

DREAMING OF A MAIL-ORDER HUSBAND

Russian-American Internet Romance

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to participate in building democratic societies.

To the women
who have shared their
stories with me.

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Introduction

*W*hen Russian mail-order brides appear in American news reports and TV documentaries,¹ they are usually connected to stories of abuse, domestic violence, and human trafficking. Often these brides are described as victims, trapped in horrible marriages with lonely, imbalanced men. Sometimes they are portrayed as gold diggers looking for economic stability and a green card. Occasionally they are shown as women married to American husbands who are helping them adjust to life in the United States. Rarely, however, are they allowed an active role in these portrayals. The women are contacted, courted, married, imported, abused, or cared for by men. They are the direct object of American attention, for better or worse. Seldom are they allowed to be the subject of their own activities.

This book tries to offer an alternative. It is about six women from the former Soviet Union, who have met men through listings on the Internet. It is a study about how and why the women have placed themselves on Internet matchmaking sites. Rather than writing about foreign romances, trafficking, or mail-order brides in general, I use this book to let these women themselves speak. This is a highly problematic assertion: I, as the author, am still interpreting what they say, in some cases translating their words, and always co-opting their voices. But I am also trying as best I can to present their perspectives and reflections on why and how they have chosen to meet foreign men through the Internet. To try to give the reader a feeling for the details of the world these women inhabit, I have included

anecdotes from when I studied in Russia during the mid-1990s. Including my own experiences in the text this way can give this book a personal memoir style, but I hope that the reader will see these anecdotes as a way of describing what the Russian transitional economy looks like on the ground and in daily life. I also hope they can show how the women's descriptions and explanations of their activities are influenced by their own personal life experiences and that I, as an outsider, had a special relationship to their context. While I cannot hope to convey or even construct any detailed understanding of these individuals' personal backgrounds from an interview or a few exchanged correspondences, I can try to give the reader a feeling for how I, as an American, experienced life in Russia and perhaps thereby also create a contextual background against which the reader can place the interviews and the other academic research I cite.

I work in the field of gender and technology, and this book stems from a study originally designed to examine the spread of IT to and within the former Soviet Union. It is based on interviews with Russian women both there and in the United States, women who were writing to American men or who had moved to America to live with a man they had met "online." When I began the project in the late 1990s I did so by purchasing the addresses of women listed with a Russian mail-order bride website and writing them a letter in which I introduced myself and the study. I sent that letter to eighty-eight women, asking them if they would be willing to participate. A few of those letters were returned unopened, and some probably got lost in the mail, but from the ones that made it to their destination, nineteen women wrote back to me. Many of these women said they would be willing to meet me in person, and when I traveled to the former Soviet Union a few months later, I interviewed fourteen women, two of whom were also working as local matchmaking agents.² A few years after the initial project, I took up the research again and interviewed individuals in the United States who were involved in Russian-American relationships, seven in total, this time both men and women.

Most of the interviews I conducted in the former Soviet Union were done in Russian, though a few of the women I spoke with saw our meeting as an opportunity to practice their English, and in those cases we spoke in English. The interviews I have recreated here are from notes

taken during and after those interviews. Names and other identifying details have been changed throughout the text. In a couple of more sensitive cases, to protect the identities of the women I interviewed, I have created their personae based on composites of several different interviews. The interviews with women in the United States were conducted in English, but when writing them up for the book, I fixed grammatical structures in the interview transcripts, mostly adding articles and correcting verb tenses. These are aspects of spoken English that Russians sometimes have difficulties with, and I decided to change them for two reasons: first, it makes the text easier for a native English speaker to read, and my aim is to express the content of what the women are saying, not their specific way of speaking; and also because the English in the translated interviews would have otherwise appeared much “better” than the language in the interviews conducted in English, unjustly creating an apparent difference between the women in their ability to articulate feelings and ideas. So, reader beware: the interviews that follow have been reconstructed, some have been translated, and others have been “touched up.” But the meaning of what the women said comes through.

