

Hat Shop Girls

by Marcy Dermansky

The other girls in the hat shop didn't like Betty. She wore lipstick. The owner of the hat shop, Boris, didn't pay hat shop girls. At the end of the week, we were given coupons for food, allowed to pick out a hat, and that was it. You might see us wearing the same dress day after day, but we always wore a different hat. My favorite was a red bowler, a man's hat, which I never dared wear outside my tiny bedroom. My three brothers wanted it too much to take that kind of a risk. They'd poke me with various sharp objects: the serrated edge of the bread knife, the rusted TV antenna, jagged strips of soda pop cans. Life would have been easier for me, but I wouldn't give them that hat. Betty didn't wear hats. Boris paid Betty in lottery tickets. She won things.

I started working in the hat shop when I was ten. My mother and my grandmother and my great grandmother made lace for Boris's hat shop and other hat shops, hat shops all over Devushka. Nobody makes lace anymore. My oldest brother Nickolai blamed the end of lace making on Modernism. He cited changes in literature and art, blaming the circumstances of my sad sorry life on machines and the war, the development of artificial fibers. Nickolai was a porter for the railroads. Books, especially literary criticism, weren't allowed at the train station, but his uniform included a red felt cap and that pacified him plenty. Nickolai would protect me from my brothers, but only after I'd handed over all of my food coupons and cooked the family dinner.

Ten was the age for learning how to make lace in our family. I'm almost a woman now, according to Nickolai, old enough in years, but have the skinny body of a girl. My mother's mother pulled her out of school when she was ten, and my mother assumed the same was right for me. Their lace was famous all over Devushka. Boris still talked about my mother's intricate cross-stitch she did with snow white poodle hair. When the lace market came crashing down, my

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mother sold the dogs. She was a licensed poodle breeder. Poodles made loyal pets, and she trimmed their fur for a soft, warm lace trim; a style that was always popular during the bitter winter months. My brothers wept when she decided to sell the last poodle, Lilianna. Nickolai threw a potted plant against the wall; he smeared the scattered dirt along his cheeks and he pounded his fists against his bony chest until my mother sold me to the hat shop and kept the dog. A week later Lilianna swallowed a deadly dosage of rat poison and my poor mother jumped in front of the six o'clock train.

Boris claimed to have a heart. He sent me back to my brothers. I worked in the hat shop during the day, and at night trudged home through the heavy banks of snow to work for my hateful brothers. They paid Boris thirty tribbles a week; I cooked for them, cleaned for them, did their laundry. They slept all day long on the hard mattress, huddled under blankets, reading, all of them, gaunt cheeks and pent-up anger, waiting for me to come home. I made Kraft macaroni and cheese each night, imported cheap from the Americas, and I didn't care how much they complained. I didn't stop even when our bowel movements turned orange. I liked mac and cheese fine. Mushy and warm. My comfort at the end of the day.

You see, life was hard in Devushka. The sky was non-stop gray. The stone buildings were heavy and gray. The water of the great lakes, lapping at the edge of the city, were murky and gray. The hair on poor people's heads: wiry and gray. Only the very wealthy could afford the cloth for a colorful outfit. Hats were the rage, a burst of color in the dull landscape. Most people couldn't even afford hats. And then there was Betty, bubble gum pink lipstick and cherry red lipstick and mocha brown lipstick on those full, pouty lips. How could I hate Betty? How could I not love Betty? Her hair was jet black and shiny. Her cheeks burned hot red. I'd never seen another woman like Betty. I understood why Boris chose her above all the other hat shop girls.

This story starts when Betty fainted in the hat shop. The ten years I spent working for Boris, lonely and afraid and deprived of basic food nutrients and affection, are not interesting. Ten years of

Boris calling me imp, scrawny chicken, skin and bones, my brothers calling me brat and kiddo and sisterslave. I'd forgotten my name. I'd forgotten my face.

And then Betty fainted. I was handing her wigs as she dressed the store mannequins when she collapsed, slicing my shins with the sharp edge of her peach-colored glass slippers.

"Out," Boris yelled. "Get her out of here."

