



Dillon Hamilton

A Shishkin

by Dillon Hamilton

My first yearnings for an original Shishkin felt like something that should have been ignored and forgotten, given the time in which they arose. I had grown up with Plenty, but once Plenty had realized there was work elsewhere and that Equality was willing to do less work for higher pay, Plenty left. He left discreetly, quickly, too, but sent me a letter, from wherever he had landed. He wrote, “My return is possible—not eminent. If your fruits return to your own care, so will I. Until that time enjoy Equality. She has this habit of getting into everything and staying longer than even she likes, but she’s what you asked for.”

I wanted a Shishkin not because his work was rooted in progression, borne out of a movement away from the old rules and institutions, but because his work could never shed the old rules that clothed it. His work still wore shoes, combed its hair, bathed occasionally, and showed up to its appointments on time. It was polite in presentation and consumption. Never filling itself with wine, debauchery, and decadence. When it promised rye, that’s precisely what it gave you, down to touch, smell, and taste. There were no budding daffodils in winter scenes. Pine forests were never mistaken for oaks. And Saint Petersburg and Moscow were hardly hegemonic cultures. No, for all his frustrations with the academy about high versus low, he could not help but use color and words just as much as they did.

I wanted *Bratzevo* with its towering pillars of cloud and peasants walking next to a field of grain on a wet road. I wanted to hang it in my office. Not behind my head like most publishers might do to have whatever wealth and power it took to acquire the piece in direct reference to the seat in front of it and whoever occupied it. I wanted *Bratzevo* behind the celebrity agents and writers that walked through the door. They would never know it was there, but I would. When

they started their spiels about the “next bestseller” in their hands, my eyes could drift up to wherever Shishkin had been and my mind could join him. I wouldn’t have to hear the ramblings about discovering genius, whatever they thought that was. I could just look up and see the work of someone who had pursued it. I even had dreams, pleasant dreams, of a writer walking into my office, introducing themselves, looking around for last minute clues as to how they may make this book pitch, and finding *Bratzevo* hung behind them. If they said, “I love art...”, “I prefer...”, or any number of general responses one might have in any museum, I had already passed over their own work without hearing their pitch. Is this needlessly presumptuous? Sure. Judgment before the testimony? Yes. But I didn’t want to publish works from minds such as these. I would have missed out on some huge bestsellers with that method. But if they said, “I want to do that. I don’t believe I can, but I want to,” I would polish and sell whatever they slid across the table, even if they spelled and wrote as well as a Twain character spoke. Those were my favorite dreams about *Bratzevo*, but they never came true. Just as it looked like they might come true there was that big dust-up, shaking of the foundations, reset, if you will. We tootled along at the office for another year or so. Business as usual. We were one of the Big Five and held on to our positions and profits far longer than the low to midlevel companies, but eventually the Big Five became the Public Five. They promised a complete teardown and build back up, or better, or different. I can’t remember which. So, when the big turned public, the publishers of each naturally had to represent that public and its thoughts, desires, and momentum.

This meant I was replaced by a young lady with many years of hands-on experience in publishing. Her first jobs included manifestos, academic critiques of anything and everything, the ‘values’ sections of job descriptions, and ‘what we believe’ portions of many social movements’ websites. I was told she was quite adept as a grassroots multimedia marketer of

these things as well and when I asked for her handles on platforms to look at her work, I was told it wouldn't be for someone such as myself. I remember thinking to myself as she came in that the wall where I had dreamed of hanging *Bratzevo* would likely go to a photo of Marcuse or one of his friends, and the penetrating scent of cannabis would likely fill the space.

I remember her being proud and excited with herself as if she had orchestrated and sustained all events leading to her rise in position. I let her ramble on about her future plans, which seemed to have more to do with her own progression rather than the publisher's. Before I dug into the documents concerning the day-to-day and other issues at hand, she asked to switch chairs. I saw no reason to object as it was to be *her* chair quite soon. We switched.

