

WEDDING IN BRIGHTON BEACH

Brighton Beach weddings are such sumptuous extravaganzas, each could be the last on Earth: a wedding to end all weddings. Every time it seems like the Earth's energy has finally been depleted, and no one will ever again try to marry; how could anyone beat the celebration still winding down even as we speak? In the end, why live in this great big world, gentlemen — former comrades — if not to lavish such nuptials upon your children and grandchildren! So live it up with little Tanya and little Misha — you can relax later. Your last worldly concerns will have been satisfied.... And don't forget, the wedding you organize is also a notch in our memory of you. Make such a splash that afterwards, sighing and shaking their heads, everyone will remember Zuskind: What a man! What a wedding he threw his granddaughter! And such people have to die!

Well, no one's thinking of dying. Last night's wedding-maker is simply lying low for a while. With a nonchalant look he checks out another party, to assure himself once more of what he already knows: no one has ever, will ever, or can ever outdo his wedding. Of such stuff Brighton Beach legends are made.

I was at such a wedding. Let me testify....

1

They say that nothing surprises America. Brighton Beach is an exception. Brighton, a.k.a. Little Odessa, is the fruit of an unprecedented transcontinental migration taking place right before our eyes, a huge city carrying itself here through the air, not a quantum of its soul lost. And what a city it is, still — more like a legend in the making! Set out now from Moscow for the south, for the Black Sea, and climb a steppe hill, to view the gulf from its north-

ern shoreline. You'll see that the town no longer exists, the town where, once, a sixty-year-old arrival from Murmansk would feel a sudden lifting of his spirit and an unexpected desire to live another forty years. The facades of buildings designed by fugitive French architects on Deribas Street and Richelieu Boulevard and in the former Palais Royale still charm with their faded beauty, like aging Parisian women. Along splendid Pushkin Street autumn still unrolls carpeted pedestrian paths touched by ochre and vermilion, woven of chestnut, maple and plane leaves. And the sea waves along the most delicate beaches still sneak up to your feet like playfully threatening puppies mistaking them for house slippers.

But the living city itself is no longer there. It's gone. It's clambered aboard TU-104 jets. Or onto trains that rushed across the former Soviet border and through clean little Viennese streets, Roman stations and Tyrrhenian resort towns. Dragging suitcases and trunks stuffed with frying pans, pots, packages of porridge for infants (on the road anything can happen, including unplanned children) and little pillows needed to steady the unruly head of the traveler trying to fall asleep in foreign lands, this city gradually, grain by grain, settled in the southernmost protuberance of Brooklyn. Also near a huge watery hulk — only not just another sea, but a rank higher — the ocean.

2

Weddings in Brighton take place in restaurants. Naturally, in the largest and most fashionable. The king of them all is the National (in honor of its unsurpassable Moscow namesake and by virtue of tradition, pronounced not just any way, but with a French intonation). Of course there are smaller restaurants and cafes in Brighton that seat a good hundred, let's say, even a hundred fifty. But a Brightonite would consider it indecent to make a wedding in any one of those. It would be like getting married in a snack bar.

Debts are heavy in Brighton. Everybody is everybody else's relative. Distant or close — among immigrants the distinction is meaningless. Someone may be only distantly related, but he lives nearby — so he's considered "close." Especially when it comes to

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weddings. And so sometimes you end up at two celebrations in a week. You ask your inviter, "Will there be a lot of people?" and expect the usual modest response: "Ah, what're you talking about! How many relatives have I got here! Only my own folks, a narrow circle." Which means, maybe, three hundred or so.

As a rule, nobody carries presents to the newlyweds. A bunch of flowers for the bride, yes, but no more than that. New times, new customs. With one arm a guest shakes the groom's hand, with the other he slips into his pocket unnoticed, as if into a mail slot, an envelope with a check. Everyone knows what the Russian restaurants charge per person. That's why, in the end, no one loses, despite the scale of the event — the more the merrier.

