

**Biography:** Tom Crosshill's (1985) fiction has been nominated three times for the Nebula Award, the WSFA Small Press Award and the Annual Latvian Literature Award. He is the author of *The Cat King of Havana* (2016), a YA novel about Cuba, salsa, and lolcats. Crosshill lived in the United States for several years and now resides in Latvia.

**Synopsis:** The collection *Seeing Double and Other Stories* was published in Latvian in 2011. It contains 13 of Crosshill's stories, including 2011 Nebula nominee "Mama, We Are Zhenya, Your Son" and 2009 Writers of the Future winner "Seeing Double." From quantum mechanics to flying pigs, from hive minds to passenger dragons, from time travel back to the USSR to a future where Russia rules the Baltics, Crosshill's tales span numerous settings and genres.

### Excerpt

Mama,

This is Zhenya, your son. I'm in a castle with gnomes! When you said Dr. Olga would pay many rubles for a boy to help her, I was afraid but I didn't tell you. I didn't want to be selfish because with rubles you can pay for the hospital so you can be strong again. Now I'm happy that I came.

Dr. Olga says I must write what happens in a letter so you can read it and not worry. We can't send pictures because the gnomes have no cameras (silly gnomes) so I will describe everything.

I fell asleep in Dr. Olga's big room, in the red university building by the Botanical Garden. I had a helmet on my head stuffed with wires. There were lots of lights and noises like in that

game which Dima's Papa bought him and you said we couldn't buy because we don't have a Papa or rubles. Then the lights went away and I was in a castle.

It's not like Moscow at all except maybe on the Red Square. There are stone corridors and pretty towers with mushroom tops, and a big hall with a glass roof so you can see the stars when it's dark.

The gnomes live in the cellar. They're short and green and wear big fluffy hats with their names on them, like GUI 1, GUI 2, GUI 3, which they said means gnome user innerface. I asked them for food but they didn't understand me real good, only jumped around and sang songs. I think Sulyik is smarter.

Oh, yes, Sulyik is here! Dr. Olga put a helmet on his head too. At first he was afraid of the gnomes but now he barks at them very loud. We found a run place for him with grass and water. I told Dr. Olga about the linden tree behind our building where he likes to bury bones and she put a linden tree in the run place too. He likes that.

Dr. Olga can't come here but she talks to us sometimes. Her face is in the wall like the stone is soft and moving. She hasn't told me what work I have to do yet but I promise I'll work the hardest I can, Mama!!!!

Zhenya (your son)

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Mama,

This is Zhenya, your son.

We are hungry. It's not so bad for me, but Sulyik whines and drags his belly on the floor.

Dr. Olga says there is a food place and it's our job to find it, but we can't because the path between places keeps changing. We go all around the castle and we should be where we

started and we're not. Start in sleep place, end in run place. Start in run place, end in the big hall. It's like that time I got lost in Izmaylovsky Park and you said I was a stupid boy because anyone could just follow the signs but there are no signs here.

Dr. Olga doesn't help. She says if I train my mind to get from sleep place to food place and food place to sleep place, then I can find the treasure place. I ask her what treasure place but she doesn't tell me. I hope she doesn't think I'm stupid too. But maybe I am. Maybe Sulyik is hungry because I'm not smart enough.

Zhenya (your son)

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Mama,

This is Zhenya, your son.

Sulyik found the food place! We were in the big hall and he ran away from me like at the carnival with the mirrors, many Sulyiks in every direction. Then he barked and ran back and pulled at my pants, just one Sulyik. When I tried to go with him there were many Sulyiks again, and I didn't know which one to follow. Then he brought me a banana and I got excited because I remembered the time I got to eat one for my birthday, but the gnomes took it from me before I could have it. I ran after them but the gnomes are very fast.

I told Dr. Olga, and she says I should be more flexible. After all I am only eight and my pathways are fresh and it's really not hard if Sulyik can do it.

