

**Bor**

by Alisa Vereshchagin

On a humid and overcast fall day in Austin, Texas, I hike on a trail not far from my house. Reaching a small creek, I sit on a rock at its edge and take in the moment. Crickets chirp softly and the water gurgles. A child laughs in the distance. Then, the hiss of a truck just outside the park spoils the pleasant scene. Its annoyance is brief, however, for the sound of that truck cutting through nature's hum has a warm familiarity. It carries me back to a place with little semblance to this one: a tiny Russian village nearly 10,000 kilometers away.

In this village, there were more dogs than people. Free to roam the land, the dogs knew the meadows, valleys, and forests better than anyone. Once a week, on Sundays, the dogs howled in unison when a food truck rattled down the village's single gravel road. Somewhere in the middle, the old Soviet truck stopped, and the village residents, like the dogs, heard the commotion and came running. Because there was no grocery store, this was the villagers' only chance to buy what they needed for the next week. That truck stirred up enough dust to disguise itself and obscure its immediate surroundings, but in the few minutes that the driver stopped, shut off the engine, and disbursed his goods, the haze settled to reveal the silhouettes of dozens of ill-fed dogs.

The village felt worlds away from civilization. It had no electricity and no running water. In the absence of streetlights, I came to know darkness intimately. On a clear moonless night, I could see countless stars in the sky, but I could not see my own feet walking to the outhouse to relieve myself.

There was a light pink wooden cottage in the village. It had brown shutters and a crooked, slightly caved-in roof. It was ugly, yet somehow heavenly; dilapidated, with

peeling paint, but surrounded by trees, flowers, and overgrown weeds. In summer, the yard smelled of lilacs.

In front of the cottage, there was a small sand pit. As a child, I'd dig in that pit until I hit earth. Then I'd dig into the soil, looking for worms. I kept those worms in a rusted aluminum can and in the heat of the afternoon sun I would walk west of the village to a river, where they wiggled from a small hook that hung from a homemade fishing rod.

The soil there was fertile. Untouched by industrialization, it had only been farmed by hand. No pesticides or chemicals touched it until 1986, when the Chernobyl power plant in Pripyat, Ukraine exploded and scattered toxic radiation across Eastern Europe. Thousands of kilometers from Pripyat, a research station in Finland detected airborne radiation only hours after the accident. The village was closer to Pripyat than Finland, yet we ran around barefoot. We bathed in the river, rolled in the meadows, and dug into the earth with our bare hands. It was dangerous, but this was Russia in the early 90s, and danger was commonplace.

I was a child during the “reckless” 90s in Russia; a time marked by a coup, the collapse of the Soviet Union, an explosive growth in organized crime, and two wars in Chechnya. People escaped reality with any number of vices, and many left the former Soviet Bloc, dispersing all over the world to begin anew. Those who stayed and lived through the tumultuous decade never forgot it.

While it was far from the chaos of Moscow, the village had its own problems. There were fewer than fifty residents at the time, and about half of them, like my family, lived there for only part of the year. People stole from each other when neighbors were away, but the offenses were never grave. With nothing of value in people's homes, the thieves targeted root cellars to fill their empty stomachs. And they were transparent about their infractions. More than once we heard stories of neighbors coming forward, openly confessing, *it was me. I was hungry.*

Behind closed doors, the villagers drowned their sorrows with alcohol. Life had dealt them a poor hand and they didn't know how to cope with their sadness. So, they drank. While the dogs scavenged for food. And the stunning Russian landscape cradled this equally beautiful and barbarous place in its embrace. The name of this village was as simple as the existence unfolding within it. Its name was Bor.

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My father bought the pink wooden cottage for my grandmother—my babulya. It was a summer home known in Russian as a dacha.

Babulya grew her own food in a plot behind the cottage. The plot was so huge that I wondered how she managed to care for it herself. We

rarely helped her, but she always praised us when we did. She liked to tell the story of how I once weeded her entire strawberry patch by myself. Moving at a steady pace through dozens of rows of berry plants, I did not miss a single weed. I was five years old. “It was your dogged stubbornness,” Babulya would say when telling the story—“no, *perseverance*”—she’d correct herself every time.

The strawberries from Babulya’s garden often went into her delicious pies and pastries. For baking, she used the cottage’s centerpiece item: a huge clay stove that took up almost half of the main room. The stove had a ladder to the top where up to three

people could sleep comfortably. We curled up there on wintry nights, warming our bodies against the stove's clay exterior, the wooden ceiling just inches from our faces.

