

THE VISITOR

K. Gorcheva-Newberry

It began with fish. One sulky, rainy afternoon, a man walked into my store and asked if he could order fifty live salmon. Dressed in leather, he was square-jawed and dark-skinned, with a creased face, gray braided hair, and huge earlobes that reminded me of my grandmother's. She used to tug at her ears when she told stories about WWII and the concentration camp, where she'd been discovered on a pile of rotting corpses by an American soldier. When she died, her ears were large and floppy, like burdock leaves.

As an immigrant living in Virginia for nearly twenty years, I was used to seeing all kinds of odd customers in my store. They were mostly people like me, expatriates from the former Soviet Republics or other faraway countries, so I tried to place my visitor. Could he be Georgian, Moldovan, or even Armenian? Greek, Turkish, or Middle-Eastern?

I was just about to ask, but he read my mind.

"Native," the man said in a deep flowing voice that made me think of rivers. "From Spokane."

"Really? I mean you look like a local guy riding a motorcycle."

"Russian Delicacies," he said, pointing at the sign on my store window. "You don't look Russian either."

"I'm half Armenian."

"Which half?"

"Father's."

"You sure? You could be anything."

"What do you mean?"

"You have brown skin. You could be like me, part Coeur d'Alene."

"The discovered people? Up in Idaho? I just saw something on the Internet—"

"I don't have Internet."

That puzzled me, mostly because I had no idea there were people on this planet, other than my father, who didn't have Internet. He was disgusted by the machines, those soulless creatures consuming human lives like hell's fire. I thought of my family, who couldn't exist were it not for the Internet. Neither my three daughters nor my wife would know how to share a dinner table if we didn't own iPads and iPhones.

“What do you need all the salmon for?” I asked the guy.

“Do you have it?”

“I can get it. Anything for the right price.”

“I can’t pay much. A dollar a fish.”

I considered the ridiculousness of such a proposition.

“I need it by Friday,” he added.

It was Monday, so after a slight deliberation, I said, “No can do. Two weeks at least.”

“That’ll be too late.”

Another customer walked in, and I got distracted with her order of quail eggs and Armenian sheep cheese, so when I looked up again, the guy was gone.

Later that night, during dinner, I told my American wife with all-Irish ancestors that I wanted to dig for my origins, trace all the devious and minute migrations of my blood.

“Ancestry.com,” she said and scooped shepherd’s pie onto my plate. For the taste of that pie, I knew I would marry her again and again.

“I want to test my DNA. What if I’m indeed part Native American? Perhaps that’s why I’ve never felt entirely Russian or Armenian, why I wanted to stay in this country. What if my mother named me after some great chief?”

My wife, the sweet plump-faced woman that she was, frowned at the absurdities of my desires, just as she did in bed when I wanted to turn on the light during sex.

“You were named after the famous dictator—Joseph Stalin.”

“How do you know?” I asked. “Maybe I was named after the famous writer—Joseph Conrad.”

With her vigilant stare, she examined my face. “Conrad was prohibited in Soviet Russia. Stop with that nonsense already.”

Distracted by the actual verbal communication between their parents, our daughters—seventeen, fifteen, and twelve—raised their foggy, disapproving eyes from their electronic devices. In their resentment and sadness, they looked almost Russian to me, almost like my mother when she’d left my father and cut off all communication.

My daughters said, one after another, from the oldest to the youngest:

“Can I tell at school that my father is part Native American and let those white racist assholes start apologizing?”

“Can we skip the Thanksgiving parade this year?”

“Can we eat salmon instead of turkey?”

My wife, who never cursed or had impure thoughts, endowed me with a graveyard look, the look in which one could trace generations of impoverished, struggling Irishmen. In her staid accusing silence, she gathered dishes from the table, and I began rinsing them off and stacking them in the dishwasher. I soaped the skillet while tracing the lines of my face in the dark window. I discovered two moles on my forehead that I didn’t know existed. But other than my

Armenian eyebrows, which were like furry sleeves over my eyes, I saw nothing remarkable, nothing that could make me doubt my identity.

