



Greyhound Bus Potemkin

Fade in on a ragged backyard almost indistinguishable from the front, the same tufts of drought grass, the same scattering of once-bright toys faded to cheap pastels of neglect. A boy, me, waits for his birthday guests, bouncing a half-inflated ball on the hardpan. His eyes show the dawning conviction that no one is coming.

My mother speaks to me in Russian. I have lost nearly all that I learned as a toddler, and now recognize only a handful of words: Car. Tea. Stick. Regret.

I shrug. "English," I say.

My mother turns away, disappears through the skewed screen door. Her voice jabbars on alone in a language best used to itemize regrets.

Pan across the small garden by the fence to the chorus line of clothes hanging from their sagging cord. Legs scissor by, sweat pants luffing, sandals clapping. Hands begin digging in the nutrient-free soil of the garden.

"Serf's up," I say.

The sun transits. Time passes. A guest arrives through the festooned gate. A girl, something of a tomboy—flannel shirt and blue jeans, a red cowboy hat. She holds out a present wrapped in paper milled from the small, fragile trees of possibility.

"Happy birthday, Misha," she says.

She doesn't know that it's a nickname, a term of endearment. It's the only name she knows me by. Was it unfair of me to trick her into being so unwittingly familiar? Maybe, but never mind.

She looks into the camera, a present from my uncle. He's an Eisenstein, grandson of Sergei.

"He isn't," my mother says, in her peerless Russian negation.

A smudge on Tara's cheek. Dust caught in spilled juice or spent tears.

"Am I early?"

The camera moves left-to-right-to-left indicating the negative.

We climb together to the top of the jungle gym that my mother pulled from the gutter on neighborhood clean-up day. The plastic vertices are yellowed, the bars chipped and peeling. If I lean close to the hollow tubes it's like a conch shell, but instead of the sound of the ocean there's the scraping of metal down the street, the embarrassed music of scrounged things.

"Sarah got a horse," Tara says.

"Really?"

"Uh huh."

"My great-grandfather rode a horse. He was a Cossack."

"A what?"

"A Cossack."

Red slowly infuses her face.

"I don't think that's something you should be saying."

My face reddens too, though the camera can't see it. It dwells lovingly on her. The smudge on her cheek vaguely resembles the borders of the capital of the Soviet Union.



A squalid apartment, Moscow, 1978. My parents are newlyweds, held close by the tenderness of oppression. They light candle stubs from cigarettes and read Doctor Zhivago. The wall is still up and is to them anything but metaphorical. The bread shortages are likewise not metaphorical. Nothing throughout the wide frozen expanse of Soviet Russia is in fact metaphorical, as much as my parents might wish it to be.

Their friend Sasha enters skulking.

"Pasternak," he says. "Bourgeois soap opera. He is a threat?"

"It's lovely," my mother says.

"What would you know, you're Russian."



My father and Sasha are bundled in black wool coats enlivened by the impressionistic patterns of moth holes. Underneath, my father wears a Clash T-shirt. No one can see it, but he is freer knowing it is there against his skin. They cannot touch me here, he tells himself. It is one of the many things he tells himself, that nearly all Russians of

his generation tell themselves. We are free in our hearts. Of course, bootleg punk T-shirts do not a revolution make, as Sasha would no doubt agree. Besides, with all due respect to my father, they can most definitely touch him there.

They walk along the concrete embankment of a river. What river would it be? I have no idea. I do not know my homeland geography as I should. I know the Pledge of Allegiance, I know the capitals of all fifty states, I know the secret menu at In 'N' Out Burger, but I do not know the name of the river that runs through Moscow and along which my father and Sasha, a KGB stooge, walk.

They stop beneath a weak light—"this is Soviet power plus the electrification of all countries"—that gives a sturgeon-belly glow to the landscape. The snow is grayish-brown, the color of smoke. Little bits of particulate matter form the nuclei of still-falling flakes. But, unlike snowflakes everywhere else, the majority of these are exactly alike, as if issued from a stamp press. Children catch them on their tongues and taste a peculiar compote of pogroms and spent nuclear fuel.