The group of people I have spoken with is self-selected, and their self-selection can influence my results. This raises questions about the women I met. Why did these women, and not others, reply to my letter? Are they more or less satisfied with their matchmaking experiences than others? Are they more positive or negative about the options available to them than other Russian women? Are they more reflective about their activities than many of the others whose photographs are listed on the Internet? I will never know the answers to these questions, and yes, my study is skewed because of the character of the empirical material.³ But that is part of doing a study like this. All samples are necessarily skewed. Likewise, my analysis of the material creates another layer of interpretation. This is an unavoidable element of social science research. I cannot claim that this study tells a whole and unadulterated truth about Russian women and foreign men. I can only hope that this book will stimulate a more nuanced discussion about their relationships. I also hope it will prompt recognition that the terms “Russian woman” and “Russian mail-order bride” describe an extremely varied group of individuals.

In writing this book, I have chosen to detail the experiences of the six women presented here because they each bring out aspects of their search that are different from the others, yet at the same time their stories of what they did, whom they met through the letters, and how they reflect on their contact with Western men resonate with the comments I heard from others during this research. Their experiences are in some way typical, yet they are each unique. That is one of the points I want to make with this book: “Russian mail-order bride” is a much more heterogeneous category than tends to be presented and understood by the matchmaking industry, in the media, and in activist debates against the phenomenon. As telling as the six narratives presented here are, however, it is true that there are many more stories to write. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of Russian women are writing to Western men and each of them has her own reasons for doing so. In addition, the correspondence generated in these courtships touches and involves other people the women know. Some of these contacts appear tangentially in the book. Predictably, parts of this book reflect on the men in America, and in other countries, with whom the women meet and correspond. But the cast of characters does not end there. Their stories also involve children, usually from first marriages to Russian men, who are co-participants in the relationships that develop. And importantly, it turned out that these stories often involve the older generation, too. In fact, I met mothers of both Russian women and American men who played significant parts in trying to develop the international marriages that are detailed. These “supporting characters” in the narratives highlight the point that the term “Russian mail-order bride” can really be conceived of as a trope which hides a myriad of relationships and actors.

Why these six and not others? The simple reason is that I was most moved by these six, but their experiences say much about the difficulties of life for women in the post-Soviet society. Although, in the early 1990s, the Soviet Union dissolved and the republics it had comprised became independent states, many of these states are still loosely federated (as the term Commonwealth of Independent States indicates); this commonwealth is contentious in a number of the republics, which has contributed to political instability, ethnic conflicts, and minority status for the Russians living in them. The switch from communism (at least in name), with a strictly

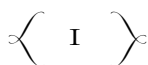
planned economy and a tightly woven social welfare net, to (robber baron) capitalism has created extreme hardship for some of the population and allowed others to accrue fantastic wealth. The transitional period has also involved general economic instability, job losses, sporadic bouts of hyperinflation, and a currency that is not always reliable. It is not clear whether, or how, matters will improve. Therefore, much of what the women say should be understood against the context of their lives in the postcommunist landscape. Their decisions to write to men abroad and the opinions they form from these correspondences are flavored by structural influences on their daily lives.

My original research project was an analysis of the spread of technology in the former Soviet Union and whether men and women had different levels of access to computers and the Internet. These issues are important, but I realized that there was much more involved in what the women are doing than could be addressed with this limited focus. I felt that there were more details about the practices of Russian women writing to foreign men that should be examined. How did they find out about these matchmaking sites? Why were they interested in foreign men? What kind of responses did their listings generate? How many found “love and happiness”? These were questions I wanted to answer as well. When I started to write this book, I tried to contextualize the material I gathered in the interviews, about IT usage and much else, against academic research on women, work, family life, and feminism across the former Soviet Union. To answer many of the questions my material raised, I took an interdisciplinary approach, relying on work from fields as diverse as sociology, anthropology, economics, international relations, Slavic studies, even literary studies. I also wanted to touch on the feminist debates about whether mail-order brides are trafficked women or if they are free agents. But this proved to be very difficult. The material I gathered tended to problematize the discursive framework of these debates more than it suggested answers. The perspective my informants shared with me served to dislodge my original understandings of mail-order marriage and the impact of IT on the international political economy of desire more than it gave me simple answers.

