



12-15-1994

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Recommended Citation

Mayo, Wendell (1994) "The Hermitage, 2:10 p.m.," *Westview*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol14/iss2/5>

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The Hermitage, 2:10 P.M.

by Wendell Mayo

But there is a meaning?

A meaning? . . . Look it's snowing. What meaning has that?

Chekhov, *The Three Sisters*

My roommate Smith, a civil engineering student and a troubled boy with dark circles around his eyes, sat on his bed with his back flat against the cinder block wall. He looked gaunt, beat-out, the usual for Smith, but he looked snug and serene too. And I was feeling pretty good. I had a glow on and I was beginning to feel the dark beer. I was in the best state possible confined to our room in a snowstorm, feeling perfect since it was Friday night, a long stretch to Monday classes, and since Smith hadn't had a drink all night. He was diabetic and not supposed to drink anymore, so this time he could be straight about things, and I was the one who could catch a buzz, so I wouldn't have to worry about Smith drinking and going into spasms.

Smith was listening to me talk, watching me pace the room back and forth, wall to wall, like a slow pendulum in the housing of a ridiculous clock. So even if he wasn't loaded, I said, "On a night like this, don't you feel exquisitely removed from even the smallest calamity? Even the most minor disturbance?"

Smith rubbed his back up and down against the cinder blocks and sighed with relief. Smith knew what I meant. He had said so. It was the combination of things, the snowstorm, the gusting wind, the small cinder block room, "Good company, right?" Smith had said.

I carried my bottle of dark beer and wandered the room, knocking into one object then another: two twin beds with vintage mattresses, one of two small matching

dressers, two desks, and four stick chairs. I went over and stripped the blanket from my bed. I wrapped it around myself. I pinned the blanket with one hand at my neck, and continued to drink my beer with the other hand. I started pacing again. Tick. Tock.

Smith just sat there, looking up at me, looking like he expected me to say something more. He was not like himself at all. Shy Smith. Unselfconsciously conscious Smith. Smith of Smiths. Broke Smith. Absolutely flatbusted, student-loaned to the yin and yang Smith. He could hardly afford to be diabetic.

"I'm going to Russia when I get out of here," he said. "I'm going...maybe for good."

Smith had been going on about Moscow and what-not all night. No doubt about it, this was uncharacteristic of Smith or Smiths, and the boy seemed obsessed more than happy about the notion of living in Russia.

"Damn it, Smith," I said, feeling woozy, "why don't you give it a rest." Smith wasn't listening. I went on. "What's the difference, anyway? If you're going to Russia to get away from the ordinary, forget it. The item in Moscow is the All-American hamburger. The Big Mac. It's progress."

Smith reached for something on the floor, got up from the bed and stood in front of me; his face was obscured by black—click!—pop!—light exploded in the room; then circles of light crested like waves; an orange dot, like a tiny ripe setting sun, was stuck in the air; it bounced and wobbled; it grew a tail of light and swung back and forth; my eyes hurt.

"I'm blinded, you son of a bitch," I told him.

"There," Smith said very seriously, "now you won't be forgotten."

The orange ball stayed in the room a long while, and after it had died a long and stubborn death, I got my glow back from the dark beer. Give it a rest, I thought,

for cripes sake, Smith!

That was when Smith got out Luba's photos of Russia. Luba lived in the east wing of the complex. She had grandparents in the Ukraine. She was really fat, but she liked Smith, so she gave him her pictures to keep as long as he liked. Smith knew she liked him, but he ignored her. He ignored most things he didn't want to face.

So Smith rifled his desk, and he came out with all of Luba's notes that went with her pictures. He opened a bottle of dark beer, poured some into a small tumbler he had borrowed from the cafeteria that morning, and handed it to me.

"How you feeling?" he asked me, like he wanted to be sure I didn't mind looking at his photos.

I told him, "Okay." I had a good buzz on. "Thanks for the beerski," I said.

"You really want to look at these snapshots?"

I could have cared less about Smith's photos of Russia. I really didn't care to see them again. Besides, I was already feeling okay, so I didn't want to spoil the glow I had on. But I didn't tell Smith this . . . and it wasn't that I wanted to spare Smith's feelings; it was more like I just didn't know how to explain the glow to him, how strange and delicate the feeling was, like a silken sleep, like a web heavy with dew, about to break, about to be broken by Smith's photos. I felt a little ridiculous thinking about how I couldn't explain things to him, so I let him go on with his picture show.

