

Jamais Vu

She knew she would find the letters. They were in the last box she opened. They were exactly as she remembered. In the mad rush to decide what to keep and what to throw away, she selected one letter as a souvenir; she thought that would suffice. After all, the experience was more than a quarter of a century ago and had lasted less than a year. But she should have kept them all.

Unexpectedly, a wave of forgiveness for herself washed through her as she examined the envelope, her name in his script; she physically felt it—a relief. It wasn't a deliberate decision; it was spontaneous, as if the time had finally come. She didn't know she needed this forgiveness. She had always cherished the experience, but with mixed feelings. Now she could embrace it as a sublime encounter, an escapade. Her life had turned out fine, more than fine, despite her fears at the time.

The memories of the summer and the following year flooded back. She only glanced at the letter as she sat in the attic, but she remembered the contents, remembered having read them in her room in the rental house on campus. This instant cutting through time and space to this experience confounded her at first, but then she realized that this was a defining moment in her life and understood the significance.

Just as suddenly as the forgiveness came, she remembered that she had taken that job teaching English abroad in an attempt to see him again a year later. She hadn't chosen to return to his country because she didn't find a job there, and because that would have been too presumptuous, too restrictive for two young, ambitious people trying to make their way in the world. He had just started university full-time; and she had just graduated from university. They had not discussed specific plans to meet again, but they both hoped that they would—some day. She felt she had to give him space for his studies and his independent life. She also needed space to establish herself and become financially independent.

She had written to him when she first arrived at her teaching job, but he hadn't responded. So she had put away the letters, the relationship, and the memories because she had felt it was time to devote her

energy to her current adventure and move on. She dismissed the idea of them being together, mainly because she couldn't imagine how she could arrange it without money, connections, or a career. She had no guidance for this type of pathway; all her energy and courage had gone into traveling to his country for the summer of adventure. She had always wondered about what happened to this last letter to him. Had the letter never arrived? Had he ignored it? Had he meant to get back to her and life got in the way? She would understand any of these reasons.

Those were tumultuous times in his country. There was seemingly opportunity and abundance after the collapse of the government. People no longer had to stand in line for basic necessities. Durable goods were more easily accessible. Apartments were easy to rent; in his letter, he had mentioned his search for a new apartment. There were no longer ration cards. But that year was also the beginning of a downward turn for the economy and society; and after a while shortages occurred again. Some people became wealthy, but other people fell into poverty and could no longer rely on the government safety net. Unemployment and crime were rampant. Beyond the economic turmoil, society was transforming rapidly. Government workers were exposed for contributing to societal repression. No one could be certain who was an enemy of the people, or, worse, if such enemies had ever existed. She had witnessed some of that turmoil during her summer there, but that was just the beginning. She knew that life was difficult in his country, but there were also elements of hope and possibilities.

Amid this chaos were he and his friends, becoming adults in this transforming society after a childhood under a wholly different society. She could only imagine what challenges he faced during that time. But even when she met him, he and his friends were already gaming the system, trying to figure out a path ahead in the new economy. They had already set their sights on becoming entrepreneurs.

Apart from the economic and social story of the time, she had told herself a personal history: that their relationship had been a youthful indiscretion, and an impossible situation that would not continue,

repeating these facts to support the logical trajectory that had played out. However, in the time it took to open the box, she could no longer promote that version of the story because it was not consistent with how she felt. All those years of trying to ignore the possibilities, disappointment, and heartbreak slid away. She could now embrace the experience and relive it in a different light.

The letter she kept was his response to her first letter and a care package she had sent him with items she knew he couldn't easily obtain in his country: socks, smoking cessation gum, a cassette of current music she liked, and one of her basketball t-shirts. She had included En Vogue's 'Free your Mind' on the cassette, a daring anthem that was meant to show him what she was about and encourage him during the changes that were occurring in his country. His letter was a love letter, neatly scripted in Cyrillic and beautifully expressive language, started and stopped in his language and English several times, he had admitted. He had philosophized about love; told her how happy the package had made him and that he carried the letter with him; and imagined their tender kiss in his closing. She hadn't thought of it as a love letter until now. He had written that 'to love and be loved, that is all a person needs to be happy.' The sentiment was more profound when written in his language, she noted.

