

THE RED SHOES

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*Once upon a time in a far off land there lived a little girl, pretty and dainty.
Her family was very poor. In summer the children went barefoot and in winter they wore hard wooden clogs that chafed their feet.
One day the little girl went to the railway line to search for scraps of coal. She came through the woods in time to hear the rumble of a train slowing down for the curve. She looked up at the rich people in the carriages.
An old woman dressed in furs leaned out of a window. 'Here you are little girl.'
She threw a pair of shoes.
As the train pulled away the little girl picked up the shoes and put them on.
At once she started dancing. She danced along the railway track and into the village. She danced between the hovels and past the church. She danced through the graveyard. She danced among the villagers. Children laughed and pointed. Dogs barked. She danced onwards. The poor folk ran after her.
These were magic shoes.
They twirled and swooped. They glittered and twinkled. The little girl waltzed and tangoed and trotted the fox. Nothing could stop her.*

Evdokia Kartseva was born in 1914 in a Russian village.
1914 wasn't a good time to be born in Russia.
In the famine of 1919 the family left the village to forage and beg.
Five of Evdokia's siblings died in childhood. Evdokia survived. Her father found work in Moscow and Evdokia seized whatever opportunities came her way. She was clever and she studied. She worked hard. She got a white-collar job in Intelligence in Moscow. She became a cryptanalyst, a code-breaker, a reader of riddles, a spy.
Was she an important spy?
That's a riddle.
In 1937 Evdokia and her partner had a daughter. But her partner was denounced and sent to a labour camp. Evdokia was in danger. Her daughter died, still a toddler. Moscow was full of pain and fear.
Evdokia did what women did, in those days. She found herself a nice safe husband. He wasn't faithful, he wasn't sober, but at least he was a husband.
He was a spy too. He had a selection of names. He started out in life as Anafasy Mikhailovich Shorokhov. Now he was Vladimir Proletarskiy. Soon he would be Vladimir Petrov. She called him Volodya.
Cryptanalysts like their husbands to have lots of names.
Evdokia and Vladimir were posted to Australia. They arrived in Sydney in February 1951 on the *Orcades*.
Welcome to Australia, Evdokia. This is where women give up their names. From now on you will be known only as Mrs Petrov. Mrs Vladimir Petrov.

*The little girl was no longer poor. She was famous for her dancing. People flocked to see her, men threw themselves at her feet.
She chose a handsome prince and married him. She put on the shoes and danced him to the other end of the world.*

*The country at the other end of the world was governed by a large rectangular man. He had notable eyebrows and was in love with the Queen of England. His friends called him Mr Menzies.
Mr Menzies heard about the magic shoes. He wanted them. He longed for them. He had always dreamed of a pair of red shoes.
If I had those shoes, he thought, I could destroy the ALP. Nothing would stop my dancing. I'd spring across the floor in a quickstep. I'd shimmy and swing and make people gasp. I'd win the trophy for the longest dancing government in the history of the world.*

It would be known as the RG Menzies Trophy for Perpetual Dancing.

What exactly did Mr and Mrs Vladimir Petrov do in Australia?

That's another riddle.

Officially they were part of the diplomatic staff of the Soviet Embassy. Petrov was Third Secretary and Mrs Petrov was accountant and secretary to the Ambassador.

Unofficially Petrov was 'Resident' in charge of espionage in Australia. Mrs Petrov did the cipher work.

Did Petrov break into the Reserve Bank in the dead of night? Or the headquarters of the new security organisation, ASIO? Were there guns and desperate car chases in old-fashioned black Humbers?

No.

Just as well. His driving was terrible.

Petrov made a lot of trips to Sydney. He spent his time there getting drunk and chasing women and being spied upon by his mate Bialoguski, who worked for ASIO.

Petrov wasn't a very good spy. He didn't even realise that Bialoguski was spying on him.

He thought they were friends.

Moscow gave Petrov a lot of instructions, people to cultivate. He didn't get round to doing most of it.

