

NARRATIVE



Russell Working, a finalist in *Narrative's* 2021 Spring Story Contest and First Place winner in the 2019 Fall Story Contest, is the Pushcart Prize-winning author of two story collections: *The Irish Martyr*, which won the University of Notre Dame's Richard Sullivan Prize in Short Fiction, and *Resurrectionists*, winner of the Iowa Short Fiction Award. He holds an MFA in creative writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts, and as a former newspaper reporter, he has filed stories from throughout the former Soviet Union, Asia, the Middle East, and aboard the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*. He and his wife, a Russian journalist, have two sons.

Izola

AN ESSAY

BY RUSSELL WORKING

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SHE SAID, “We were talking about you,” and I said, “Oh, really?”

She said, “Yeah, we were wondering if anything here was really amazingly different from anything you’ve ever seen before, since you’ve traveled so much.”

And I said, “Oh, sure. All kinds of things.”

We were in Slovenia, former Yugoslavia, a mountainous republic tucked against Italy and Austria. Castles, lakes, Bavarian-style churches, caverns for spelunkers, outdoor cafés dishing up ice cream, a monument to a poet in the capital’s central square, a pink cathedral on which some Visigoth spray-painted his virtue (STOP WARS NOT REFUGEES).

But then I thought, Well, I guess it’s true that nothing here in Slovenia has been as different as the differences I’ve seen elsewhere. So far nobody here has carried a screaming pig by the ears and tail and plonked it into a jury-rigged motorcycle-and-sidecar unit upon which I and seven other people were riding, as happened in Cebu, Philippines. Nowhere among the mountain Slavs have villagers shouted, “Welcome! This is George Bush’s village!” and feted me with a dinner of grilled chicken and hummus and offered me a twelve-year-old bride for the sum of (if

**WINNER**

memory serves) one thousand dollars—not a fixed price, bargaining was welcome if I didn’t happen to have enough cash on hand, ATMs being uncommon in Kurdish Turkey on the Iraqi border. In Slovenia I toured an astonishing castle built into a cliff face, but was that *different* different? For all the wonder of it, the fortress seemed oddly familiar to anyone who has heard fairy tales or read Tolkien or watched all twenty parts of Peter Jackson’s movie series. Here on the sunny southern flank of the Alps I have not yet committed the faux pas of wearing a blue shirt and red polka-dotted tie to the wake of an assassinated Mafia kingpin, as I did in Vladivostok, Russia, only to have goodfellas in black suits and ties (and even, some of them, black shirts) glower at me while throwing down vodka shots and agree when one of them said, “That guy’s wearing a blue shirt. That’s disrespectful. I’m going to kill him.”

The Adriatic does not freeze a meter thick, unlike Amursky Zaliv in the Russian Far East, where truckers drive loads of coal across the ice to the other side. There have been no fourteen-hour-a-day blackouts here that go on week after week. I have not been paid a month’s salary in coins. Dogs do not run wild in packs and attack old ladies carrying their groceries home (maybe dumplings and sausage and a head of cabbage, as well as a tub of ice cream), because who knew where their husbands were, out drinking, or in the grave? In Slovenia I have yet to visit a dogfight, a cockfight, or a boxing match in which a bloodied contestant is floored with a left hook to the liver, a punch to remember in your arsenal of moves, if you know how to deliver it, which I do not. I know of no illegal gun factories where shirtless workers in shorts and flip-flops fabricate knockoff Uzis and Colt .45s, complete with fake American serial numbers, as they do in the Philippines. Here in

Ljubljana I have not interviewed a Jordanian cleric who sneaked into Chechnya to establish sharia law on sovereign Russian territory. I have not fended off Mongolian lambs that fell in love with my long sheepskin coat and kept following me around and crowding up under it, even when I walked away from a cluster of yurts to find a place to pee out there on the treeless steppes. (“Get! Go on, you! Shoo!”) No old lady here has extended a retractable pocket telescope and searched for her runaway camel, a speck among camel specks on the limitless Mongolian horizon. I didn’t gasp for breath at a Kyrgyz gold mine located at fourteen thousand feet. No doctor here has dragooned me into helping load the corpses of children, victims of malnutrition, in a morgue, as happened in Haiti.

