MY SOVIET SHADOW

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We don't talk about our days in Soviet television. It brings up too many questions. It dates us to the Cold War, now quaint. We don't talk about it with each other, but sometimes at parties we will tell the story of our days of Soviet fame: how we were selected by Yuri and Professor Weil to travel to Moscow for *Obraz!*, the teenage game show of literary analysis; how we lived with our Soviet counterparts and their families, an unusual cultural exchange for that winter of 1990; how we went up against *Obraz!'s* all-star Soviet team in a grueling studio day competing over *War and Peace* and *Huckleberry Finn.*

Before we left for Moscow that February, we were told we were paired by our personalities. It's part of the gimmick: that the Americans and Russians be different, yet alike. *Obraz* means *image* in Russian, and the teenagers together will have to build an image in the mind. Yuri will be able to show Natasha and Becky Thatcher teaching each other to dance waltzes and hoe-downs, Pierre and Huck fishing on a raft while Jim and Andrei look on, trading stories and talking philosophy.

We are shown the footage of the inspiration for the Soviet/American literary analysis battle while we are being recruited. Yuri and Professor Weil came up with the idea of the American/Soviet face-off when Professor Weil, head of Northwestern's Slavic department, appears as a guest judge on *Obraz!* Professor Weil, a bear of a man with a gravelly voice, who likes nothing better than singing Kalinka with his students as loud as possible, the kind of professor who always wears bow-ties, asks innocently, "Wouldn't

it be wonderful in the spirit of glasnost if an American team could compete with these soulful Soviet teenagers?"

Yuri grabs Professor Weil's hand and shakes it, then and there. "Dearest Professor Weil, consider it done. Go back to Chicago and bring back your team! We at *Obraz!* await you." They end in a rousing chorus of Kalinka, Professor Weil's arms around the necks of the Russian teenagers. Yuri is a showman, wiry, jittery, complete with floppy mustache. We think he can't be too important in Soviet television's hierarchy, or he wouldn't be assigned to *Obraz!*, but we're missing just how popular a game show of literary analysis could be.

Yuri gets Ostankino, Soviet TV's major channel, to partially fund our trip. Professor Weil goes back to Chicago and runs out of time. Instead of recruiting an all-star American team, an all-star Chicago team, he falls back on our high school, Evanston Township High School, right in Northwestern's backyard. E.T.H.S. will take on the Soviets. To try out for the team, we read *Crime and Punishment*, write essays, and answer sample questions out loud in front of Professor Weil. Only nerds try out. Only the most literary nerds are selected. Conveniently for Yuri and Professor Weil, the team has some diversity worthy of an American team—my friend Tara is black, my friend Chenel has a black mom and white dad, and they are both brilliant and big readers. Tara and Chenel are the kind of friends I dreamed about when I was in grade school, back when my best friends were books. The remaining five members of the team, myself included, are white.

We are not diverse when it comes to class. Although Evanston has mansions on the lake where some of America's richest people live, and many of the kids in my elementary school got free lunches, we chosen nerds are in a narrow tax bracket—middle class comfortable with parents making sacrifices so we can go to the colleges of our choice. We always do the reading. There are other nerds who also always do the reading, but whose parents can't afford a ticket to Moscow. They don't get to go. When we are first recruited, we are told, all expenses will be paid. Which expenses will be paid keep changing, and kids keep dropping out.

Professor Weil tells me that Tanya is just like me, my Russian spitting image, my doppelganger, my shadow. I'll love her. Tanya gets fan-mail from

all over the Soviet Union, Yuri says. There's a twenty-three year old man in Siberia who wants to marry her. Tanya is his favorite. She's the youngest on the Russian team, but the best at literary analysis because she is so soulful, he says. He shows me a tape of her. She purses her lips before she answers each question. Her mouth never falls into a smile. Professor Weil translates her answer for me. They are grim, the answers of a sad, old person. She doesn't look like a teenager. She's tiny, not like a child but a miniature adult. She's not wearing the red Young Pioneer scarf I imagined, but a skirt and blazer that don't match. When she's done with her questions, the team leader pats her on the head. Professor Weil startles her with a bear hug.

