PHILIP METRES

Dispatch from Russia in the Long Cold War

It seems as if every U.S. media story about Russia revolves around Russia's meddling in our democracy and helping us to elect an autocrat. I'm as fascinated as anyone by the sudden resurgence of a Cold War, with its stories of Russian spies living secret lives as Americans and the exploits of the dictatorial Vladimir Putin, whose shirtless and botoxed reign seems both bizarre and yet completely understandable, given Russian history. And yet, Russia—its enigmatic people, its cruelty and kindness, its troubled beauty and crazy lovely culture—slips from our self-interested and misunderstanding grasp.

Twenty-five years ago, I was drawn to that puzzle of a country—where it was said that poets recited their work to stadiums and were feared by the regime—to witness to the dramatic historical change after the Soviet Union fell, and to meet the poets who helped make it fall. I wanted to slip behind the formerly Iron Curtain, and the curtain of images that we associated with that place. To see it for myself. What I found was more surprising and more mundane than I could have imagined. Nearly four months into my stay, my family came to visit, which is the occasion for this story, a glimpse into a Russia that you couldn't read in the news then, and you won't read in the news now.

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"How can he even see?" my father said, shaking his head at the taxi cab's damaged front windshield, as the driver scurried in the winter cold to fit the suitcases, Tetris-like, into the shallow trunk. Running from left to right, diagonally downward, a huge crack scarred the front glass, like a lightning bolt frozen in flight. It was December, 1992.

"Whoa," Dave, my twelve-year-old brother, said, elbowing my sister, Kath, toward the jalopy and its windowscreen.

They stuffed themselves into the tiny car like clowns in scarves and down coats—Mom and Kath and Dave in the back, Dad riding shotgun, next to their unnamed chauffer. Once inside, the view of Russia was no better. Everything outside was split into two, or more than two, if you counted the webbing of smaller cracks. You just had to get used to seeing through cracks.

A few minutes earlier, they'd drowsily stumbled through Moscow security and emerged onto the other side, into Russia, looking for me. I'd told them over the staticky phone line that I'd meet them at the airport, but I was nowhere to be found. I'd been living there for four months already, on a fellowship to study Russian poetry, and they'd come to visit this enigmatic land, this strange place that had sucked in their son.

They spotted a driver holding a brown cardboard sign: Metres.

"Where's Phil?" my mother asked the man, a sharp panic cutting through her dull sleepiness.

"No English," he said, shaking his head, and grabbing my mother's suitcase, gestured for them to follow. "Come."

My dad hesitated. Were they being kidnapped? The Cold War had ended, but how could they trust the Russians? This Russian? All he had was a sign with their name on it. Visions of the Lubyanka Prison swirled before him, the cornucopia of techniques that make people talk. But no one else appeared from the amoebic mass of unknown faces. They had no choice but to follow this anonymous man through the suddenly-parting crowd.

“Is *this* the country we feared?” my dad wondered aloud from the front seat, laughing in astonishment, looking out at the cobwebbed vision of Russia. He’d been stunned by the dingy airport. The smell of the public bathroom in the airport almost made him puke—not just the ammoniac scent of old piss, but the raging nastiness of decaying shit. The toilet looked like it hadn’t been cleaned since Stalin died. And the only thing to wipe your ass with was little shreds of yellowed newspaper. He’d staggered out like a punch-drunk boxer, trying to keep his insides intact. And now, the creaky car and its thunderstruck windshield, the battered highway road, the driving without the headlights on in the pitch dark. How wrecked the country seemed.

Nothing about this place was what he’d imagined. Having spent his entire life under the shadow of the Cold War, his adult years serving in the Navy and Navy Reserve, he could hardly believe his eyes. Could this be the mighty Soviet Union? The fearsome order of marching troops and tanks and missiles parading across Red Square? The Duck and Cover drills in case of a nuclear attack, hiding beneath his desk in elementary school. A thought began to itch away in his brain. What if the whole thing was a grand fiction? Not just that the Soviet Union had bluffed about its strength, but that America had wanted them mightier, more sinister than they were.

