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Driving to Russia

The summer we attend Russian Culture Camp, Marina is thirteen. Thin. Hair the color Russians call chestnut. For years I've tried to nourish my daughter with her birth-country, thinking it will solidify her identity, but Russia has all but evaporated from her every day life.

"She's not Russian," my husband, Kevin, always argued when I lobbied for us to attend one of the events planned by our adoption agency, "culture matters more than where she was born."

I'd look at him, maybe respond, wonder how he got things so easy.

"We can't dish up Russia in the middle of North Carolina," he'd say.

I couldn't disagree, but I also couldn't help insisting that we pack the girls into their booster seats and drive thirty miles to attend the agency's annual picnic or ice cream social where we'd stand with fifty other parents we barely knew as our born-in-Russia children ate too many potato chips or drenched scoops of ice cream with chocolate and caramel sauce.

That's the way my mothering has gone since we adopted Marina: my reaching for Marina's heritage and grasping at almost nothing. What I'm really after for her is something close to what I know about myself: my English and German descent, my ancestry of mid-western farming and north woods lumbering. The family stories and lore and people that help tell me who I am and where I'm from. Since my daughter's ancestry is mostly an unmarked snowfield, giving her a whole country seemed like the best I could do—my attempt at strapping little snowshoes on her feet.

I first heard about Culture Camp the year Marina was two and put it on the back burner. In the meantime Marina squirmed through adoption-agency sponsored demonstrations of Moscow folk dancers and mutinied when the Russian Ballet performed Swan Lake at a nearby university. She ignored

our readings of Tolstoy's stories for children and the Chagall prints hanging in Kevin's office. When her older sister, Tess, was cast as one of Mother Ginger's polichinelles, Marina still could have cared less about Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker. My youngest daughter has never taken a bite of borscht. Or enjoyed classes in gymnastics. Or been drawn to the 60" by 70" framed map hanging on one wall of her bedroom with Russia, not the United States, displayed huge and slightly off-center like a heart.

One year I splurged on Russian Christmas ornaments sold as a fundraiser by our adoption agency. Two dozen, carved from wood and hand painted, that I imagined Marina and I slipping into plastic gift bags and tying with red and green ribbon. But when I set up the project on our dining room table, Marina played with her Legos, not even admiring the shiny eggs and smiling matryoshkas. When we took several to Philadelphia for the Russian women caring for Kevin's parents, they scooped Marina up and spoke her name like only native speakers can, but it was Tess, not Marina, who agreed to present these gifts to them. And it was Tess's arm that one caregiver, a former Olympic swim coach from Azerbaijan, lifted up and admired.

"You-big-muscles," she said, announcing that our oldest daughter should be a competitive swimmer.

By the time Marina was five or six our attendance at adoption agency events had dribbled down to the annual Father Frost Festival, the Russian Christmas celebration that reemerged in the early nineties thanks to the rise of democracy and capitalism. After that I don't know if I let go of the agency or the agency let go of me, but we stopped making the effort and the parting seemed mutual. No one in my family ever seemed to miss the January 7th celebration featuring a tall man with his long white beard and robes of blue and white. The last Father Frost celebration we attended I went alone with the girls, and I remember having a headache. Too many kids were running around the hall of a church and too much food, not necessarily Russian, overflowed from paper plates. Father Frost looked shabby that year, like he really had emerged from the woods he was purported to live in, and whatever magic was there for the girls in the past was gone. By then Marina had learned that the man she probably thought of as the blue Santa Claus was good for one tiny gift while the real guy in red, who came down the chimney thirteen days earlier, was good for many more.

It was about that time that I started perusing the Culture Camp brochures that I'd requested a couple years before. It seemed unlikely that traveling all the way to Colorado was a better way to get to Russia, but the campers in the photographs looked happy.

"And," I told Kevin when first introducing the option, "we'd be with a 'sea of families' just like ours."

My husband looked at me as if I had finally and thoroughly lost my mind. "I'm quoting from the brochure," I said.

A big catch with camp for us, besides its cost and location almost 2,000 miles west from our home, was that family members had to attend together, an idea that never gelled when we were making vacation plans, especially as the girls got older.

