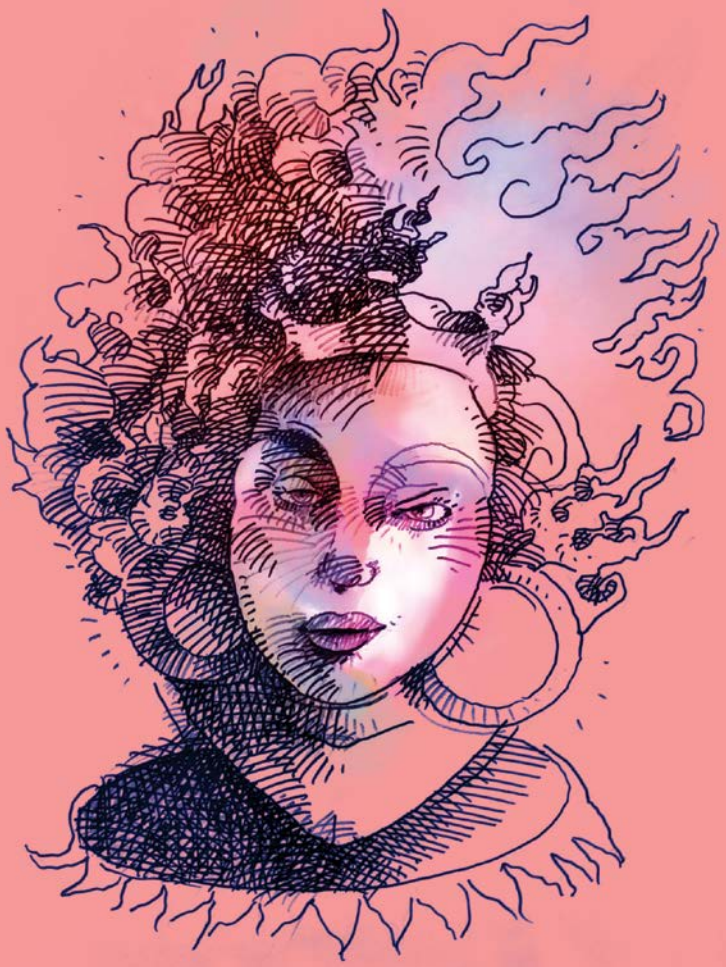
TWO BIG DIFFERENCES



BY IAN ROSS SINGLETON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TWO BIG DIFFERENCES

a novel

BY IAN ROSS SINGLETON

Illustrated by William Ford

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Ian Ross Singleton

Two Big Differences. *A Novel*

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Одесса очень скверный город. Это всем известно. Вместо «большая разница» там говорят — «две большие разницы».

Odessa's a very wretched city. Everybody knows that. Instead of "a big difference," they say, "two big differences."

— Isaak Babel (1894–1940)

Изя, ты куда идешь? — Нет, иду домой.
Izya, where are you going? No, I'm going home.

— Mikhail Zhvanetsky (1934–2020)

A NOTE BEFORE READING:

In this text, italics indicate a translation from Russian. Otherwise, language in quotations is as it sounds.

PROLOGUE

Valentine, Valya, or Valinka

This story is the American English version of one that should take place in Ukrainian Russian. Odessan Russian, Zina would say. She would call me Valinka or Valya or Valentine.

Zina…how would she tell this story? It's in her voice, in my head, which is located in America now.

But my head was in her Odessa. When I waited in the airport to fly away, to fly home, I pictured Odessa from above. As my mind flew away, my body soon followed. My Russian is still fluent. It's not fluent enough to tell this story in Russian, though. It's enough to speak with my inner Zina. I drive around the destroyed landscape here in Detroit. It means nothing to me now. I want to see it from above. I want my inner Zina to fly me away from here on her silver tongue.

Her tongue I tasted. It was *spicy* like Odessan chestnuts, as Odessan as the wisps of grassy seaside air. I loved her tongue.

So now I should no longer speak Russian? There are two sides to every story. The real story comes out of what's least expected, what's not quite right. I'm an American, born and raised. This story made me foreign here in America. I'm here now on the opposite side of it, the opposite end from the day it began, even though it began here. But here wasn't here then. It was different. I loved Zina's tongue, and I want to become it. I want to spread my Odessan bird-of-paradise wings and fly like Zina did when she told stories.

