

Americanization

Svetlana leaned in close. "Why are you taking so long to eat today?"

"Mom, you always complain that I eat too fast." He raised his bandaged hand to prod her memory. "Now I'm too slow?"

"I would never say you eat too slowly, Nicholas." She levied her troubled smile on him and added, "When it comes to food and eating, your Americanization has been a complete success."

He pushed the remaining half of a muffin into his mouth and spoke through the mashed cake. "That's not a word, by the way." He didn't know if it was or not, but his mother made them up as she needed them, particularly when she spoke English with him. "Why are you in such a rush to get rid of me?"

"I'm not, but it seems you're avoiding your friends. Go visit with them while I say goodbye here. I won't be long." She lifted her Styrofoam cup of tea and slid the paper plate with the remains of her meal to him.

"I'm going." He choked down the muffin, grinning as he gathered their trash. "I wouldn't want you to miss any good gossip because I got in your way."

Svetlana conceded a smile. "Get out of here. I'll be there in five minutes."

Nicholas was six years old when he and his mother left Russia and the eleven years he spent in the Virginia public schools system since then had all but washed away the foundation of his Slavic heritage. In her desperation to

shore up the damage, his mother lugged him to the Saints Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Church in Manassas every Sunday for Divine Liturgy. The congregation was a montage of displaced innocents mostly from Central and Eastern Europe who gathered for potluck lunch in the basement after services, and while Nicholas endured the weekly immersions for his mother's sake, he would never share her nostalgia for the old country.

Outside, he found the parish men divided into two camps. The first was paying its respects to a dead air conditioning unit at the back of the building, burning off-brand cigarettes in place of votive candles, and the second was gawping into the engine compartment of a Reagan-era minivan. The smaller children swarmed over the playset as Nicholas walked past them to the back of the lot, where the high school kids had stretched out on the weedy lawn.

"Here comes the American," Igor Sokolov said. His few comrades chuckled, but most of the group shared Nicholas's opinion of him and ignored the comment. He was leaning against a chain link fence with the new girl, Masha, at his side and reclining her head on his shoulder. Nicholas had spoken with her a couple of times in past weeks and she seemed friendly enough, but seeing her wedged against Igor that way made him wonder if she had something defective in her judgment. He nodded to the group and Igor kept on talking.

"What happened, American, did your mama send you out to play?"

One day he would lose his patience with Igor, he knew this as he knew his shoe size. One day soon, he thought, but not at church or when his mother was at hand.

Masha whispered something to Igor and he pushed away from the fence with his elbows, separating himself from her. Nicholas and Igor attended the same high school, though in the presence of American kids and when he had to communicate in English, Igor was reserved and wary, invisible. Here, his self-assurance didn't waver even when good sense might dictate otherwise, but Masha stepped in front of him and cut him off. "What happened to your fingers, Nikolai?"

Maybe there was a seed of wisdom there, after all. He held up his right hand, the third and fourth digits taped together, "I dislocated one of them in a football game Friday night."

She reached for his hand to examine it. Masha was pretty but her thin frame was only a couple of missed meals away from deprivation. "You didn't tell me you played on your school team." Nicholas nodded and she raked her fingernails across his palm, tracing them outward to the tips of his fingers. She was almost purring when she asked, "Does it hurt?"

"He plays baseball, too," Igor interrupted. "Only American sports for our American."

Masha smiled, not breaking eye contact with Nicholas, and said, "And what's your game, Igor?" The silence drew out and her grin spread like a spill. "Nikolai, your palms are so rough."

His throat tightened and he pulled his hand away, resisting the urge to conceal both of them behind his back. “We run a dairy.”

“His mother married into manual labor.” Igor laughed and added, “Don’t get excited, Masha, he has a girlfriend already. She’s an American, too, but she’s a real one.”

Masha blushed a furious shade of scarlet. “Everyone told me you would end up being a jerk, Igor.” She turned from the group and her girlfriends scrambled to her aid.

“The American is just another slow-witted immigrant to them. Mention Russia and all they can think of are Putin, prostitutes, and vodka.” The girls distanced themselves and he raised his voice, kicking the sarcasm up a notch to anger. “He’s their dancing bear. They keep him around for laughs.”

Nicholas took a step toward Igor but a Ukrainian kid named Taras caught him by the arm. “You’ve worn out your welcome, Igor,” Taras said. “You don’t belong here.”

Igor stared at the Ukrainian for a long moment before turning his attention back to Nicholas. “You might have been born in Russia, but you’re no Russian. You’re no one.”

The girls reached the rear door of the church as Svetlana stepped out with two other women. Nicholas turned back to Taras, patting him on the shoulder. “I’ll see you next week.”

