

René Georg Vasicek

The Golem Made of Stainless Steel

There I was...teeth numb from lack of sleep and too much coffee. Punching the air like a prizefighter past his prime. A man thinks a thousand thoughts ...so what?

My thirteenth semester as an adjunct professor of English at the Trotsky Institute of Technology in Brooklyn was no different than the twelfth. I pretended to teach. The students pretended to learn. My waking life had become restless boredom interrupted by sleepless nights.

One student, however, aroused my intellect. Her name was Nataliya. She was from St. Petersburg. In her essay “Washing the Human Brain,” she began with Henry Miller’s prophecy: I see America spreading disaster.

“I am a step-daughter of Brooklyn,” Nataliya wrote, “and so for me, Henry Miller is the literary godfather of the Beats. He understood that America is always on the brink of apocalypse—and therein lies her ugly beauty.”

Nataliya’s fascination with Henry Miller intrigued me. Rare is the woman who can look beyond his misogynistic rants and find something deeper, more meaningful. And yet here was Nataliya, this bleached-blond girl from Russia, doing just that. Needless to say, she got an A+ on the paper.

On the day I returned the essays, Nataliya stayed after class and waited for the other students to leave. In her mink fur, she looked like an Eskimo in high heels. When Nataliya finally approached me, she got uncomfortably close. I thought she was going to kiss me. Instead she slapped me across the face.

“You are too easily pleased!” she chastised. “This paper is no better than a B!”

My left cheek stung from the blow of her small, delicate hand.

“Nataliya, you can’t hit your professor,” I said calmly.

“Ha!” she protested, “You call yourself a professor? Next semester you’re going to take my class, Nataliya’s Course in Life. There are no grades. It’s strictly pass-fail.”

Our first “class” was held at Borscht, a Russian speakeasy in Brigh-

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ton Beach. Nataliya showed up wearing a black cocktail dress. Draped around her slender white neck, an Arctic fox stared at me through glass eyes.

No streetlights penetrated the private social club's crimson velvet curtains. A hostess led us deep inside the cavernous space and seated us at a small table beneath a portrait of Czar Nicholas II. Nataliya ordered a carafe of Moldovan red wine.

"I am surprised you agreed to this," she began.

"Why?"

"Because I think you are a coward," said Nataliya.

"Maybe that's why I'm here," I suggested.

"Ah, facing your fears," she mocked. "In Nataliya's Course in Life, not even God can save you."

"So...do you have a syllabus?" I asked.

"It's all up here," she said, tapping a lavender fingernail against her temple.

Sitting across from Nataliya, I had no idea what to expect. It was precisely this feeling I worked hard to avoid. I was the type of person who needed to know what was coming. Otherwise I freaked out.

"My father was a literature professor at the University," Nataliya continued, "and like Hemingway, he smoked a pipe and wore cable-knit sweaters."

"That explains everything," I said.

"If it does, you are a superficial student of life."

"Checkmate!" I said with a laugh.

"Do you play chess?" Nataliya asked.

"Of course, I'm Czech."

"Excellent! At our next class, you will play against my uncle Vitaliy."

"Is he any good?" I asked sheepishly.

Uncle Vitaliy's apartment was located directly above an Indian restaurant. Nataliya led me up a stairwell shouting, "Tikka Masala, Number One Seller!" On the second-floor landing, Nataliya hesitated in front of Uncle Vitaliy's door.

"What?" I asked nervously.

"There is something I didn't tell you about Uncle Vitaliy," she said.

"I'm listening."

"He is a Grandmaster...currently ranked number sixty-eight in the world."

"Nataliya!" I gasped.

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Uncle Vitaliy opened the door before I could run away. He was a giant of a man. Broad shoulders like an ironworker. Sporting a navy blue Adidas tracksuit and slippers. Instead of shaking my hand, Uncle Vitaliy grabbed me by the neck. I struggled with the old man in the hallway. After putting me in a headlock, he shouted: "Say uncle!" I did. Uncle Vitaliy let go and marshaled us into his apartment, where a chessboard sat on a coffee table.

"You'll have to excuse Uncle Vitaliy," Nataliya apologized, "he's a very competitive man."

"Make yourself useful, Nataliya," he ordered in Russian, "bring us vodka."

She disappeared into the kitchen. Uncle Vitaliy motioned for me to sit. As I eased into a black leather sofa, my nostrils inhaled the aroma of cardamom seeping through the floorboards. He offered me the White chessmen. Only then did I realize that Uncle Vitaliy's left eyeball was made of glass.

Nataliya returned with an unlabeled bottle and three shot glasses.

"Uncle Vitaliy was a mechanical engineer in St. Petersburg," she said. "Now he works in robotics."

"Do you know the origins of the word *robot*?" I asked, opening with P-KN4.

"Am I idiot?" Uncle Vitaliy scoffed. "Karel Čapek's 1920 play *R.U.R...*Rossum's Universal Robots." His glass eye glistened as he countered with P-K4.

