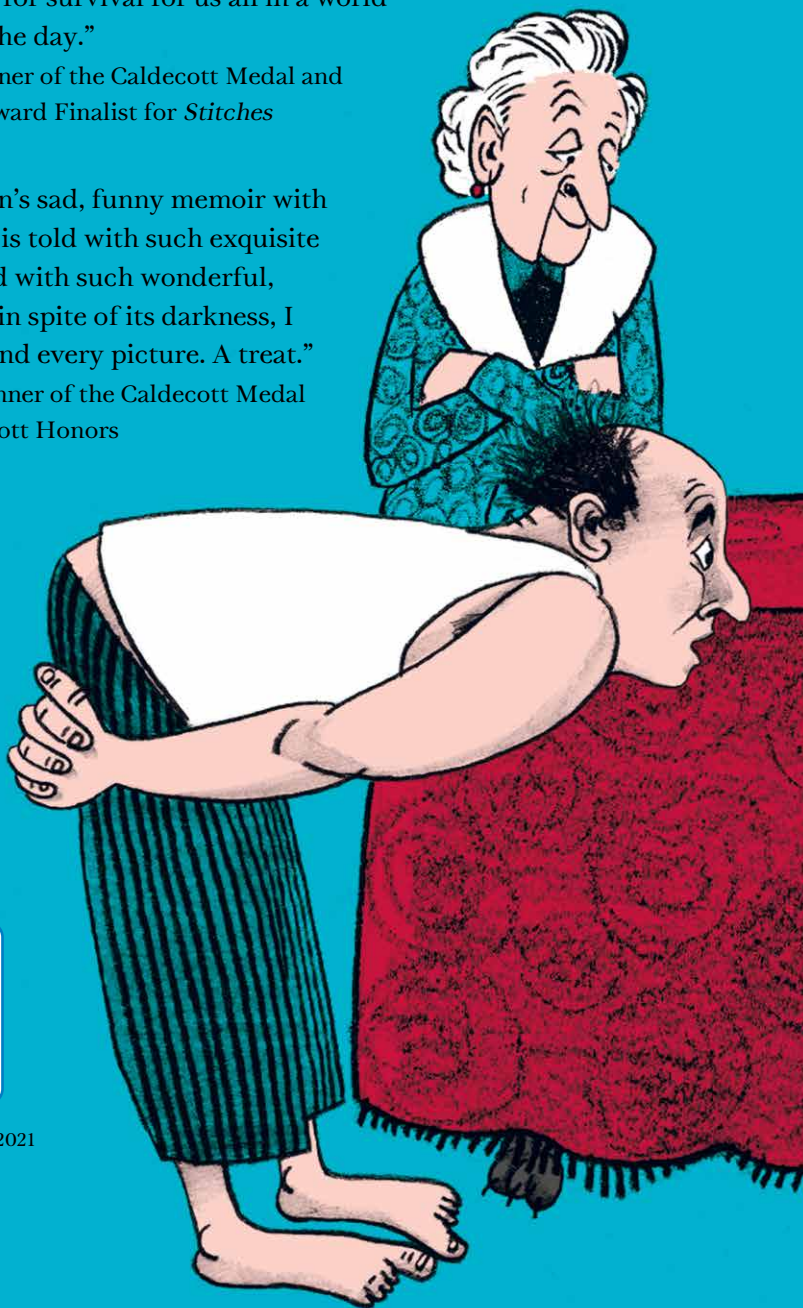


“An extraordinary work of memory told with clear-sightedness and ironic good humor, both disguising a great deal of pathos. This book is a recipe for survival for us all in a world growing tougher by the day.”