My mother sits on the concrete step in front of our rented house in Stockton, California. The grass is dead, Soviet military brown curling in brittle cowlicks. She takes a deep drag on her cigarette, exhales. Tobacco awareness has completely bypassed the Russian émigré community, Soviets and New Russians alike. A desire to live a long life is just another American obsession, a weakness like so many others. Russians are not long for this earth, and they know it. It is in fact a point of pride.

"It was the end of them," she says. "The KGB, that whole world. They were hurrying to become other people, as we all were."

"But he betrayed you both."

"He was true to himself. That's what matters."

"No it's not."

"You don't understand, you have always lived here. It's different. The choices are much easier."

"But my father."

"Yes. Well."



The light above the river bank flares, brightening the scene. Sasha takes a thin package from beneath his coat. He holds it out to my father.

"Ramones," he says.

My father takes the thin plastic "record on ribs," a crude copy of "Rocket to Russia" etched onto a discarded X-ray. A cracked ulna traverses the center hole, the fracture meandering along the bone like the river beside them.

"In exchange for?" my father asks.

Sasha shrugs.

"Nothing now. Maybe later."



Slow focus to the passenger in the seat next to me. African-American, skinny, his carelessly attached limbs jutting out at unnatural angles. He is just waking from his heroin dream and jabs at the air with his elbows. He shot up in the bus bathroom half an hour ago and has been sleeping since. When he comes around, he will begin talking again, the velocity of his speech increasing as the narcotic in his blood grows more and more dilute. He is a little frightening. I have no idea what he is capable of. Of course, that could be said of nearly anyone.

Out the window, field after field, a belligerent flatness licking up to the edge of the road, the asphalt crest the only altitude of any note. Hawks perch on the reflector posts, flushing intermittently.

I'm not sure where we are. Nebraska possibly.

Simon begins to mumble and stir. That is my seatmate's name, Simon. Though I am hopelessly forgetful with names, he has made it impossible. He prefaces many of his statements with the phrase: "Simon says." The novelty of it is long gone, like the last swell of the Rockies's farthest finger. It's as if the mountains were never there now, towering arrogantly out the window. The flatness has taken over, and it is a terrain I have more sympathy with. Its guilelessness is almost touching.

"The next town," Simon says, eyes fully open and fixed on me now. "All you got to do is point."

"No," I say. "Please."

"I got to convince you, man."

"I believe you."

"Bullshit. I saw. You had that look. That 'nigger's full of shit' look."

"I'd never say that."

"Course not. You'd sure as shit think it, though, wouldn't you?"

We've been reenacting this same argument for close to twelve hours. It's our binding thread, our unifying conceit. I will pick someone from the crowd, Simon says, and he will beat the hell out of that person. To prove that he can. I have told him it's not necessary, that I will take his word for it, but he has a heroin-induced single-mindedness that is unbendable. I keep my arms pinned to my sides when we approach a station, fearing that I might inadvertently wave to someone and sentence them to a china white ass-kicking.

Very tight shot of his eyes, red-streaked with yellowed sclera. The pupils occupy nearly the whole of the iris, just a trace of green showing. Does he have green eyes? Is that possible? The eyes blink once. Twice. Lethargically. If you look closely, you can see the interior of the bus reflected in parabolic distortion on the glassy lens.



Exterior. Bus Station. Grand Junction, Colorado. Two days earlier. Tara is standing at the edge of the shade cast by a faded canvas awning, the loping outline of the eponymous dog just visible beneath a verdigris of mildew. She shades her eyes with her hand. I can wave safely, since Simon has not yet made his entrance. I do so, but she doesn't see me through the deeply tinted and scarred window. I am invisible. As usual.

I step onto the soiled concrete of lane seven, meet her halfway. She turns her head, mouths something to someone behind her. A hand rests briefly on her shoulder, a cowboy hat leans forward, brushes her ear.

"What's with the camera?"



Lap dissolve to a hand-painted map of the city of St. Petersburg, dissolve again to my parents walking through the thin slush of a Russian spring.

"Glasnost," my mother says.

"Perestroika," says my father.

"Gorbachev."

Sasha has followed them here—though he is unseen for now—to

this new old city with its elastic name springing always back to the superstitious original.

