Wrestling with Russia

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A man stands with his 10-year old son, pointing out some of the details in Ilya Repin's monumental painting, a staggeringly wall-sized piece in the Tretyakov Gallery. The boy leans back against the body of his dad, his expression that of somber trust. The dad has placed one arm across the boy's chest, protectively, as if to shield him from the shock. It is the day after Russia has repatriated Crimea, and here in the Tretyakov nothing really looks different from the day before—patrons, docents, the paintings, this dad. He isn't shielding his son from anything having to do with Crimea—but from the shock of the painting itself.

People fainted when Pavel Tretyakov first displayed it publically here in 1885. It led to governmental restrictions on art.

In a fit of madness, the Tsar has killed the tsarevitch, his heir and chosen successor, and we see not a feared autocrat but an anguished father cradling the bloody body of his adult son. "Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan on November 16, 1581" depicts the singular act that kicked off an unsettled period known as the Time of Troubles, a tsar-less interregnum which saw many pretenders to the throne come forward as well as several false Dmitri's.

A puffy red velvet divan is situated about 10 feet from the painting, in case people need to sit down while gazing upon it and get a grip. The boy and his dad remain standing. It means a lot when the Tretyakov places a velvet divan before a work of art in any of its galleries. It means the piece really draws the crowds, really inspires contemplation.

It means the piece takes people over the top.

On this afternoon in late winter the flakes are flying outside, and we've all surrendered our snow gear to the babushka at the coat check counter. The dad has leaned forward slightly so that his chin rests affectionately at an angle against the top of the boy's head, and this makes his cheek bunch up a bit. Left finger extended, he points at something in the painting. He and the boy train their gaze on that very spot.

Russia, meet Russia.

Ruthlessness is part of the chronicle—blood, terror, torture and fright. Ivan killed his son more than 400 years ago. More than three centuries ticked by before Repin painted this scene. He captured the two men down on the floor in a death clutch, the tsarevich lying limp in the tsar's arms. This calamitous event has happened so abruptly that everything is in disarray—a chair overturned, the rug under the tsarevich's teal green boots rolled up and rumpled. On November

16, 1581, before anyone in imperial Russia knew what had happened, the rug and the chair register the jolt. Part of Repin's realism lay in the way he enlisted ordinary objects to convey some of the emotional heft. He knew of course what the money shot would be—Ivan's terror-stricken eyes, the free-bleeding wound on the tsarevich's head. But the painting is as much about a scrunched up rug as it is about a murderous act. Repin took intense delight in rendering the folds of the tsarevich's pink satin dressing gown and texturing the harlequin wallpaper behind the two men. Lying bunched up like this, the rug received his greatest care.

His canvas has hung in Moscow over 100 years—through every kind of upheaval imaginable: the bitter end of the Romanov Dynasty, revolution, Soviet repression, the collapse of the U.S.S.R. When this is the history you must learn, it's necessary to start young. When this is the archive set before you, it's good to have a puffy red velvet divan to cushion the fall should you find yourself all at once pitching backward. Or the sheltering body of your father to brace you. When this is the archive from which you draw, Crimea can change borders overnight. And no one blinks.

I glance at the other patrons in the gallery. A 50-ish woman studies the painting, as do a couple teens. There's a 20-something with a Point 'n Shoot camera on a strap hung around her wrist. I search their faces, as if examining a tableau of characters gathered improbably before me, like in a deliberate composition, as if an artist has chosen them, has positioned them just like this. I scan for a clue. Neutral expressions prevail. The people look. They see. There is no blinking.

I take a few steps back, gaining a little aesthetic distance, and my legs bump against the puffy divan behind me.

Crimea, Crimea—how much do I really know? Cradle of Christianity for the Kievan Rus'. Land acquisition under Catherine the Great. Longtime seaport for Russia's naval fleet. Most Americans could not with any accuracy pinpoint the tiny Black Sea resort peninsula on a map, so little has it ever featured in our national psyche, so small it is, too—10,000 square miles, about the size of Vermont.

Nevertheless, Russia has ardently claimed it.

In 1853 when Tolstoy was stationed there during the Crimean War, he wrote *The Sebastopol Sketches*. In them he probed the forces on earth that could compel men to put up with battlefield hardships. Not the cross, he said. Not even an abstraction like Honor. There had to be a higher motivation: "This motivation is a feeling that surfaces only rarely in the Russian," he wrote, "but lies deeply embedded in his soul—a love of his native land."

