



Source: Dan Bilevsky, 'Selling Turkey', *International Herald Tribune online*, 08/10/05.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [death](#), [disenchantment](#), [bombings](#), [retribution](#), [husband/wife](#)

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Several severed heads stared at Nastya Alekseyevna from the screen of the 1970s television set, sitting on a shelf beside the gas-stove in the small kitchen of her tiny house in this Siberian provincial town.

The faces on the screen seemed distorted, as if they had been pickled or otherwise preserved. As she deftly formed the minced and spiced lamb into neat little balls wrapping them in the small circles of soft pastry she had earlier prepared, sealing them with an intricate twist which would hold them together while they cooked, she wondered why it was that those heads on the television, which were said to belong to suicide bombers at the centre of an explosion in a far off place, were so well preserved when everything else at the scene had been completely destroyed beyond recognition and it would take weeks of investigation to identify the victims.

But the thought faded quickly from her mind as she prepared the pelmeni, the special dumplings she was making to sell on the train platform to travellers passing in both directions, east and west.

The water was now boiling in the large aluminium pickling saucepan on the stove so she tossed in the first batch of pelmeni, and returning to the table, she glanced out the window, to see if any of the other women were already walking to the station. The train was due in about twenty minutes, but now she couldn't see the platform because a row of ripe sunflowers had grown tall and thick at the end of the garden, the flower heads turned to the still bright midday sun of early autumn.

Already the taiga on the other side of the track was golden. Above the sunflowers, she could just see the Sayan and Sajan Mountains on the horizon to the south-east and briefly—very briefly as there was no longer any point in thinking of the past in this way—she thought of Tofalaria and the taiga hunting grounds where her family had once lived, herding reindeer and hunting sable and squirrel and where she too might now be living if her father hadn't joined the Red Army at the beginning of the war and given up the rodovyi taigi, his traditional clan hunting grounds.

He turned up again after the war, a complete stranger to her and even her mother was unprepared for his return, having received only two letters from him in five years, and assuming he was dead.

In the meantime, she'd taken up with Semyon Yevseich, a decent enough man, even if he was a Jew; the war had hardened everything and everyone, but it had softened the invisible lines between groups in the town, where the family moved after leaving the kolkhoz. Semyon Yevseich, kept her company through the cold winters and brought sweets for her two children and they lived as well as they could. Some people thought that he was Nastya's real father but no-one knew for sure, except that Nastya felt in her own heart that he was not and that her real father

was the man who had returned from the war, no longer knowing how to be a father or a husband. After servicing tanks and planes he was now more accustomed to the hardness of metal than the softness of forest and flesh. Besides, his old hunting grounds were now occupied by Russians rather than Tofans and had become new oil and gas fields, with massive pipelines carrying away the new products more efficiently than sleds of reindeer.

Nastya's keen sight picked up the glint of metal moving along the track on a bend in a distant gap between hills, visible long before the train arrived in the town. She would just have time to cook the second batch of pelmeni and then walk to the platform with the hot dumplings. She quickly put on her coat and headscarf, drained the water from the saucepan and left the house.

The main obstacle now would be Boris Timofeyich, the slightly-built but thuggish son of the local mayor, who controlled the stalls on the platform, extorting payment from the small traders. He was a bully who had terrorised them for months, threatening them with a gun and controlling their lives; if a stallholder didn't pay what he demanded he would send her home with more fresh food than she could possibly eat herself and no money to buy ingredients to try again the following day. It was a delicate balance to humour him and last year when someone defied him, reporting him to the authorities, she disappeared and her headless body was found in the taiga after the snow had thawed.

Today the petty enforcer was too busy harrasing the train passengers, intimidating them with his gun and stopping them from taking photographs. But the women were even more concerned by this image of their town which the travellers would now take with them. Voicelessly, they decided something must be done.

Nastya would lead Boris Timofeyich back to her garden with the promise of her famous apple pie, which no man had ever been able to resist. Once there, the other women would be waiting, hidden in the garden. Their strong arms would hold him and his throat would be cut the way a sheep is slaughtered, quickly, cleanly. Only last month they had to slaughter all the chickens in the district because of bird flu, so they were well practiced with the knife.

The tall wooden fence hid the garden from its neighbours and a quickly applied gag muffled any likely scream from this man who turned out to be physically weaker than they had expected, though it was harder than they thought to separate the head from the body. In any case, they all agreed that they had achieved a successful makeover of their local economy—an *ekstravagantii mekoffur*, they called it, after a television show they had once seen.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Helen Grace.*