

# Mail-Order Family



Irina  
VanPatten

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Irina VanPatten

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# *Toská*

All day I had a feeling that some shit was about to happen, and there he was, showing up at my door, unannounced, like he always did.

“Congratulations, Irina Mihailovna, we are officially divorced,” Igor said with fake bravado the minute he walked through the door. He dusted snowflakes off of his coat and shook off his hat. The snowflakes melted before reaching the floor.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” I said, unsure how to feel.

“You don’t have a phone. I couldn’t call you.”

“They wired our house six months ago. Now we have a house phone, thank God. It only took us fifteen years to get it.”

“Good to know. Next time, I’ll call. I thought I’d bring you the certificate of our divorce. I didn’t think you’d like to take a twelve-hour train ride to Crimea just to get a piece of paper.” He eyed me, looking for a reaction, but I gave him none. “Sorry it took me three years to deliver it. Better late than never, but I thought you might need it one day, in case you want to remarry.”

“Yeah, the men pile up in stacks to marry a woman with two kids.”

“Papa!” Lica yelled, and jumped into her father’s arms. Her big brown eyes sparkled, her long auburn hair flipping in the air.

“Hello, Lica-Lica-Angelica, my little daughter, angel of my eyes. Daddy missed you.”

“I am not little anymore. I’m eight.”

“Don’t you think I know that? I just like to call you little because I love you. Where is Serghei, the heir of my nonexistent treasures?”

“Pop, you are so funny,” Lica said, and put her hands on her hips with the swagger of a teenager. “You didn’t see him outside?”

“He’s still outside? It’s getting dark.”

“You know how your son gets when he sees the first snow. He said he’d be right back half an hour ago,” I said.

“I’ll get him.” Lica ran to the balcony, opened the window that insulated our apartment from the cold, and shouted at the top of her lungs from the third floor down to the courtyard. “Sereoja, come home! Papa came to visit!”

“Ira, what’s up with all this yelling?” My sister, Mariana, showed up from the other room. “I’m trying to study here.” Her annoyance faded when she saw him. “Oh, Igor!” She stopped halfway. “What a nice surprise!” She jumped toward him like a playful goat.

“Mariana Valerievna, look at you. You are taller than your older sister. What the heck, you are taller than me. And you’re only sixteen.” He shook his head. “Your hair is so much longer since the last time I saw you.” He pulled a lock of her hair jokingly. “But when you stand next to each other, you can hardly tell you’re sisters. You, the blondie, and Irina, the gypsy.”

“We have different fathers. Remember?” Mariana pulled her hair back.

“Of course, I remember. I haven’t been out of the picture for that long.”

My sister turned to me. “Why is he calling me Mariana Valerievna?”

“That’s a Russian thing. Basically, it means that you are Mariana, daughter of your father Valera.”

“Oho! A lot has changed since the Soviet Union disappeared,” Igor said. “I forgot that Mariana was a baby when the whole country broke into pieces. You don’t use patronymics anymore?”

“Not in Moldova, we don’t, not since the divorce from the Soviet Union was finalized. We just go by our first names, so I am now simply Irina or Mrs. Iancenco.”

“What are they going to call you now, after the divorce? Do you go back to being a miss?” Igor asked.

“I don’t think it works in reverse,” I told him. “Once a missus, always a missus.”

“I messed up your missus thing forever, haven’t I?” Igor looked sincerely concerned.

“Don’t worry about it. In my English class in college, they told us they have a neutral Ms., so we’ll probably all have neutral titles soon.”

A scuffling noise of fast-moving feet was coming up the stairs behind our apartment wall. The sound grew closer and closer until the loud *boom* of a door thrown open interrupted our conversation.

“Papa!” Serghei yelled, and jumped into his father’s arms, just like Lica minutes earlier. The door smashed into the side wall behind him, and the broken plastic door knob fell to the floor.

“My dear son, what are you doing?” Igor asked, looking over his shoulder to see what had happened.

“Oh, great! Let’s break the last thing that has survived in this house!” I yelled, ready to give my son a good smack on his rear.

