

In the Wrong Time

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Rain was all he could see, lying in his bed, stiff on the pillows and surrounded by bottles of various sizes, shapes, and colors. Raindrops bulleted the window, splattering against the glass and slithering to the sill. His wife had made the curtains years ago. He had never liked how they came down to the middle of the window and then stopped, cutting the scenery in half.

In the mornings, he watched the light sneak in early and touch the red mahogany furniture pushed against the fissured walls. The light spread onto his wife's collection of dolls with flat cloth faces, and a myriad of books jammed against each other on the narrow bookshelves, and the gilded picture frames that stood haughty, spaced with a definite precision across the marble top of the mantle. He couldn't see who the people in the pictures were, and it made no difference to him. Nothing did. It was as if he lived in a museum or an antique shop, where the things displayed and tagged had meaning only to the people who had once owned them. He belonged there. A useless, venerable antique, frayed and fragile in its helpless presence in a world so hollow it sickened him—an old man.

The people from Home Health came and went, taking turns feeding him, refilling the medicine bottles, changing his sheets, shirts, diapers, wiping and washing his behind, which had flattened and looked like the continuation of his back split in two at its lower end. His genitalia had changed, too. Shriveled, they began to resemble frostbitten fruit of some sort, the transparent skin wrinkled, the pulp squishy-soft. He hadn't lived to be that old, and he wasn't ready to go. A mind is a funny thing, he thought. It acted young and restless while his body had become nothing but a pain-trap, a cluster of bones wrapped in a paper-thin skin, rattling and growling and moaning day and night and twice as loud when it rained.

Somebody would be bringing his breakfast soon—a glass of apple juice with a bright red straw sticking out and something else he wouldn't be able to eat or hide his disgust for. Somebody would twist open all the medicine bottles one by one and, after having shaken a pill out, would seal the lids back on. He would be raised and propped up into a sitting position, and an arm would stretch out in front of his mouth, and a fist would open up, and he would be measuring with his eyes the impossibility of the task he was expected to do—swallow all of the pills at once or one by one, choosing the order in which to take the pills or not choosing any order at all.

He looked at a silver baby cup on one of the bookshelves. It had been engraved in Yiddish that he could never read or speak, but he knew what it said: "To our son, Mikhail, from Mama and Papa. September 3, 1930." His birthday. That was all he'd taken with him more than thirty-five years ago when he'd deserted the Soviet Union and fled to America. That and a volume of Pushkin poetry and a handkerchief filled with dirt his mother had dug up and brought home from the cemetery where his grandparents lay. "It's a tradition," she'd told him. "Sprinkle that dirt under the windows of your new house, and it'll become your home." He never did. Customs inspectors took it away when he entered the States, and they had his suitcase turned topsy-turvy, searching for illegal literature, food. Stuffed in a wool sock, the baby cup survived the search. After they were done rummaging through his things, he picked up his suitcase and wrapped his arm around it and carried it to the bathroom and dropped it on the floor in a puddle of water or urine he hadn't noticed at first. He fished his baby cup out and filled it with water from the faucet and drank it empty. Then again and again and again. He was drinking free water in a free country—a free man.

Political asylum. When he had told his parents and the rest of his Jewish relatives that he'd been granted asylum, they were shocked and speechless. His words ricocheted off their austere, fear-stricken faces like raindrops off a window glass—hard, cold, loud. It was as if they heard of him being dead and buried someplace they could never visit and leave a tall shot of vodka on his grave. He never saw any of those people again.

His parents had tried to get visas twelve times, and twelve times the Russians had turned them down because, as his parents were told, they had no good reason to leave their own country. He called his parents once in a while, sent them money on occasion. But they said not to do it. All he could send were dollars, and his parents could get into

trouble exchanging them. It was against the law to handle any currency other than rubles. Once or twice he wanted to go see them, but they asked him not to. They were afraid that he'd get arrested for being an expatriate and thrown in jail and sent to a work camp in Siberia.

Everything had changed since then. Perestroika. The fall of the Iron Curtain. It turned out he had been born in the wrong time.

Fifteen years. His parents had been dead for fifteen years, and he still missed them. Like he missed birch trees under the windows of his house or the strong smell of black bread, fresh from a bakery. Even now, when his body had almost lost its ability to listen to what the mind told it, when it seemed that his mind existed independently, far away from the body it once used to be a part of, even now he could feel his jaws move a little as if remembering the old habit of chewing on a tight, spongy piece of black bread from the bakery on the corner of Nevsky and Fontanka in Leningrad.