He turned to Kath, his daughter, in the back seat.

“I remember when I was your age, I watched the news during the Cuban Missile Crisis in the dorm common room. I thought it was only a matter of time before I was called up.”

“Were you scared?” she said.

“Everyone was scared. The world seemed so close to war,” he said, casting his eyes over the hulking white apartments, massed at the edge of the city.

The intimidating military force, combined with godless communism, for which the ends justified the means, meant that we would have to stop at nothing to stop them. And yet, as he looked around, recalling the great fear, he couldn’t understand why everything in Russia seemed so dilapidated. If they couldn’t afford new windshields and headlights, if they couldn’t give the buildings a new coat of paint, how could they have ever have won a war?

He couldn't keep looking, and his head hurt to think of what he'd seen, so he sat back in his seat, closed his eyes.

By the time they arrived at the apartment, the winter moon was bright, and they looked eagerly past Olya when she opened the door.

"Where's Phil?" my mother asked, her fatigue tilting toward confusion and worry.

"At hospital," Olya chirped in her rudimentary English, trying to explain my absence but not getting much farther than "hospital." They knew I'd been living there with Olya, a middle-aged physicist who not only rented me a room, but cared for me like an overgrown son. Still, they were alarmed by my absence. Olya fluttered about, trying to fit them into slippers and ply them with tea, trying to settle them into the two room apartment, which only increased my mother's panic, which in turn elevated Olya's fluttering, her tone now roughly somewhere between soprano and glass-breaking.

Earlier that day, I'd been burning in the oven of fevers, wrapped in blankets in the wreckage of my couch-bed, my face swollen almost twice its size and covered with undetermined spots. I was trying not to die of a mysterious illness that looked like measles but felt as if demons were attempting to drag me beneath the soil to the center of the earth. I could feel how hot it was already, and I was sweating through clothes every few hours, just to make sure that I'd either to freeze to death or burn in Hell.

It seemed a metaphor for my entire time in Russia. I'd arrived in humid early September, eager to delve into this country where poets were admired by the people and feared by tyrants, where suffering seemed noble, and everything felt real. I'd been repelled by the bloodlust of my own country in the wake of the bizarre media coverage of the Persian Gulf War, where it appeared that no one died and that smart bombs were heroes. The worst part was that my fellow citizens appeared to revel in the lie. I couldn't wait to see the truth of Russia, knowing that it too had been enveloped in a cloud of Cold War fictions and deception.

But by the thick of winter, in loneliness and despair, I'd seen Russia's own problems all too clearly, knew them in my bones, and now

was wracked in the rack of delirium. I gave up my solo battle against the fever-demons and decided to take a cab to a clinic, to see if a doctor might figure out my complicated case.

When I opened the door an hour later, everyone rushed to the foyer and, after examining my face and smothering me in hugs, drowned me with questions. Yes, I was at the only American health center in Moscow. No, an indistinguishable disease. Yes, sometime around Christmas. Yes, after a week of sweating and delirium, I could no longer ignore it. Yes, that's why I wasn't at the airport to greet them. Yes, some medicine that would at least help me breathe and not discover the magic of spontaneous combustion.

"It's okay, Mom," I said, "I think I'm getting better." One side of my face looked better than the other, so I turned that side toward them, trying not to worry them. The country looked like shit, and I looked like shit, and seemed as if it and my face might collapse or explode at any moment. Ever since I'd arrived, I'd fallen into one hole or another—literal potholes in roads, of course, but also colds and fevers, water shortages and power outages, byzantine train schedules and overstuffed sweaty local buses, angry cashiers and overprotective hosts, urinating public drunks and desperate stares, communist protestors and capitalist prostituki, insomnia and depression, bitter cold and murderous cold, unnameable feelings and unpronounceable words—so many holes beneath my feet and around my head. But suddenly, with my parents and my sister and brother now here, I wondered, maybe—just maybe—I and the country would survive.