A ten-minute walk south of my babulya's cottage brought me to a woods abundant with berries and mushrooms. It is the only place where I have ever seen hedgehogs in the wild. Sensing the earth tremble from our footsteps, dozens of them would scatter across the forest floor in search of refuge. Those woods smelled of pine and rain unless it was late spring when lily of the valley blanketed the forest floor. Trapped by the dense foliage overhead, the intoxicating jasmine-like aroma of the flower lasted for the entirety of its month-long bloom. The birds of the woods sang ceaselessly, while the wind, like in Pushkin's poems, spoke and breathed and bargained with the sun. It was heaven on earth.

My babulya was entirely at home in Bor, its wildness and bucolic nature fitting for her personality despite her polished professional background and adventurous work experiences. Babulya was a distinguished radiologist. She was brilliant, but her heart was more in nature than in books. Babulya loved animals, especially dogs. And the dogs of Bor loved her. They had a daily habit of circling the cottage until Babulya came outside. Then they followed her, sometimes for hours, waiting for her to pet them or to reward them with a small piece of sausage or fish.

She came to Bor every spring, traveling by train for more than twelve hours from Murmansk, a city near Russia's border with Finland, and then taking a bus to a small town where she would find a taxi driver to bring her the rest of the way. Babulya remained in the village for the entire summer and oftentimes into fall. As much as the Soviet system admired work, it also recognized the value of rest. Time off was copious, and when she finally retired from her work in the hospital, Babulya spent most of her time in Bor.

Babulya had been married, but my grandfather left her not long after my father was born. Maybe it was some divine will, but shortly after he left, he had a heart attack and

died. Babulya would outlive him by over forty years. When I asked her about my grandfather many years ago, Babulya didn't avoid the conversation. "He did what made him happy," she told me, "and believe me, I am happy, too."

I like to think that his absence was a good thing, because after he left, Babulya did many brave things. She moved to Siberia to work as the only radiologist in a small town. After that, she grew fearless and more adventurous. She enlisted as a doctor in the navy, working on ships for months at a time. I now know that this was the life that suited her best: a life of self-reliance, adventure, and close connection to nature. Babulya's confidence and intelligence were only surpassed by her absolute certainty of who she was; she didn't need anyone to change her life because she had tailored it perfectly to herself. She was an admirable woman and I wanted to be just like her.

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My parents brought me and my twin brother Alex to Bor every summer for a break from our modern lives and to spend time with our beloved grandmother. We spent the winter months in Murmansk, in a large apartment building that housed hundreds of families in small one and two-bedroom apartments. Alex and I loved coming to this place where the rules of nature governed. The most important adult-imposed rule was simple: play where you please, but be home before sunset.

There was only one other family in Bor with a child at that time. The matriarch of this family was a woman around the age of sixty. She was a friend of Babulya's. Her daughter Sveta came to Bor with her son in the summers. The boy's name was Dmitri, but to me he was simply Dima.

Dima's father was never around. Sveta cared about her son, but he was, by all accounts, wild. The strictest disciplinarian could not have kept him from sneaking out after dark, starting fires, or climbing trees. And while Bor would not tame him, Dima could safely run free with little to no supervision because there was nowhere else to go.

Beyond Bor, the Russian plain rolled out like an endless carpet into thousands of kilometers of some of the most sparsely inhabited land on Earth.

In the summers we spent together, Alex and I became friends with Dima. Like a pack of wild wolves, we roamed every corner of the village. One summer, we built a fort under a birch tree and hid there to see who—or what—passed by. Nothing did, but we were proud of ourselves regardless. At the river, we tested our strength by throwing sticks to the other side. I threw hundreds of sticks, but they always fell short of the bank. And while I never gave up trying, I eventually made myself more useful by collecting sticks for the boys.

Keeping up with Dima and Alex was a test of endurance and ingenuity. Both were bigger and stronger than I was. They could run through the meadows and wheatfields with their eyes above the sea of golden-brown, but I was not tall enough. They scaled fences and trees with ease. I, however, resorted to looking for holes in the fences and for trees with low limbs. In every race, in every test of strength, I was always last. This was an understood part of our friendship. As long as I was around, neither Alex nor Dima had to humbly accept the title of loser. They focused on competing against each other and counted on my failure as a fail-safe protection for their pride.

