



Vladimir Nabokov in 1908, with his mother, Elena Nabokova and his uncle, V.I. Rukavishnikov.

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## Searching for *Nabokov's Unreal Estate*

"You have to walk through the path that runs through the entire village. You'll pass by an abandoned electrical factory, a bunch of huts, and a tractor standing in front of a large mound of dirt. Turn right there and walk for about ten minutes, and when you reach a little meadow and see an oak grove to your left and hear a waterfall to your right, you'll be standing in the spot where Nabokov's house used to be."

These were the instructions given to me by the tour guide at the Nabokov estate on how to get to Vyra. Vyra. The country home Nabokov had described with such languorous longing and parched nostalgia in *Speak Memory, Mary*, and countless Russian poems, where he had discovered through nature those literary techniques that he would later release through art.

Vyra was where he had experienced those first thrills of what he termed aesthetic bliss: "a lark ascending the curds-and-whey sky of a dull spring day, heat lightning taking pictures of a distant line of trees in the night, the palette of maple leaves on brown sand, a small bird's cuneate footprints on new snow."\*

Text and photos by Diana Bruk



"I particularly remember the cool and sonorous quality of the place, the checkerboard flagstones of the hall, ten porcelain cats on a shelf, a sarcophagus and an organ, the skylights and the upper galleries, the colored dusk of mysterious rooms, and carnations and crucifixes everywhere."

– Vladimir Nabokov on Rozhdestveno (above)

This was where he learned of the transformative power of perspective, while peering at the garden through the harlequin patterns of their veranda: "If one looked through blue glass, the sand turned to cinders while inky trees swam in a tropical sky. The yellow created an amber world infused with an extra strong brew of sunshine. The red made the foliage drip



Inside Rozhdestveno. It's exhilarating to see that it's all there. Nothing is kept behind glass, nothing is forbidden to touch.

ruby dark upon a pink footpath. The green soaked greenery in a greener green."

This was where he and his mother would go mushroom-hunting in a fir-lined forest that possessed "that special boletic reek which makes a Russian's nostrils dilate – a dark, dank, satisfying blend of damp moss, rich earth, rotting leaves." It was the magic of these childhood hide-and-seek games that he imbued into his novels, in which the author hides what the reader must joyfully seek.

The Nabokovs were one of the last truly aristocratic Russian families, and as such they had a house in St. Petersburg in which

they lived throughout the year, and three country estates in which they spent their treasured summers. His mother's estate, Vyra (Nazis, fire), his grandmother's estate, Batovo (Bolsheviks, fire), and his grandfather's estate, Rozhdestveno, which he inherited and promptly lost. Of the trifecta, only the Rozhdestveno manor remains.

The journey to Rozhdestveno is simple enough from St. Petersburg. Just hop on a train at Baltisky Vokzal that is heading for Luzhskoye, and get off at Siverskaya station. There you will be faced with the delightful existential problem of taking bus number 500 (which tends to tilt drunkenly at the curves on the road) or *marsbrutka* number 121 (a large white minivan in which the driver somewhat worryingly counts your change while operating the wheel with his forearms). Whichever option you choose, you can be certain that there will be no instructions about where to get off. So you have to tell the driver, in your sweetest and most imploring Russian, the words "Rozhdestveno, please" then sit and wait until he gruffly yells "NABOKOV!" which is your cue to lunge out of the semi-stopping vehicle.

Once you and the ground are reunited, you should be standing next to the only signs of civilization on the empty village's main street: a *produkty*, a few log cabins of inexplicit purpose, and a boarded-up billiards hall. And it is here, as in some fairytale, that you see the stately mansion, with its creamy white columns and pleasantly pale blue color that blends with a cloudy summer sky, sitting with its hands politely folded atop a lush green escarped hill. You might be surprised at how much the still *selo* around you resembles precisely what Nabokov described in his memoirs, the "sun-spangled river; the bridge, the dazzling tin of a can left by a fisherman on its wooden railing; the linden-treed hill with

its rosy red church and marble mausoleum where [his] mother's dead reposed; the strip of short, pastel-green grass, with bald patches of sandy soil, between the road and the lilac bushes behind which walleed, mossy log cabins stood in a rickety row..." The only difference is that the bridge is now a steel-grey highway, on which boxy cars sputter along like in Soviet cartoons. But if you close your eyes while climbing the shaded stairs

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that lead up to the mansion, you can pretend it is just the rush of the river behind you.

