

ТИЗ

МДЛТЗЯ ІІ

СДФЗ

МФЯРИІПЗ



ТИЗ МДХТЗЯ ІІ СДҒЗ МФЯРИШПЗ

ДИОМAGE
ТО МІКHAІL BULGAKOV

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THE MASTER IN CAFÉ MORPHINE

A Homage to Mikhaïl Bulgakov

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*The Master in Cafe Morphine:
A Homage to Mikhaïl Bulgakov
is limited to 100 hand numbered copies.*

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ERA SATHANAS

TO MORPHIA &
TO THE SILENCE WHICH SINGS
FOR THOSE WITH EARS TO HEAR
& TO MIKHAIL BULGAKOV,
ARCHIVIST OF THE TWILIGHT,
EMPEROR OF THE WHITE HOUR
& CARTOGRAPHER OF INFERNO,
WITH OUR ADMIRATION
& ESTEEM.



*“The séance is over!
Maestro! Hack out a march!”*

~ Mikhail BULGAKOV

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ПІПЗ ЗЖИВІТЯ

Mark Valentine

A SKULL CAP

Mikhail Afanasyevich liked to wear a velvet skull cap with a tassel. It suited his wry sense of style and his desire to be different. It was part of the costume of a real writer.



A CAT'S WHISKER

He enjoyed the company of a smoky cat and would read it his work; an audience. He wondered once: "I don't know about the cat's dreams. It probably dreamt about dogs, but perhaps people too. And that's far more frightening."



A JAR OF BRIOLINE

He thought that his neatly parted hair, carved with hair cream, annoyed the apparatchiks: it marked him out as a bourgeois and very likely a royalist. Nevertheless, he would not change this.

Mark Valentine



A TICKET TO BATUM

There was to be a journey to the Black Sea port to research a fictional life of the General Secretary, YV. Stalin. The journey was abruptly cancelled by the authorities. Evidently the first draft was not fictional enough.



A WHITE PERIWIG

As Assistant Director at the Moscow Arts Theatre, he once also acted. He played the Judge in a drama of *The Pickwick Papers*. With a tight white periwig and a port-stained false nose, he looked the part, leaning sternly over the lectern at the defendant. When his own work was judged sternly, he read Dickens' book for solace.



AN OLD ALMANAC

He preferred the Old Style, pre-Revolutionary dates, and liked to mark saints' days, especially Michaelmas, 30 September, his name day.



Nine Exhibits

A COPY OF THE HOOTER

For a time he wrote satirical sketches for the railwaymen's paper, *The Hooter*. They were about well-meaning workmen who misinterpret Party instructions. He was paid to write six sketches a month, and said each took about twenty minutes, including time for smoking and whistling. After these, because no one would take his other work, there was plenty more time for smoking and whistling.



A STOVE TILE

Mikhail Afanasyevich's stove was one of the most well-read in Russia. It consumed many pages of his work.



A PHOTOGRAPH OF 1940

He wears round dark glasses, and furs that do not disguise austere flesh. He wrote on the photograph, to his wife Elena Sergeevna: "Don't grieve because my eyes are dark. They've always been able to tell the truth from falsehood. 11 February, 1940."



He died on 10 March 1940.

БЭЛӨНЭ СИДӨГ ТИДТ СӨМЭХ БУ ПИГИТ

Jonathan Wood

*Remorseless rain
Beat down, pale piteous monotony,
Upon the inexorable plain.*

from “*The City of God*” by Aleister Crowley

I don't know how to begin to write this. My hands shiver more with fear than the cold and more also with the understanding and realisation of what I have done. The gift of knowledge is a dangerous thing and something to be shunned, believe me. When you have drunk all the cheap vodka in the neighbourhood, you still would not feel like this; like the living dead marbled with guilt and the rot of fear. But I shall try to write and you shall read this one day when I am gone and there is no pity left for me or horror, only the separation of the fact and the history and the word of the law.

I itch like a tramp, because I am a tramp now and if I said that I was from Great Britain and had travelled to Moscow all but unnoticed then that would be true. I am an exile. All my friends are dead in mind and in body and I am now Russian in mind but British in body. I have to be. My name is now Sergei and I am many years too late, but still you will listen to me as you turn the pages of this testament. My voice will stay in your head like a story read to you by your babushka that you would like to hear and which involve a slow journey east through the rain and the mud, to see your poor relatives. You can see your own faces by the candle, lit for the expressions of wonder when a good tale unfolds.

Beloved Chaos that Comes by Night

I am now Sergei and in the deadly hush of the early winter snow you will hold me in contempt as the ash of the sky settles upon the windowsills that are left in the quarter that I have chosen. My secret, as I write, aches with the voice of a holy trumpeting angel to sing out in truth. But in truth, *we have, I have* done things that we should not have done and in my exile, these things become more acute.

I hope that there is a London bed still unslept in. My rent was paid until the autumn at least, when the memory of the war will have been expunged and the impression of my body will have subsided into merely the crying confines of an anonymous blanket. All my possessions, all my things are on the dressing table I hope, as they always were when things were somewhat normal and I was recognised for what I was. I can, even now conjure the smell of my shaving brush, alluring to the nostrils – the olfactory sex bond that all men have with themselves! A bed unslept in is a bed fecund in symbolism – my funeral shape with all my friends around me peering into the open cask. My bitter birth canal, where I loll and float in the inner ocean with its cold sky, populated by strange reptilian birds and by thoughts of the “Hollow Earth” and how to get there!

I am here now in the “Hollow Earth”, my friends, and believe me when I tell you that I am a tramp and an actor; always an actor. You must believe me when I tell you this, these words that you read now. Look at my face in the photograph pasted to the front of this notebook. Is that not the face of an actor? And actors love to cake their faces and their lives and to apply the daub of history and place and persona. See! My face looks one way in the semi-darkness, almost the “benevolent nephew” but now when you place it near to the oil lamp like I do now, what do you see? You will see what I see – the perfection of the dead man who dreams that he is alive; just for a moment, just for that fleeting reunion of love with the family that made his childhood a halcyon joy and then is gone forever in a fatal blink of the mind’s eye, where flies inhabit, licking the inner lens of sense until all that is left is gnawed memory and the eternal cancer of remorse.

My exile took place amidst the deepest refraction of my life where my mind was permanently drunk with unknowing. Be proud and uplifted if you know yourself, for truly I do not recognise me in anything.

Let me thus tell you as best I can...

Jonathan Wood

I was happy once and in my happiness before I could write this way, I was an actor, a poor but happy actor in London. I had a yen to travel and to see the world but my travelling was done purely in my mind or upon the stage where I could conjure to physical form and emotional grandeur those roles given to me. I could travel the world by being on stage. My roles were small, but in those roles I could inculcate a version of myself that was outside of me and so my happiness would increase. I was attached to a small and worthy company of players that had the regular use of a small stage down in the East End of London. It was noisy, it was grimy, it was all but a hovel, but the smell of dust and the sight of it caught in vagrant rays of the sun that came through the walls behind the stage was my very contact with the infinite. The director of our little company was a Russian man called Velgov and he was a very special man! He wrote all the plays that we were to perform and sometimes co-wrote them with an unusual fellow, an Englishman, who would turn up some times, unannounced, smoking a fine long cigarette held in an ivory holder and clasping his two trademark fine leather travel bags, slightly weather-worn, for effect. He looked the very part. His name was Valentine Spendley and we knew that he was active in the radical street politics of the time and that he was described as “obscure” and difficult to get to know. I didn’t care about this. All I cared about was that there were those plays and Velgov. He had lived in London for some 10 years since deciding that the Russia that he loved and was born into was no longer the Russia he recognised. He used to muse upon the society that he had left behind and it was always laced with the ambition, the dream that one day he would return there and that he would take us all with him – at his own expense. It was a vision held up to us as if we were poor and starving and that for the further nourishment of our lives that we should stick with him. And of course we did. Tell me, which one of us would have ever argued with Velgov? I felt that I would have followed him to the ends of the earth!

To be honest though, we knew very little about Velgov, his background or where he lived in London. He was always first to arrive at our little theatre and always the last to leave. To follow Velgov would have demanded the skills of a consummate actor, indeed. I often imagined myself following him at a distance after his ritual of shutting the theatre

Beloved Chaos that Comes by Night

up for the night and wandering the streets of the East End in the fog and then the despairing gloom, once I had lost sight of him. I would dream of such things and in my dreams, Velgov would disappear ahead of me in the mist, only to reappear walking back towards me, with a smile upon his face and his cheeks caked in greasepaint. His hand would be outstretched to take mine, but he would pass me by and vanish into thin air. I would awaken with a start in the guilty silence of my rented room and then fall back to sleep, to dream of learning my lines and fantasising about Anna, who was part of his company. Lovely, bright Anna whose face was like a vision wrought by Rossetti and yet her eyes seemed somewhat dead, hollow, and emotionless. But when she was on stage, her eyes lit up like a happy child or perhaps a mischievous child about to tease a family pet to the point of distraction. I often imagined that Velgov and Anna were together and that they knew each other intimately and that I thought I would be right in this respect, one day.

The plays that we performed were good-hearted efforts about provincial life in both Russia and London. In some ways, it was very hard to distinguish the difference and anyway, the small audiences that we had, really liked them. Velgov seemed to be able to distil the essential core of the character by his thoughtful and crafted monologues and by his ability to balance emotions with restraint in the dialogues. To be on stage and to become one of his characters was a rare privilege. I remember in the play “The Country and the City are One”, my character was that of a petty official who always brought good news and in that role I excelled myself. Anna often said that it was a role ‘made for me’ and I think she was right. She always smiled when she said this and I took it as a great compliment that someone who was a more accomplished performer upon the stage and who was so close to Velgov, should pride themselves in saying such a thing to me. What a fool I was.

I should note down that I also had it in myself that I was a writer and that one day I would be a very successful playwright like Velgov. I could not write poems, for some reason, the rhythm would elude me, but I would sit alone at night in my rented room and I would compose and page after page would fall onto the floor as my creations came to life. And when I had finished one play, I would rush down to the East End and hope that Velgov would be there in his small office, hours before we were

Jonathan Wood

due to perform, so that I could show him my work. He would always look up and smile at me and call me “his little Sergei” and he would take my papers and with his feet resting up on his small desk, he would begin to read, but read in the cursory way that the man of authority is prone to do. At this time, he looked like a high-ranking official scrutinising my papers or a rich lawyer eyeing up the last will and testament of a man who is still alive. I was under no illusion that he either liked or cared about my play. My work was safely in his finely groomed hands and for that I was grateful. I would leave him reading and would stop outside the door after I had closed it for the inevitable sound of the shuffle of papers and the close of the desk drawer, as he consigned another of my masterpieces to the darkness of oblivion. All that sweat and effort, all that emotion now lifeless in a drawer, like a still-born pauper’s child. I had no sense of disappointment that I could capture, for my mind was beyond such things. As the clock ticked upon my life and the performances upon the stage grew in stature, I felt able to think less hard about such things. I was slowly giving up the will to care and it felt good.

Velgov’s yearning to return to Russia became more palpable in his new plays. I could not put my finger on it precisely, but here beat the heart of a man upon the page who felt that exile that was self-imposed was the exile that had to be overcome. To take that bold step and to embark upon the emotional and cultural journey that would lead one back to the Motherland was the stuff of high drama and it was a privilege to be able to be part of his pretty dream. I felt that I was stepping into the body of his exile and that his little room with the wooden desk and the newspapers strewn across the floor – why, that was his exile’s cell, although he never let it show. I tried to speak to Anna about Velgov and why he left Russia, but she would look at me with her hollow sockets and from her expression I knew that I was meaningless and that any such conversation was utterly redundant. Velgov would call me his “little Sergei” on regular occasions when we met and so would Valentine Spendley when he came to visit to discuss a draft of a play with his theatrical partner. Spendley was always dressed like an English gentleman but his politics were of the left or so it seemed. He had no history as far as I could see but there seemed to be an invisible trail of “something” about him. I really didn’t care for this man but my opinions were simply of no consequence. He could write

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and write well and so he was above me in the pecking order. As soon as he would arrive, smoking his cigarettes with the sweetest perfume and coloured paper, he would disappear into Velgov's office. The sound from within would often be silence punctuated by laughter or exclamations or sometimes very serious discussion with raised voices. I knew that as Velgov saw more of Spendley, so things would change for us all and yet I didn't know how or in what way and perhaps then it was just as well. I was a man who no longer had any family but this small company of players who were now my family. Apart from Anna, who had my respect in a peculiar kind of way, my other fellow players were the best friends that one could want to have and they worshipped Velgov. We used to laugh a great deal. Velgov was our saviour from the gloom of the post-war theatre of peace, if you will pardon a very silly pun, but I know that it will cast a smile upon the face of he or she who reads this and if that is the case, then I will have my legacy, my one special line!

Velgov's discussions with Spendley would always end with Spendley leaving the theatre with a large portfolio of papers under his arm. I would be standing outside the door of the office in the darkness and I would hear the drawer open and shut and the shuffle of papers as individual pages of composition were sifted and sorted and placed under his arm.

And then one day it happened.

It was a Saturday and the evening performance of Velgov's "The Orphan in the Cornfield" was over and we could all relax and look forward to a free Sunday. On a Sunday, I would usually go to Hampstead and walk across the spine of the heath to clear my head and to pretend that I had exiled myself to the countryside. But with Hampstead, you know that whatever position of the compass you look from, you can always see London and it can always see you. The city stares back at you as it expands and sprawls and belches its smoke up into the gloomy upper air of its outer rings. That was my practice and even alone, it was a pleasure to do this. To stare down at the distant vision of the East End amidst the fading glory of the vanquished streets and the sights and sounds that surrounded our little theatre, to stare down, gave me immense pleasure. It was as if you could see both my past and my present and my future combined in one vision, with its centre upon our humble little stage; Velgov's stage.

Jonathan Wood

But I digress in my record, but I wanted you to know what is at the heart of me. Upon this Saturday after the performance, Velgov called me into his office and sat me down. Spendley was already sitting there and did not look at me, but drew in upon his cigarette, exhaling after what seemed like an age, a vibrant and fragrant stream of smoke that had one second before been caressing and declining in his lungs. Velgov looked at me and smacked his hands together with a forthright “clap” and said to me “Your time has come, my friend. You have become a playwright!”

Velgov told me with all the sincerity that he could muster and I thought it was genuine, that he was very much taken with the drafts that I had handed to him over the months and that I was not in any way to be discouraged by the very singular lack of reaction to them that had taken place over the past year. Only a Russian could have made that statement sound as if he were complimenting me and I absorbed his words into the barren hinterlands of my soul as if I had just been told I was going to die, but peacefully. Velgov looked at me and took off his wonderful half-moon glasses that had always fascinated me from the moment that I saw him; he said “I have a proposal and this proposal is going to take us on a journey, a journey of discovery and much more besides. We are going to Russia and you are going to be my ‘little Sergei’ on his home soil.” Valentine Spendley laughed out loud and turned his head towards me with one singular turn of his neck as if he were an insect selecting his prey. The smoke trickled out from the corners of his mouth as if his head were some grotesque and baleful mask, behind which burned a conglomeration of unholy incense, sickly, sweet and clogging. His face was now a theatrical tragi-comedic mask and his face and this mask were one and when I looked at Velgov, in my mind I could see that he too had the mask on. Those classical masks, tragedy and comedy, mouth turned down or mouth turned up, bedfellow faces for the true and haunted individual. When you have authority, you can wear those masks with impunity and with ease and with style, but when you are a nobody, the masks begin to melt, to blur into one’s flesh and bone, until one looks back in the mirror and sees only a reflection without a face, an inhabitant of the Hollow Earth. I know that this is true.

Beloved Chaos that Comes by Night

My vanity was such that I could not be anything but intrigued and in my deferential intrigue I began to smell of cant and greasepaint and the theatre of life. It was an overpowering smell, for sure.

Velgov told me that he had been particularly impressed with one of my drafts – the story of a young man who travels alone to Russia to become an actor. He said that he particularly liked my attempts to distil the feelings of a lonely young man embarking upon his new life in the distant world that he knew nothing about and that it moved him emotionally and that it made him think about his Motherland. He told me that when he read about how I would like the stage to look so that it represented the small room in which I would stay, like that of a child, he said that he was moved to tears. He stared at me after he had said this and with no trace of irony upon his face. He said that he felt that he was back in Moscow and that I had clearly worked hard. Spendley too, had read this draft of my play that I had tentatively called “In the Night and of the Day” and inside I resented his involvement and the fact that Velgov had not consulted me first before showing it to his partner. Again I began to smell of cant. “Your draft needs work, of course and it needs a context and a core and a dramatic direction, you understand,” exclaimed Velgov, to me and of course I willingly agreed to these notions. The play was being scrutinised by the master, as I saw him and who was I to argue with the creator of “The Country and the City are One”. Velgov left the room and I could tell that he was speaking to Anna and the other players, bidding them goodnight and thanking them for their efforts and that perhaps there would be good news for them during the coming week. I began to feel very alone, for Spendley was no company for me. A man that you would term an anarchist and a liar, a man whom the papers now described as “not to be trusted” and a person who had the fateful and aloof upper-class mien about him; the double brand of hypocrisy and autocracy that fractured the English so malevolently. I stared him up and down from the corner of my eye, but gave this up when Velgov returned to his chair.

Velgov begin, “Now, my little Sergei, we have work to be done! We like your play and we would like to produce it but we need to take its lovely skeleton upon which to put some flesh and blood and organs, if you will be so kind as to understand this.” I sat there with the life

Jonathan Wood

deflating from my soul's centre, knowing that from now on, this was the reality that I had not really consciously sought but had no will or chance to escape from. Velgov continued in his assured and measured voice, "my colleague and theatrical partner Mr Spendley has taken it upon himself to add his own life's blood to this new dramatic work that you have submitted and has worked deathly hard upon your behalf and upon ours as a company, to transform your play from being the work of a promising neophyte writer into something that will be remembered as the work of a theatrical magician and Ipsissimus. Imagine if you will that Mr Spendley is playing Mr Aleister Crowley, the amazing English magician upon the stage, in all his fine robes and that he is working his heavenly spell upon us!" Velgov and Spendley looked at each other and laughed like girls at this specious conjuration. This was another spectrum to add to the stench of cant that had pervaded the room from all sides.

I had heard of Aleister Crowley of course and his Black Equinox group and his theatrical rituals and I knew that Velgov had known him for a little while back before the war. Velgov had told me that once Mr Crowley had taken a troupe of dancing girls to Russia, all of them dirty whores, and how he had envied Crowley in this respect and how this magician had never answered any of his letters, save for one which said simply "One day, Velgov, you must return to your Motherland but you must go incognito and with your poor players; I fear that you will have much great work to do with them here." Velgov told me that he knew instinctively what this meant and that now was the time for him and us to do it. He told me that this Aleister Crowley was a sage and that he too knew the theatre and its craft. I cared not for Aleister Crowley.

Spendley produced a draft from his portfolio and handed it to Velgov who handed it across the table to me as if it were my death warrant, signed on scented purple paper; a love letter from my executioner, hooded and besotted with me in my grim cell of life. I handled it with shaking hands and read the new title "Beloved Chaos that comes by Night" and I read the authors' names of Spendley, Velgov and myself. My breathing became tense and Velgov said to me, "Dear player, my little Sergei, take this home and read it, do not mark it and let us speak again on Monday. Your Sunday will thus be well engaged, will it not?" He glanced over to Spendley and they exchanged expressions of such knowing that I nearly ran from the

Beloved Chaos that Comes by Night

building, alone and with no family so to speak of anymore. To be alone in London, is truly to know loneliness from within a glass jar, where silent leeches come and go and journey across one's face for evermore, marking out one's allotted time in piteous slime.

And so it was that Sunday became this certain special day for me. I slept soundly on that Saturday night after the meeting. My dreams filled with images of Aleister Crowley that I had seen in the press; his dark robes, face obscured, flickers of candles, cascades of playing cards falling like rain across the room with Velgov's smiling face transplanted onto his altar, the ultimate showman. There was a sense of floating in this dream as if life meant nothing, as if everything was going to be alright. I remember the feeling of beloved elation during this dream, as if I had broken free forever from reality and was free to float atop the river of consciousness that we all aspire to swim in. But with the banishing ritual of waking up, the prison of reality looms and embraces us as the eternal hollow mother of life and of death makes her sign. I knew this to be true. And so it was and is.

I sat cross-legged upon my bed and began to read this draft, smarting inside with its very feel. My own work, hewn out of vain ambition and writer's block, now transformed and appropriated by Spendley and by Velgov; insurgents of the dramatic arts whose web I had willingly walked into. I no longer felt that this was a happy company of players and I now knew why Anna's eyes were dead and hollow for me. As the sun rose in the window to the east, casting its spiritless rays across my face, I began to read this "Beloved Chaos that Comes by Night".

I did not like the play. It shocked me and was a complete departure from the uplifting and confident provincial and national dramas that were so characteristic of Velgov and Spendley. It wasn't my play anymore either. The words were there, the character was there, and let's face it the character had been me, but it *wasn't* me. It was now too stark and its message, if indeed it had a message was hollow and its moral compass had been twisted and bent out of all recognition. For someone like me, whose own moral North, South, East and West had been spun into oblivion during the recent years, this was the worst possible characteristic that this play could display. The play was now about an English man who goes to Russia who takes the name of Sergei, possibly

Jonathan Wood

after Sergei Necheyev and who under the cover of his acting commits acts of extreme terror against an unsuspecting and undeserving community in a suburb of Moscow. The play clearly had Spendley written all over it, for it was he who had these malevolent tendencies and not me, you have to believe me when I write this. Spendley was a man of severely dark thoughts and to focus a lamp upon them was to induce shock in the viewer. My words were still there but mutated or even worse untouched, but their meaning changed by the dramatic contextualisation that Spendley and Velgov had constructed around them. This was not so much a play with three acts, more it was a statement of intent, of action. Its precision came with its dramatic slide into the individual intent of the main character and I was to play this Sergei. I feverously compared this work against a fair copy of what I had submitted to Velgov all that time ago and I was shocked by how similar it remained and in some cases, it was identical. But I had been suffering under the yoke of writer's block and what had come out had been perfunctory, but it suited this new accursed play. There were thick-cut vicious quotes from Necheyev's "Catechism of the Revolutionist" intercut into my words and yet inside of my soul, there was a stirring of my vanity and my soul, as if this was *my chance*; that this was going to be my destiny. I was going to succeed and be recognised as both an actor and a writer. My name was on the title page alongside Velgov and Spendley. I was no longer English, I was both English and Russian and that whatever I thought, I should go with them, the happy company, go with them to Moscow and succeed. I cannot let them down, although in my heart of hearts, what was left of it, I wanted to disappear for good; to escape from the cant and the vanity. The play was to be spectacular and required a great number of theatrical maroons during the final act to engender the visual and aural effect of bombs and by coincidence I knew that in the store room under the stage, there was such a supply in three large wooden boxes. This play was going to be quite something!

I awoke early on that Monday and made my way to the theatre in the East End that I so loved, with its gaudy little sign and its red and white door and little ticket office window. When I arrived there, I was met by Velgov who was half-way up a ladder, taking the sign down and

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carefully resting it upon the side of the wall. The red and white door had already been painted in a muted green and the metal grill across the ticket office window had been fastened tight. Velgov handed me my tickets and itinerary and said that we shall be leaving tomorrow and would I make sure that I was ready to go. I could see Anna inside the vestibule, carefully removing posters and the residual glue with a razor blade. Her face was intent and concentrated as if she were sculpting the face of Christ out of marble with the finest array of chisels. A stupid thought, but that is what my mind was like. I felt a sense of loss and concern as if this was a piece of my life that was being rolled up, folded and put in a box. It was early enough in the morning for the street to still be quiet. Even the Jewish tailor next door to the theatre was still unopened. Was last Friday, the last time that I would have smiled and nodded at Mr Isaac Bechrim, as he sat stoically behind his desk, waiting for customers and working away his life through chalk marks upon grey linen? Spendley emerged from out of the theatre carrying his leather travel bags. He signalled to me that there were these three large wooden boxes to be collected from within and “would I be a good fellow and get them for me.” I did as I was told and resented his presence with a fervour borne of tiredness and detachment. Once inside the theatre, I took the opportunity to drink in the last vestiges of the good times that we had had. The travails, the capers on and off stage, the suspicions, the fumbling in the dark, the standing outside Velgov’s office with my ear to the door, the mice and rats, the applause, such that it was. I could hear Anna’s voice and see her face staring across the stage at me in my role as a petty official. I have never forgotten the look she gave me. I stood and drank it all in, knowing that today was the last day of the life that I had known. I knew that we would travel to Moscow and that no one here would think about me and wonder where I was. I was and had been a phantom citizen of this great city for some years and now I was to be a phantom with a new name – I hated this “little Sergei” business – but it kept my body and soul together and I was always paid, even when there was no play to perform. We were a special company, although we had about us something of the pallor of the afterthought; that which gets overlooked or that which makes one flinch in the mirror, as if something has passed

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by to one's right. We were not right, but I was glad to leave this city and this country. It was by mutual agreement and we had been happy once.

Like the strangest family on earth, we travelled through France and Germany and on to Poland, where some of our baggage was stolen, sending Spendley into a dramatic and acute ague, until Velgov came smiling down the corridor of the train, rocking from side to side, addressing Spendley and telling him "not to worry – you English have worrying in your flesh and blood." Spendley sat in silence for the remaining hours, or disappeared at regular intervals while we all slept. It was easier than I had thought to sleep and when I finally woke I found myself in a trance, rocked from side to side by the rhythm of the train. I came to and stared out of the train carriage window and into the reflected image of the face of Velgov and Anna that due to their position in the carriage had merged into one iridescent reflection of that which I feared. Spendley had withdrawn again to the quietude of the train corridor, there to smoke himself half to death and to enjoy the anonymity that I had myself craved. You see, one of the reasons that I became an actor was that I could live through the personality of someone else and it befitted me that I had sought to do this in London, where individuals drop between the cracks in the paving stones and are seen no more. I could walk for hours and hours around Bedford Square and Russell Square and no one would notice me. I was a wreck and the journey was taking its toll upon me, despite the sleep. I had been told by Velgov that it was indeed a distinct honour to take the risk and play the notorious Sergei Nechayev on stage. I had never heard of him of course but was making immense effort to perfect my part and to call out of the shadows of history, the character of Nechayev. How could *I* alone do that? The little play that I had handed to Velgov all those months ago seemed a great distance from me. Its title "In the Night and of the Day" seemed quaint and oblique whereas "Beloved Chaos that Comes by Night" was precise and promised much. The vanity of the actor cannot see beyond its promise. That is true now and was true for me then. I am blind, but my eyes still see.

Velgov promised much to us as the train approached its final destination of the City of God. We were stinking and wretched with

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tiredness and ready to drop into beds or graves, I don't think we cared which at that time. We were entering the belly of the Holy City and its trumpeting cavalcade of imperative political and social change. Velgov looked very physically and emotionally moved and was ready for birth again back down the canal of self-exile and out into the world, his world; the world of his Motherland. Our company felt confident, if that is not too strong a word and we let the deadly fatigue of travel, like a grim bridegroom, caress us helpfully on our way. The human spirit can take a great deal when there is the promise of a hotel room, albeit under the thrall of a new order. I had no idea what to expect and I kept my eyes down contrary to what Velgov had instructed in me. He said that I must burn my eyes into the souls of the Russians and by so doing, try to understand what was to take place. I didn't understand him then but I understand him now, too well. I thought too of the spotlight upon my face in the theatre that we were destined for, a disembodied head that would speak to the audience as if we were intimate friends and believe me that was my ambition. When I saw their reflected faces one upon the other in the train window, it was an epiphany for me. All the rest of the world was shut out and I saw only a single path of white light that would lead me up onto the stage. This white light would follow me in the darkness to rest upon my face in this place where the new gang of communism had swept the world awake with its coterie of cultural and political explosives! I had no doubt that Velgov and Spendley were as foreign to this milieu as I was. Velgov's self-imposed exile held some interest for me but to see him now alighting from the train, I knew that I was with him in the right place. Our hotel was soon reached and in the coolness of the summer night, we were safe inside the bosom of the City of God. By night, the city's sounds and the shouts of its citizens took on an ethereal air as if we were somewhere that floated in mid air, where the weight of history was suddenly being expanded and where eternal flux was our very oxygen. Spendley had disappeared but this was of no concern to Velgov who stated that "your Englishman, your author has no fear, as you have fear. He is off to seek his fortune or should I say destiny... and your destiny too!" Velgov stared at me as I made my way along the corridor to my room, his face a rigid emotionless mask that he would hang upon the

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wall outside my door. My eternal guide on the road to darkest night; my blood brother united by our difference.