When you first peek into the restaurant hall, you see nothing but flowers. Posts of bouquets like frozen explosions, wafting a heart-stopping mixture of fragrances, hang over the guests and threaten to topple down. What smell so sweet are peonies, the favorite of Brightonites, surprisingly like Black Sea women in sumptuousness, spice and beauty. Stalks of gladioli with little pink petal ears barely emerging from tight buds push upward timidly through the heaps of peonies. So the arms of the Brightonites' daughters, the teenaged girls of an already new, American vintage, reach nervously for the shoulders of their young men for a first kiss.

You loiter awhile in the lobby and greet the person who invited you — some distant uncle on the girl's side. He might have arrived just two days before from Russia with bag and baggage, still somewhat befuddled and not sure himself he knows the bride. (He's last seen her as a pot-bellied infant with one tooth in her mouth in his grandniece's arms, during a short visit from Dushanbe in Tiraspol, where he'd come for the wedding of the son of his second cousin on his mother's side.) Then, inching sideways to your seat, you try your best to show that the food interests you only up to a point — more than anything, naturally, you're just overwhelmed with happiness that your relative is getting married.

At a Brighton wedding you expect not just to "proceed to reception," but to *live it up*: at a wedding you're to *eat, drink and dance*. Now pay attention — that's *eat*, and not "dine" (if it's more toward evening). And certainly not — "have supper," which, back home,

had meant a modest portion of blintzes with a glass of kefir or tea and a small sandwich the size of a beer mug coaster. None of this ascetic stupidity will be tolerated here. A true wedding — where the eating itself is essential to the ritual — is no place to “have a bite,” snack, or, God forbid, “grab something on the run”.

Once you cast your eyes over a Brighton wedding table, you understand: sitting down was easy, getting up will be harder. Say so long to your diet — as long as you’re in Brighton, you won’t see it again! If you’re in the mood for a long walk, try searching the countless food shops for fat-free (or even low-fat) milk or cheese, or skinned chicken (evidently thus disfigured as punishment for some frightful misdeed). You won’t find such “ersatz food” here, where they respect human, earthly pleasures. Tell someone you’re “on a diet,” and his or her eyes will moisten in sympathy. It’s clear you haven’t long to live.

3

Your table is so crammed with platters and saucers, plates and little jam dishes and wineglasses and shot glasses and goblets, that you can’t even see the tablecloth. Surveying the possibilities spread out before you, you realize your life is not yet over. The best is yet to come. Behold: a surge of earthly fruits, there for no other purpose than to offer you the endless energy of the sun, embodied in the best of its creations. In anticipation of this new landmark in your life, you secretly undo the shirt button near your belt. And one on your chest as well — there has to be room for your heart to expand, for at this moment it wants everything in the world, except to rest.

In ordinary American restaurants, the food is arranged primitively, in horizontal order. Not so in the Russian restaurants of Brighton Beach. The plates making up this fantastic feast, like cars in Manhattan’s municipal garages, tower in many-leveled pyramids. The upper tier is loaded with the starter food. The appetizer *pirozhek*, round little pies adorned with hills of red and black caviar, should be enough to reinvigorate your interest in life. Having sampled two or three of each kind, after a proper pause you’re

ready for a patty of normal dimensions — that is, the size of an Odessa longshoreman's palm. As you eat, slices of cold smoked Siberian salmon glimmer from the neighboring dish with a languid moisture and now and then catch your eye, as if to say, "We're here, don't pass us by completely, you nice former comrade."

Representing the vegetable gardens are fresh cucumbers, sliced with such deft strokes that through the translucent flesh the seeds gleam, like tiny tooth roots through the gums of infants. Nearby, cheeks puffed out, New Jersey tomatoes watch you with a single squinting yellow-gray eye. Alas, despite their decent size and excellent flavor, they're only a dim reminder of those the Black Sea immigrants are used to from childhood — Fontan tomatoes with an odor and taste (and this every Brightonite knows!) unequalled in this world or, it's suspected, in the next.

Other tomatoes, bashfully pink, under whose fine skin the juice languorously chases round a water-level bubble, are part of a salty-sour group. There's also white and red cabbage, lightly pickled, and homemade dill pickles. (Not trusting the restaurant's specialist, the bride's grandmother has pickled them herself — so they have a fresh-made crunch.) When that's almost gone, slices of pickled watermelon are at your disposal. And if you're up for marinade, you're welcome to the little field mushrooms.

