

MOSCOW DOGS

by Sweeney O'Toole

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Smashwords Edition

Part One

1

There was someone at the door. ‘...forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred. Twenty, forty sixty eighty, a hundred.’ Three taps, softly. Ivan Vladimirovitch.

He brought me tort that his mother made as well as other tidbits. He was always asking me what I was doing here and saying how he worried that I didn’t eat enough and that you had to be careful with your health here because there were lots of bad things here and was my room warm enough and did I need extra blankets. His father was a local judge and he gave to his only child beyond what was decent, mapping out a scheme for his son, a means to allow him everything he wished. I never took Ivan seriously when he told me how awful life was in Moscow, whilst at the same time he was spread out like a tired pussy cat, consoled by the extravagance of his parent’s garden ring apartment, neither when he said he had a lover, though it was notable that he never took to naming names, for the impression I duly formed, was that there was something of the queer about Ivan.

‘I’m going to London, Leo. Pradstavlayesh? We’ve spoken with Papa about the Royal College. Help me with my English. I’m going to make new friends...’

Yes Ivan, all your wonderful friends waiting for you there, waiting on Hampstead Heath after dark, in the toilets of the underground, and in Bloomsbury Square. ‘Go Ivan, quick, bistra,’ I thought, ‘they’re waiting for you and your father’s money!’ But I didn’t encourage him. I didn’t even

correct his he she mistakes. The fact of the matter was the tort was dry, dry like an old spinster's quim and it depressed me to eat such a thing and if Ivan couldn't see that it wasn't right, then all the articles and prepositions, all the phrasal verbs and future perfects in the world weren't going to make any kind of difference. He wasn't a boy, far from it. It was too late as far as I was concerned. Anyway, he got what he wanted, what they all wanted, in the end. I still had sympathy for him, even then, being as he was in a place like this, but that was as far as it went. And as for why I was here, I was here for the bad things Ivan, but such a concept you had yet to understand. So I forgot the door and his mother's stinky tidbits. I didn't have time for that anymore. Instead I continued to count and thought of Nadia.

Despite knowing the Russian types by then, I'd been in Moscow for more than a year at that point, I was nervous of Nadia, as one often is when desirous and needing. I should add that she wasn't the beauty of a magazine, far from it. She had a striking look, the product of asymmetry compounded by flawless skin, but there was something awkward and academic about her, sexless one could say. What was certain was that she gushed with youth and to that point I found her difficult to resist. I'd met her in a fast food restaurant, the beginning of summer, her wearing these fabulous little shorts and a candy striped t-shirt.

I wrote a few lines of English on a napkin and placing it before us, watched as she happily took the bait.

'A majestic present of fate' she said later in a moment of intimacy, no longer a brag of how English was her third language!

But what was particularly eccentric was the accent. Perfect Home Counties. This from a girl, who, it turned out, had slept in the same bed as her sister for years because her divorced parents, who shared the next room,

needed the single beds. For years! She had a little corner and a desk and she spent hours listening to her Oxford English cassettes and practicing her vowels while Mama and Papa screamed in the background, somehow having the discipline to do it every day so that she could stop being Nadia if she wanted and be, instead, Charlotte or Henrietta.

‘I’ve just graduated from MGU School of Languages,’ she said, ‘frankly there are endless possibilities and no end to it.’

She kept a diary and checked her schedule, happily filling in the blanks to the nearest half hour. At that time it was Korean and French. She told me about her friend, the businessman whom she met at Korean class, how he bought her gifts and took her to a Chinese restaurant, how they went to some dacha for the weekend and he got drunk and ignored her and that he was rich and wanted her to live with him and that the twenty year age difference wasn’t important, that he loved her. ‘Fucking boy,’ is how she described him, eyes like iodine.

Our ascension from hamburgers to the Hotel Maskva was more complex than might be imagined. It was a pilgrimage, which spun out over weeks. There were promises; lies; commandments; half-truths; restaurants; apologies; threats; theatres; even signed agreements. Eventually though, one Sunday evening, we arrived on the 11th floor of that Soviet monolith, which according to the brochures in the lobby is in the centre of the centre of the city. Everything was perfect. Even Nadia’s insistence on turning off the lights as we soaped up in the shower was, for me, a simple idiosyncrasy, a curious expression of innocence.

I imagine myself on my knees, the panorama of Manezh Square and the Kremlin out the window, back lit for the tourists at night, more Hollywood than Mosfilm, Nadia on the sill, bare legged in a Benetton top,

knees hunched up by her breasts, words worth the work, drooling from my mouth, ‘you are bejewelled Nadia, how come you shine and shimmer, in the name of the father, and of the son and of the holy ghost, Amen... Then no words, words worth nothing, the back drop, the room, the moment, an escape. A few dollars, a few words then...

But already... Already we are ahead of ourselves and I’ve barely written a page or two. I must stop right there and go to where this story starts. To the beginning.

2

The fact was I was a prisoner, a consequence of my past. I was the guest of Svetlana Yevgenyevna, a middle-aged former colleague from a school where I’d worked. She hosted me on the condition we spoke English. She was a robust enough type with an engaging smile and good teeth who paid careful attention to her appearance and in comparison to her peers was in fair shape. Above all else, when her husband had flown the nest on the wave of new money, she had managed to cling on to a piece for herself. As a price for agreeing to the divorce she had assumed complete ownership of a four room mansion on Prospect Mira, the building dating back to Stalin’s time, with high ceilings and hot water in the summer, the windows looming over and above the inaptly named ‘Prospect of Peace, Prospect of the World.’ I knew as soon as I arrived that I was well suited, as much to the place as to the owner. My imagination ran wild. The city, which is the tramp of Europe, was finally below my feet, it’s inhabitants, like little mice, scurrying back and forth before me, like a show for my satisfaction. And

satisfied I would be, with such an address. I adored the walls, the little white cherubs on a cool pale blue, the clean Swedish desk which sat in the corner, the great white bed from where you saw the sky.

It was a different world up there, free from the stench such that the stench could be abstracted and discussed over good wine. Perhaps in a thousand years the historians will look back and wonder how there ever could have been such a place, just as we look back to Carthage and the Carthagians looked back to Gomorrah. As for Svetlana, whether it was her husband's leaving or not I don't know but there was a bitter edge to her which left her more capable than you might have expected. A qualified doctor as well as a background in education and administration and the network of her former husband's colleagues, she had recently begun coordinating the transfer of Russian orphans to homes in the West and I helped her with the enquiries, which we solicited by phone and e-mail. Often the children were actually there in the house and with the prospectives who came to view (I'm drawn to the ones from Lawrence, Kansas, the would-be mother the size of a small elephant) we had pirok and ice cream as well as other things that made up an evening feast. My business was selling children and I found I had a talent for it.

Svetlana Yevgenyevna, as I found out once when the imported Bordeaux was flowing, was of Belorussian descent. White Russia. Her family were originally from Brest, but when the great war of the motherland came along and the Nazis rolled up looking for oil to fuel their tanks, the resulting siege took the lives of three uncles, two aunties, two grandfathers and a grandmother. 'A dirty business,' she said, eyeing her manicure. 'Only my mother and Auntie escaped, They hid in a mail truck going to Moscow. Nazis, you know. She paused and shook her head. 'There was no food.

People ate people. Oozhus. ‘Anyway,’ she continued casually, ‘they went to Minsk. The militia found them and I remember my mother saying they had bread and potatoes and that it was the best meal of her life. From there they went to Sverdlovsk, it’s Ekaterinburg now. It was because they had small hands! They made the lighters for the bombs.’

‘Fuses,’ I said.

Yes, of course.’ She paused. ‘They were happy there I think. Eta bil collective. A new family. And then the war ended and my Aunty married, she was pregnant, and my mother, how do you say, caught the eye of the manager at the factory. He was going to Moscow to study. He asked that she go with him, that they start a new life here in Moscow. He gave her daffodils and got down on his knees. My mother said Da.’

Svetlana came along eight years later, preceded by a brother who died of polio before he was six years old. Such talks left me wondering how they survived at all, how they managed to live from winter to winter, beaten by the elements, beaten by the very nature of the land, not to mention the terror, the revolutions, the wars and famines and other human failings, but my host was above such things.

‘Most don’t mind at all’ she said. ‘When I myself heard the new truth, I shouted and cried then went to protect my interests,’ and she unconsciously preened her well-groomed hair. ‘You should remember one thing,’ she said. ‘This is Moscow. This is a place to live,’ and she proceeded to fill the glasses with claret.

Perhaps Nadia could have lived there with us but there were other options. I had earned enough in the previous weeks to easily rent a flat and invite Nadia to share the flat and so, as a consequence, spend all my time with her and devote myself to her but there was a part of me...how to say...

Well, it seems to me now that I was waiting for a push, a push that, unbeknown to me at that time, would come before that day was out.

3

The door knocking stopped and was replaced with voices. They were in the living room. Svetlana Yevgenyevna had obviously invited them in, whoever they were, but I was still protected by my closed door, which decency dictated could remain so if I wished it.

Besides, I was elsewhere, by the window, watching the miracle of the sky. Everywhere, all around, all the children were smiling and their parents beginning dialogues of nostalgia, babushkas were setting off for the market with bagfuls of mittens and hats, slides were being conceived and snow queens imagined, men changed tyres and put fresh oil into the plough machines while lovers spent their seconds drawing hearts out with their fingertips.

Outside, the first snow was falling. It's strange how there never seems to be any warning before it snows, no wind or storm, no darkening of the skies. There is an inevitability about it, which needs no introduction. Yet the relief is palpable. All the grime and tar, all the filth which oozes from the city's skin like bad sweat, all the rubbish heaped up in the gutter, all vanquished in a blink of an eye, the city transformed into a precious stone, a glistening re-incarnation who boasts beauty and begs you feel welcome. That she'll rip open your chest isn't apparent; for the harshness, lies beneath, omnipresent, frozen. It was on Komergersky Pereulok that she had stopped

me in my tracks and bid me take a look. Eyes like glass. The very first snow. Olga pulling me along, sliding through the air, breath like ice, snowflakes like feathers, the thrill of Moscow pumping adrenalin, cascading, and beautiful Olga dancing and singing Zemfira songs and teaching me the words.

‘Ya iskala tibya, Leo, iskala!’ Cascading. Cascading.

I thought I wouldn’t mention Olga until later, that it would confuse you to hear her name so soon after Nadia’s, and what with old Svetlana and beautiful Ivan as well, but now she’s in I see little point in trying to avoid her. After all, it was Olga who was the first, it was with her that Moscow unravelled itself and put its arms around me.

I had met her and her husband at a school. I was teaching a class of Advanced English two evenings a week and we became acquainted. Sergei, the husband was a bore. He would go on about his trips to Rome and London and how this hotel was better than that hotel and how the English were all this and the Romans were all that. He worked for some big corporate oil company and liked to play the new Russian. He was fat swine as far as I could see, fodder for the bowling alleys, without culture or refinement, just brute force. Olga on the other hand was charming. She was from near Ekaterinburg originally and had studied Psychology and English at the University there. She was passionate about all these people I’d never heard of like Serov, Balarkirev and Bunin and I was intrigued to know what she was all about. She had met Sergei whilst he was in the Urals on business and six weeks later the two of them returned to Moscow together where he installed her into his river view apartment on Naberezhnaya. That they were a mismatch was blatant but Russian girls are, above all else, practical, and so in the eyes of her family the girl had done well. And Sergei, too, drew the

benefit of upgrading his peasant stock with something he felt was more akin to the money he was making. It was a relief to me, however, when Sergei announced his schedule no longer permitted him to spend time on his English, that he had more important business to attend to. He assured me though, that he'd enjoyed our little chats and that he thought me a good teacher and that he would like to employ me as Olga's teacher at a time that suited them both. So that was how I came to be Olga's private tutor.

She was a very gifted girl, clear sighted, though she could be arrogant and given to fits of condescension, occasionally playing mind games when she was bored. She would make an appointment then fail to arrive and then, later, when I met her on the street she would patronise me before her friends with her husband's American dollars, only afterwards, apologising and blaming herself. Overall, however, she was sharp and brilliant, as conscious as she was unremitting. It was as if there was a fire all around her and one could never lose a moment that was spent with her. Sergei, I saw, became frustrated when he couldn't match her and she always had to prompt him with a word. He wanted to own her, he didn't want to compete with her. Yet Olga didn't seem to care. She was only twenty after all. Twenty and married off. We took to our lessons with vigour. She had a hundred ideas of what she wanted to do, from the stage to PR, the only thing of which she was sure being she wanted the English of the English. She loved to play with words and sounds, nursery rhymes to Shakespeare, and seemed to pick up everything without any great cost or effort. She spoke of living in London of course, but as well, of Rome and of New York and Paris, to put her money to use, with Bolgerkov in one pocket and Gauloise blondes in the other.

'I'm going to be a new kind of new Russian,' she said, as we shuffled, un-noticed in the suburbs. Poor little rich girl, that's how she played me, while with Sergei she wore another mask, I'm sure. Of her habits, she loved to buy things, anything, just to go into the shop and pick out something that caught her eye, presents for her family, clothes and jewellery for herself, small gifts for friends. The upshot of all this 'gathering' was that Sergei's old flat in the suburbs of Moscow was maintained as a storage space. And it was at this flat, far from the glamour of the riverbank that I, on several occasions, accompanied Olga. It was up near the top of an old seventies tower block, and was, generally, quite grim, with dirty floors and boxes lying everywhere, only the view giving it some kind of appeal, shedding light and air if nothing else. The prize of the 'gatherings' was a Persian rug, bought as a gift for Olga's mother and yet to be delivered out to the Urals. The first time we went there I undid the string without any fuss and unfurled the thing in the middle of the room. We took off our shoes and socks, sat down, I, upon invitation, massaging her soft pink feet, my hands both gently pressing and rubbing, the conversation staggered and tense, monosyllabic with half laughs and breaths, the smell of skin and sweat, conscious that every moment my fingers inched higher and higher until the tension in the room was such that it was impossible not to take her by the waist and undo her clothes, myself doing likewise, her mouth all mine, her body all mine, all for the first time. She looked at me almost puzzled, as if there was something she didn't understand, then suddenly, overcome by her own sex, began to tear at my shirt, at my skin, the taste of her legs, her hands and mouth on my chest, on my stomach, an aching pause as she pushed her wrists and arms along my thighs, hovering above me, uncertainty long gone, each breath now full and slow, as I arched my back towards her, willing her

closer. Her response was to sit up, her back to me and begin masturbating me.

It was good but it wasn't enough. I wanted more. For a second I thought of Sergei. Fat Sergei with his gold pen and leather filofax. He liked to stretch out when I asked him a question and answer 'fucking A,' like a halfwit American frat boy.

'Fucking A, what are we paying you for Leo if you don't have the answer yourself,' he would joke.

'Fucking clown Sergei. Look, this is the answer.'

I lifted myself up and put her beneath me, climbing in between her legs. I was inside of her. With every even stroke I gave Sergei the answer, and Olga too. I could taste blood coming from my lip where she'd bitten me. My tongue was in shreds. She dug her nails in me and moaned 'more... no...' I remember the nap of that rug was like cat's fur, that I dug my toes in and gave her everything I had. 'I'll widen the gates so the new Lexus won't even touch the sides. He won't even recognize his breeding box when I've finished with it,' on and on, xodit, vxodit, xodit, vxodit.

And then we collapsed, paralysed by sex.

Our events opened up a whole new language for Olga. I suppose it was a honeymoon period. By the time Sergei pulled the plug on the lessons everything had changed and could never be the same again. I didn't regret it though, not then. It was three months later that I met Nadia.

4

'Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred; twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred; twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred.' I counted as the snow fell.

I added to it what I was owed then, with this sum safely locked away in my head, went about putting the little piles in a shoe box which I safely locked away in my wardrobe.

When I was finished I was ready for outside. My exit, however, was blocked by the sight of Svetlana Yevgenyevna comforting Ivan, who, by the redness of his eyes, was apparently, upset. They continued their line of conversation, which I failed to make any sense of until, finally, Svetlana Yevgenyevna offered me a simplified version of events. It transpired that Ivan's mother had gone into the hospital with some kind of nervous problem and that it was a serious business and they didn't know when she would be home. I realised a quick exit would have been tactless, and instead went and brought a bottle of hvanchkara, a sweet red Georgian wine which was Stalin's favourite tippie. I poured out the glasses and, on their refusal, insisted that we take it, not for ourselves, but for the health of Ivan's mother and on this all were quickly accepted and drained, such is the sense of theatre in the Russian consciousness. I refilled all around and settled down opposite the two of them, Ivan, well groomed as ever, his blond hair slicked, his Armani shirt, a signature, Svetlana with her demi-wave and fifties American bas couture, slacks and slip-ons, as if the 'Soviets' had never been.

I listened to the saga and I nodded and ummed and ahned as was fitting but what with the mood of the room and the heaviness of the wine I began to feel nauseous and my instincts told me to make my excuses and go. I drank my glass and raised the empty to Ivan who voiced an emotional 'spasiba,' in thanks.

'How is your father,' I asked, as I got up to leave.

‘He makes us suffer,’ Ivan replied, courtly and rather bitterly, his eyes coming up to Svetlana’s, not mine.

‘Nu, on ochen davolen nashei rabotoi,’ he’s very satisfied with our work, Svetlana put in, looking at me reassuringly, changing the subject as well as the language.

‘He has a dragon’s appetite,’ Ivan continued, his beautiful face so polished and dignified, the acid tone all the more biting for it.

‘You can be very poetic,’ I thought to myself, but I didn’t acknowledge it. He had too many traits that I disliked by then, and instead, I nodded in agreement, wishing to infer that it was a difficult business.

‘I’ll see you tonight?’ I asked.

‘Tonight I can’t. No,’ and he put one finger to his chin, before adding, ‘but tomorrow, yes, I think. Nu, da.’

‘I’ll see you tomorrow then, I hope,’ and kissing Svetlana three times on the cheek and whilst taking their goodbyes, I made for the door.

Outside we were in the midst of a great transformation and it was a relief to see all the filth disappearing. The black soul of the city with its dirty greasy fingers was being magicked away under a blanket of white. The rowanberry trees in our little communal garden were in bloom and the look of them, with the snow nestling all around made me think of an English Christmas card. I could feel the warmth of the hvanchkara inside me and there was a gorgeous sense of order as I jumped a passing trolley bus on up the Prospect, to VDNK. I phoned Nadia to meet me at the billiard hall near the metro and though she didn’t seem too inclined at first, she finally agreed after a little persuasion.

I decided to get off a stop early to buy a beer and to get a feel of the snowflakes, the snare of the crisp ground underfoot crishing and crashing as I went through the fresh new landscape. I was in my element; my fur-lined

boots so snug; I felt I could walk all day and I began to regret making the date with Nadia as I finished my beer and skidded and slid into the park, taking in the aspect of strangers as I went.

By the time I got to the space museum my face and hands were perfectly frozen. I didn't even look up at the rocket, which attracts the tourists. Across the way the Monument of the Worker and Collective Farm Girl forlornly looked on, out of time, contemplating the unfathomable possibilities of post-soviet Moscow while the sparkling Hotel Cosmos brought to mind a night of caviar-filled cunt.

'So what,' I thought, and let the blizzard take care of the past.

5

It was the dead of my first winter when Olga made her move, coyly telling me she would be at Asterhazi at six and suggesting I might like to happen along. The temperature that day had hovered around minus eight, and I'd killed the hour before we met shivering on Manezh Square, listening to Vivaldi in the underpass there, performed by buskers moonlighting from the Philharmonic. Still having a few minutes on my hands, I decided to walk instead of taking the metro and found myself shuffling along a frozen Ohotny Riad, up past the Bolshoi theatre, all fabulous and yellow, and on to the monstrous grey stone of the old KGB building at Lubyanka and beyond to Kitai Gorod and the café.

On the stroke of six she walked in and came and sat down in the corner, next to me. She was radiant, evidently excited about something, and how she looked in her soft blue Italian sheepskin, made to measure, a square

of the finest llama wool, dyed pink, and wrapped so as to hug her throat, her high heeled thigh length boots, so pointed at the toe, that she cut the room in strips as she moved, ribbons sent flying in all directions, but held to her as if to a maypole, everything coming to spin and revolve around her, her aura like that of the celebrity, her sheen, the light of the new truth. She could barely wait for the tea and cakes before telling me her very big news.

‘Guess what?’ she said, raising an eyebrow, so confident in her comfort.

‘What?’ I said, reaching for my cup.

‘Wait, padhazhdi,’ she said, ‘don’t start yet. I want us to remember every detail. You see...’ and she took my leg under the table, her face, unyielding and performing in the public gaze.

‘What do you see?’ I asked.

She paused to re-align her thoughts.

‘My mother says I’ve become dull. Dulled by all the things she always wanted. Do you think I’ve become dull, Leo?’

I covered her out of sight hand with mine as she squeezed the muscle of my thigh.

‘Sophisticated is what you’ve become, grown up,’ and wanting to satisfy her, went on, ‘look, you’re perfect, with everything. Your mother wants your misery as penance, that’s all.’

She paused and shook her head. ‘Nyet. It’s not true. I’m her only daughter. It isn’t misery she wants.’

‘Well whatever it is, you can buy it for her. Wasn’t that the point?’ the spectre of her fat husband, as ever, unassailable.

‘I don’t know what the point was or is, I only know what I want.’

‘And what’s that?’ I asked, our fingertips touching.

‘More,’ she said, casually looking about the room. ‘I’ve always had plans.’

‘Five year plans?’ I mused.

Her glossed lips broke a half smile and she put her hands together as if to pray.

‘I’m going to America, Leo. San Francisco. Sergei has some business there. We’re going for six months.’ She was so proud, that I thought twice so as not to quip.

‘Well, I’d say it was inevitable, wouldn’t you?’ I said, finally.

‘It’s the future, prosta. I don’t know what else. I hoped you’d be pleased for me, would wish me something special,’ she answered.

‘I wish you would stay, I wish you were poor, I wish you weren’t so irresistible and I wish you wanted me. How’s that?’ I replied.

‘But I do want you,’ and she slowly and delicately ate a mouthful of her moonstone sponge cake, her eyes fixed to mine, as if recording the moment, her goal being to collect a full fan of emotions that would cool her and pretty her when she tired.

‘Let’s eat our cakes and take our tea, then go to the flat in Medvedkova,’ she said quietly.

‘And what about Sergei?’ I muttered, sarcastically, teeth clenched.

‘Sergei?’ she huffed, re-positioning herself on her seat. ‘Sergei is nothing. You must see that.’

‘He’s your husband. You belong to him,’ I continued.

‘Nyet, nyet, nyet. I belong to no one. Not you, not him, k nikhto,’ she replied, her voice remaining calm and composed.

‘Have you told him?’ I asked.

‘I tell him what he needs to hear. Da, I’m learning fast Leo. Very fast.’

‘Then you should tell him that you can’t stand his foul breath, that you’re in love with someone else and that it’s the mistake of a lifetime to compromise love.’

‘Love? With who?’ and she paused to take a sip of her tea, continuing ‘it was you who said we were, sto takoe... da, fuck buddies.’

‘I was being sardonic. Don’t pretend you took it literally.’

‘What does sardonic mean?’

‘Like irony, not serious,’ I replied.

‘Ahh. Love, irony, husband, fuck buddy. You haven’t tried your cake. You should, it’s delicious,’ and mimicking her slow deliberate manner, I carefully took a corner to my mouth.

‘Takoi, ti nargli,’ she said dryly, how awful you are.

‘It’s not true, I just want every bite to be like this. Why can’t life permanently buzz with sugared cherries?’

‘Mozhno,’ she shrugged, it can. ‘And tonight, it will,’ she added, becoming more animated.

‘Why, what are your plans for tonight?’ I asked, savouring my dessert.

‘Znayish, Sergei has been sent to Siberia,’ and we both laughed at the prospect of her husband in the gulag. ‘I’m going to meet him next week on the other side, in America. But tonight...’ and she leaned her head forward, her hands now flat before her. ‘Tonight we are in Moscow,’ she whispered, ‘and I have a plan. I plan to drink the best champagne, I plan to eat the finest caviar and I plan to fuck you, to fuck each other, as many different ways as possible.’

And we did. We played out our little game of sugared cherries and moon cake, afterwards, the two of us, shuffling home alone, me to my little home in Taganskaya, and her to Naberhezhnaya and the river.

6

The entrance to the billiard hall smelled of piss. Some old boy obviously couldn't make it to the street, the alcohol loosening his inhibitions. It had seemed perfectly logical to piss where he stood after the bottle of Stary Maskva and, really, who was bothered anyway? I, myself, was so accustomed to the smell of piss in the city that I didn't pay it a second thought. Inside, I immediately saw Nadia in the corner, dressed in a tidy pink tweed suit, very Oxbridge, and I regretted that I hadn't suggested somewhere on Tverskaya as a meeting place as opposed to a pool hall by the metro. She saw me but pretended to be engrossed in her book, before finally turning to me with a casual, almost bored look, then breaking out into a devilish grin.

'Vodka, old sport' she said, the words, acerbic velvet, so contrived as to be significant. I didn't say a thing.

I went to the bar and looked around. There were five tables, two of which were occupied. The nearest group were Muscovite boys, three of them, early to mid twenties, all drinking, all smoking. At the very back of the hall there was a gang of Kafkazis, six or seven of them. They looked as if they had been there all day, the dress code the usual black leather and suede. There was an assortment of espresso cups and glasses scattered around as if the 'deyvushka' had forgotten about them, purposely or

otherwise. When she appeared behind the counter I ordered four hundred grams of vodka and a sliced lemon with a side dish of pickles, which she brought over to the table.

When the waitress disappeared I took Nadia's hand in mine and told her I had missed her, taking the chance to touch her delicious cheeks.

'Why?' she asked, blankly.

'Because I have.'

'But what do you mean?' she continued unconvinced, and I realised we were in for a metaphysical five minutes. Kant cunt as Bukowski said, but cunt you can feel and Kant you can't. For some reason I imagined Diogenes in a barrel but I left the thought unsaid and instead uttered banality.

'It means I want to be with you more.'

'Why? Because you're bored in Moscow, so call Nadia and have a bit of fun,' she added matter of fact. If only she knew what was in my head. I was anything but bored. 'Why can't these people just get along,' I wondered, 'accept order, play friends.'

'How about I'll be nice to you and you be nice to me,' I suggested.

'That's the very essence of you. You always want something in exchange. If you give something to me, you expect something back. You can never just give and that's the end.'

I was stranded. A lost cause. If she wanted to fight, what could I do but fight back.

'What's the matter with you?' I asked.

'Nothing. Forget it.' And in the exasperation there was a hint of retreat but it was too late by then because my chemicals had changed. Synapses had been bound.

‘No, I’m interested. Is everything alright at home?’ It’s a subject I never tired of, her and her younger sister in the same bed. She tilted her head to one side and looked like the boy in the reproduction painting in my mother’s hall that had his trousers rolled up and was fishing. Pure seventies kitsch.

‘Papa says *don’t do that*, Mama says *I love you*, brother says *I don’t care*, and sister says *I hate you*,’ she sang monotone.

Then she didn’t. ‘You know, it’s none of it is your business. You’re not my family. You shouldn’t ask me about them and if you do again I’m leaving.’

So what did I do? Encourage her to part? Propose marriage? Or the third way, the ugly way, half way. I chose ugliness and apologised and it seemed to lighten the air. We were at least comfortable if not content and that was platform enough to kill time. We each took a hundred gram stopka of vodka and drank it down in one followed by a bite of lemon. I felt a tingle in my throat, then the full flash of the shot suddenly came on. Nadia too seemed, if not enlightened, at least pacified.

‘Let’s go to Peter’ she said. ‘Let’s go tonight. I’ve had enough of Moscow. I need my own life.’

I’d heard it before and nodded that it was a good idea, that I needed to finalise some accounts here first, to get more money while I could and then we’d leave. She saw I was half hearted about it, about the business and the move. The truth was I didn’t know what to do. Several months earlier Olga had left for America. Moonstone sponge cake. I was waiting for a call that never came. I stared blankly at the walls of the place, at the ‘soft metal’ posters of bands long forgotten and a girl dressed in leather with a billiard cue and a tiger. The more I looked, the more interesting it became. Another

poster had a snake locked in battle with what looked like a ferret and a third was a woman with her finger on her lips saying 'ne boltai', meaning 'don't gossip', a reference to not giving away secrets in the great war of the motherland.

'What are you looking at?' Nadia asked, the vodka brightening her intonation.

'What does it mean, Nadia? I replied, parodying the metaphysical line, the thought of Diogenes and his barrel entwined now with eastern European cock rock and knowing it was all connected at that time and thinking perhaps this girl might have some insight into what the connection was.

What does what mean?' she asked, assiduously.

'This,' and I alluded to the room and the walls and the Moscow boys.

'It means nothing. It's where you chose to bring me. It's where you let me wait for you.' And she went back to her book to emphasise her point. At least she had explained why she was in a foul mood and I apologised for being late, explaining the word tardy to her and all round trying to buffet her mood a little.