Zina would think I stole her story and flew from Odessa with it. Sometimes I hear her tongue deep within my ear, a little Zina in a foreigner's mind.

Her father, Oleg, was convinced that America, where I am now, stole her away from him long before he even met me.

ONE

Oleg

In February 2014, on the morning of the day when Zina would return to her motherland for the first time since leaving for America, Oleg's feet touched the floor early. Black tea finished the job of waking him. Half of a pan-warmed sausage and buckwheat kasha finished the job of feeding him. He was a freelance handyman and mechanic who specialized in maritime vehicles. He used to find jobs in the port. Now he typed inquiries into internet search engines. Either way, he still found next to nothing. He lived off next to nothing.

Now that Zina was returning home, he would need more, at least more than black tea, half a sausage, and kasha, even if it was buckwheat. The temperature in Celsius was already approaching *twelve*. To swim, his magic number was *fifteen*. He did a set of stretches for his knee to coax three more degrees of warmth from his motherland. He limped through the apartment littered with books piled alongside tiles, parquets, boxes of nails, a sander and behind a ladder draped with a sheet of canvas, the only occupants of his home since Zina left.

Outside the apartment, he could and did make wider strides. He had always annoyed his mother when he talked to himself. Then he annoyed Galka. Then Zina. *Snails for dinner. Probably, like an American, Zinochka will be sickened by snails.*

Down a crumbling path to Lanzheron Beach, he passed an acacia tree. He thought of the tiny yellow leaves that would be there in a couple months, how they would spiral slowly downward. The sky was clear, as was the beach, the water. He undressed, revealing be-

neath his shirt the chain from which hung a piece of shrapnel that had once occupied space inside his leg. *I'm that handy*, he would say if somebody asked where the shrapnel came from. He annoyed those who knew him, other "*specialists*", with such talk.

If somebody asked, *Who swims in the Black Sea in February?* somebody else, somebody who knew Oleg, would answer, *He can take it*.

He wedged his feet into fins, grabbed his mask and snorkel, and made a splash as the water took him in. He plunged in the direction of the sea wall. After surfacing, he tried to float on his back, but his torso floated downward. In his mask, sky to sea to sky again. He snorted, sprayed water, flipped on his stomach, but still floated downward. A wave washed over his face. He took it and cleared his nostrils of the salty spray. There was no one in the water by any of the beaches stretching north to the city center or south past Ibitsa Beach, where the nightclub raged till morning. He dove, snatched snails from their paths along the silent floor.

Mackerel swam alongside the sea wall. He tried to mimic their languor. The anecdote went that, on the beach side of the sea wall, they waited for some fishing pole to snatch them from their lonely life. He had considered catching and releasing them into the wide world on the other side. He climbed and walked along the barnacled top. He dove and scooped several snails, placed them in the bag and, when it was full, twisted it shut and looped it around his wrist. *The job is such. The "Amerikanka,"* as he referred to his daughter, *should help save the sea. Eat snails — save the sea.*

Having almost filled his first bag, he surfaced and set it on the sea wall. His movements made the empty second bag billow with water. His mask fogged. That fog and the water lapping against the concrete and the waves along the sandy places took his memories. He used to swim out so far that the land was a fogged essence, against which the waves lapped and over which they washed until it was gone. He returned toward that essence, emerged, crossed the beach, and lay under a tree against the cliff

over Lanzheron. On this sandy flat place he had lain, with a backpack for a pillow, so many drunken nights of his life. He remembered that morning every day. When he woke, Galka lay in bed with one eye open, her arm poised to push herself up. He dressed, came here to the beach. When he returned, his woman was gone. It was simple, a little bit stupid even. The man who came to collect Galka's bare essentials was quiet. And Oleg was glad for that. Zina was not quiet. *How could mama leave?*

Back then he was no good at thinking of anecdotes, so he simply answered, *How could mama arrive?*

Zina's arrival would be in a few hours, so he had to push himself up, take his backpack full of snails home, and sit on a bus to the Odessa airport.

