

RAISA BOROVSKY



**M**ARTHA'S  
**VINEYARD**



# MARTHA'S VINEYARD

*a novel*



*by* RAISA BOROVSKY

BOSTON • 2021

**RAISA BOROVSKY**

*Martha's Vineyard. A Novel*

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*To all immigrants who are destined  
to live — and raise their kids —  
in the culture that is not their own*

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## SUMMER WEEKEND IN THE FALL

### 1

Summer has ended abruptly, as if God looked at the calendar, and decided to act accordingly. The eve of Labor Day was still mild, with a cloudy sky, but pleasant enough for BBQs and other outdoor outings. The next day it was all over: cold winds from the north brought heavy rains; trees, still green, swayed helplessly, as if trying to escape the inevitable arrival of a long New England winter. This weather continued almost for the entire September, so that humans, together with Nature, began to think of summer as long past.

Suddenly, on the last weekend of September, summer returned. The rain stopped, the sky turned pale blue, covered with just a few transparent white clouds; the temperature on the mainland reached the high seventies, and the wind turned gentle and caressing. Even the Atlantic Ocean lay calm and unthreatening, and tourist boats finally were able to resume their runs to the islands.

On Saturday morning, a middle-aged couple boarded a ferry at Hyannis, Cape Cod, heading for the weekend on Martha's Vineyard Island. On Friday, they drove all the way from New Jersey, spent a half-a-day in Boston, dutifully following recommendations of the guidebook for sight-seeing, and after a night in a 5-star hotel, headed to their final destination. It was their twentieth wedding anniversary; they had been planning it for months, looking at Caribbean islands, Hawaii, Italy... But, with busy work schedules and endless family obligations, they finally settled on a low-key weekend away. She had never been on any island off Cape Cod — and why go to the end of the Earth when ...

well, there should be something special about Martha's Vineyard if so many American presidents had been choosing it for decades as the place for their summer retreat...

Her husband of course, had been on the Cape numerous times with his first family, and almost certainly visited Martha's Vineyard; in his mind, he had clear pictures of his young kids playing on sandy beaches, and their mother refusing to swim "because the water was too cold." They were not unpleasant



memories, but he did not need them right now: he loved his second wife, and the twenty years they had spent together had passed by swiftly, as if they were twenty weeks.

Unexpected happiness at mid-life, too short to get used to it, even less to get tired of. So, he positioned

himself on the deck of a small ferry and looked at his wife, who stood with her back to him, with tenderness and gratitude; gratitude to that mysterious overpowerful Somebody who had brought them together in this wide, wild world. He was savoring every moment they were alone, finally away from the everyday life of their family home, from adult kids who brought more anxiety and pain than joy, and from her frequent tears that he could neither help nor ignore...

She was looking over the water, into nowhere. By all the rules of psychology, she should have hated oceans, and open water in general—but, surprisingly, she did not. The immenseness, the vastness of water without boundaries with no land in sight, captivated her, transferred her into a meditative state. Time



stopped, and there was no past, no future, no joy, but no pain either. She was inhaling the salty sea breeze, marveling how the air filled her lungs, and how it was possible to be so fully alive, but have no thoughts or feelings...

No one looking at her would guess that she was in her mid-fifties. Slim, medium height, tight jeans, white windbreaker filling with warm air like a sail, straight hair of light brown color loosely covering her back, she was gracefully leaning at the railing, light, transparent like the clouds above her, almost ready to be picked up by the wind and blown away. Her husband was an older but still youthful-looking man in his sixties. He was fit, medium height, with a neatly trimmed grayish beard and thick, slightly wavy gray hair and eyeglasses; a loner at heart who had long ago learned to hide his social awkwardness behind the appearance of successful businessman...

# LIZA

## 2

She was born half a world away, in Russia, a cold and spooky country, at that time all but closed to the outside world. Her parents named her Elizaveta. In English, she went by Elizabeth, but only on official documents. Friends called her Liza (“Liza”, with “z”, not *Lisa*, a name she hated); she completely discarded Lizzy, Betsy, and other equally foreign versions of her name.

She had grown up in Peterhof, which for some may just mean a suburb of the city then known as Leningrad (formerly and currently St. Petersburg). Peterhof was, however, much more than a “suburb” of anything, a UNESCO World heritage site, with its magnificent palaces and gardens attracting visitors from all over the world. Any encyclopedia will tell you that Peterhof’s so-



phisticated gardens with elaborate fountain systems had been modeled after France's Versailles. But, once an adult Liza visited Versailles, she was gravely disappointed: Peterhof's parks were much larger, more luxurious, the fountains were more plentiful — and everything was overall, better. "Like everything in Russia," she used to say. "You guys just don't understand what you've been missing!"