He sat up in bed; he flipped through the book-length stack of snapshots; he coddled them in his lap, picking them out, cocking them up for me to see. I was standing and sipping the dark beer slow and easy so I wouldn't accelerate the evenness of my glow. Then Smith started flipping through the photos faster, then he slowed, and he slowed some more when he came to the shots of

Leningrad. It was somewhere around Leningrad that I lost what Smith was saying about the photos. I started listening to the wind outside the room and turned to the window. I watched the powdered snow swirl and blast the window like sand. I was thinking about how my mind had gone off, how my whole head had gone off, prodigal-like, how the place it had gone was so far from where we were; my head seemed to be walking in a distant province, not part of the same continent; it wasn't that I didn't want my mind to be with me, it had left because of where I was in reality, and the snow-storm.... Was it the enigma of exile? Dorm life? Was I really imprisoned and yet, somehow, free? I was feeling so good and comfortable to be in the dormitory with Smith, and not to be with more than one other person—any person; I could have easily been with myself; being with Smith was usually like being with myself—just me and Smith, and no place to go, no place that wanted us, no place we wanted to be. I did not know where my head had gone.

I wanted to tell Smith the only way out of here was to imagine his way out, which bordered on the metaphysical. Or he could put himself half-in-the-bag as I had done and walk, wall to wall, hoping that with one swing across the room, this way or that, he'd break out of the dull pattern. But this also verged on the metaphysical, and would not be entirely wise since I had figured he would need to stay blitzed until the spring thaw to achieve a completely crabbed state of mind: much, much too metaphysical, and the dark beer'd kill him for sure. But there wasn't any use in thinking about this further. I mean, I couldn't say this stuff to Smith, or he might have taken it seriously and got snookered; then I would have had a mess on my hands! So I couldn't tell him the truth about being blitzed and free, except in my head, where I'd make up these dialogues with myself.



This thought. That thought. Tick. Tock.

So this was the way my mind worked most of the time—by itself, on itself. It was worse in winter.

I let the blanket fall to the floor, stepped over it, found my Salems on the desk and lit one up.

By now Smith was way into his stack of snapshots of Russia, and he hadn't really shown me one up close. He just kept flipping them up at me and laying them down. It was like as time went on, he knew about the glow I had on, and how my head had run away, and how I didn't want to be bothered. He was probably hoping some odd juncture of shape and shadow would capture my attention. I knew he was trying to have me say just once, "Tell me about that one, Smith," or "Where do you suppose Luba shot that?" But I thought, Who cares, Smith? I knew where I was, minus my head, and I'd be there until spring, same as Smith. We weren't going anywhere, least of all Russia. So why did he go on with the photos?

Then he stopped flipping and straightened himself in his bed. I could see his head had come off too—the way his eyes seemed lifted and distant.

"You want a diet soda or something?" I asked him. "You up to it, Smith? Hey, Smith... Earth to Smith!"

He shook his head no and took up the stack of photos again, and with his palms he squared the corners of the pictures sticking out of the stack. He dragged one of the chairs up to his bed and tapped the stack on the wooden seat. He set the photos neatly aside. And I don't know.... I guess I had just had enough of looking at the cinder blocks and the institutional bone color of the room; I was tired of hearing the steam condensing in the radiator, socking itself against the pipes. Bong. Bong.... So I became this evil person I sometimes became when I felt free, when I thought I really felt I had a hold of a problem with something, and felt merci-

less since I could be so falsely merciful.

"Smith," I said, "you need a break. You want to go hitching rides with me tomorrow?" Smith didn't answer me. He smiled briefly, then he rapped the stack of photos on the chair again, and I laughed, but I recognized the laugh as my evil laugh, so I quickly took another sip of dark beer, hoping I could keep the glow on, and shut up before Smith found out I was slipping into my evil mood.

I walked over to his bed, and he held a photo up for me. I looked at his picture of Russia and sipped more dark beer. I was rocking a little, so I caught myself and stood straight up.

"What's in that next photo?" I asked Smith, partly to divert him from studying my face, and partly because I felt odd, like I was losing my balance.

I took the photo from Smith and moved it back and forth in front of my face. This wasn't working at all, so I paused, moving my eyelids up and down, blotting the beer foam from my mustache with my hand. I rubbed my thumbs into my eyes, and finally got the scene of the photo: the snow was trampled; a gray wet street ran up and down the snapshot, terminating at a river's edge; a huge granite building stood on the right side of the road; the building was ornate with curling cornices, lions resting on smooth white slabs, small windows, no people.

Smith's commentary was synchronous with my perusal of the photo:

"When Peter the Great was a boy," he said, "he had them build an enormous boat house, like a grand tomb. There, he kept a boat the size of a skiff."

