

Little Horrors

Chronicles of Good Girl and Bad Girl: Episode 1

Good Girl finds Bad Girl by the side of the river. Good girl pushes Bad Girl into the water and Bad Girl starts to drown. Good Girl then picks up some rocks, and drops them on Bad Girl's head. Good Girl wins. The end.

I am two and a half years old. My parents and I are eating breakfast in our New York home. This morning, like most mornings, I'm rambling in broken Russian. Normally, I recount the stories my grandmother has read to me and the Russian cartoons I've watched. However, this time, I am incredibly proud. Good Girl and Bad Girl are the products of my own imagination. Strangely, my parents do not seem to agree.

My mother slowly lowers her fork back onto her plate and readjusts her seat. Her eyes are wide and focused directly on me. For a moment, she says nothing. Then slowly, with a look of concern growing on her face, she asks me "Talichka, don't you think that's a little scary? The Good Girl sounds more like the bad girl here. Don't you think?" Ah, I was expecting this question, but don't worry. I have already rationalized all of this in my two-year old mind. "Mama, you don't understand," I giggle. "This happened in Russia!"

Immediately, my parents are dumbfounded. Where is this violence coming from? They abandoned Russia almost a decade ago. I should have been shielded from the violence and despair. Suddenly, they worry. Did they create a little Soviet nihilist?

In an attempt to answer this question, let me refer to my favorite childhood poem translated from Russian.

*In childhood my mother put out my eyes,
So I don't steal jam from our winter supplies.
Now I can't read, but I've learned to hear well,
And I've also got quite a good sense of smell.*

Isn't it cute? How about another one?

*It's Sunday, we're marching in the parade,
Little Vanya brought out a rifle grenade.
The militia is conducting meticulous searches,
Old brain jelly plop-plops from the birches.*

I grew up on these rhymes, one after another. I heard them sung from my parents, my grandparents, my babysitters, even my brother.

Turns out, these rhymes have a name – *Strashilki*. Translated into English, they are “Little Horror Poems” (Esanu). However, this translation does them no justice. In the Russian language, adding the diminutive suffixes “ka” and “ki” soften a word. For example, to my parents – I am not “Talia,” but “Talichka.” Adding “ki” to the root word “strakh” (horror) presents horror in a humorous and somewhat childish way, which is exactly what these poems aim to do.

Strashilki originated during the 1970s in the Soviet Union. At first, they seemed to resemble other dark, Western cautionary nursery rhymes. However, while Western cautionary poems correct, preach, and caution children, Strashilki never moralized. Instead, they drew on absurd and grotesque exaggeration and “simply presented cold-blooded situations as if for their own sake” (Esanu). Strashilki were gruesome and absurd, and beloved by the people of the

Soviet Union. Strashilki were beloved by my family as well, and served as a light-hearted reminder of the inexplicable despair that encompassed our history for over a century.

In case you are unfamiliar with the inexplicable despair that is the history of the Soviet Union and my family, it goes something like this.

First comes the Red Terror. From 1918 to 1922, the Bolsheviks lead a campaign of intimidation, arrest, violence and execution as Communism takes hold over Russia – 200,000 die (Keller). My grandfather's family are some of the victims. The Red Army arrives at their small farm property in the south of Russia and seizes the land. Half of his family is killed immediately. The other half is shipped to Siberia to die. Oddly, he survives.

Next, comes years of famine and executions – 11 million die. Following this, Stalin takes control. From 1927 to 1938, Stalin goes on a dissident killing rampage, known as the Great Terror – 700,000 people die. Next, from 1939 to 1953 Russia incurs a lighter rate of executions by comparison – 400,000 die. However, in the meanwhile, there are 1.6 million people dying during forced population transfers and at least another 2.7 million people dying in the Gulag (there goes most of my mother's side of the family). This makes up 20 million dead Russians under the Communist Regime (Keller).

Now, to top this all off, there is World War II. The Soviet Union, despite its apparent victory, boasts another 26 million Soviet Deaths. A quarter of Leningrad, the home city of my parents, dies from violence and starvation (Keller). The Holocaust and the occasional Pogrom also add to the mix. Concentration camps kill my grandmother's father and (unsuccessfully) sentence my grandmother and her mother to their deaths. Oddly, they too survive.

