

Natasha Lvovich

Sister in Russian, Cousin in English

SHE IS WALKING ON PARK AVENUE, ELEGANT AND SLIM, IRREPROACHABLY fashionable, drumming Sinatra’s “New York, New York” with her high heels. Her allure is businesslike and confident: she is focused on her destination, on the potholes in the asphalt, and on countless rushed yet important thoughts, while at the same time she talks into her phone. Only real Manhattanites, fortunate to have been born on this celebrated land—firmly grounded, perfectly well-oriented, perpetually overbooked, and multitasking with ease—move with such a gait. She murmurs into her phone in a language that has been for centuries, for millennia, for eternity, her own: “Honey, don’t wait for me, just order yourself some Chinese. I’ll be home in a little while. Yeah, I know, I know. I’ll get you some. Love you.”

The trace of a Russian accent is almost imperceptible. Thank goodness for those caramel English words, which make her a different person and a different mother than her own, less dramatic and less rough around the edges, with the sweetened texture of an American mom raised in an Upper West Side apartment. She looks at her watch; she checks her messages; she passes her hand over her platinum hair as if to make sure the makeover hasn’t melted away.

But no, the magic of the disguise is lasting and has grown into her skin, reminding me of Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris*, in which the earthlings have to face their past and guilt by dealing with haunting flesh-and-blood creatures generated out of their memories by godly Solaris. In one scene, the protagonist encounters a reproduction of his dead wife, and when he attempts to undo the laces of her dress he realizes, in shock, that the laces have no ends. His “wife’s” clothes have been “created” as part of her body, out of his mind’s image. In order to undo the laces, he has to cut them off with scissors. Surprisingly, the ghostly creature does not express any reaction to this odd inconvenience—she is not aware that her clothes are supposed to be separate from her body.

In Russian, *cousin* is a two-word expression, *dvoyurodnaya sestra*, literally “cousin sister” (the male version is “cousin brother”), but my “cousin sister” had shrunk into one word—*sestra*, sister, my only sibling, my twin. In our previous Russian life, there was no distance whatsoever between us, just as there was no distance between our mothers, who were born less than two years apart. What in English is called an “enmeshed family,” implying its inability to be autonomous and independent, was a normal fact of life in Russia. What is termed “emotional support,” carefully measured and distilled by drops in American culture, was an integral, ongoing, and at times exhausting connection between family and

friends. What is labeled in the West “the culture of the collective,” the family and community dynamics and psychological effects of surviving coups, wars, and terror, was soul kinship, spiritual intimacy, and brother- or sister-hood.

In the Russian consciousness, there is no concept of—or even word for—“privacy.” Throughout Russian history, mutual support has been a vital necessity, a matter of survival, the only currency that could “buy” help when money had no value. Although it has seldom been economically possible, individual privacy was not—and is not—condoned, and has long been considered an unnecessary luxury, even during the most peaceful Soviet times.

Soviet pedagogy was originally based on Anton Makarenko’s concept of “commune,” a romanticized rehabilitation facility for juvenile delinquents, a rigorous authoritarian children’s collective in which young communists were to share work, food, and personal lives. This pedagogical model failed later in Soviet practice, but its Orwellian notion of submissive facelessness was implemented nevertheless, as it helped consolidate and maintain power and discourage individual thinking. As a result of the combination of economic and political hardships, several generations of people who lived under socialism were assimilated into large and small collectives, at home, in school, in summer camps, and at work. In spite of ourselves, we, like the Borg entity in *Star Trek*, spoke in chorus.



When we were children, Nina and I lived together with our parents and grandparents in one apartment on Podsosensky Street in Moscow. I considered all eight people my nuclear family. Since most families lived with strangers in large communal apartments, ours was an enviable housing arrangement. My parents and I occupied a room near the front door and my aunt’s family lived in the living room, in a corner separated by a curtain. All four adults went to work early in the morning and returned in the evening, and Nina and I stayed with grandparents, our primary caretakers. Nina was blond, pale, thin, freckled, and timid, and I was dark-haired, olive-skinned, big-boned, and rambunctious. *Babushka* (grandmother) called us *beliy* and *chorniy*—white and black—because of both our contrasting appearances and our radical personality differences. I was restless, always busy with a game or an activity, and very sociable. Nina was quiet and painfully shy.

