

Irene: Hello and welcome to Queer as Fact, the podcast bringing you queer history from around the world and throughout time. I'm Irene.

Alice: I'm Alice.

Eli: I'm Eli.

I: And today we're going to be talking to you about Sofya Parnok, a lesbian poet from early 20th-century Russia, often called Russia's Sappho.

[intro music plays]

I: Before we start, we have some content warnings for this episode. There will be a mention of someone being outed without their consent; descriptions of chronic illness; an institutionalisation for mental health issues; and mentions of the Russian Civil War and related famine. If any of this is something you don't want to hear, feel free to listen to one of our other episodes instead. It has different content and different warnings!

Sofya Parnok was born in Taganrog, which is in Russia. If you start at Moscow and go like, directly south 'til you hit the sea, you will be in Taganrog. It's a small seaside town.

A: Okay.

I: So you're just near the border to Ukraine. She was born on July 30th 1885, to an ethnically Jewish family who was not particularly actually religious, but definitely culturally Jewish. It was also a highly educated family. Her mother was a doctor...

A: Mm!

I: ...which is, in 1885, particularly remarkable.

E: Mm, yeah.

A: That's pretty cool.

I: And both parents valued education highly. She had a governess to teach her German, like, before she was five.

E: I envy Europeans at all times.

I: Yep. [laughs]

A: [laughs]

I: When she was six years old her mother died giving birth...

A: Mm...

I: ...to her twin younger siblings, but her father continued her education in that vein, and by the time she was age six she wrote her first poem.

A: [gasps]

E: Oh, okay.

I: Unfortunately I don't know what was in her first poem.

A: Aww.

I: We just know that she wrote it.

E: Mhm. It was probably bad.

I: It was probably bad.

A: Yeah.

I: I probably wrote a poem when I was six. It was probably bad too.

E: Yeah.

A: You'd probably just discovered that some words rhyme with other words.

I: This is true.

A: It was a big moment.

I: Anyway, so in 1895, at age probably ten – she may still have been nine, I wasn't sure...

A: Yeah.

E: Mm.

I: ...she entered the Empress Marie Gymnasium for Girls, which was her high school. By this time she already knew to some extent that her, like, sexual attractions were not normal. We have evidence from like, mid-high school of her writing poetry about her attractions to women...

A: Mhm.

I: ...and her feelings about other girls in her class. Her first still extant poem was written in 1900.

E: Hmm...

I: It was about the dance class she went to with her classmates on a Saturday, and basically she goes through a whole class and describes the attractive features of everyone in the room.

[laughter]

I: Unfortunately...

A: Beautiful.

I: ...I don't have the poem. In the biography I read, the footnote just said "original manuscript in my possession."

E: Oh.

I: So the author...

E: Wow.

I: ...of that biography has the poem and chose not to translate it for me.

E: What's the name of the author? Because I feel that...

I: Yeah.

E: ...we're gonna...

I: Yeah, um.

E: ...address them.

I: We are gonna address them a bunch, because they have a lot of these original manuscripts.

E: Okay.

I: Diana Burgin...

E: Okay.

I: ...is the author.

E: Okay.

A: Is she Russian?

I: She speaks Russian. I don't know whether she is Russian herself, but all the poetry translations I'm going to tell you were done by her.

E: Mm.

A: Okay.

E: Are there many editions of Sofya's work that are out there? Like, are there many translations of it, or is she not...

I: It doesn't...

E: ...widely appreciated?

I: It doesn't seem to be. She was not appreciated in Russia until fairly recently...

E: Mm.

I: ...because of how Russia is...

E: Okay.

I: ...because of how the Soviet Union was about queer people basically.

E: Yeah, yep.

I: She was, like, reasonably well-known in sort of poetry circles in her lifetime.

A: Mhm.

I: And then kind of...

E: Mhm. Mm.

I: ...was forgotten...

E: Yeah.

A: Okay.

I: ...during Stalin's time.

E: I mean, it's not like Russia today is any great shakes for...

I: No, no. Certainly not, but I think just the sort of increased like, communication...

E: Yep.

I: ...with the world and that kind of thing...

E: Yeah.

I: ...makes it a little bit harder to lose a poet because...

E: Yep.

I: ...she's gay.

E and A: Yeah.

I: It's obvious though while she's at school that she feels different; she feels isolated from her peers. I'm going to read you this lovely poem that she wrote – it doesn't sound great in English...

A: [laughs]

I: ...because...

E: Okay.

I: ...it's a poem, but the contents of it was just very relatable.

E: Uh-huh. [laughs]

I: She's talking about, she wants to leave her town; she wants to leave her school; and she says: "Leave here as soon as possible! Oh, faster!/I'm smothering; I'm growing dull;/I'm becoming malicious and nasty;/I now shun everyone.../I don't feel at all engaged with other people./Their happiness gives me no joy.../I despise all people.../Animals are a hundred times dearer to me.

E: Okay. Before we got up to the animals I was like, "Irene, are you okay..."

I: I'm fine, it was just the animals.

E: "...that this is relatable?"

A: [laughs]

E: Okay.

I: It was the... it was that point she got where she was like, "I hate people. Only animals."

E: [laughs]

A: Does she have any key pets throughout her life?

I: She does have a pet later on...

A: Good.

I: ...which I will tell you about briefly later on.

E: I feel like...

I: It is a good pet.

E: I feel like this is a pretty like, stock Queer as Fact episode if we're like, "Here's some relatable poetry, and an animal!"

A: [laughs]

I: Yeah, yeah. That's why I had to read you that poem.

A: Yeah.

E: If she gets a wife she'll be every queer woman we've ever talked about.

I: [laughs]

A: That's factual.

E: Mm.

[laughter]

I: I will not tell you yet.

E: That's reasonable.

I: [laughs] In 1901, she took a summer holiday with her family to Balaclava, where she had what appears to be her first same-sex relationship.

A: Oh good.

I: We, again, don't know a huge deal about this other girl. The only details are from poetry which the only copy of this poetry is a manuscript in the hands of Diana Burgin, it seems.

E: Oh no.

A: Cool...

I: Yeah, basically all we know about her is she seems to have kind of provided an introduction to...

E: Mhm.

I: ...romance, for Sofya.

E: Mhm.

A: Mhm.

I: And kind of introduced her to this idea that she can have female partners.

E: Is that not something that she was already actively wanting? Like, if she was aware already that she was attracted to women...

I: She was aware of being attracted to women, and I don't think she necessarily knew that there were other women who might be attracted to her or that...

E: Oh, okay.

I: ...she could do anything with this. She was just sort of aware...

A: Mm.

I: ...that she had these feelings that other people didn't have.

E: Mhm.

A: Oh yeah.

I: And that all the girls in her class were very good looking...

A: [laughs]

E: Mm.

I: ...but she was unlike them in some way.

E: Mm, yeah.

A: Okay, yep.

E: Do we have photos of her, or like... paintings of her or...?

I: We definitely do have photos of her.

E: Okay, cool.

I: So she continues basically in this general vein for the sort of late years of her highschool and her early twenties, having like, short-term relationships with women like, sort of on-again-off-again girlfriends, fairly casual relationships. Her father is concerned about her.

E: Mhm.

I: Less because of her relationships with women, which – as we've established in a lot of other contexts – are fairly acceptable when you're a teenage girl...

A: Ah yeah.

I: ...it seems. Like, her relationships with schoolmates – these sort of short-term, intense, almost romantic friendships...

E: Yeah.

I: ...were seen as fairly acceptable, but her father was concerned that she showed no interest in men, and also that she didn't seem to have any like, ambitions or career plans or any sort of study plans for herself.

A: Mhm.

I: She was interested in poetry and music, but didn't seem to have the sort of drive or intention to follow that anywhere.

E: Mmkay. That's also relatable I s'pose.

I: Yeah, her...

[laughter]

I: Her career, especially in her twenties, was quite relatable. There was a lot of... she was like, it's not that I feel a vocation for poetry, or I'm called to poetry. It was just the most enjoyable of the like, limited and not-very-useful skills that I had.

E: Oh wow.

A: Oh no.

I: She was very... She was interested in very much the arts...

E: Mhm.

I: ...and she was like, I don't know what to do with this. She at one point briefly tried to study law and then was like, that was a mistake.

