

“A novel that made me laugh, then cry,
and stayed with me long after I finished reading.”

—**STACY McANULTY**,
author of *The Miscalculations of Lightning Girl*

“*Ain't It Funny* is a story that's wholly original, bighearted,
and empowering—just like Maya herself.”

—**JENNIFER RICHARD JACOBSON**,
author of *Small as an Elephant* and *Paper Things*

Eleven-year-old Maya's life is a bit of a mess.

Her dad just moved out to pursue his stand-up comedy dreams, her mom seems more preoccupied with running the family's Russian deli than getting Dad back, and Maya's anxiety and germ worries have only been heightening. Her grandma always tells her *slozi goryu ne pomozhet*—tears won't help sorrow—but right now it's hard to be strong.

So when her teacher Ms. Banta announces the sixth-grade talent show, Maya sees an opportunity. If she can perform stand-up comedy in the show, she can prove to her mom and dad that comedy has a place in all their lives and try to bring them together again. But conquering her fears amid her family falling apart and a growing hot-hot-hot feeling inside is easier said than done . . .

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Ain't It
FUNNY

BY MARGARET GUREVICH

Penguin Workshop



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CHAPTER 1

When people leave you, it's supposed to pour.

But the unusually hot November sun has other plans.

“Well,” Dad says as he puts the last moving box into his trunk, “that’s that.” He shoves his hands into his pockets and forces a smile.

“That’s that,” I repeat, like it means something. Like he’s just going away to perform in a comedy festival as he’s done on other weekends. But that’s not it at all. The next time he’s here, it will be to pick me up. Not to come home.

“Sooo.” He rocks back and forth on his heels. “I’ll see you next weekend.” He takes his hands out of his pockets and pulls me to him.

His breath catches as he hugs me tight, making the lump in my throat even bigger. My eyes water, and tears mingle with the dampness of his shirt. I pull away because I know Babushka is looking through the window, and she wouldn’t approve.

Slozi goryu ne pomozhet, she always says. Tears won’t help sorrow.

“It will be okay,” I say. “We’ll get through this.” I’ve heard him and Mama say this, but the words sound wrong on my lips. Still, Dad nods, eyes distant.

He kisses the top of my hair. “Are you sure you’re only in sixth grade?”

Babushka knocks on the window, and Dad gives me one last hug and jogs to his car.

I wait until the words #1COMIC are only dots on his New Jersey license plate before running inside. Until I’m certain my eyes are dry, and my lips don’t tremble.

“The Russian Gourmet opens in half an hour,” Babushka says as soon as I walk into our store’s kitchen.

I know she and my dad didn’t really get along, but I can’t believe she’s acting like this is a regular day.

At least Mama will be in my corner. There’s no way *she’s* up to working.

“Mama?” I say as she places sliced carrots on top of the gefilte fish.

She straightens her sagging shoulders. “Your grandma’s right. The deli can’t run itself.”

“But—”

Babushka positions herself between Mama and me and drapes a hefty arm around each of our shoulders.

Mama’s eyes are glassy, and she bites her lip.

“Let me tell you both something about the women in our family. We’re strong. We can get through anything. Your great-grandma used to say,” she pauses, kisses her fingertips, and raises them to the ceiling, “*Slozi goryu—*”

“*Ne pomozhet,*” I finish.

“That’s right,” she says, pulling me into her soft middle. Mama straightens her shoulders and adds fresh dill to the fish.

I blink back fresh tears.

“I guess I’ll go shower,” I say. My clothes feel extra sticky.

“Good girl,” Babushka says. She glances at Mama. “Sarah, why don’t you take a few minutes, too?”

Mama hugs me, and we trudge up the stairs that connect our two lives. Thunder rumbles in the distance. A few gray clouds try to sneak past the sun, but it pushes them away.

“Nice try,” I whisper, but *slozi goryu ne pomozhet*.



Freshly showered, I inhale the smell of marinated pickles and fried onions as I place the brown cardboard box beside the magazine display in our store.

The magazine, *Otvet*—or *The Answer*—is like Russia’s version of the *Enquirer*. This week’s cover has a UFO on it, and side stories about talking dogs, celebrities, and Russians’ favorite remedy for all diseases—fresh garlic.

