A tale of love and lighting on Divisadero Street

Description

How deeply did Yury Budovlya fall for Liya Klets, an 18-year-old Siberian beauty? When she traveled to his Ukrainian village, Korosten, from her native Siberian town of Novosibirsk for her uncleâ??s funeral in 1977, how soon did he know she was the one? Instantly.

A metalworker, heâ??d been hired to fabricate the railing around her uncleâ??s grave site, and he couldnâ??t forget her after she returned home. So, he called and reached her mom, who told him, â??If you are indeed my daughterâ??s chosen one, (*izbrannik*), then you must come here to meet me.â?•

How much did he love her to get on an Aeroflot propeller plane bound for Siberia in a deep winter snowstorm with the heat not working, flying over 6 hours from Kiev to Novosibirsk and transferring at Omsk?

â??I arrived absolutely frozen and exhausted, took a taxi to her apartment where her mom took one look at me, pushed me into a hot shower, and poured me a large cognac.â?•

Yury Budovlya at work in his shop on Divisadero Street. (All contemporary photos by Colin Campbell)

That same determination and spirit sparked his familyâ??s emigration to San Francisco in 1989, and his successful re-launched career as a lighting craftsman, a master fixture restorer, designer, and repairman.

His 1977 marriage to his â??chosen oneâ?• has tempered like steel, their bond strengthened through migration, raising a family, starting two businesses, through a stroke he suffered during the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic, and now tariff worries.

Walking into his shop/atelier, Yuryâ??s Lights & Beyond on Divisadero, is to step into a glowing crystal forest: elegant chandeliers swinging from the ceiling, floor lamps tilting at odd angles like young trees, and everywhere lights glittering on tables.

A daunting jumble

All available wall space is jammed with shelves holding lighting hardware, shades, and bulbs. His workshop, a daunting jumble of wires, bulbs, switches, tools, and fixtures, is in the back. The store is crammed and cozy at the same time, harkening back to old-fashioned hardware stores with parts filling every corner in seemingly chaotic organization, albeit one that makes sense to Budovlya.

â??I buy from auctions,â?• Budovlya remarks, â??Most of the lamps are from Europe, France, Italy, Spain, and the United States. And 99% of my lamps are vintage.â?•

Budovlya has a silver pompadour, a neat mustache, wears bifocals on a chain, cardigans and Uggs (â??I hate to be coldâ?•) and gets impatient if you keep him too long with too many questions. He wants to get back to work.

He was born in 1953 and left high school at 16, transferring to a vocational training school where he learned to be a machinist. â??My dad, a smart man, said: â??Yury, people always need lightsâ??, so I studied lighting as well,â?• Budovlya said.

â??Then I went to work for a gigantic machine-building factory, 5,000 workers divided into specialized sections: sheet metal, metal fabricators, and lighting. We manufactured parts for oil drilling rigs. I worked with bronze, with brass, cutting and shaping metals.â?•

Yury and his father-in-law in the Soviet Union. (Photo courtesy of Yury Budovlya)

The couple lived in Budovlyaâ??s Ukraine to be close to his elderly parents. Budovlya was born when his dad was 60. (His fatherâ??s first wife and three kids died of hunger and disease during WW II.)

Budovlya made 250 rubles a month, which was â??for the time, very good, not bad at all,â?• and Liya was a popular barber, with many clients. They lived with his parents as well because their pensions were too small to survive. Six people on two salaries left nothing extra for vacations or fruit out of season.

He wanted his kids to attend the best kindergarten, so when that schoolâ??s director hinted itâ??d be great if he built them a jungle gym, he did itâ?? after work, with discarded metalâ?? and his kids got in.

He even fabricated waste baskets shaped like penguins. â??An artist painted them, but I designed and cut them and made it so two sides swung back and forth when the kids threw anything away.â?•

There was antisemitism, but â??it was veiled, subtle, you know, behind your back they would say â??he is a good man, but he is Jewish,â??â?• Budovlya said.

â??What a smart Jew you areâ?• was a compliment he got from his boss after he solved a vexing problem. He knew his talent would never overcome his Jewishness, and he wouldnâ??t be promoted within the enterprise.

From Ukraine to San Francisco

So, when Reagan told Gorbachev, â??Tear down this wall,â?• and Jews were allowed to emigrate from the USSR, he and Liya decided to leave with his widowed mother, their 11-year-old son, and 6-year-old daughter.

