

Social Zakuski

Barbara Haas

Malaya Sadovaya is a Saint Petersburg pedestrian mall that attracts squads of teenagers and kids on scooters and mixes them up with laborers, tech boys, tourists and pensioners wearing sensible shoes. It is a people watcher's paradise anchored by an imposing statue of Catherine the Great, who casts her imperious gaze over the ice cream kiosks and the ornamental lilac shrubs. Shaded on either side by former palaces and baroque mansions, Malaya Sadovaya, Little Garden Street, is lined with limestone benches, green bioswales and sidewalk cafes whose broad red awnings overhang glass-topped tables and rattan chairs. Cozy spots like these invite a casual crowd to sit down, enjoy a drink and snack on zakuskis, the salted mushrooms and preserved cucumbers served up on little plates. When landscape architects design civic spaces, they use lofty language to describe how "an adaptive urban texture" can "counter adverse municipal pathologies." When they write grants to fund these projects, landscape architects talk about the way "tree alleys are programmed to catalyze community identities." When they seek matching governmental funding to build their projects, they rhapsodize the "multi-use space" as a "platform" that enables families "to engage in stress-relieving activities and to enjoy the company of others."

Hardscape Malaya Sadovaya is exactly what the grant writers envision, right down to the last bricks and mortar detail. It has the flowerbeds. It has the water features. It has the fanciful sculpture.

People-scape Malaya Sadovaya is what the grant writers never stick around to see.

The pie slice fountain, crafted of ruddy granite quarried in the Urals, has grains of feldspar scattered throughout its stone like flecks of nutmeg in a slice of pumpkin pie. Bubbling spigots spout up a gushing spray of water near the "crust." Balanced right at the tip of the pie slice, a black marble Kugel Ball resembles an a la mode scoop of ice cream. Rotating slowly on hidden jets of water, it glides effortlessly with the slightest of

touches. Few people can resist reaching out to spin the four-hundred-lb sphere. An ultra-thin film of water keeps it uniformly wet and shiny, and the hydraulics make it easy to steer in all directions. Passersby roll up their sleeves and lean over the short wrought iron railing that defines the edge of the fountain. Parents lift their children and cantilever them toward the ball.

From my people-watching perch in a tearoom overlooking Malaya Sadovaya, I watch a little dog splash around in the fountain before its owner leashes it and they walk away. A twenty-something woman stands at the tip of the pie slice, back turned, eyes closed, pauses a reflective moment, solemnly collecting her thoughts, it seems, and then tosses a coin over her left shoulder, as if this were the Trevi Fountain in Rome. She turns around, moves along the pie wedge to see where her money landed. Immediate feedback from coin-toss fountains is important, after all. Wishes might be slow in coming, but verifying the coin's place among others in the sparkling water can happen in real time. Satisfied with her spot near the dark and enigmatic marble sphere, the young woman spins on her heel and walks away.

I dissolve a pebble of brown sugar in my tea and stir, thinking about how uniform and universal our fountain behaviors are all over the world, no matter the country. Anthropologists date our compulsion to engage in small token sacrifices like these to 200 B.C. based on tens of thousands of Roman coins they've dredged from wells all over Europe. They theorize that pagans made modest monetary offerings to water sprites and spring deities. Century after century the coins piled up. We have long been a species that ascribes some kind of magic to public waters. This promise of magic prompts us to toss a coin or two—nothing excessive. It's not as if anyone's going to drop a million bucks.

When I glance back at the pie slice fountain a head-scarfed babushka is wading around in the ankle-deep water and stooping to pick up the various coins, including the one the young woman has just tossed. I sip

my tea and wonder if the Five-Second Rule applies to coins in fountains. How many wishes get undone when someone pockets the cash?

People amble about—tourists, commuters—and no one reacts to the babushka in the fountain. It's as if she's part of the assembly, as the black marble Kugel Ball is, yet another heavy object driven by hydraulics, animated by an additional tier of hidden jets of water that cause her to cycle through her predictable moves—stooping, scooping, shuffling along. Some kids gather to spin the marble sphere while she snatches up the coins. At the sidewalk café adjacent to the fountain people seated in rattan chairs sip their drinks and don't appear to take note. A plate of zakuskis lies on the glass-topped table before them—pickles, a few mushrooms. No one's going to interfere with a babushka in a fountain. Her presence doesn't hinder the ambient magic. Not even Homeland Security in the U.S., with its See Something, Say Something campaign, would crack down on the likes of her.

If she had taken the coins from people—grabbed them from their hands—we would call it theft. If people had handed her the money instead of throwing it in the water, we would call it charity. The fountain itself contextualizes the moment, influences how we interpret the behavior that occurs around it and the actions it compels—even on the part of passersby.

This is wish-granting water. Everyone knows that.

There is nothing equivocal in people's actions here. They toss their money away. Their intentions are explicit, and they readily give up their coins to chance, relinquish them before God and country, as if making a proclamation. When a city builds a public sphere, its intent, for instance, is to counter municipal pathologies, in the parlance of the grant-writing landscape architect. When a city installs water features and limestone benches its aim is to catalyze community identities. People in need are every bit a constant of this catalyst just as water features or limestone benches are. Promenades like Malaya Sadovaya are designed for mixed space use. Vagrants, beggars and the homeless mix into that space. They use that space.