The next day, the store was nearly empty. In no time I found the website my wife had mentioned and ordered a kit. All I had to do was return my saliva sample, and my DNA would be analyzed for more than 700,000 genetic markers, results returned to me via e-mail in six to eight weeks. For whatever silly incomprehensible reasons, I was excited. I browsed through the pictures of Native Americans on the Internet, searching for the traces of my own hairy face in their slick fierce ones. Somehow, I felt brave and stoic, an invincible warrior. I knew that most of those pictures weren't authentic and that most of those tribes were nearly extinct, the genocide committed yet not properly acknowledged by the American government, but as an Armenian I felt much affinity with those people, much pride.

I couldn't wait to call my father, who lived in a Brooklyn retirement community, where he played chess and chain-smoked.

"I wonder if my mother cheated on you," I said.

"Why?"

"Someone recently said that I could be part Native American."

My statement was greeted with a weighty silence. I could hear him blowing smoke into the receiver, then nothing. "Are you there?" I asked.

"One more statement like that and I might not be. I might be obliterated from your genetic memory and thus from the face of the earth."

My father had a vile sense of humor, which had caused my Russian mother to pack her suitcase and fly from Yerevan to Moscow one early winter morning. That and the fact that he'd slept with her sister, my aunt, when she'd visited, which she finally confessed to my mother two years after it'd happened.

"I'm serious. I had this Native American guy in my store who wanted to buy salmon, and he said I looked like his people. So, I'm just curious."

"That's what did it to you in the first place. Curiosity. That's why you stayed in this country. Now if you'd followed your Russian-Armenian dream and become a pianist—"

"I had a weak pinkie. Besides, the world doesn't need another immigrant pianist."

"No. An immigrant grocer is much more plausible." He cleared his throat, then asked, "How did he get there? That guy?"

"What do you mean? How did *we* get here?"

"We flew. First you, then me. You reunited with your father because your mother refused to move here and you felt lonely and afraid. Joseph, with your name you should never feel like that."

"Stalin was afraid of his own shadow. That's why he sent twenty million to the Gulag, so

no one could contradict him or see his fear. He slaughtered his own people.” I paused, then added, “And I’m not lonely.”

“Of course, you are. That’s why you invented that nonsense, so you could you feel connected to a place you don’t belong to.”

“I didn’t invent anything. It really happened. I swear. He just appeared and asked for salmon. I could’ve never imagined such a thing.”

“Well, then, test your DNA. Maybe you came to this land because of some genetic metamorphoses. Maybe I’m not your father after all. Now, if you excuse me, I have a chess match, which promises to be more exciting than what I’ve had in years. This guy is really good, and he’s a Turk, so it gives me double pleasure to knock him dead.” My father laughed, a short dusty laugh that turned into coughing.

We both hung up, and I had this annoying feeling as when my mother had said, “You want to be with him, then go, get out of my flat. Love him all you want, the bastard that he is.”

My mother, she knew no mercy.

When I was sixteen—the age of maturity according to my Armenian ancestors—I visited my father in Yerevan for the first time since the divorce. My mother had fled Armenia when I was three, so I had no memories of him other than the smell of his pipe and clouds of smoke, behind which his face hovered unrecognizable. When I left Moscow that summer, my mother swore never to cook or care for me, a promise she didn’t break. The world could not imagine a less affectionate woman. But I felt the need to see my father; the call of blood was stronger than my mother’s threats or the stigma of betrayal. The three weeks turned into three months, the entire summer, at the end of which I feasted on the largest, the sweetest of pomegranates and learned not only how to cook Armenian food—dolma, harissa, and *khash*, a dish of lamb feet that had been boiled overnight and served with *lavash* bread—but the entire history of the Armenian people, starting with Noah’s Ark and ending with the 1915 genocide, when one and half million Armenians had been murdered.

My father told me how Ottoman Turks used starvation as well as execution to kill Armenians, and how the world failed to intervene but turned deaf to the pleas of tortured children and women. He spoke about the routine rape of young Armenian girls, whom the Turks would line up against the walls of their homes, choosing one, two, three, four, five each night, their language, their songs beaten out of them. He described the death marches through the deserts of Der Zor, now paved with Armenian bones. “People still find them,” he’d said. “Chips of bones, fragile like desert dust. They don’t touch them but search for a stone, any old rock, to mark the place. Now, the entire land is paved with rocks. They look like skulls sticking out of the ground.”

