

Two Stories by Irina Luk'ianova

Irina Luk'ianova is one of Russia's foremost writers. Originally from Novosibirsk, Irina moved to Moscow in 1996, where she now lives. Her work spans journalism, blogging and creative writing. Irina's fiction exhibits psychological acuity often laced with irony and humour, but there is always a human warmth to her writing. The two stories translated here are 'Nightmare on Garibaldi Street' and 'Miracles for Dummies', first appearing in the Russian daily newspaper *New Gazette* in 2009.¹

NIGHTMARE ON GARIBALDI STREET

Every day Nadia dashes from lesson to lesson. She's the upstairs neighbour, the mother of one of our Alex's classmates, and does extra tutoring in French and Russian since the college pays her a mere hundred bucks a month. By some twist of fate her students all live scattered along both sides of Garibaldi Street and she zigzags from one to the other.

It's December. Nadia is walking along the dirty icy street, on her way from one student to the next. She falls. Gets covered in dirt. Brushes herself down. And gets stuck in a snowdrift. She struggles out towards the traffic-lightless zebra crossing to cross Garibaldi Street. It's dark; cars stream by. One, two, ten, eighty-four, not one of them stops to let Nadia past. Imprisoned on the kerb in a mountain of snow, she stands, hunched over against the everlasting Moscow snowfall, helplessly watching the torrent of cars. 'I will die in this snowdrift,' she thinks, 'I will die while running from lesson to lesson. I'm 50 years old, I have a stomach ulcer, and I've been done in by an impractical boot. I will die in a December snowdrift on Garibaldi Street, waiting in vain for someone to stop and let me reach my student. I need to revise the French past tense with him and earn my fifteen dollars.'

At that moment, a flashy car slowed down in front of Nadia and signalled for her to cross. Nadia scrambled across the road, slipped, slid, and toppled onto the other side of the street.

That evening, out of the blue, Nadia received a phone call from a friend:

'Listen, do you have anyone who can do a six month stint in Burma?'

'I can!' Nadia shrieked into the phone, before she'd even heard the end of the question.

'Be at the embassy tomorrow at 9am. Bring all your documents.'

Within a month, Nadia, stomach ulcer and all, bid farewell to her husband and two sons aged 23 and 12 and set off for six months in Burma, a country under martial law and with inedible spicy food. She settled in a remote town, well off the maps, and began teaching Burmese soldiers the Russian language. Now Nadia emails us photos of herself posed against dazzling backgrounds of white Buddhist temples, magnificent stone lions and red tropical flowers.

There is no Garibaldi Street in Burma.

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¹ The original Russian texts can be found here:
<https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2009/03/19/43515-irina-lukyanova-kon-v-palto>

MIRACLES FOR DUMMIES

I can actually perform miracles. I can summon rain, hurricanes, dust storms and frost; I can arrange traffic jams and delay flights. It's very easy.

The easiest way to summon rain is to leave the house without your umbrella. Another way is to clean the windows, which is more labour-intensive, but with a guarantee of better results. For a light rain, you only need to clean one window. For heavy rain, clean two. For incessant rain, you need to clean three. If your windows are large and you clean them all in one day, you can confidently predict a dust storm. Dust storms are also practically inevitable if you hang out your freshly washed white bed sheets on the balcony.

If you want to create frost, you need to either leave your plant box with seedlings on your balcony for a few nights, or plant them at your dacha. You can be sure of consistently good weather if you forget to water your saplings; the sun will shine all week until they've been burnt to a crisp. On the other hand, a good watering will guarantee a soggy, cold week. If you need hail, you ought to bring all the household plants onto the balcony and leave the large-leaved plants, like lilies or elephant's ears, at the front, so hail can bring especially great damage to them. You can quickly and effectively calm a strong wind by going on a walk with a kite. If, in winter, your sheepskin coat gets filthy, or the zip on your warm boots breaks, you can guarantee an instantaneous drop in temperature to -20C.

My mother asks me not to leave the house without an umbrella if she's going to the dacha with her grandchildren. My children also know that their mother has magical powers, and when I approach the windows with a bottle of green liquid and a duster, they giggle in anticipation and ask whether or not there will be thunder and lightning along with the rain.

My neighbours say, 'Katya's hung up her washing on the balcony – shut the windows, the weather's about to get worse.' I'm the local Mother Frost – I put cushions to dry on the balcony, and in the sky the rainy, lilac, fluffy clouds all huddle up together. When darling Sergei left for his last business trip and took my passport instead of his own, I shoved bed sheets into the building's washing machine on a delicate setting (fast and no spin cycle, so that it was even damper, and would take longer to dry). This brought flurries of sleet, which delayed all flights, so I was able to get to the airport in time despite the traffic jam, which I had also conjured up along the way. Having charged my phone, I could have reversed the spell on the way back (because if your phone's dead, a traffic jam is inevitable), but I didn't have time.

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