

Goluptsi

Ryan twisted the napkin in his lap again, the Russian spilling past his ears like a swiftly flowing river, pouring by without making contact. Some good that semester of 101 had been. He tried desperately to catch a single word. He twisted the napkin the other way. It was going to fall apart for sure by the time this meal was over. He looked around at all the unfamiliar, foreign faces, their clothes and hair just so slightly different from American styles.

Finally Marina emerged from the kitchen, carrying a plate heaped with something steaming. After she set it down on the table—to profuse unintelligible approving comments from those seated around the table—she moved to the chair next to him and flashed him one of her blinding smiles, grabbing for his hand and giving it a quick squeeze. He began to remember why he was there. He squeezed her hand back, grinning in what Marina’s family would describe later as “the puppy way.”

An ancient woman that Marina had introduced as “*Babushka*” emerged from the kitchen. She looked so small and fragile—she might have reached Ryan’s chest—that he worried for a moment the weight of the bowl she was carrying would cause her to topple to the floor. Her eyes were magnified behind very thick glasses, and she kept squinting around the room as if the glasses were doing little good. *Babushka* made her way painfully over to where Ryan was sitting and placed the bowl in front of him. She said something rapid in Russian, laughed slightly hysterically, and patted him on the head with her thin, long-fingered hand. Ryan smiled wanly at her and glanced down at the bowl in front of him.

His heart transformed abruptly into an eel and tried to squiggle out of his chest. His stomach was seriously considering following his heart. The bowl looked more like compost than food...it contained some browning leaves of cabbage, equally brown carrot peelings, what Ryan could swear were coffee grounds, and something that looked like bones.

Feeling sick, he turned to Marina’s *Babushka*. “Um...ma’am...what is...this?” He pointed to the bowl.

She crowed softly and clapped her hands once, letting out a string of alien words in which he caught “goluptsi” several times. There was a general exclamation of pleasure around the table. “Ah, *goluptsi!*” Marina’s mother said happily. “One of my favorite dishes. Pass over this way when you are finished, *detochka!*” She plopped down in front of him an economy-size bottle of ketchup and a tub of sour cream. Ryan looked down at his bowl. Somehow he didn’t think all the ketchup and the sour cream in the world could make this *goluptsi* taste good.

He looked over at Marina, who was talking animatedly to one of her cousins. The warm light from the lamp hanging over the table outlined the curve of her neck and a curl of dark hair that had escaped her braid. Her laugh danced like music through the air. He looked around at her family, so foreign and so friendly. They would certainly be offended if he didn’t eat this traditional Russian dish, whatever it was, especially *Babushka*...He looked over at her. She was busy cutting a dumpling into very tiny pieces, concentrating very hard on handling a knife and fork. Ryan looked down at the bowl again.

How insulted would they be if he didn't eat it? Could he pretend to eat it? How insulted would *his* family be if he brought home a foreign girlfriend who refused to eat the barbecue or the sweet potato pie? Nervously, he glanced over at the wall over the fireplace, where hung a portrait of one of the Russian czars. Maybe Nicholas. The czar glared down at him from under huge, forbidding eyebrows.

"Eat the *goluptsi!*" Czar Nicholas boomed.

Ryan jumped and stared down at the bowl again. He supposed he'd better try at least one bite. Shakily, he reached for the ketchup.

Ryan took a sour cream and ketchup-laden bite. It tasted like moldy cabbage, with a sprinkling of coffee grounds, drowned in ketchup and sour cream.

Babushka threw another Russian sentence at him.

"Um...*da*. Good!" he lied.

Marina whirled. "Ooo...I love *goluptsi!* Let me have some, Ryan." She pulled the bowl over and put her fork in. Ryan watched in unabashed amazement to see how she could possibly love this dish. However, Marina had barely touched the food when a disgusted expression crossed her face and she turned to *Babushka* in astonishment. She spurted out a rapid sentence and *Babushka* looked up, shocked, and said something in return. The whole family turned toward their side of the table, and, after clarifications were made, burst out laughing.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Ryan!" Marina's eyes were full of remorse. She almost looked like she was going to cry. "*Babushka* can't see very well...she gave you—"

"It is compost for garden!" Marina's mother exclaimed, and tried unsuccessfully to smother a laugh.

Babushka wailed a little and let out a stream of Russian, grabbing Ryan's shoulder and moaning.

"No...*Niet*...really...it's okay!"

"Here!" Marina's father put another bowl down in front of Ryan. He couldn't really blame *Babushka*...this bowl was also blue and also was topped by cabbage leaves and carrot, but this time not brown and old, and no coffee grounds.

Ryan applied the ketchup and sour cream and tried a bite.

"Delicious!" This time he was not lying. Marina's family beamed.