According to a prevalent ethnic theory of good health, children had to spend many hours outside, at any age, in any weather, temperature, and season. Babies had to be outside almost all the time between meals, whether on balconies in their carriages or in a yard or a park with their caretakers. That was called “walking the baby,” the exact equivalent of “walking the dog” in English, a transitional verb directing action to an object, whether a pet or a child, who doesn’t have his or her own will and must be disciplined and submissive.

Until Nina and I reached school age, we were “walked” every morning

by Sofia Moyiseevna, an older but very energetic heavy-set woman with a moustache and an incongruously coquettish old-fashioned hat that she wore sideways covered with a woolen scarf. Taking a few children to a nearby park was her little private (officially forbidden) enterprise, which complemented her meager pension. While *Babushka* and *Dedushka* (Grandmother and Grandfather) bought themselves a few hours of freedom, my sister and I filled our lungs with fresh air. Our little gang would run around and play in the snow, except for Nina, who, in her stiff silent posture, would cling to Sofia Moyiseevna, trying to hide herself, her face covered with her gloved hands, like an ostrich in the sand. Alas, she was never left alone.

Babushka, whom we called Baba Mina, cooked for the family of eight, not an easy task in a country of food shortages, long lines, and poor food quality. Putting her natural ingenuity and survival experience into action, Baba Mina prepared unimaginable blends that we lovingly called *smeshki*: jams with fruit, two different compotes, stews with roast leftovers, and unthinkable combinations of veggies. She worked in the kitchen all day long, peeling and cleaning, boiling and re-boiling what had seemed to be inedible groceries. Her creativity had no limits and extended to other crafts, like altering her own clothes, adding new collars and buttons, cutting out lace from her underwear to adorn a dress, and even remaking her shoes.

Every day, after we returned from the park, Baba Mina served us dinner. One, two, three—and I was finished with her delicious hot concoctions, but Nina notoriously refused to eat, and Baba Mina got ready for a battle. Feeding Nina included cooking her favorite *kotlety* (beef patties), chopping her food into tiny pieces or even shredding it, and promising to take her to see a ballet with her favorite dancer, Maya Plisetskaya (who, to Nina's surprise, was Jewish, like us). If nothing else worked, Baba Mina proceeded to tell her Vovochka stories.

The precursor of today's multi-episode TV movies for young audiences, the Vovochka series that Baba Mina improvised for Nina was a saga of adventures that ended in suspense at the end of each meal, so that Nina would open her mouth to listen—and to eat. Vovochka (informal for Vladimir, incidentally Lenin's name) was a bad or a good boy, depending on whether or not he ate his *bortsch* or *kasha*. More often than not, he sat there with his mouth full, which was exactly what Nina did, rolling her food from one cheek to the other until it became a disgusting flavorless mass. Baba Mina would stop talking immediately, and Vovochka's adventures would freeze in mid-sentence. Nina's strategy was to hide her food in her cheek so that she could open her mouth to trick Baba Mina into continuing the story. Then, her mouth overstuffed, Nina made horrifying faces and choking sounds, showing with all her might that she was about to spit the schmutz out. That was the usual dramatic ending to the scene, with Nina weeping, Grandma screaming "Mischugeh!" while cleaning the table, and me begging for the story's ending.

However, Baba Mina would not give up that easily; one more attempt was in order. A police motorcycle would pick up Vovochka and take him to the

police station, and then and then . . . Babushka would move in the direction of the window, pretending she heard a motorcycle roaring. “Swallow! Swallow quickly! Hear that? Vroom! Vroom! The motorcycle!” Nina would start shaking while she forced her own food down her throat.

While Nina was swallowing a phobia of the authorities along with her food, I sat across the table with my mouth open, addicted to Vovochka stories. I did not understand my sister’s problem, nor did I understand the adults’ problem with creating a problem, but I looked forward to finding out to which abominable place the motorcycle took the anorexic Vovochka.

The meaning of Baba Mina’s unconscious work of imagination has become apparent to me only recently: in Vovochka stories, evil and punishment were represented by the country’s own police force. In her experience, the internal terror of *svoyi* (our own) must have been more traumatic than any other nemesis, even the Nazis. The homegrown trauma had filled every cell of her mind and body, every tiny corner of her existence, and spilled out, in small and disguised droplets, here and there, onto her children and grandchildren.