Yury, Liya, and their children in Ukraine. (Photo courtesy of Yury Budovla)

His sister and her family had emigrated to San Francisco years earlier (â??cause she is smarter than meâ?•) and they sponsored them. Straight to Judah Street, where they stayed with her family.

They arrived on April 26, 1990, 35 years ago, with nothing.

â??I had no idea what Iâ??d do for a living, but I had a family on my shoulders and needed to work. I was 37. With zero English. I walked along Geary reading my flashcards, looking for a job. I saw a store at Geary and 8th: The Lighthouse.â?•

Budovlyaâ??s voice chokes with feeling as he continues. â??The owner, John Clark, said â??May I help you?â?? and I only could say: My name is Yury. I come from Russia. I need job. I know lights.â?•

The proprietor gave him a piece of wire, cutters, and a socket and told him to connect them, and the result was a job offer to start the next morning: $5 per hour, at the ownerâ??s second store in West Portal.

â??I was so happy I cried; the store opened at 9:00. I was there at 8:00.â?•

Heâ??d been working for cash as a handyman at some Tenderloin SROs at Mason and Eddy, where the Russian owner paid him $3 an hour. â??I worked 10 hours, and he handed me 30 bucks, and I went rolling home like a millionaire, I was so happy.â?•

Yury and Liya Budovlya in the lighting shop.

Thrilled to get a job for a better wage in his field in a nice area, he grabbed the chance to learn English on the job.

â??Mr. Clarke taught me how to talk to clients, I never went to adult school, just worked. I was embarrassed I didnâ??t know â??dozenâ??: A lady wanted a dozen bulbs, I had to ask â??what this means: dozen?â??â?•

He learned how to write an invoice, how to order parts, how to use catalogues, how to work with vendors, how to bid at estate sales, and auctions. He served an apprenticeship in the business of a field about which he knew all the technical aspects.

In the evenings, he picked up work cleaning and polishing crystal lights and chandeliers in the homes of customers he met at the store. Cleaning how?

Soap and water goes a long way

â??Very carefully, with soap and water, I cleaned lights in place. Some evenings till 10 pm.â?•

He worked at the store, and Liya passed her barber license exam. She worked on LaPlaya Street, cutting hair for $5 per hour, in the Russian community.

â??I saved, saved, saved the earnings from my extra work, till we had $4,000 cash, and for me that was millions!â?• Budovlya said.

They heard from friends in the East Bay that there was a barber business for sale, in Richmond, for exactly $4,000, and they bought it, opening Liyaâ??s Barber Shop. She commuted to Richmond till she retired in 2016 due to back and shoulder problems.

Budovlya became the manager of The Lighthouse. Then, in 2003, he was offered an opportunity to take over the lease of an antique store on Divisadero. After 13 years of learning the ins and outs of the business, Yury took a bold step and opened his own shop in 2003.

Yury Budovlya in his lighting store.

â??We did the work ourselves to build out the store. I was so anxious I lost weight; friends asked my wife if I had cancer, and I got so thin. But I had a great landlord, and he gave me a chance.â?•

He had a reputation by then, and his authority and experience were valued: fix, restore, re-do, re-wire. Customers followed him from before, and new ones found him, perfectly situated in lower Pacific Heights.

The worst times he had were during the COVID-19 lockdown.

He was closed for three months, then snuck back to work, meeting clients at the door, taking their lamps and fixing them alone in the back. (Heâ??d left a note with his cellphone on his door saying he worked there twice a week, and his clients responded.)

â??It was a terrible time. Though the landlord lowered the rent to a few hundred dollars, I was so nervous all the time when I stopped working, it was the hardest time in my professional life. I was sooooo miserable, I worried myself into a stroke.â?• Fortunately, he made a full recovery.

A 48-hour week

Budovlya currently works six days a week, eight hours a day, and says if someone were to buy the business, he might consider retiring. Might.

Budovlya and Liya spend much of their free time with family members. Their son, Steven, is now 46, daughter Irena is 41, and grandson Brandon will be 17 in July. They are successful professionals with their own careers, said Budovlya.

â??I adore this country. America gave me a way of life, freedom to work as I wanted. Just donâ??t be a lazy man. Money is lying on the floor; just work and pick it up! Here there is freedom, no one says â??Oh, you are a Jew or Russian, forget it, so I wonâ??t rent to you.â??â?•

He pauses for breath, â??This is a country that gives you a chance. I still canâ??t speak very well English, but I am known here among antique dealers, designers, electricians who donâ??t care if I speak good or not, they do not judge me for my bad English. I adore this country.â?•

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