

Fall 2014

Annihilation Tango

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Recommended Citation

Kulik, Katya (2014) "Annihilation Tango," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 81 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss81/5>

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ANNIHILATION TANGO

I have hated her for twelve years. I have hated her like I have never hated anyone else in my life. I have never hated anyone else in my life.

I hated her guts. I also hated her thin body, long slender limbs, transparent wrists, shiny red hair, pale freckles on porcelain skin, smoky grey eyes, affected gestures, and the classy way she drawled her 'ah'-sounds which signaled at least two generations of educated Muscovite ancestors.

I hated her so much that at some point I was going to write a novel about how much I hated her, but then I read Irvine Welsh's *The Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs* and had to abandon my plan since he wrote my book for me.

I hated her so much that I could not live in the same city with her. So much that I would forbid my friends to mention her name in front of me, and acted out if they forgot about the prohibition. So much that I would stop reading books, listening to music, watching movies, basically anything that I knew she liked too.

I deleted her phone number from my cell.

I blocked her on Facebook.

The very few emails that I ever got from her are kept in an old mailbox I hardly use these days in a folder named "Ihateyou".

I hated myself for keeping those emails.

I hated myself for hating her, because as I have said above I do not hate people. If I say that I hate somebody, it at most indicates the feeling of mild disgust. In my world of strong negative emotions there was only one Everest—my hatred for her, then the ever so permanent Mont-Blanc of

self-deprecation, and finally the Great Russian Plain of my negative feelings for everyone else, with an occasional low-rise here and there, ever so slight, almost always unnoticeable.

Why? I asked myself in self-denial. Why? asked my friends. Why? she would wonder if she ever learned that I hated her.

Pure and simple: *cherchez le dude*. Duh.

We were undergraduate students at Moscow State University, and at one point we happened to form a twisted love triangle, in which I loved him, he loved her, and she, I have no idea who she loved. Sometimes when I feel vain, I think it was me. But then she dated him for a while, which means that she probably loved him more than me. Mostly likely she loved herself, but I did not know it then, because if there was an obtuse angle in that triangle, it was me. I was such an idiot.

And really, I can't blame him for choosing her over me. When that happened, it did not surprise me. Any man would choose her over me. I would choose her over me.

Men usually find me cute and entertaining, like a puppy or a toddler who says unexpectedly intelligent things, which I don't really mind because how could I mind being a puppy? There is only one serious drawback of being a puppy that manifests itself in cases when I have the prospect of sleeping with someone. Alas, even the basest and shallowest of men retain enough moral principles to dissuade them from harming small creatures. In other words, no one wants to fuck the puppy. Too loyal, too open, too sweet.

No, no, they want the enigma, the puzzle, the conquest, the green light, the Holy Grail, and she was the one who promised them all that, with her

feline languor and slight lightheadedness—not the one which comes from foolishness, because boy she was smart, but the one which results from basking in admiration for just a little bit too long. If I was a puppy, she was the Sphynx, and everybody, everybody wanted to fuck her.

So I could not really hate him for the choice he made and continued faithfully loving him for two more years (if anyone needed proof of me being the obtuse angle). I could not really hate myself more, because I was already heartbroken enough. So I started hating her with all the power of my foolish puppy heart.

And I noticed that she never left me without more reasons to hate her. She was smart, outspoken, successful. Our professors adored her, every lecturer would know her name out of one hundred because she asked those complicated, intelligent questions which they sometimes would not be able to answer on the spot. I was a shy incoherent mumbler. Speaking up in class left me drenched in sweat every time I mustered the courage to do it. I only got noticed by those professors who had a chance to read my papers. She did not have a single B for a single final exam in five years of studies. I had three, and my mom still regularly reminds me of my B in English, even now when I live in the States.

We learned that she was a poet when she won a literary prize for new authors. I shuddered with hatred, took my pitiful scribbles and hid them somewhere deep in the drawers of my desk. I have never tried to write a short story or a memoir sketch in Russian ever since. It was also the time when I declared that I hated poetry and all poets.

I stopped admiring all red-haired actresses who I used to like a lot. The worst was to give up Polina Kutepova, a most talented Russian actress, who I enjoyed seeing in many films and plays, but she was a redhead, and hence my love for her had to die. It was tough. Later I was capable of finding a loophole for Tilda Swinton, who I claimed to like only in the role of the

White Witch, because she was more blonde than red-haired there.

