I TRY TO FIND A HOCKEY GAME

BY KEITH GESSEN

All drawings by Julie Winegard.
You had to be fundamentally stupid, I sometimes thought, to become the sort of academic specialist that hiring committees liked. You had to be thick somehow. You had to block out all the other things in the world to focus on one narrow, particular thing. And how, without knowing all the other things out there, could you possibly choose? I was enjoying this thought one day while walking to the Coffee Grind. It wasn’t the only time in the day that I had to think, but it was the most concentrated. I always walked past the little grocery where I got my sushki and then I was on creepy, deserted Bolshaya Lubyanka. I had no choice but to think.

If I looked at my classmates, the ones who started at the same time as I did, could you possibly choose? Most of them were smart, and some were quite a bit smarter than I was. That wasn’t the difference, though. The difference was their willingness to stick with something. The successful ones were like pit bulls who had sunk their teeth into a topic and wouldn’t let go until someone shot them or they had tenure.

To the ongoing frustration of my adviser, I was not doing that. “Pretend I’m a hiring committee,” he said once. “What is your pitch to me?”

“My pitch is that I love this stuff. I love Russian history and literature and I love talking about it to people.”

“But a university is also a place for research. What’s your specialty?”

I had been through this with him before. “Modernity,” I said, knowing already that he wasn’t going to like it. “I am a specialist in modernity.”

My adviser, a six-foot-four former basketball player from Iowa, did a very girly imitation of my voice. “I’m a specialist in modernity,” he said. “I study the ways in which modernity affects the Russian mind.”

I waited for him to finish.

“I’m a specialist in my own butt!” yelled my adviser. “That’s not what got me this job!”

“What’s wrong with modernity?”

“It covers three centuries! It’s not a specialization. Three years is a specialization. Or better yet, three months. Three days. If you were a specialist in, like, Tuesday through Thursday of the first week of February 1904, but also in total command of Russian modernism, I could get you a job anywhere you wanted.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I mean, look at the writers you’ve studied.”

We were in my adviser’s tiny office, the two printed-out sheets of my CV lying on his desk between us. Despite his unorthodox advising methods, he was a good guy. He said he’d gotten serious about studying Russia after he realized he wasn’t going to the NBA. (“It took me a long time to realize that,” he said, “because I am dumb.”)

He was a great teacher, a truly inspired teacher, but his own academic career had not gone smoothly. He wanted me to avoid his mistakes.

“Who is Patrushkin?” he asked now, looking at the description of my dissertation. Grigory Patrushkin was an early-nineteenth-century poet. He hadn’t actually written very many poems, nor were the poems he wrote very good, but I wanted someone from that era who wasn’t Pushkin. Although Patrushkin knew Pushkin.
“In fact the only thing I was in danger of being arrested for was accidentally buying too many cappuccinos at the Coffee Grind and not having enough cash on me to pay.”

“Patrushkin was a friend of Pushkin’s,” I now said. “A friend?”
“He sort of knew Pushkin.”
“And does this mean you can teach Pushkin?”
“I don’t know.”
“Because there’s no course on Patrushkin!”
“I just didn’t want to write about the usual suspects. I thought . . .” I sort of trailed off.

“Look,” he said. “Do you think I want to be studying the architecture of early Russian huts?” In his one smart academic move, my adviser had developed a theory that medieval Russian huts lacked chimneys—they discovered chimneys some two hundred years after Western European peasants—and this gave early Russian peasants brain damage, which explains why they didn’t develop some of the farming strategies that radically increased crop yields in early modern Europe and helped bring about the Renaissance. “Do you think I wanted to become another of these people who come up with a monocause for Russian backwardness? No, dude. I wanted to be Isaiah Berlin!”

“I know I’m not Isaiah Berlin.”
“I know, OK. I’m just saying. I know you love teaching. That’s a good thing. But in order to teach, you need a teaching job, yes? And right now, at this point in time, that means finding a topic that’s going to appeal to a hiring committee.”

Back in July he was very excited when I told him I was going to Russia.

“This is great!” he said. “You’ll be on the ground. You can find something new and original. Or something old.” It was my adviser who suggested I interview my grandmother. “She’ll tell you stories about the USSR. You can weave them in and out of a tale of modernity. That shit is gold, my friend. People love that shit.”

“Hiring committees love it?”
“Yes. Who did you think I meant when I said ‘people?’”

