

The Boarder

by Alexander Jablovkov

We start off this issue with a story that isn't actually science fiction or fantasy. Nonetheless, we think you'll like "The Boarder." This piece of historical fiction fits in with the growing body of works like Andy Duncan's "The Chief Designer" and Ellen Klages's "The Green Glass Sea" that view the scientific changes of the Twentieth Century through a lens of fiction. Mr. Jablovkov, who is of Russian descent, assures us that the story is wholly fictional; in fact, he says that in researching the story, he had to find a vintage issue of *Playboy*, just so he could look at the ads.

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A couple of years after I was born, my parents bought the house where they still live. Before they even moved in, they had arranged for a boarder to rent the small room in the basement. They had decided, in a fairly formal way, that, as Russians with extra rooms, they should take in boarders. Neither had ever had an extra room.

So they put lace curtains on the basement windows and installed a bathroom with a thundering exhaust fan and a tiled shower stall whose grout reliably turned black every summer. It was my job to scrub it out with a toothbrush. The room had a narrow bed with an embroidered cover, and dark icons of several nondescript saints, bought at a church sale from a glum anti-Semite who also tried to sell us copies of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* from a box under his table.

It was not an appealing room, but they seemed to have no trouble finding tenants. The first was a princess. An actual princess, some collateral of the Trubetskoys, born in Paris, her transliterated name ending in a scrolled double "f," rather than the prosaic, anglo-phonetic "v" of ours. My parents, both products of the Soviet intelligentsia, were fascinated by aristocrats, even ones whose father had made ends meet by becoming a haberdasher. Princess Anna snored loudly and had the most impressive eyebrows I had ever seen. She always sighed over my mother's food, though she could never articulate, in her exaggerated Petersburg accent, what it was she was looking for. I don't think anyone really missed her when she left a few months later, to move in with a friend of hers, a duchess, in Brooklyn. She thought herself literary and was given to observations like: "Always read Turgenev in French. He makes much more sense that way. Some people prefer Shakespeare in French also, but I really do think that his cragginess shows off better in the original Russian."

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Some time later came the Little Green Man, a skinny, intense guy, an ex-Army Ranger or Green Beret or Navy Seal, I was never quite sure, who was studying Chinese at the University of Chicago.

He believed it was possible to become invisible. He learned every board in the house and could slip through without making a sound. After he moved out, my mother found that he had kept a bag of cedar bark mulch in his bedroom, to cover up his steps in the flower beds.

The night he earned his name, my parents had some friends over. I don't remember them, but I do remember their daughter, Maureen. She was a couple of years older than I, fourteen or fifteen, and wore a short skirt and a loose top. I was all over her, offering drinks, snacks, tours of the house. After some pestering from me she agreed to meet me out at the end of the block, past the shrubs, for ... I hadn't really thought it through, but already knew that thinking it through was what kept you from getting it done. She resumed her collapsed stare. For her, each second went by like a swallow of dry bread.

Then she shrieked, "A little green man!" and pointed. We caught a glimpse of a startled face painted in shades of camouflage amid the rhododendrons. He dove through the basement window and was gone. Maureen had hysterics and insisted on leaving. She forgot all about her agreement with me. Thinking about it now, I realize that she had someone else to meet, and that the LGM's appearance in the shrubbery was a godsend that kept her from having to fake an epileptic fit or something. Still, my feelings were hurt. The LGM later married a nice Vietnamese girl and they now own a small tax accounting firm in Downers Grove, not far from my parents' house.

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Vassily moved in not long after that. He was, in his way, much stealthier than the LGM. He just appeared one morning at breakfast, smearing jam on a chunk of bread and peering at an already coffee-stained issue of *Iron Age*, a steel-industry trade magazine. Too-large bites at his bread revealed teeth made of various alloys, which revealed his profession, though I did not know it then. He did not acknowledge me. My parents, somehow following his lead, also pretended I was not there. I only learned his name a day or so later, by which time various of his possessions had made their way into the living room, and even into my closet. I complained about the gigantic leather bag that took up residence amid my sneakers, but no one listened to me.

My parents wanted me to learn Russian, so they had me read Russian children's books. There were no non-Soviet Russian children's books, so I found myself imbibing gentle political indoctrination along with my stories of impudent Pioneers improvising solutions to their dilemmas, and became a sentimental Soviet, longing for tram cars, red neck kerchiefs, and Lenin portraits at the fronts of schoolrooms.

