

F I R S T C R O C U S E S



D O N A L D P L A T T

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.