

Project seeking publisher

The Last Hope Foundation: A (post)colonial romance

By Lilya Kalaus

Translated by Shelley Fairweather-Vega

Asya can handle her abusive stepfather, layoffs at work, and the debauchery of a corporate retreat with her wacky coworkers. She can probably even cope with the homicidal ghost in Room 4. But can she survive a slowly budding romance with a sophisticated stranger from Moscow?

The city of Zorky is the proud capital of a country called Burkutistan, the imaginary 17th republic of the former Soviet Union, and it is home to the Burkut branch of the Last Hope Foundation, a grant-making NGO founded by an Italian billionaire and run by a colorful cast of local staff. When the story opens, the office is abuzz with rumors that the organization is about to get shut down, and that Oleg, the sleek, handsome young man who has just arrived from distant Moscow, is there to usher them all into unemployment. But Asya catches Oleg's eye, and instead of laying her off, he makes her his assistant—for now.

Zorky is also the hometown of an elderly gentleman named Rostislav, a self-styled “rambler” and amateur culturologist. He has long since moved away to live with his grown children in Germany, but when our story begins, he has returned for a visit. His sojourn in Zorky is not going quite as planned — the city has changed, his old flame disappoints him, and most worryingly of all, the guests in the next room keep dying horrible deaths. Rostislav decides to stay and investigate.

Meanwhile, Asya and Oleg gradually grow closer. The quiet attraction between them is palpable, but there are real obstacles that threaten to sabotage their happiness: Asya is unhappily married, Oleg is unhappily engaged, and both have pasts that keep coming back to haunt them. They might finally have a chance to work things out during Last Hope's corporate retreat at a dilapidated resort outside the city. But there, too, circumstances get in the way, including their nosy coworkers, Oleg's obnoxious former colleagues, and a mysterious meteorite that has landed in the woods nearby.

When the disastrous retreat is over, it's back to business *almost* as usual at the Last Hope Foundation, where the staff is determined to put on one more gala conference before the organization is shut down for good. Naturally, they choose the best hotel in town, and unfortunately, it's the hotel where Rostislav is contending with the murderous phantom in Room 4. As the two storylines collide, Asya and Olga finally are forced to decide what to do about each other, and Asya discovers a strength she never knew she possessed.

Read the book too quickly, and it could pass as just another story about a beautiful but shy young woman who manages to win the love of a confident, wealthy stranger. But even the smallest bit of extra attention reveals the fascinating texture and moods the author weaves around the characters and the plot, held together with real humor and a delightfully ironic view of the world. Whether you call it a love story or a ghost story, this book is about a particular time and place: Zorky in its first post-Soviet decades, where things change quickly, and not often for the better, in a world cut loose from its cultural and historical moorings.

In *The Last Hope Foundation*, author Lilya Kalas has created a universe at once intriguingly strange and reassuringly familiar. Here, a chaotic NGO office, a tense family life, personal tragedies, and a tentative love affair play out in a city that is teeming with competing cultures, ambitions, languages, and generations. She calls her novel “post-colonial,” and it is. Oleg is mostly a sympathetic character, but can a dashing, rich stranger from Moscow truly have the best interests of the Last Hope Foundation, or of his employee and sometimes lover, Asya, in mind? Kalas lets that question linger beneath the surface of every chapter in her novel. Meanwhile, those chapters steer the reader through the highs and lows of the love affair, office politics, family drama, and, of course, the mystery of the murders in the old hotel. *The Last Hope Foundation* is a showcase of Kalas’ individuality and wit, and I believe readers around the world will be thrilled by the tales she spins.

Lilya Kalas is Kazakhstani but writes in Russian. Critic Maia Stavitskaya calls Kalas’ writing “A bewitching word game careening freely through a four- or five-dimensional universe of words and expressions that are paradoxically both thoroughly carnal and extremely meaningful.” *The Last Hope Foundation* was longlisted for the prestigious Russian Prize in 2010 but has never been published in print in Russian.

Aside from curating her blog, writing, and teaching, Kalas also collaborates with Kazakh-speaking writers to re-create their work for readers of Russian and is a strong advocate for Kazakhstan’s unique, and often overlooked, culture and history. Most recently, Kalas served as editor for the Russian version of Talasbek Asemkulov’s novel *Taltus* (later translated into English as *A Life At Noon*, forthcoming from Slavica in autumn 2019). Talented and hard-working though she is, Kalas seems nevertheless to be too Kazakh for the current Russian literary establishment, and too young, and perhaps too female, to take advantage of the Soviet-era writers’ union and other institutional behemoths that still control publishing in Kazakhstan today.

Despite these institutional obstacles, women writers in Kazakhstan are beginning to break through into English. I helped to create a feature on Kazakh women’s writing for Words Without Borders in 2018. Zephyr Press recently published an English-language collection of poetry by poet Aigerim Tazhi. Still missing on the scene, however, is a genuine novel, written in an up-to-date style, appealing to a wide audience, addressing current themes in Kazakh life. This book could be the one to fill that gap.

With all its brilliance, a book like *The Last Hope Foundation* necessarily presents challenges to the translator. How can we render the polylingual environment of Zorky, which is so important to the story’s themes, in English alone? How many of Kalas’s sly cultural references can we bring over into English without frustrating the reader? What sort of English style can convey the tension in every scene while maintaining the playfulness of her language? Yet it is vital to address these challenges, so that English-language publishers can be presented with a compelling sample translation that will ease their fears about taking on a manuscript from an unfamiliar country like Kazakhstan, one that is, so far, unpublished in any language. I sincerely hope that my translation does its part to make the case for this remarkable book.