I cringe now to think of how pompously insistent I was on the wonders of the people's paradise: the free health care, the fine education, the rights of women, the spotless and prompt public transportation. No wonder it was months before Vassily could even acknowledge my presence.

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Vassily had an urban Russian's facility for gardening in a small space. He dug up a stretch of weedy grass along the side picket fence. Most of both summers he lived with us were spent out there, growing odd, dark varieties of tomato, lumpy rustic cucumbers, beans you could buy by the pound for almost nothing at the store.

His gardening outfit consisted of a beat-up pair of dress loafers my father had thrown out, black socks pulled up to the knee, long shorts that looked like they had been cut from a pair of work pants by someone who hadn't quite gotten the hang of scissors, and a hat folded out of that morning's *Chicago Sun-Times*. He had a sagging belly, and the beginning breasts that older men get, but he seldom wore a shirt. He was often burned red by the sun, and scratched his peeling skin, but never tired of the ability to walk around bare-chested. He always grabbed that day's paper off the kitchen table to fold his hat, and because he got up so much earlier than everyone else in the house he sometimes ended up wearing a section my mother had not yet managed to read. She would gulp her tea and glower out of the dining room window at him, as if she could pick out the headlines as he bent over his hoe.

On the other side of the picket fence was Mrs. Melmar's yard. Luscious Mrs. Melmar favored flowers. She had her own gardening ensemble: straw hat, large sunglasses, lime green shorts—a bit too tight, as my mother observed—a discarded pink oxford shirt of her husband's knotted up under her breasts, and sandals with daisies on them. She had fair skin, despite the amount of time she spent in the sun, and you could see the veins in her legs. She protected the red nails on her hands with huge yellow gloves. The skin of her belly was loose, from giving birth to her two kids, one college age, with a red MG I admired, and one just finishing up at St. Joseph's prep, but that made no difference to how wonderful I thought she was. Mr. Melmar worked long hours at a law firm downtown, and all I ever saw of him was the back of his head as he drove off in his Cadillac.

Vassily and his stupid newspaper hat seemed like an aesthetic affront, and I wanted to defend the innocent Mrs. Melmar from it, so, the first and only Christmas he was with us, I bought him a straw hat. It was not a great straw hat, I'll admit that, not a snappy Panama that you could roll up and stick into a cigar tube, but at least the damn thing wouldn't make him look like an idiot. He showed metallurgical teeth when he saw it. "I'll look a regular Tom Sawyer with this! Thank you, Andrewsha." Like all literate Russians, he had grown up with "Mark Tven." I'd seen the movie, thought the girl playing Becky Thatcher was kind of cute, but didn't really know much about him as an author, which distressed and irritated Vassily, as if, in turning my back on my great national literature, I had committed some kind of crime. He assumed that a boy my age would have read the complete works of Victor Hugo, Turgenev, and Conan Doyle as well. Such discoveries of my ignorance always sent him off on a tirade against the painfully inadequate American educational system. "You will lose!" he would say, though how a knowledge of world literature was supposed to save us, he never said. "But you will not end up having to learn Russian. Oh, no. Our day is done. Prepare to speak Chinese!" Needling from me once revealed his complete ignorance of Chinese literature, and he sulkily retreated to his room.

I thought he had thrown the hat away, but once the ground thawed, he was out there, with it on his head.

He looked like Jed Clampett painted by Camille Pissarro, but, still, I counted that as a small victory.

We ate a lot of cucumbers while Vassily lived with us. I tried to develop a taste for them, since they were a quintessential Russian vegetable, but never managed to do more than tolerate them. By the end of the summer, they rumbled into our kitchen like an avalanche. As it happened, though, the last ones were allowed to rot on the vines.

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I sprawled in the dark living room, reading. Someone creaked past and I waited for Papa to tell me to go outside, it was such a nice day.

“The true history of that time will never be written.” This was the first time Vassily had ever addressed me directly.

“It’s not about the past,” I said. “It’s about the future.”

He ran his thick finger on the cover. “But what is that?”

Against stereotype, no one in the house ever gave me a hard time for reading science fiction, or even remarked on it, although the ridiculous covers, with their screaming girls and junkyard robots, did sometimes made me feel self-conscious. But this one just showed a spacecraft on an airless planet, with a couple of guys in spacesuits climbing a slope toward the reader. It wasn’t on the Moon, or at least not on ours, because you could see an alien planet with too many continents just at the horizon.

“It’s a spaceship.”

“Is an A-4,” he said. “What Goebbels decided to call a V-2: the German vengeance rocket. I took one apart twenty-five years ago after we overran their testing field at Blizna, in Poland. We have better technology now.”