Finally, he revealed the story of my Armenian great-grandmother whose family was killed by the Ottoman Turks and who’d been abducted when she was thirteen. She remained in

captivity for ten years and never owned a pair of shoes. Her feet would freeze, and her skin would peel off. She delivered eight stillborn children. She gave birth to death. She was rescued by an old Turkish woman, who took pity on her, bringing her shoes and sneaking her out of the village on a market cart, hidden under a pile of rugs. As my father spoke, his voice, his eyes welled up with tears. He always finished his talks with two admonitions: I was to remember my heritage and never to marry a Turk.

At the store, I heated up the leftover of my wife's shepherd's pie then added a few pieces of fresh dolma delivered to me by a local Turkish family. Had my father known this, I would've been disowned. I picked up the phone and called my fish suppliers in New York and asked them if I could have a large order of wild salmon by Friday.

"Not unless we catch it ourselves," they said.

"Can you?"

"Are you nuts?"

"And if the price is right?"

"It depends."

"Just bring the fish, will you?"

My dolma overheated, but my Shepherd's pie was still cold. I sat behind the counter and swirled my silverware inside the layers of potatoes, carrots, and beef, then added a chunk of dolma. I felt ridiculous about the whole thing, and yet I was convinced that my Native American customer would return. I knew that I didn't dream him up, but his sudden appearance did puzzle me.

Where indeed had he come from?

There were two state-recognized reservations in Virginia, the Pamunkey and the Mattaponi. My daughters had learned about them in school. Every Thanksgiving, since the 1677 Treaty of Middle Plantation, the two Indian chiefs presented our governor with two dead deer and pottery. The original treaty promised that the tribes would be allowed territory and hunting and fishing rights in exchange for their fealty to English rule. In reality, the state's registrar tried to eliminate the category of "Indian" from the state's records, which resulted in generations of Native people whose very identity was denied by the state.

I grew disconcerted and called my mother in Moscow.

"Did you cheat on my father?" I asked.

"Hello to you too."

"Seriously? Is that why you left him? You were ashamed to admit it?"

"Unthinkable. Where do you get such ideas?"

I told her about my visitor and the DNA test I'd just ordered.

My mother could never listen. She interrupted me, her friends, and her lovers before their thoughts had a chance to materialize. She was impatient and restless, always switching topics.

People bored her. She could read a book in one day and forget it the next. She was in command of the situation, and when she wasn't, she'd try to reverse it. Like many Russian women, she was filled with contradictions, although hers were contradictory desires rather than truths.

Still, my mother remained silent—for the second time in our mutual history. The first time had been when I told her I was in love with an Irish woman and staying in America for good. She voiced no curiosity or damnation back then, she just hung up.

“Mom, did you hear what I said?”

“Yes. I heard. And I'm trying to determine whether it's an exile-induced insanity or whether you've always been crazy and somehow I missed that, which would make it my fault.”

I continued to chew my food.

She didn't say anything else for a while, and neither did I, although I knew she wanted to ask about her grandchildren, and—oddly—my father.

“He's O.K.,” I finally said. “Smoking like it's his last day.”

“Maybe it is.”

“Don't say that.”

“What else is there to say? The man was born stupid, and he refuses to admit it.”

“I was thinking if you didn't cheat on Dad, maybe Grandma cheated on Granddad?”

“Joseph, I gave you that name so you would grow up a strong, decisive man. But since day one you've been sinking in doubt like flies in horse shit.”

At first, I didn't laugh, but then I did. Even in the time of abject grief and throat-chocking anger, my mother could be marvelously vivid in her expressions. She made the world listen.

“Here's my theory,” I said. “Grandma was discovered by an American soldier in that concentration camp. Maybe he was Native American. Many had been drafted. The 49s, the warrior songs—some say the name originated from this one incident when fifty Native Americans had been sent to fight a battle in WWII, and only one came back. But some say forty-nine came back and one died.”

“I'm lost.”

“Could Grandma have had an affair with the American soldier? She had you right after the war.”

“Bye, Joseph. It's one a.m. here. Hug the kids.”

“When are you coming to visit?” I asked, not out of curiosity but out of politeness.