Liza had a happy childhood as the only daughter of a university professor and a schoolteacher. Having just one child was typical for educated Russian families of that time, no matter what the government tried to do to entice people to have more children. The family lived in a small, neat apartment, with windows facing a quiet boulevard lined by hundred-year-old trees. Little Liza ran around freely through parks and green inner yards, without much concern for safety. She went to a good school, and was a good student. She had friends who also ran around green inner yards and parks without any concerns, except who to play with and who to avoid (at least for today); they, too, went to good schools, and had good grades. Most of her friends had moms and dads; divorced couples with children were rare — single moms unheard of.

At seven, Liza went to school for the first time, wearing a brown uniform dress with a lace white collar, and white silk ribbons in her dark long braids. Like other kids, she carried a huge bouquet of flowers to be presented to her first-grade teacher. She did not go to the closest school to her home, as most kids did, but to a privileged "English" school where one needed to *pull strings* for a child to be admitted. The latter requirement didn't apply to her, since her mother was a respected elementary school teacher in that very school.

During her first three years, Liza happily sailed through the fun of being a *Little Octobrist*, proudly wearing a red five-star-shaped badge with a portrait of Lenin as a young child. She

recited patriotic children's poems at school events, and sang in chorus with her classmates about happy life in their great country, all of which they believed. At the age of ten, Liza, like all of her friends, was initiated into the young Pioneers. A red tie now decorated her modest brown dress, and, together with her friends and comrades, she used to sing: *Blue nights, run up like bonfires, We are the pioneers, workers' children, The epoch of bright years is approaching, Our pioneers' watchword is "Always be ready!"* At the words "workers' children," her friends smirked at each other (quietly, so that the teachers wouldn't notice), since hardly any of them was a "worker's child". Most of their dads taught in the university, or, at the very minimum, were engineers or doctors. But then, the blue nights lit by campfires indeed existed — and, even better, *the white nights* of northern Russia, where the summer day lasts for 20 hours. And there was singing around campfires and hiking in the woods and along the picturesque shores of the Baltic Sea. There were lots of jokes and laughter, and later, when the kids became older, overnights in tents, and secret kissing behind trees, and gossiping among girls discussing "who is in love with whom..."

As a typical Russian housewife, Liza's mom Olga Petrovna made sure the house was clean, the laundry done and folded, and hot meals for the family ready at the designated hours. At other times, she was mostly busy preparing for her lessons or checking her students' homework. She was quietly and reliably present, from time-to-time scolding her daughter for the dishes she had not picked up, or a sweater left on the floor, or for an occasional "4" at school. For all other parenting obligations, there was Liza's dad. It was Fyodor Ivanovich who read books to her, taught her how to swim in summer and brought her to gymnastic classes in winter, helped her with homework, and later taught her how to play guitar. Dad was the adult in her life she could always talk to. He could disagree with her, but never acted condescending, or raised his voice; he would say something like "well,

on the other hand..." or "...if you think about it...". And at the end, it always turned out that dad was right.

With all the wonderful things about her father, the best time they had together was visiting the city of Leningrad. They wandered through art museums, saw theater plays and listened to operas, or just walked along the embankment of the Neva River. Fyodor Ivanovich would tell his daughter stories of his childhood right after the war; for example, how he and his mother and sister returned to the bombed-out city after the siege had been finally lifted, and how they found their old house intact, but the apartment occupied. He would make sad memories sound funny; Liza never tired of hearing how the family had to sleep in the kitchen of their own apartment, and how her dad and Aunt Tania, his younger sister, would steal food from the neighbors. Dad would talk about Liza's grandmother who sewed a skirt for a teenage Aunt Tania from her brother's worn-out pants, because at those times a girl could not survive without a skirt, no matter how hard life was...

At the end, the stories always came out humorous, and Fyodor Ivanovich laughed, and Liza laughed, too. The best of all were visits to Auntie Tania, who shared her brother's memories and would always add some new funny details. Then they would all laugh together: Aunt Tania, her husband Arkady, and their only daughter Marina. Marina, Liza's beloved cousin, was a red-headed, curly-haired plump girl, one year her senior, to whom Liza always looked up.