There was a pause. Another piece of time disappeared.

'Where were you anyway, building snowmen with your little friends?' And she put her book down as if to give the conversation all her efforts.

'You are a snowman. You should be careful.'

'I know I am,' I replied, 'but I had a problem. I couldn't find a carrot for a nose. That's why I was late.'

She shook her head.

'You're such a boy Leo, such a boy,' which she uttered with an air of disinterest.

I was watching the Russians on the pool table and it seemed natural to call them as a point of reference.

'It's a shame. I'd like to be a grown up like these boys. What do you think? Is it possible for me?'

She paused, as if she may have found something but wanted to check the details before delivery. After all, it was a game we were playing, a game which we took too much to heart. Then she spoke.

'You can never be like them, Leo. Look, two of them are early twenties, the other, a little older. That's the first difference. What else can you see? Tell me, I'm interested.'

They look same same to me. Short hair, dark clothes, black boots. Like every other male in this city.'

'But you're not seeing past the surface. You look at this city but you don't understand what you see.' She feigned exasperation and for a moment I despised her. I hated the way she sighed. There was something so pretentious about it. Adolescent. I could have squeezed her neck in that instant. She continued. 'The details mean nothing to foreigners. You want bears and old flags and, and this,' and she clutched the carafe of vodka and poured out the remaining liquid into the two stopkas. She then took the glass to her lips, her eyes latched to mine the whole time and whispered 'to hell,' which may have been 'to health,' but I don't think so. Very deliberately she emptied the glass, the bite of the liquor rendering her eyes to glaze over, as if tears might come. There was a sea change as she stared out vacuously. Weakness oozed from her. She wasn't a drinker. She was a fragile little bird. Tweet, tweet. From wanting to squeeze her neck, I now wanted to squeeze her pretty little breasts and go on from there. I threw back my vodka to get it out of the way, squeezing the lemon juice onto my tongue, settling

then to watch her unfold as the afternoon light began to fade. She stretched and I continued to stare with a smirk on my face. Time passed, seconds, and she grew bored with my forced silence. She leaned forward, the unfamiliar warmth of vodka unfolding the scene, creating deeds that would normally have been left undone.

'They're bad boys Leo. And you're a good boy,' she said. They used to wear green uniforms, the older one in Afghanistan, the two younger ones in Chechnya. Imagine what they've seen. Listen...,' and she paused to focus on the talk around the table.

'You can't understand what they're talking about right now can you? You don't know what they're saying.'

She took my hand and continued in more of a whisper.

'I'll translate for you. They're talking about how there is a job for real money.' I looked over to the table. They all looked loose with drink, moving in slow motion, calling every shot. I took it as some kind of competition, I don't know why and I began to nod my head slowly, slowly like a rocking-horse. 'All they have to do is kill someone,' she continued. 'Just like before,' I added sarcastically, 'everybody is killing somebody in this city,' but Nadia didn't hear me, she was too busy working, clinically interpreting the language as if she were in the language lab.

'The man who needs to be killed is a thief. Tak, eta prosta dyela. It's just business.' She continued to look away, ignoring my reaction to what she said.

'You're here but you don't know where you are. Ignorance is bliss. Isn't that what you say? Well you say it because it's true.' She turned to me, our eyes aligning. 'You have to be careful.'

I know, I know, you're right,' and I lowered my eyes to the table, but she wouldn't let me diffuse the situation. I wanted to tell her things, sweet things, perhaps for her or perhaps for myself or perhaps I couldn't say why ...but she wouldn't let it go. The second vodka had loosened her enough to seek some payback, payback for the indignations that she suffered every day, payback for the way she lived, payback for knowing too much and having too little, for the paltriness of her birthright and for the fact that her purse was empty and the shops were full of things. She couldn't let it go now so she pushed, unfolding the scene.

I grabbed her hand. Come on, let's go,' I said, but she ignored me.

'Izvini, paren,' she called over to one of the three Muscovite boys and began a show of words. I understood the numbers and the reference to me, but I was lost when one of them, a skinny sleazy looking character with bad skin, started asking me questions and got riled when I answered that I didn't understand. He was standing next to the poster of the ferret and I couldn't help seeing a resemblance. I looked to Nadia for help and to my dismay saw shock in her eyes, as if she had overstepped the mark, opening up a darkness which was unmentionable, which went under the carpet, under the snow, and was to be forgotten. She was out of her depth. The skinny boy kept up with the questions, working himself up, his thin acned face ready to split and my response was to look for the waitress, to look anywhere except into his watery piss hole eyes which were utterly incomprehensible anyway. He then came forward and gave my face a little slap, more insult than injury. Nadia grabbed me and pulled me to my feet but the two other boys had since drifted over to the exit and were standing there, ominous in their disinterest. I finally caught sight of the deyvushka but she wasn't 'part and party' and turned around, disappearing without a word. I was waiting for the hit, the

head butt or open palm to the nose. At least my body was. It was all geared up, its chemistry transformed and ready for anything. Positive sodium went one way, negative chlorine, the other. Electricity was happening. A miracle. Meanwhile, my heart was a medicine ball banging against my sternum wall, begging for my brain to think. The ferret then changed his tack.

‘Fuckin money.’

He gave me another little slap and Nadia tried to intervene. The ferret screamed at her and one of his boys came over and grabbed her from behind and put her to one side. Chaos theory. He lunged towards me but I jumped back knocking over our table and everything on it. It was at that moment that the Kazakhis stepped in. The ringleader was wearing a ski-jumper and a suit jacket that looked as if it was made from old embroidered curtains. He wanted to know what was going on and who was to blame. There is no love lost between Muscovites and the ‘chorneys’ and on hearing my poor Russian the Kazakhis asked for nationalities. This further cemented our newly established fraternity and I caught my breath as I watched the ferret try to hold his ground. Now, however, it was all about face. Nobody knew who had what, knives, guns, who was connected to who, vi ot kovo?, and there was a complicated ritual of backing off, involving gestures, language and exhortations. At the point when the militia arrived, it was as if we’d all gone to school together, the hate still there but safely undercover once more, the delicate balance re-established. The police checked our papers then we were outside in the snow. It was then she began to cry.

‘Fucking shit’ she sobbed, catching her breath, as I put my arms around her.

‘It’s OK. Everything’s OK. We’re fine,’ I said, numbed by the elements.

‘It was my fault,’ she said.

‘It was nobody’s fault,’ I replied and held her as tight as I could.

‘I love you Nadia. You don’t believe how much I love you. Come on.’

And I meant it.

She responded with the sound of laughter through tears.

‘We didn’t eat the pickles’ she said.

‘Well, never mind.’ I said. ‘Let’s get out of here’ and we headed off towards the worker and the collective farm girl.

7

Not only did we not eat the pickles, we didn’t pay for them either. Or the vodka. This much occurred to me later. What else? I was home again. It was evening and I was reflecting on the goings on. Reflecting on Nadia and the time when I began to see beneath childish exteriors.

I remembered it was mid-August, six months after Olga, two months after the hotel Maskva, around the time that I lost two jobs in a week. I lost my job as a proof-reader because of cutbacks but they insisted there would be more work once the summer slump had waned. The cause of my parting company with the school was never fully explained, but suffice to say that we had different opinions about methodology. They certainly didn’t want to air the problem and it seemed best that the misunderstandings be swept under the carpet and everybody involved be fairly compensated as and how

the school saw fit. The truth is I clashed with the director of studies and I think he made a target out of me. The first opportunity that arose to get me out the door, he took. The student involved had nothing but kindness for me. Be that as it may, the upshot was I suddenly had a month's salary and time on my hands. It was my host, Svetlana Yevgenyevna, who on hearing of the incident, came to my rescue. As well as inviting me to work with her agency, she came up with the idea of a holiday to make use of my fortuity and to see a little of Mother Russia. Her suggestion was that I go and stay with her Aunty's family near Rostov in the south. Cossack country. Her relatives there were poor but open hearted she said. There was her cousin, Tatiana Igorovna, and Tatiana's grandson, Vanya, who was in his early thirties. There had been a father who had disappeared and a mother who had died of something or other and the son now worked in the local school as did Svetlana's cousin, a perfect provincial scene. The way Svetlana spoke of the family inclined me to want to see more and I agreed that I would make the trip and deliver certain gifts from my host as a way of introduction as well as ask Nadia to accompany me to help with interpretation and to generally smooth over any difficulties that might arise. When I asked her she was delighted and her parents too were happy to have a little more space in the apartment for the ten days we would be away.

It is a common trip for Muscovites, the long train ride south in the summer. For me however, it was the most magical of things. We arrived at Komsomolskaya, that filthy hole where three stations collide and from where you can reach out to the whole of Russia and to where the whole of Russia reaches in and festers looking for the elusive, the fairytale that is the Moscow of Pushkin and G Ivanovski and Bolgurkov. It is in the novel that you will find the heroic and the brave as well as concubines and lovers,

gamblers and fools. Even the devils submit to philanthropy. And a good thing too for God is aloof in the city. But perhaps I'm being over-colourful in comparison to what is. An age without heroes is an age beyond books. Perhaps, as I read somewhere, *chance rules* and you go where the odds are best. That the elusive fairytale had led so many to be outside the Kievski train station to be battered by the odds against says more about necessity than prose. I, though, wasn't dismayed and saw nothing but opportunity. The trip would take twenty-five hours and I would see the land and its people as it should be seen, up close. Nadia had been telling me all about her kodachrome summer trips to Sochi as a child, how the journey would pass, how the passengers would bring their pirashkis and blinshkis to stave off hunger, their kvass and their chai to stave off thirst, everything neatly packed and well-organised, how the children would play and roam, the old babushkas knitting and the men drinking and playing cards or chess, telling stories and squeezing their wives, as a ceaseless stream of wheat fields went by the window. I thought back to my own sepia coloured memories and about how the past had made the present. Always better to be going somewhere; to be getting away to that day in the sun. For nostalgia is best in the mind's eye of the young whose history is re-playable, it is a curse and a poison for the old.

Lubmal, where we were headed, was on the Azov Sea, which was, according to the map, a giant lake, fed by the Black Sea, but contrasted in that the water is shallower and the surrounding land less mountainous. We hadn't been able to purchase any tickets for our chosen train as forty five days notice is required to make any kind of reservation for a coastal express in the summer months but word had it that with cash for the conductor we

could take any train we wished and could arrange seats and beds once aboard.

We planned our arrival to coincide with the 5.23 to Rostov on an outrageously humid Wednesday afternoon, thermometer in the thirties. The platform was pandemonium, like war had again come to the city and everyone was again trying to leave with everything they could carry, if not they might lose everything. Large plastic carry-alls, thin-striped, heavy duty, being hauled by men and women, a handle a-piece, everyone drenched in sweat, the children loaded up, no decorum, just push, survival of the best-fitted. Everything grey and dusty, sweat and push, sweat and push, for the believers, the promise of the 'velvet season' and the sea, drowning in the echo of 'have faith children, to toil is to live, everything can be overcome if you push. Everything.'

We didn't know which way to look to try and get the berths and that, coupled with my corduroy jacket, is what probably brought us to the attention of the tout. If there is such a thing as making luck then this cat was the cat's meow. Up he came. Skinny siamese. Long tail. Whiskers and black fur. Well-groomed, best of breed, taking our bags before we'd bought the 'billetiki.' and making such haste along the platform that I thought he was off with them until he suddenly threw them down and put his arm around a guard, whom he introduced as Vladimir, the conductor of a second-class carriage, who was happy to offer us two seats in a four berth for a single \$100 one way.

'Sounds good, what do you think?' I asked Nadia in English.

'One hundred? That's two months pension,' she replied in Russian and began to laugh. 'How about a month?'

Vova looked at his watch and then at Nadia saying something like ‘it would be criminal to leave such a beautiful girl at the station,’ and insisting we call him ‘Vova.’

‘Payekali, oovazhiimi passazheeri,’ he said, motioning us on board, let’s go dear passengers, and he helped us onto the blue train giving the siamese a crumpled one hundred rouble bill as we went. Almost immediately, it seemed, the engines started up, the whistle blew, and we began to pull out of Moscow, the debris of panic consumed by a wave of well-being, although how all the people got onto the train I’m not sure. Vova, however, was busy explaining to us that for an extra \$50 we could have our own private room and that no-one would disturb us as the cabin was actually his and that perhaps we would be more comfortable if we had our own space, it being such a long trip and he signed his little sales pitch with such an engaging look that he was difficult to refuse. Not that the two men who would be our cabin mates should I refuse did anything to hinder the offer. They come to me now as late-thirties in shell-suits, reckless skin with loose manners, begotten of a careless state, which banked on man and lost the lot. In the militia free zone of a cabin there would surely be misunderstandings. And how they looked at Nadia, scouring incomprehensible glances, up and down, monstrous thoughts without counter. I knew better to look after myself than to play the liberal card, grunted at Mr.Adidas and Mr.Reebok and, after a quick add-up, quietly pressed a Benjamin \$100 into Vova’s soft warm hand. The room, which was next door, however, was tiny, not the luxurious quarters that I had presumed. Nadia was all smiles though. She had been swooned and liked the idea that we could have things if we wanted them.

As an aside, when considering Russia, one may make comparison with the atomic structure of elements. In any given element there is a cluster of protons and neutrons in the heart. This is where the mass is concentrated and where you will find the positive charge. Beyond the core there is relative emptiness. Scattered electrons drift through this space and make the atom complete and definable. It is from this vantage, with room, that chaos unravels, for in the density of the heart it is incalculable. Leaving Moscow, it occurred to me later, was like leaving the proton heart in order to wander in a vast, open expanse, the trace of smashed lives as visible as dawn and dusk, the heirs of earth admitting, and beauty a burden.

‘She shouldn’t look to me,’ I thought. ‘I’m a boy here, vulnerable.’ And I couldn’t help being pre-occupied with the neighbours as I listened to their drivel through the wall. Vova, though, was a tower of honest strength with whom we were a party and in whom I held faith. You buy your trust in Russia, nothing is given, everything has a price. It was this simple system of economics that appealed to the likes of me.

At the time I secured the door however, such thoughts were gone from my mind. I reached across the compartment and pulled the blue curtains to, turning to take Nadia by the waist from behind.

‘Idi k chortu,’ she snapped, literally ‘go to hell,’ but I didn’t listen and instead, undid the buttons of her skirt, her hands frozen to the tops of her thighs. I quickly undressed then lowered her onto the bench cum bed. As she went down she grabbed one of the clean white linen sheets, neatly folded at the head of the bench and, after spreading it out to cover herself, eventually fell back and emptied her lungs as I slipped her out of her underwear.

Her eyes were fixed to the wall, her arms crossed on her breasts. Below those fresh clean sheets I could lick her and suck her and, in truth, begin to eat her, to really bite into her and chew and see how a chunk of her tasted, how it would feel to be smothered in her, an embryonic vision of the beginning, adolescence on the creep with the end which isn't quite, so of course I wanted to bite her and eat her. But a million years of natural selection had bred out my intentions and, as a consequence, a gang of cells produced a gang of molecules which acted according to the universal laws of physics, and sought out their perfect partner. Instead of blood and destruction, there was a flood of empathy, the higher centres in control, with brain knows best, so sayeth the brain.

And so, we went beyond pagan lust and conceptualised and interpreted the experience, animals with ideas striving for the fantastic.

Those that see can stew in their books and the others can keep to the vodka. Mr. Adidas? Fuck him. For I am the flesh made man. I, it is me, who is, presently, God. Are they even aware that they are in the same carriage as The God of Virgin Cunt. I think not, despite the moans. For I am the first and the last, the giver of life, assured there was no other before me. Of this I had her word. It added substance and gave me a certain licence to know that no one else had touched her, at least, not in that way.

We began with spermicidal foam, a kind of cream, then I eagerly put myself into her, inside her for the first time, the soft walls of her cunt as tight as a rubber tube, her youth gushing out, her groin bursting as I pushed myself into her then sucking as I pulled myself out, my skin bristling, her heart pounding, faster and harder until after barely a minute I could bear it no more and I had to pull out not to come prematurely. Our day in the sun was waxing and waning and a soft orange hue filtered through the gap

between the curtains, despite the window facing to the east. She raised her head and mouth as I leaned back, so I helped her sit up and went on my knees. We stayed like that for some time, to and fro, the light flickering, gratified by the rhythm of the train, her head in my hands, back and forth without a gag. But when I knew I could hold it no longer I went back between her legs. No sooner was it in than I came.

Quietus.

It's strange how we change. How love dies. I lowered myself back onto the bench, closing my eyes and listening to the silence, the breaths, the muttering from the next room and the wheels turning relentlessly, hypnotically, without end. Nadia got up and disappeared. When she returned we settled down as the evening began to dawn and managed, as the whisps of cloud turned from warm red to cold blue, to both fall asleep for an hour.

8

When I awoke, I was ravenous. Nadia had her hand on my chest and I couldn't help but notice the ring she was wearing, such a common ring, in fact, for Russians, silver- coloured with blue inlay, it was inscribed 'gospadi spaci y saxcrena menya' translating as 'God save and protect me.' I was always struck by these little rings, how fashionable they were, yet how contradictory they seemed for such a place as Moscow, but I liked the design immensely and I made a mental note to get one as soon as the opportunity arose. They were only a couple of dollars and, as I said, they produced a very pleasant effect. I was thinking to wake Nadia and suggest the buffet car

and so I began whispering in her ear, twisting the ring on her finger and she began to come around.

That was when we heard the scream. My unconscious self jumped up from the bed, fight or flight, but once at the door I had to think what I was doing, whether I was locking it or opening it. I looked back at Nadia and the sheets so pretty and white. Nothing bad could happen here. I was further comforted by the sound of Vova's voice amongst several others and a definite absence of panic. Besides, I was conditioned to open doors.

In the passageway there was a host of shell suits, perhaps five or six of them, all visibly engaged by the sight of our neighbours, nothing much heard or understood, back to the beginning with bare teeth and all. Vova was shouting at them from the other side of the carriage.

A shriek came from the neighbour's room. Then all were silent, agog. Then there was a whimpering sound coming from the room as well as another voice, growling at the onlookers, the apparent focus of all the attention. I leaned my head over the group and realised that I was quite wrong. What was drawing the attention was Mr. Reebok's hand, impaled like skewered meat, a fishing knife fastening it to the table. Beneath the hand, I could see playing cards, queens. There was blood all over the cards, apparently from Reebok's nose, as well as on the crystal blue vodka, which Mr. Adidas was brandishing as a weapon. He smashed the end off and bid Mr. Reebok shut the fuck up. He then proceeded to cut his own arm, for what purpose we'll never know, and then rip the knife out of the table and thus, as a consequence, from out of his companion's be-ruined paw. The scream that ushered forth cracked hearts, hopeless and anguished as it was. Perhaps it even touched Mr. Adidas as he paused for a second, bravado style, and smashed the bottle on the floor, brandishing the knife half-

heartedly at the audience, the death throes of his piece. On this he was immediately engulfed by those in front of me and at the site of the militia arriving, I quickly went back into the cabin to inform Nadia and to otherwise pause for thought whilst watching the land go by the window.

Two fifths of the world's trees are in Russia. We spent the next thirty minutes meditating on a small proportion of them, birch mainly with some oak and pine and beech mixed amongst them. The door was double locked. It remained that way until we stopped and Mr. Adidas and Mr. Reebok were escorted from the train, the makeshift bandages unravelling as they went. The sight of Reebok was so pathetic that you had to have sympathy for him. His jogging bottoms were too small for him and he had such a terribly sad look of despair about him. He didn't seem like trouble, just keeping the wrong company. At least that's how it appeared. Nadia said that they were typical provincials, the two of them, and that outside of Peter and Moscow they were everywhere. With this in mind I turned my eyes back to the window and to the darkened sky and the trees.

After a spell we decided to go for dinner. Once beyond our carriage we found a very different atmosphere to the place where we had been hiding. It was more akin to the kodachrome familial gatherings which Nadia had described, with people of all ages and all sizes running along the corridors, in and out of compartments, holding drinks and sandwiches and cakes, so convivial like the holiday atmosphere which we had hoped for. One small girl we came across was blowing bubbles and we spent a few minutes trying to catch them without them dissolving into thin air and waving our hands so as to direct them which way we fancied. The mother was propped up in the carriage with pillows beneath and behind, brooding like an old hen, a fist full of sunflower seeds keeping her occupied, while her

men whiled away the hours slamming dominoes. We found the dining car three carriages along, quite a regal affair relative to the rest of the train, with real linen table cloths and napkins, there being about twelve tables, of which three or four were occupied. Outside, the day was done for. It was night in the east and dying embers in the west. The waitress came over and gave us the menus.

9

I am reminded now of the time I went to Riga and sat in a similar dining car with Svetlana Yevgenyevna, this being before I became her house-guest. I was going to Latvia to renew my Russian visa and Svetlana was going to meet prospective clients for her fledgling business, clients, who couldn't, for whatever reason, enter into the Russian Federation. We knew each other through a school at that time and had decided to make the fourteen hour journey together, my Russian still welcoming assistance. There are several incidents that I remember about that trip but what comes most strongly to mind is the story she told me of her 'brother', the sausage man. When she was a young girl, her and her parents shared a flat on Tverskaya with another couple and their adopted Spanish son. The boy had been sent over from the Basque country in thirty-eight to escape Franco only to be stranded by the Second World War. When the war finished, the boy was at school and it was decided that he should remain in Moscow to study, although his real father was still alive at that time and living in the Basque town of Zarautz. He worked as a postman there and, once a month, would send a postcard to his son in Moscow, later in the time of Krushchev, a

parcel accompanying the card, the contents of which were always the same, sausages. Now, the young Basque boy had become a young Basque man. He had entered Moscow State University on a special government scholarship and in the late afternoons he would often return to the flat, always with a different girl in tow. Svetlana would be in the communal kitchen playing with her dolls when the girls would be brought in and introduced. The ritual was always the same. They would take tea, talk about Spain and politics, then, he would show the girl the sausages. After that, they disappeared for ten minutes, the walls telling all, before finally, returning to the kitchen, where he presented the girl with her gift. As time went on, Svetlana, seven or eight by then, began to prepare and wrap the sausage, once she heard that the business had commenced, later telling me that she may have even had the occasional peak through the keyhole. The story however, ended sourly when her 'brother' was sent, after University, to the Pacific. It was the time of the atomic sea tests and after witnessing the miracle of the bomb first hand, he spent the next three years dying a withering death from lymphatic cancer, ending his days in a Basque ambulatorio tended by the father he had barely ever known.

10

We took the menus, cursive font, and glanced over the dishes on offer. I took Solyanka to start, a meat soup mixed with olives and pickles and lemon, and Nadia took the Uxha fish soup, served with a vodka, which she passed to me. I followed my soup with Pelmeni, small doughy meat parcels, steamed and served with butter, chives and sour cream and Nadia took the

Chicken Kiev. We drank red Georgian wine to match the curtains and the colour of the sky. What else of that night, of the little blue train? What else of the moments? Something about the neighbouring table, how the daughter sipped and licked her spoon, later, carefully trimming the fat from the pork, how the father beamed and stroked her cheek, raising his Baltic pint, how the mother leaned to her husband's ear and whispered, the three of them laughing at the silliness of it all. Or from one of the other tables, whose stories remained a secret, only colours and numbers being revealed, a perfect picture how say, the whole room given to blessed harmony, words for words, flames for flames, all in equal measure. But there was more, for harmony is the end and can never amount to anything and as the wine disappeared and the land with it, I found myself slipping into a velvet state of carelessness, the mind reeling, revealing, unperturbed by the machinations of those around me, the only scheme which I considered being the scheme of the night, the scheme of the wind and the engine, how we tore through the darkness with our bitty plans and aims so easily tossed aside, randomly, so easily cast in another light with a change of scene. How we all change, playing our roles to suit the sea. Forever opportunists, waiting, carelessly, but waiting nevertheless and when the time comes wreaking havoc amongst the innocent who know not what they have done. Layer by layer, the wine uncoils the tail of the beast. The serpent hisses with its tongue at full stretch. The wild dog bites, sinks its teeth in. No pause for the higher centres to over-ride. No empathy. Flesh is ripped from the bone. So sweet and wet. Red is the colour, red juice dripping down my chops, licking my lips and swilling so as to feel the taste with every taste bud. And such a sweet bud it was. Young and tender. In the middle of nowhere, the crème de la crème. A little gong struck ten times and then asked to leave.

The night crawled on. Still young, still loved and cherished and worshipped for what it might bring, for the sweetness, which lies within. We stumbled back to our cabin and en-route met all the family. The old ones gone bad in the mouth, just happy to be there, happy to watch their children and grandchildren, asking for nothing and dying with every smile they saw. The whole system had been turned on it's head, the way they lived had been rejected, was considered unfit. They were the lowest class, for they had failed. The parents were caught betwixt between. The old ways were gone, they had to adapt, be flexible. They knew all they learnt at school was a lie, that power must lie to console the weak, but they were young enough to get on regardless. They felt hunger in their belly and therefore were choice-less. They looked to their parents as little as is perfunctory, to their children they orientated like a flower to the sun, for hope springs eternal. One lie had, after all, been undone. These people had themselves been children at the time of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, the summer in which all the children were shepherded off to camps for three months, away from the city. They had been told that foreigners were coming and that they would try to poison the children with sweets and that under no circumstances should the children speak to the foreigners or accept anything from foreigners because they were dangerous and look what happened when they came before, the French with Napoleon, the Germans with the Kaiser and Hitler. This information was disseminated in the schools that spring. Such social conditioning makes people wary and hence inflexible. The children, for this reason, burnt the brightest. This was and is the age of youth. We are not wine. We must give to those who can. And so we give and the apple barrel turns upside down. Poor granny, in her chair with her knitting. Wouldn't she be better in her box? Or is it better, the ingratitude of neglect, with the foreword 'you get

what you give.’ I was glad all my relatives were boxed. I had a brother in Cornwall, a misery of a man whom I rarely spoke to except about inheritance and an aunty in the North with whom I exchanged Xmas cards. There had been others at other times but all had since passed from my life and I can’t say I wasn’t glad of it. I couldn’t imagine a big family gathering and I, in the midst of it with Nadia or Olga or God forbid one of the others. It’s easier to fail abroad. One can become the essence of oneself. As a consequence you fulfil your destiny, for better or worse. After all, others did the same when I was a boy. And I’m not a seventh son of a seventh son. I cannot call up mystical incantations with which to cleanse my soul. Only own up to myself, and get on and look as best as I might.

Beyond the track of the corridor we found the sanctuary of our room. So silent now, the clock half of ten, heads laying upon pillars, hearts upon hearts, the wheels of the train going round and round, carving through the darkness to the South of Russia and an unknown house with strangers whom I knew simply as figures in a tale, Nadia, disinterested in my chat about the Cosmos, curled up, above me with a copy of Vonnegut, out somewhere in the middle of Indiana, being fruitful and multiplying and every word I offered an interruption to the flow, leaving me numb below, clutching *A Dog’s Heart*, but not having the impetus or inclination to turn the pages.

There is something gorgeous about trains, about going and leaving everything behind. Perhaps it’s the promise that you’ll get up at journey’s end in a new place and, by deduction, be at the beginning again, faultless by renewal.

This was the feeling that I had as I lay in the shadow of Nadia’s lamp. And then, out of the blue, she asked me about my father, connected, no doubt, to what she was reading, and so without a pause for thought, I told

her about the time when I was eleven and took one of my first train trips, going with my step-father to the Lake District for the weekend, camping. I explained that he wouldn't have been best pleased to know I was talking publicly about the family, that he had been very much 'a stiff upper lip' type who believed in minding one's own business and not prying into other's. I also told her how he had been a keen outdoorsman and loved walking and hiking and rambling in the country and how we climbed to the top of Hellvellen that weekend, full pack, the second highest mountain in England, camping on the other side.

I told her how I was in awe of him at that time, hanging on his every word, endlessly trying to please him and satisfy him, how I would quote him on every possible occasion and never doubted a thing that he told me. My mother grew to hate it and it wasn't until later, looking back, that I saw his true standing as a good man. And I even saw how it destroyed him, his failing, his evident inability to live up, even, to his own expectations. He disappointed himself, I told her, stressing the pronoun. That's the truth. My mother said that for a few lousy moments he had poisoned himself and thus would die a lonely death. Of course you can blame the environment, upbringing, genetic inheritance or a whole host of other reasons, which create a milieu in which we are allowed to fail. Or perhaps it's simpler. Man is a beast in the shadow of an illusionary God.

'I'm here at the bottom Nadia,' I said, 'and it's a constant surprise to me because when we were at the top of Helvellyn, it seemed as if the whole world was at my feet.'

She liked the switch, though I'm not sure that she really understood what I had said. Only after she turned off the lights did the mood of the wine hit me and in the light air which accompanied this feeling and in which

the whole spinning trouble became a complete and utter nonsense, I put my head round the curtain of the window and seeing the sky I felt the protection of the stars. ‘The stars,’ I thought. ‘What the hell? What does it matter? What does anything matter?’ A hundred thoughts in fact, except the obvious, the thought that I was drunk. I wished Nadia good night, and she returned the thought. And then we slept.