“Never. Not with your father there.”

“But he doesn't live with us.”

“I can feel his presence for kilometers. It's like his cigarettes—the poison slips into your body unbeknownst.”

I laid down the phone and rubbed my ear. Then I walked outside and sat on the curb.

It was Indian summer. The weather—warm, benevolent. A kindling of the late-afternoon sun. The mountain ridges weaved in the distance, a patchwork of garnet and amber.

That night, my wife and I watched an interminably long Turkish movie, *Winter Sleep*, named after the second movement of Schubert's sonata No. 20 in F-sharp minor. I remembered the piece well from my conservatory days. The music flooded the scenes with despair, a sense of tragic inescapability.

When I looked at my wife, she was crying.

"She's trapped that woman," my wife mouthed through tears. "Locked inside that house, inside that marriage. She'll never get out. All the silence."

I had a terrible premonition that somehow her comments were addressed at me, and I rushed to cut off the TV. The house sank into darkness.

"Something is wrong with us," my wife finally said.

"Us?" I asked.

"With you. Something is wrong with you. That obsession with the DNA test. I feel disconnected. Alienated."

I walked to her and wrapped my arms around her trembling shoulders and pulled her close against my chest.

Later that night, for the first time, I failed to make love to my wife. I began having thoughts of death and mortality and lost my erection. My heart thumped in my chest, and I grew unnerved, just as I did when my mother had slapped me across the face after I'd confessed that I loved my father, and that a man, any man, deserved a second chance.

Sleep eluded me. For hours, I continued to breathe heavily next to my wife, feeling punished for watching a Turkish film and buying dolma from the Turkish family. As I lay there, I remembered my father saying that all important discoveries were made in the dark, and so I made one too: Perhaps I did imagine everything—the odd customer, the salmon; perhaps I was indeed suffering from some bizarre identity crisis. My father was right—I'd never felt truly at home in America. But then I hadn't felt at home in Russia either. When we'd travelled there last year as a family, I couldn't wait to leave. My wife, my children, they were strangers to that land and to my mother, who was too excessive in her opinions—her eccentricities, her age aggrandized by our presence. Somehow my Russianness was aggrandized too. There had never been a time in my life when I felt so separated from my children, not even when they were still in their mother's womb. I was surrounded by my people, my language, my culture, the native birches and church onion domes, the smells, the tastes of my childhood, and yet I had experienced such grave loneliness.

The next morning, I went to work early and closed the store around three p.m., speeding through the roads of Harrisonburg to pick up my daughters before my wife did; she taught chemistry in

the same school. Our oldest had a license but no car, so she always drove the four of them back home in my wife's van.

I scooped the girls in my arms—those raisin-haired, petal-skinned creatures, who smelled like spring rain. Reluctantly, they allowed me to pull the phones out of their hands and toss them on the passenger's seat, each asking:

“Dad, are you O.K.?”

“What's wrong, Dad?”

“Does Mom know you're picking us up?”

I sent a short text to my wife, and she followed us in her van, all the way to the house. Our phones kept ringing, one at a time, but I ignored them. When we got home, I ushered the girls into the basement and waited for their distraught mother to join them. I opened up an old upright piano and asked my family to sit on the couch pushed against the opposite wall. My daughters seemed more frightened than amused. They'd never heard me play; I'd stopped practicing right after the first one was born. The instrument sounded dull and out of tune, but I was surprised by how well my fingers remembered the notes, the touch and feel of the keys. Even my weak pinkie rose to the challenge. I knew I could always dazzle my wife with Chopin or Brahms, but I didn't wish to bore my children, so I played a few Russian folk songs before moving onto Komitas, the father of modern Armenian classical music. He was a priest, a composer, and a teacher, who'd travelled across the country collecting native dances, work songs, love songs, wedding songs, as well as songs about the pain and the trauma of displacement, to which his people had been subjected again and again. He was an eyewitness to the genocide and spent the last fifteen years of his life in a psychiatric hospital.

As I continued to play, all the tunes I'd ever memorized, I suddenly remembered how red the pomegranates were that summer in Armenia. And how my mother crushed them with her fist upon my return.

