FIRST CROCUSES

DONALD PLATT

They are the colors of my dead father’s Lenten chasuble, royal purple with one huge gold cross, as he celebrated the early Sunday morning mass. No, these crocuses are the colors of my first girlfriend’s striped panties as I groped her on the balcony of the Mahaiwe Theater. We were watching the Bolsheviks in Doctor Zhivago wait in silence with their machine gun under tall pines for tiny soldiers in white tunics to walk closer across a wheat field studded with poppies before opening fire. After the gun rasped out its hacking coughs, the Red Army battalion crossed the waist-high wheat field to find they had executed boy soldiers, students at St. Michael’s, a local military school. Golden the wheat field, purple the shadows that the tall pines cast. Red the poppies and the white tunics splashed with blood. It was too sweet communion wine, white wafers on the gold-plated paten my father held aloft and blessed, Behold the Lamb of God; behold him that taketh away the sins of the world. Sin of that machine gun stuttering, pronouncing its idiot, one-word sentence on the bodies of boys barely fifteen.
David Lean, director of *Doctor Zhivago*, shot the movie mostly near Madrid in midsummer. He recreated Russian winter by buying hundreds of tons of marble from a nearby quarry. He had the stone ground down to a fine white powder and spread the snow that wouldn’t melt across five acres of a Spanish plain for a single cavalry charge. In the title role, Omar Sharif complained of David Lean, “He considers everybody on the set, everybody who is helping to make the film, as objects, rather than as people. They are the things that are making *his* film, and well, you can see how easy it is . . . to be terribly unhappy and rather hate him for it. I know that I have, at the end of many days’ shooting, felt terrible hate for him.” A son renouncing the father who gave him the best role of his career, who said, “He’s a very sensitive actor, and we happen to work very well together . . . And I thought I could get this Russian poet out of him.”

Imperious father, who liked to say, “Alright, Omar, action!” but who told Sharif to let the other actors in *Zhivago* act. “You don’t have to play anything at all. They will all be better than you. You must never be wonderful at any shot or any scene that you are playing. I don’t want anyone to say that you are good. You will be normal, completely nothing. No acting
at all!
But at the end, when people see the whole film, they will say you are good.”

At the end of his life, Omar would admit, “I loved David Lean, and when he said this to me, it was an order. I never tried to act in the film. I was completely real.”

At Varykino, Omar still looks out the frost-ferned window that thaws to a field of daffodils and birches waving in the wind.
The balalaika plays.

Omar looks and looks with wide, brown, sorrowing eyes that see nothing but a single daffodil that dissolves into Julie Christie’s face stunned to see Yuri enter the dusty library where she bends over an open book in shadow.

Crocuses’ orange pistils are the size of my first girlfriend’s swollen clitoris beneath her wet, silk, purple panties striped with gold. Her breath’s sharp intake. It all comes back, but only for one moment. I’ve heard she manages a bank, is married, has three children. I do not want to spoil that hour in the dark by seeing her again. I won’t whisper her name. Life is unreal as an epic film fed reel by reel into an ancient projector that stutters, then breaks down.

My father died from Alzheimer’s. He forgot everyone except my mother, who now is dead.

One day I too will close my eyes, won’t see that this spring’s crocuses are all there is.