11

I was awoken by Vova who put two large mugs of black tea on the table, sugar, cream and biscuit on the side, the spoon already in the cup. He looked immaculate, his foppish mousy hair slicked back, fresh white shirt, silver grey tunic with golden epulettes and clean-shaven to boot with just a blush of sun on his cheeks. He caught my half opened eye and simply nodded without a word, immediately departing. I wondered where and with whom he had slept.

Outside, the fields rolled by, clumps of trees here and there, the vastness undisturbed save the occasional shackle of wooden cottages with rickety looking walls, thick blue smoke issuing from the yards, shadows of men on the periphery, faceless and anonymous, going about their business of wood and game, shadows of women also, bent over their gardens, tending the ground that fed them. Now was the time of fruit. The time of harvest.

The sun grew strong as we took our tea and idled in the glow of a new day, wheels continuing to turn, the conversation, a rambling discourse on Soviet history from the polyglot jew and Koba the Dread, to the wall coming

down and the bottle boy on his tank. He knew better than to feed the mob dry ideals. Let them bite and be bitten and feed for themselves. And so the country was divided equally amongst them all, serve and volley, game, set, match, until the last one hundred men.

Out our eastern window, occasional concrete structures began to appear, brutal things, re-bar slabs, thrown together without any apparent purpose. The sun hadn't touched them yet. Slowly they became a cold grey rash on the skin of the land and the train began to slow. I was thinking about the queens when the train stopped. There were dozens of people strung out along the platform, mainly old babushkas with crooked backs and headscarves, all with baskets or carrier bags or sports bags. Dogs lay prone on the platform unmoving. Business begged. In the baskets the vendors carried chicken and hot potatoes with chives and butter, ready to eat in plastic bags. Others had punnets of raspberries and wild strawberries as well as peaches and apricots, salted tomatoes and salted pickles. In the carrier bags, I saw bread and sweet rolls. The sports bags held the beer and the vodka.

We went to the door of the train and were greeted by two boys dressed in filthy tracksuits, holes front and back, both cut at the thigh to make shorts. The taller of the two was hydro encephalitic with a giant sickly forehead, the smaller fairer boy having ribs that protruded like low hanging bony breasts through his undersized t-shirt, his angelic complexion, his saving grace. They were a desperate couple and moved swiftly from bargaining to tears, offering everything they had for fifty roubles. We took the wild strawberries and the peaches and the salted pickles, all of which looked excellent, and gave them what they asked for, without bargaining. It struck me how well I understood the two of them. How they spoke more or less as Nadia did, this impressionable creature of books. In terms of accent I mean. A product of

the Soviet Union I supposed, an entire nation without fiefdoms or dominions, only the one, hence the one tongue. I felt a certain power at being able to communicate with these boys, these freakish little boys in a place whose name I never learnt and sensed that I actually held my own dominion here, in the shape of innumerable rouble notes. Such a thing can hurt the heart of a young man but I was entering the age where my brain thought better of such notions, seeing each man's soul as something indomitable, so I was happy to send them off for mineral water and beer and was happy to part with another fifty when they returned with the things I had asked for. I noticed the encephalitic one also had a twisted leg, which he dragged along as he went. It was a bizarre show of humanity out there in the middle of nowhere. The last I saw of the town, as the train pulled out, was a girl of eight or nine down on her haunches, defecating.

12

The sun was high in the sky when I decided to take a stroll to the buffet car to get away from Nadia for an hour. The compartment had become suffocating and it seemed a very natural thing to do, to leave her to the high point of her book. It was in the buffet car that I received the card of Bernard Sweet.

Philosophically speaking, as well as cosmologically, it can be said that the universe is unbounded, that there are merely strings of repeating patterns and shapes, which interact and dislocate in an ever expanding infinity. However, we must accept that despite there being no limits in a cosmological sense, we, indeed, do have limits. We like the idea that we are

the same as when we ran in the school playground but we know, as a fact, that we have been reduced to something completely different, completely unexpected, and in most cases, to ourselves, something of a disappointment. The causal agent is an ephemeral thing, a casual encounter, by all means a seeming accident. The agents, in general, have no plan or incentive to alter us but by their very nature they do so. A word or a phrase. A look or a brush with the fingertips. These are the touches with which we age. One may think in chemical terms, in terms of finite inevitability or biological clocks, but in a vacuum there can be no change. One may live as one arrived in an empty space but in a metropolis of millions this is no longer the case, the agents of change are everywhere and it is inevitable that you will be transformed. And in Russia you will become unrecognisable, as anonymous to yourself as to others. I can't imagine what Bernard Sweet was like in his early forties but the ten years he had spent in Moscow had left the essence of a sick and twisted man all wrapped and carefully postured in the fine bespoke cloths of a very English gentleman.

I met him at the cash desk in the buffet car, only the two of us there, and recognising our common history, we both offered cordial 'good days.'

When the waitress arrived he ordered a small beer in crisp Russian, then turned to me and offered me to join him. Given the situation I was powerless to refuse, such is fate. I made a mental note of his accent, distinctly southern English, slow and detached, so sure of itself, with vowel sounds that could sink ships. The waitress asked us to take a seat while she poured the beer so we took a table at the back of the carriage, away from the service, on the west side of the train, and there we began to make our conversation.

The first thing that struck me was his bloated oily skin. It looked as if it had been peeled off and put back on, flesh side up. His cheeks and jowls were incredibly puffy, gleaming with grease from overactive sebaceous glands, which visibly oozed and formed beads on the fleshy red pores that covered his face. His nose was a purple bulbous thing, swollen with tissue fluid to the point of rupture and his mouth was turned down at the edges giving him a slightly miserable demeanour. White spit coagulated in the folds of these glum spots and the beer did little to alleviate it. All this was in contrast to the fabulously understated white silk shirt he was wearing, accentuated only by a thin gold cross and chain. As the beer went down, so his story emerged. He'd originally come to Russia as a lawyer working for City investors but had found the place so much to his taste that he had sold his London mansion and used the money to set up permanently in the centre of Moscow. He continued to work part-time as a consultant and lived off the interest from his investments.

'I'm on the Arbat' he said.

'I love the South much more than the East.'

'Sochi this time, or thereabouts.'

'Peter is a gem which never disappoints.'

'You must come to the Club. Meet some of the boys.'

'You wouldn't believe what goes on. You wouldn't believe it.'

'Have the steak at John Bull's.'

'You shouldn't take chances. Know who's who.'

'There was this little blond haired one. I don't know where they get them from.'

'Always keep a thousand for the militia.'

Looking back on Sweet's manner, I'm taken by how it cuts, the language of decency, in the expression of the indecent.

As well, there was something about his watery grey eyes, so steady in their gaze, such arrogance and surety. When he listened to you he gave the air as if he didn't hear you, as if he was calculating something astronomical, something unthinkable. He prodded me with questions about my work and about the places where I spent my time and money but there never developed a serious line of conversation. No religion or politics. Everything was glossed over, half suggestions, insinuations, hints and ambiguity. But what I did gather was that he was interested in little other than entertaining himself and gratifying his desires to the full.

Nonsense breeds, just as sense breeds. And both need fuel, instigation.

At the end of the second beers Nadia joined us, and it was immediately obvious that her and Sweet had met before. Nadia's reaction was one of shock and surprise and she seemed at a loss for a moment or two, taciturn and awkward with her words. It transpired they had met at some party or other outside the city, though, in fact, they had hardly spoken at that time beyond preliminary introductions. Sweet seemed very interested as to the fate of Nadia's partner that weekend, whom he claimed to know from his club but whom he hadn't seen in some time. Nadia told him she hadn't a clue, and Sweet sensed that this wasn't the time or place for such questions and, instead, suggested he buy her a drink. From then on it was a show. He fairly slavered all over her, telling her how gifted she was and how it was a privilege to be in her company and how he was interested in Chinese hieroglyphs and that he wished to take a trip there and perhaps she could advise him. It annoyed me a little, watching her play a type through all this.

She stroked the bridge of her nose and blushed while Sweet was foaming and drooling like a dog. He eyed me differently too. As if he had found the answer to the sum he was calculating. The conversation petered after the third drink and I felt tired. Lunch wasn't for another hour and I couldn't stomach the porridge, which was on offer at that time, so I got up and offered my excuses and headed back to the compartment, insisting that Nadia take her time and enjoy the view.

'Here's my card' Sweet said as I got up to leave. Then, as I turned, he whispered in my ear 'Call me when you want to have some fun.'

I didn't settle back in the room though. I kept expecting Nadia to appear through the door but after fifteen minutes of silence I could stand it no more and made my way back to the buffet car thinking to drink juice until lunch was served. When I got there, however, the car was empty. A tremendous feeling of jealousy swept over me and I immediately began asking directions to the first class carriage. Once there, I asked the guard where I might find Sweet's compartment and I was shown to his door. I knocked, then banged, several times but there was complete silence. After a pause and a final attempt I gave up and went back to the buffet car, better to be moving than waiting. When I arrived, the two of them were sat where we had previously been sat together. Nadia looked at me, smiled and asked me how I was feeling.

'Fine' I said. 'I was just here but I couldn't find you.'

'I went to the bathroom and there was no water. Russian trains!' she frowned, her face flushing.

Perhaps it was true. Probably it was true. But the doubt put me into a foul mood, compounded by the beer.

‘There’s mineral water in the compartment. You can use that,’ I suggested, matter of fact.

Sweet got up to leave. He wasn’t as fat as his face suggested and the beer didn’t seem to have slowed him any. He offered us both a smile and said he hoped he might see us later, although there was no concrete time or arrangement. Then he slipped back to first class. I sat in silence with Nadia for a while then asked her what she thought of him.

‘He’s strange.’

‘Where is he from?’

‘Greasy skin.’

‘Is he typical?’

She added that Sweet suggested they have dinner sometime in Moscow and that he had given her his card but that he wasn’t in any way insistent, and was, in fact very casual to the point of disinterest.

‘I was just about to come and find you when you came back,’ she said and she touched my face tenderly, as only Nadia would and I felt very close to her again as if we had been lost to each other and then somehow managed to find our way back.

13

We didn’t see Sweet again and in the late afternoon, with the smell of salt in the air, we finally pulled into Morevsk. Vova was there with a firm hand, wishing us much luck on our way and helping us out onto the platform but as the train pulled away and we looked around we realised we had arrived in a hole of a place. It looked half-finished, as if the money had run

out before the work was complete. Slabs of stone were piled up by the timetable board and parts of the platform were connected by wooden planks with a six foot drop below as punishment for the unfortunate or inebriated. There was no obvious way out as both sides of the track opened out onto fields with no barrier or constraint, the platforms being connected by a bridge which was literally crumbling away, the open concrete steps reinforced with chicken wire so as to stop you falling onto the track. It was such a grey depressing thing that it seemed stupid to have travelled for a day to get there. I consoled myself that this wasn't our destination though, that in fact most of Moscow is a similar wreck beyond the grandeur of the centre and the rococo of the metro and that wherever there is a transient mass of people, there is a permanent pile of waste. Here, there and everywhere.

We had been told to take a taxi from the bus stop, a twenty five minute ride that would cost about a dollar or so but there was no sign of a car so we asked directions from an old barbushka we passed and she pointed us east along a gravel strip and told us we would find a tarmac road for Lubmal about 2 kilometres further along. She was selling lemons so we bought a couple as an act of thanks and courtesy as well as a practical aid for the small bottle of Russki Standard which we had brought along.

And then we walked. We walked out of the station, our backs to it and the sun, and walked into an immense space, which immediately dwarfed the railway line whose scabby occupation was almost completely discounted by the vastness of the land, the significant earth. We walked into the steppe and were consumed by it. It opened its arms and bid us welcome.

When one thinks of Russia one thinks of snow drifts and fur shapkas, bears and hammers and sickles, tanks on Red Square, children in military garb, Brezhnev or Stalin above the tomb. One thinks of the freeze and the

frozen. One never thinks of barren fields stretching out across the steppe, or of apricots rotting in the sun or sweet wine being pressed behind chicken sheds. One would never think of barbuskas in vietnamki flip flops and paper thin flowery dressing gowns bargaining at the market for the wishes of the 'damas' from the towns. Yet here it was, something else, something unseen. The smell of camomile was consuming and with the lowering of the sun there dawned the most beautiful and serene colours, that walking for a while in this wilderness seemed like a gift, a pilgrimage, that everything that had been and would be was pale by comparison and could never be quite as sweet and tender as these moments alone in this unknown corner of Russia. As we went, Nadia pointed out different plants and birds that she recognised and corrected my pronunciation and swung her hips and showed me how bees dance by doing little figures of eight with her elbows akimbo and her hands fluttering like little wings and she told me about Cheburashka and the Crocodile and how they took the train to the south but that the bad witch, who wasn't really a witch, stole their tickets and the crocodile's accordion and that they had to walk and how the witch had a pet rat and that in the end the witch wasn't so bad and gave them back their belongings and that they all lived happily ever after. Then we didn't speak for a while and just listened to the soft hum of summer.

'A majestic present of fate' she said, closing her eyes but continuing to walk with her arms outstretched. I'd never seen her so ecstatic. That this was hers, her garden of land, never occurred to me. She was a thousand miles from home and yet she went as if she was in the 'padyezd of her tower block.

‘Use left a little, right a little and guide me along the road and if I’m going to hit anything, tell me. We went like that for a quarter of a mile and I never opened my mouth except to gasp.

Time flew. We arrived at the road and continued south-east, there being no sign of any cars, or even of any people for that matter. We talked about the East and how we should take the train together to Beijing, and further to Shanghai. We made a promise to take that trip as soon as the time presented itself and to seal it Nadia wrote it on a piece of paper and we both had to sign it. I liked her little quirks, her eccentricities. As we walked she began a song in Russian that the crocodile used to sing, and it was such a sweet and beautiful little melody and what with the red streaked sky and the warm air, I thought that nothing could be more perfect, but then we saw the sea in the distance, the mysterious Azov Sea and in that moment Nadia paused in recognition and looked at me intently, giving the hint of a smile, a sign of love, love perhaps only for the circumstances, the situation, but who needed to say more, for what more was there beyond circumstances, a long stream of events and collisions, each one triggering the next, predictable only if one knew the environment in which one moved, less obvious if one was lost.

Beyond the song and the sea, the sun bent down and kissed the apparent earth. Sunset.

And as it sank I felt a twinge of pain. We had walked for over an hour and hadn’t seen a soul. Nadia had cheap sandals and had to stop to check her feet. But the mood carried us forward, the overpowering sense of quiet which prevailed all around in the absence of others and the sense that at the end of the road there were people who were expecting us, who had prepared beds and food for us and for whom we had gifts.

The twilight soon began to settle in the east where a thin line of apricot trees seemed to run along for miles. Our stride had become military, regimented and determined. The midge flies and mosquitoes were out in pursuit of fresh meat. Swarms of them began to appear as the light continued its descent into infra-red. Our road seemed to be moving away from the sea, towards the steppe and away from the light. At one point a swarm of hornets, perhaps seven or eight of them came upon us and panicked us with their insistent presence, as if at any moment they might descend upon us or be joined by more of the nest and under which circumstances we would have suffered gravely but the moment passed and they seemed suddenly to lose interest and simply buzzed away to God knows where. It was enough, though, to provoke doubt.

‘Do you think we should go back’ I said.

‘Back to where?’ Nadia asked in reply, out of breath.

‘Back towards the railway station’ I continued. Perhaps we took the wrong turn at the junction.’

‘But the directions were clear and the woman with the lemons said the same.’

She paused and wiped her face with her hand. Her blue Benetton t-shirt clung to her and branded her perfectly.

‘Here, have an apricot. It can’t be much further’ she said.

I noticed hundreds of midges hovering around her legs, then realised I was being bitten on my arms by a similar number. My hands became covered in blood from the ensuing crushing and eventually we decided to change our clothes, Nadia putting on jeans and myself, putting on cords and a long sleeved shirt. By the time we had changed and finished the water we had brought along, it was night. Darkness. There was an unfamiliar and

disquieting hissing all around, some kind of cricket or grasshopper I guessed, which we hadn't noticed before. The moon appeared in the east, a slither of the crescent, *myesets*, not nearly enough to light the road, which was sinking into an inky blackness. The transition was profound. Seamless. The genius of nature had turned the light off the earth and in doing so opened up the sky. The hundred billion stars of the Milky Way rolled out above us like a streak of fog. The hundred billion cells in my head were dumbstruck in recognition. Brains. Galaxial and cerebral. All for one and one for all. For a moment it felt as if we had walked out of the world, as if we had managed to leave ourselves behind and be, instead, on the tip of some evolutionary step, with ramifications beyond blood and bones, beyond sex. Flesh disappeared. We were one with the night, the monster of night. How gorgeous! For that which is evil, knows no evil. You become what you live. And nature knows not what you are until it's too late. Thus, the moment passed. We crept on and as we went I felt the air become heavier and more pungent, sweet at first, like the smell of figs, but as we continued, the smell became more intense and repugnant and I could only assume it was some kind of rotting vegetation, perhaps silage or a dump or some geography with which I was unfamiliar. In the absence of light and strength, the way took the markings of a tunnel, on and on, winding along, a snake, lost to the earth then emerging again, as if a pendulum swung and called out fate, visible, invisible, a chemical urge, nature's fruit laid out all around, its sweet sticky juices, gelatinous and membranous, the air, thick and dark like primitive flesh, licking and touching our skin, moaning, barely audible, a whisper from a beast, and all of it a dream, unreal, nothing to see but the ceiling, nothing to hear but the walls creaking, on and on, again and

again, until finally there is nothing, not even the walls, nothing but blackness and a vacuous stare.

From this we were given. We passed through.

‘What’s that over there do you think?’ Nadia asked, tugging my sleeve to attract my attention.

‘It could be a farm’ she added.

On the horizon there was a cluster of lights of differing intensities, much yellower than the stars and unmoving. Houses.

‘Let’s go?’ I asked.

‘Yes, but let me talk. This isn’t Moscow. These people aren’t the same. And you remember the men on the train?’

I had happily forgotten about the hand of cards and Mr. Adidas but now I was reminded, my immediate reaction was to stop and speak.

‘Let’s not go straight up to the door, okay? Let’s just get close and have a look and see what we see. Let’s use our heads. Perhaps they’re all drunk. What’s to stop them taking an axe to us?’

‘Your passport’ she replied, and I felt in my pocket for my little red book and sure enough it was there. I was suddenly more at ease knowing I had that book of paper.

Then she added, as much to assure herself as me, that I would probably be the first foreigner they had ever seen.

‘You’ll be fine,’ she said, ‘come on.’

But she didn’t move, hesitating perhaps from fatigue, perhaps from premonition. Whatever the rules and reasons, it was I who set off first.

It was I who approached a narrow path that led to what appeared to be a large old house. It was I who cut along a bramble hedge, who pushed back

a creaking wooden gate, who edged like the celestial night towards the porch.

I remember how it was.

I could feel sweat dripping down the side of my neck, the humidity having beaten the breeze. The night was dead and everything with it. In the silence, only breaths. It was then I was attacked.

There are two situations where your native tongue comes to the fore: counting and panic. 3 and 5 will always be 8.

‘Get the fuck off me,’ will always be ‘Get the fuck off me’ or something similar depending on what was impressed upon you as a child as being appropriate for that given situation. Wherever you are, with whom ever you are engaged, these imprints will jump into your head because of the clearly and deeply defined function of these words. There is no ambivalence, no need to pause for thought because there can, in the brain’s opinion, be no mis-understanding. Unfortunately, evolution has yet to ‘best fit’ multi-ethnicity and the linguistic incompatibilities, which ensue from our tribalism, and although, ‘Different is OK’, is fine as a concept, in reality, ‘different is not okay’ and in the absence of harmony there will always be pain.

The pain game. There in Lubmal, Russia.

Nobody knew the rules when they arrived but all of them had to play. And the misery of it. The sheer misery of it.

Everywhere, howling, depressed, as inescapable as death. It was in my hair and skin, on my tongue, it ran in my bones and legs and spread to the parched grass beneath my feet. As I jumped back in a fit of panic I felt it in the air, how it wrapped itself like a shroud around the shadow of the

house, how the timbers were rotten with it and cried and squealed as if they couldn't stand it any more, as if they would rather a bomb come and wipe the whole lot off the map than suffer one more moment like this. The myriad coalesced in my ears before I'd had chance to see for myself and manifested themselves in my throat before I could speak. The screams for someone to help, for innocence to come from somewhere and give back that, which had been lost, to protect and give succour as before. I would have done anything for it. Again and again I felt the stab, the air putrefied, coming in waves, filling my mouth and nose as I breathed. I'd heard him making for me, slavering as he came, new meat in a garden of badness, and I tried to fend him off but it was useless. That he got me came as no surprise. That he continued to get me was brutal. Sweat.

'GET OFF ME' I screamed instinctively, as I tore my trousers away from his mouth. 'Get off me.'

More sweat.

I continued to struggle and he backed off for a moment, his bark less injurious than his bite. Then something unhinged him, the bark became a growl once more and he struck again, higher. I retaliated by grabbing his head and trying to gouge his eyes but he quickly struggled free and got me again. With it I was inured. Nothing comes to mind until the porch door swung open and everything passed from black to grey.

14

Stood in the door, be-halped by a forty watt bulb stood an immense woman, cast faceless by the backlight, her sex indicated by her chest and the

cut of her clothes, there being what appeared to be a skirt hung on massive hips.

‘What do you want here? What are you doing here? Hitrishka get away.’

This is what I understood, but I couldn’t speak. I looked to Nadia but she was behind the gate. The dog offered a warning shot of a growl but it turned to a whimper when he was grabbed and smacked across the nose. His keeper was a big round thing with tuberculin phlegm in her throat. The commotion seemed to have brought on an attack and she stood there a good five or ten seconds hacking and growling up mucus the best she could, spitting the gob-full she managed, on the ground that lay between us.

‘What do you want?’ she went on, hands on hips, her voice as rough as the gravel on the road.

‘I’m looking for Tatiana Igorovna,’ I replied in soft Russian, gently pressing myself to check for the damage. The truth was I couldn’t feel a thing and in the grey light it was as if it might never have happened, and I imagined a new scenario where there wasn’t damage and it hadn’t happened. As long as I didn’t see physical wounds, it would always remain plausible. I took a deep breath.

‘Hmm, eta ya. Ya Tatiana Igorovna,’ and she gestured for me to follow her as she turned towards the door adding that she couldn’t see if Nadia was a girl or a boy but whatever she was she had better come as well.’

Tatiana Igorovna. From what I saw and heard she could be pig’s liver cooked without the lid, or sweet warm cherry pie with a sugar seeded crust. She had once been a pretty slip of a girl, who ran through fields and made crowns from chamomile petals by carefully threading the stems. She would skip to the pond and strip naked and spend summer afternoons laid on her

back beneath the water, her flat chest breathing through a straw of hay, watching the magic of clouds. The farm was a colhos then, a soviet collective. One day, as she skipped to the pond, she heard a Georgian flute. She didn't skip back and that was the beginning of the end.

We entered into a narrow hall with a door on the left and another on the right. We went right and found ourselves in a large kitchen with several tables running in a line and two large cupboards side by side with metal pans sat atop of them. There was no sign of any stove. The walls were freshly white washed and save for a painting of a horse on one of them, they were bare. The painting, I noticed was an attempt to copy Petrov-Vodkin's '*the bathing of the horses*', with a boy riding a red horse across a river but the final result was ill-proportioned, and one of the horse's legs was much wider than the other three and the overall impression was dismal for some reason, the effect being neither childish nor restrained.

'Those scratches need wiping' she said, inspecting my leg. There's nothing here so we need to send out for something.' Nadia translated and I nodded in agreement.

'Do you have ten roubles?' she added, after a pause, her eyes fixed on my wounds. 'For ten roubles we can get what we need,' the second utterance a mere mutter and from where she continued to mutter, more to herself than to those who were listening.

I homed in on the request for money, comprehending little of the rest.

'Dyeset? Da, oo menya yist,' I replied and began to fumble for my wallet. There was thirteen thousand roubles in my wallet, mainly blue one thousand bills and purple five hundred bills. I fished out a rogue one hundred note and handed it over.

‘Vasnite pazhalsta,’ I added, as she took the bill, which was fresh from the national mint. Our host eyed me like a hawk, with hawk eyes and heavy wrinkles, bags of years under her eyes, her cheeks inconceivably hollow, her lips as thin as when she had threaded daisy chains, her chops too. Yet her body was massive, God only knowing what weight she dragged before the sickness, which ate her from inside out. Mycobacterium tuberculosis. So slow on its feet. Taking its time to eat through the lungs and bones of this big monster. So much time.

She disappeared and left me with Nadia and my wounds and I beckoned Nadia to come closer so that I could kiss her. Her lips were dry and looked as if she’d brushed them with fine white sand. Dehydration. Salt had crystallised on the delicate translucent hairs on her neck, salt tears were welling in her tear ducts.

‘Fsyo harasho? Are you okay? Why did you just stand there?’ she asked, tenderly touching each mark with a wet tissue.

‘I don’t know. What could I do?’ I replied.

‘Three times two plus one is seven,’ she said, counting aloud in Russian.

‘Sem. Udatcha,’ she concluded with a half smile, ‘he must have missed you once.’

That explained the hole in the wallet. My money had saved me, at least a little suffering and we both began to settle when we realised that it didn’t seem as serious as I had feared. The corduroy pants that I had changed into because of the mosquitoes had taken the brunt of the bites, the skin being broken only in two places and neither looking too serious. I touched my wallet for assurance, an undertow of fatigue beginning to counter the wave of shock.

‘I wonder where she’s gone?’ I asked. ‘I didn’t notice a supermarket, did you?’

‘No,’ Nadia replied absently. She was looking around the room, finding her bearings.

‘I feel I should know where we are, but I don’t,’ I said, watching her.

‘Lubmal, on the Steppe. You’re waiting for a woman to bring something for your leg. Then sleep for a while and then wake up in the morning, when it’s light. Tomorrow, ice-cream, okay?’

‘You’re a good girl,’ I said.

‘What about pretty?’ she asked, turning to look at me.

‘That too,’ I said.

And she was. I just wished I could want her as I had wanted her. There were too many moments when I wished she wasn’t there, wasn’t clinging to me and demanding my attention, hoping and believing in me. I was filling her head with ideas that belonged elsewhere and I saw how she took to it, how she wanted to believe in me, as if I were the hero who would save the day and that at the end of the story we’d all live happily ever after. I’d known her two months, desire had fuelled the sex and wit, the conversation. I wondered, what, if anything, was beyond desire. I knew enough to know it was full of sense, but I doubted myself as to whether that was sufficient. There were times with her when all the words were real and other times when the ten years between us seemed insurmountable. She wandered over to the only point of interest in the room, the spavined horse.

‘His legs aren’t right,’ she said.

‘They’ll never make it across the river,’ I added.

‘Will they drown?’ she asked, detachedly.

‘No. The boy will make his own way. He’ll leave the horse behind.’

‘Perhaps someone will come and rescue them?’

‘The vultures,’ I replied, rubbing my eyes and face for want of rest.

At that moment, Tatiana Igorovna returned.

‘Vot nash drook, udatcha!’ she beamed, the transformation striking. Gone, was the miserable sneer and the deep jowled frown, instead, a cartoon clown was greeting us, with a rotten toothed smile and a noticeable cadence in her voice which accentuated the second syllable. She performed a veritable waltz from the door to my chair, spinning on several occasions and insisting as she went that everything would be perfect, everything would be perfect.

‘Fsyo budit preKRASno, gosti, preKRASno,’ she said.

She turned her attention to Nadia who, in turn, translated back to me.

‘Tatiana Igorovitch was a great dancer when she was young,’ Nadia relayed.

She studied at the conservatory in Moscow for a year but her mother fell ill and her father needed her to help on the farm.

‘Moscow was a great city then, not like now. Now it’s full of Kavkaztsis.’

At this point Tatiana Igorovitch coughed up a ball of sputum and spat it into her handkerchief.

‘Kak budit chorni popki po-angliski?’ she asked.

‘How do you say black backsides in English,’ Nadia translated without thought. ‘Black bums? No. Black asses? Black arses?’

I nodded, a smile cracking my dry mouth, and we both turned to Tatiana in unison and voiced the words ‘black arses.’

‘Hmm. Kavkaztsi black arses,’ and she growled again for effect and spat once more into the handkerchief, before wiping the beads of sweat from her furrowed brow.

‘Vot, tak. Di mnya stool tam,’ she said severely, the inner parent coming to the fore and she pointed to the back of the room whilst taking another handkerchief from the pocket of her dressing gown and uncorking the bottle of cloudy white alcohol with her teeth. Nadia hurried for one of the wooden stools and placed it opposite my feet.

