SHORT STORY

In Memory of the Beaches of Siberia

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"Daisy Chain" by Sarah Schneider

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1.

From the open window of my room in a St. Petersburg communal apartment, I heard the joyful screams of swallows in the bright evening sky and the multi-voice drama of the television. The birds' squeals and their piercing urban echo reminded me of the lull of late summer in Irkutsk a mere six years earlier, when I was in high school, and the swallows were like children, swimming in the warm evening water, while the adults were busy being adults: drinking, grilling.

Before all else, I had to persuade my father or my brother to drive me to the quarry lakes, while the sun was still high. If, exasperated by the heat, they agreed, we would go and spend some time looking for a spot amidst familiar crowds. My father would then be the first to go in, always alone, and swim far, but not long, focused and serious about his powerful breaststroke. My brother could not swim and none of this was fun for him at all, but he would make a conscientious effort to go into the water at some point, when it had been tested by the others, and thrash about for a few minutes, always learning something new with each attempt. And I would take off my jeans — shorts were not masculine enough and therefore taboo — and t-shirt and then, without priming my underactive body in any way, step into the brownish-green, stagnant, utterly innocent water. I would walk into an unavoidable spurt of underground seepage and feel its frightening cold, but keep going until I could plunge forward, assume an imperfectly horizontal position, and start thrusting my arms and pushing the water down to a rhythm. My breathing was always the greatest of my worries, and I would measure my strength against the weight of the water, until the water proved stronger than my panicky lungs and my puerile front crawl, and I would stop in exhaustion, float on my back, and look up into the sky. In it, up in the unimaginable blue, almost too bright for my eyes, swallows would cross the much lower and more irregular trajectories of black-veined white butterflies, but having my ears submerged in the water I would not hear the birds. Only when I turned around, waved my arms some more, and waded ashore, with that happy tension in my shoulders, would I become aware of the sounds and smells and sights around us. Having dried ourselves on a single big towel, we would sit on the littered gravelly bank, talk, and people-watch as we waited for our desire of water and movement to build up for one last time before going home.

Our quarry lake was one of the several man-made reservoirs, each the size of three soccer fields, clustered together by the hydroelectric dam in Irkutsk, on the left bank of the Angara. The only bodies of water within the city limits that did not have cold and deadly currents, shallow and landlocked, they were popular in the hot summer months, especially with children. Older kids would leap and dive from an improvised springboard in our lake with

raucous screams of unsupervised merrymaking, while younger ones would splash in the shallows, and all would yell at each other and generally continue the regular drama of their onshore lives. It smelled of the invisible film of drying silt covering our hair, of gasoline, diesel fuel, and motor oil, car exhaust, dust, sometimes barbequed shashlik, but above all else there was the pervasive odor of tobacco, both stale and fresh.

2.

In the six years since that summer in Irkutsk, I had finished high school, graduated from Irkutsk University with a degree in Russian literature, and arrived in St. Petersburg in search of a new beginning. When I had come to the city in August of the previous year, I had not known anyone there except an online friend who, in recognition of some translating work I had done for him, invited me to stay in his parents' apartment while I was looking for permanent housing. The apartment was in an old, unfashionable, and pleasantly quiet part of the Petrograd Side, halfway between the Peter-and-Paul Fortress and the Finland Station. I was installed in a cluttered closet of a room, where the family kept their least-needed furniture, useless dried paints, cleaning supplies, and abandoned books. The air was humid with the effluvia of the mire on which the house had been built, but this was St. Petersburg, and I was sincerely grateful for a bumpy bed with a blanket and for the books, stacked on some shelves in an easy-to-browse fashion. The books especially gave me a sense of accidental luck, as if I had something to learn from them, and lazily I took down a volume to skim before bed every night. I plumped, one evening, for the curious title *Letters from Siberia* by the Russian philosopher, one of the inspirators of the doomed Decembrist revolt of 1825, Mikhail Lunin. After the revolt, even though he had not participated in it directly, he was sentenced to exile in Siberia and wrote home frequently. The man, it turned out, belonged to my favorite class of writer who represented culture as their birthright. I myself aspired to that class and now tried on the fate of a Lunin. Coming across the Latin and English quotations and the unapologetically abstract intellectualism in his political letters, I indulged my cultural aspiration and imagined what it must feel like to be born into a privileged St. Petersburg family — until something soured the daydream and made me lose all interest in the book. The self-proclaimed Catholic and one-time would-be regicide, Michel Lounine wrote in French and signed his letters from Irkutsk to his sister in St. Petersburg: *l'exil*. It was confusing and unsettling. Was it justified, the excitement I felt at having reached the city of words, if my trajectory was the exact opposite of the writers I admired?

