

You loved your last book...but what  
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new  
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

---

**Opening Extract from...**

# **Mind of Winter**

Written by Laura Kasischke

Published by Hesperus Press Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

Published by Hesperus Nova  
Hesperus Press Limited  
28 Mortimer Street, London W1W 7RD  
[www.hesperuspress.com](http://www.hesperuspress.com)

Copyright © Laura Kasischke 2014  
The right of Laura Kasischke to be identified as the author of this  
Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright,  
Designs & Patents Act 1988.

This edition first published by Hesperus Press Limited, 2015

Typeset by Sarah Newitt  
Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd

ISBN: 978-1-84391-548-5

All rights reserved. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall  
not be resold, lent, hired out or otherwise circulated without the express  
prior consent of the publisher.

# Mind of Winter

Laura Kasischke



For Bill

*Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place...*

– Wallace Stevens, from 'The Snow Man'

## Christmas, 20 --

She woke up late that morning, and *knew*:

*Something had followed them home from Russia.*

This scrappy bit of information had been offered up to Holly in a dream, she supposed, a glimpse into a truth she'd carried with her for – how long?

Thirteen years?

Thirteen years!

For thirteen years she'd known this, and not known – or so it seemed to her in her half-awake state on Christmas morning. She rose from bed and went down the hallway to her daughter's bedroom, anxious to see that she was there, still asleep, perfectly safe.

Yes, there she was, Tatiana, one pale arm thrown over a pale coverlet. Dark hair spilled over a pillow. She was so still she could have been a painting. So peaceful she could have been –

But she wasn't. She was fine. Holly felt reassured and went back to the bedroom, slipped into bed beside her husband again – but as soon as she did, she thought it once more:

It had followed them home!

This was something Holly had known, apparently, in her heart, or in her subconscious, or wherever it was inside her where bits of information like this hid themselves for years, until something made her aware of what she'd forgotten, or repressed, or –

Or was it something she'd willfully overlooked? Now she saw it:

Something had followed them home from Russia!

But what?

And then Holly thought, *I must write this down before it slips away*. It was that feeling she used to have when she was younger – the almost panicked desire to write about something she'd half glimpsed, to get it on the page before it dashed

away again. Sometimes it had felt nearly nauseating, that desire to yank it out of herself and put it into written words before it hid away behind some organ deep inside her – some maroonish, liverish, gillish organ she'd have to pry behind, as if fingering it out of a turkey carcass, ever to get at it again. That's what writing a poem used to feel like to Holly, and why she'd quit writing poems.

My God, though, this thought was like a poem – a secret, a truth, just out of reach. Holly would need time to pluck this out and examine it in the light, but it was in her, whether she'd known it or not until now. Like a poem that wanted to be written. A truth insisting on recognition. It was the explanation for so many things!

The cat, crawling off. Her back legs, her tail.

And her husband. The bump on the back of his hand, like a tiny third fist – a homunculus's! – growing. They'd said it was benign, but how could such a thing be *benign*? They'd said to ignore it, but how? Something was bearing fruit inside her husband, or trying to claw its way out. How were they to ignore it?

(Although, to be fair to Dr. Fujimura, they *had* learned to ignore it, and it had eventually stopped growing, just as she'd said it would.)

And Aunt Rose. How her language had changed. How she'd begun to speak in a foreign language. How Holly'd had to stop taking her calls because she couldn't stand it anymore, and how angry her cousins had been, saying *She loved to talk to you. You were her favorite. You abandoned her while she was dying.*

And then the hens. Ganging up on the other one, on the hen she'd so stupidly, so cavalierly, named Sally. Six weeks, and then –

*Don't think about Sally. Never think of that hen and her horrible name again.*

And the water stain over the dining room table in the shape of a shadowy face – although they could never find anywhere

that water would have seeped through their skintight, warranty-guaranteed roof. The roof company men had stood around in their filthy boots and stared up at it, refusing to take any blame.

Also, without explanation, the wallpaper had curled away in the bathroom. Just that one edge. You could never do anything to keep it in place. They'd tried every adhesive on the market, but the daisy wallpaper would stick fast for exactly three days and nights before it peeled away again.

Holly needed to write down these things, this evidence! The cat, Aunt Rose, the bump on her husband's hand, the hens, the water stain, the wallpaper.

How long had it been since she'd woken up needing to write? God, how Holly used to *need* to write. Now she needed to write again. What time was it? She was still in bed, or in bed again. Had she already risen, looked in on her daughter? Or had that been a dream? She'd come back to bed and slipped again into sleep? Perhaps. Now she didn't need to open her eyes to know that it was morning, that it was snowing.

Was there a pen in this room? If she found a pen before Eric and Tatiana woke up, would she be able to actually sit down and write? That broken habit. That abandoned necessity.

Holly thought she could. She would be able to write. She could feel it – the bitter ache of it. There was some awful pressure on her lungs. There was, she felt, something stoppered up in her torso. She imagined vomiting it out of herself, like vomiting up a swan – something with a long, tangled throat nestled inside her own throat – choking on its feathers and all its bony quills. How relieved she would feel afterward, lying on the bedroom floor beside the swan she'd vomited out of herself into the world.