Once in my room, for a period I looked out of the window over the inner courtyard of the hotel, with its piles of wooden pallets and non-descript metal piping arranged in the corners. I longed to be outside, to find the theatre where I would perform. And so I left my room and as I passed Anna's door, I heard faint and furtive laughter and a clinking of glasses and caring not in the least what was going on, made my way out into the extraordinarily pleasant evening air. I had no moral compass anymore, I told you that, but I had a fine instinctual compass and that is what had helped me find Velgov's East End theatre in the first place. I will never forget that day and now here in Moscow, I applied my compass again to do some urban orienteering of my own. Instinctively, I turned towards where the source of the greatest noise was coming from. All it took was a sharp turn left and down the side of the hotel into a long and desolate alleyway that eventually gave way to an intriguing and dim-lit delta of streets. I was passed on all sides by young men and women who looked as if they had just attended some kind of political meeting. At the end of these streets was a square where many clutches of activity were still in process. Of course, I was an ignorant Englishman with but one language and so I could not understand what was being said, but I felt somehow that the fervour of the crowds was akin to my own elation at being in this majestic city at this great and unsettling time. It was, I should blush and perhaps not tell you this, but it was as if I was on holiday for a while. The sense of elation was akin to the first kiss of a new love or the first ever kiss that one has with some ordinary girl that for some reason takes a shine to you. Perhaps she is part of a theatrical company or perhaps she is discovered in the half-light of a doorway, the demi-goddess of the silent street making her presence felt with the lighting of a match and the offer of comforts for the night. I cared not whether I went back to my hotel or not, but it was a pleasure to continue down from the square into a further maze of streets. Windows covered with hanging sheets, old shutters gutted with soot and age behind which were dim lights and the warm wash of conversation in domestic bliss or so I thought. I spied upon a smaller courtyard open from the end of this street and

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made my way to it. As I did so, Valentine Spendley exited from a dim doorway ahead of me and without turning back to survey the street behind him, made his way down into this smaller courtyard. His gait, his clothes, the tilt of his hat were alien to this place as if he were some kind of midnight Mephistopheles, that had appeared in a gloriously lurid puff of smoke. His long thin elegant legs made short work of his journey and soon he was knocking upon and then entering through a door at the top end of the courtyard. My sense of elation and holiday was at an end. The unexpected presence of this man was like a speck of dust upon a perfect lens. I stared back from whence I had come and for a second resolved to trace my steps back to the hotel and there to sink into my sheets. However, the last vestige of the man in me bolstered me on and so with one furtive look over my shoulder, I advanced towards the end of the courtyard. Light came through the ground-floor window of the house where Spendley had entered and the window was open. By being the actor and advancing to the top-right of the courtyard and then across very slowly like some comic hunchback, I was able to take my place amidst the foliage to the right of the window. I was like some lurking player from the Jacobean school, where blood and bones and gnawing truth were companions of remarkable familiarity and loyalty, like old cousins who no longer care whether they are seen making “as one” with each other. In the evening air behind this foliage I was the consummate actor, waiting for his cue.

I was able so to see into the room and there was Spendley and there was Velgov sitting at a table with two other men. In the rear of the room were a collection of large bags. These two men were grim-faced and wore tightly buttoned coats even though it was not cold. They both had beards and they looked like tramps, in fact I would have given up a week’s salary on the basis that they were tramps. In whatever city you inhabit, a tramp is a tramp; a black arbiter of tastes and experience and spirituality beyond the banality of our provincial souls! They wore dark caps and looked like some kind of renegade revolutionaries, too. Velgov was laughing and pulling faces as if he owned the place and Spendley was speaking in low measured tones to both these tramp men. Velgov came to the window and breathed in the cooling air as Spendley spoke to them. I could not hear everything but I heard the words “Perfor-

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mance of your lives” and that “God will be proud of you in this now godless country where he has been evicted and his family put to the sword.” I let my mind think of Holy Russia and the sound of bullets and the taste of iron and blood and earth. Velgov pulled the blind down with a dramatic start as if to signify that he was aware of my presence; but how could he have been aware of my presence and even more, how could he have left the hotel ahead of me. I had assumed that it has been him laughing in Anna’s room, but I could not be sure and so I must have been wrong. But who knows, for Velgov seemed the very magician back in his beloved city. The light went out and there was silence and then the sound of the door opening. Spendley left the house on his own, carrying papers and that was that. The house was in darkness and I was there behind the foliage, my heart pumping and my eyes shut. I waited upon time until Spendley’s figure disappeared in the distance and I made my way back the route that I had come. His footsteps seemed to have no sound as if he were just a memory.

Retracing your footsteps is a horrible thing at dead of night in a foreign city in an unsettled land. I became overcome by that sense of hopelessness that any weary traveller might experience. Yet, here was I, an expert explorer of the urban landscapes, losing my way, finding it again, recognising small landmarks – the torn poster upon the tree, the beggar at the gates of the park to my left, his eyes like those of the hypnotist; things that I had barely noticed before. It was only the grating sounds from the station that allowed me to draw myself back to this temporary base of the hotel. The plumes of steam exhaling from great engines as they were settled for the night and the screaming friction of iron and steel, drawing wheels to the position of infinite peace and stasis. The wheel that has no motion is the ultimate symbol for me. The journey is over and the revelation has befallen its seeker, thus to find it for all eternity. For an ordinary man I can be profound, you know. I went to my room and was soon asleep, waking only once in the night, to the impression of the sound of someone slipping a document under my door. My provincial self told me to wait until morning and to exult in sleep, which is what I did. The bed was as hard as a mortician’s slab but I cared not. It had sheets and a pillow, albeit greying and full of memory and experience. I cared not and so slept like the dead.

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In the fuzz and light of the morning, I could see it – there was the poster on the floor of my hotel room, already smattered in dust and plaster from the ceiling. I stared up to see cracks and minute specks falling from the ceiling from the motion of the footsteps in the room above, as if someone was dragging a heavy object across the floor. The poster was written in English and Russian and it announced that “Beloved Chaos that Comes by Night” would be performed over five nights at the Theatre Gallery by the station. The image of the face of a serious bearded man was on the cover. The man had a cap and his eyes were intent, if such a thing could be conveyed through the medium of cheap printing. There was a knock upon the door and there was Anna, beautiful Anna who could speak many languages or so she said. She advised me that Velgov wanted to see me over at the theatre with all due haste and so ten minutes later I was there, watching Velgov climbing up a ladder to put his small theatrical sign up over the entrance door. This was his world and he was master of it. He looked very much at home and gave me a long and unusual stare from his position above me as if he was trying to tell me something, but just didn’t care if I knew or not. I had been diligent in my learning for this part and in my private rehearsals, I had spent many hours perfecting a suitable persona; but now watching Velgov, with his sleeves rolled up and his metal expandable rings around his arms keeping these sleeves in place either side of his waistcoat, it was as if he had forgotten who I was. He stared beyond me for what seemed like an eternity and then fell back into his consciousness and descended the ladder. He put his arm around me and led me into the theatre itself. It was small, just like the one in London and had the smell of oil and sweat about it. He opened the inner doors beyond the lobby and there was the stage. He said that there were going to be some modifications to the play from the outset but that I should not worry; that these changes were going to be dramatic and that a new art-form of action and counter-action would be born within the confines of this humble little theatre. “You must simply carry the part and be yourself, for all to see, and we shall take care of the rest; it will be very dramatic and that is what we all want, isn’t it?” were the words he left me with as he departed out into the street. He turned to me and exclaimed, “You are the reason we are

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here, aren't you?" His face was like that of an expert at the game of chance and in the return from his exile he had shed his old skin and become the new man of the hour. I sensed this. I was thus alone.

By 6 pm, I was transformed and my ridiculous false beard itched with its black horrible hairs and the glue that held it was seeping into my left ear and down the back of my neck. My cap was placed upon my head by Anna and in my mind and in the mirror before my small table, there I was, no longer the player of petty officials or minor characters. I was the dead centre of attention. In my mind, my own self imploded with the revelation that only an unaware sensibility can finally unveil; like the man who discovers that he has syphilis but pretends that it was just something overheard in a crowded cafe, in a dream relating to someone else. There was no going back and the breathing exercises that my theatrical landlady had taught me back in London were of little benefit in dampening my pounding heart. There was the stage, there was the table and there were the audience, who were not paying for this as it was a dress rehearsal. Velgov was very specific about this detail and I remembered that it was at odds with how he was in London. The drapes of the stage were in black and Velgov appeared as oily as you could want, standing upon the stage and speaking in his native tongue to an audience of jaded Muscovites and the detritus of the English community, spat out by the diplomatic service. With a wild clap of his hands, he turned to where I was standing behind the curtain and said in Russian and then in English, "My little Sergei, to be exiled in the mind is one thing but to be exiled in history is quite another; come out of the ice of history and damnation and live again." I was to be his homunculus and Velgov was going to breathe life into me; the life to end all life.

As I listened to these chilling words from behind the curtain, I thought of my parents, long dead, sound asleep in their English graves who had given me all that they could and had worked themselves into these early graves for me to be an actor. And here I was, caked in greasepaint with a false beard, my left ear filled with gum standing behind a curtain ready to embody the soul of a notorious renegade. When I came upon stage, so the action and the counter-actions began. My words in English were like the sounds of the imbeciles in the asylums;

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they would not be understood and as I took my soliloquy down to the front of the stage and the beams of light from the torches at its base lit up my figure, so the theatrical maroons were detonated beneath the seats of the audience. One by one these maroons exploded into life horribly, sending the audience shockingly into each other. The smell of gunpowder and fuses and flesh converged into one mad cloudy exhalation as each maroon went off sending out its hideous and shocking thunderflash and explosive charge into the guts of the audience. One mad bang and flash of biting hot magnesium ribbon on each maroon lit up the theatre's insides like Death's comforting lantern of hope, swung for those who have no hope. The magnesium seared into the legs and buttocks of those still seated turning the mere screams of agony within into the precision of the Chimera's chorus and choir of the Devil. The doors were set open by Velgov and by Spendley who were now dressed in black, their faces on fire with the radiated shadows of the conflagration within. I took my chance and ran past Velgov into the night, my creator, his "little Sergei" running into the night for all to see, face streaming with cake and daub like a mad whore who has just seen her aged father outside the door! I heard Velgov above the conflagration laughing at me and telling me to "Run little Sergei, because there will be nowhere to hide," and so I ran and in the beauty of my madness, I tore at my beard but it would not come off and neither would my cap; it was held fast by gum around the rim. My vanity had sought its lover and it had found itself in me.

Within minutes, I was down by the station, clambering like a madman into a carriage of a train about to depart and there were the two bearded tramps wearing caps. They each had a large leather bag pockmarked with time and wear. They begged me to sit down and said that "luck was on our side". As I sat down the first bomb went off on the platform sending innocent travelling folk into the horrid embrace of the masonry of the station walls. The faces of these tramps lit up and they both greeted me as "their little Sergei" and that Russia and England would be proud of what I had done this day. As the train began its intractable journey out of the station to safety, its steam already up at full pressure, another bomb, a larger one, went off inside the hotel, sending roof tiles and timbers into the night air and showers of brick

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and mortar into the side of the train as if it were somehow a hellish magnet that was in love with this material. The screams of the dying were exceeded by those of the living waiting to get into the ante room of death itself, where flesh fries and organs burst and boil and last memories burn like Hell's beacons. The pavements are the solace for the dying in the act of terror, for the stone slab matches the comfort of the pillow at that point where you know that your last understanding before oblivion is there to clasp like a crucifix thrown into a furnace. The train, once out of the boundary of the station came to a grinding halt and quick as a flash, it was boarded by armed and ordinary party members for it was their city now and not the city of God.

As our carriage door was opened a third bomb went off, even more powerful, if that were possible out beyond the remains of the hotel and down towards the neighbourhood streets behind. Ash was already falling like black snow upon the carriages as the power of the blast blew these party members in through the glass and timber of the train's corridor like so much matchwood and bone. The two tramps clambered out of the shattered carriage window and disappeared down the line, running as if pursued, but they were not pursued at all, waving "good-bye" at me and laughing and speaking of a "job well done".

If an actor has any instinct, it is for self-preservation beyond the obliteration of the self that happens when he performs. He has a secret relationship with the self and that allows him or her to speak with authority with the face of the imposter, with the mask of the tragi-comic fool and the endless cant of the liar. The actor is a liar, not to himself, but to his audience. Does an actor care that he has poured himself into some character save for the fact that even this character knows who his master is? Velgov the actor and impresario, Velgov the writer and Velgov the terror-monger and sweating exile spinning on his own axis, grimacing with history and lasciviously tonguing his destiny amidst the bodies upon the floor. I am his creation, am I not? I am his "little Sergei", the renegade fruit from the poisoned free of anarchistic nihilism. I am the sole member of his little game that is the game itself and not the player of the game. I am merely English but I do not have to be. My parents cannot speak to me in their graves and if I return to the country of my birth, they will know nothing of this and know me only

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as their son, staring down at their graves amidst the sunshine of the late summer. I longed for that remembrance, as my ears ran with blood and bitter tears welled up into my eyes.

I fell out of the wrecked carriage onto the track where it was virtually untouched by the blast and made my way with these two bags across the matrix of the lines and back into the city itself. The wreaths of smoke and the belching flames of the bitter and hollow inferno were the spiritual symbols of Velgov and Spendley in their richly embroidered altar cloth of madness. I was going to find my master and to smell him out and to search for his cant amidst the bodies and the rubble. The Theatre gallery was ablaze and yet there were no longer any screams. All the bodies were consumed like cattle in the concentration of the blaze and outside the sign had already been removed. There was Anna, lying dead upon the floor, her face at rest, her eyes for once filled with life, with the recognition that Death is in love with us. In her eyeballs were the reflections of Death and Velgov and *my* play, for it was *my* play now and I was going to find my master. Anna's face was like that of a child blinded at an early age. I shall never forget it. Her head lay there at peace and yet I could not find it in myself to bend down and cradle it in my arms.

As I passed swiftly down towards the many accommodation blocks down to my left, I felt that Velgov and Spendley were near at hand warming their hands upon this their own Beloved Chaos that comes by night. I felt it to be so and then, yes, I saw them as I turned into a side street. Spendley was upon the ground, his face a conglomerate of charred flesh and bone, his clothes immaculate. He had been dragged from the theatre by Velgov! Velgov saw me and laughed and said, "My dear little Sergei, it is an untold pleasure to see you and to show you what a theatrical maroon can do to an English face. Look at my friend Spendley, my friend who came with us but who will not return!" Spendley's face smoked but there was no life within it, save for the crying embers of the sinews and muscles of his features in the exquisite body-shock of fatal surprise.

Velgov's face was ablaze with delight and spittle hung from his lower lip like bile from a bull's mouth. "Follow me into my permanent exile and show the city what is in these bags that you have. The city

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should like to know what is in the bags!" he exclaimed, turning on his heels and running from me for dear life. I followed him, imbued with an extraordinary strength but even with that, I could not catch this man, who promptly disappeared into the maze of alleys and stairwells. The tracery of his laughter grew fainter and fainter as he ran. I placed the bags on the floor of one of these stairwells and sat and waited. I waited but no one came and nothing happened and in the distance was the unfolding chaos of the night's performance with its actors far from home and too near home and with its central character far from home. In my heart of hearts, there was no redemption. I opened one of the bags and shuffled through it pulling out clothes, papers, drafts, my drafts, passports, books. The other bag was heavier but I left it unopened and made my way back to the conflagration. I left the bags there in the stairwell of the accommodation block at the very start of the maze of streets where Velgov had disappeared. Velgov was back in the beloved memory lane of his childhood, into the neighbourhood of his youth, in the City of God, where beloved orphans play in peace and pretty memories of night and day hover like heavenly laughter in the air. Velgov had come home.

Within seconds, my ears were on fire, the back of my head ablaze, the hollowness of my heart revealed as the final bomb went off like the judgement trumpet from out this second bag, raising its exulting anti-matter and beloved oxygen genie into the night air and into the fabric of the building, sending its message of love and destiny into the hearts and minds and bodies of those within. The dust and ash cloud that descended immediately, radiating out into the night, jostled me out of the way as if to acknowledge the part that I had played upon this stage, passing me like an old lover in the night who has a better bed to visit. Screams and silence came in equal measure and with it the sound of children; a sound that I shall never forget as I put my pen down now and I sit and stare at the wall and measure out the rest of my days on the fatal streets and in the dismal, stinking underground as I post this book to the authorities.

I itch like a tramp now, because I am a tramp now and if I said that I was from Great Britain and had travelled to Moscow all but unnoticed then that would be true. I am an exile. All my friends are dead in mind

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and in body and I am now Russian in mind but British in body and my name is now Sergei and I am many years too late, but still you will listen to you as you turn the pages of this diary. My voice will stay in your head like a story read to you by you babushka that you would like to hear and which involves a slow journey east through the rain and the mud, to see your poor relatives. You can see your own faces by the candle, lit for the expressions of wonder when a good tale unfolds.

БЪИЗМОЃТИЃ СДЯПЦДЛ

Stephen J. Clark

Down there in the darkness, some say in Hell, wherever that may be, or as others reckon in dream, through the forests and across wide black lakes, there is a place where a company ritually remember and celebrate that great night on Sadovaya Street.

Beacon fires on nearby hills burn, lighting the late arrivals riding the air on the shoulders of great owls and plump sows. Goats wearing garlands are led in processions to a shipwreck auditorium.

Even from a distance one can spy the candlelit stage and the motley caravan congregated in the valley before it. Given the meagre attendance one would think sulking Hades himself had hosted the gathering. Yet these were the elect of the melancholy come to hear the old cat speak.

If you look carefully you might see a strangely familiar face in the crowd pass by, some crowned like the goats in blossom; faces of poets perhaps that are only celebrated now they are long dead. Should someone speak of the poets' earthly reputations, they'd feign surprise and politely change the subject. (After all, there is some decorum to telling lies down there). You'd be forgiven for thinking of Rimbaud but you're mistaken, he couldn't attend.

More accustomed to sacrilege than reverence the guests' eyes gleamed, indeed some hid their tears behind hands, paws or talons giddy with ecstasy, as Behemoth took to the stage.

"Citizens, that night the sky was as black as my fur. You could have picked the stars from it with a flea-comb. All Moscow was ablaze. Such was the anticipation that the great theatre's tongue rolled out to lap at the gutters. The pavements were littered with ripped cocktail

Behemoth's Carnival

dresses, singed red banners and shattered perfume bottles. How fine it is to see ravished human bodies by the light of bonfires. The carnival is in town, smash the clocks! Let roubles rain down from the heavens. I walked on my hind paws for their amusement. Lit my cigar with a pull of a trigger and brandished poor Bengalsky's head. Is he here tonight? No?"

Someone shouted out "Fetch a doctor!" and laughter or what passed for laughter in that bestial throng rippled through the crowd.

The cat continued after an exaggerated smirk and a twist of his whiskers, "No he couldn't make it and besides there's only so many times you can cut off a man's head in public before it becomes passé. We'll dispense with the Party's scripts. I know my esteemed friends before me now will have no time for such distasteful mummeries."

"They say I am a cat but truly I am the cat's shadow. I am every cat's shadow rolled into one. I am every cat's shadow all at once, from every time and every place. And what would the world up there be without its shadows? Before I leave you with our first guest for this evening's proceedings let me give you a few morsels that may prove useful when next up topside:

The virtuous are cut from tailors' patterns, too trite perhaps?

Well then, let havoc breed obscene disparity.

Always ensure eavesdroppers hear you joking. Give them a taste of the forbidden and bite them on the ear while you're at it.

Always laugh in all the wrong places.

If need be, keep to the rooftops when you're flying on the shoulders of swine.

And speaking of wine, now for our honoured guest: he's here seeking refuge from Matthew Levi and his fanatics. Back by popular demand. Please put your hands together and give a warm welcome to Yeshua Ha-Nozri. Yeshua, if you would be so kind as to consecrate this water ... oh, and this fish while you're at it."

Behemoth, proffering a fat fish on a silver platter, bows graciously to the saviour and winks.

ТИЗ РЯПСЗХХ ФФ РИФЗПСІД

Colin Insole

On the night of June 29th 1904, the icon “Our Lady of Kazan”, was stolen from the city’s Monastery of the Theotokos. Several years later some of the thieves were caught and the Madonna’s circlet of gold and precious stones were recovered. The thieves claimed to have destroyed the icon which dated from the early years of Christendom in Constantinople. However, later rumours persisted that it was either housed secretly in Saint Petersburg or that the Bolsheviqs sold it abroad. During the Siege of Leningrad a substitute, apparently dating from the eighteenth century, was solemnly paraded around the city on the orders of Stalin.

Everyone has forgotten or pretends to forget. I dare not speak or look closely into the eyes of those I have known for fifty years lest we give ourselves away. Everything changed on that bright summer’s morning in June 1904 in our town of Klön Batiuska, in the marsh country five miles from Kazan. Before that day, wars and revolutions were no more real than the folk stories we heard in class. They passed by us like the arrival of wild geese on the mudflats or the distant glimpse of wolves on the hills in February.

But now, the long years of cowardice, of looking away, have passed. No longer can I merely “seek faded roses and listen to lifeless nightingales” as Nikolai Gumilev, patriot, poet and friend, wrote. The ghosts of past days have come back. They will watch and judge me in the hours to come.

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Although it was high summer, Alexander Cherevin, our school-master, had lit the log stove to toast little oat cakes in honour of our visitor. It was our annual inspection and a dignitary from Kazan was our guest and inquisitor. Bowls of strawberries and vases of dark violets were dotted around the room and their fragrances mingled with those of the flowers and wet grass drifting through the open window.

Alexander Cherevin was an excellent teacher who'd never raised his voice to us in anger let alone used the birch rod padlocked in a high cupboard. He told us about the legends and stories of our people – of Alyonushka and her star-bear, of Ivan the wolf-rider and the Gamaun, the prophetic bird, which flew out of the east on the gathering storm, singing our sacred hymns and bringing tidings of war and ruin.

Our task was to re-tell a story from the Old Testament. My close friend was last to stand up and read. We'd all performed creditably but knew that his tale would be the longest and the best. At eleven years old he could write romantic verse in the style of Pushkin or imitate the languid satire of Goncharov. We called him "The Little Master". His story was called "The Princess of Phoenicia".

He told of a proud woman, tired and bitter, yet still defiant, looking out from her upstairs window, waiting for the approach of her enemies. She applied kohl, the black eye shadow, to hide her wrinkles or brushed her dyed hair far down her back as she remembered.

As a young girl, on the shores of the Mediterranean at Tyre, she'd laughed at the coarse shanties of the Egyptian sailors and dreamed the love songs of the river poets. Every morning she'd risen early, watched the sea turn salmon-pink as the sun rose and listened entranced as the priests wove their voices in harmony for a hundred different prayers to Baal. Then, heartsick and crying alone in her cabin, she'd been sent abroad in a forced marriage to a weak king in a harsh arid land. There was a brutal barren religion, without any of the art and music she loved, and in time she brought over many of her own prophets and advisers. Every one of them had been slain out of spite in a test of strength against the local beliefs. Amongst her dead was a man whose evening hymns to Astarte could sing the woods awake. Countless nightingales would echo his music across the groves of cinnamon and pomegranate.

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There was a scholar who alone knew the ancient moon dance of Arwad and a love poet whose subtle lyrics had shaped her girlhood. They had not only been her prophets and religious leaders but her friends and confidantes, sharing jokes, games and memories long into the desert night. All of them butchered on the orders of one man. In fury she'd driven him from her lands, but now, her fool of a husband long dead, she felt old and beaten. Younger, stronger enemies were coming – she could hear their horses.

In a weak moment she'd considered escape – sailing back to Phoenicia – to fade quietly among the orange groves of Tyre or to grow old in the indigo city of Sidon, watching the craftsmen making glass or rich purple dyes out of snail shells.

But no, she would face them as she'd always faced her enemies. Better to die alone, better to be devoured by the wild dogs that ranged the city walls than to go meekly and without honour. She recalled her words to the man who had killed her friends, "If you are Elijah, so I am Jezebel."

The inspector from Kazan was a lazy, self-satisfied man who'd been snoozing in the morning heat. He'd eaten well and cake crumbs were dusted over his mouth and shirt. He'd been lulled by my friend's lyricism but when he heard the name "Jezebel" he sat up, awake and bristling with rage.

"This is blasphemy. You give a voice to profanity and corruption. It's clear you have been badly taught. This classroom, this town, reeks of luxury and sin. It's rank with the dust of violets and fallen fruit." Rising quickly, he seized the bulk of my friend's story and threw the pages into the log stove. "As Jezebel defied the law and burns in hell, as Avvakum defied the law and burned at the stake, so I consign this heresy to the flames."

Quietly my friend replied, "As Shakespeare gave a voice to both Miranda and Iago, as Dostoyevsky gave reason to both Raskolnikov and Sonia and as even Pontius Pilate shall speak, my manuscript will not burn."

Incensed, the visitor grabbed my friend and thrust the hand which held the last page of his story deep into the flames. During his ordeal

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he never flinched or cried out but we could smell the burning paper and flesh mingled with the summer flowers.

Alexander Cherevin sat crumpled and helpless at his desk. Someone dismissed us and we dispersed into the streets and alleys of Klon Batuska.

That night I dreamed I was at my bedroom window, watchful and anxious, looking east towards a bright cloudless dawn. At first the sound was barely perceptible like the fall of a rose petal in a distant garden. On the horizon a tiny black speck appeared, elusive and half-imagined, a nightingale passing from shadow into darkness. Outside, the leaves were stirring and the skies darkening. A bird was coming on the wings of the storm. In my fear I'd known her name but dared not admit it. She was the Gamaun. The bringer of storm and ruin. But she was not like Viktor Vasnetsov's painting with its head of a sorrowful Russian maiden. This was a vile screech-owl – Lilith the night monster – whose harsh voice rose and fell as the trees outside bent and broke. She spat out our sacred songs in mockery and contempt. I strained to catch her words as I heard the endless list of villages, towns and cities which would suffer the killing storm to come – Moscow, St Petersburg, Odessa, Baku... Surely she would not include our town for we were protected by God, Kazan and our ancestors. And then she flew onto my windowsill and I could smell the rank contagion from her feathers. Clearly I heard her say, "Klon Batuska". My parents found me asleep and shivering by the open window.

They allowed me to sleep late and when I woke at midday the town was in turmoil. There were rumours that Alexander Cherevin had been dismissed or that he'd committed suicide. Both were true. And then riders and tradesmen from Kazan brought news that the holy icon, "Our Lady of Kazan", had been stolen in the night from the Monastery of the Theotokos. We shared their horror and grief. The Madonna was the protector of the city. Our protector. It was like hearing that our own mother had been defiled. Our priest, hearing the news, smashed his fist on a stone wall.

"I curse those responsible. I curse their families, their homes and all those who shelter them," he said.

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That afternoon I sought solace and consolation in “The Hall of the Whispering Puppets”. It was a long wooden house of comforting shadow and darkness lit by flickering oil lamps and smelling of beeswax, sandalwood and frankincense. In 1675 a traveller from our town showed kindness to the Old Believer, the Archpriest Avvakum, when he and his family were imprisoned in the sunken pit at Pustozorsk, on the Arctic Circle. Risking his own safety, he lowered black bread, two cold roasted fowls and wine into the prison. In thanks, Avvakum tore three strands of hair from his head and told our traveller, that if preserved, those hairs would protect his family and town from all wars and conflicts, both then and in the years to come.

On his return, the traveller wrapped the hairs in a ball of clay which he moulded into a face. His wife wove some black clothes and a puppet was created. Down the centuries, whenever one of our town died, three hairs were plucked and a puppet was made. Their names and dates were recorded and thousands lined the shelves of the main hall and overspilled into its murky recesses and cellars.

In times of personal anxiety or national danger the townspeople visited the puppets. Some were content to sit in shadow and sense the rows of unchanging faces stretching back into the darkness over the quiet untroubled years. Others, like myself, took a puppet from the shelves, placed it over our hand and listened to the whispers.

My favourite was Gregory the Storyteller 1726-1795. His puppet sensed what tale you wanted to hear. Today I wanted reassurance – the story of Alexei the woodman, who married the moneylender’s beautiful daughter. Alexei built a cottage in the heart of the woods with stone so strong that the wolves and bears could never break through. In the evenings he sang the old songs to his wife and children while the fire glowed and the stove sizzled with bacon and sausages. Outside, under a full moon, the shadows of the wolves would pass. But inside all was warm. All was safe. That was the story I wanted.

I slipped Gregory’s puppet over my hand and waited for the soft voice to begin. What came was hoarse and breathless.

“But men from the town grew jealous of Alexei’s good fortune. They coveted his gold and lusted after his wife. Each day when Alexei was working far away in the woods they chipped quietly at the stones

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which protected him. Soon those stones were held together only by dust and the men whispered to the wolves...”

I could stand no more.

Others confirmed my fears. The puppets were in ferment. Wise old grandmothers, long consulted for their folk wisdom, muttered of miscarriages, abortions and secret smothering whilst the pious blasphemed and giggled of depravities.

Few people in our time chose the old Archpriest Avvakum as a confidante. He was rough-spoken and used archaic Russian beyond our understanding. But during those troubled days the archivist himself sought the Old Believer’s advice. He emerged grey-faced and shaken.

“He swore at me. And worse. He told me we’d betrayed them. And then he was silent. I don’t think he’ll ever speak again.”

A week after the Kazan theft the puppets remembered their old stories again but there remained an anxious unsettling tone to their voices – as if they were afraid of strangers, as if they too had seen the Gamaun in their dreams. The archivist was right. Avvakum was mute. He never spoke again.

Two weeks later I received a letter from my friend. Furious with the school inspector, his father had enrolled him in a Moscow academy. The pair were living in a tiny apartment whilst Irina, my friend’s older sister, retained the house in Klon Batiuska.

He wrote, “Last night I thought of Gestas, the unrepentant sinner, crucified at Golgotha, the hill of skulls. Christ is always portrayed looking away from him towards Dismas, who joined him in Paradise. I saw Gestas surrounded by an aureole of eleven stars, wincing in pain at the fiery brightness. I believe our own Gestas knows about the stolen Madonna. But beware of that puppet. He’s a dangerous and angry spirit. The first time I spoke with him he told me I would become a great writer. On my second visit he said I would spend many years of despair in an asylum – forgotten by all but one woman.”

Of all the puppets, he was the one I feared the most. His real name is lost. In 1836 he was convicted of stealing a gold necklace and confined. Throughout his forty-five years in prison he protested his innocence, riled and swore at the priests who visited him and was thus nicknamed “Gestas – the Unrepentant Sinner”. Two years after he

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died, defiant to the last, the gold necklace was found in the deathbed of Martha the Devout Seamstress – 1802-1883. Poor Gestas had told the truth. His puppet then acquired the gift of prophecy. But he was a cruel adviser. Men and women have killed or gone mad after speaking with him. For in death, as in life, he always told the truth.