I remember panting at the top of the hill and pushing aside an enormous fluffy fir tree bough in order to see the manor house, but that might be just mnemonic embellishment. What I know for sure is that a huge wooden chessboard lay at the entrance, an exciting detail for all who know of the endless chess games that pervade his work.

Because Russians don't particularly like Nabokov and non-Russophonics can't

figure out how to get there (well, now they have this guide), it is very likely that on your pilgrimage, as on mine, you will be the only visitor in months, and the snoozing, shawled elderly woman and curly-haired graduate student who work there will jump at your arrival like china dolls leaping to life.

A mere 90 rubles (about 3 dollars) will buy you an old-fashioned ticket made of brown paper and a guided tour through the spacious estate. Nabokov did not describe his inherited property with particular nostalgia, writing only, "I particularly remember the cool and sonorous quality of the place, the checkerboard flagstones of the hall, ten porcelain cats on a shelf, a sarcophagus and an organ, the skylights and the upper galleries, the colored dusk of mysterious rooms, and carnations and crucifixes everywhere."

And yet it's exhilarating to see that it's all there. Nothing is kept behind glass, nothing is forbidden to touch, not one photograph or knick-knack seems to have been removed. The house feels like a living being, and it seems as though the Nabokovs have just gone out for a picnic and might return at any moment to greet you with an aristocratic nod. Despite being

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a palace, it has that endearingly familiar smell that all Russian country homes exude, that maternal smell of sunbaked beechwood and *parnoye moloko*.

But this is not what I, the burgeoning Nabokov scholar, have come with a metaphorical butterfly net to seek. It is Vyra – the estate that sounds so much like the Russian word for faith.

I ask my curly-haired guide where Vyra is, and he shakes his head sadly.

"It was burned down..."

"...by the Nazis, in 1944,"

I finish. His eyes flicker with the recognition of a fellow stalker. Satisfied I am worthy, he now shares the long, intricate instructions with which I began my tale: "You have to walk through the path that runs through the entire village..."

I wish he would just come with me and show me where it is. I have, after all, come so far – from St. Petersburg on that day, but really from a house in Brooklyn, from a summer when I, fifteen and long-limbed and sun-kissed and sooty-lashed, read my first copy of *Lolita* on a beach in Brighton and fell in love with words. But I feel as though these instructions are almost like a riddle from a Russian fairytale, a journey that I, who is true of heart, must go at alone. And I delight in the knowledge that I am physically acting out one of Nabokov's favorite literary devices: the game of hide and seek.

I also assume that there will be some markers, some Alice-in-Wonderland arrows or marble plaques to help me on my quest. But I will be wrong. As it turns out, the butterfly net is full of holes.

As I embark upon the dusty path, I am shocked at how much the village really is a genuine Russian *derevnya*, populated only by little floral fields and abandoned junk and rows of rotting log cabins that are quiet except



The path to Vyra. I assume there will be some markers to help me on my quest. But I will be wrong.



Outside an abandoned cabin, a cat squeezes her eyes tightly as six kittens suckle fervently on her many teats.

for the occasional, ennui *mooooo* of a bored cow. I stop at one of these cabins to watch a cat, sitting on a wooden table amidst a heap of twisted tin and a bowl of watery mush, squeeze her eyes tightly as six kittens suckle fervently on her many teats. The heavy door creaks open and the owner, an elderly man in a cotton frock and felt boots, appears. He is friendly and chatty the way provincial Russian folk often are, not distinguishing between relatives and strangers. But when I ask him where Nabokov used to live, he asks me who that is.

He tells me he's about to milk his goats and offers to sell me some, and I accept. Hunching to get back through the tiny entrance, he slips back into the house and appears only a few minutes later, carrying an enormous glass jug of milk. I can tell when I pay him that he thinks he's getting an absurdly large amount of money, just as I feel I am paying absurdly little. I drink the milk and it's like nothing I've ever tasted before: thick and rich and still warm from the udder. It's a special sort of warmth, like the kind that you feel when pressing your ear to a pregnant belly. As I drink, the milk dripping around my mouth, the cat hops off the table and rubs herself against my leg, begging to be petted. I feel like I'm imbibing all of the love of the Russian countryside.