I had always heard from writers and agents that had been in my office many times before that the seat across from me was an uncomfortable one. I had thought them liars since I had spent a few hundred dollars more on that chair than my own, but now, I realized they had not been lying nor exaggerating. The chair was defective. Its occupants clammed, wilted, dithered. It was no longer a wonder to me that many a pitch had gone awry in that chair.

“Well?” She said.

I reached across to my mug, swigged my coffee, and handed her a copy of the transition document. “Let's skip the pleasantries and welcoming chapters and go straight for the plot, which should be around page twenty-two of the document—”

“Why did I expect anything different? Same old story. You can't throw off something you're so addicted to,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“It's far from excusable. You're skipping all the things that might challenge who you are and your power. Do you realize how many ceilings I have flown through?”

If I'm honest, I was, and still am, quite surprised that there were any apparatuses—no matter how well-engineered—that could disconnect her from the earth. I lamented for my old seat behind the desk.

“You have no idea the struggles and obstacles I have strained to overcome!” She said.

This brought to mind a particular elevator that must have had very recent struggles and strains.

“You still cannot let go of the power you so crave in your heart!”

“But I have willingly given my seat and position to you. Does this not show the lengths to which I would go to prove my contrition?”

“Ha!” She exclaimed loud enough to draw the eyes of the office, even the interns rummaging through the slush pile in the far corner. “The arrogance baffles me. You never even asked what *I* thought would be enough. You assumed this was ‘enough’ based on some natural objectivity that your and your culture’s power complex thrive on. My ascension is the harbinger to the end of the supremacy of bigotry at the highest levels of publishing. I plan on changing all of this with a few fundamental shifts.”

“I did not mean offense.”

“No, you come by it naturally as most of *you* do.”

I shifted to the edge of my seat. The less my rear made contact with that throne of clamming, wilting, and dithering, the better off I was. Noting her particular use of *you* had been a collective one, I fought the urge to stick up for my ilk, but then realized I had never truly belonged to a collective outright and that I would need to clarify exactly what collective *you* she was referring to in order to begin my defense. It all seemed tiring, so I granted her point.

“Sure...your responsibilities may change day-to-day, depending upon the season, but be prepared for meetings to take most of your time—”

She held up a hand. “I’m going to stop you there, Mr. McKinley. I and all the others like me are done being explained to by *you*.”

There it was, again. That pointed use of an ambiguous plural *you*, as if it were the poison dripping off of the arrowhead that had been shot in my direction. I had no idea who this *you* was and an even scarier notion, which I have entertained only recently, is that even she wasn’t sure who the *you* included. She may know them once she came across them, but she could no more name them than I could, and I was supposed to be counted among their number. She promptly called security. A guard looking much like herself, only with different colored hair, escorted me to the parking garage, and was supposed to guide me on to my car but didn’t bother. She was breathing heavily. I told her I would cover the homestretch alone. She nodded and released me.

After this incident with the young lady who had replaced me, Shishkins looked ripe, pluckable even. The severance was cut back because it was public and my exit was considered “graceless” once it hit a few papers and digests, but, pending a new job offer, we had more than enough to go after *Bratzevo*. With the news hitting the digests and papers, the job offer was revoked within a few days and the dream of *Bratzevo* abandoned.

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Though *Bratzevo* was lost for the time being, my wife, Kathy, encouraged me, God bless her, to invest elbow grease and the severance into something I could build upon. I started a small publishing company, one that sought to be traditional, on the outskirts of Philadelphia, near Gladwyne. The real estate prices would have sunk me, if not for the family property and connections I still had in the construction business.

The transition was quite unusual. I expected the big names, sellers, agents to come back through my doors. For the first four months, I floated between my windowless rear office and the minifridge behind my wife's desk. I would grab a dark soda that seemed to get warmer and more generic in brand as time went on and plop behind my laptop, answering emails and punching out a few quippy and heartless lines to a biography I was working on for an agent that had begged me for a "tell-all" work, since I had been let go. It was mostly copied and pasted from past emails, but as he had said all I had to do was compile the words and he would make mountains out of molehills for me.

