Lashed by rain and saddled with an umbrella that kept turning itself inside out, I dashed across the wet cobbles alongside the Griboedova Canal and ducked into the Resurrection Cathedral on Spilled Blood. This close to the Gulf of Finland, capricious summer storms assailed Saint Petersburg willy-nilly every afternoon, often dumping an inch of precipitation in a slanted torrent before all at once breaking to reveal a sky of the most intense bluebird hue. Dinner was more than two hours away, and my intention had been to spend that time leisurely browsing through Dom Knigi, the House of Books on Nevsky Prospekt. I liked stocking up on exotic editions of Dostoevski, Tolstoy and Chekhov every summer before heading back to the States. Today I had made it halfway there when the heavens opened up, so I sought refuge in this onion dome cathedral along the canal.

A handful of people were milling about in the dim antechamber, some folding up umbrellas and giving them to the coat check babushka, others examining a brochure about the decorative mosaics inside the sanctuary. The Resurrection Cathedral was the most dramatic landmark in Saint Petersburg, a tour de force example of over the top architecture in the highly ornate, cupola-bedecked bulbous Russian style.

The dimness of this antechamber mimicked the gloom outside. The musty scent of wet stone rose around us. Heavy wooden doors led to the sanctuary,
and small tour groups huddled before them with their guides. I saw glimmering through the gap where the two doors met a seam of white light. When people passed through and went inside, a full-wattage brilliance engulfed them. This light did not spill into the murk where we stood or illuminate the antechamber in any way but stayed very contained, very sequestered in the sanctuary, as if to cross that threshold back toward us, to leave its post and pass through those doors, were somehow out of the question. The light flared, it radiated, but it remained neatly held within. Even when the doors were closed and all I could see was that thin bright stripe, I nonetheless had the sense of the light concentrating its energy, confining and consolidating it. This was a light that would not come to you. You had to go to it. I had visited Saint Petersburg four times and had never set foot inside its most illustrious building.

A young man standing next to me—maybe he was my son’s age—pointed to a Cyrillic phrase in the brochure he was holding and in British-accented English asked me to translate. He had a soft new beard, fine threads and silky wisps curving against an angular jaw, like a man’s first beard though he was perhaps 23 or 24 years old. He possessed the demeanor of an intellectual, eyes deep-set—still and unblinking. There was something cerebral and intent in his gaze. I looked at the phrase he was showing me in the brochure: на крови.

"On blood," I said.

He cut me a side glance and nodded a sheepish assent, as if to say, "Well, of course," a private smile quirking the edge of his mouth. After all, this was the Cathedral on Spilled Blood. Petersburgers were so casual they dropped "Resurrection" entirely and just called it Spilled Blood. A tour group moved toward the heavy twin doors. Tucking the brochure into his back pocket, he joined them. The doors cracked open, and the sanctuary blazed with a white intensity. Everything seemed to vanish in the white burn.

на крови.

The cathedral had been built on the exact spot where an assassin’s bomb cut down Alexander II in 1881. Although the perpetrator was apprehended immediately, an anti-monarchist radical, the residents of Saint Petersburg were
themselves blamed for the heinous act. Their sin? Not Russian enough. Too European, too western.

So European that they had failed to thwart regicidal mayhem in their midst.

Un-Russian. Unable to keep their divine leader safe.

The people were made to foot the bill for this cathedral “to enshrine the blood of the assassinated tsar,” this according to historian Richard Wortman in his essay “The Russian Style in Church Architecture.” The building itself would be “an act of repentance for [embracing] Western culture.”

It was true that since its founding Saint Petersburg had looked European, its art and architecture boldly neoclassical, hailing from Italian, Dutch, French and Prussian masters. This was Peter the Great’s extravagant Window on the West, meant to bring the world cascading voluptuously in, one luscious baroque wave after another. Fountains were designed to out-Versailles Versailles, churches to rival the masterpieces of Rome and Paris—harmonious, balanced, symmetrical, restrained. The cityscape was a builder’s playground: confection after architectural confection in peach tones, butter yellow and mint. Saint Petersburg was a European intoxication in the heart of Imperial Russia. Tuscan porticoes were resplendent with columns, rooflines squared to Bavarian design.

Had the city kept its window open too long?

In 1881 the bloodstain of the Tsar stood as an indictment of this degenerate failing. “Alien, western influences were to be dispelled; the capital was to be resanctified by making it more like Moscow,” according to Wortman. The Resurrection Cathedral would be the atonement—On Spilled Blood. Its exterior would hearken back to the medieval ecclesiastic style of the 17th Century, with St. Basil’s on Red Square as the perfect model. It would be a riot of blooming kokoshniki petals unfurling from flamboyant tent-shaped steeples, all of it ornamented to excess with girki (limestone pendants) and shirinki (deeply recessed enamel squares). Where Ivan the Terrible had intended St. Basil’s as the new Jerusalem in 1561, this cathedral more than three centuries later would have an intention, too: “to administer an open rebuke to the city and constitute an effort to Muscovitize Saint Petersburg.”

