



Source: Jonathan Freedland, 'It is not the end, but the first chapter of the war in Iraq is drawing to a close', *Guardian Unlimited*, 05/09/07.

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This is just a child's school pencil case. The pencils go in here, pens in here and in here, say, cards with figures and letters. My wife made it on an ordinary sewing machine. But the material is very fine, it's very simple. She picked up her thimble and sewed it.

My grandfather, the one who taught himself English by reading Dickens with a Russian-English dictionary, was an inveterate maker of objects. None of them have survived into my adulthood, but they populated our childhood like a coterie of slightly down-on-their-luck relatives. Only one of them was made specifically for us: the baby chair, made when my eldest brother was born, in which I can remember my little sister sitting, as my mother and I took turns spooning strained pears into her ever-open mouth. The rest of the collection of my grandfather's home-made artefacts had come to my mother in his effects. My parents had been away in America when both my maternal grandparents died about eighteen months apart. When my mother returned in 1954, it was to this modest collection of objects, the only thing left of her family's domestic life together.

It was as though my grandfather's things spoke with his foreign accent. Uneasily at home amongst my parents' modernist furniture, the baby chair, the kitchen chair, the little chrome bathroom stool and the breakfast tray could not conceal their different aesthetic origins. Their proportions spoke of necessity, their forms dictated by what was available in my grandfather's workshop. At the same time, they were all marked by a sense of modest optimism, of making the best of things. I remember the curved back of the baby chair, carefully fabricated from two pieces of plywood in a rudimentary sunburst pattern, and the little rail on its tray, lovingly turned by my grandfather on his home-made lathe.

He could never resist a bit of extra ingenuity. The baby chair could be adjusted by folding its little hinged table underneath it, lifting it to the height of a regular dining table so that an older child could sit up at the table with the rest of the family. However, my mother stopped using it like that when I was three, after I rocked to and fro in it hard enough for the locking mechanism on the hinged legs to give way and the chair to jack-knife and collapse. My memory of this incident is vivid, uniting the smell of freshly laundered pyjamas and spilled soup with the crash of shattering crockery, and my first outraged sense of the way in which the benign objects of our daily lives can turn on us and betray us.

It's made from a hay basket. What's bad about it is that it gets deformed when you carry heavy stuff in it. But, then

you can only carry large stuff in it, like hay, as the openings are so big anything small will just fall out. It's not even really suitable for wood chippings either. But, I suppose, all the same, it makes things easier.

The breakfast tray was an enigmatic object. Made of plywood with collapsible legs designed to fit over one's lap when having a meal in bed, its middle section could be lifted and propped up at an angle. My mother explained that her father had made it like this so you could read at the same time as you ate your meal. I could never understand how this worked, since when the middle section was lifted up, there was no room on either side to support a bowl or a plate. It wasn't until I was an adult that I realised that this was an object that was in all probability perfectly tailored to my grandfather's own specific breakfast, which consisted of a glass of tea, a book and a cigarette.

Recently a friend gave me a catalogue of vernacular artefacts made by people in the Soviet Union, ingenious solutions to the consumer shortages of Soviet culture. In the curious sequence of makeshift tools, television aerials, home made fisherman's seats and bathroom shelves, I recognised the cadences of my grandfather's things. There was something about the independent-mindedness behind their making, a sturdy reliance on individual ingenuity that I recognised as salient to my grandfather's account of escape and migration, the great refrain of his life story. At the same time, there was something essentially unknowable about them, something always in need of translation, of interpretation, that announced them as a migrant's objects, tools for navigating a world in flux, a world never quite his own.

Lengthening a metal object! That's the kind of thing that only my father could have thought of. He's no longer with us. Because this torch shone weakly, my father made the whole thing longer, for a third battery. By the way, it's an old Soviet torch, if not from the 1930s, then the 1940s....Lengthening a metal item, that's a hell of a job! As you can see, he wasn't a lazy man and he found time to do such damn work. In here went three Soviet batteries, Leningrad ones by the way. It's not so effective really, but when you put it into words it's touching. Lengthening a metal object, I ask you!

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Anne Brennan who acknowledges the words of Pyotr Yevgenievich; Nikolai Babinov and Vladimir Krichevsky from Vladimir Arkhipov's **Home Made Contemporary Russian Folk Artifacts**.*