“Bring me the tools before you get your ass whooped. *Papa* will fix it,” he said, and let Serghei down, shielding him with his body. “I see nothing has changed here. The son breaks things, and the father fixes them.”

“More like Serghei breaks things and Mariana fixes them, because Ira is working all day at her day care and then goes to college at night.” Mariana sighed. “I’m with them after school every day. It’s very exhausting.”

“Here it is.” Serghei brought out the screwdriver and hammer. Igor took off his winter coat, then pushed the bag and the guitar case he’d brought with him to the side and knelt in front of the door to assess the damage.

“Well, I am impressed, son, that you know where the tools are,” Igor said.

“Yeah. It’s not a big deal. Are you staying with us for New Year’s?” Serghei asked.

“No, I am just here for a few days, if your mama lets me.” Igor looked at me.

“Pop, we only have two rooms, but I can put a mattress on the floor for you, and we can sleep together. Isn’t that right, Mom?”

I raised my eyebrow, irritated. *Sneaky bastard!* Imagine if I kicked him out now. What drama it would cause with the kids.

“He’s definitely not sleeping in my bed,” I said, “so you can sleep together wherever you want. I’ll go start dinner. You must be hungry from the road.”

I set the small table for five. The cramped kitchen could barely fit us all. The old, bulky Soviet refrigerator took up a lot of space in the corner. The tall, yellowish cupboard, which used to be white, looked out of place in the middle. The rest of the space was crammed by the oven and the sink, which had a garbage bucket underneath. Igor and the kids sat down on the bench along the wall. Mariana and I took the two stools on the other side. Igor looked at the wall with amusement.

“How wonderful,” he said. “The same wallpaper as the last time I was here.”

“We don’t have the money to replace it, so it will have to do for a couple more years.”

“I’m serious. It’s wonderful. It brings me comfort that some things are still the same. It’s like going back in time, when things were,” he paused, “normal.” He shook his head. “But let’s not talk about it. I’m really thirsty.”

“I don’t have any vodka, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“I quit drinking vodka.”

“Uh-huh!” I deployed all my skepticism. “You’ve said that a couple times before.”

“This time it’s for real, mostly because I don’t have enough money to drink.” He laughed it off.

“Oh, that I believe.”

“Come on, don’t bust my balls. You know it’s not my fault there are no jobs in that dinky village I’m from. I was digging wells this year for *kopeiks*—that’s how bad it is out there.”

“How do you dig a well?” Serghei asked seriously.

“With the most superb tools in the world, son, a shovel and human hands.” Igor showed him his palms.

“Oho!” Serghei took his father’s hand and touched the two large calluses on his palm. “They are hard. Do they hurt?”

“Not really. After a while, you get used to them.”

“Isn’t it hard to dig a well in the winter when the ground is frozen?” Lica was always asking the practical questions.

“I only dig them in the summer, honey. Winter is the dead season. As soon as the winter starts, there is only *toská*.”

“What’s *toská*?” Serghei asked, intrigued by the new word.

“That’s a very good question, son.” Igor paused for a while to gather his thoughts. “It’s like when your mother told me she wanted a divorce, and I drank for six months straight after that. That’s *toská*.”

“Is it when you are really, really sad?”

“Yes, son, it’s when you are really, really sad. Though I honestly didn’t believe you”—Igor looked straight at me—“till the minute we stood in front of the judge. I thought you were bluffing.”

“Why would I bluff about something like that?”

“To scare me back to my senses, like a warning shot. I really, really hoped you were bluffing.” His eyes softened, but he’d had plenty of chances to call my hand before we stood in front of the judge, but he never did, and he sure wasn’t going to now.

“We got some homemade wine from Uncle Vasya from the village,” Mariana said, all of a sudden.

“Mariana,” I shushed her. “I was saving it for New Year’s.”

“What? He’ll find it in the fridge anyway. It’s not like you can hide it from him.”

“Irina without the patronymic?” Igor theatrically threw his hands in the air. “For old time’s sake, can you pour me some wine? If that’s from Uncle Vasya, I have to try it. I’m surprised, though, he still keeps making wine after your grandpa died.”

