

## STORY

### PULLING SOMETHING OUT OF A HAT

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Her duty was to help, and she was anxious to, though she was weary when the plane of drunk businessmen landed in Omsk at 0600. We had worked together and had had stiff chats. She got me passes to plays. I was good for small gifts. But I had been traveling two days and the theater had sent her to meet me at the airport. We waited for my luggage, shivered, dazed, gossiping, too tired to stop tossing around the decision to wait in the van, out of the cold air, which I later noticed smelled not only of toxins from factories but of apple blossoms. In a week this was replaced by a lilac smell dangerous to sleep in and lily-of-the-valley scent between bits of newspaper proffered by downy-haired old men and downy-chinned women, advance scouts of the airborne poplar fuzz that cruelly transforms a sticky honey cake on the windowsill into an uneven adolescent duck and that layered streets and parks with drifts and films that a lit match makes into a flashing, running sheet of flame. A friend almost started a fire that way "across from the KGB building, near the State's Attorney's Office."

The woman standing with me, for me, was around forty, well dressed and tinted, and exhausted and dutiful in a way I understood: tatters of anxiousness to help flapped from some arbitrary part of her. I left Vera a really sincere note of thanks and fancy umbrella (that had been given to my grandmother) in her office two days later, when she had gone to meet the Americans for whom we would work.

In a day, Vera dashed in, grasped my arm, made eye contact, gushed, not thank you, but markedly, that she was very grateful, and vanished. A few days after that she said she had a present for me. We left the office so a coworker wouldn't see what was in the plastic bag whose naked woman was faded from repeated washing (nudes had replaced churches, flags, and eagles). Gifts were often given in word and only later in deed. The announcement of a gift weeks before it was acquired afforded an initial moment of pleasure to all. Surprise on receipt of a gift was often not preferred to such multiple pleasures. Vera did not prepare me, though she did say "What a present I have for you ... " In the corner, next to the manager's "American" toilet, Vera drew from a torn box (thin, speckled Soviet cardboard with everything stolen out of its very substance!) a sleek dark mink, of hats the most surely about status, tidy uniform splendor. It was like ones Mafia wore, and young saleswomen at the market; but it was also the unmarked hat for respectable people. It had false earflaps, sewn up. Real earflaps, though never brought down by such people, indicated a better hat: all that fur had been splurged on the intimate, never-seen side of the ears. In cold weather women often wore intricately knit Orenburg goat down scarves with scalloped blocked edges (they fit through a wedding ring), or print wool shawls under their hats to cover their ears, deftly wound around to the back of the neck and tied. Older women had round minks or sables. The mink Vera handed me was a little too small, but I demonstrated its fit. She might be pleased to know that I later gave it to my mother.

I myself am indifferent to fur, which was found at the market in tight passages made of people who, their sides touching, clutched a bottle of shampoo relatives had brought from Germany, stolen salami, nylon Chinese panties. As we chugged sluggishly between these shores in 1990 Grisha and Kolia had persuaded me to buy a huge fox hat for the equivalent of \$20 (twice their monthly salaries) and jubilantly brought me and my stupid bushy tail to Olga, who

caustically scolded them for having dushi too Russian to know well-tanned from rotting fur. Needing baby clothes, in a room that smelled like bread (skins were covered with dough-like stuff as part of tanning), Olga fixed the hat, gave me a jar of peas, and offered to introduce me to useful people.

I found myself lusting after a rough sort of water rat, shortish reddish fur with dark tones, not the airy, pale red fox that flamboyant or perhaps lightly spiritual young women preferred. I had only seen men's hats from ondatra, but they were the traditional shape, with tied-up ears, that both men and women wore. When I mentioned to woman friends that I was thinking of buying a hat they assumed I meant the fashionable light mink or sable, which, at \$30 or so in rubles, were out of most people's range. When I revealed my preference I was treated like a not particularly intelligent child. As if I nursed a passion for the dog fur some men wore, as much a sign of poverty in an adult male as were child-related hats of leather, sheepskin, or rabbit, or extremely worn mink. Just this side, that is, of the economic abyss of wool or acrylic knit. An otherwise decently dressed woman in a knit cap could mean only fear of the violent crime increasingly committed against the well-furred.

