

Two Nasty Falls, One Super Joyous Wedding, and Literally Zero Vegetables

Our trip through Hell; though we're not quite sure we're back yet

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Exordium: Everyone in Memphis was incredibly kind and friendly. Southern hospitality is a thing. We loved every family member/family friend we met, all of whom were so welcoming, generous, and just wonderful people. And the newlyweds are very happy together. This may not translate in what follows as such details detracted from the narrative.

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The following is a brief four-part summary of my family's trip to Memphis.

Part 1: Arrival

The Airport

Our red-eye flight landed at the Memphis Airport (a rather generous term for what was really a barren 70s-era shack) at 8am last Thursday morning. We made it approximately three gates from where we landed before Babushka Klara tripped and fell.

We tried to help her up, but she was in a lot of pain and couldn't bring herself to stand. A tall, strapping passer-by rushed over, introduced himself as an EMT, and offered to help Babushka Klara. Perhaps it is some solace that despite the horrific fall and subsequent pain, Babushka Klara faithfully stayed on brand and immediately reached up to let the strapping EMT help her up and to a chair at the adjacent shoeshine station.

The shoe shiner immediately called airport police and an American Airlines representative, followed by the paramedics. The shoe shiner was very kind to offer us his chair, his help, and the comforting sentiment: 'the floor is uneven, so people fall here all the time!'

The paramedics arrived and immediately took Babushka Klara and my mom to the hospital. My dad, Levy, and I gathered up our five suitcases and four bags and, looking like a family with a slight hoarding problem, trudged 40 minutes through the ~~grubby wasteland~~ airport to car rental.

After the Hospital

A couple hours later, Babushka Klara was released with a (false) prognosis of a contusion and a Vicodin prescription. A prescription that took no more than 10 minutes to fill, but evidentially long enough for a new car's battery to die. Waiting an hour for road-side service in an empty Walgreen's parking lot at 9pm is not really equivalent to Babushka Klara being confined to a wheelchair for the entire trip, but it certainly rounded out our first day nicely.

Part 2: Family

The Great Cherkassy Exodus

A long time ago when my mother's aunt and uncle immigrated to the United States, they chose their destination by requesting "somewhere sunny". No one can say that the immigration officers did not deliver because they were sent to the sunniest of places—~~hell~~ Memphis, Tennessee. This resulted in one of the world's largest, though virtually unknown, mass migrations, as the entire city of Cherkassy was uprooted and relocated to Memphis (seriously, go to Cherkassy, total ghost town). Some held tightly to their Soviet roots, whilst many quickly assimilated into American culture (for instance, it came as a serious shock that anyone born in America could speak Russian).

Vitya

The first family member we met was Vitya, my mom's cousin. Vitya, we quickly learned, tends to amaze himself with his own personal anecdotes or fun facts and expresses this amazement quite vocally and, seemingly, unceasingly. When Vitya first met up with us in the emergency room, he was particularly shaken by the fact that he owned a wheelchair that he could lend us. Though the wheelchair was a total lifesaver, Vitya wasn't looking for thanks, rather he seemed to be blown away by the mere fact that the wheelchair existed in his possession. Sometimes he would address a person specifically, other times he would just wonder out loud to no one in particular: "but I *have* a wheelchair! I have one at home and I can just *give* it! To use! It's not even a problem! I *have* a wheelchair!"

Rita & Igor

Hair stylists and old family friends, Rita and her son Igor (for a visual, imagine Lord Varys from *Game of Thrones* and Edna from *The Incredibles*) are both full of very extravagantly elaborate stories about themselves. Rita in particular is quite openly opinionated and, upon finding out my mother wanted an undercut, exclaimed: "your mother thinks she is cool?! She is a woman! She needs to focus on framing her face, not forcing a razor to the head of every family member. This is NOT CLASSY!"

Richard & Anya

We met up with Anya, my mom's other cousin (her parents were the catalyst for the Great Cherkassy Exodus) and her husband Richard for brunch the morning of the wedding for some real American grub. The restaurant décor included, but was certainly not limited to, all manner of firearms and an intricate collection of taxidermy mounts. Food included biscuits, sweet tea, and chicken fried chicken* topped with *white* gravy.

