

A Different Perestroika

*Down and out in 1990s
Moscow*

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My year in Moscow began with tanks. Fed up with an incalcitrant, unruly and possibly seditious parliament, Yeltsin called soldiers in from the potato fields and autumn harvest to their machines. Under cover of night, they rolled down Leningrad Avenue, leaving deep tracks in the asphalt, to positions around the parliament.

At work the next morning, we left the editing room and our scientific manuscripts to gather around the TV and watch the show: puffs of smoke, dust, and airborne concrete as artillery pounded the parliament building, commuters sprinting below from subway to sidewalk between explosions. I called my Russian editor to arrange a meeting.

"I don't leave my apartment when tanks are in the streets," she stated.

"But there are no tanks in the subways," I countered. She hung up abruptly.

While the tanks settled political scores in central Moscow, I returned to my manuscripts. In the lingo of my employer, I was a stylist, charged with reviewing, sentence by impenetrable sentence, English translations of Russian authored scientific articles. The journals of petrology and stratigraphy were my responsibility. Guided by a house style book, I checked every comma, dash, ellipse, and subjunctive, enforcing its severe scientific code.

It was a lucrative business, or so I'd heard. But I learned, after a few weeks of struggling with the befuddling intricacies of the hyphen and dash, that I neither liked nor had aptitude for the work. It was a bad match. With a monthly stipend of \$150 (plus a modest housing allowance), I didn't have much incentive to care. The editing felt too much like high school chemistry, the necessary evil of a poorly compensated enterprise. Within a month or so, it was clear who had talent for the task and might move up the ranks to supervisor. I was a bench warmer, just like in little league, when I played right field in the last two innings per rules that everyone, even the

scrawniest and most uncoordinated, bat at least once per game. At least Charlie Brown got to pitch.

Underpaid and uninspired, I looked for other ways to pass the days. A coworker mentioned a soup kitchen that needed volunteers. I'm not sure what my motivations were—charity, altruism, boredom, or some combination of all three. A few days later, I took the subway two stops north and, after some searching, found the soup kitchen. Like so many spaces in Moscow, it was bland and anonymous, a good example of the Soviet architectural aesthetic, utilitarian with a brutish twist. Inside the dimly lit, dusty cafeteria, three-dozen or so pensioners sat in small groups, eating a soup, small salad, serving of grain, and piece of meat, the standard Russian meal. These were the darkest years of the post-perestroika implosion, when coffers ran dry (or were looted) and pensioners were left to fend for themselves.

At first I didn't know what to do. Three Russians in white coats and hats were cooking and serving, sort of like in my high school cafeteria. Sort of in the way so much of Russia can seem at first glance. Sort of until closer examination, when often something very different appeared. Like the difference between a donkey and a mule. Two young, courteous Africans—Ethiopians, I later learned—a man and a woman, sat behind a table at the entrance and handed out meal tickets to the pensioners as they arrived, checking their names off a list. Once seated, other Africans took the meal tickets, went to the kitchen, and brought back a lunch platter to the table.

It wasn't the soup kitchen that I imagined, the soup kitchen of American holidays, eager high schoolers or sports stars behind the counter or at the stove, serving up turkey dinners to the poor and destitute, a feel-good, Kodak moment for all. Most of the pensioners regarded us with a neutral acceptance, a thing to be endured for a greater cause. A few were overly grateful and even effusive. The other pensioners avoided their company.

Ugandans, chatty and even gregarious, were responsible for bringing trays of food to the pensioners. Keith, a Ugandan student

at the Patrice Lumumba University of People's Friendship, was the first to introduce himself. Located a stone's throw from my apartment, Patrice Lumumba's students were mostly foreigners, beneficiaries of the Soviets' grand plan to coax countries into alliance.

Keith was the son of a judge in Kampala, I later learned. His father was a severe man by his accounts, hard to please and with high expectations. Keith came to the soup kitchen through its sponsor, an Episcopalian church of which he was a member. Charity was not his sole motivation at the soup kitchen; the African students ate a lunch platter after the pensioners finished their lunch. The empty coffers of the Russian government affected the students as well. Stipends were often late, always insufficient. The pensioners and students were in the same boat, abandoned by a bankrupt state.