“Well, he inherited Grandpa’s vineyard. It’s not like he can stop picking the grapes now; they grow every year. Besides, Grandpa always said, ‘Wine is the country’s liquid gold.’ You can buy or exchange a lot of stuff in the country for wine, especially now, when no other industries are working.”

“I remember your Grandpa Ivan once took me and your cousin to the vineyard to help him spread the fertilizer—the horse manure—to be precise. We, two young, healthy guys, took one bucket with manure out of the horse carriage and almost dropped it because it was so heavy. Your grandpa looked at us, shook his head and, without saying a word, took the second bucket from the carriage all by himself, lifted it up, and kept on walking like it was nothing. The man was in his eighties! It was pretty embarrassing, son,” he said, turning to Serghei. “Let’s drink to Grandpa Ivan, the man, one of a kind!” Igor lifted the glass filled with bright-red wine that Mariana had poured for him. He emptied it in a swift gulp, then breathed out like a tired horse, just as he used to do when gulping a shot of vodka. “Is it made from Lidia grapes?” he asked me, wiping his mouth.

“Yes, it is.” I nodded, amazed that he still remembered such details.

“God, I missed Moldavian wine. You people know how to make it right.” A playful smile brightened Igor’s face. There was no way he would ever quit drinking, no matter what he told himself. He enjoyed this ritual too much. Besides, his veins were by in large a stream of vodka. Except today, they were flowing half-wine, half-blood.

Igor’s cheeks turned red and his tongue started slowing down a little.

“Pop, eat something. You know you’re supposed to eat when

you're drinking, or you'll get drunk fast," Lica scolded her father, concerned for him, as usual.

"My beautiful daughter," Igor answered tenderly. He caressed Lica's long hair, which cascaded to her shoulders. "You are so smart, just like your mama and your Grandma Katya. By the way, how is my favorite mother-in-law, Katya? Still working in Greece?" he asked me.

"Yes, still in Greece."

"Still helping you with your college tuition?"

"Who else? You're not sending me any alimony," I said quickly. It'd been on the tip of my tongue, but now it was out there.

Igor was quiet for a few seconds. "Your mother will be happy that we divorced. She didn't like me much, though I have nothing but respect for her. She is the most hardworking woman I have ever known. I can only imagine what it's like to be there alone and far away, cleaning houses and taking care of other people's families, while leaving your own family behind. How old were you, Mariana, when your mother left?"

"Thirteen," Mariana answered. "But she was gone before then, on and off to Moscow or wherever she could find work. Thank God Ira came back home from Crimea with Lica and Serghei. I was getting tired of being left with neighbors and relatives. You know my father was drinking, so he was no big help."

"What times we live in, when women have to take this burden upon themselves," Igor said philosophically, ignoring the drinking comment. "You women are so much stronger than us. We are the men of a broken country. We aren't breadwinners. We're nobody! Forget Hamlet. Look at what's going on all around us right now. That's the true tragedy of our days."

Lica was right, I could see. Igor needed to eat something. The wine was getting to him already. He put his elbows on the table and dropped his head into his hands.

"Pop, don't cry." Lica stroked his head. Igor turned to give his

daughter a hug. His left hand swung wide and overturned the glass of water in front of him, which spilled across the table and all over the floor.

“I’ll get towels,” I said, and went into the other room. Mariana followed me.

“Why is he crying?” Mariana whispered. “He’s a man.”

“He is a *broken* man. Broken men are allowed to cry.”

“I don’t remember Mom or *Babushka* Veta crying like this.”

“Your father made our mom cry plenty of times. She just didn’t like to show her tears. But I’ll never forget how our mother cried when my father died. I was just six, but I remember it to this day.”

“That was at a funeral!”

“This is a funeral to him,” I told her. “It’s one big funeral to every one of us. Do you think it’s easy to bury the country we grew up in? When it was all we knew our entire lives? Some of us shook it off and moved on, but others got stuck in the past.”

“I don’t understand when you speak in metaphors.” Mariana looked at me quizzically.