He did arrange an assignation with Mme Ollier from the French Embassy. He met her a number of times but all he managed to find out was that Australia was sending shipments of arms to the French in Indo-China, and everyone knew that.

She didn't give him the French security codes, which was what Moscow was after.

There was one thing that Petrov worked hard at. He and Bialoguski ran a lucrative trade in the sale of duty free liquor. Petrov bought it on stolen Soviet Embassy requisition forms and he and his ASIO mate sold it for profit.

Mrs Petrov was the Embassy accountant.

Customs later discovered that between March 1953 and March 1954 the Embassy's liquor order increased tenfold, from 64 gallons in six months to 650 gallons in six months.

That's a lot of Scotch.

Later on, under oath, Petrov said he couldn't explain the increase. It must have been ordered by the Embassy Social Committee.

There was one other thing that Petrov claimed to have done, though his memory was hazy.

He remembered, belatedly, that he'd delivered \$US25,000 in a suitcase to the Communist Party of Australia.

The fabled Moscow Gold.

It's an iconic story, almost holy.

Holey, as well.

For a start, \$US25,000 was a huge amount of money in 1954. Not the sort of thing that a person would forget, even if his brain was pickled.

The second hole was that Petrov said the money was in \$5 and \$25 dollar bills. But there's never been a \$US25 bill.

Later, when he was trying to help ASIO, he was confused about dates and times. ASIO prompted him with a list of possibilities, but the facts remained elusive.

Does a story have to be true to be believed?

Meanwhile what was Mrs Petrov doing in Canberra, besides the paper work for her husband's shady liquor trade?

According to *The Age* she was 'a smart figure among Soviet Embassy wives with her trim dressing and attractive appearance. She did not speak good English and chance acquaintances found her reserved, almost to the point of being chilly. At Griffith it was common to see her shopping with a huge Alsatian dog on a leash ...'

Her 'attractive appearance' and western tastes might have counted against her at the Embassy. They might have counted against her anywhere in Australia in 1954. An attractive woman with a husband often away in Sydney was probably no better than she ought to be. A seductress. A nasty piece of work.

Especially if she knocked you back.
She knocked back the Ambassador. She 'refused to become his mistress'.

Petrov's Moscow bosses were less than happy with his attempts at espionage.
The Embassy was less than happy with Mrs Petrov.
Perhaps they'd counted the bottles.
In November 1953 she got the sack and Petrov went into a spin.
He was already talking about defecting. By February 1954 ASIO was offering him £5,000, plus another £5,000 if he brought documents with him.
Moscow recalled him. He was to return as soon as his replacement arrived at the beginning of April.
Petrov, in a nervous sweat, took up the ASIO offer. ASIO organised his disappearance in Sydney on 2 April.

It was all very well for him.
He didn't have any family in the Soviet Union.
Mrs Petrov had parents and a brother and sister. If she stayed in Australia, they were disgraced.
If she went back to Moscow, she was disgraced.
She was alone in Canberra. She had no idea what had happened to her husband.
After four days the Soviet Ambassador called her in to the Embassy. She was kept there until couriers could arrive to take her back to Moscow.

Mascot, 19 April 1954. By evening the airport was wild with protesters, mainly refugees, 'New Australians' from the Soviet bloc countries. They were there to save Mrs Petrov.

Mrs Petrov was Russian, and still a citizen of the USSR. In fact, since she was a Soviet spy, she probably felt some allegiance to the Soviet Union. Or had done until quite recently.

A yelling crowd of Poles and Estonians and Latvians and Czechs and Lithuanians may not have seemed heaven-sent to her. For all she knew, they wanted her blood.
She was hustled towards the plane by two big men in grey Russian suits. She looked sick and terrified. The crowd pulled at her and pushed.
Even ASIO thought she was more frightened of her would-be rescuers than of her escort.

In the scuffle she lost her shoe.