Dr. Olga doesn't know Sulyik. He's a very smart dog. I can't win hide and seek with him even with my eyes open. When I watch him run away there are many Sulyiks everywhere so that doesn't help. But when I see him somewhere and go catch him, I can't guess which way he's running and how fast.

The gnomes watch and laugh and chant, hai-zen-berg! hai-zen-berg! hai-zen-berg! I don't get angry at them, though. My Sulyik is smarter than me!

I'm still hungry.

Zhenya (your son)

P.S. Did you go to the hospital, Mama? Are you all right?

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Mama,

This is Zhenya, your son.

I'm afraid, Mama. The gnomes make me play a game, and they hit me when I lose. It hurts very much! Sulyik tries to stop them but they hit him too. And Dr. Olga doesn't come when I call.

It's a hard game. The gnomes have a big gold box with two rooms and a paper wall and no door in the wall. They put me in one room by the wall and they leave me. There's a dragon painted on the wall, all red and black. The gnomes say I must get to the other room or the dragon will eat me.

But the dragon doesn't come. The gnomes come back later and ask me, why are you still in this room? And then they hit me and make me do it again.

One time I broke the paper wall and went to the other room, and they got very angry and hit me many times and said I shouldn't do that. Tunnel, they say, use a tunnel, but the floor is hard and I don't even have a shovel.

What can I do, Mama? I know I must try hard for you, but it hurts!

Zhenya (your son, waiting for your letter)

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Mama, the dragon came. She came and I was so scared, I went through the wall and it didn't break. Only she came again on the other side and I couldn't run away. She burned me! She burned me real bad, Mama.

I'm sorry, Mama. I'm sure I did something very bad but I don't know what. Please, can I leave now? I know we need rubles but I'm scared. Please, Mama?

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Mama,

I think this is Zhenya, your son. I'm not sure.

Nothing is sure. I understand that now. Everything is, and is not. The dragon helped me understand. A wall is no wall if I'm everywhere.

I can find the food place now, if every one of me goes looking. Every me doesn't find every food place, but one of me finds a food place.

I don't know why I was all in one place before. I think all the little parts of me, they could be many different places but they disagreed. They pulled in different directions like in that story about the wagon and the horses so they stayed in place. Now every little piece of me agrees, and I am everywhere I want to be.

Oh, yes, Dr. Olga came back. I was angry about the dragon but she said it's okay because I can go home soon. You always said I should keep my mouth shut around aunts and uncles, Mama. I try very hard with Dr. Olga but I don't like her so much anymore.

She says my pathways changed. A miracle of tabyula raza, she says. A young mind can learn to think qantumikally in a simulated qantumikal environment. I think she wanted to talk very much because she said many more things about how she proved the brain of

somebody called Penroz is real, which is silly because how could a brain not be real. Then she looked very strange and cried. I asked her why, and she said many important aunts and uncles would be very happy and put her name in books, which I guess is important like when you get a Guinness record for how big a cake you can bake.

I don't care about any of that, Mama. I just want to come home.

Zhenya (probably your son)

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Mama,

We are Zhenya, your son.

All of I found the Dr. Olga says I have to write clearly because you can't understand. Is that why you don't send me letters, Mama? I'm sorry. I want you to write very much.

I found the treasure place. It's on the roof, with the stars right above. The treasure's a groaning metal thing as big as a house. I knew what it was as soon as I saw it because gnomes were standing in a circle, holding their hats and singing, "Treasure, treasure, treasure!"

I'm not sure it's a very good treasure if gnomes have to tell you that's what it is. And Sulyik doesn't like it. I called him over but he just barked and wouldn't come near.

Anyway, I thought the treasure was interesting. There are so many handles you can pull, it's like a big yellow hedgehog, with twisting knobby gears which are never in the same place when you look. Dr. Olga said she couldn't understand the treasure because it's a qantumikal motor and it needs a qantumikal brain but I should understand it because I've got one.

She's right. When I'm everywhere at once, I get all tangled up with the treasure and the handles become my arms like I'm conducting an orchestra, and I understand everything. But

it's scary when that happens, Mama. The castle becomes squishy like plasticine in my hands, and I can shape it.

