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Russian Women's Lit
Lara Vapnyar, There Are Jews In My House
"Lydia's Grove"

Finger Shadows

Lara Vapnyar's collection of stories There are Jews in My House is a collection of shadows, a magnified intimate look at the underside of things that are unspoken.

Although most of the stories in the book focus on Jewish Russian identity, the story "Lydia's Grove" takes on a different topic. Told through the voice of eight-year-old Lara, "Lydia's Grove," explores an intimate world between women and the intricacies of lesbian relationships. Especially poignant is the perspective brought by the young Lara who has taken the narrative of her mother's story in her hands both figuratively and literally. Through Lara's hands, we are given the sensual pleasure and burning cold of being exposed to the hidden truths that lie beneath the surface of people and relationships that cannot be expressed in words.

Lesbians are often invisible in both literature and sexual discourse. Seen through the male eye "I" of hetero-compulsive culture, intimacy between women is indicated for male pleasure or ignored completely and registered as "friendship." Where the woman's experience is excluded in history and literature, lesbian relationships are the double woman double negative. There are few words for the invisible and often it is a writer's job to take those words on and stretch them with the entire body. Following Russian traditions like that of Marina Tsvetaeva, Vapnyar takes on the subversive with intimacy and intensity. Yet unlike Tsvetaeva and within a new century, Vapnyar does not only use the absence of pronoun to suggest a Sapphic presence (presence through absence).

Instead, she takes on the absence and grapples with it, gives it a shape, a pattern, and face.

"The lesbian double threatens because it suggests a perfectly sealed world of female desire from which man is excluded... But exclusion is also part of the nature of voyeuristic pleasure which demands that a distance between the object and the subject who is looking should always be preserved."¹ The voyeur in this case is not a male protagonist, rather, it is Lara. As a child, Lara threatens the boundaries that demand distance. She is her mother's daughter, connected through constant presence and inclusion. The reader meets Lara in a hostile environment, the snow, the subway, the push and pull and wet of everything that surrounds her. Dressed as any other cared-for child might be—in layer upon warm layer, she is inconspicuous. Yet there is one telling characteristic that allows you to understand the nature of Lara's voice instantly: "I never wore gloves," she states, "because I needed my fingers to be free."² Lara's fingers can be followed throughout the story, constantly engaging with the sensual world belonging to Lydia. This sensual world is passionate. Lara describes Lydia's grove as unlike any other place and follows with a description of wind gusts that come "out of nowhere and pin you to the ground." This place Lara describes not only pushes against her, it silences her: "the cold air made my teeth ache when I spoke."³ Because of this, besides the narrative of thought, we are taken through the experience with Lara's sense of touch.

This touch begins with her mother's actions—when her mother rings Lydia's doorbell, Lara's heart begins to pound in anticipation.⁴ The reader must wonder if this

¹ Creed, Barbara. "Lesbian Bodies" 122

² Vapnyar, Lara. There are Jews In My House, "Lydia's Grove" 63.

³ Vapnyar, Lara. There are Jews In My House, "Lydia's Grove" 65

⁴ Vapnyar, Lara. There are Jews In My House, "Lydia's Grove" 66

pounding is echoed in the mother's chest as well. At first, one might assume that Lara's mother is disconnected from this story. That her interests are detached beyond the passion she may feel for creating the perfect manuscript. But the manuscript must be examined. The manuscript of the children's book connects Lydia and Lara's mother deeply. Within art, within any collaborative experience, creation is a sort of lovemaking. It requires a sense of intimacy, trust, and joint possession that must be had, otherwise—the creation fails. With this in mind, it is worth noting Lara's observation that: "for years, their names had appeared on their book jackets with a hyphen: Veller-Rousseau. Some of their readers even thought that it was one person with a double name." The hyphenating of names into one name is most common in modern marriage practice—wherein two partners desire to combine last names without erasing the others'. Therefore, one can read their creative partnership as a type of commitment similar to that of a marriage.

The binding aspect of the manuscript is not the only way in which the character of Lara's mother appears to defy the expectations of someone who would "reject" lesbianism. As Lara watches Lydia's hands move close to her mother's, she notes that her mother becomes tense and drops her hands under the table.⁵ My point of interest is not the tension or the avoidance but rather the lack of leaving and the act of returning. Lara's mother is bound to this marriage and creative partnership, but she is also not without choice. One can choose to leave a partnership or find a different route toward collaboration—such as a postal exchange. These options are not detailed in the story, nor do they need to be. The bind is not merely professional or an obligation. It is also a bind of love that is inexpressible through Lara's mother.

