

The Thing We Call Grace · Jennifer Atkinson

IT WAS THE SHAKING that drew me downstairs. I was a tourist, and like most tourists in Moscow, worn out after a long day of sight-seeing. Since I hadn't been able to get tickets to the Bolshoi or the circus and since I'd already walked most of the boulevards and alleyways around my hotel, I thought I'd take the night off with John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*, written, the concierge must have told me ten times, "Here. In hotel."

My room was in the back, and so, because it boasted no view of Red Square, couldn't have been Reed's. But it was cozy with polished wood and unmatched furniture, and I'd made it homier still by decorating lavishly with laundry washed in the bathroom sink. The next morning I was off to Leningrad, the Kirov Ballet, Pushkin's grave, and the memorial to the city's thousands of World War II dead. That night I was resting.

Among my heavy blankets and half-dozen feather pillows, Reed's sentences were gaining momentum: "This was the Day of the People," the day of revolution. "A military band came marching up, playing the 'Internationale,' and spontaneously the song caught and spread like wind-ripples on a sea, slow and solemn. . . . On earth they were building a kingdom more bright than any heaven had to offer, and for which it was a glory to die. . . ." They were the words of a rich, compassionate, hot-headed Harvard graduate; they were fun. Then suddenly—it's true—the world began to shake. The bed trembled on its springs, my teacup ticked in its saucer, the slats of the window-shades rattled violently. It felt like one of Stalin's subway trains was tunneling directly under the hotelroom floor.

Through my back window, all I could see were crowds of people hurrying around the corner toward Red Square. I imagined the worst—whatever that was and, as I rushed to put on every piece of dry clothing left in my backpack, remembered that just that week SALT II was up for ratification in Congress but probably wouldn't pass. I thought vaguely of the Soviet invasions of Afghanistan, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, but really I didn't think at all. The shaking ground and the image of Muscovites running to assemble in Red Square undid all my years back to grade school, when twice a month we practiced hiding from Russian bombs by pulling

the green, lead-filled curtains and ducking under our desks. Despite the friendliness of the Russian and Estonian people I'd met, despite the marching-band thrill of Reed's book, I panicked.

By the time I got out the front door, though, I saw why Moscow was shaking. It felt like watching a newsreel before the movie starts. Except this theater was ice cold in a snowfall, and the audience stood absolutely quiet, watching, shoulder to shoulder all along the street that faced Red Square. We stood in the dark and falling snow watching a slow, musicless parade. Row after row of soldiers dressed in winter uniforms marched past and around the corner—without speaking, without orders. Breath steamed around their mouths. Snow fell on their fur hats and on the starred shoulders of their cold wool coats and never melted. Behind the men, ranks of displayed weapons—tanks, bazookas and machine guns on trailers, convoys of trucks and missile-carriers shook the street, as they rumbled by in formation.

With all those synchronized soldiers, the weapons, the trucks, and then the tanks—I'd never seen a real tank before—my childhood fears returned. The lack of music was the scariest part. I'd seen soldiers march before. But a band had played gaily then, and crowds had cheered. As they passed, I'd probably waved a miniature Old Glory at them. This dark parade was silent, except for the roar of machinery.

The night before, after the ballet, I had walked through Moscow's grand streets. It was ice-cold, the snow fell then, too, but the ballet had been wonderful—not the story or the breath-taking leaps of the stars, but the whole transformation, as when, beyond discipline and trying, a whole ensemble moves individually and together to show the audience who we really are. The wonder was the thing we call grace, and for good reason.

I was with an American friend kind enough to indulge my sentimental love of ballet; he didn't insist on the subway. But a few blocks along, he suggested we step into a champagne and ice cream cafe to warm up and probably to change the subject. Champagne cafes, apparently, are not uncommon in Moscow, and to judge by this one, they're not unpopular.

The place was jammed and dark and smelled of wet wool and flowers. We sat down as if we knew what we were doing, and by listening hard to the people around us, we learned the words for ice cream and champagne. We said them. Big bowls and a whole bottle arrived. Twenty minutes later we were sharing a second bottle with a pair of university students,

whose English and French sufficed for conversation. The four of us said what people always say. We exchanged reassurances of our nations' desires for peace. We clinked glasses.

We shook hands four or five times all around. We said the problem is the governments, not the people. We clinked glasses with earnest and absolute sincerity. Then we really started drinking, and, frankly, I don't remember what we said. Now, watching the Soviet army, I still felt those students' friendship. Whatever this was, we were in it together.