E: Yeah, fair enough.

[laughter]

I: And she ceased. Somewhere during this time she met the poet Vladimir Volkenshtein.

E: Well that's a great name.

A: That is a solid name.

I: Yep.

A: Volkenshtein.

I: A solid name. I don't know exactly how she met him – they correspond for a while and then meet in person. The two of them have a lot in common. They become close friends very quickly. I'm told they had similar senses of humour and loved puns and pranks.

[laughter]

I: Unfortunately I was not given any concrete examples of pranks they did together.

A: Oh no!

E: Oh no!

A: I love learning about historical pranks.

I: And they also have a lot of the same ideas about poetry and writing and what they like and where they sort of want that art form to go...

A: Mhm.

I: ...and share a lot of taste in music. When she tells him about her sexuality – she tells him she's exclusively attracted to women – and he seems quite accepting of this.

A: Oh! Good on... wait...

I: Vladimir Volkenshtein!

[laughter]

A: I was like, I remember Volkenshtein, but I'd already forgotten his first name. Do you know what music they... what music she liked? Like, you said they shared taste in music.

I: They like a lot of those kind of nationalist Russian composers. I think Vladimir Volkenshtein had some mutual friends with Rimsky-Korsakov. They're in a lot of those kind of like, creative circles together.

A: Mhm. Yep. Okay.

I: Anyway, so she becomes close friends with Vladimir – they get on really well – but she continues to sort of concern her family, who...

A: Mhm.

I: ...feel like she should be getting married, or at least doing something with her life, and eventually in 1907, she essentially seems to give in to family pressure and she and Vladimir decide they're gonna get married.

A: Okay.

E: Okay...

I: This wasn't like, a hundred percent giving in to family pressure – she respected him a lot, it was going to give her financial independence from her family...

A and E: Mhm.

I: ...which she wanted. She was very interested in having children as well.

A: Oh, okay!

E: Okay.

I: So she and Vladimir got married.

A: Is he queer, or is he interested in her, or do we not know?

I: I'm told he loved her, but I don't really know in what way he loved her. They do have...

A: Okay.

I: ...a sexual relationship, which seems to have surprised him, because...

A: Mm.

I: ...she's been very clear that she's only interested in women.

E: So why do they have a sexual relationship? Like, just for him, or is she...?

I: I think it's partly for him, because he enjoys it; it's partly she wants to have children; and I do think it's partly even though she's not sexually attracted to him the intimacy...

E: Mhm.

I: ...she kind of enjoys anyway.

E: It's nice, okay.

I: It's nice, yeah.

A: Mmkay.

I: She does write a little at the time about how she finds sexual relationships with men unsatisfying.

E: Mhm.

A: Mm.

I: They're not... what she's looking for.

E: Okay.

I: She writes this poem about sex with men – essentially about sex with Vladimir – which says: “...there is a mystery more boring than ours and simpler:/The merging of one soul with another soul beloved by her.” Where the two 'souls' are feminine words.

[Note: the poem actually reads “nonmerging”; “merging” was an error.]

E: Mhm.

A: Okay.

I: And so I think what she's sort of saying there is that a relationship with a woman just feels much more...

E: Yep. Okay.

I: Yeah.

E: So it's like, just kind of like, sex with men's just like, eh, as opposed to being like, awful.

I: Yeah.

E: Yes.

I: Yeah, she's like, fine with it.

E: Okay.

I: Unfortunately – or possibly fortunately in the long run – the marriage doesn't last very long. For a variety of reasons. She finds out during this time that she's infertile.

E and A: Aww....

I: So she can't have children. Beyond that, it's not very clear what happens. In late 1908 she goes to Moscow for Christmas to visit some friends. In January she writes to Vladimir sort of saying, you know, when she's planning to return home, and everything seems normal, and two weeks later she's decided not to return home, and asked for a divorce.

E: Oh, okay.

I: It's not really clear what's happened here. She talks later on about how she felt artistically stifled by him.

E and A: Mhm.

I: She would often like, show him her poems to get advice and things like that and she talks later on about how she felt he was stifling the valuable parts of her poetry...

E: Yep.

A: Okay.

I: ...and that kind of thing, but it's not really clear what dramatic change happened in those two weeks.

E: Mm. I mean it could have been something that she was weighing and she was kind of like, no no no, I'll just write to him, and I'll just go back, and then she was like, uh actually no.

I: Yeah.

E: Like it might not necessarily have been a complete turn-around.

I: Yeah, no, it might not have been.

E: So I'm seeing that we don't have like, as many sources as we would want here.

I: We really don't – or at least not a lot that I could get to.

E: Yep.

I: And even Diana Burgin – who was that like, major biography that I used, who reads Russian – still came to a lot of those, so there's nothing we really know about what happened to her in this year...

E: Okay.

I: ...sort of stuff, so yeah.

A: Mhm.

I: So there isn't a lot of material about her. Diana Burgin did write in her introduction that we know little about parts of Sofya Parnok's and things like that, and what she sort of said was really the question isn't why do we know so little about her, it's that it's remarkable that we know so much...

E: Okay.

I: Considering that she's this lesbian poet from a period when that was really not...

E: Mhm.

I: ...acceptable.

E and A: Mhm.

E: She seems to be having a pretty chill time of things for someone who's living in a time where this is not acceptable.

I: Like, the circles she's in generally are fairly accepting...

E: Uh-huh.

I: ...of her sexuality, but as a poet she finds it very hard because...

E: Okay.

I: ...what she's writing is often not acceptable for publication...

E: Mhm, okay.

I: ...or is hard to get published, or gets published and just doesn't get taken seriously.

E: Mhm.

I: I think that's a lot of her issues is much more that what matters to her is dismissed.

E: Yep, okay.

I: Rather than that it's sort of directly condemned.

E: Yeah, okay.

I: In any case, the divorce is fairly long and protracted. It's not very amiable.

E: Aww....

I: I think Vladimir is quite shocked by it.

E: Aww....

A: Mm.

I: I think it comes as unexpected to him and he doesn't really handle it well.

A: Yep.

I: Whether he is just in love with her and upset that she's leaving; it's not really clear; whether it just turns out he's not as good about her sexuality as he seemed to...

E: Mm.

I: ...or thought he was.

E: So do they have like, no-fault divorce, or...?

I: She needs him to agree to it.

E: Ahh, okay.

A: Okay.

I: There's this ongoing thing where she kind of petitions to him for a divorce and he's like, "No. No. Come back."

E: Yeah. Well...

I: And...

E: ...that's not great.

A: No.

I: Yeah, it's not great. At one point he writes to her younger siblings and basically outs her to them. He's like...

A: Oh.

I: ... Sofya Parnok is a lesbian. She's leaving me to have a lesbian relationship. And Sofya writes to Vladimir and is like, look, I get you're upset with me, but I don't know why you had to involve my family.

E: Yeah. So he's not as good about it as he pretended to be.

I: He is definitely not as good about it as he pretends to be.

E: Well...

I: Or possibly he thought he was comfortable with it and then when he was married to her he realised that...

E: Mm. Even if he's not uncomfortable with it, like, he's certainly willing to use it to manipulate her.

I: Yeah. Their friendship before the marriage seems to have been quite good, like they're quite supportive of each other...

A: Mhm.

I: ...and their work, and they read poetry to each other and that kind of thing, and then everything just kind of goes to hell in the marriage, basically.

A: Yeah.

E: Well that's a shame.

I: So then by sort of the end of 1909 she writes to a friend and she says, "I've wasted a lot of time and energy searching [for the right person] ... Now I want to try and see if I won't profit more from the company of books with which I've had little contact."

A: That's sounds nice.

I: She's left Vladimir – he agrees to divorce her...

E: Mhm.

I: ...and she's decided to focus seriously on her poetry instead. So she discovers fairly quickly that it's not really going to be possible for her to support herself through her poetry alone.

A: Is that just 'cos of sexism?

I: Yeah, it's partly... it's sexism, it's partly poetry is just a fairly unreliable...

A: Mm.

I: ...source of income. Like, sometimes you can publish books, sometimes nobody wants to publish your poetry.

A: Yep.

I: And she needs more reliable income than that. And it's partly just the kinds of poetry she wants to write are not really of any interest to the sort of established poetry... what's the word?