An older man named Volodya was on the bus with Oleg. When Oleg was a boy, Volodya had taken him to weight lifting sessions. Now Volodya was complicated, like the intricate mechanisms he invited Oleg to fix at Volodya's dacha in Arkadia. Volodya couldn't use his own arthritic fingers. He asked, *Who in your family emigrated? Who's coming home?* The first of these questions had bothered Oleg most of all in his life. It was a light bother, like a stomach groaning. Yes, both his wife and his daughter had left Odessa behind. Lots of people leave their homes. And lots of people don't speak to their parents for lots of different periods of time.

Out of all that bother, an anecdote had arrived to him, and he answered Volodya with:

> *A boy and a girl lived in the same building where, without the supervision of their mamas, they played together when they were bored. The girl became sad often, counting the dark clouds. The boy took a toy airplane and scraped the air next to the girl's ear. "It's cleaning your bad thoughts away," the boy said. Whenever an airplane flew overhead, he said it was carrying away the girl's sadness. It seemed the boy knew by heart and could recite the schedule*

of the few airplanes that flew over their apartment because, as he declared this, one roared overhead. Maybe because it was so amazing for a little Odessitka, it worked. The girl became...happy.

At age sixteen, the girl's hand flew into the boy's when they met. At seventeen, they played tails and holes in the boy's room shared with his mama who was away, of course.

At eighteen, the boy went to say, "At your service!" in the Flot. *The girl worried that something might pummel the voice out of his body. The girl put his words about her thoughts into the cabinet where they would sit alongside the beautiful dishes only to be used on special occasions, which became rarer and rarer until there were no more special occasions whatsoever. She looked at a knot in the cabinet which resembled a heart like the one in anatomy class. She didn't want the boy to see her cry. Boys didn't cry. Girls shouldn't either. But the girl wasn't an idiot. She knew the boy would know about how she put his words away, would know she cried. It was as if the boy lied about how he took away her sadness. It was as if he replaced it with a new sadness. There were more airplanes by this time. But now they brought sadness rather than carried it away. She watched them scrape the sky and wanted them to fall like flies. She swore always to remember this offense in her heart, which hurt and hurt until it became wooden.*

When the boy returned from the Navy, he was wounded and, maybe for that reason, he wanted to wound others. He banged his fist into his palm. There were things he didn't tell the girl, things he might still want to do. He forgot how they walked in the forest nearby.

The girl waited. She gave birth to a baby. But she was still a girl who was waiting and waiting. While she waited, she liked to sip vodka in order to fly.

When the girl was a mama for seven years, she disappeared, leaving the boy and their daughter behind. She forsook where she came from. The boy and girl became two strangers. Neither of them told anybody their story. It felt unfinished, without an

ending, a kettle that screamed and was abruptly removed from the stove.

What about the daughter? asked Volodya.

The daughter, well…

I can tell you wrote that down. That's unlike any anecdote I ever heard, Volodya said. *They say "Smells like an anecdote." That doesn't. And besides, anecdotes are usually a Jewish thing. About that Abramovich fellow.*

Well…, Oleg responded. He never finished his sentence, like so many didn't finish sentences during that uncertain time. Oleg didn't care if it smelled right. What good would it do to tell, instead of his anecdote, that his wife, the girl, left him because of a very small argument that took place in their kitchen and then echoed through his thoughts in the bathroom? He, the boy, charred some blintzes. Not long before, his wife read a book that said char caused cancer. It was an American book, poorly translated into Russian. In the bathroom, he swore to himself that he would separate with her. So it began. If they couldn't be in the kitchen without an argument, that meant it was the end because the kitchen is truly the home's heart. Then came that morning. *How could mama leave?*

Volodya limped out of the bus at a stop before they arrived at the airport. When Oleg, a bit more neatly, limped off, he realized that it was the second time in his life that he had been to the Odessa airport. He had studied the science of partings many times at the Odessa train station, closer to the center of the city. He had even thought of exiting the country he had known all his life. By the time glasnost had begun, the borders had opened up. The Berlin wall had come down. The country had locked down. *Maybe you won't be able to return*, his mother had said on the brink of her death, withering whatever bodily link with Soviet sentimentality existed. The TV had showed only *Swan Lake* on repeat, and the world of all Soviet people changed forever more. That

had been twenty-four years ago. During that time, a postcard had arrived from America, San Francisco to be precise, something he had never told Zina. Galka had become only a thread of correspondence, an abstraction, out there in the world. Packages of sweets and riches from San Francisco had arrived too. He wouldn't touch them with his finger, not to mention his tongue, and he had discarded them before Zina could see.