Now that was out. If I couldn’t use my grandmother’s stories, which she didn’t remember, I would have to think of something else. But what? I really had no idea. People like Alex Fishman made their careers repackaging Russian dictatorship. “Gulag,” said Fishman, then “internet,” and granting institutions swooned. (He was now doing an online history of the Gulag.) People loved reading about the Soviet Gulag—it made them feel better about the U.S. of A.

Of course it wasn’t like Russia was now a flourishing democracy. But it was complicated. Back in Brooklyn on the internet, and now in my grandmother’s kitchen on Echo of Moscow, all I heard about was what a dangerous place Russia was, what a bloody tyrant Putin had become. And it was, and he was. But I had half expected to be arrested at the airport! I thought I’d be robbed on the train. In fact the only thing I was in danger of being arrested for was accidentally buying too many cappuccinos at the Coffee Grind and not having enough cash on me to pay. (They did not take credit cards.) The only robbery going on was the price of croissants on Sretenka.

The country had become rich. Not everyone was rich—my grandmother wasn’t rich, and in fact, speaking of robbery, she had been robbed of certain things—but overall, generally speaking, a lot of people, especially in Moscow, were pretty well off. Looking out the window, it was hard to square all the talk of bloody dictatorship with all the people in expensive suits, getting into Audis, talking on their cell phones. Was this naïve? Didn’t people in Saudi Arabia drive fancy cars and talk on cell phones in between chopping off the heads of dissidents? Yes. Maybe. I don’t know. I’d never been to Saudi Arabia. For me—and not just for me, I think—Soviet oppression and Soviet poverty had always been inextricably intertwined.

Not everyone was happy about the new conditions. The liberals on Echo complained about press censorship and the marginalization of opposition politicians. Sometimes they held small protests to express their anger at the regime. And there were also occasional local issue-oriented protests, for example against the building of a mall in Pushkin Square. Most of these were tolerated, but some were violently dispersed, and my grandmother had apparently seen such a dispersal because every time we walked past a larger than usual group of people—whether waiting in line or watching a juggler perform, and especially if there were police nearby—she would say, “Let’s get out of here, it’s a protest, the police are very harsh toward protesters,” and pull us in the opposite direction. Nonetheless
she remained very curious about the news, and every time she found me in the kitchen with the radio on or Kommersant or the Moscow Times in front of me, she started asking questions. “What are they saying?” she’d say.

“You know, about the situation. What’s the situation?”

What was the situation? I couldn’t tell! It was some kind of modern authoritarianism. Or authoritarian modernization. Or something. I tried to keep her up on the latest, and she gamely nodded her head.

In the meantime, the fall PMOOC sections had begun. I was in charge of four online sections of Jeff Wilson’s class on the classics of Russian literature. It was an OK class.

Jeff was in his midforties and taught a kind of hepped-up version of the classics. He would say things like “Vronski is a bro in a hipster outfit” and “Tolstoy was sort of the Kanye of Russian literature—he was always making embarrassing public statements and then being forced to apologize.”

The idea was to make the books relatable to a younger audience. I didn’t mind, even though, having TAed for Jeff quite a bit in grad school, I had noticed that he also compared Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevsky to Kanye, to the point where I wondered if he knew any other figures from popular culture. (“Pushkin is really the Tupac of Russian literature, though, don’t you think?” my adviser quipped once, when I complained about it to him.)

The class began in early September, and so in the Coffee Grind across from the FSB I would watch Jeff’s lecture, skim the assigned book to refresh my memory, and then log on to the different class blogs, where the students wrote responses to the text and then commented on those responses and then commented on the comments—forever.

In my many years of grad school I had taught all sorts of people. I had taught arriving freshmen in their first semester, when they still resembled children, their upper lips irritated from their first shaves; they thought that Tolstoy or, better still, Dostoevsky was trying to communicate directly to them and responded accordingly (often without doing the reading). I had taught cynical seniors who had learned to manipulate the limited belief system of contemporary literary studies and receive good grades. They knew that Tolstoy was just a name that we gave to a machine that had once written symbols on a piece of paper. It was ridiculous to try to assign some kind of intention or consistency to this machine. The seniors floated in and out of class, making fun of me. At the end of the year, I watched them all get jobs at hedge funds. I experienced it as a personal failure when they left literature; the only thing worse was when they remained. But the PMOOC students were something else altogether—a volatile mixture of the young and old, the overeducated and the autodidactic. They wrote me a tremendous number of emails.

