

The Mujahideen

by Daniel Harris

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Private Dmetri Kabalevsky squatted to relieve himself. The Pashtun tribesman had Dmetri's balls in the sights of his ancient British Lee-Enfield rifle.

The shot was high. The bullet entered Dmetri's mandible at tooth 30. It ricocheted off tooth 14 and exited his mouth. The bullet bounced off the rock and reentered his skull exiting his head above the hippocampus. Eighteen-year-old Svetlana Kabalevsky was now the widow of the poet Dmetri Kabalevsky, soon to be another widow-whore on the Moscow highway.

Two uniformed men parked their black Chevrolet in front of 587 Third Street. Mrs. Melody Boatthwaite was expecting their visit any day since her dream. In the dream her son, Captain Boatthwaite, USMC, was propped against a rock in Afghanistan slowly bleeding out. Captain Stephen Boatthwaite frantically tried to staunch the bleeding, but there were no hands on his arms. Unbeknownst to her, it was the very rock Private Kabalevsky died leaning against relieving himself twenty-two years previously.

When Dr. Boatthwaite arrived home, Melody Boatthwaite was sitting in the tub of the master bathroom with a black plastic bag over her head. Her right hand still gripped the kitchen knife she used to slash her femoral artery.

Svetlana survived ten years of whoredom and then eight years of college and nursing school. When she graduated there were no jobs.

A pimp she knew approached her and made a proposition.

—Svetlana, you are still a beautiful woman, but too old for the trade. I can sell you to a rich American. He will marry you. You will become an American citizen. Your life will be much better. He will pay for everything. Trust me.

She flew to JFK airport. After an exchange of a briefcase, she met her new husband, Brian Kelly, a retired FDNY deputy chief. He was in his mid-sixties and a mostly non-violent alcoholic.

Life with Brian was better than her life in Russia. Most nights he was too drunk for sex. Mostly he left her alone. He liked to show her off on the boardwalk and in restaurants.

As soon as she was licensed in New York State, Svetlana took a job as a surgical nurse at Maimonides Medical Center Cardiac Institute. The surgeons appreciated her perfectionism and her good looks in the operating theater. Her alertness saved many procedures from disaster.

Of all the surgeons, Svetlana liked Dr. Boatthwaite the best. He was kind, professional and not full of himself like the other surgeons. Even though he possessed a rye sense of humor, a certain sorrow hung about him.

A taxi on Surf Avenue in Coney Island struck Brian Kelly. He died three days later, never regaining consciousness. Svetlana ignored his Irish Catholic family's wishes and had the body cremated. She threw the ashes out with the cat litter.

When Dr. Boatthwaite asked Svetlana to accompany him to a Chicago blues festival, she accepted. They both enjoyed the festival and the city. She was excited to be in Chicago. They stayed out late going to ever more dangerous neighborhoods to hear real Chicago blues. They slept in the same bed, but never had sex. Svetlana experienced true affection for the first time since her marriage.

—My husband was a poet. He was killed in Afghanistan, said Svetlana as they lay in bed.

—My only son was killed in Afghanistan, replied the doctor. My wife committed suicide the day she received the news.

Their sorrows enveloped them like a down comforter as they embraced each other.

Droon Malik, an enterprising grandson of an old Mujahideen fighter, began offering tours to Russians and Americans whose family members had been killed in the Afghan wars. He would take them to the very place where their loved ones had perished.

Droon had gained access to old Soviet and American military files thanks to Wikileaks. It was a profitable business. He was an affable young man. Everyone liked him, his clients and the many people who profited from his business.

Thanks to his grandfather's legacy as a legendary Mujahideen fighter against the Soviets, he had contacts with tribal elders, warlords and political hacks who assured he and his clients safe passage to all the theaters of the two wars. Droon happily paid the demanded taxes and bribes. The tips alone made him a very rich man.

Svetlana told Dr. Boatthwaite about the tours. They decided to make the tour. It took six months to arrange visas and tickets.

After two days they arrived in Kabul. Droon greeted every one of his clients like a lost personal friend. He and his assistants treated their clients with the greatest respects as required of a proper Moslem. No request or question went unheeded or unanswered. Droon had never disappointed, nor lost a client to accident or disease

Svetlana and Dr. Boatthwaite had been in the country for a week when they finally reached the stunningly beautiful outpost near where their respective husband and son were killed. After a cold night in rough lodgings, they set out the next day.

The altitude made hiking difficult. The teasing of the local children made the hike easier as the children ran about playing tag and silly games along the pathway. When they arrived at the rock, there were small brass plaques with the names of Private Dmetri Kabalevsky and Captain Stephen Daniel Boatthwaite.

They stood apart, each mulling their own thoughts and emotions.

Svetlana thought of the many debasements she had to suffer because of her husband's death. She could barely remember his touch or smell. Why did she come here, she asked herself. Where would she be now if he were alive? It wasn't even the same Russia.

Dr. Boatthwaite thought of his son sitting with no leg and no hands as his life slowly ebbed away in ever diminishing spurts of blood. He remembered the football game his son caught the pass

that defeated Harvard. There would be no second-generation cardiac surgeon in the family.

They turned to each other in tears and embraced.

The guide suddenly moved away.

—We must leave now, he told the two of them.

—One minute more, please, demanded the doctor.

—We *must* go now. Please hurry. It is not safe, pleaded the guide.

The old Mujahideen squeezed off ten rounds from his Soviet era Kalashnikov, spat violently and disappeared into a tunnel.

The ten penetrations to Dr. Boatthwaite's back became ten penetrations into the chest and belly of Svetlana. A falcon soared above watching a rodent approach the corpses, which appeared to lay in conjugal bliss.

