Shaking the Shadow
Ingrid Rachinski

Moscow Nights: Folk song

Even whispers aren’t heard in the garden,
Everything has died down till morning.
If you only knew how dear to me
Are these Moscow nights.

The river moves, unmoving,
All in silver moonlight.
A song is heard, yet unheard,
In these silent nights.

Why do you, dear, look askance,
With your head lowered so?
It is hard to express, and hard to hold back,
Everything that my heart holds.

But the dawn’s becoming ever brighter.
So please, just be good.
Don’t you, too, forget
These summer, Moscow nights.

I told myself to remember
the way the light of the
neon sign blared red behind
my father’s shoulder. Oddly,
the neon sign has become ce­
cmented in my memory, while
most of the conversation that
night remains only a little
more than a blur. Even now, I
hear my dad’s voice through a
cloud, but can trace the rim of
the sign against the black of
my eyelids.

I could just barely make
out the glowing letters from
the parking lot of the cross­
town high school. My father
had parked the van near the
street so that we could talk
about his affair, a word we
could not yet form in our
mouths. I couldn’t take my
mind off the engine which
was still running quietly, mas­
saging itself against my feet.
The sound of the engine com­
hined with my father's voice, which was slow and uneven, created an unbalanced hum. His voice faced forward, and he would not look at me, leaving me with only the red neon sign. Arlene's Flowers.

He paused, and I looked again at the space between his chin and shoulder.

"I guess that I loved her." His voice was quiet and full of guilt. He didn't look at me.

The Discovery Channel once had a special on the Venus flytrap and its green jaws that clamped together in slow motion. The lips of the plant tightly closed behind interwoven fingers. I took a breath and felt something suction shut and harden across my jaw.

I remember feeling my teeth fitted against each other and the listless ride home, but I don't remember when he became my father instead of my dad. A sudden formality was imposed between us as I found it hard to talk to him or even about him. There was awkwardness when I ran across his former students, my age, who had taken Spanish or Russian from him.

"How's Mr. Rachinski?" The question was blunt and sudden when Morgan asked it. Other people in the room looked at me, mildly interested. Morgan had taken Russian from my dad for a few years in high school.

"He was such an awesome teacher."

I wanted to answer that he was miserable, but I didn't because she wouldn't be able to imagine it. No one would.

He was a different man when he taught; happy, content, at ease and in control. To begin with, there was something about my dad that allowed him a certain amount of presence. At six feet tall he had neither the height nor the build to make a powerful impression as he entered a room; but he still managed to command attention.

Maybe it was his quiet personality that made people not want to impose, not want to offend. It was with his quietness that he could silence a room. He would stand at the front of the classroom not moving, only waiting, until the last student stopped talking, acutely aware of the tension. These moments, however, were uncharacteristic to his generally loose teaching style and an openness that he had with his students.

Languages were both my dad's passion and talent. Including English, he has taught four languages, including German, Spanish and Russian.

His favorite language, like a favorite child, was Russian, and it was obvious in the way he spoke it and the way he taught it. He made Russian comfortable and familiar
because he fit so well into the language. He acquired it as if it was his and he belonged in it, taking advice and compliments from native speakers.

"I'm still learning," he would say, despite the fact that even the students from Russia admired his speaking ability.

It was by this example that his students took in the language readily through games and flashcards, and with the same ease that they learned the country's history through murals that marched across the walls. Each graduating class was given a stipend of and on the wall where they could combine themselves to Russia, leaving an imprint on the classroom. The oldest of these paintings were simple and lacked the spark of creativity. A large C.C.C.P. took over the head of the room, a dark red against the yellow walls. On the foot of the same wall was the Cyrillic alphabet, which the first year students always used for extra help on their first tests and quizzes.

After that, pictures and scenes bloomed almost wildly across the room. A scene complete with Vladimir Putin and Darth Vader lined itself up on the inside of the Russian space station. On the wall to its right, another mural of an old Russian icon was drawn over the door. The traditional scene was slightly contorted so that the six characters seated around a table took on different faces and the man painted in dead center was my father.

The opposite wall was cut like an upside down stair, and painted on it was a line of about six maroshkas. Matroshka. My dad pronounced it for his students to describe the Russian dolls shaped like wooden pears that fit into each other snugly like puzzle pieces. In English, they were called 'nesting dolls.' On the wall, each doll was depicted to represent the great, Russian leaders; the last and biggest of these had the title, (Mr.) Rachinski, accenting his characteristics until he began to look like Lenin.

It wasn't a hard task to make my dad look the part of the founder of the Soviet Union, and it was a running joke mimicked by different students, at one point or another, nearly every year he taught. Every student noticed the familiarity that lay mostly in their bald heads which were lined with dark hair from their ears and reached down toward the back of their necks. Their eyes, too, reflected each other, set off by their bare foreheads and defining thick beards.

"Lenin really was a great leader," he would remind us. My dad taught Lenin and Russian with fervor, fascinated with its idiosyncrasies
of history and turmoil. It was a history that became melded with his own and a country to which he felt a calling.