The first book we read that fall semester was Tolstoy’s The Cossacks. It was one of Tolstoy’s early novels, about a spoiled young officer from Moscow who is sent to do his army service in a Cossack town on the southern Russian frontier. Back home, the young officer has gambling debts and a bad reputation, but in the Cossack village he starts over again, falling in love with the simple, straightforward, earthbound ways of the natives. He falls in love too with a handsome, strong-boned Cossack girl named Dunya, and though she is engaged to be married to her childhood sweetheart, the spoiled young officer eventually convinces her to break it off. Though skeptical, she knows she’d be a fool to turn down a wealthy Muscovite. And then, just as they’re about to make it official, there is a raid on the village and Dunya’s former fiancé is killed. Somewhat unfairly, Dunya blames the young officer for her friend’s death. Unable to muster a defense of his actions, he packs his things and goes back to Moscow.

The end.

The students did not like the book, primarily because they
didn’t like the young officer. “Why read a book about a jerk?” they said. After reading seven or eight responses along these lines, I wrote an impassioned defense of *The Cossacks*. Books weren’t just for likeable characters overcoming hardships, I said. Some of the world’s greatest books are about jerks! I wrote the post and uploaded it and waited. The blogging software we used allowed people to “like” posts, as on Facebook; after my heartfelt essay received just one like, I spent an hour in the Coffee Grind figuring out how to disable that function, and did.

At the end of my work sessions at the Grind, I would check the Slavic jobs listings page—in early September it was, predictably, pretty fallow—and then give myself the dubious treat of scrolling through Facebook. Sarah hadn’t bothered to unfriend me after our break-up and it would have been churlish of my part to unfriend her, and now I saw her posting solo photos of herself, looking cuter and cuter—here on some beach over Labor Day, there on some college campus that was definitely not our college campus . . . Her status was still “single,” and she was alone in all the photos, and it was possible that it was just a friend of hers who was taking them—maybe her friend Ellen?—but they didn’t feel like photos that Ellen would take. Sarah was going into her third year in the English department, and she had said that all the boys in English were ridiculous, but maybe she had found one who wasn’t. Or maybe she was dating a guy from anthro. I tried not to think too much about it. I went back to studying the Facebook posts of my stupid former classmates: A syllabus completed! A manuscript accepted! An issue of the *Slavic Review* with their peer-reviewed article in it! Oh, how I hated all of them. Through gritted teeth I pressed “like” on all their posts, pretty much without exception.

At that moment I concluded that I needed to solve this sleep situation before it got any worse. I needed to find some exercise. If I couldn’t jog or afford a gym, then I would need to find a hockey game.

The next day I wrote Dima to ask if he’d found out anything at all, and he apologized and said it was trickier than he’d anticipated and that the only thing he’d learned was that there was a game at Sokolniki, at the Spartak arena. He didn’t know when or who, but maybe I could just show up there and figure it out? It’s certainly what you’d do in America. So one day I finally packed all my gear into a large blue Ikea bag I found in the closet—I had, somewhat rashly and also to save on baggage fees, thrown out my ragged old hockey bag before leaving Brooklyn and simply stuffed my gear into my big red suitcase—and in the evening took the metro to Sokolniki.

I reached the rink without any trouble: it was an actual stadium, the home rink of Spartak, and unlike most buildings in Moscow it was neither surrounded by a tall metal fence nor insanely and unreasonably guarded. There was a guard at the entrance, but he saw my hockey stuff and nodded me along. I made my way down to the ice. It was a nice, modern, professional rink, with about five thousand seats; I had never played on a professional rink before; presumably Spartak was out of town or simply wasn’t using the ice that evening, and whoever ran the rink rented it out to earn some extra money. Very cool. Only in Russia, I thought. For about five minutes, the country struck me as a vast informal arrangement, outside the reach of modernity and regimentation, an ever-evolving experiment. I liked the place. Like I say, this feeling lasted about five minutes.

A pickup game was in progress. The level was mixed, with a few excellent players weaving through mostly mediocre ones. It was a little incongruous to see these middle-aged
nonprofessionals on a professional ice surface and on the professional benches, in this beautiful arena, but it was definitely a game I could play in. And there weren’t too many guys—three on each bench, in fact, which is a couple too few.

On one of the benches stood a guy in street clothes, like he was a coach. He probably wasn’t a coach—I had noticed that there were always guys like this hanging around in Russia, without any apparent purpose, just because—but I figured he’d know what was up.