Boris didn't like to be kind to Betty in front of the other girls. The hat shop girls already loathed and despised Betty because of the lottery tickets. Kindness would incite them to madness. One girl had slipped arsenic in Betty's pea soup when she came to work wearing a blue satin sash around her dress.

"Imp," Boris yelled, pushed me to the ground. "Go."

I slid my arm around Betty's waist, kissed the fabric of her dress, inhaled her perfume, and then helped her to her feet and down to the basement of the hat shop. I hadn't been back to the basement of the hat shop since my mother's death when my brothers decided to rent me. As we walked down the steep, winding steps, the wood creaking beneath our feet, I began to shiver and my legs began to shake. The ends of my hair tingled with the kind of electricity produced by sharp pangs of fear and we leaned against each other, collapsing side by side on Betty's cot. The walls were made of yellowing bricks and sealed tight with heavy mortar. Three missing bricks in the wall made a window; the wall so thick that no light from the outside could pass through. Icicles hung from the ceiling. A gust of wind came through the room and an icicle dropped onto the thin cover on Betty's cot between our legs.

"Feel my forehead," Betty said. "Feel it."

Betty was burning with fever.

"You're sick," I said sadly. Suddenly, I understood the brilliance of her cheeks. "You're ill, terribly ill."

Betty shrugged her shoulders. "It'll pass," she said. "Or I'll die. Are you okay? Would you like some caviar?"

I hugged myself tight with arms, shaking my head. No. I didn't remember much about the room, except the noises at night, furry

bats banging blindly against walls. Betty had a brand new General Electric refrigerator in the corner of the room. Inside it, there was a tall stack of Godiva chocolate bars, two lobsters, and a bottle of cherry nectar. "The lottery has been kind to me," she said.

Betty scooped spoonfuls of pink fish eggs onto a thick piece of bread and handed it to me.

"Nah," I said, looking at the strange food.

The day I cooked my brothers their first box of macaroni and cheese, I kissed the mysterious bar code on the back of the box and made a bargain for my future happiness. Any chance I had in this world depended on eating that warm comforting mac and cheese and waiting. My mother had taught me deprivation but good. I couldn't try the caviar, couldn't gorge myself on chocolate. I wanted to cry and I was going to cry. Boris didn't give food coupons to crying hat shop girls. I never cried. I didn't cry when my mother died; I was so mad about her choosing the dog. I never cried. Tears welled out of my eyes and poured down my face, but I didn't make a sound.

Betty hugged me, her embrace so hard and sudden that I fell onto the floor, banging my head on a tin water bucket at the foot of the bed.

"Oh no," said Betty.

I saw hats. Red hats, blue hats, an emerald green fedora.

"Oh no," said Betty.

She sat down on the floor, putting my head in her lap. I think I moaned. She mopped up the blood with a silk robe that hung over the bed. "I'm so sorry," Betty said, pressing the robe against the top of my head to stop the bleeding. She kissed my forehead. "Do you know you're the first hat shop girl Boris sent down here who hasn't gobbled the whole jar? You smile at me in the hat shop. You like me. I've noticed you. You. We're going to take care of each other."

Three-cornered hats circle round my head, swooping down fast and then soaring high.

I woke to the sounds of the bats.

"Mama," I whimpered. "Mama, I want to go home."

Betty was packing. In the flickering light of a small votive candle, I saw her wrapping jewelry into gray linens and placing the bundles into a gleaming silver trunk. The mattress I lay on was wet and sticky. Icicles wrapped round my blood-crusting hair.

Betty rushed to my side when she saw that I was awake.

"I thought I killed you," she said. She kissed me on my lips, and I sneezed. Betty reached under the bed, pulling out a heavy mink coat, which she draped round my shoulders.

"Baby," she said. "We're going to drink some cherry juice, eat the lobsters, and then we're leaving."

"Leaving?" I said. The fur coat was so soft. I rubbed my chin against my shoulder, felt my eyes closing again, until another bat crashed into Betty's refrigerator and then hit the floor. "Can we leave?"

Betty smiled. She leaned so close she was almost kissing me again. She didn't actually say something out loud, but her lips moved. "I have an entire book of lottery tickets," she mouthed.

