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Nina Romano

A Kiss by the Greenhouse

The evening before Thanksgiving the year I turned sixteen, I sat in my leotard to stretch my legs in front of the fireplace. My mind bustled with images of Alexei Ivanovich Tomeshevsky, whom I'd been in love with since age six.

Mother spoke on the telephone with Yelena Tomeshevskaya, my ballet teacher. Her son Alexei, about to become engaged to Lydia Davidova staggered me. I made king monkey grimaces until Mother covered the mouthpiece and said in an exasperated tone, "Ninotchka, what do you want?"

"To speak to you." What I really wanted was news of the impending marriage. If true, I wanted to slit my wrists in a bath of tepid water like the ancient Romans my history teacher told me about. Suicide—the only answer to such a tragedy. Could Alexei actually marry that flighty, nasal woman, who couldn't walk her way across a ballroom floor? What I wanted was to confess my love once before I did myself in.

I thought of the times Mother said, why is everything so earth-shatteringly urgent when one is sixteen? Mothers don't understand. Were they ever young? Have feelings before old age? Mother was thirty-five. She could be more modern; after all, it was 1950, not the Dark Ages.

She sat in an old-fashioned telephone table made of palisander from Eastern Europe. The brown, frumpy telephone seat nestled in the curlicue base of the circular staircase, in a house painted gray and white, was a klunker and didn't match our décor. I wanted to junk it, along with the icons, samovars and lacquered boxes from the old country. I mean, we lived in Garden City, New York, for Heaven's sake, not Siberia.

I stood, one hand on my narrow hip while the other drummed her telephone book. My tactic worked. She hung up.

"What?"

"Did you finish my white crepe dress? It's yards big."

"For this I ended my conversation with Yelena? Keep losing weight. It's sewn and in your closet. Your legs are spindles!"

"Is Alexei going to marry Lydia?"

"Don't entertain thoughts of him—he's reserved all the dances on her card. For life." She patted my cheek.

My knees collapsed, and I wanted to vomit all over the gray carpeting.

"You see what I mean about not eating? You can't even stand."

I took the stairs two at a time, feeling like the gray walls. On my canopied bed I cried myself to sleep with dreams of dancing at Garden City High's Senior Ball, Alexei in his West Point uniform. I awoke as he was about to kiss me under the enormous ring set up in the West Point gymnasium for their Ring Hop. This made no sense, since seconds before I'd been in my school gym, but switches like these happen in dreams. My

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school dance was three weeks away, right before Christmas when he'd be getting engaged.

Mother called me to make the turkey stuffing. As if I cared to ever see food again. What difference does it make to an almost corpse if she eats or doesn't?

I envisioned my wake. Thousands crying. I waved goodbye as Alexei closed my casket. At least I'd never have to see Lydia with my man for the rest of our Orthodox lives.

Alexei would never divorce. I couldn't see myself as *the other woman*. After all, I was a virgin who'd only dreamed of kisses. I needed a strategy, like Hannibal crossing the Alps. If only I could see Alexei, show him the womanly me blossoming. I'd give Lydia competition—race her right out of his thoughts and down the aisle. I'd been a toad the last time we met. In my dresser mirror where pink satin toe shoes hung by ribbons from the corner, I practiced saying, "I love you, Alexei." The last time he saw me I had braces and weighed twenty pounds of baby fat heavier. I wore glasses, but now sported snazzy new corneal contacts that made my eyes a lighter blue. "Alexei, my love!"

I slid down the banister, arms thrust sideward like wings. If I could fly to West Point to walk down Lover's Lane just once, I'd die a happy woman. Why wait? He was home for Thanksgiving weekend. I needed an immediate plan. I ambled into the yellow kitchen—the only room not gray—my noggin throbbing with a scheme.

"Mother, tomorrow after lunch, we've been invited to Madame Yelena's for tea. None of the girls from ballet can go. Would you mind dropping me off?"

Where had the words come from and the boldness to speak them? Was I nuts-o?

"Odd. She didn't mention it," Mother said.

"I've never seen Madame's garden greenhouse." I changed voices and accents, trying to sound Crimean, if not Russian, but it came out more like Dracula. "And her photographs from Mother Russia." I began to mince onions and said in dulcet tones, "Please, it means so much." Tears filled my eyes.