When I finished the last of the Komitas pieces, my family remained silent. They didn't breathe a sound, their gaze softened by the music. They had no idea how to respond to such tenderness or my need to share it with them.

I said, “This is who I am. And also who you are. And I hope you can love it. I hope we can all love it.”

Then I told my wife that I didn't want her to ever endure the silence, trapped in a relationship like that woman in the movie. I could go to therapy, if she needed me to, I could learn to cook. I promised never to sleep with any of her friends or sisters. I told my daughters that they weren't to blame for their parents' fights, mistakes, or insecurities. The throes of aging. I loved them more than I loved myself. I might not always understand them, but I would break their boyfriends' necks if I had to, if anyone dared to hurt my children.

~

On Friday, the DNA testing kit arrived. I spat into the provided tube, stowed it in the box, and put it in the freezer, where it should stay for at least twenty-four hours before mailing. Outside, on my way to work, I inhaled the fall air, the dead grass and leaves, and tasted the presence of great longing. I thought of the Native American guy, his weighty greasy hair he probably never cut. I wondered what it felt like to keep something all your life, that part of you that wasn't useful or even pretty?

I called my father again.

“Did you love her at all?”

“Who?”

“My aunt? Why did you sleep with her?”

“Why do I have to explain myself now? Ever been caught in a moment?”

“Not that kind of moment.”

“Then you wouldn't understand. But in short—she made me feel good. Your mother, she always patronized. And she was a lousy cook, unlike her sister. Oh, those meat *pierogi*!”

“You traded my mother for *pierogi*?”

“Don't get sentimental. Your heritage doesn't allow it.”

“Fuck you,” I said and hung up.

The rest of the day I had trouble positioning myself in the world. I assisted the customers, but did so in a kind of foggy delirium. I gave out foods—smoked sturgeon, Russian chocolate, black bread, and *khalva*, a sweet delicacy of honey and crushed sunflower seeds—to anyone who asked.

The fish arrived an hour before closing time. Surprisingly, the tanks were smaller than I expected and the fish much slimmer. The driver carried in the tanks and set them on the floor, and I passed him the money envelope. It was all the cash I had without having to write a check or tell my wife. I loved her, but I could never disclose my craziness, which she would then relay to her therapist, who would strip me to the bone—my broken home, my childhood, my desire to please both parents, the guilt over betraying each one. The cultural displacement induced by immigration. My failed erection.

“There're forty-nine. One short,” the driver said.

“How come?” I asked.

“It died on the way.”

I nodded and peered inside the tanks, where the beautiful ray-finned fish glistened underwater.

I waited for the Native American guy, but he didn't show up. I laughed, mostly at my own stupidity, and also my obsessive stubbornness in believing that all things happened for a reason, that one man's fish could become another man's prophecy.

Right at seven, I turned off the lights.

As I opened the door, I discovered him sitting on the curb, smoking a cigar. His hair was loose, hugging his shoulders. It reminded me of my grandmother's, who, after the war, after she was able to grow her hair back, refused to cut it. When she died, her skin was thin and parched like fallen leaves, but her braids, thick and silver, reached down to her knees. It seemed as though her entire life, each one of her stories, had been woven into her hair.

The guy offered me his cigar, and I took it, placing my mouth around the damp softened end.

"I got your salmon," I said, my words dissolving into a cloud of smoke.

"I know."

"How?"

"The wind whispered in my ears."

I flipped him a finger.

He grinned. "I saw the driver carrying in the tanks. How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing. It's a gift. From my people to yours."

"What can I give you instead?"

I shrugged and passed him the cigar. "A song?"

When he began to sing, his voice reverberated through the air like thunder through the mountains. I couldn't understand the words, but the melody was deep, undulating, with dramatic leaps and descents. It resembled those sacred Armenian melodies that echoed through my heart, "Hov Arek," "Mankakan Nvak," "Msho Shoror"—a dance performed during pilgrimages to the Surb Karapet, the monastery demolished after 1915, its population annihilated.

I thought how I'd go home and play piano for my daughters; how I'd throw away the DNA kit because what could it possibly change? For them, for me, for my parents or grandparents?

"You *are* real?" I asked when he stopped singing. "Aren't you?"

He laughed. His laughter soaking through me like grief. And then like love.

And then like a confluence of both.