

## Groznyy / Грозный (Ivan Murders Ivan)

Repeatedly, my students ask me for the meaning of a word. When I give them the answer out-right, they often nod their heads, and proceed to forget the definition. Instead, what I prefer to do and what helps them remember, is to provide the context of a word through a story. This way they can understand, beyond a dry translation, the essence of a word, especially one bathed in history and emotion. A word, like a name, has value not for its relation to another, but in how and when and why it is used, don't you find? I must be indirect, ultimately, because even if I tried, I could not give to a student what must be discovered on one's own.

For example, here, you encounter a strange sound and ask, "What does грозный mean?" I reply, "A bloody collection of incomprehensible letters; a terrible epithet; a form of formidable; at once the absence and the providence of God." Yet you are unsatisfied, and you repeat the question. Would you believe the story of its meaning were it told to you in plain words?

й й й

The last Rurik Tsar of Russia sat at his desk in his winter estate of Alexandrovsk. He had been staring out an icy window, looking at a frozen landscape, far from civilization. For a moment he had mistaken the waxing gibbous moon for a full one, so bright was it outside. And while he had stared, he had trembled. An open letter on his desk, dated November 1581, lay splattered with blood. Next to it was a letter opener, shimmering in the light, but with its golden handle also splattered with blood. Next to them both stood an upright icon of Christ.

Ivan Грозный let his hand empty the last drops of crimson onto the desk, palm facing up. The old man had opened his hand while opening the envelope. After reading, after bleeding, simply sitting, there, a feeling of *déjà vu* overcame him. Ignoring whether or not he had lived this moment before, and distracting himself from the pain in his hand, he resorted to philosophy. Life repeats, or it ends, the Tsar thought. Whereas divine cycles repeat endlessly. He looked out the window again, and again looked at the moon before a single cloud brushed against its incomplete left side. The Tsar leaned back into his chair, and contemplated the frost on the edge of the glass. He compared it to the brown that forms on an apple when bitten and left out in the open. That's what his cut was beginning to do. Christ, the Tsar pondered, contemplating now his desk's icon. That boy never hid his stigmata. What were his last words in Greek, or were they in Aramaic? "Eli eli lama," Ivan Грозный murmured. "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

The letter on the desk had come from the King of Polonia. In it, he mocked the Tsar for losing the Baltic Sea, and recounted the twenty-five years of war their frontiers had

endured, which had ended in ruin for both, though one had won and the other clearly lost. This wasn't the first letter addressed to the Old Bear from a ruler whose barking signaled nothing but vanity. Taunts rarely follow the victories of a great leader, rather they often come from a ruler who fears the threat of retaliation. Thinking of his grandfather, who taught him this lesson, the Tsar recalled, "Ivan Дедушка did well to break up the Golden Horde."

The heirs of the original Golden Horde, who had occupied Russia for about 300 years, divided the empire after their fall into three separate tartar Khanates. Within two years, Иван Грозный had managed to break two of these Khanates, in Kazan and Astrakhan, annex their territory, and grow strong enough to threaten the last remaining one in Crimea. The letters from this last Khanate, addressed to the Tsar, only grew more violent the stronger Russia became. And yet these tartars were the weakest they had ever been. That's what differentiated those dogs from the Old Bear—in contrast to those beasts who divide themselves and quarrel, when the Bear is injured, he recomposes, shuts his mouth, and focuses his attention elsewhere. Hence, his invasions westward, only those diversions lasted longer than they should have. "The Black Sea will be mine," the Tsar slurred. "But what about the Sultan? Invade southward, too? So many years, so many wars. How many throats slit, and why? How many catapults blasted, and why? How many children sent to die, forsaken by their fatherland?" To the Tsar it brought a cold shiver down his spine to think: What has been made for one thing—like throats, catapults, and children—when corrupted, could be made to act against their intention. Then his thoughts drifted to his life's trajectory, as happens with men left alone in their dimly-lit study: "Crowned in 1547, and a fire devastates Moscow. Attack Polonia and Livonia for the Baltic Sea in 1565, and then another fire in my capital. Establish the secret army of 1565, and the boyars revolt. Yet here am I, a Caesar, a Tsar."

"In one successful siege," he pronounced, "of that damned city of Pskov, I shall renew my honor"—but running out of breath, whispered—"though prolong the war."