“Then I failed you.” I smiled. “I was so good at metaphors. When I was fifteen, I won a regional essay contest among the best schools in the city. It was a beautiful essay about World War II.”

“What did you know about war? Did you fight it yourself?”

“It’s called research.”

“Show off.” Mariana smirked, took the towels out of my hands, and marched to the kitchen to clean up the mess.

Igor switched from the bench to the stool to get out of Mariana’s way, then picked up his acoustic guitar from the corner, a sign that he was ripe for singing. He touched the strings lightly, moving his left hand up and down the guitar neck. A pleasant, joyful, familiar sound filled the kitchen. I loved hearing him play the guitar until *Babushka* Veta asked me one question I couldn’t find the answer to: “Can he feed his kids with his guitar?”

“*Kolotushka!*” Lica yelled excitedly.

“You remember that?” Igor smiled.

“Yes, that’s the funny lullaby that you used to sing to us when we were little.”

“You remember the words?”

“Of course!”

“Then sing along ... *Kolotushka, tuk-tuk-tuk.*”

Lica stood up beside her father with one hand on his shoulder, straightening her back like a true opera singer. She picked up the next line without forgetting a bit.

“Sereoja, come on, join us,” Igor encouraged his son.

Serghei stomped his foot in frustration. “I don’t remember the words.”

“How come? We used to sing it together so many times. Do you remember the first line?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s sing it together: *Ko-lo-tush-ka, tuk-tuk-tuk.*” Igor knocked on the guitar three times, imitating the *tuk-tuk-tuk* sound. I smiled, seeing them swirled up in the music, as if they were on the stage in the stoplight, and the walls behind them disappeared. The raspy sound of the guitar, competing with kids’ voices, was bouncing in the air, stirring up long-forgotten emotions.

“You guys all did great,” Igor chanted when the song was over. “Except Mariana. You, sister, were not born to sing.”

“Oh, come on now!” Mariana swung her hand, trying to hit him on the shoulder.

Igor ducked and burst into laughter. “Truce, truce. Happy New Year’s, everybody!” He cheered, and then he lifted another glass of wine, welcoming the year 2000, which was right around the corner.

“It’s not New Year’s yet,” I felt compelled to remind him.

“Does it matter?”

“I guess, today, it doesn’t.”

# The Snow Queen

Ms. Lidia, the dark haired, hawk-nosed principal of the day care, gathered us, the teachers, for a pre-Christmas planning meeting. She looked around the room exquisitely, as if searching for her prey.

“Who wants to be the Snow Queen?” she asked. “We need one for the matinee. Mrs. Vera over here agreed to be *Moș Crăciun*. She, I mean, *he* will bring presents for the kids. Irina, can you play the Snow Queen?”

“Sure. Do I get a costume?”

“Unfortunately, the costume went kaput. The moths got into it a couple years back.” She shrugged. “We’ll have to improvise.”

“I can bring my old wedding dress and veil,” Nina, the youngest teacher, offered. “It will make a great costume for a Snow Queen.”

“Don’t you want to sell it?” I asked her, mostly because I didn’t like the idea.

“I can’t. It has a few stains from spilled wine, but I can sew some snowflakes on them to cover them up.”

“Isn’t it bad luck to wear a wedding dress for anything but a wedding?” Mrs. Vera asked.

“Please,” the principal interrupted her sternly. “That’s a folk tale from old times. We are modern, educated teachers, not a bunch of superstitious *babushkas*.”

\* \* \*

“Breathe in, breathe in,” Nina repeated a few times on the day of the matinee, trying to zip me up in her old wedding dress, which was now a Snow Queen costume, decorated with a bunch of plastic snowflakes. It must have been one fun wedding to deserve so many snowflakes.

“We should have tried it during the rehearsal,” I said, disappointed that I couldn’t squeeze in. *What the hell?* Nina didn’t look much skinnier than me, but she sure was half a mile taller, because her dress was dragging on the floor, and I had to constantly pull up the front to avoid stepping on the hem.

“One more time, we’re almost there,” Nina said. “Now, don’t breathe out too hard.”

“How am I supposed to act when I can barely breathe?”