His interest in Russia began in his last years of college, the late 70's, when both countries were making promises toward peace and long after Russia had begun its downward spiral toward its failed communism and fragmented government.

Communism had begun more than 50 years before with the Russian Revolution in 1917. From a tradition of tyrannical leaders, a revolt began with a dissatisfaction of a nation. Factory workers formed underground socialist parties that started to bring themselves forward after basking in unhappiness that had tucked itself deep in hiding. Unhappiness, I realized, haunted my dad for longer than I could trace back as I tried to find the discontent that had hidden itself for years in layers of dissatisfaction.

The length of Russia’s history before the 1900’s was wound in centuries of undisputed leaders and aristocrats, a framework of authority and stability that dissolved quickly and without warning. It had been a silent uprising, catching the rulers unaware. Like the shock to find that a part of my dad had vanished, left in Russia over a summer. It seemed like overnight.

With the same swiftness, the substance of a nation only took a week to change, evaporating against the breath of women who marched on Petrograd, the city of St. Petersburg. Russia disappeared in front of ten thousand women who demanded peace and bread at the Tsar’s backdoor. It was in the face of these women that the Tsar gave up, readily handing over his throne in surrender. An interim government already had taken control, meeting together as if Russia’s Tsar did not exist, now required to act without him with sudden responsibility. It was an unusual revolution; there were no staggering deaths; no war waged; no fight; only a quiet abdication that left the nation reeling in shock. My father acted the Tsar, abdicating when he returned from the summer, leaving me reeling, too.

“You acted so different from what you used to. Did something happen?” I begged my dad for an explanation.

The e-mail back unhinged me. “I’ve lost something. I don’t know if I can ever get it back... I have sat here for 10 minutes trying to find a way to elaborate on this, but I keep deleting what I have written. I am crying. I can’t talk about this. I know that your mom is worried and doesn’t understand why I am like this. I can’t talk. Somehow, some-
where, sometime I will come out of this.”

But he had given up, and I knew that he had lost any hope that he would really return to normal, back to the way it was.

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The abdication of the throne was only partially filled with the provisional government, leaving the rest of the nation open like a wound. It was through the opening of this wound the nation courted communism – the other woman of Russia. On the square of Moscow and underground, revolutionary groups and factory workers whispered her name in breathy words of *comrade* and small printed flyers that circulated to unite the socialists. They became the Reds, the Bolsheviks and the beginning of the new Russia.

It was the lady of socialism that divided the country and set it against itself; she spurred a civil war. Loyalty took up arms against her, still aching for the Tsar to rule and for life to return to normal. It became a battle between loyalty and the new allegiance of the Bolsheviks, Lenin, and of a Marxist Russia; the Whites versus the Reds.

“In theory, communism is a very good idea,” he told me. He believed it and a part of me believed it with him.

“As your dad a communist?” some students asked me politely, curiously, and I had little defense.

*Commie.*

I could see the thought race through their minds.

But other students also had that little bit of socialist streak to mark them. Like Charlie who wore his bright red Ché shirt several times in a month and by the third year of my dad’s class he wanted to change his earmarked Russian name from Uri to Ché.

Charlie sat in the front row of Russian class every year, seated next to me, eyes dancing. He adopted the same keen interest that my dad displayed in the front of the room. Charlie quickly learned and memorized the strange history and nature of Russia in his effort to soak in the language and the people, adopting their mannerisms, accents, and emphasizing them with deliberate hand motions. Charlie was a little shorter than I was, even with a large crown of dark curly hair that added two or three inches. He had a straight, determined face which added character and depth to the way he spoke. He dwelled on silence when he was upset or frustrated, but for the most part was amiable and spirited.

Immediately he and my father got along. When it came time for summer, Charlie was
one of the first students to volunteer to go on a student trip to Moscow and St. Petersburg.

After three years of classes, Charlie became cemented into Russian and cemented into me. I know the way he walks and the way he thinks as if I had seen it all my life. There were things he did that were meant to be remembered, placed deliberately at times that he was sure I wouldn't forget, like prom and my graduation.

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I could see Charlie out of the corner of my eye. He crouched at the front of the bleachers where the only thing that separated him from the football field was an iron railing. The football field held about 400 chairs for graduation. I sat near the end of the rows, legs folded underneath my chair, acutely aware of being watched, but pretending not to notice Charlie's steadfast eyes. Despite the fact that we were not on good terms, again, Charlie had come clutching a gold box in his right hand.

After the ceremony he slipped the box into the palms of my hands and walked off without looking back. Under the lid of the small box was a set of three things, the red head of a dried flower, a black and white photograph of him that he had artistically placed, cut and moved in the dark room, and a note.

"My worst fear," he wrote, "is that someday you will be sitting on your front porch, years from now, when you have gotten old and lived your life, and you will have forgotten me."

Unfortunately, I have tried to.

I refused to officially date Charlie, even when he felt like he was owed "his turn."

"What makes him better than me? When do I get my turn?"

But despite that, we followed skips and jumps of talking, and anger, close friends and arch nemeses.

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Now, years later, I have come to accept the realization that I am constantly dating Charlie. Granted, not the man himself, but his twins that have proliferated around me as if I am being followed. They even look like him.

