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CADAM IN RYAZAN

by Mother Nectaria McLees

We sit blanketed in darkness as the heavy metal stairs are hauled aboard. An iron door at the end of the carriage slams shut as the deep, old-fashioned whistle shrills through the train, and a shiver of expectation through its passengers. We roll slowly into the night; there's no turning back. It's "Spring Nicholas," the May feast of the great saint's relics, and four pilgrims are headed southeast from Moscow, Russia: Katia, my 18 year-old English student, her 15 year-old brother Alyosha, myself, and our friend, Tatiana Grigorievna. We are bound for Ryazan, to Katia and Alyosha's aunt and uncle, and a newly reopened monastery in the remote town of Cadam.

On an overnight train from Moscow's Kazansky Vokzal, we are traveling *koupay*, a compartment with four beds and a door that closes, instead of the open-halled, six-bedded *platzcart*. The choice is rarely settled quickly. *Koupay* is more comfortable, more expensive, and for a few hours or days, you can close yourself into your own small world. Conversely, if the ventilation doesn't work, the penalty is stifling heat, and, if you are less than four, it's pot-luck as to who will fill the extra beds — no small consideration travelling cheek-to-jowl in a closed compartment. *Platzcart*, though cheap and breezy, is an uncomfortable sleep, though it's as public as a bus with its attendant safety-in-numbers and intriguing Dostoyevsky-like characters to lighten the tedium. Each compartment has a tiny fold-down table next to the window and, at the end of the wagon, a huge samovar, like a miniature steam boiler, for heating tea water. We are strict in our observance of Russian train customs — half the pleasure of the journey is the traditional midnight picnic; cup after cup of fragrant Russian tea drunk out of glasses in silver metal holders, and excited, whispered conversations long into the night.

At six in the morning we are put down at Sasavo, the nearest station to Cadam, where we are met by Sergei, Katia, and Alyosha's young cousin. A second Sergei, a son-in-law of Fr. Anatoly, Cadam's senior priest, collects us in the monastery truck, and fresh early morning fills the cab as we make our way to the village.

Cadam is in an idyllic setting, physically divided by its own small river, the Moksha, which winds between the little town's two small hills. From the top of the larger hill, which local Orthodox affectionately call, "Tabor," there is a wide view of clustering single-story wooden houses, each with their *pechka* (Russian stove), white lace curtains, and inevitable geraniums in the three front windows; the pungent smell of wood smoke drifts towards us from hundreds of early spring fires. The backyards are small, each with its vegetable garden and bathhouse. Many homes don't yet have running water, but each street claims its pump and water is carried by hand. The neighborhoods are alive with crowing roosters, foraging hens, freely roaming dogs and cats, and equally free and roaming children. Past the rooftops are lush fields, stretching for miles as the Moksha winds its way through the spring green. In the far distance, the inevitable ring of forests — from one coast to the other Russia is a huge expanse of birch and pine. Summer and fall, nearer woods harbor wonderfully fragrant patches of wild mushrooms and berries. Towering like jewels at the center of an old-fashioned setting, are the monastery dedicated to the Mother of God, and the beautifully restored village church — St. Sergei's — a large, majestic structure, and obviously the pride of little Cadam before the horrors of the 1917 revolution. The golden cross on the bell tower is so close that one is tempted to reach out from the hilltop to touch it.

We aren't staying at the monastery, which doesn't yet have living quarters, but with Katia and Alyosha's Uncle Vladimir and Aunt Tatiana. Uncle Vladimir is the monastery *econom*, who does the major purchasing, raises donations, and generally oversees the monastery reconstruction.

Cadam Monastery

Dedicated to the *Milosti* Mother of God, the Cadam Women's Monastery was closed in the 1920's when the nuns were exiled and imprisoned. It reopened three years ago through the efforts of Fr. Anatoly Kytlinov, a sixty year-old priest with five children, who now serves there with his youngest son, newly

ordained Fr. Dimitry. Fr. Anatoly and his wife, Matushka Zoya, live a few blocks away in the village. The pre-revolutionary monastery is venerated by local Christians and there is a strong local tradition that St. Seraphim himself came from Sarov, seventy kilometers away, to bless its dedication.

There are a handful of nuns here: a few who were secret nuns during the Soviet period, and others, like the future abbess, Matushka Lyubov, who was tonsured more recently. Matushka graduated from Moscow State University twenty-five years ago with a degree in economics, married, and had a son. Plagued for many years with a bad heart, she became an invalid, and it was during this time that she began to pray and go to church. Even standing through services was so exhausting that she often had to lean against a wall for support, or simply go home. One day, the priest asked one of the parish cleaning ladies to wash the very high inside walls of the church. The woman protested, saying that she was too old to climb the ladder, and looking around saw Lyubov: "Why don't you bless her to do it, she's young?" Not knowing of her heart condition, the priest blessed her, and Lyubov, too surprised to say anything, kissed his hand and left. Deciding that a blessing must be fulfilled, she returned to the church and set to work on the precarious ladder. The work was exhausting, but as the days passed she found her health rapidly, miraculously improving until she was no longer an invalid.

After her recovery and her husband's repose, Lyubov moved to Cadam. The monastery was not yet open, so she went to work as the director of the local cheese-making factory, taking her monastic vows a few years later. The monastery has not yet regained its former cells, so she continues to live in the village with her son, while attending daily services, overseeing the monastery's extensive vegetable and flower garden, and supervising the workers who are reconstructing the monastery. Though the monastery garden is on the distant outskirts of town, even the older sisters ride bicycles back and forth to tend it.

