SHORT STORY

The Overcoat

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"Moscow Nights" by Lasse van den Dikkenberg

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I stood by the bronze horseman and shivered. It was already April, but the frigid wind that blew in from the Neva went straight through me. Even Peter the Great, dressed as he was in his emperor's toga, looked chilled, his fingers of copper reaching stiffly toward the West.

Then I saw Yurek heading toward me across Decembrists' Square. Right away I noticed he was wearing a new coat. When he came closer, I saw what it was: a camel affair with lapels and sleeve flaps—the kind of coat an adult would wear. It made Yurek's slender, fourteen-year-old frame appear bigger and bulkier than usual. Even his normally pale face was a little flushed.

"Hey," I said. I wanted to tell him he was late but instead I only said, "Nice coat."

"Hey," he said, as if he didn't really care.

"Looks kind of fancy. Where's it made?"

"Poland."

Lucky bastard, I thought. Poland was almost Paris to us Soviets. My own coat, rough-hewn and threadbare, the color of the Leningrad sky in winter, was produced at a factory called "Bolshevichka." Naturally, I had already ripped off the tag with that shameful brand name, not that it made the coat look any better.

"Alright," I said, "let's get going."

"Let's — only I want to go up Nevsky."

For some time now, Yurek and I would get together after school and embark on a particular kind of expedition. We'd start by the horseman and trek along the Neva embankment, right by the Admiralty and the Hermitage Museum and the once-gorgeous palazzos, now state institutions with crumbling facades and bureaucratic titles etched on the tablets that hung by their entrances. We'd continue all the way to the Kirovskiy Bridge, then over to the opposite side of the river where the old battlecruiser Aurora and the bastions of the Peter and Paul fortress still grimly faced the Winter Palace — all the places we were most likely to bump into *zapadniki*, people from the West.

We were always on the lookout for Westerners. Our country was separated from the rest of the world by the mighty Iron Curtain and visitors from the "other side" — in cold season mostly Finns on coach tours — aroused in us no less curiosity than the first pale-faced arrivals must have among the natives of the New World. Everything about them was striking: their bright-colored outfits, the way they kept their heads up when they walked, like they weren't afraid of anything, even their chewing gum, that ultimate symbol of Western civilization that we craved. Each time we spotted one of their gleaming coaches, near some

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monument or museum, we would hide behind a granite column or a statue and wait for the mysterious representatives of the forbidden West to come out. I already knew some handy phrases, like “how do you do, sir!” and “pleased to meet you!” I had learned in my English class that I was eager to use in “the real world”. Yurek, who was bad with languages — the only thing he knew how to say was “*purukummi yo*?” which meant, “got chewing gum?” in Finnish — appointed me to be our spokesman in any future head-to-head encounter with the aliens. But we could never find a way to get close enough to them without running the risk of being apprehended by the secret police — for the crime called, “accosting foreigners” — so we usually admired them from afar.

“Why Nevsky?” I now asked Yurek. Nevsky Prospekt was Leningrad’s main avenue. There were Westerners there too, of course, but there were also more police and more chances to get caught.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “It’s kinda windy by the river, no?”

“But I thought your new coat was warm?”

“Not *that* warm.”

“All right then,” I conceded. “Nevsky it is."

We crossed over into Aleksandrovsky Gardens, its wooden benches vacant in anticipation of spring. The wind was blowing hard at our backs, pushing us forward, toward the Nevsky.

“How’d you come by the coat anyways?” I asked Yurek.

“Mom got it.”

His mother, Aunt Ivanna, had stumbled upon the coat at the DLT department store. It was one of those rare occasions when a batch of imported coats suddenly arrived and a crowd of people elbowed and pushed their way to the counter. Luckily, Aunt Ivanna had in her pocket the child support money that Yurek’s estranged father, Zorik, had sent her on the occasion of their son’s fourteenth birthday.

“It’s kinda big, your new coat, no?” I said.

“Not really.” He straightened his back and spread out his shoulders. “It’s supposed to be sort of loose anyway. That’s how they wear them in the West.”

He said it with so much authority I didn’t dare to contradict him. Yurek was a couple years older, already in eighth grade, and I looked up to him, not least because I thought he was really lucky. He wasn’t an only child like I was, but had a sister and a brother, with whom he lived in his mother’s communal apartment on Pesochny Lane. The old bourgeois abode had

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winding, dimly lit hallways and old servants' quarters — a maid's room and a butler's pantry — adjacent to the kitchen. Yurek and his family occupied the former maid's room, an arrangement which, on account of its overcrowded condition, my mother used to call a "gypsy encampment," but whose rough conviviality I often envied. The communal pantry also had a nickname, *predbannik*, "the dressing room," given it by Aunt Ivanna. She taught evening school, and Yurek and his siblings could do whatever they wanted all day after classes, which, to someone like me whose father was always on his case about homework, was the epitome of freedom. Late in the evening, the family would gather in predbannik to devour the sausage, cheese, and bread that Aunt Ivanna had picked up on the way from work — the fare that my mother dismissed as lowly "grub," but that I, with my mandatory warm supper, secretly craved.