His was a disturbing puppet. It reminded me of some African juju dolls I had seen. It had been made in grudging haste with filthy sackcloth before his innocence had been established. The eyes were two cracked ill-matching glass beads which squinted as I lifted him from the shelf.

His voice was petulant and sullen, “Another child has plucked up the courage to goad me. Is it a dare? A forfeit? Knock on the door of the witch’s house and run before she puts you in her oven. But no, I do you a disservice. I sense that, like the other one, you come in good faith. You worry about the Lady of Kazan. Rightly so. The thief has been here before you. For two days and nights I hid your Madonna in my rags. While men scoured the houses of robbers and ransacked their attics and cellars, she was with me. Then only her gold and jewellery were left but that was stolen too. We’ll burn for this. All of us in this hall. And you’ll abandon us. You’ll whisper against each other and your town will tear itself into rags as mean and filthy as the ones I was given. But your Madonna will come back to you. The thieves will say they destroyed her. Liars one and all. She keeps fine company now. How your priests’ mouths would gape!”

“And you, boy, will die a happy death. An old man’s death in your own house. Laughing as you watch shadows on a screen while a wall crumbles. They smash it brick by brick, dancing in the rubble, and your heart will fail, even in its joy.”

Things were never quite the same in the town after the Madonna was gone. We heard anxiously the news from Baku, Sevastopol, Tallinn and Moscow and felt it coming closer. Still we pretended. But one cold evening in February 1913, we found slumped on a footbridge, a man we once knew as a fine singer of ballads. He’d left us fifteen years before, with his daughter, who was to dance at the academy in Saint Petersburg. He was young then and full of dreams. He was fed, rested and given shelter. Then he told his story.

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“Eight years ago my daughter, Natalia, danced in Saint Petersburg for the role of Aurora in ‘The Sleeping Beauty’. She practised and rehearsed so hard that her toes bled. But in the evenings I bathed her feet in wild honey and rosemary and we were content. I sang to languorous hussars and their blowsy mistresses in cheap nightclubs to pay our rent. During her audition of the ‘Rose Adagio’, she danced so perfectly she needed no support from any of her male dancers. She was accepted and was to tour Paris and London. On the morning of January 22nd we walked in happiness down the Nevsky Prospect and up to the Winter Palace, hardly noticing the crowds of people solemnly marching through the streets. Do you remember that day? No, I felt the same then. I thought the outside world could never harm us. We felt like spectators, curious and entertained by the icons held high, by the images of the Tsar on banners. We were untouched for soon we would be in Paris with an apartment overlooking the Seine. Then people began screaming and running and volleys of shot whistled from the Winter Palace. My daughter, caught by a stray bullet, never spoke a word. One moment she was talking of champagne in our rooms, of bluebirds and Puss in Boots, then she was dead in my arms.

“I’ve spent the empty years since singing sentimental ballads in cabaret. I taught a man the ‘Cherry Tree Tango’, a sickly confection with ceiling fans, peacock feathers and palm trees and he taught me how to like cocaine.

“Our dancers have since learned a new step. The music’s harsh and dissonant and the feet are turned back upon themselves. It’s full of stamping and anger. A rite of spring? A rite of death. In Paris, during the terror, the mob danced the Carmagnole, hundreds weaving through the streets, mocking and mimicking the victims of the guillotine. We’ve come to that.”

The news of Natalia’s death numbed us. We’d all celebrated their departure for Saint Petersburg in 1899 with a street party. Her photograph was still pasted on our classroom wall – a shy happy girl dressed as Clara in “The Nutcracker”. It seemed our town was held together by dust like the cottage in Gregory’s story. Soon the wolves would be here.

When war came I served in intelligence at Tannenberg. Our junior officers, brave and naïve, were better suited to dancing polkas at regi-

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mental soirees or blowing lazy blue smoke rings in the billiard rooms of Saint Petersburg. By late August they were broken – the remnants shivering in tattered uniforms – betrayed by folly and misunderstandings. And waiting for their moment, quiet and watchful, were the political agents and agitators. In our retreat, as we passed the lines of bodies, I overheard one say,

“The Nutcracker hussars and chocolate soldiers will sleep forever now. We’ve done with their fairy stories.”

Our town came of age at Tannenberg. All the years of ease and detachment came rushing down on us in those two weeks. Our classroom registers became roll-calls of the dead.

At the height of the battle I met my old friend again in a field post office, surrounded by sacks of mail. We shook hands.

“They call me now ‘The Kind Master of the Dead Letters’. I’m an unwilling intermediary between the living and the dead. These letters arrive from all parts of the empire – from wives, sweethearts and fond parents. All of them are written to the dead. You’ve seen them out there in the fields and ditches. My task is to write back. Everyday I lie and lie a thousand times, reassuring each peevish wife that her husband died with her name on his lips – all her complaints and grievances forgotten. I’ve become a whispering puppet, comforting the unknown from Kamchatka to Yalta. Like Gogol’s Chichikov I am a gatherer of dead souls.

“Yesterday I was thinking about my tale, ‘The Princess of Phoenicia’, remembering my burnt hand, the theft of the Madonna and my father bringing me to Moscow in his anger. As the guns sounded and the wind roared, I smelt again the sickly mimosa of spring in Klon Batuska that I hated. My bible blew open to Nahum’s book of vision, about the fall of great Nineveh – the city of a thousand sorrows – that bloody city full of lies and robbery. He writes that the shield of the mighty men is made red, that chariots will rage in the streets and that the palace will be dissolved. Our town and all old Russia are finished. You know they caught and punished the thieves who stole the Madonna – men from our town. All they recovered was the circlet of gold and jewels that surrounded her. The thieves say they found it in

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one of our puppets – poor old Gestas. They say they destroyed the Madonna.”

I told him of Gestas’ prophecy, that the Madonna would return to our town.

“The word of Gestas against thieves. The same old story. Who would you believe?” he laughed bitterly. “My father is ill. When I left Moscow his reason was fading. I found him searching in despair for my lost story, crying over its burnt pages. He told me he must walk out, like the doomed wanderer in Schubert’s ‘Winterreise’, into the storm and the cold. He knows no-one in that city. He sees the hostile landscape of those songs, with the images of loneliness and despair, in the grey faces and bone-shaped buildings. Finally I persuaded him to compose his own settings for the song cycle.”

We parted amid the wreckage of our country’s young. As order disintegrated I joined the platoons of White Guards and saw action in many western parts of our lands.

We found him in a barn at the beginning of August 1918, near the town of Revda. My companions wanted to shoot him as a spy for, by his clothing, he was clearly a Bolshevik. But there was something defeated and empty about him, something that welcomed capture and would have embraced death, that puzzled me.

I questioned him alone, sharing a bottle of vodka as we spoke. He was Hungarian, in his early twenties, embittered by his own army’s collapse and easily seduced by the red fervour.

“No-one told us,” he kept repeating. “A month ago we were guarding a house at Yekaterinburg. Yurovsky was our commanding officer. He woke our barrack room at 1 a.m. in a blue panic. The Czech army was breaking through and we had to move quickly. He picked seven of us – Hungarians and Latvians. No Russians – I thought it strange at the time. There were three Bolsheviks with him, smiling and rat-eyed. He told us we had to shoot a group of spies and led us down to a basement. Holy Mother of God. No-one told us. We were the ones. We shot the Romanovs. We all hesitated at first but Yurovsky threatened to shoot anyone who refused. My pistol jammed. The men, the boy and the Tsarina all fell dead at the first volley but the daughters were barely

touched. One of the Latvians dropped to his knees, sobbing that they were immune to the bullets, that they were protected by God and that we were all damned. Even Yurovsky was pale and sweating. The air was full of smoke and screaming. One of the girls ran to the door and clawed at the wood. We'd guarded them for weeks. We liked them. Maria – we called her 'little bow-bow' – always asked us to guess the name of her dog. It died in that cellar with her. When the smoke cleared they fixed bayonets and massacred them. I was still on the ground fumbling with my pistol. It seemed to last forever. That butcher's shambles. We found out that the princesses had diamonds and other stones sewn into their dresses which deflected the bullets.

"We buried them outside and poured sulphuric acid on them. Yurovsky took the clothes. I hear they sold the stones. But when we returned to our barracks, I found that a blood-stained piece of one of the dresses – Maria's – had stuck to my boot. Eleven stones there were inside. We quickly decided that it was our payment for what we'd just done.

"It seemed though that Maria's blood had soaked into the bones of each jewel. We kept wiping them clean as I've seen men, too long at the front, continually washing their hands.

"Such dreams we had that night. I was lucky. I was only a witness to the slaughter but I sensed the grey shapes, the shadows of the dead in the firelight, of all the men I'd killed since 1914. The others knew no peace. The dead were always with them.

"One dreamed every night he was playing charades with the young princesses before the war, miming the continual plunge of a bayonet. And they were laughing, trying to guess his actions.

"'You're father, planting apple trees at the Summer Palace in Yalta.'

"'A dancer in Mr Stravinsky's new ballet that we're not allowed to see.'

"'Our English uncle Tum-Tum shooting rabbits.'

"'Hamlet, killing Polonius behind the arras.'

"'I know who you are,' said Maria. 'You're our murderer.'

"And then he saw again the killing, the burying of the bodies and smelt the reek of sulphuric acid on flesh. They smiled at us when we entered that cellar. They thought we'd come to help them evacuate the

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building. That made it worse. They thought we were taking them to England.

“And as the presence of the dead grew with each day, the faces of their own wives and children at home became lost to them.

“‘I cannot remember what I was or where I come from,’ one told me. ‘I had work once, in a western country long ago, but I can’t remember the way back.’

“Sleep deserted us. We felt the dead around us as we marched. Quarrels festered over imaginary plots and slights. I was handed the jewels as the others feared them and distrusted each other.”

“What happened to your companions?” I asked.

“One shot himself after pleading with a man he’d killed three years before. The others deliberately walked, rifles raised, into a platoon of your White Guard. They saw your banner with the white skull and laughed. All of them are now dead.”

With a gesture of surrender he drew a leather pouch from his pocket. “Here, please take them.”

I think he would have welcomed a kindly bullet but I hated those squalid executions of the raggle-taggle foot-soldiers who are left behind.

A few weeks back we’d met a family of travelling actors and musicians sheltering in a house near Cherkassy. We were tired and homesick, and in exchange for food and a little money, the grandparents, women and children, danced, sang and tumbled for us. There were no men. I didn’t ask what had happened to the men. One of the girls was shivering with fever and without thinking, I gave her a spare jacket and hat. Three days later we found them all dead in a ditch. My charity had killed them. The Bolsheviks recognised the clothing and assumed they were our spies.

Anna Akhmatova, Gumilev’s widow, wrote that wild honey smells of grass and freedom, a girl’s mouth of violets but that only blood smells of blood. In vain did Pontius Pilate wash his hands. Still the stench of it stuck to his fingers.

I’d seen and smelt enough of blood during those four years. I sent the Hungarian back to his mother in Cegled. Perhaps the shadows would leave him now that the jewels were gone.

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I shook the eleven stones onto the table and examined them. It was like looking from a high bridge into a dark whirlpool where the river rushed past perilously below. I feared sleep when I remembered the terrors of that wretched firing squad. Finally tiredness overcame me. I dreamed I was in a sickroom – imposing and austere. On the bed an old man was dying alone – slowly and painfully. His lips moved constantly but no doctor or friend answered. Instead, from a nearby room, angry and frightened voices were whispering and quarrelling. At the doorway, surrounded by an aureole of eleven glittering stars was Maria, the murdered princess, aloof and imposing, watching the old man. And then it seemed that her face changed and I saw instead the Madonna of Kazan, as I remembered her when we visited the Basilica all those years ago in 1903.

I confided in no-one about the Hungarian's story. By mid-1921 we were beaten. My own courage drained the day in August of that year I heard of Gumilev's death. He had seemed invulnerable as he mocked and raged against the Bolsheviks. I met him in Kiev and he spoke as fearlessly as when he walked in Africa amongst the giraffes and hippos he loved. They shot him for his support of the Kronstadt uprising in March. He read me his bitter poem about the gates of paradise. There was nothing grand or sacred about them – merely an opening in a forgotten and neglected wall. There was no Saint Peter either – only a tired beggar with a set of rotting keys hanging from his belt. That would have been his end. A shabby death in a damp cellar. An heroic end nonetheless but one I feared and hid from.

Like the lost cabaret singer we found on the footbridge in 1913, I staggered back to Klon Batuska in the summer of 1922. Our town had been renamed Smiertdush. Within a week we were called to a public meeting by the Commissar of the People's Russian Office – (COPRO).

He addressed us, "Not only do the inhabitants of this town persist in the false superstition of the churches, but you suffer the delusion that your ancestors speak with you through a collection of moth-eaten, flea-ridden rag dolls. Your ancestors are long dead and buried and will now be forgotten. The entire toyshop will be destroyed tomorrow at noon. If you need advice or direction you will consult with a party

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member in the very same building for we need its many rooms and cellars for the public good.”

And so, our “Hall of Puppets”, with its many hidden recesses and dark corners of sanctuary, became “The Cellars of Whisper”, a place of hearsay, rumour, accusation and death.

Next day, our townspeople helped them pitchfork the puppets into the market square. They were the same men and women who had sought solace from the storytellers and balladeers, the old priests and merchants, the wise and the wicked. Gumilev wrote that his executioner came dressed in a red shirt with a face like an udder. Our townspeople fell over themselves to suckle at its monstrous dugs. At any time since the proclamation was issued, I could have rescued Gregory the Storyteller but I felt numb and impotent. In the daylight the puppets had lost their magic. They were crude clay or papier-mâché dolls dressed in dusty rags. They burned without a murmur. Two hundred and fifty years became ashes in ten minutes. There were no prophecies. We had abandoned them.

I buried the eleven jewels in a lead casket underneath a humble white rose bush in my garden. For over thirty years now, their blooms have been dark red – contorted and twisted flowers of exquisite dream and nightmare. Their perfumes recall the rooms, gardens and landscapes of my childhood. But, each year, on July 17th, the anniversary of the murder, they smell only of blood.

When the terror came and we all became shrunken and cowed, afraid of our neighbours’ malice, afraid of the gossip and rumour that would lead to a basement and a bullet in the “Cellars of Whisper”, only Irina, my friend’s older sister, outfaced them.

We’d always treated her with amused contempt. She reminded us of Gogol’s lumpen peasant women with her heavy stolid walk, thick pebble glasses and shapeless grey clothes. She taught piano to the bored daughters of clerks and merchants and played with a hesitant stumbling touch. “She has the soul of a turnip,” I said once and that became her nickname.

In the summers before the Great War we’d walk the paths among the reed-beds, shyly offering the girls flowers picked from our gardens

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and inventing stories about the marsh wolves to make them cling tighter. No-one walked with Irina. She was too plain, too desperate for affection. She also claimed to know from memory a lost Schubert sonata, taught to her by her grandmother, but we laughed. She struggled to play her pupils' exercises.

But now everything had changed. She knew that the world that might have made her happy had gone forever. Her despair gave her a reckless dangerous courage.

One afternoon I was dragged from my desk and taken for interrogation. First, they removed my belt and shoelaces and made me walk with my hands clasped behind my head. It's impossible to retain any dignity, to walk with pride when your trousers are flapping at your ankles and one shoe has fallen off. But, as I stumbled in the mud outside the "Cellars of Whisper", I heard piano music start from Irina's house.

It was a sombre andante, a hero's march to the scaffold. My captors grew uneasy, fumbling with the keys to the cellar. The final movement was a wild careering presto agitato of fifteen minutes, a piece of dazzling virtuosity and defiance. Irina flung all her years of failure and defeat back into their faces. Her modest little piano rang out with forgotten harmonies and unearthly echoes. It was the Schubert, the lost E flat minor, the key of storm, rage and darkness. Occasionally she struck the major key but it was like a falling man briefly grasping at slippery rock grass before plummeting into the swirling waves.

Every time one of us was taken Irina played her sonata and always with the same passion and intensity. Her music was the last sound some of our townspeople heard.

One night they broke her door down and smashed her piano into matchwood with sledgehammers. They ripped her music into shreds and one by one broke her fingers.

The next day Irina tore down every notice she could find. It was a proclamation about "appropriate designated forms of address" – the weasel language of the semi-literate. In front of the "Cellars of Whisper" she made a small bonfire and destroyed them all.

They took her within the hour and she was gone from us. She shamed us all.

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One November morning in 1932, I was woken at three o'clock and taken in my nightclothes to the brightest of those cellars. Box files had replaced the puppets and the perfumes of sandalwood and frankincense had long been sanitised. Facing me across a plain metal desk was the Commissar. He feigned apology for the hour and my dishevelled appearance, uncorked a bottle of the best burgundy I have ever tasted and placed before me a chessboard. The pieces were elaborately-carved onyx, the white representing the Tsarist forces and the black depicting the fallen Austro-Hungarian empire. We played and drank in silence for an hour and then he spoke.

"I understand your dilemma. In four moves you will checkmate me. But do you dare to win? Or, do you risk more by allowing me to win?" he laughed. "No – in everything that matters most you have allowed us to win. I play this game for fun. The victory is yours." He knocked over his king – the emperor Franz Joseph.

"You have a former school friend in Moscow. A writer. A Master, it must be said. He interests us. Sadly he is unwell but is enjoying the best care our doctors of the mind can offer. That is why your nostalgic reminiscences of lost youth have ceased. He is deeply troubled by an incident from the dear dead days. The theft of the Madonna of Kazan. Guilt and that tiresome old vice of forgiveness haunt his work. He writes about Pontius Pilate, a crucifixion and a thief called Gestas. A waste of talent that troubles our leader, our Gardener of Human Happiness. You know his views on such mummery.

"But these old icons may well have their uses in the glorious days to come. Don't believe those old stories that we sold it to buy tractors for our sweating peasants. And we don't believe that the thieves – from your town, I remind you – destroyed it. Of course, we are aware that you were only eleven at the time. But children see things. They remember. If your friend recalls anything and confides in you, we wish to know. You enjoyed your wine? Good. Here is another bottle. Take it. We will play again. Next time I will represent the Romanovs."

His revelations disturbed me. I had no suspicions about the thieves. I knew of course that the Commissar would read in advance all of my letters from the Master and intercept my replies. I was being tested and in fear dutifully showed each one to him. My friend's doctors encouraged

him to write hoping that one of us would incriminate someone from the town.

Over five years he wrote perhaps a dozen times – chatty innocuous ramblings about our schooldays, families, favourite authors and the puppets. Never once did he refer to his own writing or the Madonna. And then in 1937, in the middle of a long anecdote about his dead father was this short extract: –

“You remember it was my father who suggested we should first speak with our favourite puppet, Martha the Devout Seamstress. I still miss her warmth and honesty.”

Every word was a lie. Martha was the thief responsible for the forty-five year imprisonment of Gestas. Hers was the only puppet our parents forbade us from consulting. She was a trickster and a liar in death as well as in life. Why was he linking her with his own father? What was he telling me?

And then I understood. The terrible burning of his hand by the inspector from Kazan and the theft of the Madonna were no coincidence. In revenge the Master’s father stole the icon and hid it for two days in the puppet Gestas, discarding the gold setting. Someone else had discovered her jewels. They were caught and punished. The Master’s father must have confessed the truth as he lay dying, causing my friend to lose his reason. But what had become of the Madonna? Had his father really destroyed it?

The Commissar read the letter over our game of chess.

“Still the same longing for the past. Childhood games and fairy stories. The pair of you are like that dreamer Pasternak. Harmless cloud dwellers. Holy fools.”

In the years that followed I rarely heard from the Master and he offered no more clues about what his father had done with the Madonna. My games of chess had stopped for the Commissar himself was taken to the “Cellars of Whisper” and a new man faced us across the metal table. From him we learned different fears and a new generation was taken and forgotten. But in February 1953 a package arrived early one evening in the Master’s handwriting. The letter read:

“I’ve searched all these years through my late father’s documents and boxes but can’t find ‘The Lives of the Tatar Saints’ you wanted

The Princess of Phoenicia

returned to Klon Batiuska. I fear he destroyed it. Instead I have sent you his settings of Schubert's 'Winterreise' and some poems by Anna Akhmatova. All things return at last to what they once were." I opened the package.

I saw it burn. In that classroom nearly fifty years ago. I saw him throw the manuscript on the fire and then burn the Master's hand with the final page. I smelt the wood smoke, the strawberries and the violets. But when I unwrapped the poems and the Schubert it was there before me again. "The Princess of Phoenicia" had returned. There were his finger-marks and the strawberry stain on one of the pages. When I held it up to the light a pale shadow formed like a watermark of a flaming arm with smoke rising from the fingers.

"My manuscript will not burn," he had said. The ghosts of past days had come back to me. I recalled the voice of a puppet, "She keeps fine company now. How your priests' mouths would gape."

Outside, as twilight fell and the marsh fogs swirled over the town, twisted round the carcass of Irina's ruined house and through the broken teeth of the school, the sadness of those fifty years overcame me. I remembered the Gamaun, the screech-owl of my dream and Lilith in the bible stories, who carried away children and destroyed them. They were our classroom registers of the dead at Tannenberg. I remembered Jezebel, defended and given voice by the Master. I held "The Princess of Phoenicia" in my hands. Two pages were stuck together. In the fire-light the watermark gleamed gold and black, secret and strange.

Carefully, I pulled the pages apart and there she was. The lost Madonna. The power of all the ages was in my room. Created in Constantinople, at the dawn of our faith, where forgotten artists, goldsmiths and holy dreamers worked by the shores of the Bosphorus, she'd seen that great city pillaged and wrecked in three terrible days. Countless icons and sacred books were trampled and burned while the mob danced and howled. Taken to Kazan and buried in a garden when the Tatars invaded, she was rediscovered in a child's dream. How many thrones and empires had fallen in her time? Rome, Constantinople, Paris Berlin, Saint Petersburg...

Her gold and jewels had been wrenched away in anger by the Master's father. I counted. Eleven empty settings around her, eleven

Colin Insole

bright stars around the Princess Maria in my dream and eleven dark and perilous stones buried in a lead casket in my garden. Eleven stones that spread madness and fear like a contagion among the guilty.

The Undertaker of Human Happiness had sought her in the years before the Second War. He would have her. I would bring her to him.

Shrouded by the fog, I dug tentatively under the rose bush. The casket, buried for a generation, yielded to the first thrust of the spade. Inside again, I rolled the stones on the table alongside the Madonna. They arranged and aligned themselves. I had feared that it would prove impossible to set them firm but as I fixed each one to its appointed place they became immovable – a vault of Heaven. Looking into the smoky gold of the icon – coloured by centuries of incense – I saw the old city of Constantinople, clouded and shimmering with eleven stars. I made preparations for my journey to Moscow.

As the crowded train rattled through the night, I walked the corridors as if invisible. No-one spoke and no guard or security officer checked my papers. Lulled by the smell of soot and heavy damp woollen clothes, I drifted into sleep. I dreamed of a bleak landscape with hollowed smashed buildings and shapes of people crawling in the wreckage. It was the town of my childhood. But, as dawn broke far away, salmon-pink like the seas of Tyre, eleven bright stars shone. The Gamaun was coming again. This time her music was solemn and sweet. The tidings of ruin were not for us. I heard the names of those who would fall. Some were known to us – the mighty ones – the Undertaker and the Snakecharmer. Others were thrusting alongside on their coat-tails, and some, unknown to me now, were our future masters. These were the ones who would watch as their Cellars of Whispers were torn down.

A cold mist draped the early morning Moscow streets as I joined the silent crowds as we swept up Kuznetsky Most towards Red Square. In the half-light people appeared disembodied – huge rabbit faces, grey with stubble or sheep wrapped in headscarves, mouths falling open. They were frightened and subdued, eyes expecting a hidden blow. Was this how the crowd shuffled and jostled on the way to the Hill of Skulls?

I posted my package in the special box knowing that he would open it. I'd added stamps with the old double-headed eagle of the Tsars. That

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would catch his attention. I thought of the puppets, of Irina, of Nikolai Gumilev and the Master. Turning back to the railway station, I remembered the words of Gestas, that as an old man, I would watch, as the walls crumbled and fell.

ТИЗ СДАДІЗЯ ІХ УФЦ

Michael Cisco

I'd been practicing inside for hours and correspondingly becoming steadily more restless, finally moving around the room playing and barely managing not to knock things down. Finally, when it seemed like there was nothing more to be done, I felt it was permissible for me to go out for a stroll, which is the only form of non-medicinal relaxation that reliably calms me. The day was making itself a sour yellow color, employing a low baffle of fog to do so. It wasn't entirely convincing. The fog still had too many of the qualities of smoke to be really plausible fog. But I felt sure there was no fire anywhere. My smelling is acute, and I didn't smell anything but the excessively parched odor the ground gave off, and which was inconsistent with the supposed moisture of the fog. Of course, the fog didn't come near the ground. Nor was it high. It was exactly equidistant between the ground and what is known as the firmament.

It seemed to me that the dim, too numerous shadows of the afternoon were brown and almost red. Everything seemed foreshortened and ugly, causing me to wonder if I might also be affected. That way of framing things is unsurpassable and unsustainable, being more unreasonable than is warranted by reason. I began thinking about the Wilson book again, and especially the photographs. Actually, I never liked Wilson, but only found the subjects he made it his business to discuss interesting. The photographs didn't depict anything particular, anything edifying, but they had an unsettling reality that I wanted to try to understand. They were black and white photos, printed on a quire of special, glossy paper in the middle of the book. Mostly, they showed rooms and domestic scenes, a spindly man squinting in a

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garden with a frog dangling from his hand, and of tables on which labelled ordinary objects had undergone a process of organization and laying out for display regularly spaced. Something about the light in the rooms made them seem to be underwater. They were pictures of Hades. As is reported to be the case in Hades, everything was washed out. The light the photographs captured was glaring and dingy at once, and seemed to grubby everything it touched.

I mention all this to explain why everything should have continued to be so fresh in my mind when I made my discovery. I had been walking for a while, perhaps forty minutes or so, and was beginning to think about how I would turn and make my way back. During this time, nothing in the derangedly immobilized atmosphere of the day had changed appreciably and I had become used to it. Actually, I was trying not to think about playing, and I resisted a temptation to think along lines that I already had determined to be boring.

I noticed the dog and stopped at once to look at it, because it was covered in blood all down its front, and was behaving strangely. It didn't take any notice of me, first of all. To approach a dog that doesn't so much as glance in your direction is enough to make you wonder if you've accidentally turned invisible. Even a sleeping dog seems to be aware of the comings and goings around it. This one kept its face resolutely turned in a certain direction, although there was nothing making itself noteworthy there. In silence, it placed its forepaws well forward and then lowered its body to the ground, raised itself at once and lowered itself again, three times, then sat upright, still staring at the same place into the distance. A moment after I began using my eyes to scour the horizon for whatever it might be looking at, or looking for, it repeated the three bows and sat upright again. This was repeated a number of times, but I didn't think to keep track of how many, as I was not yet becoming fully sensitized to the significance of the situation. The dog was still about thirty feet away from me, and I couldn't see the bare ground it occupied until I drew closer, because, as I remember, of some tall grass.

Drawing nearer, I saw the second dog, dying sprawled on its side with its head thrown back, exposing the lacerated throat. Smearred pawprints dotted the ground with bloody marks in a crescent around the body, and

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there were streaks of drag marks in the dust on which it lay. As I took this in, the other dog, which had been sitting on its haunches, slowly rose to its feet, paused, then turned toward the body, and approached it, not at all moving like a dog. Dogs move in a galvanic, impulsive way. This one was making himself too deliberate to be entirely like a real dog, although I didn't for a moment believe it was anything else, and it certainly didn't move with the moplike inertia of an elderly dog. The dog raised and lowered its head and touched the head of the dying dog with its forepaw. Then it carefully took the scruff of the dying dog's neck in its jaws and dragged it, placing its feet with care, further in the counter-clockwise direction toward which it had already been doing some dragging. This operation required it to come within a few yards of me, but still it was not aware of me. Or gave no sign of its awareness of me. After dragging the body in an arc of a few degrees, it shook the neck, causing the dangling head, yet gasping, to swivel, until some drops of blood splattered the ground. Then it set the head down, leaving it in much the same disposition as it was in when I first saw it, and pawed at the blood with one paw. It touched the blood, and pulled it this way and that.

Recognition was forcing itself on me so violently that I felt as though there must have been a gasp and other sounds, because the idea was causing physical pain. The dog meanwhile stopped adjusting the shape of the pool of blood, slowly returned to its former position, and resumed its lowering and rising. The shape it had made there in blood which I recognized was only just a short time before hovering in my mind's eye as one of several painted on a wall in one of the photographs in the Wilson book. The astrological symbol for the planet Saturn. Many of the other pawprints were also occult symbols I was familiar with, although I couldn't reliably remember what they meant. Other planets, I'm sure. There were some I hadn't seen before, and all of them were rough. It had never occurred to me that animals might also practice sacrificial rituals, which were, I had believed, obsolete anyway.

For a time after I recovered a bit from my surprise, an ingrained respect for the religious practices of others prevented me from interfering with the living dog. Then I was for some reason enabled to perceive the absurdity of this, and I picked up a rock in order to cause a disruption, thinking that it was essentially a phantasm stretched on

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the surface of a pond, a pond of air in this case, that I could shatter with a rock. The stone trembled with spiritual awe as I lifted it, and in horror I dropped it again. It was no more aware of my touch than the dog was aware of my presence; both the rock and the dog were, in their own way, caught up in an all-engrossing spiritual rapture. Now my hand was contaminated with a worshipping residue of the stone, and I held it away from my body. Why *would* it be absurd to respect the religious practices of a dog? Unless it were the category of species and not that of activity that coded for the appearance of respect.

