

ALMOST INNOCENT

DANCING IN THE SPACE BETWEEN

Michael Mish

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Michael Mish, musician, philosopher, playwright, composer and environmental activist, has written a cross-disciplinary book that looks at the human condition with wise and clear eyes. *Almost Innocent* provides a unique and empowering solution to the greatest pain from which our modern world suffers: damaged innocence.

With carefully chosen anecdotes, brilliantly wrought insights, and self revelation trembling with transparency, *Almost Innocent* delivers a wallop of wisdom.

Perceptive, nearly haunting, Mish's understanding of a problem we all share offers surprising and imaginative solutions. The reader is gently taken by the hand, shown where we fell off the track, (through no fault of our own) and then offers a paradigm shift that allows restorative self-compassion.



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Vladimir in his Moscow apartment - Dec 1978

CHAPTER 11

Vladimir Vysotsky

AMONG SOME OF the most amazing things that have occurred in this, at once charmed and strange, life of mine is that I've met absolutely amazing people.

Richard sat next to me on a plane while flying back to Germany to meet my former German girlfriend, Elke, with whom I stayed for 8 months alternately on the Greek Island of Santorini and in Stuttgart in 1971. Richard sold computer hardware, at the time, to the Soviets. Richard was Polish and, like most everyone from Europe, multilingual. Though he lived in Southern California, his dealings had him speaking in Polish, Russian and German as he'd travel to those countries. We committed to getting together when our respective trips were over. My visit with Elke was disappointing. We'd simply gone in two entirely different directions to relate to one another anymore. She had continued with her study and practice of pedagogy as we had *both* planned to do in Hamburg, and I had made a sharp left turn to become a salesman. We made radically different life choices and we no longer recognized each other. I'd even venture that she was repulsed by me and my mustache. The thoughtful, and sensitive guy she knew in Greece and Germany had been supplanted by a cocky and bawdy American salesman.

Richard and I promptly met up a month after our respective trips. By all indications he was an enormously successful business man. Jocular and playful, he had what seemed to have eluded many of my American male friends: a very playful sense of the absurd. Because I could meet him on the theater of the absurd, he felt that I should also meet a man he'd recently met while staying in Moscow. This Muscovite and his wife, Marina who lived in Paris, were to be coming to the states and would I mind letting them stay at my house in Pacific Palisades. This was to be Vladimir's first time in the United States. Richard's house, at the time, was spoken for and, besides, I'd get along with them "great". Seldom one to decline a new experience, I agreed.

Vladimir¹ was small and wiry like me. We could have been brothers. Marina², born of Russian parents who'd immigrated to Paris, was a beautiful blonde and a working actress in France. It was 1977 and we met with instant, playful, recognition. After a brief getting to know each other on their evening arrival, Vladimir emerged from the downstairs bedroom the next morning and we greeted one another. He approached me like a child. Rocking back and forth like a marionette as he walked, I emitted a high munchkin voice in greeting him. His eyes widened. I did it again. And he walked right up to me to look inside my mouth to see where the sound was coming from.

"Do it again," he begged.

I did it again. Then he tried it. With his low, gravelly voice he was challenged to get into that vocal register. Once again, he looked in my mouth as I did a Mickey Mouse voice. He laughed and once again tried to find the placement in his own voice to do it himself. Fascinated by the sound and where it came from, he was determined to find out how this sound was created. He was captivated by the vocal mechanics of the squeezed munchkin voice. Why did it work? How did a tiny voice come out of a man's voice box. He was a mixture of delighted, intrigued and, like a scientist...obsessed with getting to the simple physics of it.

He gave up on Mickey Mouse, for the moment, and we walked out to the bluff near my house overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Flowers along the sidewalk, that were so characteristic of that neighborhood, filled the air with a heady concert of jasmine and enumerable other flowers as if in a florist's shop. As was so often the case in the early Fall, the sky was a striking clear blue and the colors of the flora were other-worldly.

¹ Vladimir Vysotsky (1938-1980), one of the most talented Russian bards.

² Marina Vlady won the Best Actress Award at the 1963 Cannes Film Festival for *The Conjugal Bed*.

Approaching the cliff as the ocean revealed more and more of its vast expanse, tears welled in his eyes. He looked earnestly at me and said, "I'm going to spend the whole day here, tomorrow, just looking," he said. He looked out over the panoramic deep blue of the Pacific Ocean and took deep breaths. He breathed in every color, every sensation – every inch of the horizon. For moments afterward he was inward and pensive. We walked the few blocks back to my house in silence. Before we went back in the house, he pulled me aside.

