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Siberian Sunburn

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Photograph by Olga Matveeva

Siberian Sunburn

We leave the train tracks by meters. We leave my last pair of walked-down sandals in a platform trash can. We leave a three-legged dog running after the train, clone armies of high rises, Vladivostok. We leave villages preserved in Soviet formaldehyde, where people pin rinsed plastic bags on clotheslines to dry.

We leave pines, birches, and larches in the reverse order we saw them on our way in; a village called Coal we passed two days ago. There are still 9,260 kilometers to rewind before Moscow. In our sleeper car: six square meters; two upper cots, empty; two lower cots, filled by Olga and me.

We leave a village called Labor as I write “yes” on a paper napkin. We leave Salt-Dirt when I cross out the “yes” and write “no,” just to see how it looks. Thick black electrical wires pass our windows. We leave skinny sheep. Seals that I now know taste like tuna-fed cows. Teenagers carrying inflated inner tubes into the sea. Housewives using the last of the August sun to dry apple slices on the tin roofs of their garages. Men drinking moonshine in front of lopsided “Palaces of Culture” that were built for their political and social enlightenment. We leave the Sea of Japan and the Glass Beach, where four days ago I got sunburned behind my ear.

When Olga runs off to photograph a seagull gutting an old corncob, her five cameras dangling across her chest, I sit on an empty petrol tin, try to keep my breakfast inside me, and reread Andrei’s telegram:

WILL PICK YOU UP AT TRAIN STATION IN MOSKOW
STOP WE WILL GET OUR SHIT TOGETHER COMMA KEEP
IT TOGETHER AND MAINTAIN IT NEATLY IN GOOD
WORKING ORDER STOP SAY YES STOP

I haven’t. I haven’t said no, either. I haven’t told him anything about it. “Vera!” Olga shouts, and when I look up, I am blinded by her flash.

“I told you a million times!” I say for the millionth time since we began working together. To me, being photographed is the same as getting shot. With a gun, straight in your face. That’s why I always look so startled in photos.

Olga says it's not just the photos. That's the way I look.

We start walking along the shore to the Glass Beach—an ocean cove the size of an ice-hockey rink, covered in water-polished glass: bottle-green tiny pebbles, see-through ones, blue, even pink. The ocean chewed up broken bottles from the dumpster and then spat them back out, licked smooth.

The sea glass is crunching under our feet. Olga's steps are lighter than mine, even though my legs carry 29 years of life, and hers 43. The sun sets the red straw of her hair on fire. Olga is sometimes extremely pretty and sometimes extremely ugly. Most of the time she looks like a tripod for her camera, a lens always hiding her face. The Glass Beach is the last chapter of our travel guide *Siberian Beaches 1991* for the State Committee of Foreign Tourism—the grand finale of retouching lakes and rivers into travel-brochure azure (Olga) and chapters about “wide coastlines, warm water, and a budding hotel industry” (me). Both of us know it's putting lip gloss on a perishing dinosaur.

The cove is windless and hot. When I take off my long sweater, I catch Olga glancing at the fly of my jeans, which I haven't been able to close for a week and a half.

“What will you do?” she asks, eyes on my belly.

I watch a mosquito get full on my blood like a cranberry. Then I push a thumb against my vein, making it swallow blood till it bursts, like Olga taught me to.

We leave rivers wide as soccer fields and mushrooms the size of baby heads. We leave mills. We leave meadows. (And isn't it unfair that people like Olga could leave everything behind, and I couldn't even leave behind one man, a piece of him following me across the country?) We leave pines, birches, and larches covered in snow two-thirds of the year; there are six days of pines, birches, and larches between Vladivostok and Moscow.

We leave the beach on the Amur River, where I got sunburned between my toes; little mining settlements where people weave doormats from nylon tights; fields of burdock that I now know make good toilet paper; tadum-tadum, yesno-yesno, yesno-yesno, and every strum of the train wheels pulls me closer to Andrei. Pigeons poop on Lenin's bronze bald head. Children blow up plastic bottles with dry ice. A hairy man pees against a graffitied fence: “Communism? Capitalism? Alcoholism!”; “V.L.♥J.U.”; “USSR = you pretend to work + the state pretends to pay you”; “Dick!”

We leave the day, we leave the night, sometimes without exchanging a dozen words. The world outside the train gets left behind piece by piece. Electrical wires are the only ones that don't leave us, following us everywhere, the only umbilical to reality. We leave bloodless villages, where inhabitants emigrated either to bigger cities or to heaven: Chilly; Installation; Garlic, where the old man grows exotic fruit.

The old man is eating a peeled onion like an apple when he opens the door. He is a simple guy, he says. His Siberian mangos and Siberian papayas he saves for the guests. He is one of Garlic's last three inhabitants. The other two are his dogs.

Once a month the postman brings his mail, his medicines, and his pension on a tractor. He heats his house with chairs, window frames, and boards, cannibalizing the abandoned homes in the village.