Liza was never particularly popular at school, a very thin girl, a little too tall for her age (she slouched slightly to appear shorter, which helped neither her looks, nor her self-esteem). She wore her dark auburn hair in two long braids, which was already out of fashion at that time, but that was her little rebellion against the society. Her skirts were too short for her mother's taste, and that was her way to rebel against her mother. Other than that, she conformed to the rules of adults, which just made

life easier. She always had a few good friends, both at school and in the neighborhood — and, of course, she had her first cousin Marina, whom she thought of as “her sister.”

She had her first kiss at “sweet sixteen,” in the middle of the ninth grade, with a boy from her class. Misha was a good student, wore glasses, planned to go to college after school to obtain his higher education, loved reading, and played guitar. In short, he was a younger version of her dad, and that was just as well. They were “a couple” until the end of the 10th grade when, after school graduation and successful admissions to their respective colleges, they decided to go on a *real* adult camping trip, run by an official tour company. That turned out to be too much for both of them. Did Misha show undue interest in another girl there? Was he jealous of Liza speaking too much to other young men? Was sleeping in the same tent (with three other camping mates, and without opportunity for sexual intimacy) hard on their bodies and souls? In any case, they both agreed to go their separate ways before the new school year started. She entered the biology department of the university, a few bus-stops away from her home. He went to the famous engineering school in downtown Leningrad, and spent hours each day commuting. When occasionally running into each other at school reunions, they were friendly to each other and would usually dance at least one slow dance together, without ill or hurt feelings from either side. Life moved on.

### 3

**L**eningrad University, the second largest higher education institution in the country, was a universe of its own, with different laws of physics and gravity. Substance rotated around Big Stars — professors who were mostly famous and brilliant scientists (although sometimes famous but not brilliant,

or occasionally brilliant but not famous). Planets were made of laboratories, clubs, and the most active students, the rest of the student body constituting satellites of various importance.

Like the majority of freshmen students, Liza in the first few months was overwhelmed by one and only desire: to survive. The first semester, all her energy went toward holding her head above water. After passing the first series of winter examinations, she started believing that there was a bottom somewhere beneath the waves, and that she might be able to make a life for herself in that brave new world. During that time, other students started looking around, assessing their new classmates who would become their extended family for the next four-and-a-half years.

Liza changed her hairstyle, by replacing two braids with one, covering her back to the waist, like a symbolic Russian beauty from a fairy-tale picture book. The main change in her appearance, however, came from stopping slouching; instead, she learned to walk around proudly, wearing high heels that made her look taller than her medium height. She replaced miniskirts with jeans, which did not fit the image of a Russian beauty, but was far more practical, especially in winter. She began to make new friends. It took a long time to find the ones who would become as close as her childhood playmates had been; and with no one she ever got as intimate as with her cousin Marina.

As everywhere in the Soviet Union, university education was free; moreover, most students got a small stipend from the government. Liza was not the only one who wanted to make some extra money; she just happened to have useful knowledge: thanks to the special school she had attended, she could read and write in English, almost without mistakes. She began translating articles from English-language biological journals into Russian for her professors. Occasionally, she did even bolder things: translated the professors' latest writings from Russian into English, to be published in America or presented in interna-

tional conferences. So, she put her knowledge of English to use, which made her feel somewhat proud, and increased her self-esteem even more.

According to the unwritten tradition of Soviet colleges of that time, her first summer vacation was spent in the job corps. Although students worked ten-hour days, they had enough energy to stay up past midnight, singing and dancing. Somehow, they survived for two months on four-hours-a-night sleep. The majority of girls had affairs, most of which did not last past the summer.

The second academic year was much easier for Liza: she knew her way around the university, was friendly with quite a few students, knew her professors, and learned how to prepare for an important test by postponing studying until the night before (and still pass with a decent grade).

She spent very little time at home now, preferring to hang around the students' dorm and study in the university libraries; after all, that's where life was happening. During rare weekends at her parents' apartment, she would try to invite her new friends. In the warm and cozy atmosphere, students living in dormitories could get a brief feeling of finding "a home away from home," while enjoying hot tea in the kitchen, and delicious pies that Olga Petrovna would bake during her short breaks between planning for lessons.

Occasionally, some boys would ask Liza out, but no one was serious, and by her nineteenth birthday she did not have a boyfriend and was still a virgin. For the first time in her life, she started worrying that something important was missing in her life, although the worries were subtle and in no way amounted to unhappiness.

Her most meaningful hours were now spent with cousin Marina, during the girls' regular meetings. With Marina, Liza could put her feelings into words, without the slightest fear of being



misunderstood. The times when her father was her main confidant were clearly over.

