

The Opera Singer

I met the old man at the end of my first week in Bishkek. Saturday morning meant I could finally explore the city on my own, taste real Kyrgyz food, shop at a bazaar, whatever I wanted. I was ready to get out of the cramped little apartment, buy some lunch from a street vendor, and start the day.

There was some trouble locking my door from the outside, however. The key got stuck every time I tried turning it and eventually my frustration mounted and I turned the key as hard as I could and it broke, one half in the lock, the other half in my hand.

“Shit.” I turned the knob and the door opened, which meant I couldn’t leave now. I was seventeen years old at the time and I wasn’t the smartest traveler in the world, but I wasn’t going to leave my apartment door unlocked and unattended.

While I was standing dumbly in the hallway of the second floor, two old men from upstairs walked past, one Kyrgyz and one Russian. They were both short, but the Kyrgyz man was a bit taller and seemed younger. The Kyrgyz man noticed me distressed, standing against my door, and stopped.

“Hello,” he said, and I shook hands with him, but the Russian man didn’t offer. He gestured as if he was searching for other English words he knew. “America?”

“Da,” I said, and the two men laughed. I wasn’t sure if they laughed because they were delighted I had responded in Russian or because my pronunciation sounded silly.

“Student?”

“Da.” They nodded knowingly and smiled, and a silence followed and the Kyrgyz man looked at me puzzled and put his finger to his mouth as if he was thinking. I assumed he wondered why I was standing against my door in the middle of the hallway.

“My key broke in the lock,” I said, and he continued staring at me. I turned and gestured to the lock and he understood and sprung into action. He examined the lock and took my half of the key and studied it all carefully. The old Russian man finally spoke then, but I couldn’t understand him. He and the Kyrgyz man counseled briefly about what to do. A neighbor’s door opened.

“Hello,” said a woman standing in her doorway. The old men turned and greeted her, the Russian man removing his fedora and holding it to his chest in his right hand. I noticed then that he only had three fingers on his right hand; his index and ring fingers were missing.

The woman and the old men from upstairs conferred amongst each other while I stood watching. She was white and appeared to be about thirty. Her burgundy robe she kept clasped below her neck with her left hand, long black hair draped over her wrist. After speaking with the men for a couple minutes, she turned to me.

“These men,” she began nervously, taking her time to find each word, “will help you. You need a new lock. You have some money?”

“Yeah,” I said, digging for my wallet. “How much do they need?” I grabbed five hundred som and offered it to the Kyrgyz man.

“That is good,” she said. “This man,” she gestured to the old Russian man, “will wait with you while the other goes to buy a new lock.”

“Okay,” I said, and I opened the door for the old man. The Kyrgyz man shook my hand and smiled at the woman next door before he started downstairs.

“I will be in here if you need something,” the woman said, and closed her door.

I walked into my apartment after the old man. He glanced around my modest living room and placed his fedora on the small folding table where I ate my meals and sat down on the love seat on the other side of the room. He wore an old tweed suit jacket over a brown button-down shirt tucked into tan pants; he sat with his legs crossed and seemed to be analyzing my apartment, which didn’t take long.

“Would you like some water?” I asked. He stared at me blankly so I pantomimed drinking, bringing an invisible cup to my lips and tilting my head back. The old man laughed and leaned forward in his chair, suddenly interested.

“Da! Cognac?”

“Um, no Cognac, sorry,” I said, and the old man looked disappointed and sat back in his chair. I brought him a plastic yellow cup full of water, the only hospitality I had to offer him. My stomach growled with hunger.

The two of us sat in awkward silence, him on the love seat and me on a small wooden chair by the makeshift kitchen table. Occasionally he would turn to me and adjust his sitting position and sigh, all the while staring at me as if he was making up his mind about me.

“Student, da?” The old man asked finally, pointing at me.

“Da.”

He nodded. After another, shorter silence, he spoke again, gesticulating with his hands while he tried to find the words.

“Vash papa? Vash papa?” I didn’t understand and he made a motion with his hand like an airplane. “America. America, vash papa.”

“Oh, da. My papa, America, da.” He smiled tenderly and seemed proud of our dialogue, simple as it was. I hadn’t realized until then how striking he looked, how he looked like nobody I had ever seen before. He had a wrinkly brow that seemed to weigh heavily on the rest of his face, almost dragging it down, and a short bulbous nose with a mole on his right cheek above his thin brown beard. His hair was short and gray, receding in the front but messy and poking out at the top, and his beard had clung to its original brown color but it was clearly fading; it looked as if it was dying. For all of this, however, he carried himself with the dignity of an aging nobleman, and possessed a thoughtful, elegant presence that made me feel underdressed in my button down and jeans.

“I, papa,” the man said, smiling, pointing to himself.

“You have a son?”

“Da.” His smile faded and he looked out the window where the sun was pouring through; we could hear children playing soccer in the alley below. “Son,” he said, struggling with the words. “Moscow.”

“Your son lives in Moscow?”

“Da,” he sighed, and still staring out the window.

“Moscow is very far away,” I said, even though he couldn’t understand. He nodded as if he did and once again we sat in silence.

After a minute or two the old man turned to look at me and smiled, again pointing at himself.

“Moscow, London, Italy,” he listed.

“You traveled to all those cities?”

“Da. Opera,” he said.

“Opera?”

“Da.” He stood up without further explanation, a new excitement in his countenance.

With arms outstretched he began to sing opera, a loud and raucous song that reverberated throughout the apartment building, the sound climbing up the stairs and bursting out the windows like he was a beam of light in a dark room. The old man slapped his thigh and danced slowly as he sang, his blue eyes gazing out over me as if he were performing for a crowd of adoring fans who he adored back.

His song ended and he sat back in his chair with a satisfied sigh; I wasn't sure how to respond and I began to clap but stopped when I heard him singing again. Huddled in the sofa as he was before, his hand at his chin and his legs crossed, he sang slowly and longingly, not nearly as loud as before but just as clear. He stared out the window again as his song rose and fell and he no longer looked as if he performed for a multitude but looked instead as if he were singing for one. Whether he sang for his son or his youth or an old lover or all of the above I didn't know, but his voice was calling out for something long lost and I had to look away when I thought he was about to cry. The old man finished singing but he continued gazing out the window and we were silent together in the room but it was a different silence than before.

A half-hour had passed when the Kyrgyz man returned with my new lock; the opera singer and I snapped out of our trance and we watched him install the lock. When the Kyrgyz man was finished he fished in his pocket for my new key, handed it to me, and the three of us exchanged goodbyes in the hallway outside my apartment. The two old men left me then, continuing down the stairs as if nobody had interrupted them.

After checking my door to ensure that it would lock, I finally escaped my apartment building and walked out into the city. I never spoke to the opera singer again, but every so often when I was in my apartment at night I could hear him climbing the stairs and passing my door, humming a song as he ascended, and I couldn't help but look out my window and wonder what he saw out there.