As I walked toward him I realized that since I’d arrived I had hardly interacted with anyone who wasn’t my grandmother, and I wasn’t sure in this situation whether to use the familiar ты or the polite ви. Back in Boston my parents had said ви to just about everyone except their close friends, but the culture had moved on, and my sense was more people now said ты. But I wasn’t sure. Ви was safer, and I went with ви. Excuse me,” I said, using the polite form. “Can I play with you guys?”

The pseudocoach thus politely addressed looked at me in a neutral fashion and said, “You’ll have to ask Zhora,” then turned back to the game.

“Excuse me,” I was forced to say again, again very politely. “Where is Zhora?”

Zhora was on the other bench. I went over. The guy closest to me on the bench was older than I was, past forty, but in good shape and with a scar on his cheek. I asked him (ви) if he could point out Zhora. He could. Zhora was on the ice, a big right-handed forward who could barely keep himself on his skates. Unlike most guys who can’t skate, however, he was fed a constant diet of passes from his teammates and given plenty of room by his opponents. I intuited from this that Zhora paid for the ice.

When he came to the bench at the end of his shift I saw that he was about my age, with smooth, almost babylike skin and a tan. All his equipment was brand-new and he held somewhat awkwardly a very expensive stick.

“Zhora, hello, my name is Andrei,” I said quickly. Increasingly uncertain of my ви, I added, “I just moved to Moscow and am looking for a hockey game. Do you have room?”

Zhora looked at me. I was saying ви to everyone, like a foreigner. Instead of a proper CCM hockey bag, I had a big Ikea bag with my stuff falling out. And I was wearing my favorite short-sleeve, collared shirt, from some thrift store in Massachusetts, that had a picture of a gas station and the name “Hugo” on the chest. I either looked like a very committed hockey player or a total idiot.

Zhora decided it was the latter.

“We’re full up,” he said.

This was patently untrue.

“Every single time?” I said. “Maybe you’re full today, but not next time?”

“Where’d you play?” said Zhora. He used the familiar ты, like he was my boss. I could now continue saying ви to him, in a sign of deference, or I could also switch to ты, which could be seen as aggressive. Or I could avoid expressions that required a choice.

“Where did I play?” I asked, not quite understanding.

“Yeah,” said Zhora. “For example, that guy played at Spartak.” He pointed to the rough-looking guy who’d helped me locate Zhora; he had jumped over the boards when Zhora came back to the bench and was now skating with the puck. Spartak was effortlessly dodging guys half his age; he was a tremendous hockey player.

And, to be fair, the question of where one played was not unreasonable. In hockey you don’t want to play with people who suck. They disrupt the flow of the game, for one thing, and for another, skating on a slippery surface and holding on to sticks, they can be dangerous. Zhora himself, for
example, was such a player. So I didn’t exactly resent his question; it’s just that there was no way for me to answer it sensibly.

“In Boston,” I said.

Zhora chuckled. “Where in Boston?”

“In school,” I said. In Russian there is no word for high school—all school, from first grade to tenth, is referred to as “school”; more important, as I did not quite understand at the time, there is no such thing as high school sports in Russia. Youth sports take place in so-called “sports schools.” They can be affiliated with one of the major professional teams (Red Army or Dynamo or Spartak), or they can be independent. They train kids from a young age, sometimes for free, encouraging those with talent and discouraging those without it. Whereas my answer to Zhora made it sound like I’d played shinny on the pond behind my elementary school.

“School, huh?” Zhora laughed again. “No, it’s all right, we’re full up.” Then, in English: “Sorry.”

“All right,” I said, though I was pissed. At least I hadn’t had to call him vy again. As I walked away, I watched the game a little longer. There really were three or four terrific players out there, but the rest of the guys were at my level or worse. They had not played at Spartak.

My stuff felt heavy as I lugged it back to the metro, and to add further humiliation to the previous humiliation, I got stopped by two cops and asked for my “documents.” This had happened to me all the time when I was younger—the police usually stop non-Slavic-looking men, in case they’re illegal migrants or Chechen terrorists—but it hadn’t happened to me since I’d been in town, presumably because I had aged out of the illegal immigrant/Chechen terrorist cohort. But my bag must have looked suspicious. I showed them my passport, they started practicing their English but I answered them in Russian, and then they lost interest and rudely (vy) sent me on my way.