The Tsar knew there would come a second letter soon—one with the King's conditions for surrender—from the only man he could entrust to courier such important documents: Boris Godunov, an aristocrat, warrior, and recent in-law. "He taught my eldest son to wrestle, and married his daughter to the other one."

The possibility of peace seemed enticing. After half a century of waring with one ruler or another, the Tsar had had enough. The Tsar even considered, seriously that night, to reply to his arch enemy with an acceptance of the offer granted to him a decade earlier to assimilate Polonia into Moscovia diplomatically. All the Tsar would have to do is assume another throne. Why hadn't he done this earlier, before losing best friends and countless generals for nothing?

The word "Why" rung in the old man's head as if it had been said out loud. He rubbed his temples and glanced across his study. There were enough religious candles and icons to supply a small church. He could pray here, he figured, but enjoyed pilgrimages too much. He recalled his first, a 350 mile journey to Kirillo with his beloved first wife, Anastasia

Romanovna, and their son Dmitri, who didn't live to see his first birthday. "And before him we lost two baby girls," Ivan mumbled. "We had traveled to the monastery in Kirillo to bless Dmitri. But, on the way, the Шексна River took him when our boat capsized and the nurse dropped him."

When the thought of corrupted things returned, the old man wept. It felt like the small tombstone in his chest, the one he had many times mistaken for a heart, was tumbling down. Heartless, but not guilty, the Tsar believed in the power of divine justice. Surely having paid his debts to God by now, the Tsar could renew his soul in this dark hour and sign a treaty. And if there were crimes of his yet unpunished in the eyes of the Lord, then his son, Ivan Иванович, heir to the throne, would in replacing him wash these sins, and continue diplomatic relations with the exterior. Twenty-seven years he had trained this Tsarevich for just this purpose, and with love. Aside from heir, the boy was living proof of Anastasia's grace, beauty, and good nature.

The Tsar wiped the tears from his cheeks at the thought of his son, his pride. Sure, the old man thought, there is his brother, but that fool is more of a plant, and less of a son. The Tsar, in moments of stress, could always fall back on this idea: that his Tsardom was secured. No matter how many times a plague decimated his economy, or barbarians ravaged his countryside, or a city fire leveled his capital, his time as a ruler, a time which historians were already calling "medieval," would be reinterpreted through the rule of his son. Even if he had been rough with the boy lately, redemption was still possible.

"Plus," the Tsar remarked, in a quiet English, "it can't get any worse," before remembering it can always get worse, as clouds faded from the night sky and let moonlight in.

A knock on the door. A turn of the knob. The eldest son, the Tsarevich, entered.

"Father."

Ivan Иванович closed the door behind him, but not all the way.

The Tsar didn't notice his son's winter wardrobe. Nor did he notice the quivering upper lip. Not even the sabre strapped to the Tsarevich's hip, or the hand ready upon the handle. The only thing he looked at, truly stared right through, was the crisscrossed black hairs between his son's moonlit eyes and furrowed brow.

The son knew this would be his father's reaction, reticence. There was a lot more the son knew, a lot more he had held secret inside his heart. The only way to speak to his father, for example, was to ignore everything else, and to accept the context, this Russian world they lived in, where serfs were blessed by God, and by the Devil rulers cursed, each mortal crawling from injury to injury, from painful event to painful event, in a string of suffering that made no sense to anyone who did not himself suffer one, a concept as abstract to the outside world as the stoicism a birch tree needs to survive the winter. For twenty-seven years, Ivan Иванович lived by Ivan the Father's side, imitating every move his father made. The Tsarevich, from an early age, came to understand the gravity of his position as heir. Unfortunately for the Tsarevich, his strict upbringing never allowed him to see any

possibility of life outside of his singular role. It was as if his entire existence served one purpose—and tonight he would find out exactly what, but not why.

“Father,” the son repeated. “We must speak.” He took a step in, and gripped his saber. Once its handle entered the silver light of the moon, it shimmered.

Growing up, Ivan Иванович was never out of his father’s sight, and as a result they became inseparable. Not so secretly, his father did not want to repeat the same mistake he had made with Dmitri, but overall the relationship was positive. The father would let his son hear his advice, sometimes his thoughts, and the son would give his father a kind of worship no ruler receives from his subjects. Ivan Грозный had given his son everything: robes, horses, an identity, women, life, and the complexes of a young prince soon to vie for power from his implacable father.

