

A SINGULAR STORY OF IDENTITY AND ACCEPTANCE

VIJAY MENON

A BROWN MAN
IN RUSSIA

LESSONS LEARNED ON THE TRANS-SIBERIAN

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V I J A Y M E N O N

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Avi and I (tan jacket) strolling through Moscow on day two of the trip (don't let the blue sky fool you!)

Chapter 1: Why so serious?

*December 13, 2013
London, England → Moscow, Russia*

When I was a child, my parents asked me what I wanted for Christmas. It took no time for me to respond — I requested the Nintendo 64 game *Banjo-Kazooie*.

I woke up on Christmas morning with a distinct feeling of anticipation in my gut. I sprinted downstairs at the crack of dawn and fidgeted impatiently by the tree, eagerly waiting for my parents to rouse. After a seemingly interminable wait, they finally emerged.

“Go ahead,” my mom offered. “Open it.”

The words seemed so sweet at the time. Tearing apart the wrapping paper, I felt a surge of dopamine as I pulled out my prize. Lo and behold, what was in my hands?

A National Geographic Atlas.

“Ah,” my mom offered with faux remorse. “Looks like Santa was unable to pick up *Banjo-Kazooie* this time around.” My face dropped, as my Dad offered a consolatory, “Maybe next year?”

And in that moment, Santa Claus was dead to five-year-old me.

* * *

The bitterness of that event is not lost on me, but time has mostly dissipated the raw wounds of December 25, 1998. In its place, a countervailing emotion began to incubate — namely, one of appreciation.

Because on that day, my parents inculcated upon me an unconditional love for travel that has carried with me throughout my life.

As I grew up, I became fascinated by learning more about the world around me. I read voraciously, becoming enamored with trivia and Geography Bees.¹ I hauled around a tub of global facts supplemented by recent article clippings from *the Economist*, devised spontaneous lists of top-ten vacation destinations à la *Conde Nast*, and proudly announced my ambitions to aspire to future ambassadorship.

All the while, I had never so much as set foot in neighboring Canada.

So though I could rattle off the name of each world capital with relative ease — including all three of South Africa's — I always felt as a child that actually visiting them was somehow out of reach.

As I entered adolescence, however, that misplaced belief slowly melted away. Tinkering on the Internet, I developed a penchant for travel hacking — scraping error fares, spotting the best routes, and snagging the cheapest flight deals. For the first time in my life, the pages on the *Atlas* began to come to life.

And I explored the world — one flight at a time.

It started small at the onset. But the real turning point was a solitary trip to Guatemala the summer after my freshman year of college at Duke University, living with a host family and sponsoring micro-consignment for local entrepreneurs.

Upon my return, I recall for the first time experiencing a sensation distinctly different than anything I had ever encountered before. Rather than refreshed and rejuvenated, I felt strangely unfulfilled and unsettled — like I didn't quite want to be back.

My exploratory itch had become insatiable, and I hungered for more.

Nay.

I demanded it.

* * *

Fast forward to the summer of 2013.

¹ Ah yes, the stuff of nerds. Almost three million 4th to 8th graders competed in the 2017 iteration of the annual competition. If you knew that the Kunlun Mountains lay between the Taklimakan Desert and the Tibetan Plateau, you could have been crowned champion yourself.

That June, as I lounged in my grandparents' residence in Calicut, India for a week before starting a new job at Microsoft, an ineluctable idea planted itself inside my head. I couldn't tell you where it came from, or how it first appeared — only that it was there and that I couldn't stop ruminating on it.

Mongolian Christmas.

Fifteen years to the day of my most crushing childhood disappointment, I felt an irrepressible desire to find myself in the country that I had first learned about in my initially unappreciated but now cherished *National Geographic Atlas*. And so an innocent Google search morphed into hours spent on Seat61.com², and an incipient idea soon transformed into a burning desire.

Over a quick Skype call, I pitched my plan to the only people I knew would immediately be receptive — my Duke roommate Jeremy and our fellow classmate Avi.

The two made ideal travel partners, albeit for different reasons. Jeremy, a Knoxville-bred man, possessed not only the appearance but also the qualities of a 19th century frontiersman — intrepid and gritty, with a gnarly red beard to match. Avi, on the other hand, retained an unbelievably laid-back nature that belied his fast-paced Jersey roots — so much so that one could be forgiven for wondering whether he could more aptly be described as carefree or careless.

“The Trans-Siberian Railway? Mongolian Christmas? Say no more.”