How many times he had bought loaves of black bread in local supermarkets, how many times he had thrown them away. Too soft, too chewy, foreign. He'd even traveled to New York, to Brighton Beach, and looked for black bread there, in Russian stores, which had only been a few back then. Sometimes he would find a single loaf, hidden at the back of the shelf, hard or moldy. He would take it anyway and put it inside his jacket and bring it home and, peeling the plastic wrap off, lay it on his kitchen table and smell it. It smelled of home, of everything he knew that came with that word. The dust from the streets of the city he once had lived in and the clean, dizzying smell of young grass springing from the ground late in April and oil in his mother's loose hair when he'd bent to kiss her stooping over a pot of something—stirring, stirring. He smelled it all. Even the flat cakes his mother had made from dried up and ground potato peel during the war, him sitting somewhere on a dirt floor in a dark cold place surrounded by other people, their eyes so wide and roaming, plucking at the cake in his hand. "Eat, eat," his mother had told him. "They'll stop bombing soon." He could even remember how hot and chilling and still the air was after they'd gotten out of the bomb shelter and the thick taste of torn, ruptured earth settling inside his mouth, on his teeth, scratching at the back of his throat.

Lying in bed and listening to the rain, he began to wonder why nobody had yet knocked on his door and asked him how he was doing this morning, with a smile perpetuated on their lips as if it had been painted there over and over again. Why did they have to ask him that? What difference did it make to them? He was never able to understand that about Americans. There could be somebody shooting outside his window, or a tornado passing through, and they would still come into his room and ask him how he was doing, with the same goddamn smile molded into their faces. It was something in that smile that had made him uncomfortable at grocery stores or in buses or walking down the street, made him feel his foreignness in the country that had adopted him and granted him his freedom, as if freedom was something that one could buy or win in a lottery or lose in a poker game or sell or pawn or give as a gift.

He remembered how after he'd been living in this country for eight months, selling hotdogs and pretzels on the streets, washing cars, he'd walked into a supermarket one evening and seen a man and a woman picking out apples. And just by looking at the way the woman was holding an apple, close to her face, smelling it and probing it with her fingers and by the way the man looked at her, indifferent, oblivious to the manner she was doing it, fumbling at his coat and watching other women pass by, he knew that those two were not Americans. There was no smile on their faces. They seemed tired and bothered and lost. When he came closer, he heard the woman ask: "How much is it, a pound? Is it more than a kilogram?" Before he even realized that she'd spoken Russian, the language he'd already begun to mix involuntarily with the paltry vocabulary of English words he'd picked up off the streets, he stepped closer to the couple and said: "There are two pounds in a kilogram. Almost."

They had been the first Russians he saw in this country, and he could've picked them up and carried them into his apartment and set them at the kitchen table and poured some vodka in the glasses and let them munch on pickles and taste a piece of foreign black bread. He wanted to scoop them in his arms, to touch them, to smell the air around them. Home. They smelled like home. What place in the Soviet Union did they come from? Moscow. How long had they lived here? Three months. Where was their apartment? On the grounds of the Russian Consulate. They didn't immigrate like he did. They worked here. And they were not allowed to talk to any Russian expatriates. It could get them into trouble. They turned and began to walk away. He almost sank to his knees then, weak, still trembling from the excitement of meeting his people, at the prospect of finally having some friends, getting close to someone other than the single pillow on his floor mattress and the volume of Pushkin poetry he read every night, and the instant loss of it all,

and the emptiness that had struck him in the chest afterward. “Don’t go,” he mumbled to their backs. “Please, don’t go.”

The rain kept striking the glass. It must be too early yet, he thought, for anybody to come in and check on him and change his diaper. The left side of his body could feel that it was wet. He was cold, lying under his blanket with several extra afghans thrown on top of it. He always felt so cold. In Leningrad, in the last winter of the nine-hundred-day blockade, he remembered being huddled up against his mother’s body, piled over with every blanket and coat in their apartment, trying to get warm. There was no food, no heat, no more furniture to burn in the room they’d confined themselves to. After that, no matter how much clothing he’d put on, it seemed that he could never get warm enough. He did not feel the heat of a mid-July sun melting into his body, or that his tea or soup burned his tongue raw, or how a stream of hot water he washed his hands with nearly scalded his skin, leaving his fingers swollen and red. He wore thick-woven sweaters and wool socks all year round and never noticed the heat.

