

How I Left Onandaga County

by Jane Ciabattari

Push back. Push on the arms of the chair. There. I want you all the time comfortable. Does that make you happy? I not should say happy. One should not expect happiness. Contentment? *Da.*

Relax. I give you massage. Neck, below. The French call *la poitrine*. This? This is moisturizing. We have jars of this, the owner brings it back from the Baltic. You would pay much more to get this oil from Revlon. So there are three masques I put. First the antiseptic. Before you know, this one is almost over. Second, honey, which is moisturizing. Then vitamins.

Excuse. the phone rings.

Hello? No.

Asking if we do Brazilian wax for men. Hah!

I am Russian. I come from upstate. My parents were in Moscow. They came to Syracuse New York when I was ten. They spoke only Russian. I started school speaking Russian and some English. Sixteen, I was getting in trouble. Seventeen, I was wanting to run away. There was this older guy, Igor, from Baltic Coast. Near Estonia. He was telling me he was flying from one end of Russia to the other, it took seventeen hours. Ten hours were across Siberia. He was trying to impress me he know the whole of our country from the beginning to the end. He was telling me I was pretty. Good dancer. He was telling me this place. I could make a lot of money. "The Last Lap." Nude dancing.

You look shocked. I was girl. He described a farming place. A tiny town. The farm boys drink beer in the parking lot. To get their nerve up to come inside to see us. They were young, sweet. Not dangerous. I never had to do anything. I

would dance with the pole, come down to my bikini, no top, and then I sit on their laps. They were so sweet, so quick. Nothing extra. I was good girl.

Igor, he was dangerous. When I was lap dancer for awhile, he brought me along on a party. A motel behind a bar in the mountains. Igor knew the owner. We could make chicken and beef on grills, and drink vodka, no one paying attention, just the night sky. It was your night of independence, the July four. What you call it? Yes, that's it, the Fourth of July.

Igor got drunk. He was pulling at me to go with this other one. I didn't like him. He had an evil look. We were loud. Igor and the man were yelling. I was crying, I was saying no. And miracle, they start fighting together and after a while they pass out, and a door opens.

This woman, she call to me in Russian. She heard us. After Igor and his friend pass out on the ground near the barbecue she open the door and I disappear into her room. I listen, I fall asleep, the next morning I listen, the parking lot gets quiet. The woman is nice to me. She is my hero.

She bring me here. You see this room? Ten lounge chairs, all services, facial, waxing, manicure, we hold your hands. When I look around this room with ten women lying back, massaged with our oils, it is like a meadow in the summertime. Good smells. All warm. I give you a good massage, then I soften your face. You feel good, I feel good. It's like heaven.

Your brows? Ten dollars extra. I put, you see. You will not believe this. Look. Eyebrows. A little more color, if you like. Dye your eyelashes? That is twenty-two dollars extra. Anything you want.

I've been here six years.

I don't miss my country. At first I did. Spring, when the plants begin. Then I planted morning glories in a pot, see, out there. And I put a long stick, a stake? Yes, a stake. The plant grows up to the roof, on a string, and I have blooming, until Christmas

So, like I said. *Da*. I have dealt with the men, when I was a lap dancer. The men they need the....manipulations. I have good hands. They want me to see them naked, their power. Here it is only the women. The massage, the facial, the waxing, the Brazilian waxing where you get close in and remove all the hair. I learn it all. And it is ...what is the word, tender? No, gentle. I am the one in charge and I try to be gentle with these things, around the female parts. You understand. If you need anything, ask for me, Alexandra. My parents named me Alexandra, after the czarina. Igor, he called me "tZandee."

I can do without Russia, or those places upstate. The winters. The frozen lakes. The Niagara Falls. Here it is perfect. On Seventy-second Street, I find everything I need. Even nature. There is the Central Park. At lunch time I walk. Even in winter when the trees are bare from leaves, I find it beautiful. There is green grass during the winter here, when it's mild.

Now I am spending New Year's in the most beautiful place in America. Seventy-second Street. This is paradise. The coffeehouses, everything I need, all on one block. Here I am, surrounded by my mother's musical language. Now I talk Russian as good as my grandparents.

So, like I said. *Da*. I have served the men, and the women.

The women are better.