No science fiction writer had ever imagined the complicated and hideously expensive way we finally made it into space. Even as Apollo missions were climbing to the Moon, the spaceships in my books stayed sleek and unitary, things you powered up and flew off in.

To Vassily, science fiction was a way of reasonably thinking about the future and its possibilities, so he did not end up liking most of what I lent him to read, with its mental supermen, exotic planets, and entertaining aliens. It made no sense to him that their very impossibility was their pleasure. He puzzled over the spacecraft and their handwavium drives. “The thousand and one nights of Scheherazade, told by an engineering student who failed his graduation exams,” was his literary judgment.

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Two things Vassily liked about American life:

Saturday morning cartoons. Yogi Bear (I did actually hear him mutter “smarter than the average bear” to himself after fixing Mrs. Melmar’s lawn mower), any superhero, though I think he favored Spiderman. He did not care for Jay Ward productions, the ones I loved, like *Rocky & Bullwinkle* or *George of the Jungle*, I suspect because he did not get most of the jokes. I was old enough to be embarrassed by some of the things he laughed uproariously at.

Breakfast cereal, the sweeter the better. Trix, Cocoa Puffs, Lucky Charms, Alpha Bits (which he claimed was “educational”). And he never finished a box, but left a tiny bit at the bottom, making me throw tantrums when only a crumbled handful of Cap’n Crunch tumbled out into my bowl in the morning. And he picked the marshmallows out of the Lucky Charms. I’m sure he did. More devious than you would expect of an adult, he would reach into the box and mine a vein deeper in the cereal, arranging it so that I was the one who would get a bowl of marshmallow-free cereal, then stare at me expressionlessly, daring me to complain.

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Vassily was an excellent draftsman. While looking for work as a metallurgist, he earned money with technical illustration. He came into our house with two plant engineering textbúks, written by his friend Kolya Mishkin, for which he’d done the machine layout illustrations. One of them continued to be used as a textbook in Soviet engineering schools into the early 1960s, in an edition revised by others. Kolya Mishkin sometimes wrote Vassily long letters, which he stuffed into envelopes until they were close to exploding.

So I was used to seeing diagrams of milling machines lying out on his bureau. But once, on stiffer paper, there was a portrait of a woman. Vassily had used a piece of reddish chalk, so that it looked quite old. The woman had a Louise Brooks-style bob, and a direct, sad gaze. She looked intelligent, and a bit severe, like someone you would be uncomfortable with when you knew her, but whom you would think about later. A candle burned in front of it for a day, leaving a lot of wax that enraged my mother, and that

I had to try to get off the oak top of the bureau. I looked at the picture while I did it. Vassily did not say who it was, and I did not ask.

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One thing Vassily hated about American life:

Wernher von Braun.

There are plenty of other things on the list, but none of them really says much about him. Von Braun though ... I remember Vassily sitting in the living room, huddled like a sulking child, staring at a NASA press conference after Apollo 8 successfully orbited the Moon.

“Sturmbannführer von Braun,” he muttered, using von Braun’s SS rank: major. He affected to be flabbergasted by the fact that our space program was run by someone who had been both an aristocrat and a Nazi, but I don’t think he was really surprised at all. He was just jealous. Years later, my mother revealed how many times Vassily had tried to get work at Huntsville. He blamed his failure on security problems, but it was really the less-than-cutting-edge nature of his metallurgy. A lifetime working with Soviet technology had left him permanently behind.

TV, newspapers, and magazines were dominated by the launching and orbiting of space vehicles in a way that makes no sense now. Those Mercurys, Geminis, and Apollos were celebrities, in a way their spacesuited occupants never quite became, despite the ticker tape parades and interviews in the magazines. It had been barely a decade since Sputnik had been launched, and now we were getting ready to land on another planet. Who knew where we would go beyond that? Vassily was always on the lookout for something that indicated laxness or poor metallurgy on the part of “Herr Sturmbannführer von Braun” and his team. He examined magazine photographs with a magnifying glass, but he never found a crooked weld or a bad alloy choice that he could be satisfactorily irritated by.

My issues of *Boys’ Life* were filled with pictures of Moon bases, and stories about boys settling planets orbiting distant stars. I once calculated how old I would be at the turn of the new millennium, and discarded that age as scarcely credible, but knew that we’d be scanning asteroids for likely metals and eating in restaurants lit by the light of Saturn’s rings, accompanied by large-breasted women in oddly cut but revealing outfits. The breasts are the one thing that actually came to pass. I’ve learned to live with that.