Matushka Lyubov is considered by those who know her to be both "very kind and very clever." Uncle Vladimir, the *econom*, wipes his brow with respect when he speaks of her organizing abilities. Well-educated, she is also capable of dealing with the rough-and-ready workers who make up the construction crew. One morning, soon after our arrival, young Sergei came back laughing after his day's work at the monastery. Matushka Lyubov had discovered one of the workers with a bottle of vodka, strictly forbidden on

monastery grounds, and had gone after him with a stick. The workers had run from her panic-stricken, tossing the bottle from man to man as they tried to escape her reach and save their precious contraband.

The former monastery church is in ruins. After years of renovation, its two side altars will be dedicated to St. Seraphim and St. Sergius of Radonezh, while the main altar, like the monastery, will be dedicated to the *Milotsi* Icon of the Mother of God. The former *kellia* for the nuns and a large guesthouse are still standing, but only the church and the dilapidated abbess's residence have been given back. The large building that housed the monastery's pre-revolutionary nuns is still in the hands of the local *militia* (police), the guesthouse is a technical school for seamstresses, and until recently, the abbess's quarters hosted Cadam's nursery school.

Although the monastery has been returned to the Church by the federal government, it is up to the local administration to order the *militia* and the technical school to find another residence, and this is one of Uncle Vladimir's most difficult jobs — prying the buildings back from Cadam's administration.

Uncle Vladimir

Uncle Vladimir is a short stocky man, with thick dark hair and a full beard, whose story is one that you can hear only in Russia. After school he joined the army, rising in the ranks until he was a well-placed adjutant to a Russian general. Although he intended to make the military his career, the army began to disintegrate under Gorbachev and opportunities plummeted. Vladimir, like many other career soldiers, left to look for more lucrative work. With the decline of the Russian economy after *glasnost* and *perestroika*, there were few opportunities for an ex-military man, and he ended up joining what he frankly calls, “a gang of bandits.” Their commercial enterprises were borderline, and when they finally became involved with the mafia and arms sales, Vladimir pulled out.

When his chief discovered Vladimir's abdication, he was furious and threatened to have him killed. Knowing this was not idle talk, Vladimir moved his family to his wife's village in Kasimova, in the Ryazan region. Even there, he knew he would eventually be found and decided that the only way out was to murder the chief before the chief murdered him. Although not yet a practicing Christian, Vladimir did have a certain respect for the



Yelatma Church.

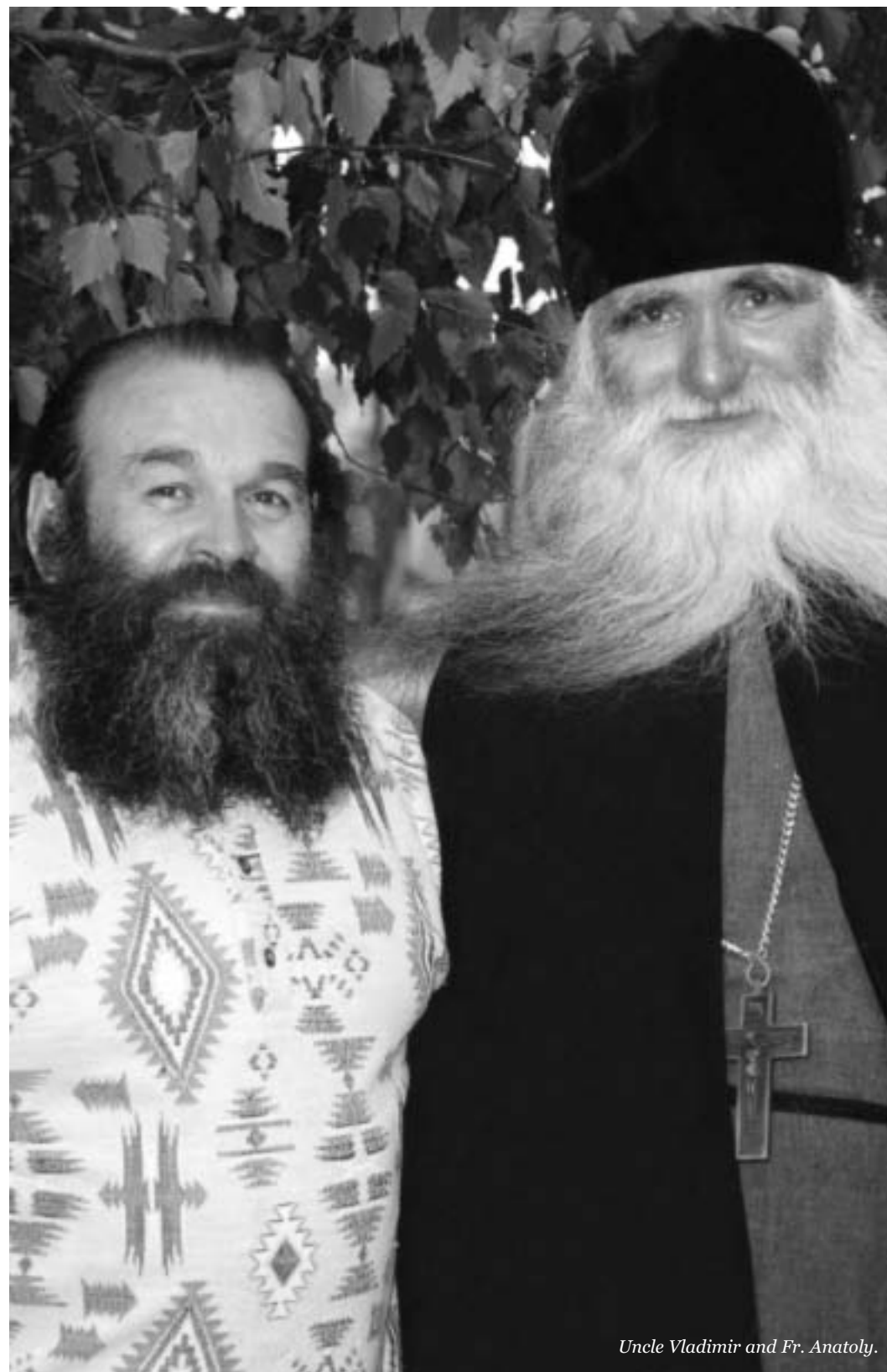
idea of God, and driving past a country church one day he decided to stop and tell the priest, in an odd sort of confession, *before* he killed his chief.