"Maybe they'll bring back the tsar."

"From the dead?"

"His cousin's still alive."

"The waiter? In Kiev?"

"Yes."

"He's an incompetent waiter."

"One may not have much to do with the other."

"He didn't know what Chicken Kiev was. In Kiev."

We see the tips of Sasha's cowboy boots, bought on the black market, peeking from a doorway. Steel tipped. "Jew kickers" he calls them. They tap in time with the soundtrack, the Ramones again, "Why Is It Always This Way?"

"You'll be able to get a real guitar," my mother says.

"I like my Semistrunka. Even my Tonika."

"But Fender, Gibson..."

"It's the song that matters, not the instrument."

My mother presses the heel of her hand against her left temple.

We pull back to the apartment block where they live. A massive gray eyesore with curtains blowing out through broken windows. My parents pause by the door as if reluctant to enter. They move closer together, their fogged breaths mingling. Cue Sasha.

He enters from the right of the frame, a wooden dowel in his hand, cocked back. He swings it casually, smacking it against the side of my father's head. A sound like split claves banging together, or a bat breaking on a hard slider.

My father drops to one knee like Al Jolson. How I love you, how I love you—there's a smear of blood on his hand when he pulls it away. Sasha draws back again. Oddly, he's the one singing:

"Last time I saw her alive, she was wavin', wavin' bye bye—"

The screen goes suddenly and inexplicably black.



Feet slowly materialize, stepping in time. Elbows emerge flapping from the darkness. Hands clap in unison. A different music comes up. Willie Nelson singing "Whisky River."

Tara line dances with the cowboy as I watch, back to the bar, long-

neck in hand. My hair is cut in the Russian way, though it doesn't have to be. Nobody makes me anymore. But habits are what keep us together, as my mother says. Not love, not mercy. Habits.

My short hair blends in here. All these cowboys could be Russians, with their buzz cuts and fuck-all attitudes. Put them in track suits and it could be the Drozny Club. Electric balalaikas, knockoff Strats, heartbreak songs that make this country crap sound like whining. Grudges flare at the bar, fifty-year-old fights enter the next round, Reds and Whites, nothing changes. Change is what we mistrust even more than happiness.

A girl comes up to me, long legs a little bowed. She licks my cheek without saying a word, without introducing herself. Where am I? I'm not a complete stranger, I'm more American than Russian, though neither side is quite willing to claim me. I wipe my cheek, which seems to offend her. It's sticky with some kind of fruit cocktail. Pineapple and tequila and salt.

"That's how I say howdy," she says.

"That's a borderline public health issue. The CDC will want to know."

She punches me in the shoulder.

"I'm a goddamn nurse, don't give me that bullshit."

"MRSA," I say, pronouncing it as a single word. Mersa.

"What about it?"

"Ask Roy Orbison."

I catch Tara's eye and she winks at me. I wink back. I'm a good sport.

Later, while her cowboy and my nurse are in the bathroom—separate bathrooms—I move over next to her.

"This is it," I say. She smiles an uncertain smile that is also a question. "After all these years."

I reach my hand across to hers. She pulls it away. She looks down into her glass of beer as if analyzing its chemical composition. She shakes her hair, looks at me again.

"I don't want to give you the wrong idea Misha," she says. "I never—"

Stop! Cut!

I push back from the table, a little too hard. The table rocks, all four beers spill. Tara starts to mop the mess up as I back onto the dance floor, clapping my hands and dropping into the kazachok.

There are many unfriendly eyes in the darkness.

I do my Russian peasant dance to "Orange Blossom Special." Tara's cowboy comes out of the bathroom and pulls two other cowboys off me. I'm against the wall, my eye is throbbing, I'm bleeding a little. The nurse looks after me. Her breath is liquored and stale. I kiss her. Tara's cowboy laughs.

"He's gonna be all right."

Tara walks away, disappears out the door. I imagine reasons for that, reasons that would suit my interests, but I know they are not the real reasons. The real reason is she is tired of me. After all these years, for all that I've taken from her, she's got nothing from me.