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I scored a *Playboy* off my friend Paul, who had two older brothers. I read it cover to cover. Yes, I know that's a joke, but what I learned about hi-fis, driving sports cars at high speeds, and choosing shirts was almost as important as seeing naked breasts. So I was in despair when it vanished.

I had hidden it in what I thought was a perfect spot, above a heating duct in the basement, at the end opposite the washer and dryer. I had searched through the house for a long time, trying to figure out a place which could escape Mother's relentless cleaning and rearranging, and here, where there was a half-inch layer of old dust, seemed perfect. I even slid it a fair way in so that a casual glance from someone getting a light bulb off the top shelf opposite would not reveal it.

Then, one day, it was gone. I imagined a protective kitchen glove and a flipped-up garbage can lid as she disposed of the thing.

I walked past Vassily's room a few days later, and there he was, reading it. The cover was folded back, revealing an ad for a Teac reel-to-reel tape recorder, but I recognized it. He had his reading glasses on and was paying deep attention. He read something—a joke, a cartoon caption—lips moving, and frowned. He pulled the English-Russian volume of Smirnitsky's dictionary off the night table and looked up a word. Then he reread. He paused for a moment, blinked, then howled with laughter, teeth glinting.

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Vassily was enormously and irritatingly facile at a whole range of small things.

He could tie any number of knots. He could tie knots to secure a load on top of our station wagon, or to tie up a package neatly, or attach a thin line to a thicker so that it did not slip. He even indulged in decorative knots, though I learned about that only by accident.

I delivered some food to Mrs. Melmar from my mother. She was having a party, and my parents had been invited, but were unable to come. I didn't think they'd ever made it over to one of Mrs. Melmar's parties, but that was fine; Mr. Melmar never seemed to be able to attend either. My mother always sent food: casseroles, plates of cookies, Jell-O molds. When Mrs. Melmar answered the door, flushed from the shower, with her hair in a towel turban, I saw that her living room had been decorated with swags of dark-red velvet ribbons.

"Oh, it was Vassily," she explained. "He says it's a style that was used at the Imperial court. For those grand balls. Thank you so much, Drew, for this lovely..."

“Chicken Tetrizzini. But—”

“Thank your mother for me.” Before I could decide whether to start with an explanation of Vassily’s complete and total lack of connection with the Romanovs, or with the information that I was not called Drew, she had closed her door and disappeared.

My mother tallied everything, from dinner invitations to caramels in seemingly long-forgotten candy boxes, and so she also kept close track of dishes that ended up at Mrs. Melmar’s. But the bowl that held the chicken reappeared in its proper cabinet just as Mother was on the phone telling a friend of our neighbor’s lack of responsibility. Papa came into the living room holding it triumphantly, “See, it was here all along! You should go a little easier on her, her life’s pretty difficult....”

As I only learned years later, sometimes fights aren’t about the past, but about the future. The next time Mrs. Melmar had a party, Papa went, but did not bring a casserole. He took a bottle of vodka that, due to my depredations, was at least half water. I don’t know what that many-times-reglued tax seal looked like in the light, but Papa seemed to enjoy the party anyway.

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Some of the metals in Vassily’s false teeth: gold, stainless steel, palladium, platinum, and zinc. He once said he could teach an introductory metallurgy class just by opening his mouth.

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Vassily’s friend Kolya, the one who had written the plant engineering textbooks, would sometimes visit Chicago. He worked for GE. The two of them would walk around the neighborhood, talking, and once spent a weekend in the Indiana Dunes together. The gangly and well-dressed Kolya had slid into American life in a way that Vassily had never managed. He had a Japanese wife and drove a late-model car.

It was after one such visit that the picture of the woman on Vassily’s bureau disappeared.

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Vassily had worked on the Soviet space program, and had, in fact, worked on the first Sputnik. He built a mockup of the satellite for testing separation from the spacecraft. His first model had been a cone, the initial design, but Korolev, the design bureau chief, wanted a sphere. It was an aesthetic decision, not an engineering one. He wanted a gleaming sphere, with the antennae thrown back as it galloped through the sky.

Vassily was reprimanded for his work, a humiliation he still felt over a decade later. Some of the welding on the test sphere was less than perfect. “But it is a test, Sergei Pavlovich,” he said. “To test separation.”

“This test sphere, all these things, they will be in museums!” Korolev shouted. “Do you want your grandchildren shaking their heads over your drunken welds?”