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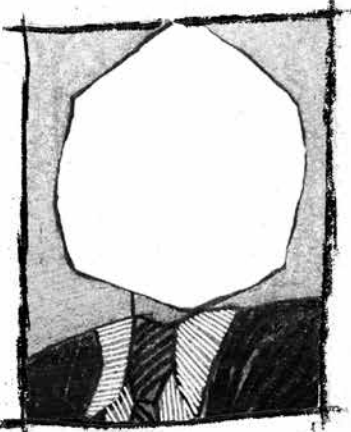
MOM



DAD



GRANDMA



GRANDPA



VICTOR



ME

THE GENIUS UNDER THE TABLE

GROWING UP BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

EUGENE YELCHIN



CANDLEWICK PRESS

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For my brother



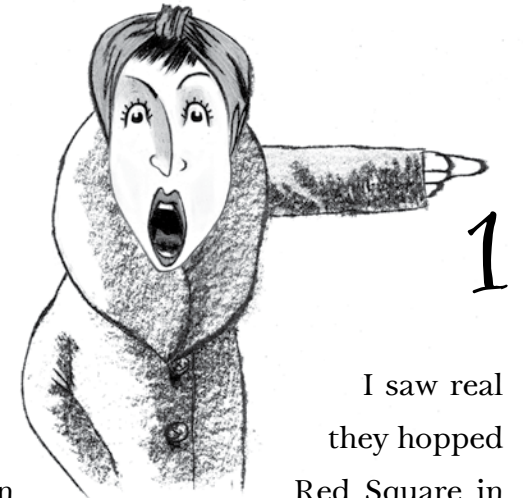
THE FIRST TIME

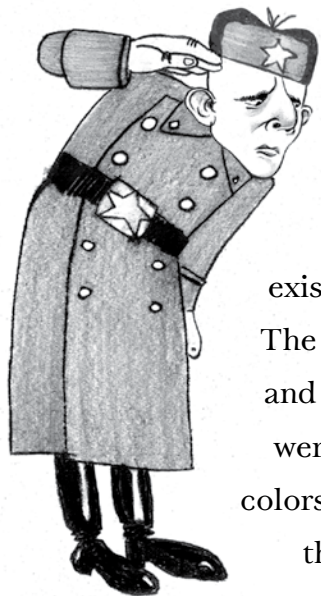
American tourists,
out of a tourist bus in
Moscow and cut in front of us in line.

“Nice manners!” my mother shouted. “We’ve been freezing our butts off for hours and they just breeze in like that?”

We were in line to the mausoleum where the founder of our country, Vladimir I. Lenin, was laid out embalmed like an Egyptian mummy. To see him, you had to wait your turn.

Making noise near Lenin’s mausoleum was forbidden, but the Americans laughed and spoke in loud voices. The Americans and my mother were breaking the rules.

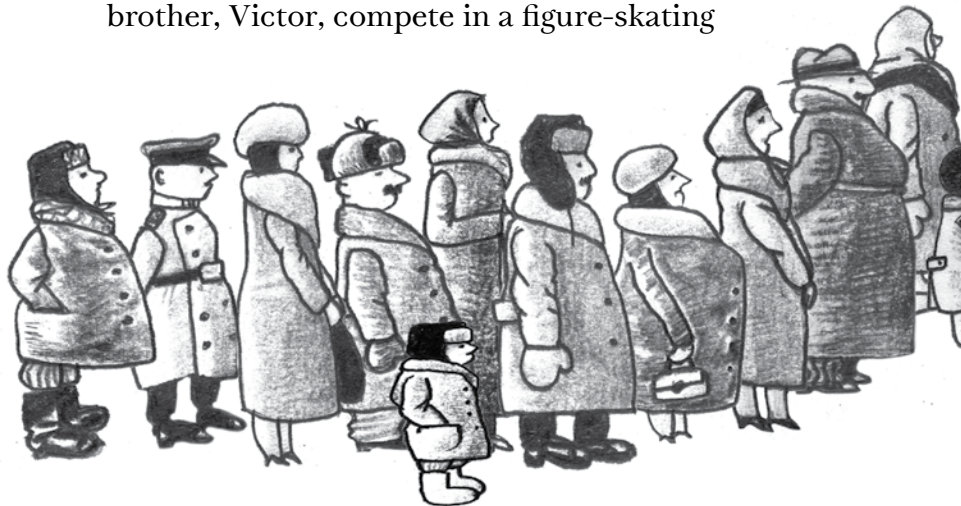




Everyone in line was staring at my mom for shouting, but I was staring at the Americans. The Americans' clothes were in vibrant colors I did not know existed. They did not fit in Red Square at all. The square may be called Red, but it is black and white in the winter. Most citizens in line were also dressed in black and white. Other colors were brown, army green, navy blue, and the red of our country's banner, flapping above the mausoleum.