The couriers got her, half fainting, onto the plane. It took off.
The journalists rushed off to ring their stories through.
The redoubtable W.C.Wentworth MP, crusader against the Communist menace, rang Mr Menzies in Canberra and said that if they didn't get Mrs Petrov off the plane in Darwin, the coming election was lost.

Out on the dark tarmac a little girl is dancing, dancing. She twirls and pirouettes. She waves as the plane takes off. 'Dance with me,' she cries, 'dance with me ...'
Through the porthole she catches a glimpse of a strained white face.

Mrs Petrov, one shoe off and one shoe on, fell back into her seat. Would the plane turn into a pumpkin? Would a handsome prince come and rescue her?
In those days the flight to Darwin was an all-night affair. The Russian couriers dozed, the other passengers dozed. There's something very dozey and cosy about a plane at night.
Mrs Petrov had a chance to gather her wits. She talked to the steward and to the air hostess, Joyce Bull.
Joyce was a kindly, sensible girl. She knew that no one in her right mind would want to live in Russia. She knew that Mrs Petrov would rather stay in Australia.
She told the Captain. The Captain radioed to Mascot. The control tower told ASIO. ASIO told the Acting Administrator in Darwin. By the time the plane landed at 5am the Australian Government was all set to offer asylum to Mrs Petrov.
But still she wasn't sure.
She sat in the airport at Darwin between the two Soviet couriers.
What is there to choose between grey Russian suits and grey Australian suits?

At least the Australians had taken their jackets off in the Darwin heat. But not their ties.

For several hours Mrs Petrov dithered. They arranged for her to speak to Petrov by phone, to prove he was alive. Maybe. She said she didn't believe it was him.

How much did she care?

What she cared about was her family in the USSR.

At the very last minute she asked to stay. She was whisked away to Government House and the plane went on without her.

The Press went wild. Communism had been defeated. Truth and justice and the Australian way were vindicated. Mr Menzies would win the election.

Menzies' enemies believed that he set up the whole affair to boost his flagging popularity. Or at the very least manipulated the timing.

But some leaders are lucky. Just at the crucial moment a Petrov turns up.

It's all a matter of seizing what the Good Lord sends and twisting it to a useful purpose.

And the shoe?

The shoe was lost in the crowd at Mascot. Mr Menzies didn't get it.

He didn't mind though. He had a Royal Commission instead.

Lots of Australians were named at the Royal Commission, Communists and so on.

There were lengthy arguments about whether they'd done anything wrong.

It didn't much matter in the end.

The show's the thing, the us-and-them show. Especially if you want to have a war.

Korea, Vietnam, Libya, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Iraq.

If you want to have a war, then first you have to have an enemy.

The Sydney Morning Herald, 22 April 1954: 'now Australians have had a useful object lesson. In future, if they should wonder why Australian troops went to Korea, why France has been fighting a full-scale war for years in Indo-China, why the defence vote should be one of the heaviest items in the Commonwealth Budget, Mrs Petrov's shoe will provide the answer.'

ASIO was happy. They got their man, poor incompetent drunkard that he was. They got Mrs Petrov, furious with her husband, distraught about her family and her own betrayal of her country.

They got some Soviet codes and the names of lots of Soviet spies all over the western world.

However somebody in MI6 told Moscow everything that the Petrovs had told ASIO. In the peculiar world of espionage and diplomacy the personnel changed but the balance of power remained much the same.

It's all about who knows what, and who knows who knows what, and who knows who knows who knows what, and who knows what it's all about?

ASIO set the Petrovs up with false identities and an income and six chooks. They became Sven and Maria Anna Allyson in suburban Bentleigh, in Melbourne.

Welcome to Melbourne, Maria Anna. From now on you'll be known as Mrs Allyson. Mrs Sven Allyson.

After his Royal Commission, Mr Menzies was able to retire and dream about the Queen.

In due course she knighted him. His cup overflowed.

He was succeeded by a small, round Prime Minister with the same eyebrows. (You have to have the eyebrows to be Prime Minister of Australia. Women can't do it.)

