THE WEATHER WOMAN

THE WEATHER WOMAN

SALLY GARDNER



An Apollo Book

First published in the UK in 2022 by Head of Zeus Ltd,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Sally Gardner, 2022

The moral right of Sally Gardner to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form
or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording,
or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright
owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of
the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781786695253
ISBN (XTPB): 9781838931698
ISBN (E): 9781786695246

Typeset by Divaddict Publishing Solutions

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



Head of Zeus Ltd
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

For Becky Congreve.

For my darling Aunt Jo.

The silver Thames was frozen O'er
No difference Twixt the stream and shore
The likes no man had seen before
Except he lived in days of yore.

Printed on the ice at the printing office, opposite
St Catherine's Stairs, in the severe frost of January 1789

Saturday 17.– The captain of a vessel lying off Rotherhithe, the better to secure the ships cables, made an agreement with a publican for fastening a cable to his premises; in consequence, a small anchor was carried on shore and deposited in the cellar, while another cable was fastened round a beam in another part of the house. In the night the ship veered about, and the cables holding fast, carried away the beam and levelled the house with the ground; by which accident five persons asleep in their beds were killed.

Famous Frosts and Frost Fairs in Great Britain
William Andrews, F.R.H.S.
Printed in London in 1887
400 copies were printed

Part One

Dear Courteous Reader,

On the 25th of November last year a frost set in which lasted seven weeks. It was recorded that the thermometer stood at 11 degrees below freezing point in the very midst of the city. The Thames was frozen at London Bridge and the ice on the river assumed all the appearances of a frost fair.

1

Thursday, 15th January 1789

This January Jack Frost has sunk his freezing fingers into the Thames and the river below London Bridge is silenced by ice. The watermen, quick to make money, begin to charge a toll to help tentative visitors climb down onto the glassy surface, the stage for an improvised frost fair. Here, for two weeks, all sorts of entertainments are on display: dancing bears, jugglers, puppet shows, exhibitions of wild beasts. A tented street built of rowing boats and canvas springs up, selling gifts. There are booths with gingerbread and alcohol aplenty. One ferryman has the bright idea to make a paper boat to pull his customers across the frozen surface. The fair folk are masters of the entertainments and London is transformed into a land of winter merriment. Such jollity makes people reluctant to leave, and even though they know the frost never holds a permanent footing, it does not stop the crowds of visitors.

Amid the bustle one small child crouches and listens intently to the ice and the unearthly sound it's making. She tries to mimic what she hears. She thinks about the fish frozen stiff beneath the feet of the crowd.

Her father calls.

'Neva!' He picks up his little daughter. 'We have a show to do. I told you to stay in the tent.'

She sings the song of melting ice to him as he walks with purpose towards a red and white striped tent.

Mr Cutter, known as the Bosun though retired from the sea, does a roaring business when the river freezes, letting booths to fair folk. He is waiting by the entrance of a tent where a sign reads *The Unbeaten Chess-Playing Bear*. He has still to be paid for the rental of this one.

The Russian and his wife are notorious for their rows. He has heard they have a child.

'Is this your daughter, Mr Tarshin?' asks Mr Cutter. 'A pretty little thing – such black eyes and hair.'

Her father nods. Mr Cutter holds back until the oil lamp is lit and then follows him inside the tent.

There, emerging from the darkness into the light, stands the chess-playing bear. It casts an inky black shadow over the back of the tent. The child knows that when no one is looking the bear moves around, hungrily sniffing out her mother, waiting to gobble her up.

'Not a word from you and no singing,' says her father, putting Neva behind a straw bale. 'Did you hear me, girl? Not a word.'

He speaks to Mr Cutter, assuring him he will have his money tomorrow. Or, if he wishes, he can take the pretty child instead, at a bargain price of course. Mr Cutter laughs but Neva knows her father means it. When he's drunk, he often argues with her mother, saying they should leave her in a church for the parish to look after, or give her away to someone who would want her. He says it would be for the best. These arguments usually end with another bottle until they no longer remember what they were arguing over.

Years later, when Neva thinks back to this time in her life, some things appear brighter in her memory even as

other images fade. How much she has pieced together with the wisdom of age, she cannot tell. For these events will be recounted to her by Mr Cutter who remembers Andre Tarshin, the arm-wrestling champion from Russia, his petite wife Olga, and, of course, the chess-playing bear.

Colours, Neva feels, are more reliable for the truth of her emotions. Her mother was red, orange, a flash of lightning yellow. Her father, ice-blue steel and greyish black. They were two weather fronts that collided to make a storm. She was born into the tempest of them, with no way of escaping from the eye of their fury or her mother's hard hands. The terror of being washed away in one of her parents' rages will forever haunt her.

This afternoon Neva stays forgotten in her hiding place. She is scared of the chess-playing bear, with its lopsided snout and staring glass eyes that open and shut. Every day the bear eats a little bit more of her mother.