A waiter brings another pot of hot water for

steeping my teabag, and I thank him. People-watching from this spot is like live-streaming life in the moment without having to hold a device. Malaya Sadovaya is the device.

Just a few paces east of the Kugel Ball another landscape folly entices the pedestrian to participate. This is a bronze statue of Vasila the kitty cat installed on a small jutting ledge about fifteen feet up from the cobbles. The point is to make a wish and then toss a coin. The trick is to toss the coin in such a way that it will land on the ledge and stay there. If it doesn't spin off or drop back down to the cobbles, then the wish comes true.

Vasila is to scale. In real life she would be a twelve-pound short hair kitty cat, the perfect size for snuggling with in an armchair of an evening. Up there on her ledge, she holds a cute pose, head tilted and one paw affectionately raised. School kids especially cluster in hordes, leaping and tossing, trying for the best angle. They offer advice to each other, a little coaching, point out strategies.

One has limitless chances to try, and at first getting a coin to land on the ledge seems deceptively easy. It doesn't matter if the coin stays the first time or the fiftieth. A granted wish is a granted wish, after all. Unlike with one-arm bandits in an arcade, it's okay to use the same coin again and again.

Dash over there. Pick it up. Keep trying.

There's no penalty for repeated tries. Kismet alone seems to be the arbiter, plus one's energy level, what with all that tossing, all that leaping. In some ways this is better than a Pilates class at a techno gym on Nevskiy Prospekt. It has that value-added component, too—fitness plus, potentially, a wish come true.

Winking gold-colored coins shine, flung into the air. A handful of grown-ups, unable to resist the merriment, crowd around. The coins bounce off Vasila's ledge like popcorn popping in a hot pan. Everybody scrambles to pick up their own failed coin and try once more—over and over. Same wishes? Modified wishes? Retread wishes? Regrets? Discouragement? Resignation? No matter. Futile attempts aren't futile when they actually buy time. Time gives everyone so many more chances to refine that wish. Clarify it. Perhaps even compromise somewhat, as if it is possible to bargain

with kismet or to meet kismet halfway, as we do when, suffering through a trial, we pray, “Dear God, if you will only get me through this, then I’ll promise to do such and such.”

Who knows what gets promised? Who knows what god gets invoked? Where do the promises go? Do they go the way of wishes? Something about Malaya Sadovaya, the promenade itself, is its own invocation, a nonstop invocation, ceaseless, ongoing, a forever invocation, all of it sanctioned by the statue of Catherine the Great, who stands high atop her granite pedestal like a Las Vegas gaming commissioner, overseeing it all, endorsing it all. Superstitions, taboos, desires and human drama: the public has laid these things at her feet.

Part of what makes people watching so engrossing, something fun to do whenever there’s a minute to spare, is the pleasure of looking, speculating, imagining. We pour out the Earl Grey, we glance, we stir the sugar, we glance. Often, snippets are all we see, slices of insight. They connect somehow to other revelatory moments that would flesh the entire story out and make it all make sense if only we had more than just that glance, if only we looked long enough to connect up all the revelatory moments and construct an actual narrative. The glance disallows this, however. We receive snippets, slices. Although incomplete, this is satisfying. It’s a snack of sorts, social zakuskis. People watching is not surveillance. We’re not in See Something, Say Something mode. When we’re people watching, we don’t want to see something that will obligate us to say something to somebody—let alone file a report with the authorities. It’s just light entertainment.

When the adults tire of Vasila’s ledge, they make a beeline to the Kugel Ball, as if magnetically drawn. That leaves a little girl in a fluffy mouse-ear knit cap, leaping and leaping. The boy with her, maybe an older brother, hasn’t taken his backpack off. Perhaps they were walking home from school together, and now they’re both tossing coins up to Vasila. The left strap of the boy’s backpack has slipped down on his shoulder. He is smooth-cheeked and serious-looking, maybe a dreamer, maybe bookish—not one to try out for the sports leagues or for fútbol after school but responsible enough to see his sister safely home at the end of the day.

While I watch the kids, I notice a gray-haired man in gray slacks and jacket standing near the Kugel Ball fountain. My gaze centers on his face, which is a little haggard, a little craggy, a little vulpine. People who feel tempted to spin the marble sphere have a certain look, a certain demeanor. If you’ve ever driven past billboards for U.S. casinos, you know that look, you know that demeanor, the glint in the eye, the glitter of hope there, the mouth opened wide enough either to shriek with laughter or just to shriek. Sometimes on those billboards it’s difficult to know pleasure from pain. This is the look of someone who can’t not do it, whether it’s tossing dice or spinning that slick marble sphere. The man in gray does not have this look, however. There’s something fixedly freaky about him. He watches the coins fall from the kitty cat’s ledge.

