



Simon Roberts' best shot 'It is minus five and she is wearing a puffa jacket – but with a lace pinny on top'

Pyatigorsk is a famous spa town in the northern Caucasus that Russians visit in summer. One morning, I was being taken round the town's huge meat market by the owners, who were suspicious of me having a camera and wanted to walk with me. The atmosphere was quite jovial, though. It's one of those places not many tourists visit, so it's interesting for them to see a photographer.

This was taken as we first walked in, before people started asking what I was doing. The woman is doing a very unglamorous job, surrounded by meat. It was about minus five, which is why she is wearing a puffa jacket, but on top she has a lace pinny. And she has done her makeup, but in her hand she is holding a big meat cleaver, which you almost don't see.

Also, if you start looking around, there are all these other things happening, like the money changing hands in the background.

Then there's the richness and redness of the picture – the red meat in the foreground, balanced by her red hair and lipstick, and around her the red structure of the building.

She is very dignified and, in her own way, very beautiful; she seems at ease with her environment, while at the same time almost outside it all. For me, it is the image that best describes the essence of the Russian concept of *rodina*, or motherland, the place where one is born and feels a sense of belonging.

I never found out anything about the woman. But I quite like the fact that in this instance she remains anonymous – this otherworldly person we know nothing about.

Interview by Leo Benedictus. Picture taken from *Motherland* by Simon Roberts, published by Chris Boot Publishing. Details: motherlandbook.com

Curriculum vitae

Born: Croydon, 1974

Studied: Sheffield University

Inspirations: Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, Carl de Keyser

High point: "Publishing my first book."

Low point: "Photographing the Spice Girls."

Pet hate: "I can't stand digital photography.

With film, you gave the film to a lab, then you could go off and have a pint.

With digital, you sit at your computer and spend hours processing files. It's very laborious."

Dream subject: "I'd like to spend a year travelling round England, free from any assignment. I'm

interested in looking at how we spend our free time."