I nodded. In Devushka, there was no such thing as a losing lottery ticket. Only the wealthy could afford them. The wealthy ran the lottery, they picked the prizes, and they distributed the tickets amongst themselves. I'd heard rumors of the ultimate grand drawing in the hat shop. I knew that many of the hat shop girls were having voluntary sex with Boris just to get a lottery ticket. They were stupid, all of them. Boris gave lottery tickets only to Betty. "I found a razor in the mattress," Betty said, steadily emptying her closet, folding colorful clothes. "Another hat shop girl was in here. They do that. Try to kill me. Search for lottery tickets. Steal my make-up. You almost lost a finger."

Around my pinkie, Betty had tied a strip of scratchy gray cloth. It was steeped in blood, a gorgeous red. I hadn't noticed any pain from my hand because of my aching head.

"Such a beautiful color," I said. I was mesmerized by the sheet. I didn't know there was so much red in me, signs of life as bright and exciting as Betty's lips.

"We have to go," Betty said. "Now. Before the light comes up. So drink." Betty held the jar of cherry nectar to my lips and I swallowed, the flowing juice pouring down my throat and spilling down my lips, dripping down my chin. I belonged to Betty, and though I would not understand this until much later, the next day, until the end of this story, Betty belonged to me.

Betty wasn't good at running away.

We stood in the middle of the alley behind the hat shop, completely and entirely defeated by her trunk. It was too much for one person to carry alone, and with my injured hand, throbbing from the weight of it, we were only able to manage a few feeble steps.

"Yes. I got attached to my things," Betty said. "These are the kind of things most girls in Devushka never dream of having. Precious objects. It would take me a month in a brothel to buy one of those sweaters." The sweaters Betty spoke of were made of chenille and accentuated her ample bosom.

Betty extracted two cigarettes from her bra and handed one to me. I'd bought cigarettes with my food coupons but I always made sure to give these to Nickolai to guarantee his kindness.

"For me?" I said to Betty.

Betty shook her head. "Idiot," she said.

And then it started to snow, snowflakes swirling, falling hard and furious in our faces, coating our skin. The snow doused the flame of Betty's matches before she could light our cigarettes. I stared at my cigarette with longing and then I started to cry again, the second time after a ten year drought, tears streaming from my eyes, freezing on to my cheeks. Betty either did not notice or ignored my state of distress

"All right. Fuck my things. We are going to die if we don't move fast. We'll freeze in the snow, and Boris will find us frozen and he'll laugh. Find himself another hat shop girl. He'll buy her black hair dye. Oh, will he laugh. So we leave the trunk. Come, Baby."

Betty put the wet cigarettes back in her bra, hooked her arm around my shoulder, and we were walking, unencumbered by possessions or a past I still can't remember; we were free, cleansed by the fresh, gray snow. I looked back over my shoulder, saying a silent good-bye to Betty's shiny silver trunk, to her lipsticks and chocolate bars and silk scarves, to the lobsters I would never eat, and the cherry juice that dripped down my face that I would never, ever get to swallow.

I was staring at her trunk, Betty pulling my arm, when there, at the end of the alley, illuminated by his red felt beret, I saw my brother Nickolai. He was on the way to work at the train station.

"You!" Nickolai yelled. He strode across the alley, pulling a luggage rack at his side. He shook me. "We didn't eat last night, little sister. If you were smart you won't go home at all. They broke into your room and stole your hats, all of them, Sergei's got the bowler."

"Oh," I said. My bowler hat. Red and beautiful.

"She's not going home," Betty said.

"Where did you get that coat?" Nickolai tugged at a sleeve of the mink. "You're too skinny for a lover, kiddo."

Betty calmly handed Nickolai a cigarette. He still hadn't noticed her. Or the trunk. Or that our thin shoes were getting wetter and wetter as we stood there getting yelled at. It took Nickolai longer to drink in reality than most people. He was as nutrient deprived as I. He never talked to women. He was plain scared of them. He dropped his precious cigarette in the snow. And then it was gone, covered by the heavy snowfall.

"You work at the train station?" Betty said.

Nickolai nodded.

"And that device," Betty pointed to the piece of equipment at his side. "Has wheels? For transporting luggage?"

Nickolai stood dumb, his arms hanging limply by his sides.

"Is he stupid of what?" Betty said.