Vassily fixed it, and said that he was careful to be perfect from then on.

He only defected after Korolev’s death.

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My friend Paul’s older brother came through for me again: a six-pack of Pabst. I hid it in the shrubs by the garage. Paul and I had some elaborate plan—we were even going to see if Marilyn and Stacy from Paul’s CCD class would join us. But that disappeared too, and the cans showed up, one by one, in Vassily’s trash, which it was my responsibility to haul out.

Vassily had spent a few years in the gulag. I didn’t think that was any excuse.

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Vassily brought with him several pieces of a strong, light, silvery metal: part of a wing strut of a MiG-25, an open-ended wrench, and a cup, which he kept pencils in. He sharpened his pencils with a pen knife.

This was titanium. Everything’s made of titanium now, from bicycles to eyeglasses, but then it was a mystery, and all sources of it lay within the Soviet empire. This metal was his negotiation point, and his knowledge of how to handle it almost got him down to Huntsville. Almost.

Would he have made it down there if he'd stuck around? My mother says no, and she's usually right. Still, I think about the former *zek* shaking hands with the former Sturmbannführer and getting down to the job of getting us into space. I don't know if that's a happier ending, given the way things have happened.

Using some rubber tubing, he turned the wing strut into a slingshot. He preferred ball bearings as projectiles.

“Ah, we would have dreamed of this. I would have ruled Sobornaya Street. We tore the trees in the city park apart, looking for strong forks. And the postman lost his tires once: a rubber inner tube made enough for a dozen. Acorns we had plenty.”

Demonstrating the technique to me, he knocked a squirrel from its perch in a tree branch. I was near tears, looking at that elegant fluffed tail and the blood drops on its mouth.

Vassily was unmoved. “Squirrel. You like squirrels? They are cute on TV. Mice too. Children here like amusing vermin. Could not find a live squirrel in Kostroma, not even to eat. Cats either.”

“You killed cats?”

He looked disgusted at my squeamishness. “They are much harder to kill. Don't worry about them. They yowl and run.” He grabbed the dead squirrel by its tail and slung it into Mrs. Baumeister's battered garbage can. He stared at it judiciously. “Trash day is Tuesday. Air not too warm. Will not smell too bad.” And he chuckled to himself.

And here I'd thought one of the characteristics of Russians was how much they loved animals.

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He could also spit farther than anyone I'd ever seen, and he was disgusted that this was no longer a skill much valued. “In *Penrod* ... ah, they are dead,” he would mutter, for in addition to Twain, he seemed to have grown up reading a shadow version of American literature: Booth Tarkington, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, Carl Sandberg, James Fenimore Cooper.

He did not understand why there was a big shrine to a sport he knew nothing about in the hometown of Leatherstocking's creator. It seemed disrespectful.

And he was an excellent swimmer, with a loose-limbed form that got him through the water with a lot of splashing, though he did not wear bathing trunks, which he regarded as a bizarre affectation, and used a ragged pair of shorts, held up by a length of clothesline, that stayed wet and clammy for hours. He knew the constellations, which planet was up, and the species names of the trees on our street. I presume there is a detectable difference between a maple and an oak, but to this day I am not sure what it is. Taxonomy and classification are dead and dusty arts to me, but to Vassily they were vital parts of viewing the world.

But there were limits to his taxonomic abilities. The cliché about Russians loving mushrooms is absolutely true. On the cover of one of my Russian readers is a dirt road curving through a wheat field somewhere out in the great Russian plains, without a person or habitation to be seen. The very last double-page spread in the book shows edible mushrooms on one page, poisonous ones on the other, and a brief story about children having a contest collecting mushrooms in the woods. One brings back a full basket of toadstools and one brings back a bunch of beautiful red mushrooms with white spots: fly agaric, death caps. Aside from a scornful reprimand from Mom about their poor mushroom hunting skills, there is no panic or hysteria over death narrowly averted. The third brings back a handful of fine edible mushrooms. Quality, not quantity, is, I gather, the most unSoviet moral.

Vassily told a few stories about finding mushrooms with a fuel engineer in the woods outside Plesetsk, the space complex he worked at before moving to Kazakhstan. The stories were not interesting, but you could see that they brought back important memories.

One day he borrowed my mother's car, drove off to the woods, and came back with a full bucket of dirt-flecked fungi. We were alone in the house. My mother was visiting her sister in Ohio, and Papa was at some academic conference. The neighborhood was silent. Vassily fried the mushrooms in butter. I declined to join him.