Those were the colors of the Soviet rainbow.

My family had come to Moscow to watch my older brother, Victor, compete in a figure-skating



competition, but Dad said that it was our patriotic duty to see Lenin's mummy first. No one in the long line was allowed to complain. Except for my mother, of course.

"What are you complaining about, citizen?" the security guard whispered to Mom.

He looked nervous

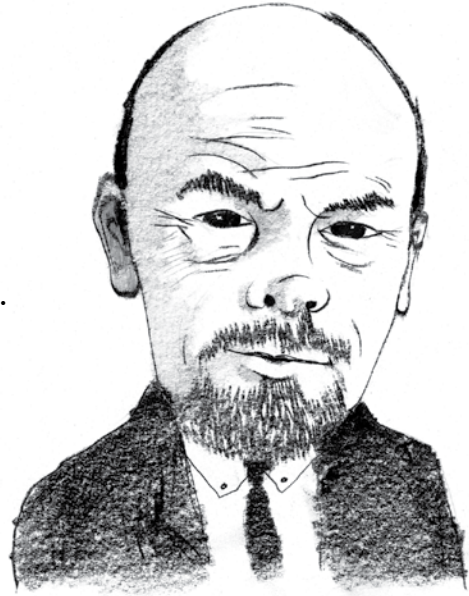


that she was making a scene in the most sacred place in our country.

"Complaining?" my mother shouted. "You didn't hear me complaining yet, young man! I demand to know your name and rank! Write it down, Victor. Who's in charge around here?"

At last the line began to move, and Mom, having let off a little steam, became perfectly calm. She took my hand and we stepped into the mausoleum by the rules, in silence.

The mausoleum was spooky inside. The stone walls reflected no light, and what light could they reflect? There was not a single light bulb anywhere. I rose on my tiptoes, hoping to glimpse the American colors up ahead, but a citizen's back blocked my view.



The guards hurried us along the platform on which Lenin lay. I had never seen a dead person before, and this one had been dead since before I was born.

“Don't be scared, Yevgeny,” Dad whispered to me. “You love Grandfather Lenin.”

Lenin was grandfather to all Soviet children, which was



a little confusing. So many children in our country! How could all of us have the same grandfather? I did not know, but it was better not to ask. Asking questions was considered not patriotic.

I was six years old, and it was my first trip to the capital. While waiting in line I had been looking forward to seeing Lenin's mummy, but with these vibrant Americans nearby, I suddenly was not so sure. Why did I have to look at Lenin anyhow? I knew his face better than my own.

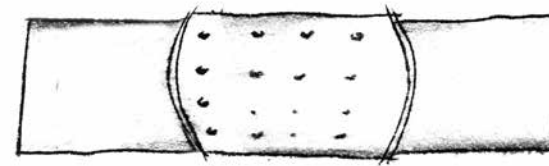


Lenin stared at us from everywhere. From postcards and paintings, from banners and pins, from teapots, from money. His statue was in every square. His head and shoulders in every hallway. As for his name, streets, parks, and sports arenas were named after him. Even the city we lived in was called Leningrad.

I shuffled by the mummy with my head turned away, but at the last moment, I could not help myself. I peeked. Lenin's face, glossy like fruit made of wax, glowed in the rosy spotlight. Just below his thin red beard, I saw a narrow strip of tape covered with paint the color of the mummy's skin, but this close, still perfectly visible. Oh, why did I look! Lenin had a bandage under his beard.

2

I STUMBLERD OUT of the mausoleum, hanging on to my mother's arm. Why did Lenin have a bandage? Could a mummy scratch itself? I wondered if I could ask Dad about it, but no, it definitely would not be patriotic to ask him such a question.