Through Keith I met Charles, Tom, and Djuma, also Ugandan students. Charles and Tom were veterans of the Ugandan army, their service compensated in part by scholarship to the University of People's Friendship. Djuma was, by nature and birth, the outsider. He came from a minority tribe in the north often at odds and in armed conflict with the central government. But in Russia ties of country trumped those of tribe.

The Ugandans were respectful of and at times affectionate with the pensioners. One babushka had taken a shine to Charles, who, with his compact, muscular frame, impish smile, and charm, was the dandy of the four. After her platter was cleared and her lunch friends had shuffled off, she would wait for Charles to sit for a chat. He usually obliged and so Charles and his babushka would commiserate on the weather, the price of bread, the too salty soup, and noisy neighbors.

In general, though, the pensioners left us to our devices, we to theirs. After a busy hour of serving, I often shared a cigarette—a new habit, part of my Moscow persona—with them. My vice loved company and there were few activities more conducive to small talk than sharing a smoke. Long draws allowed for silence, smoke, a distrac-

tion, and deep breaths, giving a relaxed rhythm to the conversation. Over Marlboros and Lucky Strikes, I bonded with Keith, Charles, Tom and Djuma.

Keith and Charles were buddies and quick wits, both first-class ironists with keen eyes for the devices, tricks, and predators of Moscow street life. They taught me how to shake hands the African way. First the shake, then the snap. As hands move back, index fingers engage, sliding with growing pressure against each other, leading to a snap at the end, an exclamation to the greeting. Once intuitive, the handshake had its own fluency, a quick, cursory snap between acquaintances passing on the street or a full snap on meeting a friend.

Tom enjoyed Keith's and Charles's easygoing company but was more self contained, more given to solitude than solidarity. He was taller and thinner than Keith and Charles, with sharp cheekbones and quick eyes that reminded me of Steven Biko, the South African civil rights leader. He was also, as far as I knew, stranded in Moscow. For reasons unknown to me, he wasn't a student, either cut off from his Ugandan scholarship or expelled from university. The soup kitchen provided his one reliable meal of the day.

When we met, Tom was working a few afternoons a week at the Moscow office of a refugee processing center run by an NGO funded by the UN Moscow Mission. The then-porous borders left by the Soviet Union's implosion made Moscow the newest transit point between war-stricken countries like Afghanistan and Somalia and the capitols of Western Europe. Groups of Somalis and Afghans were a not-uncommon sight on the streets. Tom worked the frontline of the processing center, troubleshooting the myriad and endless troubles and tribulations of the refugees.

In early winter, Tom was offered a job managing a refugee camp outside of Moscow. With its promise of full room and board and a modest salary, he took it without hesitation. The job required him to live about a half hour beyond city limits, where pre-fabricated twelve-story apartment buildings suddenly gave out to stands of pine

and birch. The camp was an old high school, its classrooms converted into rooms for families and other groups of refugees.

Soon after Tom started at that job, we met for beer and curry at a café run by entrepreneurial Indian students at the university. We talked mostly about his time at the camp. He had many roles: cook, teacher, sheriff, social worker, janitor. At the end of our meal, he invited me to the camp. Intrigued by Moscow's hidden corners, I accepted.

With a friend from work, I went by train to spend a night at the camp. Tom lived in an office, perhaps the principal's office in the former life of the building (May Day parades with red pioneer scarfs, after-school choir and volleyball, the chatter of children's Russian in the hallways during break). Tom's room was a sort of no-go zone for the refugees, the threshold a line of demarcation. As we sat making small talk over instant coffee and cheap cigarettes, a group of male refugees approached.

Tom stood to address the spokesman of the group, who was angry about a conflict between two other men earlier that day in the camp's cafeteria. The discussion of the incident grew heated and the man threatened to cross the threshold. Tom stepped forward and said enough was enough. Go back to your rooms. Let this nonsense go. A moment of silence and then the refugee turned around and walked away, followed by his small delegation. They get bored and so make trouble, Tom told us. They've nothing else to do with their time.

The women, Tom explained, kept themselves busy in the mornings teaching the children basic math and such. The afternoons were spent on cleaning, keeping the kids occupied, and other domestic tasks. The women collected the food from the cafeteria, brought it back to the rooms, and then re-engineered the rice, vegetables, and simple meats into more familiar and tasty dishes using their own spices.