Resistance to the temptation to follow this line of reasoning rose up in me. I tried to understand that it was the whole scene that was absurd; it must be false. This idea received no support, because this was plainly happening. Perhaps he has a trainer. This thought revived my hopes – the dog was exceptionally well trained. It was directed to me, however, at that time, that rocks cannot be trained, and that someone who could believe such idiocy was not fit to live. I angrily spoke up for myself, as I have learned to do, and denied things on his behalf. Trembling happens in hands all the time. I simply mistook the tremble for the rock's when it was my hand's. I looked at my hand and it seemed to be covered in clear, thin mucous. That there was something wrong with it was obvious, but this could only be an organic problem most likely something that had begun well in advance of the manifestation of any symptom. For example, I could have been practicing too hard. I wiped my hand on my pants. The stone did not look wet, but it had fallen among a number of similar stones and I couldn't be sure which one it was.

I knelt and inspected the marks written into the dirt. It was then that I realized the injured dog was dead. When I once again raised my eyes, the other dog had disappeared. It was then time for me to be informed that I was the one responsible for all this, and then came the accusation that the paws of the dead animal drew the marks and then wiped clean. Dogs don't ritually sacrifice one another and they don't write.



In a gloomy office, two people sit reviewing the notebook, its pages neatly filled with minute handwriting. The script is as regular as printing.

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“Now this is the real stuff,” one says to the other. “That bit about the rock is especially good.”

The other doesn't answer, but her frown darkens.

“All the same,” the first one adds, scanning the pages with his eyes as if merely brushing the words with his gaze would cause them to release more of their distinctive fragrances, “Hennel is still better.”

This man is Professor Tycho, a third-rate academic who considers himself a connoisseur of the writing of the insane. His lengthy monograph on Wolfli's interminable strings of numbers and lists of nouns with his own name inserted into them is considered a success, but, when it comes to simple enjoyment, he much prefers to read detailed accounts of hallucinations and delirious mental states, carefully composed in lucid, controlled prose, setting his teeth into the torment of others – or at least, into their own representations thereof – with relish.

The woman folds her arms across her chest and sits back in her chair brittlely, turning her attention to the unbroken screen of trees that sway outside the window.

“I knew it would interest you,” she says, without looking at him, and without sounding very pleased. Having snagged his eyes on something of interest, Professor Tycho has begun reading again, gobbling the words greedily.

For several nights, the writer records how he became aware of a low, murmuring sound, originating somewhere far away, that continued for hours. On the second evening, it occurs to him that the sound begins at roughly the same time, and, attending to it more closely on this occasion, he concludes that it goes on without interruption or variation. He thrusts his head out his window, and even wanders outside, but he can't discover anything further. Night after night it returns, and, although he keeps himself awake as long as he can, he is always asleep before it ends.

“I'd say it's the real thing –” he says, breaking off for the moment. “There's the overall passivity that is associated with the schizophrenic's difficulties in untangling himself from what is not himself. He refers to things happening in his head, rather than taking responsibility for those events. The voices are subtly handled. He doesn't go for any really fantastic imagery, but sticks to modified versions of ordinary things and sights. What was the name again?”

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At last, Professor Tycho turns his attention to his associate, Doctor Cone, the head of the Valkoburg Psychiatric Television Depression Institute. Her eyes swivel toward him as well, although nothing else in her posture changes.

“There isn’t any,” she says. “As I said.”

“Huh,” Tycho replies, and drops his eyes yet again to the pages. He tosses them lightly from side to side. The text now seems to glow with its own isolation, unique and untraceable. “Like the *Diary of the Schizophrenic Girl*. Do you plan to publish it?”

Doctor Cone draws a short breath in through her nose and exhales it again almost right away, a silent snort. She’s a lean, middle-aged woman whose blonde hair has dimmed, and become filmed with grey, like neglected brass.

“I suppose,” Doctor Cone says, breaking the rampart of her crossed arms and rubbing her brow with her fingertips, “I should have expressed myself more clearly. It was natural enough, on your part, to assume I’d wanted your professional appraisal of the manuscript. But that isn’t the reason at all.”

Professor Tycho is an essentially selfish man, but he is also an aging bachelor, and he has not failed to notice that Doctor Cone’s waist continues, as is not always the case with women of her age, which is not far from his own, to be significantly more slender than her hips, nor is there exactly nothing at all to obscure when she folds her arms across her chest. He likes, on occasion, to imagine an unnaturally large, transparent, ghostly hand, like something out of a sketch by Rodin, smoothing the lines of fatigue and tension from her face, making it as pretty as it surely must have been, once upon a time. Since he wants something from her, or perhaps one should say *of* her: when she speaks, he listens.

“The patient who wrote that was not committed to the Institute – although that was to be considered, which is why this came to my attention at all,” she continues. “I never had a chance to examine him or even catch a glimpse of him. He was Doctor Bion’s patient.”

“Why not take it up with him, then? I don’t understand.”

Doctor Cone takes a moment, inhaling deeply, apparently hesitant to answer. “Well, we can’t seem to ... locate, Doctor Bion.”

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Although he hasn't been especially fidgety to begin with, at this, Professor Tycho becomes unusually still.

"Doctor Bion hasn't been seen in four days," she says quickly, looking him steadily in the eye.

"You don't think —?"

"Hi, how are you? Praise the Lord."

The tall, staring, athletic man who enters now beams with incomparably white teeth. So white are these teeth that they seem to bring light into the room. The pink skin of his high, broad forehead is so firm, smooth and taut that it gleams like glass beneath a perfectly uniform brush of thick, whitening hair.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," he goes on, pressing his large, flat hands together.

"No, no," Doctor Cone says neutrally. Her entire demeanor has changed, flattened, like a cuttlefish changing color to match its surroundings. She can feel the hum of his vibrant basso voice in the arms of her chair, in the air, in the floor.

"I'm only visiting," Professor Tycho adds hastily.

"Well, well," the man says, holding out his hands reassuringly. "I won't take a moment. Now *I* don't believe I've had the opportunity to make your acquaintance, sir."

Introducing himself, Professor Tycho jerks forwardly awkwardly from his seat and inserts his fingers into the firm clasp of the extended hand. The other lunges at him, earphones around his neck dangling in the air. Their speakers, adorned with crosses, are turned outward, filling the air around him with a tintinnabulation of popular computer music.

"I'm Doctor Brad Fred, Predicanten. God bless you."

"Ah!" Professor Tycho says, not at all surprised.

"I was wondering, Doctor Cone, if you had managed to come up with that new draft of the orthodoxy assessment review."

He talks like an announcer, Professor Tycho decides.

"Oh, yes ..." Doctor Cone takes a moment to find the words. "Well, that will have to wait a day or two. Something has come up — I'll present a report with the details at the next committee meeting. That's at two, isn't it?"

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“Prayer meeting is at two,” Doctor Fred corrects her. “The committee convenes at three fifteen.”

Professor Tycho, a perceptive man when he wants to be, notices that the snowy whites of Doctor Fred’s eyes are visible all around his wan blue irises. They remind him, fleetingly, of those anti-evil-eye charms tourists bring back from Greece.

– and your observation, of course,” he purrs, his smile widening, “at five.”

“Yes, I’ll have the report by then.”

“Don’t you worry, little lady,” Doctor Fred says, and for a moment Doctor Cone and Professor Tycho both receive independently the impression that he’s about to pat her on the head. If that thought crosses his mind, he thinks better of it and crosses it back out again. “Just get them ready as soon as you can manage it.”

He leans forward on his toes, raising his eyebrows and looking down his nose.

“Reading together, huh? Anything interesting?”

“A patient’s manuscript,” Doctor Cone explains quickly. “Professor Tycho was referred to me by a mutual acquaintance because the writer was interested in publishing it, and I thought he, Professor Tycho, could advise me about it.”

“I’m not sure I understand. Aren’t all personal papers and suchlike – information – having to do with patients confidential? I mean,” he turns to Professor Tycho, chortling jovially, “even I am not supposed to see them!”

Taken by surprise, Professor Tycho can manage only feebly to lift his features into a pale imitation of shared amusement.

“The patient is anonymous,” Doctor Cone replies dryly. “Even I don’t know who he is. The manuscript was passed on to me by another doctor.”

“Doctor Dion?”

Doctor Cone regards him steadily for a moment before answering.

“Bion.”

“Right, right! Heh, I’m usually better with names. I’d be interested to see it, when you’re done giving it the old onceover,” Doctor Fred says jauntily. “Since it’s anonymous I don’t suppose there would be any

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problem with that, there being no confidence to violate. I'll drop around later, after your observation. Well – nice meeting you!”

The handshaking is repeated. Doctor Fred sighs contentedly.

“Ah, no rest ...!” he says, heading for the door.

After glancing at the clock in his mobile telephone, he briefly makes the sign of the cross with his right hand, still holding the phone, which is white, with a golden cross on its back. The official salutation meant to accompany this gesture is “God’s wealth to you,” but, given the great frequency with which this phrase must be repeated throughout the day, it has come to be pronounced merely “Swealth.”

“Swealth,” they answer, each reflexively drawing their own rough crosses.

The closing of the door sends a puff of Doctor Fred’s expensive yet antiseptic cologne wafting back across the room. Professor Tycho sniffs at his twice-shaken right hand. Cologne, and institutional soap.

“My sense of the publishing world,” he says, speaking distinctly, if not quite correctly thanks to the state of his nerves, “is that it’s not going to be especially well received. There’s rather a lot of that kind of thing going around these days.”

Doctor Cone watches him closely. The Institute resounds with the noise of each patient’s individual television and the communal televisions lining the halls and public rooms, so that any conversation in an office is unlikely to be audible through the door, all the moreso in this case, since Doctor Cone’s office is well insulated against the sound. However, she needs a moment or two to calculate the moves to come in the unfolding of the day.

“Why the devil did you show me this?” Professor Tycho blurts, still making the effort to suppress his voice. He stares at the notebook in her hands as if it shone with leprosy. “You should burn that thing at once!”

“You know that wouldn’t work,” she says. “Especially not now that he’s seen it.”

She tosses her head toward the door, which is still so completely infused with Doctor Fred’s presence that it almost seems to *be* Doctor Fred, with his head scrunched down between his shoulders and his arms at his sides. There’s even a cross in the panelling of the wood.

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“Actually, it would make things worse.”

“Well, why the hell couldn’t you have been a little more discreet about it then?” Professor Tycho snaps. A tumult of emotions are tangling his brains: on the one hand, there’s fear, now that he’s been seen reading this piece of poison, anger at Doctor Cone for putting him in this jeopardy, but also hesitancy in expressing that anger arising principally from his cherished appreciation for her many arresting dimensions with the correlative disinclination to do anything that might, by offending, prompt her to further withdraw him from the prospect of them with barricades of frosty propriety, or even to sever their friendship altogether and a lot of good that would be. The image of an hourglass ringed in thick and doorless ramparts of stone flits through his mind.

“*Why the hell couldn’t you have brought this to me at my place?*” is roughly what he means to ask, but Doctor Cone is lost in thought, and oblivious to his questions.

“This passage was written recently and, evidently, the behavior of the man who wrote it changed around that time. Right around the time of the Doctor’s disappearance. You know, I wasn’t lying when I told... our visitor just now... that I didn’t know anything about the patient. All I know is that Doctor Bion evidently met him at an informal colloquium for horn players – he played as well, you know. He – Doctor Bion, not the patient – lent me the notebook for one night, saying he would come back for it in the morning, and I haven’t seen or heard from him since.”

“Why did he show it to you?”

“Hm?” Doctor Cone glances at Professor Tycho. “Oh, he wanted to know if I thought the man who wrote it should be... well, out and about. Anxiously. You know how dispassionate he was normally.”

Doctor Cone’s facial expression alters strangely, surprising him again with the realization that she also has a mind. It’s difficult for him to reconcile his appreciations.

“Something...?” Professor Tycho asks leadingly.

Without answering him in words, she turns the pages of the notebook and holds it out to him, again. The sun has momentarily emerged from the tumbling clouds and pours its clear ether into the room; this

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light rebounds from the page as she extends it across the gap dividing them, so that the paper blazes like silver, riveted with black impressions. “Well,” Professor Tycho thinks, “I’ve already read some of it, and been seen reading it. What is there to lose?”



...to me the kind of night it was. The murmur grew more and more distinct, and arrested my attention by splitting itself in two. There was a guttural whispering of many voices that repeated something short, or calling and responding in rapid alteration. This I hadn’t heard before, since it was fainter, but the other muttering was familiar, forming itself into protracted phrases that swelled unhurried out of the silence and receded back upon it again. A soft language of vowels, snarled in methodical unison by many dry, deep, growling throats, in tones that rattled, like the clatter of pebbles. It was like the night itself was chanting solemnly to itself to invoke itself and cause itself to become another night to which the darkness of familiar night would be like broad daylight in comparison, and the silence of the familiar night would be transformed into a deafening, bellowing silencing procedure. Things did darken themselves as I approached them, or directed my attention toward them. I thought that I was doing it, with the darkness and silence centered around me. I touched my throat, and it was humming with sound I wasn’t aware of making nor could I hear, but, when I touched with my fingers the lips and the area around them there was no movement, but only the regular shifting to and fro of the breath through a more or less unfluctuating aperture.

I had been walking in an open space and now it was so dark I could barely see the few low shrubs, the hand. I realized that the voices belonged to animals. Dogs sometimes whimper or moan in a resonant basso voice, a little like a low note on a violin – it’s a sound they often make at the end of a yawn, for example – and this was a chorus of such voices moaning long extended notes together, strictly together. The tone was constant. It had, in each voice, the steadiness of a practiced vocalist, and none of the aleatory accidental irregularities of an untrained vocalist. I began to see them. A few latecomers, loping in from the edges. Then clearly I saw them, as some of the chanters persisted in their

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chanting while others started to howl. They sat in rows. The howlers at the corners. The howls rose and fell, and whether or not they were natural or arranged was undeterminable. A procession of eight or twelve of them passed between the seated choruses, the most magnificent dogs I'd ever seen, with coats that shone like glass and black eyes glittering in the intensely clear darkness as limpid as the icy pools they say you find in lightless caves. You see them conducting in their midst, somehow, a dead human whose hand you saw lying on the ground some time ago. This human might have been a dog in life, and it seemed to me that this human had only just become human in death. The human is naked, you can see the discolored spots and you know that these are the marks of violence, because you can feel the bruises sliding on to you in the same positions, and you can feel the horror of violence radiating from the corpse like a silky wind of sickening cold. Dancing somberly with the corpse, which is now trussed up and bobbing up and down in their midst while the dogs who brought it school like fish, becoming impossible to untangle visually, or to follow in order to get a sense of the pattern, if any, they might be describing with their movements. You rise and you fall in a churning mass of electrically gleaming dog silhouettes: the cadaver is you, you realize that it's you, right in the middle, at the center, of the act of losing everything, and you're a totem in the dog's religion because you were at one time a dog yourself and have betrayed them in your humanity, betrayed them. You unbend your limbs and, while smiles open in faces masked with fur so black that nothing can be seen of them but the liquid reflections of the eyes and the gaping red jaws with long tongues and white fangs, your withered, skeletal corpse dances for them. It bends painfully trying to assume a former posture of quadrupedality, a terrible pain lancing its every joint, and its dance is also a struggle to overcome their hostility and resistance so as to become once more a dog and to escape the betrayal. Stern, baritone howls rise to a crescendo, looming up like towers, and it flees in terror from the sound.



“I believe it,” she says quietly. Then, wringing her hands, she adds at once. “I mean, of course I don't! It's absurd! That's obvious!”

Michael Cisco

Professor Tycho waits to hear what she will say, inappropriate and offputting rejoinders flashing across the desk of his inner editor. When some time has passed and she still says nothing, however, he ventures to comment.

“Well, yes, absurd!”

“But there might be something to it after all,” Doctor Cone says musingly. “Do you read Stravinsky?”

“*Read* him? No, what do you mean?”

“The psychiatrist, not the composer.”

Professor Tycho shakes his head. “Never heard of him.”

“Well, he had a theory that human religious practices are a further development of instincts all animal life has. In the service of strictly material needs, of course. There was something else he wrote, too, about some influence...”

She knits her brows to think for a moment, then makes an harsh sound in her throat and lightly thumps the arm of her chair in mild frustration.

“I can’t remember. Something about ‘religionogen’, a bacteria or... a pheromone? I lent the book to Doctor Bion, damn it.”

“You know, it’s funny you should mention that,” Professor Tycho says thoughtfully, after making sure he wasn’t interfering with Doctor Cone’s attempts to remember. “But there was something I’ve read somewhere along those lines too. Although, like you, I can’t seem quite to remember it. It was a story. The conceit was, that the gods are superior beings who present themselves to humans in order to make use of us. This being the case, why stop with humans? Why not any lesser being? If worship is an effect brought about by a, I don’t know, a huge telepathic will, then it would presumably appear among any creature with a receptive brain.”

“But birds!” Doctor Cone cries, suddenly heated. “Birds have virtually no brains at all. The size of a pinhead!”

“Wwwell,” Professor Tycho says, drawing out the guttural sound a little, showing her he is unsure how to take this sudden switch of topic. “Crows, minahs, and other bird-brained creatures have proven capable of speech, and even the use of tools, if I’m not mistaken. So, it may be that brain size alone is not the only factor. Maybe the... relative proportions...”

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He peters out.

“Were birds, uh, mentioned elsewhere in there?” he asks, waving at the notebook which he has since returned to her.

Doctor Cone looks down at the pages dejectedly.

“The problem is that... today, this morning, I saw a literal procession of cardinals making its way along a tree branch as I walked to work.”

She raises her voice to plough over Professor Tycho’s half-serious, half-joking rejoinders.

“They were walking in pairs, bowing their heads now this way and now that way, gingerly lifting and setting down their feet as solemnly as any officiant I ever saw.”

ТИЗ ДЯКЗУТ ШИТЗ

Rhys Hughes

CHAPTER 0 PRELUDE

The smell of stale apricot juice and coffee filled the small café as the two men entered. They sat down at the last remaining table and scrutinised the interior from the corners of their eyes. It seemed a safe enough place for a rendezvous, though one could never be sure of anything in a Moscow that was an incorporated nightmare, the darkest it had ever been, with tides of death pulsing inwards and outwards.

One of the new arrivals was clearly in pain, but did his best to conceal his discomfort by adopting a strident tone to match his fierce expression. And yet it could be readily observed that he was a kind enough soul under his mask and a strong personality. The other man was weaker, spiritually, morally and mentally, but there was a core in him as hard as a stone at the centre of a shrivelled, unpicked fruit.

“I have what you need,” said this second figure.

The first man nodded, clutched his left kidney, grimaced and managed to control his voice. “The same kind?”

“I have both the standard sort and the special.”

“I’ll take the special, of course. The ordinary stuff isn’t strong enough anymore. There’s not much hope for me; but I’m resigned to that and have been for a long time, as you know.”

“Yes, your condition was inherited. Well now!”

A waitress came over and asked if they wanted anything. She thought she recognised the man in pain, a writer once famous, but she

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couldn't be sure, and didn't care to embarrass or endanger herself by commenting on the fact. The little man ordered tea.

When it came it was tasteless, but this was hardly surprising. War was raging in the west, and though trade with the nations involved wasn't any part of the economic plan, and all tea was produced domestically anyway, the quality of everything was down. Fire and blood in the sunset: another excuse for inefficiency and absurdity.

"The last lot was the best I ever had," said the writer.

The withered man nodded. "It's the finest there is; the finest there ever could be. But it wasn't easy making contact with my supplier. He doesn't use normal channels. Are you ready?"

With a single deft motion, he passed the box of morphine phials to the writer, an operation that was conducted under the table. With equal skill, the writer dropped the box into the pocket of his coat. Then he sipped his tea and said, "I'll pay you tomorrow."

"Oh sure, try it out first, but it's the last of the batch."

"You want to raise your price?"

"No, my friend, I really mean that it's too hard to obtain now. Besides, I'm going south. I have unfinished business in the Caucasus. You dwelled down that way yourself, didn't you?"

The writer nodded. "A very long time ago."

"It's a long time for me too."

The writer finished his tea. "Morphine is made from opium and opium is made from poppies, which grow in the south. Maybe you'll locate some down there that will also be *special*?"

Rather surprisingly, the little man shook his head emphatically. "That's a curious thing about this situation. My supplier doesn't live in the south. He comes from the far north and grows his own. I don't understand. Shut your eyes and hold out your hand..."

"The north! Well, I'm not yet too old for games."

The little man pressed something into the writer's palm and told him to close his fingers around an object that rustled. "Now I'm going to tell you a story. Don't open your fist until I've finished. When my story is over I'll leave without saying another word. Then you can look at what I've given you. It should prove I'm not a liar."

The writer smiled ironically. "I like stories!"

Rhys Hughes

The shrunken man said, “This one is about the Zander Brothers. More than twenty years ago it happened. The father of the boys was an entrepreneur but I doubt you’ll find his life honoured by the government down there. Where do I mean when I say ‘down there’? Why, I mean Sukhumi, city of tired dreamers and other castaways...”

CHAPTER I THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

There are many places in the world where east meets west, but Sukhumi is one where the north overlaps with the south so precisely that nothing comes of any attempt to detach them. The Russians who live there claim it is entirely theirs in spirit, but such claims are made from beneath palm trees on the shores of a sea ploughed by triremes in ancient times. Tropic summers give way to chilly winters.

It has a history so long that a sizeable percentage is mythical, and its best-known visitor remains Jason in his Argo, searching for a fleece of gold. The Greeks, many of whose descendants still live there, knew the city as Διοσκουριός and regarded it as a boundary of the human world; but Romans followed them and renamed it Sebastopolis; then came the Ottomans, who called it Sukhum-kale.

Even after the first wave of Russians appeared, bloodshed was rare. Most settlers preferred to trade and make money, but at last something snapped. The shadow of Lenin fell on Sukhumi and its dark weight was unbearable, and the soul of the city shattered and fell inwards in pieces; but a few individuals bravely resisted in original ways and thus there are many weird tales to tell about them.

The weirdest concerns three brothers who fled the terror in the wrong direction. They had good reasons for going east instead of west, but the decision was a mistake anyway; and that was something they understood only when they reached their destination and learned it wasn’t the end of their journey after all. So they had to keep going, through lands none of them had ever dreamed of before.

Nicholas was the eldest of the Zander boys, a bookish fellow far too dreamy for the mathematics he studied under private tuition at his

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father's behest. Michael was the middle son, shrewd and manipulative, seemingly destined for success in business. Andrei was the youngest: an impetuous and courageous lad with a burning desire for military service. They were notable youths and popular enough.

The father was a widower and spent his days increasing his wealth. He had the unusual trade of acquiring primates for the pathology laboratories that blighted the hill above the city. His contacts in Africa ensured regular shipments of baboons into Sukhumi. In a sense this made him something of a joke among the local aristocracy; but he was genuinely respected for his efficiency and industriousness.

One spring morning in the eighteenth year of the century, the complex serenity of the ancient port was shattered by a sudden political coup. Few had imagined the red terror would reach Abkhazia so soon. The numerous *ķiaraz* militias, made up entirely of peasants, joined together under Nestor Lakoba to overthrow the existing regime and establish Bolshevism. They entered the city almost unopposed.

On the last day of April, orders were given to round up enemies of the new government and deal with them in the standard way. Most were shot. The quiet importer of apes was silenced forever and his body left lying in the gutter. When his three sons went to collect it, they were warned off by poorly aimed shots from a modern rifle. Having lost their home, they had no choice but to convene in a café.

Nicholas wanted to understand the philosophy behind the deeds of the radicals, perhaps believing that if he studied their motivation he might be able to control them. Michael preferred to deal openly with the invaders, to win their trust, until sabotage from within became feasible. Predictably enough, Andrei cared only for direct action, to borrow a sabre and rush at Lakoba himself, removing his head.

The waiter knew the Zander boys and came over, flicking a napkin in his theatrical way. He spoke from the side of his mouth as he served three glasses of brandy. He had overheard conversations earlier in the day: one of the advantages of his job was that he was always well informed about events in Sukhumi. The gist of his warning was that Lakoba had planned something special for the brothers.

"What exactly do you mean?" asked Nicholas.

The waiter lowered his voice.

Rhys Hughes

“He said your kind was the worst sort of traitor, that your father helped only the rich and spat on the poor. You know that the apes on the hill are used in medical research but the work only benefits hospitals abroad! The suffering is ours; the rewards are elsewhere. In retaliation, they intend to put you in those cages and experiment on you. I heard this from Lakoba’s own lips. And he was quite sober.”

He flicked his napkin again and turned on his heel. The brothers drank their brandies and left the café. They must vacate the city immediately. In the mellow sunlight they shivered.

“We should go to Istanbul. That is where refugees from the Civil War are gathering,” insisted Michael.

Andrei shook his head. “To Odessa. We can enlist with the Whites and fight our way back to Sukhumi!”

Nicholas sighed. “How can we go to either of those places without any money? And we don’t even know anyone who lives there. But we do have relatives in Baku. They work in the oil industry and I know those regions are untouched by the conflict. I’m sure Uncle Basil will lend us funds and *then* we’ll decide what to do next. That’s the sensible answer. We can rely on hospitality on the route: Abkhazians, Georgians and Azeris are bound by honour to aid poor travellers.”

“Yes, that fact makes going east more simple.”

“How much do we have on us?”

They emptied their pockets and stood around the meagre pile of coins, keys and oddments. An elaborate magnifying glass donated by Nicholas was the most significant item: a device that aided his reading of formulae printed in tiny fonts. Large and impressive, it had a pearl handle and was probably the only possession worth selling. They knew a Greek merchant with a shop down a backstreet who might be interested in buying it. They hurried there with grim expressions.

Kostas Spheeris was sitting at a desk near the window when they came inside. The sunlight slanted through the grimy panes and illuminated an object he was repairing, some sort of camera. He nodded at them wearily, like a man who has heard the same tale many times, as they approached to present the magnifying glass. He took it and peered at it from all angles before curling his lip indecisively.

“It appears to be fine quality, but I can’t be sure...”

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He took another magnifying glass from a shelf and proceeded to study the first lens through the second. This was tricky work. As he adjusted the focus by moving his hand, a sunbeam fell into the optic trap and burned a hole in his desk. He jerked away the upper lens, shrugged and took up the repaired camera with a faint smile.

“Clearly, this is a safer method,” he said.

He photographed the elaborate magnifying glass and then disappeared into a backroom. The rattle of jars could be heard, the slosh of liquids. He emerged with a developed print that he could study at high magnification without the risk of starting a blaze.

Nicholas endured this behaviour with patience; but Michael planned to use the delay to strike a better deal, demanding compensation for wasted time; while Andrei puffed and paced the floor, his eyes roving over all the curios on display but truly seeing none of them. At last Kostas was ready to make a decision. He opened a box under the desk and extracted from it a handful of tarnished silver coins.

“We accept,” said Nicholas.

“So little for all our trouble!” objected Michael.

“Let’s go,” growled Andrei.

They left together, half convinced the Greek would betray them to the authorities if they stayed a moment longer. They had decided not to trust anyone in Sukhumi and this decision had grown spontaneously in each of them, with no need to discuss the issue. They couldn’t leave safely before twilight, so they looked for somewhere to hide until then. The lobby of an abandoned hotel served the purpose.

Nicholas began talking about the equations of history and it seemed he believed that Lakoba was nothing more than an incorrectly added integer in the algebra of illusion. Michael saw a perverted economic basis for the takeover, though he expressed surprise that Abkhazia had succumbed so early, even before other Caucasian states. As for Michael... With a shock they realised he had gone. Where?

He returned within the hour, dangling a bunch of keys in one fist. The sun was setting over the Black Sea and now the crimson glow flooded the lobby, for the hotel’s open doors faced west, imparting a surreal vigour to the dilapidated furniture and dusty obscure ornaments. He shook the keys again and they tinkled unmusically.

Rhys Hughes

“I always carry these around with me. I knew they might prove useful one day; and so they have,” he said.

“Where have you been?” demanded Michael.

“Up on the hill: to the cages. I let them out, all of them. Those unlucky creatures *are* workers, after all, and now they are liberated; though I don’t suppose Lakoba’s thugs will treat them with respect. It seems a good idea to use the ensuing fuss as cover...”

“Yes, let’s hurry and leave this nightmare!”

The stars were out, but there was no moon, and the darkness thickened rapidly in the unlit streets. The brothers moved quickly and the sounds of angry shouting and shooting urged them to maintain their strenuous pace. The brooding hills were alive with baboons; and the vengeful beasts were descending into the boulevards.

Once they saw a vast silhouette projected on a wall by a solitary lamp, the shadow of an ape rending a man; a soldier who gurgled as the fingers closed on his throat and the fangs followed. A trickle of blood turned the corner and Michael briefly paused.

“They aren’t liars. It really is red,” he said.

CHAPTER II
THE WISDOM OF STICKS

Away from the sighing sea and into the mountains, they went. By day and night they walked; and they rested in villages where life hadn’t altered for millennia, since before the region was named Colchis. Because he spoke basic Abkhaz, Armenian, Georgian and Azeri as well as his own tongue, Nicholas acted as a spokesman for his brothers. The fabled hospitality of these lands turned out to be simple reportage, and they never lacked food or shelter. Indeed, the generosity of the populace was overwhelming; and they took grateful advantage of it.

News of events was scarce, but before long they learned that what had occurred in Sukhumi was an anomaly. The lackeys of Lenin hadn’t seized Abkhazia entire; Lakoba’s coup was premature, and the Georgian Guard, backed by the Transcaucasian Federation, was planning to invade the city and oust him from power. Absorbing this

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information with glee, Andrei considered enlisting, despite his distrust of Mensheviks, almost as bad as Bolsheviks in his mind, but volunteers were expected to bring their own equipment; and his funds were too low for that. Nicholas persuaded him without too much difficulty to persist with the original tactic of reaching Baku and borrowing money there.

For all three brothers the process of *real* education was beginning and among the small tribes of the mountains they found much to respect and emulate. North of Tiflis, in the secret valleys of Khevsuria, dominated by the ferocious and honourable descendants of Frankish crusaders who fled here long ago, Andrei was taught how to fight skilfully with broadsword and shield. He was an adept pupil at this nearly lost art, and he earned the admiration of these archaic warriors, who still wore chain mail coats and dreamed of recapturing Jerusalem.