The Big Change happened in the middle of the winter, during one of the many traditional end-of-December parties. It was the night when Liza met Andrey. Or, more precisely, when they had their first flirtatious talk and danced together — the evening when Andrey, actually, noticed Liza. Formally, they knew each other before — just enough to nod and smile when they brushed past each other in the corridors of the university. Everyone knew Andrey, he was not a person to be missed. Six-foot tall, handsome, blond with blue eyes, athletic, a Komsomol leader, and brilliant student, he was the soul of every company, the most desired boyfriend for the most popular girls in the dorm. At the same time, he managed to keep his distance, and none of those who called themselves “his friends,” could say that they really knew him.

Liza, who inherited her dad’s general dislike of people who were too popular, or too showy, had never dreamed of dating Andrey. It was just one of those evenings in somebody’s home (because Liza was not the only lucky one living with her parents, instead of a crowded dorm room), with wine bottles that did not need to be hidden, with “foreign” music (outlawed at official university parties) that students could openly dance to. The semi-darkness of the apartment was broken only by the garlands of colored holiday lights; and Liza, contrary to her self-imposed custom, let her long thick dark auburn hair down, with some curls at the ends. Instead of usual jeans, she wore a very tight mini skirt; she had brought her guitar, and, after a couple of glasses of light sweet wine, sang one romantic song after another, without her usual shyness. She came to her senses outside, in the crispy cold December night, with Andrey walking her home and carrying her guitar, and fresh snow crunching under their feet...

She was not planning to have an affair with Andrey; on the contrary, she was rather determined not to let herself get swept away by his masculine charm. But something must have gone wrong, and before the end of the winter session, on a Friday evening, she stayed overnight in Andrey's dorm room, while his roommates were all out — for one reason or the other.

She left the dorm early Saturday morning, as soon as the darkness of the night started fading away (which, at those latitudes, was not that early at all), and slowly walked home, mentally preparing to face her mother's rage and her dad's quiet reproachful gaze... She knew only one thing: she would never be the same person again. An innocent girl had died that night, a young woman emerged in her place, as a fledging bird emerges from an egg, after finally breaking its shell...

At nineteen, Liza was not at all naïve. She was fully prepared for the banal turn of events, where Andrey would stop waiting for her outside the auditorium a few times a day and would not sit with her in the student cafeteria. They would return to the casual brief “hi” in the hallways — and of, course, he would never again invite her to spend the night in his room. She was rather astonished when none of that happened. Her head was spinning from this unfamiliar relationship to the point that she got close to failing her winter exams. (Andrey, on the other hand, got all “fives” which allowed him to keep his special stipend, awarded only to the best-performing students.)

She tried to mentally block her mother's daily monologues about “no guy ever respecting a girl who sleeps with him before marriage” — not that she had anything to say to that universal truth, or that her mother expected a response. She just allowed herself to live, one day at a time, savoring each moment of that newly discovered womanhood.

Winter break came, and all students had to vacate dorms. Andrey, as always, went to stay with his parents in Ukraine. To everyone's amazement, he called Peterhof every day from his little

suburban town somewhere near Kiev. Liza knew that Andrey's parents did not own a telephone, so he had to walk to the post office and wait for an hour for the phone operator to "give him the line". Liza's dad shook his head thinking of the enormous expense of those daily calls. Liza would try to sound cool and calm, speaking matter-of-factly about skiing trips with her girlfriends, movies she watched, theater performances she attended. But it was a pretense indifference: every time the phone rang with those special, long-distance rings, her heart was ready to jump out of her throat, blood pounded behind her temples, and her stomach tightened until it hurt.

She was greatly relieved to find out that she was not yet pregnant, and rushed to her cousin Marina to ask about birth control. (Not much was available in Russia at those days, so women had to be creative.) Luckily, Marina, a medical student, knew many tricks — and by the end of the winter break Liza felt much less nervous thinking of the hours she would spend alone with Andrey in his dorm room.

#### 4

“Well, perhaps he sleeps with half of the girls in the dorm, but he is marrying *me*...”

She learned that — now habitual — response, after her engagement with Andrey was officially announced, and most of her friends (and even friends of friends) rushed in to warn her that she was about to make a grave mistake. She knew they could be right — but she had reached the point of “no return” on the swift takeoff of her love flight. She no longer had a choice; she succeeded in convincing herself that she was, indeed, special, and deserved to be loved by someone as glamorous as Andrey. She was also popular now — the girl that even professors who did not teach her, or use her services as a translator,

knew by name. She had become a satellite of that brilliant star named Andrey, and his light shone on her, making her noticeable, desirable, causing envy.