The writers and agencies I had worked so hard to get and keep in the old days never came through my door. It was a decent drive from New York. Most of them didn't own a car and with my name being sullied recently, I could understand a relative hesitancy to join an upstart, who may cause you to smell of bumpkin upon your return. But the behavior that truly hurt came when the loneliness settled in. Not a loneliness brought on by lack of a companion—she was only a few strides away—but a professional, or some might say vocational, loneliness. I'm sure there have been many men in history who have experienced that desert-island, lone-survivor-at-sea, *contra mundum* weight. The kind of mental space where a man convinces himself that the trees outside his door have taken measurable steps to physically evict their proprietor.

It started with, not one, but four of my favorite agents responding to my emails with an automated message. Isolated from one another I could come up with a myriad of excuses for their senders, but not all on the same day with the same lack of hope. Then, a writer friend, one of those writers who would have turned in the clammy, wilted, dithered chair and given me the response to *Bratzevo* that I wanted, simultaneously canceled a round at the country club and disinvited me to his daughter's wedding, citing low finances and saying, "It had to be

somebody.” The final straw for all the old friends was one of the interns that had done well for herself and navigated the cultural climate with an air I had rarely seen since my rise in the industry. She milked all the knowledge and wisdom that she could from me in just ten emails. She was efficient and driven, which made her emails seem like they were written by a cold man. I was afraid it would end in bitterness for her, but nonetheless I had her test the winds for me in New York. I desperately wanted back in and was willing to man the sails for any direction the wind might come from or change my course toward, but she informed me that I had been in the doldrums for some time without knowing it. She advised, with brevity, that I should sail in the direction opposite of the public five. My name was dynamite in those ports and my services would be considered high crimes at sea to anyone who would accept them. When I asked her, what might be the opposite direction of the public five, seeing as I had never taken the road out of town, she said, “Indie writers,” and refused any further communications with me. She could have likely gotten fired just for answering one email, and yet, she had answered a baker’s dozen. It was a kindness no one but her paid to me in those days and I’m still very thankful for it.

Taking the road out of town I noticed that it was not less traveled. In fact, it was much more traveled and those stuck in the traffic, parents and couples trying to make extra for savings in a writing “side hustle”, were more than eager to roll down their windows to any scammer who promised big promotion and sales for their book. I picked up on the trend when one of these scammers accidentally emailed me to promote a self-published memoir that I had endorsed but not authored. So, naturally I self-published a fifty-six-page exhortation to indie writers called, *Stop! Google Them*. To the young indie writers who had been aware of these wolves all along, my book was “needless”, “obvious”, “something a boomer might need”, or at least that’s what the reviews said. I would kindly point them to my sales reports and show them that sometimes

needless, obvious, and things that boomers may need sell pretty well. Sometimes they sold so well that the dreamers who wrote them could entertain the idea of a Shishkin once more.

After research, observation, and the helpful advice of an art dealer acquaintance from the old days, Kathy and I settled on a smaller, lesser-known Shishkin that I'm forgetting the name of. There had been some dispute as to whether the piece was really his or one of his followers, but some corroborating documentation had been found floating around the Old Bloc countries. The story of how they were acquired is quite amusing. It was a mixer of sorts between some of the aging bloodletters of the Communist era, young tycoons, and random benefactors of each. One of the bloodletters joked about the softening of the Russian man during Bolshevism's zenith and how his father, apparently one of the firmer softies, had stowed away some of Shishkin's letters in their dacha storehouse. Through the contents of these letters tens of pieces were appraised as Shishkin's and gave their previous owners a bit of hives as they realized they had passed along an original for somewhere between three and six thousand dollars.

