

A Young Soviet pianist must reinvent herself to save her journalist father from certain death in the Gulag. Determined to find him, she recruits a Soviet-Israeli doctor, and they embark on a perilous mission to smuggle him out of Russia.

Dissonance: A Novel

By Carol Cosman

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DISSONANCE

A NOVEL



CAROL COSMAN

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The Neva River's hypnotic pattern of gray-green waves captivated Mikhail Lev Aronovich so much so, he had to stop on the bridge risking a late arrival at Shostakovich Hall. He imagined himself swimming underwater, sliding past his troubles, his fears, his doubts—the ease in his movements, liberating. Awakened from his trance by gusts of wind whipping through his graying hair, he lifted his eyes. His gaze swept along the horizon to the Winter Palace darkened against a backdrop of a bleeding violet sky.

He welcomed this time of year when the sun never set, when the city finally woke up from its long, darkened days. Taking in the last of his cigarette, Mikhail threw it to the pavement and crushed it under his shoe. He glanced at his watch. *It's getting late*, he thought. With one hand, Mikhail held onto his old leather briefcase; with the other, he curled his fingers around the neck of a wrapped bottle of cognac.

He strode from the bridge past The Bronze Horseman fashioned after Peter the Great, the horse trampling the serpent of treason; hastened his steps through Decembrist's Square, where a bloody battle had once taken place between

rebellious officers and an autocratic Tsar. As he approached Saint Isaac's Cathedral, Mikhail looked up at its golden dome, testimony to a bygone era when religion had a place in society. *It's always the same. Whoever is in power crushes the will of the people.* The thought dampened his mood as he turned the corner to Malaya Morskava Street, its pavement eclipsed by the jagged shadows of the buildings that flanked its length.

His footfalls took on the evenness of a metronome, a reminder of his daughter Natalia's piano practice years back when she was a child. *Andante*, the metronome had willed her delicate, determined fingers to adhere to the moderate tempo of a Bach Invention. *Andante*, slower, Mikhail stepped in tempo to his daughter's piece. Like her mother, Natalia had practiced until every nuance was mastered. He would often stop whatever he was doing, listen to her play, and find her so absorbed that nothing stood between her and the music. As her practice continued, her pieces gained speed. Channeling Natalia's tempo, he quickened his pace to an *Allegro Moderato*.

Mikhail recalled that morning's call with Natalia when she phoned him at work. Following the pleasantries, she said, "Papa, try not to be late this time. The competition begins at seven-thirty tonight."

"Natashka," he said, "don't you worry. I'll be there in plenty of time," adding a calm to his voice which masked his anxiety.

"How can I not worry?" Natalia asked. "Remember Moscow? You arrived just before intermission and even then, you seemed so...preoccupied." Static hissed through the line, and Mikhail could hear what sounded like a phone booth door slam on the other end.

He wished he could tell her everything. She was an adult, after all. He cursed himself for never finding the courage to tell her the story of how his life had taken a dangerous turn long ago. And he certainly wasn't going to say anything to her over the phone.

"I won't be late this time, Natashka, I promise. And afterwards, we'll celebrate," he said.

As Mikhail spoke, he fidgeted with a pile of notes on his desk interspersed with a week's worth of *Pravda* newspapers, a typewriter, and the latest report from *TASS*. A colleague at the next desk raised a brow in Mikhail's direction. Their boss had just entered the room speaking with a stranger dressed in a gray suit. His boss kept his focus on Mikhail, whose stomach suddenly recoiled as he recognized the stranger as a man who had followed him on the trains the night before.

Mikhail's hand tightened around the receiver. "I've got to go," he said.

"*Proshchay...Papa.*" The hesitation in Natalia's voice echoed Mikhail's fears.

"*Proshchay, moy dragotsenny.*" Mikhail said goodbye to his precious one.

He checked his watch. It read 19:10. *Nyet!* Agitated he couldn't keep a simple promise to his only child, he quickened his pace.

Not far behind, footfalls blended with his cadence, and he felt his skin prickle. Despite his desire to run, Mikhail willed himself to slow down. The footfalls from behind slowed—to his exact pace. Not daring to look back, he stopped short and pretended to adjust his briefcase. No one passed him.

Mikhail resumed his walk. Within the block, he came to a café popular among the city's intelligentsia and commuters. If he ducked into the café, he might lose any stalkers. Before he entered, he stopped at the café window thinking this might

confuse his follower. Glancing at the reflection in the window for anyone suspicious, he saw a tall man with a thin frame and a creased, worn expression etched between his brows. The man's cheeks were gaunt with shadows. A moment passed before he registered that the person looking at him was his own reflection, no one else. How he'd aged these last few months! Mikhail sighed and entered. His eyes swept the back for an exit. *None!* Patrons waited for tables or gathered around the bar, smoking, downing shots of vodka, freeing up a week's worth of built-up tensions through chatter.