Tom enjoyed the job, the flow of daily tasks needed to keep

the ship of refugees afloat until, family by family, then moved on to Western Europe. But he missed his Moscow friends, Swahili banter with Keith and Charles, and making his rounds at the dorms of Patrice Lumumba, keeping track of friends, acquaintances, confidants, and contacts.

For dinner, we walked through field and forest, jumping off the road onto snow banks when cars and trucks passed, to a café in town that served standard Russian food. After a few shots of vodka, Tom referred vaguely to his time as a soldier in Uganda and then talked of what he found most difficult in life. It wasn't the daily trials of the young African in Moscow, the cold, the ever inquisitive police, the uncertainty of shelter and food, the racist comments from kids and pensioners. It was the loss, the often-sudden absences, of friends and loved ones. A grief that began when he left his family for the army, growing with war, relocation, and then the constant churn of refugees and itinerant Africans, Russians, and many others in and out of his life.

We met in Moscow infrequently after that weekend, until, in mid-spring, Tom showed up at the soup kitchen. He was no longer working at the camp and was now sleeping in a dorm room at Patrice Lumumba. The work had grown tedious and the ornery, demanding company of the male refugees had worn him out.

"You get fed up with their nonsense," he said. "They get on your nerves, man, they really do."

By late spring, life for Charles and Keith became more difficult. Poor grades, poor attendance, and poor financial backing from the Ugandan government led the university to dismiss them. Their standing at the university had been tenuous even before their dismissal. They liked their beer and were familiar enough with the drunk tank at the local police station to be on a first-name basis with the Moscow cop—Misha—who patrolled the university beat. They even had a nickname for his baton, the *pozhalusta* stick. Pozhalusta: *you're welcome, much obliged*, the reflexive response to *thank you*. You want to get drunk and make a scene at my police station, whack.

Pozhalusta. In you go to the cell to sober up.

Charles and Keith pointed Misha out one evening as we sat on a polished granite embankment across the street from an oversized, Stalinesque plaza, in front of milk, bread, and produce stores. The embankment was a popular meeting point and gathering area during the long summer evenings. Students of all nationalities stopped to chat, shake hands with the snap of the finger, and then move on. Misha was a forgettable man: 5' 8", a little overweight, a permanent scowl on his face, and a mess of brown hair beneath his blue police cap. The baton hung from his belt comfortably, an oft-used and easily accessed tool of his trade. On this street, though, he was the outsider and the students, ever the other, were the insiders. Only his *pozhalusta* stick gave him status.

By late spring I was a regular for evening beers with Keith and Charles on the granite wall. We usually drank a bottle or two of fresh, sweet Russian beer, which went stale after more than 5 to 6 days on the shelf. A sticker on the side of the bottle indicated which day of the week it had been brewed. Then they introduced a new vice into our company, marijuana. I'd smoked some the summer between junior and senior years of college, when a co-worker at a day camp grew his own and shared the crop magnanimously. I was a giggly, happy stoner but the habit didn't stick.

One afternoon we went to my place to indulge. My mother had recently travelled with her church choir to Italy, which included a brief performance and audience with the pope. She sent me photos, one of which was a kind of confused, blurred, up-close shot of the pope's face and miter, taken as he walked by. The pope's determined yet calm expression sent us into spasms of gut-wrenching laughter. Now there's a man, look at him, you don't mess around with him, Charles said, and I laughed so hard it hurt. No, seriously, what a look on his face. That's the pope, man. The pope. We must have laughed for 30 minutes, just a glance at the photo sent us heaving and panting with laughter.

I didn't stop to question how Charles and Keith, poor and

destitute, relying on a pensioner's soup kitchen for food, had such a consistent and good supply of weed. In mid-summer, Keith and Charles stopped coming to the soup kitchen and evening beers at the granite wall. I asked around. No one knew where they were. Then, they called.

They needed a safe place for 24 hours, somewhere to lie low while they figured things out. Apparently, they had been dealing marijuana to the Patrice Lumumba community. Somehow they had screwed up, pissed off their supplier, and were scrambling to make amends.