He became desperately ill. "Evil twins," he gasped. "Here mushrooms have evil twins. No wonder Anglo-Saxons do not eat them. They fool you. This is a frightful continent."

Despite my irritation with him, I took care of him. He never apologized for having stolen my desperate attempts to enter the adult world, but he started telling me things that he had not before. At the time, I did not see that as evening anything out between us. But, still, I let him talk.

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Commentators always called the Soviet cosmodrome "Baikonur," as TASS, the Soviet news agency, insisted. It drove Vassily crazy, since the launch site was really at Tyuratam, over a hundred miles away. He did not understand why our news media were so obedient.

He talked about how cold it was, and how hot. “At your Canaveral they sip colorful drinks on the beach with their toes in the warm water. That makes sense, ah? Americans know how to do it.”

The Soviet engineers went between their barracks and the launch sites by a special train called a *motovoz*, made of wood, probably a lot like the train Vassily had ridden on the way to the camps. No toilets aboard. No water. Windows stuck shut or open. Once a blizzard came up as they were on their way home from work, and the train was stranded for two days. No one died, he said, and no wolves came. Just a bad commute.

The more he learned about the Saturn V, the more despairing he became. The first stage of the Saturn V came by barge from Louisiana, through a canal dug just to get it out of the facility to the Intracoastal Waterway. The second came from California through the Panama Canal. The third was flown from California in a Super Guppy airplane.

Soviet boosters had as many as thirty multiple engines. That had been a quick fix to getting sufficient power in the early days, but hamstrung their later development. The rockets were built in Kuibyshev, then taken apart, put on trains, and shipped to the cosmodrome. It had been Vassily’s responsibility to get them all welded back together.

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Two more things he loved:

Getting “free gifts.” In his room he had three toasters, a waffle iron, and a never-functional pants presser he got for opening checking accounts, along with a yellow whistle shaped like a locomotive, a paperweight shaped like Mt. Vernon, and a Frisbee, all also with bank names on them: We would get multiple statements from accounts with minimum deposits for years afterward. He also had a gravy boat, a plate with the Maryland state seal, two tumblers of different styles, and a teaspoon, from various gas stations and supermarkets. He kept them lined up on a shelf like trophies.

Archie comic books. He did not steal those from me, but bought them himself, and shared them. Actually, I swear he once bought a forty-five of “Sugar, Sugar” to play on a bulky mechanical record player he’d trash picked and repaired, but I could never actually find it in his room. I had heard that piece of classic bubblegum in there, somewhere between the Tchaikovsky and the Puccini, late at night, quietly, I was certain. I know he was fascinated by Veronica, but would grunt “the kind of person who caused the Revolution” if I wanted to talk about it. It seemed that the Veronicas of the world had a lot to answer for.

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Vassily had defected wearing a pair of heavy black shoes with weirdly thick soles. Even for Soviet shoes, they seemed ridiculous. Once, he turned them over for me. Shining flecks of metal studded the shoes' soles. I touched them. They were tacky, like tar on a hot day.

He and some other metallurgists had been taken on a plant tour visit in West Germany. Some kind of *ostpolitik* thing. They weren't allowed contact with anything potentially useful to them, but Vassily had worked out a way to pick up alloy shavings without being obvious about it.

"They were all over the floor. Impossible to pick them all up with alienated proletarian labor. So they were available to us." I never knew whether the occasional appearance of Marxist-Leninist concepts in Vassily's speech was satirical, or whether a lifetime of political and linguistic indoctrination had actually had some effect.

Not enough, though. He faked food poisoning, ran off to the bathroom, and kept running, out a door and into a street where he was almost run over by a tiny BMW Isetta. He and the driver, a bank officer from Augsburg, exchanged Christmas cards for a while.

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When Sputnik was launched, everyone involved, Vassily included, walked together, in silence, in front of the rocket carrier. It was two kilometers from the assembly-testing building to the pad. No one said a word. Most people only realized that they had been part of history afterward, if at all. But they knew. It was not a Red Square parade, though that certainly came later. It was a real event.

Did Vassily really weep when he heard the first beeps from the satellite he had helped build? He never told me that he did. But the way he avoided saying anything about it made me think that he had.

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I was responsible for mowing Mrs. Melmar's lawn. I did it gladly, though I always demanded a decent rate for it. I neglected the Toro, and it crapped out. I asked Vassily to help me fix it.

So I watched him do it.

“Von Braun wanted to go to the Moon, but found himself killing schoolchildren in London and Antwerp with rockets built by slaves kept in underground pens inside a mountain. Like Flash Gordon. Why read your books when we can achieve those horrors with such ease?” We watched reruns of *Flash Gordon* serials together, but I guess we were watching two different shows.