Olga Petrovna stopped lecturing to her daughter, but spoke mostly of the preparations for the wedding, planned for June right after the spring exams. Fyodor Ivanovich did not think it was a good match, and displayed no enthusiasm. Of course, he never said anything to Liza, but his “congratulations, daughter” didn’t sound happy. Apparently, he shared his concerns with his sister Tania, and Aunt Tania discussed the matter with her husband Arkady. Their daughter Marina accidentally overheard her parents’ conversation, and reported everything to Liza. Marina, who always saw eye-to-eye with her cousin, dismissed the parents’ concerns, and was the one who came up with the famous phrase: “Yes, perhaps he is sleeping with half of the girls in the dorm—but he is marrying *you*...”

Marina was also in love. Even though she was not yet formally engaged, no one doubted that she and her boyfriend were meant for each other. There was nothing special or brilliant about Pavel, except that he was in love with Marina head over heels, and was as devoted as a young man in his early twenties could be to his girlfriend. He was about to graduate from the same medical school as Marina; everyone knew he would get a job in one of the city hospitals, making modest money but helping people, which meant spending his life doing what he cared about the most. He would then marry a plump, cheerful, always ready to laugh Marina, with her red curls that never stayed in place, and adore her and be faithful to her ever after.

And so, the two *sisters* concentrated on wedding plans, preparing to have as much fun as possible, and refused to allow any sad feelings or any worries interfere with their youthful happiness.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**RAISA BOROVSKY** was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, and immigrated to the United States in 1991, a few months before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

She met her American husband in Washington, DC, and together they lived—and traveled extensively—in a number of countries of Africa and South-East Asia.

Always an adventurer, Raisa has worked as a computer programmer, editorial staff member of a Russian Jewish magazine (which was printed in Israel and then secretly delivered to Moscow), Hebrew teacher, and later, after her emigration from Russia—as a librarian, English as a Second Language instructor, elementary school teacher, yoga instructor, and mental health counselor.

In addition to having their own biological children, Raisa and her husband Wayne adopted two girls from Russian orphanages.

Currently Raisa lives in a suburb of Boston Massachusetts, with her husband, younger adopted daughter, and two cats. She currently works as a mental health counselor in a private practice and teaches yoga, and is a part-time writer.



**RAISA BOROVSKY** is a professional psychologist and Russian-American author, living with her family outside Boston, Massachusetts. Her previous works include *Siberian Summer: The World Upside Down*, an historical novel based on intellectual and dissident life in late 20th century Russia, especially during Perestroika, and on Jewish immigration to the USA.

*Martha's Vineyard* continues emigration (and immigration) themes — but from an entirely different perspective. The Berlin Wall physically and symbolically divides two worlds — the “evil” world of socialism and the “free” world of capitalism. The reader sees the divided planet as if looking from the Cosmos, and engages in the lives of characters “on both sides” of the globe.

When the Berlin Wall collapses in 1989, the division is supposed to disappear, and the two worlds slowly merge into each other. . . Is that what is really happening? Life capriciously brings John, a successful businessman from New York, with Liza, a very educated and smart, but severely traumatized daughter of a Russian university professor; joining in the picture are Liza's son Dmitry, who had grown up without ever having a place called “home”; and last (but not least)—Martha, a girl from an orphanage in a northern Russian village, who “wins the lottery” by being adopted into an affluent American family. How do these people adapt to changes in their lives? Their changes are not just “geographical”—but social, economic, and psychological. Each of them goes through their own struggle to find their place — and preferably adjust — to the new life that they had not necessarily chosen for themselves.

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“Raisa Borovsky has written a valuable novel documenting a life lived in two worlds. Liza, the protagonist of Ms. Borovsky's *Martha's Vineyard*, grew up in the harsher, yet somehow more innocent, world of the Communist bloc, and then, like so many other Eastern European emigres, made her way through the looking glass to the long-forbidden world of the capitalist West, with all of its possibilities for fresh starts, material wealth, spiritual poverty, loneliness, and memories of distant tragedies and joys. As the rules of the game shift about her, Liza relentlessly studies her own elusive heart, whose mysteries shadow her wherever she may go. Raisa Borovsky makes Liza's search through life our own.”

— **Charles M. Boyer**, author of *History's Child*, winner, Associated Writers & Writers' Programs Award for the Novel and Great Lakes College Association New Writers Award, Fiction



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