Concerned and curious, I offered my apartment as a temporary hideout. I'd never harbored drug dealers on the run, but I figured they would be hungry. On the way to meet them at the metro station, I bought sausage, cheese, bread, chocolate, juice, vodka, and cigarettes. A modest spread of sugar, fat, nicotine, and alcohol to take the edge off.

They were ragged and a little spooked. "They are after us," Charles said with a spark of self-deprecating irony, as if he were a character in some British adventure movie he might have seen many years ago in Kampala. Back in the apartment, after a meal, a few shots of vodka, and a cup of coffee, Keith and Charles relaxed and told their story.

The marijuana they'd been selling was from a stash provided by some Georgians. Somehow—I never got the details—they were behind on payments. Now the Georgians were searching for them and the money. Keith had wired his father, the judge in Kampala, for money. They were anxiously waiting for him to wire back funds and so make amends with the Georgians.

"So you see, Andrew," Keith concluded, "We've got ourselves into a big fucking mess."

I took a photo of Keith and Charles that afternoon. I still have that picture. They sit in front of the kitchen door and a bamboo screen of a naked geisha kneeling down to pick a flower. They wear

matching green camouflage jackets and regard the camera with a mischievous, faux seriousness.

Somehow Keith and Charles managed to get out of their predicament and in a week's time were flush with money. They invited me out to a new restaurant to celebrate my birthday and gave gifts of good vodka and chocolate. They had honed their craft and now enjoyed a reliable revenue. They had the network, the contacts, and the product. I heard and saw little of them after my birthday dinner. Perhaps they earned enough money for tickets back to Uganda. Maybe they emigrated to Europe. Maybe they found a bad end in Moscow's drug trade.

Djuma carried around a small book in which he would, on occasion, jot down a thought or overheard sentence. He scavenged daily conversation for scraps and bits that might be used in his stories. He was an observer and I understood—his aversion to judgment, the acceptance of ambiguity, the joy of the mundane, the leaf that swirls in the wind across the courtyard.

I never read anything he wrote but saw the manuscript he toted around several times. He wrote with the support of a British woman at the British Council, a benevolent arm of the British Consulate whose library was a refuge for Djuma. Back at the kitchen he mentioned the assignments for a class she taught on writing. In our chatter, it irked me that they read and wrote so often on British writers. The imperialist notion still found expression in the liberal literary mind. I remember one discussion in which I asked him why African writers were always seen in contrast to the Europeans. African writers, I offered, didn't have to prove or justify themselves to the canon. They were African writers, in and of themselves. My own frustrations, the Oedipal impulse, after four years of literary criticism as an English minor, had found a cause in Djuma. I was as much an imperialist as his teacher at the British Council. One side encouraged compliance; the other, rebellion.

We mostly talked about his writing and Moscow life in general. There were no adventures to refugee camps or drug trafficking. A week or so before I returned to the United States at the end of my contract, I heard that Djuma had fallen out of a dorm window and broken his arm. Details were fuzzy. Perhaps too much drink and then an altercation. I was concerned but also caught up in the details of travel and my next job.

I had an early morning flight out of Sheremetyevo International and so ordered a taxi. Djuma called me earlier in the evening and we arranged to meet so he could accompany me to the airport. As I stood with luggage at the side of the quiet, empty boulevard, Djuma appeared. His left arm was in cast and sling and his right arm was cupped against his chest. Earlier in the evening, he had found a baby sparrow that had flown the nest too soon. It chirped and wiggled in his hand, nestling up against the warmth of his chest and heart.

He kept the bird in hand all the way to the airport. Its head would pop out from the top of his fist, beak open, waiting for insect or worm. In the terminal, Djuma waited as I checked in and then walked to customs. Unable to embrace or shake hands, we settled for kind words. Then I was gone, through security, back to New York. Djuma was left with a long bus ride back to the nearest metro station.

I read a complimentary copy of the *New York Times* as the plane taxied to take off. From habit, I turned to the sports pages, which featured a photo of football players in the scrum, a running back in full flight toward sure impact. I am a Giants fan but, for a moment, the photo was alien to me. It made no sense. I was an outsider, looking in, trying to make sense of hulking men in hard helmets, grappling with one another.

