

[Home](#)

[Winter 2007](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

[Summer 2005](#)

[Spring 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Mail](#)

FYODOR THE MAGNIFICENT

BY RESHA AMER

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It looked like a simple butcher knife, but in the hands of Fyodor the Magnificent, it was truly a miracle. The knife sailed high into the air, turning end over end, the blade flashing with reflections of sunlight, to mingle briefly with a meat cleaver, steak knives, and even a cheese grater. Then, unable to defy the proclamations of physics any longer, it returned to earth with a menacingly soft swishing sound. How the old man managed to snatch the handle from the air without injury kept the late afternoon strollers enraptured. Several bicycle messengers, nannies with toddlers, and the odd plumber or two watched in amazement.

Fyodor possessed a thin, meager frame made even smaller as he stooped to bear his great age. His skin was brown, wrinkled, and generously decorated with liver spots. A simple tweed cap had slipped precariously to the side to reveal only a few thin wisps of pure white hair clinging desperately to a rather pointed head. But his eyes were bright. They sparkled with the deep blue of a clear spring day.

Those incredible blue eyes intently followed each piece as it returned to earth. He captured the cheese grater, and did a complete spin on the toe of his right shoe, placing the utensil on a clean white towel spread out on a low brick wall. The wall formed the border of a tired old pavilion standing near the entrance of City Park. The mortar was crumbling; the roof was rotted - filled with wasp nests and spider webs. Most of those who watched him were passersby on the outer sidewalk. Only a rather startled drunk had actually come upon the show from inside the park. On the ground below the towel were the remains of several apples Fyodor had used to demonstrate the veracity of the utensils he juggled. After the grater, the steak knives were laid to rest next, and then the meat cleaver, but the butcher knife was sent into the air one more time.

Fyodor grunted with the effort as the arching knife startled the pigeons from the roof of the pavilion. Momentarily his back straightened, and his head was tipped all the way back, surrendering his cap to the ground.

The knife drifted forward, away from Fyodor, as it made its journey. The old man stepped after it, trying to judge the path of descent. His shoe caught a gnarled root. He stumbled. His eyes lost their focus on the knife with a startled downward glance. Wisps of white hair flailed madly about his head. The knife came down, and Fyodor pitched after it. The crowd gasped, and one of the nannies screamed as everyone watched the knife bounce out of control from hand to hand until the old man smacked the ground.

No one in the crowd could overcome their horror. Everyone remained silently rooted in place. Slowly, Fyodor rose. His hands shook, arms bent at the elbows,

framing the handle of the knife protruding from his chest. A dark red stain slowly spread into a crisp white shirt. He staggered backward, and one of the toddlers began to sob.

Then Fyodor's lips parted, slowly growing into a broad smile of large white teeth. With a quick half-turn, he faced the crowd, pulling a theatrical knife from his shirt. His eyes flashed as he snapped the flimsy blade with his index finger to show it was harmless. The same finger was used to swipe some red from the shirt into Fyodor's mouth. As he grinned, he said in a heavy Russian accent, "Mmmm, cherry."

The crowd exploded with applause. The plumber shook his head with a knowing smirk that said, "Alright, you got me," and tossed a few coins into the hat before he continued on to work. The drunk raised his bottle in a wobbly salute, put it to his lips, and staggered back into the dark recesses of the unkempt trees and bushes.

Yet one member of the crowd was obviously not happy. Her neck bent to let long, dark, curly hair cascade over a simple red dress. Large, deep brown eyes stared menacingly at the old man from beside a thin, angled nose. Her arms were crossed, pulling in the shapeless red dress close to her body to reveal an advanced pregnancy. Plain gray slippers covered bare feet, one of which tapped the sidewalk impatiently. Fyodor grinned sheepishly, throwing out his hands in a pleading gesture.

"My Nadia."

Nadezhda sighed. He could always melt her with those amazing eyes, and he knew it. She would always be his little girl. "Papa, what will I do with you?"

"That look," he shook a finger at her, trying to rescue himself. "It is just like your mother." Then he gazed upward with sad melancholy as he clutched at his heart. "I miss you my dear Marya."

"Oh, stop it, Papa." Nadezhda tossed her hair back over her shoulder and rolled her eyes. "What am I going to do with you? I need to start preparing dinner for you and Bryan. I go to the kitchen, and where have all my knives gone? Out here to aid Fyodor the Magnificent. Papa, you can't keep doing this." She gasped in frustration, throwing her hands out in a helpless gesture toward the apples on the ground. "And I see we will have no fruit with dinner. Now I must get to the market before Bryan comes home."

"Bryan," Fyodor grumbled. "A blight on my life. I come to this country. I learn the language. And one born here can't even spell. Bryan with a 'y'. Who thinks of such things? And the way he speaks of our people - as if we were gypsies."

"Papa," Nadezhda scolded. "He does no such thing. He is the father of your grandchild. He is a good man." She rubbed her hand over her belly.