Then there was Yurek's pale complexion. He wasn't swarthy like me, but had straw-colored hair with a golden sheen and the big blue eyes of a good-natured rascal, that he inherited from his father, Zorik. And even though he also had Zorik's aquiline nose that would ultimately earn him, among friends, the nickname Pelican, no one ever called him *zhid* at the pioneer camps where we summered. Yurek's "Aryan" looks, together with his Polish surname, Chernyavsky, fooled the young anti-Semites with red bandannas around their necks into believing that he was a fellow Slav.

And now he had this sporty new coat.

As usual, Nevsky was full of commotion. Throngs of passersby in drab attire moved past shop windows with displays of domestic things that no one wanted. Yurek's coat stood out in the crowd, and I noticed girls give him quick, stealthy once-overs. I realized that Yurek must have picked Nevsky on purpose. Everybody who wore imported stuff would take it to Nevsky sooner or later.

But there were no Westerners in sight. We had already passed by all the likely landmarks — the House of Books, the Kazansky Cathedral, the Anichkov Palace — and still not a single shiny coach!

"Where the hell did they all go?" I heard Yurek mutter.

"To the Hermitage, I bet," I said. "Or else, to the Fortress." I now felt mad that we had taken the Nevsky route, instead of our usual one along the river, where we never failed to see at least a few foreign buses. *Just because he wanted to show off that stupid coat of his!*

We were now at Vosstaniya Square mall with its metro station in the shape of a rotunda with columns, and a crowd of gypsies, winos, and idlers milling around. Stone markers linked

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with heavy cast-iron chains separated the mall from the rest of the square. This was where the “fashionable” part of Nevsky ended and the seedier one began. Behind the markers, across Ligovsky Prospekt loomed the façade of the Oktyabrskaya Hotel, where my mother worked as concierge of the fourth floor. In the warmer months the sidewalk before the hotel was crowded and there were many buses and cars parked in front of it, but now it was all but empty.

We were about to call it a day and split, when a big, red-and-blue coach pulled up in front of the Oktyabrskaya. “See that?” said Yurek.

“Yeah!”

“Let’s go and check it out.” And he started in the direction of the hotel.

“Wait,” I said. “Wait.”

“What?”

“Why don’t we watch them from around here. We could hide behind one of these columns.”

“No, I want to get close. Maybe we could get some gum.”

“But…” No one was supposed to loiter in front of hotels like Oktyabrskaya where foreigners stayed. The only time I went near the hotel was when I visited my mother. I would go in through the back entrance, where the guard knew me. My mother had told me that the hotel had a special office called *piket*, staffed with KGB men, *piketchiki*, whose job was to detain anyone they suspected of accosting foreigners. “What if we get caught?”

“We’ll just walk past the coach. We could be living around the corner from the hotel. We have the right to walk home, no?”

His argument satisfied me. I followed him as he made his way through the crowd. Some fortune tellers tried to grab our hands and tell us our fortunes but we brushed them aside. We stepped over the cast-iron chain and crossed Ligovsky Prospekt. The facade of the Oktyabrskaya rose before us like a castle. We began to walk alongside the hotel toward the red-and-blue coach.

It was a double-decker with a windshield that extended almost all the way down to the bumper, which made it look like a spaceship. Its diesel engine idled expectantly and a greyhound raced along its sleek flank. The sign above the windshield read: *Turku-Helsinki-Leningrad*. The uniformed driver slumped back in his captain’s seat, a pair of gold-rimmed sunglasses on his nose, his jaws masticating. I smiled at him, but he screwed his nose and

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looked away.

Yurek and I circled the coach as if it were a monument; we admired its massive wheels, its tinted windows, and the three-point silver star on its radiator. Mercedes-Benz! That they employed the most prestigious automotive marque in the world as a means of public transportation was most awesome. Nobody in the Soviet Union, with the exception of the General Secretary Brezhnev, rode in a Mercedes. Even the fumes the coach emitted seemed to have a sweet, aromatic smell, which I inhaled with pleasure.

“Bet they’ll be coming out any minute,” said Yurek.

“Who?” I said, momentarily dizzy from the fumes.

“The Finns, who else.”