For Michael the finest moment came among the Teutonic settlers who had established villages on the frontier between Georgia and Azerbaijan. Here he learned a business trick or two from the sly merchants who kept stone cellars stocked with wine and traded vintages with the surrounding tribes. They showed him how to feign appeasement and how to give the impression of yielding while remaining in control. Among these pioneers he was happy, and on the verge of applying for permanent residence, but his ignorance of the German tongue went against him. When his brothers moved on, he departed with them.

Well fed and exposed to the mountain climate, the Zander boys found themselves approaching the peak of physical fitness. The journey became a pleasure rather than an ordeal. North of Baku, on the final stage of the trek, they entered the realms of the Kipta, the mountain Jews who dressed like bandits and spoke an ancient dialect of Persian. No one knew where they had originated, not even the Kipta themselves; perhaps they were the remnants of the Babylonian expulsion. On a whim, Nicholas attempted to teach them mathematics; in return they told him about the Kabbalah. That moment changed his life forever...

Michael and Andrei finally managed to drag him away from his frantic studies and they resumed the walk, but he came with volumes

Rhys Hughes

donated by his benevolent hosts, creaking copies of the Tikkunei Zohar, the Book of Splendour and the key Lurianic works. Baku was only one day distant but Nicholas was exhausted by the time they caught sight of the city from the low hills, and the Caspian Sea beyond; and his tiredness was spiritual and mental rather than corporeal. He demanded a rest under a tree and they all sat in a circle, sharing a wine flask.

“I never guessed the equations of magic could be as lovely and perfect as those of calculus,” he remarked.

“Why should you ever have suspected that?” laughed Michael, but his mirth seemed to pain his older brother, who blushed and closed the book he had opened. There was an awkward pause; and a warm breeze moved through the branches and dropped fruit into Andrei’s lap. He took a bite, nodded his head, squinted at the sky.

Nicholas sought to change the subject. He picked up three sticks lying on the ground near his knee. “We should make a solemn vow never to be apart from each other again; for in unity there is strength. One stick alone is fragile, but together... Take all three and try to break them; then you’ll understand precisely what I mean.”

He passed the bundle to Andrei, who snapped the three sticks instantly with a single fluid motion of his large hands and said, “The demonstration would be a terrible cliché otherwise.”

Nicholas blinked in alarm, then he frowned and reached for the broken sticks, planting them in the soil, sharp points upward. Each was a weapon by itself, a trap for the unwary. He mumbled, “In that case, we must make a different vow. Separately we are more effective; there should be no ties that prevent us fulfilling our individual destinies. When a time comes for us to strike out alone, that is what we must do; with no recriminations. Do you solemnly agree to this proposal?”

They did so with a set of handshakes. They all burned with a desire to fight for the right to be individualistic; and what more coherent way to do that than alone? It was a sacred pact.

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CHAPTER III THE DEPARTING TREASURE

They entered Baku in the late afternoon and the lunatic bustle of the port was a shocking contrast to the peace of the mountains. Even the activity of Sukhumi had been nothing compared to this. They still hadn't spent a single coin gained from Spheeris, and now there was no need, for Uncle Basil was extremely welcoming. He had assumed they were dead and he gave them rooms in his large house.

Uncle Basil was an oil magnate and his mansion was filled with all the latest comforts and fashions. He bought expensive clothes for the brothers and introduced them to his business friends. Servants appeared with trays whenever a bell was rung and the corruption of easy living began to creep into their souls. Andrei resisted it with horse rides along the coast, but his older brothers gave in to temptation.

The times seemed good in Baku but this was an unstable mirage; and in fact a vicious Bolshevik regime had been displaced only the previous month. A bizarre coalition government was now in place. Declaring itself the Centrocaspian Dictatorship, it was an alliance between Mensheviks, Dashnaks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, backed by British troops under General Dunsterville. It was doomed from the beginning, but no one even admitted that prognosis to themselves.

Yet the city streets were peaceful and stable for the time being. Uncle Basil had good news for the boys. His eyes glittered as he announced that Lakoba had been chased out of Sukhumi, that the Red Army was faltering in their war against the Whites, that the British were planning to flood all of Central Asia with soldiers from India. The tide was turning at last; and Lenin's days were certainly numbered...

Michael asked for employment in the oil industry and was given a job that required a great deal of guile. Nicholas spent most of his time with a group of Jewish scholars, using number theory to analyse old texts. Only Andrei felt impatient and dissatisfied with the current state of affairs; he ached for action, for a chance to avenge the death of his father. One night he came home with a deep scratch on his forehead. A rumour soon went around that he had fought a duel on the beach for the love of a Circassian girl; but he refused to confirm this.

Rhys Hughes

The summer gradually passed and the notorious winds of Baku gained in strength along the waterfront. General Dunsterville fell out with some of his allies and threatened to withdraw his protection. An enemy force was rapidly closing in on the city, but it wasn't communist; it belonged to the Army of Islam, a Turkish creation led by the brutal Enver Pasha. The Zander boys didn't understand the peril, until Uncle Basil reminded them that they were Armenian on their mother's side. This was something they had previously paid little heed to.

"The Turks hate the Armenians and a massacre will undoubtedly take place if they successfully enter Baku. It might be time to consider fleeing again. I'm sorry to suggest this."

The brothers conferred together on the marble floor while Uncle Basil stood above them on the staircase; like a mercantile pasha. Andrei's hope they might return to Sukhumi was dissolved by the acidic inconvenience of encirclement. The Turks had isolated Baku from the rest of the country and the only way out was by sea, eastwards. In fact Uncle Basil knew the captain of a rusty vessel ready to leave at midnight; his cargo wasn't oil but antiques, the most precious possessions of Armenian merchants, gold and silver ornaments that could be bartered for passage across the deserts and ranges of Persia or Turkestan.

Andrei puffed out his cheeks as he absorbed this information. His lust for battle was tempered by the fact he wouldn't be opposing Bolsheviks if he remained in Baku, but progressive Turks. Michael saw his opportunity to profitably involve himself in the smuggling of antiques by becoming a close companion of the captain. Nicholas had more esoteric ambitions; he had felt something swelling up inside his soul ever since his meeting with the Kipta, a swirl of vague ideas that would soon coalesce into something crystalline and yet otherworldly.

Uncle Basil told them the captain's name, and where on the waterfront to meet him, and what words to speak to reassure the fellow. As darkness fell, the gunshots echoed from far away. A messenger entered with a wild rumour of a howitzer that could shell Baku all the way from Istanbul; and he nervously joined in the laughter of Uncle Basil and the brothers. Out at sea, an oil derrick was blazing like the fuse of

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a gigantic bomb; and for an instant they felt the planet under their feet groaning with barely contained fury. The brothers were prepared.

“Is there nothing else you require?” asked Uncle Basil with a frown of alarm. It was obvious he wanted to blurt out something, but fine manners compelled him to hold his tongue.

“I don’t think so,” they answered unanimously.

“Are you quite sure?”

“Indeed. You have already helped us too much.”

The magnate bowed with the self-confident humility of the aristocrat that is both born *and* made, and waved them farewell. Out into the murky night they ran, the smoke from the derrick providing useful but unhealthy cover. Suddenly Michael stopped in his tracks and clutched his forehead, then threw up despairing arms.

“We forgot to borrow money!”

Andrei fumed. “Surely we won’t need to pay for our passage across the water? That’s an outrageous idea!”

Nicholas placed a placating hand on his shoulder and said, “You forget we are at the mercy of fate. Everything has a high price in times of war. If a common sailor wishes to exploit us, how should we resist, if we hope to survive and fight another day?”

Michael reached into his pocket. “The money that Spheeris gave us; the coins in exchange for the lens.”

Andrei nodded. “Finally, a chance to spend it!”

CHAPTER IV THE SCIMITAR

Bolshevik agitators had been hiding in the city for months; they ran amok in the streets, firing randomly. The Turks were being resisted at the edges of Baku and the fighting was intense, but the Bolsheviks were damaging the defence from within. It would be to their own disadvantage, reflected Andrei, for the Turks wouldn’t tolerate their presence with more kindness than they planned to extend to the Armenians who dwelled in the city. A grinning soldier scurried past them, discharging his rifle into the sky. The madness gushed like an oil strike.

Rhys Hughes

They found the captain and crossed the gangplank onto his ship. Uncle Basil had given them a secret code word, which they now employed; the grimy sailor acknowledged it and lowered his pistol. He showed them to a cockroach-infested cabin and demanded payment in advance. The coins in their possession were just enough. Then he spat a wad of tobacco on to the floor and jutted a scarred chin.

“Our destination is Krasnovodsk, due east across the sea from here. It’s currently governed by radical republicans hostile to Bolshevism, but don’t get the idea it’s a paradise for exiles.”

“Does the regime based there plan to fight?”

The captain smirked. “Against the Red Army? Yes, but they are too weak and isolated to serve any useful purpose in that sense. The political situation is confused and prone to sudden changes. The only ruler in that part of Asia who really has the vigour and determination to give Lenin a proper war is the Emir of Bukhara.”

“Bukhara,” echoed Nicholas wistfully.

The word was a mantra, a promise of mystery and delights, of oriental splendour and decadence. It seemed to evoke scenes belonging to another dimension. Visions that were a mixture of myth, fable and the dreams of fevered imaginations briefly possessed the brothers. The captain shrugged and turned away and the spell was broken. Andrei sat on a rotten wooden crate in a corner of the cabin and stretched his legs. Nicholas stared at his hands and mumbled very quietly:

“A place of ancient wisdom, Bukhara.”

“Immense riches too!” added Michael, but Andrei’s nostrils flared and he said in a tone of righteous rage:

“To help the Emir strike back against his enemies is obviously my new calling. You may do as you please; but I will lend my sword to his service and risk my life for justice. Not my purse, mind you, nor my scholarship, but my blood, flesh and bones!”

“You don’t carry a sword,” pointed out Nicholas.

“I’m sure the Emir will lend him one,” said Michael quickly, to defuse the tension. Then he grimaced. “This space is too constricted for me. Why not join me outside on the deck?”

They followed him up a short metal ladder and when they emerged in the night air they found they were already under way. The pulsing

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of the engine had been masked by the low vibrations of explosions in the city. A handful of other ships were steaming out of the port; a few were heading the other way. A British cruiser played its searchlights over the dull sheen of the black water, but what it was searching for was impossible to guess, unless it was smugglers like themselves. And yet no one challenged their departure. Magnates had bribed the coalition authorities; or the vicarious concussions of conflict had dulled enough senses to guarantee the smooth running of any audacious project.

Both options were more than feasible. The times were paradoxical and astonishing. The maze of rickety offshore rigs made complete extrication from the aura of Baku a subtle game. Nicholas peered at the structures as he passed, and the concept of a city in the sea, beyond the reach of landed laws, lapped gently in his mind. Some sort of utopian refuge, hermetically sealed, a place where Bolsheviks couldn't enter, physically or psychically, because they lacked the essential respect, wisdom, serenity of soul. Could such a sanctuary ever be created?

Michael nudged him out of his reverie.

"The wind's picking up. The Caspian is notorious for abrupt storms. I don't like the shape of that cloud."

"Superstition. You know nothing about meteorology."

"Such ignorance isn't bliss!"

Nicholas laughed. "In the hold of this corroded hulk are piled antiques and precious heirlooms, silverwork, paintings, chandeliers and jewellery, the accumulation of generations of hard work, opportunity and luck. Do you suppose the Creator intends to punish the owners by sinking it all to the seabed? And punish not only those owners, many of whom are sure to be executed soon anyway, but also the ancestors who handed them down? What would be the lesson of that?"

"Humility. Material objects mustn't be idolised. Take me, for instance; I care only for the value of things, not for the things themselves. I exist in a purity of quantities called prices."

Nicholas failed to see the joke. "Idolatry? Even to worship holiness in man is idolatry. Even when that holiness is the Holy Spirit itself. That is the view of Chaim of Volozhin in his *Nefesh Hachaim*; and I believe him. I remember all the verses perfectly."

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Michael pulled up the collar of his shirt. "You've become fanatical in recent months. Not sure I approve."

"It surely took longer than months; I assume many lifetimes first had to pass before I reached this stage."

Michael blinked. "Are you referring to reincarnation?"

"Of course. I learned the truth among the Kipta. We are born countless times until we earn the right to the ultimate transcendence. It's an elegant solution, a blending of eastern and western thought. Don't look so anxious and scared! Yes, I have become a Kabbalist, but I'm still your brother. I'm not going to disown you or attempt to preach at you. Every man has his own path to follow; we agreed this."

"You can't be a Jew; you aren't circumcised."

"That's quite irrelevant..."

Andrei had gone for a stroll. Now he returned. He had found a scimitar and a sash to wear it in, and both had undoubtedly come from the hold, an act of theft that Michael greeted with an approving nod. "Here comes our little warrior with a Damascene sword. This blade will be sharp enough to complete your religious conversion!"

Nicholas ignored the jest and mumbled a prayer.

CHAPTER V
AN IMPULSIVE DECISION

The storm rattled the ship until the teeth in the jaws of the brothers ached and their hearts hurt. In the hold below they could hear the smashing of crockery and the rending of furniture: the heirlooms were being shaken to splinters. Michael cursed his luck; Nicholas meditated; Andrei honed his balance by fencing with shadows on the pitching floor. The waves licked rather than battered the hull, but with an appalling force. The clouds were like stains of crude oil in the sky.

Suddenly they vanished and it was already dawn. The captain came to inform them that they had been blown off course; he wasn't sure how far, but they were further north than they should be. His proposal was to head in a southeasterly direction until they sighted land; it

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would be simple to deduce their whereabouts when they spied the coast. They stepped out on deck and stood together by the rail.

The sun rose ponderously to its highest point, began its descent, made the eyes of the watchers sore as it splintered its beams on the water. There were no sea birds, but many fish glided just under the surface. And yet it wasn't hard to remember the world was in turmoil; something in the mild breeze stank of loss and upheaval, or maybe the sensation of unease came solely from a delayed reaction to the jarring effects of the tempest. It was hard to be certain. They didn't try.

A line on the horizon resolved itself into a rocky ridge, featureless and depressingly barren. The smell of salt was overpowering. The captain was clearly happy to leave the control of his vessel in the hands of unwatched crewmen, for he appeared behind the brothers again and said, "That ridge is very narrow and beyond it exists a terrible lake, a miniature sea almost, known as the Garabogazköl. This slice of Turkestan is virtually devoid of inhabitants, but Krasnovodsk is half a day's sailing from here, so feel no fear. But please cover your mouths."

"Why is the lake so awful?" frowned Andrei.

"Poisonous waters. Nothing exotic, just an excess of salt. It is actually saltier than the Dead Sea. There's a narrow channel that leads into it from the Caspian, but I've never sailed down it and I have absolutely no desire to. The Garabogazköl has no fish in its depths and nothing of value on its shores. It is blankness. Nullity."

"Salt is valuable," pointed out Michael.

The captain nodded and pulled his moustache. "Indeed so. A few men make a living by evaporating the water in shallow pans. They rarely reach middle age. The air is unhealthy and makes everything taste of salt. That's why you ought to avoid breathing it in. Return to your cabin: such is my advice. Salt turns a man insane."

"Salt is white," mused Nicholas.

Dryly, the captain replied, "You are a most erudite scholar and I thank you for that observation but..."

Andrei gestured with his sword. "Look!"

"Ah yes," said the captain. "The mouth of the channel. The fish caught in the current will die slowly on the other side. The lake is a death trap. I wish the inlet could be sealed off."

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Nicholas spoke without inflection. "Take me there."

The captain laughed, but when his eyes locked with those of the sober scholar he clamped his mouth and gritted his teeth. Then he shouted with incredulous fury, "Are you mad?"

"I want to visit the Garabogazköl."

"It is never done; or almost never done. I refuse! I wasn't paid for such a foolish adventure. Be silent!"

"I must see it with my own eyes. I must."

The captain tried a new strategy. "If you insist, I'll call men and order them to throw you overboard."

"Do that," growled Andrei, "and you will follow."

"Bah! I'll summon my sailors to hurl all three of you over the side! Far better to return to Baku and the attentions of the Turks, the Bolsheviks or anyone else than to enter that place. Don't you understand? It's a corner of the world that God has cursed."

"No, it's a blank canvas for new creation."

Michael said tactfully, "He has become religious in an unusual sense. I believe he speaks in metaphors."

Nicholas shook his head. He radiated a serenity that was powerful and absolute. Andrei touched his arm gently, yet this produced no effect. "But why die horribly, dear brother?"

Nicholas stirred and it was with considerable difficulty that he seemed to awaken from some trance; a mood the others had been unaware of until it finished. His smile was inhuman, beatific but unnerving. "Death doesn't wait for me there, I assure you."

"You don't know what it's like!" wailed the captain.

Nicholas continued to smile. "Neither do you, for you earlier specified that you had never sailed into it."

"Yes, yes, that's true, but all the same..."

Michael and Andrei conversed together. Then they broke apart with an almost formal gravity and the youngest brother said, "Although we both disapprove of what you ask, we can't use force or guile to dissuade you. We remember too well the lesson of the broken sticks. You are free to do as you please; but we wish to express our disappointment that you appear to have given up the struggle. You will die in toxic waters

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and your death will serve no good purpose. Goodbye forever, brother, and bear in mind that we intend to continue fighting.”

Nicholas listened and then responded, “I have no obligation to reveal my intentions, for the pact we made in the hills didn’t bind us to that, but I deny that I have abandoned the struggle. On the contrary, I have found a way to win. Something can be created from nothing; the teachings of the Talmud of Babylon confirm this and such formation is also the theme of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Men have failed to put this truth into service because they have lacked a suitable ‘nothing’. Finally I have been given the chance to work the magic: a wasteland lacking feature or colour. My faith will be free to impose my own design; and thus will I build a miniature world, a place for our kind to take refuge...”

“That is all nonsense, but we must respect it,” said Michael with a sour face. “Good luck to you, Nicholas.”

The captain cleared his throat. “Aren’t you forgetting that the ultimate decision is mine? I refuse to take my ship down that channel. The mystic fool will have to swim it, unless his mind is able to craft another ship out of air or water! Let him try that!”

Nicholas blinked. He had never learned to swim. Then he resumed his odd smile. “Something will turn up.”

CHAPTER VI ON THE TERRIBLE LAKE

The fisherman was happy to aid Nicholas and he required no payment of any kind. A rope ladder was dropped over the side of the cargo vessel and the eldest Zander brother swayed down it while the fisherman did his best to keep his boat steady. Once the transfer was made, the captain stamped off, presumably to order a restart of the engines. Michael and Andrei both remained watching at the rail, dwindling figures on a receding ship, men with their own plausible answers.

The fisherman gave his name as Jangar. He was a Kalmyk, one of the most mysterious of the races that inhabit the Caspian shores,

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remnants of the Oirat Mongols who invaded the region three centuries ago. Kalmyks still profess Buddhism as their religion, Nicholas learned, and Jangar was named after a mythical hero of his people. His Russian was idiosyncratic but coherent and the pair had no difficulty communicating. They debated metaphysics as the waves churned.

“You are Jewish? Yet you believe in rebirth!”

“It’s not a conventional article of the faith and most rabbis regard it as a false doctrine; but it is central to the Kabbalah and certain wise mystics have written extensively on the subject. Chaim Vital in *Sefer Hagilgulim* explains the need for reincarnation: very few souls can expect to achieve perfection in one life,” said Nicholas.

Jangar considered this. “Few? I would say none!”

Nicholas stared at the mouth of the channel and asked, “Why are you fishing in waters so far from home?”

“I am seeking a way back to our original lands. The elders fear that a catastrophe is coming. To leave Kalmykia and return east might be a wise decision. Perhaps the lake you speak of is a gateway. I want to be sure. It suits my own purpose to investigate.”

The heaviness and saltiness of the air increased. The current entering the channel wasn’t strong and Jangar’s hand remained light on the tiller. A stillness closed around them, as if sound itself had been poisoned, and the rock walls on either side reflected the sun’s heat with savage intensity. It should have been a relief to emerge into open water on the other side, but it wasn’t. The Garabogazköl opened out suddenly, its sluggish waters flat and undisturbed. No wind, no waves.

“That such a place exists!” marvelled Nicholas.

Jangar nodded. “I will proceed east until we reach the far shore; I wish to see what is there. Perhaps nothing.”

“Nothing is what I hope to find. But how can we move without wind? I fear that we are stuck in one spot.”

Jangar took down the sails, fitted two oars into sockets, began rowing. Progress was painfully slow through the brine, more than one third pure salt, ten times more concentrated than the world’s oceans. The air too was slow; and breathing was arduous. Nicholas meditated on his plans and he faced the fact that he now had doubts; where precisely might he establish the foundations of his project? There were

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no reference points, nothing to distinguish any random part of the lake from any other. Yet this was what he had wanted all along, wasn't it?

The lake was without its own rhythm, all the usual pulsations of nature were suspended, and if it hadn't been for the slow passage of the swollen sun across the sky it might be reasonable to conclude that time itself had stopped. But Jangar continued to row without anxiety and Nicholas knew that he had no real regrets; that his apprehension was a simple indulgence to mark the end of his regular emotions, a final fling of weakness before a new reality eased itself out of him.

When night fell they shared Jangar's water canteen and the dried fruit he kept in his pouch and they slept in cramped positions at the bottom of the boat. Nicholas woke before dawn, turned onto his back, stared up at the sky and saw a void sprinkled with salt crystals. The stars seasoned the cosmos, he decided. He fell asleep again, woke a second time to discover that Jangar had resumed the rowing.

The days passed. Nicholas felt the salt seep into his body; his nostrils were encrusted, his tongue bloated, and even his blood was sluggish and poisoned in his veins. But Jangar was indomitable. Then something of a new nature appeared at the limits of his vision. A blur in the shimmer, but even this minimal stain seemed remarkable in the circumstances. Not the eastern shore, but an island. A tiny island, a reef of salt, somewhere in the Garabogazköl. And Nicholas had found his location at last. The empire of his imagination would rise up here...

"Land me on that!" he cried.

Jangar frowned. "Without water, food or shade you will die. First you will go mad, then you will try to kill yourself; but no one can sink in such salty water, so drowning is not possible. Please reconsider your request. I urge you to be realistic and wise."

"You don't understand. I have resources."

"Where? I see none."

Nicholas tapped his forehead forcefully. "In here. My mind! Trust me, I know exactly what I'm doing."

Jangar shrugged. He had done his duty by raising an objection; it was not his custom to save the lives of fools by force. He rowed as close as he dared to the glittering white reef and said, "You must wade the rest of the way. I can't risk stranding my boat."

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“Thank you. Good luck with your quest!”

Without waiting for a response to this farewell, Nicholas leapt into the water. It lapped his chest and he strode forward against the viscous liquid as if pushing a heavy cart. Brine splashed his face as he thrashed, entered his mouth, made him retch; but he pressed on. Finally he gained the shore and collapsed on the crystalline beach. His own sodium island, as long as the grand hall of a palace. Nothing grew there, not even moss. No seabird strutted or screeched. He was alone.

The Kalmyk explorer rowed away, probably to disappointment on the equally bleak eastern shoreline of the lake. Maybe he would be devoured by the ghosts said to roam the nightmarish Turkestan deserts. Who knew? Nicholas couldn't allow himself to wonder; it was imperative he kept his heart and mind devoted to his task.

If the texts he had studied were correct, it was possible to create matter from the energy of his soul. True, the Kabbalah had specified that only an unsullied mortal could mimic God in the role of creator, and no man was so spiritually clean.

But Nicholas had a tactic to circumvent this clause. It consisted of being flawed, as he was, but creating a reality that was *just* pure enough to attract holier men to it; and they would adjust and correct his fumbling efforts; and their efforts would attract even holier men, who would tune it still more accurately, and so on. The perfection would thus be imposed retroactively. A noble idea and one worth striving for, despite the bold perversity of its assumption.

He sat upright and shut his eyes. He had no choice but to succeed. The first thing he would attempt would be the formation of a wall around the island and a roof; then he would fill the palace with floors, rooms, stairs, objects, windows. The result would be a stronghold devoted to the cause of righteousness. Other mystics would sense its existence, seek it out and improve it, expanding it until it became a realm, a world, a dimension. It would serve as the perfect refuge for opponents of the evil that had arisen in Russia and was sweeping Asia, for it would exist within that grotesque empire but be inaccessible to its minions.

This refuge would evolve to contain buildings within buildings, and gardens on roofs or in sheltered courtyards filled with fruit-bearing

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trees and marvellous flowers, incredible blooms with rare properties. Beauty as well as justice would thrive there.

He licked his lips. A droplet of sweat ran down his face, tickling him. He opened his eyes, but no walls had appeared. There was just the island and the Garabogazköl. He shut his eyelids again, tried once more to focus his mind, felt a deep surge of cold fire.

CHAPTER VII THE CITY OF DEFIANCE

The cargo ship was greeted in Krasnovodsk by surly officials of a corrupt and inefficient regime and the captain was promptly arrested for failing to deliver his antiques safely. Not all were smashed but Michael doubted the pieces in good condition would ever reach the magnates who had owned them in Baku. He and Andrei were interrogated briefly by the ramshackle police and allowed to go free. Without money they were too unimportant to harass. They wandered the streets.

Krasnovodsk was a city with few redeeming features. The flavours of the fabled Orient had failed to penetrate this far. Sand the colour of brick dust formed drifts everywhere, choked the river, clogged their pores. The Republic of the Red Water, as the government called itself, lacked spirit. It was merely waiting for the enemy to descend and destroy. They passed a café and Michael suggested they go inside and ask for free food. Andrei first sneered and then laughed at this.

Inside they found a game of backgammon in progress. “Maybe we can earn money from gambling?” mused Michael, but Andrei reminded him that they lacked a solitary coin to use for a stake. He was overheard by a smart gentleman who sat drinking mint tea at a nearby table. This fellow turned his head towards them.

“You are refugees? Newly arrived?”

“And lost,” sighed Michael.

The smart gentleman introduced himself as Abraham Nussimbaum, an oil commissioner from Baku, who had fled even before the Centrocaspian Dictatorship was founded. He was in Krasnovodsk with his son because he owned property here, but he planned to leave soon

for Bukhara, where the prospects for anti-Bolsheviks were better. When Andrei answered that they too had that ancient city-state as a destination, Abraham courteously invited the brothers to join his caravan.

Abraham was staying with his son in the only cinema in Krasnovodsk, given to them by his property manager, who was also the Foreign Affairs Minister of the regime. On this side of the Caspian such connections were far more important than wealth. The same as on the other side, remarked Andrei, but Michael seemed upset by this possibility. Stroking his beard, Abraham suggested that the brothers also accommodate themselves in the cinema, until they were ready to set off.

They accepted this offer. But the public showing of films hadn't been suspended simply because of the Nussimbaum's presence, and during the tedious evenings they were often obliged to sit and watch melodramatic actors and actresses jerk across a tattered screen.

The films were always outdated; and news of the outside world tended to be unreliable. Nobody knew what the situation in Abkhazia was; few were even aware that such a country existed. The Emir of Bukhara, Alim Khan, was rumoured to be hurling prisoners of war from the Kalyan Minaret, a restitution of a tactic favoured by his forebears that had long ago fallen out of favour. Michael was appalled; Andrei was delighted.

"We won't know the truth," Abraham reminded them, "until we reach that city and see with our own eyes."

They satisfied themselves with this simple truth.

It was in the month of October that they finally left Krasnovodsk and headed out into the Karakum Desert. Although a perfectly decent railway line ran all the way to Dushanbe and beyond, it was controlled by militant communists and deemed unsafe as a method of travelling for opponents of Lenin. So camels had been engaged for the venture.

The old fashioned caravan was fifty beasts strong, and other Russian refugees accompanied them, as well as Armenians, Ossetians, Chechens. Between Krasnovodsk and Bukhara stood a number of small cities, many of which were already under Bolshevik influence. It was safer to avoid these altogether, to stick only to the empty wastelands, the moonwashed sands, the fossilised Silk Road, the path of scorpions and bones.

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Both Michael and Andrei attempted conversation with the leader of the caravan, the chief camel driver, the *chalwadar*, but found him mute to the point of obtuseness; and yet his reticence wasn't ignorance but some profound specialisation of cognition. He had eyes, ears and mind only for the desert. Those squares of the mystic chessboard known as nights and days passed with an impeccable shift.

At last the cry went up. "Bukhara!"

And there it was, on the horizon: the city that had nurtured Ibn Sina, Firdausi and Rudaki, where Nasrullah Khan chopped off the heads of ambassadors sent by Queen Victoria, where the stagnant waters of the canals distorted the mulberry trees and medressas, where Nasruddin and his wise foolishness was embellished.

Formerly a piece in the Great Game between the British and Russian Empires, and now one of the few viable bastions against the Red Menace, Bukhara thrived under its dynamic, cruel, enormous Emir; by sheer force of will he kept the Bolsheviks at bay. Yet they were licking their wounds not far away, in Tashkent, and would return again and again, like rabid dogs, to bite at his independence, to infect his people, polluting the dirty pools with blood. Although he tended to win his battles, he was ordained to lose the wider war and his heritage.

As the caravan approached the oasis, riders came out to inspect it and escort the refugees into the city. The ancient walls and gateway no longer marked the boundaries of the metropolis and the ugly suburbs had spread westwards like a slow stone tide. The Zander brothers steeled themselves for disappointment, and yet the core of the city proved to be as wondrous as the rumours. Pinnacles and domes rose in every direction; and the Ark itself, the palace of the Emir, was an Oriental labyrinth of interconnected buildings, each more secret than the last.

Fountains made rainbows in peaceful old squares, but Bukhara was on a war footing and armed guards patrolled the streets, and the people had a weariness in their eyes.

