

Yellowed Photographs

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They say a camera is a photographer's best friend. But is it really just the camera or the photographer's artistic eye for circumstance that makes a picture unforgettable? Ironically, it all depends on how you look at it.

Growing up in Ukraine, I was not too camera friendly. When my mom or dad pointed the camera my way, I stood there for a second, stuck my tongue out, and ran away. My family, on the other hand, was crazy. Raised in a generation where a simple bathroom could at anytime double as a dark-room, my grandmother had a whole closet devoted to shoebox after shoebox filled with images. But, as much as I didn't like being in pictures, I loved looking at them. No afternoon could have been better spent than rifling through my grandmother's pictures. I can still remember it as if it were yesterday. My favorite box was the one labeled "Zaporozhye Institute of Ukraine, 1952." With the past gone, the pictures seemed to be the only physical remnants of a time long ago. I was always careful to put them back in order exactly as I found them—almost as if not to disturb history—with the one from my grandparents' first date on top.

But with the general uncertainty and confusion that go along with immigrating to a new country, all that is left of my grandmother's most precious possessions could fit into one single box. Of course, that is not to say that our life in Ukraine accounted for much more: about six bags of luggage was all it took.

Once, being asked to trace our background for a class project, I was struck with the terrifying fact that my memories of Zaporozhye were now coming from the Internet. Not only that, but I had trouble spelling Zaporozhye in Russian. Horrified that I had forgotten something so simple and fundamental, I wanted to turn to my friends and ask for help. But, as I looked around, I realized that none of them could be of any help. In my need to assimilate as quickly and painlessly as possible, I had surrounded myself with people who were nothing like me. That was the beginning of my nostal-

gia. In need of seeing what had once been there, I began to spend hours on end trying to catch my fleeting past.

To me photographs were truly, and are still, the faded remnants of what once was. Today, flipping through the dusty album, every picture whispers its own story to me. As I stop on a familiar scene, a face of a smiling girl catches my eye and transports me back to that particular day.

To everyone else it was a sunny, typical day in the middle of Ukrainian summer. To me it was something else—it was a long awaited wish come true. It wasn't too hot as I walked down Lenin Prospect, the main street of Zaporozhye. I tried to blend in with the bustling lunchtime crowd, but it just didn't work. It wasn't my clothes, since jeans had long ago stopped turning heads in Ukraine. And it wasn't even the Nike sneakers or my tennis-team sweatshirt. But surely the camera, my grandmother's gift, never once leaving my hands, was the dead give away. But I didn't care. I was determined to freeze-frame every moment, for her and for me, so I would never forget. Scanning the plaza through my viewfinder, I remember thinking that so much had changed. Adjusting the aperture, I noticed my favorite ice cream kiosk had become a café, the fountain in the middle of the plaza had been renovated, and the oak tree my friends and I used to climb had long since been cut down. It was all too foreign. But then again, like Lindo Jong of *The Joy Luck Club* I had perhaps become foreign.

I don't know why but I could never associate that moment of realization in Zaporozhye with anything else. I can still remember reading *The Joy Luck Club*. For a long time in high school, I used to detest English class. I hated wasting away hour after hour trying to keep my eyes open in hopes of getting to that last assigned page. It wasn't even that I hated reading, but I wanted to read something that would speak to me, something that I wouldn't be tempted to use as a substitute for a sleeping pill, something that was both assigned and interesting. Ironically enough, *The Joy Luck Club* turned out to be just that. As cliché as it sounds, Amy Tan spoke to me. She haunted me, never allowing me to forget Lindo Jong's awkward first visit back home to China after living in America for years.

Walking down the streets of Zaporozhye, I couldn't help feeling like Lindo. It was as if she were walking by my side. As it turned out, neither one of us was immune to getting strange looks from the surrounding crowd. Somehow they knew that "my face was not one hundred percent" Russian. It was as if, without even giving me more than a second glance, they were seeing something that I had always done my best to hide. After all, all through high school, still allowing me to join their circle, my American friends had

lovingly called me “the Russian.” But then, here I was, back home after seven years that had seemed like an eternity, and even the passerby’s could sense that I was no longer one of them. Where was it that I had become Americanized, as if the term Russian-American had been stamped on my forehead? I had always wanted to pinpoint a certain moment when that hyphen had silently crept its way into my life, but obviously this could hardly be done. It wasn’t as if coming off the plane, or uttering my first phrase in English, or even eating a slice of pizza with Coke had magically assimilated me. It wasn’t that easy, it took time.

