Story and photography: Gabi Mocatta



40°BELOW

If we could feature 40° north in Issue 15, thought Tasmania-based journalist Gabi Mocatta, then why not 40° below? She writes about an icy winter spent east of the Urals and a cold that most antipodeans would find hard to imagine.

Once the mercury goes below -40°C, it is said, you can't feel any colder. A bone-numbing, face-frosting 55° below consumes no more joules of winter reserves than even the most malevolent -40°. Forty degrees below is a turning point. It's where air turns to frost and breath becomes brittle. Hands cover faces as people slither along ice-coated streets. Forty degrees below is not good to be out in, but for millions of Siberians it is part of winter's challenge.

Imagine you wake up in the stuffy, tropical warmth of a flat centrally warmed by the town's communal heating system. It might be 28°C inside but obligatory before dressing is a peek at the outside world. Of course the outer of your double windows is frosted with delicate, icy fronds, so, dressed as you are for a sweltering night, you wrench open your balcony doors to glimpse the thermometer. When it's 40° below, though, you don't need a thread of mercury to tell you. Great cascades of freezing air billow past you into the warmth, your breath suddenly catches, you gasp in icy shock.

Inside you'll put on layers. A thermal vest and a jersey or two, thick socks, winter trousers, wool-lined boots. By the front door, you'll be sweating as you struggle into a coat – floor-length and heavy – with a life of its own. Then you'll reach for a hat, something furry, with earflaps that fasten unfashionably under the chin. You stuff a scarf into your pocket as protection against the wind, and, with gloves gripped in your teeth, you fumble with the door.

In the dank stairwell you greet the cool with relief, but three floors down and you are never quite prepared. First, there's the intense white. Every surface is covered with it – *inyei*, they call it: hoar frost or rime. It has a jagged beauty it's hard not to admire. But then the cold pours down you as you suck it into your lungs. Your nostrils freeze and thaw alternately as you inhale and exhale.

Because it's a sunny, windless morning, tough boys on skates are out in the grimy courtyard, doing battle with sticks and a puck on a smooth patch of ice.

Around me, people are rushing with heads bowed through the cold. Each footfall causes a crunch of ice. At the bus stop ancient buses slither to a careering halt, wheels locked from 20 metres away. Inside they seem packed with the skins of a thousand animals, and I half expect a snapping and snarling to interrupt the muffled chatter.

Swaying along precarious roads, we swing down alongside the mighty Yenisei. Its waters captured upstream behind a vast hydro-electric dam, the river no longer freezes but steams furiously when the temperature dips below -20°. Today great banks of fog rise 50 metres above the water, and vehicles on the road bridge emerge ghostlike from this white, clinging shroud.

By the last stop the bus has nearly emptied, its passengers scurrying off to underpaid – often unpaid – work or cold classrooms. But today people will be glad of any cover; forecasters have predicted a storm. It's too cold for snow, of course, but scudding clouds are already smothering the milky morning sun, and a biting wind is sweeping down the Yenisei. It's now that -40° will really get nasty as wind chill nips viciously at any exposed flesh.

All day icy blasts batter windows and whip up a howling white-out in the street below. Pavements are deserted. By early afternoon it's almost dark, and the gale shows no sign of abating. I'm invited to a premiere at the Musical Comedy theatre that evening, and on the way I remember to buy flowers.

Out on the bitter street I dash into the florist shop nearest the bus station. I'm in an oasis of light and colour, reminders of summer and the south. I decide on some pungent lilies which the flower ladies wrap up for me in protective sheaths of newspaper. They won't last long outside, they caution, as I run to catch the bus now skidding to a halt. But before the performance, when they're unwrapped with delight, their delicate edges have already frozen brown. Perhaps they'll improve in the warmth, eternal Russian optimism suggests.

After two hours of musical escapism we hurry home with our faces covered, our lungs aching. That night on the television news there are images of a country in crisis. The archaic heating system has failed in several apartment blocks. Some people are being evacuated, others stubbornly staying, putting up tents in their living rooms, sleeping in fur coats, braving the possibility of frostbite.

But tomorrow will be better, a smiling weather man assures us. He starts in the Arctic with -56°C (warmer than today's -61°) and progresses down the Yenisei to this beleaguered town. For Krasnoyarsk tomorrow, -32°, he announces joyfully. Sunny, no wind. Yes, tomorrow will surely be better than today.