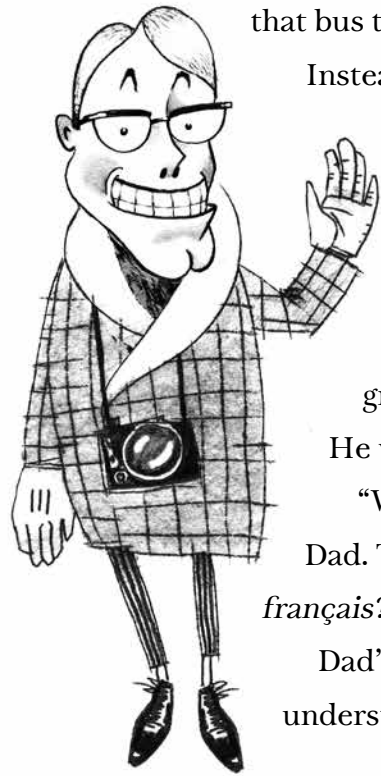
The Red Square was only white now. It was snowing. Behind the snowflakes, the American colors were flashing toward their bus. The Americans would be gone in a minute.

A picture of Lenin's bandage caked over with rosy paint appeared in my mind. The color made me ill. Why did we have to stay in line all day to see someone dead? Why did

we have to learn a poem at school with the line “Lenin is more alive than all the living”? And why could these Americans take one quick peek at Lenin and board their bus to go back home and never have to see the mummy and its bandage again? Why?



I could not ask anyone, but a crazy idea shot through my head. If we ran fast now, my family could get on that bus to America, too.



Instead of us running, a young American—turquoise at the bottom, canary yellow at the top—sprung toward us. His colors sparkled so brightly in the falling snow that he seemed to float, and I wondered if our Soviet force of gravity did not apply to the Americans.

He was yelling at us in his language.

“What is he saying?” Mom demanded of Dad. To the American, she said, “*Parlez-vous français?*”

Dad’s face turned banner red. “*Verboten, understand? Go away.*”

“Juicy fruit! Juicy fruit!”

The American thrust something into my brother’s hand.

“Give it back at once, Victor!” Dad said.

“Say thank you, Victor,” Mom said.

I was staring at the narrow strip of glossy wrapper in my brother’s hand, the same shape as Lenin’s bandage but of the brightest yellow. I could not take my eyes off it, but somehow, I also saw men running at us from all directions



and knew without being told that they were secret policemen disguised as regular citizens.

The American saw them, too. He turned around and bolted toward the bus. All at once, it got dark. A circle of men in black overcoats had closed around us.

“What did he give you?” one said to Victor.

The yellow wrapper disappeared into my brother’s pocket.

“Leave my son alone!” Mom shouted.

“Excuse me?” the man said to Mom.

“No, young man! You will not be excused! Permitting foreigners to cut in line to see our beloved Lenin!

Outrageous! Your superiors will hear from me, you can be certain of that! Step aside, citizens. My son is expected at a national figure-skating competition.”

“Figure skating, my ass,” the secret policeman said. “Get out of here before I lock you up, you filthy yids.”

“What are yids?” I asked my brother as Dad hurried us away.

“That’s what some people call Jews,” Victor said. “We’re Jews—don’t you know anything?”

I did not care. Being called a filthy yid did not matter to me at that moment. What mattered was the stick of American chewing gum in my brother’s pocket. No chewing gum was sold in our country, and for a good reason. We barely had stuff to eat, let alone stuff to chew that you could not swallow.

For three weeks afterward, Victor chewed on that stick of Juicy Fruit. Nights, he soaked the chewing gum in a cup of tea to keep it soft. By the time I inherited the gum, it had neither taste nor smell. Still, it was better than what I used to chew while pretending to be an American—black chunks of tar left over from street paving. The tar was so hard, I broke a tooth on it once.