Turning my attention back on the album, I remember focusing on the figure of a young girl happily following her mom into an archway heading into a small neighborhood. She reminded me of myself. Following them, I rounded the corner, coming face-to-face with my old home. Unlike the renovated city that surrounded it, this place had not changed with time. It was all here, my childhood in a nutshell. I snapped away like crazy, finally zooming in on an all-too-familiar spot. Looking into the first floor windows of my apartment, I was tempted to reach for the keys, but a cruel sight brought me out of my reverie. Overwhelmed, I sat down to watch as a family gathered around to eat dinner in our kitchen. The girl at the table was right around my age. It was almost as if I had been replaced. The setting had not changed, but I was no longer in the play.

I was so absorbed in the scene that I did not notice as a person sat down on the bench next to me. I remember Alena’s light tap on the shoulder bringing me back to reality. She was older and her features had matured, but I knew her immediately. I was surprised as I saw the recognition echo in her eyes. There was no strange pause, or moment of silence as she threw her hands around me and enveloped me in a hug. Amazingly, it only took us a minute to start chatting away about our lives like the best friends we once were. After sitting there and staring at people going about their daily routine in our old apartment, in our place, I needed that. It was just a little thing, but it did so much. And somehow, suddenly everything wasn’t so foreign anymore. In a place that had changed and shaped itself without me, my friend’s inviting arms made me feel like I belonged. If I had had one wish then, I would have framed that moment so I could have it forever. At risk of sounding like the ending to a Hollywood movie I did, at that moment, feel as if I were home.

Ever since then, I’ve been even more possessed by all things Russian. Coming back from Ukraine, I must have developed at least ten or more rolls of film. It was the greatest feeling to sit there pouring over album after album filled with memories with my grandmother. Flipping the pages, I could’ve

sworn I saw something glisten in her eyes. Looking away, she said that perhaps when in the far, far future someone asks my children or even grandchildren where their family is from, they will be able to open one of these albums and tell them all about Zaporozhye, instead of mumbling something indiscernible with a shameful, quizzical look as too many second-generation immigrants are prone to do.

Obviously then, to no one's real amazement, when it came time for my photo final in high school, I knew my topic. My grandmother always joked that I had caught her disease. That was the weekend my family had guests over from Russia, and like the dutiful hosts we were, we took them sightseeing. Of course, in my mind, going to see Philadelphia and then New York always created photo opportunities; the invention of the digital camera had made sure of that, but it wasn't until we were on our way to Brighton Beach that I finally willed myself to load the film into my trusty semi-automatic SLR. To my surprise, as my family took our guests on a tour of the notoriously Russian part of Brooklyn, I found myself making excuses to stay on a boardwalk bench in hopes of finding a theme for the project. As I took in the so-called "Little Odessa" atmosphere, something about Brighton Beach and its odd culturally confused inhabitants reminded me of Amy Tan's Chinese-American struggle. As I zoomed in on several old Russian men, proudly wearing their war medals pinned to their shirts, playing chess, I realized that it was just as Amy Tan had described. The older generation could never truly hyphenate themselves, could never really become "-American." It was as she said: American circumstances and Chinese, or in this case Russian, character did not mix. While perhaps picking up something American here and there, they would always remain true to their native ways. But was it like that with kids? Did America's melting pot gradually lead to the decline of their traditional values? Funny, but as I looked around at the people my age, all those speaking mixed "Ranglish," or sometimes even plain English, all things I was often guilty of, *Joy Luck Club's* discussion of the first generation didn't strike too far from home. I knew the symptoms too well myself. I wasn't any different. Being pulled to fit into the American mainstream in school, and yelled at at home for adopting one too many foreign ways, I had lost my definitive Russian mark. But the traces of it, the half that remained untouched was still there. Now I had a choice—to preserve it or to forget it. My grandma always said that it was as if so many of us teenagers were ashamed of our background, so much so that we seemed to have adopted an exclusively American way of life. It always made her sad. I just hoped that as time erased more and more of my past, as it has a tendency to do, I would be able to hang on to its rem-

nants. As long as I could teach my children the Russian language and the culture I grew up in, I would be able to hold on.