The only other time he had been to the Odessa airport was when Zina left on an airplane for America. While Zina was there, he would demand that she call him no matter the cost. He worried that something would be lost of their language, which meant their togetherness. It had been such a foolish reason for her to travel to America. Why find her mother, Galka, when Zina had Odessa, her motherland?

In truth, he had tried to live as if Galka never existed, had never been born nor, more to the matter, given birth. It was easy, the same way he lived with regard to his own father. Why did Zina need so much motherly love when he had been fine without a father?

Oleg loved to recite a true anecdote, not written by him, about delinquent dads. The punchline goes, *It's called immaculate conception*. Another one goes, *Abramovich complains to a stranger that he has no children. "It was the same with my father, and my grandfather too." With surprise, the stranger snorts, "Then where are you from?" "Odessa," Abramovich answers.*

And then there she was before him in the airport, as if she had been born of the Heavens. His dear daughter had returned. And there was an American with her.

TWO

Zina, Zinka, or Zinochka

Zina hissed, "The guide for tourists says *privyet* or *den dobryi* for hello. Not what I like to say, *drassss!* Anecdote." She switched to Russian with another heavy *D* sound. *Two travelers are on a boat. One asks, "Where are we headed?" "Yalta," says the other. The first says, "You said we're headed to Yalta because you thought I would*

think we're not headed to Yalta. But we're definitely headed to Yalta. Why are you lying?"

I didn't understand, Valinka said. So he switched. "I was just reading about this word, *tovarishch*, comrade. It's from Turkish. It's a commercial word. Capitalist."

Talkative, with more questions than answers, Valinka was womanly. Was that why Zina wanted him to come with her to Odessa? She looked through the glass wall of the Detroit airport, in the vacuum of which they sat. The wind had mutely twisted all the pieces of the world. She was returning home not with her mother, Galya, not even with a mother figure, and not even with a woman, but with a womanly person, at least.

On the walls were photographs of a Detroit-born *Great Patriotic War* sailor. She supposed the sailor himself would call it World War II. He had been lost at sea for three days. "My papa, he was in the Navy. You gonna meet him soon. So you gonna hear one of his stories. He once climb all the way to the top of the mast." Her English sounded better than ever, she thought to herself. "He is on the cruiser. There is the antenna there. A little ladder. You saw it? So, he swear this is true story. He was so high that he see fighter jets. They were American. One of this jets come so low that the American pilot wave at my papa. My papa almost fell into the water. My mama never believed this story." Her papa always said, at least, that she never believed.

Another one came to her. "Also, once, they catch the shark. They pull the shark onto the…*palubu*," her native language was regaining territory in her brain, "…and the shark, she is still alive. In Russian, *akula*. She. They caught her on the hook on the fucking chain." She could see other Americans nearby taking notice of her. She was loud, she was on her way out, thank God. "She jumping on the deck. The sailors cursing her. All she can do, she can growl. She growling at them. One sailor, one man, he put his fist in her eye." With her fist, Zina waved. "You know what she does? She jump and she eat his fucking arm off." The man next to them

dropped his cell phone when Zina mentioned the bitten off arm. He and a woman next to him began to gather their items. "One bite." Zina laughed. The couple stood. While laughing, Zina saw the landscape again and longed to be able to sit and look out the window. "Point is, that like Ukraina. Don't fuck with her."

Valinka sat back and made a small tent with his fingers. He looked inside. In one of the spaces vacated by the Americans, she rested her feet. Now she had a better view of that mute, windswept world, which she could again witness. "Better than TV," she said. On the tarmac, the controllers were walking around with their glowing wands. Strolling was a better word for the way they walked. She wondered how much these jobs paid. They should pay well. Think of how much is involved, the responsibility of bringing these whales of the sky to the right place the right way, to tame them.