I'll have to trust my sister's memory on the Pizza Hut order, since I was still somewhere between delirious and demented. The background is this: that fall, not one, but two Pizza Huts had appeared suddenly in Moscow. The first Pizza Huts in Russia. I'd been amazed when a window—not a hut, but a mere window—had opened on Tverskaya Boulevard, offering personal pan pizzas. It was a window in one of the usual stone buildings, but there appeared to be no way to enter from the street. Still, a Pizza Hut window! It was the equivalent of finding out that your closet had a portal to a world called Narnia. A cheesy, butter-crusted Narnia.

It was one of the few windows in Russia you could approach to purchase something and not get castigated or turned away for some unknown reason.

I mostly avoided it, trying to do my best to live like a Russian.

"Pizza Hut" in Russian sounds more like "Pizza Hat," if the "h" were aspirated in a way that makes it sound like you were suffering from a sore throat, and probably need to expectorate.

My family was relieved that I wasn't going to die. But they were also hungry.

Pizza Hut, the new telephone directory suggested, was now offering delivery—a fact that seemed as fanciful as demons that drag people into Hell or letters that could travel through a phone line.

The possibility of pizza brought directly to the apartment was too delicious and warm to pass up. After all, it was approximately minus 72 degrees outside, also known as the number when Centigrade actually sounds better than Fahrenheit.

My father made the call, and asked for a cheese pizza.

"Margarita?" the Pizza Hut man replied.

"No, no, cheese pizza," my dad tried to explain, using louder tones, in case the line was staticky, or the way one speaks louder as if to express one's increasingly beset will and to make children do as they're told.

There was a click and the line went silent.

I told them to wait. If there was anything I'd learned since I'd come to Russia, is that you can wait much longer than you think you can.

"And by the way, 'margherita' just means cheese pizza," I said.

Fifteen minutes later, my dad said, "FUCK THIS," and hung up. He tried to call the other Pizza Hut location, but our phone was dead.

"Maybe," I suggested from inside the oven, "the neighbors were using the shared line."

So I limped over to the neighbors' door and inquired. They weren't using the phone.

After fifteen more minutes, the phone was working again. Apparently the K.G.B. was sufficiently pleased with our persistence and gave us an open line.

Dad asked for a "margherita."

"There is a fifty dollar minimum," the Pizza Hut man retorted.

"We only want one pizza," my dad said.

"You could order beer," his nemesis declared.

Dad deflected the attempts to sell us beer and took another tack. "How about a salad," my dad said, as if to negotiate a truce.

One hour later, the pizza arrived. Upon opening the box, we saw that the pizza was cold. Very cold. Ice crystals had formed on top.

Our oven, sadly, wasn't working. It was the gas line, no doubt, which occasionally decided to go on holiday. I offered to warm the pizza next to my feverish body.

The salad, the key to completing this accord between hostile powers, consisted of yellowed cabbage, dry onion, canned peas, and tomatoes from the 19th century.

We feasted like serfs.

A day later, in the biting cold, my friends Dima and Natasha took my family to visit Red Square, with me still wrapped in a half-dozen blankets, my face slowly returning to its former size. But my father was worried. He'd just retired from the military, and here he was on enemy territory, without any security, not even a knife or a sidearm. When they got off the Metro at Krasnaya Ploschad, he glanced in both directions, looking for suspicious men, wondering which of them would be the kidnappers.

There were fewer people on the street than the previous day, given the biting arctic wind, and everyone was bundled from head to foot, with great fur *shapkas* pulled tight around their heads, even the ear flaps pulled down and tied beneath their chins. They looked more like starving bears than KGB agents. My mom was freezing in her thin red cashmere overcoat, as I had been some months before, in my own cashmere coat, learning the same lesson about appropriate winter wear.

Still, a woman was selling ice cream, banging the lid of the gray metal cooler against the top with her mittened hands, trying to attract

customers. *MoROzhenoye*! she cried into the cold, as if to keep herself warm. A couple walked away, licking vanilla cones in their mittened hands. He couldn't believe their tongues didn't just stick to the ice cream.