Most arrests, called “pick ups” in Stalin-era lingo, took place in the middle of the night to create an effect of surprise. In the anticipation of a “pick up,” Baba Mina, like scores of others, spent sleepless nights pricking her ears to the sound of a slamming car door downstairs. She had packed for her husband a small suitcase and kept it under the bed while the circle of arrests and disappearances of friends, family, and neighbors closed in on them during what she called “*strashnoye vremya*” (terrible time)—or did she mean the Time of Terror?

Vovochka must have been taken by a motorcycle to Lubianka Street—to the basement of the KGB building, rumored to extend multiple floors down—and judged by a “triad,” the tribunal of three judges written into law by Stalin. He would eventually disappear in Siberia, perhaps shot or frozen to death in Siberian woods. This was a typical ending to most families’ stories. What else could *Babushka* do but protect her children and grandchildren by forcefully feeding and “walking” them, making decisions for them, fiercely controlling them, and keeping them together, next to her—passing on the “enmeshed” symbiotic relationships, forever and ever?



In one of our pictures, Nina and I, two sisters, two opposite poles, *beliy* and *chorniy*, are hugging each other and laughing, our faces comically touching, like Siamese twins. Obviously pictures don’t produce sound, but I know that at that moment we are shouting into the camera: “We are sisters!”

We attended the same school and then the same college, Maurice Thorez College of Foreign Languages, majoring in French studies. In Nina’s second year of college, the family applied for an exit visa.

Standing next to my mother in the college president’s office, Nina was visibly shaking—and who wouldn’t be?—while my mother, the family commissar, tried

to get the president's signature on Nina's college withdrawal application, which contained the mandatory line ". . . due to application to live permanently in the state of Israel." Such a withdrawal meant that a betrayer had been nurtured in the very heart of a Soviet "ideological institution," and the president, a colossus whose very shadow spread fear, stamped her feet and spat out expletives. Comrade Borodina's signature was the end of Nina's linguistic career and of her "normal" Soviet life.

There was no official immigration from the happy Soviet kingdom—who would want to leave it?—but Soviet Jews won a lucky ticket in cold war politics as leverage in the trade-offs between the US and the USSR. The number of missiles to be reduced in the arms race and the price for grain were exchanged for human rights and family reunification. At the end of the day, the question was: How many Jews will be let out?

In order to apply for an exit visa, a Jewish family first needed an official invitation from a "relative" in Israel certified by the Israeli government—not an easy task since all correspondence was censored. Once such an invitation was procured, the process of gathering documentation for the application would begin. Although the actual departure was still far from being guaranteed, at the time of application Soviet Jews had to be officially excluded from college, school, or day care, fired from work, and publicly declared betrayers whose morality was incompatible with the allegiance to Communist ideals. That was done at public meetings, at which the "incompatible element" was verbally stoned, shamed, and proclaimed Zionist (incidentally, a lowercase letter in Russian, simply a euphemism for "filthy Jew").

Every signature required for the application was literally battled for, as in Comrade Borodina's office. Once the "Zionist" was excluded from all possible affiliations and memberships and declared *hors-la-loi* (outside the law), having lost professional, financial, and social standing, endless bureaucratic obstacles were created for more stamps and certificates, which were impossible to get without other stamps and certificates. In endless lines for stamps and certificates, the word "Israel" was loudly uttered to provoke anti-Semitic skirmishes. It would take at least a year to get through this Kafkaesque horror, by which time the Israeli invitation could expire—and one would have to start all over again.

In the best-case scenario, if the application had been successfully submitted, applicants would begin the waiting period, called *byt' v podache* (to be in application mode), an awkward grammatical structure in Russian emphasizing the idea of process. That nominative syntax, which could not be rendered by a verb, expressed with subtlety the situation of exclusion as a *modus vivendi*. Next on the list of similar grammatical neologisms was *byt' v otkaze*, to be in rejection mode.

By 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, its relations with the West dramatically deteriorated. In this climate of international tension, there was nothing to trade Soviet Jews for. Jewish exodus from the Soviet Union abruptly stopped. Jews were denied exit visas and became *otkazniks*, known as *refuseniks*

in the West, outcasts who were simultaneously denied the right to leave and the right to stay. Besides open hostility and marginalization, *refuseniks* faced years of poverty, professional stagnation, and educational impasses for their children. The fight for emigration took a larger political scope, and many *refuseniks* walked a fine line between being outlaws in Moscow apartments and inmates in Siberian camps.