The last time I brought up the idea at dinner, it flopped. "Mom," Tess said, "you're kidding, right?" Marina's answer was succinct. "I'm not going," she said.

So even I'm surprised one July afternoon when I find myself driving a rental car up into the Rockies with my travel-loving mother beside me and Marina in the backseat listening to her iPod. We're in elk country, and it comforts me to realize that elk also live in Siberia close to where Marina is from. Although I'm not really expecting Russia in the midst of all this Colorado beauty, it does seem wrong when the valley opens up and camp appears as a group of dark brown log buildings surrounded by a split rail fence.

At our first camp dinner we sit alone at a round table with plates of mashed potatoes and salad and bread still corralled in our trays. I find myself observing the other children, looking for some indication of what they have in common with my daughter.

"That kid looks your age," I say to Marina, nodding to a grey t-shirted girl sitting with parents I wouldn't mind talking to, but Marina's face slides into what I've come to think of as her typical, disinterested teen-age expression. My mother reads over the camp schedule divided into separate events for parents and children and earmarks the events she wants to attend.

"Ukrainian egg decorating sounds interesting," she says. "I might try that."

"What about you?" I ask Marina.

"Archery," she says, knowing that target practice is not part of the agenda, but that because our camp is held within a bigger camp which hosts family reunions all summer, we can take part in typical camp activities, but on our own time, at our own expense.

"Why don't you go with the middle school kids in the morning," I say, "and I'll take you to do archery after lunch." It's a compromise that semi-works. When I pick Marina up after her session she's painted an orange bird on a small canvas with oils, but it's clear that she's connecting with none of the other children or with the counselors who are college-age volunteers. Usually social at school, if not with the kids then with the teachers, Marina walks over to me silent, no one noticing that she's leaving the group, but when we're alone we have fun shooting arrows into targets and vinyl-coated polyester statues of wildlife: a deer, a bear, a brontosaurus.

"How was the session this morning?" I ask, loading up an arrow, holding it steady, drawing back my elbow as Marina watches, tells me to reposition my feet. "What did the counselors talk about?"

That's what the three of us do: stumble through our own little camp within a camp, sticking primarily to ourselves and negotiating every move, but not quite fully participating. If Marina goes to the session about how kids can make a difference in the world, I'll take her horseback riding. If my mother attends a beet salad demonstration, she'll take Marina on a hike and I'll attend a session on the rewards of parenting. When I suggest that we attend "Finding Your International Birth Mother" together, as a team, Marina refuses to accompany me and asks to go swimming. With the camp-within-a-camp plan none of us seem angry or frustrated or feeling as if we're wasting our time or money. Instead we're interested campers, watching what's happening to others even when we're right there participating: waving the Russian flag with one hand and the American flag with the other; learning steps to a Russian folk dance we'll never dance again; following along at the end of the opening-ceremony

parade, the gymnastic prodigy springing in front of us like a mechanical toy.

A vodka tasting and silent auction are scheduled for the last night of camp. My mother and I try orange and lemon vodka, and then discuss their differences. Each taste is \$5.00, served in little paper thimbles smaller than the Dixie cups I once drank Kool Aid from. We sit at a round table with other mothers. Most of them single, not just at camp, but still single when they return home. I've only met one other mother who is attending camp without her spouse.

Marina sits glum beside me with roller skates tied on to her feet. The rest of the kids are skating in a makeshift rink, going around counterclockwise, and even though I know I'm being ridiculous, I imagine her joining them and rewinding time, meeting the Russian-born friend she's never had, getting a closer connection to where she's from.

"Don't you want to skate?" I ask more than once, and when she finally stands I have the urge to push her gently into the rink. Instead Marina rolls off towards a line of tables stretched along one wall.

Like the vodka tasting, the silent auction is part social event and part fundraiser. The whole camp, I've discovered, is dual-purposed, functioning to educate and entertain campers and to generate income and gather donations. What I've come to understand and accept is that adoptive parents are a major part of the scaffolding that keeps the institution of Russian adoption standing. Besides bringing our own possessions to camp, we were asked to bring winter clothes to be sent to an orphanage in Putvil, Ukraine and Russian toys and crafts to replenish the camp's Cultural Treasure Chest. As a family of a middle school camper, we were also assigned "spa items" for the silent auction. Some parents' camp job was to arrange lotions and shower gels and soaps into one huge gift basket for parents to bid on.

