

Saint Basil's

by Anne Elezabeth Pluto

There were two of them. Women. Nothing remarkable there, but the small one was wearing pink flannel pajamas and worn down at the heel pink bunny fur trimmed moccasins. We thought she may have been retarded — looking suspiciously around her as she crossed Flatbush Ave at the corner by the old Dutch Reformed Church. She walked like a queen, her posture that of a ballerina, pulling her navy blue down jacket tighter around her.

Her companion was a tall heavysset lady — in black — with short henna red hair and a perpetual scowl. The ease with which they walked together showed years of friendship and understanding. The pajama ballerina looked into the store windows as if she was looking inside a snow globe. Her large friend kept pulling her small black bag close, slung across her left shoulder and across her chest like a bandolier.

They were hungry.

I followed them down Flatbush Ave. Many of the high-end businesses, the stores of their neighborhood and youth, had been long boarded up; the Strand Bookstore had moved here, across the bridge from the big city and the flannel ballerina nudged her companion to its door. They didn't go in, instead the large woman in black, steered them to a long forgotten department store, its ice blue awning, tattered, the once gold letters writing out a grand name, faded by weather and time. I can't even recall what it was called. Inside they mingled with the crowd, the thin woman in her pajamas painfully aware that the shoppers were looking at her. She pushed through them and headed down the worn marble staircase to the bargain basement, her large friend at her heels.

“My parents used to come here every December, right before Chanukah to purchase chocolates. I thought this place was closed,” Henna Hair whispered.

Like children they found the candy department, set apart from the rest of the basement. Walking through its glass towers, they were made young again by the Russian chocolates — fantastically packaged in red, gold, purple, yellow, and green foil wrappers: Faberge eggs made of spun sugar, large bars of dark and milk chocolate with or without nuts, and made to scale chocolate model of St. Basil's with marzipan onion domes and doors.

“Do you know what these five onion domes represent?” The pink princess whispered.

“No,” her friend answered, not paying attention as she purchased a small bag of salted caramels.

“The last of the Kazan Tatar Khans. Each dome represents a severed head. The triumph of Orthodox Christianity over Islam in Russia,” she said as she shoved a large dark chocolate bar into the pocket of her blue jacket. Her friend whipped around and took her by the elbow. They were lost in a second, obscured by a steady stream of customers; even if the salesgirl had noticed the missing chocolate bar, she did nothing.

Outside, in the stark winter sunlight, she unwrapped the candy, offered half to her friend, and gobbled up her share. They were at the end — Flatbush Ave melted into the Manhattan Bridge. The large woman offered to give her friend a ride home, but the chocolate thief refused. She would walk, or walk halfway and take the subway, or the bus, or the bus and the subway. Where were they? Oh she could walk to DeKalb or even Atlantic, maybe 7th Avenue; after all it was a nice day. Her friend offered a ride to the subway, but she declined that too. She looked lost, her sad eyes

fearful, her hands thrust into her pockets looking for another piece of chocolate, another way to stretch out this late winter afternoon. Her friend couldn't see it, but I, who had followed them from the beginning, was privy to her secret.

She was homeless. There was nowhere to go.

