

Looking for the Century

The grandmother bewildered many oncologists, as she began smoking long before they were all born, that is to say year 1953. Back then she was of an age young enough to be convinced that Stalin is a god and will watch over all the Komsomol children of Moscow for eternity. That did not turn out as planned, and, after she had marched through the Red Square at the public funeral, she borrowed a cigarette from another adolescent comrade and had her rite of passage. When Khrushchev was in power, she graduated and got married. When Brezhnev was in, she moved to a new apartment.

She was the first tenant in the building, for a month sharing nine floors with only a concierge downstairs. The house filled up, and life paced up, obliging the glorious new Soviet family to trouble themselves about both playgrounds, diapers and the eventual collapse of the regime. Years later, in that same apartment, mom left my cradle on the balcony, and I would look out and see how the sight of the eternal Russian sky was blocked by our deteriorating 50-year-old ceiling. The sentinel of the early 2000's, a toddler unaware of what came before her time.

It was the hottest summer to date – 30 minutes until trains would have started running, one day until the flight, one year until the 31st of August of 2020. Through thick foliage, early morning sun flooded inside the apartment, submerging its interiors in liquid green light. Dust was thick in the air, bedsheets still on, kitchen uncleaned. The back room was a long way from the one I slept in, and I would not have heard it if the shelves had finally collapsed. The other two were residing in the back room: that morning, they both suddenly woke up from their nocturnal delirium facing the crisp room, furniture framed by illuminated dust like gold thread. It was the right time to be troubled by the shelves, so they began spilling its contents on the floor. Fixated by newborn clouds of dust from each fallen object, they finally reached the belletristic top shelf, and must have flipped through hundreds of pages out of boredom before reaching that one picture.

Never did it cross my mind to steal anything, but I knew that the picture was to be mine. I woke up, swirled into the kitchen, sat in silence for a moment and finally felt obligated to announce my presence to the two in the back room. They showed me the book – a blank white page, then the painter's name, year, medium, size, name of the gallery. And there it was, the painting we all knew we'd seen before because of candy wrappings and postcards and the excessive golden frame its reproduction had being hung in Brezhnev's office. In fact, sometime in the past, our apartment must have had its own reproduction somewhere in its bottomless storage cabinets. Somehow, it suddenly made sense to me that nobody would miss it. Nobody would notice if it just left the gallery. Few have seen the original, being so used to shiny wrappings and awkwardly framed copies instead. That picture was mine, it has been mine all along. There was no point in explaining the why and the how to the two, so I simply stated the fact that today we will go and cut it out of its frame as one of us distracts the museum attendant. We would then call a taxi, board our flight and leave everything behind in peace.

You hear the voice of your childhood, long stairwells, puddles, garages, thunder, stolen apples and strawberries, the feeling of free flight? You see the lightning and crawl under a blanket because the thunder will not reach you there. You remember your colorful socks and the candy you are not allowed to have, sand playgrounds, metro trains that are so extremely loud they seem like a horror show. Yet some memories will never be retrieved: your first cradle, first walk, what the news presenter talked about as your diapers were changed for the first time. Thousands of years of history documented each minute by generations you will never

get to know. All in one place, drifting through time from ancient pagan dances to the Stalinist Seven. As I myself drifted farther away, I only got a glimpse of it on blank page of a book. It does not have a giddy and gracious nature, faraway mystical castles, mysterious arches and alleys, vineyards and silver linings of tender mountains. It is colossal and deserted, as if no man has ever dared to adapt to it. Like small dots cities are sprawling on the map, intimidated and uninviting. Sea to sea, endless pines and steppes. I would rather be unhappy there than happy anywhere else on the globe. No painting can fully seize the Russian monumentality, yet mine tried.

It went ahead to be a neurotic morning as it always is before a long flight. We did not have much time left in the apartment; in fact, we did not have any time at all. During the last three months spent here, none of us have thought of dusting out or thoroughly cleaning the place, so we all silently philosophized our final cleanup as the finale of it all. They did not question my decision at all, perhaps because we all anticipated that questioning would come after we've landed back and admitted to never having to see each other again. At an afternoon symposium, it was decided to throw out everything that smelled or had never been used, to gift out what has not been significant to any of us, to pack all our belongings into suitcases as fast as possible, to clean the fridge, and finally have a moment to ourselves. Doze crawled in, but I was the only one who managed to resist.

I thought of how history passes from September to June and halts for the entirety of my sojourn in the apartment. Nothing in here ages: it stays a mere reflection of what it had been before. If you look closely, you can see how many cups have shattered against the kitchen floor, how many hundreds of times the carpet has been cleaned, how many coats the closet has seen. However, it all stays in its limbo, waiting to become a part of the history or part of the garbage outside. It all drifts back, while the pilot tells me to fasten my seatbelt. It drifts back, and there are no painters to frame it with gold, only museums to steal it from. Centuries of history, a half-hour for the heist.

As evening approached, the first lamp to be turned on was in the kitchen. Looking out, I could only recognize the thick maple foliage pressing against the window. As promised to all the tenants of the second floor, it was soon to be thinned out, leaving our coy kitchen exposed to the roaring city outside. In a few minutes, I will wake up the two in the back room. Later in the evening, I will roll the painting and won't part with it ever again. Tomorrow, I will fall asleep in a germ-free, air-conditioned, foreign paradise and hate the bland and indifferent walls around me. In a week, I will have an insight and realize that I might be searched by Moscow police in suspicion of stealing an invaluable work of art. In a year, I will be able to see my tram stop through the thinned-out foliage as I prepare to leave the apartment again.