

Babel

By Kim Leon

When it was exactly the right time, her grandmother gave her Isaac Babel. “The second greatest Russian short story writer of all time, and Jewish,” she said.

The ancient, patinaed woman straightened herself against the orange velvet of the couch and opened the book. She began, “The wise and beautiful life of Pan Apolek went to my head like an old wine...” And that, of course, was that. Babel sat with them for a while, and the world was, for all three, immediate and mysterious and vivid. Babel told them of Russia and the Soviet occupation of Poland. He told them of his days as the misfit member of a band of Russian Cossack cavalrymen. He told them how he judged the violence and the beauty of those men and their lives and their world. It was a world not made for him, and yet there he was, a horseman.

“And you,” her grandmother finished, the words floating up to join their brothers in a humming smoke that filled the room, “will be a writer one day just like him. For your people and for this country.” She liked to cite America, as she was still quite enamored with this new land she had dug into for her family.

Rebecca read late into the night, tangled in Babel’s serpentine sentences. She loved him because in the stories he was young and sometimes foolish. He saw and committed acts of extreme violence and yet there was, in the images that seeped out of the book and clung to the velveteen hairs of the couch, bravery and mercy and reverence for human life. She felt she would become a writer, too.

The next day Rebecca walked the eight blocks to the first day of her junior year of high school, and it was there that she met the boy.

He sat so far forward on the edge of her couch he seemed to levitate. She placed the computer on his lap and made him watch video after video of Russian horsemen performing the masterful tricks of their trade. She told him about Babel.

“He just knew,” she said, as a horseman swung his leg over the saddle, dipped to the ground and snapped back to the top of the horse. “He knew where he belonged and what he would do with the rest of his life.”

The boy smiled as another rider slid off the horse and ran along side, his legs moving too fast, one arm gripping the reins. “He wrote stories full of truths, he knew about people. Someone asked for him to be hanged, but they didn’t hang him.” The rider let the movement of the ground push him up to the horse’s back. He stood almost recklessly, his feet a V on the leather of the saddle, and stretched his arms in triumph. “Can you imagine,” she said, “Only twenty, and he knew his whole future.” At the end of one video, the horsemen scatter into the blue-green of the Russian Steppe. The boy came back the next day, and, again, the day after.

Rebecca made up futures, six at once like rivers in her mind, benevolent and careful stories for this boy. She was in them, of course, and she saw their lives stretch out in many directions. There would be troubles and pressures from family and her mom would be secretly happy she had married someone of the faith. And she would be a new wife, who would pick at her lips with worry but whose dreams would be filled with sounds and smells, and she would write a triumphant novel and dedicate it to her grandmother and to three young children all with the same curve to their face. On the couch in the living room as they did their homework, she smiled because of these things she knew.

But they broke up after a few months. He began tutoring another girl in their math class, and their love was one of sums and remainders, built on the solidity of solutions. “You’re just too good at math,” her grandmother said as she folded her into her arms.

Rebecca watched again and again the graceful movements of the horsemen and imagined tragic epilogues for this boy. A thousand possible endings, Babelian in their gruesome detail and their beauty. And the rider with careless ease climbed under the saddle of the horse as it ran and emerged perfectly preserved on the other side. Her own future was as wide and soft and open as the Steppe. Endless, it seemed, in every direction.

Rebecca walked along the water’s edge at Battery Park with another one. This one’s name was James. Over the course of her twenties, Rebecca had shifted and sunk to the bottom of the island. For this is where the young and successful live. And she was young and successful.

There were dogs. It was a dog park. Some running, some sniffing, some with mouths open, enjoying the same evening ease as herself. She sat with this boy and watched the water, and watched the dogs. Two began to fight, one lanky and big, a mix that had some Rottweiler in the length of its limbs. The other smaller, with splotched fur, pushy as an underdog in a story. The sun made its careful way down the sky. Like a lopped off head, she thought to herself, as Babel would say. He was the kind to use words like this, words like full-throatedly, words like beslobbered.

She looked out at the Statue of Liberty. She liked to imagine that this woman, too far away for details, secretly had the face of her grandmother. It would be fitting, after all.