At the bar, Mikhail kept an eye on the entryway while he ordered a drink. He placed his package and briefcase beside him and lit a cigarette. His stomach rumbled—he hadn't eaten anything since morning, a meager breakfast of weak tea, black bread, and kippers. He started to feel nauseous, overcome by the smoke and his hunger. Two gray-suited men entered, one calm and measured, the other straining his neck forward, impatient. *KGB*. Mikhail lowered his head and looked away. He recognized the first man from earlier—the same guy who spoke to his boss that morning at *Pravda*. He allowed his shaking fingers to pull the cigarette away from his lips, crushed what was left of it into an ashtray, then picked up his belongings. It was time to move. He followed a boisterous crowd on its way to a table, until he was close enough to blend in with another group on its way out.

Outside, he mingled with the crowd until they dispersed. A burning sensation rose in his chest. *Keep it together! Natalia must be playing by now*, he cautioned himself. Mikhail's fist gripped the neck of the cognac bottle. Footsteps pounded behind him, quicker this time, not coordinated with his own. *One more block until Nevsky Prospekt*.

On the street, a black Volga slowed down ahead of him and stopped at the curb. A short man wearing a black leather

bomber jacket jumped out. Before Mikhail could register what was happening, a muscular arm wrapped around his neck from behind, choking him and dragging him backwards as his heels scraped the pavement. Mikhail gasped. Piercing spasms shot through his neck and down his back. He saw flashes of Natalia's past performances. Why of all nights, were the *Chekists* after him tonight? Another attacker yanked Mikhail's briefcase from under his arm and knocked his wire-rims from his face. He still had the cognac. In a desperate attempt, Mikhail tried to smash the cognac bottle over the leather-jacketed man's head, but thick fingers pried his own from the bottle's neck; he saw Leather Jacket sneering as he drew a knife from his pocket. Mikhail envisioned a brutal ending.

"*Nyet!* Not that way!" came a shout. The knife disappeared. One of Mikhail's assailants smashed the bottle of cognac onto the concrete and threw him down with it. They all swarmed over him, kicking his every centimeter from knees to crown. He recoiled. One of his eyes swelled shut, and the mixture of liquor, broken glass, and the metallic smell of blood overwhelmed him.

"Mikhail Lev Aronovich. What a piece of work," said an amused voice. "We're on to you. You've stolen the Brezhnev document. Where is it if not in your briefcase?"

Mikhail knew if he survived this abuse, his only recourse depended on his resilience and ability to protect a document that could threaten the lives of many people.

The voice mocked him. "Guess what. Your *samizdat* articles are trash. But the Brezhnev document!" The voice paused. "What a fucking hypocrite. It's beyond me how *you* were almost editor of *Pravda*."

Mikhail groaned inwardly. He would never risk putting the others in danger.

“Let me tell you something, Zionist Yid. Where you’re about to go, you better use your tongue as freely as your pen or you’ll be missing out on a lot more than your brat’s recitals.”

Mikhail’s body convulsed with violent coughs. He’d rather die before disclosing anything to these savages. Within seconds, his assailants dragged him into the waiting Volga. The life Mikhail had lived, enlightened in truth, darkened in fear, spun before his eyes from the images of those he loved to Leningrad—its glory, its war-torn terror, its vibrant colors, and white-nights, until every dueling image vanished.

With her back against the wall, she stood by two over-sized doors that opened to the Grand Auditorium of the Shostakovich Philharmonic Hall. Eyes closed, she listened to her competitor's piano arpeggios filter into the waiting area. *Too mechanical*, she thought. At twenty-three years, Natalia Mikhailovna Aronovich knew better. She'd distinguished herself as one of the Soviet Union's most promising classical pianists. Her musical and technical brilliance had captivated audiences nationwide.

Tonight, Natalia had made it to the third and final round of the Khachaturian International Piano Competition. If she won first place, she would enter the worldwide arena of most sought out performers.

Applause resounded. Natalia opened her eyes. A musty scent filled the airless room, and a leaden sky cast an oppressive light through massive, sealed windows. Portraits of Russian composers hung on ruby colored walls, and across the room the bust of the Dmitri Shostakovich sat high on a pedestal, his expression, imposing.

Natalia's mind wandered to memories of her deceased mother. As a small child, she observed everything about her mother prior to a piano performance. She'd gaze up at her,

her heart filled with adoration. *I—am—enough*, Anastasia Petrovna Aronovich murmured. Natalia cherished the memory. *I—am...* she inhaled...*I—am—enough*, she exhaled.