"I tolerate him." Fyodor tried to wave away the image of Bryan. "But only for you," he said. The old man stepped toward Nadezhda, taking her face in his hands and reaching up on his toes to place a kiss on her cheek.

"Papa!" Nadezhda pushed Fyodor away, brushing the front of her dress. "You'll get me all dirty. And," she wagged her finger to imitate his earlier gesture, "if you think I'm going to wash that shirt, you are delusional."

"I'll make you a deal," Fyodor said as he gathered up all the utensils in the towel. He pulled the real butcher knife from where he had hid it during one of his spins and placed it with the others. "You wash the shirt, and I will go to the market for

more apples."

"I'll make *you* a deal," Nadezhda countered. "If *you* get new apples, *you* wash the shirt, and *you* fix the window fan as you promised to do yesterday, I won't tell Bryan how *you* spent your afternoon."

"Blackmail," Fyodor pouted. This time Nadezhda was unaffected by his dramatics. Again she crossed her arms over her protruding belly and tapped her foot, waiting for an answer. "Yes, yes, of course," he finally said. He handed her the towel full of kitchen items, then strode away from the pavilion, out of the park, and down the sidewalk to his left.

"Papa," Nadezhda called after him. She extended her arm to point to the right.

"Of course, Nadia, of course," he replied, his head nodding. As he turned and passed by her a second time she chuckled quietly under her breath, and watched him go.

* * *

"Blast!" Bryan roared. "Where is my white shirt?"

Fyodor put his head down and scrubbed a little more rapidly. The special fabric cleaner was not living up to its label. The room had an overpowering, nauseating smell of oranges. Fyodor could detect a small hole forming in the cloth between his hands, but the pink stain remained. He looked sadly at the inoperable window fan. If only he had fixed it as Nadezhda had asked, he could relieve the awful smell. Opening the door would work as well, but he dared not do that.

Fyodor leaned backward slightly toward the door as he heard Nadezhda's soft voice speaking meekly to Bryan. She was covering for her foolish old papa. Why *did* he do things like this?

"You spilled what?!" Bryan's voice blasted through the closed door again. Nadezhda's voice followed with more sweet nothings that Fyodor couldn't make out. He probably didn't want to.

"You don't understand what tonight means!" Bryan spit out each word like a cobra releasing its venom. "I take care of you! I take care of the old man! I'm trying to get us out of this god-forsaken-pit! Tonight might have done it, but – will you put down that knife and stop chopping that stupid onion!"

"Don't grab," Nadezhda scolded. "Bryan, be careful!" Slam!

With one move Fyodor dropped the shirt, spun, and flung open the door. *What was that noise?* was on his lips.

Nadezhda backed up against the refrigerator, her hands to her mouth and eyes wide with terror. The butcher knife quivered, point buried in the cutting board, handle waving in the air. Bryan was bent over, cradling one of his hands, and Fyodor could see blood dripping onto the floor.

"Oh, Bryan," Nadezhda's sob poured out to wash over her husband. She grabbed a dishtowel from the sink, gently took his hand, and wrapped it tightly. The towel began to grow small, dark red spots.

Bryan looked up to see Fyodor, and his face flushed with sudden shame. He looked away, muttering, "I'll find something else to wear." He quickly left the room and headed for the master bedroom. At least that was what Nadezhda called the

closet at the end of the hall where she had managed to shoe horn a bed and small dresser.

Tears were pouring down Nadezhda's face. "Oh, Papa," she shook her head as she wept the words that broke his heart. "Why didn't you tell me it wasn't your shirt?"

* * *

For the next few days, whenever Fyodor had to leave his room, he took the back stairs at dawn or dusk. He didn't want to see his daughter. He bought an apple or a bagel and ate in the park. Every night Nadezhda's voice pleaded through his door, "Papa, please come out."

"I am tired," he always replied.

The last time he passed through City Park he noted someone was tearing down the sad old pavilion. The rotted roof lay on the ground, and dust billowed into the air as a grinding sound ate away at the brick wall.

After begging at a thousand stores he found a night job cleaning up the old grocery over on Fifth. The ancient oriental woman had given in to her rheumatism and gone to live with a niece in Buffalo. He had a job, and he would replace the shirt.

Fyodor spent most of the day sleeping. Sometimes he would walk uptown and stare into the river, or read a book at the library. He spent the night sorting out the stale bread and the brown bananas, mopping the floor and cleaning the guest bathroom.

* * *

Two weeks were taking their toll on Fyodor's knees. The grocer was never satisfied with the floors. The mop just didn't get them clean enough. Fyodor resorted to scrubbing with a hand brush, crouched over a bucket of dirty water. The walk home was agony. The six blocks seemed more like six miles.

Tonight Fyodor couldn't make the trip all at once. He had to stop and lean against a light post for awhile. As late night gave way to early morning the cool darkness changed to long shadows pierced with hot September sun. The old man held his cap with one hand and shaded his eyes with the other as he squinted up at the spires crowning the buildings. The sun glinted off the copper and steel, dousing him in a shower of reflected sparks.