Draped in green, her grandmother would be regal. She sacrificed endlessly and gloriously for her family. She was a triumphant woman. Babel had felt that too, that reverence for his uncanny people. Rebecca read it in his stories. There was a singular dignity and life in the way the Rabbi sprinkled water on his palms. There was God in the movements of the woman who covered the face of her father. Rebecca owed her grandmother a novel and much more besides: years worth of care and attention, a husband to be brought home, a belief in God. But these were impossible expectations and she was only one of many hopelessly indebted to a vision of success so miraculous it could stand on the grimy waters of the Hudson.

“Becca,” said the one whose name was James. “I think we need to talk about the future.” And she knew that he was going to break up with her. He talked like trailing his fingers in sand. She couldn’t tell the shape of his meandering grievances and if she shook her head, his denouncements disappeared. She had, of course, imagined the rest of her life with this person.

He said: “This isn’t my fault.” He said: “It will be okay.” He said: “This is the right thing to do.” And Rebecca imagined Babel, sitting with them on the bench, shaking his head at such youthful simplicity.

She watched the dogs.

“Becca,” he said, “You have to say something.”

She thought about this for a while. She must. And she imagined him a Russian cavalryman atop his horse, looking down the patent leather of his boots at her. Precise movements and precise orders, it was that way he had of being accidentally cruel.

“Do you see those dogs?” She asked.

He was frustrated. Even in our greatest moments of taking we are filled with the expectation of the ones who love us to offer more. He wanted tears, indictment. He wanted panic.

“Would you intervene if you knew that one of them was going to die?” She asked.

“Come on, we need to talk about this.”

“I could ask you if there is someone new. I could ask you about the money or about the future or the past. There are so many difficult questions. And all I want to know is this one thing. Look at them. See those incisors? Would you save that dog?”

They watched as sunlight slid off the backs of the dogs and danced in grass. No sound but the click of teeth on teeth.

“Alright,” he said, finding himself a certain kind of heartbroken. “Yeah, I would.”

“No, think about it. I have given you five years of my life. Give me two minutes and think about the dogs.”

The younger dog rolled and ran, stood at the end of the pen and charged, again, the behemoth.

“See,” she said, “The sharpness of the teeth. That is a big animal and that one there is a young and arrogant dog.” The splotched creature twisted and bit and pulled at the flesh of the other’s cheek. “The young one belongs to that family,” she said. “See that woman watching the Rottweiler? One eye on her children and the other on that dog.” He followed her words, saw the woman. “See the way they move. That one could start in at the neck and mean it. And we would be implicated, watching it die. Could you put your body between them?” She asked. “Would you do it, if you knew that bite would be in your arm? The strength of that jaw against your bone? The piercing of those teeth in

your own flesh? Would you save a helpless life for that?" And they watched the sharp beauty of the animals. The dogs reared, heads pulled back, jaws wide. They balanced for a pure instant against each other and fell to the ground.

"No," he said. "I wouldn't save the dog."

"I know," she said but she didn't feel better. She looked over her shoulder at the river to the west. No one is ever winning, she thought, even in America.

"Neither would you," he said and he stood up. "You wouldn't either."

"I would," she said. "If nothing more, that is who I am." She kept her eyes fixed on the river and its simple tireless waves.

"I'll stay at my brother's tonight," said the one whose name was James. She waved him away without looking.

Left alone, Rebecca found that she had nowhere she needed to be. Stuck with the dog park and the end of Manhattan and the whole of her life before her. Loss began to settle itself into all of its usual places. The younger dog lay on its back in the grass, pinned. The pink of its belly visible under soft fur.

Maybe it wasn't that Babel could see his future, maybe it was that he couldn't and then he did all the things he did anyway. The Rottweiler stood over his companion and did not kill him. It was an image Babel would have understood. Violence and mercy interwoven: teeth that bar themselves in threat, that hold the tender fur of the neck, and do not bite.

She knew Babel would pull her through and she pictured him in her mind. But she did not think of the Babel who spent his last days in Lubyanka prison before his execution. Nor did she think of the Babel who, having eloped with a young, hearty wife,

lived in the sinuous mazes of Odessa, where life was sooty and golden. No, Babel sat in her mind on a horse. He was nestled within a band of Cossack soldiers and he stared knowingly out over the endless Steppe.