But as it would shake out, I learned to empathize with those previous owners. Hives became my new normal state as I made my daily checks of the sales reports to my fifty-six-page exhortation to indie writers that had sold so well in the beginning. The sales numbers plummeted at a grade that made any nearby sportsman clad himself in skis and grab his poles. This troubled me. I had studied the trends of book sales for the past thirty-three years and the only other time I had seen downturns this drastic were after major scandals, which usually caused a mere one-month dip, and poor reviews. I searched for scandals I might have been involved in without my knowledge—nothing. I scanned reviews on all the important sites—nothing. I then emailed the platform directly and received my answer. I had violated the middleman's community values, code of ethics, terms of use, etc. and though my work had been listed as an "up-and-comer" and

my name had been considered for their monthly cash giveaway for writers, *Stop! Google Them* was now actively being given the short stick, moved to the back of the line, and because it would violate the community values, code of ethics, terms of use, etc. I cannot say the one about the totem pole. With those sales drying up, the millstone ground to a halt as did any hope for a mid-tier, original Shishkin.

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God bless the unmarried pariah. They bear their ostracized state in public and still must come home to basic duties like dishes, dinner, and sleep. Who could, without a half-day's prayer and good night's sleep, receive abuse and disdain from the world and remember how to properly execute a breaker reset, hot-ham-and-cheese sandwich, and over-the-phone car payment in one evening? If it weren't for Kathy, three months of pariahdom would have done me in. I was busy building another publishing company with a trowel and fighting off the naysayers at my back with a sword, while she took care of the entire household and resumed her career as an equine dentist. Many days were heavy for me as I had overvalued the "old days" and friendships lost, but Kathy foresaw my coming pariahdom and jumped in alongside me with both feet, saying, "What a lot to be consider a leper by!" She singlehandedly changed my views on pariah work. Before losing my position, and this would have been quite clever, I would have changed anything and everything—my name, identity, gender—in order to keep my millstone turning. I was hardly proud of the flour, but there was loads of it and everyone wanted some. They grew fat and happy. I would have grown richer, maybe not in monetary terms, but some people have enough social capital to be given original Shishkin's. I could have done whatever it took to keep my seat in one of the public five, but this pariah thing fit my skills and personality much better and it took Kathy's keen observations for me to see it. Again, God bless the unmarried pariah.

By this time the public five had restructured into Public Publishing, and they had solidified their legitimacy and regulatory principles with a dot gov. Pariah publishers, like myself, ran the daily risk of any and all of the new intellectual property and tax evasion suits. We all operated in a traditional fashion. Exchanges were made hand-to-hand in hardcopy or hard drive format. Sales were determined by personal connections and not search bars, which was quite an adjustment for someone like myself. Capital P pariahs were the first to be arrested and tried on these charges. With the decline in volunteers for law enforcement programs, they just couldn't keep up with all of us and those with operations in small towns or rural settings could operate with libertine flair without a lingering fear of prosecution.

My operation was caught somewhere in the middle. We had moved into a well-preserved, turn-of-the-century schoolhouse by yet another golf course. I played fewer and fewer rounds in those days, but most of our buyers used a round of nine or eighteen holes to stop by and see what was new. Hershey, mind you, was, at this point in time, a place that enjoyed a bit of the old ways of speaking and thinking, though they'd never casually admit such things to a neighbor. In fact, I staggered clients' visiting times so that they might avoid any such run-ins with their neighbors. They couldn't imagine making eye contact with one another while holding abominations like *The Green Dragon: The Lives of Banastre Tarleton & Mary Robinson*, *Heart of Darkness*, and any of the droves of Chesterton and Ishiguro that I had stored away in taped boxes that were labeled "Taxes 2024". Thankfully, this all came to a halt when local, state, and in some instances, federal law enforcement agencies began hiring minors and the prepubescent for "in-home police work" as they had dubbed it. Kathy and I joked that the fuzz had quickly become the peach fuzz. It seemed an inevitable trend when considered with a clear head. Swelling the ranks by any means necessary has always been a mark of these swift movements throughout

history. They always name them something noble-sounding, powerful, “future shapers”, “red guards”, “league of youth” and the like. We had no children to potentially betray us. Kathy bemoaned this. I was glad. I knew if we had had children, I would have been the type of father to raise a shaper, a guard.