I am horrified. This is how people see me, what I must look like in person, what I will look like on camera. Professor Weil has tried to stress that they have matched us up by personalities, but with the shrewdness of teenagers, of nerdy teenagers, of teenagers who read too much, with bad skin, bad posture, a vocabulary we can't quite pronounce and a book in one hand, our fingers still marking the page where we've left off, we know it's not just the personalities Yuri is going for. These Russians are our essences, what we would be if you strip away our accessories, our slang, our pop music, our jeans, our ironies. They are what we most fear. We are shadows of them. We feel like the copies.

I am not Professor Weil's favorite American. I ask too many questions. When we discuss *War and Peace,* I play devil's advocate, root for Masha or one of the other minor characters. I'll argue that Mark Twain is a much better writer than Tolstoy and refuse to entertain the idea that because I can't read Tolstoy in the original, who am I to judge? But he has seen something in me that is like Tanya, the pet, this serious, solemn girl who does look like me.

Moscow, the night before the taping, at Ilya's party. The only time in Moscow when the two teams socialize together without Yuri or Professor Weil around. It's the first event (1) that is "not on the agenda." It's casual, unofficial. Tanya's coming down with a cold and her parents don't want us to go, but Tanya begs and says, "But we must go! Must!" and then starts in

on her mother in Russian.

At the party, Ilya's mother keeps kissing Scott and Ilya on the cheek, calling them both her boys. Scott's Ilya is a ladies' man who can't stop quoting Shakespeare. Scott and Ilya both have dome-like foreheads, making their faces look skeletal, above all drawing attention to their massive brains. At E.T.H.S., Scott is the king of the nerds. He can't talk to people below a certain level of intelligence. He tolerates our team, but barely. The Russian girls love Scott. They admire his forehead, his thick glasses, they follow him around the long dining room table at Ilya's place. I think to myself, Ilya's got a dining room. They must be part of the nomenklatura, ahead of even Tanya's family who has a three-bedroom apartment, but no dining room. I'm keeping track of the distribution of wealth, and size of apartments is the only reliable indicator I've found.

Sasha asks us if Scott has a girlfriend, while Tanya and Anya giggle. We think the Russian girls are being silly, but later, when I reread my diary, I find pages on Ilya, lists of his favorite lines from Shakespeare, his answers to the questions I asked him about Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Tolstoy's attitude toward fate. The evidence is in: I must have been as dazzled by Ilya as Tanya was by Scott.

The night of the party coincides with Soviet Army Day, February 23. Ilya takes us out on the balcony to watch the fireworks. Ilya's mother asks, "Are you cold? Are you cold?" She makes Ilya bring us out coats. Everyone asks us if we're cold. They can't seem to figure out that we're from outside Chicago, that Moscow cold is nothing that we can't handle. It is cold, though, the kind of cold that hurts your nostrils when you breathe. The streets are full of men in uniform, the Soviet army overcoats that Chenel and I find gorgeous. I've never liked American uniforms. Maybe it's that the Soviet uniforms look lost in time, circa World War II, and the boys that wear them turn into old movie stars, Cary Grants, Gary Coopers, and Jimmy Stewarts all. The uniformed men stream down the street. The older veterans are

(1) Outside of a spontaneous snowball fight in the Tula Kremlin (Yuri and Professor Weil were prominent targets, although they both seemed to enjoy it until Yuri tapped his watch and told us it was time to go).

drunk and stumbling. They fall in the snow and pick each other up. They're going to a parade or coming from a parade. No one knows.

The fireworks start, red stars shooting over the Kremlin. Ilya asks me, "How do you call them? In English?"

I tell him dreamily, "Pyrotechnics." Chenel jabs me in the ribs and I blurt out, "Fireworks. I mean fireworks."

"Pyrotechnics? Like the Greek?" Ilya says. I nod. In Moscow, I can't seem to control my vocabulary. I hear myself starting to sound like Tanya's schoolbook English. Tanya likes to call things "cozy" and high praise for people is to call them "pleasant company."

Ilya's mother makes us come back inside. She's serving bliny stuffed with cheese and jam and sugary tea. "Are you hungry?" always closely follows, "Are you cold?" A classmate of Ilya's plays "House of The Rising Sun" on the guitar while we eat. I'm the only American who knows the lyrics. Ilya punches me in the arm to show me he's impressed. I must be blushing. I hope people will think I'm flushed from the tea. I wonder if the Russians know it's about a brothel. Maybe they do; maybe it's used to teach about the sexist capitalist horrors of the United States.