At the time, doubt had crept into her mind: how could she feel love for him and connection, how could he feel that way about her? She was awed by this 22-year old man writing something so profound, so eloquent; and that she was the recipient. She was impressed with his insight and honored by his attention. That impression had stayed with her all these years, she realized.

She recalled how they met, a serendipitous encounter. Of course she remembered; it was one of the most interesting things that had happened to her in her life. On her way to language classes with her friend, an inebriated man overheard them speaking English on the trolleybus. This man asked them if they wanted to party. They declined, but the man persisted and followed them into the metro station

and onto the train car, growing increasingly aggressive. On their final attempt to lose the man, they quickly exited a train car onto the platform, but the man pursued them.

He was waiting for a train on that very same platform. He had observed the incident, then calmly but firmly told the man to stop harassing the women. Almost immediately, the man turned and ran away from them. She was impressed by his calm confidence in intervening in the situation; she didn't know any guy his age who would have intervened in that way.

Afterward, the young women expressed their thanks and engaged him in conversation. They learned that he was taking night classes and preparing for university entrance exams, and that he lived in an apartment with one of his friends from his military service, and an American man who was teaching English. They spoke in a mixture of English and his language. He gave her his phone number and said his name was 'Jack.' She asked him his real name, wanting to remove any pretense from their meeting and meet him where he was. She wrote it down when she got back to her host family's apartment. She found that slip of paper among her photos of that summer when she had unpacked the last of the boxes in the new house.

She wasn't exactly sure why he had given her his number; maybe it was simple curiosity. But it seemed as if they were connected by this experience and shouldn't lose the connection. He seemed intrigued and impressed by the women traveling to his city, to his country recently emerging from being mostly closed to westerners, to study his language. The connection was full of possibility.

He was a year older than she was. He was soft-spoken but confident, handsome, tall, tan with kind dark brown deep-set eyes, and rich brown hair. He wore cork sandals, shorts and t-shirts, looking like any European university student of the time. She herself didn't yet own a pair of cork sandals, and seeing a contemporary wearing them in his country indicated to her that he had an elevated level of sophistication.

He was certainly more sophisticated than she was. He was born and bred in a big city brimming with culture and history, the most European of all the cities in the country: ballet, museums illustrating a long history of royalty, philosophical ponderings, political discussions at the kitchen table, a priority on education, all amid the driving force of modernization. Even his everyday life seemed more sophisticated than hers; mass transit, busy streets and shops, large apartment buildings, a summer cottage were a fact of life for him. He knew English, which was rare at the time. In contrast, most of her life to that point had been confined to a small, provincial place, only learning basic French in high school. She had been eager to leave her hometown and was expanding her cultural sophistication at university, but it was nascent when they met. This trip was part of her quest to become a global citizen.

She had called him a few days later, not really knowing what to expect. They spent an intense six weeks together, trekking all over the city together, talking and learning, spending as much time together as possible. She remembered him as kind, intelligent, thoughtful, ready for adventure.

On one of their first outings, she took him to eat *khachapuri* at a Georgian cafe near the palace square; it was one of the first places she had discovered with her classmate. She delighted in showing him her discovery, especially because he hadn't been there before. He was amused by her enthusiasm at sharing it with him.

One morning, they met in the park by her apartment block to jog. Afterward, she had brought out water from the tap because it was colder than the water that had been boiled. He impressed upon her the importance of only drinking tap water that had been boiled. In those days, there was no such thing as bottled water.

One night they stayed up all night talking in the park near her apartment block. She stood on the park bench to meet him eye to eye. They laughed and talked, nuzzled and kissed as the night fell. Her legs were covered in mosquito bites, but she didn't care.

He showed her the city under the white nights. They ended their all-night tramp in the same park where they had started. She took two photographs in the park, images of dusk and dawn. During that night, they had talked about their experiences in school, the differences seemingly so great, yet each of them could see the value of the other. When she moved into the new house, she found those exact photos.