At this point, the spreading fragrance of fresh coriander and tantalizingly acute scent of *khnel'* and *sunel'* (a cilantro-like aromatic grass) announce the favorite dish of the friendly Georgian people: *satsivi*, a complex conglomeration of chicken parts in a fancy sauce. Lovers of especially sharp sensations will appreciate the cheese paste, thoroughly seasoned with garlic and embellished with slices of pineapple, served in a delicate jam dish.

Dutch cheeses, among the upper-layer foods devoid of any special fantasy, will satisfy those who consider cheese an aristocratic delicacy. There are also the thinnest slices of Swiss — for the aesthetes, who think of it more as lace for supporting a line of ivory elephants on Grandmother's sideboard than as food. And if only for the sake of a full palette, the moistly sparkling Greek Feta is an honest attempt to simulate the salty sheep's milk cheese of Privoz, the famous Odessa market of bygone times.

None of this, however, has the right to call itself appetizers, *zakuski*. It's only priming — a sprinkling of gunpowder in an ancient blunderbuss — to signal the approach of real food. It's a weak roulade from a Young Pioneer bugle of school days: "Get up, get up, put on your short pants!" To wake up your body for real business. So that you'll get the hint, extrapolate, set the imagination in motion, and prepare yourself physically and morally. Something much more essential, and even grandiose, is on its way.

4

The aroma from the tables reaches the nostrils of the invited. The torture becomes unbearable. Meanwhile the wedding ceremony hasn't even begun. It turns out there's no one to unite the betrothed — where's the rabbi? By now a woman scolds her round-eyed, sad-faced husband so loudly that those sitting nearby can hear, "Yuri, why aren't you eating! Remember your ulcer, you're not allowed to stay away from food for so long!" She smears butter on some bread, spreads out little beads of red caviar like a set of Chinese checkers. She sighs deeply, weighed down by two thoughts: first, how primitive is human nature, that says "give me food, and to hell with the dignity of the moment," and second, how hard it is to live with a sick husband. What stoicism you need, and how rarely outsiders understand the special problems of human physiology. It's easy enough for them to accuse a sick person of gluttony!

But still no sign of the rabbi. Eventually it becomes clear he's not in Hawaii, or the Virgin Islands, or the Persian Gulf region — he's not that big a schmuck! He's here — in Brighton Beach. En route from another Russian wedding. He's already welded the newlyweds together with a valiant "*Mazel Tov!*", already drunk another toast to their happiness and unending health, already escaped from the teeming relatives' embraces into the fresh air. And it's done him in. The flood of emotions has overcome him. In his blue Toyota he's circling the block where the guests numbering three infantry regiments await him. He's searching for, but just can't find, a parking space. Finally someone from the bride's reti-

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nue has the good sense to lie down, waving his arms and legs, on the hood of the religious servant's car. As if to assure the rabbi it's okay to calm down and leave the wheel — they'll find a little space for the car, even if they have to move the vegetable store on the corner. The guests are utterly exhausted; the knees of the young bridegroom with the first fuzz on his chin are trembling from the advancing trial of manhood; the bride herself is by now unmistakably hot to trot. So how about it, rabbi, it's no time to drag your heels!

5

While the rabbi is caught and revived, the guests, ill at ease, avoid one another's look and make short work of the upper tier of food — that is, the priming. The layer beneath is the *zakuski* proper, there to open wide the bodily locks and conduct through them with a rumble, music and applause an ocean liner filled with the principal food, splendid in quality and unsurpassed in quantity.

First are the cold hors d'oeuvres: Russian *olivier* salad; fresh cucumber and tomato salad with huge gypsy earrings of onions, seasoned with oil as fragrant as Ukrainian black earth; and herring with split belly and eyes fixed wide in amazement — she obviously hadn't expected such a turn in her fate. (However, the Brightonites' love for her, undiminished with the years, must be of some comfort to her. Here they address her not without an anxious quivering of the stomach — *sele-e-dochka*, "my dear little herring!") Also turning up at the Brighton table is an honored guest and local foundling — senior avocado. And, naturally, pickled pepper. And stuffed pepper. And of course paste of eggplants, seasoned with garlic and grated tomatoes, known to the entire Russian culinary world by the Odessa name "little blue ones" (*sinen'kie*). And right there in far-sighted wisdom — prunes with a walnut's cerebral hemispheres adroitly hidden inside.

