A Painter's Journey

Vlad Avkshtol

Artur Vasilevich sat with his legs crossed, peeling the paint off of his hands. He wore a crisp white T-shirt and old blue sweatpants colored with splatters of paint. Behind him was the Pacific Ocean. A wave crashed down onto the white sandy beach, and an old man with a surfboard admired the beautiful sunset that scorched everything red and orange. To the left of that were the Rocky Mountains dotted with trees, and a river winding through the rocky grooves down below. To the right there was another painting of a man in a dark room struggling to push a large boulder. I sat with Artur in his brightly lit living room, its walls covered with mirrors.

He asked me if I wanted some tea, as he stood up to go to the oddly clean kitchen. Numerous paintings stood on easels and cans full of brushes were scattered next to them. The nice wooden floor was covered up by rolls of brown paper to protect it from the paint. In the corner, two couches were also rendered nearly invisible by many layers of blank canvases and wooden frames. Everything seemed even more cluttered by the mirrors that reflected the mess. Artur gave me the cup of tea that I politely refused fifteen seconds ago. “Well, let the interrogation begin,” he said with a laugh, and I couldn't help but chuckle back.

Growing up in a small village in Belarus, then the Soviet Union, Artur has been an artist as long as he can remember. He drew pictures of animals on all of his homework, despite his teachers' disapproval; but with his mother's encouragement and his art teacher's constant amazement and praise, these childhood doodles soon became paintings and sculptures. Eager to attend the Minsk School of Art, he asked to fulfill his mandatory army service as quickly as possible in order to have time to apply. To his surprise, he was sent to the Siberian army unit, where people are usually sent for violations of the law.

Despite the horror he must have experienced, Artur had nothing but comical stories to tell, and he would frequently burst out in laughter. He told me that after being worked all day, he would have to stay up half the night to guard. “Your body is so stiff from the cold, that you really had no problem falling asleep standing,” he recalled. “It's only when they would do their rounds to check on you, would you have a problem.” After the service, Artur easily got into art school and pursued his dream. Due to the many government construction projects in the Soviet Union at the time, great artists were highly coveted and made quite a good living. Luckily for Artur, he was considered the best artist from his graduating class. He quickly got job after job, painting murals in churches and government buildings. Unluckily or Artur, the Soviet Union collapsed soon after he graduated. This forced Artur to find work in far places, even different countries.

It was easy to talk to Artur about his past, because like me, he came to America with no idea of what was in store. I told him how lost I felt the first year I was here, and he couldn't help but laugh at some of the similar memories we shared. He, too, remembered the first time he went into an American grocery store and how intimidating and different it was. This, however, wasn't the first time he felt lost in another country. He told me at length about one moment in his life when he felt particularly alone and lost, during his time in Poland, where he had gone to paint a mural in a church. After he finished the mural, he decided to take some of the money he earned to buy a Fiat automobile.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, prices skyrocketed, so many people bought Polish cars in Poland and drove them over the border to sell for a good profit. Since he was already in Poland, he thought it was a great idea to make some money on the side and have a car to drive back in. Of course, this wasn't as easy as it seemed-the Russian mafia often confiscated these cars and held them for ransom. To make matters worse, the Polish government at that time

looked the other way if foreigners were the victims of crimes, so the Russian mafia was often able to get away with these robberies. Nevertheless, Artur felt confident that he would have no problem making the trip as long as he could cross the border by night fall.

He packed up the Fiat with all of his supplies and set off early in the morning. As a bad omen, though, he broke his only pair of glasses before the trip began. The snow was coming down hard, and the poorly made Polish roads were soon covered white. Less than three hours into his journey, Artur ran over a dead deer that was lying in the middle of the road. “I didn't even see it,” he told me. “At first I thought I ran over a person.” Everyone behind him ran over the deer, too. He checked his car to find a broken exhaust pipe, leaking coolant, and the front of the car covered in blood.

Just then, another car pulled up next to him. Two big guys got out of the car, throwing their cigarettes into the snow. It was the mafia; he knew it. They soon started pestering him to give them money to “help him.” Artur knew that if he gave them money they would only ask for more, so he told them he had none, but that they could take his car if they wanted since it was broken. They laughed, telling him they didn't want a useless car. They finally left, but he knew it wouldn't be his last encounter with the mafia.

When he got to the capitol, he drove through the streets in a blood-covered Fiat that was making as much noise as a motorcycle. “You should have seen the looks people were giving me,” he said as he burst out laughing. He was pulled over three times by the Polish police, and each time he was asked to pay a fine. He told them all the same story: he had no money, but they could take the car if they wanted. The Polish police said they had enough broken down cars back at the station, and they didn't need another one.

The snow was still coming down as he left the city. He still had a while to go, and he had

already been driving for fifteen hours, which quickly turned into twenty hours, and his eyelids grew heavier and heavier. “I don't think I ever missed my bed so much,” he said, smiling. It was hard for him to stay awake, as the constant fall of snow lulled him to sleep. He woke up with a startle. He was driving in the middle of a field, heading straight toward a tree. He tried to apply the brakes, but the crash was inevitable. It was cold and snowing, his car was ruined, and he had no idea where he was. People from a nearby village gathered around the accident, some pointing to objects in the car that they would steal as soon as he left. “I thought, that was it, that's the end,” he said, as his face suddenly turned very serious. Artur sat in the car looking straight ahead; he never wanted to cry more in his life. The police arrived promptly, but they left just as quickly when they realized that he was a foreigner. He was angry at everything: Poland for its uncaring police officers and Russia for its inability to control their own people. He knew that the mafia was going to be there soon, and he wouldn't be surprised if they took all of his money. He just wanted to be back home in Belarus, having some tea with his mother.

Artur's saviors came with a knock on his window. It was an old couple; they said that he could spend the night at their house. They took him to their warm home where they fed him and even allowed him to call his brother for free. The next day, when his brother came, he found out he was only three miles away from the border. They tried to start the car, and it actually drove for a mile before the car hood completely blew off. They ended up pushing the car over the border. Everything ended up working out for Artur, although he was only able to sell the car for its parts. Artur didn't know how to thank the old couple, not only for their hospitality, but for making him feel less alone in an unfamiliar place.

He told me that he felt alone again when he came to America. He made his living painting walls at McDonald's until my mother helped him find galleries and clients. Like the

elderly couple in Poland, my mother came to his aid here, and now he does the same for other newcomers to America. He lets them stay at his house, and helps them find jobs if he can. Being lost in a different country is scary and frustrating, and only the kindness of strangers can save you from this abyss.

He showed me some of his new, old, and unfinished works. He showed me one that he named *America*, a demoralizing painting of a woman lying on a hill of skyscrapers. “It's one of the first paintings I drew when I came here,” he told me. “Not very surprising, is it?” Then he showed me the painting of the old man and with his surfboard in the Californian sunset, which he calls simply California.

Like me, he too now feels like an American, but he still wishes to go back to Belarus. Artur took a sip of tea and said, "I don't know why but I am addicted to its poverty, poor politics, and corruption." As always, he didn't fail to laugh, and I laughed along with him.