Scott slips Ilya a tape and they put on Sting's "Russians" (2). The Americans look horrified; the Russians look moved. Scott smiles and his eyebrows raise over the rims of his glasses. He's the puppetmaster here, watching what happens when you provoke the two teams. Ilya asks, "When you first heard this song, did you think we loved our children?" We squirm.

"Of course," I say.

"Of course," Chenel echoes. "Of course Russians love their children, too. Everyone loves their children."

Chenel hisses quickly to me, so fast that Anya and Tanya can't follow her, "Isn't this in poor taste?"

Tanya only likes classical music anyway, and she looks up as the song

(2) One of the particular ironies of this song being played was that one of our E.T.H.S. teammates, Scott's academic rival, Alex Teller, was the grandson of Edward Teller, father of the H-bomb. "How can I save my baby boy/ From Oppenheimer's deadly toy," indeed.

trails off into the Prokofiev theme Sting borrowed to make the atmosphere Russian. She cocks her head at us and asks, "What is your favorite piece by Prokofiev?"

"This one," Chenel offers. Chenel loves David Bowie and Prince.

"Who is your favorite composer?" Anya says to me, her chubby cheeks breaking into a smile at the sheer joy at the thought of classical music.

"Tchaikovsky," I answer confidently. Since I've been in Moscow, I've been asked this question every day, by Tanya, Tanya's family, her friends, and I've now got a solid answer that everyone likes because he's Russian. I only know the "1812 Overture" (Fourth of July picnics) and the "Nutcracker Suite" (Christmas matinees), but I'm getting good at bluffing. I can answer the question about who my favorite painter is much more easily: Chagall really is my favorite painter.

I have brought Tanya mix tapes I'd made for her of music I liked, Suzanne Vega, Laurie Anderson, the Pixies, the Talking Heads, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Prince's "Purple Rain" (3). I wonder if anyone will ever listen to them. Where will they end up in Moscow? Handed around to other kids in her high school? Sold on the street at the value of a blank tape? Will Tanya use them to tape symphonies off the radio?

Sting's "Russians" trails off with its ticking clock that's supposed to mimic the atomic clock, the hands almost at midnight for most of our young lives. It competes against the antique clock with its hands sputtering out the minutes on the bookshelf in Ilya's dining room (more proof of how comfortable his family is). Ilya's mother looks startled at the double clocks, but goes on pouring tea. "Eat, eat!" she urges the Americans. There is an awkward silence after the atomic clock finishes up. Scott clicks off the tape, Sasha hanging on to his arm while Tara looks on disapprovingly. Ilya's friend starts strumming Russian folk songs.

Tanya says, "It's good Professor Weil isn't here, or next we'd have to

(3) Tanya gives me the Aquarium album *Equinox*. I think it is Soviet kitsch and use it for decoration in my dorm room. Once I finally start listening to it a decade later, it becomes my soundtrack for Cold War nostalgia.

sing Kalinka again." Chenel and I look at each other and decide whether it's okay to laugh or not. We risk laughter. Tanya looks pleased. She folds her arms over her thin pink blouse and nods. Her bun is coming undone and she looks almost young as her hair falls to frame her face, softening her cheekbones that can be as edgy as her attitude. She refused to bring a sweater to wear over the blouse when we left the house, even when her grandmother begged her.

We were told the Russians couldn't understand sarcasm. Tara was particularly annoyed. "What am I going to talk about if I can't make fun of things?" she demanded. "Are we all supposed to sit around saying, oh, isn't this nice, isn't that nice, oh that's great?" To our relief, we're beginning to understand our Russians don't just speak English, but the language of sarcasm, too. Sasha and Tara both roll their eyes behind Scott's back. Scott and Ilya wink at the Soviet and American girls, respectively.

Tanya keeps making everyone laugh in Russian, but tells me she can't translate it. It's the fundamental problem of my building a friendship with Tanya—our best selves are rooted in our languages. The part of ourselves we don't care about, the parts that say banal, everyday things about weather, asking and answering if we are cold, is what we have to offer each other. What we have to offer each other is kindness. I've never believed in kindness. All my interest is in wit. I can't understand why Tanya would like me if we can't follow each other into slang.

