

The Shift

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“What is the purpose of your visit? Business or pleasure?” the officer of Homeland Security asked me.

Despite my well-rehearsed answer, I wasn't sure of my real purpose. Sixteen hours before, I had a caring family, a whole bunch of friends and enemies, a small apartment, college, a promising career, and twenty years of memories. In other words, about 1240 minutes ago, I had a Home.

“Have a good night, ma'am, and enjoy your stay.” The stamp said “Arrived 1/3/08.”

I grabbed my passport and went down the hall to the airport's exit. As I walked ahead, my life felt like a bridge in a video game: my past was impetuously collapsing while my future was unfolding half a step ahead. So by the time I reached the doors, the length of my life was about fifteen minutes. My fiancé Gino saw me there, smiled, took my hand, and drove me to his apartment.

I was fifteen when I first met Gino. It was my parent's anniversary, and they invited their best friends' family. By this time Gino had already moved to America and was just visiting his uncle who brought him to our party. He was the same age as I was, and about my height. His Jewish roots made him look Hispanic: dark hair, swarthy skin, and brown eyes. Was it love at first sight? Maybe. Was it just youthful ardor? Maybe. We hardly spoke that evening, but there was something in his eyes that enchanted me - big brown sparkling eyes. He flew back to Boston the following morning. Over the next year we wrote each other e-mails and tried to learn about each other. He – in English, I – in Russian. I remember sitting in front of the computer

screen for hours turning over the pages of English-Russian dictionary, my hands trembling with excitement. I did not understand much because they did not print translations for slang words or idioms, or explain jokes. That was something that pushed me to study English. However, what they don't tell you about learning a foreign language is that even if you go to the best school in the city and really are the best student in class, you still will not be able to order food in a restaurant or read a newspaper in the country where this language is commonly spoken for a good while.

Since the first moment we saw each other, we became parts of each other's lives. One year after we first met, Gino came to Russia again. We had been together 24/7, if not in reality then in our hearts and minds. We met about two times per year, wrote letters, and called every day to say good night or to wake each other up. One year. Two years. Three years. Four years... I couldn't live like that anymore. I felt like I was missing the most important part of myself. One beautiful sunny day I was walking home through the park. I didn't notice how nice it was outside till my mom pointed it to me. My soul did not have rest anymore. I missed him so much that my pain made me numb to everything else in my life. I had to change it. The same day I bought a ticket to the United States of America. I gave up everything in Russia, and in less than three months my plane landed in Boston. I had to be with him. Nothing else mattered.

On my first morning in the United States I woke up and found myself in another world - a parallel reality. As I was sitting in the plane, my life had been shifted like a fragile puzzle. Everything was so new, different and strange. Gino and I rented an apartment in a suburban city with small streets and mostly private houses. After twenty years of the constant noise of gigantic Saint Petersburg, I could not stand the quiet, it. Those long weekdays when Gino was at school or at work drove me crazy. I couldn't go shopping or to the city because I did not have a car and

the distances in America are immense. Our apartment was my cage. I couldn't watch TV because I didn't understand it. Even when Gino was home, I could not watch a movie or a TV show and cook or iron at the same time. I was gripping the remote with the pause button on it. I had to concentrate extremely on each word, each gesture, each sound, stopping the movie every minute to ask Gino, "What did they say?"

Did I regret my decision to move to the States? No. Not for a second. Life here with him was still better than there with family, friends, college, career, and everything else I had in Russia. I regained the ability to feel. I regained the ability to live.

I could not go to college until my immigration paperwork was done, which in my case meant a year. I couldn't find any legal work, either. The only option for me was working as a babysitter or housekeeper. When I got summa cum laude in high school, I didn't imagine leaving work with my hands eaten away by Windex and toilet cleaner, or my legs throbbing after several hours of cooking and vacuuming. In about a month, I found a way to get to work myself. Before that Gino used to drive me there. I took a bus, and then I took a train, and then walked for about one mile. It was forty minutes longer than by car, but I saw other people. I scrutinized each and every person I met. Before that I had started to think that the family I worked for, Gino, and I were the only people on the planet. Now my world grew a little bit bigger.