The church was in the small hamlet of Yelatma, near his wife's village, and he had driven by many times before, once seeing the tiny form of 100 year-old schema-nun, Matushka Nikandra, on the roadside. He was so unaccountably frightened at seeing her — "It was the demon inside of me that didn't want to get close to all that grace," that he stepped down hard on the gas and sped away.

But this time, he stopped. The priest at the time was Cadam's own Fr. Anatoly, who, with Matushka Nikandra, had reconstructed the Yelatma church. When Vladimir told Fr. Anatoly his story and how he was going to Moscow to murder his chief, Fr. Anatoly mildly advised him to wait, saying, "I'm sure things will turn out all right." After Vladimir left, Fr. Anatoly, unnerved by this strange, violent man, went to the altar and prayed fervently to God that he never see him again.

A month later Vladimir was back. Fr. Anatoly says, "I looked up and saw him in the doorway and groaned, 'Oh Lord, I told You not to let him come back!'" Vladimir, however, had not killed the chief and was there to talk. After some months he became a spiritual son of Fr. Anatoly, and when Fr. Anatoly moved to Cadam he asked Vladimir to come with him as the monastery's *econom*.

Uncle Vladimir's sense of humor is legendary; the stories are endless and he and his listeners laugh until the kitchen rocks. Over tea, he tells how, three days earlier, he had used our arrival to encourage Polykov, Cadam's regional administrator, to give the monastery a potato field: "There's an important Orthodox nun from America coming to inspect the monastery this weekend. She's a journalist with *Russky Palomnik*, the biggest Orthodox journal in Russia, and, of course, she's going to ask us how we feed the nuns and workers, but we have no fields to show her." Slamming his fist on the table he shouted, "You will shame yourself and us when we tell her that we have no land!" Polykov is visibly anxious. "When did you say she is coming?" "Friday night, and she'll demand to see everything on Saturday." The administrator thought hard, then waving his hand in defeat said, "All right, I'll give you fifty hectares [125 acres] on the edge of town — a hundred if you want, but if you're lying ... I'll be at the monastery on Monday morning to see if she's there."



Uncle Vladimir and Fr. Anatoly.

The Town Square

After breakfast, we set out to explore. The spring sun pours down out of a blue sky onto the rutted dirt tracks. A few beautiful old wooden buildings line Cadam's main street, a provincial Park Avenue, holding the breach against a throng of tiny wooden houses jostling for precedence behind the town square. A few street merchants sit patiently next to upturned boxes, selling sunflower seeds, early vegetables, a few clothes... There's little work in Cadam; only at the monastery are new laborers being hired. A concrete block bakery smells of fresh rye loaves, and we stop to buy the dense black village bread, reputed to be the best in the region. We sit in the square pulling off warm, fragrant handfuls. It's marvelously quiet. A car quietly rolls over the gravel road, accompanied by the low-pitched conversation of the box merchants, foraging chickens, and a hammer ringing in the nearby monastery. A children's game shrills in the distance. Late in the afternoon, the church bells sound for vespers. The Saturday service is five hours and it's well after nine when we walk back through the cool spring streets to tea and the long evening conversation that Russians love.

Aunt Tatiana's Kitchen

When we arrive, Aunt Tatiana, a warm, comfortable, capable woman, is at the stove, and has already put out homemade jam and bread, salted mushrooms, fish, and vegetable relishes. Her shrewd humor matches her husband's, and she keeps us wide-eyed and laughing with stories of Cadam life. As everywhere, her bright, clean village kitchen lures family and friends. Tatiana's wonderfully fragrant cooking is non-stop: crisp potatoes with wild mushrooms, marinated fish, herbed tomatoes and cucumbers, fruit simmering into compote or jam ... One kitchen wall is formed almost exclusively from the home's built-in Russian stove — plastered or tiled brick, extending from floor to roof. Spring, fall and winter, the *pechka* is kept going almost continuously as the house's sole source of heat. Unlike the open frontier-type fireplace in the West, this is a tightly sealed structure, and except for the cooking area, has only a few tiny doors and slots to add wood or vent the fire, using much less wood. Strings of dried mushrooms and bunches of herbs garland the upper reaches of the stove wall and in winter it serves as



Fr. Anatoly and Matushka Nikandra.

an infirmary. Not a few visitors stopping for the night with mid-winter colds have been treated to one of Aunt Tatiana's hearty dinners, then sent to the bathhouse for a steaming sauna (water poured over pitch-hot rocks), then bundled into blankets, given a shot of vodka and bedded down in the cubby-hole sleeping shelf in the top of the stove to sweat it out. In a country where antibiotics are still not plentiful outside the big cities, colds are not treated lightly, and tried-and-true Russian methods still do their duty. No one awakens with a cold in this house.