Mother touched my shoulder. "This has nothing to do with Alexei, right? I'll call Yelena. We can talk about the recital."

"Oh, that's Okay. I'll call straight away to ask Madame about the Christmas recital." A mind reader, picking thoughts of Alexei out of the kitchen steam!

I tossed the paring knife into the sink by the window. Long Island winter drizzle turned into large snowflakes. "Early snow. So magical."

I called Didi Frank, my best girlfriend. "How are you this evening, Madame?"

"Have you gone flippy, Ninotchka?" Didi answered.

"I'm calling to confirm the visit tomorrow to see the greenhouse. Yes,

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we're having a lunch with all the trimmings too." I twirled the phone cord, shifting weight from one foot to another so I wouldn't have to sit in that abominable seat. Over my shoulder I saw Mother busy stuffing that fat bird. "Mother'll drop me off."

Mother's inattention—a gross miscalculation. She'd been listening, and said, "No I won't," in her schoolteacher voice. "I'll stay for Ivan's delicious coffee and bring Madeira."

"Oh, God, Didi," I whispered, "did you hear? Play along. I owe you." In a shrill voice, I said, "Mother'll stay for coffee, Madame. Happy Thanksgiving." In the same breath, I said, "Mother, may I call Didi about homework?"

"I'll be in the basement."

I heard Didi say, "Now what?"

"I'm in borscht up to my neck—Alexei's getting engaged to ancient Lydia—at least twenty-one—scads of acne—skillions of defects—is he blind-o? Old bat-legs wears an outsized bra—triple D, has no waist—I want to die—he's home for Thanksgiving—I've got to see him—can't believe this—mother thinks I've been invited—now she's taking me to Madame's, staying for coffee—could you die twice?"

Mother closed the basement door. "I'm up, darling, still on the phone? Come mix the pumpkin pie."

"Page 179? Thanks a bunch, Didi."

The wise-ass voice on the other end said, "What drama. Wish I could be there for the next episode—this beats mom's radio serial, *Our Gal Sunday*."

Later Didi and I sat on her patchwork comforter as she painted her toenails fuchsia. Her book report on *Ethan Frome* would do in a pinch, but no great shakes.

I talked about my transgression. "What'll I do when we go to Madame's?"

"Wing it," she said, fanning her toes with *Seventeen Magazine*.

"I've never lied to Mother. She'll never trust me again my whole life."

"Not to worry. It's almost over anyway. Think of it this way—you'll kill yourself if Alexei's out with Lydia tomorrow."

"Oh, my, I never thought—"

"We'll work it out," Didi said.

We devised a plan. Early evening of the next day, somewhere near to Great Neck (a forty minute car ride from home), I'd really call Madame Yelena, and tell her we went to visit friends but got lost; forgot their phone number which was unlisted, and since we were in the neighborhood, decided to visit her.

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Only Didi could outline such a simple operation. And only a half-wit like myself would go along.

Purple pouches appeared under my eyes from an awful night of interrupted sleep. I napped before Thanksgiving lunch till my father came home from Connecticut. The food was wonderful, except the stuffing overloaded with onions—which gave me heartburn.

While I helped Mother clean up, father said, “No need, darling, I’ll drive you to Yelena’s. It’ll give me a chance to reminisce with Ivan. Haven’t seen him since he retired from Fordham.”

Father, eons older than Mother, a CPA and tax lawyer, had been a full professor at Fordham where Alexei’s father Ivan had taught Advanced Russian Language.

The situation compounded itself like a fraction. My fear heightened because there wasn’t time to phone Didi. I dashed upstairs in the white crepe dress. The princess line showed my tiny waist and the cut enhanced my small ballerina chest. I swooped my blonde shoulder-length hair into a French knot. Too sophisticated, so I let it drop and combed it into a page-boy. I put on pink lipstick. What if he kissed me? Why would he? Even if he did, it would be a courteous cheek buss, like kissing air. I outlined my lips with a brush as for a theater recital, pursing provocatively, blotting with a Kleenex.