Now, when the guests are warmed up, they're ready for the hot hors-d'oeuvres: baby potatoes with garlic and fresh dill, swimming in little puddles of butter as sweet-smelling as alpine meadows — they cooed over in the most gentle and voluptuous terms — *karto-*

shechka, “my darling dear sweet little potato!”; duck baked with apples; carp roasted by the slice; pudding with mushrooms and ground beef.

The only vodka served in Brighton, let’s not forget, is Swedish, with self-promoting name Absolut (no need, so to speak, to look any further). The cognac, of course, is Hennessy — anything else would be an embarrassment. (Don’t even mention Napoleon!) As a chaser, there’s an extract of sour cherry and red grape juice.

6

After your dip into the hors d’oeuvres, before you get down to the serious consumption, you enter the dancing circle and shake it up for a while. Recovering your breath, you pretend that nothing has really been eaten yet, and it’s time to return to the table and have a nosh....

First the young people dance. Then, the forty- and fifty-year-olds. And finally, during the first chords of *Freilechs* and *Hava Nagila*, up from their chairs spring the elderly — those who ordinarily can’t move without their relatives’ help.

As a breather for the audience, the orchestra kindly switches to something measured, a popular tune brought from the old country:

On the steamship the music plays,
While alone I stand on the shore,
At the sounds of the song my heart stops,
I can do nothing more.

The hall listens with particular attention. For the immigrants, the song is all too real. Though in their case there hadn’t been music. Not counting the upbeat singsong about Soviet space flight wailing from the station loudspeaker, with the refrain: “Fourteen minutes to start!” At that time, “to finish” seemed more to the point. After the turmoil of the last sleepless nights, the painstaking wrapping of grandmother’s silver knives to save them from the customs thieves, the incoherent conversations with friends never,

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in all probability, to be seen again, in the head and heart there'd been nothing but fear and hollow melancholy:

On the steamship the music plays....

A steamship! How about a leaky dinghy? That was more likely. The sail would flare up with a shallow ripple, the mast, threatening to fall, would creak, the wind would get behind your collar, and time and again little Regina's doll carriage would get lost. Or maybe it was the doll and not the carriage that got lost....

While alone I stand on the shore....

The rapt, reliable audience sits around the tables. Expensive Italian leather, black, harshly figure hugging, glimmers with a dull shine; the striking forms of women predominate. The naturally Mediterranean faces of the guests look surprisingly like Kabuki masks. In the solemnity of the moment the muscles of the thickly powdered cheeks are motionless, the eyes are narrowed to a slit, the lips — done in fashionable carmine tints — are pursed primly.

Gradually gathering force from a tiny trickle, soon enough the table talk turns into a powerful turbulent flow and gets in full swing. As a rule, guests know one another only slightly: as a close friend of an aunt on the groom's side, as a co-worker of a cousin on the bride's side. The usual immigrant chit-chat: "Are you here long?" "Are you well settled?" "How's your English?" "Do you need it at work?" Those who've started a business here speak of it modestly, with a slight sigh. What else could they do? In America, without the language, their former occupation — warehouse clerk — had become pointless.

At the table is also a woman who'd come to America, with a small child, in complete despair — not only without a husband and without the language, but without any basic survival skills. But then, out of nowhere, after a short course in something as simple as giving facials to the natives, everything, little by little, had become possible — even a trip to the terrifying homeland to see dear girlfriends. Telling her simple story, the narrator can barely restrain

her love for her own hands. It turns out they're such clever little ones! Up to now they'd pretended all they could do was write phony reports from the ghostly construction sites of communism, or newspaper articles, full of feigned enthusiasm, on the gala openings of public laundries: "A joyous surprise awaits the working mothers of the Red October region." In a surge of gratitude that her little hands could be such good providers, she kisses them.