The storm was coming up hard, reaching its peak. I heard the wind rattle the glass in the window frame. I put out my cigarette. I didn't know what to say. I mean, it wasn't like I couldn't appreciate the absurdity of little

Peter's big boathouse, it was just that I already knew Smith had. We had agreed at the beginning of the semester that we wouldn't waste words with one another when things were already understood.

Smith took the photo of Peter's boathouse back from me.

"Who asked you, anyway," he said.

He put on his slippers and went down the hall to take a whiz. I could feel the glow I had go heavy in my head, calling it back from distant places, like gas cooling and seeking ground zero—sinking. My head was sinking and my thoughts were trickling down inside me. I didn't dare sit down or lie back on the bed—but there was this evil in me that kept going. I was standing there lock-kneed so I wouldn't keel over, swaying a little, side to side.

I lit another cigarette. I decided my mood wasn't the worst sort, since Smith already knew about my moods. We had talked about them before. I had given him fair warning: since he knew about my evil moods, I had told him, it made them less sinister, right?

Smith came back from his whiz.

"You're full of shit," he said with his Smith smile.

I took up another picture from Smith's pile and got it into focus. This time I focused on the photo quickly since I'd had some practice, and by now the glow was centered in my stomach, not in my head or eyes.

Smith stood behind me. I heard him rub his beard stubble with his hands.

"That's the prison in Leningrad, there, you see, that tall wall cut off in the picture at the right? Thousands of political prisoners were executed in there. When the bodies piled up they heaved them over the side of the prison wall.... The bodies floated out to sea."

I could tell from his voice that Smith was proud of himself, proud of his lurid description; it was not like

him. It was getting really creepy—spooky—since I was supposed to be the one with the mysteriously evil moods, not Smith.

"No shit, Smith," I said, "you suppose they tortured any college students?"

That was all I could say about the photo of the prison at Leningrad. So Smith went back to his bed. He sat on it and rocked. And I was still standing, then I was prowling again, bed to bed, talking, remembering how glad I was that Smith wasn't buzzed so he could hear all this straight.

"Look, Smith," I said, "I hope you get to go to Moscow and what-not when you get out of here, and I won't talk about it anymore after now, okay? But you can't live on this kind of thing exclusively. I mean, you can't be thinking about being over there all the time you're over here. Nobody says you have to choose. You couldn't go to Russia even if you wanted to. You don't have any money. So why don't you just calm down." I felt my foul mood unapproachable; there was no way to stop it. "To hell with you and Russia," I added.

Smith got up and went over to the radiator by the window. He twisted the round black valve on top. The steam gushed in, banged once against the pipes, then twice; it knocked softly a couple more times, bing, bong, and stopped.

"You want another beer?" Smith asked me.

"Yeah, okay."

I set the photo of the political prison in Leningrad down on his desk. Then I said:

"How are you, Smith? You okay? I mean are you really okay?"

Smith took the cap off the dark beer and handed the bottle to me.

"I don't know. What difference does it make?" he said. "You know, a little can't hurt."



I poured the dark beer into my glass.

"Jesus," I said. "You know what I mean, Smith. You have those black rings around your eyes again. Just forget about that shit I was saying. . . . You going to stay off the sauce tonight?"

"I don't know," Smith mumbled. "You don't look so great yourself."

The glow was in my feet now, so I stretched a hand back uneasily for a chair. The chair wasn't there, so I swayed upright, locking my knee joints again. Smith sidearmed a photo at me. It hit my arm and fell onto the toe of my boot. Smith came over, got the photo and handed it to me. It was a picture of a dark palace with many peaks and spires.

"The Hermitage," Smith said, and sat back on his bed. His head banged on the cinder blocks and he winced. "It's like Louis the Fourteenth influenced the architect. The Sun King. It's really rich, gold leaf everywhere—everything curls, really curls from the walls, pillars, furniture."

"The Tsar's Winter Palace," I said.

"During the Revolution, the Bolsheviks took the place in a single afternoon."

"Not a hell of a good hermitage," I said.

"Not really," he said and tossed me another photo. I juggled it, but got this one. "Here's a shot of Catherine the Great, a full-length portrait."

The photo showed a painting of a farm-faced woman with thin lips. She had no body to speak of, since whatever curvaceousness she may have possessed was sunk somewhere in billowing silk and ruffles. She had a librarian's eyes, eyes that made me feel like I had run up a big tab at the main branch back home.

I told Smith that Catherine the Great did not appear to be as great as her reputation. I said I'd rather be making it with the *Mona Lisa*. At least she seemed like

the kind of woman who could have a good time and still show some faint recollection of it.

