

## **The Second Pair of Slippers (Winner, Ashby Writers' Club, November 2007)**

Olga Petrovna launched herself into the night, leaving behind the warmth of the Metro. She clutched her coat more tightly and pulled the fur collar around her ears. The street was almost empty. A last-minute voter hurried into the polling station; an occasional vehicle passing. But the normal hubbub was missing. The city, exhausted, was resting, holding its breath in anticipation.

As she reached the steps leading to the Elections building, she heard a squeal of tyres on wet tarmac. A Mercedes with blacked-out windows made a rapid U-turn and slammed into the curb, sending drops of water flying, narrowly missing her feet. The doors opened and three large men spilled out. Each wore a discreet earpiece and carried a walkie-talkie radio. They were followed by a slight figure, wearing an Armani suit, cashmere scarf and overcoat. It was Alexander Ivanovych Polychenko, leading light of the Our Future party – one of the most well-known men in the country.

The group swept up the steps towards the imposing glass and metal doors, engrossed in their momentum to the exclusion of all else. As they approached, she caught Alexander's eye and smiled, about to say something, to wish him luck. He seemed to pause fractionally, but the group was moving too fast and the moment passed. The door swung shut with a hollow clang.

Olga stared after the group, but all she could see was her reflection in the glass. Her face seemed frozen; more of a grimace than a smile. Slowly, like snow in the sunshine, it melted, replaced by a look of disappointment. She clenched her fists, biting back angry words. She was wearing her best suit and new boots; her hair was freshly bleached and permed. But to them, she didn't exist.

Olga compared this man now with the boy she first knew so many years ago. They lived in the same apartment block, attended the same school. In the summer evenings they sat on the swings in the small courtyard, surrounded by crumbling balconies, and planned their futures. They wandered hand-in-hand down Leninsky Boulevard. There was no McDonalds, no internet cafes and most of the shop windows were empty. But, each evening, there were crowds of people strolling in the fading light. Even in those dark days, they were free to walk and dream.

Following the group into the building on that Sunday night, Olga heard the clock strike nine. She reached into her bag for an official pass. It was time for her to go to work.

Monday lunchtime, Olga walked through the dim building towards the canteen, ignoring the crowd that milled around her, demanding answers. Only three of the eight light fittings contained bulbs. After the bright atmosphere in her office and the counting hall, she had difficulty focusing in the semi-darkness.

As she opened the door she smelt the usual aroma of a municipal canteen; a subtle mix of fat that has been fried once too often - and dill. Dill, the aromatic herb that is used to flavour everything – fish, meat, sauces and mashed potato.

Lights flickered from all sides. Wall-mounted TVs in opposite corners of the room showed different channels. One an old Russian movie, the other a local fashion programme with skeletal models showing last year's designs. No-one was watching either. People were concentrating on their food, enjoying a brief respite from the mayhem in the rest of the building.

She chose a chopped beetroot salad from the display cabinet, added to her tray some vinegary rye bread and a glass of raspberry compote and moved with leaden feet to an empty table. As she passed a mirror on the wall, she glanced furtively at her reflection. Her boots, all pointed toe and high heel, still shone. But, she had rubbed a blister on her left heel and was beginning to wish she had chosen a pair a little less fashionable and a little more comfortable. The adrenaline rush provided by the excitement of the occasion, and her role in it, had started to wear off. She looked at the sleepy women serving the food and sympathised with their yawns. If this went on much longer, she would have to close the canteen for the staff to get some rest.

As she ate, she glanced across to the glass-walled section reserved for the politicians. There, at the centre table sat Alexander Ivanovych and his supporters. She was still hurting from their slight, although the sting had faded somewhat.

The four men were smoking and drinking small glasses of vodka. In front of them lay the remains of Russian salad and aubergine rolls. Their jackets had been slung over the backs of their chairs and their ties had come adrift. Their posture was tense, their brows creased and they kept looking towards the door. Alexander was talking urgently and waving his hands around. First one man rose from the table, then another. They walked out of the canteen in the direction of the counting hall. After a

few minutes, the third companion followed them. Alexander chewed moodily on a fingernail, tapping his foot in a staccato manner. Then, he too jumped to his feet and left.

For ten minutes or more, the tableau remained unchanged.; a table bearing the debris of a meal in progress. Finally, Alexander came back into the room. He took his former place at the head of the table and smoked yet another cigarette. Eventually, one of the others returned. By the time Olga left the canteen, the other two men had still not re-appeared. She was to see them later in the company of a young up-and-coming politician from one of the other parties.