Tatiana combines warm Orthodox piety with country-bred cleverness. As we sit over tea, she speaks of the struggle against village witchcraft — often just centuries-old superstitions, but sometimes in darker forms. One woman, reputed to be a witch, had recently visited Cadam from a distant village, and on Sunday morning confessed to Fr. Anatoly, who blessed her to receive Holy Communion. A local woman, with a relative in the same village, noticed the visitor, however, and told Tatiana of her reputation. As she received Communion, Tatiana watched her intently for some time and then went to her and said, "Swallow now, and don't come back!" The woman swallowed with a grimace, and left the church. She had intended the Holy Gifts for her own dark purposes.

A Six-Hour Liturgy and an Equally Long Tea

Sunday morning, of course, is liturgy, but as in many fervent Russian villages, it is not our western parish standard of an hour-and-a-half to two-hour services. Like the mighty Volga, the service flows on and on, even by Russian standards. The bells for the hours ring at seven in the morning, followed by confessions, public reading of the canons for Holy Communion, the liturgy itself, and a sermon. A full *moleben* follows, with a *pannikhida* and a lengthy blessing of the waters. Both Fr. Anatoly and his young son sing well. We finish close to two in the afternoon, and then all of us: Fr. Anatoly, his wife, Matushka Zoya, Matushka Lyubov, and Fr. Dimitry with his new bride, Nina, adjourn to Uncle Vladimir and Aunt Tatiana's to eat.

In Russian homes, on church feast-days and name-days, the linen-covered table is set up in the living room, and laden with *zakuski* (starters) and salads: beetroot or carrot, potatoes, fish, and peas. Three different dishes of smoked fish are on the table as well as platters of cheese, salted mush-

rooms, early tomatoes and cucumbers, and piles of fresh, village-made bread. Savory beef or fish soup starts the meal, followed by new potatoes and crispy fried fish. Cookies, chocolate, fruit and tea are for dessert.

Dozens of stories are told around the table: of how Uncle Vladimir came to know Fr. Anatoly, of Matushka Lyubov's conversion to Orthodoxy, of my own interest in the last Russian royal family, chronicles of local saints and righteous men and women, and finally, of Uncle Vladimir's recent trip to Mt. Athos, which, he insists, is like no other place on earth. Deeply moved by the sanctity of the Holy Mountain, he wants us to catch his enthusiasm.

"I used to think that monks weren't smart enough to be successful in the world and had to go to a monastery, but on Athos, every time you turn around — this one's been a professor, that one was a director of a large company, another a major in the army. One was even a hero during the Russian war in Afghanistan. When one of his company jumped out of the troop plane and his parachute failed, the future monk jumped out in a free fall until he caught the soldier in his arms, opening his chute for both of them!"

Tatiana Grigorievna, who hopes to become a nun when her son marries, asks for stories of Ryazan monasteries. Fr. Anatoly obliges by telling how a married priest in the region, several years before, had complained of the nuns at the monastery where he served, saying, "They call themselves nuns, but in confession they tell me they still think of men." A few months later he went to an elder in the Ryazan region (now reposed) and begged to be taken on as his spiritual son, insisting that he loved him and would do anything he asked. The elder said, "If you love me so much, then don't come together with your wife for a year." The priest went away but returned in three days, begging the elder to change the difficult obedience. The clairvoyant elder said, "See, you can't even stay away from your wife for three days, yet you judge the poor nuns for their accidental thoughts, when they don't even do anything."

Nina, Fr. Dimitry's young bride, is teased and complimented until she blushes — which is just the intent — and Fr. Dimitry, seeing her confusion, tells a new story on Uncle Vladimir. "He has the whole town in an uproar. Just last week he went to the town offices to file one of his never-ending requests and the clerk said, 'What are you going to do next — petition to take Lenin's statue down?' Uncle Vladimir: 'I don't have to ask, he's going by himself.' 'What do you mean?' 'Haven't you noticed? As soon as we reopened the monastery, he took a step towards the edge of the pedestal. One day he'll just walk off into the woods!' " Later in the day, Sergei came



*Aunt Tatiana's Table.
L to R: Tatiana Grigorievna, Matushka Lyubov, Katia, Fr. Anatoly, Fr. Dimitry, Nina, Uncle Vladimir.*

across a group of villagers gathered around the dusty metallic figure, the first time it had seen such attention for a decade. One of Lenin's bronze legs was indeed thrust forward, as if about to stride off the platform, and the locals were laughingly arguing amongst themselves as to whether or not it had always been like that.

Talk turns to the reconstruction of the church roof, and Katia and I slip out for a walk. If services are long, so are the feasts—we've been at the table for six hours.