My aunt's family happened to apply for their exit visa right before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Their application, among many others', was refused for ten years.

For all those years, my aunt, Ilia, a PhD in biology, tried to make ends meet by freelancing as a translator of English-language articles for an agronomy journal. My uncle, Mark, a former aircraft construction engineer, worked for a few years as a security guard (which was indeed a typical employment for a *refusenik*). My parents, who made a decision not to apply in this desperate climate, provided them much needed financial support. My sister busied herself learning English and participating in *refusenik* activities, which consisted in clandestine Jewish culture seminars, risky meetings with foreign journalists, and organizing. She helped with communication with the West and translation, and so did I. This severe Russian winter stretched into years, without so much as a whiff of thaw in the air.



Several years into this limbo, the family made a radical decision to get Nina out of the country at any cost, even if it meant separation. By that time, she had been a student at a nursing school, a medical institution that granted an associate's degree and overlooked her *refusenik* status. The medical field was an entirely new venue, but my omni-talented sister excelled in her studies and adjusted well to a social environment in which her peers had never heard of Georges Brassens or Marguerite Duras. Most importantly, they knew nothing about *refuseniks*.

As a result of many people's efforts, a "fiancé" was found on the other side of the Iron Curtain. He was a good-looking young man in his early twenties, with curly red hair, green eyes, and charming dimples. Dennis, who lived in the US, had been raised in Mexico and was a Mexican citizen. His Mexican (and not American) passport was a stratagem to smooth the situation, since Soviet relations with "brotherly Mexico" were more relaxed. The right contacts had been made in the Mexican embassy in Moscow and the Mexican attaché d'affaires had been befriended. Having consumed lots of caviar and smoked fish in Ilia's house, the dignified lady and her deputy assured us that the Soviet authorities would not separate legitimate spouses.

Dennis was fun to spend time with while necessary arrangements were made, paperwork collected, applications submitted, and the wedding scheduled. Our time together felt very much like courting a movie star rather than getting

to know an ordinary person. If he was Mexican, why did he live in the US? How was it possible to have a German Jewish father and a Mexican mother? What was it like to be fluent in English, Spanish, and German? The idea of divided loyalties was beyond our monogamous Soviet comprehension, as was Dennis's bursting joie-de-vivre and uninhibited insouciance. He was invisible to us through the thick armor of his Western paraphernalia: his chewing gum, Marlboros, blue jeans, broad white smile, and faint aureole of erotic perfume, the fragrance of an unattainable world.

We fell in love with Dennis or perhaps with the idea of Dennis, of the West, and of America. As a clan, we toured, fed, and entertained him. With so much undeserved attention and so much vodka with Russian delicacies, he got playful and flirtatious. In our eyes, a business transaction was turning into the most real, the most authentic thing a Russian can think of—a novel, in Russian, *roman*, the word also standing for romance. Who wouldn't fall for an enchanting happy ending of a story imbued with so much suffering? Who wouldn't want to own this utopia? Nina blossomed and made plans for the future. The future finally existed!

Romantic faith—or call it collective hallucinations?—had energized our grandparents and normalized our parents' lives during war and terror, and it was romantic faith again that pushed us out of our realm into a myth of the West, the utopian *Imaginaire*, a term coined by French historian Serge Gruzinski, who attributed a special significance to the formation of personal and collective mythology to satisfy the human need for wholeness. In the face of social trauma during Stalinism, as well as during Brezhnev's "stagnation era," adopting the dynamics of illusion, adaptation, and hope as a therapeutic coping mechanism allowed millions to survive mentally and physically within collective and personal myths. Perhaps it is in the lyrical workings of the *Imaginaire* that one can see what is commonly referred to as "the enigmatic Russian soul."

There was a ceremony, guests, flowers, a borrowed dress, borrowed wedding rings, and a full-blown wedding party. The purpose of this staged performance was to demonstrate to the Soviet authorities and to the Mexican embassy workers the marriage's authenticity, which, like a good work of fiction, rang true to its authors. In what felt like an overproduced Spielberg movie, where lavish photography overshadows dialogue, we lovingly acted out a wish for Nina's happiness, with Nina herself living this wish as a real event.

