

BACK IN THE USSR

(EXCERPT)

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THE AIRPORT

Jet planes screamed down the runway, thumping and skidding. An electric guitar twanged. Drums rolled to a crescendo.

I carried my Walkman with me overseas and across continents, but in truth, I didn't need it. I heard the songs in my head. Here in the enemy capital, they'd keep me sane. My passport would keep me safe. And my daydreams, they'd keep me company.

My breath condensed on the glass as I watched through the terminal window. It made no difference to the view. Moscow winter painted the sky a dull bronze, wrapped the hangars in a dull beige, and coated the tarmac in a dull powder.

Inside, the arrival gate smelled like stale bread. It was standing room only by the time I got there, and the lucky people sitting in the cracked plastic seats stared into space out of dead eyes. The militsiya weren't letting anyone through customs.

We'd been waiting an hour or more when it happened. A shift in the air, a buzz, a vibration. It dislodged the haze from my mind. I turned. The crowd parted, and she appeared.

She snapped orders in Russian at the underlings who swarmed around her as they tried to keep up. You could have mistaken her for nobility, if we hadn't been in a communist state.

She radiated power and purpose, from the way she moved right down to the point of her nose and the angle of her cheeks.

She was utterly beautiful, like no one I'd ever seen.

Straight, dark hair fell to her neck. A long coat swept behind her. She glided like her feet didn't touch the ground, and she wore a smirk that said she belonged to a different world.

I belonged to a different world too — a boarding school in Connecticut, the Charles Froate Hall Academy. About as different a world as there was from the Soviet Union. But I was back in the USSR, just arrived from New York via Frankfurt on one of those screaming, skidding Aeroflot jets.

The mystery woman glanced my way. She did it casually, and gave no outward hint she noticed me, but I'll never forget what I saw in her eyes. Dreams took shape in their depths. Visions flashed. They lasted a moment, then were gone.

She floated forward. A soldier with a red star on his olive jacket snapped to attention. He scurried to open a swinging panel to give her passage, and she disappeared.

I couldn't tear my gaze from the spot. Her aura lingered, and I stood there, hoping, maybe, she'd come back.

Instead, a voice crackled over the loudspeaker. All the machinery of Sheremetyevo International Airport swung into action. The customs booths filled up with officers, the plastic seats emptied, and the masses lined up before I could move from my window.

Somehow, the beat of my pulse overpowered the fog in my brain. All I knew was that I had to catch another glimpse.

I'd gone through the customs ritual before, so I knew what had to be done. I slipped around the back of the crowd to the far side, where the booth said “Дипломаты.” Diplomats.

I'd evaded the proletariat. Now I faced the bureaucracy and its glacial cogs.

I slid my passport under triple-paned glass. The Soviet officer took his time. He studied the document, cocked an eyebrow, stamped a page, triple-stamped another. I was only a teenager. He didn't want to harass me. He wanted to get out of his booth, go home to his wife.

He held my passport up, jammed a finger at it, and spoke, finally, in stilted English.

"This is you?"

I tried to approximate my sleepy expression in the photo — it was easy — and nodded.

"Age?"

"Fourteen."

"Purpose of travel?"

For a boy carrying a diplomatic passport, it should've been obvious. I wanted to say, *Well, it's not for pleasure, I can tell you that much.*

"Visiting my parents. At the U.S. Embassy."

As he scribbled, cocked, and stamped, I bounced on my toes, trying to see past customs. Partitions blocked the way. I swiveled to face the thick lines I'd skirted.

One consisted of foreigners, non-diplomats, marked by bright clothing against a dominant palette of glum. Soon they'd be taken under wing by Intourist, the state travel agency, whose guides would follow them everywhere. The guides did double duty as spies, monitoring visitors and reporting their movements to state security. Everyone knew it. Nobody blamed them. It was their job.