The Tsarevich step forward, looked around at the candles. “Do you know,” he said, turning to his father, “why I’m here?”

Ivan Иванович lost his mother at age six. He could not picture Anastasia, save with the aid of his imagination, sketching her face from the few portraits of her left. The father, to probably assuage some real pain, had destroyed most of the images of her after her passing, with the effect of depriving his eldest son from any prolonged exposure that might rekindle a memory. Thus, with time, his mother’s face slipped from his mind. As a child, as with all good children, he had believed his father when he said it was best to move on. But in adolescence, he blamed his father for depriving him of his mother, because as it turned out the father’s harshness had begun much earlier. The father would not allow his son to be alone with his mother even while she was alive.

“...Yelena lost the baby,” said the son.

Match making was common among 16<sup>th</sup> century royalty, but what made it unique for Ivan Иванович was this: he had fallen in love with the daughter of a foreign king, but, because of his father’s political wars, his heart would not be satisfied. A year later, Ivan Иванович was betrothed to a princess, and then another, and then a third. The first two matrimones ended because the women weren’t producing offspring. What upset the Tsarevich wasn’t that he was childless, or that all three matrimones were set up by the Tsar, nor that he did not marry his first love. It was the fact that the Tsar had selected these women from the batches of princesses brought to Moscow to replace the deceased Anastasia, for the Tsar himself. The father would pick his favorite, and then give his son the second best. Earlier this year, Ivan Иванович found himself in the third of his loveless marriages organized by his father, paired with a woman named Yelena Sheremeteva. In October she became pregnant. While everyone celebrated the blessing of the Rurik line, Ivan Иванович grit his teeth. A secret about this pregnancy wasted his heart. It rotted the Tsarevich, as he traversed half of Moscovia, one thousand miles, to meet the Tsar in his winter estate. The expanse he had traveled on horse, with soldiers and by caravan, paled in comparison to the two steps he had just taken, and the few left from where he stood to his father’s desk. Each

beat between the poundings his heart awoke in him that truth so long repressed, along with the one real question he had come to Alexandrovsk to ask.

“Did you hear me?”

Not even a week before tonight, Yelena had received a fist to the womb. The strike had come from the Tsar. It was claimed that she had been dressed too immodestly by religious standards. For Ivan Иванович this was just another tragedy in a heap of tragedies. Why would the Tsar injure a possible grandson? One logical reason would be because of power, the realization that he would relinquish the scepter so soon. But this was Russia. And there was an illogical reason for the beating as well.

“Answer me!”

The father remained seated, remained silent, remained.

“She won’t tell me,” the son grumbled, gnawing his back teeth, taking small steps towards his father. “Not even now, with the baby gone. She won’t admit what you really did to her.”

The father pierced his son with his eyes. If the Tsar had stared at a candle this intensely, his stare would have put out its flame. Ivan Иванович knew that to avoid the gaze, or to look directly into either of those vast taigas for eyes, and not between them, meant to fall into his father’s trap.

Rarely did anyone challenge the Tsar in person, and never for this long. The father trembled now with the same chill that had shaken him moments before, alone in his study, bloody letter in hand. With the breaking of the last cloud of the night sky, the letter opener glimmered at the desk, as did the Tsar’s eyes.

“Now you know what it feels like,” the father said. “To lose a son.”

Ivan Иванович halted. One foot rested on the rug that covered the floor between him and his father. The wound of those last four words made the son brim with tears. The Tsar grinned to see this.

“You know as well as I that the baby wasn’t mine,” the son grumbled.

“What’s that, boy?” the father roared. “Speak up!”

“Let me ask you a question,” the son said, pounding his chest once, before bringing his palm to the end of his sabre.

The father blinked.

“How does it feel to murder your own son?”

Like God, the father thought, turning to face the icon on his desk. He reached for his scepter, as if to get up. But when he grasped the iron with his hand, he paused to reach also for the letter opener. The gold of the handle felt cold. It no longer glimmered.

“You still have a lot to learn about Tsardom,” the father began, “and about the bedroom...” The old man clenched his chair’s arms, braced himself to stand. But the son’s words kept him seated.