“You’ll be fine,” Nina said unconvincingly.

I huffed, treasuring each breath. “Let’s get that crown on my head before I pass out.”

Finally ready, I stepped down the long hallway and peeked through the cracked door into the assembly room to listen in. The room was full of parents gathered for the matinee. Igor was sitting in the corner, too, watching the action, which had already started.

“Mom.” Serghei was pulling on my dress. He was wearing a folk costume: black pants, white shirt, a peach embroidered jacket, and a pointy gray lamb hat, just like my grandpa used to wear in the winter. He held a long red sash in his hands.

“You are not supposed to see me,” I shushed him. “Why are you wandering around?”

“Mrs. Cristina sent me because my button just came off, and my pants are falling down.”

“I don’t have anything to sew buttons with.” I took the sash from his hands, wrapped it around his waist, and tied it in a double knot. “Here, that will have to do. Don’t breathe out hard, or it will get undone.”

“How am I supposed to say my lines like this?” he asked, holding in his belly.

“You’ll be fine,” I answered with a feeling of *déjà vu*. “Go, go to your class. My part is coming up soon.”

\* \* \*

“Who was a naughty kid this year?” I yelled dramatically as I entered the assembly room, flapping my “magic” wand in the air. I stepped to the right, looking for Dina. I was supposed to “freeze” her with my wand. The kids, shocked by my outfit, started screaming hysterically and ran to the left. Little Dina forgot her part and ran away from me too. I stretched out my hand to catch her before she ran too far. *Swish*. I heard the sound of my hemline ripping under my foot. I only realized what was happening when I saw myself in the wall mirror, tumbling down to the floor. The room went silent. Igor, on the other hand, burst into high-pitched laughter.

*Thanks for your support, asshole.*

Dina tiptoed back to check on me. “Are you all right, Mrs. Irina?”

My elbows were burning, and my left knee throbbed, but my “show must go on” spirit kicked in. I pulled my feet under my butt and quickly, as if we’d planned this all along, grabbed Dina by her foot and said, “You were a naughty kid this year, weren’t you?”

Dina screamed.

“Shh! You’re supposed to be frozen,” I whispered. As if struck by magic, Dina snapped into acting mode, stopped fidgeting, and “froze” into an icy statue.

“Uh-huh! I caught you, evil Snow Queen!” I heard the voice of Mrs. Vera behind me, who looked unrecognizable in a Moș Crăciun costume. “Go away and leave the kids alone!” I got up and backed away to the door, as my role required. “Bring in the *haitori!*” she said out loud then, referring to the kids who were sup-

posed to recite carols. Serghei was one of the boys in folk costumes who lined up in front of the parents.

“*Aho, aho!*” The group started the traditional Christmas recital in unison. Serghei held a little bell in his right hand, ringing it so loudly that I could barely hear his lines. The boy on his left held a stick with a papier-mâché bull’s head with colored ribbons, swinging it in the air to make the ribbons float. Another boy held a cardboard roll under his armpit. It looked like a bull’s body with a long tail made out of real horse’s hair, and a third boy pulled the tail to produce a squeaky sound resembling the voice of a hoarse animal. The only girl in the group had a bag filled with wheat, which she started throwing at the rows of parents, as the last words of the recital wished them all long years ahead: “*La mulți ani!*”

\* \* \*

“Son, I’m speechless,” Igor said, wiping his tears when we could finally leave. “I couldn’t understand much of what you said, but some things don’t need translation.” Serghei giggled and wrapped his arms around his father.

“I had no clue he was so good at Romanian,” Igor said, this time to me.

“Well, he’s learning fast.”

“I forgot all the Romanian words I’d learned while we were married,” Igor said, disappointed. “Though, I still remember some. Why did they address the crowd as ‘brothers’? The folk poems don’t have a place for sisters and mothers?”

“I guess that doesn’t rhyme, so they threw the words out.”

“That’s a lame reason to exclude women from a scene in a festivity.” He laughed, as if he could fix centuries-long issues with his laughter. “I’m glad I got to see your production before I leave tomorrow.” Igor turned to Serghei. “That’s something your dad will never forget.”

