JULIA ZARANKIN

THE FABRIC OF NOSTALGIA

I FOLD AND UNFOLD MEMORIES on the floor, sitting amidst piles of letters from my childhood that I sort, categorize and catalogue by year. A rubber band clasps each year's worth of letters, with the year written in bold red Sharpie ink. I've thought about organizing them by sender, but certain senders have disappeared, lost frequency or ultimately faded from my life. I've had close to a hundred correspondents over the past twenty-five years. I can't stop myself from archiving words addressed to me, but I'm loath to give ex-boyfriends and friends I've fallen out of touch with folders of their own. I prefer to store the memories in their own cubicles, locked into time, rather than floating through it. And so I have them there, sorted by year, tightly nestled into three file boxes in my closet. It soothes me.

As I sort through letters, the Russian pop band DDT plays in the background. The songs on the album have become landmarks for me; I wonder why the penultimate track, no matter how much I anticipate the generic guitar solos and drum routines, plunges me into a state of contemplation. Every time I hear it, I straighten up in my chair and inhale memories of a world I've never known.

I left the Soviet Union in 1978 at the age of almost-four. It feels fitting that we left without passports, since the country no longer exists. Now my passport tells me I come from a country I've never been to and whose language I cannot speak. I have to think for a minute before answering the simplest of questions.

"Where were you born?" The dreaded question at a party.

"Russia," my instinct tells me. And yet my passport says Ukraine. And so I reiterate, "Well, actually, the Ukraine." All I can see are my interlocutor's white teeth.

"So you're Ukrainian?" I'm asked. The question is a mere formality, requiring a one-word answer, not more. Certainly not meant to invite an identity crisis.

"Well, not exactly." And my explanation unfolds. I've compressed the history of Imperial Russian Jewry to a thirty-second self-contained

narrative: since Jews weren't allowed to settle in the Russian capitals in large numbers they occupied the Pale of Settlement—areas we now know as Ukraine and Poland. I'd like to add nuance to this explanation, but I have no idea how much the woman with white teeth wants to know.

"So wait. You were born in Ukraine but you're not Ukrainian and you don't even speak the language?" This Ukrainian business is new and wasn't an issue until the former Soviet republic became a sovereign nation in 1991. Now I have another identity to contend with, even though the Ukrainian one feels imaginary.

My relationship with Ukraine revolves around an invisible part of speech. All my life, I knew of my birthplace as *the* Ukraine, a part Russia, an endlessly flat appendage. Remove a three-letter article—*the*—and suddenly, the place becomes a sovereign country. The only Ukraine I am still a part of has an article attached to it. With the removal of *the* came a slew of new spellings—my birthplace, Kharkov, is now Kharkiv—a new flag, a new currency.

Hardly less absurd are the words I find in my mother's first foreign passport, delivered by immigration authorities in Austria, our first stop outside of the confines of the Soviet Union: *staatenlos*. Country-less. Landless. The same official inscribed my name and birth date into that dusty passport, and I wonder, now, what kind of foresight he must have had to label me *staatenlos*, as if he were branding me with unnamable geographic coordinates.

The Ukraine as I knew it—*Ukraina*—literally means at the edge, the land located at the edge of the Russian Empire. If there is a place that I come from, I imagine a place on the far end of a map. But because I grew up speaking and reading Russian, I've always claimed the entire landmass as my own.

My understanding of Russia revolves around émigré culture, permeated by loss, kitsch revival, self-conscious accents, trying to fit into a culture while all the while proclaiming your difference. I pride myself on being able to pinpoint a Russian woman of a certain age just from her walk; I can spot one from a block away. The distinctive, unmistakable waddle beneath a head of peroxide hair. I'm rarely wrong, but the final test is a woman's earrings: Russians always wear reddish-gold earrings with a clasp in the back that would withstand any petty thief's technique. Those earrings could only be stolen with ear in tow.

My grandmother left the Soviet Union and arrived in Canada in 1987 with a pair of gold earrings for her twelve-year-old granddaughter who had yet to have her ears pierced.

"I had to leave my jewelry behind in Odessa, but I brought you a pair of earrings," she told me. I had expected her to present the earrings in a jewelry box, but instead, they were wrapped in layers of handkerchiefs with their edges tied together in little bows. She took out a pair of small, red-gold hoops with a clasp at the back.