Valinka had taken out his Russian dictionary. She watched him flip the page, find the top corner of the next one. His eyes darted back and forth when he thought. Her papa's eyes did the same. She didn't know whether hers did.

She glanced out at the flat landscape of southeast Michigan, glared at how mute it was. The worst part of airports was the feeling of already being in soundless outer space. The wind was whipping the world, slapping surfaces and vibrating through metal sheets, shaking trees enough to shatter, and she could hear none of the destruction. "You read your books. But how you think it gonna be in Odessa? I guide you. But how you think it's gonna be?" she asked.

You should speak to me in Russian, was his answer.

On the tarmac, a controller, having fulfilled her duty for the time being, put her arms out Christ-like and fell into the wind, which held her for half a second before she stumbled and barely caught her upper body from slamming into the cement. Zina wished she could hear what kind of curses the woman was uttering. Maybe the controller wasn't cursing at all. She could be

laughing. Other controllers approached her from a different side of the tarmac. One took her elbow in hand. They had a meeting there on the tarmac. One crouched down and began the arc of a slow-motion backflip, not completed. If Zina tried her hardest, she could imagine them speaking. The controller who had done the trust fall spoke Russian.

I'll tell you, she said, the way Galya would. It was time to speak the mother tongue. Upon hearing it, Valinka immediately put his dictionary away and sat upright. *The water around the port in Odessa is choppy with activity.*

We're flying in, he said.

Don't interrupt. I bought your ticket. You'll say, "There are the dachas of Odessa," when you see them. When we arrive, probably, it's red morning. As usual, there's a crowd when outsiders arrive. Odessa's in miniature, but it always feels as if it's in miniature. Watch out. There's a man in a peacoat, like the one I have from my papa. He'll greet you, request your passport. If you give it to him to hold, he'll walk away with it. He will shrug his shoulders the Odessan way as if he was a puppet, lifted for a moment by invisible strings hanging from the hand of God, who snatched him away with your passport. In short, don't give him your passport. Don't be swindled. He might have a little badge on a little chain. He might have a military uniform of some kind. Look around. There are many people with pieces of military uniform. This man has a fucking "budyonovka." What is it? It's what the Bolsheviks wore almost one hundred years ago. And this asshole wears a shirt with a loop of cloth for epaulets. No epaulets, though. This man wears several rings, clinking jewelry too large for hands that work on a ship. And in one of those hands is a cigarette. Don't speak a single word of English.

*A young boy will remark on your beautiful shoes, unlike any he saw before in his life. A man with large cheek bones will size you up. Under the protruding Slavic bone of his cheek will be a scar. Everybody is still gaunt, as if it's still the nineties. If your passport was stolen, you'll find a policeman. You'll complain to him. He'll tell you, "*Hello*!" with a heavy KH sound. Then he'll say, "Follow me." Maybe he'll smile, but his voice*

won't. Your steps will echo along the cobblestones. When you complain again about your passport, he'll say, "Welcome to Odessa."

If you go to the police station, which I don't recommend, there will be a man without a uniform, in a suit instead. The suit doesn't fit him. How could a suit fit him? Even he's gaunt. When you complain, he'll raise his index finger to an evil smile. "Can you prove you're American another way?"

Another cop will say, "Ask him if he has any dollars to prove it." For them you are exotic, a trinket from America, a souvenir.

If not for me, this tragedy would happen. If not for me, you would stay in a hotel by the central port, where all the foreigners live. You would have a view of the stairs of Potemkin, the Opera Theater, small sailboats, high cliffs overlooking beaches, the walls of an aqueduct. It would cost a lot more money than you have, all your money for a long time.

I'll take care of you now. You'll live with me and my papa. You must speak Russian.

Imagine what it was like for a woman who came to your country.

