

Faber-Castell Classic Colour Pencils by Aeen Norouzi¹ Translated from Persian by Yasaman Rahmani

It was exactly twenty minutes before the New Year; approximately fourteen hours before our flight to Russia.

Going to a place like Russia was obviously a gift from the universe, as I thought, given only to me while the rest of my family was just tagging along. Not just because I had never been abroad before, but also because I was a pimply-faced teen, like everyone at that age, who would think he was the most important person on earth.

For the first time in my life I did not have new clothes for the New Year, due to (as my mother repeated a thousand times) the fact that I was in puberty and I would outsize any clothes, in just a few months. This was one of their rationalisations for the miserliness which had passed on through generations in my family and was so obvious that even a thirteen-year-old boy could sense it. The truth was that I did not care. The only thing on my mind was that colourful cathedral on the box.

I was in the third grade when I saw the box; Faber-Castell classic colour pencils 48L, all in metal. The fattest boy in our class, who was famous for eating ants in front of everyone, took the box out of his old grey backpack. Seeing him own those fine colour pencils was a bit of a shock, because if he had come from a rich family, he would not have to eat ants just to attract others' attention, as I assumed he did. The picture on the box was taken from a bizarre place. There was a huge palace-like building, with five or six colourful domes that looked just like candies and cookies that we had seen in cartoons. The walls of the palace were brick red and the variously sized domes were coloured differently from each other. They were striped in white and blue, red and green, blue and maroon, pear green and yellow and finally there was a small golden dome at the highest spot of the structure. The whole picture was so magnificent that I could never believe it could exist in real life. The ant boy insisted on the fact that his mother had seen the palace herself, but he couldn't remember its name. We ended up betting on it, and when the teacher told us that the picture was actually the Kremlin palace in a country named Russia which was ironically so near to our country on the north border, for a moment I felt betrayed. I felt so retarded. Millions of people had visited that place, and a great number of them could see that every day on their way to school, work or home, while I had even failed to acknowledge that it was real. That day, on my way back home, I wished I could visit it sometime. Although deep down I knew it would never come true.

Years later, when I visited Moscow, I felt betrayed again. It was not the Kremlin but Saint Basil's cathedral, which was always on TV news whenever something happened in Russia. Standing in front of it was really something for a child born in my family. We were of those people who never thought about going abroad. If we sorted out ourselves and cut out all the expenses, we could spend a couple of days in Dubai or Istanbul. But Moscow or Saint Petersburg were words that my parents could not even spell. The only way my wish could have come true was through a stranger who was new in our family: my sister's husband, who worked in a travel agency. The

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agency appreciated his hard work by offering him and four of his relatives a cheap tour to Russia.

The last couple of hours before that trip didn't go well for us, though. Early in the morning we were getting ready to celebrate the New Year. Our impending trip to Russia had influenced all our behavior. My mother wandered through rooms, reminding us of what we needed for the trip. For the first time, the fanfare in our home had a real meaning, as we were anticipating a jubilant event to happen in a couple of hours. Commanded by my mother, everyone had worn their best clothes to take some pictures in front of the 'Haft Sin'.² My father had put on his best jacket, looking for a proper tie. Even I had to wear a tie, in fact my father's old and small tie, to be posh, and that was another saddening thing about that day.

We had never done such things before. Of course there was photographing in all the ceremonies, as if we were celebrities who would take thousands of pictures in order to choose the best ones, but wearing our best suits and ties and seeing my mom wearing a mini skirt sounded extremely cheesy to me whereas today, it occurs to me, that to my mom the whole idea was to preserve the happiness of that day.

I put the camera on self-timer and lodged myself beside mom who was worried about showing too much through that tight skirt. My father stood behind her and affectionately put his hand on her shoulder and a bunch of her styled hair which made her uncomfortable and worry about her hair, but there wasn't enough time to talk about it in two seconds. She probably thought there was much time left to take numerous pictures, not guessing that it would be the first and the last picture of that day which was never even developed.

With much certainty I'd say, twenty minutes till the turn of the year, we heard the doorbell. It was my uncle, wearing a pair of old jeans that was thoroughly dotted with grime. He asked for me and my father to go downstairs, while my mom was talking to one of her numerous friends, boasting about the trip, which probably, they had already made!

Seeing half of my uncle's face was enough to guess that something bad had happened or was about to happen. I leaned forward to hug him, but he pulled back and said, 'So, where's your dad?'