Outside, the wind sounded like a nerve being yanked through the tree. It was Christmas morning, but late. It must be nearly nine o'clock. They never slept this late on Christmas morning! Far too much rum and eggnog last night. Was Tatty still asleep



in her bed? Her pale arm, pale coverlet, pale pillow with a splash of dark hair, still. Holly had looked in on her, she remembered this, but it had been hours ago, hadn't it? Surely Tatty would be up by now, ready to open presents. Where was she? Why hadn't she come into the room to wake them up?

Because she was fifteen, of course. She was probably also still asleep. There would never again be a Christmas morning, crack-of-dawn Tatty coming in to slap their faces lightly with her damp, new, tiny hands. Instead, they'd all overslept on Christmas morning, and Holly had woken up with this little horror in her mind, that something had followed them home.

Something evil?

Well, perhaps not evil. But it had sapped them. It continued to sap them.

'Oh, that's motherhood,' Thuy would say. 'You're just talking about motherhood. Children, they're energy vampires...'

But don't forget the cat. The wallpaper. Aunt Rose. Even when she was semi-lucid, even when the words were familiar English words, Aunt Rose had seemed to Holly to be reciting lines from 'The Fire Sermon': *On Margate Sands I can connect nothing with nothing the broken fingernails of dirty hands my people humble people who expect nothing la...*

And there had also been their CDs, hadn't there? All their favorites had been scratched, as if overnight – although, surely, it had been over a long period of time? *Every one* of their favorites had been ruined, and they'd never even bothered to replace them. They'd just left them there on a shelf, like their books, which they never took down to read now, or even to blow the dust off.

And speaking of the dust! My God, it was everywhere. It *was* Holly's exhaustion. It was floating and impossible, still bearing cat fur in it after all these years without the cat, as well as strands of Tatiana's long black hair. When Holly complained about the dust, Eric claimed he didn't see it, that he had no idea

what she was talking about, but that if it bothered her that much she should hire a housekeeper again.

And yes, she could have hired a housekeeper again, but she'd never even found the energy to do that, not after the last one, and her accident on the back steps, slipping on ice while taking out a bag of garbage. And even before that, her allergies, her rashes, and Holly's guilt at paying another woman, a poorer woman, a Spanish-speaking woman, to do this intimate work for her that she should have been perfectly able to do for herself.

Dust, exhaustion, it was in the air. Repeat it, Holly thought. It is a refrain. As in a poem. *Write it down*. Write down the way some shadow face is finally peering around a corner on this Christmas morning (they'd slept so late) and shown itself.

Something that was here all along. Inside the house. Inside *themselves*. It had *followed them all the way home from Russia*.

\* \* \*

But not the baby! Not Baby Tatty! Of course not the *baby*. They'd *brought* the baby Tatiana home from Russia. She was no follower, no revenant, no curse from another country.

No. Of course not Baby Tatty wrapped in her Ratty Blankie. Not Tatty the Beauty. Gorgeous Russian dancer, howler monkey, sweetheart, wanderer, love of their lives. Not Tatiana.

No. Some Thing. And the only thing it had in common with their daughter was that it came back with them from Russia.

Holly was still simply trying to wake up, imagining a pen in her hand, writing it down... How late was it? Ten o'clock?! Why was she still asleep, or asleep again, on Christmas morning? She patted the place beside her for Eric. *Please, God*, she thought, *let him be gone*. Let him be gone so I can have a few moments alone to write. She'd almost managed to open her leaden eyes. *Please, God, let Eric have taken Tatty with him to the airport to pick up his parents. Please give me half an hour to write it*

*down, to make sense of it, to look at this thing.* Otherwise she would forget it, she knew, and then she would never know it, this thing she knew. It would never be a completed thought, let alone a poem, this thing that –

That had broken three of her mother's iridescent water glasses! And scratched every one of their CDs, as if with a pen-knife. Left them unplayable. Unreplaced. Not even downloaded onto iTunes yet (but would they ever have gotten around to *that?*). The Water Music. The Four Seasons. The Patti Smith. Even the Beatles. Had Holly even *heard* those Beatles songs since then? Even on the radio of a passing car? It was as if those songs ('Norwegian Wood', 'I Want to Hold Your Hand') had never been written, or played.

And the cat. The horror of that. And before that, the hen, their favorite. How the other chickens had turned on her. Not even pecked her to death, but just pecked her so close to death that she was only a forgotten brokenness, left behind them, as they went on with lives.

And the notebook full of poems snatched with her purse from the coffee shop, and her laptop full of poems from the hotel in California – from the *safe*.

And the housekeeper, Concordia, whom Tatty had loved, but who'd suffered from allergies and rashes she'd never before had when she began housekeeping for them, and then twisted her ankle on ice on the back steps (taking out their garbage, full of plastic bottles Holly should have recycled) and never come back.