They drove to the palace grounds at night with his friends. He gently wrapped his arms around her waist from behind and rested his chin in her neck. She reached behind her and squeezed him as his friend took the photo. She could feel his warmth when she looked at the photo.

They made dinner together at his apartment. She had enthusiastically offered to cook the potatoes. However, she hadn't used sunflower seed oil before then; and her potato frying technique was unseasoned. Her effort turned into mush. She felt disappointed, but she joked about it, as was her nature. He just smiled and helped her finish up the cooking. She closed her eyes and could see them eating in his tiny kitchen.

She came to a party with his friends from his military service and the American teacher he had befriended. They had warmly welcomed her. What had they thought about her and this whole experience, she wondered.

She spent the night at his apartment several times. He made her coffee and brought it to her in bed, the first time a boyfriend had done this for her. It was the best he had, and he offered it to her without hesitation. She had nothing but her time and attention to give him.

They cruised along the river viewing the city's astounding architecture and industry, one of their last outings together before she left. They had visited all the landmarks in the city they could and take photos so they wouldn't forget about this time and experience. One of the photos was her playfully kissing a statue of a lion outside one of the palaces. This particular photo was in an album that had not

been packed away, and had always been accessible. But the significance of the photo was known only to her.

On the night before she was to leave, they stopped to buy flowers for the dinner table. He wanted to get roses to make the occasion special. But the roses were slightly wilted. She suggested they buy the bright red gladiolus, which looked fresher than the roses; the vendor had agreed with her. After she had found the letters again, she had investigated the meaning of gladiolus: they represent remembrance and pierce the heart of the recipient, conveying infatuation, a perfect symbol for them.

On the morning she was leaving, he accompanied her to the bus station to say good-bye. They were both quite sad. She choked back tears; he kept reassuring her. They promised to write to each other; it was all they could promise at the time. As the bus pulled away, they waved to each other. Then she saw him turn to go, hunched and staggering as if someone had just punched him in the stomach. Her own stomach twisted in knots; and she felt numb. Nausea crept in as she recalled that moment.

'If I meet that man again who harassed you and your friend on the metro,' he wrote, 'I would buy him a bottle of cognac and persuade him to drink to our health. He really wanted us to meet.' He wrote about it being fate that they had met, and that he was thankful. Yes, she could now agree, but all these years later she wondered why fate had brought them together. Why had fate caused so much trouble after she left? And why had it kept them apart?

Also in his letter, he had honored her by writing that she was the sweetest, dearest person he knew, and his favorite person ('most liked' in his language). He had felt her presence as he went about his activities in the closing weeks of that summer while he was preparing for his exams. He wrote that he never felt alone; that their relationship had been a spiritual grounding for him when he sat for his exams; and that he had 'turned to a better side' because of her. So she had impacted his life for the better. If that was the

only reason for their meeting, then perhaps that was the answer that she had been looking for. But she didn't want it to stop there, not then and not now.

During the year after she left his city, she felt guilty for leaving him there in a chaotic situation for the relative comfort of her life in the States. She had tried to make it work after she left, but she hesitated. She couldn't imagine what would happen if she tried to live in his country without having established herself. It was also too big of a risk to commit to someone with whom she had spent such little time with. She didn't know who they were together and couldn't imagine what they could become. These doubts made her feel guilty, too, but she couldn't overcome them. Now as she reflected, she was proud of herself for being bold and embracing the love in front of her at the time despite the foreignness of the situation.

They wrote letters to each other for the next year. They called each other—a huge expense for both of them at the time. She recalled feeling some frustration trying to converse and stay connected in a mixture of his language and hers. But she wanted him in her life, in whatever way possible. Then, she got the diagnosis, and she fell apart. She told him about it, and this added a layer of complexity that she wasn't ready for and couldn't handle. They continued to call each other and write, but she was a mess. He must have sensed it.

If she had kept the remaining letters, she might have been able to remember what had transpired between them after that. All she could remember is that their relationship slowly slid away, like a fallen leaf in a stream. Nonetheless, she felt lucky that she had this first letter because it captured the memories perfectly, and it allowed her to remember this adventure, unspoiled and unencumbered by life and time.