Then we started a PhD program at Moscow State, and because the advisor she worked with in undergrad school did not have enough credentials to advise graduate students, she was placed in care of my advisor. Of all professors that I have ever liked and admired in ten years of studies, I have liked and admired my advisor the most. Tatyana Dmitriyevna was able to see past my non sequitur ramblings during discussion sections. She trusted my writing and said that my papers were immune from plagiarism because I had a unique recognizable style. It was pure magic to have somebody so cool believe in you. I was flattered, proud, and extremely grateful.

I worshipped my advisor, no less, thanks to an extreme affinity for personality cults that sits deep in every Russian's genes. I fancied myself my advisor's pet, and to prove that I deserved the title I helped her tirelessly when she organized conferences or invited visiting lecturers. I remember one conference when I traveled from Moscow to Leo Tolstoy's mansion in Yasnaya Polyana (two and a half hours in a rattling bus one-way) back and forth every other day for a week running all kinds of errands, from filing immigration documents for visiting professors to making copies of handouts, because as we had discovered, it was hard to find a working copy machine outside of Moscow. By the end of the week I was a zombie, but a happy one because my advisor was grateful, and it was her approval that I sought most.

Enter the redhead bitch, and I was no longer the pet. Or rather, I was the neglected one, the one who was not intelligent enough, not critical, not edgy. I became a disappointment. I was still needed for running errands, and, true, was thanked warmly for that, but I lacked the ability to soar in the intellectual highs, bound to earth by my desire to please, to help, to worship.

In a desperate and misguided attempt to win my advisor back, I knitted Tatyana Dmitriyevna a scarf for her birthday. I did it on an impulse, and

what seemed so great in theory turned out hard to perform in reality: I had no idea how to present it to her. I waited for her after the department's end of the semester meeting. I pulled the scarf out of my bag and handed it to her. "Happy Birthday, Tatyana Dmitriyevna!" I mumbled. I felt so embarrassed that I could not lift up my eyes. I looked at the light purple stripe of the scarf on which I knitted the letters "TD" in dark blue yarn and kept thinking that I should have gift-wrapped it. "Oh thank you, Katya," she said startled. "This is so sweet." Then she hesitated for a little and hugged me. It was all awkward as hell.

We stood in silence for a short while, then she noticed my rival in a distance, and called out to her: "Don't go yet, please, I wanted to discuss the last email you sent me." She sounded relieved. She turned away from me, and they walked to the elevators together, and the last thing I heard from them was my advisor's excited: "So you see, what you are claiming is actually Lacanian!" I knew it then—I was dropped at the shelter. The info card on my cage read: "Good, obedient, hard-working puppy. Doesn't understand Lacan or Derridas. Unlikely to achieve that even with rigorous training."

A year after that, I won a Fulbright grant to study in the US, and a year later, still in the middle of my master's program at Fordham, I dropped out of grad school in Moscow. I had discovered creative writing classes by then, and I could no longer see myself performing the literary criticism my department at Moscow State wanted me to. My advisor is still very disappointed with me.

By the time I was getting ready to travel to the US, I had already come to terms with my hatred problem. I admitted I had it and looked for ways to get rid of it. I was practicing "letting go" hard: I stopped loving the one who preferred her over me, I made one of the first independent decisions in my life by getting a tattoo, and I had an affair with my student from the language school where I taught English as a foreign language. When I boarded my first ever Delta flight to New York, I felt elated, even if I shed a

fair amount of tears over separating myself from my lovely disciple.

Another reason why I found going to New York so exciting was that I had an acquaintance there, one of the visiting professors who my advisor invited to Moscow State when I was still an undergrad and with whom I spent a lot of time then. I helped him to find an apartment for the two weeks that he was there, showed him the city and, in general, was my best people-pleaser self. After he left, I felt unusually sad and empty for a couple of weeks, during which we exchanged emails almost everyday. In those he made fun of me and I tried to reply something witty back, with varied success, but then everyday routine swallowed me, the emails stopped coming, and I forgot all about it.

Or so I thought, until a month or two later my nemesis told me about going to a concert with our visiting lecturer when he was in Moscow. I matched the dates in my head and realized that it was on the day when the professor under my care called me to say that he felt really sick, and decided not to go out (as he told me we would before) and instead would stay at home to get better. I was hurt, but as I was in my “letting go” stage, I brushed what I heard aside and tried to forget it. The seed had been planted, however.

To be fair to Professor (that was and still is his code name when I discuss him with my friends), he was not a liar. Throughout our two year relationship while I was in New York, he was almost always honest, painfully honest at times, and I won't exaggerate if I say that I can count the lies he told me on one hand. But that was the first lie he had ever told me, and it had always remained at the back of my head.