For what will be the last time, she watches Olga climb into the bear's belly. Andre's giant hands make sure she is sewn in tight. Then he moves the automaton and connects it with the cabinet on which the chessboard sits. The magnets on the bases of the chess pieces show Olga her opponent's moves while she works the bear's paw with a series of levers that grasp the pieces, lifting them into position. On a small table sits a candelabrum. Finally, a large mirror is placed behind the bear so the audience can see its moves.

The reputation of the chess-playing bear has spread well beyond the frozen river and this evening two elegantly dressed gentlemen walk to the front of the queue. The drunker of the two boasts he can beat the old fleabag and wagers twenty guineas.

'Let me see your money first, sir,' says Andre.

'Here,' the man replies, taking the coins from his purse.

Andre tries not to show his desperation. The sum of money on offer is a king's ransom and would mean he would be able to pay the clockmaker to redesign the automaton.

Mr Cutter is there. At least here's a chance he'll be paid but he can see Mr Tarshin hesitate.

'Go on, Mr Tarshin,' he urges quietly.

'The bear always plays black,' says Andre to the gentleman.

All Neva can hear is the ice groaning under the weight of the people. Why can't anyone else hear the song it's singing? She feels it in her belly, an unearthly sound, angels calling out a warning.

The drunken gentleman sits with his back to the audience. 'Be prepared to pay up, Russian,' he says, making his opening move.

The tilted mirror shows the game being played. When the bear lifts a chess piece it is accompanied by a mechanical, clockwork noise.

'This scrawny old fleabag will never win against me,' says the young gentleman.

In fewer than ten moves he has lost.

He turns to his companion. 'Well! I'll be damned,' he says.

'My dear friend, I'll win it back for you.'

'That's another twenty guineas, sir,' says Andre.

The tent is full of people, standing rather than sitting on the straw bales to better see the game. The second young dandy sits languidly in the chair, one arm stretched out, his hand resting on the silver top of his ebony cane. As he rocks it back and forth Neva catches a glimpse of his ring glittering in the dark. She watches his demeanour change from nonchalance to intense concentration. In less than half an hour he too is beaten and his gloved hand knocks the chess pieces to the ground.

'It's a trick,' he snaps, rising to his feet. 'A cheat.'

Andre, who has been expecting this reaction, moves forward, as does Mr Cutter, and Mr Cutter, having the better English, says, 'You chose to bet, sir. You lost, you pay. Now leave.'

Knowing he is outmatched, the dandy says, 'I would like to meet the man who's inside there.' He pokes his cane into the bear's fur.

Mr Cutter holds Neva's father back.

When they are all gone and Mr Cutter has received his money, Andre closes the tent flap to make sure there are no prying eyes before he goes behind the bear and removes the stitches.

'I am unbeatable,' says Olga.

'Nevertheless,' says Andre, pulling her, hot and sweaty, out of the bear's belly, 'we have to pack up and go.'

'Why? I could beat Catherine the Great,' she protests.

'But no one beats the ice,' says Andre. 'We are leaving, don't make me say it again.'

'Why? Why?'

'Because the ice is going soft. The child thinks it's—'

'You are soft – in the head,' snaps Olga. 'She is three and thinks nothing, you superstitious old fool.'

Andre takes no notice, packs up the cabinet and the bear and loads the handcart. It's just before dusk when they start for the shore on the Surrey side of the river. Andre takes his daughter's hand and Olga follows, pushing the cart, grumbling loudly. Neva listens to the high-pitched notes of the ice singing its farewell song.

Suddenly behind them is a frantic rush of people. Andre quickly lifts Neva onto his shoulders and tells her to hold tight. Grabbing the bear with both hands he shouts to Olga to run. People push past them but Andre strides toward the shore where he leaves Neva on the bank with the bear.

'Hold onto him,' he orders.

She clutches the bear as her father rushes back to help Olga. Neva sees him lift the cart, hears Mama scream.

'Andre, don't leave me!'

He reaches out his hand for her. She hesitates. Amid the mayhem, the ice is on the move.

'Olga!' he yells as he puts the cart down.

She leaps. He catches her and they slip down onto the riverbank. He pulls her to her feet, puts Neva on his shoulders again and lifts up the bear. Olga drags the cart up the shore and only when safely away from the river do they look back to see the scene they've left behind. It is one of chaos, everything in motion. The ice has cracked and broken free. People on the shore frantically call out for those still on the ice to jump to safety. The Tarshins watch in horror as those unable to save themselves are carried away down the river, their shouts for help disappearing into the night.

'I hope those two buffoons drown,' says Olga.

Neva has her hands over her eyes. She peeps through her fingers as the Punch and Judy man screams.

'The devil! Do something!'

The river answers as only a river can and he sinks beneath its freezing silver waters.