When we approached the Tomeshevsky house, Father pulled into a diner so I could make an urgent trip to the ladies’ room. I called Madame. A waitress, on her break smoked and blew out rings. Nauseating. Madame’s phone rang. My palms sweated. She answered and I gave my best performance, and, in her kind, scratchy voice, said she’d be delighted. In ten minutes we’d be there. My jellied knees jiggled.

Madame greeted us and Professor Ivan took our snowy coats and hung them in the hall closet. After the salutations, the men excused themselves and went into the study. The somber Tudor house had small lamps lit here and there, giving it an otherworldly appearance. A living room table, covered with long brocade cloth, sat next to a baby grand piano, the shorter baton held up the lid; a nearby credenza hosted dozens of photographs in gilded frames, one with a tiny sepia snapshot of a peasant woman wearing a *babushka*. The bent photograph showed white through the glossy coat. “My mother,” Madame said. “Alexei has her eyes, you agree?”

“Definitely,” I said. “By the way, how is he?”

My worst fear. I’d forgotten during my rushed call to inquire if Alexei was home.

“He accompanied Lydia home. A lovely girl, don’t you agree?” Madame asked.

I averted my eyes. “Just Lovely.”

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Mother and I sat on a worn velvet settee. Madame sat on a Queen Anne chair of the same material, situated on the other side of an onyx coffee table. The velvet furniture, once vivid forest green, had now faded to moss. Heavy silk damask curtains, partially drawn over opaque French windows, gave the impression the drawing room belonged to a past century. I envisioned the cobwebbed hall of *Great Expectations*.

Madame opened the Madeira and poured a tiny glass for Mother and myself. Mother raised her eyebrows. That didn't stop me. Somehow I knew I'd need it to bolster me if the truth came about. Pretending not to notice Mother's arched eyebrows, I sipped. I'd never drunk spirits before, but Madame assured me it wasn't strong. Again, I tasted its sweetness and sniffed the pleasant bouquet. My cheeks grew hot. Mother asked me to play *Für Elise* for Madame, and I complied willingly. My hands flew over the keys, and the ladies became engrossed in conversation. My fingers didn't stop after concluding the piece, but positioned themselves into several transitional chords until I started playing *The Third Man Theme*.

Professor Ivan greeted someone at the door. Alexei's voice reached me before I saw him. My hands froze above the keys.

"Please don't stop on my account," Alexei said, his voice deep and resonant.

But I'd already stood and walked back to the settee. If I reversed my steps, I'd falter—splat, a charming spectacle on the floor. By some miracle my glass was filled with Madeira. I drank in one gulp, grateful not to have plopped down on the divan as the tall, uniformed figure of Alexei bent to kiss his mother's cheeks. He extended his hand to my mother and nodded to me, but I sensed confusion in his eyes as they locked on mine an instant longer than they should have.

My feet were in the third ballet position and my hands semi-circled in front of me, poised for a demi-plié, but instead I sat down next to Mother, oblivious to Alexei's observation of me.

"Where are the men, Alexei? Won't they join us?" Madame asked.

"They'd rather smoke in the anteroom, and Father's going to make Turkish coffee." He glanced at me. "Don't drink it, Ninotchka. It'll make your blond hair turn black and uncurl."

He knew my name without having been told. I was sure he never knew it, and if he did it was in association with a fat, four-eyed, iron-mouthed monstrosity. Not me. He pronounced my name softly, knowingly.

"Here, Ninotchka," he said, getting himself a glass and pouring me a thimbleful of dark liquid fire, "far better than Father's coffee." He clinked glasses with me. Only me. Not his mother, or mine.

I sensed he didn't want to look away, but was forced to by a sense of guilt—wanting to linger gazing on my mouth, my breasts—he was taken by me like he'd never really seen me before. Alexei made a slight bow. If I were standing, my knees would've given way, and I'd be sprawled on Madame's faded Persian carpet. I smiled instead, crossing my legs, aware

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of his intense gaze as I adjusted my skirt, and ran a hand over the pearls at my neck, a gift for my last birthday, making me look mature.

I pinched the palm of my hand to be sure I was really in the company of my true love and future mother-in-law.