The Russians are much more physically affectionate than we are. Anya wants to hold Chenel's hand as they walk down the street. At the party, Scott and Ilya walk about with their arms around each other. Sasha and Tanya kiss each other in greetings. Maybe there is a reason that they are quick to find ways to express sarcasm physically as well? Sasha grabs Tara's hand to take her closer to the guitar. As Sasha pulls, Tara whispers to me, "Remind me when we're back in Evanston not to do this? Hold hands? Just think how fast we'd be slammed into a locker."

Tanya wraps her arm around my waist. She's listening, along with all the Russian girls and Ilya, to one of Ilya's friends from school talk to Scott. He's asking his most important questions, the ones he's always wanted to ask an American.

"What do you prefer on a girl, skirts or trousers?"
"Would you die for a girl?"
"If someone insulted you, how would you receive satisfaction?"

The next morning, we have to wake up early for the taping. It's still dark as we sit in the kitchen and Tanya's grandmother fills us up with tea. Tanya's grandmother is little like her, nimble as she darts about the kitchen. She doesn't speak English. Tanya tells me her grandmother grew up listening to operas through the stage door where her father worked and knows all the major Italian operas by heart. I think to myself, when in time are we talking about? It must be the 1920s or 1930s when Tanya's grandmother was a girl. Lenin days or Stalin days? How happy was her childhood? She has a china doll from back then, bigger than the size of a real baby, painted black and dressed in a striped gingham dress. The doll is called Tom, after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It sits on the shelf in the parlor, where I sleep. It's the first thing I see in the mornings. I am trying to connect it to a Soviet interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn*. Tanya told me she used to pretend that Tom was her baby brother. All of the Soviet all-stars are only children. No one can afford more.

We watch the sky turn from gray to blue above the apartment blocks in Tanya's neighborhood. As lovely as Tanya's apartment is on the inside, her building and the other buildings around the courtyard look to me like Chicago's housing projects, some kind of communist Cabrini-Green. Out the kitchen is a long angled highway leading to an old Moscow church, its onion domes glinting in the cold morning sun bouncing off the ice and snow.

Tanya's family is Jewish. She didn't tell me they were Jewish right away. It came up the third or the second day. She said, "We're Jews," and backed away from me, as if she was waiting for me to recoil.

When we were at the churches in Sigorsk, taking in the tourist sites on *Obraz!*'s agenda, Tanya told me how beautiful she thought the icons were, pointing out the one of Mary with three hands. "For saving more children," Tanya said. She told me about icons in Russian culture, about how important the image was. Obraz again. Icons were worshipped. I couldn't help but think about the Lenins we'd been passing all over town,

the massive statues out of scale to the city around them, the little busts available for tourists. His image was everywhere, in all sizes, as if he'd been miniaturized so he could fit everywhere, and blown up so that he could expand across the sky.

At Sigorsk, Tanya helped me light a candle in remembrance for my grandmother. She was slowly dying of cancer back in the States. Tanya, so close to her own grandmother, couldn't imagine anything worse. Tanya held my hand in its mitten the rest of the afternoon. She asked me to believe in the power of the icon, even if I wasn't Russian Orthodox, even if she wasn't Russian Orthodox. Tanya liked all aspects of Russian culture. All she wanted was to be seen as Russian first, Jewish second. Many of her family friends had already emigrated to Israel or the States. Tanya's father was an important mathematician—he could leave for Harvard, Oxford or the Sorbonne at any time. Her best friend from childhood lived in Philadelphia now. She asked me how far it was from Chicago.

Tanya never wanted to leave Moscow. She said, "It's not leaving Russia that I can't imagine. It's leaving *Russian*" (4).

Tanya's grandmother is hurrying us to our coats. Tanya's mother will take us over to the station. She checks to see our coats are properly buttoned, our hair wrapped up in the scarves, our scarves tucked in the collar of our coats. Tanya's grandmother kisses us goodbye and gives us a package of hard-boiled eggs in newspaper for lunch.