It was in the morning, on the third or fourth time that I stayed overnight at his place, when I raised my eyes to his bookshelf and felt an impulse to pull out a thin gray paperback from the stack. When I am in love, I become

attuned to everything my love does: I know the exact moment when to turn my head to the window to see him approaching, I feel when he thinks about me, I know when the interest starts to subside. I am very intuitive in general, but in the first moments of being in love I am a goddamn fortune-teller, and even more so—when I am jealous.

As I looked at the cover of the book, my hands started shaking. I opened it and there was a dedication in the top left corner that designated Professor as the person who understood her as no one else did in her life. I fought the desire to tear the book into pieces and throw them out of the window. I managed to put it back onto the shelf and sat down on the bed trying to make my hands stop shaking. Professor entered the room with two coffee-mugs. He put one on his desk where he had been working since 5 am. “Are you all right, tsarina?” he asked as he gave me the other mug. I nodded. “You are probably groggy because you only slept eight hours, not your usual twelve hours, and I am partly responsible for that. Come here, polar bear, let me make up for it.”

So much for “letting go.” I returned home in the afternoon a raging lunatic—Othello paled in comparison. I remembered that she had a blog, I spent hours trying to find it, and when I did, I binge-read and reread it every night, examining every sentence, every word, every smiley emoticon for the clues of how Professor was actually in love with her, not with me. I did find the proof that they exchanged emails, but there was nothing that would suggest an actual physical relationship. I never talked to Professor about it.

After a month of active insanity, I managed to calm down, as Professor was still by my side, so lovely, and suave, caring. Our relationship had a predetermined expiration date, and since I knew that this would be over with at the end of my Fulbright, I focused on living in the moment, of enjoying him while I could.

I made a decision to ignore her then. I forbade myself to read her blog, I asked my friends not talk to me about her, I made sure I was not invited to parties where she could be present, I did not friend her on Facebook no matter how often Facebook reminded me to do so.

I learned to live with my hatred as one learns to live with a chronic disease. It became much harder, however, when I returned to Moscow after my two-year bliss in New York. Megalopolis as it is, Moscow is still just a big village. After three years of accidentally bumping into each other, I once again moved out of the city.

In Chicago I felt relatively safe. It was unlikely that she would ever be interested in such a small city (the only way up for a Muscovite is New York), she was too smart for my university (plus, she already had a degree, a fact that my also very intuitive mother likes to point out to me every time she has a chance) and since I got into tango, I have met more men who would be less likely to see me as a puppy, at least until they get to know me better, and then, more often than not, I am again a puppy, but this time a puppy who wears sexy clothes and has a hell of an embrace.

And as irony would have it, more than a half of the people who I met in Chicago and who I love dearly are redheads, most of them are poets, and I think I bought more books of poetry than fiction since I came to the US the second time. I also wrote a play in Russian, which I keep sending to the literary contest she won, mostly to annoy the hell out of the reading committee.

Two years ago I got a message from her that said: "I've heard you are dancing tango too. Wanna chat about it some time?" I almost cried. Not tango! If there was something that I thought was mine, it was this dance. Why,

I whined, why does this stuff keep happening to me? I gave up so many things because of her, and now I would have to relinquish this? My tango friends, my tango shoes, the incredible elation one feels after a good dance? Fuck no!

I blocked her on Facebook, picked up my favorite pair of cross-straped Comme-il-fauts and rushed for my private class with an Argentine maestro. And in two years since I became good. Of course, not as good as I want to be, but good enough to have guys securing a dance with me at the beginning of the *milonga* (a tango dancing party) because they know that otherwise they might not get any, as now I sit down only when I want to.

Still not good enough for Moscow, however, as I learned this summer. It was my first ever try to go to a Moscow *milonga*. Moscow tango community is notorious for being snobby and exclusive, and so I researched my options carefully and chose a supposedly easy *milonga* where people dance on the open-air stage in a park. The similar outdoor event that I organize in Chicago is probably the most casual and laid back *milonga* in the city. People come to dance wearing their regular street clothes, everybody dances with everybody, and those who are not dancing at the moment, chat.

I thought it would be similar at the park *milonga* in Moscow, but as I waited to be invited for an hour and had my *cabeceo*—an eye-contact with a prospective dancing partner—declined by men who were just above average and who I wouldn't even think about inviting back in Chicago, I knew that Toto was no longer in Illinois. I felt extremely underdressed in my light linen pants and simple summer top among the ladies in glitzy cocktail dresses and revealing dancing costumes. People came in small groups and talked only inside those groups. In the first two hours I got two dances: one with a beginner who was sweet but very tremulous and who kept running me into people and one with a dancer who was relatively good—maybe imperfect from a technical point of view, but his embrace was comfortable,

and he smelled nice which is not that often the case for Russian men. Yet I didn't despair. All I needed before I left home was one good *tanda* (a set of three or four tango songs one dances with the same partner) and I was firmly determined to get me one.