Yet, as vital as other research is to explain why and how the women are meeting foreign men, analysis of the technology they use is still relevant.

When I conducted the interviews, in the late 1990s, the women I met had extremely limited access to the Internet. What existed was very expensive, beyond the means of most of them. Five years later, when I interviewed Russian brides in the United States, it was obvious that access to the Internet had changed significantly. Many of the women I spoke with in America were in close contact with their families back home through the Internet, and several of them had even been in regular contact by e-mail with their husbands before they moved to the United States. This is influencing the transnational aspects of the relationships being developed and maintained. However, the option of regular and affordable access is still not a reality for all women in the former Soviet Union. In the development of Russian-American romances, e-mail, chat, and affordable long distance telephone calls are complementing the letters traditionally associated with mail-order brides, but letters are still a common way of developing initial contact between partners.

These are the academic details behind the work presented here and the style in which it is written. But there was another motivating factor behind my decision to write this book. After I had reported my initial results on Internet access patterns, I found I could not stop thinking about what the women I had met had said and done, and wondering how they were progressing in their search for a husband. The material would not let go of me, and I felt there was much more to be said about and, importantly, *by* the Russian mail-order brides I had met. So I sat down to write, again. This book is an attempt to finally let them speak about their actions and their dreams. My intention is to highlight the thoughts and understandings of Russian mail-order brides and address the fact that they have generally been objectified, silenced, and discussed in the media and on websites but rarely given the opportunity to speak for themselves.



A Catalogue of Women

*O*ne afternoon, early in my stay as an exchange student in Russia, I had been invited back to a new friend's apartment for dinner. We chatted in the sitting room, looking at pictures of her childhood and talking about her hopes to land a job as a singer, while her mother made dinner in the kitchen. The smells that started wafting out to where we sat were making my stomach rumble, and when we were finally called in to eat, I was both hungry and excited to be treated to a home-cooked Russian meal. The food was already dished up when we sat down at the little table, and Natasha's mother smiled warmly as she encouraged us to eat. I said "thank you," picked up my spoon, and looked into my bowl only to realize that the "chicken" in my chicken soup consisted of one boiled claw standing straight up out of the broth. Natasha and her mother both had bowls of broth with little pieces of onion floating in them, but I, as the guest, had been given the claw to chew on. It was the first time I had been invited home with Natasha; I knew they didn't have very much money, and I understood that I was being treated as the guest of honor. So, I delicately picked up the claw, smiled my appreciation at both of them, and ate what I could of it.

Natasha was one of the first women I met in Russia, and she had impressed me with her self-confidence, her talent, and her determination. Because of this, I had been more than a little surprised when, after we had finished our soup and were drinking tea and eating teaspoons of jam, she confided that she was listed with a matchmaking agency offering Russian

women to American men. She seemed so independent and ambitious that I found it difficult to reconcile her personality with the desire to be an imported housewife. But she was serious about her chances of finding a husband that way.

This was in the mid-1990s, before the Internet had really taken off, and Natasha's picture had been printed up in a black-and-white catalogue and mailed out to interested men. Because of that one picture, she had received letters from about fifteen men, and when I asked her about them she eagerly put her teacup down to dig the letters out of her drawer and show them to me. We spent the next hour poring over photos and words from men who were interested in Natasha, and she asked for my help pinpointing where they lived on the map of North America in her mother's atlas. As she opened up to me, it became clear that Natasha was no longer attractive to local men, having reached the ripe old age of twenty-three. This surprised me at first, but as the year wore on, I gradually realized it was true. Women in Russia, at least in the provincial town where I was studying, were expected to have been married by her age. There were not that many men who would want to marry a *devushka* as old as Natasha. She was constantly being approached by married men, but because she wanted more than a romantic affair, she thought an American husband might be a better solution.