⁵ Vapnyar, Lara. There are Jews In My House, "Lydia's Grove" 70.

Lara sees her mother express affection once, when Lydia gives presence to her desires and Lara's mother rejects them while taking Lydia's hand in hers and softening her name. This affection surprises Lara who cannot recall her mother softening her own name.* Juxtaposed against the rejection, the softness with which Lara's mother called Lydia her best friend is the same softness that literary tradition has often used to push lesbian intimacy into the category of friendship. Lara's mother is bound to compulsory heterosexuality. If the reader remembers, one of the first things we learn about the mother is the fact that her hand remains in possession of a husband that is long gone and a ring that remains.⁶

Untouched by that possession, Lara allows her love for Lydia and what Lydia represents to envelope her. She takes on the lack of reciprocal sensuality, preferring to touch the leather bound books in Lydia's bookcase. It is Lara who discovers the word cat carved into its wood and gasps from the delight of that discovery. Two symbols are at play here, both the cat—often used to enact female sexual nature and the act of discovering with the fingers—often attached to lesbian sexuality. In this place of lesbian sexuality, which Lara registers as a fantasy world like that of fairy tales, she can feel powerful and inspired. She looks at her finger shadows through the delicate teacups that belong to Lydia while they talk about “business,” she is allowed to claim the room as her own.

After the incident of the rejection, Lydia takes on a lover named Emma. But defying the expectations of making Emma the true embodiment of a lesbian presence,

* Common in Russian culture is the adding of a softened ending to a name to indicate affection. ex: Lydia= Lydachka, Lara= Larachka

⁶ Vapnyar, Lara. There are Jews In My House, “Lydia's Grove” 65

Vapnyar makes Emma the embodiment of the absence that moves between Lara's mother and Lydia. Upon meeting Emma, Lara's mother clutches a greasy dishrag in her hands and does not realize she has been doing so.⁷ Perhaps it is at this moment that Lara sees her mother as having made a choice that went against her desires. Lara also notes that Lydia's hands are changed. She takes up cooking instead of ordering out and in this way she takes back her once rejection of being a proper Russian woman who keeps house. "When I looked at her delicate fingers covered with black, sticky peel, the story of Cinderella always came to mind."⁸ Although Emma becomes a human presence, the intimacy between women in this story becomes invisible except for Lara's own sadness and desires. Lara takes on lesbian sexuality, which she has discovered through her exploration of Lydia's world and her mother's silence. She imagines using her fingers to pull a trigger that shoots a revolver at Emma and liberates Lydia.⁹ Lara knows that by doing so she does not kill female sensuality. She is aware of the word cat that had once been carved in Lydia's bookshelf and the way the bookshelf was replaced with a dog who goes by the name of Kitty but is not one. By imagining Emma's removal, Lara not only hopes to liberate Lydia but allow for the existence of true identity—perhaps even her mother's.

But Lara is young and is still bound to the limits of her imagination. It is Lydia who breaks the silence and gives presence to her sadness. At this moment of truth, Lara's mother is also compelled to show affection and engage in an embrace with Lydia. When this embrace is invoked, a spell breaks in the story and Emma becomes a character as

⁷ Vapnyar, Lara. There are Jews In My House, "Lydia's Grove" 72

⁸ Vapnyar, Lara. There are Jews In My House, "Lydia's Grove" 75

⁹ Vapnyar, Lara. There are Jews In My House, "Lydia's Grove" 75

well. The embodiment of absence is challenged and in that moment craves to undo itself, to open up into something which is tangible—touchable: “clawing her skin on her chest with her crimson fingernails.”¹⁰ But the absence cannot undo itself because Lara’s mother remains trapped. She chooses to run away from the confrontation and in this second choice of rejecting truth, breaks the bind that has connected her and Lydia—the manuscript that Emma throws out of Lydia’s apartment, out of Lydia’s life.

It is Lara who picks up the manuscript and brings it to her mother. Lara carries the memory of the bind between her mother and Lydia, the Lydia who Lara herself loved. Lara Vapnyar uses a child’s perspective to successfully detail desire and restraint. Skillfully, she uses hands when a mouth is not enough, a mirror held up to the deepest intimacies of lesbian relationships. Through Lara, the intricate relationship between two women is not only radically explored but also longed for.

¹⁰ Vapnyar, Lara. There are Jews In My House, “Lydia’s Grove” 76