It was unanimous. We were going to take the train across Russia, through the Siberian tundra, and down into the ancestral home of the Khans. And we were going to do it smack in the heart of winter.

I wish I could provide a more cogent explanation for why this notion of a trip through Siberia took hold of my mind — an all-encompassing story that explains this strange desire and wraps it up nicely in a bow-tied package.

But to contrive a reason would be to deceive.

So rather than lie, I borrow the terse, but sufficient words of John Howard Griffin from his 1959 novel *Black Like Me*.

“I decided I would do this.”³

2 The Internet's pre-eminent source on anything and everything train travel related.

3 A key tenet to life – stop seeking external validation!

And just like that, I was on the runway of snowy Domodedovo Airport in Moscow in December 2013.

* * *

As I shuffled out of the terminal towards border control, I fretted the warped lost-in-translation world into which I was entering. I stepped towards a waving customs agent wearing a fine fur hat and grinned sheepishly, hoping desperately to avoid questioning so as to obscure my ignominious ignorance of the Russian language.

As she flipped to page one of my passport, the woman behind the desk began to laugh uproariously.

And so it began. *Already? What have I done?*

Cackling, the lady pointed down at the passport picture and then looked up at my face.

“You?” she asked with a smirk of incredulity sketched upon her visage.

“That’s me!” I wanted to yell.

But I remained quiet and smiled as the woman scanned back and forth, trying to reconcile the commonality between the antiquated passport photo and the person standing in front of her.

At this point, a bit of table-setting is in order. My passport picture was taken when I was a sixteen-year-old high school sophomore. At the time, I had flat, combed hair — the metaphorical epitomization of my constricted living circumstances. When I went to college, I grew out my hair — not as a result of any well-formulated plan, but simply on account of not knowing where to find a barbershop and not wishing to spend any money on it. After a few months, I realized for the first time that my hair is naturally curly and that it settles into a miniature afro without any real maintenance.

I dug the look, and so I’ve kept it — in its various iterations — ever since. But the picture of me in that passport and of me today are sharply in contrast, even to those who know me quite well. So I couldn’t help but laugh along as the customs lady put her bewilderment on full display at the counter.

Unable to make a determination for herself, she motioned over for some other border control agents to join. Before I knew it, I was the center of a burgeoning commotion comprising five separate

Russian officials cramped uncomfortably inside a small customs booth.

Those five sets of heads bobbed up and down from the passport to my face, trying to visualize whether I truly was the same person or if I was some sort of impostor — an existential threat. After all, I'll be honest. It doesn't take much typecasting for me to fit the stereotype.⁴

Eventually, though, concern gave way to laughter — and finally acceptance.

The lady in the fur hat nodded in acknowledgement, mercifully motioned for the other officials to exit the crowded booth, and stamped me through the gate.

My time in Russia had begun.

Dobro pozhalovat'!

Welcome!

⁴ And the Transportation Security Agency in America seems to agree! Lowlights of airport travel for me include having a “Te Quiero Mama” candle brought from Guatemala for my mother smashed in half in Los Angeles because it “look[ed] like a vessel for illegal contraband”, having my afro patted down and searched by an agent with a single white glove in front of the rest of my half-aghast, half-entertained college debate team en route to a tournament in New York City, and being questioned alone for twenty minutes in a back room in Orlando en route to Puerto Rico because it seemed “suspicious” that I was travelling alone – never mind that I was actually with three friends who had yet to arrive at the airport.

Lesson

Like any other human being, I am a mixed bag of character traits — some good, many bad. Every day is an opportunity to improve. But if there is one trait that I can single out as the most invaluable component of my life, it has to be the ability to not take myself too seriously.

To laugh at myself.

Whether it be the day that I wore my polo shirt inside out to work, the occasion that I pulled out a plastic fork at a Chinese restaurant, or the time that I confidently stated a three-point revenue solution to my CEO before going on to forget the third entirely, I would not be able to get through life were it not for my liberal application of self-deprecating humor.

Take, for instance, my experience at customs.

I am convinced that my reaction expedited my entry into Russia, if not ensured it. The fact that I laughed along with the customs lady rather than launching into a fiery rant of indignation helped turn a potentially combative situation into a friendly one.

I have faced similar situations in various other forays abroad. For instance, I was once nearly denied entry into Nigeria when I forgot to bring along a required immunizations card. When asked where the form was, I joked that it was flown away by a dengue fever carrying mosquito. The woman at customs laughed, asked for the real explanation — which was simply that I had forgotten to bring it but was indeed immunized — and then let me through.