Matushka Nikandra

On Monday we drive to Matushka Nikandra, the 100-year-old schema-nun who lives in the village of Yelatma, near Kasimova. We are once again in the monastery's canvas-covered flat bed truck, with Sergei the driver, Fr. Anatoly, and myself in the front, and Uncle Vladimir, Aunt Tatiana, Katia, Fr. Dimitry, Matushka Zoya, eight-year-old grandson Misha, and Tatiana Grigorievna in the back on wooden benches. The four-hour drive to Yelatma over deeply rutted roads (an "excursion" in Russia) bounces us to the cab roof, and I shudder for those in the springless back. Along the way, Fr. Anatoly points out ruined churches, telling their names and stories of the priests who served there at the beginning of the century. One huge wooden building, bigger than a barn, sits on a desolate hilltop. It is so dilapidated that it's difficult to tell what it was, but when I ask, Fr. Anatoly says sadly, "*Kazansky Sobor*"... "Kazan Cathedral."

We arrive at Yelatma a little after noon. The white picturesque church, dedicated to All Saints, is bordered by an earthen yard, chicken-coop, and tool sheds. On the far side is a well-kept cemetery, overhung with willow trees, fragrant lilacs, and the ever-present wreaths of artificial flowers that decorate Russian graves through the long winters. We cross the yard to a small, concrete-block house, or rather a "duplex" where Matushka lives in one room with a tiny entrance hall.

We knock and Matushka Nikandra comes to the door, radiant with welcome. Our visit is unannounced: the nearest telephone is in Kasimova. Like many Russian nuns, she works in a simple house-dress with a scarf tied around her head, indistinguishable from millions of her countrywomen. She is pleased that we've come, and with great good humor draws us into

her *gostinitsa*. Her one room serves for everything — living room, dining room, bedroom, and guestroom. A tiny alcove does duty as a kitchen. Unlike the concrete-block exterior, her room is a marvel. Flowered paper adorns the walls, kept company by a carpet depicting a large Siberian tiger. The carpet is hung on the wall, Russian-style, to brighten the room and keep out the damp. The patterned linoleum under our feet is spotless, and everywhere, festoons, wreaths, bouquets, and vases of artificial flowers spill over onto tables, windowsills, and the icon corner. The narrow beds that serve as divans during the day are spotlessly made up with white linen and hand-made comforters. Plump pillows in starched cases stand stiffly at attention. As we enter, Katia, no mean housekeeper herself, turns to me in awe, "Look how clean...and she didn't even know we were coming."

While Matushka Zoya and Aunt Tatiana go to Kasimova to purchase food for the meal, Katia, Tatiana Grigorievna and I peel potatoes, and Matushka Nikandra buzzes around doing a hundred things at once. I quickly understand that this is not to be a half-hour call, but another half-day at the table. Uncle Vladimir, whom she knows well, talks exuberantly — his voice booming through the room. She stops him with mock-severity to say, "Just because I don't have teeth, doesn't mean I don't have ears. You don't have to shout."

While the food is prepared, Fr. Anatoly, Fr. Dimitry, Katia, little Misha and I go to the cemetery to look for the grave of another eldress who lived here decades ago: Matushka Anna Ivanovna Matfeeva. Much-loved by the local people, she reposed in 1969, a few weeks after her 100th birthday. Fr. Anatoly says sadly, "There were many like her in our region, but now they are all slipping away, and who is left?" After a half-hour search we find her grave: November 9, 1869 (OS) to November 24, 1969 (NS). Fr. Anatoly thoughtfully serves a *pannikhida*. He seems far-away and as he finishes I ask,

— Did you ever meet her?

— Indeed, she saved me. I was a sailor in my youth, and very fond of my wife, but once, when I came to port, something strange happened. I found I didn't like her anymore. We hadn't quarreled, but I couldn't even look at her, I didn't want to be around her. We had children, but I wanted to leave and I didn't know why. Zoya came here to Matushka Anna and told her about my strange behavior. Matushka thought for awhile and said, "Never mind, someone gave him a bad drink. They cast a spell on it so that he wouldn't love you. Ask him about it, but don't worry. We will pray and he'll be all right." When Zoya wrote and told me her words I remembered that



Matushka Nikandra and Fr. Anatoly.

indeed one night I'd been given a strange alcoholic drink, and it was after that I had begun hating her. Scales fell from my eyes, and I loved her again as I always had."

Matushka Anna was widely known to cure cancer through her prayers — many people came to her and were healed. Thirty-five years later people still come to take the earth from her grave, but Fr. Anatoly says, "It's only those who have warm faith and speak to her as if she were alive that are healed now."

We sit with Matushka Nikandra, who has changed into her monastic garb for the meal. It was she and Fr. Anatoly who rebuilt the church, and served together for several years, he as the priest and she as his *altarnik* (altar attendant). They exchange news, and then Fr. Anatoly leans over to ask, "Tell Matushka Nectaria about your time in prison." Those who know, fall pensive and silent. What followed was simply the most incredible story I had ever heard.

Matushka began:

"I was born on Sept. 13, 1897 and was baptized Sophia. I was the oldest of a large family, six boys and six girls and my father, Simeon Feodorovich Pokrovsky, was a priest here in Ryazan.

"One night, when I was about eleven, my grandfather, Feodor Pokrovsky, visited us. He was also a priest and was known to be a righteous man. (Later, he died serving. He had taken ill during liturgy, but forced himself to serve to the end. The moment he finished wiping out the chalice he leaned against the wall with the holy cup and the cloth tightly clutched in his hands and died.) Grandfather had a beautiful long beard and this particular night, when I sat on his knees after dinner, I began plaiting it. He watched me for a moment, and said, 'You are a silly girl now, but later you will see very bad times. You will know hunger and cold,' he sighed ... 'you will know everything.'

