

Benjamin Matvey

Cognitive Therapy in Russian

So, I have this little light. It's small and plastic, with three white bulbs running across its center. It's supposed to simulate the rays of the sun, and keep me from getting too sad in winter.

It's the same reason why people keep strings of Christmas lights strung over bars in Denver or Boston or Novosibirsk. We aren't designed for darkness. Something deep inside of us, something much older and deeper than us is telling us to move away, get to warm, because if we don't, come winter we will die.

And it has to be this way. Reason doesn't move lemurs, it doesn't move bears or chimpanzees, it has to be something sub-rational, something that would gnaw at us, promise us depression if we stayed here, because *that* moves us—whatever economists tell us. "Rational actors"? Don't be ignorant.

So, I can talk my plight away, spin them in circles until I find myself elsewhere, but it doesn't change the fact that here I am alone in a small, off-white painted room, in the clone-ish brownstones of Brooklyn, trying to squeeze a bit of happiness out of a light bulb pointed at my face in an ocean of dark.

When my babushka died (and it's pronounced BAB-ush-ka, not bab-BOO-shka—that is a made up American word for the headscarf that grandmothers wear) I went to the first orthodox mass I had been to since I was baptized. It was in Valley Cottage New York, right on the other side of the decaying Tapan Zee bridge where Tsarist Russian refugees go to die. They laid her embalmed, wax covered body (little dress and headscarf and all) on top of a raised table in the middle of the church. My "Russian" cousins were there—cousins who grew up in Fishkill, but spoke Russian like 19th century Muscovites because their parents did not care about normalizing them to the U.S. The priests muttered prayers in old church Slavonic (which sounds like mock Russian) and swung censers with burning incense three times so that the chain and the metal would ring against each other.

My cousin Kolya, my cousin Vera, and my dad stood at different moments and crossed themselves in backwards Russian fashion. Russia had fought bloody wars over the correct way to cross oneself, but what was the pattern here? I asked my father, "when do I cross myself?"

He looked at me and, though he was New Yorker for four decades, answered:

"When the spirit strikes you," he said, pausing with Russian disgust creeping from the side of his mouth, "Of course."

In a room full of my own blood I smelled how foreign I was.

When you are close enough to your lover's face you can feel your noses compete for air. I loved knowing that we found enough for both of us, and that every atom of that breath belonged only by chance to one of us and not to the other.

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Yes, I know. It is the love-drunk thinking of oxytocin and myth, the effect that makes every moronic love song on the radio speak to you.

She was romantic, dangerously, stupidly romantic, and I knew this when I first met her, leaning up against the bar, her eyes painted with too much mascara, her lips swollen and glossed in an exaggerated, brash display of sexuality. Swollen like a baboon's ass declaring, "I am ready."

I find myself checking my e-mail every few minutes. I switch over from my work e-mail and click send/receive and every time I am ashamed at how sad I am that no one has written me. I am heading into the belly of my life and my world and my circle of friends is getting smaller, further away, more involved with their children, or sickness, or regrets.

My sister recommended this book on cognitive therapy, a plan to intentionally re-structure the way you talk about your life to yourself, because depression is supposedly caused by the things we tell ourselves about the world.

For example: instead of saying to myself "Sveta left me because I am not worthy of beauty, because I am ugly, because she could feel a darkness within me that was only deepening with time, because I am genetically flimsy, because I am not as handsome as those around her, because I am too old, too awkward, because I am and always have been a little inferior and I don't know my place, because she could smell that life with me was settling, settling for a lesser man." I am supposed to say something like: "Sveta was not ready to settle down."

And apparently I am supposed to believe this. I have never been so desperate to be happy that I was willing to lie to myself; at least not so egregiously.

Cognitive therapy. They call it that because they fear calling it the "power of positive thinking" will remind people of what a meek, rotting cliché it is.

So my questions for the author of this book is, how should I think about my father or babushka? My babushka's husband died of typhus, leaving her in Yugoslavia a penniless Russian refugee from the communists with three children below the age of 10 to feed. She could not feed my father or his older brother so she had to give both of them away. She lived in poverty, saw the Nazis take over Yugoslavia, saw her relatives die before her eyes in a botched American bomber raid, had to flee to the German zone of occupation at the end of the war so Stalin couldn't kill her. Maybe there was a bright light when my father took her with him to move to America, so he could study to be a big rich American one day, but on getting here, she was alone and isolated. She had a stroke when she was in her sixties and spent the better part of three decades an invalid in the Tolstoy home for aging Russians. Her English eventually entirely left her, and when her grandchildren came to see her she could not speak to them.

We found her frightening. We thought she was the witch, Baba Yaga, and what twists in the wound every time I think about it is I now can see she knew we thought that. She gave us candy we did not like and we cried when her son, my father, told us to kiss her. She died at 94 after praying to her icons for death for fifteen years.

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And what about my father? The child who had to be given away, the 6 year old who watched his father die and the same child who begged his mother, my babushka, not give him away. He remembered (with that strange broad smile he had any time remembering something unimaginably painful) that he begged her to let him stay with her. "I can fit in your suitcase," he said to her in his little boy voice, thinking, hoping if he could just make himself small, make it so he didn't eat, so he could keep his family.

He spent the next 5 years the unwanted child of an over stretched Slovenian family. He had rickets because he didn't have enough to eat, sciatica because he didn't have shoes. He saw the village he lived in Serbia for one of the only happy moments in his life wiped out by Nazis, and his house collapse on his grandmother and brother once he had made his way back to his family on Orthodox Easter day in 1944.

True, he got his way to America, the miracle country that nonetheless bombed his home that Easter Day. But guilt of standing on the right side of a collapsing partition as bombs fell made him push away anything that might give him comfort. It would all be ripped away from him; that he could rely on.

He died when he thought things had taken a turn for the better, when he was brought his father's remains to the US to be buried next to his mother in the Old Russian graveyard in Valley Cottage. He collapsed, clutching his chest, pale and terrified next to me just minutes after he had said to me that he could at least be happy he had a long time to live.

So was the problem that dad and Babushka didn't think about their lives in the right words? Did they think it in words at all? Were they the wrong Russian words, the wrong German words, the wrong Serbian words? Or was it just when they closed their eyes they could see so much blood, and that the ambient sound of everyone's life is the certainty of a painful end?

It is not the words I think in, it is that my tongue will not lie to my mind.