

Liquid Church

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Maybe I need real-sugar Dr. Pepper when I'm in Saint Petersburg as a hedge against the city's tragic past. Maybe I use that bitingly fruity flavor to block out thoughts of the sadness that crushed this place. Bombardment, starvation and mass graves constrained it to a heartbreaking fate. Seventy years later, the city of course bears scarcely a trace of that long ago siege, but it's hard to be here and not feel a density of heavy emotional weight.

Ergo Dr. Pepper.

Back in the States I stopped drinking the stuff after Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* exposed how much HFCS (high fructose corn syrup) pervades the beverage market. It was a drag, a sacrifice—not that the American bottling industry ever noticed my sudden lack of patronage. I visited Saint Petersburg last summer and rejoiced in discovering a part of the world untouched still by ADM, Cargill and Con-Agra.

When I should have been exploring the icons at St. Isaac's Cathedral or touring the Peter & Paul Fortress across the Neva River, I was instead discovering the motherlode of Peppers at a bodega on Nevskiy Prospekt, the city's resplendent promenade. I took a can outside and cracked it open. A tiny birthday party of bubbles tingled at the surface. I sat in the sweaty shade of the

massive limestone buildings that line Nevskiy Prospekt and watched a city swirl of office workers, shoppers and sightseers parade by.

I smiled.

Tourism requires effort and can be labor intensive. There is a WASP-ish work ethic attached to it. When you've spent *all that money to get here* and you don't try hard enough to see the sites, to catch the monuments, to sample the restaurants, to visit the churches, then guilt is your sad and appropriate reward. Last summer, at the very moment I sat foot-jiggling in the shade of Nevskiy Prospekt, I should have been booking a hydrofoil to go see the gold gilded fountains of Peterhof or heading to the Hermitage to take in the Malachite Room. Instead, I was reveling in a zesty caffeine charge.

Bliss!

What I sacrificed to Dr. Pepper *last* summer in Saint Petersburg, I am damn well not going to let happen *this* summer. Last summer I was glib and unbridled. I practically worshipped at the altar of real-sugar, as if Dr. Pepper were a world religion.

This summer--? No.

I rise at dawn my first morning back and embark upon a grand leisurely stroll to go see the Eternal Flame in the Field of Mars. Never mind that I hope this stroll will eventually deposit me in a bodega's refrigerated section where I can palm a couple icy cans of D.P.

Oh, oh.

At the 60th parallel in mid-June the days never really end. At 3 a.m. you can draw the room-darkening shades aside and find a warm twilight glow still illuminating the city. It is possible for a golden full moon to share the sky with a

rosy sun ball that remains suspended above a still-bright horizon. As if besting its heavenly rival in a footrace to the edge, the moon sets. The sun refuses to.

Dawn has already lasted a couple hours when I hit the bricks for my stroll, and the sky is suffused with a peachy break-of-day radiance. The waters of the Moika are glassy and still as I walk its northern embankment. It looks less like a river than a canal. Heavy red granite walls have fully contained it since 1711, a necessary stream-straightening maneuver in this flood-prone city. Impractically built on a marsh, Saint Petersburg has relied on the nonstop ingenuity of civil engineers for more than three centuries to organize and orchestrate its network of canals and to subdue and restrain its rivers. The Moika wends its way among these stone buildings and through these cobbled streets but lies so calm below my feet right now, motionless as a millpond, it doesn't seem to have a direction, current or flow. The native people of this place, the Ingrian, called it Mya, which meant "slush" or "mire." The early Rus called it Moika, which meant "to wash." Quiet and smooth, is how it looks at this hour, its waters silvery and flat—un-riverlike. When I peer over the granite walls of the embankment, its surface mirrors the buildings lining the other side, as if reflecting up to me an alternative city—inverted, reversed and glossy—trembling on the water.

A neighborhood of pastel-painted mansions floats there, shoulder to shoulder, no gaps between them. The colors are drawn from a confectioner's palette: peach, pistachio, lemon, robin's egg blue, deep spearmint green and the occasional Mac & Cheese gold, all of them trimmed with ivory paint framing the windows, like piped on frosting. I look from the reflection back up to the real thing and then double-check again with quick evaluative glances to see how well the copy has transferred from the original, how little diluted it actually is. The

Moika displays an impressive level of detail—scrollwork, cornices, bas relief medallions—all of it accurately represented, a fluid likeness of the grittier marble, granite and limestone world that looms above. When a slight breeze feathers across the surface, a weaving crosshatch of tiny currents intermingles. Swimming there before me is the city's enchanting twin.

In the 18th Century the Commission of Stone Buildings decreed a law stipulating that no structure could be taller than the Winter Palace, the Tsar's residence, which was four stories. Highly ornate Elizabethan Baroque architecture prevailed—the work of Bartholomeo Rastrelli, Domenico Trezzini and Carlo Rossi. On account of the height restrictions, everything about the buildings was intended to draw one's gaze upward into an illusion of stature. Even grand soaring columns had grand soaring columns. Rooftops attracted the eye; life-size statues appeared to cavort there: Gargoyles taking flight, lovers embracing, winged lions maintaining a stately calm.

These get reflected in my Moika mirror right now. Walking along and looking down, not up, is another way to enjoy the sumptuous architecture of Saint Petersburg. It's like taking a cruise where the whole point is to see what's pictured *in* the water, not actually to be *on* the water.

