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Look Up

When it was finally my turn, I stared at St. Peter's metallic foot. Flattened by kisses, it had a sloping, utilitarian sheen. If I had known the word for " spatula" … but I didn't know the word for anything. I found myself lost in a new, temporary country; I was leaving my native language behind like a trail of crumbs. Eight years old, I was a pre-literate child again, but now self-conscious, not joyfully scribbling for the sheer exercise of it. If I had known the word for " spatula," I might have imagined Peter at his pancakes— the taste of which, in various incarnations as *blinchiki*, *latkes*, *crespelle*, transcends the language barrier— flipping them with his foot all day long. I would have shared this fancy with my parents and my older sister, who hovered beside me. Instead, wordless, I could only stare at the saint's duck-flat foot.

Our journey to Rome was not built in a day. It began in Minsk, U.S.S.R., years before I was born. In their youth, my parents wanted to hike the frozen Bering Strait into Alaska, until daughters arrived— my sister, then I six years later — like anchors to ground them. My parents still dreamt of escape; now they would sail through official channels. My grandfather, a Party member, and decorated from the " Great

Patriotic War," filed a document with the Department of Visas and Registrations that forbade my family to leave the country, because doing so would rob him of his grandchildren. The weight of his medals nearly pulled us down forever.

I was not yet touched by ideology, nor the desire to adorn myself, although a metallic, baby-faced Lenin caught the light from my school uniform: I liked things that sparkled. My sister and I spent hours at our grandparents' *dacha*, smashing rocks open with hammers. Unearthed by the plow, the rocks were potato-plain on the outside; when broken, their insides coruscated with colors and crystals. My sister, too, wore a shiny Lenin pin; her Lenin was older, and she was already a Young Pioneer. She and I went to school on skis, slicing the snow which would have been waist-deep. We wore fur coats and big bows in our hair; we went with a bigger contingent of girls, all skiing to school, a bevy of anchors. We got a daily send-off, and an equally vigorous welcome, by shouting neighborhood boys. The snowballs they threw had rocks inside them.

A teacher, knowing my family was Jewish, told my sister to give an oral report denouncing the state of Israel. Shortly after she refused, my parents yanked my sister and me out of the school system (I would glorify this very system to everyone I met on our journey, praising the incredibly long winter recess). There was nowhere else to ski to, save the local grocery store, whose new system—

shoppers were allowed to take food from the shelves without the saleswomen's help— was heralded as a great advance. Once a sparrow trapped itself inside the store and flew around in a panic while people stared up at the ceiling. No one knew how to get the sparrow out.

We left Minsk on February 2, 1978, one month after we received permission. We had a friend named Zorik who worked in immigration and promised to help us find housing along the way. We left on poor terms with most of our friends, whose minds, my parents said, had been poisoned by the state, and who, in turn, said we had been brainwashed by the Zionists. We were traitors.

My mother spent days threading all our amber and coral beads into necklaces; transporting anything loose, even ground coffee, was forbidden. This was in order to prevent smuggling, which we were too frightened to attempt. We had 550 dollars; my father hid the money, and a map, inside the belt. On the train to Brest, where we would say goodbye to my uncle and my grandmother, we ate eggs and *buterbrody,* and washed our hands with alcohol. My mother was trying not to cry. My sister took a knife and cut my doll's mouth open from ear to ear, like a clam, because I had wanted to hear the doll talk, or, at any rate, speak my language.

We arrived, freezing, in Warsaw, in the middle of winter, in the middle of the night. If we went into the station to buy tickets, we would miss the only train to Vienna. Prior immigrants had told us, like motorists

blinking their brake lights to warn those behind of highway police, of the unofficial passage to Vienna. We found a *poluprovodnik*— a " semi-conductor" — and bribed him with ten dollars and a bottle of good Stolichnaya vodka. He thanked us and let us into a cabin that had already been reserved.