But instead of the dark curly hair that amassed around his head I have dated Alex with his bandanna bound blond curly hair and the most recent Jacob with his more reddish and slightly tamer waves of hair. They think like him, talk like him, move like him – I'm cursed with him.
Like when I was asked to cut Jacob's hair. No big deal. Until I realize that the first time that I really hung out with Charlie was to fix the horrible mess that he had done with his rueful head. And there have been many occasions that I have been the one to sit down and cut off handfuls of Alex's blond 'fro.

All of the above have temperamental eating and drinking habits that reflect (at least for the first two) their storms and bouts of emotions.

I think they all have played soccer at one point in time.

They actually like Ani DiFranco. That is enough to rule out pure coincidence.

They either write, or draw, or both.

And they mumble when they speak.

"I bet I could think up a few questions for him, I know the type all too well," my mom told me after I told her about Jacob, irony lying hard in her voice.

She could pin him down with her eyes closed. My mom and I are attracted to the same men.

In fact, Charlie was the first of the many people whom I dated that I could admit was exactly like my dad. And like nearly everything else, they mirrored each other's obsession with Russia. They were the communists that infiltrated my life.

Mentally, I am already starting a list that is branded in red of these men who might take over the pits and grooves of my life. I am conjuring proof of the men who threaten, like the men who threatened democracy. Subversives, spies, saboteurs. It is 1950 and I am John McCarthy.

"Communism will take over," he warned, and America took to hiding. Everyone was watching and everyone was terrified to make a step.

"Ladies and gentlemen, can there be anyone here tonight who is so blind as to say that the war is not on?" asked McCarthy.

We held our breaths, each of us; within the U.S. and within the Soviet Union. Silently we guarded ourselves, speaking only when necessary.

"How have you been?"

"Fine."

When my dad came back from Russia, one of the things that he pulled out to showcase was a poster that portrayed a young Russian woman with a bandanna over her hair and a finger to her lips. Ne boltai it read, "Don't gossip." Someone was always listening, and speaking could incriminate; so we didn't speak. Instead, the gaps of silence stood one over the other, looming, casting a long, thin shadow.

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Every night while I was growing up, my dad tucked me into bed with songs in German, Spanish and Russian. A Spanish song of animals and children, the German Du, Du, and Moscow Nights, greeted me until I was much too old to ask to be tucked in. When he first began the ritual of his quiet singing he would rock me in his arms, his forearms underneath my neck and knees, holding me close enough to hear his chest take large, deep breaths. When I got old enough, I learned how to sing along, forming foreign words and mispronunciations. I would always ask for the English translation, but forgetting it easily I was just happy to hear the sounds of the foreign languages that softly rocked me to sleep.

Du, du, liegt mir im Herzen,
Du, du, liegt mir im Sinn,
Du, du, macht mir viel
Schmerzen
Weisst nicht, wie gut ich dir bin.

You, you, are in my heart,
You, you, are on my mind,
You, you, do me much harm
Don't know how good I am
for you.

Now, a song that I had always heard with a tone of confidence and reassurance wavered. I had never heard the question marks in the song, but now I hear it in his voice and the way he looked away when he spoke. But I did too.

It began late in August, the very day he came back from a summer long trip to Russia. But for a year I was unsure, talking to him only with caution and suspicion, nothing concrete.

It wasn't until 1946 that Winston Churchill announced "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an Iron Curtain has descended across the continent" that the Cold War began. Like a whiplash, Stalin retorted with anger, the Truman Doctrine was established and a cold winter whipped through Europe in several foreboding months of famine. So the Cold War wrestled with the world. Over 40 years the superpowers played a murky game of chess. First it was Germany, then Korea, then Cuba.

Khrushchev issued a letter to President Kennedy near the end of the most tense years of the cold war:

We and you ought not to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied too tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it.... Let us not only relax the forces pulling on the ends of the rope, let us take measures to untie that knot.
We are ready for this.

A little bit at a time, a released guard began between the two powers, beginning a period of time called Détente.

Détente is a French word that means “release from tension.” Détente between the United States and the Soviet Union began around 1971, as both countries regarded each other with caution, but with an element of hope. A wistful hope that would end the cold stare between nations was in the eyes of tired leaders and exhausted nations.

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Our own Détente has begun as well. He called one morning in a truce, for lunch.

Sitting across from him, I could see he was exhausted. I don’t know how good I am for you. I saw it again as we talked, polite.

When the U.S.S.R. collapsed, the country must have had this same expression on its face. One that wasn’t ready to start over, taxed and empty, but knowing that it had no other choice. This is where we rebuild.

The Soviet Union, too, was forced to start over. It fell like an aftershock of the falling of the Berlin wall two years earlier. The failing economy whipped the country’s feet out from under it. Bankruptcy cornered the country, leaving it helplessly resigned. To Democracy and to truth and freedom America thought. But Russia was left with nothing.

Russia is in shambles and so is my father. They are trying to rebuild from torn stones, the last of the foundations.

“It’s not the same,” my dad told me, quiet enough so the rest of the restaurant couldn’t hear. “It will never be the same.”