That night while I'm with the nurse I dream I'm with Tara. I'm awake as I dream, looking down into the nurse's squinted eyes, her face turned up waiting for something that she will continue to wait for after I'm gone. She ridiculously says the word "love" and I laugh. It's the most American of words. It means nothing like what it is supposed to mean. It's all candy lips and Valentine's Day. What an insult.

I leave the nurse's car parked downtown in a handicapped space and walk out along the hard flat lots to the development where Tara's mother lives. She invites me in and puts me to work. I don't mind sweating. I don't mind the hardpan even. Chipping at it with a blunt shovel, it is the kind of futile labor I was born to.

I soak the ground in between bouts of shoveling to soften it up. The hole fills up and I watch the water very slowly percolate down into the earth. Then I dig a little more. The sun continues to move in its arc that everyone claims is perfectly predictable but I'm not so sure. Tara's mother brings a small peach tree out in a green plastic pot. She struggles with it across the yard and I watch. She stops halfway, expecting me to offer to carry it. I lay flat on the ground and bury my face in the muddy water.

Below the surface I see peach trees burning, axes felling them. Kit Carson riding up and down, neither happy nor sad in his work. The Navajo watch the American Cossack from above. They drop rocks down on him, but he is long gone before the rocks hit the floor of Canyon de Chelly.

"Stop," my mother says.

"I would love to stop," Sasha says. "Let me stop."

There is blood in my father's eyes, down the front of his Television T-shirt. Marquee Moon. He hasn't asked Sasha to stop. He hasn't asked for anything. His willingness to take it is my inheritance and the thing I despise most about him. He is so proud in his pain. Like an old woman at the very back of the bread line.

"Misha," Sasha says. I think he means me, but I'm not born yet, so it's unlikely. Unless he sees the future too and is talking to me, giving me a little taste of what waits. "You gave them my name?"

"They're your people," my father says. "They know you already."

"We don't have names. They don't know me like that."

"I didn't think it would matter."

Sasha looks at my mother.

"Do you hear him?"

"He believes," she says.

"Oh, he believes." He squats beside my father in the guise of a peasant, two farmers debating the weather. "Look, Misha, it's easy. These people here, at the clubs, these stiliagi, they don't know you. Not like me. You pick one of them, a name from a hat. There's nothing to it."

"For you," my father says.

Sasha pulls the stick back, then stops. He throws it into the corner.

"Look what you've done to me," he says. "I should kill you."

"You already have."

Sasha makes a pffft sound, a raspberry.

"You are made for America," he says. "With your stupid, selfish metaphors, this substituting one thing for another that is not at all the same thing. A little discomfort for death. Svoloch meshok."

He raises his hand again, then remembers he has thrown the stick away. He laughs.

"Creatures of habit."

My mother looks at my father, but does not go to him.

"I've thought about your offer," she says to Sasha. "We don't need your help."

Sasha smiles.

"So you're all set?"

"Nearly."

"Ah, yes. Nearly."

My father looks back and forth between them. He does not quite understand, which is probably for the best.

"Your days are over, Sasha," he says. "Your kind."

"My kind." Sasha laughs. "It is never over for my kind. We are shadows that do not need the sun to live."

He goes to the window, opens it.

"Mayakovsky, I think."

He leans his head out and takes a breath. The air, as always, is stale and seasoned with chemicals.

"Your kind, however, Misha," he says, "I do not hold out much hope for your kind."

My father lifts himself slowly from the floor, goes to the turntable in the corner. He puts on James Taylor.

"Jesus," Sasha spits.

My father closes his eyes, sways.

"I've seen fire and I've seen rain," Sasha sings in a girl's voice. "God damn. Who hasn't?"

My mother goes through into the little kitchen that is separated from the main room by a curtain to make tea. She has a samovar that was my great-grandmother's, with designs of woods and bears and peasants. The good old days. At some point she hears an unusual sound from the other room, but she doesn't go to check. There are so many things it could be, though not really. She hides what she knows from herself and when she returns to the room she is carrying two cups. The thin curtains in the window blow into the room, white wings flapping.



I try to hate Tara's cowboy, but it's not easy. He gives me his cowboy hat, sets it on my head like he's deputizing me. He gives me a Willie Nelson CD too, calls me "pardner." Tara hides in the shadow of the bus.