Pariah publishers of indie works created local, grassroots gluts. I was no different. In fact, my best sellers were a set of three craftsmen books, two on carpentry and another on plumbing of all things. The poor saps that wrote them didn’t even want their names printed with their work, nor did they want the proceeds of their labor. They feared what may happen to their non-pariah family members. I used most of the revenue to print more, but there was enough fat and marrow left over to entertain the idea, however dangerous at this point, of going after a Shishkin.

In an odd chain of events, I set my desires on one of his sketches that was owned by a government architect in upstate New York. It was one of his works of a pine forest with a few felled and leaning trees at the forest’s edge. A road, likely built by loggers, wound in from the right and turned into the heart of the forest. Some might consider this to be setting the bar quite low, given my reputation as a pariah, Shishkin’s fall from grace, and with the current cultural climate. Prices for Shishkins had fallen to an affordable level but locating them was most difficult. Never quite understanding this fall from grace, I pursued his handiwork through all the backchannels that grew ever numerous and dangerous. But, as Kathy pointed out to me, going after a Shishkin sketch was much less dangerous than operating an illicit publishing operation.

I set a meeting with the architect. We met at a diner that had closed in 2020 that the architect knew from his running days in the Catskills. I mentally prepared, as I always did during these remote meetings, for a wave of kid officers to sprint out of the hardwood slopes ready to cudgel me. Normally, I was the seller in these situations, but this time, being the buyer, I realized

how much less I had to lose. I could throw a few wild haymakers at the peach fuzz, never intending to land one, sprint back to my car, and make a run for it, without having to worry about protecting or getting caught with any illicit works. Though we could argue about whether I deserved to get caught for all the infractions I had gotten away with, I was not going to let it happen and I never had to.

The most action on the road was a pair of fawns that lingered too long, led by their mother. It was overcast without being drab. The wind prodded at any creature caught in it to step lively and somewhat happy. I got out of my vehicle, approaching the architect's, and grew happier as I went. He eased out of his vehicle concerned—wary even. He made fists and jabbed the bottoms of his jacket pockets, which I thought, at first, was to ward off the chill. His khaki combat boots marched over the asphalt. *Thu-doom. Thu-doom.* Reminded me of something Rambo might have worn. I followed his lead with the concern, wariness, and frustrated punching of my own jacket pockets.

“You’re not going to believe this,” he said.

I stopped, looked up the slope to my left, and said, “What?”

He waved a hand at the woods to my left. “No, don’t worry about that. It’s my wife.”

“Is she hurt?” I asked.

“She probably should be, but no. She turned me in for selling the art. It was part of my signing bonus, but I had to sell every piece so we could survive. Now she wants to survive without me.”

I felt for him. His story was similar to many in these days. Work and money dried up, but the desire for them didn’t. “I can pay you extra for the Shishkin,” I said.

He shook his head and spat. “She replaced the Shishkin with one of our mirror frames. I noticed it when I stopped to go to the bathroom in Schenectady. I can’t believe I came all this way with...I’m so sorry.”

“Think nothing of it. Just transfer the crypto back and we’ll call it even. I’ll see if there’s another of your paintings...” I trailed off because of the look I saw growing out from a troubled brow.

“She’ll already have that.”

“Right. Well, she doesn’t have this car, yet.”

“She’s my wife. I share everything with her.”

“Not a love for offloading your art apparently.”

He held up his hand, asking for mercy. “Maybe there’s some other way I can—no, I’m sure you won’t want that. It’s been illegal since the pandemic.”