E: The establishment.

I: [laughs] Yeah.

A: [laughs]

I: The poetry establishment. She at this time kind of internalises a lot of that and there's a lot of her writing where she talks about how the things that she wants to write about are tawdry and melodramatic; her life is like a cheap novel.

E: Aww....

A: So what sort of stuff...

I: And...

A: ...does she want to write about?

I: Basically she wants to write about her attraction to women. She wants to...

A: Mm.

I: ...write romantic poetry about other women.

A: Mhm.

I: And she just finds that people kind of find this cheap and scandalous and not literary.

E: Okay.

A: Mm.

I: And so she finds it quite hard to get published.

E: Mm.

A: Yep.

I: She takes a job at a newspaper writing reviews, which a friend gets for her.

A: Book reviews?

I: Yeah, like book reviews, poetry reviews, that kind of thing.

A: Okay.

I: She's a sort of literary critic person. She's not very keen on it. She writes to the friend and says, "Thank you ... for arranging for me to write reviews... No doubt, I'll like the work. But at the moment I'm utterly exhausted. ...it's obvious that without a salary I can't support myself no matter where I might go, even to heaven. It's horribly tedious."

E: Aww....

[laughter]

I: In general her literary criticism is fairly – I don't really want to say 'conservative', because we have a lot of ideas tied in to conservativeness...

E: Mhm.

I: ...where we tie together a whole lot of different things about what a conservative believes...

A: Yeah.

I: ...that aren't really connected, but she tends to prefer work which is more styled like the classic works of Russian literature...

A: Mhm.

I: ...than she does more experimental modern work.

E: Mm.

A: Is that her personal taste or is that just 'cos she's like, this is just a job and I may as well do things that will be widely acceptable?

I: It's not very clear. The literary criticism that she writes, she writes under a male pseudonym. The name she chooses is this kind of intensely typical masculine Russian name.

A: Mmkay.

I: And so it might just be that she's chosen this kind of acceptable persona...

E: Mhm.

A: Mm.

I: ...to...

A: Do you know what the name is?

I: Andrey Polyinin I think?

A: That is a Russian name.

I: Yeah.

E: [laughs]

I: It's a very Russian name.

A: Confirmed.

I: So Diana Burgin, she almost kind of implied there was some hypocrisy in the fact that Sofya's literary criticism was so conservative when she was progressive in her personal life...

A: Mhm.

I: ...as in, she was a woman attracted to women, and was fairly open about that. I felt I had to bring this up, because I think we do this weird thing a lot – like I said – where we connect a bunch of things which we currently think of as...

A: Yeah.

I: ...conservative, progressive values that don't really have anything in common.

A: Yeah. Mhm.

I: And so yeah, I just sort of wanted to say here that there's not I think anything inherently unusual or hypocritical about the fact that she prefers more conservative poetry although she is socially progressive.

A: Mmkay, yep.

I: I will read you though, a hilarious review that she wrote.

A: Oh good.

E: Okay.

I: This is very beautiful. It's only... it's a couple of sentences from it. It's a book by a man called Andrey Bely called Petersburg and she says, "Irony has never been the mother of a large-scale work of fiction: a large child can't be carried to term in a small pelvis: thus, what has happened was inevitable: a large child has appeared prematurely and Andrey Bely's Petersburg makes the kind of unnerving, unnatural impression that a giant premature baby would produce."

[laughter]

A: I don't really know what that meant, but it was good.

[laughter]

I: It just made me laugh so much! That she was working a serious job...

A: [laughs]

I: ...as a literary critic, and she read this book, and she was like, "This book was bad. It was like a giant baby."

[laughter]

E: Just imagine him reading that and being like, I guess I'm insulted...

[laughter]

A: You are like a large baby.

E: Not just a large baby, but a large premature baby.

I: That's right!

E: I guess.

[laughter]

A: Oh dear.

I: Around this time she met Iraida Albrecht, who was the daughter of a wealthy Moscow socialite. I'm not really clear, again, a lot of what happened in their early friendship but they do move in together fairly quickly.

E: Alright.

A: Okay.

I: And...

A: A good start.

I: It is also like, fairly clear that this is a romantic relationship.

A: What's her name? Iraida?

I: Iraida.

A: Okay.

I: So we have this quote from her which says, "I'm renting a whole apartment, have even acquired some furniture, and now, as a result of luxury far beyond my means, I'm a stay-at-home in Kolokolnikov Lane with my girlfriend and a monkey, who, by the way, despite..."

[laughter]

I: I told you there was an animal! "...who, by the way, despite her considerable monkey charm, is rather unbearable as a housemate for humans."

E: Okay.

I: I thought at this time that the monkey probably belonged to Iraida, but Sofya just continues to have custody of the monkey after this.

[laughter]

I: So it's presumably it's Sofya's monkey.

A: So that's at least three queer women with monkeys that we have covered in this podcast.

I: True! [laughs]

E: That's a weird coincidence.

A: Yeah.

E: Do either of you feel like you're about to imminently obtain a monkey?

I: I will let you know if I do.

E: Okay.

[laughter]

A: Do you know the monkey's name?

I: No.

A: Ohhh.

I: Unfortunately I don't. I just know that there was a monkey. The monkey does come up again – it's mentioned in later quotes.

A and E: Okay.

I: The...

E: And the monkey's a bad housemate. But she keeps the monkey for a long time.

I: [laughs] Yes.

E: Okay.

A: She's won over by the monkey's charm.

I: She keeps the monkey for several years at least.

[laughter]

I: In 1914 Sofya and Iraida take a trip through Europe together.

A: Mhm.

I: They go to Italy. they go to Germany. When World War I breaks out the two of them are in London together.

A: Okay.

I: As soon as possible they return to Moscow. Sofya sets about trying to find where her younger siblings are...

E: Mhm.

I: ...to make sure that...

A: Mhm.

I: ...they're okay; they'll be safe; and she finds her sister fairly quickly – her sister is in Berlin, visiting friends. She sends her some money and a letter and is like, look after yourself.

A: Oh yeah, that's good.

I: And she has a much harder time tracking down her younger brother. In the end it turns out that while she's been away, he has become a fierce Zionist and has gone to Palestine. She tries to wire him money in Jaffa – he's on his way to Palestine – and she's told by the bank that they can't send money there. She doesn't have contact with him for a long time after this.

A: Okay, okay. Yep.

I: At this time, two other major things happen in Sofya's life. The first is, at a poetry salon run by a close friend, she meets another female poet, Marina Tsvetaeva. Marina is 23; she's already married to a young student named Sergey.

A: How old is Sofya at this time?

I: 29.

A: Okay.

I: And she has two-year-old daughter called Ariadne.

A: Mhm.

I: She's never been in a same-sex relationship before, but she's always considered herself bisexual, and been attracted to women...

A: Okay.

I: ...as well as men.

E: I see where this is going.

A: [laughs]

I: It's going where you think it's going. And she recalls falling for Sofya basically at their first meeting.

E: Aww...

I: So Sofya comes in to this poetry salon and a friend grabs Sofya and is like, "There's another female poet here! You need to meet her!" and introduces her to Marina and Marina pretty much says they like, clinked glasses in greeting and she thought to herself, "Be my Orestes!"

[laughter]

E: Oh my God!

[laughter]

E: I just imagine her like, straight-faced while mentally being like, yes.

[laughter]

I: That's basically what happened there.

A: I like that. It's a new "Are you Achilles?"

I: Yep.

A: Ah, that's good. Beautiful

I: The first little while of their relationship is fairly slow to develop. Like they spend time together and they're both obviously into each other, but neither of them is really ready to go any further than that, than to like, become friends, basically.

A: I guess Marina is married with a child. She has some things to negotiate there. Even just in her own head, if not with her partner.

I: Yeah. She's...yeah. Her partner seems to be aware of the relationship and she maintains both relationships for the whole time that they're together. I mean, additionally, Sofya has Iraida still at this time.

A: Mhm.

I: Neither of them seems to expect a monogamous relationship from each other, although the fact there are other relationships on the side for both of them does cause some sort of tension.

A: Mhm, okay.

I: They do sort of talk about jealousy and being afraid that they're not the one who can give the other what they want, and that kind of thing.

A: Okay.

