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## Wire Sculpture

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# T-Shirt

Olga Y. King

LIVING IN A COUNTRY THAT AMERICANS USED TO CALL "COMMUNISTIC" **WAS AN EASY THING FOR A TWELVE-YEAR-OLD, ESPECIALLY IF YOU WERE FROM MOSCOW LIKE ME.** One had just a few duties to carry on: learn how to march and salute at festivities, study your young pioneer's vow, and know your enemies. The last one was very important. Our official enemy was the "decadent, capitalistic West," with its epicenter in the USA. I was lucky to grow up in the 80s - in the time my parents' generation thankfully called "The Thaw." To the Soviet mind, that meant "relax!" It was probably that sense of a new relaxation that made it possible for a t-shirt with the American flag and the word 'Texas' on it into my suitcase one summer when I was leaving Moscow to visit my grandparents in Kirgizstan.

My grandparents had lived in Kirgizstan since my grandfather was transferred there for army service in the '50s. My grandfather, born and raised in the Soviet Empire, was a dedicated and unyielding communist. He fled from hunger in the Ukraine under Stalin, only to fight for him in the Second World War and grieve for him when he finally died. The communist ideology had always been the fuel of his generation. Even in the time of "The Thaw," grandpa would sing along with grandma in the car to all those lofty patriotic songs, while I was dying of shame from them in the backseat. Grandpa's interest in politics made him well-informed about all bad news from the 'Center of Evil.' The treatment of blacks in the U.S., the horrors of the Vietnam War, obscene new dances with silly names like 'rock-n-roll,' free talk about the Western form of love called 'sex,' or assassinations among corrupt Western politicians all confirmed his belief that the Soviet Union really was the best place to be. Since I was a girl, talking with me about the news on TV was not appropriate. So, every time grandpa was watching TV, I was watching his face and reactions to the news to learn more about the world outside and him. Grandpa's knowledge and competence earned him a strong reputation in our family. His word was law, and his decisions were unquestionable.

I remember one of his decisions. That summer I was spending my school vacation at their home in Kirgizstan like I had done since I was a baby. By that summer, "The Thaw" unofficially had taken effect for everyone who was wistfully awaiting it. My grandpa was not one of them. That summer evening, he was sitting at the table in our backyard waiting for his dinner and reading a newspaper. Tired from work, he stretched himself, smiled pleasurably and took a long breath trying to catch all those flavors coming from the kitchen. Finally, grandma set the table and called me from the street for dinner. I galloped in, excited from the daily adventures and unable to calm down. I just started swallowing everything from my plate when the strangely stern voice of my grandpa made me freeze for a second.

"What's that you're wearing there?"

"My t-shirt," I looked down and introduced my favorite piece of clothing.

"Where did you get it?" said the same slow, deep voice.

"My parents," decided to use the shortest possible form of answer since my mouth was pretty busy with potatoes.

"Hmm..."

"What's wrong with that shirt?" my grandma intervened.

"What's wrong?!" We immediately stopped eating. "Don't you see the American flag on it? And... what's that? It even says 'Texas'! See? Right there!"

"Oh! Mmm ... OK," said grandma, peaceably considering the discussion to be over. I, for my part, saw the t-shirt already folded in my suitcase awaiting its flight back to Moscow in a couple of months.

"Take it off! I'm going to burn it in the oven," grandpa stated. "No, wait! After dinner! And I'm going to call your parents this weekend. I just can't believe it! The American flag and then Texas!" he returned to his dinner. Now, the discussion was over.

I was speechless. I loved that t-shirt. It fulfilled all most important requirements of coolness out there, in my world, where "The Thaw" had just begun. First, it had more than two colors. Second, it didn't deform or lose those colors after you washed it. And third, it had those magnificent non-Cyrillic letters on it: the letters not everyone could read. Those letters were crucial. Not only did they represent the forbidden world of capitalism with its supposed decomposing prosperity, social inequity, and high unemployment; they also demonstrated how close the owner of the clothes with such letters was to the forbidden world. Being close to that world was the unwritten law of coolness. After all, the white stars and red stripes on it, the symbol of viciousness, made the final touch and provided one with an aura of political disobedience. Now, I was supposed to say goodbye to that precious world.

Soon after dinner, though, grandpa's mood changed. The meal, the rest, the warm shower and some good news on TV did their magical work on him and he decided to reverse his judgment. Instead of burning the t-shirt, he decided to throw it under the bench in our sauna and use it as his foot towel. This idea of a daily symbolic humiliation of our enemy appeared to him as a much better way to express his patriotism. I didn't care about patriotism and suffered every time I went to the sauna and saw the shirt hanging lonely and sadly under the bench. Then, I wished he had burned it. However, I didn't resent my grandpa's ruling on the t-shirt issue. After all, I felt as if we were from different planets and my twelve-year-old vocabulary wasn't good enough to explain that new complexity to him.

Sixteen years later, I introduced my American fiancé and his dad to my family in Moscow. When I told this story at our new family dinner, grandpa laughed with us and shook his head as he couldn't believe it. "Good Lord, how life can change..." he said.

Sixteen months ago, my life brought me to Texas. Here, I bought a new t-shirt for my grandpa with the word "Texas" on it and sent it to him. He, being used to the stiffness of military clothes, had been trying to get used to this strange piece of clothing with incomplete sleeves and without buttons for about one year. Then, his life changed for the last time. In his memories he used to criticize the new world of Russian democracy, but, thanks to some of my stories from here, he also learned that one can have a pretty nice life in the world of predatory capitalism. My t-shirt reminded him of all those changes that one life can make.



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