Sometimes struggling was almost too difficult; sometimes I was on the edge, some days I was lost in despair. My adjustment was made much more complicated because of the time differences between Saint-Petersburg and Boston. My week used to start on Monday, now it was shifted to Sunday. I had to wait twenty more days than before until every season began. Moreover, there is an eight-hour time difference. When Russians get up in the morning, it is time to go to sleep here. It was really hard to find a good time for both sides to speak. My work didn't

involve meeting new people and making new friends, and I couldn't really talk to those left in Russia, either. The only young people I met were Gino's college or high school friends. I hated those evenings. First of all, I couldn't really understand them, but when I caught the meaning of some simple phrases it wasn't much better. One Friday in March, a couple of his friends stopped by our place. The boys went to discuss sports, while I was left alone with girlfriend Kelly. Trying to break the awkward silence, she asked, "What school are you going to?"

"I don't go to school."

"Have you already graduated?" a broadly smiling mouth asked.

"No."

"So what are you doing? Do you work?" she asked in perplexity and gave me a puzzled look.

"Yes, I am a housekeeper."

"O-o-ouh!" She pressed her lips, looked aside and completely lost her interest in me.

Don't think that I didn't try to do something. I did. Once I enrolled in the Voice class at the adult education department of Brookline High School. I was very excited, but on the first day of classes I found out that the closest person to myself was at least eighteen years older. So even by the end of the course, I was alone: we did not have much in common. The plan didn't work.

In April life became a little bit better. I plunged into the wedding preparations, which left me much less time to think and feel sorry for myself. When girls dream about their weddings, they want to share the happiness with their moms and their girlfriends, to shop for the wedding dress together, to choose flowers, etc. So did I. But my parents and my brother arrived less than a week before the Big Day. My maid of honor was someone I hardly knew because it was too difficult for my Russian friends to get a visa, and too expensive to buy plane tickets to the United

States. But it still was the happiest day of my life: I was marrying Gino.

It was the end of August when we came back from the ten “honey days” spent on Virginia Beach. We drove twelve hours back and forth because I didn’t have proper documents to buy tickets for a plane or a train. I went back to work. It was still humiliating, but it was not as hard as before. I knew that in two months I would become legal, and would get my permanent resident card. By this time my English had improved a lot. I started to dream about college. I thought about it as the solution to all my problems: lack of friends, physical labor, and degradation in some way. Many times when I was waiting for the bus to work, I watched students on the Boston College shuttle with admiring envy. “Someday I might be among them” I said inwardly, calming myself down.

October 23rd. I took a day off at work, and with all the butterflies of the world in my stomach, I went to downtown Boston. I couldn’t believe it: I got my Permanent Resident Card. I was still shivering for many hours after the interview. “I can visit my family and friends now... Finally!” Without this card I would not be able to enter the USA again. I would not be able to come back to Gino. I flew to Russia in less than a week and spent almost a month there. By the end of the trip I had shocked myself. I MISSED BOSTON! How was it that in America I missed Saint Petersburg, and in Russia – Boston???

After almost one year after I had moved to the States, I was on the plane to Boston again. “Please fasten your seatbelts. We are about to land.” Seat 12A. Olga Doktorov. I was born in a city that you will never find on a map, in a country that doesn’t exist. I live in a state where people don’t speak my language. I am twenty years old and I am married. And I am happy. I didn’t know it yet, but in a couple of months I will start my education at Boston College; I will meet a lot of new friends and will be among those students on the shuttle. My English will let me

study, though it will still be very difficult.

“Are you returning home?” the officer of Homeland Security asked me.

“Yes, sir, I am.”

The shift had occurred. My husband picked me up from the airport and brought me Home.