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A Russian New Year

John Veneck

Standard procedure with every Russian family I knew, when hosting any kind of dinner party or large gathering, was to push the dining room table against the couch to create the illusion of additional seating. One of those spots would always be offered to me, the guest, because it was thought to be more comfortable than a regular chair. I would sink deep into the couch trying to look as natural as possible while eating off a table that reached just about eye-level. Somehow they had grown accustomed to eating above their heads, but I could never get past the sense of foolishness I always felt. That feeling was intensified the first time I had dinner with Anna's entire family. Anna and I had been dating for over a year, since I first arrived in Yekaterinburg where I was assigned to teach English as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I knew it was a sign of acceptance to be invited to spend the New Year with the family, all of whom I'd met at one point or another, but never together as one large non-English-speaking collective. So I tried to disguise my nervousness the best I could, occasionally helping myself to a little chicken or pelmeni, debating whether it would look more natural to hold the plate in my lap or continue taking it down from the table for a quick bite or two.

Food and drink appeared from the kitchen in waves. I couldn't understand how her family, always seemingly on the brink of financial disaster, could still find the means to put out such an elaborate meal. From my vantage point I could see the translucent green and burgundy wine bottles rising from all points of the table. There was a half-eaten roast and the skeletal remains of a baked chicken. Salads, vegetable platters, and half-empty glasses were also scattered about the table. There had been times at parties like this when I thought I would go blind if I ate another bite... and not just because of the food, there was an endless stream of wine and vodka as well. I had full glasses of each on the table before me, and I knew that by not drinking them I was causing a stir between Anna and her father. All the men in Anna's family drank, and I knew that they were upset that I wasn't joining in.

Anna was doing her best to defend me, and for once I was glad that my Russian skills, skills that ranked somewhere in the range of "advanced beginner," weren't as good as they should have been considering I'd been living in Russia for over a year. But now I could feign ignorance, sit at my end of the couch in relative peace, free to let my thoughts wander back to my own family, to what they might be doing for the New Year. And it was at this moment, perhaps to ease the tension brewing at the other end of the table, that Anna's grandfather turned to me and asked if I had a grandfather back home. His question took me by surprise because the two of us had rarely spoken and he'd been sitting beside me all evening in relative silence. He was a tall slender man with thin hair and large ears. He was

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wearing a white shirt with thick black stripes and a silver tie that was about six inches too long. He was very angular and looked about as awkward as I felt. He was also the only male member of Anna's family who didn't drink, so his demeanor was far more reserved than the others'.

I told him simply that both my grandfathers were gone. He nodded knowingly, then asked if either had fought in The War. I told him that one of my grandfathers had, but I was embarrassed to admit I didn't know much about what he had done. As the storm between Anna and her father began to die down, she settled in beside me and explained that, in World War II, her grandfather had worked as a guard in a camp for German prisoners. Before leaving for Russia I had made a point of reading as much history as I could, and memories about what I had read about wartime Russia and life during Stalin's reign came rushing back. I tried to contrast the image of this man next to me with the stories of all the hardships and brutal conditions Russians were forced to endure at that time. What might he have seen, I wondered, and worse yet, what might he have done? Against the far wall, in a bookcase, there was a silver star, a Soviet star given to Anna's father when he was an Army Officer. There were other things too: plaques, ribbons, and pictures of him posing proudly in his Army uniform. I looked over to where he sat, slumped over drunk at the head of the table. His eyes looked heavy as he drained another drink. We locked eyes, then Anna's Grandfather turned to me again.

"You know," he began, "Russians don't celebrate Christmas."

"I know," I said, not sure where he was headed with this question. But he seemed to be thinking, so I waited.

"But Germans do," he continued after a moment in his calm, easy voice. Then he settled in closer and told a story of how one Christmas he and some other guards had smuggled sausages and vodka into the camp for the prisoners, and how they had all gotten drunk and started singing carols in German. He said they were so loud that he was afraid they all might get into trouble, but nobody said anything.

"So what did you do?" I asked, cutting into his pensive silence.

He shrugged his shoulders and said, "We sang with them." Then he laughed and winked at me in a way that reminded me of my own grandfather.