I had tried to ask her why she felt it was so important to get married, especially since she was busy building her career, but I could tell she thought it was odd I would even formulate a question like that. To her, it was essential she find a husband, and she was very serious about the possibilities her American letters contained. I was not overly impressed with the men who were writing to her, and several of the letters were so poorly put together that even Natasha could see that she wrote English better than those men did, but she was nonetheless willing to give most of them a chance and had started correspondence with several of them. During the rest of the evening I helped her formulate a couple of letters, translated some of the colloquialisms the men had used, and then just listened as she told me her daydreams about life as a wife in the United States.

That was more than ten years ago, but I was reminded of Natasha a few

years later when I was working on a research project about the spread of information technology in the former Soviet Union. I was trying to gather some preliminary data about Internet usage in a certain city, and I had typed the city's name into an Internet search engine, hoping to find listings of service providers, cyber cafes, and possibly even IT courses at the local university. But the search results gave me none of those things. Instead I found a short page of CIA facts about the region, a personal home page by someone who had recently visited the place, and page after page of biographical details from Russian women who were trying to find husbands in the West. Instead of the names and prices of local e-mail service providers, I found "Ludmila, 24, I want a kind, serious, honest, caring, well-off man who loves children"; "Irina, 30, I am kind, good-mixer, cheerful, romantic, honest, humorous, and loyal. I can only speak a little English"; and "Svetlana, 20, cheerful, soft, faithful, humorous, loving woman. I like music and sports. I especially like knitting and sewing. I also like pets."

For a brief moment, sitting there at my computer, I smiled wryly at the irony that the city's cyberspace identity was made up of women who were trying to leave it. My smile disappeared quickly, though, as I started surfing through the women's pages and the other parts of the "International Matchmaking" site to which they belonged. I soon started feeling queasy. The section of the site I had surfed into was just one of many for the various regions of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and there were thousands of pages listing women like Ludmila, Irina, and Svetlana. And as I surfed around a little more, I realized that the company I had found was a small part of a large industry listing available women around the world. I knew that Russian mail-order brides had become more common in recent years, but until I came across those pages, I had no idea that there were so very *many* of them on the Internet.¹ Or that the women were literally being presented as potential wives to be "purchased" from the companies which were marketing them.

But aside from my shock over the sheer quantity of women on the sites, my repulsion was stirred by the obvious objectification and commodification that the pages contained. I was surfing through a veritable catalogue of goods. And I mean literally. One typical site let me search its databases of women in different ways. I could view listings of the women whose

pictures had just arrived that week or of all the women from a certain city or region; I could run a query against the database and find the women who met my demands for specified physical and social characteristics—all women under twenty-five with blonde hair and no children, for example. And regardless of how I refined my search, I was presented with page after page of small thumbnail images of women who were waiting to write to me. Or, more precisely, who were waiting to write to a future husband in North America, Europe, Australia, or New Zealand. Next to each image was the woman's first name, her age, height, and weight, and when I clicked on one of these headshots, the woman's individual page appeared with a larger photo and her personal details. I could see a full body shot, read her biographical description, and, if I was still interested, I could click on the button which let me "add number 90541 to my shopping cart."

The "shopping cart" button was only one indication that the women were being presented as objects for sale. In "satisfied customer" testimonials sprinkled throughout the site and on separate pages dedicated to the virtues of Russian brides, this consumption rhetoric was rationalized by saying that the women, as such, were not for sale, it was only their addresses that were being sold. And to be fair, this was literally true. But the overwhelming impression given by the site was just the opposite. The way the women's identities were presented for potential husbands also helped the process. Each woman's page was dominated by a large picture of her, taking up the entire left side of my screen. In some cases it was a snapshot, an amateur photo of the woman peeking out between two birch trees, or on a lake shore, posing in a swim suit. But most of the photos looked like studio portraits, showing women who were professionally made-up and standing in obviously choreographed poses like shop window mannequins.

Below each woman's main photograph was a link that took me to another page of three or four additional images. Here the women were shown in different outfits, usually a swimsuit, a revealing dress, and another more matronly outfit, plus a close-up of the woman's face. The impression these images gave, along with the larger, first-page picture, was of women who were consciously and successfully balancing on the tenuous line between madonna and whore. I remember, for example, one