

Cow Tongue

Finally finished with dressing up to go out into the elements, which, for my younger self, always managed to evolve into an epic struggle of me verses the zippers, I picked up my feet one after another and trudged through the heavy snowfall. I carried my favorite game, Monopoly, under my arm and tried to run all the way up the block to the warmth of my friend Misha's house, fearful of what the wet snow would do to my prized item. Panting, I arrived and quickly jammed the doorbell a couple of times.

"Okay, come in, okay," my friend Misha's babushka (grandmother) greeted at the door, her words on the fringe of recognizable English.

I squeaked my response while nodding and smiling at her. I plopped my winter clothes on the floor and proceeded to the dining room, where I knew I could find Misha.

He sat on a piano bench, staring at the sheet music in front of him, his fingers motionless. Misha spent hours a day at that piano, often against his will. His mother and babushka thought it important that he play, and drilled him all the time. Learning piano presents challenges to young children – focus, commitment, and even hand size— but these didn't faze his mother. She taught him aggressively, and the music flowing out the room turned quickly from simple Russian lullabies to Bach melodies. He often practiced while I lay on his bed, across the house, and wished I could be in his place, making the piano sing.

The door to the dining room was right at the corner of two walls, and the piano rested slightly in the way. Tall, boxy, and made of dark, thick wood, it demanded attention and respect. I felt diminutive as I appeared in the doorway. Misha's eyes lit up as they went from my grin to the game in my hand. I placed my Monopoly board on the table, and we got to work. Monopoly had become a daily event, and we competed furiously. Buying, selling, and rolling the dice— heaven to us both. Somehow, we always

managed to keep our focus, sometimes playing games close to four hours in length. We never did actually finish games, however, because when either of us appeared to be a clear winner, the other would wipe the board clean, swipe the money plies onto the floor and chant, “You didn’t win ‘cause we didn’t finish. You didn’t win ‘cause we didn’t finish.” When I came back home, my parents would chuckle at the little American boy who played Monopoly with the little Russian boy in the house of a man who spent ten years in the Soviet Army.

Babushka never understood our passion for that game of money and property. Babushka loved painting, and she set out to engrain this same love in Misha. If she caught him playing on the computer or if she saw him reading a book, she would drag him into the dining room. They had a beautiful oak table, which, uncovered, was art itself. However, I rarely saw the elegant grain of the wood. Workbench and showroom, this table always displayed paintings in every stage of completion. The vibrant colors of Misha’s and Babushka’s flowers on canvass filled the room. Babushka prized color more than anything else, and kept an enormous variety of paints in the house. A spectacular tulip needed a spectacular amber, a spectacular chartreuse, and a spectacular scarlet. The table was a garden, and I strolled through, taking in the beauty. Even after babushka ceased to hum and smile while stroking her brush across canvas, her presence remained on the walls, and anyone who had ever visited while she painted instantly remembered her upon walking in the room.

Unlike Babushka, Misha’s dad almost never smiled. Six foot seven and close to three hundred pounds, Yuri already was an imposing man, and his sullen expression intensified my fear of him as a young child. If he talked to me in his deep, broken English, or even if he simply entered the room, I shook in fear. That is, until I played the card game Durak for the first time. The end of the table cleared, we huddled together and played this simple Russian game. I stumbled through hand after hand, and my fingers trembled, I feared Yuri’s impatience so much. But he taught me, patiently, and by the end of the

night, he and I laughed and laughed. At first I felt embarrassed, seeing him laugh, experiencing the soft side of this hard man. I then, however, felt privileged, knowing that only a few people besides the others at the table had been allowed to peek around the wall of solemnity.

If the sound of laughter and the elegance of painting bring that room back to me, then surely also do the sweet aromas of the plethora of gourmet dishes served to me there. The culinary experience of their dining room cannot be duplicated. Misha's mother's fresh ideas combined with fresh vegetables always made my taste buds happy. Her borsch, a simple beet soup and Russian staple, brought me running to the table. Never could it be served alone, however. She always made multiple side dishes, and complex salads, always with plenty of mushrooms. I ate cow tongue regularly, eventually tolerating the way the cow's taste buds would rub against mine.

We would stay at the dinner table for hours, somewhat to savor the flavor, but also because of how the dinner discourse pulled us in and kept us going. I learned about all sorts of things: the inner workings of a device being designed by Yuri to improve balance in stroke victims, how to use one's feet most effectively swimming the freestyle. But the conversations reminiscing about life in the collapsing USSR have stuck with me the longest. There were no jobs, no safe places. Everybody stood in food lines, everyday. His parents escaped due only to their intelligence, their value as scientists. Those daily struggles contrasted starkly to their comfortable lives in America. Maybe the memory of food lines graced the table in the form of Misha's mother's gourmet meals.

The Danilov family provided me with much of what my typical American upbringing did not. Music bounced off the walls of their dining room and flowed down the halls and throughout the house at all hours of the day. Often, those in the house would simply sit, listen, and enjoy. In my household, music serves as a supplement to another activity, if that. The art on our walls hangs devoid of personal

meaning; it simply fills space on the white wall behind it. It adds no unique flavor, no inspiration. And our tuna helper is a far cry from the luscious entrees of Misha's mother.

A couple of years ago, I helped the Danilovs move. Time for a bigger house in the suburbs. When I arrived, only the piano and table remained. Both were out of place, shoved into a corner of the room. I walked into the dining room like I would the room of a relative on their deathbed. The table and the piano were dying, reduced to two bulky, heavy pieces of wood. The sheet music packed, it no longer sat where it had for so long, on top of the piano. My voice sounded lost; the walls and ceiling, in protest of the move, seemed to distort my words. Babushka no longer hummed from the walls; her paintings too were packed. Bright spots now took her place, spreading gloom by pointing out exactly every place her colors had danced. The chairs rested in the moving van already, leaving no place to slow down for a last attempt to feel the magic of the room again.

Yuri presided over the move with not even a hint of a smile on his face. We disassembled the table first, and transported it piece by piece to the van. This task didn't take more than ten minutes. It seemed as if the table knew that its time had come by the way it came apart without a glitch. The piano proved a much larger challenge. Unlike the table, it refused to go easily. It took twelve men two hours and one broken finger to simply get it through the back door. The piano squeaked and moaned and groaned, determined to share its last music, however dreadful, with the house. And as I am sure the walls of the room mourned their loss that day, I too mourned my loss. I knew that never again would I see Yuri laugh.