With one last gasp of effort he pushed himself away from the light post and stepped painfully forward. "Come on, old man," he muttered to himself. "Just one more time. We won't walk to the river today. We'll rest today."

As Fyodor tried to make his way down the sidewalk, he was suddenly blocked by the shadow of a man. He shuffled sideways, not expecting any courtesy. The shadow shuffled with him.

He looked up, puzzled. The sun was behind the man, and all Fyodor saw was a dark form. His heart was in his throat. He placed his hands behind his back so the figure wouldn't see them shake, trying to appear casual. The officer of the beat wouldn't start his morning stroll for another hour. Yes, he was an easy target, but he didn't have anything to steal. He decided to tell the looming figure just that.

"I do not have money."

“Where have you been, old man?”

“Bryan?” Fyodor looked up again, squinting, turning his head this way and that.

“Nadezhda has been a wreck. I’ve had the doctor over three times because I’m so worried about the baby. Come on. I have a taxi waiting.”

“Is she OK?” Fyodor asked with concern.

Bryan sighed. “I’ll explain on the ride back.”

The taxi smelled like the drunk who had used it only a few hours earlier. The upholstery was torn. The wire mesh between Fyodor and the driver had several dents from punks who had tried to get the cashbox. Fyodor studied every detail intensely, over and over again. It was the only way to avoid looking at Bryan.

It was the younger man who broke the silence. “You know I’m a complete fool. I hate my Irish temper more than you do.”

Fyodor snorted, but gave no words in reply. The noise was enough.

“Nadezhda loves you, Papa. She adores you.”

“Papa?” Fyodor returned the name with a growl. He finally looked at Bryan.
“Papa?”

Bryan glanced uncomfortably out the window. “My old man was a loser,” he said. “I haven’t seen him since my fifth birthday, which is probably a good thing. But you,” Bryan turned back. His eyes were intense – red-rimmed eyes. Fyodor blinked. “You I respect,” Bryan said.

Fyodor was speechless.

“That night,” Bryan continued. “The night of my ... I certainly got attention at my business meeting. Sure, at first they just stared at my bloody, bandaged hand – at my ridiculous shirt with clashing coat and tie. But then, rather than looking, they started listening. It turned out to be the best night of my life.”

It was Fyodor’s turn to look out the window. He was still stuck on the word respect. It rang in his ears. It was all he could think about. He never would have imagined ... the apartment building was outside the window. But it wasn’t the same building anymore. Yes, it had the same shape, but.

“What is that?” Fyodor asked as he turned back to Bryan. His finger was smashed up against the glass, insisting on an answer.

“I love this neighborhood,” Bryan drew a deep breath, as if to inhale the community as he spoke. “Maybe it’s an Irish thing to love the soil from which you spring.”

“Soil?” Fyodor asked sarcastically, making a faux survey of the concrete bordering the apartment building.

“You see,” Bryan laughed. “You’re a man’s man. Enough talk is enough talk. Get out, old man.”

Fyodor still wasn’t quite sure what Bryan intended to do with him. Maybe this had all been a ruse. He slowly opened the door of the taxi, and stepped out into the warm September morning. Pigeons cooed and bobbed about on the sidewalk. He chuckled to himself, “Soil.” In his gut it felt right to be home, despite what Bryan

might do. He was anxious to see Nadia again.

“No,” Bryan redirected him by pointing across the street. “This way, old man.”

“Enough with the ‘old man’,” Fyodor pulled free from Bryan’s guiding hand. “I’ll take ‘Papa’ if I have to.”

He turned from the apartment to face City Park across the street. The sight took his breath away. The old pavilion had not been torn down. It was restored. The brick wall had been power washed and repaired in places. The sidewalk twisting into the park was lined with new lights. The trees and bushes were trimmed.

“Half the apartments are empty, or filled with squatters,” Bryan explained. “The landlord doesn’t make any money. He’s given me a chance to turn him a profit. I still have much work to do, and I can’t save the whole world, but .”

Fyodor didn’t hear anymore. He couldn’t think anymore. His knees didn’t hurt anymore. He crossed the street, his eyes filled by what he saw. “A place for the baby to play safely,” he whispered.

“Yes,” Bryan nodded. “But it won’t stay this way if we don’t have something to bring new people here. We need restaurants – a civic life. I need something to attract the people. So ...” Bryan’s hand swept toward the pavilion.

Fyodor didn’t care if he was supposed to be a man’s man. He started to cry. A unicycle leaned against the wall inside the pavilion. A cliché magician’s hat sat upon a small table draped in tacky purple velvet. Rope and rings and playing cards dressed the walls. “It’s beautiful,” Fyodor said.

"On one condition," Bryan noted in a stern voice.

"What?" Fyodor cringed slightly.

"That stays on the wall."

The old man followed Brian's extended arm to the arch leading into the pavilion. Below the gold stenciled letters reading 'Fyodor the Magnificent' was a knife mounted on galvanized hooks. It was an ordinary knife. It looked like a simple butcher knife.

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