"I went to the monastery the next year," she smiles. "...I went with my dolls." "Did you want to go, Matushka, or did something happen in your family?" "Oh no, I wanted to go. I loved the nuns and at that time there were many twelve year-old girls who were novices, and sometimes even younger. But life was different then.

"I went to the monastery of *Znamensky* [Mother of God of the Sign] in Balikino Celso in the Ryazan region. Matushka Arkadia, our abbess, was very good: strict but extremely kind. I was a great jokester. I couldn't live without jokes. One day, I remember, the nuns went to the fields to dig potatoes. One nun was very afraid of frogs, and when we stopped to rest I put a frog

on her back and told her the knot in her scarf had come undone. She put her hands behind her head to fix it and touched the frog! She began screaming, 'I'll kill you! I'll kill you! Who did it? I'll kill you!' I said, 'Well, dig my grave because I did it.' We were like that all the time, laughing and joking, but we were obedient. We did what we were told.

"I had many obediences. I was as strong as a man and for years I milked 25 cows by hand twice a day and herded them out to pasture in-between. Later, I was the abbess' cell attendant for four years. I was tonsured when I was twenty, with the name Seraphima. In 1926 the monastery was closed and the nuns taken to prison. I was in prison for twelve years. I was 27 years old and I'd lived in the monastery for fourteen years.

"One morning, the guards came in and called my name. I stood up and they said, 'Come, you're going to die.' They took me to the prison yard and tied me to a tree with my hands bound behind my back. They wouldn't even let me cross myself. There were seven of them and they shot at me, but the bullets didn't touch me. They couldn't understand why, but the rules said that if they don't kill you the first time, they couldn't try again that day, so they untied me and took me back to the prison. Every day for thirty days they did this, and every day the bullets from seven to ten guns didn't touch me. No one could explain it."

Here, Fr. Anatoly quietly adds, "What she doesn't tell you, because she is modest, is that finally, the commandant of the camp called in a firing squad of thirty army soldiers to execute her. This time they didn't tie her to the tree, but stood her up against a wooden fence. They all fired on command, but when they lowered their guns, the bullets had pierced a perfect halo in the fence behind her head. The soldiers threw their rifles to the ground and said, 'If you want to kill her, you have to do it yourself.'"

Matushka's account was verified recently by an old man in his late eighties, who was then a young recruit in the Red Army. The well-known Moscow television show *Rusky Dom* (Russian House) heard of Matushka Nikandra's miraculous escape, and in April of 1997, found this old soldier and interviewed him about the incident. He told the same story to the reporters, adding, 'Nothing has ever been right in my life since then. I've always known it was because I tried to shoot her. I have no family, no friends, nothing...'

Matushka continues, "They also tried to hang me. I had a gold cross that the commandant wanted, but he wanted me to deny my faith so that I would give it to him myself. I wouldn't. It was during the same month that they



Pilgrims at Yelatma.

L to R: Fr. Anatoly, Uncle Vladimir, Matushka Nikandra, Tatiana Grigorievna, Aunt Tatiana, Sergei, Katia, Fr. Dimitry.

were shooting me that they put me into a room with three guards and told me I was going to be hung. I said, "I'm ready to die," and I began to pray, saying good-bye to the sunlight, good-bye to the earth, to the sky... As I prayed, the four of us suddenly heard a voice, like a young child's say, "What are you doing this for? She hasn't done anything." Even though they heard the voice, it didn't stop them. They hung me anyway. They tried to hang me many times over that month. Each time they took me down, thinking I was dead, only to have me regain consciousness." She quietly adds, "Even though the voice was that of a child, I'm sure it was the Mother of God." Finally, the commandant just took my cross.

Fr. Anatoly later tells us that Matushka was again too shy to tell what the voice had actually said, which was "Don't touch this saint! She hasn't done anything!"

“The nuns were all forced to work in the forest as woodchoppers. Every day was a workday, but on Sundays and feast-days we refused to work. As punishment the commandant took away our dresses and shoes and made us stand on the snow and ice for hours. Many of us died of exposure and starvation. We were only allowed 300 grams of bread a day [about half a pound].

“At this time my father was also imprisoned in a nearby men’s camp, which was a little easier than ours. Theirs was an “open” camp; ours was behind walls. But those big men couldn’t live on 300 grams a day of bread and died quickly. I didn’t know father was there until one day an old man came to us on prison detail: ‘There’s a priest who looks like you in the men’s prison.’ ‘What’s his surname?’ I asked. ‘Pokrovsky.... an old *starosta* [church caretaker] from Christ the Saviour Cathedral brings him supplies, but they won’t let her in.’ When I knew that my father was in prison, I began saving my bread to send to him through this old man. I was young and strong and I knew I could last a long time.

“Not long after, we were in the woods, chopping trees, when a tree fell on me and I lay under it in terrible pain for the rest of the day. The guard in charge of the work-crew wouldn’t let anyone help me and when night came he forced them to go back to the camp and leave me there. He hoped I would die. When it was nearly dark, a huge bear came out of the woods and saw me. I was horribly frightened, but I couldn’t move — I was afraid it would eat me, so I began praying and it went away. After the next day’s work I still wasn’t dead, so that evening the guard let the nuns help me. They pulled the tree off me and he picked me up by the back of the neck, like a cat, and threw me onto the wooden reindeer cart we used for hauling wood. Then he kicked me. They hauled me back to camp and I was in terrible pain. When we got there they put me in the prison hospital. Every bone in my body was broken: arms, legs, back. I was in a plaster cast that covered my whole body except my head for eight months.