I was very bad at shaping at first so I broke the food place. There were sparks everywhere, and Dr. Olga said the hash had overflowed though I don't know why because I never saw potatoes in the food place. Then I learned to stretch the castle so for every thin part there is a thick part and it doesn't break. I stretched and stretched until I could see through to other castles.

Mama, there are many castles just like this one except each a little different. Some are a lot different. And when I stretch more with the handles, I can make openings to those other castles and reach through and be in all castles at once!

Dr. Olga said I should grab rooms and light from the other castles and bring them back so we have more energy. I did it but I think there is another Zhenya and another Sulyik in each of the other castles and they didn't like it, because there was a loud noise and the castle moved very much, and some of the gnomes screamed and fell to the ground. Now there is green blood on their hats and they don't move anymore.

Dr. Olga said not to worry, it's a soft wear glitch and they're not important anyway. I don't like the gnomes but I think that's not very nice of her. The treasure hurt them and it's all because of her.

I'm scared, Mama.

Zhenya (your son, we are)

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Mama,

Today Dr. Olga told me to use the treasure to look out of the castle and at the big room where Sulyik and I went to sleep. I moved the handles to stretch the air and I saw us sleeping on a long table, Sulyik and me. Aunts and uncles worked all around, and in the middle of the room there was a big metal box. It hummed and flashed lights when I moved the handles of the treasure.

I think the metal box is like the treasure except it's in Moscow and it doesn't move. When I used the treasure and the box started to make noises, all the aunts and uncles looked very excited and not afraid. I thought that was dumb because I was very afraid.

Dr. Olga told me to use the treasure to open other Moscows, like I'd opened other castles. But when I stretched the big room thin, I saw bad little fast things come out of the metal box. They were hitting Dr. Olga and all the aunts and uncles so I stopped.

The aunts and uncles and Dr. Olga didn't believe me because they couldn't see the bad little fast things. Dr. Olga said they had Gaigar counters and eye-on chambers and there was nothing there. She said I had to use the treasure to get energy from other Moscows because only I had a qantumikal brain and the whole world was waiting and anyway Sulyik wanted me to.

I said no. I don't think Sulyik wants me to do a bad thing. I asked him and he licked me which is not very bad. He just wants to sleep with me under the linden tree in the sun.

When I told Dr. Olga that, she said she can't give me rubles if I don't help with the treasure.



I think maybe that is important but some of I are not sure anymore. In some Moscow, always, she gives me rubles. In some Moscow, always, she does not give me rubles. Both happen always. You're sick and you're fine always, Mama. Some of you, in some Moscow. If that is so always, why should I help? All is, always, somewhere. But the bad little fast things are bad everywhere.

Zhenya (your son, we are)

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Mama,

Okay, I will help Dr. Olga with the treasure tomorrow. Okay, okay, I will help.

All of I loves Sulyik. When Dr. Olga said she will hurt Sulyik, I thought many Sulyiks everywhere, can't hurt all Sulyiks, we will be okay. But she took Sulyik away from the castle and when I used the treasure I saw him standing alone by the table with my body, outside in Moscow. He looked very sad with his head all shaved. Dr. Olga came and took him away, and now I can't see him at all but he barks very loud like he hurts, and it's hard to remember there are other Sulyiks in other Moscows.

I don't think Dr. Olga is nice. I think maybe she was never nice. I think maybe when she promised us rubles she didn't really mean it.

Please, ask her to give me Sulyik back. I'll be good, I promise. I'll do anything she wants.

Zhenya

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Mama,

Zhenya, son.

I put this letter your table. Don't afraid. Don't scream.

Yes hide under bed. Under bed safe. Don't open windows. Don't go outside. Moscow not safe. Hungry smoke bad.

I protect you.

Sorry write little. Only have fingers if think hard.

Zhenya

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Mama,

Zhenya again. Got more time now so I can write better.