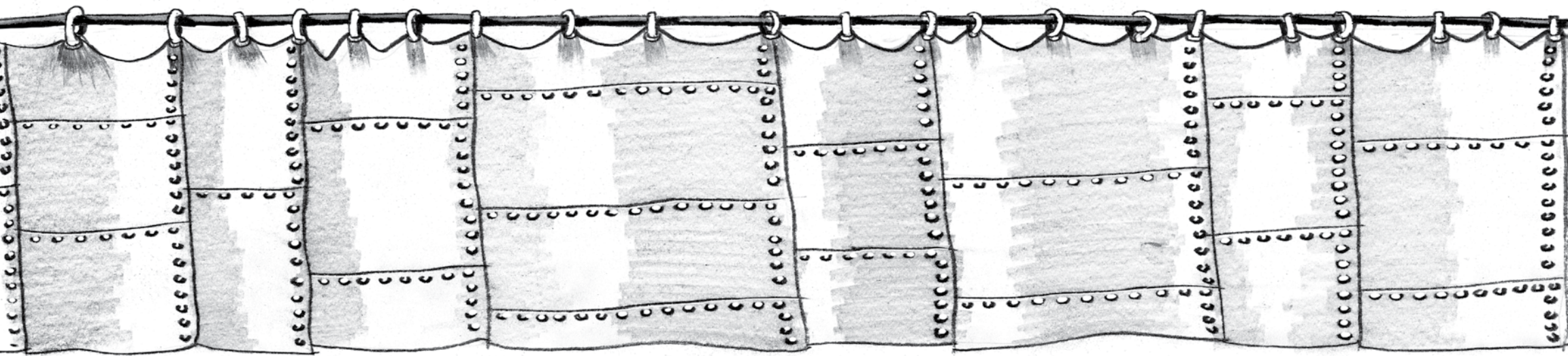
3

RUSSIA WAS CALLED THE USSR at that time, or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. If you think the name was long, take a look at an old Soviet map. One sixth of the world was painted red just to make the name fit.

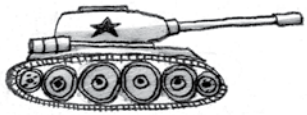
Those old maps were made to trick our enemies. In case a foreign army invaded us, it would get lost. Lakes and forests on the map were drawn incorrectly on purpose. Rivers flowed in the wrong directions. Mountains were missing.

The Soviet borders ran for so many miles that when the sun rose at one end, it was already setting at the other. No matter how vast our borders were, they were so perfectly guarded that nobody could sneak in. Nobody could sneak out, either.





My brother told me that leaving the USSR for a trip to a foreign country was forbidden unless you were an important government official or had a terrific talent for something.



“I bet you didn’t even know we live behind the Iron Curtain,” Victor said to me once.

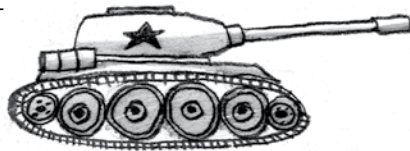
I pictured a huge curtain made of iron hanging along our borders.

“Sure I did,” I said. “What’s the iron curtain?”

“Not what you think,” he said.

Victor told me that the Iron Curtain was not a curtain at all but a bunch of friendly countries along our western borders.

To keep our neighbors friendly, Soviet army tanks, loaded with ammunition and ready for action, were stationed right



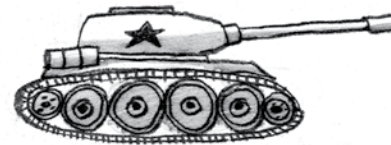
inside their countries. Our tanks scared everybody, not only our friends, but also those who lived across the ocean, our enemies.

“It’s the Americans,” Victor said. “It’s their fault we live behind the Iron Curtain.”

“Why?” I said.

“We’re at war with them now. Only it’s not a real war.

It’s mostly talk. That’s why they call it a Cold War. But in my opinion, it’s not even that cold. It’s lukewarm.”



“Why do they call it cold, then?”

“Because it’s not hot, don’t you get it? The Americans and us built so many nuclear bombs, we could blow up each other in seconds. That would be a Hot War, then. Would you want that?”