"Are these really gold?" I had meant to say thank you, but the colour threw me off.

"Are these gold! This is high-quality Russian gold. 585 *proba*. You're used to that Canadian shiny junk!"

"What's a *proba*?"

My father came to my rescue. "That's the Russian equivalent of karat. They measure it in percentages. So, 585 means 58.5% pure gold and 41.5% other metals."

"Oh, like our 14-karat?"

"Your 14-karat is *gurnisht*." My grandmother used the Yiddish word for 'nothing.' "These will never hurt your ears."

My grandmother's unexpected gift forced my parents to succumb to my ear-piercing desires a year earlier than planned. Her earrings gave me infections and seemed clunky at first, but they're the ones I resort to for comfort now. I was the only one in my grade seven class with red-gold earrings, but like most Soviet goods, a large percentage of people who had purchased earrings during the winter months of 1987 own the exact same pair as mine. Soviet fashion didn't subscribe to Western notions of variety and heterogeneity; whenever something good appeared on the market, everybody stood in line for the exact same commodity. I wear the earrings, now, to access a world I only ever knew about from hearsay, a universe I experienced through my parents' retelling.

I grew up speaking Russian, worming my way in and out of thoughts, inching my way toward meaning. Halfway through a sentence my mother would stop me to correct my grammar. "Don't you remember that negations always take the genitive case?" she'd say, while trying to position the chicken on a roasting pan, on her ten-minute break, before rushing back to her piano students in the basement. I noticed that, at thirty, her fingers were already calloused, from what I took to be a mix of teaching, cooking, and correcting my Russian.

Russian is an inflected language with six cases and I walked around juggling them in my head, never really sure which one to toss up first. My

head garbled the six declensions and I was left uncertain about how to craft meaning from them. At my Russian teacher's dining-room table, in between servings of meat pie and buckwheat followed by black tea, we wrote the case names out, syllable by syllable, in loopy cursive longhand: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, prepositional. Next to the mysterious names, I would decline a word, say "table," and it would sound like *stol, stola, stolu, stol, stolom, stole*. It was only years later, in Latin class, that I learned the actual meaning of the cases. Until then, they were a collection of names that rhymed. I would go to school the next day armed with knowledge that I had no idea how to articulate.

It took years for the case rules to become intuitive; my childhood was spent in a balancing act, hoping the correct noun or adjective ending would fall in my lap when summoned. "Remember what happens to the accusative case in animate masculine nouns," my mother cautioned me after I had made a *faux pas*. I had a hard time backtracking in the middle of a thought in order to revamp that accusative ending, and by that point I couldn't piece together what it was I had wanted to say about Jamie Storrow's new Sonics sneakers. The thought felt perfectly symmetrical in English, but once translated, I got stuck at the seams. As long as I arranged the nouns in neatly organized charts, the series of vowels at the end of each word made sense to me and looked almost like poetry.

"And so what about those Sonics Jamie was wearing?" My mother tried to prod me along.

I stared blankly before answering. "I don't remember." The Sonics sneakers Jamie Storrow had worn to school that day were exactly the same ones my father had bought at Sears two weeks earlier. A relative clause, two accusatives, a prepositional, and a critical decision about the verbs: perfective or imperfective? Was the verb already a completed action or was it ongoing? I could hear my mother asking me, and my words wouldn't worm their way into a coherent sentence.

"Did Jamie buy the same shoes as me?" my father asked, operating as a gifted interpreter.

I had forgotten why it mattered. "When we were playing soccer and Suzanne stole the ball because she runs faster than me and passed it to Jamie because he was in front and shot it straight into the goal," I blurted out in one breath, my syntax racing ahead of the corrections.