This womanly person, whose eyes were glazing over, who was clearly not listening, this Valinka Zina was bringing to the place of her birth, the place where she lived most of her life, the place where, probably, she would die. She would not be able to return to the United States of America, the land where Galya was. Maybe she should go, at least, to where Galya was from? Not Poltava. Galya from Poltava, a Poltavka, came to Odessa, married an Odessan, learned Odessan anecdotes — many of them having to do with poor Abramovich — so well that the Poltavka became an honorary Odessitka. And she had herself a child Odessitka. Maybe now she was too much of an Amerikanka to be an Odessitka anymore.

The Odessitka needed to keep telling Valinka about Odessa. *This place was Kievskaya Rus, became the Russian Empire, became the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, and became Ukraine. Each place was an acacia petal, rising in the breeze, floating, only to fall underfoot*

again. Like the tongue speaking Russian, it touches the top of the mouth at times, for the soft sign, or to say the name of my birthplace properly: Odyessa. "Odd Yes Ah." *The breeze there carries the smell of grass and sea. Those petals come to a rest on shellrock both gentle and strong. That shellrock was unearthed to build that city on its own hollows, which run all the way to Tairovsky Cemetery, one of the biggest in Ukraine. There, they say, lies an entrance to the catacombs.* Galya, in her mind, said, *Sh, don't tell anybody about it.*

Her anecdotes touched Valinka, unearthed him, and this power made her an honorary Odessitka again. Ah Deceit Ka. He called this Odessitka Zina, short for Zinaida, which nobody would have called her. He could call her Zinka or Zinochka too if he wanted. If he called her Zinaida, she would stick her tongue out in his face. If that hurt his feelings, he might not stick it out in Odessa.

You were never an honorary Amerikanka, Galya said inside Zina. Her American dream had begun twenty years ago when Zina was seven, when she woke one morning to find that her mama left her and papa and traveled to America. Now, slouching in the airport, Zina could feel it coming to an end.

When Zina had asked why Mama left, her papa told her it was because her mama had wanted a car, something which, in Odessa, he had never possessed the means to acquire. When Zina read the list of the cities in which Gastarb East — the guest worker program that was her ticket to the USA — would offer employment, she picked the one where they made all the cars for all the Americans. She picked the city of Detroit. Through Gastarb East, a McDonald's near the Corktown neighborhood of Detroit sponsored Zina to work. The American dream was ready for her, the same way it had laid itself prostrate before her mama. Her mama, though, had a man. Zina was alone. The closest she had to a man had been a Ukrainian-American in the Detroit area. He had friended her on ibook.com. His name was Valentine Pechenko, and he had offered a space where she could live. He was

a self-proclaimed Socialist and lived in what he thought was a communal apartment. He was even learning Russian. It was a start, a communal apartment. The next step would be her very own room. The American dream was one's own apartment. Her mama probably shared one with her man. The American dream was what had brought her mama to America. If Zina stayed in America too, her papa would die. The American dream was, therefore, the dream of the Western enemy, who wanted to kill a poor old Soviet.

When Zina had arrived here, she had passed through Customs more easily than when she had left Ukraine, where she had been asked several times whether she was a prostitute. Now she expected it would be easier on the Ukrainian side.

When she had arrived here, she had taken a bus from the airport into the city. The bus heaved through regions of the Detroit metropolitan area that resembled the industrial outskirts of Odessa. It was a translation. The towers built outside the city center of Odessa had their translations here too. Neither kind of structure was a place to live. It was a place to put people until they died. It was not a dwelling. It was housing. In Detroit, there were individual bricks. In Odessa there was more lightly colored cement, a broad seamless swath.

She had thought she could translate the dream back into something she and her mama spoke in Odessa. The American dream became the American joke.

In Detroit, Zina had exited the bus, walked, and finally dropped her duffel bag on a patch of sidewalk at the intersection of two streets. Inside were her clothes, a notepad, and her items of hygiene. Along these streets ran empty dirt fields, lots with cement paths leading to nothing. There must have been homes here once. Zina had wondered where all those people migrated, where their dreams had taken them and from which dirty bus station they had departed. A rhythmic drilling had been audible there, although it was unclear from which side it was com-

ing or whether it came from the ground itself. To this emptiness and its drilling, which was as black and without echo as the hinterland between Odessa and Kiev, she said, *Greetings*. Her papa had taught her this word. It was one of the first learned in Russian. Many learners, like this Valentine she was about to meet, couldn't even make it past those three initial consonants, *Zdr*. Once somebody could say *Greetings* without thought of the drilled suddenness of the sound, they were on their way to familiarity with the listener.