Each person at the table considers it a duty to assure the neighbors that, except on family occasions, he or she rarely gets together with immigrants in restaurants. They more often see Americans. Generally, meetings with Americans, American friends, are a topic of pride — intended, no doubt, to invoke envy.

"Excuse me, I'm in a hurry," a middle-aged lady in a pink dress with sparkling gold epaulettes on the shoulders says with a reserved dignity as she gets up. "Sorry. Not to come would have been quite awkward. They just sent a limo from Manhattan. Madonna has to go to an opening. She sent a bodyguard for me."

"Madonna?" someone says. "Which Madonna?"

The wedding deserter's eyes roll upward. "Which? Which? The singer, of course! 'No one will do,' she says, 'but the Russian manicurist Rosa.'" In America the concept of "manicurist," it turns out, is old-fashioned. On Rosa's business card it reads "Nail Artist." Maybe Salvador Dali couldn't have unfolded his fantasies on such a tiny canvas, but the Russian Rosa manages all right.

The conversations around the table are often such in name only. Unlike in American restaurants, which are as quiet as the admitting rooms of village hospitals, at Russian affairs the guests can't communicate other than by shouting in one another's ear. The orchestra so roars that you're sure the trumpets and saxophones are only rented. But the musicians have been paid in hard currency, so let them squeeze out as much music as possible, to the last note. Even if the instruments overheat to collapse, there's nothing to worry about: the insurance will cover it.

"Your first time here?" your neighbor on the left yells in your ear.

"First!" you bark.

"Thirst? So have another drink!" he screams.

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“Good idea!” you chirp.

7

It's either the importance of the occasion or his hoarseness from the previous wedding, but in trying to conduct the ceremony over the thunder of the orchestra and din of voices, the rabbi slides his voice down to the lowest possible register. His tone is inappropriately tragic. The father and mother of the couple are called. Sisters and brothers. Uncles and aunts. Nephews and nieces. First cousins and second cousins.

“What about grandmother and grandfather?” people grumble around the tables.

In the tumult and heat, the rabbi has indeed gotten off track.

“Grandmother Lo-o-o-o-ba and Grandfather Ro-o-o-o-va!” he trumpets.

No one hears him. The wedding's already roaring louder than a Brighton subway train shooting up from the lower depths and rumbling between heaven and earth.

“*Pazhalusta teekha!* Silence, please!” the American rabbi yells, employing his entire store of Russian, mastered specially for Brighton weddings.

A few natives always attend the parties — usually colleagues of the bride's and groom's parents whose ideas about Russians are gleaned from two-minute television reports on world events. Watching the Brighton merriment, the American guests shout “Wow!” and go nuts. Television Russians are gloomy; they glower into the camera. But this — it's no mere wedding of recent refugees, but a spectacle, the hands-down victor in razzle-dazzle over any Olympic Games opening ceremony.

Meanwhile, the waiters (mostly Russian “tourists” with expired visas who've cramped their cheek muscles from the effort of smiling) remove the hors d'oeuvre plates to make room for the main food of the party: roasted chicken with buckwheat kasha, side of lamb, shish kebab (*shashlyk po-kranski*), chicken Kiev and chicken *takbaka*, unfurled and spread out like monks before the altar.

“Your fork! Give me your fork!!!” my round-eyed neighbor (the fellow with the ulcer) cries out. For some time there hasn’t been a trace of his usual melancholy. He’s addressing an American, the only one at the table, who, his first time at a Russian wedding, is smiling a smile that could mean only one thing: he’s completely stupefied. The Round-Eyed is convinced that even if the natives have admittedly put together not too bad a country, they still have no idea how to live. And it’s up to ex-Soviet citizens like him to teach them. Judging by how events are unfolding at the table, life, undoubtedly, has turned out well. He respectfully takes the fork from the American’s hand and with great drama pierces a patty, glossy with butter, that’s miraculously survived from the hors d’oeuvres. He gazes at it as a lover upon a daisy and returns it to the native guest. At the sight of the butter, the American strains to conceal his horror. The round-eyed Russian’s face shows the pride of the tiller — he himself grew the grain, threshed it and baked the patty. Get a load of us, Yankees!