'Probably talking to mom, but he's coming. You alright?'

He winked a couple of times, maybe out of sadness or anger, but didn't say a word. The awkward moment was taking too long till my father finally came down, with his fat feet lifting all the dust on the stairs with every step of his.

'Where's Soheila?' My uncle asked him.

'Doing some stuff. Want her down?'

'No,' he answered decisively. 'It's about Aziz! Her house's burnt down; entirely I guess!' He said. 'But she's alright.' He added after a minute's pause.

I felt my whole body go numb. Was it as unreal as every other thing about that day? I leaned my face toward the wall next to the door. Only then I could see the other person in my uncle's car, a woman sitting still, not even looking at us, but I could see her lips trembling in a fine rhythm. My grandma and her burnt house were real.

I opened the back door of the old Peugeot 405; the smell of roasted meat and burnt coal hit me. I went half way into the car, but hugging my grandmother was a bit strange at that moment. I didn't know what to say, nor did I have the energy to move and sit beside her. All I did was stay in her arms until I felt she was uncomfortable. She wanted me out. Putting my tingly buttock on the rough car seat, I finally asked, 'You alright, Aziz?'

There was pure silence. She didn't even wink. My uncle coming by the car said, 'She won't

²Haft Sin table or spread: the traditional New Year custom in Iran that consists of a ceremonial display of the seven symbols of the arrival of spring to celebrate the day of the vernal equinox.

talk.’ Then I heard my mom, crying out in the street. Maybe I should hate myself for this, but at that moment, imagining our trip was going to be canceled because of a burnt house, left me desperate, whereas seeing my grandma in that state or thinking about my childhood house entirely destroyed was not that horrible. Any good mood vanished in less than a minute and we had turned into that same boring family.

Going upstairs to take our ties off and put ordinary clothes on, I was thinking about any possible relation between being sad or angry and not wearing proper clothes. But when I saw my mom, texting on her phone so quickly, everything became clear to me.

We got there in no time. My aunts and their families had already arrived. Of course no one said, ‘Happy New Year’. No one even realised the turn of the year, or at least didn’t mention it. I could see them looking at their watches once in a while to check on the special moment but when it came, as I was counting the minutes, no one seemed excited.

The door was open, so I hurried enthusiastically, ahead of everyone to enter the house. My father yelled: ‘Whoa,’ then came forth and said, ‘Don’t just blunder like a fool! The roof might fall on you, moron.’

He said that in such a tone as if we hadn’t been embracing each other for those pictures less than an hour ago. My uncle came down and said that he had just checked everywhere, and that the doors and walls were mostly intact; the entire furniture was burnt, though. That meant he had heard my father shouting at me and it was much of an embarrassment. It was so naïve of me to think that going to Russia could change our family’s etiquette. Dad’s disgraceful action and mom’s ceaseless grumble were taking us down to the very actual level we had been in our entire lives; to our originals.

The smell of charred plastic, carpet and even fruit wafted across the staircase. I could smell the burnt oranges as I used to scorch them on the heater when I was a child. When I entered the living room, the bowl of fruit on the floor caught my attention at first. Three oranges, looking like charcoal balls, and a shrunk banana that was similar to fava bean shell, were in a china bowl, all discoloured to a brownish hue.³

My grandma came in to her own house, looking around with perplexed eyes, and suddenly started crying. I had never heard an old woman wail before. She started opening every single shelf and cabinet and emptied them on the floor, like it was a command she had to obey. She wouldn’t let go of the smallest things. Holding a pack of spaghetti in her hand, she insisted on not throwing it out. The pack had melted on its edges and a couple of spaghetti strands were half incinerated in it. My mother tried to snatch it from her, but she started yelling and resisting. Even for a woman that stingy, the reaction was out of proportion. She was trying her best to preserve the least useful stuff among all those charred rubbish. All her life was destroyed just because of a samovar.⁴

The whole situation was like a pulp fiction; a grotesque attempt to depict the contradiction between two different situations. My cousins, wearing all their new clothes, came to see their grandmother’s burnt house and we, on the other hand, were about to go on the most important trip of our lives that same night. Nobody could pick on us or ask us to cancel our trip. But they could read it in our eyes while we were rummaging through all the burnt furniture, that half of our minds were busy fancying Russia, a country where its coldness, even in early spring, was opposed to that

³A species of flowering plant in the pea and bean family *Fabaceae*. It almost resembles green beans; the fruit is a broad, leathery pod that is green, but matures to a dark blackish-brown, with a densely downy surface. It is widely planted in Iran and the beans – whether steamed in shells or chopped and mixed with rice – are quite popular.