Tanya's mother bangs on the elevator doors until it opens. The cage doors close around us and we go down the fourteen flights. There is a sense of finality to it—at last, we're off to the literary battle. Everything looks like an old movie to me, the army uniforms, the Maltese Falcon elevators. The phones in Tanya's and Ilya's apartment are bright, candy colors, like the phones in a James Bond film from the 1960s. Nothing looks like 1990. It's like the whole city is trapped in amber, that the snow that falls

(4) She'll leave Russia but not the language. She'll teach Russian literature at Columbia University, find me through Google, and dance with Tara and Chenel at my wedding.

around us blurs all the years together.

Every day it keeps snowing. No one ever shovels the snow, and Moscow has no salt budget. It keeps piling up, raising the level of the sidewalks higher and higher, like the layers of an archaeological dig. I have to concentrate to keep from slipping. Everyone wears fur hats perched on their heads, as if everyone was walking around with their own little pet curled up to guard against the cold. Tanya's mother asks me if I'm cold.

We duck into the metro and go down the deep wormhole to the station platform. The escalator is so long I get dizzy. The station has elaborate mosaic tiles in abstract floral patterns. It looks like a museum. Like people's apartments in Moscow, it's beautiful on the inside. No one smiles on the metro. Tanya's mother tells me, "Remember, they're grumpy because their lives are hard." She works as a professional translator between French, English and Russian; she knows words like grumpy. Once we get to Ostankino, she kisses us both good-bye.

At wardrobe, Chenel, Tara and I are measured by bossy stout ladies with pins in their mouths. We're going to be dressed like Natasha Rostova at the ball. Empire waists, pink and blue sashes, little satin slippers for shoes. Our hair is done in ringlets. One of the ladies almost burns my ear with the curling iron.

The Russians dress first. Once they're done, they clap their hands together once they catch sight of each other in the mirror. Tanya covers her mouth in surprise and Sasha hugs her.

"We look like princesses," Tanya said, holding up the hem of the dress and turning her ankle so that she can see the slipper pointing out and different angles.

We think we look ridiculous until we see the boys walking down the hall. They're dressed in Russian army uniforms of the Napoleonic wars, holding their tall hats in their hands.

As we enter the studio, the lights are so bright we can't see straight. The backdrops are of a Russian country house, circa 1812. The twelve-piece band strikes up a waltz. Yuri leads the Soviets to the other side. They walk away confidently, in a straight line. They're pros at taping; they're the Soviet all-stars. We're given our headsets for the simultaneous translation.

The ringlets get in the way, as does Scott's grenadier mitre-cap. He puts it down across our table. It covers the paper we've been given to formulate our responses, and everyone yells at him to put it on the floor.

The games begin. Yuri smoothes his mustache. The questions come. Some are identification—minor characters from the novel, settings, references, tricky but nothing for people who've read it over and over as we have. Some of the questions are thematic. They take longer; we have to take turns answering them. The Soviets keep sending Tanya or Ilya to answer. We wonder if that's cheating. We're rotating our team more democratically.

The questions about Tolstoy's idiosyncratic ideas of history are hard, but we have been prepped well. Most of the judges seem willing to give us a chance, but there is one judge in particular, a Russian professor from Moscow State University, who seems horrified that Americans have invaded the sanctity of *Obraz!* He says, looking down his slender, pinched nose at us, over and over, in English so that the whir of the simultaneous translation in our ears goes quiet, "Once again American team refuses to understand suffering of Russian soul. No points."

Should we understand their suffering? Do we want to understand their suffering? They think suffering is beautiful; we think happiness is. Do they understand our suffering? I'm beginning to wonder how the Russians will understand Twain.

There is a dance competition, waltzing in partners. I watch while Ilya whirls around with Sasha, Scott with Tara. It shifts to some sort of minuet—everyone gives up but Tara and Sasha, who've both studied dance. They end with a bow and flourish. The Russians are ahead because of our failure to understand suffering, but we still have a chance to catch up until the food competition.

We are led blindfolded into a different studio.

The room is dark except for a spotlighted table heaped with food, American on the left and Russian on the right. At last, we think, the force-feeding the Russian mothers and grandmothers have been doing for two weeks will pay off. There's bliny, there's borscht, there's pelemeni. And caviar. And some elaborate salads, pickles, beets, salted fish, hard-boiled

eggs—we've never seen it before and have no idea what it's called. We lose points. The Russians have no problem identifying hamburgers, hot dogs, apple pie.