And that was when I turned my head and in the opposite corner of the stage I saw her. She raised her brows and I probably did the same, only that she did it with the grace of a movie actress, and I could tell from the spasms of my facial muscles that I looked as if I had just swallowed a wasp. But what could I do—she seemed to know the crowd, and there is no better way to get to the higher-level dancers at the *milonga* than through locals. So I walked to her. We kinda hugged and started chatting about tango, as if two or three years had not passed since we last saw each other. She pointed out to me all the good guys in the crowd (though she did not introduce me to any), warned me against the ones to avoid and indicated the ones who could be either perfect or horrible depending on how the stars lined up that day.

Then somebody invited her. As I watched her dance, I knew that I was trying hard to find faults in her dancing. She didn't collect feet here, oops, got off her axis here, ouch, that might have been uncomfortable. Soon I gave up because she was good. I could not really tell whether she was better than me, probably we were the same, since once you reach a certain level of dancing ability in tango, you stay at that level for a long while, but she looked good, and the guy who danced with her seemed to enjoy it. And as I continued watching, I caught myself thinking that I hoped that she enjoyed it too. There was something about the way that guy held her right hand that suggested that it could be uncomfortable, and in tango you never wish on your fellow follower what you do not want to experience yourself.

I still didn't get any luck. She returned after the *tanda*, we chatted some more, thanks to the limitless possibilities that discussing tango shoes offers

to *tangueras*. We saw a performance of an Argentine couple, and I noticed that she and I liked the same moments in the couple's dance. Then *milonga*, a fast type of tango music, started playing, and I understood that I would not get any *milonga* tonight unless I led one. And I knew that inviting a girl would kill off my already non-existent chances to be invited by advanced people as it would cement my reputation of the night as an out-of-town lesbian weirdo, but *milonga* is my drug of choice in tango, and there was no way I was leaving without dancing it.

"You dance *milonga*?" I asked her.

"You can lead?" she asked, and I could hear the surprise in her voice that I had never heard from her before.

"Well, a little." I said (a necessary tactic for a leader, not to raise expectations too high). "But I hate to miss this *tanda*—they are playing my favorite music!"

As I was saying this, I was already working on the straps of my shoes because I can not lead in heels.

"You are going to lead barefoot? How do you do that?"

The more surprised she sounded, the more I wanted to get on the dancing floor.

As I put my left arm around her and drew her nearer to my chest, because no decent leader dances *milonga* in an open embrace, I had an out-of-body moment—I saw myself on the dancing floor, hugging tight my enemy of twelve years, and I started to freak out. I suddenly forgot all the moves, and the dancing couples around threatened to run into us because we were not moving.

“Breathe, and shift weight for a while.” I commanded myself, and as I started transferring my weight from right to left foot, from left to right, and she started doing the same, I calmed down. Soon the music and the technical issues were my main worries. The dance seemed to be developing well: we walked together and turned together, and she got most of my double beats which is always a challenge, and she seemed to be most of the time in tune with my interpretation of the music. Then I noticed that I could not get her to transfer her weight in a particular movement, and so I tightened my embrace and forced her to do it a little bit stronger. And she followed me.

She was the follower. I was the leader. I could walk in whatever direction I wanted. I could do whatever I wanted. And she had to, or rather, it was her pleasure to do whatever I wanted. The more confident I was, the more she would enjoy dancing with me, the more memorable the experience would be for her.

And as I kept dancing with her, I concentrated on how she felt when she danced and very soon it was all that mattered. Advisors, old lovers, books, dissertations, favorite cities—there was no such thing as mine or hers anymore. The world now revolved around the way she moved and I moved, and how the music made us both smile—not because we liked each other, but because we liked the dance.

When the music ended, we walked back to the place where I left my shoes, one hundred years ago.

“Sorry about the last song—I started freaking out because of all the traffic.” I apologized (another tactic of a successful leader—preemptive apologies illicit additional compliments)

“Oh no, no, it was good. You are quite good, actually,” she replied.

Quite good. I will take it. I have led for about a year, so that's a huge compliment. Soon after that, since my dancing fate was sealed at least on this dancing floor, I changed my shoes, so I could get to my temporary home in the suburbs of Moscow.

"Thanks for the dance. I really needed a *milonga* tonight. It was fun!" said I.

"Thanks. See you at some other *milongas* then?" she replied.

"Oh no, I am not dancing in Moscow ever again. See you somewhere else around the world."

As I walked to the metro, I suddenly felt very empty. It was very cool to feel that.