\* \* \*

The next day, Mariana, Lica, Serghei, Igor, and I were standing on the railway platform waiting for Igor's train to Odessa. *Choo-choo* sounds of coming and going trains were floating in the distance. The crisp, cold air penetrated our coats, but the kids didn't seem to mind. Serghei and Lica were blowing steam from their mouths, trying to outdo each other, imitating their father, who was smoking a cigarette next to me.

"So," Igor started the conversation. "You really haven't found anyone since we divorced?"

"I had a fling with someone, but...it's complicated," I answered cautiously.

"I thought 'complicated' was my specialty." Igor laughed. "Speaking of complicated, Tanya and I are back together."

"The Tanya that you were dating and had a kid with someone else?"

"We sorted that old stuff out." He waved it off like it was nothing. "It's not Liza's fault, what happened between us, she's just a kid. I love her like my own daughter. Besides, Tanya is pregnant again, this time with my kid. What can I say? I make gorgeous kids."

"So, you are going to have four children?" It was hard to hold back fiercer words. "How are you going to take care of four, when you can't take care of these two?"

"I might be bad at many things, but being a father is one thing I'm good at. Look at them." He pointed at Lica and Serghei. "Aren't they wonderful?"

"Yes, they are, but not thanks to you. Do you think that showing up once every few years is being a good father?"

"Look, I didn't tell you this to stick it to you." I caught his sneer before his expression softened again. "I'm just telling you so you're aware of my situation. Honesty is all I have left."

“Oh, indeed, letting me know about your situation is one other thing that you are good at. There is always something that stops you from buying them shoes, or school supplies, or paying for the doctors. It’s like they don’t even have a father.”

“You can always bring them for the summer. You know my mom and I would love to have them. In the summer, we have fruit and vegetables in the garden. Feeding them is the least we can do.”

“Sure, if I can only find the money for three round-trip tickets to Crimea every year.” I shook my head. Though his suggestion was kind on the surface, I knew relying on him would be a mistake. “I’ll just keep doing what I always do: take care of the kids on my own,” I said, and crossed my arms. I was done talking. I just wanted the train to come, so Igor could finally leave.

A light, anemic layer of snow swirled in the air, covering the platform, but it was too weak to stick. People walking back and forth were wiping it away with their feet.

\* \* \*

I called Gicu one hour after I got home.

“I’m glad you called,” he said.

“Nice to hear that you’re glad. I finally got my certificate of divorce.”

“Yeah?” he answered, uninterested.

“Yeah, my ex-husband brought it from Crimea.”

“Your ex-husband was visiting?”

“What’s the matter? Are you jealous?”

“No, you’re a free woman. You can do whatever you want.”

“I was a free woman during the past year when we were dating. Nothing has changed,” I said, unsure how to react to his tone.

“I wouldn’t call it dating. When was the last time we saw each other? A month ago?”

“That’s because I have kids and I’m going to school. I can’t just drop everything—”

“Yes, you have kids,” Gicu interrupted. “I want to have kids of my own one day, but I don’t want to raise someone else’s kids.”

“What are you trying to say?” I gripped the phone firmly.

“That’s the thing I wanted to talk to you about. I found my soul mate. I want to marry her.”

“For God’s sake, I was at your house a month ago. When did you have time to find a bride? Or were you doing this soul mate search at the same time you were doing me?”

“I thought I’d tell you now, before you get to my house and you bump into each other.”

“That’s so thoughtful of you!” I said, then dropped the receiver. *What a toská! What a fucking toská!*





Left, my ex-husband, Igor (in the middle), my sister, Mariana, and my kids, Serghei and Angelica. This photo was taken in the day care where I worked at the end of the Christmas matinee, circa 1998. Serghei is still in his haitori costume. Right, me in the pink dress at the College Graduation Ball, 2000.



Studio photos for the dating agency, November 2000. *Left:* Me in my black pants and the black sweater that I took off my sister, Mariana, for the photo shoot. *Right:* Me with the purple flower.



Our first photo together of David, me, and the kids after our arrival to the U.S. in May of 2002.