Moreover, self-deprecation got me into South Africa on an entirely separate occasion where I should legally have been denied. When my passport was filled with too many visas for the agent at border control to allow me in, I joked that she could either stamp on my endorsements page or suffer through a week with me. She chose the former — and to this day, my passport bears a stray stamp from O. R. Tambo International Airport on an entirely random page.

I have observed the benefits of not taking oneself too seriously not only firsthand, but also via observation. Having worked in technology for several years, I have encountered all sorts of leaders — from engineering managers to business VPs.

The best leaders are uniformly those who make you feel empowered to treat them as peers. They go out of their way to make you feel at ease, demonstrate the humility to admit what they don't know, joke with you, inspire you to be yourself, and motivate you to produce your best work. And, invariably, they have a flip mode that they activate only when necessary.

When they are serious, you know it. And you get it done for them.

These leaders are the type to attract and retain the top talent. And the culture they espouse undergirds Silicon Valley — arguably the most laid back and yet most productive workspace in human history.

Conversely, the worst leaders have always been the ones who make the fatal error of taking themselves too seriously.

You know the type.

The ones who avoid asking questions for fear of looking foolish. The ones who need the center chair at the meeting table. The ones who cannot laugh at themselves.

They are the ones who poison the well for all others around them. And ultimately, if they are not dealt with, their cancer metastasizes to the point that an otherwise unassailable company can fail by virtue of outsized leadership ego alone.

When situations come up in life that can be uncomfortable or potentially embarrassing, we are presented with a stark choice. We can be stiff, angry, and irritable in a shambolic display of defending our proverbial manhood. Or we can laugh, embrace the absurdity of the situation, and let it roll off of our shoulders.

Carl Sagan has made a career out of reminding us of our own insignificance⁵ — but somehow, somehow, some of us will never get the message to stop taking ourselves so damn seriously.

While I may never fully comprehend the Cosmos, I will always take the core lesson of the cosmic perspective to heart.

5 In sharing an iconic photo of Earth as a miniscule speck on the surface of a voluminous galaxy, Sagan once famously posited that “our posturings, our imagined self-importance...are challenged by [the pale blue dot].”

Chapter 2: You are a lottery ticket

*December 13, 2013
Moscow, Russia*

It is difficult to come to grips with reality until you are fully immersed in the moment.

Such was the case as I stumbled through Domodedovo Airport, arriving at the unpleasant realization that I simply was not adequately prepared — neither emotionally nor physically — for this trip.

Not for the weather, nor for the culture, nor for the language — let alone for getting to the hostel.

In fairness, this is often my natural state. While so-called experts relentlessly sing the praises of preparedness, I have always prided myself on possessing a certain level of familiarity — comfort, even — with ambiguity.

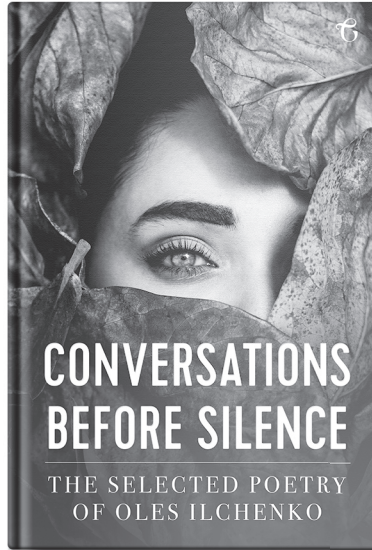
There are manifold explanations for this, some reasonable and others more questionable.

On the sensible side, one must admit a certain cathartic effect that being plopped into an unfamiliar circumstance and getting away unscathed has on the human psyche. And so I thrived in impromptu speaking and parliamentary debate in high school and college — forums where preparation had no effect on outcomes and where success was exclusively a matter of do or die.

Perhaps more dubiously, another reason that I preferred the unencumbered route of non-preparedness was to shield myself from the disappointment that over-preparedness so often brings. Some of the most crushing defeats of my life have been in circumstances when I felt poised and ready, only to subsequently fall flat. Conversely, the greatest victories have often been the ones I least expect.