I began to rely on my parents to rephrase my incoherent babblings and transform them into grammatically correct meaning. It hardly surprised

me when I later discovered that Osip Mandelstam, Russia's great twentieth-century poet, had traveled to Armenia in hopes of regaining his poetic muse and had found it located in the landscape and sounds of a language he could not understand. I wondered if, to him, Armenian sounds resembled my declension tables. Lacking access to a formal grammar, he attributed his own etymologies to sounds, objects and landscapes. I first met Mandelstam in a volume of poetry lying on the bottom shelf of my parents' cluttered bookcase; I didn't read beyond the poem titles, but that was enough to convince me that the book belonged on my shelf rather than my parents'. He infused the Russian tradition with classical, Latinate echoes and I read the titles over and over: *Silentium*, *Hagia Sofia*, *Tristia*, *Notre Dame*. Mandelstam became my fellow traveler, following me through university, graduate school and back home to Toronto, where he stands, underlined, highlighted, full of post-it notes, torn at the sides, on my shelf of favourites.

I found Mandelstam's definition of poetry, as a "longing for world culture," addictive. He longed to communicate with other poets—Catullus, Ovid, Dante—in real time. It was the first time I had encountered someone whose nostalgia was more tangible than my own.

I wasn't searching for world culture, but I was groomed to find solace in distance. To me, letters were more real than their addressees. Ever since I can remember, I wrote my grandparents letters. Absent addressees whom I had never met who were still an ocean away, in that place in the Soviet Union, known as *the Ukraine*.

Dear Grandmothers and Grandfather (Babushki and Dedushka), I began. How I relished that opening line. How many people had two maternal grandmothers? I was the only person in my class who still had a living great-grandmother, and also the only person who wrote letters in Russian at the age of seven. The letters' beginning felt auspicious, full of promise, the smoothly lined paper in front of me. I cleared the kitchen table for this event and sat up straight. *How are you? How is your health?* Stop. I let my left elbow slide to the side and rested my head against my hand. What if my grandmother smelled like Sonia's great-aunt? That stale smell of mothballs. Would they even know about my wheat allergy or that I can't drink milk? And then the litany of information about myself: *I practiced an hour of piano today. I'm learning my third language—French! This year I am going to summer camp again.* Not much has changed since last month, I felt like writing. *I played in a music competition a few weeks ago. I didn't win, since there were only three*

winners, but the judge told me that if he could have picked a fourth winner it would have been me. My swimming class is going well and I can swim underwater. I had forgotten the word for "dive" in Russian, but it was just as well because my dives weren't real dives since my stomach always hit the water first, even though I pointed my hands the way the teacher said. *I miss you and love you. I'm sending you a school photo. Mummy warned me not to open my mouth, but I couldn't help it.* Only seven more lines on the page. *I have to go and practice piano now. Thank you for the books you sent. I'm reading ten pages every day now. The Yugoslavian wool sweater you sent me fits and I like it even though it's prickly and I can't wear it without an undershirt. I can't wait to see you. Kisses, your grand-daughter.*

And then the corrections began. My mother's red pen left circle marks around almost every word on the page. Arrows, grammar rules in the margins: don't forget the accusative case! It refers to movement—*where to?* Inanimate masculine nouns take a different ending than animate ones! Prepositional case most often ends in an "e."

"Why did you tell them the sweater is prickly?" my mother asked.

"Because it is. My neck burns every time I wear it."

"Let's leave that out. They must have stood in line for hours to get that sweater. Especially one made in Yugoslavia."

"But it's scratchy." I wasn't sure where Yugoslavia was. "Why would they stand in line for that sweater?"

"You can't just buy things in Russia. Stores are empty, and when products come from abroad, everyone stands in line for hours to get them. Your grandparents stand in line for every book they send you. That's why we wanted to raise you in Canada."

My mother said *we*, but she meant *your father*. She had been a gold-medal graduate of the Leningrad State Conservatory, her professor's pride and joy, beloved only daughter, surrounded by friends in all her photographs. There she was in a picture, walking by the Kirov theatre, an arm woven through her friend Olga's, laughing, her hair freshly curled and parted in the middle, five-inch platform heels, a black-and-white midi-dress, eyebrows plucked into submission and lipstick highlighting her full lips. My mother had no intention of leaving the world of her familiar. It could have just been youth, but in the photos of her early years in Canada, she had shed that self-assured look along with the platform shoes. Instead, she traded in her glamorous Russian past for a language she was never given the chance to learn properly, since immigration authorities in 1978 only funded one family

member's English classes. When choosing between her acute musical ear and my father's lack of linguistic sensibility, her perfect pitch had put her in second place. It was not the first time that it deprived her of an opportunity.