From under her collar, she pulled out a delicate gold filigree amulet that formed a hand. An onyx stone shaped like an eye embedded its center. She squeezed the finger-like form between her thumb and index finger and recalled the night Papa enfolded it into her four-year-old palm. Scooping her into his arms, he whispered, “Natashka, your Mama loved this *hamsa* necklace and wanted you to have it. My *Babushka*, your great-grandma Leah gave it to her to bring good luck. It’s our family secret. Keep it safe, my little dove, and show it to no one.”

“Put it around my neck, Papa. I’ll hide it under my clothes.”

She never removed the hamsa and always kept it hidden. Natalia smiled at the tender, bittersweet memory. She heard another muted applause followed by silence. The doors opened and Natalia’s mentor and teacher, Sonya Brodetsky, faced her.

“They’re ready for you,” Sonya said. She placed a hand on Natalia’s shoulder and whispered, “Never forget, Natalia. Anastasia Petrovna is watching over you.”

Natalia forced herself not to pull away. *Of course, I’ll never forget. Why does she always have to remind me?* For as long as she could remember, the shadow of her mother’s legacy had followed her.

Sonya moved aside, and like a magnet, Natalia was drawn to the Bechstein concert grand, its open wing, beckoning. As her heartbeat quickened, she felt heat rise to her cheeks. *I—am—enough*, she repeated, each word blended with each step as she drew closer to the stage stairs. Natalia barely noticed Maestro Vernovsky and hadn’t yet

acknowledged the orchestra poised to accompany her in Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 2 in C minor.

She stopped before the keyboard, her eyes scanning the audience. *Where is Papa?* she wondered. No time to question. Natalia took a seated position, adjusted the bench to her comfort level, and placed her hands on her lap. With one deep breath, her heartbeat slowed. Body and mind calmed.

In her mind's eye, her mother's image merged with her own, her mother-self poised and ready. Possessed by Anastasia's spirit, a young woman emerged, tall and slender, shrouded in white, her flaxen hair pulled back in a plait. She would transport her audience to the heights and depths of the Russian soul. Mother-daughter fingers hovered over the keyboard. Natalia's mind shifted to the present, and her eyes met Vernovsky's. They exchanged nods and her focus settled on the keyboard. Natalia introduced a foreboding series of bell-like chords with alternating bass octaves. The two violin sections, viola section and first clarinet began in unison, then Natalia accompanied in rapid arpeggios. She wove the music in and out with the orchestra, while the string section lamented the harshness and longing that embodied the Russian spirit.

Natalia immersed herself in the music's language. Effortlessly, she took the lead with each new phrase as it reached a *crescendo*, then receded to a *diminuendo*. She felt herself take the audience on a journey—to Russia's past, its present, to Leningrad's grand Neva River. Her fingers fluttered like gossamer wings over the keyboard, at first audible then retreating into a dark sea of sound. Natalia again emerged, triumphant, taking her audience with her. A single clarinet entered, its melody, reassuring. Tilted forward, Natalia's hamsa swayed to the wave-like push and pull of the music.

She flawlessly transitioned to an agitated conversation between piano, woodwinds, and strings, wove her way into a tapestry of earlier motifs, in, then out with the orchestra. Now they traveled together reaching an ominous climax that all at once recapitulated into the harshness of the music's first theme.

The music pivoted into the depths of despair and Natalia took the same turn. A crash...the auditorium doors had slammed. She continued playing, ignoring the interruption. Her peripheral vision, however, captured the image of an officer of the Red Guard close in on her. Tremors ran through her arms, her hands, her fingers. *I'm drowning*. She could barely breathe.

The judge called out, "Natalia Mikhailovna. Stop!" Natalia refused to give in, her mind rushed ahead. *This couldn't be happening! How dare they cut me off!* The audience's murmurs grew louder; the orchestra froze mid-phrase. She noticed Vernovsky turn, face the judges, the audience, the cameras. Natalia sensed the uniformed man behind her—her head dropped and her arms collapsed to her sides. Silence took center stage.

"Why are you here?" Vernovsky demanded.

The guard ignored him. Instead, he wrapped an arm around Natalia's waist and pulled her away from the piano. "Natalia Mikhailovna, you must come with me at once."

Sonya rushed onstage. "You're mistaken! The girl has done nothing wrong!"

The guard held on to Natalia to keep her from falling. "My superior just gave the order to remove Natalia Mikhailovna from the premises," he said.

"This is an international competition," Sonya declared. "I've never heard of such a thing!"