On Tuesday morning, for the second day in a row, Olga stared out of her office window at the slow dawn. Light was creeping across the street, turning the snow from grey to brown. It had been many months since any white had shown through the lingering piles pushed by the snowploughs to the sides of the road. Her eyes were stinging from lack of sleep and she was having difficulty concentrating. She hauled herself to her feet and checked her reflection in the mirror once more. Her skirt looked like she had slept in it. Strictly speaking, she had – but only for a few moments just after midnight when she could no longer stay awake. Her blouse looked as if it had never been near an iron. If she had known the counting was going to take this long, she would have brought a spare with her.

Nevertheless, she knew that her big moment had arrived at last. The counting was finally complete. Every objection and argument had been dealt with. All parties accepted the results and the official announcement could now be made.

Olga applied a new coat of lipstick and checked that none was smeared on her front teeth. In the early morning light, the gold replacements for her top molars shone dully. She threw back her shoulders, took a deep breath, picked up the document from her desk and opened the door.

It was strangely silent. For the past thirty-two hours, reporters had hounded her each time she ventured out of the office. Whenever she went to the canteen or the counting hall, she was followed by her own personal pack.

‘Olga Petrovna, is there any news?’

‘Not yet guys – we have just gone to a third recount’

‘But can you tell us who you think will win? Any news that we can put in the early edition?’

‘Sorry guys – I can’t help you. You know I can’t say anything until the final result is announced.’

This time, the corridor was empty. As she passed the open door of the pressroom, she realised why. All around the room, representatives of the local and international media were sleeping. One had made a bed out of cushions and lay stretched across the floor. A couple were lying with their heads on the desks.

‘Just like Alexander and me when we were in junior school’ she mused.

The others were hunched in their chairs, trying to find a comfortable position. She rapped smartly on the doorframe.

‘Gentlemen of the press - official announcement in five minutes’. She smiled to herself as she walked on, leaving behind a sense of panic and urgency.

As Olga walked on to the stage, she glanced at the paper in her hand. For each result, she had underlined the successful name in red, to make sure there were no mistakes. Under the heading of Central Oblast, the name she had underlined was Yulia Grigorovna Semerenko. The difference between her votes and those of Alexander had been very small. That was one of the reasons why this election night had gone on for so very long.

Olga glanced up and saw Alexander standing at the back of the room. He was wearing his jacket once more, but his tie had gone - and so had all his companions. She contrasted his appearance now with the last time he had appeared on television, at an election rally a few days ago. Supporters and well-wishers had surrounded him. But he was irritable with the crowds, his answers to questions off-hand and dismissive. She remembered wondering where this streak of arrogance had come from. Didn’t he know that he depended on these people, rather than the other way around?

For a brief moment, she allowed her neutrality to slip and found to her surprise she was pleased he had lost. Maybe it was the lingering effect of Sunday night’s slight. Maybe she had not liked the man she had watched on TV, the man he had become.

As the television lights shone down on her and the cluster of microphones pointed upwards from the front of the stage, Olga announced to the country the results of the election for Parliamentary Deputies. She leaned slightly against the lectern to support her weary body and was thankful that her feet were hidden. It would not do for the news footage to show that the Head of the Central Elections Commission had

made her announcement in fluffy pink slippers – having finally abandoned her new boots as the mistake she had known them to be, even when she bought them.

As Olga walked out of the building some hours later, she was hit by an icy blast. She paused to tighten her scarf around her neck and pull her gloves up to cover her wrists. She was suddenly aware of someone at the bottom of the steps. A slight figure, still expensively dressed but looking very crumpled and somehow older. He was wearing a cashmere scarf around his neck, but his overcoat hung over one arm. He shivered in the cold. No longer entitled to an official car and without his former bodyguards, he seemed uncertain what to do or where to go.

She slowly walked down the steps towards the man. At the sound of her heels on the stone, he looked up and recognition broke through the bewilderment in his eyes.

‘They don’t want me any more. It’s all been for nothing’.

Olga gazed at him and the final vestiges of hurt and anger melted away. She no longer saw Alexander Ivanovych an arrogant politician wound up in himself and his ambitions. She didn’t even see the little boy who excitedly told her his dreams as they wandered the streets. She just saw Sasha, a husband, father and grandfather who had for a time lost sight of what was really important and now needed support and reassurance.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, she slipped her arm through his and leaned over to kiss his cold cheek.

‘Come home Sasha’ she said. ‘I have your slippers warming by the fire and Anna is bringing the babies to see us today. Tomorrow will be soon enough to think about what happens next.’