But Smith the Smart Ass got out his camera and popped another photo of me. I felt dizzy and blind. I put my arms out and reached for his throat, but he ducked and I fell onto my bed. I laughed my evil laugh, watching an orange dot dance under my eyelids, up and down.

"Do that again and I'll clean your clock," I said.

Smith relaxed. He didn't seem to mind my cracks about his photos or my trying to choke him. And my biggest fight was to keep my evil mood under control.

Smith wagged his head, "I don't know, man. There's something about Russia, something...."

He went over to the window and felt it with his hand. He said it was a real bitch out. From my bed I watched him remove his hand from the glass. I watched the steamed outline of his hand fade from the pane. I doubted that either of us would be remembered.

I got up from my bed, swallowed the last bit of dark beer, about a one inch heel in my glass, set the glass back on the desk, and slumped back onto my bed.

"You and goddamned Russia, Smith," I said and closed my eyes. My mouth was on automatic, like I was speaking in tongues to him. Between my eyeballs and eyelids there were worms and stars, and ringing in my ears. Ring a ding. "It's a free country," I added. "You do what you want to."

And then my wagging tongue was still, just like that; it got numb and stopped. The worms and stars were still in a strange interplay behind my eyelids, and it seemed like I could hear the smallest things. I heard Smith's weight load up the springs of his mattress. I heard him get back up, turn off the lights, and lie back down. My glow was all gone. Everything stopped.



Later that night Smith woke me. He was sitting on my bed. He was right at my face with a burning candle. He was holding a photo up to my eyes. The rings around his eyes were blacker than before and swollen.

"Jesus, Smith," I groaned.

"Look," he whispered, keeping the 5 x 7 photo right at the ridge of my nose.

I reached out of the covers and pushed the 5 x 7 back a little so I could see it better.

"It's a clock... you got it?" Smith said. "See it—? A mantle clock in the Tsar's Winter Palace."

"Yeah, it's got the same curly gold leaf all over it." I rubbed my eyes. "So what."

"Right, exactly," Smith said. "Read the time, check out the hands, right here."

"Ten after two," I said. "So what?"

"Right, two-ten p.m. The clock's broken. Stopped. It's stuck at two-ten p.m. It's been stuck at ten after two in the afternoon for over seventy years."

"No shit," I said.

"Right!" Smith seemed elated. "The Bolsheviks broke the clock in 1917, the moment they swarmed the Winter Place, and it's been stuck ever since then, just like that."

Smith was sitting on my leg, so I yanked it out from under him.

"So freaking what, Smith?" I said.

"Well, isn't it incredible? I mean there's really something to it! You know what I mean?" Smith took the picture from me and stared at it. His eyes were glued to it for a long time. "It is. It's incredible. Everything stopping. Just like that. We can never know how incredible. We can never know!"

I sat up in bed and flung the covers off myself.

"Why don't you just take it easy?" I said. "Look at me. I've never been so damn content in my life! But

every time I get feeling good you start this Russia crap on me. What do you know about it? What? Nothing! That's what! You never will! Go to sleep!"

Smith stood over my bed and glared at me, then the photo, then back at me. He looked like he was going to kill me—or himself. I didn't know which or what to do. So I asked him: "Hey, Smith, you want a beerski or something?"

He said no and he went back to his own bed holding the candle in one hand, still staring at the photo. I asked him again if he wanted a beer, but he just sat staring at the picture, nodding no at me.

"I feel really cooped up in this place," I said. "You want to walk?" I asked him. "Do you?"

Smith threw the photo onto the bed.



When Smith and I got outdoors, the snowstorm had ebbed and the sky was clear. The powder lay still, shining in the way snow shines with bits of blue light, reflecting in the moonlight. We made our way out from the complex. I remember we sounded like horses working through the fresh snow, muddling the flat, wide blanket with our boots.

When we were far out across the dark, white expanse, Smith turned to look at the hunkering complex from which we had come. Not one window was lit, not even that of our tiny cinder block quarters.

"Look Smith," I said, "all that crap I said before about Russia. I didn't mean it—it was just the black beer talking."

He wasn't listening to me. He was walking ahead of me, out from the complex.

"What time is it?" he asked without looking back to me.

"I don't know. I honestly don't know," I said. I made a couple quick steps to catch up to him. "You've got a



touch of cabin fever, Smith. That's all."

I told him this, but it did not seem to make a bit of difference—so without a bit of the glow, without the evilness that had been in me, without a smidgen of my usual meanness, I caught him, took his arms, turned him, and faced him to me.

"Come on," I said. "Right now," I pleaded softly. "Freaking come on. I can't take all this back and forth shit: here, there, here, there. Things are the same all over."