And then, before him: Red Square, where the Red Army marched and flexed its fearsome muscles, smaller than he'd imagined, perhaps the size of a couple football fields, from St. Basil's on the far end to where he stood now. On one side, the pale yellow Kremlin wall, and on the other, a shopping mall. Nestled near the Kremlin wall, the Lenin Mausoleum, where the old visionary murderer lay like a greasy pancake, ready for viewing, if not consuming.

A few years later, when he returned with some Navy comrades to Vietnam for the first time in forty years, they were stunned to see that the country they remembered—the country that simply meant "the war" so that you didn't have to say "the Vietnam War," just "Vietnam"—the country they'd carried with them in their skulls and bodies over the years, all the hurts and worries and griefs and smells and confusions and glories and memories, that country no longer existed. How strange it was, to walk around that burgeoning metropolis with the shiny skyscrapers and a new name—no longer Saigon but Ho Chi Minh City—and have almost nothing that recalled that time. And relief, relief that Vietnamese people had moved on, that they weren't murderous or even angry at Americans for what had happened.

In Moscow, at the heart of this stubborn country, my dad could not get over what he was seeing.

"Red Square," he said, not knowing what else to say, stopped on the cobbles, leaning over and placing his hands on his knees, standing inside the heart of enemy territory.

And the next day, when I was at least feeling human, we all took the train to Kaliningrad to meet the Maslovs, the family who'd taken care of me during my first months.

Along the way, a leak developed in the traincar, and began to drip directly onto my head, as if the whole universe had wanted me to stay in bed. Still, at the station, when we tumbled out of the car, Valera Maslov and his friend were there to greet us, and ushered us into their

cars, to drive back to their three-room apartment. In the warm interior, behind Svetlana Maslov and her son Alyosha, Svetlana's father Nikolai stood, dignified and quiet. His beard was white and well-groomed, and he was gentle and frail with the years. The Maslovs had been so good to me, treating me like family, and now my two families greeted each other, each trying on the other's native tongue, before sitting at the table in what was Valera and Svetlana's bedroom, and also their living room, and now also their dining room. The feast before us was the usual and astonishing array of Russian classics—shredded beet vinaigrette, the Olivier potato salad, and, of course, caviar—astonishing because I knew how hard it was not only to prepare, but to find and buy.

"Delicious," my mother said.

"Delicious," I said in Russian.

"Thank you," my mother said.

"Thank you," I said in Russian. And we were off. Despite my aching brain, my Russian tongue did not fail me. I translated everything, and it was a wonder to everyone including myself—that after four months, I'd gone from a deaf-mute child to a bilingual adult, my feverish tongue a bridge between my parents' English shore and the Maslovs' Russian one.

When all the courses were done—the salads, the soup, the meat, and the dessert, and we'd all gone quiet with contentment, Nikolai stood up from the table.

He pulled something colorful and shiny from his pocket, and held them up.

"These are from the war, the Great Patriotic War," Nikolai said.

They were ribboned medals—golden-coined commemorative pieces that Nikolai had earned for his service to the Motherland.

The last war when Americans and Russians fought on the same side, to defeat fascism, their armies meeting in Germany, Hitler dead from a self-inflicted wound, in his fuhrerbunker.

Nikolai put his hand out to my father, who'd stood up when his fellow soldier had stood.

"There should be peace and friendship," he said, "between the people of great nations."

My father hesitated, not believing what he was seeing.

"Thank you," he said, putting his right hand over Nikolai's hand as he opened his left hand to receive the gift.

On New Year's Eve, Olya told me that she would be celebrating with some friends at their place, to give my family some space. The six of us including Olya had been packed into two rooms, sleeping on every available couch, and I thanked her again for opening her small apartment to my people.

"It's nothing," she said, and bid us farewell as we tromped back out into the tundra.

It was so quiet on the streets, and even in the Metro. No one spoke.