CONVERSATIONS BEFORE SILENCE:

THE SELECTED POETRY OF OLES ILCHENKO

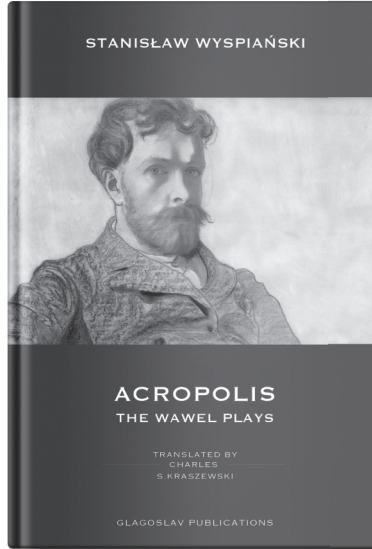


An avid reader of English-language poets such as William Carlos Williams and Stanley Kunitz, Ilchenko is one of the best Ukrainian poets writing in free verse today. His poetry is associative, flitting, and fragmentary. At times he does not form complete sentences in his poems and links words together into phrases before shifting into another thought or idea. The language of his poetry has a tendency to collapse into itself, often forcing the reader to reevaluate a word or line, to reread a previous word to focus on the poet's inner logic. This fragmentary incompleteness and permeability mimics much the way human consciousness works without the filter of the written communicative convention of sentences and grammatical structure. This "slipperiness" and rapid shifting of voice comprises one of the essential invariants in Ilchenko's poetics. The poet also flaunts many traditional poetic Ukrainian conventions. Like ee cummings he tends to avoid capital letters or punctuation such as exclamation points. One will find only commas and dashes for pauses, and an occasional period in his poems, which do not always end with the finality of that punctuation mark...

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Acropolis – The Wawel Plays

by Stanisław Wyspiański



Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907) achieved worldwide fame, both as a painter, and Poland's greatest dramatist of the first half of the twentieth century. *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays*, brings together four of Wyspiański's most important dramatic works in a new English translation by Charles S. Kraszewski. All of the plays centre on Wawel Hill: the legendary seat of royal and ecclesiastical power in the poet's native city, the ancient capital of Poland. In these plays, Wyspiański explores the foundational myths of his nation: that of the self-sacrificial Wanda, and the struggle between King Bolesław the Bold and Bishop Stanisław Szczepanowski. In the eponymous play which brings the cycle to an end, Wyspiański carefully considers the value of myth to a nation without political autonomy, soaring in thought into an apocalyptic vision of the future. Richly illustrated with the poet's artwork, *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays* also contains Wyspiański's architectural proposal for the renovation of Wawel Hill, and a detailed critical introduction by the translator. In its plaited presentation of *Bolesław the Bold* and *Skalka*, the translation offers, for the first time, the two plays in the unified, composite format that the poet intended, but was prevented from carrying out by his untimely death.

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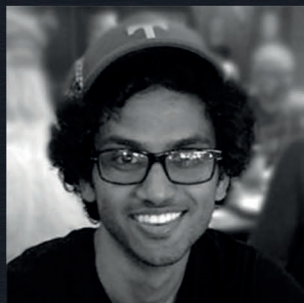
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More coming soon...

A Brown Man in Russia describes the fantastical travels of a young, colored American traveler as he backpacks across Russia in the middle of winter via the Trans-Siberian. The book is a hybrid between the curmudgeonly travelogues of Paul Theroux and the philosophical works of Robert Pirsig. Styled in the vein of Hofstadter, the author lays out a series of absurd, but true stories followed by a deeper rumination on what they mean and why they matter. Each chapter presents a vivid anecdote from the perspective of the fumbling traveler and concludes with a deeper lesson to be gleaned. For those who recognize the discordant nature of our world in a time ripe for demagoguery and for those who want to make it better, the book is an all too welcome antidote. It explores the current global climate of despair over differences and outputs a very different message – one of hope and shared understanding. At times surreal, at times inappropriate, at times hilarious, and at times deeply human, *A Brown Man in Russia* is a reminder to those who feel marginalized, hopeless, or endlessly divided that harmony is achievable even in the most unlikely of places.



Vijay Menon is an American author, statistician, and backpacker. His TED talk, *Lessons Learned on the Trans-Siberian*, garnered acclaim as he described his unique experiences traveling through Russia as a person of color. This culminated in his debut novel, *A Brown Man in Russia*, in which he provides a lens into a Siberian winter from the perspective of a total outsider and relates

subsequent lessons. In addition to Russia, Vijay has traveled to more than 50 countries in six continents over the past five years ranging from Zimbabwe to Taiwan. He graduated with dual degrees in Statistics and Economics from Duke University. Vijay has been published in the *Economist*, is a Duke Debate champion, and had his winning submission on global sustainability forwarded to President Barack Obama's desk by the United Nations following their national essay contest.

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