Even here, Bolshevik agitators lurked in shadows and political assassinations were common. Earlier in the year, Alim Khan had ordered a massacre of communist sympathisers in his domain; he was now of particular interest to his enemies. Immediately to the north of the city,

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isolated groups of Whites and Reds fought each other: the landscape was a patchwork of allegiances and only chaos was a consistent victor in the subsequent skirmishes and raids.

Michael and Andrei had befriended many refugees during the arduous journey and some of the richer members of the caravan insisted on giving them sums of money. So they weren't reduced to begging in the streets of Bukhara, as had almost been the case in Krasnovodsk, but Andrei hoped to secure proper employment anyway.

He requested an audience with the Emir, which was granted, and went to see him one morning, expressing a desire to give his life, if necessary, in opposing the invaders. His passion and commitment impressed Alim Khan, who shifted his great bulk slowly on his throne and pondered a response.

Andrei had expected, at most, a position as ordinary militiaman in the city's guard, erecting defences for the inevitable onslaught and sharing his knowledge of Khevsurian swordplay with his comrades. But Alim Khan's ambitions for the youngest Zander were grander and more audacious. He announced that he wanted Andrei to lead a new cavalry corps, a foreign legion made up of the best warriors among the refugees.

The dream had turned into reality at last; Andrei was ecstatic. He quickly put together a force of formidable fighters utterly loyal to the White cause: a mixture of monarchists, nationalists, conservatives, liberals, Islamists, democrats, even a few anarchists and non-Bolshevik socialists. They might all have incompatible aspirations for a time after the Civil War, but for the present moment they would strive together.

This force would ride out periodically from Bukhara and carry the war back to the enemy. Instead of merely fighting defensive campaigns that only bought temporary respite, Bukhara would finally launch offensives of its own, maybe attempt to link up with other White divisions. Andrei's soul was at peace; he slept without dreaming every night. His first raids were successful and he caught the Bolsheviks by surprise again and again and he became a local hero in his adopted city. It occurred to him that he would be happy to live here forever.

Michael was unhappy by this development, but the pact they had made precluded him from objecting too much. One day, Andrei

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declared that he was setting off on his most daring and important mission so far, a proper attack against the Bolshevik stronghold of Tashkent. Until now, he said, his cavalry had achieved little more than a few dents in the enemy's pride. But this assault would be different and may even force Lenin to abandon his plans for Turkestan. It would be difficult to prevail, however, and the chance of failure was rather high.

"In essence, you are saying goodbye," sighed Michael.

"But only as a precaution."

Michael nodded. "Let me clasp your hand; you have found your true vocation. I must still find mine."

The brothers parted and Michael found himself alone. When the time came for Andrei to depart, he watched, but the horses and flashing swords seemed unreal. He drifted through the city like a clot of sand in the shape of a man, desiccated and aimless. The weeks passed and no news of any sort came; then a single rider returned from the northeast, bloodied, weak and demented.

Among his gibberish were snippets of sense. A battle had been fought on the shores of Lake Aidarkul and the cavalry corps had met its end there, struggling to defeat vastly greater numbers. Whether Andrei was dead he couldn't say for certain, but probably yes, for the last vision he had of him was as leader of a desperate charge of a tiny knot of riders against machine guns. It was over.

Abraham Nussimbaum had already left Bukhara with his son, heading for Persia to the south. Michael decided to follow his example. He would escape to Western Europe somehow; and there he would make his fortune with astute financial deals and the profits would finance his revenge, his own retaliation. Nicholas had fought with the soul; Andrei with the body. But he would unsheathe his mind.

CHAPTER VIII THE BLEEDING EARS

Michael joined a caravan and travelled through a landscape littered with the ruins of forgotten cities. Persia was exotic and quaint, even to

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a man who had walked the length of the Caucasus and sampled hidden cultures in misty valleys. The Nussimbaums had turned west, encroaching on the realms of the Jafar Khan, the provinces of Mazandaran and Gilan, hoping to reach the British controlled port of Enzeli; but Michael decided to take fewer risks and head eastwards.

His route took him through Khorasan and Baluchestan into the Indian subcontinent. He was detained by the authorities in Jaipur, but they soon let him go, and he wandered south until he reached Goa. The Portuguese colonists had no stake in the Russian Civil War and regarded him without suspicion; he befriended a few local businessmen and did rather well. For seven months he pampered himself in this lush paradise before arranging his passage to Lisbon on a liner.

He found that city to his liking and he even met a dozen émigrés from Sukhumi there. They told him how Lakoba had been bitten by a diseased baboon during his reign; and although the tyrant had recovered from his wounds he was now very nervous of animals. Michael thought of Andrei wistfully, and then he laughed. But Lisbon wasn't where the real fortunes were being made. He left and travelled through Spain and entered France and eventually ended up in Paris.

Almost at once he realised that he had found his rightful place, a city where wealth would come to him like iron shavings to a magnet. He went into partnership with a Jewish financier called Golder, a buyer and seller in petroleum products. Part of the business involved dealing with agents acting on behalf of the Bolsheviks. Both sides thought they had the upper hand and were swindling the other; but Michael came off best in every transaction. He was very cunning.

As his wealth increased, he began to pay more thought to the matter of how best to spend it. He didn't intend to waste it on frivolities, despite his love of comfort. On the contrary, it was his weapon, his means of attack. Should he fund the projects of those émigré White Generals who planned invasions of Russia with eclectic armies? Or would it be better to give the money to armed resistance groups already within the Soviet Empire? But those were crumbling away rapidly.

Direct war, the physical spilling of blood, wasn't his specialist subject. It occurred to him that he might be far more useful as a contributor to the *cultural* resistance based in the West. He subsidised writers,

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painters and musicians who opposed Lenin, Stalin and the other tyrants. Great works of literature, art and opera appeared as a direct result of his munificence. He acquired a reputation as a wholly committed patron of the arts; and so the years passed. Then the decades.

One evening he suddenly understood that his spirit was rotten. The art that he funded had become the major interest of his life; but its aesthetic qualities were what he cared about. The original message had been lost in the medium. Shocked by this revelation, he hurried out of a theatre where an absurdist drama penned by one of his favourite protégés was rumbling along, and tramped damp streets, trying and failing to frown an authentic purpose back into his existence.

Incapable of resolving anything with his own powers of self-analysis, he decided to enter the nearest café and get himself drunk instead. Within five minutes of passing through the doors and ordering Pernod, he felt the rough hand of a stranger on his shoulder. He turned slowly, expecting to confront a Bolshevik assassin, for White émigrés did get murdered now and again, even in Parisian society.

“Brother! How many years has it been?”

Michael felt his knees buckle. It was Andrei! The scarred face before him should have been unrecognisable but it wasn't; and although his eyes had a haunted quality, they still twinkled to a certain degree. Despite his old injuries, the youngest Zander seemed healthy enough as he chuckled and slapped the millionaire's back.

“Tell me everything!” gasped Michael.

Andrei seemed reluctant for a moment, then he nodded and beckoned to a table in a corner. They sat down and drank to each other. Around the table next to theirs were gathered a group of Bohemians, young, foolish, full of ersatz enthusiasms and naïve faiths: they were toasting Trotsky as if that cold blooded butcher was a hero, and Michael felt the hairs on his nape stiffen; at the same time he was anxious that Andrei might jump up and assault them if they persisted.

But Andrei was oblivious to his surroundings and all his concentration was centred on the remarkable tale of his escape from the Tashkent prison where he had been taken after losing consciousness on the battlefield. For two years he wore chains in a dungeon before finding the opportunity to murder his jailer and set himself free. By

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the time he saw daylight again, it was too late to return to Bukhara; that city had fallen to the Reds. So he went into the Chatkal Mountains.

Andrei peered into the past, squinting.

“That was in the late autumn of 1920 and the *basmachi* movement that was to become such a thorn in Stalin’s side wasn’t yet organised properly. Otherwise I would have joined them, even if it meant converting to Islam. But this was before Anwar Pasho.”

Michael frowned. “The name is unfamiliar.”

Andrei smirked. “You’ll know him better by his Ottoman name: Enver Pasha. Yes, the same fellow who indirectly chased us out of Baku became the leader of warrior clans in the remotest regions of Central Asia! Life is full of such ironies. Anyway, I kept going east and north. In the spring of 1921 I was in Mongolia with Ungern-Sternberg. I took part in the capture of Urga but we only held it for a few months. I kept escaping and fighting and keeping just one step ahead.”

“Where did you go next? To China?”

“No. A year later I ended up in Vladivostok and offered my services to the Merkulovs, leaders of the Provisional Priamurye Government, the last official White enclave. There was more politics than fighting, I’m afraid, and the Merkulovs were soon deposed by General Diterikhs, who began styling himself *voivoide*; but I never pay much attention to such theatrics. On his behalf I did kill a great many Bolsheviks, but never enough: there were always more. Then Vladivostok fell to them and so I joined the most remarkable commander of all, the one White general who simply refused to give up, Anatoly Pepelyayev...”

Michael laughed. “Ah, that stubborn rascal!”

Andrei stroke his moustache. “Through sheer force of will he carved a free territory of his own in the wilderness, but even here he was endlessly battered by divisions of rapacious communists. I was present at the Siege of Ayan, the very last action of the Civil War. Ayan fell in June and some of us managed to escape to Sakhalin. The Japanese controlled that island at the time and allowed us to take passage across the Pacific to the United States. I didn’t remain long there; I crossed the Atlantic to Europe and I’m here now, exactly as you see me.”

“That’s an incredible story! What a life!”

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“Yes,” agreed Andrei, “but it’s not finished yet. Indeed no! I hear that Stalin has ambitions in Finland. This seems my opportunity to oppose his evil once again. I will travel to Helsinki and enlist. I plan to leave within the week. Just like old times, eh?”

“Yes, brother; the same story, retold differently.”

Andrei fell silent for a minute and then said, “Do you know anything about what happened to Nicholas?”

Michael shrugged. “I made researches. I spent a lot of money, but I’ve never heard even a single rumour.”

“In that case, let me solve the mystery for you, at least in part. I heard this from the lips of a Bolshevik I took prisoner in Ayan; he was only in my custody for a day before I was forced to release him. But what he told me was remarkable. Five years earlier he was part of a special squadron trained for an invasion of Turkestan. They decided to try an unexpected and undetectable approach, crossing the entire Garabogazköl from north to south on inflatable boats. During this strange journey, they spied a man on an island of salt in the lake. He had no shelter, no supplies and he was insane, babbling meaningless words.”

Michael chewed his lower lip. “Did they kill him?”

Andrei sighed. “They captured him instead. He was a curiosity, an odd trophy of that dreadful region. He was passed from prison to prison, from madhouse to madhouse, and his life became a purgatory of squalor. Some vile bureaucrat eventually signed the order that condemned him to one of the worst gulags of the far north, a labour camp perched right on the edge of the Arctic Ocean. Here the prisoners toiled eighteen hours a day on the most ludicrous tasks and most died.”

“Did you learn any more?” asked Michael.

“Not from the Bolshevik in Ayan; but I met refugees in America and one of them had spent time in that same camp. He remembered Nicholas well, but described him as profoundly *sane*. Indeed, he said he had never met such a coherent mind before. And yet our brother had done one mad act; like many captives he made an escape attempt, but it was unique. He stole a boat and went north. Nobody ever went north, through the narrow channels between the shifting ice floes. It was suicide! The guards didn’t even bother to set off in pursuit.”

Rhys Hughes

“Then he truly is dead after all,” said Michael.

“Yes,” replied Andrei, “but the environment of his death wasn’t the one we expected. Not among the whiteness of salt, but the whiteness of ice. Only the colour was the same.”

“The context is everything,” avowed Michael.

“Perhaps. I don’t know...”

The Bohemians on the next table were singing communist songs now. The brothers winced and shuddered. Michael stood and buttoned up his coat and said in a resonant voice:

“I know a better place than this, a café frequented by Whites. Shall we go there instead and leave these children to their games? I can’t stand this idiotic stuff; my ears are bleeding!”

CHAPTER IX
THE MAP

They took a shortcut down a narrow street neither had ever visited before and halfway along they noticed a strange little shop. It sold antiques and junk, all mixed up together. They stopped to inspect the cluttered display in the window. Among broken clocks and mouldy books, snapped swords and creaking flintlock pistols, glittered the lens of a powerful magnifying glass. The brothers stared at it.

“Say, isn’t that the one that belonged to Nicholas?”

“I’m sure it is. How bizarre!”

The shop was open and they went inside. At first it seemed that no one was present to serve them, but then they noticed a wizened and shrunken man sitting on a low stool behind a counter in a corner where the thickest shadows had gathered. He stared at them in attenuated disbelief and some part of his mind must have reasoned that he was dreaming, for he rubbed his tiny eyes and frowned deeply.

Michael approached the counter. “We’re interested in the clock in the window. The one without hands.”

He winked at Andrei, who misunderstood and blurted, “No, no, it’s the big magnifying glass we’re after!”

The Darkest White

Michael shook his head and laughed ruefully. “My dear brother, you’re still as innocent as ever. In a place like this, you aren’t supposed to reveal your actual intentions. Yes, of course we desire the magnifying glass, but don’t you want a low price for it?”

“Sorry. Subterfuge isn’t a talent of mine.”

“Agreed. So keep silent and leave the talking to me!” Michael took a step closer to the shopkeeper. Then something in the little man’s features made his heart beat much faster.

“Yes, it really is me,” Kostas Spheeris said.

The brothers exchanged glances, puffed out their cheeks and whistled in amazement. “Time hasn’t been kind to you,” noted Michael, but there was no malignancy in his voice.

“That’s true, but my story is rather a dull one. And yet, I’m planning to redeem myself, to return and do what I can. First to Moscow and then on to Sukhumi. I doubt I’ll succeed.”

“The magnifying glass, please.”

Kostas rose and went to fetch it. He handed it to Michael. “I think you should have it for nothing. That’s only right. It was a fire hazard anyway and burned down my other shop.”

“Very well.” The gift was accepted.

The brothers turned to leave, but Andrei noticed a set of maps hanging from a stretched cord near the back of the room. Two of them showed the Arctic coastline of Eastern Siberia. “Let us test the lens. I can show you where Nicholas was sent,” he said.

“I would appreciate that,” replied Michael.

Andrei pointed to a bleak peninsula. “He was based there and then he went north into the empty ocean.”

“What’s that speck of land?” asked Michael.

“Which one? Heavens! An island in the middle of nowhere! The print is very small. I can’t read what it says.” He angled the lens over the words and recited, “Sannikov Land...”

“Maybe that was his destination?”

“Let’s look on the other map. It might be more clear.”

The other map was a larger scale chart of the same area. But it showed the sea as devoid of solid ground.

Rhys Hughes

"I don't understand!" muttered Andrei.

"There's no difficulty," said Michael. "The second map was made first, before the island was discovered."

"That's not right," spoke up Kostas. "The first map was made after the 1902 expedition led by Eduard Toll. The second map was made just a few years ago and is far more accurate."

"Impossible! Islands don't just dematerialise!"

Kostas shrugged. There was no answer to that. The brothers left with a curt farewell and continued up the street. Finally Andrei said, "You don't suppose that Nicholas succeeded?"

"In reaching Sannikov Land? It's possible."

"No, I mean in creating his miniature world. I've often wondered about the meaning of his last words to us. He wanted to create a dimension that was sealed off from our enemies, but accessible to our kind. To do this he needed a 'nothing' on which to impose the strength of his will. The salt of the Garabogazköl clearly wasn't the right kind of nothingness, but maybe the endless ice of the Arctic was!"

Michael pouted. "But the island didn't suddenly appear from nowhere; on the contrary, it simply vanished! You've got it the wrong way around. He built nothing, created nothing."

"Yes, it vanished from communist maps. But maybe not from reality! It might still be there, existing adjacent to this dimension, attracting men of a mystical persuasion, keeping them safe and hidden, nurturing them, preparing them for that moment when they will return and slay the evil and inherit the earth for our sake."

"That's quite a daydream," mused Michael.

Andrei was undaunted by the criticism. "We know that Nicholas failed in the Garabogazköl. Only a man free of all sin can become a creator. Our brother wasn't that, but he thought he was pure enough to achieve limited success, to call others more pure, and *they* would complete the work. But perhaps he wasn't even pure enough for that. What if his power was only sufficient to summon the utterly impure, the Bolsheviks who found and captured him? And yet it was they who accidentally gave him his second chance, sending him to a yet more perfect nothingness, a blanker canvas for creation, and by that time,

The Darkest White

thanks to his sufferings, he had genuinely become pure enough, strong enough!”

“It’s worth thinking about,” conceded Michael.

They had reached the other café. They paused by the entrance. Songs of defiance, courage, loss and beauty emerged; and the brothers thought they detected the voices of old friends in the chorus. Together they went inside, closing the door behind them.

CHAPTER ∞
REDEMPTION

And inside a dissimilar café in Moscow exactly one year later, the writer with the kidney disease and a few months to live slowly opened his hand. The petals of a crushed poppy uncurled on his palm; but it wasn’t a flower from an ordinary plant of that species. There was something cold about it, something very pure and unearthly.

He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. Kostas Spheeris had given him the whitest poppy he had ever seen.

Д СЦПТЯУ ДФСТФЯ

Adam Golaski

There must have been a knock at the door – why else would I have opened it? – but I remembered no knock, nor putting down my book and cigarette, or stepping into my slippers, or walking down the stairs, etcetera. Nonetheless. At the open door stood a man dressed head to foot in boiled wool, gray, much like a soldier’s winter uniform, though unadorned but for the six buttons and breast pocket of the coat. The pocket, I noted, was sewn shut. Atop his head, the ubiquitous fur hat. My own was settled on a little table that stood beneath a line of coat hooks. The table was damp, as was the floor, from melted snow. All around the man the blizzard turned. I asked, What is it? I hoped my tone indicated annoyance – since my arrival in Nikolskoye, I’d masked my insecurity with a brusque manner. He showed no timidity and replied to my question with a piece of folded paper. Wind sucked at the fire in the hearth and snow gathered at my feet; a gust shoved a chair over; the note whipped back and forth in my hand: this man was a stone to it all. I turned from the open door – from him – to read the note, aware it would have made more sense to invite him in and shut out the wind. The note:

Our little girl. Please. Come at once.

I shouted questions as I gathered what I’d need for a house call. What is her age? Illness or injury? How far to the house? The man said not a word. I stopped a moment, medical bag open, ampoules of camphor in hand, and glared at him: he turned his back to me and took his place on the driver’s bench of the sleigh that awaited me.

At the threshold, I hesitated, then decided to retrieve my Browning automatic.

A Country Doctor

Folded atop my trunk was a blanket I decided to carry on my shoulders. During my first week at the clinic, Sofia, sixteen, was brought to me after a terrible farm accident made tatters of her left leg. My *feldsher* assumed her soon dead, urged me to ease her painlessly out – she was too lovely a girl, her bloodless skin. She recovered in the clinic. During that time she made me a blanket on which she embroidered a pattern like a stream through a woods. Once recovered, she shyly presented the blanket to me. The blanket did more for me than keep off the snow.

Again at the door I looked over the clinic. In the ward were three sleeping patients, watched over by Askinya. Just as I looked at the door to the ward she opened it to look in on me. We stared at each other for a dumb moment; I waved her away and she stepped back into the ward. I immediately regretted being so curt. A word, a smile – I would have benefited from the smile I would have received in return.

Outside, the wind slammed the clinic door shut – to take a steady step hard at best but what struck me most were the horses hitched to the sleigh. So white, when snow swirled around them they appeared to dissolve, and huge, ferocious animals – the driver struggled to hold them steady and before I was able to situate myself on the sleigh we burst across the snow. Behind us, the clinic, a lantern, snuffed out when the road dipped down, and then there was no light but that from the lamps that swung at the front of the sleigh, illuminating little but the driver's legs and the muscled rumps of the horses.

Is it much further? I shouted. No answer but the sleigh's blades on the snow.

Wrapped in Sofia's blanket, I withdrew into my thoughts. I worried about what might face me. My habits: worry, that I was not up to the task about to be put before me, I promised myself a centigramme of morphine; a few centigrammes. A cigarette to take the edge off. Impossible to light, even under a tent with Sofia's blanket. Still, I made a few comic attempts. My legs and buttocks grew numb.

The sleigh stopped, though not fully, it paused and shuddered, tense – Are we here? – the driver indicated with his head where I ought to look – a little behind me – I turned awkwardly to see it – a house that stood alone at the edge of a wood. (Snow flakes gathered on my

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sleeve. Briefly, I was distracted by the shape of a snowflake that reminded me of a poem: not of the meaning but of how the words appeared on the page.) My face hurt from cold. (A thought to the driver's comfort; he seemed too implacable to be cold.) The simple house, a snowed-over path to the front door, three windows above, two beside, each window lit by a single candle except one filled with light. The shoulders of a man in his shirtsleeves, who stood at the foot of a bed; the top of a woman's head, seated, I supposed, perhaps holding the hand of her sick daughter.

The man came to the window. His old face disappeared when he put his hands to the glass so as to see out.

The sleigh jerked – the driver turned and showed me his teeth – to keep the horses steady evidently a great strain. So he would neither take my bag nor bring me to his master's door. Fine. In Nikolskoye, formalities were vestigial anyhow. I shouted, Keep the horses ready! Maybe he nodded his assent, maybe he was yanked up from his seat by the reigns. I disembarked; the sleigh pulled away so quickly, I was all of a sudden alone.

Along the edge of the wood I saw animals that crept close to the ground. I touched my Browning automatic, glad for its frozen weight in my pocket. So much could go badly here.

The old man remained at the window as I approached the house.

Before I could pound at the front door, it was opened to me by a maid. A thin girl dressed in frumpy black clothes and a plain apron. She spoke – I could see her mouth move – but I couldn't hear her. The wind, I reasoned, carried her voice from me. I brushed past her and said, Speak up. She replied – I could see she offered to take my coat but I still could not hear the words. She closed the front door, daintily, and she spoke again. Frustrated, I said, sternly, I will keep my coat, and I ordered her to show me to the child's room.

She was swift on the stairs – I couldn't keep pace with her. She waited for me at the top of the stair. Where the walls were illuminated – lit wicks curled into oil – I noted the wallpaper pattern: wilted purple flowers, thin black stems entwined like vines. I was hot in my coat – and Sofia's blanket still across my shoulders. I sweated heavily.

At the end of the upstairs hall was the brightly lit room.

A Country Doctor

Now you may take my coat, I said to the maid; I thrust Sofia's blanket and my coat at her. Don't put them away, I added. She nodded, not without a hint of amusement (or scorn? Later, I would remember scorn).

I entered the brightly lit room ahead of the maid. On the vanity, on the nightstand, on a little table set at the foot of the bed, were lamps and candles. My patient was not a child but a woman in her thirties. Your little girl? I asked. An endearment, then, but I was annoyed nonetheless. To the old man, who still stood at the window, peering between his hands as if watching me walk the path to the house, I asked, What is wrong here?

He shrugged. He shrugged!

Futilely, I asked again, What is wrong here? No reply, the only sound my own dumb voice. The woman, old, too, the man's wife, I assumed, sat silently by the bed. Excuse me, I said. The old woman looked wistful, gazed at the woman on the bed as if at her sweet and sleeping baby. No. The old woman stared at nothing, at the air between her and the bed. Has your wife taken anything? I asked the old man, recognizing her expression at last as one I'd seen on the faces of addicts content with their drug. (My own face, in the glass I kept upright on the desk in my room.) The old man said nothing. I turned on the maid, shouted, Has she taken anything? and, What is wrong here? then, Never mind!

Since I would not push the old woman aside, I went around the bed to work where there was a narrow space between the bed and the wall. I told the maid who – while apparently mute was at least responsive – to bring the table and the lamp from the foot of the bed to my side. She did so, blocking me into my corridor. (I noted, as she performed this task, a phonograph in the corner of the room, a record turning on the turntable, the tone arm raised so the needle hovered over the music.)

My patient, the woman, appeared to be asleep, and peacefully, at that. Her color was good. Her hair shone healthily – was cleaner and better cared for than I'd seen on a woman since I left Kiev – even Askinya, very pretty in fact, wore her hair in a bun to hide its usual state. She was by any measure lovely. Her breathing – a hint of caraway on her

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breath – was regular. She had no fever and when I counted her pulse (two fingers at her throat), I found it strong.

To examine my patient further, to look for a rash (syphilis was endemic here) or for injury, I naturally lifted the covers from her. She was naked. I spoke sharply to the old woman, Where is her nightgown? I ordered the maid to get her a nightgown.

The old man shrugged again, and then once more. The maid opened all the dresser drawers. They were empty. The closet, I said, and pointed to a narrow door across from me. The closet, save for a piece of paper on the floor, was also empty. The maid stood by the open door looking sheepish. I ran my hand through my hair, an expression of my exasperation. My hair was drenched with sweat. The room must be warmer than it seems, I decided. I took advantage of my patient's nakedness and examined carefully the whole of her body. I found no rash, skin perfect but for a little a scar on her leg.

A last, exasperated effort to find something wrong, I put my stethoscope to her chest.

And this was strange. I could feel her heartbeat, but could barely hear it. I put the stethoscope to my own heart – there was nothing wrong with my instrument. I tried again – only the faintest beat. I leaned up against the wall, watched as her breasts rose and fell with every breath, yet – and that's when I noticed that I could not hear her breathe, either.

The empty dresser drawers hung open.

This woman is not ill, I said. You have wasted my time.

The old man stepped away from the window, faced me, stood with his arms out, palms up. The old woman looked up at me. The maid closed the closet door and slipped out of the room.

I looked down at the woman on the bed. Her skin, a moment ago all over pink and healthy now was pale. Silent as before, her heart was now still, too. I grew nauseous – my white shirt was soaked through as if I'd been in surgery for hours. I managed to break open an ampoule of camphor, to draw it into a syringe, to inject it – but I forced medicine into a corpse. Awkwardly, I moved the little table out of my way, the lamp wobbled, I trembled. I offered a typical condolence, maybe even apologized – I don't know I couldn't hear myself. Their quiet shut me up. I wanted to smash the empty dresser drawers, which impeded me

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getting to my coat and Sofia's blanket. As I put on my coat, I said, You must call the proper authorities. I did not look at either the old man or his wife. Bag in hand, the blanket over my shoulder, I left. As everyone in the house knew, there was nothing at all to say.

I was deeply relieved to find the sleigh ready for me, horses' muscles taut, frozen in the instant before they would be sprung, and they might have been frozen, and I did pity the silent driver who sat out in the cold and snow, but no more than I pitied myself.

We were off – snow all around us, from above and kicked up into a great cloud by the horses. I covered myself with Sofia's blanket; though not especially warm, it was a great comfort to go inside the room it made (and to know it was made for me by a grateful and living patient).

The clinic would be my cure. I could inject the morphine I'd packed for this trip, easy enough to claim I'd administered it in the line of duty, a claim not so far from the truth (if misleading). In the morning I'd wake, rested. Askinya might bring me breakfast. As I mulled the events of the evening and contemplated the morphine in my bag with greater intensity, I lost all sense of awake versus asleep, of time, and of place. I may have slept. I could not stop shaking. I lifted the blanket from my face to see if maybe the clinic was in sight.

The driver was gone.

I doubted the empty bench, the slack reins – how reliable a reporter was I? – but empty the bench was and slack the reins. The white horses moved in and out of gusts of snow.

To grab hold of the reins was the only reasonable course. The driver, I had to assume, was somewhere behind, likely injured, and our tracks were rapidly vanishing as snow steadily fell, the odds of finding him worse for every moment I delayed, and the sleigh might be far off course – a terrible danger on such a cold night. I saw myself leap forward to take the reins, but I did not actually do so. Instead, I sat back, and worried at my blanket.

As my fingers followed its embroidered pattern, I noted a subtle change in the horses' behavior. The demons that drove those horses calmed a little, and while the ride remained steady and swift, I no longer felt as if the sleigh was wild. I followed the raised stitching down the length of the blanket, from my chest, to my gut, to my legs, to the floor.

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From the dark appeared the lights of the clinic. I followed the stitching across my boots and back up to the center of the blanket where the pattern ended. The horses slowed, stopped.

At the door of the clinic was Askinya, and she said, “Oh! I’ve missed you!”

ДЯСИДІС ДЯТІФІСІДІЛ ЛІЦІХ

D.P. Watt

“The stage, you know, is only one third of the hall.”

Vladimir Mayakovsky,
Prologue to *Mystery-Bouffe*

A few of us – sparks of nothing – will see shadows of the future; a moment of foreboding, a portentous dream, senses of the night. It is only a matter of record though with the great names in history; the artists, the warmongers, the proselytisers – all snivelling hunters after immortality. With Mikhail Afanasievich it was different. He had been a doctor back in the dawn of time and knew something of the meaning of his presentiments. He did not have a diagnosis but he knew that something had hold of him and would not relinquish its grasp. So it was in a spirit of acceptance, and nostalgia, that he eased the needle into his vein, which had been difficult to find. He felt the flush of a familiar calm.

After only an hour though he was feeling tired; it was not the same as it had been nearly twenty years before, when he took his last shot of that blessed pharmakon. Indeed then it had been that levelling nepenthe fog he most craved; a state of bliss where nothing rose above the frivolous and banal. Now he most needed release from his anxious rewriting of a play about the Leader; a man holding his own pen full of real strokes of torture and death. The draft was now being read by the Committee for the Arts and it had slipped from his control.

Yelena knew he was changed when he kissed her on the cheek and murmured that he needed some air; his eyes tiny black bullets of entropy.



He wandered – numb, euphoric and slightly drowsy – down Kamerersky, to stare at the crowds. The Arts Theatre had been plagued again by that most wretched of inhibitors to artistry: success. The revival of Saltykov's *The Death of Pazuhin* had struck its bland chord with the blandness of the age and the crowds gathered nightly for the office to distribute its few remaining seats.