"If we lived in Russia, would we have to stand in line for clothes too?" I asked.

"Yes. Even for food." The first time we went to Safeway, my mother read food packaging with the same intensity that she reserved for learning a new piece of music. She read into every word and every picture. We came home from Safeway with a package of fifty ice cream cones, marvelling along the way at how light ice cream felt in this new country with magical stores that had everything and where cashiers smiled and inquired about your day. *But the box had a picture of real ice cream on it*, my mother wept, when we sat down, ready to spoil ourselves with this multicolored frozen delicacy, and found ourselves sitting amidst 50 empty cones that tasted like cardboard.

"But why would she choose a sweater that was so itchy?"

"OK, just get rid of the sweater," and her red pen tore through the sentence and it was gone.

"I wanted the letter to go down to the last line of the page," I muttered, and my mother quickly added a line. *Thank you for all your gifts. Everything fit me perfectly*.

"There. Perfect. Now, all you have to do is rewrite it."

I sealed each envelope with a sense of loss and hoped that my grandparents had the powers of interpretation required to read through my linguistic fissures.

When I turned twelve, the year after music camp, we moved to Toronto and I wrote so many letters I lost track of my addressees. I wrote to every person who had signed and included an address in my flower print notebook. Each letter I sealed brought me back to the music camp's red-brick, Edwardian dormitory. I could see us sneaking out the window after midnight, once the doors were locked, running into the cricket field and lying on ground wet with dew, where I learned to distinguish Cassiopeia from the other constellations. I was numb at school and couldn't utter a word when called on by Mrs. Shields. She tapped her nails lightly on the desk and I stared at her blankly, my mind running through Russian declensions and case endings, rendering me immune to her glare.

And yet, I covered page after page in my chameleon handwriting. I bought a purple pen to reply to my friend Alyssa's turquoise ink, and began

sprinkling my letters with Emily Dickinson quotations, following her lead, adding "hope is a thing with feathers" on the backs of envelopes. I didn't get an allowance as a kid, but the amount of stamps and stationary I consumed amounted to far more than the weekly five-dollar bills my friends received.

I slowly wrote my way into a voice and into syntax, to salvage distance, and to forge meetings. When I sit down to write my way through yet another note-card, another letter, I imagine myself writing under my grandfather's watchful gaze. The same grandfather I can piece together only from photographs and family legends, the one who had a knack for languages and who wrote letters with an ease that others reserve for phone conversations. He had disappeared from my verbal repertory and I lost track of him until, a few months ago, going through stacks of old papers at my parents' house, I came across a pile of his letters. There they lay, wrapped in a thick, Soviet-style plastic bag—the same bags my grandmother used to wash and air-dry on her balcony, where they hung like underwear.

I was shocked to realize how much the handwriting I cultivate—uniformly rounded letters without the obligatory tilt to the right, or the awkward leftward sway—resembles his. Sitting on the floor of my parents' bedroom, propped against a thin, rounded leg of my father's antique secretaire, I perused the stack of letters, running my finger against the ballpoint pen marks, to see if they would still smudge, if they were still alive**.** Each letter consists of a single sheet of paper, folded down the middle to create a four-page document, and then folded once more to fit in the envelope. I straightened the creases on a few letters, and folded them up again, meticulously, as if I were studying the crease marks on a paper crane. I could barely connect the seamless, even-keeled, almost delicate writing with the bear of a man I knew from photographs, the same man who smothered me with kisses in the photo where I'm crying in his arms.

I read a few lines here and there, and find myself watching the movement of his hand across the page, imagining how he might have tightened the grip around his pen, pressing down with his index finger to round the Russian *d*'s just so, forcing a momentary pause—dash—to continue a word on the next line. I have no idea whether he's left handed or not, but I imagine him writing, like me, at the kitchen table, writing to an absent addressee, to merge the distance between himself and the family he would not live to see again. And I read his questions addressed to me—what was I reading, was I slouching less, how were my French lessons, had I learned *Für Elise* on the piano yet, were the new shoes helping my flat feet, was I eating well—and

realize that he too was imagining me, crafting me through words, watching me come alive, however slowly, by gently pressing the edge of his navy blue ball point pen into the page at an angle.