“While I was in the plaster, a man came to me one day and said, ‘Do you know who Pokrovsky is?’ I said, ‘My father.’ ‘They’ve put him in the hospital, he’s dying of starvation.’ He was in the same hospital I was, but I couldn’t get up to go to him. I saved most of my hospital rations and begged the attendants to give them to him, but he died anyway. I saw them take his body away through the window.

“When I became healthy again, they sent me back to work, but one day the commandant and the prison director came and took eighty-five of us

and locked us in a small room. They poured kerosene all over the floor and outside the room, and set it on fire. Everything was on fire — fire everywhere! Eighty-two nuns died; only I and two others escaped. We were in the middle, towards the back, and when the fire began we found a bolted door with sand underneath. We quickly dug the sand out and escaped through the hole, our clothes all on fire. One of the nuns who escaped with me, her head was on fire, and she has all the scars until now. We rolled on the grass to put the flames out and when they came to take the dead bodies, we lay very still. They threw us into the lake with the others, but they couldn’t throw us far and we waded to shore. We had awful burns. The next day they came and found us and tried to force us to work, but we couldn’t, we just couldn’t, so the guards took clubs and beat us. It was terrible, but worse was hearing the cries of the nuns as they burnt to death.

She continues softly, “But what I have to tell you next is even harder. They often took the prisoners on small boats up the river to work in the woods because there weren’t good paths through the forest. The boats only held about six people, but one day they put 26 or 27 on each boat. We begged them not to, that the boats couldn’t carry so many, but, of course, that was their intent. There were two boats and we watched, weeping from the bank as they sank. One of them had *Matushka Arkadia* on it. They drowned and we could do nothing ... I loved her so much. (*Matushka cries for a bit.*)

“Another time when *Pokrov* [Feast of the Protection of the Mother of God in mid-October] came around and we wouldn’t work, they took us three kilometers from town and put us up to our necks in an ice-cold lake. The ice froze around us and that evening they had to pull us out of the ice. They took us back to prison, but they wouldn’t give us any wood for a fire. There were no fires, ever. Many died from exposure.

“A few years later, they took us from the prison in Ryazan to Kondalakshi in the far north, along with some other nuns whose convent had been closed. They took us part-way by boat, but only gave us small salted fish to eat, and no water to drink. We were so thirsty, it was terrible. We all wanted to drink so badly. One of the nuns found a little hole in the bottom of the boat and she began drinking out of it. When the others saw it, they decided to make it bigger so that we would have enough water for everyone. The boat began to fill with water, and when it was up to our knees the guards came down and understood what we had done and stopped the hole. I was very worried when they came down because one of the old nuns was 103. We had been

helping her secretly, walking with her in the midst of us so they wouldn't notice she was ill, and feeding her ourselves. But when they saw her, and understood her condition, they came and took her by the hands and feet and threw her over the side. It was very cold water — we were in Sofil, near Archangelsk — and we saw her eyes wide open with fear as she sank to the bottom.” (*Matushka Nikandra begins to cry again.*)

“After twelve years I was released from prison, but the communists had stolen my family home and wouldn't give it back. I lived on a farm and slept in the barn with the cows in exchange for work. Later, I lived as a cleaner and *altarnik* in one unclosed church after another. It was a very difficult time. It is very hard to talk about this... even in the Bible you won't find a story such as mine.

“Later, I bought a house with earth floors in a village here in Ryazan. People helped me buy it. I lived there for 38 years and then I came here. This church was closed, but I wanted to reopen it, so in the 1980's I went around and gathered money and signatures, petitioning the administration for permission. It opened in 1988 and Fr. Anatoly came and we repaired the church and did services. I was his *altarnik* for four years.” (I count to myself and realize that Matushka had undertaken her campaign to gather money and signatures when she was over 90.)

Matushka Nikandra still does 300 *poklones* (full prostrations) a day as part of her prayer rule, gardens, and keeps her own house. She sees quite normally without glasses and her hearing is acute. At the end of our visit she takes us out to the cemetery to show us a wooden cross that she has newly-painted for her own grave. She has promised Fr. Anatoly that as soon as the monastery in Cadam has living quarters for the nuns she will move there “...but maybe I can't go. I can't leave my dogs and cats, there will be no one to take care of them.” Fr. Anatoly and Matushka Zoya assure her that she can bring them with her.

“After the monasteries reopened, many of them wanted me because people know my story. I went to some in the Ryazan region, but I didn't like them and left. I'd rather live where there aren't so many people. There are many young nuns and abbesses now, but they don't carry on the traditions from before. It's not the same spirit. In one of the monasteries, I used to go to *trapeza* on Saturday and Sunday, and the rest of the week my cell attendant was supposed to bring me food. She often forgot and one time even said to me, ‘Are you still alive? I forgot to feed you.’ Many times I stayed hungry.” She adds,

“Now monasteries are like the world, and the world has become like hell.” Tatiana Grigorievna asks, “But Matushka, if the monasteries are bad, what should I do, can I hope to go to a monastery?” “It's still good to go to a monastery. The most important thing is to pray. You should go to Cadam.”

