

The Iron Curtain

A. V. Neidle

My father was born three years after the end of the Second World War, thrown into history on the dark side of the Iron Curtain. He ate wild garlic on the plains of Siberia in the Russian army. His father was an artist. His father's father is lost to me. When he married my mother, my father gave her a gold ring engraved with Hebrew letters and a picture of grapes, the literal meaning of his family name. For two people who were born and raised on the soil of an atheist state, Hebrew was as inscrutable as Egyptian hieroglyphics but it was an appealing secret, an ancient tongue that somehow bound them together. My parents lost their wedding rings.

One night when I was in college, we sat in the yellowish glow of chandeliers and listened to the clink of silverware over the soft undertones of 'Let's Do It' by Cole Porter. The faded mirrors on the walls bounced around muted reflections of the lights. My father was on my right in a grey suit that matched his receding hair and his twinkling blue-grey eyes. He touched my elbow.

'Nyusinka,' he said, using the nickname he made up for me when I was a child, 'be a dear and read me the menu. I didn't bring my glasses.'

'Of course you didn't,' I said, making no attempt to hide my irritation. I was resigned to my role as his interpreter with the world of text he could not see and the English-speaking voices he could never fully understand.

'What? What is that? What's in it?' he would ask in an embarrassingly loud voice after nearly every menu item.

'*Oolitki!*' I yelled back so that he could hear over the din, translating to Russian. The waiter's approach signaled the next step of the process, which could be tricky. Occasionally it would turn into a negotiation with me as the unwilling mediator. In Belgium, I had once earned a dagger-sharp stare from an ice cream seller when, prodded by my father, I asked her to transfer the ice cream from the big cone into the small cone, and after that again into the big cone. This time, luck was on my side. My father stayed silent as I ordered the dish he wanted.

Something about the word ‘*oolitki*’ stuck in his mind that night. He would sit quietly for a few minutes, with a slight smile on his face, as I talked to others at the table. Then he would touch my hand and ask, ‘How do you say *oolitki* in English again?’ I would answer him and resume the conversation, only to be interrupted again a few minutes later with the same question.

‘Papa, you’ve already been told three times that it’s snails!’ I talked to him like a child, although this was the oldest I had ever seen him. The onset of old age rang through that haunting question. Snails. Snails. Snails. Why couldn’t he remember?

As we drove home in the cooling rain between late summer and early fall, the rest of the family chatted about our special-occasion outing.

‘How do you say *oolitki* in English again?’ my father asked.

I couldn’t help but wonder — had I missed my chance to know him? Somehow a lifetime had slipped between us, roaring away like a passing train.

The heat of summer was like another person in the room with us, a house guest who had overstayed his welcome. Keeping still required almost superhuman effort. My hands were cupped and stretched out in front of me, my arms forming an oval and my left foot out to the side.

‘How much longer?’ I asked my father. It wasn’t that I didn’t like the *tutu*, and I was excited to see the finished portrait, but posing was wearying. He promised that he was almost done, tilting his head to the side and wiping his paintbrush with a cloth.

‘I got a ninety-three on my math test,’ I announced, fishing for praise.

‘Is that good? Is that an A?’ he asked absent-mindedly.

In the finished painting, I noticed that the ballet pose was depicted exactly right, but somehow the girl’s face didn’t look quite like mine.

My mother tells me that my father was not always like this. In Russia, he was popular, fashionable and athletic. When I think of his adolescence, I imagine young people running around in the snow, pulling one another on sleighs amidst Russian laughter. I think that scene is from a Russian movie I once saw. In 1993, my parents crawled out of the ashes of the former

USSR to escape anti-Semitism. Only Israel and America were accepting Russian Jewish immigrants. They joined my aunt in Philadelphia, but soon after their arrival, this country turned my father inside-out. He never caught on to the styles, the people, or the language entirely. He had studied French in school instead of English like my mother, and his language skills never matched hers. Through some peculiar twist of fate, he settled into a solitary life dominated by his hobbies: gardening, cooking, photography, and painting. For a year or so, we took art lessons from the same teacher. Mine culminated in a small oil painting: a wooden hut stands on the slope of a snowy hill on the edge of a forest, smoke rising from the chimney. The painting hung in my room for some time but I regarded it with suspicion, doubting that my eleven-year-old artistically-challenged self played much of a role in its creation. In the hut, I recognized his solitude.