"You can hug her if you want," the cowboy says. "It's all right."

Tara gives him a look.

"What?"

"You."

"Well hell," he shrugs. "He came all this way."

He has a point, but there is that last little distance I can't quite get

across. The bus starts up beside us and the air brakes exhale into the dead air.

"Guess that's me," I say.

"Take care of yourself," Tara says, with the same level of affection she might show a siding salesman. She probably sees the disappointment in my face, though I'm not sure she's ever seen anything else there.

I climb onto the bus and sit down in an empty seat beside a skinny black kid snoring and twitching in his sleep.



"This town coming up," Simon says. "It's our last chance."

"I told you, I believe you."

"Don't insult me, man."

It's not much of a town, something from off the steppes. Shacks and huts, neglected fields blooming bright yellow with wild mustard. The outskirts streak by, blurred by movement. An intentional effect.

"These people could use it," Simon says. "Give them something to talk about. Shit-ass town like this."

The depot is inside a store that ships packages and sells boxes and tape. The transitive property is in effect at all times. There is a small ice cream counter in the corner of the shop, near the front window. A boy is tapping on the glass, dancing from foot to foot. The bus settles on its haunches, the doors wheeze open.

"People need correcting," Simon says.

I wonder what the name of the town is, I hadn't noticed on the way in. I scan the signs up and down the street, but there are no clues. It has an artificial feel, the unreal aura of something from a studio lot. The people are hired to be here, I'm convinced, to mill around and mouth gibberish that looks authentic on camera. The buildings are thin as paper and would fall over if a wind came up.

A man steps out of the depot and looks directly at me. The little dancing boy follows him, licking an ice cream cone enthusiastically. He is talking around the licks, a steady stream of words I can't hear but that are surely important to him. The man says something without looking at him. The boy licks his lips, then repeats himself loudly. I can almost make out the shape of the words. They are round mostly, though there are some edges.

The boy is making his point forcefully when the man reaches out without warning and slaps the ice cream cone from his hand. It splats on the sidewalk and begins melting immediately. The vanilla white stain spreads across the concrete, slurps into the cracks. The boy watches it, disbelief holding sadness and anger briefly in check, but only briefly. He starts to cry.

I move my hand from the camera and wave at the man. Twice, back and forth. Then I crook my finger into a little gun and drop the hammer.

"Got you," Simon says.

He is as good as he claims, a blur of hands and feet and snapping corn rows. The man lies on the sidewalk like a collection of human parts left at the curb. The ice cream river washes up against his back, then changes course.

The boy looks down at his father, then up at me and at Simon, who is taking his seat again. He doesn't stop crying. If anything, his crying becomes more intense. He stares at the hulk of the bus, at our tinted, half-visible faces, and I realize that we haven't exercised any kind of justice, but have only given a little boy one more thing to be afraid of.



My mother brings out watermelon and sweet tea. The tea is too sweet even for me. Tara holds the little ornate cup delicately and tries not to crinkle her face as she drinks. The watermelon is better. We spit the seeds into a little pile beneath the jungle gym and talk about how we will come back in ten years and the yard will be a field of green striped melons.

Afterward our hands are sticky with watermelon juice and orange from the rust on the jungle gym. My hand touches hers briefly. She doesn't pull it back right away, and that carries me for the next fifteen years. She only moves it when we hear the booming voice from inside and the clomp clomp of his steel-toes coming through the house. They stop when he stops to put on some music. The Ramones, of course. "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow." Then the screen door, slamming with its tinny rattle.

"Sasha," my mother says. "Sit down."

And he does, looking briefly at me, then at Tara, then past us both

toward the fields behind the house and the cement river and the train tracks in the distance. He takes a sip of beer and almost smiles. It disappears quickly like a short-lived pain, a little jab behind the tooth or at the corner of the eye. These things too will pass, he is thinking. Nothing is to stay.

In the corner of the yard, propped up by a length of dowel, is a peach tree. It doesn't get enough sun over there, shaded by the garage. The soil at its base is pale and crusted. The leaves are green, but slightly curled at the edges. There is a single peach hanging from one branch, small and round and not yet ready for us.