Even the mellifluous Slovenian language, which I had never heard until nine days ago, is oddly familiar to a Russian speaker. In fact, the word *mellifluous*, whose root is “honey” (*mel*), recalls the similarities among the Slovenian word for “honey” (*med*), its Russian equivalent (*myod*), and the English *mead*, which Beowulf drank by the tankardful before slaying Grendel, somewhat drunk, I’ve got to think. Slavic languages morph like the colors of a lava lamp in their iterations from the Adriatic to the Sea of Japan, from Afghanistan to the Arctic Ocean. The Russian word *iskhod*, meaning “exodus,” marks the emergency exit of a Slovenian bus, as if the twelve tribes of Israel were planning to crowd out the door single file: man, woman, and child; manservant and maidservant; along with their goats and sheep and oxen and asses and the Ark of the Covenant, carried by Levites. *Pozor* means “shame” in Russian, but a sign in a bus station surely wasn’t urging personal humiliation when it commanded: POZOR TLA

DRSILO. If Google Translate can be trusted, it means, “Pay attention to the floors,” and I promise to do so from now on.

But I did see this one thing: an old woman eating an ice cream cone alone in a café facing a marina full of boats in the Italianate Adriatic port of Izola, a town of red-tile roofs, laundry racks hanging from windows, families in bathing suits walking the quay. The flavor of the ice cream might have been cherry or strawberry. Something pink, anyway. Lana, let’s call our old lady. Maybe she was a widow. When had her husband died, old Stojan or Bozidar? Was he felled by coronary thrombosis, or cancer of the liver from all that brandy he drank no matter how many times she warned him, “It’ll be the death of you”? Could she not persuade a fellow old lady to join her for twenty minutes of ice cream licking and grumbling at the memory of that thrice-accursed husband, how he bought her plastic flowers on that one anniversary (*Plastic! What is wrong with men?*) and could never remember that she hated orange soda? Maybe there was a reason Lana could not find a friend with whom to eat ice cream and rail against a man so selfish as to die and leave a girl alone for her last twenty years after promising they’d both live until the age of one hundred and spend every evening sitting in a café overlooking the Adriatic and holding hands on his lap under the table.


Perhaps old Lana had been a shameless flirt, suspected of dalliances with other women’s husbands, and now, in her old age, the girls all took satisfaction in the karma of her loneliness.

Or perhaps my assumptions were wrong. Maybe old Bozidar was alive and well. Perhaps she, solitary Lana, just liked a quick ice cream break to fuel up for the evening’s excitement. Maybe she was planning to scurry home to meet Bozidar, arriving from work at the auto-body shop, for a romp in bed, never mind that he

needed a shower after a week of procrastinating, as if cleanliness were a chore to be avoided like paying the electricity bill, in the old Slavic village tradition. Who cared about a whiff of male exertion and motor oil? Not Lana. The frizzy gray of his chest hair and his ripe-pumpkin belly, her own sagging breasts that he was still crazy about. (*These kids with their tattoos! Everything would sag. Could they not see that!*) Life was short, and one had to seize the day to make up for all those years of denial when the children kept climbing into bed in the middle of the night. Maybe this situation, their sturdy old love, hers and Bozidar's, wasn't so different from what happened between men and women everywhere, but love is new every time one encounters it, even fleetingly: as sweet as ice cream, sweet as honey, sweet as mead, to be savored, like the saltiness of skin, on the tip of the tongue.

Promise me you won't die first, Lana maybe says to old Bozidar, her cheek on his frizzy chest. *Wait till I'm gone. I can't live without you, you old fool. You want me to end up sitting alone in a café, watching the ice cream melt?*

But did he heed her? Did he live? Would he be there tonight? That's what I wanted to know.

"All kinds of things," I told my friend. "Like, for instance, once I saw this old lady eating an ice cream cone." 

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