I: But they do eventually enter into a relationship. At this time, Sofya doesn't write a lot of poetry, but Tsvetaeva writes an entire cycle entitled Girlfriend, which is just like a whole series of poems about Sofya.

A: Beautiful. Do we have any of those in English, or no?

I: We do, I have some translations of them here. The first one she writes, I think she wrote a couple of days after their first meeting. And the one verse of it that I have translated goes, "Is this really all a dream/because of the ironical enchantment that/you aren't -- a he".

[laughter]

I: I just loved that. That's just one line, on its own. "You aren't a he!"

A: I love it.

I: And that was delightful to me. And then, a little later, they have sex for the first time. They're still at this point, they seem to be in a kind of friends with benefits arrangement.

A: Oh yeah.

I: Because Marina feels as though she's trying to seduce Sofya romantically and isn't getting anywhere.

A: But they are having sex.

I: But they are having sex. It's the first time she's had sex with a woman, and she writes this poem that goes "What happened, really?/What do I so regret and want?/I don't know. Did I conquer?/Was I overcome?" And I thought that was interesting.

E: Hm...

A: Mmm.

I: Because I thought of when we were talking the other day about penetration as a zero-sum game.

A: [laughs] Ah yeah, the ancient Roman model of sex.

I: Yeah, and I thought that it was quite interesting that she had sex with a woman, and she was like, I don't know what happened. Who won?

A: [laughs] Yeah, I wonder if that is what that means. Because you were saying that she was trying to seduce Sofya at this time. Like 'did I conquer?' could just mean like, have I successfully seduced her...?

I: Yeah... But "was I overcome?" is also in there.

E: Yeah, like that does seem to be like, the tradition roles you have in sex, if a woman is having sex with a man, have kind of been thrown out the window.

A: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, no I think that is also a valid reading.

I: She didn't know...how to read that dynamic, I guess?

A: Yeah, yeah.

I: Years later - I have to read you this because it's about the monkey...

[laughter]

A: Very important.

I: Years later, Marina's daughter Ariadne wrote about remembering the visits that Marina made to Sofya's house and she says, "Mama had a friend, Sonya Parnok. She also wrote poetry, and Mama and I sometimes went to visit her."

A: Sorry, just a moment, is Sonya just a diminutive of Sofya?

I: Yeah.

A: Okay.

I: I've tried generally to use consistent names for everyone, but Russian is all over the place with this, and there are like seven diminutives for every name, and I didn't want to change it within a quote.

A: No, that's fair enough. I was just checking.

I: "Mama would read her poems to Sonya. Sonya would read her poems to Mama. And I would sit on a chair waiting to be shown the monkey. Because Sonya had a real, live monkey who lived in the other room!"

[laughter]

A: That's just such a vivid picture of like a small child like, they're reading poetry and it's boring, but I know the monkey's here.

E: When do I get to see the monkey?!

[laughter]

I: Yes.

E: I really want to know what exactly the like, living situation for this monkey was.

I: I don't know.

E: Just in the other room. Like...

I: [laughing] It has a room.

E: What!

I: Is it a bedroom?

E: Is it in a cage? Or is it just sort of like, this is the monkey's tiny bed, and this is the monkey's tiny chest of drawers.

I: [laughs]

E: And this is the monkey's tiny basket where it keeps its bananas.

[laughter]

I: The second thing which happened to Sofya in this year is that...she seems to have discovered Sappho.

E: I see!

A: Ah!

I: Yes. So in 1914 and 1915 two books of, like, Sappho's fragments were published in Russian, I think for the first time. And this kind of set of what Burgin described as "a minor rage for Sappho", in Russia.

A: So I assume that these fragments that have been published are not including anything about Sappho loving women?

I: They will include things about Sappho loving women, but these just tend to get read as kind of this intense friendship, or she is a teacher who is feeling a motherly love for her students...

E: That's quite a new idea at this point.

I: Mm.

E: It's garbage also.

I: It's garbage, yeah. The closest people kind of got to Sappho had some kind of same sex attraction was to describe this very like, mystical, platonic...

A and E: Mm...

I: ...erotic-but-not-physical attraction to women, that was in some way purer and more artistic than the unclean same-sex lesbian love that gross women in Moscow were doing right now.

[laughter]

E: Yeah. It's like, quite easy to read Sappho's poems into something that's socially acceptable if you're so inclined.

I: Yeah...They were very into that...what's that story about the man that she kills herself for?

E: Yeah, so there's this kind of ongoing myth - we're not really quite sure where it came from, but it's definitely not real, let me be clear, [emphatically] it did not happen...

[laughter]

I: Yes...

E: That Sappho threw herself off a cliff because she couldn't get a guy to love her.

I: Yeah.

E: His name was Phaon. He was the most beautiful man in the world.

I: Yeah. [laughs] Anyway, so yeah, Russia is really into Sappho at this time, but they're really into this like, heterosexual version of Sappho which they've created. In any case though, Sofya basically entirely rejected that reading of Sappho, and was like, look, clearly this is a woman writing poetry about another woman...

A: Mhm.

E: Mm.

I: and she would often like, borrow a single line fragment from Sappho and build her own poem around it.

A: Oh!

E: That's so interesting.

A: That's cool!

I: She writes this one to Marina. The fragment of Sappho, I have translated as "Like a small girl, you appeared in my presence ungracefully".

E: Mhm.

I: She writes this poem that goes, "Like a small girl, you appeared in my presence ungracefully/Ah, Sappho's single line shaft pierced to my very core/During the night, I leaned over your curly head pensively/Tenderness stilled passion's mad rush in my heart/Like a small girl you appeared in my presence ungracefully." And that's just one verse of this poem that she wrote.

A: Mhm.

I: But that's something that she did quite a lot, take one line or one fragment of Sappho, and build something of her round it that was about same-sex love.

A: That's cool.

I: In December 1915, Sofya and Iraidia Albrecht seem to have broken up. They moved out of that apartment that Sofya described, and Sofya takes the monkey with her.

E: [laughs]

I: I'm still unclear whose monkey it was in the first place.

A: The monkey is its own!

I: Yes, but Sofya keeps the monkey.

E: They asked the monkey, "Who would you like to have custody of you?" and the monkey thought about it...

A: And it picked up its basket of bananas...

I: [laughs] Yes. And went with Sofya. That is right. Around the same time, Sofya and Marina's relationship has a lot of tension in it.

A: Aww.

I: For a variety of reasons. For one, Marina really longs to have more children.

A: Ah yeah.

I: She has this sort of weird thing where she says a lot to Sofya how nice it would be to have a child with Sofya.

A: That doesn't seem that weird a thing really.

I: It's quite a weird thing because Sofya is infertile, and quite upset about this. And Marina is quite almost...resentful of Sofya that they can't couple the way a heterosexual couple can and produce a child that's genetically theirs.

A: Okay. Like, I feel Marina is just as much to blame for that as Sofya.

I: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. Many years later, this is like, decades later, when she's living in Paris, she's broken up with Sofya, and she writes this weird tract about problems with lesbian relationships, and one of the major things in it, she says, that "the major curse of a lesbian partnership is that the older partner can't give the younger partner a child", and you're very much looking at this like, you're writing this as though this is universal to lesbian relationships, but you're clearly referring to one thing here.

E: [laughs]

A: Mm.

E: It's interesting that she says the "older one" can't give the "younger one" a child.

I: Marina always very much portrayed herself as playing this kind of innocent young boy role.

A: Yeah...

E: Oh.

A: Wait, so when you say "the older one can't give the younger one a child", you don't mean the older impregnate the younger one, you mean the older one can't bear a child for the younger one which she...

I: I mean...

E: Oh!

I: It doesn't really matter... She's not very clear. Like neither of them can impregnate the other.

A; I mean, that's also true.

E: I guess the phrasing's still like, depicts one of them as the one who has to do the impregnating.

I: Yeah.

E: Like, it's not just like, neither can give the other a child. Like, they're definitely... it's projecting roles onto the older one and the younger one.

I: Yeah. It's not only Marina. Sofya also often talks about Marina's, like, boyishness. Or her like, child...what's the word...?

A: Childlikeness?

E: Youthfulness?

I: Childlikeness is probably...