⁴A metal container traditionally used for heating and boiling water in Russia, which was introduced to Iran during the Safavid Era and over time became an integral part of the Iranian culture. Samovars are found in almost all domestic and public spaces.

burnt house.

Our trip started with vexation. My mother cried in the airport and called my aunt's house with one of those free airport phones to check on her mother. I, on the contrary, was enjoying myself to the fullest extent. But everything became serious, the moment I cast my eyes on one of those blue-eyed Russian flight attendants. Before that, my mind was filled with far-fetched dreams, but then everything seemed real. Looking back, I realise how exciting the trip was, although I regret having been so young at that time. I was sixteen and a visit to Hermitage Museum could be so boring for a youngster. All I could think of was showing off about seeing Da Vinci and Raphael, or Lenin's mummified body, well-matched with a face so white that it looked as if he was afraid of all those people circumambulating him, even though one was not allowed to do so more than once and then had to exit the exhibition.

To me, Moscow was compressed in its subway and in Saint Basil's cathedral. Watching all those strangers commuting through the subway, wandering around, headed to places I didn't even know existed, was the ultimate adventure. We got off in every station just to look around. As others were occupied by the paintings and the tiles on the ceiling, I watched people. They didn't smile much or even look around. They would simply put their bottles down immediately after the last gulp. This could happen anywhere and the funny thing was that they didn't throw the bottles, just put them so gently on the floor. All the corridors were full of empty bottles like a bowling club filled with frozen-faced blond players.

When I had a photo of me taken in front of Saint Basil's, I felt blessed. I wondered if any of them, walking around the Red Square, had a story like mine. Which of them had seen that illustration on a colour pencil tin box? I felt unique, and it made me happy.

The journey was not entirely void of dark moments, though. Despite all our efforts to behave like those civilised Europeans, our originality popped up every now and then. This got bolder when it came to my parents. My father kept skipping the museums that we were supposed to visit, just to save the entry fee. Food was another catastrophe. Most nights we had to eat the canned-food we had brought from Iran, instead of going to restaurants and getting familiar with Russian cuisine. I can remember the mornings in which my mom served herself with nearly all the salami in the hotel's buffet, in order to make us little sandwiches which she would wrap in big white tissues and dump in her purse. My sister and I objected and our new son-in-law probably just smiled in embarrassment. But later, when we were starving in the streets of Moscow and Saint Petersburg, these little wraps would save us.

One night before our departure, I made my second wish. My brother-in-law and I were waiting in a queue at a McDonald's while the rest were looking for an empty table. There were not more than five or six people in the line. When people reached the cashier, they would quickly order and then exit the line. Everything looked ordinary, even to us as tourists. But a moment later, the woman ahead of us said something in Russian to the girl who was before her in the queue. The woman was obese and hulking, wearing a tacky black t-shirt, whereas the girl was petite with a pony tail. Their entire conversation, which we guessed was about the turn in the queue, took less than thirty seconds. The woman grabbed the skinny girl by her pony tail, pulled her out of the line and dragged her along to the end of the queue, and then threw her right behind us and returned to her place in the line. Neither did the girl make a fuss, nor did she try to escape from the woman. In the whole process, which lasted less than a minute, no one even turned his head to look at them. It was only us, always craving for a fight in the streets, who looked on. I turned my head and looked into the girl's eyes. I had become reckless for I knew I'd leave that country in less than a day. I can still remember that moment. She looked as if nothing had happened. Her large slant eyes were empty of any emotion, looking straight at a point I couldn't locate; so I turned my head back to see if she was looking at the woman or something specific, but there was absolutely nothing.

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Transnational Literature Vol. 11 no. 1, December 2018.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

The woman had ordered her food and was already gone.

This brief incident is the weirdest recollection I have of that trip. That moment I wished I could get close to a Russian, preferably a tall blonde girl. The differences between us and Russians made me think of them not less than aliens. All I wanted was to talk to one of them and ask her how they could manage to behave like that.

Two years after the burning incident, my grandma passed away in a new apartment which her children had bought her. When she died, she was alone at home, perhaps thinking about her old house.