Our naïve scenario of Nina's liberation quickly turned into yet another debacle. Nina's application for an exit visa to join her legitimate husband in Mexico was denied. Upon her request to provide an explanation, she was openly told that the authorities would not be fooled by her Jewish tricks. The Mexican embassy tried to help but stumbled upon a categorical Soviet *nyet!* And a comic twist completed the drama: now on top of her Jewishness and *refusenik* stigma, Nina had acquired an unutterable hyphenated Spanish-German last name with which she had to survive in a monolingual xenophobic country. Dennis never called or wrote, not even once, debunking wishes, illusions, and hopes. He vanished somewhere too far for us to imagine—perhaps into the borderlands

of his own *Imaginaire*, Mexican, Jewish, German, American . . . We never saw him again.

89

Like bread and wine after a funeral, learning kept my sister afloat. She was liked and highly respected in her nursing school. Another round of tortuous efforts was required to get her divorced and to have her name changed back. We laughed with relief at the irony of the situation, evoking an old joke about a dirt-poor Jew at the end of the rope who was advised by the rabbi that he should buy a goat—and then sell that goat—to discover his happiness . . .

Predictably, mingling among her fellow *refuseniks*, Nina fell in love, passionately and deeply, with one of them, a medical doctor, much older than she, who was part of a dissident group. He had been arrested; he was often followed by secret police; his phone was tapped; his apartment was often searched. A new arrest was imminent. As danger enflamed passions, this *roman noir* Soviet style was close to a denouement. Nina was an inch away from serious trouble.

Meanwhile, with the aid of her mother's former doctoral student, who lived in Cheboksary, a town seven hundred kilometers east of Moscow, Nina was accepted into its medical school, which was a real miracle for a *refusenik*.

However, it also meant she had to leave Moscow. As opposed to the US, where higher education institutions often exist outside of big cities, and where one can thrive in less populated areas, in Russia the move from center to periphery is nothing but exile. There is an enormous gap between big cities and small towns, especially between Moscow and St. Petersburg, on the one hand, and the rest of the country, on the other—designated by the Russian word “province.” Feudal serfdom had not been abolished in Russia until the 1860s, industrialization was slow, and the Russian periphery, the heartland, the essential Mother Russia, remained parochial, backward, xenophobic, and psychologically and culturally closed off. Gogol's and Dostoyevsky's scenes of stuffy petit-bourgeois provincial life still rang true; Savrasov's landscapes of the Russian countryside in the spring allowed only for a glimpse of hope; and Perov's scenes of peasants and children on unpaved roads encapsulated uniquely Russian gray rural infinity. Still carrying a heavy legacy of the past, the Russian heartland remained angry and hungry during the Brezhnev years. Roads were muddy, alcoholism rampant, and ignorance widespread.

We took turns sending to Cheboksary packages with meats, chocolate, candy, cereals, and whatever food we could find. One by one we visited Nina in her sad provincial exile. Separation from family, friends, and a familiar social environment was already an incredible test of courage, exacerbated by an exile to this foreign land, somehow farther away than Israel, America, or Mexico. Cheboksary was “emigration” in the opposite direction.

As a year came to a close, my sister's immune system gave up under the stress. She fell ill with life-threatening pneumonia and was urgently transported

to Moscow, straight to a hospital emergency room. She spent weeks in the intensive care unit fighting for her life.

Nina's illness was a signal that there was a limit to what she could bear. Every effort was made to work the system and transfer her to one of Moscow's medical schools, in the belief that she had somewhat better chances with a transfer than with regular admission. Grandfather put on his best 1950s suit, pinned on his war medals, and, with humility, paid visits to a few *apparatchiks*, who still remembered his legendary past. My mother was at the lookout for "connections," big shots to be bribed or in need of her favors. Nina's excellent grades and academic honors helped, too. When her transfer finally occurred, it seemed like a major triumph—and a sign, invisible from the inside, of a crumbling system in its lethal collapse.