He ran his finger on the inside of a metal ring, frowning. “Pitted. No good.” He flicked it off into a dark corner of the garage. I heard it tinkle and vanish beneath a stack of old tires—the remnants of a truly Soviet project of Vassily’s that involved retreading them by hand (“the only way we kept our vehicles moving in Tyuratam!”). Even he had finally realized the incompatibility of this with American production capabilities, but the tires remained, to my mother’s dismay. Papa collected so much crap of his own that the tires barely mattered.

“Korolev wanted to go to the Moon too, but found himself putting atomic bombs on top of rockets to destroy New York City. Even Sakharov loved his bomb. He wanted to understand the Sun, and he found a way to destroy cities with what he learned, working for men who would tear your fingernails out with pliers as easy as I talk to you now. Men he never would have broken bread with. But he let them stand over him in their bloodstained boots. Because they let him build and understand. Someone above knew us better than we knew ourselves.”

He threaded a cotter pin through the hub, took the needlenosed pliers and bent it to hold. You could see the satisfaction he took in having just the right tool for the job, hanging right there in the tool rack, a tool rack my father never used.

“I am no different. I worked on missiles, as well as satellites and spacecraft. It was like anything else. Not defense of the motherland, or a desperate attempt to equalize power with the capitalist enemy. Just work, interesting work. Good work, what a man lives for. We sat in that miserable desert for years, testing. Not enough testing, for we were always in a hurry. You should static test all engines. Americans always do. They can afford it. We did not. Hurry, hurry. We had to meet our schedules, get the engines working, get them firing. Once we were testing an ICBM. The R-9. Oxidized with liquid oxygen. Made no sense for an ICBM. I can admit that now, but then we fought with the other design bureaus, some who were developing storable propellants. An ICBM needs to be launched quickly, and so needs a storable propellant. A space probe or manned flight, not so much. So, were we secretly working on what we really wanted to work on? An interplanetary spacecraft disguised as an ICBM? No. We were working on a weapon. It just wasn’t a very good weapon. It does not excuse us.

“We were testing the first stage. We had built a test pad: a fixed part, and part that rotated on it. The missile was attached to the movable portion. We were ready to ignite, when I saw a cloud of mist at the pad. We were way behind schedule. Khrushchev himself, we were told, had an interest in this test. He needed to threaten the Americans with our might, and no one was to know that we had no missiles. Your

John Kennedy complained about how many missiles the Russians had, and how badly the Americans had done under Eisenhower. Fantastic nonsense. I suppose we would have laughed if we had not been so busy trying to make sure he was right. He won his election, for all the good it did him. Is that democracy, that you get to choose your lies? We had to take the lies we were issued.

“Condensation meant a leak, which meant a delay in the test, which meant ... we did not want to discover what it meant. I went out to the pad. It was a night test, no one was seeing me. It was a liquid oxygen leak, a small one. The repair would take at least a day, but ... I unzipped, and I pissed on the leaky joint. It froze into ice and plugged the leak. It held until ignition, and the test went off well. That was how we did things at that time.”

He took the lawnmower back. A short while later I heard it start up. The bastard. Did he think he could charm Mrs. Melmar by doing her lawn? A few hours later he came back, as glum as when he went, and put the mower away without cleaning it off. And he'd left a few stray lines of grass uncut. I snuck over and trimmed them later, with hand shears. It's no wonder you don't see many Russians in lawn care.

* * * *

Vassily avidly watched the Apollo coverage—with pleasure at the accomplishment, but with sadness too. Because he was watching for something else. Something that never came.

All that year, the Soviets were trying to launch the complex, thirty-engined N-1, which was to be their lunar launch vehicle. And, because of inadequate static testing, because of the fact that every piece of it was essentially a one-off, because they had to hurry, it kept blowing up only seconds after liftoff. No TV commentator ever mentioned what was going on at what they would have called Baikonur.

Vassily tried to convince himself that if only Korolev had lived, a Russian might still have ended up walking on a dusty surface not too different from the dusty steppes of central Kazakhstan, but I don't think he ever succeeded.

* * * *

Years later, while traveling on business, I found Kolya Mishkin at his retirement home in Sarasota. A simple phone call, and he invited me over. His wife, Kumiko, somehow pegged me as Russian, and served me a variety of foods preserved by smoking, salting, and fermentation, along with vodka in ornate shot glasses. Kolya told me a few things about Vassily that I never learned while he lived with us. He and Vassily were no longer in touch. I could tell this hurt him.