"He's Czech, Uncle...so he knows such trivia. What was that other thing you claim Czechs invented?" Nataliya asked.

"Pilsner beer," I said proudly.

"No, it was something else."

"The contact lens?"

"Yes, that's it," said Nataliya, raising her arms theatrically. "The contact lens."

Her mocking tone of voice irritated me, so I said: "I read somewhere that if you sustain a high-voltage electrical shock, the contact lens can actually weld itself to the cornea. And when you try and take it out..."

"Please," Uncle Vitaliy protested, "you will give me brain attack!"

"Sorry," I said, daring him with P-KB4. "Czechs are drunken sailors in a landlocked nation...thus the maritime greeting Ahoy!"

"Prague is a beautiful city," Uncle Vitaliy mused, sliding his Queen to KR5. "I was there in 1968, in a T-62 tank. Your father probably threw Molotov cocktails at me...Checkmate!"

A week later I received a telephone call from Magda Dzhugashvili, the president of Trotsky Institute of Technology. Through the receiver, I

could smell a lit cigarette.

"It's been brought to my attention that you are having sexual relations with a student," she said matter-of-factly.

"That's preposterous," I said defensively.

"Nataliya is bragging to other Russian girls that you are...how can I translate?...*Spelunking each other's brains out.*"

"Nataliya?" I gulped. "She's a *former* student of mine...you know, like a former Soviet republic. And besides, we haven't even kissed yet."

"So you admit to having relations with her?" Olga asked.

"Not exactly," I said.

"Not exactly is not good enough," Olga lectured. "We have ethical standards here at Trotsky Institute of Technology. The Board of Trustees will meet on Friday to discuss your fate."

"Who is on the Board?" I asked.

"I am," she said flatly.

"Who else?"

"No one else."

I was fired a week later.

I called Nataliya on my mobile. She answered.

"T.I.T canned me," I said.

"Are you a tuna fish?" she asked. "Enough with these idiotic American idioms!"

"Trotsky fired me."

"That's wonderful!"

"How is that wonderful?" I asked.

"I've liberated you," she declared.

"Liberated? Without a job I'll probably end up a junkie in Jersey City...itching myself in a tattered sweater in Journal Square."

"Oh stop...you're too scared to try heroin," she challenged. "And why New Jersey?"

"New Jersey is my worst nightmare," I confessed.

"Wrong!" she corrected. "Long Island is your worst nightmare. Living in the basement of your parents' house."

"You're right," I conceded. "The basement isn't even furnished. Stacks of cardboard boxes with all my childhood belongings. I can't go back there. I just can't."

Uncle Vitaliy operated a machine shop in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Nataliya brought me there after I expressed a desire to "work with my hands." Uncle Vitaliy was standing outside the factory building.

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AQC

Revolt of the Underdogs



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“He needs a job, Uncle!” she pleaded.

Uncle Vitaliy waved me off, “The Professor has two left hands.”

“I’m a lefty,” I said.

“Have you ever worked on a lathe?” Uncle Vitaliy asked.

“My father was a machinist,” I answered. “We had a lathe and a milling machine in the garage of our house. I was raised turning steel.”

This pleased Uncle Vitaliy. He smiled knowingly...as if he’d been waiting for me his whole life.

“Let me show you something,” he said.

Uncle Vitaliy pressed a button on his keychain. The automatic garage door rose like an iron curtain. He whistled into the darkness. A shadow emerged into the sunlight, each step calculated and precise...a robot dog.

“His name is Laika,” Uncle Vitaliy said proudly.

Laika was a perfect replica of a miniature schnauzer. His aluminum skin reflected the August sun burning fiercely high overhead. Laika’s mut-tonchop whiskers, crafted from chainmail, conjured Emperor Franz Josef of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Uncle Vitaliy handed me a tennis ball. “Throw it as far as you can!”

I think he underestimated my throwing ability. I chucked that ball a good three-hundred feet. Laika became a blur of motion, tiny metal feet kicking up blue sparks on the pavement. The clanking sound of soda cans tied to a dog’s tail. Except that Laika *was* the can.

Before I had a chance to say anything, Laika dropped the ball at my feet.

I answered my own question: “Why does Laika have one eye?”

So began my career as a builder of mechanical dogs. Uncle Vitaliy received orders from all over the world: Tokyo, Sao Paolo, Prague...where hundreds of thousands of people live in concrete apartment blocks and pets are forbidden. Laika, the cyclops dog, was Uncle Vitaliy’s gift to a lonely planet.

I moved in with Nataliya. As it turned out, she lived directly above Uncle Vitaliy. He owned the apartment building, so I lived rent-free as long as I took out the garbage. It wasn’t a bad arrangement. My only complaint was that Nataliya and I had to muffle our screams on nights we spanked each other with wooden spoons.

There was also an uncomfortable silence between Uncle Vitaliy and me. This was especially true at the machine shop.

“Are your intentions noble?” he asked me one morning.

“How do you mean?”

“Don’t play idiot,” he said.