Soviet citizens made up the rest. Customs officers with gloved hands pulled at straps and tugged at zippers. They rifled through

carry-ons, extracted underwear, examined rolled-up socks, all in search of smuggled Deutsche Marks or other contraband. One guard confiscated a paper bag full of cigarette packs. Another drew an LP record out of a briefcase like a rabbit from a hat and scratched a key across the shiny black surface. Its owners looked on numbly.

Meanwhile, my bags would go untouched.

It was a privilege, but it wasn't only that. It was a separation for Western diplomats that pervaded every aspect of our life in Moscow, beginning right here. They wanted to keep us in a cocoon from the moment we entered the country to the moment we left. We could go every day with little or no contact with ordinary Russians. We lived in designated buildings, worked in guarded compounds, and socialized in our own tight-knit diplomatic communities.

Cracks in the barriers could open, and Westerners could widen them. But it meant taking risks. For the Russians. And for us.

I didn't like risks. All I wanted for my winter break was to be left alone.

The officer grunted, and I turned back. He slid my passport through the glass, flaunting a toothy grin. I snatched it off the counter and shuffled off. If I hurried, maybe, I could catch her.

Before I'd gone three steps, a voice echoed in my head. My father's.

Flip through the pages. Every time. Make sure every stamp has the right date. Make sure they give you back your passport, not someone else's. Remember, they're always watching, waiting for you to slip up. You have to pay attention to every detail.

The thought of losing my diplomatic passport, my little shield, paralyzed me. I stopped. Flipped through the pages, checked every stamp.

And lost my advantage. The masses started to reconvene on this side of customs, moving slower than molasses toward the baggage claim. I pushed through.

In New York and Frankfurt, Instamatics snapped away as happy travelers reunited with friends and family. Not here. No photos at Sheremetyevo. It was absolutely forbidden, the absences of flashes leaving the atmosphere eerily subdued.

I stood on my toes again, craned my neck in every direction. She was gone.

Instead, a stocky man with a bushy mustache stood in my path, squinting at me. He was the spitting image of Josef Stalin, the dictator who had ruled the USSR with an iron fist. But he carried a sign, and it had a name on it.

My name.

Harrison George.

Yes, my parents had named me after a Beatle. Inadvertently, apparently. And backward. Stalin didn't seem amused.

Next to him lay a canvas duffle bag with airline tags. I recognized it as mine.

I didn't recognize him.

"I'm Harrison."

"Ah. Mister Harrison. Your parents, they are, ah, detained. They send regrets. I am driver from Embassy. Sasha."

The way he said the word *detained* sounded slightly ominous. And the fact that I couldn't see his mouth under his mustache unnerved me.

I peered around him, still hoping to see her somewhere beyond. He misinterpreted.

“Nothing wrong, Mister Harrison. They are working late, is all. Come, I have bag. Davai. We go for car.”

He lifted my duffle, and I followed him past the baggage carousel as it spit suitcases out of a metal turret like an armored tank.

Nothing wrong. A warning bell rang inside my head in a moment of lucidity — or paranoia. I had no way to know who this man really was.

Maybe the likeness to a former Soviet dictator was no coincidence. Maybe the KGB recruited for that. Maybe my parents were somewhere else in the airport, checking their watches, inquiring after me.

I saw myself thrown into the trunk of a dark sedan, bound and gagged, bruised against the spare tire as my “driver” weaved and swerved through the chaos of Moscow traffic, before I was dumped into a basement deep inside the infamous Lubyanka Prison, left there for hours with the taste of rope in my mouth, mesmerized by the swinging back and forth of a light on the ceiling, until finally placed before a line of faceless men who hissed unintelligible interrogatories at me.

I’d seen Lubyanka Prison before from a car window and scoffed at the dreaded KGB headquarters, thinking myself bold, confident I had nothing to fear from its imposing facade. I was the son of U.S. diplomats. What could they do to me?

Now, following this stranger who carried my bag, I asked myself that question again. What could they do?

I thought I’d been safe. I’d laughed. Who’d be laughing now?

Back in the USSR comes out December 2022! Sign up for an advance reader copy at patrickdjoyce.com.