When he had first arrived in this country, he had a pair of wool socks his mother had finished knitting the day before he left. “Buy yourself more as soon as you find a job,” she said, pushing his silver baby cup inside one sock. “So it won’t scratch.” She smiled and dropped the stuffed sock in a suitcase that lay open and half-empty on his bed. She didn’t look at him but stepped to the dresser and began to take his underwear out of the drawers. “I’ve mended it all. Looks like new. Of course, where you’re going, I heard, people don’t even darn socks, just throw them away and buy a new pair. What?” She turned and looked at him and turned back to the dresser. Walking up to her, he gently wrapped both his arms around her body, so light and fragile and familiar, and pressed his stubbled cheek to the back of her head.

“Oh, stop that, you silly. So old and so silly.” She petted his arm and bent lower over the drawer.

After he had found a pair of wool socks in some fancy men’s store, it took him almost ten minutes to read the label and make sure that the socks were, indeed, one hundred percent wool (so fine and soft the knitting was) and another twenty minutes pondering whether or not he wanted the socks that cost more than all the clothes he brought from Russia. Buying the socks also meant skipping dinner that night. He chose the socks.

Pulling his blanket up with his left hand, he sank his head lower into the pillows and eyed the room. The dolls sat on the radiator under the window, hanging their feet down, talking to no one. Lucky they had no breasts, he thought. Nothing to worry about.

When he had left the Soviet Union, he was a last-year student in medical school and fascinated by everything that he saw or learned there. The sight of blood excited him, the smell of ether gave him goose bumps; he’d gone from dissection of frogs to dissection of cadavers to cutting through live flesh. A human body had been both a mystery and a laboratory to him. An intricate edifice of tissue and bones and arteries stuffed inside a skin sack, a man-made life, a miracle. There was nothing else he wished to do but to be able to fix it, mend it, sew it back together, set its clock again and listen to its quiet beat—steady, pumping. All he knew about bodies and the art and science of healing them was neither useful nor valid for American hospitals. He had to have some kind of diploma from a local university that would certify him to do the work he wanted to do and was so good at. He had no money to go to school, no friends to borrow it from, no knowledge of the English language sufficient enough to even take the high-school test. After a year or so of selling hotdogs on the streets and doing any other little job that had come along, he began to take English night classes. There he met his future wife, a Hungarian girl eight years his junior who’d just immigrated to America with her parents.

They moved in together, got married, worked feverishly, took loans, went to schools, took more loans, and went to more schools. A doctor and a lawyer, they had an American citizenship, a two-story colonial house full of antique furniture and a massive fountain at the front, a fat dripping turkey for Thanksgiving, and a neat pile of gifts wrapped in glittery paper on New Year Eves. When they’d first met, they each often had to guess what the other was saying, but their knowledge of English grew along with them and with what they owned until one day it became the only thing that they had in common. They tried and tried to have children but to no avail. Artificial insemination wasn’t practiced much and gave them no results, and invitro was science fiction. His wife began to collect dolls; he worked more night shifts. They drifted apart, their sex life changed, slowed down, and died off. She spent most of her time with her clients and at auctions buying dolls; he selflessly attended to his patients and searched grocery stores for black bread. They’d started off as friends, then became lovers, then turned into distant relatives. He wondered whether there could

have been another turn if she hadn't died of breast cancer. He wished he knew. He wished he could have saved her. Medical science had mastered the impossible since. They'd lived in the wrong time, he thought.

He heard somebody moving around the house and the voices, first distant but becoming louder and louder until he could hear people talking outside his door.

"You know he had a stroke. He's paralyzed on his right side."

"Can he talk?"

"Don't think so. He won't eat much either. Maybe he'll listen to you. Who are you again?"

"It's a long story. He'll know."

"Let me check if he is awake first, okay?"

There was a tap at his door, and one of the nurses peeped in. "Dr. Fridland? How are you doing, sir?" She smiled.

He kept staring at the dolls.

"There's somebody here to see you. She says you know her. She actually came in yesterday evening, but you were already asleep. Do you need me to change your diaper first? If it's a yes, blink once, please."

He shifted his head a little and rolled his eyes to the door.

"Okay then. You can come in, ma'am," the nurse said.

A woman stepped inside the room. She had a plastic bag in her hands, and she kept scrunching its handles with her fingers.

He looked at the nurse and then at the door.

"I'll go now, so you two can visit. I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything." The nurse smiled again and closed the door behind her.

His eyes pointed at the chair pushed close to one side of the bed. The woman walked up and pulled the chair out and sat down, the plastic bag nestled on her knees.