A: Well even that Sappho quote she chose, what is it? You appeared to me like a young girl, ungracefully or something...

I: Yeah...

A: Yeah, like, that's within that vein. But it is a young girl in that...

I: Yeah.

E: I mean, if you're looking for Sappho poems about young boys to fit in your lesbian relationship, you might be...

[laughter]

A: Something's gone awry.

I: That's a weirdly niche thing to need.

E: Why a boy and not a girl?

I: I don't know. They just both use this language fairly often where they talk about Marina as boyish.

E: Okay.

I: She's described as having a boyish appearance...

E: Uh-huh.

I: ...in that she wears her hair short and she's very like, slender and doesn't have curves...

A: Yeah. So, if Marina is being conceptualised as a young boy in this relationship, what's Sofya being conceptualised as?

I: I don't wanna make this weird, but I think almost she's playing a motherly role here. And I don't know how much of this again is Marina later on kind of wanting to absolve herself of the blame of being in this unacceptable relationship. Sofya playing this nurturing role, but Marina also kind of reads it as though she's being led astray by Sofya.

A: Mhm.

I: So it's kind of a nurturing role but also a seductress role. So yeah, I'm not really sure what to make of that other than whether they felt they had to read this kind of heterosexual...

A: Mmm.

I: But even then, it's interesting that Sofya's playing the older role but is definitely the woman here.

E: Yeah, that is interesting.

I: Yeah. At the same time as well, so in late 1915, Sofya started collecting her poetry to put in to a book.

A: Oh good.

I: Which she simply called Poems.

E: A very strong first book of poetry name contender, as I understand it.

I: [laughs]

E: For all of human history, yes.

I: Indeed. So Poems was an anthology basically, of her poetry, from the years 1912 to 1915.

A: Mhm.

I: She discarded everything that she'd written before 1912 as bad and not worth it.

[laughter]

A: Okay.

I: In 1912 she was 27, which I found quite reassuring, honestly. I read that and I was like, "Cool, so my good work is coming, soon!"

E: [laughs]

A: Yeah.

E: Like a few more years of garbage to churn out, apparently, which I guess is reassuring in a way.

A: Yeah.

I: It was divided into five sections, which each had a theme, and they were of uneven lengths. So, the sections dealt with wandering, death, Russia and the war, love and poetry, and love and remembering.

E: Uh-huh.

A: An interesting set of themes.

E: I was like, "This is building to a gay thing, isn't it?"

I: Yes. So, the love lyrics, which were roughly a third of the book between "love and poetry" and "love and remembering", introduced what Diana Burgin - I don't know whether this is true or not, and I always hesitate to be one of those things that says "This is the first time a like, same-sex this was ever published" or whatever.

E: Yeah, I...yeah.

I: But Diana Bergin says that this was "the first openly lesbian poetic speaker and desiring subject ever to be heard in a book of Russian poetry". It may well be she was the first published lesbian poet in Russian.

A: Or the first poet publishing poems specifically about being a lesbian.

I: Yeah. It doesn't sound implausible. I'm just hesitant to make that "this was the first time" statement.

E: The superlatives are always a bit...

All: Yeah...

I: In any case it was certainly an unusual thing to manage to get published.

E: Mhm.

A: Mhm.

E: So how did she publish it?

I: She... found a publishing company who was willing to do this apparently.

E: Okay. I wasn't sure if there'd be some big story or just...you know, she did.

I: There wasn't really a story. She was by this time getting published fairly regularly in journals and magazines and that kind of thing.

A: Mhm.

A lot of the poems in this book had been published previously. So I think she may have just like... eased them into lesbian poetry.

E: Uh-huh.

A: Yep.

I: Obviously there was a lot of response that basically said that this was grotesque. It was... you know, as you expect, this was dangerous, bad, et cetera. But the more positive critics, they generally gave it positive reviews but avoided directly mentioning...

A: The lesbianism?

I: ...the same-sex attraction.

E: Mm. Mhm.

I: They would review and kind of say, this is good poetry, great lyric poetry, her words are beautiful, she's very good, and never kind of address the subject matter.

E: Which I assume led to a bunch of people getting it and being like, hang on a gosh darn minute.

[laughter]

I: Yeah, I think so, I think so. But overall the book seems to have been relatively successful.

A: That's nice.

I: At least positively received.

E: Good.

I: At this same time though, her health was deteriorating.

A and E: Aww...

I: She for most of her life, suffers from some kind of a thyroid problem which causes a bunch of different issues...

E: Yep.

I: ...to do with like, headaches, digestive issues, muscle weakness. Like, a whole range of problems, basically. This put further strain on her relationship with Marina, basically because she would sort of encourage Marina to go out, and go to parties, and have fun, and 'it's fine if you go out without me, I don't mind,' but Marina would go out and still feel guilty while she was out there that she'd left Sofya at home sick.

A: Ah yeah, yeah.

E: Mm.

I: And even though she knew Sofya was fine with it, she kind of came to resent her for having to carry that kind of guilt while she was out.

A: Yep.

I: During this time, she met a friend at a party, and she was sort of saying to them, 'oh look, I'm gonna go home early just to check on Sofya,' and her friend said, 'oh, no no no, stay,' and she said, "I know I'll never be able to forgive myself whether I stay or go."

E: Oh.

A: Mm.

E: That's mm... very hard.

I: Yeah, it just genuinely seems to have been quite hard on her.

A: Yeah.

I: And during one of these parties which she attended briefly and guiltily, she ran into Osip Mendelshtam, who was a poet who both of them had met previous at you know, poet gathering that they'd had, who'd showed romantic interest in her before.

A: Is Osip a man?

I: Yeah, Osip is a man.

A: Okay.

I: They apparently had a conversation, the contents of which we obviously don't know, which they felt needed to be continued at a later date. About a month after, Mendelshtam turned up in Moscow, where he didn't normally live and came round to Marina's house and said, we should continue that conversation, if you want to show me around Moscow.

A: So Marina still lives with her husband at the moment.

I: Yes.

A: Mhm.

E: Okay. So Marina's about to have an incredibly busy love life, is she?

I: Yes.

[laughter]

I: But at the same, Sofya had become close with another woman, the actress Lyudmila Erarskaya. Burgin made much of Lyudmila's physical difference from Marina, so Marina always gets described as this kind of slender, golden, small, boyish.... and Lyudmila by comparison is described as tall and statuesque and dark and very feminine.

A: Mhm.

E: Okay.

I: And I feel like the book made a deal out of this in order to kind of draw comparisons, and kind of make a love triangle that wasn't really there. So during those few days when Mendelshtam was in Moscow, Marina took that time to show him around Moscow, became very close to him, and it was sort of I think the first time she'd managed to enjoy herself without worrying about Sofya in a while.

A and E: Mm...

I: Meanwhile Lyudmila came round to Sofya's place to keep her company where she was at home sick, and they also had some conversations about their relationship.

E: This sounds like it could develop into a like, better situation. For people who are already doing polyamory, it sounds kind of okay.

I: Mm, from Sofya's perspective, it's okay. Marina comes back after these few days and Lyudmila is there, and essentially in the near future after that, Sofya and Marina break up. From Sofya's perspective, she sees this fairly positively, she sort of sees you know, that relationship is over, but it was a good experience, I got a lot from it, I don't resent her.

A: Yep.

I: From Marina's point of view, I mean, I think, she was a lot younger...

A: Mm.

I: ...it was a lot more significant to her, being her first same-sex relationship.

A: Mm, yeah, yeah.

I: So Marina, I think feels quite hurt by this. Though they don't remain close, she continues to sort of be concerned about Sofya throughout her life, like...

A: Mhm.

I: ...when it comes up that sort of, Sofya needs help, Marina will contact people for her and that kind of thing, but overall, Marina is much more I think hurt by this, and becomes quite resentful. And you can see... like I said before, that in the 30s she writes this sort of anti-lesbian tract which was essentially directly aimed at her experience with Sofya which she generalises to all lesbian relationships.

E: Ah yes.

A: So is this the only lesbian relationship we're aware of Marina having had?

I: No, she does have another one later on.

A: Okay. Before or after she writes that tract?

I: Before.

A: Okay.