In the next eleven months, I moved three times, pursued by the humidity, confirming with each new place my sense of homelessness. In January, at the witching hour when long winter shadows seemed longer than ever, I ended up in a dark armpit of an apartment at the end of Galernaya Street by the Wharves, one block away from the Neva. I wintered there, and when the fetid St. Petersburg spring made its unimpressive entrance, I opened my second-story window into a narrow well of a courtyard, with the green tips of New Holland poplars barely visible above the roofs. I would leave the window slightly ajar at night and hear the scratching of a cat's or a crow's claws on the tin roof. In the morning, a middle-aged neighbor would walk his minuscule Shih Tzu in the courtyard below. The slow, evidently sickly animal would sneeze repeatedly, and, after each sneeze, the man would say in a low, matter-of-fact voice: "*Bud' zdorova!*'" (Bless you). And then, not a week sooner than scheduled, there was a cool, bracing St. Petersburg summer. The city did not know any better kind of summer and poured into the streets and parks to strike up conversations with strangers and to engage in the favorite local pastime of endless perambulation. People tread the streets until it grew dark and they knew by the smell in the night air that they lived by the sea.

3.

Topical reading and news from healthier climates seemed excessively optimistic sometimes. A litterateur from Moscow, for instance, who called himself, with pre-emptive modesty, a second-tier author, claimed to have put an end to the century-long debate regarding the authenticity of *The Tale of Igor's Campaign,* an anonymous Old Russian epic poem written in the twelfth century and rediscovered under unclear circumstances at the close of the eighteenth century, after which its only surviving manuscript had perished in the Moscow Fire of 1812. The Muscovite was almost proud to side with those who believed that an unprecedentedly great work, a one-of-a-kind masterpiece could *not* be authentically ancient. Convinced that the world needed to hear his inspired argument, he continued by claiming that only individuals could, as a rule, forget things of vital importance, but a community, let alone a nation, by the law of large numbers, could never dislodge from its collective memory an object of such value. There was no way the Russians could have forgotten for six centuries their most remarkable poetic achievement; the *Tale,* therefore, must be a fake. I weighed the amusing intellectual nimbleness of his argument against my experience and had an impulse to take the man on a tour of St. Petersburg's old cemeteries, for him to witness the depth of oblivion of which Russians were capable, as a family and as a nation. The whole of St. Petersburg was a forgotten pearl of a city.

Only as a tourist destination did it still remember its former glory of an imperial capital. And even then, the city did not seem to believe the window-dressed quality of its own brightly illuminated downtown areas, with the Soviet identity of its proletarian neighborhoods tucked away out of sight. Its greatest secret, revealed to anyone who stayed in it beyond the short tourist season, was that its northern palaces, geometric squares, and Dostoevskian tenement houses only existed for the loud appreciation of foreign visitors, and without their attention everything went limp and dim. To live in St. Petersburg for a year was like watching a very old actress before, during, and after her performance: you saw a stirring, an unfurling, a determined and patient preparation; it was followed by an all-out gaga gala, with fireworks and champagne, and a general sense of vigorous self-immolation; and after that, when everything was over, and the emptiness of the auditorium reflected and augmented the emptiness of the old face, a tremendous relief, and you hoped, for the old woman's sake, that this was her last time.

4.

Without realizing it, I lived in grief. I mourned my childhood. The era of adulthood came as an ability to love unsafe, dangerous things. This was how I loved St. Petersburg, whose crowds intimidated me. People shamelessly sunbathing on the narrow strip of sand by the Peter-and-Paul Fortress left me aghast. As far as I was concerned, there was nowhere to go for a swim, no one to go with, as if I had left all humanity in *l'exil*, and this was no more than a sight to see. Afraid to be embarrassed in my search for people, I kept my existence a secret from them. I consistently rejected the reality which offered itself to me, presumably in hopes that at some point, another, more acceptable version, would present itself. I was excited to see in my circumstances a rare opportunity to live outside reality altogether.

A remittance man of sorts, I lived at an unnatural remove from the world. A philosopher at sea, I was scared to imagine to what extent my actual life at the time depended on my parents' money. The city was dismally cold and aloof and disdained to take me in, but it was gradually becoming clear to me that it was my parents' support that made it possible for me not only to survive the city's aloofness, but to leave unarticulated and unresolved the conflict between my silly ambition and the city's hardness. My loneliness in St. Petersburg was not a problem as long as I could sustain this lifestyle. At irregular intervals, when I asked, my father put a little sum into my account in Irkutsk, without enthusiasm but with unwavering commitment, as if he had lost a bet and was compelled to pay what he owed, and the money made it terrifically easy for me to find myself outside the moment, outside live relationships. I was free to choose a lifestyle, and instead I withdrew from life altogether. I had a chance to

discover the value of money in determining how I wanted to spend it, and instead I spent a year's worth of living expenses cruising mechanically between my room and the library on Nevsky Prospect.