Vassily had had a wife named Irina who was a physician in the Red Army and was taken prisoner by the Germans at Vyazma, in 1941, along with half a million of her comrades. She never came back. Presumably she died in one of those open-air cattle pens the Germans kept Soviet POWs in, regarding them as barely human. Kolya said she might well have come back, only to be rearrested by the NKVD, as all ex-POWs were, being of suspect loyalty, and shipped to a Soviet camp, to die there.

Vassily and Irina never had children.

Vassily was arrested in 1938 after other members of his aircraft design team, already in custody, cited his name as a saboteur. One of their test aircraft had recently crashed on takeoff and damaged a wing. He was in the middle of dinner with Irina. They had been married for five months. They never saw each other again.

Vassily lost his teeth in the gold-mining camps of Kolyma. He'd had one of them, a molar, which he kept in a jar when he lived with us, along with a gallstone (not his, but not an interesting story either), a rubber lizard, and a valve from the fuel line of a German V-2 rocket he'd picked up at the testing site in Blizna, Poland.

He worked with three of the colleagues who had betrayed him in various space projects in the years after the war. One of them even ended up running a design bureau. Vassily never brought up what had happened, and neither did they. Two of them he liked and continued to drink with, and one of them, the bureau chief, he feuded with, but none of that had anything to do with 1938. It would have made no more sense for him to be angry or vengeful about that than it would have been to react to something they had done to him in a dream.

Kolya, Vassily, and Irina had all been school friends. After a few vodkas, Kolya revealed that he had once been interested in Irina as well. But he was assigned to the hydroelectric project at Bratsk before an understanding could be reached, and she married Vassily two days after her father, an officer, was arrested, in the Red Army purges that followed the execution of Field Marshal Tukhachevsky in 1937.

Every year, Kolya lit a candle on Irina's birthday, even though Russians only learned to care about birthdays after coming to America. I was able to tell him that, at least once, Vassily had done the same.

After a glance at his wife, who smiled permission, Kolya went into his study and returned with the woman's portrait Vassily had done. It was Irina. Vassily had had no photographs of her, and so had done it from memory. He'd given it to Kolya as a present during his visit. Kolya had tried to give it back, but Vassily refused, saying he could draw another one.

Neither Kolya nor I thought he'd ever drawn another one.

* * * *

One day, near the end of the summer, Vassily disappeared.

So, to the wonder of the entire neighborhood, did Mrs. Melmar. Her youngest was now at Penn State, and it might have been that she now saw no reason to stick around.

The idea that they had disappeared together took a long time to be accepted.

My mother packed up a few things that Vassily had forgotten, but did not tell Papa what address she was sending them to. That led to the worst fight they had ever had. They got over that, but have never seemed as happy with each other since.

The next tenant was a sad man with a face like a frog who said he was writing a history of the twentieth century. I don't know if he ever finished it, but he lived there until long after I went to college. The room is now empty.

Vassily did not leave anything for me. Not a book, not a note, nothing. He just walked out and left, exactly as if I was a kid he really didn't have much interest in.

* * * *

I think about Vassily every time our makeshift space shuttle blows up, killing a handful of astronauts, or, more optimistically, whenever an elegant space probe flies past the uncut diamond of a moon. He would have admired those smooth gadgets, so unmake-shift, so unmanned, so ... unSoviet. The space shuttle, a thalidomide version of the proud spaceships that once flew in our imagination, is completely Soviet.

The Soviets themselves thought it even more Soviet than it actually was. When the thing was announced, they analyzed the costs. It made no sense. Any number of expendable launch vehicles would have been cheaper for the missions the thing could possibly perform. And Americans, after all, love to throw things away. What were they really up to?

Then they saw its trajectory: a military payload lofted into orbit from Vandenberg could reenter and hit central Russia in three and a half minutes. A Polaris missile launched from a boomer off Kamchatka in a first strike would take at least ten.

So that's how they managed to understand the shuttle: as a weapon. For once their economic analysis made perfect sense, but they still reached the wrong conclusion. They dropped the rest of their space program and developed their own shuttle, the *Buran*. It flew only once, then sat in a warehouse at Tyuratam until a fire destroyed it, along with whatever was left of the program Vassily gave so many years of his life to.

I see the shuttle has tile problems again. Every time someone drops a paperclip, it has tile problems. I'd love to talk that over with Vassily, but he can't possibly still be alive.