By the time Nina graduated from Moscow Medical School, Gorbachev's thaw melted the icicles hanging from our roofs—first in droplets, then in streams. *Perestroika* was not a temporary thaw, like Khrushchev's in the '60s, but the beginning of an end of the Soviet regime, an event beyond our imagination. Borders opened up. Jews were let go. From our clan, Nina's parents, Ilia and Mark, were the first birds to fly away, their names among two hundred Soviet *refuseniks* on the so-called Senators' List, a special request for exit visas sent by the US Congress to President Gorbachev personally. Soon after my aunt, I followed with my husband and my four-year-old daughter, then my parents, and then finally Nina, newly wed, with her first baby and our grandparents.

Nina quickly became a legend among young Russian doctors, who had to confirm their medical licenses in the US regardless of their extensive experience or their talents. Most took an average of five years and multiple attempts to pass an extensive battery of tests in modern medicine in a new language, while also surviving in a new country, often with older parents and children to care for. Shortly after our whole clan arrived, I overheard a conversation in some émigré's kitchen about a young woman who had just come to New York and passed all medical tests on the first try! That young woman was Nina, my amazing sister, who had a toddler and was pregnant with her second child.

With impressive efficiency, Nina climbed the ladder of the American medical profession, from the residency at Montefiore Medical Center and the fellowship program in oncology to practicing/academic positions in several New York teaching hospitals. After ten years of juggling work, research, three children, and a challenging marriage, she got a lucrative offer at prestigious New York University.



When Baba Mina and, soon after her, Ded Yefim died, at ninety-seven and ninety-nine, in a subsidized apartment for seniors in Brooklyn, my mother, Ilia, Nina, and I got together to dispose of their things. We opened closets and drawers and took out grandfather's pre-war shirts (still in mint condition) and

grandmother's dresses altered by hand. We divided among ourselves keepsakes and mementos: a few crystal vases and bowls, a dinner service brought from end-of-war Germany, a few enamel Chinese trinkets, and piles of photographs. We arranged for a Salvation Army truck to take away their furniture and old kitchen utensils, and we finally threw away plastic cups, which had been used and reused, since nothing can be thrown away in households that had survived war, hunger, and poverty.

Nina, who normally doesn't tear up easily, cried non-stop, "This is it. It is over. *Babushka* and *Dedushka* are gone. It is over." But what is "it"? What was over, besides our grandparents' lives, which had been lived for the whole century? For me, nothing was over. My relationship with my past, my family, history, and my native language was not over—even when I loathed it. Its boiling and fuming presence was inside me, often detested and enflamed, too alive to be thrown away. Like Baba Mina, whose personality they say mine resembles, I keep using disposable cups and dishes and altering my dresses.

However, "it" was different for Nina. Perhaps because of many other crisscrossing psychic and family ties, our grandparents stood for an entire Russian era, for her Russian past, and for her old bitter and beaten self. Cleaning up their empty house, she must have cleansed herself of the uncontrollable fate, of the Moscow saga, and of vanished mythical Vovochka and Dennis. In a single move of her sweeping hand, everything wound up in a trash can, including me, the painful remainder and reminder. Away from immigrant areas, she bought, renovated, and furnished a new apartment in Manhattan. And she filled her closet with a brand-new wardrobe.



In the Russian neighborhood in Brooklyn where I live, many families still live in big clans. Their minds trained by a lifetime of playing the system, most Russian elderly are taking full advantage of the government housing support New York City offers, finding convenient arrangements to live in "communes" where, in familiar matriarchal patterns, grandmothers often run their daughters' and granddaughters' lives, men are denigrated, and children are "fed," "walked," and disciplined. In my building in Coney Island, a post-immigrant middle-class haven, adult siblings, cousins, uncles and aunts, and several grandparents live in apartments next door to each other, continuing their habitual symbiosis in a tiresome, multi-vocal schmooze.

I watch my Russian neighbors with mixed feelings. Is my attitude patronizing, judgmental, or sympathetic? Am I celebrating my own victorious American independence or mourning my Russian losses? Is there a happy medium somewhere between enmeshment and togetherness? And, most importantly, where does individuality end and loneliness begin?

It's been twenty-five years since we came to America, and immigration is long over. We've been settled in our careers, and our American children have

grown. English feels very much *svoy* (our own) now, and hearing our children speak broken Russian with mixed-up declensions is less painful. Nina's husband tragically died in a car accident. I've been divorced for more than a decade. My dad and my aunt are long gone, and our Russian "clan" has gradually disappeared.