She put another cigarette directly into Nickolai's lips, and this time he lit it with the Zippo lighter he always kept in his front pocket, part of his uniform. Porters often had to light cigarettes for rich patrons in inclement weather that was frequent in cold, gray Devushka.

"Better," Betty said.

Two more cigarettes came out of her bra. Soon we were all smoking.

Nickolai loaded Betty's trunk onto his luggage rack, and then we were moving again, trudging through the snow, to the train station. My heart beating fast imagining the train that Nickolai would put us on. Nickolai had told me once about the coach cars, the hot coffee that got served to travelers in first class.

"I'll lose my job," Nickolai whispered to me, but he walked on, pushing the creaking luggage cart, heavy with Betty's silver trunk, wiping the snow from his face and sneaking sidewise glances at Betty. "Boris will whip you when you get back. He might kill you. Is she an heiress? A movie star? Where are you going?"

Betty reached back into her bra.

"I'm a hat shop girl," she said. "Just like your sister. You need to be quiet and move quickly and help us get out of Devushka. We'll need two tickets and a private berth."

I nodded my head fervently while I coughed. Betty laughed at me, patted my head with affection. She was going to get us coffee.

She flashed a single lottery ticket in front of Nickolai's face, and then slid this ticket beneath his red beret.

"Huh?" Nickolai said.

"There are more," Betty said. "When we get to the train station I'll give you another."

"No," I said, but it came out as another cough, a mangled note. It felt so good, this coughing. I was hacking out all that was dead in me. Stupid brother. Who protected me only when it suited his purposes. Who let Sergei steal my bowler hat. "No. Never. Nickolai

is my brother and he'll help us for free. You will. And I'll see to it that you are poisoned if you don't. You better believe I will."

"Huh?" Nickolai said.

Betty grinned. Her cheeks had turned purple. We walked quickly, quickly. The cart lost a wheel, but we didn't lose speed. Nickolai moved us forward, spiriting us to our freedom. Poison was easy to purchase in Devushka, cheaper than food and sold on every corner. Ever since the Modernist era took hold, there were no restaurants in Devushka. The chefs of Devushka, in protest of their long hours and low wages, poisoned a Friday special of goulash and thousands of citizens died. Those that survived were blinded.

"Come on, brat," he said. "Aren't I helping? Maybe I'll come with you. You never know when you'll need a man around." Nickolai stopped at the corner and lifted the rickety cart from the sidewalk to the street. We were getting close. I could see the thick smoke coming from the trains in the station, a dense black cloud floating menacingly overhead.

How did I get there, to the train station that I'd only seen once before when my mother took me with her to sell the poodles. I'd never stood up to any of my brothers before. My hands were warm, covered by Betty's woolen mittens, and sunk deep into fur-lined pockets of Betty's mink. I loved her fur coat. I could taste sweet cherry juice in my mouth, beneath the smoky taste of wet cigarette. All this good fortune because of Betty fainting. Because I refused to eat caviar. Because my brother appeared like magic in the alley. I smiled at Nickolai. My big brother. He'd gotten us to the train station. There was no reason not to love him. I loved Boris because he gave me Betty. Wherever we went, Nickolai could come and carry our bags.

Betty didn't feel the same way.

"Harumph," she said. "I'd rather give you lottery tickets before I let you come with us." I took my mittened hand from the mink pocket and squeezed Betty's arm. "I'd rather die than take a man with me. I will not have one more sad, pathetic man in love with me. I will die. I'm already dead."

"Huh?" Nickolai said.

Suddenly it was impossible to hear anything. The wound in my head began to tingle, the wet bandage on my hand began to bleed anew, and the ground beneath my feet shook, the thick coat of gray snow shimmering. I put my hands over my ears. We had made it to the crumbling curb in front of the train station. In the grand alabaster archway, a one-armed man banged on an immense brass gong. He wore a velvet jester's hat--the kind we sold at the hat shop--that was red and yellow and blue with bells at the ends of each flopping crown. That had been part of my job, gluing loose bells from the factory back onto the jester hats. They never stayed on long.

"This is highly unusual," Nickolai said.

He straightened his hat as we walked into the station, lagging behind us as porters are instructed to do.