When we enter, he shakes my hand for a long time. Olga gives him a look that keeps him from taking hers. She's not a toucher. Her body never seems to collide with anyone in this dimension, not even by accident.

"Does it ever get lonely?" I ask him.

He gives a big smile, as if bragging about a remarkable local rock formation: "Oh! And how!"

The old man shows us the fruit he grows in an old bathtub surrounded by artificial lamps: Siberian watermelon tastes like grass, the sickly Siberian bananas like raw potatoes. Siberian kiwis remind me of Andrei's balls: hairy, delicate creatures one wanted at the same time to protect and squeeze.

I am not homesick. Being homesick would prove that you have a home.

Andrei and I only had a bed, his bed. There were no more words. There was inertia. There was habit. There still was sex. At night, we clung to each other as if we'd fallen in the water. But when the sleeping-mist cleared, we were as surprised as if we woke up with an actual life preserver in our arms.

"You should try one," says the old man, plucking a kiwi. They taste like sweet cabbage.

We leave sunflower fields with blossoms the size of a round Armenian lavash bread. We leave cities vast and funereal. We leave honky-tonk bars where men are drinking vodka-hair: a double shot of vodka, then a sniff of your neighbor's hair to kill the aftertaste. Three or four times a day, women with swollen ankles knock on the door of our sleeper

car, dried squid and baked pinecones peeping out of their bags along with newspaper headlines: “After Lithuania—More Soviet Countries Demand Independence” and also something about a serial killer and a wheat harvest.

We leave Ulan-Ude, where a month ago I woke up and thought I was blind, because a swollen bug bite pinned my eyelids shut. We leave Freedom and Frying Pan. Canada and Smutty. We leave dogs the size of calves and sticky-looking children baking sand cakes, like my daughter will, if it will be a daughter, if it will be at all. Now there are 4,630 kilometers to Moscow. Old men on the beach smoke cigarettes rolled from the torn pages of books. We leave Baikal Lake, the Holy Sea, biggest puddle on Earth.

It has been pouring for days and Baikal is the color of sharks. Olga is swearing. “Convince internationals they could get their annual dose of sunburn in the Soviet Union too,” the managing editor said at the last meeting. With this rain, no photo editing would help. Olga brought five cameras with her, each for one of her photo projects (*Siberian Beaches/toilet ladies/fancy trash/pelmeni/diary/me*). But none of them are waterproof.

On the third day, Olga says: “I saw a poster advertising seal shows.”

I say: “I am a member of Greenpeace.”

The only museum is closed. There is no television and I’ve run out of books. The seals are swimming apathetic circles in a tiled pond the size of two baby pools. The show master introduces them as Winnie Pooh and Scheherazade.

The olives of their eyes look straight at us, wet and wise. “Smile!” the show master says, and the seals bare their teeth.

“Count!” the show master says, and they make the right quantity of screeching sounds, coming from somewhere deep, deep down.

“Dance!” the show master says, and they swirl in the water like two pieces of poop in a flushing lav bowl.

There is a thin red thread between Scheherazade’s fins. She is menstruating.

“I don’t have mine anymore,” Olga says. She sips kefir without stopping to take pictures. For two months she has been living on cigarettes and kefir, straight out of the carton torn with her teeth. “It’s been a year. They said they stop earlier in childless women. As if nature knew.”

“She’s hurt!” a kid shouts, and more children chime in. “Hurt!”

The show master pretends nothing happened.

“And now Scheherazade, belly dance!” he says, and she moves her body to the left and right. “Winnie Pooh, bring her flowers!”

“Blood! Blood! Blood!”

“They are on a date now!” the show master barks into his microphone. He puts on slow music and feeds the seals chunks of tuna. “Look, they are having a romantic dinner! They are in love! They are waltzing!”

The seals are swimming back and forth in the water, the perfect caricature of a relationship, two bodies trying to move in sync, fins too short to really touch each other, one of them bleeding from her genitals. I wonder if life is easier for Olga: all windows of opportunity closed, no more pull from other bodies.

“And they lived happily ever after!” the show master says.

We leave log houses with shutters the color of Easter eggs. We leave Ghosts. Wires run next to each other, wires come together, wires drift apart. We leave hundreds of horses, thousands of clouds. Babushkas crouch in potato beds, collecting Colorado beetles in three-liter glasses. Men play cards, squatting their haunches in that way village men do. Meaty matrons beat dust from their carpets. Ural Mountains. We leave Hope.

We are lying belly-down on a sun-warmed rock, me with binoculars, Olga with her strongest lens. Only a dozen feet away, a saker falcon is sitting on her eggs in a mountain crevice. Olga says it’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get this close. For four hours, we have only moved to slap away the mosquitoes, afraid to frighten the falcon or miss the moment the male returns with the food.

“Close your eyes,” she says.

“Why?”

“I need to pee.”

“But what if I miss the falcon?”

“Close your eyes.”

