



White nights, forty degrees celsius

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White nights, forty degrees celsius

[Some brief remarks as read by a kind proxy in Nice, June 1995]

Dmitri Nabokov

A brand-new impression, no matter how vivid, cannot efface the palimpsest of a long-cherished image. The older remembrance, in my instance, is vicarious — a refraction made indelible by my father's writings and my mother's narratives. One thinks, one wonders: how will Russia really be, and there are unphotographable things one simply cannot visualize. Yet, when I reached Rozhdestveno and the Orodezh River on a sweltering summer day, I somehow recognized the verdant, aromatic surroundings, and I imagined for an instant that the hiss of bicycle tires approaching on the still-unpaved lane was that of my father's Enfield.

When asked how I felt about the tragedy — the interviewer's word — of the Rozhdenstveno fire, I replied that, while there had been worse tragedies, what impressed me more than the destruction was that important archival materials had been courageously rescued and that reconstruction had already begun in keeping with the unearthed original plans.

The charming family church was there, and the funeral chapel containing my forbears that had remained sealed and unscathed by history's calamities. And the young village priest, ready to put me through some liturgical paces, which I politely declined in favor of my video camera. Even an outdoor feast — evoking ancient family photographs — had been arranged in the grassy quadrangle of the museum at the old relay station made famous by Pushkin's story, with costumed musicians and a superb, thoroughly spoiled long-haired cat named Chernish.

They were so relieved, said the enthusiastic local mayor, that Serena and I had turned out to be *takie milie lyudi* — “such nice people.” It did feel like a return to a place where I had never been and to an eddy of time that had somehow slowed.

I had had vague general misgivings about the trip, and more specific ones *en route* when the hospitable crew of the Western jetliner ushered me forward and I noticed the pilot and co-pilot, with identical perplexed expressions, trying to identify a passing coastline not by an aeronautical chart but from the little map in the airline's inflight magazine.

But everything went well — from the magnificent reception by cheerful, encyclopedic Vadim Stark to our laser-sharp driver Nikolay (whose previous job had in fact been that of laser physicist) to the lavishly restored, efficient Hotel Evropa, whose faucets continue to be inscribed in *belle-époque* French, and where nonreaders among the staff presumed that anyone with a Russian name inhabiting such a suite as mine must be a very big mafioso. A thin, miniskirted creature even said to Serena, in the corridor, “Working late aren't you, honey.”

The pretext for the trip was the reinauguration of the restored Peterhof and its fountains. The invited guests were to be, presumably, foreign-based descendants of families that had frequented the Court balls of former days. The gilding was a bit overdone, perhaps, but it will mellow. The pomp was unlimited — concerts in several resplendent halls, outdoor ballets, bewigged footmen, costumed musicians playing in nooks of the gleaming rooms. The elderly exiles were charming, and endowed with astonishing endurance. The *son-et-lumière* was spectacular despite a touch of Disney.

Most of the invited guests came to the party by sea — the Finnish Gulf — and proceeded up the Palace steps. I came early, by land, melting from the heat, to rehearse, for I had to wear not only the familial hat but two artistic ones as well: that of little Nabokov cum *nabokoved*, and that of singer. In the latter capacity I had the honor of performing that evening with the great Arkhipova. In the former I appeared before an amazingly packed hall at the *Publichka*, as the Petersburg Public Library is known, with an impromptu song in mid-lecture in response to some urging. That's still Russia, I guess — the immediacy of the love for music, animals, books.

History can be oddly helical. After decades of neglect *Petergof* reopened in all its slightly glitzy splendor, sponsored not by a tsar but by the Astrobank, a recently founded institution whose head, after having done much for the arts, died a somewhat hazy death. But his patronage did open the way for possible new legislation that would allow corporations Western-style tax deductions for their good deeds.

The Peterhof spectacle; the fast-forward tour of the city by car and boat; the aura of frenzied transition and the sidewalk portraitists for whom a general manager now negotiates; the appetizing, cheerful colors of the architecture after my grayish-granite expectations and the special Russian blue that my father loved; my pleasant meeting with Mayor Sobchak and my appointment to the Restoration Commission; the unforgettable visits to the country and to the town house at 47 Bol'shaya Morskaya; the possible symbolic return of properties with, perhaps, a bed for me in some cranny — this was all in a sense subordinate to the main cause: the restoration of order in publishing Nabokov. I am grateful for the northeast nudge both to Vadim Stark and to Serena.

History, as it spirals, can also accelerate amazingly. This was the moment to go — and, perhaps with some trepidation after all the horror stories, my parents would have waited eagerly to debrief me, and teach me still more. It was the time to go because people one can count on had come into focus — Stark, who will be sub-agent for a new, authoritative Nabokov series; Dolinin, who will be editor-in-chief of those Ardis-based texts; faithful Shikhovtsev, whom I had hoped to meet on this trip but could not find.

Crusty stalwarts of academic conservatism endure from other days. Serena Vitale found them girded for battle when she presented her brilliant and revolutionary book about the events surrounding Pushkin in his final months. It was even suggested we had forged the unpublished letters obtained from the D'Anthès family archive in Paris.

It is a pity, too, that Russians have no biographical and critical sources other than venomous Zinaïdas, benighted Struves, the still-smouldering remains of Andrew Field, and Mr. Nosik, whose crimes are more against the Russian language than against Nabokov. It is a pity that the publishers who got rich on megapiracy balk at the economics of the superb Boyd biography, which is almost fully translated and ready to dispel the rot.

These have been busy months. Between checking typescript and proofs of the new sixty-five-story Knopf anthology I journeyed to the Stockholm opera for the triumphant opening, conducted by Rostropovich, of Shchedrin's *Lolita*. I had to miss the premiere of Tage Nielsen's operatic version of *Laughter in the Dark*. A hundred other projects toil and bubble. But it was cosy to be surrounded by a language one had always spoken at home. It was good to see that a unique cultural tradition had resurfaced after gurgling and glinting underground, thanks to courageous individuals, through Russia's darkest days. Now that Saint Vlad Ilich has joined Jolly Joe in the hall of infamy, it is interesting to recall how right and how outnumbered Nabokov was in the pinkish forties; how, at Wellesley, for instance, he was asked to avoid disparaging references to the Bolsheviks. And it is curious how long, how far and wide, the wool continued to be pulled.

For some years Manomakh's hat kept bumping against the Petersburg gate. Now that I have made it through I shall be back on a Russian-Christmas visit, to see how things are going, and shall traverse Rozhdestveno with sleigh and troika, straight out of some fifth-rate novel like *Dr. Zhivago*.