Mikhail stood a moment and wiped his brow clean of sticky summer sweat. He watched the gathering as it edged forward at a tedious pace. The crowd had assembled in an orderly fashion, assisted by a few security police stationed here and there, chatting and smoking with the joyous masses.

The line stretched around the street, into the distance as far as he could see. No doubt to the very gates of Hades. The unclean and the clean mingled merrily in the stagnant air, filing their way to the Promised Land: pianists, chauffeurs, blacksmiths, merchants, herdsman, Christians, carpenters, schoolmasters, delegates, lamplighters, priests, directors, advocates, servants, actors, engineers, princes, students, papal legates, fishermen, Germans, miners, painters, soldiers, statisticians, cobblers, flautists, wireless operators, diplomats, laundry maids, and any number of other cardboard characters one may wish to add to swell the scene. Who knows, perhaps the devil himself stood in line awaiting his tickets.

How this theatre had troubled him, with its obsession with the director's craft. But now he returned with a coup. The deal was almost concluded and would at least be handled professionally by Nemirovich, and not some inexperienced assistant. Perhaps the crowds would be this vast for his new work.

For now though he must strive to put the theatre from his mind. He moved on, as purposeless as a leaf stirred by the wind.

Slipping around the back of the building, and heading away from the throng he wandered by the stage entrance and scenedock. At the stage door were posed the most ridiculous group of characters. There stood, as in a tableau of sprinters after the starting gun, four actors in bizarre, yet familiar, costume. Two were dressed in the plain blue suits of the workers' theatre. Another was costumed as a plump Chinese

Archaic Artificial Suns

with a vast pink robe and oversized straw hat. The last was equally padded with stuffing in his large waistcoat and baggy trousers. He had a dull brown peaked cap and sported a large, false, red beard and gripped two large bags, of what looked to be coins, in his hands.

It struck Mikhail suddenly where he had seen these characters before: in the costume drawings for Meyerhold's production of *Mystery-Bouffe*. That had been staged here nearly twenty years ago. Perhaps these buffoons had discovered them in a corner of the costume wardrobe and had decided to enact some absurd scene in the square.

As he pondered this question the group burst into existence from their still life.

They ran forward at a marked speed, more noticeable – no doubt – because of their previous stasis. They were exaggeratedly comical, pushing and shoving to gain advantage over each other.

Mikhail drifted after them slowly, amused by their antics. Despite their frantic energy they never seemed to progress much further from him though. After a few minutes, and just as his interest was waning, he saw them turn, as one, and gesture to him to come towards them.

He obliged. The one dressed as a Chinese seemed to be in charge.

“Might we interest you in a short performance of our own devising, on the instruction of our director?” he asked.

“Oh, no, though it looks quite fascinating,” Mikhail replied, “I am taking a short walk to freshen myself before returning to my work.”

“But comrade, we could really do with the money,” the actor said, folding himself in half with staged, silent laughter. His three accomplices joined him in this silly spectacle, more unsettling in the oppressive heat which seemed already to absorb and deaden sound.

In that brief interstice hung the balance of revelation.

“Certainly, why not,” Mikhail replied flatly. “I would welcome some entertainment.”

“Entertainment! That, comrade, is something we can always provide,” he affirmed, nodding his head frantically, making the straw hat slide ludicrously back and forth on his head.

“If you would care to follow us, we shall take you to our studio,” he said, whirling his robes in an affected curtsy.

With the servile demeanour of shop assistants the performers beckoned him on, through streets and parks, across busy roads and among crowds lethargic with the heavy heat. At every pause the players nodded, bowed and gestured keenly, as though entreating him to view some wondrous exhibit. Just as this ingratiating conduct was beginning to irritate Mikhail, and he was considering parting company with the fools, they stopped and stood rigidly to attention on a small grassy mound that inclined gently towards a tall building with a row of wide balconies on its lower floors. Mikhail recognised the place but after their absurd journey he could not recall how.

The group approached a balcony near the corner of the building. Mikhail followed dutifully again.

“Now let our *soirée* commence,” the “Chinese” began. “But first, a medley of the classics, before we move to the meat of the show.”

He knelt at the edge of the balcony, whilst the others watched excitedly. With an affected, youthful voice he began.

“But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon, who is already sick and pale with grief that thou her maid art more fair than she.”

He turned and placed his finger to his lips, calling everyone to be silent.

With one leap he was over the low wall and was at the doors to the apartment. His fellow actors followed. Mikhail still struggled with a vague sense of familiarity of this area, and most specifically this building, but he was more interested now in the purpose behind this performance.

Quietly the “Romeo” opened the door from the balcony and beckoned the others to follow. They assumed crouched poses of stealth and ushered Mikhail along. He too stooped in a sympathetic attempt at quiet.

They entered a bright sitting room with yellow and gold walls and a large dining table in the centre of the room, made of Karelian birch; a light golden colour that complemented the walls. It was an unusually opulent room, with a beautiful chandelier and many framed photographs upon the walls. The balcony doors were framed by luxurious tapestry curtains that hung in thick folds.

Archaic Artificial Suns

Mikhail immediately remembered the place. He had been here only a couple of months ago. It was Meyerhold's apartment. He and a few others had been invited for drinks after the humiliating speech Meyerhold had given at the *Directors' Conference*. A few days later he had been arrested and God only knew what had become of him by now.

As Mikhail was contemplating this, a pair of double doors opened into the next room and a beautiful woman walked through dressed in a silk dressing gown, rubbing her dark curly hair with a cream towel. It was Zinaida, Meyerhold's wife.

She stopped still and lowered the towel. Her face flushed suddenly with anger.

"Are you back so soon?" she spat. "I thought you had done with riffling our possessions."

"She speaks," the "Romeo" said tenderly, sinking to his knees. "O, speak again, bright angel, for thou art as glorious to this night, being o'er my head, as is a winged messenger of heaven unto the white-upturned wond'ring eyes of mortals that fall back to gaze upon him, when he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds and sails upon the bosom of the air."

She looked perplexed but her anger was not diminished.

"I demand to know the meaning of this idiocy," she said. "If you do not leave immediately I will call for assistance and report you to Beria directly – no, to Stalin himself!"

"I have night's cloak to hide me from their eyes; and but thou love me, let them find me here," "Romeo" implored, laying his arm across his brow in mock swoon. "My life were better ended by their hate than death prolonged wanting of thy love."

"I have had enough of this nonsense," she said, moving towards the main apartment entrance. She caught Mikhail's eyes and stopped suddenly. "But, Mikhail, what are you doing here with these NKVD dogs?"

He did not have time to respond before the odd scene played on. "Romeo" had risen from his knees and now puffed himself up menacingly.

"If you bethink yourself of any crime unreconcil'd as yet to heaven and grace, solicit for it straight," he growled deeply, now playing "The Moor".

D.P. Watt

She still stared questioningly at Mikhail.

“Is it come to this?” she whispered. “That we turn against ourselves like animals, seeking favour instead of food.”

Mikhail did not understand.

“It is too late,” “The Moor” pronounced ominously, shaking his head sorrowfully. “It is too late.”

With an unnatural speed the four actors pounced upon Zinaida and drew wicked stiletto blades from within their costumes.

They stabbed and stabbed, stabbed and stabbed.

They paused a moment to swap blades, though each appeared identical.

Then they stabbed and stabbed, and stabbed and stabbed again. The rabble of bodies struggled towards the open balcony doors as their victim attempted to flee.

Then Zinaida sank – disintegrating like a dynamited building – beneath the onslaught of brutality. The horror of the scene did not affect Mikhail. He was too deadened by the morphine. What he noticed most was the sound as the blades entered the woman’s body – like paper, swiftly torn. He collapsed into a leather chair, mute witness to the terrible aftermath.

The four assassins ceased their attack and rose together slowly, reminiscent of actors rehearsing one of Meyerhold’s own performance etudes. The “Chinese” reached out to Zinaida’s face, stroking her cheek gently.

“Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast! Would I were sleep and peace, so sweet to rest!”

He looked up at Mikhail and smiled. His features were bizarrely altered. His skin had taken on a light brown hue and seemed unusually wrinkled. A beard seemed to have sprouted from his chin. There was something preternatural and uncanny about him.

“Death, that hath suck’d the honey of thy breath, hath no power yet upon thy beauty,” he whispered in Zinaida’s ear. “Thou art not conquer’d; beauty’s ensign yet is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks, and death’s pale flag is not advanced there.”

It was the crowning insult to their Shakespearean charade.

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With a clap of his hands the show was over. The four “actors” slipped swiftly out of their costumes to reveal the olive uniforms of NKVD officers. Yet there was something strange about them. Their faces seemed flecked with bristly stubble and Mikhail was sure that they were much shorter than they had seemed before. Indeed that was precisely the peculiarity of their uniforms; they hung limply from their bodies, looking like children dressed as soldiers.

The one that had played the speaking roles in the bloody performance pulled a grey cap from his pocket and perched it upon his head.

“I am Antonielich Vasielievich Nostradascov, or Popilovnovoskov to my friends,” he stated pompously. Here the other freaks giggled. “You though shall call me Comrade Popi; on account of my senior rank.” He tapped an oval badge on his arm: a silver and gold insignia on a maroon background. The others nodded gravely and then bounced onto a chaise longue – serving as a trampoline – to each perform a Salchow before landing on their knees and waving their hands in the air as though performers in some travelling circus. Comrade Popi took a quick bow.

With the ineptitude of a troupe of clowns the other three then scrambled onto the table and arranged themselves into a ludicrous tableau again. This time mocking the pose of soldiers in socialist realist posters: in profile, their determined stances marching towards a happy, healthy, collective future. One winked and grinned at him, showing long sharp feline teeth.

Mikhail stared at them blankly.

“Not impressed, eh? What would you prefer, a trapeze of naked boyars?” Comrade Popi asked, his scrappy facial hair quivering as his lips contorted into a grotesque grin. “We can do that if you want, can’t we boys?”

His idiotic entourage stood suddenly to attention and nodded their heads with maniacal energy.

Mikhail was more disturbed by the quotation from his own writings, cruelly enough about the very man whose living room he now stood in and whose wife lay dying before him. He stared ahead as the bizarre creatures continued their charade, nodding for what may possibly have been an hour. They seemed to have shrunk further and appeared now

to be no taller than a metre. Their facial hair seemed to get thicker and darker, now virtually covering their entire faces, and even sprouting in awkward tufts from their oversized costumes.

They scattered and each attempted to impress their “audience” with different tricks. One pretended to tame an invisible lion with a chair and poker from the fire. Another balanced along the arm of the chaise longue as though on a high wire. The other juggled oranges from a bowl on the table.

Comrade Popi, like a circus ringmaster, presented each in turn. His shoulders sinking as he looked disappointedly at Mikhail’s bleak expression.

“God, you’re a tough crowd tonight! Why not have a bit of fruit – *me old fruit*,” he said, with an absurdly exaggerated English accent. “Might perk you up a bit!” He plucked an orange from the juggler performing beside him and threw it to Mikhail.

His reflexes were dull and it thumped against his chest, falling into his lap.

The juggler sympathetically dropped his remaining fruits to the ground with a thud.

“Oops, butterfingers!” Comrade Popi laughed, sending the juggler crashing to the floor with a horizontal punch to the jaw.

In a daze Mikhail began to peel the orange. Zinaida lay there before the thick curtains, the twilight breeze animating her torn dressing gown. The blood oozed in a thick pool around her. It seemed to well up from the floor, rather than from her wounds; as though the room itself were bleeding. She struggled to take in low breaths, her chest shuddering in obvious pain. Her eyes fluttered open and gazed at him, their pupils blank and uncomprehending – galaxies of emptiness.

Mikhail also watched events with glazed, dead eyes.

He could smell the peeled orange, reminding him of the evenings with Konstantin and the other boys, at the Solovtsov Theatre, where he would dissolve into the performance itself, becoming one with the dust and the footlights, whose heat would glow his face as the curtain raised itself on another world. For a moment he became a little boy again – as short as those malevolent spirits still cavorting around the room.

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Zinaida struggled to raise herself, exhaling a breathy appeal to her absent husband, “Vsevolod...”

“What voice is this?” Comrade Popi said, beginning again the theatrical mockery. “Not dead? Not yet quite dead? I that am cruel am yet merciful; I would not have thee linger in thy pain.”

He crouched down, cradling Zinaida’s head in one hand. Then, with sudden ferocity, he popped his blade swiftly into each of her eye sockets.

Again there was the sound of tearing paper. Mikhail felt it might be the brittle fabric of his own mind.

“Who are you?” was the best that he could muster as he looked on incredulously.

“We are the agents of endless abandon,” the beast said, very precisely. He stood, wiping the dagger on his uniform, which now looked huge upon him. He rolled his sleeves up meticulously and then collected a decanter of plum brandy from a cabinet beside the table and took a long draught. “We are things rich and strange, I grant you that. But the great matriarch, authority, is only the vessel to birth us into the world.”

Here he tapped his military badge again, instructively.

“She is the ordered facade through which we burst to give to revelry its true force; the anonymity of lust. Without harmony where could we sow discord? It is, unfortunately as black and white as all that. We are the faceless perpetrators of every baseless desire. It was our blood that entered your veins this evening and fired your brain with joy. It was our seed that fed your pen with wit on every page you ever inked. We are, quite simply, the glint on every blade that ever pierced a sack of flesh.”

“What kind of game is this?” came the next inane question.

Comrade Popi took off his cap and sat on the arm of Mikhail’s chair, shaking his head as though lecturing a child. His face seemed almost covered now with wiry brown hair.

“Ah, we’re all players, Miki,” he said, nudging his face up to Mikhail’s; the bristles of his beard tougher than a stiff brush. “It’s all just dancing and frolicking in the end. That’s what we’re here for. You poor devils are just hourglasses, and you know it – dogs don’t. I’ve never understood why you don’t make more of yourselves. You know, put on some new clothes – pretend to be something else!”

He slurped another good fill of spirit. The other three were at the cabinet, draining bottle after bottle in what looked to be a competition.

“Now, can you ever imagine what it’s like for us, eh?” he continued. “We’re only poor representatives of the eternal order of things; the ‘cycles of centuries’ and all that razzmatazz. Do you have any idea what immortality does to the mind – what eons of ageless nothingness does for one’s *joie de vivre*? *Would I were sleep and peace, Miki. So sweet to rest!*”

There came a quiet knocking at the door of the apartment and a soft voice calling, likely the maid.

“Oh, what a shame, Miki, we’ll have to go,” the abhorrent creature chuckled. “But do try to imagine the millions of millennia of this earth in all its lush greenery, years before the primordial *creature* emerged from the salty soup to begin its slow crawl towards your sentience. Now imagine all the years after your lot have fought and fucked yourselves into oblivion, dancing arm and arm with us into the sunset. Imagine those countless centuries as this planet becomes dry and dusty and all record of its creatures and terrain are wiped away by dusty solar winds.”

The knocking came louder, and a shrill call for assistance.

“Knock, knock, knock! Who’s there i’ th’ name of Beelzebub?” he shouted at the door. “Sorry for the rude interruption, Miki, where were we? Ah yes! Then imagine – kaboom! – the whole thing blown to bits by the last blast of the sun as it commits its final fission and casts all its broken atoms into the darkness again. That’s just the prelude to the *first act* my boy, just the prelude! Imagine having to sit through all that. It doesn’t even begin to capture what we will have to – and have already had to – endure.”

A more forceful knocking.

“Madame, are you in there? We heard voices?” a male voice enquired loudly.

A pause. Then, heavy thudding on the door.

“*Exeunt, dear players. Exeunt!*” Popi said, ushering his drunken accomplices into the night. Their transformation was complete: now so dark, stunted and hairy, that they resembled performing baby bears in a marketplace. Popi raised his cap in a gesture of farewell. “See you at the end of time, Miki; be sure to wear something wonderful, it promises to be a very special evening!”

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The hammering on the door continued. Mikhail stumbled onto the balcony and, as was to be expected, the creatures had vanished into the night. Dazed by drugs and revelation he too slipped into the darkness.



It was this perpetual performance that he was destined to reveal. He must revisit the book. Now! Now! He must be read again; so that they should *know*. In years to come the lights would flare in civilisation's empty auditorium and the cast would play again beneath archaic, artificial suns – all supplicants to the mysterious miracle – including bankers, weavers, fantasists, Zionists, lovers, jesters, Tsars, revolutionaries, waiters, sopranos, jewellers, blasphemers, bailiffs, generals, narcissists, taxidermists, gravediggers, Futurists, butchers, bakers, candlestickmakers, murderers, vocationists, bloodletters, professors, pederasts, quiltmakers, homosexuals, blackmailers, dramaturges, eschatologists, cuckolds, satirists, pallbearers. Yes, particularly the pallbearers with their flair for fatalistic melodrama and their sad, sardonic smiles.

ФПЛУ ФФЯ ТИЗ СЯФФЛЗА-ФЦТ

Adam S. Cantwell

“Don’t we too, with all our meanings and with all our being, nestle beside the dead and buried? No, no. I shall never agree with the briefcases’ current philosophy: one can write only about the crossed-out and only for the crossed-out.”

Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, *“The Bookmark”*

The lines swam before Plotvinov’s watering eyes and a scent which hinted of hoofed animals rose from the rough grey pages. Whatever errors in thought and politics lay in the cheaply-printed pages of the treatise, its meanness, its failure as an example of that category of object known as a book, was unmistakable. The murky arguments of its author, an unknown professor of agronomy from Krasnoyarsk, were embodied in a correspondingly dreary and half-formed medium. The mingled aromas of cheap glue and rancid pulp had nearly made Plotvinov faint. The prose, plodding even by academic standards, had brought a tear of boredom to his eye. The spongy yellowish boards in which it was bound were warped and slightly too large for the pages. The uneven type was ghostly where the greyish ink had been under-applied to the printing plates; in other places an overabundance of smeared greasy ink twisted the characters into black formless blobs or cloaked the margin of an entire page in night, saving Plotvinov the trouble of crossing out lines and sending them back to the oblivion from which they had been partially dragged.

Plotvinov rubbed his temple and dragged a thick line of graphite through a maze-like sentence, erasing another of Professor Oriental’s political errors. The study, touching on methods of crop management

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in the shortened Siberian growing season, made frequent and possibly inadvertent reference to matters of state that had no place being published. Whether or not it would ever be read did not matter. No legitimate social purpose was served by calling attention to freakish weather and crop failures, earthquakes and wildfires, or to the alleged shortages consequent on these occurrences. Socialism wasn't served by looking backward. Oriental's droughts, famines, and bereft, underfed peasants wandering the countryside would remain on the pages of the proof, sealed behind Plotvinov's black mark.

Plotvinov pushed the book away and squinted in the green-shaded light of the table lamp. The desk, with its ramparts of stacked manuscripts and books, was an island of light in the darkening archive. Failing early winter light cast cold rays through the high windows and down the aisles of lofty shelves, failing to illuminate the rear of the echoing room, where the wall was pierced with arches that led to the storage vaults. Against the growing dark, tiny points of gilt on spines stood out like stars, remote, yet ordered in some subtle system.

Plotvinov regarded the stacks on his desk balefully. He suspected that his assignment of Oriental's treatise was an error in the first place. His subsection of Glavlit was never remarkable for its flawless organization, though throughput was high; but the arrival of the Academy of Sciences' archive from Leningrad had greatly exacerbated the confusion. Plotvinov now dreamt nightly that he was wading against an inexorable tide of paper and cheap cardboard, contending with an inimical being built out of wood pulp and errors and haloed with grey dust.

Plotvinov expelled a sneeze at the same moment the door swung open with a rattle. Kuznetsov loved to try to surprise the older man, though he acted as if his irrepressible vigor and life-force brimmed over to such an extent that it was simply impossible for him to do anything quietly, to close a book or a door without slamming it, to sign an order without a flourish, or to make a declarative statement without gazing boldly at some indeterminate point above the head of his interlocutor, into a glorious vista of inevitable futurity. It was with reason that Plotvinov brought his work here from the cramped, smoky main censor's office where Kuznetsov and the others worked. Anything to put distance

between himself and the click of their boots, the creak of their cheap leather coats.

“Comrade Plotvinov, I knew I’d find you here! Isn’t the dust getting to you? I brought you something!” Kuznetsov, who seldom waited for an answer to his questions, dealt a thick booklet to the blotter with a flourish, setting a fresh cloud of dust into motion in the desk lamp’s light. He stood back with crossed arms. The latest Glavlit censor’s bulletin.

All of their gestures seemed to have been learned from the cinema, Plotvinov thought, their wooden dialogue as well. He was unsure whether or not they were more tiresome than the men of his youth who affected mannerisms learned from cheap novels.

“Excellent, Comrade Kuznetsov.” intoned Plotvinov. At least the smell of the ink was fresh. The light was in Plotvinov’s eyes as he looked up at Kuznetsov, but the younger man didn’t seem to be leaving. Gesturing to the drifts of printed matter before him, he said, “I’ll be happy to put aside this damned Academy work for a moment, I can tell you.” Plotvinov went on, chuckling mirthlessly, “Nearly snowed under, as I’m sure you are! Between the Academy’s overflow and my own Glavlit queue, I can barely make any headway. Here, you see – a hayseed professor’s dissertation, somehow full of state secrets... thirteen volumes of Persian history... and here, a mechanical engineer’s volume of fairy stories in the manner of Hoffmann! Where does he get the time?”

“Yet you catch these errors and onward we go, eh? More pointless books that won’t burden the People any longer, then?” It wasn’t exactly a question.

“Well,” Plotvinov began, growing serious, “we must still be diligent. There may be something of use to the People here, at least in the scientific works –”

“As I was just telling the others – one day,” interrupted Kuznetsov, “with the perfection of our system and of the People’s education, error will dwindle away to nothing and our office and these archives can be done away with, but until then –”

“I suppose, Comrade,” interrupted an irritated Plotvinov, “but until then we still have avid users of the archive in Stojka and his men, and when they have need of it – well, someone must be ready to serve in each post, pleasant or not.”

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The wary street boy in Kuznetsov, the son of fish-mongers and seamstresses, momentarily flashed at mention of the secret police, but the Party man quickly regained the upper hand. Apropos of nothing, he quoted Gorky, as he was wont to do in such situations: “Well, as it is said – books are the most important and most powerful weapons in Socialist culture. Will you be joining us downstairs?”

Plotvinov made some excuse which sent the boy back to his loud talk and ceaseless toil for the future of mankind. Plotvinov knew that they would be empty debating the contents of the bulletin, all striving to reformulate in various ways its wholly predictable edicts. The spectacle of these uneducated Party men falling over one another to affirm the obvious was one that Plotvinov would spare himself today. Plotvinov’s knowledge of what was not fit to print was encyclopedic, he needed no guidebooks or bulletins. He carried in his head a panoply of injunctions, myriad prohibitions. True, the rules changed from year to year and day to day, at an ever-increasing pace, but old Plotvinov had seen it all – had seen it, censored it, and filed it all away.

He almost laughed to see the bulletin atop the heap of documents on his desk, like foam on a wave of paper crashing against the rocks of the archives, the stern vertical landscape of shelved spines that was his native prospect. Originally an archivist by profession, Plotvinov had found his position as a censor and Party member not only advantageous for survival but harmonious with his mind’s habit of marshaling information, of indexing and retrieving facts on demand. When, as a student, the others had sat up at night arguing the finer points of Revolution, Plotvinov was the one consulted to settle a factual dispute or establish a chronology. And when fervor seemed to be called for, Plotvinov vaguely volunteered an opinion that someday, in an ideal Socialist archive, the precisely organized and systematized ideas would fit one to another like bricks in a well-made structure, admitting no draft of rhetorical wind from the forces of counter-revolution. Plotvinov wound out this metaphor when the occasion arose, to prove his credentials to himself and others, but with time this picture of walls of books lost its power for him. He had found himself a jailer of bad and wrong ideas; they made poor bricks, these half-formed books shot through with errors, and failures stacked up in the forbidden archives like stones in the crude and leaning walls of the hovels of Zamoskrechie.

Many strange and hard years had passed and now his opinion was seldom solicited. Though the stakes had grown ever higher, it had become easier to say the right thing politically as the range of possibilities had decreased. Plotvinov's Revolutionary credentials had grown stale, but he was retained in his post. There was simply too much work, particularly for one with his dual expertise in censorship and as an archivist, and the work only increased as men and women began to drop out of the new society like ill-considered sentences from the manuscript of a continually revised novel.

Plotvinov lit a cigar and exhaled these thoughts with a cloud of smoke. He stacked some filing work on a battered cart and rolled it slowly down the aisles toward the storage vaults. As he admired the soft, dying glow of the walnut shelves and their brass fittings, Stojka appeared disconcertingly at the end of a row of shelves, motionless but accompanied by an echo of boots moving among the stacks. The secret policeman never traveled alone but the men who accompanied him were rarely seen – they were presences on the margins of rooms, whisperers in stairwells, shapes in hallways and behind pebbled glass.

“Comrade Plotvinov, we need you for something gone missing.”

“Certainly, right away – and what would that be, Comrade?” Plotvinov tried, with limited success, to match the efficient manner of the thin-faced man with the hooded grey eyes.

Plotvinov made notes on a scrap of paper as Stojka rattled off the names of several authors and works which were “undergoing review”. Plotvinov was not a beautiful man but he exulted inwardly at Stojka's exceptional ugliness.

“Well, certainly I can find those materials, but some of them were not even filed and have already been consigned to destruction –”

“Hm, these requirements are immutable at the present time. It may be that they will change but until then you will be so good as to supply these items to the police? They can be ready in the morning?”

Another question that was not truly a question. “Yes I can, Comrade. Good night,” Plotvinov said to the man's back.

Stojka's boots seemed to strike curiously independent echoes from all around the room as his men, detecting his departure, also made to leave.

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A change of plans, thought Plotvinov glumly. No cinema and cigars tonight – instead a night of toil, necessitating a visit to the bottom of the waste chute and perhaps other dim labors.

Sighing heavily, Plotvinov retrieved his briefcase from the desk and placed in it the remainder of his lunch and a box of candles. He passed by steel filing carts and the waste chute's port in the wall and entered the echoing stairwell.

He had immediately recognized among Stojka's requisitions a thin book which he had sent down the chute weeks ago – a novella by some Ukrainian obscurity which had been heavily expurgated by this office already on its way to publication in a minor journal. These improvements notwithstanding, there was no chance of its seeing publication in the present climate, so the now-superfluous proof copy had been consigned to the trash. Why this particular form of this particular work was required was a mystery without interest. Plotvinov would try to locate it first, then return upstairs for the more easily accessible items on Stojka's reading list.

Changes of literary fortune came quickly in the Soviet Union. If the political status of an author changed, the effect would be felt in his extant works, which were sent to the censors again. Words that had been destined for oblivion could suddenly gain new currency, if only to damn their author; rescued from the pit and interrogated in secret, to the pit they returned, their traitorous testimony complete.

The back stairs of the once-grand building rang with Plotvinov's tread. He prized the time he spent alone in the dusty, drafty corridors of the now-decaying pile which, before the Revolution, had housed the embassy of some Nordic kingdom. He sought excuses to wander the service passageways like those of a grand hotel and the resounding meeting rooms, which were gradually being divided with cheap partitions into office-warrens and storage space. He was fairly sure he would not encounter another soul on the back stairs or in the basement. Somehow in this suffocatingly crowded city, and in the face of the never-ending work of a society in the vanguard of a world revolution, staffing problems were intractable. Even the building staff were not exempt from the unexplained and permanent absences which had become so frequent in Moscow.

The electric lamps at the bottom of the stairwell emitted a murky brown light. The door was a scarred slab of nameless wood. The marble wall paneling of the upper floors, with the umber seaming and suggestive billowing rock-shapes which gave the impression of delving into geologic strata of time, had given way to grey brick.

Plotvinov's key opened the door on a cool blackness which rang dully with the low groan of the hinges. A wave of must surged against his face as his hand found the light panel. A weak pop like a sudden flash bulb revealed a view of vast, scaly heaps of paper debris spread across the floor of the broad room, which was immediately sunk in weak half-light as one of the chamber's two bulbs failed. Plotvinov cursed growlingly, using a fanciful formulation of naval origin which he had been obliged to suppress in a celebrated author's war novel.

He would have to transfer the good bulb from the socket near the entry to the socket across the room where he needed illumination, where the black mouths of the chutes emptied in drifts about a meter and a half high. The height of the fixtures and the lack of a stepladder would require him to build a pile of books beneath each socket. He hauled heavy, thick reference books out of the pile, kicking through the mass to dislodge useless dictionaries, outdated atlases, superannuated directories, obsolete catalogs and bound volumes of unread academic journals. He knew which pile had accumulated from his floor and was careful to work around it, lest he disturb the natural strata which might allow him to deduce the location of the damned book.

Satisfied that the two piles were sufficiently high, Plotvinov lit a candle and carefully removed the good bulb. Taking the briefcase under his arm, he crossed the room carefully, shuffling to maintain his footing on the cluttered floor. A fine dust rose invisibly around him and he sneezed violently, just managing to preserve the candle's flame. Wax dribbled onto the forlorn, barely glimpsed books which littered the floor.

He climbed the second perch. In the flickering gloom the piles resembled beached whales, the raddled outlines of splayed covers and broken bindings like exposed bones, the curled rolls of pages like spilling coils of viscera.

Plotvinov had underestimated the boost needed, and, candle clutched awkwardly in his left hand, stretched in vain to insert the bulb. With

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an effort he engaged the socket's thread, but lacked the elevation to spin it into place. He set his foot in the opening of the chute to gain a few centimeters, and twisted the bulb home. He blinked in the yellow light.