I peed earlier, covered by the skirt of my dress. Olga is wearing dungarees without a shirt or a bra underneath—her almost-flat breasts don’t need one. I imagine her hovering near naked over the ground, pants around her ankles. I shut my eyes just enough to be able to peek. But in between lashes I can see Olga looking me directly in the face so that I have to squeeze my lids shut. Only then do I hear the dungaree clasp open and then the sound of water.

In the two months we’ve worked together, two months of shared sleeper cars, shared rooms, shared bathrooms, I haven’t seen her naked.

I never bothered to leave the room when changing, and if we came across a lake when I didn't have a bathing suit with me, I jumped in naked. Olga always looked away, although once, when I was getting out of the water, I caught her taking my picture. She never swam and always went into the stinking train bathrooms to change, where toilet water often stood ankle deep on the floor.

Only when I hear the dungarees click shut do I open my eyes.

We leave train station bathrooms, where we used to wash our socks and tie them to our backpacks to dry. We leave pines, birches, and larches, pines, birches, and larches, pinesbirchesandlarches, one blurred splash of color. We are asleep longer than we are awake. With every day it is harder to care about the world outside the train. When we buy oily pirozhki wrapped in torn newspaper ("General Committee on the State Emergency Takes Over"), we are more interested in the content of the buns than in the content of the article. It's cabbage.

Three times.

First time, when we shook hands. Second time, when she used my shoulder to prop up her camera.

Third time in the Novosibirsk-to-Omsk train.

She never touched me otherwise.

Novosibirsk is hot and we are sweating Rorschach patterns into the backs of our dresses. At breakfast I hope Olga won't ask me to come with her. Then when she doesn't, I feel lonely and I end up joining her anyway. We wade between sand-breaded bodies, and then I spread out my towel and open my notepad. But work on *Siberian Beaches* goes slow: "Everybody knows Siberian temperatures can drop below minus 30, but who knew they could also climb above 30 plus?"

I didn't. I didn't bring proper clothes or sunscreen. I never tan anyway. I pink. Then I freckle. Not those sexy freckles; the ones that spring up like facial hair on the upper lip. So best case, I yellow.

I don't even especially like summers. I've always felt the pressure of not using them to the fullest, not collecting enough warmth, vitamins, and beautiful memories to last the winter. The here and now never feels as big as it should. Summers are sandy, sweaty, and never have a toilet when I need one.

By noon, I am bored. By one o'clock, I feel a twang in my belly I try to ignore. But still, even after six weeks of false alarms, and a pregnancy test I took eight days ago, I can't fight hope. I spread the towel on my

lap, turn around to see if anyone is looking, and slide a finger under the waistband of my bikini, in between my legs.

No blood.

At two, I feel drowsy, but the car is rented in Olga's name. At three, I crawl under a shadow, but it doesn't help. Olga is shooting every moving thing, her camera clicking with Kalashnikov speed.

At five, I become mentally incoherent for stretches of time that are long and ugly.

At eight, Olga still hasn't finished.

At ten, when the beach is about to close, she talks one of the guards into letting her photograph after dark.

I say, "I'm tired."

I say, "I need food."

When she offers me a sip of her kefir, I can't hold it any longer: "Life isn't a support system for art! It's the other way around!"

Home, after midnight, I feel boiled. My skin hurts when a fan breeze touches it, even in the places covered by my bikini. By 2 a.m., I have a fever. Olga gives me vodka with horseradish, but the alcohol doesn't produce calm; it produces frenzy in slow motion.

"Take your clothes off," Olga says. "Lie on your back."

I pull my dress over my head and close my eyes. For maybe a second there's something sour and cold on my skin. She rubs it in with swift fingers, circling around my nipples. Her face is so close to my skin that the ends of her hair dip in the kefir.

It's the third time she's touched me, the last time.

"Is there someone waiting for you in Moscow?" I ask.

"Another job," Olga says. "Mongolia. Turn over."

When she leaves, I look down at my breasts. They are the color of raw turkey steak; my nipples are swollen, hard. Some milk dried to them, as if breastfeeding has started already. My body feels dense and heavy.

I sleep dreamlessly, like a cockroach.

We leave the Ural Mountains, Asia, a village called Mars. We leave little paths overgrown with plantago leaves. Olga taught me to use them as Band-Aids. We leave huge industrial chimneys that look like cloud factories, slag mountains; suburban three-story dachas belonging to party officials, keep calm, there is no obligation to be happy, everything won't be fine, but it will be normal. Ten kilometers to Moscow.

In the train corridor, a sprightly pensioner turns the knob on his portable radio: "Yesterday, at 11:45 p.m., several tanks closed on the White House at Krasnopresnenskaya embankment. Despite a ban on

demonstrations, hundreds...” We leave behind the welcome sign to Moscow and Olga turns to me. “You could come with me, if you want. To Mongolia.”

We leave a burnt forest, the stems sticking out from the ground like a pincushion. We leave the last kilometers of wires that have chased us since Vladivostok. Black cables, running parallel, intersecting, intersecting again, tense, relaxed, apathetic, parting, coming back together, look there is a third now, not marrying, marrying in the end, Sunday sex, further, older, further, slower, slower, slower.