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Sharon L. Stephenson
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

During the coffee break I tell Eduard that one of the bigwigs from his lab creeps me out. To him this is no surprise. He asks if I have gone swimming in the Black Sea. No. Not yet. I plan to go this afternoon, when most of the conference participants are on an excursion to a botanical garden. He decides I need an escort.

Eduard is older than my mother, born in 1935. I have known him for over twenty years. Yesterday my children chided me for not including Eduard in our skype session. Today he and I sit outside the conference center, on the floor of a stone balcony, where the wireless is decent. On my little netbook each of our faces, Eduard's and mine, are cut in half. The kids streak around in the other screen of my netbook, leaving contrails. [*excerpt*]

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*a celebration of the interconnectedness
of the written word*

Eduard, Sasha, and I Go to the Black Sea

By Sharon Stephenson

March 21, 2014

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Sasha will go with us to the Black Sea. He is from the same Russian lab as Eduard. He has had a very bad year medically, still being careful.

It is rainy, cool.

They have already been down to the sea, they know the way. I carry a plastic bag with a cashmere cardigan, my hotel pass, and two towels. I will hate the cold water.

The curvy path leading us from the hotel on the hillside to the beach below has a phrase made of thick stucco—"atoms for peace." Two of the thick stucco letters appear spongy, poking from the shrubs.

Sasha is our philosopher-king. He asks if I think the arsenals of nuclear bombs kept us from World War III. I say I honestly don't know. Eduard says I would have made a better prime minister than Margaret Thatcher. We are all full of good feelings for each other.

Construction workers are installing a new road between the hotels and the small gazebos that mark each hotel's allocated strip of pebbly beach. The pebbles are the size of Nerd candies near the retaining wall and as large as my palm at the water's edge. We sit and talk for a while under a canopy, shelter from the rain. Sasha asks us about the new work on atmospheric oxygen being primarily from water's atomic dissociation and not from photosynthesis. Eduard and I have heard nothing about this. I am skeptical—wouldn't global warming increase this ocean-based source of oxygen? He reminds us that most of the world is ocean, not forest, and photosynthesis by itself as the source of all oxygen seems wrong.

It is time to enter the Black Sea. Sasha doesn't go. Eduard says he is still on a lot of medication or perhaps he has a scar still healing.

Eduard and I pussyfoot our way to the water. The rocks are smooth and round, skipping stones, but they hurt my feet. The water is frigid. I turn around and yell at Sasha, vocalizing my misery. Eduard hits the water and starts laughing—a boy's laugh, a quickly oscillating laugh using his whole body. He always laughs like this. He yells that the water is simply too cold. He is in up to his calves, me to my thighs. His proclamation gives me a reason to wade back to shore, feet tender already from the rock.

We retreat to lounge chairs. Sasha gets up and walks around. He decides to go swimming. Eduard and I are thrilled. We have given him gumption. I tell Eduard that Sasha will brag about

this to his wife. Eduard says it depends on their love right now. He says Sasha's wife might be very angry with Sasha for swimming like this. Sasha may still be fragile.

*

Years ago my husband went on an annual trip he and his friends call "Mountain Man Madness" six months after his heart attack. Bored in the cabin, he took a stroll in the snow. No one would call it a hike. He walked alone under the beautiful evergreens while the other men with hearts unmeasured, hearts unseen by colorful dyes, hearts unassisted by stints, trudged up the mountain.

My husband took a walk alone in the quiet forest. Falling snow covered his tracks. For a few minutes he was lost. He told me about it later. The fear that I had kept tapped down during his surprising and fast diagnosis, his surgery only days later, the rehab, popped up like a released spring. I refused to lose him to his stupidity on a mountain. I can imagine Sasha's wife.

*

Sasha swims like a fish. He puts two thumbs up as he struts out of the water. After changing back into street clothes behind a boxy barrier, he sits again with us, holding his wet swimsuit rolled into a small bundle in his hand.

He asks us about the origins of life on Earth. I say the correct conditions coupled with a statistical fluke. He had planned for this answer. How bright his eyes are, periwinkle. He's "done a Fermi", an educated estimate in physicists' parlance, and come up with the chance of life on Earth being only one chance in 10^{130} . Not great odds, he says. Not zero, I say. Plus, what about the chance of life coming from whatever solar system was here before ours? Our sun is only at most half the age of the universe, so there was plenty of time for some other system to prime the pump for us.

We sit under the awnings, waiting for the rain to let up. Eduard and Sasha argue about which river in Sasha's hometown is the confluent one, the Oka or the Volga. Eduard says his grandson even knows the Oka is confluent with the Volga, not the other way around.

Sasha asks me if I swam in the Mississippi river, since I am from Mississippi. I explain how the Army Corps of Engineers made the river straighter for better shipping, and it is either too turbid or impossible to get into because of retaining walls on its banks. He asks if one can swim at other places along the Mississippi. Absolutely, although later I will research this and confirm or deny. Surely there is some place a young child can splash about with friends.

Another physicist joins us. He is in remarkable physical shape. Tonight he is showing his pictures from his Everest trip to anyone who shows up. He is sweaty from running more than he had planned—a security dog gave chase. Welcome to the new Russia, they tell him. Ukraine, tells them back. He goes to a concrete cylinder jutting from the ground and takes off his clothes. A small swimsuit is indeed underneath, he hastens to retie the sides that must have become loose when the dog made him sprint. He is probably Eduard and Sasha's age. He swings his arms in windmills first, then rolls his head around to loosen his neck. Wrists next. Knees held together and rotated in small circles. The three of us watch his commitment to fitness while Sasha points out the radio telescope, a white smear against a distant forested hill and tells us this telescope first confirmed helioseismology. We three commune over how interesting a discovery helioseismology is.

It is time to go back to the hotel. We pass the young, tanned construction workers, some still working in the light rain. The gate leading up to the hotel is locked. Eduard knows the passcode. Sasha does not. The passcode is printed on our hotel passes, but only Eduard actually read the hotel pass. Sasha closes the gate again and makes sure the passcode is true.

When we get back to the hotel, Eduard is ahead of us. Sasha's English is not so great, so he points at his wet swimming trunks in his hand and says "thanks."