“The church will recognize my divorce,” the Tsarevich said. “And then I will remarry.” The son spoke to his father, seeing the cut on his father’s hand. “I’ve also arranged

with the southern generals to lead an army into Pskov,” he said, looking at his father’s forehead now. “I’m going to recapture the Baltic.”

The father recognized himself in his son, and grinned again. But the more the son spoke, the sooner the grin melted into a grimace.

“You’ve broken my heart, father, and this nation. God wills me to make right your wrongs.”

The word God echoed in the room, as the flames from the candles in the room were extinguished by the draft of a window that just then swung open, shining one final flash of light against the golden-plated icon of Christ on the desk. Ivan Грозный remembered his wish for peace, but gave it up. There was no way. On his desk was also a portrait of Anastasia Romanovna. In darkness she seemed to look down with shame. There was no way.

“You remind me of her,” the father whispered, recalling the jealousy he had felt when the mother refused to wean the eldest son.

He jolted into the air, banging the desk with his hip, and knocking the icon face down over the letter. He ignored the pain, and instead focused on the cool grip of the knife in his hand, and the rug’s length separating him and his son. Smoke from the candles rose.

Then there came another knock at the door.

It was Boris Godunov, bearing the letter from the Poles. “Your majesty!” he shouted, swinging open the door, too rushed for formalities. Immediately, he sensed the tension in the room, but couldn’t piece together the lightless candles, the armed prince, and the blood-crusted hand of his Tsar. Rather, Godunov felt his throat, and his nose, which burned as beads of sweat dropped from his mustache. He had sprinted from the fortress’s gate.

“Your majesty, why is your hand bleeding?”

The Tsarevich broke not his concentration between his father’s eyes. The Tsar, however, did break, again, and looked over at Godunov.

“If it isn’t Boris Godunov,” the Tsar spoke. “My beloved in-law.”

Godunov let more sweat fall off his mustache.

“Wh-what is going on?”

No one in the room moved.

“A simple conversation,” the father said, dropping the knife. “That’s over.”

A clock inside the study struck its many chimes. Ignoring the sabre at his hip, and with fingers spread open wide, the son lunged at his father as a leopard upon a bear.

The father’s face came down over the top of his desk. No sooner did the son grapple with his father, though, did the old man swing an arm around his son. The scuffle led both men over the center of the rug. Red folds and thick tassels, along the rug’s patterned perimeter, circled them as they fought.

With the steadiness one practices in dealing with royalty, Boris prepared to approach the two wrestling colossi. Before he did, he was moved to lock the door behind him.

“Let me lead an army into Pskov!” the son shouted at his father’s ear, wrapping the Tsar in a choke hold. “Or I’ll tell the church!” the Tsarevich shouted. “I’ll tell the boyars, I’ll tell the people!”

Godunov had no idea what the son meant. He only sensed that the Tsar was not giving in so easily, that is until Godunov heard the first crack of bone. The warrior managed to separate the two men apart when he tackled his Tsarevich, and left the Tsar writhing on the rug. Godunov then latched his powerful hands to the Tsarevich’s arms, and with his entire body weight drove the youth back into the corner with the extinguished candles, step by step by step.

“Damn you!” Godunov shouted. “What’s this madness, Ivan Иванович? Why?” Godunov spat as he spoke. “Honor your father it says in the book. Let your heart speak words!” He struggled, because the youth was thrusting back with all his might, but fortunately for Godunov, who weighed almost twice as much as the Tsarevich, he could keep pushing. “No one understands violence!”

“Violence is the only thing that animal understands,” Ivan Иванович responded. “He’s forsaken us all!”

Boris Godunov managed to send the youth far enough back to notice something else, something strange and vacant in the youth’s eyes. They were void, save for the light of the waxing moon entering the room.

All things are clearer in retrospect, he would say later. But in that moment, Boris Godunov mistook what was in the Tsarevich’s eyes for blind rage. What he should have noticed, instead, was their emptiness, the boy’s very fate.

The Tsar pushed himself off the ground without a word. The father glowed with anger. The son noticed this, and glowed fire red too, but could not break free from Godunov’s strangle.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, and of his savior, the Tsar popped his scepter into the air and with both hands gripped its lower end. Drunk with wrath, he brought the iron top down on Godunov’s back.

