

## The life history of Anna Demovidova, as related over a snack of tea, herring, lemons, and Armenian cognac...

Anna Demovidova was born in Rostov Veliky, a historic town near Moscow, Russia. From the very young age, Anna is notoriously stubborn, unhealthily independent both in her opinions and affairs, and pathologically freedom-loving. Growing up in a small town she channels her energy into orienteering: running around the deep Russian forests with a compass, hoping to consciously stumble on the proper KPP stop (rather than a swamp); sometimes running away from the wild pigs so fast that even making gold and bronze medals (in forms of cheap plastic Soviet radios and thermoses—which was the only good thing Anna’s parents could see in her being gone every weekend and every summer).

Somewhere along the way Anna graduates from a 4-year Children’s Art School (taking 5 years due to the constant class skipping), and when in 1989 a friend announces that she is going to take entrance exams to the Kalinin’s Art Academy in Moscow, Anna seriously considers doing the same. Once she learns that the exam-takers get to live for free at the Academy’s dorm in Moscow while taking the exams, nothing can stop her from going. Not her sweet parents, who secretly hope she fails the exams and comes back home, not the Komsomol which “strong” rows she just joined (because her older sister and also the school’s deeply respected English teacher said so), not even the KGB (Kuzmina Galina Borisovna), the orienteering coach, proclaiming Anna “traitor.” She packs a small but heavy bag of potatoes, onions, and canned meat and gets on the train. Her parents, waiving “good-by” to their 15-year-old daughter, share with her art teacher that they know their daughter is coming home shortly failing the exams...to which the old wise Teacher replies: “I wouldn’t be so sure. Maybe she doesn’t yet draw well, but she does have a strong character.”

Anna learns of her strong character as she enters the run-down building situated between the coffin factory and Miusinskoe Cemetery; as she walks the spot-cleaned red carpet leading to the plaster bust of Kalinin (?); as she turns left passing the full-size Michelangelo Slaves; as she stands in front of the bored college committee looking without any satisfaction through her portfolio; as she walks the streets of Moscow inhaling the amazing spirit of the city... She decides she is going to pass the exams, and she does. An invitation letter from the Academy arrives later that Summer, and shortly after Anna packs more potatoes and moves to Moscow. Same year the Soviet Union collapses.

(Some time, over a glass of wine, Anna can tell you all about her great adventures, make you laugh or even cry, make you think, and maybe even fall in love with the strange, often hurt, always beautiful city of Moscow, its energy and its awkward nihilistic hope... But for now, let’s just say that Anna did learn how to draw and paint, and made great many friends in the three years she spend there.)

In 1992, as Russia attempts a painful transition to market economy, the Kalinin's Art Academy is left without funding. It's becoming more and more difficult for its aging professors to supplement their salaries by secretly selling students' work, and after the desperately staged robbery of the Academy's museum, they let many of their students go, and start charging money from the rest. Anna doesn't have any money, but she also believes that she has learned everything she could there, and is happy to leave.

At this point, Anna's biography interrupts, but fortunately not for very long. (She might tell you what was going on in her life at that point, but we decided not to ask assuming it may take more than a glass of wine for her to tell us anything.)

In 1994 Anna becomes a student at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Although it would be fun to keep you guessing how she ended up there, we will tell you. Anna's older sister, Elena, came to Stevens Point a few years prior to teach Russian at the Senior High School; she later invited Anna to stay with her and go to college there. Anna joins the Art Department, where over the years she receives multiple awards and recognitions. In 1998 Anna graduates with B.F.A. with Honors.

As you can imagine, Anna's life in Stevens Point is not terribly exciting; it does not satisfy her existential desire for adventures, and in some ways only contributes to the overall "To be or Not to be" question. Who knows where all this would take Anna, if not for her other multiple talents: knitting, cooking bortsch, and leading a discussion. In 1998 Anna marries a "local engineer" Jason Jones and moves to Washington, DC. Don't worry, she doesn't spend all her time in the kitchen; instead she paints some of her strongest works and (this is where Anna would modestly look down) establishes herself as a prominent artist.

Somewhere along the way Anna decides to give the world a son; in 2005 Dmitry Demovidov Jones is born. The only paintings Anna does in the next year are of him; some very strong full of love paintings appear from under her brush. While working on her son's 1<sup>st</sup> Birthday portrait, Anna decides that she is ready to return to other subjects, and particularly to her favorite "Women and Food".

To be continued...