During the last summer that I ever spent in Bor, Dima and I became close. Alex was more reluctant to tag along now; I think he had grown bored with the same games. But Dima and I continued to have our own adventures. I was taken with Dima's inventiveness and with how important he made me feel by letting me into his life. It was a blissful gift of childhood, to love and to admire someone outside the borders of my defined family for the first time.

Early in the summer, Dima and I found a hole underneath a neighbor's porch. In it, a cat had given birth to six kittens. Dima wanted to tell the neighbor about the kittens, but I forbade it. Cats in Bor were considered pests, and we knew of several villagers who would toss the kittens in the river or bury them to get rid of the nuisance.

The morning after our discovery, Babulya gave me a cup of warm cow's milk to drink. I feigned drinking it and instead brought the milk to that hole in the porch, where I poured it into a saucer for the kittens. The next time Dima and I went to see them, the saucer had been flipped over and the mother cat and the kittens were gone. I later learned that kittens don't drink cow's milk and that the smell of the milk had probably lured a fox or a sable into the mother cat's hideout. I searched for those kittens every day for the next week, but I never saw them again. Bor had a way of doing this, of teaching lessons through happenstance. From those kittens I learned that sometimes things that seem helpless fare far better when left alone. Nature can take care of herself.

Dima also taught me how to ride a bike. I was a little late to this landmark childhood moment, and I had to learn on an old adult-sized bicycle that weighed more than I did. Because the bike was too big for me, I couldn't reach the pedals while sitting in the saddle. So, I resorted to standing on the pedals. I had no problem once I got my balance, but the incompatibility in size made getting on and off the bicycle extremely difficult. Dima had to hold the bike every time I wanted to get on.

Dima never complained about me riding the bike more than him. In fact, he often ran next to me with his fishing pole in hand, the tackle tangling up around itself as it bounced as I biked down Bor's gravel road. I loved Dima for his enduring sense of patience, but I never thanked him for it. Now, so many years later, I wish I had.

As the summer wore on, Dima and I came very close to not making it home by sunset on multiple occasions and thereby violating our one firm rule. Finally, on a late August day, we did not. North of the village, we found a combine harvester. After exploring the contraption, we played on it like a jungle gym, hanging on the frame of the operator's door and walking on the bar in front of the combine like a balance beam. We started the trek home shortly before sunset, but it soon became clear that we were lost. We walked in what we thought was the direction home, second guessing ourselves with every step. In the meantime, my parents, who were beside themselves with anger, asked the only person in the village with a car to drive them down the three kilometer stretch of gravel

road to see if they could find us with the car's headlights. We saw the headlights in the distance and sprinted toward them. I don't think my parents ever scolded me as much as they did on that night. After they got in their last words and I went to bed, I heard Babulya talking to my father. She told him that Dima was trouble, but that I was the antidote to his recklessness. She ended the conversation by saying she believed that I would never make the same mistake again, and I took it upon myself to make sure I never did.

That summer I was not yet ten, and Dima was perhaps twelve. When I look at photos of Dima, I see he was a good-looking kid with blond hair, a round face, and characteristically high Slavic cheekbones, but I never noticed this at the time. All I cared about was our next adventure, of making the most of each day before summer ended. I was enamored with Dima, with his adventurous spirit and his boundless energy. I believe Dima cared for me, too. He once lent me his jacket. I know this because in one old photograph of us, I am sitting on a stump in Babulya's garden wearing his way-too-big-for-me red nylon jacket. In the photograph, my pants are covered in dirt, my chin is turned down, but my eyes are looking up at the photographer. Dima is on the left, gazing at me.

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Time distorts memories. In a year, the memory of today will be covered in a fine dust, less fresh, less palpable. In five years, the dust will thicken. Decades will pass and the memory will become as opaque as mud. Eventually, it will become something else entirely. Nothing lies quite like memory.

I've made it to middle age with a generous collection of memories, many good, many bad. The pain of the bad has faded. The joy of the good has faded some, too. But there is a memory from Bor that does not seem to fade, or maybe I won't let it. I can close my eyes and replay it exactly.

One cloudy afternoon later that same summer I was inside Babulya's cottage when I glimpsed a figure passing by the kitchen window in my peripheral vision. It looked like Dima and he was walking toward the woodshed behind the house. *Strange*, I thought. There was no



need to go into the woodshed. It wasn't cold. We weren't baking. There was nothing in there but wood.