But someone was staring at me. He pointed, and now his wife was staring, too. I wished I knew more than a few words. I felt the need to explain myself. I wondered what the U.S. had done to cause this Soviet march. Still staring, the man elbowed his way to my side and jabbed a finger at my arm. I couldn't see his face for all the windings of his muffler and his heavy Russian fur cap. He jabbed again, twice more — not hard, but insistently as if he were trying to catch my attention. Yet he would not look at my face. That would have reassured me. I looked at his wife and saw she was laughing, which only confused me further. Then the man looked up and spoke the words he must have been practicing that whole time. "Funny coat."

It was an ordinary, off-the-rack down-jacket, but, he went on to tell me in hesitant but understandable English, he had never seen a down coat before. He knew about them from stories about the Olympics, but the blimpy look surprised him. He asked my forgiveness for staring and touching my arm. I was so relieved I forgave him at least five times before I finally got my wits together to ask him what had happened? Where was the army going? Who was at war?

"No war," he said. "Tomorrow is a holiday. Revolution Day. Tonight is practice." The relief I felt was mixed with shame because I'd fallen prey to stupidity and suspicion. Ever since I'd arrived in the Soviet Union I'd known this holiday, their Fourth of July, was coming. Huge red flags and portraits of Soviet patriots, hung from state buildings; red banners flapped from lamp posts and kiosks. There were bright red commemorative posters and special red postage stamps. I should have known, but fear made me stupid.

As the last of the khaki and camouflage trucks rolled by, and the man, his curiosity satisfied, joined his wife, I tried to figure out the source of my fear. Grade-school drills weren't the only reason. There were the guns and the soldiers themselves — soldiers like machines. Their heads never turned

to smile at a friend or a child on the sidewalk. Their marching never slowed or speeded up. They never spoke. Not one so much as slipped on the icy street. They were precise, synchronized to the same empty, rhythmic march. This was mere discipline and none of the beauty beyond it. The straight backs, the long, efficient stride, and the controlled swing of the arms showed us, the audience, to how little we can be reduced.

And the guns, ranks and ranks of weaponry all designed for particular targets and particular terrain. The most frightening among them were the tanks, because tanks have no front or back, no face, and no real wheels. They bear so little resemblance to the human or the horse's body that their mercilessness is clear. There's nothing feeling in there to appeal to, no such thing in there as guilt, forgiveness, or grace.

Still, the horror of soldiery wouldn't have been so apparent if there had been music. Tomorrow this same procession would be the biggest, showiest, brass-band spectacle in the biggest country on earth. Children would cheer and wave little flags. Mothers would teach their babies to wave. The sun would glint off the trumpets and the ice and the polished rifle barrels, and it would be pretty.

Now, in the dark, the last truck gone, the crowd was going home. Across Red Square I could see the fantastic spiralled domes of St. Basil's Cathedral. Under the spotlights from the Square's roofs and the Kremlin wall, the cathedral's colors faded, but the twirls of the domes and the white stars shone clearly. I didn't feel much like going back to the hotel yet, so I walked with the rest of the audience, across the now unguarded street to Red Square. It felt good to hear their voices, the intonations of Russian, the little gasps of the sleepy children, but at Lenin's tomb, I stopped and let the others pass on their way.

Red Square cleared. The wide, enclosed space was almost silent. I could hear the snow tick against my funny coat. I could hear the painted banners snap in the wind. But I just stood there, admiring the gold domes of the Kremlin. They were beautiful at night in the snow—beautiful, familiar, and strange. I'd seen the same image—the several domes and their elegant Orthodox crosses—hundreds of times on TV, usually captioned with news about what some unpictured “Kremlin leader” had said, or, more likely, “threatened,” but had never really thought about what lay behind the brick wall and under the lids of the domes. I had assumed that like the Pentagon, the Kremlin would be mostly military and off-limits. Earlier

that day, though, I had walked right through the Kremlin gates into a series of chapels hung with old Byzantine icons, half eastern, half western. One image of Mary—her solemn face dark beneath a huge, almost ponderous gold halo—came to mind now as I stood in the cold.

A sort of combination street-cleaner and snow-plow started up and moved across the snow toward me. I turned the other way toward the wild, graceful domes of St. Basil the Blessed's. And there across the Square beyond it, visible now that the parade crowd had cleared, shone a small, yellowish light. Closer up, I could tell it was a single bulb hanging in a tiny, make-shift stall.

The sign on the stall read мороженое, the one Russian word that I could read. "Ice cream." An ice cream stand in a blizzard. The old woman who ran it, dressed in her working whites, was closing up, but she stopped when I approached and smiled when I said her word for ice cream. She handed me vanilla on a stick. I gave her the coins and we nodded. She was still banging the shutters closed and locking down the stall as I walked back across Red Square eating ice cream in the snow and glad that I knew and could tell her two right words, "ice cream" and спасибо, "thank you."