Teaspoon stopped in mid-stir, I feel a sensation sink within me, like something plunging down into the depths of a well where it will lie there cold and unmoving for a very long time. It’s a maternal feeling of alarm, an alertness born in me when I became a mother myself, or even from long, long before that, from childhood, from vulnerability, from a part of me that identifies with these kids.

They leap and toss and then dash to collect their failed coins. They are so much their own unguarded exuberance, so much their own youthful whirlwind—color high on the cheeks, eyes a little unfocused, chests heaving, breathless.

All at once the man in gray makes his move. He saunters over to the spot just beneath Vasila’s ledge, crouches down and, duck-walking a bit, begins to pick up their money.

The kids stop tossing and just hang back. They watch him. The boy rubs a shiny coin between his thumb and forefinger.

Two women, arm in arm, pass by. Because they have not seen the build-up to this tableau as I have, they no doubt think the man is the father of the kids and that he is helping them gather up their coins. They glance at him. It’s an easy assumption to make. They glance away. Snippets. Slices.

These women can’t assemble the whole story as they stroll by. The fragments and disconnected shards

mean nothing to them. There's not the luxury of continuity that would help them interpret what they're seeing. They pass Vasila's ledge, unfazed by the man in gray, and they just move on.

He doesn't seem rushed. His actions, nonchalant and normative, do not betray a concern about being observed either. It's as if the presence of loose lying money has activated something in him, like a switch got flipped. A critical mass of coins weighs a certain amount, and that amount triggers the kinetics that cause him to swoop in and clean up. There is no volition in this. It's as predetermined as machinery. Unless there's a malfunction, some kind of wrench in the gears, mechanisms operate pretty reliably. Their engineering guarantees it. The man in gray can't not do what the hidden circuitry bids him to do, has programmed him to do. A lever seems to steer him, as if in a well-grooved slot. He's a part of Malaya Sadovaya in this, part of its own mechanics, the public invocation of a place that dictates rituals and exacts from its participants prescribed actions. Like some kind of bizarre assembly line of destiny it sets into motion, as if by springs or a concealed apparatus, the behaviors its design has preordained.

Give, receive, give, receive.

Coins and wishes, coins and wishes.

Throw, retrieve, throw, retrieve.

This captures the reciprocal nature inherent in a feedback loop of human desire—wishes, wishes. In the midst of so many aspirations and requests destiny needs scarcely any invitation to show up. Just as a Kugel ball spins smoothly on a lubricating film of water in its friction-free socket, destiny comes readily and easily. Malaya Sadovaya resembles the midway of a serendipitous carnival where everything might be rigged, or everything might be legit—the way two things can be true at the same time. Every heart yearns for something there, and that yearning gets unleashed through public gestures or actions. Catherine the Great presides over this domain and lends gravitas to it. Her monument, more than life-sized, an infrastructure behemoth commanding the space, is of young Catherine in her coronation gown. Adorned with all the trappings of the throne, she is draped in a regal full-length mantle, and she holds her

scepter. Exquisite Catherine, whose accepting gaze is not so grand or great that she can't factor in everything she finds on Malaya Sadovaya. She has the continuity. She can assemble the story in its entirety because she has held her post and has indulged in people watching like this with her cold stone eyes as if from the day she wore the crown.

In a moment the man in gray stands, pockets the coins and heads south, merging eventually with the throng of pedestrians on Nevskiy Prospekt.

The boy re-cinches the straps of his backpack a bit higher on his shoulders. The little girl in the fluffy mouse ear cap takes his hand, and they head north.

I set my teaspoon down and follow their steps as they vanish more deeply into Malaya Sadovaya.

Money gone. No wishes.

I glance around the tearoom. The people nearest my table are deep in conversation. Across the room a waiter arranges blue hydrangeas in a vase. No one has noticed what happened to the kids. On the See Something, Say Something-o-meter, this place would not move the needle.

Within seconds a new crop of kids zips over to Vasila's ledge. They drop their scooters and begin leaping and tossing. Three teens in bomber-style jackets lounge against the low wrought iron rail around the pie slice fountain. One reaches out and gives an insouciant spin of the Kugel ball.

While that's going on, a young man walks away from the sidewalk café adjacent to the fountain with one of the rattan chairs tucked under his right arm. He has been having drinks there with a friend, they've settled up their bill, and now he is stealing a chair. The friend walking with him does not seem to notice that his buddy is making off with a rattan chair.

A woman pushing a stroller parks alongside the Kugel Ball. She lifts her baby up, maybe a one-year old, so that it can touch the wet stone with its chunky little hands. Decades away from gambling in a casino, if it ever will, the baby nonetheless has that expression on its face, mouth gaping wide enough to shriek. After only a second or two the mother pulls it back from the sphere, her move sudden and abrupt, as if too much contact with something this powerful is dangerous.

Urban texture?

Kismet?

As tricky as wishes, as elaborate and mysterious as dense dark marble—whether it's all rigged or not, human behavior will happen. Fountains circulate things—water, money, wishes—and Malaya Sadovaya circulates us. We can counter municipal pathologies there. We can observe families enjoying the company of others.