Book contract in her bag, Maria Tumarkin set out for Russia and Ukraine. All was well until people started asking questions.

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IN OCTOBER 2008, nineteen years after my family left the not-yet-former Soviet Union for Australia, my twelve-year-old daughter Billie and I travelled to Russia and Ukraine. I knew before we got on the plane that I was going to write a non-fiction book, if not explicitly about this trip then directly linked to it. And just in case I was tempted to forget about it, I had a contract and an advance from the publisher (spent on airfares and visas) to remind me. Yet to most of my friends in Russia and Ukraine, many of them easily in the category of people I would die for, I said close to nothing. At most, I muttered something vague about maybe doing some writing connected to this trip… You know us writers, we cannot help ourselves. Give us a spoon and a bowl of pea and ham soup and we’ll write about it. If asked what kind of book it was, what it was about, in what way connected to this place and this moment, I would get desperately ironic: the definitive post–Cold War tearjerker of course, the hitchhiker’s guide to the mysterious Russian soul, Putin’s Russia for dummies… If irony was inappropriate when, say, talking to a dear friend’s grandmother who was in her late eighties, I would become deathly serious and, with my vagueness acquiring a distinctly sombre tone, I would point to the twentieth century – revolution, gulags, two world wars, you know the kind of stuff… Big bad stuff that needs to be written about. Big bad stuff I could hide.
behind.

I cringe as I recall my inability to say a single straight word about the book, which was burning a hole in my pocket like a shoplifted Cherry Ripe. Don’t rush to excuse me – if such is indeed your first impulse – because I must tell you that to some of my friends I said nothing. Not a word. I remind you that I had a contract to write this book. So my omissions or non-disclosures, whatever you want to call them, were pretty alarming, perhaps even inexcusable. Morally I was elbows-deep in the grey zone.

Now I must tell you that it is not my style to withhold. I have written about my unexpected pregnancies and failed marriages and my disastrous delusions as a parent – not exclusively, and not at the expense of other things, but nonetheless fairly frankly. I don’t withhold much in real life either (see the previous point about pregnancies and marriages), yet on our trip to Russia and Ukraine I felt distressed, sometimes overwhelmingly so, about not disclosing my writerly intentions. This distress consisted of many elusive kinds of debilitating unease, all contributing to a growing conviction that this hypothetical book of mine was a dangerously foreign substance in the alchemy of our trip.

It was not like I was planning to write a nasty exposé, though I did intend to go into all manner of deeply intimate stuff – friendships battered by geopolitics (when we left in 1989, we thought we would never see our friends and family again), grief and love, doubts, silences in the no man’s land between those who stayed and those who left. I was uneasy that the book would not simply report our experiences on this trip after a respectable period of time, but was, to some degree at least, a catalyst for these experiences. I had not seen my childhood friends in Ukraine for almost two decades; to them, and especially to my best friend who turned sixteen on the day my family emigrated, our leaving was nothing short of a tragedy (as it was for me). It took nineteen years for me to come back and I was coming back so I could write a book – now that smelt. I imagined my friends questioning my every motive on discovering that the book was about this trip. I was, after all, a double agent on a mission, my loyalties ambivalent and fickle. Who knew what I was really after? Was I looking around ever so intently so I could pepper my stirring prose with some telling details? Was I asking questions about prices and jobs so I could write about “Russia’s tired and poor, the huddled masses”? And, perhaps most importantly, who were my friends to me? What did I see when I looked at them through my thick writer’s glasses: losers, characters, caricatures, ghosts? Was I not, for all intents and purposes, coming into their world, into their lives, not as their friend but as a journalist or a literary tourist on the prowl?

WHEN I told my second cousin in Dnepropetrovsk about the book – she was one of the very few people I did not conceal it from, knowing that I would not write about her – she retorted, “So you are going to write about how everything is dirty and falling apart.” But no matter how much I jumped up and down, no matter how many times I uttered, “God, No!” I could see that my cousin still didn’t believe me. “I can only imagine what you must be thinking,” was all she said after I’d finished my emphatic protestations. Oh the debilitating, trust-eroding second-guessing! Caution and self-consciousness muffling conversations, the spectre of the book hanging over the flow of love and grief between us. I could not bear the thought of any of this happening so I made a pact with myself – I hope it was with myself, not with some kind of devil – and I kept my mouth shut for much of the trip.

And because I equally could not bear the thought of bullshitting my friends, I made myself forget about the book. I did not go to see colourful characters from my past in search of the picaresque and quirky. I did not stage any poignant encounters. I lived day to day, thrown around by emotions and experiences, in accordance with the implicit logic of my journey and my relationships with others. I had managed to dissociate from my writerly persona, almost completely. The book dictated nothing and made me do nothing. It became a vague apparition belonging to my life in distant Australia; the only thing I did in its name was to keep a diary and to make sure Billie kept one too. This was how I got through the trip without feeling like a cheat and a backstabber.

It is quite possible, of course, that I have imagined much of this and that my friends could have dealt quickly with the initial weirdness of this book and trusted me not to slip and slide too much between my dual identities and purposes. For all I know, it could have become a running joke (as benign as they come) or it could easily have been forgotten altogether. Perhaps the heaviness of my heart primarily reflected my own ambivalence about the simultaneity of writing and living, my own sense of how intrusive and distancing literary ambitions and sensibilities can be, my sneaking suspicion that being a writer and being a friend often do not flow neatly into
each other. At various points in the trip, I told myself that I simply wouldn’t write this book (to hell with the contract and my future as a writer!) or that I would write such a glorious book that so brilliantly and truthfully honoured my friends and our shared experiences that my friends would forgive me and it would be obvious to them why saying close to nothing was the only right thing to do.

It occurs to me that till this day I have not been able to let go of my unease – first hiding the book, then hiding behind it, as if standing next to it in full view has proven quite beyond me. Since *Otherland* came out in April, I have posted it to all my friends who appear in it. Surprisingly, despite the Russian and Ukrainian postal services’ casual attitude towards delivering mail – if it happens, it happens, but don’t get too hung up about it – all of my friends have received a copy of the book by now. Armed with dictionaries, they are pushing through my prose in the language some of them know well and others remember only vaguely from rock music or sub-standard school and university courses. I am finally out of the closet. I have handed myself over to the people’s court. But whether my friends forgive me or condemn me, whether they laugh at the ridiculousness of my fears or feel wounded by my evasions, I still won’t know whether I had any right to keep this book from them or, equally, whether I could have written *Otherland* if I were a braver soul with absolutely nothing to hide. •