This set of eyebrows was called Harold Holt.

The smile was pure oil.

Harold wasn't interested in the Queen (though he did let Prince Charles come to school in Geelong).

Harold's love object was LBJ, the President of the United States of America.

LBJ was twice as tall as Harold and Harold liked that. He felt safe. It was even better than having Mr Menzies back.

He decided to go all the way with the President.

Harold's enemy was Communism. His war was with Vietnam. That would stop Communism spreading from China to Australia.

He and his friends invented a new way of having conscription. Groovy. (It was the sixties.) Every six months there'd be a lottery to decide which birthdays were lucky. Twenty year old boys with those birthdays would be called up into the army and could go and fight in Vietnam.

Australians love lotteries.

But some mothers didn't realise how sporting it was, how Australian. They formed a movement called Save Our Sons.

Harold just kept smiling.

In April 1966, exactly eighteen years after the Petrov Affair, Harold made his first Prime Ministerial visit to WA.

An official party greeted him on the tarmac at Perth airport. There was applause and people made polite welcoming noises. Harold liked that. He smiled.

Up on the observation deck a group of mothers were holding 'Save Our Sons' placards. They called out to Harold, politely, so that he would see their message.

Harold smiled.

It was too much for one of the protestors.

She thought of Asian civilians being bombed, of boys taught how to kill, of secret deals between arms manufacturers, intelligence services, Prime Ministers, Presidents.

It boiled up in her so that she couldn't stand it a moment longer. She couldn't stand Harold, she couldn't stand his pin-striped suit. Above all she couldn't stand his smirk.

She looked around for something to throw at him.

There on the ground was ... a shoe.

She picked it up and threw it at him.

At the time it seemed like a fizzer. The shoe missed Harold and hit a lackey.

Nevertheless it was a gift for *The West Australian* and the *Daily News*.

'Woman Hurls Shoe As P.M. Arrives.'

'P.M.'s Smile Angered Perth Shoe-Thrower.'

Magistrate A.G. Smith thought it was disgraceful that Mr Holt, 'the leading citizen, comes to what we call a fair state and gets a shoe thrown at him. The Prime Minister is entitled to be treated with the greatest courtesy.'

He fined the shoe-thrower twenty of the new dollars (about half the weekly wage of a secretary/typist) for being disorderly and creating a disturbance.

Inspector B. Alford said that the man struck by the shoe still had a headache.

The shoe-thrower said she had 'lost her temper when Mr Holt grinned at the demonstrators. I don't think the war in Vietnam is a laughing matter. I am particularly upset about the bombing of children because I have three of my own.'

The shoe did not appear in court.

The little girl danced her invisible dance under the noses of the big planes.

'Take that,' she cried, as she threw the magic shoe. 'Take your war and your conscription and your American buddy and turn into a frog.'

Her wish came true, though not, in the way of wishes, quite as envisaged. Harold waded into the waves at Portsea one morning and was never seen again.

He has been forgotten now by all but the intrepid patrons of the Harold E. Holt Memorial Pool. For them his name is a daily reminder that exercise can kill you.

Evdokia lived out her years in East Bentleigh. The butcher said Mr Allyson was a drunken sod but Mrs Allyson was very intelligent. The butcher's friend said she had 'lovely blonde hair, beautiful blue eyes, and a lovely smile. She wasn't a Tatiana in figure – couldn't imagine her pole vaulting – but she was very comely.'

Her sister lived near her, so perhaps they were content.

Evdokia Anna Maria died in 2001 aged eighty-eight. She is at rest in her last crypt.

And the shoe?

Some day a bored and restless airport crowd will hear the sound of far off golden trumpets, the clarion call of equality, the bass drum boom of human-and-human-and-no-more-war.

The long wait at the luggage carousel will soon be over. The machinery will whirr, the conveyor belt lurch into action.

The thick rubber strips hiding the opening will part and out will come ... the shoe.