She realized that not returning to the city was part of the great disappointment in her life, both as a career choice and a personal choice. Throughout university and during her first few years working, she



had put herself in the position to travel and work in the international sphere. A translator is what she wanted to be. She loved learning languages and was decent at it. She wanted to live in a different country, far away from where she grew up. There seemed to be opportunities to do this at the time, but they were nebulous to her. No one advised her to follow the path to pursue a career working in his country, let alone the path back to him. A couple of years after that summer, she had failed the foreign service exam. So she focused on life in the States in a city that had an international element to it.

She had kept up with his language by taking a night course and joining a group of Americans who spoke the language and had some connections with the international community. Despite her efforts, there wasn't a way forward with them or opportunities that came from being with them. Their language skills began devolving into a pidgin language without native speakers with whom to interact.

She didn't have the confidence to survive in his world. Part of it was the gender roles in his country that she didn't understand; she had no idea about how life was really like for young women, and relationships between men and women. Part of it was that she knew she could never be fluent in his language because she had started learning it too late. Her failure to launch an international career led to feelings of inadequacy and a lack of trust in herself hindered any remaining boldness in her. She was just an ordinary person not able to face an extraordinary situation.

What a shame that our contact sputtered, she thought, it would have been amazing if we had stayed acquaintances, creating a pathway for another eventual meeting. Two people born at the dawn of the 1970s in two opposing countries who had met during the great opening. It was an interesting story; surely there is more to it than just that summer.

She didn't expect to feel this way again. Why was this happening now? Because of mid-life approaching? Because of the disruption of moving? Because the end of the world as we knew it was coming: climate

change, the rise of a fascist regime in her own country? Because she wanted to return to the site of her earlier adventures?

Whatever the reason, reading the letter again she realized that they had a connection in the short time they spent time together. But at the time, connection and desire were in conflict with their path and plans. Now that her life had played out and her fears had not come to fruition, she accepted their relationship fully. She wanted to tell him that; she didn't want the impending doom to occur without telling him.

After finding the letter, she continued her daily routines, but the letter and her memories of that summer seeped through at unexpected moments, distracting her. She felt more mature, confident and imaginative now, and that perspective and money provided stability from which to meet him again, stronger and better. The letter brought back the wonderful memories she had not allowed herself to have over the years; and a fresh perspective on the relationship. She wanted to reconnect in some way. But there seemed to be no way for this to happen without major disruptions in her life; and she didn't want to disrupt or, worse, ruin his life.

She had been looking for him on social media since she had joined for her high school reunion, to know something about him, in the hopes of one day reconnecting. But she couldn't find him. Then right after she found the letter she found two profiles for him: one personal with a photo but with only enough information to confirm his identity and one professional with information updated in the last month. She was elated that she could see him, that he had a career, that he was still alive. He had become an entrepreneur. He was successful in his country, having been the director of one of the imperial gardens.

Around the same time, she had listened to a podcast about an app that attempted to illustrate the "many worlds" interpretation of quantum physics: there are many worlds which exist in parallel, in the same time and space as the one we are experiencing. Thinking that there was an existing alternate

universe that included him made her happy, and could be the way to remain connected to him. She could see that universe now that she had forgiven herself. Maybe she would have been better off in that universe; maybe it would have lasted, happily, contrary what she had believed all these years. In that universe, she had chosen imagination over practicality, she was sure. The possibilities were enticing.

To ensure that this alternative universe existed, she downloaded the app, entered the options, and selected the 'Split Universe' button. She sat back in her chair, closed her eyes and smiled, imagining this alternate universe right now. She recalled the beautiful book he had given her as a memento, the epic poem *Ruslan and Lyudmila*. She recited the ending:

“Marveled at the long night.

Suddenly she beheld the sight

of her knight.

Ruslan she faced

and passionately her hero she embraced.

Ruslan and Ludmila were together again and lived happily for the rest of their lives.”

--Alexander Pushkin

She was roused from her daydream by a text notification. She looked down at her phone and gasped as she read the message in Cyrillic: It's been a long time. Let's meet in Ireland.