‘Vot,’ said Tatiana, positioning her massive sickly frame on the stool and she began pouring the alcohol onto the second handkerchief, but I was quick to grab the tissues from Nadia and suggest I clean the grazes myself. Whilst I rubbed the samagon into my skin, Tatiana produced three shot glasses from her pocket and filled them with the spirit punctuating the process with a firm ‘druzya’. Friends. At this point, she fully exhaled all the air from her ruined lungs and once all the air was gone, she threw back the shot quickly and down. Thus resolved by the clear tenet, I followed suit, like Pavlov’s dog.

Then before the first had fairly flushed there was a second.

‘Zdarovya.’ Health.

Samagon kills inhibition. It is the melter of snow, the bringer of dark truths. There are things that should be hidden which, with it, are revealed. It is a terrible drink in such a black land but it is also a miraculous drink in that it transforms the moon into the sun. It gives heat. It gives breath. The revelation of the spirit is that it accentuates that which truly exists. With it, we are blind to the mundane, to the centuries, to scientific progress. We exist in essence, under its influence. My thoughts ran to food, perhaps a chicken or a goose in the pot. I could tear through the bones of those little

birds then find something soft with which to dance and play. Nadia was still holding a glassful of 'zdarovya' while Tatiana was contemplating 'semya', family, the third toast, from which there can be no escape. The glasses were filled and about to be raised when suddenly there was a bang on the window, followed by a muffled voice. Apparently, Tatiana's trip to the samagon house had not gone un-noticed which wasn't a surprise as the population of Lubmal turned out to be around sixty, orphans mainly, the rest the inheritors of the colhoz collective farm. It transpired that the workers were paid in food coupons due to their tendency to spend their pay on three-day alcohol binges and forget to feed the children. Thus, when hard currency surfaced, those in need were quick to find a way to cure their ills. Gennady, it turned out, was a pleasant old drunk, half blind, with a gift, which was also his downfall. He was the only person in the village who played the accordion and thus he used this talent to satisfy his thirst. Who could ever refuse a musician once the alcohol had begun to flow? On hearing I was English he said how much he liked Sherlock Holmes and said how he had fought the Germans in White Russia but he didn't seem to have the years for the latter to be true, looking not much over fifty, if at all. Tatiana was very firm with him as she put him on a stool next to the horses and suggested he would find a black cat in a black room, such was his propensity to find a free drink.

'I haven't had a drop since Easter' he replied. 'Chetiri myesetsa,' he added. Four months.

And so we drank a toast to 'the family', me to the ashes of mine, Nadia to what was left of hers and Tatiana and Gennady to their private collection of memories, which were sown together under the flag of supposed kind.

After the glass to the family I was completely undone. I felt as if I was physically unravelling before the others, that the rips in my cords were the beginning of a process that would leave me completely strewn out across the room. And what was it about the boy on the horse as I slid into the night? I was handed a large piece of bread covered in white wax, the significance of which was beyond me. Nadia, who hadn't ventured beyond 'droozya' explained that samagon is traditionally drunk with sala, solid white pig fat, the high fat content slowing the adsorption of the alcohol and rendering the drink less toxic.

'So if I eat this wax, it will glue me together inside and I won't lose any pieces,' I asked.

Nadia looked perplexed.

'Just try it, boy. I think you need it,' she replied.

The salty dripping was delicious and the bread tasted like the crust of a fresh ham pie. I began to come back to earth.

'Hotyite cookaroozoo? Yeshte esli hatyite,' Tatiana offered, a giant glob of sala on her upper lip.

'Do you want corn on the cob?' Nadia asked.

'Of course. If they have good corn, we should eat it,' I replied, lost to the flow.

It was at that moment that I remembered the gifts for Tatiana Igorovna and as she brought the corn, I excitedly got out the box and the letter, which I had brought from her cousin in Moscow. Being unfurled somewhat by the drink, she haphazardly opened the letter and began to read. For some reason she paused and looked at me intently, as if something in the letter pertained to me, and that she wanted to verify my identity. Then she quietly slipped

the letter into her pocket without comment and focused her attention on the box.

Much to everyone's delight, it turned out to be an enormous package of Red October chocolates, Moscow's finest, with hundreds of individually wrapped candies inside.

I was just starting on my corn when Tatiana asked us to come through to the other room. She stopped at one of the cupboards and, opening it with a key from her pocket, took out a two-gallon jug with a giant pink rubber glove on top. The glove was tremendously inflated as if it had been blown up with a pump. With this in one hand and the chocolates in the other, she led the procession through to the other room.

Nothing could have prepared me for the row of faces with which we were confronted. One long wooden table ran half the length of the room and the occupants were spread out along it as if it were the last supper. The television was blaring, the point of focus, and the rest of the room, on the left, was taken up with beds.

Whose children are they?' I asked, for some reason giving my question to Nadia.

'Nobody's I think,' she replied, asking Tatiana in Russian for confirmation. After a brief exchange she repeated 'No, nobody's. They're orphans from Moscow.'

'You can't say they're nobody's. It's not right to say that. I...' but I paused, not knowing what else to add. It was only later, with a solid mind, that I saw the truth of it, the truth that nobody claimed them, that nobody gave them a sense of the past, of lineage, or belonging. They turned their hands on Ohotny Riad and breathed glue at Pyatova Goda and elsewhere, spinning in circles and begging cigarettes from passers-by who were only

too glad to oblige. Sergei had called them human litter, ten year olds, provincial escapees, for whom Moscow was a window on the world, a freak show aperitif before the army called to hone their skills. Such history thickens the air; fills the heart and lungs with tar. What does a soul do in such a place? The council of innocence were considering and I pleaded for my case with a smile, glad to be outdone by our host.

‘Konfetki,’ Tatiyana beamed, putting the jug of what turned out to be cherry brashka to one side and taking the lid off the chocolates box to reveal the spangled contents and with one word the room lit up as the children, all boys, erupted into screams of delight and they literally dived over the table to get their handful, letting out gasps like waves which washed over the walls and over all those who were within the walls, a transitory euphoria transcending. I sat back, still hypnotised by the faces before me and continued to eat my corn. Nadia was talking to Gennady out of ear-shot and Tatiana was fetching glasses and water for the brashka. That was when I first saw Alyoshka. Alyoshka. I didn’t really notice him at first except to say he was the youngest child there, the most timid and the most beautiful. For some reason, he wasn’t as emaciated as the others and seemed, as far as the eye is concerned, to be in relatively good health. It was when Tatiana returned with the cups and glasses that I first really looked at him. Being the youngest, he was served first, receiving a glass of kvass which was kept in the corner in a giant barrel, and which he took with an expression of awe, his wide brown eyes glinting with delight. This was inversely related to the oldest boy who looked to be about ten or eleven and who was given a cup of water with a finger of brashka and simply grunted by way of acknowledgement. The adults were served the fermented cherry juice, unadulterated but after samagon, it was almost tasteless. Just a thin aroma of

fruit and alcohol. However, it seemed fitting and was, therefore, enjoyed beyond what perhaps would have been the case, had we been perched in some Moscow cocktail bar. At one end of the table Gennady was beginning to squeeze his accordion, with an enthusiastic Nadia close by whispering I knew not what, but I understood when the old man began to sing and the melody was the same as the melody that Nadia had sung in the afternoon. I recognized some of the words and was taken by the music and the mood as were some of the children, who tried to sing along as best they could. Nadia was sat, hands on lap, back up straight as if the Alexander technique had been one of the discussions on her Oxford listening cassette her plump lips mouthing the syllables one by one. She believed in it I suppose. She had said those words so many times as a child that she believed what the crocodile said and took it as truth.

Meddlinno minuti ooplivayut vdal,
Vstrechi s nimi ti oozhe ne zhdee.

Ee hatya nam proshlovo nemnogo zharl,
Loochshe, koneshno, vperedee.

She had a rare gift for giving herself to one thing at a time and to do so absolutely. Such a talent, not to daydream. My head constantly swam with a thousand trains of thought and the net result was stasis. I looked over to where she stood and considered how at ease she was amongst this odd and unexpected gathering, her childish grin irreproachable, her cupped hands clapping with the grace of a collector who is out catching butterflies without damaging their wings.

There was a pause from the accordion, a shot of samagon, then a build. Old Gennedy knew all the tricks to create dramatic effect and with

four sharp nips from his *garmonica* he began again, this time with added impetus, as if he knew the crowd was warming to his work. Tatiana was on her feet, hitching up the flowers of her paper gown, turning and spinning on her massive ankles and the children began to clap and cheer and suddenly I found myself on my feet with Tatiana and there was Nadia with the boy who had a finger of brashka in his water and how the music spun us on, in half circles and quick little twists, hands on hands, elbow to elbow, as the fingers rolled the notes, then linking arms and skipping loop the loop, round and round, cheering and shrieking and little Alyosha giggling, his lips be-haloed with chocolate and the words slowly crystallizing out of the molasses of the night, as if in defiance, one by one, little blunt stones at first, rough edged and slurred, as if unsure, but as I listened and went on, they became sharper and more clear until by the final chorus I felt I understood every word out of Gena's beatific mouth.

‘Slowly minutes are swimming away...

Don't wait to meet them again...

The way is laid out like a tablecloth that reaches to the sky...

The way, like a tablecloth...

Flat and straight, running to the sky. ..

Driver go quicker, go quicker, let us rush, rush from the past.

Let us rush to new adventures.’

And as the train went quicker, so Gennedy went quicker and wound up the atmosphere like a coil, faster and faster, driver go quicker, round and round to get to the start again, then the driver jumped from the train and the rails disappeared, trackless, until there was nowhere to go, no beginning and no end, only sounds and flesh and hearts, only earth and fire and nothing to do but scream and so the whole room screamed and threw sense and its

senses to the wind to be blown to God knows where and the faces that were drawn in the room, that lived in that room, were scattered like electrons across vast dark fields, across the infinite night of dreams, to paradise seas and beyond to ancestral tombs where they played out their tune in the company of one.

When did it end? When was there nothing but an empty sigh, the smell of sweat, the brashka a prop with which to nullify the exodus? So suddenly the wonderment was displaced by the familiar, gravity once more holding the upper hand, the attraction of giant objects, insuperable.

The television blared.

‘What a place’ I said to Nadia flatly, as Tatiana tried to maintain the mood by handing out more chocolates.

‘Didn’t you *say* “different is *okay*”?’ she whispered melodically.

‘Yes, but I’m not sure what is happening. I think I’m in one of your made up stories.’

‘Well you are’ she answered. ‘But it’s real made up story, that’s all. I’m real girl and these are real people. I’m not sure about you though, or the brashka,’ and she grabbed my arm and face as if to check and nodded in approval, then tasted the brashka and added ‘It can be useful to speak several languages because I can smile with pleasure,’ and she smiled politely in the direction of Tatiana, ‘and, at the same time, I can, in English, explain to you that... how say...yes...it tastes like shit!’

‘What? Shit?’ I asked and she giggled like a little girl.

‘No, no, Nadia. It’s delicious. Multitudinous bacteria are happy here and it’s delicious. I could have a bit more pig fat as well. The dog bites have given me an appetite. It’s true.’

And it was true. I may, to some, have appeared to be being glib, but I was under the influence and the words, which came, were honest ones.

‘How are you, anyway. Isn’t Gennedy a genius. The music...’ and I stuttered, as I took the last bite of my corn. I noticed I was suddenly the focus of attention, the news that I was a foreigner having spread along the supper table and I was glad that Genya began once more to play, to have a point of focus myself, to sit and listen, and to be holding Nadia’s hand as the old boy played away.

We sat like that for a long time before Tatiana spoke.

‘You must be tired,’ she said in Russian. ‘Come. I’ll show you your room. My house is across the yard. Tomorrow, will be a good day for the beach but now you should rest.’

And so to the melancholy sound which encapsulated our thoughts, and escorted by the eyes of orphans, we made our way to our own private quarters wishing all our new friends, several times over, a peaceful night and sweet dreams.

Out in the courtyard, the stench from the earth was overpowering. This wasn’t the most striking feature however. What took me by surprise were the fireflies. Millions of them, indistinguishable from the stars in the sky, as if we had gone up into the night, and were amongst the stars, were witness to an unfathomable chaos, a new cosmos without order of motion which stank to high heaven and rattled and buzzed and whose secretions oozed from all parts. We had only to walk for several seconds, however, to cross the yard and in no time at all we were in the house and being shown the first room on the left. The walls were covered in the familiar whitewash

and there was a single bed in the corner, the same kind of bed as in the orphanage.

‘The water is in the yard and the toilet is there too. If you want some fresh air you might want to open the window.’ Tatiana said, speaking slowly and directly.

‘Do you get up early in the morning,’ I asked.

‘Bivaet,’ she replied. It happens.

‘How Soviet,’ I thought, could not will.’

‘Tak, spakoini notchi’ she added.

‘Spakoini notchi’ we replied.

And with the wish of a peaceful night she left us to our own devices.

My first concern was the stench of fish.

‘What the hell is that smell?’ I asked Nadia.

‘Taranka. I don’t like it very much so we should open the window. It’s very good with beer though,’ she said, and I wondered if I was drunker than I felt.

‘Nadia, all the insects will come in if you open the window,’ I moaned.

‘There’s a screen,’ she replied and with this she quickly flicked the latch open and with the minimum of fuss, slipped off her pants and shoes and jumped beneath the thin cotton sheets.

‘Come on, we can watch sparkle flies if you turn the light off,’ she hastened, her face lighting up with the idea.

‘Fireflies,’ I replied, correcting her. ‘Sparkle flies!’ and I shook my head and laughed. I could listen to her mistakes all day then. Perhaps more than anything, this held sway when I thought of Nadia. Youth, the golden goose, which turns to clay.

‘Did you have a nice day?’ I asked, pausing by the light switch.’

‘Not bad,’ she answered, her accent almost royal in tone.

‘How about you?’

‘It was a dream. There were dogs and insects and the stench of fish and the reek of decomposing god knows what and men stabbing each other on a train and encephalytic children and defecating children and, finally, orphans and, very finally... you.’

‘I’m glad’ she said, her eyes all worn and glazed.

‘The songs and the samagon helped,’ I added, and I swayed from side to side.

‘How about sex?’ she asked, the muscles in her neck tightening, that three letter word still throwing her out of type.

These hours we remember. We laugh at our innocence, the games without tears, the nights wrapped together, mapping out a fate, the scythe of youth cutting through all obstacles, the remnants of ideas left scattered in our wake, the books, the words, all the histories at our disposal to gnaw on and chew and spit back into the face of an unknown foe. So many threads with which to spin meaning, and in the morning, beyond sleep, when our eyes are fresh and clean, we can twist every head with a simple turn of phrase.

‘A better ending, I can’t think,’ and I moved my hand towards the switch.

I imagine it was around that time, the time I turned out the light, that Sergei Sergeivitch returned home to Russian soil. I imagine him kicking and spinning in his mother’s womb, listening to his surroundings through his skin and ears, sensitive to light, to circadian rhythms, above all, I imagine him happy, happy and developing, preparing to see the world with new eyes. It would be another nine weeks before that moment, at hospital number

eight. At first, she thought he was still born, but the doctor took him in hand and gave him a start. Sergei would be saved by science, entering the global consciousness, him along with the other hundred thousand babies born that day. That was the thinking. He was two pounds and one ounce when they weighed him and, though I knew nothing of it at the time, he was my son. He brought with him hope, the hope that collectively, with his peers, through the sheer number of them, the sheer number of brain cells all calculating along the same lines, that no cataclysm would ever undo them. There would be enough Einsteins in his generation, a product of probability, to power the species beyond the boundaries of present belief. All codes would be cracked, all gaps filled, all needs fulfilled, a world of good, so said the maths.

I turned off the light, an unwitting father, a ghost from the dark of the past, a stain on the penthouse window which obliterates the perfection of the view and perhaps, as a consequence, when I look back on those days in the South with Nadia, the final days, before all hell broke loose in the city, I am over colourful. I paint the walls a little starker than they were, the stench a touch more pungent than it was, the horses a little redder than was true. All this to draw contrast to Nadia and the boy, to set them out from the debris of what were my thoughts, to show them in some fantastic light so as to worship them, to convince myself that there was never a more tender time or more affecting time, that there was, in fact, a divine rationale with which we were entwined and to which we were subject. I think of that night in a simple room in the provinces as an epiphany, the fireflies as celestial sparks, the episode which commenced being the first in which I played the part of man. And so I must say that what I remember of the evening was of a dream, incarnate of the way of man, how we succumbed to the flesh, to

pagan lusts, yet were carried beyond chemistry, beyond the room, to an unfolding idea, a consciousness which existed in dark space, in the gaps in the air, unseen, immeasurable, yet bearing down, causal in nature and, above all, a cause to love and be loved.

Thus goes the eulogy for you Nadia, for blessed art thou amongst women, blessed in that we may live beyond the deaths, beyond the sight of dead eyes, the torn open flesh, the gaping wounds and gasps which draw no breath, blessed in that the past is under the snow, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

15

The next day I awoke early. My nose was stuffed up from the dust and the taranka, and I breathed through my mouth whilst contemplating the idea of having been dipped in cod oil and how all the free floating particles of the room, all the dead epithelia of god knows who or what, had, during the night, come to stick to me and envelope me and I was reminded of Sweet, the fright of which had me turn to Nadia and bury my face in her back but even that wasn't enough. I struggled for a long time as different thoughts passed through my mind, passing, as if through gauze, traceless, without cause or want, before eventually, I got to my feet and went out in search of the water pipe.

Once outside I saw, for the first time, the lay of the land, how white the houses were, how plain and ordinary they were, how the husks of sunflower seeds littered the dusty yard, how a vegetable garden was maintained with the blackest earth imaginable, so rich as to colour the air. As I wandered about the place, I saw the flat surrounding country and I

stood on my tip toes and looked south-west hoping to see the sea, but there was nothing other than some yellow crop, the type of which I couldn't make out from where I stood. I then came across Gennedy, laid up against the west wall of the orphanage, hiding from the early morning sunshine, forlornly conversing with a comrade. Upon seeing me, he began to crackle and spit with apparent joy, as if we were long lost friends who, by the fortitude of fate, had been, justly, re-united. He stumbled up and towards me, offering his hand to some invisible object in my vicinity and I was immediately aware that he was drunk, three sheets to the wind. After exchanging pleasantries and making introductions, he grabbed an old guitar, which Vanya, his accomplice, was fiddling with, and suggested that I take the chance to do some business.

‘This one is a good one, soviet, of course, but a good one. It’s possible to sell it for two hundred,’ he said, his Russian, slow and deliberate as if he were sensitive to my linguistic abilities though, more probably, because he was incapable of speaking any quicker.

‘Nailzya,’ I replied, kindly, it’s not allowed, adding in Russian, ‘It’s your guitar. You are the musician.’

‘It’s not mine. It’s his. You could help a poor boy, look at him. His grandfather was a black Cossack you know,’ and he pushed his young partner with a flourish of the hand and let out a voluminous ‘hah’ sound, to which he felt there was nothing to add.

‘It’s true,’ Vanya scowled ‘a great man, a great man.’

‘What did he do?’ I asked, curious to know how Vanya, who looked my own age more or less, fitted into the scheme of things. From his reply I understood that Vanya’s family had grown grapes for wine, fabulous wine according to the offspring, from vines which his family had tended for

decades, and that all of the vines had been destroyed on the orders of Gorbachov during his tenure as party secretary as a measure to try and sober up the region. This didn't go down too well with the locals and Gennedy felt the need to have the last word, which was along the lines of 'that fucking cock sucker burnt the lot.' At that moment Nadia appeared, that beautiful, singular t-shirt of hers still pointing her out, a sobering vision, she shuffled through the sunflower seeds head down, the wisps of her fringe eclipsing her eyes. The boys looked on and changed their tack, Vanya straightening his back and taking his beard in his hand.

'Dobri ootra,' Gennedy hailed, as she approached, good morning, and he nodded and gesticulated, introducing Vanya before she could reply. She stretched her arms in response and fidgeted with her hair, which still looked, like her, immaculate, while she put her impressions in order.

'Ochen priatno,' she replied to Vanya, pleased to meet you, and he kissed her on both cheeks.

It's unnerving to see a man laid bare by fatigue, that particular fatigue when dawn comes between drink and sleep. How he anchors his ideas, unable to disguise his want, unable and unwilling. Given the fantasy in his mind, there would have been but the two of them and he would have ripped that top of hers to shreds. And she knew it. She played the part of virgin to her cost. Despite this, the three of them smiled when she spoke and the words seemed to flow easily beyond salutations into something about the outlying region and I understood little of what was said, taking the first pause they made as an opportunity to get back to business.

'They want to sell it,' I said, taking the guitar from Gennedy. 'What do you think?'

‘I can’t play,’ she said in English, folding her arms, half an eye on the instrument and half on Vanya who, although exhausted, continued to push, the gist of which concerned the orphanage, which was a school, and something about a carousel, which belonged to the school. Nadia turned back to me, to satisfy me, her words like spirit, which warms the ears.

‘Kerouac? Buy the guitar. Moan for man. Marx? Don’t buy it, exploiting the exploitable. Buddah? It doesn’t matter. Decay is inherent of all component things.’

It was a nervous little volley of words and she giggled at the end, evidently pleased with herself. The drunks were momentarily at a loss and seeing this she turned to satisfy them, translating what she had said into Russian substituting Keroauc with Dovlatov, Vanya continuing to twist his beard as she spoke.

‘Do you want a guitar?’ I interrupted.

‘No. I can’t play?’ she replied in Russian, as if the very idea was absurd.

‘Perhaps we could buy it for the orphanage?’ I suggested, after a pause, in which they continued to speak.

‘Why not,’ was her answer, ‘why not!’ her disinterest an annoyance.

‘Nichevo,’ I replied sharply, before adding ‘let’s take it – for the orphanage,’ and I raised my eyebrows to Nadia, as a truce and I took out my wallet from my pocket.

As I was handing over the money to Vanya, who continued to twist his beard and smile, Tatiana Igorovna appeared out of the upper window across the yard and began to curse and hurl abuse. This Vanya, it turned out, was the grandson, and she wasn’t too pleased to see him in such a state at eight in the morning. I, lazily, pointed my eyes skyward and back again,

fascinated by the sounds and rhythms of the shouting match until finally the window was slammed shut. I turned to the drunks but they were off to bed, arm in arm, up the path, and so I found myself alone with Nadia and a guitar, still searching for the water pipe.

Tatiana then appeared in the courtyard, wearing the same gown as the night before and greeting us with a hacking fit interrupted with salutations. She led us to the shower and the kitchen area, which was an outside wood burning stove, and started the business of cooking kasha, a kind of porridge.

‘You’ll go to the beach today,’ she asked, as she poured the flakes into a giant cauldron.

‘Of course, we’d love to,’ I replied, looking to Nadia for assurance regarding my Russian.

‘It’s a three kilometre walk. Take one of the boys with you for directions. Alyoshka Biziminiya,’ she added and we all agreed it was an excellent idea.

‘You can buy fish and we will have it for supper,’ she continued, after which she paused to add milk to the flakes.’

‘But you mustn’t give money to Vanya. Money is nothing but trouble here and we can’t have trouble,’ and she lit the gas and was lost to her business, her brow all furrowed, seemingly given to some pre-occupation that was of more importance.

I threw the water on my face then stripped to the waist and washed my arms and chest, catching sight of the dog, a black mangy thing, without breeding, coming round the corner with a potato in its mouth. When we were finished, we were given a mug of black tea each.

‘How is Svetlana Yevgenyevna?’ Tatiana asked, her eyes fixed on the kasha.

‘She’s very well,’ I answered.

‘That’s good,’ she replied blankly. ‘I must visit,’ then she coughed weakly, more gesture than reflex. ‘She worries about my health. This is no place for the old. But Moscow, well... Moscow is something.’

‘A place to live,’ I suggested without meaning to be ironic, simply regurgitating words I’d heard a few days earlier.

‘Yes,’ she said, and in the silence that followed I thought of all the old women I’d seen in the city, out collecting beer bottles and shuffling along in the freezing rain with a piece of bread in one hand and a bit of doctorskaya sausage meat in the other, the husbands already cold in the ground as the days crawled by, from winter to winter.

She continued to stir the kasha adding more milk and some sugar.

‘It won’t be long now,’ she said, speaking, I presumed about the kasha, not the visit.

‘Are you responsible for the orphanage?’ Nadia asked, holding the tea to her lips.

‘Ha, certainly not. Vanya is the care-taker but as you have seen, if left to him, the children would have brashka for breakfast and nothing for lunch. I, see it as my responsibility that the children have a good holiday then get back to Moscow, healthy and in one piece. They will be Sveta’s responsibility then,’ and she raised her head to the two of us and added proudly, ‘she will be the new director at orphanage no.17 you know.’

Nadia translated and I told Tatiana, politely, that I thought it was great news and that Svetlana had mentioned something about it in Moscow.

‘Yes,’ Tatiana replied nodding her head, ‘it is important that we don’t waste time now. The children are getting older and it becomes more and more difficult once they get to this age.’

It was as if she were reminding herself.

The dog came running over and dropped the potato at Nadia's feet, then began to bark at her, then snarl, then pant and wag its tail and then bark again.

'Durak,' Tatiana screamed venomously, taking the metal ladle from the kasha and cracking the mutt across the nose. 'Oohadi ot sooda,' get away from here, and the dog picked up his potato and ran off behind the house. Then she took a breath and changed tack.

'How is your leg today?' she asked, though half-heartedly and still seemingly pre-occupied and we all looked at the marks on my thigh, which were barely anything at all.

'The samagon, not bad,' I nodded in approval.

'The sea will help,' and she explained, with the help of Nadia, how the Azov Sea was half salt water from the Black Sea and half fresh water from the River Don and how it had special curative properties and that we should take a picnic and bathe there and that she would give us sunflower seeds and tomatoes and corn and that we could buy bread and wine and cheese in the shop which was nearby and would open if we banged loud enough on the door. It was strange to think that Tatiana's life was about to be turned upside down, that within a couple of months she would have more money in her hand than she had earned in the previous twenty years and stranger still, looking back, to think that she was aware of the possibility, that she was in the midst of a great reversal of fortune and that all the un-doings which she had simply brushed aside in the past, were now playing on her mind, consuming her thoughts. She was living nine lives as she stirred that pot, be-jewelled and be-gowned, boxed seats at the Bolshoi, strolls in Alexandrovski Gardens, supper at Café Pushkin with a friend. Her health

would return, that was certain, and perhaps the chest specialist would take a shine to her, him being the sensitive type in need of a good strong woman to take care of him. There was so much to see and do, so much to begin and what better place to begin than in the capital.

‘The porridge is ready,’ she said, wiping her face on her sleeve. ‘Why don’t you sit at the tables behind the house?’ and without another word she disappeared with her thoughts into the orphanage.

It felt as if something was left unsaid, that there was a root to the conversation but that it never grew, that our situation and circumstances were purposeful but ill defined. Does anything just happen? Perhaps unconsciously we were aware of more than we cared to consider but we didn’t take stock and think about what we were actually doing, and why we were doing it, we just followed the prompts, cause and effect.

‘Come on, Nadia, I’m taking you for breakfast,’ I said, pointing to the kasha and tea.

‘Super,’ she replied, disconcertedly, her deflated air compounded by her Sloane Ranger accent, her poverty the true catalyst of her creed.

‘Let’s not spend the week here. Let’s go to Rostov tomorrow. What about Sochi? It’s only twelve hours on the train.’

I saw her point of course, that this wasn’t the perfect holiday retreat but I felt there was something to be had there, that it was worth becoming more accustomed to the place, to become a little darker and richer, like the soil.

‘Let’s have a look around today, go to the water and see and then talk about it this evening,’ but we never did have that conversation. We sat in the sun with our breakfast, Nadia with her Vonnegut and me with a guitar that I couldn’t play and said nothing about anything. I found a big easy

chair to settle into and rested for an hour, the warmth of the day like a swaddling cloth in which I was safely blanketed, the wind gently caressing my face, my iniquities seemingly vanquished to oblivion by half sleep, besotted by visions as pure as snow, eyelids like rich velvet curtains drawn on the horrors which played out only for me. How the past creeps when we close our eyes, how it spreads and smothers and kills our wings so that when we wake we can barely walk, how it intoxicates us, fuels our malevolence, separates us from spirit and ash, a justification, a summation, a definition which is only known to one and is poison to the soul. I was drunk on dreams with worn out seams, at the end of three decades, too old for a casual glance at life, yet casually abandoned to a hero-less fate. 'I want I get' was a tree in salt, such was my idealism. Yet such ideals should be kept in a glass box lest the breeze do them harm. All of the myriad ideas which had sustained me one by one, and without which I was at a loss, were about to come crashing down around my feet and the very thing I sought above all was to be granted me, though not as I had imagined it would be. How singular is one's sight of the Universe and how hopeless if one cannot share it. These and a thousand other fragments flitted through my mind as the sun crawled up the ladder of the hours and misery was quelled by the promise of the sea. I was midstream, neither here nor there, discontent with comfort but without the will to change, to be influenced, to destroy. What can one make of one's age, sweeping up the dust of experience and marking crude symbols where it lies? I had no idea, thus I waited to be pushed.