The wood resins hissed in the fireplace and I looked towards the hearth, but above the fire in the smoke were no dreamy visions of a conjured up Alexei. Of course not. He was seated opposite me. His bent head showed his blonde crew cut and fine shape, offsetting his Slavic good looks. Our eyes met again, he turned away, toying with a *matryoshka* doll. He opened each of the nesting dolls as though he deliberately wanted me to look at his hands. Petting. Stroking. Fifteen in all. I counted, and re-counted. He seemed ashamed to stare at me openly and accept my reckless longing. His desire electrified the air surrounding me. This repulsed yet excited me. Love?

The two fathers came into the room. Professor Ivan set a tray of coffee and cups on a palisander sideboard. The heavy furniture reminded me of something, but what? It had an old-world elegance and charm. The coffee was served to everyone but me. The men, including Alexei, discussed the iron curtain, the cold war. I listened to Alexei say if it came to a war, he'd be thrilled to clean the Moscow streets using the Commies as brooms.

Coffee time over, Madame said to Mother, "Where exactly do your friends live?"

"What friends, Yelena?" Mother smoothed her skirt.

"The ones you were to visit before you got lost and Ninotchka called."

Everyone stopped talking. A shroud blanketed the room and hushed it to silence. Mother glared at me, a lioness ready to pounce, but not to protect her cub, rather to chew her up and spit her out. I crossed my fingers in the folds of my dress, wondered if Persian rugs could fly, when a sort of eeky little noise caught in my throat.

Mother read too many novels. Her watch intensified and she wasn't about to let me off the hook.

"Ninotchka?" she said, like her molars were glued.

"The Franks," I shouted, then lowered my voice, "Edith ... and Wharton."

"Their first names combine to make a famous authoress," my Father offered, apparently affected by the same stuck-teeth syndrome as Mother. What had Professor Ivan put in their coffee?

"A bizarre coincidence," I said and cleared my throat, marking time for the next assault. My mind darted and scurried—a mouse seeking refuge from a cat.

Alexei looked baffled, but then Professor Ivan asked permission to smoke. His politeness broke the tension, and again I felt transported by the Madeira. Ah! to be taken into consideration. This must've been what it was like at the Romanov Winter Palace before the Revolution of 1917. Alexei's father twirled his moustache, and I imagined Father doing the

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same. Ludicrous, and the giggle inside my head, by some strangeness, filled the room.

“The greenhouse,” I said, as if it were a complete sentence. Why was everyone staring at me, waiting for something else? Had I only thought it, not spoken aloud the fact that I’d like to see the greenhouse?

“The greenhouse, of course, I’d be delighted to show it to you,” my hero said.

Alexei and I walked through the kitchen to the back door, which opened onto the garden. It had been snowing steadily since we left home. The small flakes intended to stick. Alexei held the door for me.

“Don’t you want your coat?” He pulled his wool cape off a hook by the door and threw it over his broad shoulders.

Why would I need a wrap when I felt so warm? “It’s in the vestibule. Let’s make a dash for it.”

We didn’t run, but rather, glided on slippery flagstones, leaving our footprints in the snow as we advanced toward the greenhouse. I lost my footing and started to slip. Alexei reached to steady me. I turned to face him. In high-heeled shoes, I only reached his shoulder. We stood like that a moment, until he pulled off his cape and placed it round my shoulders. We skated out further into the snowy night. Soft lights flickered from the kitchen window, flooding the slate pathway. Slick was the freshly fallen snow, all the way to the greenhouse. Alexei made small talk, but I couldn’t answer. Halfway along the path, my heel caught between the stones. Again I lost my balance, only to be caught up in Alexei’s strong arms. His nearness overpowered me.

“Chantilly,” he said.

How did he know?

My face rested upon his shoulder. One arm encircled me. His free hand came up under my chin, lifting my face closer to his. Then he grasped my waist with both hands, slip-locking them around me. I knew he’d kiss me. I inhaled cold air, afraid I’d hiccup, yet wanting to savor the moment forever. His pungent after-shave mingled with residue smoke had permeated his uniform collar. I leaned my body closer in a half turn—my face against his chest. I tilted my head backwards and closed my eyes. With the snow pelting my face, our lips touched gently. We felt each other’s warm breath in the frosted air. Alexei parted my lips with his bottom lip. Madiera. I felt my cheeks burn and knees fold, wanting his mouth on mine. His pulled me tighter into his embrace.