I: It's possible that details of the other one also made it into that tract, veiled as like, things that all lesbians do. [laughs]

I: Yes. Marina and Sofya break up, basically. Marina still has a husband, she has this other relationship, but she feels quite hurt and betrayed by it. Sofya, meanwhile, like it's quite a lot of emotional turmoil for her. She spends the summer at the seaside, kind of taking a break from life.

A: Mhm.

I: And then after the summer she and Lyudmila move in together, in the town of Sudak on the Crimean Peninsula.

A: Okay. With the monkey?

I: [laughs] The monkey hasn't been mentioned for a while, but I assumed he - sorry, she - is still around.

E: You misgendered the monkey.

I: I did misgendered the monkey. I apologise. Maybe Marina took the monkey. I don't know. I never found mention of the monkey after this, but chances are it's just that it never came up.

E: Mm. All younger lesbians wish older lesbians could give them a child and resent being left only with a monkey...

I: [laughter] The quintessential lesbian experience. [laughing] The tsar abdicated in the February of 1917, after a kind of weird complicated period of temporary government, the Bolsheviks came to power in October, who are communists in case anyone didn't know. After this comes the Civil War, where the Bolsheviks and what remains of the Russian aristocracy try and kind of fight for dominance over Russia. The Bolsheviks ultimately win that war. This wasn't really significant to Sofya's personal politics. She wasn't particularly politically engaged in either direction.

A: Okay.

I: She had definitely spent some time with political activists before. At one point, Vladimir Volkenshtein got arrested in his youth for political activity...

A and E: Mhm.

I: ...but personally she doesn't have a lot of deep political feelings beyond a kind of patriotic love for Russia. So she's like, pessimistic about the revolution, but she kind of hopes that she's wrong.

E: Mhm.

I: She's like, I don't think that this will go well, but she does write that she hopes she's wrong and it will be "a fairytale with a happy ending".

E: Mm... That would've been nice.

I: That would've been nice for all of us.

E: That would've been very nice.

I: Yeah. The sort of major tangible effect it has on her is that in the turmoil, one of the major newspapers with whom she's been working and regularly published over the last five years of something has to be closed down.

A: Mhm.

I: And so she loses this source of reliable income. So in the winter of 1919, Sofya was arrested for what seems to just be showing insufficient support for the communists because she doesn't have any strong feelings in either direction.

A: Mhm, yep.

I: But it was definitely one of those periods where it was very easy to be unjustly arrested as a political prisoner because you were moderately wealthy, which she wasn't, or you were very educated, or you were...

E: Which she was...?

I: She was probably for a woman quite educated. But she was also very involved in those kind of artistic circles, she was very intellectual, and it was also just fairly easy to get arrested for... nothing.

E: Mhm. Just reasons.

I: Just existing and not being a hardcore communist.

A: I mean I guess if you're in those artistic circles, those are the sort of circles that can and do like, threaten governments in like, what they write about.

I: Yeah...

A: So if you're not actively supporting them, they might see you as a threat that they should get rid of before you start writing anything... against them.

I: Yeah. She's not imprisoned for very long, but the difficult conditions don't help her health.

A: Mhm.

E: Yeah..

I: And she contracts tuberculosis.

E: Oh, great.

I: Yeah. At the same time, because of the war as well as just like, climate conditions - there was a severe drought at this time - food in Sudak was fairly scarce.

A: Mhm.

I: And a friend of hers, Maximilian Voloshin, when she came out of prison, managed to find both her and Lyudmila jobs in the city and he sort of writes, he says, look I've found you jobs, you both should come back to Moscow. And she wrote back to him thanking him for his "comradely regard", that's her words and says, "Thank you. I've already made up my mind to die in Sudak. Lyudmila also thanks you but her health problems prohibit her from leaving Sudak too".

A: Mmkay.

I: So they elect to stay. However the famine continues longer than anyone expected. So the following summer they decide that the risk of travelling with their health issues is probably worth it. So she and Lyudmila manage to get a train back to Moscow. Which is quite difficult to do at this period...

A: Mhm.

I: ...because of civil unrest and everyone wanting to go back to Moscow.

A: Yep.

E: Uh-huh.

I: And when she got there she immediately joined the Writer's Union, found a room to stay in and then set about raising money for her friends back in Sudak.

A: Oh. That's nice.

I: So she came up with the idea of writing courtly sonnets to the women who hosted literary salons around Moscow in exchange for donations.

[laughter]

A: That's cute.

I: Yep. She writes this lovely line at this time to a friend, where she says about the time, "I couldn't write a line to get something for myself, but in this case I seemed to be able to bake sonnets from dawn to dusk".

E: Aww.

A: Did she say 'bake' sonnets?

I: Yes.

[laughter]

I: Yes she does. There was just something very nice about that. She has some success with this, she wrote a sonnet in honor of Eudoxia Nikitina, "A young healthy woman with a turned up nose, ruddy complexion and short haircut. A swell coachman who drives with swagger. A whole team of literary horses of the most diverse breeds. Her ambition as a salon, and indeed she has enough will to have one."

E: That's pretty good.

I: I just liked that description, she sounded like a cool lady.

A: Yeah. I liked the bit about the horses.

I: Yes. The metaphorical horses.

E: The fake horses.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, yeah, the literary horses.

I: Anyway, she writes a sonnet in honor of Eudoxia's birthday and in exchange Eudoxia agreed to host a fundraising evening which raised 14 million rubles.

E: How much is that in money that I would understand?

I: It's very unclear because of inflation in Russia at this time.

A: The million on the end shouldn't necessarily make us think that's a huge sum.

I: No. But it's a fairly good sum in that she's able to get a number of her friends passage to Moscow with this, and send money and food to the people who remained behind.

A: Oh good.

I: So she writes this sonnet, and having earned 14 million rubles from it, writes "That means I earned a million rubles per line, an honorarium heretofore unknown, even in Soviet Russia!".

[laughter]

I: Which I thought was quite cute.

A: Let's start writing sonnets to fund our podcast.

I: At the same time though, she was having trouble getting her own work published. Mostly it was not the same-sex issues which caused problems at this time.

A: Yep.

I: She'd kind of been exploring her spirituality over the last few years, she had a number of friends who were very involved with the Russian Orthodox church...

A: Mhm.

I: ...and she'd been sort of getting involved in that. And so she writes a lot of articles and poems at this time which refer to God and...

A: Ah.

I: ...the Soviet policy is that you can mention God in your poem, that's fine, but you're not allowed the capital G.

E: Uh-huh.

I: It has to be a lower case.

A: Okay.

I: And this caused her a great deal of stress, because she desperately needed the money but the idea of eliminating this kind of mark of respect to God from her manuscripts was very difficult for her. And in the end she agreed to a contract with the state publishing house. She said alright I'll do it, I'll take the capital G out, but in the end they never published the book. The reason she says is, "They now demand a Soviet orientation, and have begun an open frenzied attack against anything mystical".

A: Ah, okay.

I: So yeah, interestingly the major difficulty was not the same-sex attraction at all.

E: Mm. That is interesting.

I: Yeah. It was the sort of the religious angle.

A: She hasn't had much luck just in you know what she wants to write about lining up with what society will accept. Like you know, she wrote about same-sex attraction and that wasn't okay, and then she moved onto religion and then that had stopped being okay.

I: Yeah, that's absolutely what happened. She had her kind of big spiritual period right over the revolution.

A: Yeah like if she'd been writing about God ten years before that would've been fine.

I: That would've been totally fine, but ten years before she really wanted to write about having sex with women.

A: Yeah. Bad luck.

I: At the beginning of 1923, so this is a couple of years later really, Lyudmila also has tuberculosis.

A and E: Ooh.

A: I mean tuberculosis is a very contagious illness I understand.

I: Yeah. And Sofya herself seems to be going through both like, physical health issues and mental health issues, which I think are just partly brought on by her frustration with her physical health and partly by the whole situation in Russia.

A: Yeah.

I: She describes herself as having a "Fainting fit of the spirit" and writes "I'm sick almost all the time. Bronchitis and constant stomach problems. I'm utterly miserable about the poverty and exittlessness that I see in the lives of people close to me. I try but I can't do anything to help them. I've never felt so powerless". So it's a very hard time for both of them, but around the same time she also met Olga Tsuberbiller, a maths teach at Moscow University.

A: Okay so I'm going to back up but what did Lyudmila do?