He felt the iron strike like a lightning bolt. His hold over the Tsarevich slackened. The son to break free, planted a leg behind Godunov’s heel, and with a shove sent him tumbling backwards, ironically, just as Godunov had taught the youth to do years ago.

Boris stuttered a curse as his body hit the floor, and his eyes rolled to follow the Tsarevich’s second lunge upon his father.

But the father was prepared this time, having already brought the scepter high above his head for another bolt of lightning. Welded to the top of the scepter was the symbol of his nation, a two-headed eagle. In one fell swoop the eagle met the top of head of the man who could have sat on the throne. The heads shattered, and just like that the Rurik bloodline came to an end.

The rest of the scepter hit the ground, as did the rest of Ivan Иванович.

Moonlight again entered the study, illuminating the father knelt before his son. The son retracted into a grotesque fetal position, twitch by twitch. Blood gushed forth. The father looked down, at his boy, reduced to nothing but an animal in need of another bash to finish him off. But the father, not out of cruelty, only out of disbelief, held back the second blow. Instead he shoveled his palms under his son's body and lifted him up to his chest. He hadn't held his son like this since before the war, since before the massacres, since before the tartar invasions, or the new torture techniques or the secret police. The son slowly spasmed in his father's arms, letting out cool breath after cool breath.

"My son!" the father cried. "My son! Please speak!"

The son looked up at his father, as if surprised at his wrinkles and grey beard. In an instant he saw both the leader of the Russian people, and the man who had held him at birth. In a second instant, the son saw the incarnate of pure evil, and the flesh of God. A third instant brought with it realizations and epiphanies, the color purple, the illusion of magenta, blue then red, and a spinning snowflake from the outside world, reminding the boy of a sled he had seen floating the river in Novgorod once before it flowed with the tens of thousands of dead women and children his father had thrown in there. Between each instant, the Tsarevich opened his mouth to speak but only let out drool and wheezes. Now he no longer twitched.

The father turned his cry upwards. "Lord, spare him!" He shook the body. He would have preferred his son's spasms to this now absolutely still body in his arms.

Godunov, who had watched the scene with horror, felt himself paralyzed. Not even the banging on the bolted door distracted him from the two human beings wrapped in one another's blood—for it was the same blood for both men.

The father bellowed, before his eyes fell upon his son, who had just tried to say something.

The son was now attempting to say what he had wanted to say all along, the simple question that had rotted inside. It was ready to come out. The father with a black sleeve wiped the drivel from his son's lips, cleaned off the tears which could have been either man's, yet had pooled over the cheeks of the younger Ivan.

The son nodded. The father nodded back.

"Speak my son, yes, anything, you can ask me, please, God is with us."

The son swallowed a bit of goo from his mouth, and uttered his last word:

"Почему, папа? Почему?"

The father would never answer that question. And the boy's spirit crossed into purgatory, his body yet nestled in his father's chest. It wouldn't be until four nights later, on the actual night of the full moon, that the son passed away.

The father saw his reflection in those comatose eyes. No matter how hard he held onto his dying son, shook him, pleaded, the Tsar felt nothing but that same raw feeling of being a scared child at the mercy of the boyars, of fear and trembling. Not even the cut in his hand, which was open.

Boris Godunov stood up, grabbed the Tsar's scepter with one hand, and with the other squeezed his lord's shoulder. He asked the old man to stand up with him, to get help. But there existed no salvation for those three men outside of that room. They were damned. The son, because he had been killed on accident. Godunov, because he was made to rule as regent over the fool brother of Ivan, only to become ruler himself to devastating consequences. And of course the Tsar, because... The Tsar sat at the Tsarevich's deathbed, and for four days would not but shake his head and repeat a single word: the only thing left inside of him, the only thing coming out of that grave which marked where his heart had once been, in a whisper less than quiet, yet more regular than an old man's heartbeat:

“Грозный... Грозный... Грозный...”

й й й

Do you see now what that word means? A word with two whys. Bears cannot express pain, for they have no word for pain. Heathens know not God, for they have no word for God. To translate грозный into English is to misunderstand the word. The English doesn't capture the history of that word; but to a Russian, in русский язык, hearing the word feels like drowning. Neither murder nor filicide comes close to defining the events of the evening of November 16<sup>th</sup> 1581. No word can fill those shoes but the one muttered over a murdered son: грозный.