Alexei desired me. The hunger in his kiss wanted more—something I hadn’t bargained for—not the kiss of myriad imaginings. My practiced, loving words vanished unspoken like smoke above a fire, but somehow I knew his kiss would be on my lips forever. Then my hand pulled the back of his neck toward me and the pressure on our lips increased till I was frightened by his probing tongue. I pushed him gently, but the suction of his violent, insistent mouth made me push harder. Writhing out of his grasp, I twisted, shoved, and gasped for breath. In a voice not mine at all, I said, “You’re no gentleman.”

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Grinning at me, he took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped lipstick off his lips and answered, "If you were eighteen, I'd prove how right you are."

Mother stepped into the car on the passenger side, slammed the door, and said without prelude, "Ninotchka, I am rankled."

I had never heard that word before, but by her pitch, I knew she was ticked-off. Under normal circumstances, I would have had the urge to pee, but the effect of the Madeira and the taste of Alexei's lips still on mine, gave me a false bravura—the courage to speak.

"Mother, you have every right to be angry. I have never lied to you before. What I did was—"

She lowered the radio.

"Despicable." Mother sniffled. She snapped open her purse and took out a handkerchief.

Was it due to the embarrassment, or the fact I'd betrayed her trust? Maybe both.

Father patted Mother's hand. "Stepping into an adult world isn't easy, young lady, and dishonesty isn't the way. The punishment for having jettisoned your mother's magnificent confidence is to forego the dance recital and the Winter Ball." His tone was even. Unruffled. It belied the roiling emotion behind his words. In his gentle manner, he condemned me to a fate more grotesque than the guillotine. At first, I didn't comprehend the gravity of the situation because I was figuring out the meaning of *jettisoned* which I associated with boating.

"How will you redress our relationship?" Mother asked.

Redress? Make up? The dance recital! The Winter Ball!

"I'm waiting for an answer," Mother said.

Shame scalded my face. Remorse took on physical weight, leaning on my conscience. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Mother turned, and asked me a provocative question: "Was it worth jeopardizing my faith in you?"

"A thousand times no! I'm unworthy of your love. But please don't stop believing in me." She stroked my cheek and sighed. I don't remember the rest of the drive home, except being cuddled in her fur in the back seat and hearing airy strains of *The Swedish Symphony*. .

In our driveway, I remembered not seeing the greenhouse. Then a scene played in my mind: I'd stood on tiptoes for his kiss; my fingers explored his chest in an upward climb till they gripped his neck and drew him close.

Safe at home in my flannel nightgown—with angels and rosebuds—I slipped to my knees, and said the only prayer I knew in Russian to my guardian angel. It was my cherub's wings that kept me from falling on my

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keister in the garden—the self-same angel who protected me from Alexei’s further advances. I prayed for hurting Mother, and because I never wanted to ever feel that much out of control, the way I did with Alexei. Ever. Or at least until I fully understood its significance.

When Alexei became engaged to Lydia a month later, I realized desire doesn’t always mean love, but I’d been right about the kiss. It stayed on my lips for days. I applied lip balm every day for a week, but never scrubbed it off. The pressure, the warmth, the tingling of Alexei’s lips on mine returned to me for months and even years later. Even after he married.

Many things have rekindled the memory of that kiss by the greenhouse—early snowflakes, the smell of woodsmoke, and the taste of Madeira.

Nina Romano earned an MA from Adelphi University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Florida International University. Her short fiction, memoir, reviews and poetry appear in *The Rome Daily American*, *The Chrysalis Reader*, *Whiskey Island*, *Gulf Stream Magazine*, *Grain*, *Voices in Italian Americana*, *Vox*, *Chiron Review*, *The Salt Lake City Weekly*, *Rough Writer’s Ink*, *Mangrove Review*, *Irrepressible Appetites*, *Roads Literary Magazine*, *Night Train*, *A Little Poetry*, *ExPatLit*, *GULFSTREAM!NG*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *The Northville Review*, *The Bosphorous Art Project Quarterly*, *Strong Verse*, *The Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s Writers Ink*, *Lung Poetry Journal*, *The Poetry of Marriage Anthology*, and *Perceptions*.

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