When my father lost his job before I started college, I helped him translate his resume into English so he could apply for a new one. That was the first time I learned the name of his profession, which had previously been described to me as something complicated involving food. I knew that my father brought home various dessert toppings from work and I had the vague impression that his job involved carrying buckets of food up flights of stairs. Before reading his resume, I had opted to simplify matters by telling anyone who inquired that my father ‘made yogurt.’ That description particularly satisfied my sixth grade teacher, who enjoyed picking on me.

‘Well, at least he brings home free yogurt,’ he said, smirking. I felt that the yogurt description was not doing my father justice, but I did not bother to correct it. Other times I said that my father was a bioengineer, which impressed people. This came from the fact that my mother once told me he was an engineer in Russia, a generic title for many jobs there. Reading the title ‘Quality Assurance Technician’ and the name of his college, Moscow State University of Food Production, did not explain much. Finally, he told me that he tests food products for qualities like acidity to make sure they are safe to eat. Yet even now the shroud of vagueness and mystery hangs over the details of his work, and his college years have been gathered in under that same shroud. What is a University of Food Production? I can’t help imagining a factory rather than a school, a building with a conveyor belt that churns out millions of identical

products to feed the hungry masses of the Soviet Union while students take notes. I know that after college, my father worked in food production for the Russian army, feeding the soldiers. Looking through the capitalist lens of America, I associate his job and the University of Food Production with the working class. When I was a child and my father would come home in his blue uniform with a patch that said ‘Systems Bio Industries’ above the breast pocket, I thought the color of his shirt clearly identified him as a ‘blue collar’ worker. In the Soviet Union, such class distinctions were largely eliminated. I know this, and yet my American sensibility reaches in and draws grid lines everywhere, classifying him.

The glittery purple folder had not been there before. It was shining behind the glass door of my bookshelf when I entered the room. My name was written on the front in black marker, in my father’s scrawling handwriting. I opened it and a mass of papers fell out. Most of them were printouts from the internet about the ancient Roman authors Pliny the Elder and Pliny the Younger, but there were also lists of vaguely associated phrases that were meant to spell out some sort of story. My father was in the next room, thoughtfully clicking through some Wikipedia articles about obscure historical figures. When I came in, he saw the folder in my hand and smiled.

‘That’s for your book,’ he said.

‘What book?’

‘You’ll see. I had the idea, but I want you to write it. Just keep the folder on your bookshelf and one day you will write it.’

I had the urge to throw the papers on the floor and refuse this bizarre task my father had dreamt up. He sat in the computer chair, smiling with confidence in the idea that I would write his book instead of my own. Although I knew his endeavor was well-intentioned and sweet, in a way, I looked at the name scrawled on the folder and wondered why it was there. The contents had nothing to do with me.

There is a picture of us in my pink childhood photo album. We are barefoot in the backyard, next to my father’s tomato plants. He has been introducing me to the various plants in his garden,

where the tall grass tickled my ankles. My father is in a striped shirt and I am in a floral-printed dress. Vines sprout up around us, covering part of his face in shade. His hair is black and covers practically his whole head, and his height seems like it would rival a giant's. I am only as tall as his waist and my hair is a dark curly mop, similar to his but wilder. Yet the striking aspect of the photo is the similarity in our stances; we are side by side with our feet spread apart as if in mid-step and our heads tilted to the right at the same angle. There is camaraderie, a unity of purpose in that photograph. I keep trying to remember whether it was real or just a trick of the camera, or of memory.

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