As we depart, Matushka shyly shows me a tiny doll that she has made clothes for, a miniature abbess complete with a cross, klobuk and prayer-robe. I admire it and she says, “Of course, all nuns like dogs and dolls,” and thrusts it into my hand. She stands in the yard, waving us off before she turns to her chickens.

Although it is already late afternoon, we stop in Kasimova to visit Aunt Tatiana and Fr. Anatoly's mothers, who both live here. In her late 80's, Fr. Anatoly's mother, Matushka Valentina, is also a nun, and serves as *altarnik* in the church of St. Nicholas. A kind, loving woman, we find her in church and she takes us home for yet another supper and tea.

St. Nicholas Church in Kasimova is one of the few in the region that was not closed during the Soviet period. As we leave the church, we meet the priest, Fr. Vladimir, returning. Fr. Vladimir was a mathematician before his ordination. “He is such a good mathematician,” Fr. Anatoly says, “that young professors from the Mathematics Institute still come to ask his help with their research problems. But he's also a good batiushka. Three years ago, a famous Russian magician named Kaspirovsky came to Kasimova to do a show. These professional Russian magicians don't just entertain people with sleight-of-hand, they often dabble in real magic. Before he came, Fr. Vladimir blessed the hall with holy water. After the blessing, Kaspirovsky was two hours late for the show and finally arrived angry and nervous. There was a large crowd, and Fr. Vladimir in the audience in civil clothes, began to pray. Kaspirovsky began his show but became more and more agitated. Another time, a magician actually stopped his show and walked straight through the crowd to Fr. Vladimir, who, again, was not in his *riassa*, to ask him to leave. He refused and the magician couldn't continue.”

The Kremlin Connection

On our last morning in Cadam, Tatiana Grigorievna asks Uncle Vladimir to show us around the former monastery buildings. We wait outside in the spring sunshine until he appears in a freshly-ironed shirt and handsome sports jacket, his hair well-combed and seemingly ready for an official meet-

ing. We follow him down the street until we arrive at a four-story modern block building. Excusing himself, he goes upstairs to get the key for the monastery buildings that have not yet been given back. A few minutes later he is back laughing. “This is the administration building. I went up and told Polykov you were here and that he should come down to greet you.” He said, “I’m not going anywhere. For the past two days, I haven’t even gone out on the street, because I’m afraid I’ll meet her.” Uncle Vladimir, astounded, asks “Why?” “Because she’ll only ask me when I’m going to give the monastery back, and if she doesn’t like my answer, she’ll go to the Kremlin. All of these Americans have connections at the Kremlin.” As we retreat into the street I look up in time to see someone step away from an upper window and the flutter of a curtain.

Sergei’s Story and Our Return

It’s the evening of our departure and we are on the way to the Sasavo station. Under Tatiana Grigorievna’s simple kindness, Sergei, our unassuming, soft-spoken driver, begins to speak about his family and his work at the monastery.

“One day, when I first began there, one of the workers brought a bottle of vodka. When we took a rest we started passing it around. I had just raised the bottle to my lips when I felt a hand grab me by the ear. You might think I’m crazy, but when I looked up it was St. Seraphim of Sarov standing next to me, and he said, ‘I don’t want you drinking in my place.’ He disappeared and I turned to look at the others, but no one had seen or heard anything. I was wide-awake, and I hadn’t drunk anything at all that day, nor did I know yet that the saint was supposed to have been here when the monastery first opened. I just knew him from his icons. A few days later they brought another bottle and as soon as it was opened, I felt my ear pulled again, this time harder. It was St. Seraphim again and he said, ‘I told you — don’t drink here!’ ... I never have.”

Fr. Anatoly has been a priest for 29 years, first in Tyma, then in Soborova and Kasimova, all in the Ryazan region. In two separate instances, Sergei believes, God saved two of Sergei’s daughters through his father-in-law’s prayers. The first was an infant born septic and sent home to die: the second had a serious brain defect. Both times, Fr. Anatoly went into the altar and prayed for them for several hours, and they recovered. In the first

instance, a doctor said that it must have been a miracle, that it was impossible that the child survived, and in the second, the hospital staff simply shrugged their shoulders, saying they didn’t understand. According to Sergei, Fr. Anatoly sleeps only a few hours a night and in chronic pain from ulcerated legs after long years of standing in prayer. Earlier, Uncle Vladimir told us that he had confessed to Fr. Anatoly one Sunday morning when he had not yet read all the prayers before Holy Communion. Fr. Anatoly blessed him to receive anyway, and afterwards went and read the prayers Vladimir had missed himself. We tell this to Sergei, who says simply, “Yes. He takes our sins on himself.”

Waiting for the train, Uncle Vladimir and I speculate on what we can do to get the monastery back, with much laughter over our plans for contacting my “friends” in the Kremlin. The train pulls in, but Russian trains are very long, and stop for only a few moments at each provincial station. You have to guess where your wagon will stop, and, if you are wrong, run along the tracks to get to it before it pulls away. We are about five cars off, so we run, Katia and the boys laughing and calling in the night, and Uncle Vladimir shouting after Sergei, “Catch it!! Catch it!!”

We do, and the grace of God from our pilgrimage as well. ✚

Editor’s note: Matushka Nikandra reposed in the summer of 2003, 105 years old. Memory Eternal!