My phone pings as I finish the last row. Val. Val has always been there for me, but she’s been especially supportive since I told her in secret that my dad was leaving today. She even offered to let me hold on to her Moana Funko Pop! for good luck, which, coming from her, was a big deal.

You okay?

Babushka is not looking in my direction, so I quickly type back.

Russians don't cry, so I guess so.

Just keep swimming.

She adds a picture of Dory from *Finding Nemo*. I laugh, then quickly pocket my phone when Babushka glares at me.

Time for the mahtroshka display.

The Russian Gourmet is a Russian grocery store and deli, but we also sell Russian books, magazines, and toys. Mahtroshkas are dolls within a doll. We have traditional ones that are painted to look like old Russian grandmas with kerchiefs around their heads, but we also have modern ones, like the Simpsons. You open up Homer to reveal a smaller Marge and keep opening until you have a tiny Maggie.

Usually, Dad helps me arrange the mahtroshkas, and we make up stories about them. For example, instead of keeping Snoopy near Charlie Brown, we put him next to Scooby-Doo, because his Red Baron adventures would fit right in with the Scooby gang. It's already weird working without him today. Not for Baba, though. She always complains that he needs to help more and talk less. She also never liked our creative mahtroshka maneuvers. But the part that bugged

her most was when Dad would zone out and craft stand-up routines in his head.

I do that, too. It helps me pass the time and ignore the rude comments. Not to say I don't like working here. It's been fun being here with Dad, Mama, and Baba, all of us banding together to make this store great. I started helping last year—just a few hours a week—and the customers quickly learned I knew my stuff and could pack things up just as quickly as Mama and Baba, so it made me feel grown-up and important. But the mental stand-up routines come in handy for the handful of obnoxious customers. Plus, I'm better at faking interest in their stories than Dad, so Baba doesn't get annoyed with me.

"Maya," Babushka says, "we're opening in five."

I move Elsa beside Rudolph, put on my gloves and hairnet, and brace myself for the line that's formed outside. Mama winks at me and does the same.

"Was that Val? You didn't say anything to her, did you?"

Mama doesn't like me to share family business. "She's my best friend."

She frowns but kisses my forehead. "Here we go," she says under her breath. "Judgy Russian ladies at twelve o'clock."

I laugh as Babushka flips the Closed sign to Open. "*Za-hoditze, zaboditze*," she says, welcoming everyone inside.

People shove each other, trying to grab numbers, and I'm glad I have the counter for protection. The three of us divide and conquer. I get lucky with Mrs. Sanchez.

She uses a cane to push her skinny eighty-five-year-old body to the counter. Sometimes, I think the cane is just for show—or to whack people in line.

“What can I get for you today?” I ask. Mrs. Sanchez is loud and bossy, and I admire that. I love customers’ surprised faces when they realize she won’t let anyone push her around. I also love her lavender hair.

“What’s fresh today?”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “It’s all fresh *every* day.”

“Hmph,” she says, like she doesn’t believe me. It’s the same conversation we have each time she comes.

I lean forward, like I’m going to tell her a secret. “Just to show you how sure I am, I’ll throw in an extra pirozhok for free.” This is part of our routine, too. Good thing she buys a lot, or we’d go broke. The pirozhki, dough stuffed with chicken, beef, or veggies, are our best sellers.

A look of triumph crosses her face. “Deal. I’ll also have the herring salad, poppy seed cake, and those Russian ravioli, what are they called again?”

“Pelmeni.” I pack her items, moving her along.

She nods. “Yes, those. I don’t miss my dieting days, I’ll tell you that.” She slaps a bony hip and laughs.

“Why diet when you can eat?” I wink at her and bring her food to the register.

“You’re a smart girl.” She places a quarter in the tip jar as the line grows. “And funny, just like your dad.”

I force a smile. “He’s performing later. That’s why he’s not here.” Like she even asked.

Mrs. Sanchez nods and pats my hand. “Good for him.” I’ll have to change my gloves now, but I appreciate her kindness.

Baba motions Mrs. Sanchez to the cash register, and I quickly change my gloves. I cringe when I see my next customer.

“Good morning,” Mrs. Nelson says. Her daughter Lacey is in my sixth-grade class at McKinley Elementary. When I met Lacey in kindergarten, her last name was Katznelson, but by second grade, it was just Nelson. The Katz in front of it made it “too Russian,” according to her mom. I wonder if she knows that Lacey talks in Russian whenever she wants someone to feel left out. Maybe that was the compromise: Being “other” is okay as long as you make those around you feel less than.