"The first time I went to Paris I saw all the lights. I saw all the activity. And all, all, all of the color. It made me so dizzy I vomited," he said. "There was nothing like this in the Soviet Union," he continued, "it made me crazy and it made me want to cry...from sadness or joy...I didn't know which one." Vladimir took my forearm and again, looking meaningfully into my eyes said, "You live in a paradise here. Do you know this?" He kept staring deeply into my eyes. Pressing my forearm for punctuation, to let me know that the moment was finished, we walked into the kitchen.

My French girlfriend Yvette, who I'd met vacationing near Cannes had come to stay at my house, and Marina were drinking coffee. Volodya (Vladimir) spoke in superlatives about this mythical and vast blue azure jewel beyond the bluffs like a boy recounting his greatest adventure, ever, to his best friend. Marina responded matching his enthusiasm.

We played like children in those few weeks.

There was a very alive, very active, child in all four of us. I abbreviated my work days to spend more time with them. Food was a festival – a circus of ooo's and ahhh's. Walking was an adventure. Driving was an expedition. Swimming in the ocean was an ecstasy too sublime. And, laughing was the staple of life. As Marina wrote in her book³, and as I am writing in mine: *These were some of the happiest days of our lives.*

Early into his stay he took me aside in the living room and wanted to make something clear to me. "There is no person in the Soviet Union that doesn't know me. I am an actor and a singer," he felt it necessary to explain. "The people, they take my recordings. They copy them 14, 15 – 20 times so all people can have my cassettes."

I was to find out several years, after the fact, just how celebrated he really was. He hadn't exaggerated.

³ *Vladimir, or, Flight Interrupted* (never translated into English)

With his gravelly, throaty and passionate singing voice he sang ballads about the oppression of the Soviets; the suppression of the human spirit; and the fantastic resilience of that same indefatigable human spirit to rise up and fight for its rightful place to exist and to *express* itself. No one would have guessed that beneath the powerful bull-frog of a masculine voice, there was a man with more child in him than most. That this man of such colossal talent and artistic stature not only as an actor⁴, songwriter and performer but as a poet, was really a vulnerable, child-like sensitive of endless curiosity. And for me, he was defined preeminently by his insatiable *curiosity*. All of his creative *expressions* of that curiosity and wonder naturally followed.

And he was apparently so vitally important to the soviet cultural appetite, that the government did little to suppress him and his recordings even though the government never officially recognized him as a singer – and, even though he often sung out against the repressive ways of his government. He'd become a household word and a cultural phenomenon in the Soviet Union, though few from the outside had ever heard of him.

Several years after getting to know him, I went to the former Soviet Union to visit him on his turf. I've never been one to stay up all night. My mental lights just turn off. Yet, staying at Vladimir's Moscow apartment, the two of us would remain talking at his kitchen table until the sun would come up. He spoke of the richness that was the Russian spirit. How the Soviet citizenry did so much with so little, and why couldn't the Soviets have more of what the Americans took for granted. We'd cry and rage. We'd laugh until we couldn't laugh anymore. This was a man so in love with every single person that lived in the Soviet Union, I could feel it rising out of his pores. His unbridled affection for his people and his resolve to be their voice, percolated up from a deep place within and burned in his heart. True to form, that passionate brush fire would take his life.

Having not spoken to Richard in nearly 30 years, I recently emailed him about Vysotsky and he wrote:

"Vysotsky's songs contributed to the eventual fall of the Soviet Union and its empire. He was an undeclared dissident with an exceptionally strong voice."

⁴ Yuri Lyubimov opened a production featuring Vladimir Vysotsky as Hamlet in 1971, at Moscow's Taganka Repertory Theater in Moscow and that production ran until Vladimir's untimely death in 1980 (217 performances in all)

Yet, not unlike many other extremely successful people I would meet in my lifetime, Volodya had kept alive within himself an active sense of wonder. And wonder wasn't something confined only to wondrous events, people and places. No. It was something that could be found anywhere and in anything. And this is *just* as a child finds wonder. The child finds wonder in, what would otherwise be considered from the adult perspective: the mundane.

Yes. Young children and the truly creative ones can wheedle wonder out of the ordinary. For me, this is the mark of true genius.