In the late morning, after the children had risen and eaten, we went, with Alyoshka, to the beach. There were several moments that day that I would like to describe, the first being the very first moments when he came over to our table and shook me by the arm to wake me. I casually opened my eyes, having sensed someone was approaching and having peered through the slits of my eyelids and caught sight of a little boy in a dirty white vest and ragged green shorts, I smiled and, without thinking, said hello to him in English. When he didn't reply I looked to Nadia for support and she looked at Alyoshka, who stared, fixedly, into my arm.

It was as if we were all uncertain of our place, that there were roles to assume that we had never played before and we were all unsure how to begin. For how does one address a child who belongs with his mother without asking him the very thing 'and where is your mother?'

'Hello,' I said, twisting my neck so as to see the corners of his eyes and he lifted his head in response

'Papa likes Alyoshka,' he said and he grabbed my leg, keeping his eyes down, the words half question, half statement.

'I don't know,' I replied, 'does Alyoshka like Papa?'

'Papa likes Alyoshka,' he repeated with the same intonation and I understood we had exhausted the possibilities of my native language.

'How old are you?' I asked him, in Russian, lifting him away from me so as to see him.

'Five' he said, eyes to the ground, rubbing his feet in the dirt.

'Five! You look at least six' I replied, playing surprise and pausing for effect. 'What do you like?'

He shrugged, then muttered ‘Leopold,’ and puzzled, I turned once more to Nadia, who was watching us.

‘Leopold the cat?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he nodded.

‘I like Leopold too. What do you have in the bag?’ and without speaking he ran over to Nadia, and hugged her arm, handing her a carrier bag in which there were tomatoes and corn and sunflower seeds.

‘Are you going to show us how to get to the beach?’ Nadia asked and he nodded without raising his head. And so, after making the necessary preparations, the three of us set off for the Sea of Azov.

On the way I tried to ask him if he preferred Spartak or Lokomotiv, did he like Moscow, what was his favourite food, but the conversation always ended in shrugs of apparent indifference, *ne znayu, ne znayu*, happy to hold our hands without looking up. Then, we entered a field absolutely full of sunflowers, this being what I had seen from the house and I insisted that we stop to take photographs. How attracted I was to the scene and to the faces and the look of things, and perhaps because of the place or perhaps because of Nadia or the camera or who knows what or why, Alyoshka broke into a broad smile and it seemed as if we had passed our first test together, this being cemented by an impromptu game of hide and seek amongst the flowers, which were actually taller than Alyoshka and into which he could completely disappear. It was while looking for him that we came out of the sunflower patch and into the view of the sea. There was a cluster of run down houses near the shore and upon closer inspection, with Alyoshka in tow, we found a stall and a *barbushka* selling fruits and vegetables and plastic toys and we decided it would be a good idea to buy the yellow bucket and spade that she had, as well as some Baikal mineral water and biscuits.

There may have been hundreds of people there, on the front, that day, but I don't remember seeing any of them. My overall impression of the place was of a ghost town, a coast ghost town, all the crowds conspicuous in their absence, the carousel locked up and wrapped in mesh, the cardboard cut out figures with holes for heads, abandoned to would be clowns and bears and I thought that perhaps there had been a freak wave which had come without warning and swept them all up and away. I seem to remember suggesting as much to Nadia. Finally, within earshot of the Azov, what I remember is not the roar and foam that I had expected but instead a mere whisper of a wish... wish... wish... the lips of the shallow curling waves ceaselessly rolling, the waves tumbling and cascading, one upon another as they folded upon each other and spilled up on the shore, filling the air with black sea spritz that lit up in the late morning sun.

Upon the beach, we assumed our roles, and took to making sandcastle plans. There was an abundance of shells lying around so we began to gather a pile which we could use to decorate our fortress, the most interesting of which were cone-shaped limpets, which we decided should go atop of each of the four turrets. There would be an x-shaped coat of arms on the tower, which would stand at the centre of the castle and the whole construction would be protected by a moat. Isn't it the Greeks who say 'children are happiest when playing with the earth?'

'You're the king of the castle and we're the dirty rascals,' I sang to Alyoshka, explaining he was 'karol' and we were the baddies and he liked the idea so much that he learnt the rhyme and sang as we built. It seems now that a new age was being constructed or does hindsight blind the actual. Didn't I secretly cling to the truth that we were day trippers, without a tie. Wasn't Nadia just a fling thing and the boy something warm and sweet to

touch which at the end of the day could be put back with all the other toys. They weren't my blood. They were as replaceable as the shoes on my feet. Had chance brought forth another two wouldn't everything have felt the same? And isn't 'what we feel' the summation of a Godless world. Man lives page by page, a slave to his nature. He cannot see his past, nor what lays ahead, only the surroundings in which he is immersed. And so when I went with the boy to swim, I drew pleasure in that act, just as he drew pleasure and because the sea was good and warm. At that time there were no other thoughts in my head except to take what was good and to be had. I practiced my breast-stroke, the water being so shallow that you could go a long way and still feel your feet on the bottom. Nadia splashed and fumbled up to her knees, the water forming bead-like droplets on her flawless sun-oiled skin and Alyoshka dived down beneath my legs and climbed on my shoulders and began to get so excited that I promised him ice-cream from the stall we had passed on our coming if he could keep silent for two minutes. And he did. There was nothing but the soundings of the sea, the hissing whishes of breaking waves, the lap of diaphanous surf on the shore. Quietus.

We left the sea in giant steps and spent five minutes or so drying off and finishing our castle, and seeing three boys from the orphanage, asked them to watch our belongings. I thought it was a good time to present the guitar which they seemed very pleased about and ran about shouting and cheering and leaving me with a sense of having made the day a little softer, all for the sake of a couple of dollars.

'I want plumbir with jam,' said Nadia, having a clear idea, as all Russians do, about which brand of ice-cream is the best.

‘And what about you, Alyoshka?’ I asked in English, kakoy hochish, which type? Chocolate, vanilla, strawberry?’

‘Err, shocaladni,’ he said. ‘Eta sami loocha,’ it’s the best.

I took a long gulp of the Baikal which Nadia had placed in the sea to keep cool and which is similar to dandelion and burdock in that it is black and fizzy and delicious.

‘Da, chocolate sami loocha’ I replied.

‘You know,’ said Nadia, this is the fourth time I’ve been to the sea.

‘Fourth time ever?’ I asked

‘Mmm’ she nodded. ‘I really like it. I’d like to live by the sea. Is the sea in England like this?’ and I thought of the channel in the winter, battering against the rocks and cliffs off the Cornwall coast, my village a coast ghost town, the drowning crowds strolling along the front with their ninety nines and fish and chips, the air all cold and wet and the chips greasy and hot and how my stomach turned at the ordinariness of it all, that I craved it, and wanted it but just couldn’t face it.

‘No. It’s different,’ I replied.

‘But you said different is okay,’ and she laughed out loud and took a guzzle of Baikal and did another dance and I understood why she was so happy, that really she was having the time of her life.

She turned to Alyoshka, who was puzzled by our speaking English, and asked when he was last at the beach.

‘Fchera,’ he said, yesterday, adding that the first time had been the week before.

‘A shto ti doomish?’ And what do you think?

‘Normalna,’ he said raising his eyebrows, it’s okay, adding in English ‘Papa likes Alyoshka,’ the intonation the same as before.

We were approaching the ice-cream stall.

‘I want the same as you. Here is a hundred roubles. Buy Alyoshka what he wants,’ and I went to sit on the sea wall.

The sun shone, apparent, and shimmered on the surfaces, on the sea and the sand, on the leaves of the trees and on the buildings and roads and the people on the roads, and left nothing unseen, such was its aspect at the top of the sky and I thought about them and how it could and might be and about their faces and their skin and about nothing at all of any importance.

When they arrived back with the ice-creams, we began to walk. We went for about an hour along the front coming across a gang of fishermen from whom we bought perch and anchovies and who let Alyoshka stand on the boat and hold the wheel and we talked about Turkish pirates and the Romans and the Greeks who had all sailed and built settlements here long before the Cossacks came on their horses and then we talked about Russia and I saw how Nadia played without pathos, that she wasn't proud of the Soviets as were so many I knew, that all the failures which left the older generations hardened and bitter yet fiercely aligned to their history, all this had merely passed her by and left her dispassionate to her birthright, too touched by the crime and punishment and too bright not to destroy her father's daughter.

The sea whished, the sun beat on. It was time to head back to the sandcastle and have lunch. On the way we came across a shelkovitsa tree. All of the lower branches had been picked clean of their fruit, which is a kind of black cherry, but by putting Alyoshka on my shoulders he was able to gather several handfuls which he handed down to Nadia who washed them with a little mineral water and then shared them out for us to eat. By the time we climbed the sea wall onto the beach where we had given the

boys the guitar, we had nothing but a bag of fish and purple tongues as proof of our time away. There was, however, no sign of our blankets and food, and the castle, had been trampled and ruined. We eventually found our belongings up by the sea wall, everything being as we had left it and we settled down to eat and speak, the business of the sandcastle quickly forgotten.

Alyoshka went off to play by the water and I was left alone with Nadia. How ordinary it all was. How plain. Certainly nothing to write about and yet as time moved away from that moment the elements took on an imagery of their own. The sea rolled and pulled quintessentially, the sky was true blue, the breeze moved rhythmically as if the earth was breathing and Nadia sat in the midst of things, man, the thinker. I saw how she didn't care for the boy and that she wasn't a breeder, wasn't comfortable with sex or her sexuality. Didn't the happiest people I know throw their arms open to strangers and let sex happen around them as loose change happens around beggars. That such happiness is a façade, was the retort of the brains, the most miserable people I knew. It is a curse to consider, amongst other things, the stars, it is a blessing to let them be, but once you raise your eyes to them they will never disappear. Only things can displace them from your view. Sex, money, cars, jobs. It is the consolation that kills. The comparative. Perhaps I had killed Nadia that night at the Hotel Maskva. I had clouded her vision with flesh and breath. She was man, the thinker, alone with her universe, content of one vision, the future to my past. Or was it the hypnotic whisperings of her mother that bound her to me, that brought her down into my bed, to offer herself as my wife, to love, to honour and obey. The power of words. We scratched at the sand with half a heart while the boy ran about with his bucket, king of a newly built castle, happy to be

playing with the earth, oblivious for a while to the scabs on his knees and to all that which lay up above.

It was after the tide had turned and took Alyoshka's second castle away with it and after we had had our fill of sand and sea and decided to return to the house that my mobile phone rang. We hadn't been able to get a signal since we had arrived in the south so the signal came as a pleasant surprise. Then I saw the name of Olga on the screen. I hadn't heard from her since the night at the café and hesitated before taking the call, uncomfortable about talking to her in the presence of Nadia but the phone was ringing and what could I do but answer it, Alyoshka being as fascinated, as I was unnerved. I pressed answer, put the phone to my ear and said hello but there was silence from the other end, as if they were listening, as if Olga was listening. I said hello a couple of more times but there was nothing so I ended the call.

'Wrong number,' I said, showing the phone to Alyoshka and spending the next half hour thinking of Olga and imagining being asked why I was in Moscow and answering that I came to find Olga, to save her from her fat pig of a husband, to save her from compromise, to save her for me.

We continued to walk and came to a swamp. The number of people began to steadily increase until finally we came to another beach adjacent to the swamp and saw that it was covered with people. Dozens of men, women and children in bathing costumes and without, were rubbing themselves in the swamp mud, literally covering themselves and standing around to bake in the hot sun. When they were dry they were returning to the beach to join the hundreds of others, barely room to walk between them, a mass of clay and bones, laid out in the heat. A row of vendors had set up to cater to their needs and the whole area buzzed as violently as the trees.

'Civilisation,' said Nadia.

‘So let’s be civilised,’ I said.

It is a wonderful sensation to put wet mud on hot skin, Alyoshka stripping completely, but we were in no position to tell him otherwise, and after a good half hour at which point the mud had completely dried and cracked, we went, one more time, into the sea, weaving our way through hands and legs, step by step through a lexicon of flesh, the boy trying to preserve a cupped handful of sand but unable to stop it from finding its way through his fingers. On another day I would have taken it as a sign but there is something in the nature of heat that glues the mind for there on the beach all questions seemed absurd. Man in his milieu is a happy thing. It wasn’t until he found himself in a cold dark cave that the reasoning began. What am I doing here? What for? In the womb of our ancestors there is no need for abstract thought for we belong. Sand is sand, not a metaphor. Only in ice do we need to measure, extrapolate and reason. Nature betrays us so we apply new rules and laws. Man replaces God and figures the world in code. Guanine, thymine, adenosine and cytosine, or further to up, down, top, bottom, strange, charm quarks or 1.618 or 3.142 or spirals or hexagons or primes. Something, anything, for the long cold journey into the night, and no-one and nothing the better for it. Sand is sand and that is all, granular, ubiquitous, draining and re-filling, encompassed by the wear of time and rounded by time invariable, as definite as the waves which touch our feet, which wash the earth from our skin, which overwhelm us in magnitude and scale and find us on our backs, eyes closed, the tide breaking again and again and again.

A cloud passed before the sun and with it Nadia came up to the water’s edge where I lay and put her hands on my temples.

‘Let’s go billy oh,’ she said, cackling like a witch and I began to realise she

was half savant- half idiot, the mother in one ear, God in the other, and never a clue as to which would play, such is youth.

‘Come, come boy, buy me ice-cream, and one for him. What kind of father are you,’ she asked. I got up and began to walk to our belongings, throwing a hard stare at all the onlookers, whose attention I despised, though why I despised them, and why we were an attraction I wasn’t sure.

‘You know there are showers for mud-bathers,’ said a rather sour looking barbushka with a huge gut.

‘Neouzveli’ I replied. ‘Really!’ and I was glad to have Nadia and Alyoshka as protection, feeling that I didn’t have to justify myself in their company. We dried off and dressed and picked our way through the crowd and soon, after buying more supplies for the evening, found ourselves alone again on a path that led up to the sunflowers.

Back at the house an old woman was rocking to and fro in the easy chair, the shadow on the south wall barely visible in the east.

‘Come here,’ she shouted, her Russian, the growl of a peasant. ‘You!’ and Nadia and myself turned and took steps in her direction, the boy scurrying off to find the other boys.

‘No room for babies, only real girls. You. I’m talking to you.’

But she wasn’t, Nadia translating nevertheless and making introductions.

If you don’t want the militsia, do as I say. Are you listening girl.’

‘Yes, I’m listening,’ Nadia replied.

‘Good. And you can’t tell anyone about it. They put gossips in the gas showers. Do you know that. Nobody likes a gossip.’

We were at a loss for words, but she didn't seem to mind, and she puffed on her pipe and adjusted her sombrero, the subsequent mumblings inaudible to all but herself.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' I asked, thinking common courtesy might prevail as often it does, 'or some Baikal,' but she was gone, her eyes out to the fields, glazed with age, endlessly rocking to and fro.

'I'm going to put the fish somewhere cool. Where is Tatiana?' I asked, but neither the mother nor Nadia replied and before I could set off somewhere the dog came over and took our attention, licking my hand and trying to put his nose in the bag of fish.

'Can you keep a secret girl,' the woman asked.

'I don't know,' replied Nadia.

'Come with me and I'll show you where to hide,' and she began to laugh and continued to laugh and turning her attention back to the horizon we took the cue to turn and walk away.

Inside the house we found Tatiana, struggling with an iron and a dressing gown, which from what I could see, was the same as the one she was wearing.

'Blin,' she cursed, unhappy with the job she was making. She looked up and away again, seeing us hovering by the doorway. From what we saw it was obviously the living room, with pictures and ornaments above a huge open fireplace and a table with a fruit bowl filled with apricots and a whole wall given over to fitted cupboards where there were books and plates and all manner of things that people come by and keep, most notable being a portrait of Stalin.

'Kak dyla?' Tatiana asked, how are you, and continued to focus on the ironing. 'Were you satisfied by the beach?'

‘Very much so,’ we replied politely.

‘We bought fish for dinner,’ Nadia said, and I held up the bulging bag of perch. ‘And some other things.’

‘Good. And the boy?’

‘Fine. He’s playing football with the others.’

‘Good, good,’ and she put the iron down as though she were finished with it.

‘I spoke to Svetlana this morning. She sends her best wishes to you both. It seems I am to pay you a little visit in Moscow soon. For health reasons,’ and she coughed a little cough by way of emphasis and looked down at the iron and I saw the daughter’s mother in that glazed expression and how they were both, together, tied to another time and place.

‘Yes. When the boys go back, we’ll go with them on the train. So...’ and then, after a moment, added ‘perhaps we can all eat together this evening,’ and we agreed that it was a fine idea and she took the fish from us and went towards the front door and I took the conclusion as an opportunity to get away and to go and watch some football, knowing Nadia was after a quiet place to finish her book. Outside, however, it seemed that the match had come to us for all the boys were gathered at the far end of the yard, there being some obvious commotion. We went over to see what it was and saw Alyoshka on the floor being kicked. There was blood around his mouth and he was crying out for the boy to stop but it didn’t seem to pacify the other boy, a gangly blond with bulging joints, who looked about ten and who looked intent to kick him a good while yet. Tatiana’s booming scream parted the wall of onlookers and her massive hands wrapped round the boy’s neck but he was so enraged that he managed to break free and grabbed the guitar which was lying nearby and began to lash out with it at all who came

near. Tatiana continued to scream at him and so he lashed out, venomously, at her and forced her to back off. I felt I should act but before I could move he took the guitar and smashed it several times on the hard dirt floor, the boy having what looked like a fit, the final blows leaving nothing of the instrument but the neck with a vicious looking shard of wood attached. This changed the game and instead of brute force, Tatiana tried to reason with him, but to no avail. He put his foot on Alyoshka's head and I saw what he was going to do but was unable to do anything about it, sensing that to move would only act as a trigger. Regardless, he raised his hands and brought them down full force towards Alyoshka's neck, and we all looked on, to see what fate would bring. I've thought since that it is natural to kill that which kills us, that it is merely an act of self-defence. And as there was nobody to defend these boys, they were given, by nature, to defend themselves as how and best they saw fit. The moment froze, seconds like centuries, time for a species to die, the air to disappear, nothing left but Barbushka's shadow, rocking to and fro, back and forth, the crickets buzzing, '*can you keep a secret,*' all this came to pass before the blade came down on Alyoshka's neck and his neck made a twist and the blade hit the bone. Nothing but a dot of blood was drawn before the boy with bulging joints was engulfed by the others and Alyoshka was able to get to his feet and be comforted by Tatiana and Nadia. They were wiping the blood from his lips when Vanya appeared, looking as if he had just left his bed, and carrying in his hand the very bed sheet with a knot in it. He was raging at the uproar and after several seconds of his mother's barraging, enough to hear the facts, he swivelled the sheet in his hand and took the blond boy by the ear, lifting him up before he threw him to the ground. The whole ugliness was laid out there and then. He dragged the boy's shirt off and began to belt his back, the first lash turning

the boy's temper to tears. After he had whipped him eight or nine times I walked away and headed back alone to the beach, passing as I went, the old one in the chair who asked me if I needed a place to hide.

Beyond the houses, the day was as quiet as a ghost. I headed along a barren path through steppe coming again to the sunflowers whose colours blazed in the afternoon light, the buzz of the crickets unheard, the mosquitoes on the last watch before circadian rhythms would urge them fly for fresh meat. Only I moved, the rest lay in waiting, even the birds seeming tired, the sky as empty as it was unfathomable. The beating had brought back memories of my first father, who was always quick with the stick. I didn't remember the details any more, only the feeling, the emptiness inside. Perhaps that's why I so embraced the second father, physically throwing myself on him and warming to his gentle touch of love, so much better for a boy than a belt. Mother though, had her own itinerary. It was never well between her and any of them, she always being so removed from everyone and thing and never a hint as to why. How often she went once around the clock without a word, her head in her books, her saving grace for suitability, the mansion held up as dowry. I see so much now that I didn't see then. Motives for love and sex and the two confused, the futile spurt held up as a pariah, the insecurities, the histories held but unsaid, don't speak, don't act, just sit and listen and read and die. I despised her. She failed me more than the rest put together. I remember how we sat at table, the words as predictable as the chimes from the hall. I was seven when my father left with my brother. One day he was drunk on the front steps, the next he was packed up and off in the car. Mother fell to pieces, disappeared for weeks and I went to live with my aunty in Yorkshire for a spell. Within a year however, the second one was well installed, a practical man who would

apparently do me good. Well at least he didn't belt me. I remember telling Olga about those times during one particular moment of intimacy. Her response was to laugh and recite Mrashak's translation of Humpty Dumpty, it taking on a new meaning, as childish rhymes have a tendency to. 'All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Leo together again,' she whispered after fucking a second time. 'How true,' I thought, as I made the final stretch down to the beach again, bent on the endeavour of putting all the pieces in one place. I sat up on the sea wall and started with the sun's predictable descent, the certainty of which was a first step forward.

Part Two

1

There is a rationale that anything put together, must, by its composite nature, experience change. One may conclude that the building blocks of our universe are identifiable by their inability to change, what we may consider a timeless physicality in which there is certainty and predictability but which cannot be measured integrally because there exists no yardstick with which to draw comparison. Thus, the only proof of the fundamental is by deduction, just as the only proof of God is through faith. As we approach this state of certainty and reveal the patterns, which hold our world together, so we approach our impenetrable God. Where we stop, God begins, and continues unchanging to infinity, just as where God stops, we begin, infinitely bound to change and inconsistency.

These were my thoughts as I walked down Bolshaya Nikitskaya on an infinitely gorgeous late August afternoon, as well as thoughts of lunch at the

vegetarian restaurant on Kuznetsky Mosst, thoughts of words with the waitress whom I knew would be serving there, thoughts of aperitifs, thoughts of tickets for the Kremlin Palace, thoughts of sex in toilets or the park or in her bed. This, compounded by the smell of burning, the pavement burning my heels, the peat still burning in the suburbs, the whole city choking and gasping for breath, abortions and miracles in the Moscovski Komsomolits News and everything so pretty and beautiful, the golden dome of Kropotkinskaya on fire for Jesus, and Lenin in his tomb, left hand open, right hand clenched.

As it happened, however, I never got to the restaurant to flirt with the waitress, instead leaving the old TASS news building and walking towards the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, only to see Bernard Sweet across the way. I had finished for the day, though it was barely three o' clock, and I felt as free as a bird as I left the offices where I'd been proof reading, picking up a bottle of Miller draft beer as was the fashion at that time and heading off for a look down Nikitskaya to Aleksandrovsky Gardens and beyond. The first thing I noticed was how well he moved, chin up, shoulders back, chest to the front. I could see there was something of the dandy about him, as if he had found his grail early in life and had spent his time merely accentuating that to which he was born, his doubtless swagger an eccentricity, an extravagance, which only a life of luxury could afford. Perhaps he'd been an officer in his youth, a sailor no doubt, intent on his passage, and the rites there within, the law coming afterwards, like second nature to his kind, aware that you must know well the rules in order to bend them, and know better the people whose pens ruled the lines.

I hadn't intended to follow him at first, it just so happening that we were going the same way at the same time but as I didn't have anything

particular to say to him, I made no concrete effort to bring myself to his attention.

‘Let him go his way and I, mine,’ I thought, but after a short time, perhaps a couple of blocks, I began to match my pace to his, conscious of keeping him in my sights, slotting in behind him, the two of us, unknown to him, moving down the boulevard in tandem, he on the right of it and I on the left. I was interested where a man like him went in Moscow, Moscow with its ten million doors, a city I felt I knew by heart, though I’d barely passed through a hundred of them. We continued, down, past the Helikon Opera, where three nights earlier I’d spent the evening with Nadia, in love and enchanted, in the company of Pushkin and Onegin. There had been a five minute standing ovation at the end, the mood of the piece, beguiling, those three hours in themselves reason enough to walk from Piccadilly to Nikitskaya, Nadia asking me afterwards, if I’d understood.

‘Yes, yes dear, let’s fly to Petersburg tonight,’ I had replied, but instead we had gone dancing and drinking, obliterating all trace of the piece.

‘Perhaps Sweet knew something of Onegin,’ I thought to myself, though pageantry had seemed more his cup of tea than prose. We continued down the street for a couple of hundred yards until the Tchaikovski conservatory, where he turned right and took the main hall entrance. It happened to be one of the hundred doors I was familiar with and I knew he was inside making ticket enquiries. I waited on the street opposite, sipping at my beer, and in less than five minutes he re-appeared, turning right again and continuing down towards the Kremlin. From there he took the next two rights and crossed onto the left side of Malaya Nikitskaya, a small quiet back street, which was run down and crumbling away in parts, the general air being far removed from the classicism that crowded all around. It was into

one of these old decaying buildings that Sweet suddenly disappeared, turning through an archway that led into a courtyard from where there were several points of entry into different parts of the building. I managed, however, to catch sight of him as he entered through one of them, and after he had gone in, went up to read the sign. It said 'Komputerni Klub Bunker,' an internet café, but why would you house an internet café in such squalor. It wasn't that I was so desperately interested in Sweet's affairs but from a business point of view, the choice of location seemed bizarre. Half the windows in the building were missing, the house looking more like a squat for vagrants than an information technology centre. I took my wallet out and found the card he'd given me.

'It's a strange place to check your e-mail, Bernard,' I said to myself, cynically looking around the yard, and decided, after a moment's pause, to go in and check my own e-mail too.

'I saw you on the street Bernard, thought I'd say hello,' I thought to myself.

I still had half a bottle of beer and not wanting to waste it, drank it in several quick gulps. Then I entered.

Inside there was a young fellow, sitting behind a desk and there were five or six computers, all available for use, except for one occupied by two youths who appeared to be using it for gaming. For some reason, they looked up at me as I descended down several steps towards them and for a moment we all looked at each other, my conclusion being one student, two street kids, an adolescent boy and an adolescent girl. The puzzle was that Sweet wasn't there. In the room there was only one other door, at the back by where the boy and girl were sitting. If Sweet had been here, he had used that door.

Before I could excuse myself and go out the way I'd come in, my first instinct, the student was offering me a chair, so I sat down at the nearest machine and began browsing the pages the previous customers had chosen, a habit I had picked up that was often very amusing. There was nothing of interest here though, only embassies and visa advice, hotmail, google and yahoo. After five minutes or so the student got up and went towards the back door, giving me a long steady look as he went, before casually looking away and leaving the room. I did my best to see beyond the door for the fraction it was open and this was noted by the boy and girl who were no longer involved in their game but were looking at me and sniggering amongst themselves. I asked them what was so funny and the boy, a chubby skinhead of eleven or twelve, told me to go to hell, while the girl, whose face was a blotch of brown freckles, got up and followed the student through the door, shaking her head as she went.

The skinhead, whom I was left with, then began to roll off the expletives, not to me, but to a point above my head and looking up I realised we were being monitored by closed circuit television.

'Give me fucking hundred bucks,' he yelled at the camera, then turning to me to ask, without emotion, if I wouldn't have a spare cigarette.

'Ya ne kuru,' I replied, I don't smoke

'Amerikanski, da? I speak English. Give me money, sto baksov. Please, money,' the word money pronounced like maany.

'I don't have a hundred dollars,' I told him, in Russian. 'Not today,' at which point the student and the freckled girl re-entered, the student nodding as if the girl was saying something very important which needed his full attention. I suddenly felt ill at ease, the whole situation crystallising in my mind and presenting itself as something very unpleasant. There were no

windows in the room, no light let in, no onlookers who by their very presence offered security and protection. A cloud of claustrophobia suddenly took the air from the room, the beer no doubt a factor. I stared at the screen, without seeing a thing and waited, as always, for the moment to pass. Then I looked over at the student who didn't seem quite as boyish as before. He had a lock in his hand and was moving towards the entrance, the others back by the door and sniggering once more. I should use Sweet's name, I thought, as a panic took hold of me.

'Give me fucking maany, sto baksov' said the skinhead to me and to the walls, his blotchy girlfriend hitting him across the head in response.

'Tebya ne stidna,' she asked him, aren't you ashamed, and the two of them burst into laughter.

The student was paused, up by the door, without either a frown or a smile.

'We're closed now. Come back another day if you like,' he said to me in perfect English and I felt a sudden wave of relief.

'Oh, you're closing,' I mumbled in English, looking at the lock in his hand. 'I'll just get out of this,' and went about exiting the program I was using. After several moments I got up and headed for the steps. As I was going out the door the skinhead shouted to me 'prenisi cigaretki sledishea raz.' Bring cigarettes next time.

'Ya ne kuru,' I said, shaking my head and walked out into the courtyard, wishing the sober student a good day.

I walked back onto Balshaya Nikitskaya and sat down on a bench by the Conservatory, wondering if I hadn't imagined everything that had just happened and, if not, aware that I should forget all about it, aware that a city is only as dangerous as the people and places you know in it, and that the doors through which Sweet passed were not the doors for me. I must have been sat there for ten minutes, at which point, calm and collected and ready to walk down to the Kremlin, I got up and turned and almost physically collided with him.

'My Lord, I know that face,' he said, and to this day I don't know if he was genuinely surprised or being sardonic. Such was his cool enthusiasm though, whether forced or by nature, that I found myself somewhat relieved.