Single file, we walked past the jester into the train station. The four foot high, gold-plated fireplace at the far end of the lobby was filled with trash. Citizens sat on the tiled floor in clustered circles, hands over small newspaper fires. The station smelt of singed hair. After every beat of the brass gong, pieces of plaster fell from the ceiling.

Betty removed a small compact from her bra and applied a fresh coat of cherry red lipstick to her full, delicious lips. Her hands, however, were shaking, and she applied lipstick to the tip of her nose and the bottom of her chin. A large chip of plaster bounced off her silver trunk, denting the shining surface.

"Oh no," I said. "No."

Always there was loss. I lived in a world filled with loss. I was sure to lose my hearing from the brass gong before the sun rose. Wasn't I beaming with happiness moments ago? You couldn't trust anything to stay good for long. I wasn't surprised to see Boris across the black and white tiled floor sitting at a table by the juice stand drinking a large orange juice. The juice looked so good, so orange. With every sip, his head turned to the left, to the right, back to the left. As if he was looking for someone. A new girl. I'd heard rumors

that he caught some of his hat shop girls here in the train station. He would buy them orange juice, offer them some food coupons and a place to sleep.

"It must be the lottery," Nickolai said. "Sipsy always bangs the gong whenever there's a big winner, a color TV or a can of oysters, but it's never like this. This must be a big one. Really big. Look." Nickolai pointed. The floor popped open from the center of the room, and a dozen soldiers emerged, rifles pointed high, wearing tall gray hats purchased at Boris's hat shop. They marched directly into the new Starbucks. Soldiers drank coffee for free in Devushka. Their heavy warm hats were free too. So many times my fingers bled as I stitched thermal stuffing beneath the gray felt. "There's the mayor," Nickolai said. "There's Devushka's network camera man."

These men also went into the Starbucks. "Sound proof" read the sign on the stained glass windows. I'd read in the newspapers that they piped in music, played CDs smuggled from the Americas. It was deafening inside the train station. My ears had already adjusted to the vibrations of the gong and was honed in on other sounds: the clanging hiss of steam engines, citizens moaning as their newspaper fires burned out, beggars singing old Bette Midler songs, an electronic voice calling out the train schedule-- delayed, canceled, sold out, the words hanging in the air.

Betty bit her lips. She had lipstick on her teeth and her nose and chin. She kissed Nickolai on the neck. I could see him tremble. She left an imprint of her red mouth on his neck. I reached my mittened fingers out to touch the spot. "Go. Get us some tickets. Hurry."

There were no tickets to get. The train conductor had just said so, but Nickolai ran to take his place in the long, winding line. I watched as Boris ordered another juice, this one pink, pink grapefruit juice. I licked my lips. I shivered. Whatever happened next, I knew that it was bad for us to be in the same room as Boris. He was looking for us. He was looking for Betty.

Betty shook me with her shaking hands. "I've won it," she whispered. She kissed my ear, and, just like Nickolai, I trembled.

Warm. "It's me. I have the winning ticket. Thirty-two million tribbles."

Boris, I thought. The acid in the juice would turn him mean. Meaner. He was already mean. He bought me from my mother for only 60 tribbles, the amount you'd pay for a used toaster. We should have been running. There was Boris, drinking delicious juice, looking for us. But for the last ten years, I'd eaten nothing but Kraft macaroni and cheese. I was missing essential vitamins, proteins, fibers, everything. The teeth in the back of my mouth were loose and my reflexes were slow. *Boris*, I thought.

Betty beamed at me.

"We won," she said.

"How do you know?" I said.

"Let's get out of sight." Betty took my hand and began dragging me to the bathroom, the bathroom that was directly past the juice stand. "Do you see the banner hanging from the ceiling. It's my number. Mine. I have them all memorized. Boris will wish I was dead when he finds out."

"Betty," I said as she dragged me through the station. My eyes traveled fast across the room for help. Nickolai was still on line to buy tickets, arguing with the flute player standing behind him.

"Betty."

"Hurry," Betty said. We'd left the dented silver trunk in the doorway. Betty was almost skipping across the floor. "We'll get a better one. We'll fill it with all the colors tribbles can buy."