The next day their wagon is fully packed and they set off towards Kent. On the way her father stops to visit the clockmaker, Victor Friezland, who is well known for making automatons. He had said he could help Andre refine the chess-playing bear.

The housekeeper answers the door. Her master has gone to Kent, but he is expected back tomorrow.

'Who shall I say called?'

'Andre Tarshin.'

'We should stay in Southwark,' says Olga.

'No, we must go further. It's too costly,' replies Andre.

'It's thanks to me, you pig-headed, salty man, that we have money enough to stay in a decent inn and amuse ourselves with the sights.'

Every word Olga speaks goads Neva's father and the bitter easterly wind howls their frosty words back and forth as they make their slow, argumentative way towards Rotherhithe.

Neva sits huddled in the covered wagon next to the overworked chess-playing bear. It stands upright and is held fast with ropes. The wind finds its way through the metal structure so the creature sounds as if it's gently moaning.

'Why didn't they know?' she asks.

'Know what?' says her mama.

'That the ice was melting.'

'Ridiculous child. What are you talking about? No one could have known that. You see?' she turns to Andre. 'Look what you've done with all the nonsense you talk. Stuffed the child's head full of damp straw.'

'But I knew,' says Neva, more to the bear than to Olga.

They stop at a riverside inn, her parents leaving her in the wagon with only the bear for company. Its prickly fur is frozen stiff. After several such stops, Mama and Father are fighting drunk. By the time the light begins to fade, Neva is cold, hungry and miserable. She has no words for the sick feeling in her head. When she closes her eyes, she sees the screaming puppet man. While there is still a little light she tries not to look at the river but concentrates on the clouds as she curls into herself. Her eyes close and she slips into sleep.

She wakes in a blizzard to find the chess-playing bear gone. For a terrifying moment that yawns into forever, she thinks her parents have finally abandoned her. She pushes back the canvas flaps of the wagon, stands up and screams, feeling the words rise raw in her throat. 'Mama! Father!'

Nothing. Just the ice cracking in the river and the whistling of the rigging of tall ships frozen in the water.

Neva has all but given up crying for help when she sees, coming towards her, a lantern waving in the snow. The innkeeper, muttering curses, scoops her up, calling for his wife. It takes her a while to realise he is not furious with her but with her parents.

'She should never have been left out in the wagon on such an atrocious night as this,' he says, handing her to his wife's warm embrace. 'Why, the little mite's half-frozen.'

The inn is full of sailors, drunkenly singing sea shanties. Neva, who is well used to crowds, isn't frightened by the raucous rhythm of the songs.

'Drunken idiots – shouldn't be allowed to have children.'

Neva doesn't know if the innkeeper's wife means the sailors or her parents. She will never forget the meal they give her, the potatoes, soft and fluffy, with steak and kidney pie. She enjoys feeling full. She must have fallen asleep because she wakes with a start to find a group of sailors, all swaying as if the waves are still beneath them, carrying a small anchor.

'Where's the cellar?' they shout, and the innkeeper shows them.

Neva can hear the ice arguing with the thaw; it makes a taut, high-pitched sound which she supposes drunken ears can't hear.

The innkeeper's wife takes her upstairs to her parents' room and knocks hard on the door.

There is no answer, so she lifts the latch and says to Neva, 'They must be sleeping. Go in quietly. See you in the morning.'

Neva can just make out her father's shape and her mother's thin form in the dark. They seem to be tangled round each other in the bed. There is no room for her. The bear, its glass eyes wide open, stands sentinel over their belongings. She

stumbles near the bed and her father puts out his hand, not to embrace his little daughter but to push her away.

Her mother says sleepily, 'Quiet.'

There is nothing else to do. Exhausted, Neva covers herself as best she can with the clothes lying on the floor. Something familiar presses hard into her. She finds it and holds it tight in her hand. She can still hear the ice moving in the river.

She wakes with a start, not sure if she's dreaming. As the shutter swings open and the moon shines in, a picture falls to the floor and the chamber pot and chairs dance across the room. She looks up to see that the bear, shimmering and shaking, has come to life. It wobbles, topples and falls forward, banging her hard on the head as it pins her down. For a moment there is nothing. Then she comes to and in the mouth of thunder a floorboard snaps. The room is being pulled apart. Beams come crashing to the floor, plaster explodes in a fog of dust, walls pulsate, and ceilings fall on top of the chess-playing bear that now holds Neva safe in its steely embrace.

She hears muffled cries and groans around her, but when she calls out for her parents, they don't answer her. They have left her for good. The destruction slows down and then all is eerily quiet.

The stillness that surrounds her after the inn has come tumbling down holds an unfathomable peace. In this hush comes a feeling of detachment, of floating high among the clouds in a lullaby.

She thinks someone asks her, 'What do you want, little one?'

She replies in a whisper, 'Home.'