Here I stood in the elaborate rebuke.
How much guilt could one cathedral redeem--? How much atonement would be enough--?

The light of the sanctuary slanted piercingly between the heavy doors, just a thread, a micron, a stripe. Periodically Russia had to re-colonize itself. It had to reclaim its look, its feel, its story. Sometimes it threw open its window on the world… Other times it slammed the thing adamantly shut.

I thought of the way the U.S. had practiced “shock Capitalism” with the former Soviet economy after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. In 1992 a team of Harvard economists showed up in Moscow ready to school the Russians on how to privatize state property, create a new business elite and grow the middle class.

That open window… So tempting.

More recently the world had seen a coup in Ukraine—practically on Russia’s doorstep—and then the annexing of Crimea just after. Even before the West had come down hard with tough financial sanctions, Russia was withdrawing, pulling into itself, becoming more nationalistic, more militaristic, embracing the Motherland, embracing the Fatherland, finding comfort in its conservative Orthodox Christianity, getting nostalgic about the hammer and sickle. Periodically, Russia had to step back, go within itself, had to remember who it was.

*Just a thread, a micron, a stripe.*

This was one of those periods.

The seam between the heavy doors shone candescent white, and when a small tour group pushed through to go inside, I followed.
Towering arches, vaulted ceilings, high chapels and altars, every surface encrusted with rare stones and gems. Gold paint, gold enamel, gold chandeliers suspended like brilliant clouds of spun gold from sparkling gold chains, their golden candelabrum glowing gold against pillars resplendent with gold leaf embedded in glass. The eye found no rest here. This sanctuary was a Halleluiah Chorus of dynamic winking color in ¼ inch tiles and tiny cubes of cut malachite, lapis lazuli, tiger eye. Pebbles of amber backed by bronze-tinted mirrors studded the length of floor-to-ceiling pilasters. The sheer density of décor made it seem like resurrection had never existed anywhere on earth before Russia invented it right here right on the spot. Polished slabs of porphyry, anthracite, green serpentine and picture jasper framed mosaics dedicated to the risen Christ.

Russia was effusive and big. It never did anything small—whether mounting revolutions, building cities in swamps, oppressing its people or defeating an enemy. In the U.S. we often overlook or fail to recognize how forged in faith a country like Russia actually is. American history has no corollary to a tsar, for instance, no way of comprehending a leader who is the earthly manifestation of God. Mormonism could offer an example of this, as could Catholicism in its obedience to the Pope, but neither religious branch dominates our democracy or issues forth laws. Indeed, when JFK was campaigning for president in 1960 and his Catholicism raised concerns, he addressed the issue forcefully—“I believe in an America where the separation of Church and State is absolute”—in effect paraphrasing Thomas Jefferson.
Beginning especially with Ivan the Terrible in the mid-1500’s Russian monuments and churches were built to reinforce the autocrat’s special relationship to the deity, declaratory architecture in a sense: brick and stone testimony to the will of divine providence in the person of the tsar. A full two centuries before the American Constitution, Moscow was already conceiving of itself as the New Jerusalem. The gold-painted frescoes gracing the thick inner walls of heavily fortified cathedrals were already transposing the Jesus narrative to Russia, were removing Rome, removing Byzantium, removing any foreign claim on Christianity and impressing upon the people a new state mythology: Russia as the site of Christ’s story.

So the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 was not only a blow of geopolitical magnitude but also an unspeakable assault on Russian spiritual identity.

When our country suffered the assassinations of beloved presidents—Lincoln, Kennedy—our American inclination never to mix the religious with the political kept the shock at a manageably secular level. Not to say that these atrocities weren’t calamitous—they were. We grieved the human loss of leadership, of course—the Father of our country!—and mourned the national potential lost in that leadership. Building the Lincoln Memorial in D.C. became our own special American sort of declaration of this—also the Eternal Flame in Arlington Cemetery to mark Kennedy’s grave.

Something told me that those things would not have been enough for Russia.

My gaze climbed an entablature of crimson granite whose dark veins of manganese braided a path all the way to the cathedral’s high arching dome where the raised hand of Christ the Redeemer bestowed a blessing on all of us down here below. A firmament of stars glimmered around him, backed by celestial bodies. When Russia demanded atonement, it went so far over the top you could see the aurora borealis. And when Russia did resurrection it omitted nothing.

I moved close to a mosaic of St. Alexander Nevsky and saw each cubed tessara nestled against the tessara beside it, a bead of grout joining them. I moved back and saw how every hand-placed piece vanished into the overall
panorama. One by one, row by row, the individual cubes, though numerous, were devoid of nuance or content if singled out or scrutinized alone and studied by themselves. Resurrection would not happen here in one concussive blow but bit by bit, shard by inlaid shard—each piece inert, carrying no particular charge, like nitro kept far from glycerin, but igniting its meaning only when combined with the others.