'How was the trip south?' he asked.

'Fine,' I replied. 'We had a fabulous time. And yourself?'

'Just got back yesterday. The natives were a bit restless but nothing too untoward,' he said cryptically. 'Funny, I was just talking about you,' and he paused as if by way of exclamation, but his manner was such that I remained strangely at ease and the subject matter served only to disarm. If he was aware that I had actually been following him, he certainly didn't seem to pay it much mind.

'Actually, not you directly, but that girl of yours. I've got some people coming in from China next week and I need an interpreter. Pretty, preferably. I called that Yefgeny chap this morning to get her number but perhaps you could ask her to give me a call.'

‘Of course. Absolutely. I’ve got your card right here,’ I replied. ‘I’m sure I’ll see her this evening or I can call,’ adding ‘but I’m interested. Yefgeny?’

‘Ha! He was interested in you, too! I wouldn’t let him bother you though. He’s had his fun. He’s like me, loses interest after the first time. You know, he made a stack in the early nineties buying share vouchers off Siberians. Bit of a dog really. Always bragging how he bought a chemical plant for seventeen washing machines and a vacuum cleaner.’ He paused to wipe the beads of sweat from his brow whilst I digested what he had said. ‘Listen, it’s such a co-incidence, have you got time for a coffee? I’m just on my way to Pushkinskaya to collect some photographs but I’ve got a few minutes to play with.’

‘I’m afraid I’ve got an appointment, Bernard,’ I replied, disappointedly. ‘But another time perhaps. It seems fate has thrown us together so no doubt we’ll see each other soon,’ and walking off I spat on the ground where he had been, telling that he was as inconsequential as he was obscene and vowing that our same world would always keep us apart.

The episode with Sweet however, was soon erased from my foremost thoughts and I mention it now, merely as an accent, a shade to colour ermine skin whose late summer silk is dark, without indication of that which will come and is sought. No, in comparison, it meant nothing at all. It was on Nikolskaya beyond the Voskresensky and Nikolski gates, which guard Red Square, that chance played its real hand that day. I had ambled down Nikitskaya to Manezh and stood for a good ten minutes watching a wedding party throw wishing coins from point zero to the four corners of Russia, beggars on every point of the dial waiting for the kopecks to land, before, suddenly, impromptu, I upped and walked off through the gates and down a

little past Goom shopping mall where the tourists were sipping espresso and inspecting St. Basils from the café promenade. I thought I might go on up as far as Kitai Gorod and wander in the labyrinth of streets there, where little churches could be discovered and secret gardens, where solitary swings held red cheeked ‘malishkas’ and old stone walls bore the scratchings of indomitable love. I was on my way, halfway down Nikolskaya, mid-gait, when I saw her and for a few moments I hardly recognised her, such was the transformation. I had thought about her a thousand times before that moment and considered her in a thousand different lights. In the frenzy of the first months I had been dazzled by her, held her as if she were the city itself, magical and charmed, as unpredictable as sin, she had bore the weight of my expectation, the incarnation of a fantasy. When I thought of Moscow, I thought of her. They were as inseparable as they were unfathomable. It was through her that I had lived, seeing the world afresh, without rule or mundanity. Never once though, had I considered her as she appeared that day on Nikolskaya. Her cropped, dyed hair, the colour of rust, had been left to flow in thick locks of lustrous blond. Her flattened cheeks that had sucked on air with the art of disdain, had come to brim with contentment, all rounded and complete. The once mean sparkle of her eyes had become a steady glow, even the cheekbones, that had risen like pubescent mounds, were given the change, barely perceivable. But it was the arch of the back, bent to counter the weight of the child that dumbfounded. I looked on, unmoving in the flow.

She hadn’t seen me. She was paying no attention to the passers by on the street and I assumed she was waiting for something or for someone. I continued to stare in disbelief. Should I shout her, go on, or should I wait and do nothing at all. Then, as the want to say hello welled within, a black

Audi pulled up beside her, the passenger side door opening as the vehicle came to a complete stop, the engine left running. As she went towards the door of the car I couldn't help myself and felt compelled to shout her name across the narrow road, stepping off the pavement in her direction as I called. Her slender neck turned and stopped me in my tracks. She found me, placed me and on the recognition of me, she slowly froze before me, looking upon me as if upon a ghost. Her rose complexion gradually and completely drained and it seemed that if it hadn't been for the support of the car to which she clung, she very well may have gone to the ground. I looked to the driver side but the windows were smoked and I saw nothing. I repeated her name. 'Olga,' I said, tenderly, and it brought about a subtle change, enough for her to stand on her feet. Occasional raindrops began spattering the pavement slabs, indecipherable on the tarmac of the street, the windscreen wipers of the Audi commencing by way of response. She continued to look at me, to look through me and about me, but she didn't once open her lips. The light of the sky began to darken and a gust of air gave promise of an approaching front. She ran her fingers through her hair and put her head back on her shoulders as if in preparation and then I thought I saw a glimmer of a smile before she pulled her hair back off her face, looked away to some unknown point of interest, and then, finally, her attention being called back to the car, she disappeared into the sleek machine and gently rolled off, up and towards the old Lubyanka prison. I ran those few seconds endlessly after that, the calculus of re-enactment, my fairytale princess, pregnant, besieged by a dragon, and thoughts stacked up like a tower of cards, inevitably untenable, the want of a breath being enough to bring them down.

As the leaves turned, both actual and calendrical, and the sun's apparent aspect began steadily to diminish, so autumn came and with it, a slow yet welcomed improvement in the air, the deadly peat fires that had choked the city all summer, finally giving way and burning out. The third season, with its erratic fits and fickle moods brought, nevertheless, an inevitable descent, a deterioration, albeit gradual, from sun and cloud to rain and sleet and from sleet to freezing snow. And as the mercury diminished, so the city, in turn, began in its way, to contract and congeal. One was concussed by disjunctive crowds, eclipsed by the fog that plugged its main arteries, suffocated by the throng which packed the trains, crushed in the markets and the malls. On the thoroughfares it was as if the whole world had come to live there, had heard and had come to stake their claim. One didn't perceive the gathering rubbish piles in the gutters, when the drains first clogged and overflowed, how unpaved roads betrayed their origins, cars and wagons everywhere, ripping up the surface until everything outside the garden ring oozed scum and filth and to which everything within would, before the freeze, finally succumb. Yet despite the coagulating slime beneath their feet, the Moscow girls still persisted with their Spanish high heels pointed at the toe, with their dublyonka sheepskins and Italian fashion house leathers. Even the boys carried shoe wipes to polish their boots before presenting themselves on the parade ground of commerce. It can be said that if a man marks himself by what he puts on his feet, then the Muscovite holds himself in high esteem. In the sea of brown spit and spent cigarettes, their soles cut an even keel, spurred by the belief that such filth laid bare

opportunity, that scum belied want and want had a price and as the ideology of the wolf effused, it showed itself as something bred in, that the genius of Marx had brayed out and never could it be more acutely felt than in the bonanza that was Moscow, its formative laws without precedent, given over to those with a will. It was in this climate of abundance, stepping over the dead, that my days had slipped away, indecipherable, one from the other, one trail as good as the second, the first cunt as wet as the next. I was deaf to creeds for I hadn't the need, having only a use for occasional moments, a boat ride on the lake at Botanichisky Sad, a caviar coated tongue, a word from a pretty mouth in the garden of the Boar House. All coincidental, all without purpose. It wasn't until that Autumn, that all too brief Autumn, that came and went in a flicker, that I awoke one day and found an array that served my true interest. All of the elements, midst the yellow smog of Moscow, had simply happened into place awaiting only a spark, a catalyst, to facilitate and compound them as my fate, to orientate them such that they formed distinct and irrecoverable bonds.

The scientist knows the catalyst as the playmaker of life. Without this charged intermediary, the world would exist in unmoving harmony and there would be nothing but stasis and death. For without bonds there is no life, there is only solitary wandering, whether on the trail of God or on the trail of the devil. And the earth is no place for either, for they are one and nothing, fundamentals, the beginning and the end. To admit oneself as such is to follow the divine, to undo oneself in fire, to sever oneself of mass and want until the pull of the earth pulls not at all. There is no sense in words, no formulas or codes. Only cool infinity. And nothing stirs. Here amongst the living, the construction of the temple was never for the deities but for the masses themselves lest they miss a day's labour and slaughter each other.

No, the would be Christs are rarely to be heard, for they ex-communicate themselves in mountains, they hide themselves in caves, else they are kept in the madhouses of the State. For what it is in essence, is that you must want, to live. Be it for yourself or another. You must want, to live, and therein to feel, to be bound to that which is alive. Let the sepulchres take the demons and Gods and let man worship that which is real. Let man worship man and his world.

4

It was the first third of that season, with no thought of catalysts that Tatiana Yevgenyevna arrived home with the list. The birch trees in the garden whirred on gentle westerlies, the high cirrus, seemingly un-motioning, guarded the rays of a tiring sun. Way down below from our lavish yellow tower, the endless tirade of cars whizzed and crawled, depending on the hour, the beautiful long ribbons of red and white light, distancing the less favoured, who made their way by foot. And there she was, by the mirror in the living room, my mother the Slav, with crows' eyes, ecstatic.

'I have it,' she said, turning from the mirror. 'I have it. This is what we've been waiting for,' and she waved a brown manila envelope before me, taking it over to the little wooden coffee table and spreading out the contents like a captain spreads his charts. As I browsed I knew it would turn my time around, that my days would become nights and my nights, days. More striking was how Tatiana took to it, with her books and methodologies, the language of Harvard Business School finding its way into our lives, though I

believe it was her divorce and its settlement, the flat in which we lived, which spurred her more than core strategies or price tolerance, that coupled to an iron, incorrigible will.

Her guide, the little red book, was called '*From Carnagy to Iakoka. On realising the Dream*, by Hale 'Chuck' Hoogenboom.' She'd bought it from a stall on the New Arbat for twelve dollars and had me read it as a pre-condition to 'coming aboard', a task I duly completed, skim and scan, beaten to admission by the meat of it, but abhorred by the gravy, by the pontiff style. The thought of being a father however, made it clear. It was time to make money.

'Let's make money,' I said, thinking of it and I emptied my glass as Svetlana stood centre stage, scrutinising the list, the little red book close at hand.

'What we have Leo, is win, win, y nashim, y vashim.'

'We are putting extra into ordinary. Vot, tak.'

'Money must work. Not sit wrapped up in the washing machine.'

'People buy people. This is where we always failed. We must match ourselves to our customers, identify needs and delight.'

Da.

All this from an old bird, within a gin of the hot flushes.

'No yes no questions Leo, everything open, which what where. Give them choice of two or three then let them decide for themselves.'

She had held herself before the mirror. There would be no more communist parades for Svetlana. Three hundred and seventy names on a list. The day night, the night, day.

The list, itself, comprised a Michelin guide to middle class realty the world over, associated with which, were the all important names and contact

numbers. There was Mr and Mrs O'Henry of Atherton, California, Mr and Mrs Kawasaki of Bloomington Hills, Detroit, Don and Dona Jesus Labargo Hernandez of Antigua, San Sebastian, Madame Marion Lacroix of La Place Plumereau, Tours, the Williamses from Canterbury, Kent, the Southgates from Didsbury, Manchester. From Aberdeen to Berlin, from Finchley to St. Petersburg, Florida, all of these people from all of these places had one thing in common. All of them had, in the previous three years, come to Moscow for the purpose of adoption, to formally present themselves and their case before the court. Svetlana had solicited the list from Vladimir Arkadyevitch, who agreed, that if such a list existed, would do what he could to facilitate her work and aid in the running of the program. He was a stoic man, tall and lean, whom I saw rarely, but whom I heard much about. He appeared to me, reserved and circumspect, a proud man whose great uncle had lost a leg for the Bolshivicks, aged seventeen. That Judge Vladimir was Ivan's father was the saga of fathers and sons. Their evident common lineage was expressed in the same wiry musculature and the same flaxen hair and despite Ivan having inherited his mother's Roman nose, thin and straight, and the father's being more bulbous and ill defined, the proportion of the features left little doubt. Above all, however, when I think of that pair, it's their eyes I remember, cruel and foreign, hard like blue steel, eyes that demanded satisfaction, seeing it as a right, though they played as if how they saw the world was at odds.

My own business with the list was straight forward enough. I was to contact all the parties and solicit their e-mail address from which we would target them and, more importantly, their friends, with a handful of selected children. As for the ones who didn't speak English, we would use those

customers whom we found who were able to speak the French and the Spanish and the German we needed, to act as referees on our behalf.

‘The best salesmen you have are the best customers you have, who, once activated, form part of a peer network strategy,’ Svetlana read, straight from the book.

‘Shto ti doomayish, Leo? On prav?’ Is he right?

‘I think Mr. Hoogenboom may have a point, Svetlana. Word of mouth. He’s not just a pretty face.’

It was a sleight to the wholesome head and shoulders, which, be-suited, graced the book’s back cover.

We were also in agreement as to when to make the calls, thinking that we should try to find our customers at rest. Hence, I determined to work the necessary hours in order to call the world at seven pm. It soon became evident that we were sitting on a goldmine of potential millions and the Judge felt that it was something for Ivan to be more active in. When the customers started to arrive at Sherimetyevo and Domadedyevo airports therefore, it was Ivan’s vermilion lips that kissed them thrice on the cheeks. It was he who led them by the hand, that translated for them the illegible metropolis, that showed them to the Hotel Kosmos with its fabulous views over VDNX, those coming on a tighter budget being taken to a modest apartment that was rented in Atradnoe. I knew, from the start, that my days were numbered, that it was only a matter of time before I was replaced. I was an outsider, overpaid. It was decided that Ivan would work with me, would begin to make the calls, to answer the e-mails, to liaise with Svetlana. It was only his indolence that kept me in the job, or better, his refusal, to do his father’s bidding. Yet I gave it no thought. For I was myopic in my outlook, having routine to temper my reeling mind which ceaselessly ran

back to Nikolskaya and Olga. The devil had sex with his own children when there wasn't enough work for him to do. I gave myself up to it, to predictable hours, so as not to be caught out by the un-motioning past.

My day started at ten at night or thereabouts. Occasionally I started later and worked later but most often I began at ten and worked until eight in the morning. Of those hours, half were spent on the telephone, developing a platform of trust by answering questions and questioning needs, ultimately, my task being to guide them to the close. What was common to one and all with whom I spoke was the language of parenthood, which was new to me, but in which I found myself comforted and enveloped, the conversations being a kind of mind game, an acting out where for hours I played to my heart's content. When I was asked if I had children, I answered that I did, sometimes being the father of an adopted boy, Alyoshka, sometimes being the father of an adopted girl, Oxhana. It wasn't long, however, before I set on having two boys, five years between them. 'They help each other grow,' I would say. 'My Russian wife's a saint. It's no life without parents. And now she's expecting any day.' When my first customer arrived at the Kosmos Hotel from Toronto, Canada, it felt like meeting an old friend, though the twenty two thousand dollar fee, for adopting baby twins, was evidence enough that it was very much, in fact, business. When she quizzed me about my wife, Olga, however, I became less intimate. After that I left the ingratiating to Ivan the Beautiful, despite being inextricably linked, by then, to what it was we were conducting. But that was later. Afterwards. For it was still September, the tip of the iceberg, and the sun still had some heat in it.

The rain was beating on the window when Nadia arrived. She had found a job as an intern with a Chinese radio station, which broadcast from Moscow with European news and affairs. It was over by the Tretyakov Gallery and for two hours a day she helped with the checking of translations. Her main gripe was that it didn't pay and her parents had suggested she might look for something else.

'They want me to work at McDonalds. Pradstavlayesh? Four years at State University and they tell me it could be worse, that at least I can practice my languages there. My father designs helicopters for three hundred dollars a month. My mother works as an accountant for less. My brother and sister are too young, they just eat and drink and watch television. When I tell them where you and I went for dinner they just stare at me. My mother is okay, but my father, he's... he's become a monster you can't imagine.'

But I could. In the afternoons when my work was done and I stared out my window through the sun and the rain, her words in one ear and out the other and in between thoughts of Papa, I too questioned her, only more like a trader questions the market, looking for weakness, then buying cheap, stripping until everything fragile is revealed, and all of the ensuing fragments are ground to dust.

'You can't imagine!'

I could imagine. Brutality breeds. It infects everyone and is everywhere. I imagined humiliation and breakdowns, self-loathing and tears, her father with his Komsomolskaya News and a plate of pickles,

seething at the indignation, at the smart new Russians with their cool hearts and prudence and then listening to a belly full of Nadia's ideals, her can do's and then I really could imagine him a monster. And more so myself, as I turned inside out, the third season, unpredictable in all but its miserable promise, exacerbating the badness within me, a badness made profound by the city itself, and day after day, getting worse. And more than ever I felt a bitterness; a bitterness in all and everything around.

'I'm disintegrating here day by day, why not poison her too, ruin her with illusions of a simple world, where you simply box clever to have your fill.' I knew it was cruel, without sense, but why not?

And the more she hung on me, the more I taunted her.

'You should take the restaurant job. Your father is right. You know, you'd all do better selling hot dogs on Tverskaya.'

And with the taunting, came abuse. She would arrive in the afternoon while I still lay in bed and I would have her undress and come and join me. I never once spoke of my conversation with Sweet or his mentioning of the elusive Yevgeny, but the idea that I hadn't taken her virginity, whether fact or fiction, had embedded itself, no doubt to Sweet's delight, and as a consequence I began to play her with a rougher hand.

Where before I would spend hours negotiating a sexual concession, I now simply took her as I wished. I would start with a tender kiss on the lips but soon forced her head down to my groin, where, pushing myself in too deep, she would gag and retch for respite. With one hand I would hold her delicate wrists behind her neck so as to have her do my bidding, gripping her hair with the other hand, to work her back and forth. When I tired, I would turn her over on her belly and work myself between the back of her soft young legs, covering her head with my arms, obscuring the corte brunette, as

I pressed her face into the pillow. Having pinned her, I had her as I wanted, heaving, full weight, lying dead on her back, grabbing and squeezing her skin in clumps, biting her shoulders and her back and her neck, licking her face. I went in from behind, salivating like a dog, but it wasn't her cunt I was after.

As I dug myself into her, it was Olga. It was Olga's legs that I parted with my thighs. It was Olga's head, which lay buried beneath my arms. A beautiful girl in a beautiful world. A dream. She would arch her back and scratch the flesh on my hands with her nails as I pressed on for magic, with every push, our lives more strictly interwoven, the fruit of God's loom, a chemical reaction.

The rain beat on and on.

I had woken with an appetite and prepared a batchful of blini so smetani, small pancakes served with sour cream, as well as red caviar. When Nadia arrived, we sat and ate, taking tea with our garbled metaphysics, and with the final bite I took her by the fingertips and tried to lead her on off to the bedroom, the pendulum at the zenith of its sweep.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

I answered with a swing of the head and continued to tug her hand.

'What are you doing?' she repeated, suddenly exasperated. 'I CAN'T EAT, THEN HAVE SEX. Don't you see the difference?' and she pulled herself away from me. 'It's a question. Are you listening? 'DON'T YOU SEE THE DIFFERENCE?' and she stressed every word.

'I see you're upset about something,' I replied passively, releasing her hand and sitting back down on the kitchen stool.

‘Shtota ni tak,’ she said, shaking her head, something’s not right, and she remained standing for a moment, as emphasis, before joining me once more at the table.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, eyes on the teapot, pouring myself another half cup.

‘A month ago you made me promises. I told you to be careful but you insisted. You said you,’

‘I meant what I said,’ I interrupted.

You meant it then. What about now?’

‘I’m tired now.’

I see you’re tired. But tired of what. Tired of me?’

‘Of course, not,’ and I put the teacup to one side. ‘You know I have a lot going on at the moment, what with one thing and another and, well...’

I avoided saying more and shrugged to make my point.

‘I wish I could meet you again,’ she said despairingly.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked confused.

‘I wish we could meet like we met. At the beginning. I wish it hadn’t happened and was going to happen.’

I wanted to tell her not to be so naïve, to tell her that if she was down now, then imagine how it would be in ten years time. Or twenty. But she was too weak to crush, too tender. Instead I let her have her wish and told her what she wanted to hear.

‘I’m falling apart here, Nadia. I mean, look at me. When I look in the mirror I hardly recognise myself. It can’t go on much longer like this, not with the winter coming.’

‘So what do you want to do?’ she asked.

Well, that's what I wanted to talk about. Look, it was going to be a surprise for you, but as you're upset, perhaps now is as good a time as any? I spoke to my brother last night,' and realising it was significant, her intonation brightened.

'Really? How is he?' she asked.

I paused to think. 'Meeker than I remembered. Softer.' It was true. I detested him as a habit, without question, but on the telephone I wasn't quite sure as to why.

'Anyway, the news is we're going to sell the house. My mother's house, in Cornwall. We have to wait until Christmas because it's rented out until then and the tenants, who are living there, have a contract, but we're already looking to put it on the market. We're thinking it should fetch about half a million pounds. That's a lot of cash Nadia. With half of that we can buy a small flat in London and have something left over to start out. But we have to wait. Now isn't the time. I need this work with Svetlana to have something to show. It isn't going to last much longer but it's essential that I have it. We have to be patient right now.'

'Nichevo sibye!' she enthused, and she spiked her fringe with her fingers. 'No, no, I have to stop speaking Russian,' she said to herself. 'We have to speak English all the time. We have to forget Russia, Leo. Forget Moscow. It kills us. The way they live here, it's...it's like animals. We have to forget this place and go away from here or we'll become animals too.'

I reached out my hand to her and she took it; and with that, I led her off to the bedroom.

It was true that I had called to my brother, but it hadn't been the night before. It had been three weeks before, the day I'd seen Olga. As I made

my way home that day, my head in a spin, it became clear to me that what I needed, more than anything, was money. Only with money could I turn her from the comfort of Sergei. Only with money could I paint all the skylines of the world, and her, at ease amongst them all, with her palate for the finer things, as if life were art and every moment a detail, only with money could one have the refined taste to taste as she had become accustomed.

Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred, the stairway of my hallucination, the path back to Olga and the first winter. Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred, the path back and forward, up and down and all around.

How often did I think numbers, talk numbers, my happiness a number, my sickness a number, given up to numbers, good numbers, big numbers, bad numbers, small numbers, not hearing the words that weren't numbers, for theirs was the only sound I truly heard. And those around were no different. The undertow was always numerical. I weighed up my inheritance a hundred times and it was always the measure of Olga. I knew I would have her. It was only a matter of time.

Thus, I spoke to Svetlana, revealing that Olga was pregnant and I believed it was mine, adding that I had spoken to the bank and got bogged down by red tape, that in a month or two I would be rich with all I needed but until then I was desperate and in need of cash, something with which to secure Olga's faith. Consequently, she spoke to Vladimir Arkadyevitch, and sold me as a stopgap solution, my availability apparently suiting all concerned. 'It's only temporary. You'll help Ivan get up to speed,' Svetlana said. 'For me too. Nothing is permanent here. So let's work together and work quick.'

This was her window of opportunity also, a one off that could close at any moment. This, she made abundantly clear, and it helped me work my

hours. For it transpired that the judge had plans. It was his list, after all. He was the playmaker. It was late September when I first heard the name Yuri Pechugin from Svetlana. He was a Parliamentary Deputy in the Duma, an old University friend of the Judge's, whose protection and influence would be useful in the business at hand. Svetlana had met them at the tennis club and listened as the Judge outlined his vision.

‘Znayesh, Yurik, eto mozhit stat semenim biznesem.’ You know Yurik, this could become family business.

What Vladimir Vladimirovitch had in mind was a coming together of clans, Pechugin's daughter, Yevdakia, or Ducia as she was known, being already practically one of the family. Her and Ivan had been acquainted all their lives, didn't it make sense for the two of them to come together and make a home for themselves. And no one would be a better homebuilder than Ducia. They could manage the business from London, Ivan could pursue his studies there, pursue his dream, and Ducia could deal with customers, for her English was sound and would improve. There might even be the patter of tiny feet, the women being thrilled at the prospect. What mirth!

‘You see, Leo, today is our day,’ Svetlana said. ‘Kuy zhelezo poka goryacho.’ Strike the iron while it's hot.

But I couldn't do anything at that moment, only watch from the bed with Nadia, as the rain ran down the window.

It was dark when we set off along Prospekt Mira for the metro. Terrorists had blown up a school in the South killing two hundred, the whole bloody atrocity being strewn across the front pages, children without limbs being dragged from the debris, bits of bodies lying everywhere, the President, black tied and sombre once more, carrying the weight of the people's expectation. The stream of people that we passed on our way stared vacuously ahead, unseeing and pre-occupied, as if the future had disappeared somewhere and its location was now uncertain. It was only a matter of time before the next devastation in the city itself. Where it would strike nobody knew but the metro seemed as likely as anywhere.

'Two hundred times ten thousand,' I thought to myself. 'That's two million dollars.'

As we neared the entrance to the station, I began looking for a way out.

'I can't face it down there. I'm tired of being crushed. Let's take a car.'

Nadia hated taking cars. She liked the metro. She saw it as a symbol of something ideal, where the kopecks in her pocket were enough to pay the fare.

'It's going to take twice as long by car,' she said.

'But at least you can watch the city go by. Come on, not today. It's all too grim and dark down there. I need some air. I'll drop you at Tretyekovskaya and meet you afterwards at Asterhazi, cups and cakes on me. How about that?'

‘Asterhazi, of course, I’d love to. But frankly, you don’t need to take me to work. I’ll manage fine on my own. Let’s meet at eight, okay?’

She was the only Russian I’d ever met who used the word frankly and with it she turned away and went underground.

I wasn’t upset she’d gone off on her own. On the contrary, I liked her better when she was self-orientated, when she expressed no interest as to the concerns of others. It cemented us together, though when I was separated from her my thoughts soon turned to other things.

A taxi in Moscow is any car which is prepared to stop. Once hailed, the driver asks you where you want to go and after you’ve told him, he asks you how much you want to pay. Then he tells you how much he wants you to pay and a little bargaining is carried out before a price is agreed. Of course getting into a car with a stranger is a risky business, there being pro’s and cons to life being cheap. Once Nadia was out of sight I walked to the part of the pavement that wasn’t flooded and put my arm out. Within seconds two Zhigooli Ladas had pulled up, an arc of water spiralling from each wheel as the cars came to a rest beside me. The first driver wanted two hundred roubles to Frunzenskaya so I waved him away. The second asked for three hundred, but agreed to a hundred after negotiation. Once inside and headed for the river he began asking me where I was from and what I was doing in Moscow. He, it turned out, was Armenian, having emigrated with his wife and three children and he spent half of the next twenty minutes telling me how perfect Armenia was and how beautiful the women were, how good the food was and generally how excellent life was there.

‘You should see Ararat. It’s the greatest mountain in the world.

‘Yerevan is like Paris. There is everything you want there.’

‘So what are you doing here?’ I asked him in Russian.

‘Money. There isn’t work in my town,’ he replied. ‘Have you seen the new BMW, the one with the television here,’ and he pointed to a hole in the dash where there once had been a radio. ‘That’s what I want,’ and his nostrils flared as he added, ‘perfect. It’s perfect.’

He had me thinking how the English I cared for were rarely so nostalgic about their origins and never so direct as to their needs.

‘The food is bad, the people are ugly, the weather is awful. That’s why I’m here.’

But I really couldn’t answer him as to why I was in Moscow. The conversation continued about the bombing in the South and he became wild and reckless in his language, pausing only to drag hard on his cigarette, every third word being ‘blyad’ meaning fuck, and I couldn’t completely follow his slurring speech and accent although the gist was clear enough, him being of the opinion that the Russian heart was a cold heart, never happy with peace, only happy in war, in suffering. He thought the people, in general, were dirty pigs who deserved to be bombed and as for the Muscovites they were, by far, far, the worst of the lot.

By the time we got to Frunzenskaya he was naming names and proffering punishment. I’d tried to roll the window down as the car had steamed up and we could barely see where we were going but it was jammed and wiping the condensation from the inside had nil effect. When the car stopped we could have been anywhere, there being no sign of the metro with which I was familiar. I put my hand out to give him the hundred on which we had agreed and then the performance began.

‘Sto eta takoe?’ he asked, holding the money, what’s that?

I said nothing and slowly sighed aloud, closing my eyes for a moment, wishing myself away.

‘Sto takoe?’ he barked, throwing away his half smoked cigarette, becoming enraged. ‘Trista, ya skazal.’ Three hundred I said.

With the long drawn out sigh, my nerves came in primed, the higher centres counselling for reason, the primitive ‘mob’ networks, for a reckoning, a remedy.

‘Nyet,’ I said, pushing my head between the stinking seats, leaning in towards him, edging my face uncomfortably close to his as I told him he’d said a hundred, but he held his ground and was adamant. He was shouting something about working all day and night and about his family and that he had made it very clear and that three hundred was fair. There was no hope for words. I put the hundred on the seat and went to get out but he grabbed my coat and pulled me back. I tried to push him away and get free but with his left hand he struggled to the glove box, and flipping it open, revealed his wild card.