I: Lyudmila was an actress.

A: Okay.

I: The way Burgin wrote about Lyudmila she suggested that they were lovers briefly and then friends later.

A: Okay.

I: But I think what was really happening there was that Burgin was not quite sure how to deal with polyamory.

A: Oh yeah.

I: Because what essentially seems to happen is that she maintains this close relationship with Lyudmila consistently. So yeah, so around this time she meets Olga Tsuberbiller. Olga had been widowed during the Civil War and now quietly lived out her lesbian preferences.

A: That sounds like out of being widowed, quite a nice outcome.

I: Yeah I think it was probably to some extent quite nice to her that she had the kind of respectability of being a widow.

A and E: Mm.

I: And then was able to just teach maths and live out her lesbian preferences.

[laughter]

I: So yeah, again Burgin remained on the fence about whether they became lovers. She said that Olga occupied a unique emotional and spiritual place in Parnok's life. But to me looking at like, the poetry she wrote, it seems unlikely that they were not lovers personally.

E: Okay.

A: Can you read us some of this poetry?

I: The one that I have written down here she writes to Olga, and it says, "Like music I love your sadness./Your smile so similar to tears./Like the tinkle of cracked crystal./Like the fragrance of December roses".

E: What the hell?

I: I don't know what she's getting at there but I don't think you write it to a friend. She has the sort of endearing pet names for Olga, she calls her little deer.

E: Okay.

A: I'm still half on your sadness is like music. Like if someone wrote me that poem I'd be like what are you doing?

[laughter]

E: Stop letting Spotify recommend you My Chemical Romance and go outside.

[laughter]

I: Yeah I mean, I think, I think that's some of that.

A: Yeah. That's quite like an emotionally involved poem. Like there's obviously some intense emotions going on there for Sofya. Like even though it's a bit of a strange thing to say, obviously she's very emotionally invested in Olga, in whatever way that is.

E: Yeah.

I: Yeah, that's what I sort of felt about that. Like I definitely can't say oh these two had sex or anything like that, but I don't feel like sex should really be the metric of whether or not they're lovers.

E: Yeah.

I: So for the next couple of years, she's in a relationship with both Lyudmila and Olga, and I think Lyudmila found this difficult at first, but seems basically to have come to accept it. But then in January 1925 Lyudmila had some kind of mental breakdown and was institutionalised.

A: Oh no.

I: This, I think I will clarify having just said that, doesn't seem to be connected with the romantic relationships that Sofya has because for the first month of her institutionalisation Sofya is not allowed to see Lyudmila. I'm not sure why they thought this was a good idea, they had some weird ideas about mental healthcare at this time, because she's able to send Olga in her place.

E: Oh.

I: Which is weird.

A: So are you saying that as an explanation for why you don't think the breakdown was related to the romantic entanglements they were involved with?

I: Yes because if Lyudmila had had an issue with Sofya and Olga's relationship then presumably Sofya would not have felt comfortable sending Olga to see Lyudmila when she couldn't.

A: Okay.

E: I'm just hung up on the fact that apparently Olga's allowed to see her.

I: Yeah.

A: If the people running the institution know that there was some kind of lesbian relationship between Sofya and Lyudmila it makes sense to me that they would keep Sofya away from just a homophobic standpoint.

I: Yeah, that's a possibility. I'm not really sure. What she is institutionalized for is not to do with her same-sex relationships as far as I can tell. She's genuinely having some mental health issues at this point. Apparently at first in the institution she's very kind of upset and paranoid that her friends are relieved that she's gone.

A: Mhm.

I: She tells Olga that you know she thinks probably it's much easier for her friends now that she's not there and she just seems to be having a bad time of life. When Sofya is allowed to see

her, she says “It’s unbearably hard to leave her after a visit and leave her alone like that. Often when I’m having a conversation with someone, I’ll suddenly seem to see her room, and Mashenka...” which is Lyudmila, it’s a diminutive.

A: Sure.

I: “...alone. Alone, not physically but spiritually. Endlessly alone with all her darkness.

A: [sadly] Mmm.

I: She’s in the asylum for several months, after which she is discharged and the three women together rent a cottage in the countryside to spend the summer.

A: That’s nice.

I: And hopefully get over all the emotional turmoil that they’ve been through with Lyudmila in the asylum and with Sofya’s health issues as well. And they do this regularly for the next few years, the three of them rent a cottage together in the summer.

E: That sounds nice.

I: It does just sound very nice. And that’s sort of why I suspect that when Burgin said oh Lyudmila and Sofya ceased being in a relationship and became friends, I think she just wasn’t sure how to deal with this situation.

E: Yeah.

I: Because clearly the three of them are very close at this point.

E: Yeah, yeah, I mean if they’re renting cottages together on the regular.

I: [laughter] Yeah.

E: Obviously no terrible break up happened here.

I: Yeah. In 1931, so Sofya is over 40 at this point, she, after a long pause begins writing poetry again.

A: Oh good.

I: This is probably a combination of a period of improved health for her and she’s fallen in love with an opera singer whose name is Maria Maksakova. I’m going to read to you one of the poems she wrote about Maria. I don’t know how it sounded in Russian but in English it’s quite cute. It goes, “I like the fact that you have eyes that slant,/and also that your soul comes slanted./I like the headlong briskness of your gait,/and the chilly feeling of your shoulders,/you’re frivolous and none-too-ready to talk./Your tight-drawn thighs, just like a mermaid’s.”

[laughter]

E: Okay.

I: And it was an odd poem.

A: That was weird.

I: She mentions quite often when she talks about women's thighs, she compares them to mermaids'.

A: Okay.

I: Which I quite liked.

A: So she likes it if your thighs touch.

I: I think so, I think so.

A: I like the chilly feeling of your shoulders.

I: Yeah.

E: Yeah, that really...gets me going.

[laughter]

I: It's one of those things, where I always want to read these for like, one little detail in them, but because they're in translation they're just so weird.

E: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

I: And I don't know anything about Russian to...

A: And poetry is so like, diomatic and like, plays with language a lot, it's very hard.

I: And especially I think like, personal poetry, like she addresses these to specific people, in your native language you're often reading and you're like I'm not sure what you're referring to there.

A: Yeah there's like in-jokes and stuff.

E: Yeah.

I: Yeah, it's like her poetry about Olga is often about deer.

A: Deer?

I: As in the animal and the reason for that is some kind of pun they have about Olga's name and the word for deer in Russian.

A: Oh, okay.

E: Okay, yeah.

I: But that just doesn't make sense from the outside.

A: Yeah.

E: You'd have to translate her name to Deirdre or something.

[laughter]

I: Yeah. She had another lover in her 40s not long after this whose name was Nina Vedeneyeva, who she may have met through Olga's work at the university.

A: Wait there's a university?

I: Yeah Olga...

E: She taught maths.

I: ...taught maths remember?

A: Oh sorry I got them confused and was thinking that Olga was the opera singer and then I just was like what's happening?

I: Okay. Marina was a poet, Maria is an opera singer, Olga is a maths teacher, Lyudmila is an actress and Nina is a physicist. She works at the university.

E: Sofya clearly likes the hard sciences.

[laughter]

I: Yeah, obviously, obviously. She obviously feels a little bit at this point, and I think it's a combination of her ill health and social pressure, that she feels like she's an old woman at this point and she's being a little bit silly falling in love with people.

A: Aww. Are the women she's falling in love with about her age or are they younger?

I: Yeah they're about her age. So about Nina she writes several poems where she describes her silver hair and her lovely white head.

A: Aww.

E: Oh, that's nice.

I: And the same goes for Lyudmila and Olga, is they're all around her age. I think the only time that she's had that kind of age difference dynamic in a relationship was with Marina. And even then there was only six years between them.

E: Yeah they just made the most of it.

I: Yeah they just really committed to that. People talk a lot about how her relationship with Nina inspired Sofya's most mature poetic work. They talk about how she's kind of eschewed cliches and managed to sort of create something new out of this like typical overblown 19th century romantic poetry which was fairly popular in Russia. But weirdly, in spite of telling me this, the next thing that Burgin did, like the two major poems she showed me about Nina were very like cute silly doggerel. I will read you one, again it will sound a little bit weird because it's in translation, but this was my favourite one. It goes, "Oh my love! My madcap demon!/You're so bony that while eating,/a cannibal in search of meat/would very likely break his teeth./But I'm above that sort of crudeness/(and besides I'm somewhat toothless)./I won't tear you all to bits,/since I'll eat you with my lips".