“Hurry to Mamochka, American,” Igor said. “She wants to get home to your Internet papa and—”

Nicholas delivered a left jab to Igor's jaw that dropped him to the lawn like a sack of bottles. His body convulsed twice before coming to rest and the group stared at Nicholas in hushed awe, a counterpoint to his mother's scream.

The priest revived Igor and calmed the spectators, but Jesus Christ himself might have struggled to pacify Svetlana. She was shaking and teary, too upset to handle the car, so Nicholas would drive them home. Once in the seat, she dissolved into sobs. "What were you thinking, hitting that boy like that?"

"I wasn't thinking," he said, and decided that was probably true. His mother had parked the car at the back end of the lot, forcing him now to motor past the lineup of onlookers on his way out. He absorbed the scowls as he paraded by the reassembled congregation, noting that everyone but Igor was watching and no one but Masha was smiling. "He had it coming, though."

"How can you say that? Why did you hit that boy?"

The entire truth wouldn't do here, so he went with the portion of it that he considered incontrovertible. "I hit him because he's an asshole."

"Nikolai!"

"Look, I'm just different than those kids. It won't happen again, so let's drop it. And don't call me Nikolai, please." He reached for the radio with his bandaged hand and she blocked it, sending an angry thrust of pain up to his elbow.

“This is the fourth fight you’ve been in this year. What is going on with you?”

“It’s only the third and it wasn’t even a fight.” He stared out the window at an oncoming car as if her safety was his only concern. “I’m sorry I embarrassed you in front of your friends,” he finally said. He held out his damaged hand, a ploy for pity as much as a peace offering, but she declined to take it.

“How can I ever go back there? Sunday after church is the one time in the week when I can express a thought without having to worry about grammar or search to find the right word. I have to communicate with my own husband using the skills of a child, and dealing with customers all day at work is a living hell. I come here because these are my friends, Nicholas. They’re my people and I need them as much as they need me. I don’t expect you to understand that, but you can at least respect my struggle.” She reached into her purse for a tissue and dabbed her eyes.

He wanted to assure her that she spoke English like a native though she wrestled with the language, and to promise that her friends would forget the dust-up with Igor in a day or two when he knew they’d natter on about it for months. He searched for words to ease her pain but came up with, “You don’t have to worry about me causing any more trouble at that church because I’m not going back.”

“That’s your solution? You don’t like someone so you punch him in the face and run away?”

“I didn’t hit him because I don’t like him. I hit him because he’s an assho—” He reached a four-way stop and pulled up to the line. She was glaring at him now, but he wouldn’t apologize. “I need to talk with Petrakis when we get home,” he said, breaking the renewed silence, and he drove on.

Nicholas spoke with Petrakis about everything, including his misadventures, but his interest in checking in with their aged neighbor had more to do with his finding the old-timer drunk and disoriented when he looked in on him that morning.

Svetlana rummaged her purse for another tissue and lowered the sun visor in front of her to get to the vanity mirror on its backside, a sure sign that her mood was recovering. Sighing as she looked at her reflection, she said, “Leave that poor man alone. He’ll be upset if he learns you were in another fight.”

“I’m not going to leave him alone. Mr. Petrakis is the one person I know who gets me.”

She dropped her hands to her lap under a heavy exhalation, a corner of the crushed tissue poking out from her fist. “Please don’t start.”

“You’ve got your church, but where can I go? I’m not Russian enough for them and I’m too Russian everywhere else. At least the old man understands that. He’s eighty-three and lived more than sixty of those years right here in Manassas, but what do people call him?”

“They call him The Greek, I know. We’ve talked about this. People remember what’s unique about a person.” She resumed her makeup project.

“You can talk to Mr. Petrakis tonight at dinner, but don’t bother him about the fight and don’t call him *the old man*. It’s no better than calling him The Greek.” She flipped the visor back into place and they rode home in silence.

Nicholas rushed into the kitchen freshly washed up from his afternoon in the heat with his stepfather and he lifted last season’s baseball hat from the hook near the door. “I’m going over to talk to Mr. Petrakis.”

Svetlana smacked her wooden spoon to the countertop, spattering gravy up the wall behind the stove. “One time.” She turned down the heat on a back burner. “I wish you would do what I ask you to do just one time without an argument. Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes and I want you back here and sitting at the table with Mr. Petrakis before then.”

“Mom, I told you I need to talk to him. I won’t be long.”

“I’m sorry, but you were out with your father the whole afternoon and now there’s no time.”

She maddened him when she called Matt his father. “You say that like we went out for a couple of beers instead of patching the roof on the shop.”

A car pulled into the driveway and Svetlana pointed it out through the kitchen window. “Look, Lauren and Jonny are here. The three of you can go together and bring him back. Mr. Petrakis doesn’t need to hear every detail of your life. He has enough of his own problems.”