"Somebody said you were sick. How are you? I'm sorry, that's a stupid question, isn't it?" She opened the bag and rummaged inside and took out a Ziploc bag with something hard and dark brown in it. She pulled the Ziploc open. "I brought you some black bread. From Russia. Smell it." Leaning forward, she took a small brick of bread out of the bag and brought it close to his nose. "Do you want to taste it? Here." She tore a small chunk and touched it to his lips. He opened his mouth. She put the bread in. He began to chew. The bread tasted sweet and sour and strong. Like everything he knew that had come with the word *home* and the sound of her name—*Sonya*.

They'd met ages ago at the hospital where he worked and she'd come to visit a friend. Seeing her for the first time in his life sitting on the edge of the hospital bed and talking to another woman, he knew she wasn't American. And not because she had an accent—it was so light, so soft, he didn't even notice it at first. And not because her smile wasn't a meaningless gesture frozen onto her lips. But because there was something familiar in the way she sat and held her friend's hand and kissed her good-bye. There was something familiar about her that he'd recognized at once but couldn't tell what it was at first. And it had haunted him in all the years after. When she'd gotten off the bed and turned to him and said that she was Russian, too, and asked him in Russian if he could still speak it, he felt his tongue shift inside his mouth and a heat wave knock him in the chest, and his palms became moist and hot, and the air filled with the rustle of birches and the smell of black bread and the sound of his mother's voice. And he answered, "Da. I mean yes." And, like that evening in the supermarket when he'd met the Russian couple, he wanted to pick her up and put her inside his jacket and carry her home and lay her on the kitchen table and smell her, taste her, keep her. She could not have been more than thirty; he was way over fifty. So old and so silly, he thought, standing in the middle of his patient's room, desperately seeking an excuse to never let that woman go.

They'd become friends, close friends, laughing at the same jokes, munching on black bread they'd found in local stores, talking home. She visited him in the hospital when he had night shifts and time to kill. He remembered how she used to walk up to the back of the chair he sat in and slide her hands down his chest and lean forward and press her cheek against his, the heat of her body making him warm and dizzy, his heart rattling inside his chest. He dared not to turn then, not to look at her, not to stop her. Later, when she moved away, he kept wondering what it would've been like if he'd dared to make love to her then, to feel her body with his own and have her huddled up against him afterward.

He didn't dare. What could he have given her? He was old, married, and didn't even know if he was still able to make love. His erections were sporadic and almost never fully developed and didn't last. And it had been so long since he had sex with his wife, he'd forgotten how and why he needed it. He didn't dare. When his wife died, he called Sonya once, but she was married and expecting her second child. They'd met in the wrong time, he thought, and hung up.

"Do you like it?" she asked, tearing off another bite. "You want more?"

He opened his mouth, and she put the bread in. He chewed slowly and studied her face. She must be close to fifty now. Still young, graceful, with threads of silver in her dark hair, and her eyes, so roomy and moist, both confused him and set him at ease.

Pushing the medicine bottles further to the wall, she laid the bags on the nightstand and put the bread on top of them. "You want to see my kids?" She got her wallet out and, retrieving several pictures from its plastic insert, held them up in front of his face. "That's Mike. And that's Inga. They're all grown up now. Mike and his dad are very close. He stays with him a lot, helps him out, you know." He took his eyes off the pictures and looked back at her. "I didn't tell you? We divorced years ago. He isn't a bad man. Not at all. And the kids love him. It just didn't feel right, you know. Foreign. Like that black bread that we used to buy from the local stores. It tastes okay, but it doesn't fill you up. Something is missing." She put the pictures back in her wallet and slipped it in her jacket pocket.

Reaching out with his left hand, he touched her knee.

"What?" She smiled and petted his hand and took it in hers, stroking it gently, then laid it back on top of the blanket. "Do you ever have this feeling that it has already happened to you sometime somewhere?"

He struggled to smile.

"I know. Me, too. A lot actually. Like when I first saw you in that hospital, remember?"

He couldn't forget it even if he wanted to. For when he'd seen her then, he knew that he had been searching for her his whole life only to find out that he could never have her, like those birches he'd left under the windows of his apartment in Leningrad or the taste of black bread from the bakery on the corner of Nevsky and Fontanka.

"I want to do something," she said. "Something really silly." She got up and took her jacket off and threw it across the chair. Sitting on the bed and kicking her shoes off, she lay down beside him and stretched her legs out and wrapped her arm around his chest and squeezed her cheek into his pillow. "That's better," she said. "You know, I often wondered what it would've been like to lie in bed with you. But the time is never right, is it?"

He rested his head against hers and listened to rain patter on the window.