E: What the-!

[laughter]

I: And it's just this very silly piece of doggerel that's like, you're very skinny, cannibals wouldn't want to eat you, but I'll kiss you.

E: Oh it's kissing that it's referencing.

I: Yeah.

E: I understood it differently.

[laughter]

I: It may be kissing, it may be oral sex, but she's talking about like yeah, physical intimacy basically and not eating.

E: She seems to low-key insult the appearance of these women in an affectionate way quite often.

I: Yeah she does it's true. It's true.

A: Yeah when you were saying she eschewed cliches, I was thinking that poem we read a minute ago about Maria wasn't very cliched. Like all that stuff about her chilly shoulders and stuff.

I: Yeah.

A: Like I guess you'd find in a love poem in that kind of context of like the writer of the poem is pursuing the woman and...

I: And the woman is cold.

A: Yeah, but it didn't really have that vibe.

I: No. The vibe was just like, I like the way you're kind of cold and aloof.

A: Yeah.

I: I guess.

E: Mm.

I: And also your tight-drawn thighs, like a mermaid.

A: Like a mermaid.

E: I mean to be fair being like, hey baby, no cannibal would ever want to eat you, you're too bony, is not a cliché of love poetry.

[laughter]

I: This is true.

A: That is fair, that is some new content. Please read another.

I: Yeah hang on I'll find another. There was another very cute one that I enjoyed.

A: I like it when we do poets.

I: Yeah.

A: It's fun.

I: I like it best when we do poets in languages that I understand.

A: Yeah.

I: Because like even if you only know some of a language, you can still do that kind of looking things up and double-checking things and being like, why did they translate this. And in Russian I've just had to be like, one I don't have access to the original of a lot of these, and two even if I did this doesn't do anything.

A: Yeah.

E: I don't think we'll ever top the cannibal poem, but okay.

I: Here we go.

A: But I'm keen to hear more.

[laughter]

I: Okay just to clarify because I told you Nina's surname before and you've probably forgotten it. Her name is Nina Vedeyeneva. Sofya writes this poem, it's just a little poem, it's four lines. And it goes: "Don't ask what's laid the poet low/and why she acts so dreamy:/she's simply been. from head to toe,/Vedeyeneva'ised completely".

[laughter]

A: That was pretty good.

I: Yeah.

A: It was less original than the cannibal poem, but still good.

I: I mean I'm not saying at this time that she didn't write other serious poetry too. But I just thought it was interesting that people sort of say, oh this was the time of her most serious and mature work, and this is obviously a time where she's also just writing a lot of sort of silly cute love poetry.

E: Mm.

A: Yeah.

I: And I almost think people kind of want to make this narrative of her getting older and more serious and more mature.

E: Yeah.

A: She's obviously still having fun.

I: Yeah. She's definitely still having fun. Her very final poem to Nina though, she wrote in July 1933. And it is a serious poem, she writes it as a farewell basically because her health is failing and she essentially writes this goodbye poem, which as soon as it reached Nina by mail - because she was staying with Olga in the country - and as soon as the poem reached Nina by mail, Nina came immediately to see her, by which time she was bedridden.

E: Mm.

I: And on August 25th she took a turn for the worse. Olga telegraphed for Lyudmila, but by the time Lyudmila arrived Sofya had already passed away. And what Lyudmila writes about her arrival, she wrote to a friend and she said, "I arrived at 5 pm to find our Sonya already in her coffin. Her face was amazing. It appeared young and was smiling with joy".

A and E: Aww.

I: So she died with three of her favourite women present.

E: Aww. Do you have the final poem that she wrote?

I: I do actually. So the last poem she wrote goes: "Come what may you wrote, we shall be happy./Yes my darling, happiness has come to me in life!/Now however, mortal weariness/overcomes my heart and shuts me eyes./Now, without rebelling or resisting,/I hear how my heart beats its retreat./I get weaker, and the leash that tightly/bound the two of us is slackening./Now the wind blows freely higher and higher,/everything's in bloom and all is still./'Til we meet again my darling. Can't you hear me?/I'm telling you goodbye, my far-off friend."

A and E: Aww.

E: That is quite a thing to receive in the mail.

I: Yeah. And she received that in the mail. It took a couple of weeks to get there.

E: Yeah.

I: So by the time she arrived it was you know, just in time.

E: Yeah.

A: Yeah. I'm glad that Sofya despite living in a country and a time that was probably like reasonably homophobic had a pretty positive experience with that.

I: She honestly seems to have, and I just think partly it's just the kind of circles she spent her time in were fairly accepting. Or at least they were very fairly kind of surface level accepting.

E: Yeah.

I: And then sometimes she had troubles like Vladimir.

A: Mm.

E: [with disdain] Vladimir.

A: He doesn't deserve the name of Volkenshtein which is a solid name.

E: I'm going to take it and give it to a vampire character so that whenever people Google him the vampire character will come up instead.

[laughter]

I: Yes.

E: And so I will damn his memory.

I: [laughter] Good, good.

E: She had so many girlfriends.

I: She did. And I like the fact that especially towards the end of her life...

E: Yeah.

I: ...she sort of had this network of girlfriends basically.

E: Yeah, that's good.

A: That's nice.

E: I like how she seemed to just sort of like add them as opposed to like breaking up with one and getting a new one. That's nice.

I: Yeah. Like in her like last days, they were like oh no we have to get all four of us in the room.

A: Yeah and I like, I assume based on the fact that her and Lyudmila and...

I: Olga.

A: Olga would like have a cottage together and stuff, that obviously the girlfriends were like getting along well too.

I: Yeah.

A: That's good.

I: Obviously they did as well because she felt she could kind of send Olga and be like go and see Lyudmila for me while she's in the hospital.

E: Were any of her girlfriends in relationships with each other. Do we know?

I: I don't know. It's never really clear whether they were just good friends or whether they were in a relationship as well. I'm not sure. Olga, Lyudmila and Sofya is definitely kind of presented as this like triad of mutual support and friendship.

E: Okay.

I: But it's unclear to me what the friendship between Olga and Lyudmila was like, whether that was a romantic relationship or whether they were just friends.

A: Okay.

I: I don't really know.

A: It's very nice, very nice.

I: I hate the way a good queer person dies at the end of every episode.

E: Yes.

A: Yeah.

I: I mean it's always at least nice when they like die peacefully holding hands with their partner.

A: Yeah like she had all her partners there and yeah.

I: She did.

E: I like how I was like if she gets a wife, and it's like, she got at least three.

[laughter]

I: She had a number.

E: She had a surplus of wife.

A: And a monkey!

[laughter]

I: It's true.

A: Amazing.

I: Thank you for listening. This has been Queer as Fact. I'm Irene.

A: I'm Alice.

E: I'm Eli.

I: If you enjoyed this episode and wanted to hear more, you can find us on iTunes or Podbean or wherever podcasts come from. If you want to leave us a review on iTunes that would be really great and we will read you out on air as a reward.

[laughter]

E: Yeah so we started doing that when we got access to our iTunes reviews, which was a bit of a process, don't worry about it. And we had a backlog, but now we've been every time we record kind of you know maybe one or two more have come up. So as of recording we only have one new one to read you and the title is 'Awesome Podcast' by gayandexhausted.

[laughter]

A and I: Relatable.

[laughter]

E: Yes. And they say “I recently started listening to this podcast and find it really informative and interesting. It’s great to have some place to learn about in-depth queer history, especially from such amazing hosts”.

I: Aww.

A: Thanks!

I: Thanks.

E: So that was a relatively positive comment.

A: That’s good.

I: Yeah that was nice.

E: Yeah that was nice, thank you very much for taking the time to review us.

I: You can contact us directly at queerasfact@gmail.com or we’re on Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr as Queer As Fact. We’ll be back on June 22nd with a Queer as Fiction episode on 1996 Robin Williams film *The Birdcage*. And we’ll be back on July 1st with our next full-length episode on Horace Walpole, 18th century writer and man of letters. Thanks for listening.