When a troika of champagne bottles drifts past, the ripples make the windows of these upended buildings wobble and warp. When an armada of ducks glides by, the walls crease, wrinkle and undulate. One stray dewdrop from an overhead line turns the water's surface to a quake-zone. A 200-year old palace breaks up and meanders downstream. It takes several moments to restore order. A bank and a bakery oscillate, as if debating whether to reconstitute themselves. Windowpane by windowpane the city rebuilds itself. When the

river is placid again, it's as if I can reach down and peel an art museum right off the water, it looks so much like a thin film floating there.

The Moika has always served as an unedited mirror to what lies above it and around it, an evanescent record across epochs and eons, history written on water.

During the siege of Leningrad, all 900 days, the monotonous drone of a metronome sounded over a loudspeaker system and was broadcast throughout these streets. It was the city's pulse, its heartbeat, its steadiness, its courage. The shelling began in September, 1941: 5364 bombs fell that first month and 10,700 incendiaries. The next month, 7590 bombs fell, 15,300 incendiaries. If you lived in Leningrad back then, and it was your birthday, the bombs were dropping. When your mother was standing in a bread line, the bombs were dropping. When food ran out and the cats, dogs and even rats disappeared from the city streets, the bombs dropped, they dropped, they dropped.

Days grew shorter as fall commenced, and the sun cycled away from the 60th parallel. This natural process probably never felt so much like abandonment as it did in 1941. The bombardment was like a hideous season all its own, engineered by madness.

I rest my arms on the granite embankment right now and gaze down at the river. It's as if the gravity of Saint Petersburg has sunk into my own gravity. I'm not just leaning on stone so much as feeling something drop with the weight of stone within me. Yes, the summer days are long here—but there's nothing light about this place. You can't bop around Saint Petersburg--you can't frivolously cast about for your next Dr. Pepper—without feeling something twist

down deep inside at the thought of what the city, its people and this river endured.

Those nights during the siege must have seemed endless. Someone peering into the Moika back then as I do now would have found reflected up to them the gaunt face of starvation, an edge all its own. The river's faithful mirror would have displayed on its black night-time surface the flames and flares of exploding ordnance. At especially desperate moments the water itself might have appeared to burn. Each blast would have jolted the embankment on which I lean right now, shaking this heavy granite with concussive force. By December 1941, the Moika was frozen and the world seemed dead. On Christmas Day alone five thousand people died from hunger. But some little strand of this river must have seeped along deep below the surface, a rivulet entombed in ice, no matter how many shells exploded.

When the bombs fell, the Moika bore witness. When the neighborhoods got rebuilt after the war, it bore witness. It was a loyal companion to the people through a million seconds of uncertainty, pressed into passive testimony, a captive also, just like the residents. Its reliable flow must have had something of the metronome's steadiness within it, too, and perhaps was comforting: nature's counterpoint to the pitiless rhythm of war. These granite walls are not just a container or conduit for a river but a frame for a kind of historical record, ephemeral and fleeting, that is fated to erase itself practically the instant it gets reflected. The water renders this history with the same degree of fidelity that lustrous paintings in the Hermitage do. Standing here, I feel I have discovered not just a floating secret city but the cultural archive of that city.

It's as if I'm in the presence of the sacred.

I lower my head.

There on the water a replica of our world quivers like a leaf on the tiniest of ripples. The concentric circles spread out to a place where they dissolve into the image of a woman whose shoulders are bowed and whose head is bent. She seems to be praying.

Later today, when I discover that ADM and Cargill and Con-Agra have indeed come to Russia and that all the Dr. Peppers in Saint Petersburg now have HFCS, I'll feel that strange disappointment of a childish pleasure denied. I'll walk along the Moika, a little out of sorts, and a little aggravated even that I feel so selfishly out of sorts, and I'll not see that mirage-like city reflected up to me on the water's surface, because it is only visible during the stillness of dawn.

At other hours of the day and far into a night that never really arrives, tourist flotillas cruise the Moika and speedboats motor along. Sometimes a jet-ski or two bounds and bounces through, frothing up a surf that slaps the granite walls. The constant turbulence turns the waters dark, no doubt churning long-lying sediment. The surface of the Moika roils, sloshing to-and-fro. Disturbed like this, the chop reflects nothing, not even the color of the sky, let alone a secret city.

Art students sitting on the many footbridges that span the river will be sketching the neighborhood of fancy buildings later today—embassy row with all of its soft-hued consulates. Their hands will linger over the structures, will shade in some quirk of texture around the windowsills or the interplay of shadow and light in a doorway. The river for them will be just an afterthought, the shiny suggestion of water maybe, perhaps a way to sneak in a little contrast,

a few more streaks of color or a curved shape here and there, and it will assume the space-filling importance of wallpaper.

When I look from their sketchpads to the Moika, I will see only ugly urban water.

Here at dawn, though, in the blissfully ignorant moments before any of this happens I gaze down at billowy clouds that blossom right out of the river and see a grand cathedral whose harlequin-painted onion domes shimmer there on the surface—stately and fragile, the tiled arches so welcoming I want to swim right in.

Saint Petersburg must be one of the heaviest cities on earth, what with its marble, granite and limestone, what with its staggeringly sorrowful past. Yet the Moika keeps it floating along, buoyant in the looking glass.