I encounter other oddities as I continue down the path, most notably a large, rusty rectangular structure that looks quite a bit like a 1960s command station that dropped from a space shuttle and landed on its feet in a field. Nearly an hour in now, I repeat the graduate student's instructions over and over in my head and worry that I misunderstood. I pass by what looks like an abandoned factory, but is it an abandoned *electrical* factory? Does it matter? I reach the empty tractor in a field, but, wait, there are several mounds of dirt, and a fork in the road. At which

mound of dirt am I supposed to turn right?

I pick the dirt mound that feels right and trek onward, the grass growing higher and higher. I tear at it as I walk, feeling the tall blades squeak between my fingers. I hear a faint, reverberating *ooooo*, that's probably an owl but resembles the call made by Russian mushroom-gatherers who

gaps and golden teeth. He tells me the building used to be Nabokov's old stable houses. I'm dubious until he points to a lingering gold nameplate that bears the initials of Nabokov's mother's maiden name. The building is so dilapidated that the gold, which I know must be real, seems fake.



Nabokov's old stable houses, now an abandoned tire factory. A Georgian man shows me around and tries to invite me into his trailer.

have lost their way. As the summer *sumerki* approach, pink bleeds into a watercolor sky, and the crickets begin their anxious chorus.

I come across a short brick building; parts of it are scraped off to reveal a dull brown stone, and something feels not quite right about the large wooden gates whose viridescent color matches that of its surrounding vegetation. I pull at the handle, but the door is bolted shut.

Suddenly, a Georgian man appears from a nearby trailer. His hands are soiled and when he smiles he reveals a mouth of dark

He offers to let me look inside and opens the gate with his keys. The view inside is depressing: it's an average tire factory, one that was apparently also abandoned a long time ago, flanked with old rubber and ladders and oxygen tanks. I wish at that moment that I hadn't looked inside.

The Georgian man invites me into his trailer. "You come in. You drink hot soup. You nap on my bed. I give you tour," he says with a gap-and-gold-toothed grin. I smile politely and shake my head, quickly trotting away.

I love Nabokov, but not that much.

Finally, I reach a little meadow that's different from the others. It's encircled by pines and lindens that stand like loyal guardians in a neat, lifelong row. The grass is lower here and more even, as though still expecting to be scythed; there is a section near the oak grove that's balding, as though tread upon a million times before. Some of the trees lean against one another unnaturally, in permanent memory of the edifice that forced them to intertwine. I search in vain for signs of scorched earth, but find only the white globes of dandelions on which my mother, like all Russian mothers, taught her children to make wishes.

And, to my right, I hear a waterfall rushing.

I lie on the ground and try to breathe in Nabokov's genius, but more so, try to breathe in his aesthetic bliss. Later, I will futilely look for all of those details that he

described so phantasmagorically in his fiction that they pale in the white light of reality: the fragrant bushes of lilac and honeysuckle, the reddish dust of the driveway, the Dunlop tire imprints that Nabokov would follow while cycling through the paths of the park and snapping fallen twigs with his sensitive front wheel. I will try to find the ghost of the rainbow-colored pavilion in which he penned his first poem during a thunderstorm that turned the tennis court into a "region of great lakes." I will think of how he wrote of Benois and Somov paintings hanging next to a colored drawing of this pavilion and proudly wrote, "The Somov and Benois are now in some Soviet museum, but that pavilion will never be nationalized."

And I will realize that this trip, while wonderful, was completely unnecessary.

The Vyra estate doesn't exist anymore, and I may never know whether or not I truly was lying in the spot where it once stood. But I know Nabokov would have preferred it that way. It was in Vyra that he inherited from his mother "an exquisite simulacrum – the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate – and this proved a splendid training for the endurance of later losses."

Fiction, for Nabokov, was the final stand against tyranny. The Nazis may have burned down the property, but the house lives on even more vividly in his works, incapable of being destroyed or tainted by time. It exists eternally in the safe annals of literature, where he and his beloved readers can visit it whenever they please, and where they can forever harmoniously reside. And that is the only immortality any house can hope for, my reader. RL



*A little meadow that is different from the others.*

*Vyra once stood here. Perhaps.*