I followed him, pacing quickly across the main room of the cottage toward the back door. This door was heavy and unfailingly noisy. Loyal to itself, it screamed loudly as I pushed it open. Dima had to have heard the noise, but when I looked outside, I saw that he had already made his way out of the woodshed. I walked toward the fence that separated the back garden from the front yard, and through a crack between two posts, I glimpsed Dima walking down the gravel road in the river's direction.

I didn't follow him, and instead walked toward the woodshed. It was small, probably somewhere around six meters in width and length. I walked the outside perimeter and then the inside, sticking my hand between logs and old milled pieces of wood yet finding nothing. Finally, inside the shed, I looked toward the very top of the woodpile that was stacked against the wall across from the entrance. A few of the wood pieces looked messy, like they had been disturbed or climbed upon. Directly above these pieces, the beam that held up the shed roof joined with the wall and the ceiling.

With no idea of what I was looking for, I began to slowly scale the woodpile. At the top, in the space where that roof beam met the wall and the ceiling, I saw that a piece of wood had been haphazardly affixed with several nails to make a small, hidden shelf. On the shelf, there was a bottle of clear liquid without a label. I took the bottle, opened it, and held it to my nose. The smell was horrific. It must have been vodka or *samogon*—I had no idea which because I had never tasted either—but it was undoubtedly alcohol.

While I had been careful in my ascent, I now desperately felt that I needed to be anywhere else. A fear something like what I had felt while lost in the dark tugged at me, only this time I did not have my friend for comfort. I put the bottle back and hurriedly climbed down from the woodpile to the floor. As I did, a nail lodged in one of the scrap pieces of wood lacerated the inside of my left calf. The cut was deep and bled profusely. I ran into the cottage with blood running down my leg, only to be caught by my mother, who washed and bandaged the wound. The scar remains to this day, a backwards “s” shape that has long been my daily companion for tasks like getting dressed and bathing, a different kind of reminder of Bor. When my mother, who was used to me coming home with scrapes and bruises, asked how I got the cut, I was honest in the simplest way possible. “Climbing,” I said. “Of course,” she replied. I don’t remember crying much that summer, but I did cry after the ordeal was over. The initial pain had passed, yet I sobbed for a long time into the warmth of my mother’s embrace. “Sshhhh,” she calmed me as she stroked my head softly. Between gasps of air I spat out a broken chain of the same words: “It hurts, it really hurts.”

I spent the rest of the summer wondering who to tell, or whether to bring it up with Dima, but I said nothing. One evening, not long after the incident, my family was in Babulya’s kitchen and Dima was there. My father removed a bottle of vodka from the cabinet and poured himself a shot, which he took with a bite of *sa/lo*, cured pig fat. He put the bottle on the table where we were all sitting. Dima’s eyes darted to the bottle, then to me, and then back to the bottle. He said nothing, and in my mind I fabricated a new truth: the bottle in the woodshed was his and he knew I knew. Like him, I remained silent, out of fear of losing him.

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The following spring, my family left Russia for good. My parents had had enough; enough of poverty, crime, and instability. We were immigrating to a place I had never heard of before. After initially landing in New York City, we settled in Cleveland, Ohio. Everything was new, and everything was terrifying. Babulya stayed behind in Russia and when I grasped the reality that she and Dima were now very, very far away, I felt the most alone I had ever felt in the entirety of my then relatively brief life.

In the States, things were more rigid, and rules governed everything I did. I had no equivalent to a place like Bor in my life, and the distance between that place and the people I loved there felt insurmountable. I found new people to emulate, but so many of them grounded their identities in achievement, not in happiness. Not knowing any better, I did the same. Years went by and I became who I suppose I was meant to be. I did all the things a good kid should do. I earned good grades and passed important tests and went to college. There, I studied biology because I wanted to understand the natural world, and I studied linguistics because I wanted to understand people.

Living in the US with immigrant parents, I became this strange bicultural and bilingual person who did not fit seamlessly into either culture but could, when needed, navigate both, much as I could pilot my Russian home city and the wild countryside of Bor. I realized early on that I was different, and after some challenging bouts of not *wanting* to be different, my adult self convinced my child self to let that complex go. I am now, at the very least, content with myself, including my naturally guileless, gullible self.

In many ways I am still that girl in dirt covered pants posing in the photograph with Dima. I dislike pretension and have a strong aversion to crowded places. I could live out the rest of my life in a city, but I'd rather be somewhere rural with plenty of room to roam. If I ever have children, I hope that they, too, will have somewhere to run free.