Every time I heard something about Russia, I remembered her death. She never got to know anything about a place like Russia, but her death was forever associated with it in my mind. While we were busy with her memorial service, the result of the university entrance exam was announced. I had spent the entire year wasting my time, so I couldn't be dissatisfied with the outcome. I thought the best major that would fit my grades was Persian literature, and I went for it. Two years later, when I constantly cursed myself for my choice, Alena came to our university. She was a short Russian girl who had come to join a handful of other international students at our university. The rest of them were all from China who tried to behave so politely that sometimes I thought there were no common grounds between us. It looked as if we couldn't communicate much except about the courses, and that too with extensive gesticulations. But Alena was nothing like that. From the very moment I saw her, I thought she was different. Unlike most Russians, she was neither tall nor blonde and her slant black eyes resembled those of the Koreans. That was when I realised, no one can ever be as lucky as he wishes. There is always something missing. The incident in my grandma's house the night we were going on a trip and the first and only Russian girl in my life having dark hair were ironic enough.

Approaching the semi-dream girl of my life took me two months. Coming from a strange place was enough to make a celebrity out of her on the campus, despite her lack of any special beauty. When I told her that I had once visited her country, she was surprised and happy, but not as much as I had expected. I had imagined that the moment I broke it to her, all the ice would melt and she would find nobody closer to her than myself.

Every time we met, I talked about Russia, as if that was the only common thing I could find between us. People mostly warm up to certain subjects. Like soccer results, only to let your conversation with an old college friend, for instance, last for a minute or so. Our relationship was sliding down to the same state, but I couldn't let that happen, so I tried teaching her some Persian poems and proverbs to get her to talk.

Alena was busy studying. The professors were easy on her so that she could pass the courses. Some of her classmates practised the lessons with her before the exams, and I talked to her once in a while. Then gradually I realised I couldn't keep her out of my mind. I wasn't mature enough to think that we had met by chance, but now that she was there, I couldn't resist the temptation. So I asked her out. I took her to the best restaurant I knew. All I could think of, as a special treat for her, was booking a table in the terrace to make our date a bit romantic. It was late April, but it didn't feel much cooler than August. The sun shone as if its rays came right through our scalps. She was dressed so casually as if she was headed for the university without any makeup or hairdressing. The only different thing was her light blue scarf which let her auburn wavy hair show off and wander, but that was nothing like I imagined or expected.

I began to talk about our professors and mock them to break the ice, yet every time I stopped talking, an awkward silence ensued. There was something in her eyes waiting to slip away but her lips only opened to form a false laugh and I had to come up with another pathetic jest.

Finally when the main course arrived, I burst out and asked, 'Don't you want to talk about something? Anything?'

She paused and began to play with her food, then looked into my eyes for the first time on that day and said, ‘You know, I wish my studies were finished, so I could go back home.’

‘Is it that bad in here?’

‘Not at all, actually it’s about Sergey waiting for me there.’

Apparently, the amazement on my face was so obvious that she instantly added, ‘My boyfriend, kind of fiancé,’ with a wicked smile.

The irony was back. She probably didn’t even sense that the lunch we were having was a date. A foreign classmate who couldn’t even speak a word of Russian had invited her to a mediocre restaurant to have lunch on a sunny day. Of course, it could be anything to her but a date. As logical as it seems now, it was shocking at that moment. I tried my best to act normally, and I convinced myself that it worked and Alena didn’t realise anything. But that was probably another rationalisation I made.

I put my fork down and instantly asked, ‘Really?’ with a fake smile. ‘Do you have a photo of him?’

She grabbed her cellphone and there it was on the wallpaper. A bald-headed hulkingman, who wasn’t looking right at the lens and looked drunk. I stared at the photo for a minute until the light of the screen dimmed and then I looked at her, at her tiny lips, puffy eyes and long brown lashes as if it was the very first time I was seeing her.

With a muffled voice, I said, ‘I would like to see him someday, hopefully.’

Those were the most absurd, yet sincere words I ever said to Alena, knowing that I wouldn’t ever see her again. I laid my eyes on the half-eaten pasta, wondered what could make me feel better at that moment. The answer was already there on my mind. I wanted to walk in the Red Square looking at those magnificent domes like I wished when I saw that metal box as an eight-year-old boy, but this time it was Alena who was walking next to me. With her fake smile and those black eyes that had joy and sorrow at the same time.

In spite of all that, I had to pay the bill and drive her back to her apartment and say goodbye to her after a short awkward talk.

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