He didn’t want to push her, but he was desperate now to check in with Petrakis without anyone getting in his way and his frustration manifested into

a stinging in his sinuses. She extended her arms, the way she did when he was a little kid and one of them had offended the other. "Come here," she said. He hugged her, hesitant because he was too old for this, yet still yearning for her closeness. "When did my boy get so big?" She was a tall woman but had to look up to meet her son's eyes. Her own eyes teared and she turned away to pick the sponge out of the sink and went to work wiping up the gravy mess on the backsplash.

"I'm going alone."

She planted her palms on the countertop and lowered her head. "Why are you arguing with me like some American teenager?"

"I'm an American and I'm seventeen. How were you expecting me to argue with you?"

Jonny and Lauren worked their way to the door as Matt strode into the kitchen looking like a bear foraging for food. He fired Nicholas the more sedate version of his *give her a break* glance and said, "What have we got to eat?" He hugged Svetlana from behind on his way to the refrigerator.

She held up a hand to block him from opening the fridge and said in English, "We eat in ten minutes." Turning back to her son, she spoke their language. "Take your friends with you and hurry back."

Jonny and Lauren stepped in without knocking; they were like family and had been coming to Sunday dinner for years. Matt shook Jonny's hand and when he laid a palm to Lauren's shoulder she pulled him in for a hug.

“You’re going over to get Gus?” he asked, and Nicholas nodded. “Walking or driving?”

“By foot is faster if I cut through the trees at the bottom. You know how he likes to walk back home after he eats.” They made the trek every week when the weather was dry. “Why do you ask?”

“He was cloudy when I telephoned him this morning. If you get there and he doesn’t seem well, drive him over in his pickup.”

The old man had been all-out drunk, but Nicholas couldn’t very well mention that after withholding the information all day, so he agreed with Matt and tugged his cap on. He hustled across the yard with his friends loping after him and they passed through the wire fences, careful not to snag their clothes on the barbs, and dodged cows across the upper pasture, finally making their cut into the copse of trees at the back end of the property. Nicholas marched at a brisk clip, calling out for the others to pick up their pace.

He paused at the top of the hill where the properties abutted and where he could just make out Petrakis’s house through the trees. Beech and oak branches commingled above him and scattered a mosaic of shadows too feeble to mitigate the oppression of the late season humidity. The heat had reached its peak for the day, that point where the mugginess and his patience to tolerate it met in a standoff before backing down for the evening. Looking up at what sky he could see through the leaves, he decided it would rain tonight. Jonny knocked a stick against tree trunks as he plodded along and Lauren called ahead, asking why he was in such a rush.

“I need to talk to Mr. Petrakis.”

“Not one of your philosophy marathons, I hope,” Jonny said.

Lauren laughed with him. “Remember how Mrs. Petrakis used to drag me and you to the TV room after dinner so Plato and Socrates could be alone to solve the problems of the world?”

“Have your fun,” Nicholas told them, though he failed to rein in his own smile when recalling those rich days. Lauren reached out for his hand as he stretched for hers and he tugged her up the final step. The three stood at the hilltop taking in the scene.

Something was out of place, though Nicholas couldn't pin down what it was. They entered the clearing where Mrs. Petrakis used to raise her vegetables and the house, a two-bedroom brick matchbox dwarfed by the barn looming in its background, stood out now. They paced by the garden, where the fence had given way to the nudging of deer that had then wiped out the season's derelict effort. The wide doors of the barn, always open, hung nearly closed now for some reason and left a narrow rectangle of darkness between them that beckoned Nicholas's attention. He stopped and Jonny halted as quickly right behind him, but Lauren mashed her foot into the back of Jonny's sneaker and the two of them toppled into the grass, laughing. Lauren climbed to her feet and brushed herself off while Jonny hopped on one leg, protesting that she had given him a flat tire and working his foot back into his shoe.

The barn summoned again and Nicholas removed his cap to blot the sweat from his brow with his forearm as he stared at the old structure. The

humidity was a living thing today, quelling even the hymn of the cicadas.

“Quiet,” he said. Jonny and Lauren ceased their chatter, though he had only been pointing out the surrounding stillness, and the hush sent a shudder through him.

“Mr. Petrakis has been upset for a few days.” He wanted to ease his friends toward what he feared might be a coarse reception at the house. Petrakis was a sweet man, always good for a root beer and a plate of Oreo cookies when they visited, but the light in him began to diminish with his wife’s passing and though Lauren and Jonny had witnessed the old man’s decline, they didn’t know all that Nicholas knew.

“What’s wrong?” Jonny asked, humor now absent from his tone.

“He’s been drinking.” A chill shimmied across his skin like a clutter of spiders and he turned again to view the house and barn.

Lauren reached for his hand. “How bad is he?”