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Nearly twenty years after we left Russia, my father finally brought Babulya to to live with us. I guess the word *brought* might not be as appropriate as *dragged*. Babulya did not want to leave and liked to remind us that she wept when the plane took off from Pulkovo Airport in St. Petersburg.

The next seven years passed quickly, and Babulya aged at what seemed like an accelerated rate because she vehemently refused help in any form. She passed away after surgery to repair her femur, broken in a fall.

When she was in the hospital, I grieved the loss of Babulya's independence as if it were my own. That independence permeated every bit of her character, and it had made me want to be just like her. When I thought of her helplessness, waves of sadness washed over me until I felt my body shutting down. I struggled to eat, sleep, laugh. Babulya was dying, and as she died, I felt like a part of me was dying, too. I thought of Bor, of how integral Babulya was to that tiny village, and how if I ever returned there, it would never again be as it was.

After Babulya's passing, my father flew to Russia in the middle of a pandemic. Once there, he made the long trek to Bor, where he spread Babulya's ashes. It was consolation to my grief, knowing that she was home and that I could return there someday and feel her presence.

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Dima's mother Sveta had also moved to the States. She settled in New York. She left her son behind in Russia, where he was raised by his grandmother. This isn't unusual. In Russia, there's an unspoken understanding that grandparents have parental rights and many children are raised by grandparents. Dima eventually came to the US, but he was already a teenager by then.

In 2004, my family was in New York and we paid Sveta and Dima a visit. They lived in a tiny apartment on a narrow street crowded with old cars. When we arrived, Sveta told us that Dima was not home, but she never elaborated as to why. We later learned from a friend that he had been arrested for selling drugs. He was not even twenty years old. I never saw Sveta again. She did not return my parents' calls, and shortly after our visit, we heard that her mother in Bor passed away.

I sometimes search for Dima online. I know that the result will be no different than the last time I searched, but I do it anyway. The truth is, I don't know where Dima is or what became of him. Maybe it is better not to know. At times, my imagination takes me places I don't dare to explore. My thoughts spiral out of control like a wild horse running at full force to nowhere, creating in me a deep fear of the truth about where he could be. When that happens, I force myself to imagine a beautiful and happy life for him, a life I believe he deserves.

Every time I look at my left leg I see that decades-old scar and I am reminded of Bor, the summers I spent there, and the boy whose life path crossed mine for a brief moment. I now know that it was just that—a brief moment—but to my child self it was an enormous chunk of life. That scar carries with it an unshakeable guilt mixed



with grief, nostalgia and love, a feeling too complicated to explain. Dima endures in my memory as the person who taught me that love is simple. You can love someone who is flawed and you can forgive someone without ever receiving an apology. Love begets forgiveness.

There is a Russian proverb: *У кого что болит, тот про то и говорит* (One talks about what hurts him.) In essence, people talk about the things they want—or need—to get off their chest. I’ve shared very little of Bor with the people to whom I am closest, even though the memory of it has ached for a long time. It wanted to be told. Perhaps this is the beginning of my telling. Of a special place. Of two people who mean very much to me, and that still, in their absence, guide my life and my musings on who I truly am and how I became *me*. I know that I can never recreate the time I spent in Bor; those years are lost forever. But they are with me, stamped permanently in the timeline of my life.

Back in Austin, I’m still on the hiking trail, thinking. I have outgrown that girl who runs through the wheatfields and vast plains of the Russian countryside in my memories, but I still see those memories through her eyes. It is a simple and happy truth: life has carried me very far from the place that girl came from and the life she once lived, but I am her and she is me.

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Russia—the biggest city in the Arctic Circle—months before the collapse of the Soviet Union. She credits her brave and ambitious parents, who fled the USSR for the United States when she was a child, for her adventurous spirit. An exploration of identity and grief, “Bor” was born of a creative writing class that Alisa was enrolled in when Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022. A lover of travel, Alisa has always been fascinated with rural, remote and hard-to-reach places. In addition to travel and writing, Alisa enjoys learning languages, poetry, running, swimming, and taking care of her dogs and chickens.

\*\*The photos of Bor were taken in 2021. Babulya's pink cottage has long been remodeled. The village now has electricity, but the road remains unpaved. There is still a lilac tree in the front yard of the cottage and my father told me that when he was there it still smelled like it did almost thirty years ago.