In such moments there is nothing but chemistry. Sensory neurons fire, neurotransmitters cross synapses and are bound, the brain conducts a symphony of charge, motor neurons fire, muscles stop, limbs stop, everything stops. In the freeze there’s no struggle, no speak, you just wait for the infinite. For what can you make of death?

He put his hand on the grey gun. Outside the rain had stopped.

‘Trista, ya skazal,’ he spat in a low groan.

Perhaps I was afraid but not as you might expect. Instead of crumbling and unfolding bills before him I felt a wave of pure hatred, hatred for the driver, for the situation, for the stench in the air, for all of the why’s and why not’s’.

‘You fucking thief,’ I replied in English, looking him in the eye.

‘Are you going to shoot me, are you going to shoot me? Come on then,’ I went on, sick with him, with the city, with everything.

‘Come on you fucking pig. COME ON!’ and I threw my arms out by way of invitation, but he didn’t flinch, he just scratched his unshaven face, my words meaning nothing to him.

‘Trista,’ he repeated blankly, putting his hand on the head-rest, the other firmly pressed against the dash holding the weapon.

‘Ti ponyil?’ he asked patronisingly. Do you understand?

I waited a moment, seething. ‘Da, ponyil, ponyil.’ I’d have bitten his jugular if I’d had the chance. But there was no chance. It wasn’t Hollywood.

He nodded knowingly, happy to be ahead. ‘Ladna,’ he bloated.

I took out my wallet. ‘Ladna,’ I said. ‘Ladna, razboinik.’ Okay, thief, and I opened the door and took out another two hundred, which I crumpled up and threw on to the back seat.

Once outside, the back passenger door still open, I began to yell in English. ‘I curse you, you fucking black scum, I... You’re a fucking dirty thief. Armenian scum. I fucking curse you,’ but he just looked me in the eye and said, ‘ti sam,’ you, yourself.

I turned and walked away, mumbling and disorientated, continuing like that until eventually finding a crossing, the lights on red, across the way the red M of the metro came into view. Two hundred roubles was five dollars. I would have torn out his liver and stabbed him to death for it. Two hundred roubles and I would have slashed him, tortured him, hammered nails into his temples, opened his chest with scissors, and not just him but his family and any of them that bore his creed.

‘A fishing knife would be best,’ I thought as I shuffled along, ‘with a serrated edge. Catch him by surprise, in the neck then pull his eyes out. ‘See, Papa was a bad boy,’ I’d tell the children. And if he had a knife, I’d have a gun!

When I finally got to the metro my temper had cooled and I picked up a bottle of Baltica to sip as I walked along. Two boys were throwing stones at a drunk who’d passed out by the entrance.

What chance was there for any of us? What chance the world?

I left the main drag and took to the back of the houses. The paving stones were full of holes and the holes were full of slick wet mud so I had to stride and tip toe my way along so as not to get sodden feet. It was strange that this was the district of the new rich but I supposed they rarely walked on these streets, leaving the gathering to maids and helpers. The street itself was more indicative. Rows of BMWs and Audis mixed with Toyota four by fours, Mercedes, Renaults and Citroens.

This was Sergei’s street. ‘Fucking A.’

In the first wave, after the revolution, when the money began to pour into Moscow and the real monsters began to get their teeth into it, Babushkas forbade the children to play near the Mercedes 500 series, such was the propensity of the vehicle to explode. It was dog eat dog, survival of the best-fitted, the Prince and Will to Power being the books of the hour, not that they were read, for instinct needs no guide, there always being a top and the bottom, there always being a leader and the led. Now though, in the second wave, with the pie carved up and dished out, the gangsters had traded their guns for ties, the legitimacy of the court upstaging the language of the street. The Mercedes were disappearing as fast as Versace. The money drove Audi and wore Armani, symbolic of the turning tide, the new

diplomacy. And yet on the street you felt that if oil was ten a barrel, the whole lot would come down, that Lenin's mausoleum would become a shrine, that the streets would catch fire and all the disease that had accumulated with the market would be wiped out once and for all. For as I walked down to the river along Frunzenskaya, I was disgusted with it all, this hell of a place, this ragged brutal pile of lives, crawling along, detached and sad-eyed, hoping for a miracle in a Godless world. When I got to the river there was only a river of traffic, four lanes of concrete, the spray throwing a mist of black water onto the thin pedestrian strip that ran along by the houses. I continued down towards Park Culture, the old Gorki Park, the lights of the ferris wheel, some hope in the distance, but even that wasn't enough to brighten my mood. This is my world. This filthy hell-hole of a place. This is the player's lair, how goeth the played? I asked myself the question that the Armenian had asked me, why I had come, and I thought for a moment that I understood. It had dawned on me that the world was a dark place, and that if one stood in the darkest corner of the world then the light of the past would simply shine. I wanted that, a better past. I wanted it such that I chanced a darker present. It was only once the city had embraced me that I realised there's no going back, that new life emerges with every touch and as a consequence you become more entangled than ever, darker than ever. In the Moscow of my mind, innocence had warped itself, sold itself as a commodity, the cancer of man had spread on its skin and poisoned the eyes of the onlookers. I knew early on that only a Russian could be at home in such a place. The rest of us were speculators, traders, promoters passing through, with our act, the vicious circus. It was inevitable, my state of affairs, whether here or elsewhere, the difference being that elsewhere I could happily have rotted to dust. In Moscow I saw myself more clearly. I

was a boy in a town that cried 'man,' deluded by sophistry, by the surface of things. Every day my senses were battered by extremes, by a maelstrom of emotions. I remained passive, unengaged, picking and choosing as I fancied. But it couldn't go on. Not indefinitely. I detested too much what was all around.

Five million years of evolution and this is what we've achieved. I breathed hard; Genesis to Exodus and finally the Book of Numbers.

As I trudged through the earth towards my destination I felt a backlash from the taxi ride, a delayed reaction. I had to find a bench to sit for the feeling came on so swiftly and so devastatingly. I began to cry. Floods of tears ran down my face, the pain of those weeks, those years. I felt it in my gut, in my chest, the horror of disappointment, of life without, of life alone. I was alone. Alone. I thought of my father and mother and of all that had passed and I thought of Nadia and of Olga and of Ivan and Svetlana. I even had sympathy for the Armenian and was somehow glad he'd made his money and gone home. After several minutes I collected myself and walked over to house thirty eight, Naberezhnaya. I went around the back and through the arch that led to a large grassy square. The alley through to the garden was flooded but I paid no attention. I went on in and across to a swing, which was near a guarded compound where the occupants kept their cars. I looked for the black Audi but it wasn't there. After a while I went up to the door and rang a bell on the third floor. A maid answered. I asked for Olga but was told she was still away and that they didn't know when she would be back. It wasn't a surprise. I'd rang a dozen times in the previous month, called her endlessly on her mobile. And now it was October, already October and nothing. I walked back to the river and found a bench, sitting on the upper part to remain dry. I thought about another beer as I looked up

at the antennas on the roof of the houses, swaying in the breeze. It began to drizzle again and for the first time in months I felt cold. Leaves from the birch trees were piled up in mounds, the soil was glistening like dull gold, puddles splashed spangled rays of orange and yellow, reflections of the street lights, across the way the ferris wheel continuing to turn. With the passing of tears came perspective. A sense of self. And with it I turned up my collar and set off along the road, journeying by foot to kill time, to feel the city in all its ugliness, the black jugular of the city, with its barren river awash in trash, with animal carcasses and factory waste, slakes of grey froth lapping the bank walls, stagnant and aimless, no sign of a current, on by derelict building sites, by pavements torn up and abandoned, through sheet metal tunnels, the rain coming down harder, banging on the roof, streaming through cracks and then down the rusting panels, along past metal railings, past locked up gardens sold off and privatised, and all the time the cars and wagons screaming along, an endless stream, trails of blue exhaust smoke swirling, the air singeing, on and on, head to the path, barely glimpsing Great Peter setting off for the West, seeing nothing at all until turning up at Kropotkinskaya and finally looking up to the statue there of Engels.

I hated the thought of my money, of the legacy. It was a poisoned chalice. I saw it as the final nail in the coffin of my ideals. All of them had slipped away, one by one, as I changed to suit the season. I had become so ordinary and weak and yet there was a time when I thought that life held something special for me. A golden promise. When I saw what I had become I was sick, the vitriol numbed only by the counting, by associating with others who counted, who set up market and traded golden promises, setting benchmarks and standards, the backslapping types like Sweet, with their particular form of etiquette and decorum to the likes of Sergei and his

set, wearing money like a bullet proof vest. The standard I had set myself as an adolescent went down the toilet like an unwanted foetus. I stood before Engels, mad and deranged, rubbish for the river, at one with the city, the shrapnel of my ideas, obliterating and concussive, wanting to jump right in and drown before the freeze and from there on to stay frozen, immune and impenetrable, dead to ethics and Gods, the darkness a comfort, for the duration of the age with thoughts so slowed that each would take a lifetime and all around, my jacket of ice, the river itself, lost to its origins. I would be given to the city, by the doings of the city.

Da.

But I would have to wait for another season. For I was ahead of myself, out of time. I was waiting for the freeze with a warm front approaching, wanting stasis when there was entropy all around.

7

It was nine the next morning when Olga rang. I was exhausted, at the end of a long night, the lunatic ravings of the evening having left me dry mouthed with a touch of a chill, in no state to talk or care, not wanting of anything except the dumb want of sleep. I had tried for a month to make that call, to contact her and speak to her, she had been my obsession, her name a mantra, her image iconic, I had built for her a temple in my mind and every day I prayed for her, prayed to her, that she would hear sense and come with the child, would see reason and come to me from where we would plan together, the three of us, family, with all obstacles, surmountable, all histories forgettable. And what I would and wouldn't say

and how I'd play the call. All had been thought through. Yet when she rang I could barely reach the phone, even the realisation that it was her calling, her, Olga, being not enough to wake me. I stretched across the divan and took the phone to my ear, semi-conscious, speaking in a whisper, eyes closed to kill the light from the window, the words an echo of something imagined, old words rehashed, the sounds the same as before with nothing in-between but the want of sleep, perfunctories, pleasantries, glossing over gaps, I'll be at the Starlight Diner at eleven, come along, the brevity a blessing, then glad to set the clock on the phone and put my head back on the pillow.

It was only after I'd got up and showered that I began to think. 'How do I look?' I thought, staring at the mirror. I'd always looked the same, only photographs telling otherwise. My skin was too dry, my hair different to how I always imagined it. The brown rings under my eyes would fade in the fresh air. I opened the window. The thermometer on the ledge read ten degrees, scattered puffs of cloud cast against a clear blue sky. In an hour it would be warm enough to sit outside, natural light making all the difference. I pulled on a turquoise polar-neck sweater made of llama wool and set off for the diner at Mayakovskaya.

When I saw her I came around. She was sat in the garden waiting for me, browsing the Moscow Times, looking much as she had on the street at Nikolskaya, strikingly beautiful, though if anything she had become more rounded in the middle and thinner in the face. I took her jewelled hand and kissed it.

'Leo,' she said, 'ya iskala tibya,' I was looking for you.

'Really?' I answered, smiling, knowing it was a lie.

‘Da, I said to Sergei only the other day, I wonder how Leo is, it’s been so long,’ and with it she played her high card before the game had even begun. That I had broken my nerves over an illusion was symptomatic of my demise. But it wasn’t enough to ward me off. It served only to fuel my desire.

‘Almost nine months,’ I said dryly, ‘and look how you’ve grown.’

She stroked her abdomen by way of recognition.

‘Yes. Isn’t it amazing? And it wasn’t planned you know. It just happened. Prosta ...’ and shifting her weight on the chair as way of emphasis, added, ‘I just can’t seem to get comfortable any more, for months now.’

I dropped the wit hoping she’d do likewise. ‘It’s good to see you, you look well,’ I said sincerely.

‘Nyet,’ she answered, pleased, then not finding words, the two of us struck by our presence, their being in that momentary silent exchange, some hope.

The waitress came. We both took coffee, Olga, a salad.

‘I’m overweight,’ she mused, as the waitress disappeared. ‘I’ve gained twelve kilos. I haven’t slept well for weeks. Oozhus. Little Sergei Sergeiyevitch... Well, it’s physical, you understand.’

I nodded in acknowledgment, hanging on her every word, my heart, tight like a snagged line. Sergei Sergeiyevitch she’d said.

‘So it’s a boy?’ I asked.

She paused and once more ran her hands over her abdomen.

‘Da, malchik,’ she said tenderly, lost to the idea, then lowering her head, and fixing her eyes on her hands continued, ‘Big Sergei is thrilled. Well you can imagine, how husbands love sons. It’s what he’s always

wanted. Mnye, fsoe ravno, it's all the same, and she raised her head to me. 'But I forget you speak Russian, we're always talking about me. Let's stop and talk about you. It's been so long, Leo. How are you? What are you doing?'

'I've no idea. I'm completely lost.' I replied, stunned. I came here to say something but now the words escape me.' I breathed hard, a habit cum lately. 'I mean... I really don't know what to say. Why did you ask me here? For what? To tell me about your husband?'

She thought for a moment. 'In a way, yes. I was worried about you.' 'Really?' I said, disbelievingly.

'Da.'

'Well you can see I'm fine. Is there anything else?'

'It's not true. You look terrible. You're so thin, I didn't recognize you.'

'You got fat, I got thin. Perhaps there's a connection?'

'Mozhet bit.' Maybe.

'Is it my child?' I asked, pointedly.

'What? Don't be silly. His name is Sergei Sergeiyevitch.'

'Tell me the truth. Swear on the child's life.'

She countered my animation with passivity. 'What are you, Leo, I keep asking myself,' she said calmly. 'Some people are doctors, some are lawyers, what are you? A teacher? But you told me you could never be a teacher. A journalist? But I don't see your writing in the paper. So let's see. You wander around, no ties, no money, a head full of ideas and no sense in any of it. Znayesh, in Russia we have a name for you. You're tsigani,' and she began to look around as if she had missed something. 'But tsigani, don't they always have horses. Where is yours? I don't see it.'

Where is it?' She paused, emotionless, finally bringing her blank eyes to mine. 'It's no place for you here, you know. No place for tsigani. We don't like them. They take things without asking. They steal and make noise and wake up the children. Slisish menye?' Are you listening?

But I'd listened enough.

'I'd forgotten how unbelievable you can be. He must be threatening to cut your allowance,' I said, vindictively.

Oh no, I've got plenty of that. A penny for a spool of thread, a penny for a needle,'

'What?'

'That's the way the money goes, pop goes the weasel. I wanted to ask, what does it mean, pop goes the weasel?'

'What are you talking about?'

'I'm learning nursery rhymes for little Sergei. We're going to settle in America, so I wanted to be able to explain?'

'Stop, Olga, stop,' I begged, thinking I might cry or scream or just give up and fall down. 'I don't know what it means.' She began fidgeting with the napkin, folding it into triangles. 'Stop, please, don't do that,' and I took the napkin from her and put it in the ashtray. 'Look at me. Listen to me for God's sake. For once, listen to me.'

She put the napkin down and looked at me with the eyes of a girl, letting all the masks slide, reassuring to me that beneath them all there was still something left, that when the facades peeled away there was still something at the core. I continued. 'Look, I don't know what you're talking about OK? And the fact is, it isn't important. What is important is the question that you have to answer so please tell me the truth. I came here with an offer, an offer for the three of us. If the child is mine, then I'll take

my inheritance and use the money to set up a home for us in London. I have three thousand here and I can borrow another ten. We can go to your mother's house in the Urals and arrange all the paperwork from there.'

She didn't reply, just sat thinking of how to go on, of how to put all the pieces together.

'Did I tell you that Sergei is from the Urals,' she said, with the half smile she did so well. 'That's how we met. We are from the same town. There's so much industry there, it's not healthy to be there. Sergei has had problems with his health because of it.'

'What do you mean?' I asked sensing, from intonation, that she was being cryptic.

'You want truth? Huh, the truth...' and she looked off towards the theatre across the garden, as if her twenty years had been twenty thousand, the sun breaking out from behind the clouds, some small consolation, but not nearly enough to satisfy her vision.

'The truth is Sergei knows about you, knew about you. He let it continue because he couldn't give me what he wanted. And now he has what he wants. This is the truth.'

The waitress came over with the coffee. I said nothing and waited for Olga to continue, ignoring the cups and the service, my silence an invitation. She sipped from her cup, then pushed her hair off her face, preparing to get to the business at hand.

'Who do you think you are, Leo?' she said, speaking gravely for the first time. 'You're only here now because I begged for you, made him promise not to do anything until the child is born. He said he could forgive the rape only if I could forget it. Do you understand? If I could forget it.'

'Rape?' I gasped.

‘Of course, you raped me Leo, he knows that. What do you expect him to think? I asked you to come to tell you to go. Don’t come to the house again, don’t call the house again. Forget everything. Go home and find someone else. This is no place for you. Do you understand? Forget!’ and she waved her hand away as punctuation.

‘It’s not so simple. I love you and...’

‘Ne nada, please,’ she said dismissively. Really there’s no need.

‘Let me finish. It’s you who doesn’t understand. There are options. We can leave and go to London and start again. I have money, a lot of money. Half a million dollars. We can do what we want, fuck Sergei.

‘Ti prosta... you’re a dreamer, Leo, you know,’ she said, exasperated.

‘Those are Sergei’s words, not yours. You’re too young to be so cynical. Why throw your life in the bin for a rubbish husband. Come on, wake up, what are you thinking about?’

‘No, you really are a dreamer.’

I put the three thousand dollars on the table.

‘This will pay for the medical care, where-ever we go. We can leave tonight and I’ll have another ten in a week.’

For the first time she seemed unsure, confused.

‘And in London, you can study and make your own life, free to do what you want. He can’t touch us there. We can start again. No more lies.’

‘What lies?’ she quizzed, conditioned to reach for a face, for a cover, whenever she was confronted by a slight.

‘You know what I mean,’ I said.

‘I don’t. Really,’ and she once more became very calm. ‘I asked you to come to help you. If you don’t want to listen, that’s your choice. But I know Sergei. He won’t lose. People die in this city every day. Every day!’

‘And children are born every day. I mean what did you expect from me. To smile and pack my bags, kiss on the cheek and off I go. Wake up Olga.’

I went for the coffee and took a gulp, waiting for her to reply but I could see she was all upside down. Silence was sometimes the best speech, no matter how it was received.

‘I didn’t want you to know,’ she said softly, after what seemed like several minutes. ‘I thought you had left, had your fun and gone home. It was like seeing a ghost when we saw you.’

‘We?’ I said. ‘I see. He was driving.’ It had occurred to me but the fact was still a surprise.

‘Of course, didn’t you know?’ and she gave a little laugh. ‘Well you should know. Ever since that moment...’ and she lost her thread, continuing, ‘everything was so perfect in America but now... He knows I’m here right now. Panimayesh? You’re being watched. You keep coming to the house, ti prosta...’ and she shook her head before resuming her composure. ‘But don’t worry. I’ll walk you back to the metro. Nothing will happen when you’re with me.’

‘I’m glad you think so,’ I replied, un-nerved for the first time, shaken but not wanting to show it, adding without thinking, ‘a taxi driver pulled a gun on me last night... crazy,’ realising immediately I was compounding her case. I was too tired, I wasn’t thinking straight. I wanted something from the rehearsed conversations, the ones in my head that I’d proved.

‘What happened,’ she asked, concerned.

‘Ah, you know, the usual,’ I said, trying to play it down. ‘We agreed a hundred then he wanted three hundred. All show, you know?’

‘It’s no place for you here,’ she said.

‘It’s no place for you either,’ I replied, back on track.

‘But it’s different for Russians. You don’t understand that.’

‘I don’t understand anything here, least of all the people. I don’t understand why you would want a child, but not the father, or how you would explain to that child that his real father was nice enough but daddy Sergei had him killed so we could all live happily ever after. I don’t understand how you could live with that?’

‘Well, perhaps you’re learning something about Russia at last,’ she replied without emotion.

I tried a different tack. ‘You never told me about your father. Tell me, what was he like?’

‘Please, not the first course in psychology,’ she replied, feigning offence.

‘Seriously, I’m interested. Tell me about him. Is he alive? Tell me something?’

‘It’s a cliché. Father was a drunk. Life was terrible. What do you want? Tears? Then I throw my arms around you? Love that lasts forever. All those books are old. This is a new world. I want the best for Sereozh and for me,’ she said, unflinchingly, ‘whatever the price. Spend a year in the Urals, then give me your pretty philosophy. Really Leo, we were fuck buddies remember. Sergei liked that expression of yours. It consoled him. God knows he has his own. But now, today, suddenly you’re Prince Myshkin, come to save me from a terrible fate.’

‘You decide your fate,’ I interrupted. ‘You want the best for the child. That’s what I want, the best for you and my son. So we have a common interest. We can start today, forgetting what has happened and starting

again. You have to know it's the right thing to do. If you didn't you wouldn't have called me.'

'I called you to warn you.'

'You called me two months ago when I didn't even know about the child. First course in psychology? I suppose it was an accident, wrong number. Come on, Olga,' and I put my hand on the money, seeing from her expression that she was listening.

'Just don't talk love,' she sighed in response. 'My only interest as you say was to give you a chance. I did my part. My conscience is clear. If they find you dead outside your apartment building with two shots in your head and one in your heart then it was your choice. Know this is real. You look terrible. Eat, sleep. Take your money and go to the sanitorium, or better, go home. I'm staying in Moscow until the baby is born, so don't worry about me. And don't call. Go and rest, get out of the city. And when I have some news I'll call you. Panimayesh? You understand? Nu, efsyo, that's all. I'm going to eat my salad and then take you to the metro. And while I eat you can tell me about YOUR father, I'm interested.'

I could see I'd done enough and sat back in my chair, knowing she was too young not to sway, her plans washed over with a little spit and dollars.

'My father was a weasel,' I said, 'then one day he went pop. And that was the end of that.'

Part Three

1

Two weeks later I arrived home to find Ivan in my chair, cast against the window frame, the curtains open. Outside on the street, a blizzard was raging, the last trolley buses, passengerless, depot bound, driving through the snow and on up to the end of the line, the swipe of wet snowflakes settling on the roofs and sills, the domes and doorways, all laid down before the storm and the promise it brought, ahead and behind and all around, the business of the first winter having returned.

Here the story began, for that afternoon I'd been with Nadia in the billiard hall. I remember the walls were postered, that the entrance stank of urine, the ferret and his boot boys, the Kafkatzis who saved the day. All of these thoughts are fixed now, amplified, complicated by what would pass, by co-incidence which reads like an act of God. After we had left the bar we had trudged for hours to Sokolniki Park, lost to the city, as if there wasn't a city, only the primitive earth, whited out and crossed with a million trees, with birch and maple, limes and poplars, stalks of grass and dead leaves sticking out in clumps, patches of rowanberry, in front the path un-trampled, neither I nor Nadia looking back to the billiard hall, our tracks known to no-one, the world of things having disappeared before us under the burgeoning crush of soft white ice.

This was her Russia, her Moscow, not the filth of the thoroughfares, or the pomp of Red Square. This was what she saw when she looked out of her window, all her life, turning with the seasons, through lime and green to lemon and yellow, brown, red and gold and finally white; Russia left to its

own devices, prime and unyielding, running as far as the eye could see. We had parted with a kiss at the entrance to her house, her mysterious house into which I was never invited, then I'd shuffled off towards the metro, in the midst of the blizzard, the snowflakes like down, innumerable and delicate, swirling vortexes, spinning out the back of the market stalls, the last vendors closing up for the night, pulling down the tarpaulins, fastening the doors and shutters, the others already gone, finding their way home to warm rooms, as I went on down the escalators of the metro, past the billboards and the advertising, the girl on the poster, sweet fifteen, with love on her lips, catching my eye every day for a month, on along to Komsomolskaya, spare change for legless soldiers who were singing for their supper, then through the doors at Prospect Mira, thinking of going back to Kurskaya and the Boar House for a little chicken and beer but knowing I was running late, that Svetlana was waiting, that the money was rolling in and that I wanted to roll with it. When I entered the flat though it wasn't her I found but Ivan. He was rubbing his face and when he looked up and caught my eye he began to laugh.

'Leo,' he said. 'Leo. I have something for you. I have two things for you. This one,' and he poured a glass of vodka, 'and this one,' and he threw me a two thousand dollar money roll. 'It's from my mother fucker father. He's a dragon you know. A mother fucker dragon father. My mother is in hospital. Yes, she's not well and papa sends you his best wishes from his study room. He has plans you know. Big plans,' and he threw his arms out and opened his eyes exaggeratedly. 'I'm going to marry Ducia. And he is going to the Duma. Perhaps he'll be the president one day.'

He gave me the drink and I threw it back dramatically, the money in my hand prompting bravado.

‘Have you checked the mail?’ I asked.

‘Two more are coming from London,’ he replied.

‘Not bad eh? You’re going to be rich,’ I added. ‘So how do you feel about Ducia?’

‘I don’t feel anything. He tricked me. My mother is sick because of that fucking blyad...’ and he trailed off with a volley of unintelligible Russian.

I, myself, didn’t want to get into it. I didn’t care about Ducia or about how Ivan felt about Ducia. I had money in my hand and a stack more in my room. Immunity. Only the situation forced such banal small talk. When the work ended, I’d never see Ivan again but until that moment I would be polite.

So what will you do?’ I asked.

He picked up the vodka. ‘What can I do,’ he said softly and he poured another pair.

‘You can do what you want,’ I replied.

He looked at me blankly for a moment then got up.

‘Eta ne pravda.’ It’s not true. ‘You’re a dreamer.’

It struck me that Olga had said the same thing. All the possible word combinations and everyone came up with the same half dozen. Any momentary sympathy for Ivan vanished in a flash and I put my hands in my coat pocket, which I hadn’t taken off.

‘I’m dreaming of leaving,’ I said. I’ve had enough of this place. You were right when you said it was no place for me. It feels like the walls are closing in. Do you ever feel like the walls are physically closing in Ivan, closer and closer with every tick, and whatever you do, tick, tack, tock, it

won't make a difference, click, clack, clock. I don't know how you manage here.'

He looked older than ever, as if a sickness had finally shown its form, a new Ivan, the sweetness turned sour, his father's son, grappling, blind drunk for clues.

'I'm Russian first. That's how. What is a piece of paper anyway?'

I looked at my money roll.

'What kind of paper?' I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'It's all the same.'

'You're young,' I said. 'You're allowed to be idealistic. It's only when you're forty that you have to be rich. You've got plenty of time yet. Have some fun. Be yourself.'

'He said there are those who do and those who dream. He wants me to do, to use his experience and be someone, ti znayesh?'

I looked at him, his feminine air being crushed by the ever pressing battery of his ancestry. Perhaps they'd make a man of him yet.

'Why don't you take a couple of weeks in London?' I suggested.

'No. I need to be here for Mama. She needs me. I don't know what is going to happen next.' And that became my lasting impression of Ivan, a poor little rich boy, moaning for mummy.

Suddenly Svetlana appeared. She had been with the judge and wasn't surprised in the least to find us drinking. She seemed pre-occupied and spent several minutes hovering by the kitchen table, randomly touching objects and tidying papers without any real purpose. Ivan excused himself and went to the bathroom clearing the way for Svetlana to speak, my hands once more in my coat pockets.

‘Leo, I tried to call you earlier. Did you get the money?’ she asked.

I nodded and showed her the roll.

‘Not bad eh?’ I said.

‘It’s good,’ she said, as if crossing off from a checklist in her head and moving on to the next item.

‘I’m pleased for you. You have worked hard and deserve it. How is everything? Normalna? she asked, awkwardly.

‘Da, normalna. How about you?’

‘Very busy, very busy,’ the repetition buying time. ‘I received a phone call this afternoon. I’m sorry it is such short notice but... and she ummed and ahed before finally saying, ‘well...Tatiana is coming the day after tomorrow and I wanted to ask you if you could stay at the house in Otradnoe. There are some clients coming, I know, but you could stay there until you find something else and they would probably like you being there.’

I was speechless for a moment, shocked. When I finally gathered myself I managed to mutter ‘of course, no problem... I hadn’t meant to stay so long in the first place. I can pack in the morning and go over there tomorrow afternoon. No problem.’

‘I’m happy it’s OK’ she said, physically relieved. ‘I didn’t want you to have to leave but I don’t have a choice. I’ve enjoyed you being here very much. And all the work. Well... we are all very grateful,’ and she looked at me like I was a wounded animal.

I felt a sudden repulsion towards her, envisioning her when I first arrived when she used to keep urine in the fridge. Piss by the thimbleful. I never asked her about it but I assumed she drank it, as was the fashion. It disappeared one day and didn’t re-appear. Perhaps she took it at room temperature now.

‘You’ve done so much for me Svet. I’ll always be grateful,’ I replied, but the words felt hollow in my mouth.