"Betty," I said. We were getting close to the fresh juice stand, so close that I could see the pulp caught in Boris's teeth.

"Boris," I said. But nothing came out. "There's Boris."

"Huh?" Betty said.

"You hussy," Boris screamed. "I want that ticket. I want that ticket. I want it." He knocked over his table and leapt over the railing that separated the juice stand from the main floor of the station. He tripped over a one-legged blind woman selling pencils and kept running. Betty ran, too, a firm hold on my arm so that I was flying across the station, trailing behind like a ragged paper

kite. Into the women's bathroom we went, flying into a stall and locking the door.

"Up," Betty said. "On the toilet."

We both stood on the toilet, Betty locking the door, and Boris slammed into the bathroom right behind us. "Hussy." Bang Bang. "Bitch." Bang pound. "Whore." Bang kick. "You're the most expensive hat shop girl ever." Kick bang. "You weren't worth it. I'll get that ticket."

I didn't know what to do. Betty was tracing her lips with that cherry red lipstick, counting tribbles feverishly. I pounded back on the bathroom stall. "Monster." Pound bang. Pain shot through me. I'd forgotten about the sliced finger. I could feel blood oozing out of the bandage, soaking the mitten. But I could feel myself waking up, and I was angry, angry like I'd never been before. "Child abuser." Hit bang. "Slave owner." I pounded the door with my good hand. "Rapist." Betty watched me with wide eyes.

"Ugly, worthless urchin."

Boris yelled back, kicking the door repeatedly, I could see the hinges bend inward. I kicked the door back, falling off the toilet.

"Evil monster. Evil monster. Evil monster."

When the door flew off the frame, knocking Betty's lipstick out of her hands, I pounced before Boris had a chance. My head landed squarely in his stomach, and he tumbled backwards on to the bathroom floor, and I was biting and punching with all the strength I had. Boris wouldn't get close to Betty ever again. He couldn't detach me from his belly. He couldn't stand up.

"I want that lottery ticket," he cried to Betty as she ran out of the bathroom. "I want that ticket. It's mine. Who is this girl? Ow. Come back here. Damn it. Ow. Betty. Get her off me. Betty."

I didn't even see Betty go. All I could see was the gray weave of Boris's overcoat. Tears streamed down my face making it only slightly harder to bite Boris. I'd bitten the buttons off his coat, my teeth were through his sweater, hitting skin. I didn't feel his punches. Betty was gone. All I would have left of her would be that one lipstick that had rolled to the corner of the bathroom floor. I let

go with my injured to hand to reach for the lipstick and Boris threw me against the mirrors above the sinks. I could hear the glass shatter. I lay stretched across three cracked porcelain sinks when a dozen police officers in the gray hats and the one-legged blind woman rushed into the bathroom.

"That's him," the blind woman cried. "I can smell the orange juice."

"That's him." Betty came crashing into the bathroom behind them. "He tried to rob me. I have the winning lottery ticket. It's here in my bosom."

The police officers surrounding Boris turned to inspect Betty's bosom, but one office managed to cuff him, and then Nickolai burst into the bathroom as well.

"No porters in the women's bathroom," a police officer said. He took a set of cuffs from his pocket and cuffed Nickolai. Another officer took out a rope and tied a knot around Nickolai's leg, attaching him to Boris.

"But, I got tickets," Nickolai said quietly. "For us." He looked at Betty. "You, me, and her, my sister, the girl in the sink."

No one, not even Nickolai remembered my name.

"Come here, Baby," Betty said. In front of the police officers and the one legged blind woman and Nickolai and Boris, Betty lifted me up from the sink. Her black hair shone. Her cheeks blazed pink. "You saved my life. We won the lottery. Nothing is ever going to be the same."

Betty picked me up. She removed the shards of glass from my hair, and carried me past the crowd through the bathroom. After we passed through the door and into the train station. Sipsy the gong player resumed his inscrutable beat. Devushka's camera man snapped our picture. The mayor rushed to our side, leading us to a plush, purple velvet couch.

"Congratulations," he said, holding out a bouquet of pink and purple tulips and two steaming hot yellow mugs.

"Coffee," I said before I passed out.

Betty cradled me in her arms like an infant.

