

The most unlikely shoes

The first time we went to Russia, in 2000, I had dreams. I couldn't figure out if they were nightmares. In these dreams I would have to leave for a funeral or something equally momentous and once home I couldn't get back. As many inconvenient and horribly frustrating events as my sleeping mind could conceive stopped me resuming my holiday.

Five years later – not much dreaming, barely any sleep. We were travelling with our two year old, hauling the largest, lightest piece of luggage possibly ever carried on Asiana airlines; Jesse's booster seat, contained in one of those zippable plastic striped bags. It was a sodding shape, bottom heavy like an obelisk. Said booster was obsolete within five minutes of clearing the arrival lounge at Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk anyway. There weren't any seatbelts in the back seat of our friend's car.

We were greeted by two of our woman kin who had been winding each other up incessantly in the weeks between us confirming our itinerary and arriving, over the nameless horror they felt at us coming at this time when my father in law would not be there to meet, in particular, for the very first time little Jessica. He was away at sea on a fishing contract for upwards of a year, working very hard for his family, keeping to his routines.

That said, I was not bereft of man-help. There was of course my husband who discovered he's never going to blend into the landscape now, his Russian more tinged than we had ever realised with a flat Kiwi accent. That caused perceptible ear-swivelling when we went to the bazaar to buy groceries. Perhaps this was good for him, as fellow traveller empathy is not his strong suit. Remembering, we had first travelled there childless, and he didn't see

himself as translator or advocate by any stretch. He got somewhat more involved for the sake of his child this second time around despite his saying, for one example when divergent potty training techniques became an issue, "Stop putting me in the middle". I wondered where he had thought he would be.

That was awkward, and with long-held gesticulations I have never managed to temper in the first throes of culture shock I felt like the rusting ships in the harbour; still there and shaped distinctly but that what I represented as a young mother abroad was bland and dysfunctional. Still, four tiny walls smothered in flowery wallpaper and tassled rugs soon worked their remedial magic. Once I recovered my smile and got an excellent haircut while establishing a trust, an equilibrium of sorts with our erstwhile babysitters, I ventured out on a small walk and shopping trip of my own.

The city's shopping precinct was familiar to me since the last time; nothing had changed. One thing about Korsakov is you know there won't be any malls springing up in our lifetime to make you lose your sense of direction.

I hoped to buy a set of baby clothes for my sister who was having her third child, and attempted to engage in conversation about it among a bevy of retailers strung out along a segmented counter resembling a multi-chambered craft stall. A blueprint for someone's badly planned conservatory repeated formulaically, the glass frontage lurched at such awkward angles that no one who valued their safety would ever climb a ladder to make proper use of this display space. Most of the items were hung with cheap string in the prime position for fading to occur and cobwebs to flourish. Not surprisingly then I was proudly shown the sort of hand-crocheted onesie that went out in the early 80s, in a state of

extreme grubbiness. One woman became desperately puzzled as to whether I was buying for one child, or two or three, as I tried to explain my sister's family's configuration.

If you didn't know me at all, you would think why bother? Just point! True, it's messy having a foreigner rave, hands waving, giggling into their monologue yet seemingly unimpressed with the commodities on offer. Privacy may have been an issue. Adults who are uninhibited and vocal could be assumed to be drunk and by association bound to bring you trouble, interrupting your cigarette break.

However, you cannot stifle a flightless bird in a foraging wonderland. The caravan style shops suited me better. The rent being cheaper, the retailers in these fibreglass pods or flapping tents were more relaxed to listen, the atmosphere less fraught. Pressure to buy anything was secondary to a chin wag. I bought an unlikely pair of red shoes from someone who was kind.

After raving to my friends in Christchurch about the fabulous food, it was no doubt a surprise to them that when I returned home I was on the willowy side. I grew quite thin over the weeks and, upon noticing this, my in laws became individually wary and solicitous towards me but collectively resigned in one long do-as-you-like:-you-will-anyway martyred sigh. Such that, rather late in the piece I again wondered what space I was occupying here.

I should have baked to cheer myself up and make my mark upon this household. Dazzle them with cupcakes! Anton who is a chef and loves his Mum, laboured to find enough spice packets to make a curry paste from scratch and while his mother refused to try it actually, his sister couldn't get enough. Jessica enjoyed the raw dacha food, cucumbers especially,

and seedy breads with creamy cheeses. She discovered a love of meatballs called cochletta which Baba, after years of eking yummy tenderness out of stringy, fat-marbled meat with her own grinding with onions technique, made huge and juicy. Jesse would drink the broth too, but craved milk.

We were able to buy litre bags of milk, which you snipped and suspended upright in a jug. I harboured a desire to queue with others from our neighbourhood for milk poured straight off the tanker. That tiny disparate vehicle painted in the brightest jewel colours wheezed jauntily every afternoon onto the Boulevard like a battery-operated fondant figurine on dry distempered cake. While it was considered dirty, I wanted to be among the citizens who lined up with a few rubles in hand and a giant washed mayonnaise jar at the ready. I was talked out of it by the family, who knew the dodginess of sourcing dairy product in this way.

Perhaps they had a point because we had towards the end, just via those intermittent tummy troubles common to travellers, spent a night in hospital with Jessica vomiting every 20 minutes. She got over that, and we quickly got back our chubby wee bumpkin who had earlier been crawling around the rug-adorned floor with her Babushka singing "Antoshka". We have photos of them doing this. Jesse is wearing a yellow skivvy the colour of lemons and smiling, looking like a beautifully carved pat of butter.

With a toddler in need of stimulation, we kept up a routine of almost daily outings just to the local preschool grounds which we could see from our balcony on the fifth floor. Sometimes we went when the school was at play, but more often after hours. To make it more of an event than it was, we made a big deal of it for Jesse; wrapping her up against the wind, taking little picnics and bouncy balls, calling into one of the many shops throughout

the precinct for tiny treats, buying chippies and ice creams which we took back to the house to share. Often when out, I saw young women walking. These girls had, the last time we visited, run together in circles for fitness around the preschool yard. They said “Jessica Simpson” to reference Jessica’s name, the same way that the time before they’d said “Anchor Butter” to reference New Zealand. They had upgraded to jeans now, from tracksuits, and a couple of them were pushing prams as well.

I’m not a traveller really. This is the only place that I have ever been and it seems a shame that Jesse was too young to remember it. Now she is tall and quite sporty, growing easily into her Russian heritage. Her favourite colour is green. She loves her younger brother, and still adores meatballs.

We could have waited enough years for our trip to have been Euro-cool, perhaps heading to Moscow to meet more family there, our stylish city cousins; rather than bumbling along for six weeks in an oversized concrete grandstand buckling at the knees. But it did give Anton’s parents the impetus to subsequently travel to see us, twice, and live with us for a total of eight months in Christchurch. We have no regrets partaking, in a familial way and richly, of that beautiful South Island city now crumbling under its own weight, while it was still there to be enjoyed.