"Apple pie?" Tara says to me. "Apple *pie*? Like that's hard? Like the Russians don't have pie of their own? All they had to do was translate their word for pie into English. And *apple.*"

Back at wardrobe, we're stripped out of our Empire gear and decked out in a Mississippi River nightmare. Pink gingham, braids, and sunbonnets. They'd like us to go barefoot. Yuri assures us the floor of the studio has been swept clean for just this purpose. Tanya is particularly loath to give up being Natasha for Becky Thatcher.

The boys are wearing partially unraveling straw hats and overalls with patches. The patches are fresh. They are there not to cover holes, but to create the Huck image. Ilya chews a piece of straw. Scott decides to mirror him. The band is dressed in leather with cowboy hats. The women in the band are wearing leather skirts with squares cut out of the pattern. They've been given holes to approximate some kind of image of daring cowgirls. Chenel says, "Where did they get the idea that is ever okay fashion?"

The Russian judge with the attitude no longer cares if we don't understand suffering. He doesn't see Jim at the heart of the book. The band plays twangy bluegrass for the second dancing competition, the hoe-down. Nobody knows how to dance to it.

I want to talk about the end of Huckleberry Finn, about Huck's decision to light out to the territory. I'm at the age where I think heading off to the college (5) will be my way to light out. But being in Moscow makes me wonder if there is any territory to go to. Identification is easy—you learn new street names, new food. It's the big questions that follow you around, history, fate and suffering.

I'd like to talk about the terrible chapters of Tom Sawyer's return,

(5) After college, I will light out for the former Soviet Union, for the provinces of the Republic of Moldova. I won't tell my Moldovan friends that I went to Moscow as a guest of Soviet television. It will sound about as likely as a trip to Baba Yaga's chicken-leg house.

where he hijacks the book and prolongs Huck's decision and Jim's chance. Tom Sawyer showing up is one book visiting another, and it seems to fit after these days of imagining *War and Peace* and *Huckleberry Finn* together. Is there something to the fact that Tolstoy called his book, if you follow the more accurate translation, "War and the World," expanding his novel to include the war but everything else as well? Is that title a way to sum up the Cold War, too, and our small summit of literary analysis? Is Twain's title so clearly individualist, Huck Finn, that Jim's suffering doesn't matter, off the page, existing in the reader's imagination? Or are we supposed to take Huck so to heart that he becomes our Huckleberry friend, waiting around the bend, and we're supposed to know that he has the imagination, too, to think about Jim, to think about Jim so much he's willing to go to hell for him?

But what I'm called upon to do is to act as a lawyer for one of the scenes of frontier justice. Ilya is going to be the prosecutor; I'll be the defense. I could talk about the scene as a literary critic, talk about how Twain is full aware of the ambiguities, but I don't want to re-enact it, become part of lynching mentality, show off the thin veneer of American civilization for the Soviet public. I don't want to become that image of frontier justice, standing there holding my sunbonnet at the podium, banging the podium as I talk about needing to take the law into our own hands. But I do. I fall into it, under the lights. I even get into it, banging away. I can see myself, little, solemn, more like the Widow than Becky. I am not proud of myself, but then, I've already eaten Russian food in a taste-test for literary analysis, danced, dressed up like a doll, for literary analysis. None of this day of competition has been my finest hour.

I'm done, I sit back down, put the sunbonnet over my face to block the studio lights for a minute. The simultaneous translation informs me I get full points, which makes me feel worse.

(6) There is another literary battle, a trip to Chicago, filmed for local access cable. *The Great Gatsby* versus Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. Gatsby the romanitc versus Bazarov the nihilist. Much discussion of the green light at the end of the dock and death by careless autopsy ensues.

The Russians win, 20-18 (6). Their suffering, and their complicated, root vegetable-based cuisine triumphs over our happiness and pie. We won't get any fan mail.

I catch Tanya's eyes across the studio. She is indignant for me. Her hands are balled into fists and her sunbonnet slumps to the floor. She's happy about the costumes, delighted about the costumes, thrilled about the costumes, but she's as uninterested as I am in re-enactment. It's time to mix things up, combine stories in new ways, build new images and icons, eat new food.