Even following the wars, death is still rampant in Russia. My mother reflects on her college years in the 1980's USSR. "People just kept dying," she says, rather calmly. "Every

couple of months there was a funeral. One boy fell off a roof, the other got drunk and got hit by a train. Someone drowned. A couple of others stepped on some land mines. There was never any outrage, just acceptance. Human life wasn't as valuable as it is in America.”

Russian history is riddled with this endless death, and intertwined within the Gulags and the Auschwitz and the Bolsheviks, is the history of my own family: human after human dropping one after the other at the cruel hands of dictators, anti-Semites, and the occasional forgotten land mine. For my ancestors, death has been the norm. *Then, there's me.*

I can proudly say that no one has attempted to kill me, let alone kill anyone I love. I have never starved nor feared my government nor been forcibly relocated to Siberia. In the context of my ancestors, I live like royalty. Strangely enough, however, death does not feel any less inevitable than it did for my parents or my grandparents in the USSR. It grips me as I cautiously cross traffic on Massachusetts Avenue every morning, and as I peak over my shoulder when I walk home from school at night. Death creeps in the breaking news headlines reporting that *another* Jew has been attacked in France and that *another* of Putin's opponents has mysteriously disappeared. Death seems to be everywhere and everywhere is dangerous. I live with the paranoid mentality that something will eventually kill me. I am not alone in this illogical anxiety. My grandfather refuses to drive over bridges because he is convinced that they will fall. My mother immediately assumes the worst when I do not answer my phone. Unfortunately, my paranoia has been passed down to me from my family, just like my frizzy head of hair and giant nose.

In 1966, Dr. Vivian Rakoff, a researcher at the Jewish general Hospital in Montreal, a city where thousands of Holocaust survivors had settled, began to study the transgenerational effects of trauma. Soon it became consistent knowledge that parental traumatic experience could

reach the second generation. Clinical studies reported a wide range of affective and emotional symptoms transmitted over generations. Some of my favorite symptoms include distrust of the world (read paragraph above), chronic sorrow, inability to communicate feelings, lack of entitlement, an ever-present fear of danger, and unclear boundaries (Braga).

For some Russians, it can be argued that this chronic sorrow manifests itself in dehumanization in which the value of a human life begins to diminish. Masha Gessen, in *The Dying Russians*, argues that in this process of mass depopulation, Russia has taught its citizens that their lives are worthless. Even now, she points out, violent death is still prominent in modern day Russia. As of 2006, the rate of violent death is more than five times as high in Russia than in Western Europe. Thus, could my love for Strashilki be a result of some sort of transgenerational dehumanization?

I prefer a more optimistic analysis. A century of dying can carry great psychological distress and I think that my family has found a method of coping - systematic desensitization. Through, systematic desensitization, one can overcome his or her fears through gradual and systematic exposure (Dubord). If violent death terrifies us, then we must expose ourselves to it as much as we can. When death becomes a joke, there is opportunity to move on. For my family and myself this comes in the form of Strashilki. There is something soothing in the gore. Once we can joke about our anxiety, our paranoia subsides. Death becomes a joke, and thus, death is no longer terrifying. Death can no longer grip us the way it has gripped our ancestors.

As a result, I find it incredibly difficult to discuss the history of my family with a serious tone. My parents suffer from the same ailment. *We just can't do it.* We start to laugh at everyone who has tried to kill us. We decide that Soviet Jews are just incredibly unlucky. Sometimes we even blame ourselves. *There were Jewish Communists, you know.*

That begs the question. Will we ever move past our trauma if we cannot take it seriously?

I argue yes. Despite the trauma and sarcasm, my family's humorous view towards death is a form of optimism. Coping mechanisms like Strashilki, despite their absurdity and their gore, allow us to overcome our fears and hope for the best. Thus, as my family's Russian dread slowly transitions into American optimism, I think our historical trauma will finally subside. Our love for Strashilki will remain however - no longer as a coping mechanism, but as a symbol of our resilience.

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