At a distance I've been watching Marina glide from item to item, checking out possibilities. It's my mother who keeps conversation going at the table, skaters circling around and squealing behind her, the other mothers looking tired, and I don't doubt that they are. I'm half in the conversation, half with my daughter who is rolling our way.

My prediction: she'll want the movie-night gift basket filled with popcorn and DVDs donated by families with preschoolers through second graders. Instead she takes my hand and leads me to the right side of the tables, stopping in front of a plump and folded sweatshirt, the kind that's pulled over the head. Bright white, like a cloud. Like snow. Siberian.

"Is this something you want?" I ask, knowing my daughter well enough to know that it is and that the question I've just asked has been scripted between us.

Marina nods, and I hold up the sweatshirt. Unfurl it. On its front: the words "Russian Fairytales & Folklore 2010" below an orange bird spreading its embroidered wings. It's the firebird, a magical creature with feathers of flames.

In Russian folklore the firebird is both blessing and curse to its captor: a blessing because whoever sets out to capture it becomes a hero, a curse because the task is not easy. The second day of camp I attended a lecture given by a university professor who explained that the quest for the bird is usually initiated by whomever finds one of its lost tail feathers. Since the firebird is this year's camp theme, each child was given a bright reddish feather during the opening night ceremonies, one of which I found under a folding chair the next day. Although the professor was knowledgeable and her lecture was well attended, the session made me wonder about this bird. Was it supposed to represent Russia? Was its story meant to parallel the difficult life of the adoptee? Did its capture represent adoption? Was I, according to the legend, a captor?

"It's a pretty big sweatshirt," I say, holding it up to my daughter. Size large, adult, it hangs down to her knees. I scan the tables, looking for other, maybe smaller, child-size sweatshirts. "But I can see why you like it."

Her choice seems enigmatic—a huge sweatshirt emblazoned with signs of a camp she's rejected, but I know her focus won't veer to any other item. "Should we raise the bid \$2.00?" I ask pointing to the bidding sheet. I watch my daughter print tiny block letters next to our offering, and then I join my mother and the two of us table shop, leaving Marina behind on her roller skates to keep guard.

For the next thirty minutes before bidding closes, Marina summons my permission from wherever I'm standing. Our twenty-seven dollar counter bid becomes \$52.00 then \$77.00, then \$102. And when I check out the bidding sheet, I see the game we're playing: auction-tennis, a match of two bidders having the same goal and strategizing their best moves to get what they want. But I have no idea which adult in the huge room belongs to the rollercoaster signature of our opponent. It feels as if Marina and I are lobbing our \$2.00 raises back to no one, trying to figure out the backhand of a ghost.

"We can't go much higher," I say. Marina turns and look at me, her face melting, dripping onto my heart.

Ten minutes later the auction finishes with a bell and the slow calling of names as the winners exchange their cash or check for prizes. My mother has won a professionally painted Ukrainian egg. The giant gift baskets are claimed. Because Marina and I both know that our last bid has been blocked, the announcement of her name above all the talking and noise seems impossible. Still she skates to the winner's table, zooms back smiling. "I won," she says.

As I make out my check I look at the bidding sheet—the adult signature under "Marina Boyle" that has been crossed out with a thick line—and I feel the gaze of a woman watching me try to make sense of our win. Even before she speaks I'm sure she has played a role in Marina's happiness.

"Mt daughter didn't even know I was bidding on it," she explains, "and I could tell how much your daughter wanted it." I feel too moved for words.

A few minutes later Marina stands beside me cradling her snow-white sweatshirt.

"Why did you want this so much?" I ask her.

I'm not sure what answer I expect or want or that I'm going to get one this last night of camp--or ever. I'm not sure that I should know my daughter's secret desires, even about sweatshirts. I'm not even sure there's a way for any of us to understand and articulate our needs. But Marina comes close. "It's for the kids at school," she says. "I want them to know where I'm from."

