

3. Love at First Bite

Piotr defected from Bulgaria and sought political asylum in the United States after the 1988 (Seoul) Olympics. He had failed to win a medal in any of the weight-lifting events and was therefore at risk of execution if he went back to Bulgaria. He had a sincere and long-standing dislike of Communism, because its system did not allow athletes to keep their own winnings, and on that basis he was quickly admitted to the United States and given permanent residency.

There are not many good jobs available in the U.S. to 33 year old Bulgarian ex-weightlifters whose formal education stopped in the 7th grade, even if they are unbelievably strong and they are fluent in Bulgarian, Russian and English and moderately conversant in Greek, Italian, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Korean and Japanese. He might have started a business, but his wealth (such as it was) had been seized in Bulgaria and the Bulgarian currency was in any case not convertible. However, in 1988 the boom in people pretending to seek physical fitness had just started, and he was able to get a job in a gym in Ann Arbor. This paid only modestly well, but it gave him free gym privileges, and that was important because, then as now, Piotr liked to exercise at least six hours per day.

Some years later, when Piotr had moved up to a management position, Kristin appeared in the gym. Her former boyfriend had been discarded when he announced he was going on an overnight golf outing with his buddies, and she was now between boyfriends. This was not a condition that usually lasted very long for her, but she was spending too much time lately with academic types whose sexual stamina she doubted, and had not met anyone appropriate. She usually exercised at home but she had heard that gyms were good places to meet fit guys, so she bought some exercise wear from Victoria's Silly and went.

Kristin bounced around on the treadmills and then worked her way through the weight machines at the gym until she came to one on which the previous user had left the heavy (45 pound) steel plates. Although she was in incredibly good shape, she was not a particularly muscular woman and these plates were too heavy for her to lift or even remove safely. So she went to the desk and asked Piotr for assistance. He removed them effortlessly, one in each hand, and as he did so he took close notice of her magnificent boobs and she noticed the way the muscles on his back barely rippled as he lifted the plates off the machine. She would not normally have paid much attention to someone so old – he was nearly her age, and while the term “cougar” had not yet been invented, she clearly preferred men much younger than herself – but there was something about his obviously enormous strength that appealed to her and (correctly) suggested considerable sexual prowess. So she went back to the gym the next day, wearing clothing with a lower neckline, and replacing her sports bra with a pushup bra. Even in those days, before the helium bra, the effect was devastating. Piotr saw her walking across the parking lot and quickly loaded the weight machines with as many heavy plates as he could find. Then when she complained he gallantly and effortlessly removed them, and hoped that she would show her gratitude in the traditional female way.

He did not have long to wait. He invited her for dinner at his apartment the next evening, and she accepted. Kristin, who would eat almost anything if it was not spicy and did not contain garlic, asked if he would cook Bulgarian food. This raised some difficulties because Piotr was an extremely fussy eater whose typical dinner consisted of steamed wild-caught Alaskan sockeye salmon, a plain baked potato or farro pasta with extra-virgin olive oil, and some steamed vegetables. He had already eaten enough Bulgarian food to last him a lifetime, and had no idea how to cook it. However, he phoned his mother and soon had recipes for a dinner that included

turshiya, shkembe chorba, and gyuveche (served of course with lyutenitsa and both pita and banitsa), all of which would be washed down with several bottles of the excellent mavrud wine from the vineyards of Asenovgrad. Dessert would be garash cake. (All spellings are approximate due to the difference in alphabets, and because Piotr's formal education had ended early.)

Some modifications of the recipes would be necessary. He left the garlic out of the turshiya, shkembe chorba and lyutenitsa to keep Kristin happy and to keep her breath fresh. He could not find tripe of high enough quality for the shkembe chorba, but he found andouillette sausages at a snotty yuppy deli and substituted those for the tripe. Also he bought some salmon caviar (naturally from wild-caught Alaskan sockeye salmon) to eat while Kristin had the turshiya. That would be the appetizer, followed by the soup course, then the gyuveche and finally the cake for dessert.

It was love at first bite. Both Piotr and Kristin thought their meal was delicious, though they both had the same thought ("How can he [she] enjoy that shit?") about the other person's food. This was quickly replaced by "for this guy [woman] it might be worth eating fish [Bulgarian food again]." By the time they got to the cake, they were sitting very close together and feeding each other bites of the cake. Piotr would not normally eat cake, but this seemed like a good occasion to make an exception.

They had finished two bottles of wine and moved on to the rakia when Piotr leaned over and gently kissed Kristin on the neck. The effect could be compared to a tsunami, or perhaps the detonation of a small nuclear device. Within eight seconds all clothing had been removed (some of it would later need repair) and they were in Piotr's bed. For the first three hours or so, Piotr just did what Kristin said. It was sort of like being on a raft in the ocean in a hurricane – the

main thing is not to panic, and not to fall off. Just go where the wind and waves take you, and hope you are still alive when the storm abates. Finally, she laid back on the bed and said “Now it’s your turn.” So for the next six minutes or so, they did what Piotr wanted. Then they collapsed and slept until noon.

The next day was a Sunday and a moving company could not be found that would move Piotr’s things before the day after that. So he just packed a toothbrush, a few clothes and some of his lighter weights and moved into her condo, with the rest of his belongings following on Monday. Due to peculiarities of the law in Michigan (having to do with things like taking a sexual health education class before a marriage license can be issued) they did not succeed in getting married before Wednesday of the following week. Kristin cheerfully paid for the ticket for Piotr’s mother to travel from Sofia for the wedding, which featured an even more lavish spread of Bulgarian food than the infamous first meal (though Piotr ate salmon), and Piotr’s mother left with a suitcase full of pushup bras to sell for a small fortune in Bulgaria.

Their only wedding presents to each other were promises to make love for 1000 consecutive days. (Kristin later claimed that Piotr had promised her 10,000 days, but he knew that he would not have been stupid enough to agree to that.) This required Piotr to quit his job at the gym in order to be able to accompany Kristin on her many trips to all parts of the world, but it still gave him plenty of time to exercise, to cook extravagant daily dinners, and to learn to clean Kristin’s (now *their*) wooden floors with the amazing Swiffer cleaning system. Being a house-husband was not a bad life, especially when married to a woman like Kristin, even though Piotr did not yet have Ted to keep him company while she went to work.

Piotr later invented a recipe for gyuveche made with wild-caught Alaskan sockeye salmon, which can be found in his popular cookbook, *You Don't Have to Go to Bulgaria to Eat Healthy*.