As the family bedrock has shifted after my aunt's death, the distance between us "sisters" has only grown. When I talk about our relationship in English, I don't feel pulled anymore by a tinge of betrayal or by the need for tedious lingua-cultural explanations. This must have been how Vladimir Nabokov had felt translating Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*—and how he ended up with endless footnotes overriding poetry. Now it seems that the inner semiotic conflict has been unfortunately resolved, and I use the English word "cousin" without flinching to designate a shallow neutral relationship in the American vein, marked by distance, perfunctory phone calls, and family holiday celebrations—Rosh Hashanah and Thanksgiving in her house, Hannukkah and Passover in mine. She is in charge of the turkey; I am in charge of the green salad, of goodies from Russian stores, and of bringing in our elderly.

I do my best to connect with Nina's daughters, in their native English of course, leaving behind futile attempts to restore Russian closeness via the language, now perceived as the legacy of the previous generation, an endeared yet "estranged" possession. I exhaust myself texting and organizing lunches, but my efforts never consolidate into anything even slightly resembling my aunt Ilia's relationship with me, the closeness of a benign parenthood. (Twice removed cousinship is all I get. After all, Nina's girls had only a minimal share of grandparenting in Brighton Beach when they were little, and they have never experienced Russian culture in their (literal) guts, as we did.

And isn't it wonderful, I say to myself with ambivalence, isn't it what we wanted all along? A better life is a different life. But does it have to be either/or, *chyor'niy* or *beliy*, black or white?

Twice a year, my trunk loaded with bagfuls of food from Brighton Beach and my heart likewise heavy, I drive my mother and my uncle, both in their eighties, to my cousin's house on the Upper East Side. My dread dissipates a little as I busy myself in the kitchen with the salad dressing, a glass of wine beside me, schmoozing with my daughters and nieces. I cherish our *zastol' ye*, the Russian "at-the-tableness," with plenty of delicious food, Nina's and her daughters' friends, laughing and passing around the dishes, English covering small Russian voices. This is the best and the most genuine part of the show, this happy noise that has no name in my bilingual vocabulary, still sounding Russian to me, bringing back family, safety, and togetherness.

Holding my nostalgic mirror, I see my mother and Ilia, two inseparable sisters, their cheeks flushed with the oven heat and excitement, holding a huge tray with the turkey. I see my dad circling in the kitchen like a mischievous cat, looking for the right moment to smear his finger in a bowl of whipped cream resting on the window sill—and then furtively glancing around to see who has caught him (I have!). I see Ilia sitting on the couch edge holding a bowl of dried

apple rings, soft and tangy, while I am comfortably lying in her crispy striped sheets on one of those routine sleepovers. I see my uncle standing on a chair to get from the highest shelf in their cupboard a can of “eggplant caviar” made in “sisterly Bulgaria,” my favorite treat, stashed for special occasions—and for special nieces. And I see Nina open the front door of their Moscow apartment, my shelter, when I ran away from home (my mother’s home, my husband’s home). She is wearing the sky-blue sweater I knitted for her to match her blue eyes, a sweater I would never see her wear again in New York.

Is the past really an “empty space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float,” as Teju Cole describes it in *Open City*? Or is there a form of its existence, not just in our minds and souls but in our strongest relationships with others, a reflection or a translation from a mother tongue that cannot be accessed in the original?

Once, after one of those cousinly holiday dinners in Nina’s Manhattan apartment, when we were standing at the front door, putting on our coats, my uncle suddenly declared that his jacket was not his. “*Nu eto nye moya kurtka!*” (This is not my jacket!) he was stubbornly repeating, refusing to put it on and keeping it at arm’s length. In the spirit of Oliver Sacks’s stories of strange neurological conditions, Mark continued to be comically puzzled about his unrecognizable jacket, triggering in us such intense waves of laughter that we slid onto the floor, holding our tummies, tears running over our faces. He ended up going home in his “estranged” jacket, which he eventually managed to recognize.

The following morning, the girls and I were texting about this bizarre jacket situation. “Why would a person resist recognizing his own clothes?” read the text from one of my nieces. She had no idea how large her question loomed for me.

I am deeply indebted to Wendy Barker for her ongoing support, encouragement, and editorial feedback, and without whom this piece would never have seen the light of day.