A dozen tesserae formed a subtle gradient from turquoise to teal in a wall mosaic of the Ascension, and I leaned in to examine the exact ¼ inch piece where the color shift happened. I moved back. I moved close. We were all doing that. Back and forth, back and forth, like breathing in and out, in and out—as if we were a single organism, inhaling, exhaling, a giant lung. The concentration of imagery was uniting us—breathing, breathing—not many lives but one.

The color began to swim before my eyes, and I sat down on an alabaster bench. Some people were lighting candles, some crossing themselves repeatedly, some snapping selfies—Christ and I. Some had tears in their eyes. People swayed in place, heads thrown back, staring up at the dome of heaven. They, too, were the individual pieces in a living mosaic that formed and reshuffled in this cathedral.

Saints and martyrs peered out from arches, doorframes and inner curves. Every surface featured a prophet or angel, watchful guardians posting up. Panel after mosaic panel emphasized the highpoints in the resurrection narrative: Christ on the road to Emmaus, Christ in the upper room, Christ by the Sea of Galilee. Columns were beveled inward at each corner, flat spaces that made more area for imagery, more room for resurrection. Even an atheist could not escape the narrative fusillade. It would not convert you so much as conquer you. The aggressive insistence on this unswerving story transcended religion, ironically enough. It was pervasive, overpowering, a total take down. The cathedral seemed to release its resurrection in shrapnel fragments, ¼ inch by ¼ inch, all of it packed in tightly and ready to detonate in a blast of divine light.

I found myself blinking furiously and staring down at my feet. The floor was an assemblage of cut marble—14 different types and colors—in intricate star-shaped patterns and boxy parallelograms. When the Bolsheviks seized control in 1917, the cathedral became the Ministry of the People’s Will, a place
devoted, incredibly enough, to worshipping and lauding the very assassination it had been built to redeem. In the 30’s Stalin shut it down, fearing his own assassination, and there were plans to implode it. But during the Siege of Leningrad the building was needed as a cold-storage morgue for the citizens who died of starvation until a mass gravesite could be prepared, and the Resurrection Cathedral on Spilled Blood became a temporary tomb.

I tried to imagine the linen shrouded bodies laid beside each other and pushed up against these ornate walls, orderly rows stacked higher and higher, body after body, each one of them a white piece in a tragic mosaic that rose to a wretched revelation—7000 dead on Christmas Day, 1941; 5000 the day after. From all over the city families pulled their lost loved ones on sleds through the snow, and workers stacked the bodies. Even in the dim light of a Leningrad winter the blank whiteness of death would contradict the fiery color of resurrection here. I tried to imagine the mute companionship of these sentry figures overseeing that scene from their framed panels on the posts and pillars—the placid and timeless gaze of St. Gleb, himself a martyr, untroubled as he looked down on the shrouded forms below. Next to him, from a pulpit of mosaic feldspar, and with an expression of one who has relinquished all earthly care, St. Boris surveyed that congregation of death.

How much blood--? How much heaven--?

One Resurrection Cathedral was all it took to redeem Saint Petersburg. There were no other buildings like this here. When Russia re-colonized itself it did so in one strategic blast. No need to repeat the message on other streets or along other canals or in a showy plaza somewhere. Once was enough. This was declaratory architecture at its finest, a powerscape in one structure, an across-the-bow statement straight from the autocrat. And Russia made a statement, it did not stutter.

Tour groups were breaking up, and people scattering back outside into a late afternoon brilliance that sparkled all the brighter after the rains had washed through. I drifted out, too, and stood along the canal gazing down at the rippling water. My reflection shaped up on the surface, undulating in lozenges of color, and there was the cathedral floating behind me, its exterior a swirl of polychrome turrets and gilded onion domes.
In the U.S., after Kennedy was assassinated, the residents of Dallas bore a collective shame for what had happened in their midst, as if they had as a community pulled the trigger, not Lee Harvey Oswald. Dallas was dubbed the “City of Hate,” and its contentious right-wing political climate was blamed for fomenting an assassination-poised environment.

By 2013, however, during 50th anniversary observances of the tragedy, Dallas found itself completely rehabilitated. Our country of course held no grudge whatsoever against the city or its people. News reports credited the popularity of the television show “Dallas” and also America’s team, the Dallas Cowboys, for the successful rehab.

A tale of two cultures, there.

I smiled and watched a sightseeing boat skiff down the canal toward me, white caps ruffling as it passed. The Spilled Blood Cathedral disintegrated in the chop, its bell tower fluttering one way, its center dome wobbling another, its color drifting, a kaleidoscope floating on the spray.

For Russia, на крови was the only path to redemption.

Football and T.V. were the American way.