“It’s not an arrest, madam. Had I gotten the orders earlier, I could have avoided—this.” The guard swept his hand to the room.

Sonya glared at the uniformed man, then at the judge.

The judge shook his head and shrugged. “There’s nothing we can do, Sonya.”

Natalia stared ahead in a trance. “Papa...” she whispered to no one. Her paleness was other-worldly. The officer guided Natalia towards the exit doors with Sonya by her side. All eyes were on them.

An elderly woman extended her hand to Natalia. Eyes brimming with tears, she whispered, “You angel, you were as magnificent as your mother. I will never forget you.”

Once they were alone in the front foyer, Sonya pointed to a side bench. The guard assisted Natalia onto the seat. Sonya sat next to her and wrapped an arm around her bewildered student.

Sonya glowered at the guard and spat, “Now that you’ve done your damage, leave us!”

The guard ignored Sonya, sat on his heels to meet Natalia’s face, now drained of life. He cupped her hand into both of his.

“What is your name?” Sonya asked, her tone resigned.

“Dmitri Olkhovsky,” he answered, his eyes glued to Natalia’s anguished expression.

“So, tell me, Dmitri. What’s really going on here? You must know something.”

“It has something to do with her father. I wish I could tell you more, but that’s all I know.”

“And you have no idea why you were ordered to pull this poor girl off stage?”

“I’m sorry, madam. If I knew why, you—and Natalia—would be the first to know.” Dmitri kept his eyes on Natalia.

Natalia trembled and Dmitri held tight. She yanked her hand away and clenched her fists to her lap. Rising, she let out an excruciating moan. The mournful sound echoed throughout the foyer. Natalia's sapphire eyes widened in horror.

"Where...is...Papa...?" she rasped.

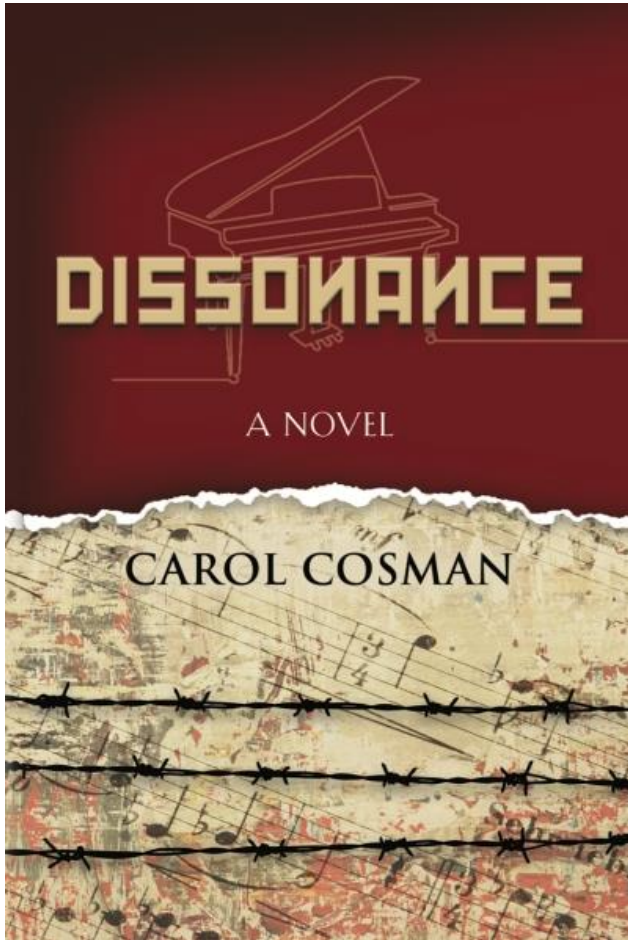
Dmitri and Sonya came to their feet.

Natalia's fingers uncurled slowly, stretched, then curled as if trying to grasp on to something.

"Papa!" Natalia shrieked. She grabbed her hamsa, ripped it off, and threw it to the floor. Natalia took in her surroundings, then hastened her steps towards the exit. Dmitri picked up the necklace and slid it into his pocket. Sonya called after her. Outside, Natalia Aronovich broke into a run and fled the Grand Philharmonic Hall.



Carol Cosman trained as a classical pianist in Jerusalem in the 1970s, and later taught piano in greater Boston and Chicago. She holds a Bachelor's degree in music and a Master's degree in education. Creativity has been her guiding force since childhood, when journaling became an essential means of expression. A past educator, Carol taught creative writing to children and teens. Her love of traveling brought her to Russia and the Middle East—the settings for her novel. She raised her children, Naomi and Alex, in Illinois where she continues to live with her husband, Jeff, and poodle, Gigi.



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