

I'm told that the best way to make a crowd listen is to begin with the words, I'm going to tell you a story.

Well, I'm going to tell you a story about a story I wish that I could tell.

This summer, I spent seven weeks in Russia. It was a difficult experience; I was often sad and lonely and wanted to go home. Yet, over the course of my time in Moscow and St. Petersburg I also got a glimpse into my grandparents lives. I met a handful of their old friends.

In St. Petersburg, I met a childhood friend of my grandmother's. I called him дядя Саша. He and his wife, Rosa, lived in an apartment with more bedrooms than people in an old, soviet-style building on Vasilevsky Island. I remember that she had bad teeth and a fondness for housecoats, and that he had a growth on his nose and brewed his own alcohol. I got to try his vodka and absinthe. They lived and breathed for their only child, Lena, who lived and worked in Moscow.

Lena visited home once during my time in St. Petersburg, and offered to meet with me and show me around. We were together for a couple of hours one night: she took me to the banks of the Neva river for St. Petersburg's famed white nights. Locals and tourists gathered by the car load as the sky remained light into the wee hours of the morning. The drawbridges opened and large vessels filed through the narrow rivers of the city. We parked ourselves across the river from the marriage bureau where my grandparents had wed 45 years prior and watched. She took some pictures of

me and adjusted the contrast on my camera, while telling me the history of both sides of the river from memory.

She drove me back, and left the next morning.

On Wednesday, my grandfather told me that Lena had died in Moscow the previous week. Her car broke down in the middle of a tunnel as she was on her way to visit a boyfriend I didn't know existed. She stepped out, and was hit by another vehicle.

I realized that I don't remember what she looked like. I searched the internet frantically for a photo of her, for some reminder that she had lived, on facebook, on google, on the Russian version of classmates.com. A photo that would jog my memory and make me remember her more clearly. I vaguely remember long dark hair, in tighter ringlets than my own. I imagine her having her father's face.

I met with Florence about my speech shortly after I had found out about Lena's death. I had expected to talk about something lighter.

Florence asked me what I would do differently if I had the chance to go back.

I would have taken a photo.

You see, I hope to make my living telling people's stories in print, recording the lives of the underdogs to show them that I, and maybe by extension others, care. Yet, there's nothing I can tell you about this woman.

She was one of four offspring of my grandparent's generation that I met this summer. She's the only one with whom I didn't arrange to keep in touch. The irony of that is not lost on me. I didn't really know this woman, and yet in some ways I feel like I have failed.

We met towards the end of my trip, when my endurance was wearing thin and I eagerly anticipated my return home. I assumed that at some point, I would return, or she would be in the States, and I could reciprocate the same kindness she had shown me.

Sometime next week, she will be buried next to—there's no good way to translate the Russian word “подхранить”—her grandmother in St. Petersburg's only Jewish cemetery, where this summer I cleared vines from my ancestor's tombstones. When her parents, both only children, pass, there will be no one to keep an eye on them, and they will slowly vanish.

I wish I could tell you her story with the same detail and authenticity that I'd be able to in a three thousand word profile. I can't, I don't remember enough. But I guess in some ways, this is my attempt to repent and document that she had lived, and that her family's story matters.