“It’s not just the wine. He didn’t recognize me this morning.” He was uncertain how much he should reveal and distress mounted in Lauren’s eyes as she watched him. “He threatened to call the police if I didn’t get off his property.”

Lauren broke for the house and Nicholas sprinted past her, hurtling up the back steps, into the mudroom and on to the kitchen. He called out for the old man, but the home gave back no response. Lauren pushed through to the living room with Jonny a few steps behind her, but he fell back at the doorway. Nicholas edged up to his friend and put his hand to his shoulder.

The boys watched Lauren retrieve a notepad from an end table and look back at them, concern distorting her face. “What is it?” Jonny asked.

She held it up for their inspection. “The list he keeps to remind himself of all the things he has to do.”

“He loses that pad twenty times a day,” Nicholas said.

Lauren read aloud. “Pay Washington Gas...” She turned her eyes toward the boys. “Feed Ringer...”

“Whoa.” Jonny said. “That dog has been dead like five years.”

“Take Nora to beauty parlor.” Lauren choked up and dropped the notepad to the table. She stepped toward the stub of hallway that led to the two bedrooms, calling out for Petrakis in a faded, nearly inaudible voice. The boys hurried across the living room to catch up and Lauren doubled back between them and dashed out the front door.

“Get to the barn ahead of her,” Nicholas said, and they raced out.

Lauren reached the broad doors first and turned back before clearing them, her expression of anxiety replaced with one of muted horror. She leaped at Nicholas, knocking him back a step, and pressed her face into his chest. “Help him. Please. Do something.” The neck of his t-shirt stretched and then tore as she pulled at the back of it.

Jonny uttered a few words that Nicholas failed to grasp and then he pushed the barn door further open. The arthritic wheels beneath it squealed as they labored across the rusted iron track and Lauren clutched Nicholas tighter,

digging her nails into his back. Inside, the old man's body laid sprawled across the floor like a rag doll fallen from a shelf. Petrakis was dead.

Nicholas's heart hammered and a voice in his mind repeated Lauren's plea for him to do something, but what could be done? Jonny stood fixed in place with his gaze locked on the ground and Lauren broke away and ran toward the house. He called out to her and she spun back, her face lined with tears. "Call Matt." She shook her head, her lip trembling and her stance injured. Her pain put a knot in his throat and he made a move toward her, but she raised her hands to her face and conceded more tears. If he tried to articulate a word now he would break down right there and that wouldn't help anyone so he turned back to the barn.

Jonny was still staring at the dirt floor. Nicholas led him by the arm to Lauren, whom he hugged and then kissed. "Go inside and telephone Matt." His voice trembled as he spoke, but he pushed ahead. "I need a few minutes out here."

Back in the barn, he was uncertain of what he should do but aware that he had to be alone to do it. Examining Petrakis, he noted that dust covered the old man's work boots and the untied strings were a scramble. Nicholas tilted his baseball cap back on his head and drew in a constricted breath as he stepped closer to the body. He imagined that he saw life in the open eyes until an ant marched across the face and its sagging expression didn't flinch.

He had to straighten up the body, though he'd take an ass chewing from the police and maybe even Matt for doing it. Seeking out a blanket or tarp to

cover his friend, he looked around and saw a decade's worth of the sort of debris that accumulates on a declining farm—broken implements, shelved tools and enough tractor parts to fall just short of aggregating to a functional machine. The aborted overhaul of an ancient chainsaw lay on the workbench coated with a layer of grime, and the damp recollection of moldering hay loitered like dollar store cologne.

He found nothing of use so he dropped to his knees to lay out Petrakis as best he could. The old man reeked of dried sweat and the stink of jug wine that had leached through his pores, compelling Nicholas to hold his breath as he worked. First knuckling his eyes to clear his vision, he tied the boots and settled beside the body with his legs crossed. He drew the corpse into his lap and cradled the head in his arm to raise it off the dirt floor, then straightened Petrakis's shirt and fixed the old man's hair with his hand.

He imagined Petrakis giving him grief about the trouble he had caused at the church that morning, responding in the irritated voice he contrived for just that sort of a dressing down. *For Christ's sake, you gotta think before you do something like that, Nick. Especially right there in front of your mother. There's a bigger world out there waiting for you, so don't let a numbnuts like that Igor get your goat.*

"You're right." The old man was always right. "It's just that Igor never lets me forget I'm an outsider." He slumped and his free hand came to rest on Petrakis's bony chest. How many times had his friend told him that he

wouldn't be around forever to look after him? That he'd have to start working these things out on his own?

The familiar hum of the tires on Matt's slowing pickup made its way into the barn and the faint but growing wail of approaching sirens followed in the distance. Nicholas pressed his lips to the old man's forehead and laid him out carefully, and then he rose to his feet.