When Nikita Kruschev gave Crimea to Ukraine as an anniversary gift in 1954, Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union. Who in those days ever thought the Soviet Union would fail? Who in those days ever thought Ukraine would pull away?

Since 2012 I have come to Moscow every six months to write about the environmental issues our former Cold War frenemy faces: hydrology, eutrophic zones, watershed toxicity. Sometimes, however, I find myself far afield and end up devoting less time to the city's eco-works, for instance, than to the feminist punk group Pussy Riot.

I am finding myself far afield today.

Word is the United States and the European Union will use financial sanctions against Russia as punishment for its actions with Crimea. That means the ruble will drop against the dollar, giving a visitor like me a favorable exchange rate, should I want to buy that antique samovar I saw in a store window the other day. It also means my credit card may not work at some point as banks begin to register the sanctions.

In truth, I am not thinking about samovars or exchange rates or whether my credit card gets refused, all quite minor inconveniences in the grand scheme of things compared to events of geopolitical significance. It's the day after Russia has repatriated Crimea. I need a puffy red velvet divan.

Fortunately, there's one right behind me. I bend my knees and drop. It catches me.

Watching other patrons take in this painting is every bit as illuminating as looking at it. It has created an opportunity for communal reckoning, a Facts of Life moment that's designed to take place in public, even among strangers—some of whom have already received this lesson, have already lived with this lesson for some time. I notice, for instance, how important it is for this dad to nestle his son back against himself.

It's more important at this moment for the dad to do this than for the son necessarily to require any kind of sheltering or to seek it out. He and his dad are having different experiences of the painting. He's a typical 10-year old. When a parent discusses the Facts of Life with a child, they are both physically present, of course, but neither is having exactly the same feelings as the other.

So, too, on this Facts of [Russian] Life occasion.

My gaze flits to the 50-something woman. A black leather handbag hangs from her forearm, and the weight of it causes her to list a bit to one side. When grandmothers say, "Child, bring me my handbag," this is the kind of handbag they mean. The woman is someone who may come to the Tretyakov every year for the express purpose of standing before this very painting one more time, or she may need to come every week. Whichever it is, the shock is not new. What the painting reveals has long been a living part of her. She returns, as if in pilgrimage, to recharge that part.

A wealthy 19th Century Moscow merchant, Pavel Tretyakov saw as his patriotic mission the need to affirm the breadth and diversity of Russian life in the art he gathered for his Gallery. Seeing the effect his mission still has on patrons, I have to believe he embraced this as a holy endeavor. It's as if a church experience has unfolded. As in any church, the congregants are in different stages of belief and devotion—some far along in the process, others just beginning.

I press back against the red velvet divan, grateful for how sturdily tufted it is. It's puffy, but it is not soft. The thing is solid and firm.

Tretyakov filled his Moscow mansion with the work of homegrown native artists and then opened it to the public. It became something of an academy of cultural and moral education not only for generations of artists to follow but also intellectuals. As quickly as 19th Century artists defined a uniquely Russian style, Tretyakov snatched their work up. Something special was taking place all over the country. It had already happened in the realm of Classical music: Glinka, Rubenstein, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky. It was happening right then and there in Literature. Tolstoy, Turgenev, Gogol and Chekhov were

all Tretyakov's contemporaries. Now his country's visual artists were having a Moment. Today the Tretyakov is a world-class treasure trove of Russian *raison d'etre* made tangible in oil on canvas or in chiseled marble. If ever there was a Safe Space for wrestling with Russia, this place was it.

And I need to wrestle with Russia.

I began coming here during those halcyon honeymoon days right after then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hit the Reset button with her counterpart in the Kremlin. Visiting during the summer of 2012, I felt the energizing effects of a giddy openness back and forth. Russia had been taboo during my Cold War era childhood. Kept from me! Dangerous! Now that the U.S. had normalized all ties, I was free to indulge. As I walked down Nevsky Prospekt in Saint Petersburg that summer, I delighted in deciphering the Cyrillic letters. A sign over a trim little restaurant caught my eye-- Бургер Кинг—and I smiled to discover something known to me and commonplace: Burger King.