5.

The girl's name was Diana. She was blonde and tall, with a gentle, sentimental quality to her ungainly youth. One fine morning in early June, I recognized her walking down the aisle towards my desk in the palatial reading room of the Russian National Library, where I had spent every workday in the previous eight months. She was with a friend, but I did not notice them. All I saw was a single most interesting, hopeful fragment of my Irkutsk life, which filled the dead silence of my circumstances to capacity, as if a family member walked up to me amidst some particularly bleak afterlife.

Two questions presented themselves at once for consideration. First, what were the odds of meeting a friend 3,500 miles away from where you last saw them? I had just discovered a fateful, mystical side to life in a big city: if you stayed there long enough, things were bound to happen, things of personal import. And second, what to do with those things when they did happen?

The girl looked at me, nearsighted, incredulous, excited. There was the inescapable comparison of individual vanities: I was in the graduate program at St. Petersburg State University; she in the even more prestigious program. Then it turned out that, whatever the odds of meeting her here actually were, they were enough to elevate me from relative irrelevance, as a not very interesting and angry classmate of five years at Irkutsk University, to a fellow zealot of knowledge, propelled by my ambition into the big world. I earned my right to visit her in the evening.

Her apartment was in the hipper part of town, with a Dostoevsky monument for a landmark, and a street musician was performing outside her windows. Disappointingly, she had a roommate and a friend visiting, and I was compelled to shake unfamiliar feminine hands and to attempt small talk, which was full of confusing, self-deprecating, knowing irony, and sexual tension. The roommate was on all fours on the floor, hand-painting a poster for a musical event, and the guest, who was about to leave, exhorted her across the room in a husky contralto, without a hint of a smile, in full awareness of my presence: "Katya, with all that crawling, don't give people the wrong impression by rubbing holes in the knees of your tights."

Impressed by the self-respecting independence of Diana's living arrangement compared to my devil-may-care communal life, I started spending long summer evenings with her and Katya. I brought DVDs and we watched early Federico Fellini and late Krzysztof Kie?lowski. I would then go home, often by foot, through the whitely glowing streets, empty of people and vehicles. At other times, when the movie was too long or the conversation too interesting, I would stay for the night and lie on the depressed spare mattress on the floor, disturbed and kept from sleep by the innocence of the situation. There would be a commotion in the middle of the night, I would open my eyes and see Katya sit up on her mattress and burst into song. Somehow, I was under the impression that the performance was intended for me but was too disoriented to figure out by whom: Diana who asked Katya to sing, or Katya who complied. Disoriented, both by the lateness of the hour and by the unfamiliar room, by the entire current curve in the continuum of time and space, I went back to feigning sleep when the performance was over.

St. Petersburg dictated our choice of diversions, and Diana and I went on fast walks, solemn like military parades, around the city. We sat down on a bench in the Summer Garden where with my phone I took a picture of her, in profile, and she remained in profile and pretended not to notice anything. In conversation, she wanted to impress me by the kind of company she kept, at university and elsewhere, as if she felt comfortable only when there was someone else around us, and yet, there was no jealous admirer for me to worry about, and I allowed myself to be unusually frank, in my prim provincial way, with her, and she responded in kind, only for our frankness to misfire at the most unexpected time. I was utterly confused by our mutual candor: welcoming, but innocent and spectrally incorporeal.

On a windy midsummer day, during one of our strolls downtown, amidst the indifferent crowds on the square by the Moscow Station, at a characteristically brisk pace, with characteristically little eye contact between us, I asked her if she had a thing she would always rather be doing, something like a dream profession. She held her breath for a second, squinted her eyes and said that in an ideal world, she would probably go work with children somewhere; she had always had a soft spot for that Catcher in the Rye business. I acknowledged the purposeful humility of her answer with a polite grunt. When, as is always the case with such spontaneous quizzes, it was my turn to answer my own question, I said, with complete sincerity, that my dream job was to be a hitman. As soon as I said it, I sensed how wrong everything was: how wrong it was to feel so angry, and how ridiculously wrong it was to tell her about it. Her reaction was to remain studiedly unimpressed, and she avoided eye contact with me even more than before. My conversational daring had infected her however, and a few days later she asked me, out of the bluest blue, if I would take her as a wife. It was obvious that she wanted to know whether, from my impartial point of view, she

was possessed of the abstract quality of marriageability, but I took the suggestive vagueness of her phrasing as an opportunity to make it personal and said I would have to think about it. I do not remember if I ever shared with her the results of my deliberation: “Yes, I would, because you’re difficult to be with, and in my experience, ease invariably leads to heartbreak.”