And, my God, Holly had almost forgotten the daughter of her coworker Kay – a twenty-two-year-old hit by a car while crossing the street with the light at a crosswalk on a perfectly sunny day. How irrationally and completely Holly had felt that she herself should take some blame for that. After all, Holly had never liked Kay, and the day before the accident Holly had slapped an employee handbook onto Kay's desk and told her to

read it (she'd been so sick of Kay's tardiness, her long lunches, her personal phone calls, but what difference did any of that really make?) and that night Kay had gone home with the handbook, in tears, and (who knew?) maybe she'd told her daughter that she was having trouble at work, maybe the daughter had been hurrying across the street the next day, worrying about her mother, and hadn't looked both ways?

'That's insane,' Eric had said to Holly. 'If the universe works that way, it means that you yourself are God. I thought *you* were the atheist, the one who had no superstitions.'

But what if it hadn't been insane? What if they'd brought something back with them from Russia? Something malevolent. Or something desperate to return to its origins? Maybe it wanted to go back!

Hadn't one of the nurses in Russia warned them? *Tried* to warn them? That one with the drooping eyelid and the hair like a Renaissance princess, all down her side in a braid made of gold, seeming slicked with oil.

Had her name been Theodota?

She'd been the one who'd worn some strange thing in a bubble of glass pinned above her breast. It was a dried rose, she'd told Holly, that had been touched to the tomb of some saint – the patron saint of stomach ailments, one of which had plagued Theodota most of her life. The thing in the bubble had looked, to Holly, like some kind of tumor, something shriveled and internal, and she'd complained bitterly to Eric about the religious mania of the Siberian nurses. Weren't they supposed to be done with religion in this godforsaken place?

'No. That's us,' he said. 'You're confusing Russians with Americans. Americans are the ones who've forsaken God. The Russians have found Him again.'

He'd always defended religion, hadn't he? Although he himself attended no church, prayed to no god. It was a way of defending his parents, she supposed, whom he always felt she

was criticizing whenever she criticized religion or old-fashioned values or pickled foods.

Had it been in Siberia that the thing on Eric's fist had begun to sprout, to grow just under the skin? Holly had a vague memory of one of those nurses, perhaps Theodota herself, at the Pokrovka Orphanage #2 taking a long look at his hand, shaking her head, trying to communicate something to him by speaking slowly and carefully in Russian, not a word of which Eric or Holly understood.

About Tatiana, Theodota had said, 'No. Don't name her Russian. Name her American. Or she'll be back.'

The nurses had called her Sally. They had explained to Eric and Holly, 'We give her American name so that in her life and in her death she will not be restless in America, try to return to Russia.'

'But we want her to be *proud* of her Russian origins,' Holly had tried, in turn, to explain, not sure if any of her English was being understood. 'We want to call her Tatiana because it is a beautiful Russian name for a beautiful little Russian girl.'

The nurse had scowled and shaken her head vehemently. '*Nyet, nyet*, no,' she said. 'Sally. Or' – here she softened, as though sensing that they might be able to compromise – 'you name her Bonnie. Bonnie and Clyde, no?'

Holly had been smiling, but she was having a hard time keeping the spirit light. She said, 'No. Tatiana.'

'No,' the nurse had said right back to her.

'Oh my God,' Holly had said, later, to Eric. 'What is wrong with these people?'

Even Eric, at that point, had regained his sense of humor enough to shake his head in disbelief at the superstitions of these people in Siberia.

But that had been almost the least of it! On their second trip back to the orphanage, this time by train from Moscow, the conductor, wanting to practice his terrible English, had

explained to them that he always wore, under his uniform, a *cilice* – which, it turned out, in his case, was a barbed cross on a chain. The conductor undid the buttons of his shirt to show the cross to them – primitive and the size of a child’s hand, hanging from a piece of twine – along with the scratches on his sparsely haired chest (could he have been even thirty years old?) that the cross’s barbs left there. He explained that the tracks of the Trans-Siberian Railway were laid over the graves of the prisoners who’d built it, as if that explained the need for the punishing barbed cross he wore against his skin.

Holly was appalled, while Eric had been charmed. Neither of them had expected this sort of thing from the Russians. They’d expected, maybe, searchlights and vodka bottles and barbed wire and an unfriendly, militaristic citizenry – although, in truth, they’d not even gotten that far in their imaginings. Had Eric and Holly even believed that Russia, that *Siberia*, existed until they were in it? Hadn’t they thought that the adoption agency was just being descriptive, calling it ‘Siberia’ – which to Holly had always been a way to *describe* a place, not an actual place. She’d perhaps actually thought, even as the adoption agency arranged plane tickets for them, that by ‘Siberia’ they just meant ‘off the beaten track’ or ‘desolate’. Not that the orphanage was actually in Siberia.

But it was Siberia they found themselves in. Siberia existed. There were vodka bottles and searchlights and barbed wire, as Holly had expected, and there were women wearing babushkas, wagons full of straw, grim men in uniforms, some beautiful young girls with fur hats – none of which surprised her. Although Holly was surprised by everything else. Everything. And, particularly, the superstition. At the Pokrovka Orphanage #2 the babies had coughs and fevers, so the nurses had asked Holly and Eric to wear cloves of garlic around their necks. They’d handed Holly and Eric actual cloves of garlic dangling from pieces of gray twine. To ward off germs? Or...?