Later, I heard screams. I remember it as morning, but only because it woke me up: it was still the middle of the night, as a group of Poles whose cabin we had taken were besieging our door. The door opened, and my sister and I began to cry. Hearing our language, a woman shrieked, " Russian SWINE!" and punched my father in the jaw. He shut the door against them and picked up a knife. We hid in the subterranean gloom.

We crossed some borders while Czech conductors strolled the aisles, giving out candy. From a cold, tortured-to-the-brink Russia, we arrived in Vienna; at the station, people were walking around with skis and actually smiling. A bus took us far from the station. We walked the sunny streets, bought bananas and climbed some steps to eat with a view of the city for company. For the first time in months, my sister did not have to make do with nibbling on the inside of the banana peel. Later, we sold some of our Russian-ness: several bottles of champagne, and a few tins of red caviar. We looked and listened, blinking in the new light; we tried roasted chestnuts and fried potatoes, served in paper cones and sold on the street. The first taste of every new place is a sense with no need for language.

We spent five days in Vienna. Soon, its marzipan figures (I passed by the same little edible boy every day, and I began to covet and care for him) gave way to the colossal chocolate eggs of Italy in Easter. Still in mid-blink, I opened my eyes in Rome; my family and I were in a cathedral. There was a statue of Moses within whose beard Michelangelo had carved the face of his patron, Pope Julius II, as well as his own face. Nearby, throngs of people were kissing the foot of a saint into oblivion. Already, his foot was the thickness of a blade.

We craned our necks out of a crowd to listen to the pope speak, although we didn't understand a word. People were referring to him as "papa." My mother got distracted by something floating above the pope, a message in the sky. She spent the next twelve years thinking how fine it had been of someone to send up a dirigible that wished everyone a "good year." Meanwhile, my sister gave up English as too difficult after one venture into the local American Club. My family took puzzled turns flipping through textbooks that taught, as it later turned out, the Queen's English. We laughed at my mother because her name resembled the British word for "truck," while she sat, a delicate woman with wheat-colored hair, nothing of the eighteen-wheeler about her, and just looked at us. Pretty soon, our ridicule seemed ridiculous, began to ridicule us, as we turned pages, learning the wrong English.

We moved twenty-five minutes from Rome to settle for several months in Ostia, a coastal city once thriving as a port, then buried under drifts of mud and sand, now excavated and green. The houses were neither ornate nor monumental, but hardy, like beige biscuits of shortbread. These shared the town with relics such as the Baths of Neptune (in black and white mosaic), the ruins of one of the oldest synagogues in the West, and occasional pine trees. I wandered up and down the seashore, looking for heart-shaped rocks called *serdoliki* that my mother told me existed. I began to wonder: what constitutes a heart-shape? could this eroded pebble have once been a heart? does this one count? does this?

Ostia, like Rome, had cats. From the second-floor window of our flat on Via St. Demiano, we looked down on the crenulated roof of a neighboring, shorter house, and watched cats congregate. They poured out of an opening in the roof and we tossed them tidbits of food for their cleverness. When my mother wasn't looking, I tossed down the congealed cream of wheat that persisted as our breakfast. I threw some names down, too, most of which didn't stick. One day, a cat I had named *sumasbroda*, which means " gone-out-of-her-mind," got stuck beneath a tile that covered the hole in the roof. Its paw stuck out, scratching at the air, as if the cat were caught by a mollusk. When the next day found the cat as stuck as ever, limply pawing at those lumps of *kasha* just out of reach, my father climbed out of the

window. His footing scattered on the scalloped roof, but he regained his balance and freed the cat. He had saved both of their lives.

An old Soviet couple, Alexandra and Alexandr, shared our flat. They both preferred to be called " Sasha." He liked to eat macaroni with ricotta cheese and sugar. She wore long, heavy earrings and was a heavy smoker, which infuriated my nicotine-hating mother. The couple watched for days as I tossed curdled cream of wheat onto the neighboring roof. One day, without warning, they threw down an entire boiled chicken carcass.