I looked toward the front entrance of the hotel. A burly doorman stood behind the glass front door, his hands behind his back, yawning. A pale sun was already setting behind the new Concert Hall to the west, and the puddles on the sidewalk had a black film of ice. This was the last place on earth I’d want to be caught accosting foreigners, I thought. Then the sun hit the glass door, and I could no longer see the doorman.

I tugged at the flap of Yurek’s sleeve. “We better go,” I said. “There’s that doorman over there.”

Yurek pushed my hand away. He examined the flap and smoothed it over with his hand. “You chickening out?” he said.

“Me? No!”

“Here they come!”

Yurek raised the collar of his coat; he now looked like an overblown spy, lacking only sunglasses. We quickly positioned ourselves near the door of the coach. “Don’t forget,” he said, “You have to say something first.”

“I will,” I promised, so nervous I felt I could throw up. Or was it the fumes?

But the Finns were already filing past us, tall and lanky, looking as exotic as well-dressed giraffes. The scent of their deodorized bodies and peppermint-flavored breaths made me delirious. All the English phrases I knew became jumbled in my head.

“Come on,” Yurek poked me with his elbow, “say *something*!”

“Ok, ok.” I spotted a middle-aged man who smiled at me. “How d-do you do, sir!” I stuttered.

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The man parted his hands and shook his head, as if to say, “I have nothing.”

“Damn,” Yurek cursed, shifting from one foot to the other. “He didn’t get what you said.”

“Why don’t you talk to them yourself then?”

There were only a few Finns left in the line. One of them was a tall blond woman in furs. Yurek stepped toward her. “*Purukummi yo*?” he mumbled.

The woman stopped and patted him on the head, then quickly pressed something into his hand.

In a moment all the Finns had boarded the coach, which gave a blast of black smoke and took off. When the diesel cloud had settled, Yurek opened his hand. A thick package of Wrigley’s Citron rested gloriously upon his palm. *Lemon Flavor*! The bright-yellow nugget gleamed as if made of pure gold. Lucky bastard, I thought again.

“Gotcha,” a hoarse voice that smelled of vodka growled over our heads. It was the doorman. He had sneaked up on us, and now we were caught red-handed. He grabbed Yurek by the shoulders and lifted him up like a puppy. “I’ll teach you how to pester foreigners, punk!” And he began to drag Yurek toward the front entrance.

Yurek struggled frantically to extricate himself from the doorman’s grip. His feet skipped against the ground, like those of a cartoon character, and his arms thrashed the air.

“Let go of me, uncle!” he pleaded. “Let go!”

“Not for anything!” And the doorman yanked hard at Yurek’s arm.

There was a crackling sound, and as Yurek broke free, I saw something dangle in the doorman’s paw like a dead rat.

We ran, followed by the doorman’s loud curses.

Behind the Concert Hall we dove into a doorway. The dim stairway reeked of cats and stale borscht. We ran up a few flights of stairs and stopped at a landing with a cracked, dirty window, breathing hard. Yurek held his left shoulder as if nursing a wound.

“My sleeve,” he moaned. “It’s gone!”

He looked so pale one would have thought he had lost his whole arm.

“The doorman must have got it,” I said.

“That motherfucker.”

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Yurek took off his coat and held it up against the light from the window, turning it this way and that and shaking his head. He was wearing two layers of sweaters underneath. His mother must have got the coat a size or two larger, figuring it would last him longer that way. Yurek, who was tall for his age but very thin, had had to put on those sweaters as padding for the extra room in the chest and shoulders. That's what had given him that bulky, puffed-up look.

"I wonder what he did with the sleeve," he said at length.

"Probably gave it to *piket*, as evidence or something."

"Damn!"

There was silence. Yurek looked so crestfallen I thought he might start to cry any moment. But then he swallowed hard and said: "I got to get it back."

"Really? Like how?"

"I don't know. I'll go back to the hotel, whatever."

"What, are you crazy?"

He looked at me strangely and repeated, "I'll go back and get it."

"But you'll end up in the *piket*!" I objected. "They'll notify our parents. My father might beat me up." My father hadn't beaten me since I was in first grade, but, given the gravity of the offense, he might pull out his old army belt and give me a thrashing.

"And my mother," said Yurek, will *kill* me if I come home without the sleeve." He told me how his mother had waved a rolling pin at his older brother, Sasha, when Sasha had swapped his leather shoes for a pair of Chinese-made sneakers. "And now she'll be really mad, cause my father won't be giving her any money again for a long time."

I had no idea that Aunt Ivanna ever hit her sons. I knew that when she came home at night with a bad headache, they would scatter around the apartment and not come out until she had taken her aspirin. Still Yurek was her favorite and I still remembered the times when she would sit him on her lap and pat him on the head and call him *kotik*, her little kitten, and Yurek would purr happily. I now had second thoughts about Yurek's good luck.