What the fuck was wrong with these people? In America, at least in 2008, you didn’t have to show your documents all the time. And you could play hockey! You showed up at a rink, found out the schedule, put down ten dollars—maybe twenty if you were in New York—and played hockey. That was all. “Open hockey,” it was called, or “stick time.” Beautiful words! As long as you had a full face mask, you could play. And here? I had come to Moscow to take care of my grandmother and I couldn’t even get into a hockey game. When I went to the store to buy groceries, the cashiers were rude. The people on the subway were pushy. The baristas at the Coffee Grind were always smiling, but that was clearly because someone had instructed them in Western-style customer service, and they would lose their jobs if they cut it out.


Novelist, translator, and n+1 founding editor Keith Gessen (George T. Delacorte Professor in Magazine Journalism) has been on a roll this past year with the publication of his essay “The Quiet Americans behind the U.S.-Russia Imbroglio” in the New York Times Magazine, a review essay on Stephen Kotkin’s Stalin biography in the New Yorker, capped off with the publication of his second novel, A Terrible Country (Viking). As the standing-room-only book launch events last summer showed only too clearly, a lot of people have been eagerly awaiting Gessen’s next novel; many fans got a taste when an excerpt ran in the New Yorker, along with an interview and a recording of Gessen reading the work.

Like Gessen’s debut novel, All the Sad Young Literary Men (2008), whose main character is named Keith, this new novel is semiautobiographical. As he explains in a New Yorker interview, “I love nonfiction, and I really love oral
history. I like fiction that is made up, but I really love fiction that is thinly veiled autobiography. Each form has its rules, not even so much in terms of truth and falsity (although nonfiction should certainly be true) but, rather, in its pacing, its tolerance for coincidence (sometimes greater in nonfiction than in fiction, paradoxically), and even its tone” (April 9, 2018).

In *A Terrible Country*, Andrei, a newly minted Ph.D. in Slavic studies from a university vaguely modeled on NYU, answers the call of his older brother, Dima, to come to Moscow and take care of their grandmother. The year is 2008 and the already slim pickings of the U.S. academic job market have become even slimmer with the worldwide financial crisis. Jobless and single again, Andrei seizes on the idea of going to Moscow, interviewing his grandmother for a possible research project, and supporting himself by teaching online sections of his university’s PMOOC (paid massive online open course) initiative. But none of that works out as planned. His grandmother suffers from dementia. She can’t remember the past and even forgets who Andrei is. He cannot afford the expensive cappuccinos at Coffee Grind, where he escapes to work on the PMOOC. And to top off everything his students hate reading Tolstoy’s *The Cossacks* because the main hero is a “jerk.” It is certainly no coincidence that Tolstoy’s quasi-autobiographical work served as Gessen’s main model for his novel.

But *A Terrible Country* is a book about Russia, not an academic satire. As he recounts in a double interview with his sister, journalist Masha Gessen, “I wanted to communicate the experience of coming to Russia and having certain expectations from reading the news about the ‘bloody regime,’ and then showing up and finding it doesn’t look at all like what you expected, and the bloody regime is a much more complicated and amorphous entity. Certainly, in the period described in the book, 2008 to 2009, it wasn’t dragging all that many people off in the middle of the night” (*New Yorker*, March 17, 2019). During the nine years it took to write the novel, Gessen considered moving it closer to the present, perhaps to the year of the Bolotnaya Square protests or the Ukraine crisis, but he ultimately decided against this because he felt that 2008–9 was “a golden moment” and that the situation in Russia had not changed all that much—Putin was still in power.

Andrei’s search for a hockey game illustrates the importance of networks for making your way in Moscow—for just about everything, including sports. Andrei has a difficult time finding a game, even coming up with the locations of rinks, and when he does find one it’s a bunch of middle-aged business guys who have done well in the new Russia. They may not be Putin supporters, but they are certainly Putin-tolerant. Andrei’s outsider status in this crowd is quickly brushed in with his indecisiveness about whether to use the polite or informal form of “you” ( vy/ty). He may have been born in Moscow, but he’s not a Muscovite. He’s a Russian American.

In her appreciation of the novel for the *New York Review of Books*, Francine Prose concludes: “In its breadth and depth, its sweep, its ability to move us and to philosophize without being boring, its capaciousness and even its embrace of the barely plausible and excessive, *A Terrible Country* is a smart, enjoyable, modern take on what we think of, admiringly, as “the Russian novel”—in this case, a Russian novel that only an American could have written.”

—Ronald Meyer