mushrooms in the egg mixture until they are fully coated.
4. Fry them for 4 minutes on each side.
5. Serve. (Ideally with some vodka!)

SONGS

NATASHA

“Baby” by Ariel Pink

“Sunrise” by Norah Jones

“Drunk Kid Catholic” by Bright Eyes

“Not the Same” by Ben Folds

From the author:

Toward the end of writing *Something Unbelievable*, I listened to Ariel Pink’s “Baby,” which set the mood I wanted: kind of melancholy, sultry, nostalgic, and filled with love.

I also listened to Norah Jones’s “Sunrise” at the very end, as a compliment to the final section’s title, “Sunset.” It created a mood that was about closing one door but opening another, which is the effect I wanted the ending to have. Natasha’s life is just beginning, in many ways, as her grandmother’s story is ending.

And then two songs I loved in high school/college, the emo “Drunk Kid Catholic” by Bright Eyes and “Not the Same” by Ben Folds created the slightly dramatic and nostalgic feel I wanted for Natasha. Though she was born in Ukraine, these are songs she would have listened to growing up—while being aware of their corniness.

LARISSA

“Gnossiennes: No 1. (Lent)” by Eric Satie

“Dark Is the Night” by Mark Bernes

“Kamchatka” by Viktor Tsoi

“Aluminum Cucumbers” by Viktor Tsoi

“Eto Ne Lyubov” by Kino and Viktor Tsoi

From the author:

Eric Satie’s “Gnossiennes: No 1. (Lent)”: This song has an urgency to me, a drama and a sense of forward motion, and I played it on repeat during the parts where Larissa’s family packs up and begins their move to the Urals.

I also listened to a few Russian songs, like “Dark Is the Night,” a song I didn’t realize was a Soviet war song until I listened to the lyrics, which are from the perspective of a soldier singing to his beloved. The song begins, “Dark night, only bullets are whistling in the steppe / Only the wind is wailing through the telephone wires, stars are faintly flickering . . .”

And then I continue to be in love with Viktor Tsoi, the Korean-Soviet rock icon, who I think of as their Kurt Cobain in some ways—he died in a tragic accident in his late twenties, but before then, he sang hundreds of soulful songs with his signature raspy voice. One of them is called “Kamchatka,” which is named after the place in Siberia. Another is “Aluminum Cucumbers,” which is really about drug addiction, and then “Eto Ne Lyubov,” a ballad where a man is trying to convince himself he’s not in love.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the parallels between Natasha and her grandmother, Larissa? In which ways are they different?
2. How do Natasha and Larissa react to the death of Natasha's mother? What does grief look like for each of them?
3. Natasha struggles with postpartum depression during the course of the novel. Have you felt this way before? What are some ways Natasha copes?
4. Discuss the evolution of Natasha's relationship with Stas. What does he provide her?
5. How does the play help Natasha process her emotions? Do you see the play as a cathartic release?
6. Distance plays a role in the narrative. Not only are the main characters physically separated, living in different countries, but they also have to communicate through platforms like Skype. How does this distance affect Natasha and Larissa's emotional relationship? When they reunite at the end, do you feel they've become closer?
7. Larissa has lived through so much trauma, but uses humor to tell her story. How does she use humor to cope?
8. Discuss the dynamics of Larissa's relationship with her sister, Polya. Do you have a similar relationship with a sibling?
9. One of the central themes of this novel is about the legacy we inherit from our ancestors, and the way history and present can overlap. How have the lessons of past generations influenced you?
10. Both Larissa and Natasha find themselves torn between two love interests. What does this tell us about their characters? In what ways do you relate to their struggle?

INSPIRATION PHOTOS