At this breakfast we learned that Anya has a brain tumor nestled snugly atop the part of the brain that controls her emotions. Unlike the active, loud, and funny woman we remembered, she was now quite sluggish, quiet, and detached (to someone who didn't know, she could have passed as freshly-botoxed). Though horrifying and upsetting to see, the doctors were quite confident it was benign and simple enough to extract.

Anya has always married American men, though Richard is her third and longest-standing husband. Richard's countenance is best described as the southern counterpart of Harry Potter's Uncle Vernon (though it is important to note that his disposition could not be more different). We met them a few

years ago in Seattle when he paid me the highest of compliments by informing me that with my beautiful smile, I would make an excellent concrete salesman.

When I asked him what he does for a living his reply was succinct: “I sell tampons, Rachelle. I pulled a lotta strings to get that job” (for anyone curious, he also sells pads). When Levy quipped that he had the smile of a tampon salesman, he responded: “Every Sunday, I open the paper to check how many girls were born and smile to myself. Because I know that in 13 years or so, business is going to boom!”

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*Chicken fried chicken is not a typo, but a variation on chicken fried steak, except with chicken. Chicken fried steak is steak that is battered and deep-fried to look like chicken, except it is steak.

Part 3: The Wedding

The original purpose of this trip was to attend the wedding of my second cousin (Anya’s son). Are you familiar with the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*? I’ve never seen it, but based on the title alone, the wedding we attended was sort of like the film title, except it was a wedding with the atmosphere of four funerals.

Before the ceremony

The ceremony was meant to take place outside in the Memphis Botanic Garden, followed by an indoor reception. We rocked up in our nicest suits and dresses; pretty hair, pretty nails, buffed scalps (my dad) though as we caught sight of several denim-clad guests, we realized we could have skipped the scalp buffing.

About 30 minutes after the ceremony was supposed to begin, the rain started. Not a Seattle drizzle, mind you, but a full-blown rainstorm. 30 guests attempted to squeeze onto two golf carts as the ceremony was moved to the reception room. The entrance was flooded, so my mom took her shoes off to rush in only to slip and crash down with full force on the concrete. Nauseous, cold, in pain, but unwaveringly Soviet (resilient, but also stubborn and not super into seeking medical attention), she refused any treatment other than wine.

Once I got a chance to look around, I realized that the groom was sitting on a bench in the entryway, crying. The bride had locked herself in the bathroom due to unforeseen stress while the bridesmaids attempted to pacify (/tranquelize) her with a cocktail of Xanax and alcohol (apparently not her first that day).

The ceremony

Finally, the ceremony started. The groom walked out, still crying. Followed by a scowling bride who entered to the first two lines of *Make You Feel My Love* by Adele: “When the rain is blowing in your face/And the whole world is on your case” before abruptly stopping. It certainly lifted everyone’s spirits. The officiant tried to make light of the situation, but while the groom’s vows were lengthy and heartfelt, the bride kept it short and sweet: “whatever, as long as it is not worse than today” or something like that.

Reception

The reception lasted about two hours. The only highlight was a terrifying sorority tradition where the bride was enclosed by chanting sorority sisters. In the words of a bridesmaid: "I don't know what's going on, but it looks like a virgin sacrifice. Which is awkward as heck cause she ain't no virgin so someone's gonna burst into flames right about now".

A lovely old Southern lady gave them two years. Tops.

Luckily there was plenty of delicious food. The buffet offered three options: Matzo ball soup, crab cakes, and pigs in blanket. Yummy *and* kosher!

Part 4: Coming Home

The flight

Originally, we had a 40-minute layover in Dallas. Issues with the plane, gave us an extra half an hour to speedily wheel Babushka Klara to the gate. Thank God we made it on time, otherwise we would have missed waiting out a storm on the plane for 4 1/2 hours.

Home sweet home

Since coming home:

- Babushka Klara was diagnosed with a pelvic fracture and has a doctor's appointment next week. She is slowly moving around a little with the aid of a walker (that is, when she's not forgetting she's injured and only remembering after she's hopped up, ready to seize the day).
- We ate some vegetables.
- Anya's brain surgery went well, and she is recovering in the ICU.
- My mom still feels pressure in her upper spine and feels light-headed and fuzzy all the time. The CT scan of her head came back clear, but she was given explicit instructions to sleep and take it easy. So, my mom has spent the last few days attempting to grasp a new concept: relaxing.
- Lesson learned. No more American weddings.