Sure, Saint Petersburg's Burger King reliably listed buckwheat kasha on its menu, and Moscow's Subway served a cup of kvass along with its foot-longs. Even in the States we're used to these small nods to regional cuisine: a Wendy's in Gloucester, Massachusetts sells lobster rolls in order to compete against local establishments. KFC, Starbucks, Dunkin' Donuts: Russia felt so familiar. People chatted on their iPhones, played games on their iPads, leaned back to snap selfies with friends. The place could have been the Mall of America. I almost started looking for Olive Garden.

Something's wrong if I can stand in Russia and feel Mall of America vibes. An illusion is at work or at least a wish fulfillment, perhaps even amnesia—

maybe all three. The more Russia looks like us, the less worried we are. The more it leaves behind its Communist era economic practices and its authoritarian political structure, the more comfortable we get. The more comfortable we get, the less concerned we are that Russia will do things we neither condone nor understand. Our comfort level itself augurs against Russia ever doing something Russian—so much so that when Vladimir Putin says, "Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride," we don't realize it's code, because if we did, we'd know: he's on the verge of doing something Russian.

Another art tableau has assembled before Ilya Repin's painting like the characters in a stage play after the curtain rises. This time it's a schoolteacher and her young charges. The kids gather and group about, most of them in jeans and sweaters, their boot tread leaving stencils of snowmelt on the floor from the wintry weather outside. The teacher stands before the students, her back to the painting, and once she has their attention begins to speak. Momentum builds. Her Russian is rapid-fire, and she gestures dramatically. She speaks so passionately about the work that the murder it depicts might have happened just last week. There's heat in her gaze, and her eye contact is forceful. The kids stare at her as much as they do the painting, as if they've never quite seen her express such zeal before, never quite seen such intensity from her when they've bent over their lessons in the dusty old classroom and she reads to them from the book. The kids look at he. They look at the painting.

The facts of life don't change. In 1581 the tsar killed the tsarevich. There's no way the country can distance itself from that, no way ever to soften the edges or outgrow that fact. It's the day after Russia has repatriated Crimea,

and there will never be enough puffy red velvet divans on earth to cushion the blow.

I stand, gather my stuff, trace my way back through the Tretyakov. Wars, invasions, hordes. Siege, battles, conquest. In navigating the old mansion's rabbit's warren of salons and hallways, I'm power-walking through Russian history. At the coat check counter I give the babushka my plastic number and while she goes to retrieve my coat I stand there, staring into space. Some day a boy will grow up to be a dad who brings his own child to stand before Ivan and his son Ivan. He'll lean in, he'll point. What father doesn't need to ask forgiveness, even if the forgiveness he's asking for is that of some other father's deadly rage from long ago? Until that day, he will carry the importance of that image within his body where it will wait, wait, wait for that well-placed family trip here, a Russian pilgrimage to a place that gets you where you live.

When I step outside I'm surprised to discover that it is still winter. Snowflakes fringe my eyelashes, and I stand for a moment blinking. My breath puffs white. So much seems to have happened very quickly that it's hard to believe this is the same season as yesterday. Yesterday was winter. Today is winter. Tomorrow, also, winter.

I head to the Metro station. Workers remove snow from the pavement. They remove snow from rooftops. Shovels rasp out a symphony of scraping rhythms on the cobbles around me. Moscow is built to push winter aside.

Inscrutable, aloof, uninvolved: the city resembles its snow. When I walk these streets, Moscow shows me second by second, even snowflake by snowflake, how unnecessary I am to its existence, an indifference every bit as solid as the Spassky Tower on Red Square. Spanning centuries, long before my

quite small postage stamp of time on earth, this place went about its business, solved its problems, told its story with meticulously applied gold paint on the interior walls of its churches. It conquered people, got conquered. When Vladimir Putin says, "Crimea is historically Russian land and Sebastopol is a Russian city," he utters a logic that outrages and confounds us in the West but captures an a priori truth for those who have walked through snow like this every winter of their lives.

Autonomy is in Russia's DNA, its lineage, its ancestry, its policies.

This is not merely the face it shows the world.

This is its face.

Sitting in a restaurant later tonight, I'll sip a glass of wine, gaze out at the flurry of snow and find myself surrounded by the surface trappings of extreme gentility—the cut crystal vase and its cluster of astromeria blossoms, the caviar service of hand-blown glass cradled inside a bowl of ice and the mother-of-pearl spoon lying alongside it for dipping the caviar.

When the waiter slides a bowl of crimson borsch before me and nestles a breadbasket near, it'll be hard for me to believe that anything terrible could ever happen here.