‘You’re welcome,’ she said and she came to me and hugged me gently. ‘We’ll speak tomorrow. And of course you’ll continue to visit and we will have nice times. I think it will be good for you to have your own flat, don’t you think? No old women around to disturb you. In a month you’ll ask yourself why you waited so long,’ and with it she pressed my arm and wished me goodnight.

My day changed from that moment. We live within spheres of possibility, our interactions dictated by our state, only Gods making things, the rest of us being made, passing from one phase to the next by touch or by shove, and so as she went and took a chunk of my life with her, I was left to recover against the back of the couch.

My only instinct when Ivan re-appeared was to leave as quickly as possible.

‘I’m going to see Nadia,’ I said casually, although I had no real intention of it, merely wishing to detach myself from the people and the place, for there comes with rejection a sudden revulsion when one knows that it is irrecoverable. My overwhelming feeling, however, was one of relief, as if I’d been granted a reprieve, two less strings with which to tie up my life. The city begged, the charmed city, where a glance could strip the pick of the bunch and lead it off to some place quiet, where squeals were numbed by a silent reckoning and eyes held fastidiously to the earth

When Ivan thrust out his soft white hand it was as if I’d just arrived at Sheremetyevo.

‘Good luck Leo,’ he said. ‘I’ll speak to you tomorrow. And thank you for your advices.’

‘You’re welcome,’ I replied as I left, not knowing if he was being sarcastic or sincere, adding ‘and it’s advice, not advices. It’s uncountable.’

‘Da, da, of course,’ he said, ‘thank you for your advice. And I’ll see you tomorrow I hope.’

‘Of course,’ I said, with no intention of it.

And with that I closed the door behind me and never opened it again.

It was in the lift, descending, that Olga came to mind. Outside, the storm was full blown, williwaws blistering down the sides of houses, screeching winds fastening around all objects, tearing at joints and roots, clouds of snow flying on eddies in all directions, funnels of powder skirting the pavement, sticking to the shadows of filth, layer upon layer, deeper and deeper, as my feet sank into the white earth, destination known and unknown. It was starting to get late, perhaps around ten, the crowds all dead in front of their T.V’s and computers, as I searched out a final scene, what the Americans call closure. Again on the metro, again the sex child with sex lips, again the soldiers with no legs and a collection box, a pregnant woman stood for want of a seat, a weasel type with a baltika beer bottle, a fat girlfriend laughing like a hyena, round and round on the circle line, changing at Park Kulturi and taking the red line to the river, looking back up to Sokolniki and thinking of Nadia and the afternoon in the forest and all the possibilities that could have been but for the weight of a life. I wondered as I went if it was Svetlana who had brought about my action, or was it Ivan, or Nadia or the Judge or Olga. Where did it start? Moaning for mummy and daddies? What else? The boulevard of fucking A’s, the Audis and Citroen’s all the same, the wind dropping at last, the snow all down on the ground, the air empty, the world stopping, on and on, winter to winter, a light on in

Olga's room as I crossed the square, the path well trampled, carelessness to crucifixion.

‘Had they really played me back then?’ I wondered. ‘Had they really both known all along?’

I'd like to imagine that as I went I saw it all. The first moments in a classroom on Tverskaya, then on to the dark bars on Dmitrovka, the overly tender kiss on the cheek, then the light of the Conservatory the first time, up in the balcony behind the crowds, her hand finding mine, her fingers lying sprawled high on my thigh, the smell of sex making me ache, Shostakovitch a cover for intimacies, Tchaikovsky and Beethoven looking on, a world of ideas undermining all laws. From the trace that those hours left behind, I conclude there was no game, that Sergei knew nothing. There are moments in our lives, divine moments, that are extra-ordinary, to the point of being fated. If not for that, I wouldn't have dragged myself through the snow to the river. I've since thought that I was delirious, that my actions were those of an animal, who, loose of reason, heard the call of his flesh and blood. But wasn't it the money roll that gave me licence, that and the push out the door? My life had been a journey along the path of least resistance, carried along on a wave of relative wealth. I belonged to the half that have and felt that was enough to do as I pleased, my philosophy a crutch and a counterweight to desire, insensitive to the scales as they tipped with time, ideals ripped up by the facts of life. Where go now in this dark time, senseless, parents in the ground, epitaphs written on cold stone, born and died, numbers, the gasps between inaudible, the dowry counted in digits not deeds, the facts hidden there in that snow covered earth, where go now when the wind blows in from all corners and I'm cut off from kind, an island in a desert of ice, wanting to scream and yell and have my time yet never the time to have it.

I arrived at the entrance and pressed the bell. Within an hour I was in the same room as my son.

2

The door to the waiting room was locked, a young nurse, of about twenty five, coming and opening it in response to my knocks. Her initial response was to tell me that there was no visiting in the evening but when I said it was my wife and it was our first child she said that it was possible but it meant her risking her job. I gave her twenty dollars and she went for the register.

‘Sedmoi etazh,’ she said, seventh floor, and had me put on plastic boot covers and a gown and mask before escorting me to the lift. For some reason I thought she was coming with me but she simply wished me luck and went back to hover by the door. I pressed for the seventh floor and the lift closed but didn’t move. I kept pressing the button but there was no response. Eventually I pressed for the doors to open and stepped back into the waiting room where the nurse I’d paid the money to, without a hint of surprise, suggested it might be quicker to walk. She pointed me on my way and left me wondering how Olga had come to choose such a place. It was common to be recommended a doctor, whom you then paid on the side, wherever they worked. The government salary was a pittance so the good doctors made their living by reputation, taking cash for preferential treatment in a state hospital. I presumed that was the case.

‘No doubt Sergei’s doing,’ I thought. ‘Peasant!’ He hadn’t escaped my mind. At their house I’d been careful to note if his car was there, again

when I arrived at the hospital. Both times it was conspicuous by its absence. I'd taken Olga's warning to heart but it had weakened over the weeks, though I continued to skirt around as far as they were both concerned, avoiding Naberezhnaya and Nikolskaya and conscious to avoid Sergei by all means possible. I was happy to come and collect my son, and with his mother, to taxi to a hotel and put the past to rest but as for all the threats and bravado, it stank of machismo, the very machismo that I encountered every time in the classroom with Sergei, as he filled his lungs between cell calls and breathed out his stink, a prophet of the new truth.

‘There'll be no more humble pie for me, Sereozh! No more, no more. You can off to your new town, the place of your birth, with its haze of poisoned air, with its lead water and asbestos, with its thrown up tower blocks, lit up at night, glowing red by the furnaces, by the factories blowing death, take your dumb cock and your shrivelled prostate back where they came from, and if not there, wherever you choose to roam. For it is of no importance whatsoever. There will be no heirs to your fortune Sergei, there will be nothing and no-one.’

I continued up the stairs. It was hot in the mask and gown and I could feel the sweat coming to my neck. I pulled the mask from my face so I could breathe more easily but as I approached my floor and came across a group of nurses I was glad to pull it back on, the get up acting like a badge of permission, the wearing of which gave me to go where I pleased.

Finally I arrived on the seventh floor and turned into the main unit where a middle-aged nurse with dark skin was browsing through several files which were scattered on the desk before her.

‘Pazhalsta,’ she said, please, it being both an offer and request.

‘Dobri vecher. Olga Ramazanova zdes? I asked, pulling down my mask a little so as to speak more clearly.

‘Olga Ramazanova,’ and she went for one of the files before her and taking it, looked up, inquisitively.

‘A kto vi?’ And who are you?

‘Ya atyets,’ I replied matter of fact, I’m the father.

‘Adnoo minootky,’ she replied, one minute, ‘ Vam nada pagavorit cvrachom,’ you need to speak to the doctor, and she went off with the file, it striking me that she wore neither a mask nor boot covers, that, in fact, nobody wore masks or boot covers, though, as they seemed non-plussed by mine, I’d do well to keep them on.

Momentarily, she returned, aided by a serious looking man in his fifties, glasses on the tip of his nose, a clipped grey beard, his head bent down so he could inspect me at a distance. They spoke briefly as he flicked through the file, him nodding intently, perhaps to assure her, perhaps to hasten her along, before she turned and walked away and the doctor came over to me and the reception desk, where he placed the file back on the table and put his hand out by way of introduction.

What I remember most of that man was that I understood barely a word he said. Whether he was drunk or mad or simply suffered from a slurring impediment I don’t know, but what came out his mouth made no sense to me at all, only bits and pieces intelligible, the fact that Olga was in the end room with the child being enough for me to act.

‘Ya pagaveriyu sney nimnoga,’ I said, I’ll speak with her a little.

‘Da, da,’ he replied, his head shaking like a woodpecker’s, ‘idi,idi,’ go,go.

I walked the length of the hall, looking in through several doors, most of which had the lights down low, there being a stillness there in the midst of life, the hour no doubt approaching midnight. Finally I arrived at Olga's door and gently turned the handle to let myself in. The light was lit and she held the baby in her arms, un-motioning, barely registering my arrival, her face blank, her mouth open but still. She finally turned to me and stared at me for the longest time.

I think back now to the time on Komergersky Pereulok, when all our devils were quieted, arm in arm we went, our left heels cutting the snow, I was looking for you, 'I was looking for you' she had said, her skin, an ecstasy, a miracle, and thinking that the world could end if it ended there and then, that there could be nothing more from this gravel strewn ball to make the sky worth the work. But we speak too soon. Our days creep on and bring new fruit to bear and haggard eyes tire for what was, the past being for the mind. There must be fresh meat, new blood, wasn't that why we were here, to pretend play God, to action out an apprenticeship in creation, the juice of kings and queens mixed up in a tower, till nine months on, he comes, born asleep, breathless, uncoiled from his mother then wrapped in a starched white rag. For this I was born. For this I was here. My fate was to freeze and stay frozen, if not born asleep, to live asleep, protected by a layer of impermeable ice.

'And of the boy, how did I know he was dead? What is it, at these times, that so unfolds? There are spheres of consciousness that exist like the flicker of a flame, fleeting moments in which, to us, our nature is revealed, as if he had a heart and was willing, at the hour of death, to spare us the misery of this place, to answer the question our mouths have yet to ask. As

real as the moment was, however, it could never be enough for me and my brutal world.

I pulled the mask from my face and spoke. ‘What happened?’

She looked away, to little Sergei Sergeiyevitch, moving the white swaddling cloth from his face and stroking his cheek. The sight of him killed me, and a terrible wave came over me such that I had never felt.

‘What happened?’ I repeated, hesitantly. ‘Olga? Olga?’

But she didn’t hear me. All that she wanted to hear had gone.

Perhaps if my world had not been so upside down I would have felt some compassion. I often wonder why I loathed her so in that moment, why I detested her for her failure. Perhaps I felt something different which now has slipped from my memory in light of what came to pass but what I take as being my thoughts at the time are that what lay before me in the bed was only a shell and that once the boy was squeezed out of her, there was nothing left inside of her. Her face seemed to have shrunk and grown twisted, from her brow ran down the deepest lines, her white lips contorted and cruel, her teeth yellowing, her breath, rancid. From Kommergersky Pereulok, we had flown to this. She gazed at me for the longest time and given the nature of her glare I grew to hate her, to despise her, lying there as she did, an empty tomb, she looked at me and hated me so I looked at her and hated her, looked until I could bear it no more.

I put my hands to my eyes and pushed the tears back then, the nurse who had met me at reception entering the room with the news that Olga’s husband was downstairs and did she want to see him. The nurse seemed confused by the message and suggested that I might want to leave now and come back later.

I turned to the two of them, to Olga and my son, the three of us there together, the fruition of our play.

‘You should listen to her, Leo. You should leave. You’re cursed here.’

‘We’re all cursed,’ I replied, flatly, ‘we’re all cursed.’

But she shook her head and inhaling deeply handed the body to the nurse.

‘Spasiba,’ she said, thankyou, and the nurse disappeared with the dead boy in her arms, Olga looking to me, her eyes flaming, saying with all the belief in the world, ‘it’s not true.’

3

Once the child had gone, I quickly followed and walked on down the hall. It was finished with Olga.

The elevator was still not working so I took to the stairs. I knew Sergei would be coming up the same way so I put the mask back on and put my head down. I just wanted to be out of there, he was welcome to his luxury.

‘She’s up there like a robbed grave,’ I thought, ‘she’s all yours. Not that there’s much you can do for her.’

What a couple they were, the leading lights, the new Russians. I saw him through the stair well and bit my bottom lip. Like an ostrich, I turned my eyes from him, his face also obscured by a mask, but I knew he hadn’t seen me. I paused after we had passed and looked back but he was hurrying up the stairs, be-gowned and blue bootied, his pinstripe suit only visible

below the knee. All the hours I had spent in the contemplation of that man and his wife, all the scheming and deceiving, all the words not worth speaking, not worth hearing. Did he know what he was rushing too, what catastrophe lay before him. There was no man born who could suffer that in a place like this.

I waved goodbye to the lady who collected the money and made my way out onto the street. It had stopped snowing, the thermometer way down, a crust of ice lying all around, glistening and pristine, everything trapped now under the blanket, wrapped up and breathless, the long night finally dawned, there being nothing in sight, no sign of life anywhere. Immediately the cold began to act and bring me into its fold, the road down to Savelofskaya starved of cars, no taxis to flag, no transport to hurry me along.

The ice cracked below my feet and my thoughts once more began to slow and unravel, a pack of dogs my only distraction.

‘What is it that I could eat? Something warm, anything warm. I could go to The Boar House and get me a little duck. Ha! And what of it? To spend your money and get nothing? No, no, no. There’ll be no cerebral misgivings tonight. Not tonight. We must celebrate the passing of little Sergei Sergeivitch. He was your boy you know. Your boy. And they took him from you. Perhaps they wanted his kidneys or his liver, perhaps they’re cutting out his organs right now, bargaining for the best price. So how about it? Something fresh from Siberia perhaps, from Irkutsk or Ulan Ude? ‘Leave me alone dogs, I warn you now is not the time. Something sweet some place quiet. Then when I’m done, I’ll have another and another, sweeter and sweeter and each one on her knees will beg me to take her away from this hellish place, to save her from you dogs. If you bother me tonight

I swear I'll take one of you and pull your legs apart, and even if you all pounce on me at once, you should know that at least one of you will have his heart torn in two, that his bones will be snapped like wood. Do you understand? Ponyil? That's right, shuffle off to your dark yards and leave me alone. I've paid enough for my time in this city. I'm owed something in return. No more Olga, no more.'

Who can say what other thoughts ran through my mind except the madness of the age, the madness of rootlessness, for I see now that I was delirious, that I had become a beast, the rantings of my brain being those of a man whose brain wasn't right, whose conscience had frozen with the season, unaccustomed to such extremes. As for the Boar House, perhaps I would have gone there if I'd had the legs for it, but tramping through the snow, I began to fade physically. When I considered going home however, I remembered how it had been and how, in my present state, I, more than anything, wished just to leave, to go to Sheremetyevo and fly away. I had my passport in my pocket and a bundle of cash.

'Why not,' I thought, 'I'll leave tonight, fly east.' The idea spurred me on, encouraged me.

'Maintain a singular mind, Leo; a plan,' I thought to myself. Taxi, then pack, the airport, then away. Now is the time to go.'

I caught a taxi near Savelofskaya and headed back to Svetlana's, suffering, in the front seat, the smell of cheap cigarettes. The driver, a young Muscovite, late twenties, offered me the pack and although I didn't smoke, I took one and lit it up. He asked me if I liked rock and I said it was okay as he played with the radio settings until he found something he thought was suitable. It was an uneventful ride through bleary streets I didn't recognize until finally we came to my district and without a dozen

words having passed between us I paid him the fare and got out. It was Friday night but the street was desolate. I walked around to the side of the building, towards the entrance and noticed two men stood beside it, one of them leaning against the wall, a scarf around his mouth the other, decked out in black leather, legs spread-eagled, arms folded. It was usual for groups to congregate in these areas, to drink and smoke with the neighbours, the tower block entrance fulfilling the role of the cafe or bar. I wished them both good evening and they returned the greeting, Leather Boy asking if I might have a cigarette, there being, in my right hand, the stub of the one from the cab.

‘Oo menya nyetoo,’ I replied, I don’t have any.

‘Vi Anglichaanin?’ he asked, are you English?’

‘Da,’ I replied.

‘Nash drook,’ he replied significantly, our friend.

But I wasn’t their friend. The one against the wall suddenly sprung up with a whip-lash motion and told his partner to wait a minute, that he wanted to have a look, that he wanted to be sure. He pulled a picture from out of his pocket and put it to my face.

‘Ti pomnish eta?’ he asked, do you remember this?’

It was a picture of Olga, the two of us, kissing outside the flat at Medvyedkava.

‘Nyet,’ I replied, looking up to the taxi, its tail-lights disappearing in the distance.

‘Eta ni ya,’ it’s not me, I grunted casually.

‘Nyet?’ he quizzed, feigning surprise. ‘A menya? Pomnish menya? Do you remember me?’

He pulled the scarf from his face, grinning his acned grin. It was the Ferret from the pool bar that afternoon.

‘Drook, kak dyla?’ I asked, friend how are you? ‘Paidyom,’ let’s go.

I suggested we have a drink to celebrate, that we go inside to my flat and open a bottle, that it was ‘prosta oodivitel'naya’, simply amazing, that we had met again and that we should drink to it, as is the custom. They were impressed, the Ferret turning to his mate and repeating ‘prosta oodivitel'naya,’ it striking him as much as it struck me, that we had found ourselves together out the front of my house. He spat in the snow then spoke to my face:

‘Ti znayish,’ you know,

‘Ya bi hatyil y on tozhe,’ I’d like to and so would he,

‘no nam nada shas rabotat zhe.’ but we have work right now.

‘Sledishiye raz, mozhit bit,’ Next time, maybe.

Perhaps he’d been reading about the Indian prince who stuck pins in slaves, intrigued at how certain parts of the body are more sensitive than others. Either way, with a single smash to the chin he kicked me off my feet and buried my fresh bleeding face in the fresh laden snow.

4

The night rolled on, a calculus without end. A cold dream. The sunlight dead in my eyes for a moment, then returning, blazing red and orange, fabulous greens and purples and blues, all blazing and shimmering, sea rollers spraying the shore, the room turned upside down, my face turned crystalline, cracks beginning to form in my skull, hairline fractures like the doors of a lift, my fingers pushing in between the gaps, squeezing them apart, enough to let in the outer layers, the sky of my mind, the blazing light

flooding out, brightening the darkness, the sea in the distance, the sound of its tides like a song, slowly whispering, barely audible, then growing as I pass through the doors, the waves are rich, they are clattering and smashing on the sand all around, sounds like words, a spray of words, frozen mid-air, like the pieces of a puzzle unfolded and spilt on an icy beach. There I am on the frozen beach listening...

Coaaa, coaaa, ssssssssssss, coaaaaa, sssssss, coaaaast, ghoaaaa, ghoaaaa, ghoaaast, coast ghosssst towwwnn, towwn, sssssss, coasst ghosssst, towwn, coasst ghosssst towwn...

It is here I am born, on a deserted beach, on the Cornish coast, the wind blustery, the rain cold, my skin wrapped up from it, feeling nothing, hearing nothing, only seeing. I begin to walk and find a boy playing with pebbles, licking the frost from them, his face, pale almost blue, his tongue, blue also. Leather Boy is behind me with the Ferret and they want to give him a cigarette. 'His tongue will freeze,' they warn.

'He doesn't smoke,' I say; they disappear.

Further along the beach we see a carousel turning, with children all aboard the beautiful horses all white and red and gold, with precious stones embedded into their saddles and stirrups, the jingle jangle of some strange melody, Alyoshka, for I see it is him, running on ahead and getting on a horse, the owner waving me over with his arm. When I get to him I see it's the Armenian taxi driver, his eyes, blue green, 'don't forget,' he says, 'ti sam,' you too!

He had cursed me. The taxi driver had cursed me.

I feel I understand everything that has passed before.

'So what can I do?' I ask.

‘Who knows?’ and I realise that somewhere else I am being kicked in the back and stamped on by Leather Boy and the Ferret, it being somehow connected to cigarettes and Alyoshka, the pain like a memory out of reach.

‘Why is it so cold?’ I ask, pulling the hood of my coat up, but the taxi driver has gone. Alyoshka appears.

‘Papa likes Alyoshka?’ he asks, and I know that he will cry if I say no, so I nod although it’s a lie. We set off along the beach, the ground not sand, but gravel and grit, with rubbish all about and icy slime making it difficult to walk. We find ourselves in a maze of housing, with people rushing by through a narrow alleyway and I have to hold tightly to the boy’s hand so as not to lose him. Eventually we turn into a side street and I recognize my building. We are in a car and have to pay the Armenian taxi driver for the fare. I give him three hundred and we shake hands. The Ferret and Leather Boy are by the door of the tower block. They are courteous and cordial towards us. I thank them both for everything and wish them good luck. Once up on our floor of the building I notice the doors are all open. We enter the room, and I tell Alyoshka to be polite to the Judge, whom I know is there. Olga comes into the room with the white swaddling cloth. ‘The doctors saved him,’ she says, but I can’t look and she hands the baby to Alyoshka. In another room, to the left, the Judge is counting money with Nadia, who is on her knees. Nadia stands up and speaks, ‘I’m ready now,’ she says, ‘come on, we’ll be late.’

I go to a church with Nadia and she speaks to the priest to let us in. He tells me to take my hood off and wait at the back. Up by the alter I see a woman in a white dress. She has a black veil over her face and I know she is crying. The priest has performed an exorcism. I push past the on-lookers and make my way to the alter. There is a dinner table there, with four places

set. A grandfather clock chimes and the ceremony begins. The priest tells me I may kiss the bride. I lift up the veil and it's my mother. Suddenly I'm ten feet from her and as I approach I realise she is screaming.

There is a bed and I lie down and rest, exhausted. The sky is no longer dazzling with colour, but grows paler and paler, darker and darker. The cracks are closing. The sky of my mind is disappearing. Eventually there is nothing but dark matter and ice. I pull my coat around me and listen to the breaths of those around me. Finally they disappear also and there is only my own breath. I realise I'm wearing a jacket of ice which is covering me completely. I'm freezing in it and begin to peel it away, bit by bit, first from my mouth and nose and eyes, then from my ears and head. It has the texture of chewing gum but when I flex my fingers it becomes very brittle and hard and I can pull it off in larger strips. I discover a zip and undo it all the way to my toes then struggle to climb from the suit. Now I am naked.

The voice has continued throughout my undressing and I know that the voice is real. I am looking up at her. She is holding my hand, whispering my name.

'Leo, it's me. Fsyo budit harasho. Everything is going to be alright.'

She strokes my brow, strokes my temple and hair. I open my eyes. I am in a hospital room. My head is laid sideways on a pillow. Outside it is snowing. Beside me is Nadia.

Epilogue

I am alone now, the Jurassic cliffs at Saltburn a solace, my penance to wander the ifs and the mights. It is with this view, with the unbroken line of

the North sea as zenith that I look back to those final days in Moscow, my head hell, my body a ruin.

The physics of it were that it took several weeks to recover from the beating. My nose was broken along with ribs, shoulder bone, wrist and fingers.

On regaining full consciousness I screamed to Nadia for my belongings. I found my phone but the money roll was gone. I called Svetlana, twenty, forty ,sixty, eighty a hundred. She came only once and gave me a key to a flat in the suburbs.

‘Your belongings are there,’ she said, ‘a little box, too,’ her back stuck to the cubicle wall like ice that cracks when twisted from its space. ‘When you are finished there, let me know.’ I never saw her again.

‘Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred. I left the hospital four days later, dragged myself to a taxi and made my way to a miserable one room hovel in Himki where I found a note, the shoebox and a neat pile of belongings.

At first Nadia came every day to visit, brought vegetables and meat to make soup as well as cakes and tea and milk. Only after a week or two did the visits become less frequent, until eventually, after a while, she disappeared from my life.

Not that I blamed her, for when I looked in the mirror it was a horror show. My face had been sliced like a piece of ham, a three inch scar running from my eye to my upper lip and although my bones would mend and the bruises fade, my face would bear indefinitely the mark of that evening on Prospect Mira as if the city had struck me with its branding iron and the wound left indelibly frozen for all to see.

As to the others, they were ghosts, apparitions of the mind, Ivan and Olga, all of them, ghosts gone forever.

I decided to leave Moscow and bought an atlas in the underpass of the metro at Altuphyevo. I poured over every page, imagining myself there, how I might fit. I thought about Gabon and Vietnam, Guatemala and Greece. But I needed time to recover. On a grey rainy day several weeks after the beating I boarded a flight from Sheremetyevo. 12 hours later I was opening a door in Saltburn, England.

Be he a devil or be he a god who sports the fabric of his soul ?

And for what? Nothing I suppose, nothing but a glimmer of excess in a pool of grey, what come to me now as the highlights of lowlife, the lines of a sketch, whilst all the time the very fabric is flattened to the sky, a pool indeed, whose ripples are unintelligible. And it isn't the horror that plays on my mind. The horror is plain visible, there for all to see, it's never the given that we yearn for.

We were on the sea wall looking out to the Azov Sea, a thin haze obscuring the descent of the sun which disappeared without a significant farewell, the colour of the water turning purple and green with furls of silver and white as it rolled. All around the air was warm, velvet-tongued, as welcoming as it was enveloping. It was then that I spoke to her. She'd walked down from the house and sat beside me without a word, her prolonged silence accentuating the mood of the shore.

'You know, I've always loved the sea. When I was a boy I was fascinated by it, by the idea that you could sail from our village and get to Africa where there were tigers and lions or Antarctica where there were penguins and icebergs. I even began building a boat in the garden; when there was just me and my mother in the house. I think the sea drove her

mad. She blamed men, made accusations about abuse. When I promised to tell the whole truth, I did. My step-father left and my mother never forgave me. It's a long time ago now, Nadia. It must be the sea making me reminisce. I wish I'd finished that boat, we could sail away and over the horizon. Fancy?'

She put her arm around me and squeezed me gently. 'Fancy,' she said.

'You know my parents, even though they're divorced, they're still together. I think it's good when you can't run away. You have to build something. I admire them for that.'

'True,' I said, 'I think if my parents had stayed together, my real parents, they would both have been happier. My mother was too... and I paused trying to pin it down what exactly had been our undoing. 'Too sensitive. She should have sold that sea-view and got a job. Russians are so practical, but it's because they don't have time to be otherwise. You're right when you say you have to build something. That's precisely it. Purpose.'

We paused, having satisfied ourselves momentarily, Nadia continuing 'And admire. You have to admire someone and try and copy them, you know? Whom do you admire?'

'Whom? Hmm, whom? Err...,' but I couldn't think of anyone. 'I can't think of anyone,' I said.

You see religious people admire their Gods and atheists admire their parents. If, like you, you don't admire anyone, you're betwixt, between. I like that expression,' and she repeated it as was her way with words she liked. 'Betwixt between. Ha! That's your problem you see, you need to find someone to admire.'

'Whom...'

The sea continued to unfurl. What else was I supposed to say?

‘I think I admire you. You’re the cleverest person I know and the prettiest. What about you, can I admire you?’ and I put my hand high on her thigh.

‘Of course you can, but what is it about me that you want to copy?’

I want to be young like you Nadia, to be young and innocent. But I didn’t say anything of the sort and mused instead, ‘I’d like to copy how you move and how you laugh. More than anything,’ and I kissed her softly on the cheek.

‘Kaneshna,’ she said, of course.

I could have taken her there and then, down on the sand by the waves, but she pushed my hand away and the moment passed.

‘How is it up there, anyway? He didn’t kill him did he?’ I asked, speaking of the orphanage and the beating.

‘As well as being expected.’ she replied.

‘As well as to be expected, infinitive,’ I corrected weakly, the classroom hours having conditioned me. Well one thing is for sure, we’re out of here a.s.a.p. As soon as possible. I’ll take you to Sochi tomorrow. We’ll get a decent hotel and live it up a bit, okay?’

‘Sounds good. Frankly I can’t wait,’ and without warning she jumped up and began to walk along the edge of the sea wall.

I followed suit, noting, over and above the sound of the sea, the jangling sound of a children’s song, coming from the direction where we were headed.

‘Do you hear that?’ I asked.

‘Da. Tbi znayish shto eto?’ Do you know what that is? ‘Eta karasyel. Pashli.’ It’s a carousel, let’s go.

We jumped from the wall and made our way along a path that followed the beach. After a minute or so we came around an outcropping of rock that jutted from the hill and from there saw that she was right, it was a carousel, and a beautifully decorated steam powered carousel at that, with all the boys from the orphanage aboard and Vanya at the hub working the wheel, a glass of brashka in his hand, wiping the sweat from his brow with his wrist.

‘Nu privyet gosti.’ Hello guests, ‘Buditi na karasyel?’ Will you ride on the carousel?’

The flashing strips of coloured bulbs began to hold their own in the dimming twilight, the sea continuing to creep, the sandcastles and the plans all washed away to nothing.

Slowly minutes are swimming away... don't wait to meet them again.

‘Driver go quicker, go quicker, let us rush, rush from the past,’ I said.

And so we rode.

The End