“It doesn’t matter what you dream up. You’ll be arrested at the edge of your driveway. That’s the first part of the torture, seeing your front door and never getting to enter that last time.”

He rattled off a cough. “You must be kidding. I’ve never seen an arrest that backhanded.”

“That’s because you’ve only seen them at work. It’s because they want you to keep coming back to work. If you had seen one of these my-family-ratted-on-me-and-got-the-cuffs-on-me-before-I-reached-the-door jobs, you’d never want to go back home,” I said.

“I’ve got to deal with this.”

“You better not go back home.”

“She cannot do this. Not when she has benefitted so much from all that I’ve done.”

“Don’t go home.”

“Like they wouldn’t let me at least talk to my family first.”

“Don’t.”

He offered a hand. “I’m sorry about all this.”

I shook it. “Me too.”

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Shishkin’s died to me like the Italian Master’s had died to non-state-funded museums. They were out there, in my price range, but so very far from my grasp. Though, as Kathy pointed out, if I was resolved to have a Shishkin before death, I would need to accept a public publishing position. Nothing was out of the grasp of public spheres, but it was also those spheres that got good men like the architect where he was. In any case, I decided to let go of ever having, or the idea of having a Shishkin. It was quite a profitable ambition to drop at the time. Once the architect had been stopped three blocks from his home, arrested, and had his car razed to the ground, deals much like the one we had had were found out all around us. In just the first month after our own failed ruse, two public curators were caught putting paintings out to pasture that they were being paid to keep hidden from public showings and display. I got a good look at the works. They were mostly decent, some beautiful, but nothing subversive. They were mostly landscapes of the American West by some artist with an obsession for Painted and Appaloosa horses. I’m glad I have memories of them before they went into the furnace.

Ironically, the death of a Shishkin enlivened the desire for one even more. If a four-decade adventure for one man’s paintings wasn’t looking downright idolatrous, then an enlivened desire had to come with its own sacraments, songs, and silent prayer, but I assure you that it merely transformed my search for the works of Shishkin and nothing more.

I bought used supplies from trusted neighbors and family members—the few that were left—and went about sorting my memories for something doable. I settled on several of Shishkin's stump sketches. They were his less detailed works and most easily replicated from my memory. I closed and opened my eyes a lot in that first week. Kathy would come in from time to time to check the progress, thinking the whole endeavor fascinating since she was the one with all the artistic talent, but I was the one with the memory of Shishkin. I was no expert, but I truly doubt that even the experts had the gumption to try what I was. They may have called what I was trying disrespectful, but you know what they say about imitation and flattery.

I spent a solid five months in a state of imitation, even to the point of growing a beard. I spent two more months remembering and adding the fine details and the final month arguing with myself as to whether I had truly replicated one of Shishkin's stumps or compiled them all into one unrecognizable work. When I showed Kathy, she recognized the stump and was sure it was Shishkin's. I opened and closed my eyes for a few more weeks to be sure and settled on the idea that it was close enough. I signed his name in the bottom right as I remembered it and realized there was no good place for me to keep it. Kathy agreed with me.

As we debated over how to get rid of the sketch, I got to enjoy it for a few more days. We thought it best to dispose of the supplies, pencils, canvases, etc., as well. The measure seemed extreme on account of the other illegal publishing paraphernalia in our possession, but if caught, it was always best to be guilty in only one medium.

We burned the canvas and frames and peeled the pencils down to fine shavings with an old pencil sharpener that came with a cartoon-themed back-to-school packet at department stores. Kathy took the shavings and shoved them at the center of her compost pile in the backyard. They broke down well.

It was well worth all the trouble and toil I had gone through to get my Shishkin, though I had it for only a short time. In fact, I'd have thought it well worth my time and effort to fistfight a good man or two for a Shishkin but not give my life. It would have been unconventional compared to the way others acquired such works in our time, but I found it more honorable than compromising my convictions for a bit of canvas, and it matched my new-found pariahdom quite well.

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