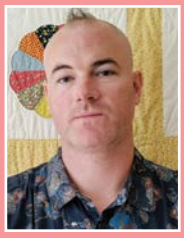
The sound was too omnipresent to hear the car which had turned at the end of one axis of the emptiness and now trolled toward her. When it pulled up alongside, the back door opened. A human coat hanger, who must have been Valentine, stepped out. Zina herself was gaunt. Odessans who had traveled to America had told her that Americans were all fat. If that was the case, Valentine was truly not an American. Only his baggy clothing made him appear as if, like a blowfish, he was prepared to become fat — that is, to become American — in an instant. Out of his pocket, he took a pack of cigarillos. She had seen such before, never smoked one. In his email, he had explained in misspelled Russian that he was a socialist. What kind of a socialist smokes cigarillos? Socialists smoke cigarettes. He lit up and took a drag from the cigarillo, put out his hand, and took one step toward her. He mispronounced, "*Zdravstvuite*," as if in much delayed response to the greeting she had cast over the emptiness before he arrived.

The dream had been strong and brave and had seized her heart then. She had asked Valentine why his family had come here. After stubbing out his cigarillo, he said, *My father…he's from Odessa. He didn't like Odessa. So he left. He didn't like Detroit either*. Odessan humor sounded like it was in Valentine's blood even though he had never been there. The other side of it was, of course, that he left Detroit too, left Valentine and his mother. Zina knew about parents leaving. Back then she believed that Valentine would un-

derstand the joke about Yalta, about how the one traveler expects something more than what the other traveler says, expects two different, contradictory messages, they're going to Yalta, which means they might not be going to Yalta, which means they're definitely going to Yalta. That was what she thought back then.

Valentine asked if she spoke and read Ukrainian. She said she spoke and read Ukrainian, Russian, and, most of all, Odessan, the language of those anecdotes. He asked, *Should I say "in" Ukraine or "on" Ukraine?*

"Say Odessa. I am from Odessa," she told him. He did so, and then he took her to his "home."



Ian Ross Singleton is a professor of Writing at Baruch College and Fordham University. His short stories, translations, reviews, and essays have appeared in journals such as: *Saint Ann's Review*; *Cafe Review*; *New Madrid*; *Midwestern Gothic*; *Fiddleblack*; *Asymptote*; *Ploughshares*; *The Los Angeles Review of Books* and *Fiction Writers Review.*

Two Big Differences is his first novel.

"*Two Big Differences* demonstrates an intimate and authoritative understanding of contemporary post-Soviet life, especially as it's experienced by people from Odessa—*in* Odessa but also as immigrants to the US. Singleton writes convincingly and authoritatively from multiple perspectives in the book, including that of a young woman from Odessa. The quality of Ian's prose also bears the rhythms and influences of some of the Soviet masters—Kataev, Olesha and, I'd venture, Dovlatov. However, it doesn't read as mimicry but as the authentic representation of the way his contemporary characters think, feel and speak."

—David Bezmozgis, author of *Immigrant City*

"Singleton teaches us that to learn a language is to be remade by that language. To move to a different city means to internalize the traumas inscribed in the map. This novel is the product of a deep engagement with the Russian language and a love song to the cities of Detroit, USA and Odessa, Ukraine in all of their different, rich complexities. Necessary reading for anyone considering a move to a different country!"

—Olga Zilberbourg, author of *Like Water and Other Stories*

"*Two Big Differences* is brightly original, structurally inventive, thoughtful and wise, suffused with love for the infinitely lovely and poignantly heartbreaking, faraway city of Odessa; full of energy and effortless narrative fluidity, replete with lightning-quick transitions between the scenes, shot through with bright flashes of humor and sharp wit. The sheer rhythms of this terrific novel are mesmerizing. Ian Ross Singleton is one of the finest young writers at work in America today."

—Mikhail Iossel, author of *Love Like Water, Love Like Fire*

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