After a couple of months of confusion, which I took for intimacy, I found myself spending a night alone with her, in her apartment, with Katya away at some friends’ and unable to interrupt anything with her song. Of course, there was nothing to interrupt and, as usual, no indication that Diana wanted me. In the morning, I woke up with renewed impatience in my tired limbs, got up from my mattress, and moved in the direction of the bathroom. When I approached her, as she was sitting in a pile of blankets on the floor and blinking slowly without her glasses, I quickly bent over and kissed her lightly on the nape of her neck, upon which her posture instantly stiffened. Once again, I realized right away how very wrong everything was. I became deeply ashamed, one on one with my baffled desire. Not daring to look at her, I muttered something by way of explaining myself and proceeded to the bathroom. When I emerged several minutes later, she was busying herself with a frugal breakfast, and I curtly apologized to her for what I had done. She shrugged her shoulders and nodded, and it was effectively undone, then and there, for reasons that were too obvious and too incontrovertible to be said out loud.

We continued to meet regularly, and when we were visiting our families in Irkutsk in August, she invited me over to a friend’s empty apartment downtown, to watch *The Shining*, which I had never seen before. She put on the movie, turned off the light, and left me alone in the room for two and a half hours: she was curious to see if it would scare me. It did not, and she was duly amused. And then I spent another night alone with her in Irkutsk, finding relief from our exhausting banter in our innocence. When I called to tell my parents that I was not coming home for the night, still afraid of their reaction, my father suddenly became curious and started asking ceremonious questions about the girl’s name, living situation, and career options, as if in preparation for a dynastic marriage.

6.

In the years since that serendipitous meeting at the National Library, I have had numerous opportunities to confirm the impression of which I first became aware then, with a girl I knew, in a city I did not, or vice versa: People never meet each other, but their conditions do, and it is their neuro-compatibility that determines the outcome of every encounter. I had never seen Diana with a boyfriend in the five years I had known her in Irkutsk, while her

female friendships had seemed exclusive, and, sure enough, it had occurred to me, in some theoretical fashion, that she might not like boys at all, but when we were alone she sounded both androphilic and personal and accepted my company with a deliberateness which I could not help interpreting as some kind of inchoate romantic interest. The truth, however, was that in Irkutsk, I had managed to live till the age of twenty-three and to remain completely ignorant of the human relevance, or even the existence, of difference and diversity, and just as I had never been to a Jewish, Ukrainian, or Buryat house, I had never met an openly homosexual person, nor had I had any idea that asexual people existed, let alone that I might know one. It had never occurred to me that, besides the usual vagaries of personal attraction, there was something else to consider in relationships.

The impression applied with even more justice to human encounters with cities. In St. Petersburg, I had conscientiously played the role of a tourist in the beginning of that year, still trusting its crumbling facades, still under the spell of its aged histrionics. It was still the most beautiful place I had ever seen. But despite the genial symmetry of the city's gridiron plan, despite myself, I eventually rejected St. Petersburg the way I felt rejected in it, and when another promised elsewhere presented itself, I accepted it as my future. At the end of my St. Petersburg year, as the tourist season dwindled and the throngs of indefatigable grey-haired travelers in churches and museums became increasingly thinner, I found myself hurrying through the city, about to leave it for good, convinced that behind this floodlit, sequin-littered stage, alive with exaggerated puppet life, there was nothing at all, a gaping rift in time, an ellipsis. I saw the similarity between this hiatus of a city and my loneliness, between its theatricality and my desire, but I did not want to see it. It was unbearable to look at my fears embodied on such a grand scale in reality.

Our solitudes were too skittish, our young souls too proud, our ambitions too bold, and that St. Petersburg summer too short. Fifteen years after I said my goodbyes to the city and the girl, my dead father visited me in a dream to let me know that, around the time when I was in St. Petersburg, a middle-aged man had called on them in Irkutsk. The stranger told my parents that the girl I was seeing at the time was his daughter and that she was interested in me: she just waited, he said, for a token of loyalty. In the dream, I knew what the message meant, and the memory was thus forever tainted with a violent sense of remorse, hopelessly belated and useless. But then I woke up and remembered with relief that Diana had grown up fatherless, and my daytime life resumed its bustle and noise and its joys of satisfied vanity, and I forgot about my gradual disappearance from home, my ignorance and withdrawal, until I dreamed of the beaches of Siberia again.