Sheepskin was not expensive, but could be crafted into original shapes and styles. Foxes bloomed above females in their twenties and thirties. Some younger men were also spikily framed in fox. Middle-aged to older women, those dressed village-style, and Gypsy women had heavily furry goat down shawls, medium gray to charcoal to browns. Nutria was striking. Black or brown baby lambfur was in revival; new shapes were being explored. People were raising khonorki, crosses of polecat and mink. Hats were about economic reach, taste, character, aspirations, class, fashion, individuality. I was not a drunk muzhik. I was an American and was aided in the purchase of an interesting light brown sable. Everyone calmed down.

Vera's gift shocked me. This was no umbrella. Even an imported umbrella, even during an umbrella shortage. True, the umbrella was from China. Some people classified electronic and other commodities as post-Soviet bloc "red," Asian "yellow," and German, American, and European "white." The Chinese sent Russia the lousiest stuff, but this yellow umbrella had come through white. Vera's gift outclassed mine, though, even after she told me she knew someone at the fur factory and asked me to find out if visiting Americans wanted fur coats. They shunned fur. I apologized. My failure to sell fur, one of a species of swarming possibilities that don't pan out, crawled back through Vera to her fur factory friends, and her hat kept on outclassing my umbrella.

Casually, Vera said she wanted a jeans jacket. Any Sovok would have seen, hovering over us, the spirit of Vera's possible jacket. She distractedly complimented the one I was wearing, briefly mistaking it for hers.

We shared increasingly sympathetic, weary discussions of what might please and interest our guests. We shared an ordeal, a dance with a moment's economy. A kind of soul that is promiscuous, all volatile flash. It's not resilient or durable. Nice, though.

When the Americans wanted to buy Vera something to show their appreciation, they asked my advice. What happened then? Something switched into gear, approximately. A funny inspired feeling of a moment of structural significance, possibility. I told them the truth. Nothing they could buy in Russia could compare to something American. For example, I said, Vera had said she wanted a jeans jacket. They had one they'd love to give.

Later I gossiped to Vera, who was chatting with our boss, that I had been consulted on her gift. As she slowly, rapidly, began to begin the insincere, excited, obligatory "Nothing's necessary, don't be silly," I said I'd told them she'd love a jacket. I then did a strange, rather self-

serving performance of a kind of "Russian," buffooning my own alleged inspired calculations when I was asked. Perhaps I did think those things; perhaps I made them up later. Vera and the boss shook their heads, pleased with my accented performance of the familiar азарт, gambling daring. Vera, by way of complimenting my luck and alertness, rhetorically asked the boss if I had Russian blood. "She does, she does," he said, acknowledging not only this but my intermediary role with the Americans.

About Russian blood. What I did to Vera by giving her an umbrella was a heartfelt gesture of gratitude for how she stood with me at 6. That's how it felt. At the same time, the Orlovs, my warm and generous family, had lamented, and lamented to me, and perhaps, who knows, lamented suggestively (though who cares), that they used to see every play and couldn't afford to anymore. I'd thought how much I'd love to get them tickets. Did I think when I gave it that my umbrella might indebt Vera? I'm not sure. A lot happens on the edge, a nuance easily forgotten and as easily exaggerated by others to forefront mercenary or calculated aspects of one's actions.

Vera conjured up a magnificent response, after which giving her a jacket would have only tediously indexed me as a wealthy American or America as a place out of which things could be screwed. Better, I pulled something out of a hat, proving myself a "Russian magician." And no one had had to touch money.

Are Vera and I, "Russians," forgiven for wanting things from each other? We forgave each other. We made a little soul together, some would say degraded, by moves in theory soulless, shot through with self-interest, but that in fact created a story of the kind you have to live, Russians say, to understand anything.