Please, come out from under the bed. Don't stare like that. Aren't you happy that I'm back?

I know I look scary but at least I'm strong enough for eyes and fingers. I can't talk but I can write you letters.

I saw you got all the old letters I wrote for you. You must have been very busy at the hospital if you couldn't answer. That's okay. I'm glad Dr. Olga gave you rubles after all. You look stronger.

Soon I'll be stronger too, Mama. I'll have arms, many, many arms, and I'll hold you, and we'll be together. Won't that be lovely, Mama? You always took care of me even when I was stupid and bad, and now I'll take care of you and won't ever, ever, ever let you go. Won't that be great?

But we won't have Sulyik. He died, Mama. When I started the treasure, the metal box in Dr. Olga's room growled, and Sulyik ran out of a closet barking. Then the air stretched and broke, and out came all the bad little fast things. They flowed together and became the hungry smoke and came flying buzz buzz buzz, like many black bees.

I stopped the treasure but it was too late. The hungry smoke buzzed and wrapped around Sulyik, and he barked and barked, and then the hungry smoke ate his head and I couldn't do anything.

I thought maybe it's okay because there are other Sulyiks in other Moscows but it didn't feel okay. It didn't feel okay at all, Mama.

Then the smoke barked like Sulyik, loud and sad. It barked lots while it ate all the aunts and uncles, and Dr. Olga too. Dr. Olga screamed very long and I thought maybe she wanted another Guinness record but she stopped and the smoke ate her head too.

After that the smoke gave up barking and whispered things, real soft like Dr. Olga. "Take, take, take from us! Steal from us! No, boy, no. No, no, no!" It ate my head last, because I was on the table and couldn't run. When I heard it coming—"Boy! Boy! Boy!"—I ran to the castle but the castle got dark so I came back. I got real scared and I twisted the treasure very much and the metal box roared, and I ripped open the air between the castle and Moscow, and I came through all the way, all of me everywhere.

I tried using my body again but it didn't work. The hungry smoke ate my head after all. It didn't even hurt because I was everywhere at once.

Don't worry about me, Mama. It's okay.

Sorry about Moscow. I couldn't help all the aunts and uncles and boys and girls and grandmas and grandpas. Sorry about the blood and the screaming. It makes me want to cry but I don't have any tears. I don't think crying would help anyway.

I couldn't protect everyone but at least I protected you. The smoke won't get into the apartment, don't you worry, Mama. I think it's real angry cause we tried to steal from its

Moscow, and it gets smarter when it eats heads like when I read books, but you've got me and I'm smart too, and I'm everywhere.

I have to catch the hungry smoke now. I hope I can use Dr. Olga's metal treasure-box and stretch the air, and send it all home. Then I'll come for you. You just hold on.

Zhenya

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Mama,

I caught much hungry smoke and sent it home. I promised we wouldn't steal from other Moscows again but it just yelled, "Slide the curve! Blast the boy! Twisted metric!" It sounded like Uncles and Aunts and Grandpas and Grandmas and little kids too, happy and sad and angry and calm. I think maybe eating all those heads wasn't so good for it. I think maybe it got confused.

I'm home, Mama. I sit next to you right now, here on the couch. Do you feel my fingers on your back? See the curtains move? It's me, Mama.

Smile, Mama. Please, why won't you smile? Once I catch the last of the smoke, we'll be together for good. We can even go to Paris like you always wanted. I don't think the smoke got to Paris.

But before that, can you help me? Look outside the door. I left Sulyik there. His fur is sticky and his head is gone. Can you wash him Mama? Can you bury him in the garden under the linden tree?

When everyone died I thought I was sad but I wasn't sure. There are many Moscows and this is only one Moscow, so why is it important anyway?

But then I remembered Sulyik. There was only one Sulyik who mattered, in the end. That means there will always be only one Sulyik. I will remember him, all of I, for sure.

Sulyik taught me that. Even being qantumikal I can still know things for sure.

Zhenya (your son, all of I, for sure)