“How can I help you today?” The hot-hot-hot starts in my stomach. My fingers tingle inside the gloves, like the tiny needles people get when their feet fall asleep. I try to shake it off. Mrs. Nelson notices everything, and I don’t need her going home and telling Lacey I was being weird.

“To be honest,” she says, unbuttoning her leather jacket, “none of this stuff compares to my mother’s home cooking. God rest her soul.” Her eyes flutter to the ceiling lights. “But beggars can’t be choosers, right?”

I grit my teeth and hope it looks like a toothy smile. “Well, uh, thanks for choosing us.” *Next time, please choose someone else.*

She fans herself. “Have you thought about turning on the air?”

“In November?”

She purses her lips. “It may be November outside, but it’s June in here. And with this line,” she waves her hand in the air, “people will start passing out.”

I can’t help myself. “Have you seen this month’s *Otvvet?* Garlic cures all. Can I interest you in our delicious cheesy garlic spread?”

Mrs. Nelson peers into the glass display case, staring extra hard at the thermometer. Like we would risk poisoning the town! “Fine. I’ll take a pound.”

I scoop a generous helping into our one-pound container and set it on the scale. Perfect. “What else?”

Her eyes zero in on my gloves. “Are those clean, dear?”

I pretend I’m my dad onstage. “Yup. I changed them right before I used the bathroom.”

Mrs. Nelson’s lips pucker. “That better be a joke.”

Baba is within earshot, and her eye is twitching. I sigh. “It is. I changed them right after I helped Mrs. Sanchez.”

“It’s not personal,” she says in a voice dripping with sugar substitute. “I just know how kids can be.”

“Yes, of course.” Except . . . she always asks Mama and Babushka the same thing when they wait on her.

“Will there be anything else?” Widest smile ever.

She taps her fingers on the glass case, even though there’s a sign asking people not to do that. Fingerprints are a pain to clean off. “Throw in four pirozhki, a pound of pelmeni, a large container of borscht, the gefilte fish, aaaand . . .” More tapping on the case.

“How about our shashlik? Everyone loves the shish kabob.”

She shrugs. “That’s fine. Whatever you think is best.” She leans in as I quickly pack up her food. If she’s worried about germ-spreading, she shouldn’t be so close. “I saw your dad’s packed car when I was out for my morning jog. Big comedy trip?”

My hand slips, and the container with the pirozhki falls behind the counter.

A loud laugh bursts from her lips. “I won’t be taking those.”

“I’ll be right back.” I rip off the gloves and run into the bathroom to wash my hands. Lots of handwashing and cold air don’t mix. The combo makes my hands extra dry, and changing gloves feels like sandpaper on my skin. I take a deep breath and return to Mrs. Nelson, making sure she’s watching when I put on a new pair of gloves and pack fresh pirozhki.

Mrs. Nelson purses her lips. “Have a good day, Maya. And give your dad my best.”

“You can tell him yourself when he gets back.” The words just slip out.

Mrs. Nelson smirks. “Will do.”

It seems she doesn’t believe he’ll be back. I don’t know if I believe it either, but I *need* to. And why wouldn’t he? Mama and Dad called this a “separation,” not a “divorce.” Sure, they both have big lawyers, but apparently you need that to work stuff out—like who gets to see me when—even when you’re just separated.

“Maya,” Mama had said when she and Dad sat me down one month ago, “we want to make this as easy on you as possible.” We were on our blue fabric couch—the one Dad got with his bargaining skills at a Black Friday sale the year before. They were on either side of me, and they looked at each other over my head, and then each took one of my hands. Dad was still living with us, but they had apparently already started the separation talks months before. I hadn’t known that until that moment.

“Just because your mom and I are going through something tough right now doesn’t mean we can’t try to make things smoother for you,” Dad added, squeezing my hand.

I just nodded because “smoother” would have meant keeping everything the same. “Smoother” would have been no lawyers, no sharing weekends, and Dad not getting an apartment in New York. I focused on Dad’s words *right now*. That made it sound like this was temporary. Like once they went through whatever this was, all would be better. This wasn’t a period. It was a comma—one big run-on sentence where things weren’t over.