All the local Soviet immigrants were sometimes herded together for dubious reasons and with varying degrees of success. A representative from Israel once showed us a film about his country in an attempt to sway some of us away from the U.S.A. The film's most enduring image was of a man with a microphone, a talking head in the desert, sweating and swatting at swarms of flies. He spoke in a Russian which somehow seemed unintelligible, estranged. A more spontaneous gathering of ex-Soviets occurred at a Charlie Chaplin film festival in town. Afterwards, we came outside into the evening, into the warm Mediterranean raindrops falling like sweet plums. Immigrants also flocked to a clothing store at the intersection of our Via St. Demiano and the main drag. The store was called " Boom Shop." Inside, hordes of people pawed at the various goods. A saleswoman walked around spraying fragrance into the air above our heads.

Russian immigrants also gathered by the sea at a market of their own, setting up spontaneously and selling anything, cheap. My father, my sister and I— my mother always too shy to come with us— stood by our goods, shouting out prices in *mille* and *lire*. We sold whatever we had managed to stuff into our bags during the frantic packing in Minsk. Some items that sold well were linen, silk, *crepe de chine*, Soviet cameras, Soviet tennis balls, and *matryoshki* dolls. At home, we slept four to a bed without sheets, which were in a suitcase taking the long way to Rome. My mother stitched together sheets from some of the scraps of fabric we had packed to sell. Periodically, the *carabinieri* would come and chase us away. We learned to pass the word along and scatter at their approach, only to regroup when they had their backs turned.

The market lasted into the night; we tried to sell everything that belonged to us until our shouts pinballed off the stars. Every night, I saw three stars lined up above our heads, and I fancied that they were a cosmic echo of the three of us standing there, not feeling any lack in language skills as long as we could count and yell out denominations of money. The ancient Egyptians believed the Orion's belt stars were the resting place of Osiris, the underworld god of creativity and renewal in nature. These stars, which the ancient Arabs called the "string of pearls," shone down on strands of beads being bargained over. The stars named "Mintaka," "Almilan" and "Alnitak" seemed to sparkle

and purr. To an immigrant weary from standing and hoarse from shouting, they seemed to shimmer, or shiver.

My family had never strayed far from the state religion, which was atheism, but we were all intrigued with the zodiac— on the previous New Year, my father had hidden leather amulets of our individual signs under our pillows as we slept— and might have been interested to know that Orion, omen of storms, was placed in the sky opposite Scorpius, so that one would rise while the other one set. This placement stemmed from a legend in which Orion and Scorpius killed each other simultaneously, by sting and club-smash, respectively. They are now considered arch-enemies. This legend we might have considered as we looked at the sky, had we but known the legend, had we but looked at the sky.

I was looking up at an enormous height; a blink, and I was looking down from an enormous height. We were on a plane, a Boeing, headed for New York. My mother and I sat next to our first American businessman. Our distant relatives met us at Kennedy Airport and bundled us off to bed, even though we had been awake for only six hours. That night, I lay on the highest floor of a building overlooking Central Park. I watched the circling police helicopter, thinking, knowing, that we had arrived on the eve of a great war between our old country and our new one. I waited for bombs to begin falling from the helicopter, and there was no one else in the room to tell me otherwise. I couldn't stop

staring at the helicopter. Its blades were just level with my eyes.

On my first American morning, I sat with everyone and ate cereal, my first American food, out of a mug. The cereal box interested me. I scrambled for a dictionary to look up the words on the hats of the brightly-colored elves. Our hosts read out one definition at a time. The first elf was a brisk sharp cracking sound. The second was one of a succession of slight sharp snapping noises. The third was a sudden, sharp, explosive sound. I put the cereal box away. It had been a close brush with literacy. I was on the brink of language— all four of us were— faced with the new names of things, and I was not sure if I wanted to accept them. I looked at my sister, but she was busy catching her reflection in a butter knife, and did not look up.