The native guest is an American girl’s dream — more than six feet tall, handsome with a Clark Gable mustache. A fashionable suit, two elegant rings — one silver, from his university, and the other golden, antique, apparently inherited. He’s an engineer, a specialist in metallic alloys. Learning of this, Round-Eyed declares that in America you have to be either a lawyer or a doctor, or, even better, a businessman. Everything else is child’s play, not serious. Engineer-schmengineer.... But it’s all right, the local man is still young — he looks no more than thirty-five. He still has time to come to his senses and go to law school. Round-Eyed struggles with his lack of words for imparting this good advice to the American.

“Well, well,” he sighs. “I should be his age, with his health, and his language. Oy, oy, oy!” He shakes his head; he can’t even begin to list his missed prospects. Staring vacantly into the empty dishes, he mumbles a little and assembles a first sentence in English. Encouraged by this linguistic success, he turns to the American, having decided, apparently, that the first step is always the hardest. From there it will surely be downhill. But the orchestra once again bursts out, and the dancing catches fire.

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Meanwhile, along the walls of the hall, they're laying the dessert tables. On them, watching above the heads of the guests, arms outstretched in amazement, tower huge dolls in hoop skirts of white, pink and pale green marshmallow. Just above them rise multi-storied pagodas of wedding cakes. Among the mountains of sweets, of chiefly former-homeland make and nostalgic assortment — *Little Bear Misha in the North*, *White Nights*, *Northern Palmyra* — dessert king Strudel reigns, covered with marshmallow of all the colors of the rainbow and filled with five kinds of stuffing.

The pièce de résistance of the dessert repertoire, however, is the chocolate: in unexpected shapes and sizes, as well as three colors. There's white — shaped like a lifelike swan, a bare-breasted mermaid and a hare thrice life-sized — and a large candy box containing dark chocolate. Most surprising is the pink chocolate in the form of a rather graceful, considering the material, life-sized woman's leg.

With his sturdy teeth, Round-Eyed breaks off his portion of the lady's ankle and returns to the table. His face shining with perspiration, he barks into the American's ear that still to come is the main wedding cake in a fountain of champagne.

8

You wonder: By what miracle, having stuffed themselves to the breaking point, Brightonites manage to dance?

There's no explanation. Just accept it — they dance!

Ah, how they dance in Brighton! Just watch them move — it's clear they love it and will never forget how. Even when still on the road, the future Brightonites couldn't let everyday pleasures pass them by. In Rome, for example, while they waited for their American visas, the travelers had to count and recount the few lire given out for subsistence. Every so often they visited the Round Market near the Termini Railroad Station and buy up the breastless chicken parts. The inexpensive fowl became popular with the immigrants and quickly took on a nickname — "The Wings of the Soviets." The Odessans are true culinary masters, and even the gizzards and other entrails turned out tasty.

They also filled the large basins, in which, by their southern habit, the arriving mothers otherwise warmed water in the sun and washed the children, with tiny fish from the same Round Market. Expertly pickled, the fish made an excellent appetizer sprat.

Wine in Italy was inexpensive. Also sold was carbonated orangeade. (The immigrants gulped it down and shouted, "I can't believe it! Nothing artificial!") From their suitcases they got out the Stolichnaya, which practically everyone had carted out to sell in Europe. And in the jam-packed little rooms rented from the trusting Italians, who'd never have believed these refugees were capable of such carnival-like gaiety, there was such revelry that the local residents, though themselves by no means phlegmatic, only marveled. How could a country as cold as Russia produce such human boilers, able to out-argue, out-yell, out-dance, and out-eat any Sicilian?

Ah, Odessa,

— resounded along the Roman streets from record players,

... the Pearl by the Sea.

Ah, Odessa, you've known so much sorrow.

Ah, Odessa, my beloved land.

May you bloom and flourish!

The trains rumble over Brighton Beach; the wedding roars, deafening the neighborhood with the hymn of life. The ritual banquet of the human clan — which no one has the power to destroy — thunders on.

Ah, Odessa, the Pearl by the Sea!

That's right, by the sea. Correction: by the ocean!

Translated by Robert Glasser