But Smith didn't say a word. Not about Russia. Or Leningrad. Or afternoon revolutions. Or Catherine the Great. Nothing.

"Jesus H. Christ," I said, then looked at his cold, wizened face, his eyes sunk into dark pockets in his head, and I knew I had failed, that my meanness had come back with all the claustrophobic force of my glow, only now it wasn't a delicate, silken glow, just a leaden throbbing in my head like the dull knocking of a cracked chime.

"Snap out of it," I whispered.

He lowered his eyes and looked at the snow.

So I hit him. I hit him hard on his chest with my fists.

"Say something," I groaned. "For my sake," I said. "For pity's sake, Smith!" ❧

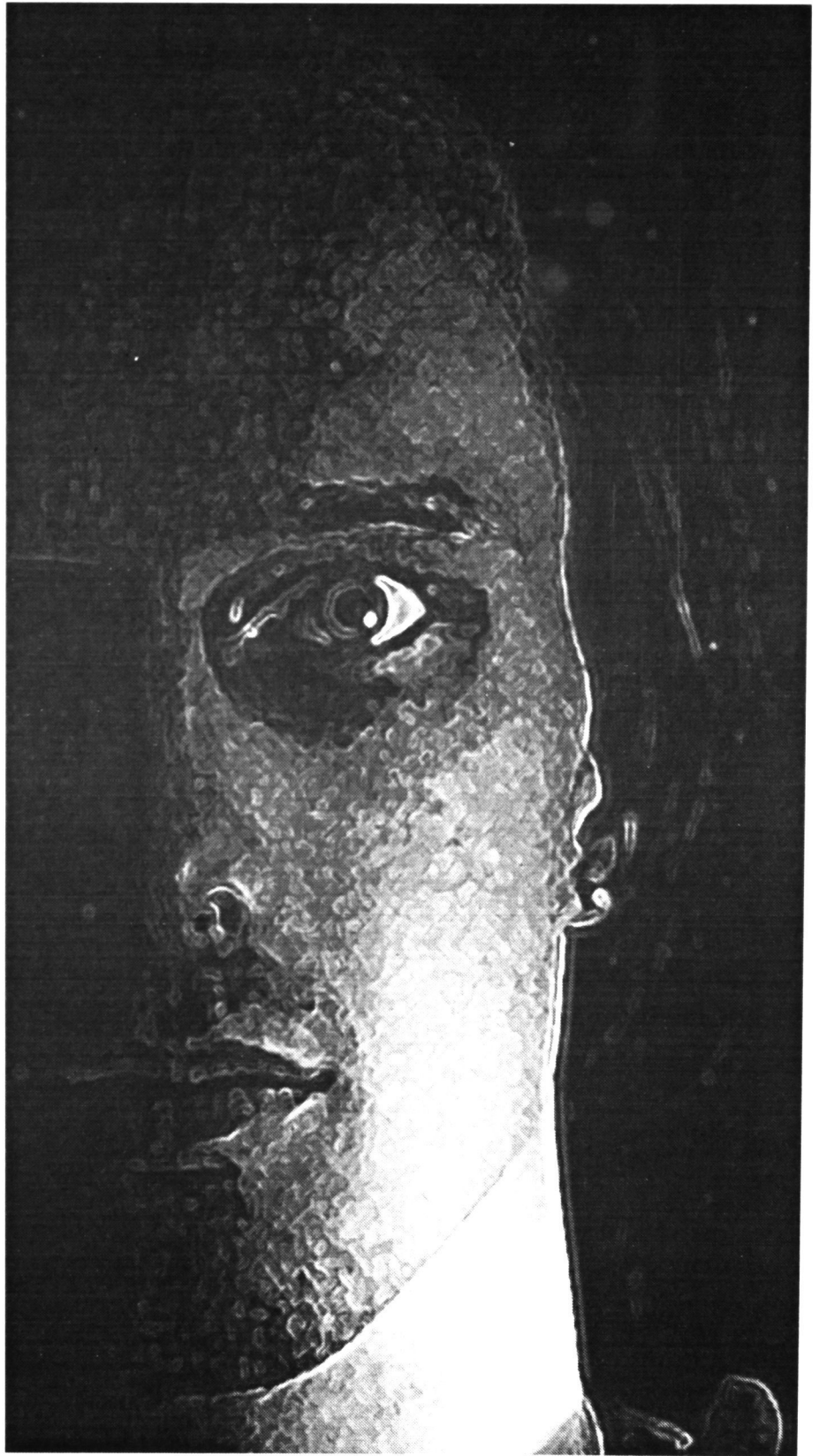


Photo Illustration by Jan Bradfield