We sat down on the well-worn steps. It was getting dark.

"Think your mother could get it back for me?" Yurek said.

"Well…" I knew that my mother often felt bad for the Chernyavsky kids, because of the circumstances they lived in, and because their father had left them. Naturally, she wouldn't want Yurek to get in trouble. But I didn't necessarily want to tell my mother about our

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mischief. I knew she wouldn't take kindly to it.

"I mean, she must know all those *piketchiki*, right?"

"Yes, but..."

"Look," he said, " she'll find out anyway. When I come home and tell my mom how I lost that sleeve, the first thing she'll do is call your mother."

That was true; our mothers spoke on the phone every day. They had no secrets from each other.

"I'll tell you what," he continued. "Why don't you talk to your mom? Maybe she could get it settled and sew the sleeve on, and then my mother won't even know."

He was right. It was better that I tell my mother myself than have Aunt Ivanna call her. "OK," I said. "I'll go talk to her. Wait for me inside the metro station."

Yurek nodded meekly and handed me his coat. Without it he looked smaller and less self-assured, his two layers of sweaters notwithstanding.

"Just make sure to ask her not to tell my Mom," he said.

"Don't worry." I rolled the coat up. I had to hold it with both my arms, like a baby. "It's pretty bulky, your coat," I said, and headed back to the hotel.

My mother sat behind her desk at the end of a long corridor. Hers was a strange job. Officially, she gave out keys and managed room attendants, but she was also supposed to be a snoop, reporting to *piketchiki* on anyone who loitered around or visited foreigners in their rooms. Her desk's strategic position at the end of the corridor allowed her to see straight down the whole length of the floor. Because of that she knew all the *piketchiki* — just as Yurek had suggested. She was sitting alone behind the desk, her silvery chignon gleaming in the light of the desk lamp. My mother's hair had begun to turn gray when she was still in her twenties.

"Pretty business you got yourselves into," she said when I finished my saga. "You both have grown big but you don't have any brains in your heads."

I listened patiently, knowing from experience that the best thing to do was to say nothing and look guilty, so I pursed my lips and stared at the tips of my shoes.

"So what do you expect me to do now?" she asked.

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“Maybe you could get Yurek’s sleeve from the *piket*?” I said. I also wanted to ask her if she would sew the sleeve back onto Yurek’s coat, but decided to wait until later.

My mother shook her head incredulously. “Where do you think that would leave *me*?”

I kept staring at my shoes. I knew my mother could get anything if she really wanted it. She was on familiar terms with a lot of people, including the director of the hotel himself. She always arranged rooms and airline tickets and other favors for friends and acquaintances. My mother had the right way with people in power.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said. “You both deserve a good thrashing, that’s for sure.” Then she reached for the phone.

“Ivan Borisych, dear,” she said, smiling at the invisible head of the *piket*. My mother never talked so sweetly with me or with my father, only with other people, especially those from whom she wanted something. When she talked like that with other men, I sometimes felt bad for my father, for both of us. But now I didn’t mind. “May I stop in?”

She put the phone down, and the smile left her face. “Wait for me here,” she ordered, and headed toward the elevator.

I sat and waited for her, gazing down the endless corridor with identical doors on both sides. I thought about my father coming home from work and eating his supper alone. I knew he would worry about me and all the homework that remained undone. And he’d probably worry about my mother, too. He hated her working night shifts and not being around at suppertime.

I’d tell my father everything, I decided — but not about how my mother talked with Ivan Borisych.

When my mother returned from the *piket* with the severed sleeve in her hand, her face seemed impenetrable. She sewed the sleeve back on with quick, practiced strokes, like a surgeon. Later she wrapped the mended coat in some old newspapers and ushered me out through the back door. “Don’t get yourself into any more trouble now,” she admonished.

It was already nighttime. In the cold glare of the streetlights Vosstaniya Square looked semi-deserted. All the fortune tellers and winos were gone.

I crossed over Ligovka back toward the metro station, the ice on the puddles crunching under my shoes. Then I stepped over the chain barrier and went into the station.

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Yurek was standing in the corner of the vestibule. In his two layers of sweaters he looked like a homeless boy. I handed him the package with his coat, and he unwrapped it and examined it carefully. My mother had done a fine job; you couldn't even tell the coat had been repaired. It looked like new again.

"Did you ask her not to tell my mom?" Yurek said.

"Yeah."

"Good." He put on the coat and raised the collar. He looked perfectly cocky again.

"I better get going," he said. "See you tomorrow."

"See you."

I watched him walk home, across the empty mall, to his dinner of sausage, cheese, and bread.

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