"Did you ever notice," my mom whispered, leaning in, "how quiet people are here? No chatter, no noise at all."

I shook my head. I had grown accustomed to their stoic silence.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Almost like prayer."

After a day exploring the city again—in which my little brother showed a remarkable code-breaking ability, navigating the Metro's daunting Cyrillic alphabet with my father to get to the Arbat to seal some deals for fur hats—we returned together to the apartment that evening tired, cold, and hungry. My mom went into the kitchen to put some tea on.

"Everyone, come in!" she called, almost immediately. "You won't believe it."

Two candles flickered on the table, casting a calming glow over the table, where a whole meal was laid out for us—borscht and pickled salad, cheese and bread. The tea water was still hot. Olya was nowhere to be found.

"That's so typical of her," I said. "Some kind of magic."

The Pizza Hut order was Russia, but this was also Russia, a Russia that kept surprising us, unfolding unanticipated layers alternating between bitter and sweet. Just when I thought I couldn't endure it any longer, its utter nonsensicality, its newspaper toilet wipes and unadjustable thermostats and batshit pizza delivery negotiations, Russia returned in the form of a candlelit feast laid out by a big-hearted woman

who'd lost nearly everything when the Soviet Union collapsed, not only her plum life but also her husband and wayward son.

"Such kindness," my mother said, scooping the ladle into the borscht to fill everyone's bowl with the beet-red warmth.

A week later, they gathered up all their Arbat finds—*shapki* and *matryoshki* and other tourist baubles, and, of course, the medals from the war—and gave their suitcases to the driver, before bundling into the cab that would take them to the airport. My sister started crying.

"I don't want to leave you here," she said. She stared at my parents with conviction. "We shouldn't leave him here."

My mother said, "are you okay? Let's just take you home." Concern lined her forehead, as she leaned in to hug me again, holding tight. I could feel her invitation tugging me from the inside.

"I'll be fine," I said, lying. I didn't know how I'd be. I was grateful and flushed from their visit, their anarchic love heating up my apartment, and I didn't want them to go.

My father stood for a moment, and bear-hugged me.

"Honey," he said, "glad you're feeling better."

It took everything I had not to hop in the cab and out of this miserable existence. I waved and watched them disappear.

At customs, the security people opened their suitcase, searching for contraband. Someone lifted up the medals, squinting at them suspiciously.

"What's the problem?" my father said.

Two security guards conferred for a few minutes.

"This is forbidden," one of them said to my father.

"But this was a gift," he protested.

He tried to pull them back, but to no avail, as the evidence of Nikolai, and that meeting of our peoples, walked away and disappeared behind a security door.

A quarter century has passed. Like some crazy country-sized cicada, Russia emerged from its purported grave and back into our American lives, whirring its maddening music. Pundits talk of a Cold

War 2.0, and you can't go more than a day without another story of Russian meddling in American politics; perhaps after some decades of American meddling in Russia, the boomerang was bound to return.

Still, all this talk of Russia seems to have missed Russia itself. When I think of Russia, I remember Olya's nervous generosity. Dima's passionate intensity for poetry and the future of his country. I remember how, when I couldn't find a way to write about Russia, I found solace in translation, trying to recreate the music of a Russian poem into English, to find the right words to house all that irrepressible sound. Hundreds of poems later, I gingerly began writing my own poems again, like a stroke victim relearning to walk and talk. I haven't stopped since.

I remember, too, the Pizza Hut order, yes, and the madness of that civilization. But I keenly remember Nikolai, a man I could never know but whose gesture reached through my clouded memory and continued to shine.

Talking to my parents again, trying to get the facts exactly right, I asked my mother about the incident at customs. She remembered it differently than my father.

"Perhaps," my mother said, "they didn't actually take all of the medals."

"Where would they be?" I said.

"One may be at the bottom of my jewelry drawer," she said. "I think I may have put a couple in my shoes. I'll see if I can find them."

We have yet to find it, that peace offering in the long cold war.

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