Moving on, I ventured down to Brighton 3, the beginning of a never-ending street full of Russian stores selling whatever the nostalgic heart desires. All in all, this wasn't a far cry from Chinatown, a self-contained community, where sometimes even speaking English wasn't necessary. It was a sort of safe haven for newcomers, a place to get up on your own two feet in familiar surroundings—kind of like stepping into the shallow end of the pool instead of diving into the deep end.

As I scanned the area, the sunset lit up the street, illuminating it with its golden rays. It was a magnificent picture, one, that with the correct processing wizardry, really could be worth a thousand words. Spotting a storefront reflection, my wondering eyes stopped on the image of a teenage girl gracing a gallery doorstep. From then on my camera takes on a life of its own. It follows her as she slowly makes her way into a small art gallery, wandering from painting to painting as if in a world all of her own. From the outside she is the stereotype of the average girl—blue slightly faded jeans, light green Gap t-shirt, nothing out of the ordinary. But focusing in on her through the lens, I see that she is the picture of cultural fusion—the old mixing in with the new to create an artistically eclectic look. Her brown hair glints blonde in the slight wind of the gallery fan, as she casually tosses her thick braid over her shoulder. Tiny amber stones in her ears and an intricate lacquered Palech style bracelet on her wrist, she is oblivious, talking on her cell phone, as I secretly snap another candid shot through the glass. As I watch, she comes to a stop before a painting. I catch her in the moment, another frame of the film gone. For a second my eyes are drawn to a tiny toy swinging carelessly from her cell phone. I can't quite make out what it is, but if I had to bet I'd say it was a *matreshka*, one of those dolls you always want to keep opening up in hope of finding just one more.

As I stand there, half hidden from her by the angle, my camera takes in the picture she is so focused on. As my memory slowly shuffles back through dusty art volumes, I realize I am looking at a reproduction of Iliya Repin's *Under the Sea*. And then, just like her, I become fixated on the work. Curious all the more, I throw caution to the wind as I follow in the girl's steps into the art gallery. As I focus on Repin's deep brushstrokes and his use of vivid colors, the girl's cheery cell phone banter makes its way past me. And as the familiar Russian words run through my head, I realize why I am so riveted by this painting as well. For me, as for her, there is a certain sense of "home" in it. Not in the literal sense of course, but in a more spiritual sense akin to

homesickness or nostalgia for a time long gone. There is a feeling of childhood in the painting, Repin's carefully crafted mermaids somehow reminding me of the mermaids my grandma told me about as a child, the ones I was sure lived in a beautiful fountain in the middle of Festival Square, the one in my favorite photograph.

An "Excuse-me," devoid of any accent whatsoever, brings me out of my reverie. Strange, if I hadn't heard her talking before, I would have never guessed. I wonder: would someone looking at me guess my heritage? Or am I so far gone that someone would never expect it? As my mystery girl makes her way around me and heads toward the exit, my camera catches the last of the sunlight on her back. Walking away, she turns around and smiles, as if aware of my presence from the start. And then it is over, as she winks and waves good-bye.

The roll is done, the last of the 24 exposures ending the story. Yet, as I turn back to glance at the painting one last time, I realize this story is mine just as much as it is hers. Smiling, as I make my way back to the boardwalk, I once again catch myself staring at the typical scene of old men playing chess, while their wives chatter and eat sunflower seeds on the bench nearby. Only difference is, this time a little girl sits in one of the old men's laps. Holding a pawn in her little hand, she asks in Russian, "Grandpa, is this where it goes?" Smiling, the kind old man nods, proceeding to teach her the rest of the game. Walking past, I smile as well. Maybe it wasn't so long ago that my grandparents were teaching me these things as well. But in reality, it must be that they have taught me so much more. While my friends in America showed me how to fit in, my family taught me how to value my culture, my heritage, and everything that stands for the place where I come from.

Looking back, sitting on that boardwalk, my photo project halfway completed, I realized that who we are is not only made by the place we are born in and our circumstance but also by the people we grow up around. Perhaps the only thing our family can do for us is to teach us to want to mix our traditions with American circumstances. No matter how much I want to deny it, this hyphenation, the process we immigrants call Americanization, is really not a choice left up to us. It is inevitable. Sometimes as much as I fight it, I cannot help seeing the traces of it around me. After all, as Heraclitus once said, "You can never step into the same river; for new waters are always flowing on to you." It just happens. Maybe the past is like an anchor holding us back. Perhaps, to become ourselves, we have to let go of something, just a little.

Excited, I cannot wait to get to the darkroom to re-enter my grandmother's story as our lives unfold.

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