A hollow rumbling sounded far above his head, then a cascade of churning thumps like remote artillery fire. Plotvinov briefly understood that the building was coming down on his head. With a whoosh of air, a heavy object knocked his foot from the chute with a cruel blow. He lost his footing and was precipitated face first into the wall and down. Thunder filled his ears and he was pummelled as he stretched prone. Plotvinov's body tried to curl itself in defense but was held in place by a slide of thudding debris. He squeezed his eyes shut and tensed for the unimaginable embrace of tons of masonry, but it didn't come. In the crashing din and choking dust Plotvinov swung his head up as a hurtling book bounded from the mouth of the shaft and spun like a cartwheel straight at his face, spraying loose pages. In a flash he recognized Oriental's book as it struck him rudely in the face with a dull clayey corner of its mangled cover. He ducked beneath further raining blows. A hollow banging clatter from the shaft rose to a crescendo – something larger than a book was coming down. Plotvinov cringed and swore as the steel library cart spat from the chute and plowed him under into unconsciousness.



At first he could not understand that he had returned to wakefulness at all.

Was he still buried beneath books in the basement trash room? Why the diffuse yellow light, the curiously doubled shadows? With a powerful sneeze he understood that a loose page had lain across his face. He had been staring blankly up through the translucent paper, unable to recognize the letters which were too close for focus, seeing only their shadows. The page fluttered down across his eyes again, but not before he had glimpsed the dim bulb and the vast pile spilling from the chute and covering his body.

Plotvinov attempted to rise. Kilos of books pinned him down and his many injuries caused him to pause and catch his breath. Soon he was able to work his hand free and push books away from his bruised and

battered ribs. The pile stood higher than a man's chest, nearly blocking the mouth of the chute. Moving carefully so as not to loose an avalanche upon his head, he tossed aside handfuls of printed matter. At last Plotvinov could pull himself to a seated position. His face and hands were scraped and bloody from the fall, and his ribs, arms, and legs were bruised and sore. Worst of all were the gash on his scalp where the steel cart had grazed him, and a badly twisted ankle. He slumped down heavily with a spinning head, and several sluggish minutes passed before he stiffly twisted his body to see where the great metal cart had come to rest.

It had apparently bounced across the room after nearly dashing Plotvinov's brains out and had come to rest in a crumpled mass against the door.

Plotvinov stared blankly. As he peered through the gloom it seemed that the angle of the door in its frame was askew. The doorknob was missing. He indulged his lassitude for uncounted minutes more, and, unable to rise on the ankle, crawled over the torn and jagged landscape of books toward the door.

"God damn them," he swore. When had Kuznetsov and his ilk ever shown the kind of initiative it had taken to dump what was clearly several tall shelves worth of material down the waste chute, with a cart for good measure? Perhaps the idiots had been trying to dump the cart's contents and it had gotten away from them. They might have come for it by now if it had not been obvious that the fall must have dashed it to pieces.

Men like Kuznetsov ruined whatever they touched. He felt dangerously light-headed and propped himself up on a bale of misprinted pamphlets. Whatever Plotvinov's failings might have been, he was at least competent and diligent in his work. Not that diligence was the way to rise in the organization, he thought. Many of his colleagues had long since gone on to higher posts, some at the fabled Writer's Union, while Plotvinov sat, unlooked-for, in a garbage pit in the bowels of Glavlit. At least here he was alone. He wondered what time of day it was and whether his foolish colleagues sat late in their office smoking and congratulating themselves.

Plotvinov had never been like Kuznetsov and the rest. He had once admired certain literary and professional Party organizations, but had

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never become involved. As he sat in the gloom, he wondered whether Proletkult, with their aim of utterly eliminating bourgeois culture and replacing it with a purely Proletarian culture and literature, perhaps did not go far enough. Wasn't Russian literature – literature as a whole – an empty exercise, powerless to effect change, beyond its undoubted efficacy as an irritant? Russians had always lifted up their writers as heroes, had hungrily devoured silly novels as a drug against their toilsome lives; if a bitter taste of preaching for a better world was added to lift the brew above its natural level of gossip and voyeurism, so much the better. Why did this so-called culture need to be replaced with anything at all? Was there not, in fact, a deception at the heart of language itself? What suitable truth was there in the arbitrary scratches and loops of letters, the grunts and hisses of speech?

Plotvinov's doubts had once been assuaged by the excitement of the new Socialist world forming before his eyes, but no more. For Plotvinov, joining the Party had once been more than a way to survive. He had been sick to his soul of injustice, in his own life, in Russia, and in nature itself. He had believed that men had seen a way out in law, in abstraction. He had thought he played a small part with his own contribution, with his near-perfect recall and powers of organization, his mind and soul like an index. The exact content of the coming salvation did not so much concern him as the promise of a rational *form* for a better world.

But time passed, formalism became a dangerous accusation, and Plotvinov grew to see that human nature was incapable of leaving principles untouched, unsoiled. As soon as rational categories were established, they were violated. Even here in the trash pit, Plotvinov could almost believe that with sufficient insight men could discern what was just, could perceive the law that had always existed behind everything. But could any sublime insight survive the shouting matches, the wrangling, the posturing of Party meetings stretching into the night? Men relished the churning fight for status. They longed to show that they cleaved to doctrine more faithfully than the next man, and that they could cleverly switch their allegiance if the doctrine changed overnight. Men were satanically clever animals and reveled in the exercise of their cleverness beyond the point where any gain was to be had. They

formed a whole with the stupid, wasteful randomness of creation, its uncountable stones and clouds, the indescribable shapes of bare tree branches in the fall.

Plotvinov had often stared out the window at the trees along the Moskva and scoffed to think how men imagined that their science or their art could understand or even describe something as common as a tree, with its infinite variety of branching angles in three dimensions. But in fact the scientist's representation was so painfully labored that it was tragic, and the artist's was only a shadow. Better that representations like these should be blotted out, stricken from the record. What could a tree's devilish complexity mean to an ordered and just mind, what could it offer to a true study of a future in which suffering was to be banished? It was enough to know that it gave shade in summer, fuel in winter. The better it fit in its pigeonhole, the better life and purpose could flow around it.

It had taken years for Plotvinov to see these things, as it had taken years to see how his new duties as censor fit with and served his inclinations as an archivist, and vice-versa. He came to see how the paring down of things, of language, served the dream of perfect organization. If the angles, the shapes and the volumes of the naked tree branches were a reality too sharp, too recalcitrant to submit to computation, there were grey words to stand in for them. The shivering boughs of autumn would be passed over in silence, the fact of their existence noted in some ideal Platonic index, then spoken of no more.

No one was coming for Plotvinov. On hands and knees he picked his way over the debris to the ruins of the cart. He raised himself tentatively to his good foot, grasped the wedged cart and tugged weakly. The tea-colored electric light in the chamber browned suddenly and failed. Plotvinov pulled again in the blackness, failed to move the wedged cart, and slid to the strewn floor, cursing bitterly.



Plotvinov sat in the dark and yelled. This lasted for an interval; then he gathered such papers and thin folios as were in arm's reach and slept.

He dreamed he was in a place of crumbling gold-brown sands and withered palm trees. As he stomped with purpose across a flat waste,

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he left crunching impressions in a crust from which rose a powdery colorless dust. He made haste to reach a conference to which he was late, where he would be required to censor the minutes. Plotvinov knew the effort would be considerable – these provincial commissars were known to be ribald, profane and discursive, refusing to heed the Party's guidance on decency and wholesomeness in speech and living, but were tolerated because their theoretical findings were of the utmost interest.

The dry rasp of his tread was strangely doubled. He looked back along his path and saw a thin young boy in a flapping garment the color of the landscape following his footsteps. His face was obscured by the glare. Plotvinov had no time to attend to the boy, who seemed somehow in need of something but did not signal in any way.

The sands sighed against the white walls of a low building. He entered under a pointed arch and crossed clay-red tiles along a whispering gallery. The meeting was in progress below in a sunken theater. He could hear the barking laughter and smelled tobacco and spices he could not identify. In a small room across the gallery he set to work at a writing table beneath a scroll rack which covered one wall. Plotvinov dipped a thick brush in a jar of ink, opened a notebook of transcriptions. A window without glass opened on scattering light, gritty breezes and the wavering figure of the boy standing beneath a swaying palm. He looked down at his work, where thick black caterpillars crawled along the lines of text or sat, with their bristles pulsing, on certain words and terms. He stared, frozen, as more worms pushed out of the crease where the leaves of the notebook joined.

Plotvinov woke with a throbbing pain in his ankle and an ache in his skull. The electric light had come on again as he slept. This could mean that he had passed a full night in the basement, or not. The schedules and procedures of the building committee were inscrutable. Power was turned on and off as needed in the various reaches of the huge old embassy.

A racking fit of sneezes wrung pain out of his bruised ribs. He lay back and moaned as the dust swirled and eddied in the filthy light. Plotvinov longed for a drink of water. He remembered the briefcase with the remnants of sausage and bread. He remembered his cigars, and set off on hands and knees through the wrack.

Among manuals, treatises, scattered pages and empty bindings he located the briefcase and greedily consumed the edibles. He added the greasy brown wrappings to the ruin of paper filling the low room and lit a cigar.

Plotvinov's bruised body sighed its satisfaction with a plume of blue smoke. He considered his situation. The door seemed to be blocked. He shuffled over and tried it again, with the same result. Perhaps his full strength could shift the mass, but it was wedged solidly enough to defeat the efforts of his weakened, stiffening body. It was not remarkable that, in the hours he had been there, no one had come to the refuse room. Weeks or months went by between visits from the disposal detail. Kuznetsov and the others, if they had missed Plotvinov at all, had no way of knowing that he had gone to the refuse room. His absence from his nominally sensitive post would be noted sooner rather than later by Stojka, but the police agent may not have returned promptly for the documents. The blunder of casting the cart down the chute would not be readily admitted to, and perhaps it had happened too late in the evening to cause an uproar.

No longer knowing what time of day or night it was, Plotvinov scuttled like a crab to the nearest chute opening and shouted up the shaft. His voice was strange and sharp to him in the yellow-grey chamber. It lingered for the briefest of seconds in the shaft's dark column of air, and was gone.

Plotvinov looked up at the naked bulb and thought it well to prepare now for the dark which could fall at any time. He pushed books together to make a low platform under the fixture. A sneezing fit reduced him to bitter tears. He sat with his head in his hands, blankly regarding the shambles at his feet.

He stared dully at a tattered yellow cover. Recognition gradually dawned on him. It was the agronomist's treatise, the one he had been censoring before the visit from Stojka. Plotvinov remembered the insult of having been pelted with the book just before the cart knocked him senseless. He flipped open the cover. Its mashed corners fell away in a mealy pulp like wet shredded rags or grey oatmeal. There was the crooked type of the title page, announcing Professor Oriental's contribution to mankind. Plotvinov shuffled the pages and saw the thick

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black lines of his own pencil, marking off lines and passages to be expunged.

He swore into the silence. His unfinished work had been cast down the disposal chute – what was the meaning? He pawed through the pile and found more work from his desk. Nearly everything he had left out had been cast down the shaft. Behind indignant anger, a cold grip took hold of his chest. But no, it was a mistake made by the stupid Kuznetsov, or by one of the cleaning women. How dare they put him in jeopardy like this with their sloppy ignorance? The meaningless and negligent point-scoring of the other Glavlit censors had gone too far now. Whatever one thought of the execrable contents of the books and papers that came across his desk, there was a process in place, one which had been handed down from the Central Committee. The People had a right to expect the literature of the nation, such as it was, to undergo a scientific process of censorship, of winnowing and ultimately of improvement. If Plotvinov was too thorough, it was because of the archivist in him. And didn't Stojka and the secret police (who were after all agents of the People) rightly demand access to the products of Plotvinov's labor? Stojka, whose suppressions and deletions, unlike Plotvinov's, could not be recovered by descending a flight of stairs...

The cold grip tightened. Plotvinov had refused to seriously contemplate the possibility that he himself might one day fall under scrutiny, perhaps because he was so intimate with repression. He knew instinctively what not to say, and moreover knew the names of so many who had said these things. As the forbidden subjects changed and multiplied over the years, Plotvinov saw everything and knew where the texts were buried. And besides, he always did as Stojka asked.

Night fell again in the brick tomb as the electricity gave out and left Plotvinov sneezing and shivering on his pile of books.



Plotvinov felt feverish. The irregular surface of his platform of thick books prodded his aching frame as he suffered in silence.

After the light had failed the last time, he had given a few half-hearted cries for help. But was this really wise, would rescue come in response, or something else? He lay curled in misery in the dark, and

dozed, or fell into a cold reverie, he wasn't sure which. He thought he heard voices from the mouth of the shaft.

"Down they go to the archive, eh?"

Empty laughter from another voice. "Hell, there's enough work as it is without playing librarian. Good riddance."

"You like my filing system?"

A knocking from above and then the dull flat cracks of books bouncing from the opening of the chute across the room.

"You think he filed himself away on a shelf somewhere?"

"He'll end up filed away or worse when Stojka finds him. If he hasn't already."

"Let that be a lesson, if you fall down drunk in a gutter somewhere and miss work the next day, you may as well stay there. Showing your face after an unexcused absence? Not at Glavlit, not these days."

"Good riddance to him, he put us all in a bad light."

Another tumble down the shaft ended in ragged thuds. More torn pages and broken spines added to the pile.



Plotvinov woke shivering under his dusty coat. The light was on again, seemingly brighter this time, and through his pain and stiffness he felt the urge to hide. After what he thought he had heard, he no longer wished to be found. But they could come at any moment, conceivably. He sorted through the heaps nearest him for the largest volumes he could find. Using these he built a small nest or fortress out of assorted and mangled books. Safely away from the mouth of the chute, the niche would render him invisible to a casual visual inspection from the doorway.

He lay back in his lair and sifted crumbs from the bottom of his briefcase, then risked lighting the remnant of his last cigar. His aches receded momentarily with the indrawn tobacco and he realized that his eyes were mechanically scanning the stacks of books which surrounded him. His fingers strayed mindlessly to spines or blocks of pages and pushed them into place.

Closer to the floor were stacked mouldering leather-bound texts written in Scandinavian tongues, which had likely been cleared from

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where they lay in forgotten storage closets since before the Revolution. Atop these were strata of more recent books of every sort, some thick volumes chosen for their suitability as building bricks but also sheaves of plays, novels, story collections, criticism, manuals on subjects from farming to photography, Revolutionary memoirs and histories, many in the rough, cheap bindings of galleys submitted for approval. Plotvinov recognized several items which had crossed his desk on the way to oblivion. Manuscripts were scattered throughout but these were generally flimsy and less well-suited for Plotvinov's purpose. Relatively few were rejected wholesale and consigned to the trash; but enough still found their way here, where they lay lonely and apart in their slim folios, specters of wasted effort and vain hope.

He was suddenly overcome by pity, for himself and, for perhaps the first time, for these pathetic manuscripts and the human delusion they represented. The forlorn, tatty manuscripts aspired in vain to the condition of truth represented in reference works or those dealing with the economic or industrial sciences. He snatched a thin dog-eared manuscript in a wine-colored folder. See how the hand-written manuscript's lines breathe fitfully from margin to margin with the unsteady hand of the faint-hearted writer, how they contract and expand from the head of the page to the foot, wavering along with the writer's conviction. The manuscript by its nature flees completion; he had seen how often sweat-stained pages crumbled or frayed away, or simply disappeared, fled without leaving traces – there when he closed the folio in the evening, gone in the morning, as if absorbed back into the inchoate mess of the author's thinking.

Plotvinov flung away the manuscript in disgust. He longed for the orderly shelves of his archive. He admired the planning that went into the manufacture of a substantial book, the setting of the print, the sewing of the signatures, the precision of the cutting, folding, and gluing. He wanted to believe that all books were tending ultimately toward a perfect form, an ideal design which would replace all the motley volumes of assorted shapes and sizes and which would determine the contents, rather than the reverse.

With emotion Plotvinov suddenly struck at his wall of books. It toppled at the weak points where thin manuscripts were stacked on

cheaply bound volumes of fiction and poetry. His cigar was finished. He hauled himself up and waded on his knees into the heaps of books, casting them aside with both hands in search of thick heavy volumes. He sneezed harshly as he dug and hauled armloads of thick dictionaries, encyclopedias, and directories back to his tomb. He at first staggered his bricks of paper and board as his father, transformed by the Revolution from schoolmaster to bricklayer, had done on those few occasions when Plotvinov had gone to watch him work. Then he started again, deciding that the staggered pattern was unbooklike. Plotvinov ignored the pain in his ankle and throbbing head, the shivering and the abominable itching in his eyes. Finally he wiped his filthy black hands on his vest, lay back, lit a candle and admired his work.

From where he lay on his back he now saw regular ranks of books enclosing him on either side. The glittering light from the candle danced on the lettered spines, reminding him of the loaded shelves of the archives and libraries which had always sheltered him.

The electric light failed and Plotvinov dozed dreamlessly.



When Plotvinov awoke the light had returned. He found himself staring dully at what was clearly a false book, a box made to resemble a heavy leather bound volume. He tugged it carefully out of its place in his wall and pried it open. Inside were a tin cylinder and a thick sheaf of papers – a typed manuscript. It was a work of archaeological scholarship, complete with diagrams and floor plans of excavations, probably discarded from the collection of the Academy of Sciences. With dull curiosity he riffled to a random page and read with a smirk:

...the word “paradise” derives from the Avestan *pairi-daeza* or “stone-bounded enclosure”. This etymology reflects a distinctive quality of Zarathustran cosmology: the *menog* or spiritual realm is seen as much the same as the material, or *getig*, realm.

Plotvinov turned to the title page.

THE VAHISTA-HAUVARTAT GATHA SCROLL, c. 612 B.C.
DISCOVERED 1878, YAZD, PERSIA

Only for the Crossed-Out

BY AN EXPEDITION OF THE RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES,
ST. PETERSBURG

He thumbed the lid off of the tin tube, shook out a scroll, and carefully unrolled a few centimeters of it. His itching eyes ran briefly over the strange looping characters, drawn in queer shivering brush-strokes along multiple lines of symmetry in a way that resembled exactly no ancient script he had ever seen.

Plotvinov wondered idly how many other artifacts, how much history (in addition to his own) had been shoveled carelessly into these depths.

Turning back to the paper, Plotvinov studied diagrams which purported to show the site of an ancient hiding place, a tiny hidden temple or chapel subsumed under a later mosque. Drawings showed a cramped and crooked hole where the sacred items of a suppressed faith had been dumped. Again, sardonic amusement quickened his interest, and he read:

In fact, the scroll is the only known scripture of a doubly-repudiated sect of heretical Zarathustrans. They were among the first to commit the prophet Zarathustra's holy hymns, or gathas, to writing. In earlier times, it had been judged that writing was too secular an activity, that only the spoken word was capable of conveying the power of gathic revelation. But whereas the preservation and transmission of gathas via writing eventually became Zarathustran orthodoxy, the hidden sect of Yazd went a step further. They believed that, with the intervention of certain Yazata or beneficent spiritual beings, a new kind of perfect or total writing could be brought forth. This "Vahista-Hauvartat Gatha", variously interpreted as "truth-perfection hymn" or "fire-and-water scripture", accessed the *menog* realm to bring transcendent powers of mind to man's *getig* plane. Vahista-Hauvartat Gatha would make available to mankind a writing system capable of directly and flawlessly conveying the written word to the reader.

Because Vahista-Hauvartat Gatha would remove all impediment to the transmission of truth and "Good Mind", thus

creating conditions for a perfect harmony in mankind, it was believed that it would attract the jealous malevolence of beings associated with Angra Mainyu, the Zarathustran Satan or deity of evil. Angra Mainyu propitiated *drug*, or the lie, to thwart the perfection of the universe sought by the supreme being Ahura Mazda. Angra Mainyu lacked the creative principle of the supreme being and could only affect the world by perverting, draining, or infecting creation. His action was limited to the subtractive; only by erasing or blotting out could he further his designs. His creations were anti-creations. The advent of Vahista-Hauvartat Gatha would remove an important avenue for his influence on human affairs – the possibility that evil men might lie, distort, or deceive others through writing.

A perfect communion of minds. Simple marks on the page catalyzing meaning, entering the eye and the mind in a state of undiluted perfection and clarity. Plotvinov snorted in bitter amusement. Most of the minds he had encountered through his years of reading and censoring at Glavlit could scarcely form coherent sentences or find their way in the new society, let alone apprehend the eternal. He shuddered to think that the mind of the Siberian agronomist or the Hoffmann-addled engineer would somehow touch his and befuddle its fraying order.

What truth did the ancient fanatics hope to transmit? So many of the works of so-called “literature” he reviewed represented themselves as quests for truth. What was the truth here? What did these writers represented in the garbage heap know about the true extent of literature in this new world? Would they ever know what Plotvinov knew about the effort that went into creating a perfect library for a perfect society? He knew that the only real truth was constituted by the pulp of the paper, the blacking and ash in the ink, the angles and tight curves of the type, repeated with limited variation in even lines across the page, endlessly marching from volume to volume, pausing only to leap from one set of covers to the next.

Plotvinov continued reading on a deepening trance of exhaustion and growing fever, barely registering the words on the page. The candle guttered and Plotvinov dropped into a black sleep.

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Plotvinov awoke to sallow electric light and a dry hollow sound. He turned to see a tightly rolled scroll issue from the chute behind him. It was followed by more scrolls, then by folded codices of archaic appearance, then small books bound in hide. He rose and stood beside the aperture and scanned the items that dropped heavily to the existing pile. The thuds and slaps of fallen books of every size merged into a dry patter like a desert rain heard by an insect. Journals, newspapers, and cheap pamphlets in foreign tongues now fell copiously from each of the chamber's openings. Fine, durable volumes like the reference books he loved now began to fall. The piles from the chutes had spread and now merged in the center of the room. Books poured out in cratefuls and formed heaps a meter high. Catalogs and works on archival and library sciences; slim, unknown works of philosophy; they accumulated too quickly for him to read titles as the flow became a continuous roar and books drifted waist-high everywhere. He waded through the heavy piles toward the door but with eyes down – there was something strange about the books he was now seeing accumulate. Plotvinov began to be afraid. He was nearly immobilized in a choking snow of books. They sprayed from the holes as if from a machine and began to tear and explode from the force of their expulsion, pages flowering and geysering up from countless impacts. At this furious rate the chamber would flood to the ceiling, he would be drowned in books. He realized what was strange about the new deluge – they were all works that he had censored, most not seen in years. None of them were the anonymous Party pamphlets or manuals composed by committee which he sometimes had the duty of screening – every work now cascading from above had an author's name attached to it, every book was the trace of a citizen's mind as it told a story, wrought a play, sung a poem, or distilled a lifetime of study.

Plotvinov glanced up to see a single detached page float to the ceiling, then saw and curl downward in a fluttering fall. It ignited in the torch's flame which now guttered where the electric bulb had been. This fire, fanned by the blast still issuing from the chutes, ignited the thick-hanging dust which erupted into a conflagration which floated below the ceiling and licked down the walls. With nowhere to run, Plotvinov dove into his narrow shelter with a strangled cry and tried to bury himself, anything to escape the inferno. The roar of the flames

fractured into a clamor, a multitude – each author of the works he had savaged, maimed and dismembered was speaking to him now, each using Plotvinov’s own internal reading voice, that voice by which the mind alchemizes the word on the page into language. He unclenched his eyes and before him was the report of the scholars of the Russian Academy. His eyes scanned the lines without his willing it and as they did he heard with perfect clarity the thoughts of the authors, understood their meaning beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Mysticism and magic were relatively unknown in Zarathustranism, but the sect of Yazd absorbed outside influences, from Gnosticism, recondite strains of Mithraic practices, and from native regional rites unknown to archaeology or history. It was thought that the ritual was hazardous, and there is every reason to believe it was never attempted before the sect was stamped out. As the benefit of Vahista-Hauvartat Gatha was great, so was the risk, and the metaphysical price. The sacrifice by fire of an evil man, a follower of Angra Mainyu, focused through the unique scroll which was inscribed by the holy *yazada* himself, would be the key to fusing *getig* with *menog* and inaugurating a new age in human thought.

Plotvinov clutched his sweat-slick temples. The professors’ long-dead voices rang in his brain, superimposed upon the tempest of silenced voices which filled the miserable chamber. He pawed open his briefcase in agony and fumbled for the bottle of ink he carried there. He knocked the lid from the tin tube and shook the scroll loose. If the scroll was required for the Vahista-Hauvartat Gatha to operate, Plotvinov still had the power to stop the accusing voices. He unrolled the scroll as the flames closed in, wetting the ancient papyrus with tears and smearing the crawling script with a dripping black fingertip.



“It’s a – it’s a wonder all this trash didn’t catch and the building didn’t burn down. Do you think that’s what he was trying to do?”

“Anything’s possible, Comrade,” said Kuznetsov, “but I doubt it. He was a malcontent, but he seemed to care about old, dusty things. We

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would have been happy if he'd destroyed more of this trash sooner, to be honest.”

“Was he trying to signal someone? The door was really wedged with that cart, seems he was trapped –”

“Or he barricaded himself in? We'll never know now, poor bastard.”

Kirilov the building superintendent stood with his hands on his hips. His men shoveled debris into wheeled bins. He and Kuznetsov looked down in silence at the canvas-covered shape. Books, some burned, most not, lay everywhere in high heaps.

Stojka glided up between them and lifted a corner of the canvas.

“Excuse me comrades, an examination of the body is required for my report.” One of Stojka's secret policemen searched through the pockets of what Kirilov could see were the unburnt garments of Plotvinov the censor.

“So he wasn't burned? What killed him then, the smoke?” asked Kirilov.

The policeman turned the body on its side to reach the trouser pockets. “A gullet full of poison would have done the job, no?” said Stojka, as a rivulet of black ink ran from Plotvinov's mouth.

ТИЗ ҒЗДЯҒЦЛ ДПА ЩӨПӘЗЯҒЦЛ РИДПТДХМ ОҒ ТИМЗ

Charles Schneider

Still in Moscow, which is hard to believe. What strikes one immediately is how alive the old ways are here. The Old Men hang out on many a street corner and café stoop, arrogantly smiling, laughing. The Knights of Herod is but a pseudonym for old school murderers. There is virtually no police presence here, and yet they prowl about, for they are paid to look away. Corruption and debauchery dance with fear and desire in this sewer of Hell called Moscow. Indeed, I now know that Hell and Heaven are not to be found in an old book. They exist where the past and the future intersect with geographical locations.

The Demons here shop in Demon Stores buying identical tasteless denim. Denim is the chosen fabric of Hell's denizens. They raise Devil-Children like wild wolves. Soon these enfant thugs will bully and terrorize those who appear alien, wise or meek, or those who fail to avert their glare from the stupid, abused eyes of the idiot-men in their armored cars from Hell.

Each night the harsh laughter pours like sewage from the Devil Bars, each themed with short-lasting novelty to satiate the bored youths who uncomfortably co-inhabit the filthy streets with the Criminal Family Vermin. Equally worthless, these Maggots of the Rich are vomited out of schooling and flock to the neighborhoods. Expensive cameras snapping endlessly at the fecal posters and utterly uninspired scrawling.

Non-Art spit everywhere by Beasts with lots of nothing to say.

'Tis a soul-crushing existence which reflects so grimly in the countless dead yellow eyes as they parade past you on the stinking sidewalks

The Fearful and Wonderful Phantasm of Time

and infected underground Worms which transport them from Crime to Crime.

The wrinkled faces suck in smoke, aged years before their time, the gutters thick with cigarette butts which are picked up by the nearly dead homeless and sucked again. Restaurateurs stare fearfully out of their Horse-Meat domains, watching secret horrors perpetuated by symbols across the street.

I hate this horrible city.

I saw Baba Yaga limping down the Square, and for the sensitive aesthete, these hags may be slowly but easily identified, as through an occult lens, fouled by the Mists of the Abyss.

On Voadvizhenkaa Street, a black-clad Devil Woman, ninety five years old, walks with shawl. She sardonically smiles, nauseatingly drooping rubbery nose, pocked and phallic, like that of a "Goon" from an ancient Sunday newspaper funny. The grey, marble-eyed hag's snout is scabbed and twitching. Grey, pubic-like hairs sprout from raw nostrils like a clan of spiders. 'Tis wise to avoid eye-contact with such creatures. Such eerie vedma. Who knows what could happen should one of these She-Demons merely get a hint of your true, beautiful soul.



A Great Demon, clearly one of Satan's right-hand minions, was spotted in an expensive restaurant in Novgorod. Do not ask me what I was doing there. I almost vomited at the sight of him. This is NO skaski. (Not a fairy tale.)



How could I not identify with _____, the twentieth century master of completely original tales of exquisite intellectual terror? His unfortunate urban exile for three years is famous for his failed marriage, near starvation and ultimate creative resurrection upon returning to the welcoming golden spires of his ancient, Occidental homeland. I pray to my non-existent Gods that I too, within days now, will finally escape this truly horrible land, before it kills me....and the old Dog.

Charles Schneider



Finished reading that wondrous weird occult story Cricket Magic on the Train home. Fabulously frightening, horrific tale which I was sad to see end. I savored the masterful yarn as an imprisoned gourmet would his final meal. I hid my book beneath a rotting paper bag.



How the Troglodyte-killers stare at me on the trains, gaudily clad preachers of False Gods point me out as the Enemy and Beast of some primitive prophecy as I skulk past in my tattered scholar's jacket. I try to dress invisibly and keep my eyes low, for they know that there is an angelic being from another planet in their midst, and they smell my rebirth with disgusting hunger.



I encountered, quite unexpectedly but synchronistical, a secret Brother on the train. We exchanged the hidden signs. He invited me to the hidden temple. How they can dwell here puzzles me and strikes me as courageous. A fistful of Rose Petals in an Ocean of rotting weeds.



Each day I pack and send my treasured books away, to be stored in the Dreamland. One day I'll recover them and rebuild the Heavenly Library of Glamorous Horror and Calculated Decay.



Decay, indeed, is all that I enjoy here. The laying of Past upon Brick, Gargoyle upon Purple Glass. Here the demons are born to consume and pollute. Some wear diamonds and priceless tiaras, exquisite and fine even to my harshly aesthetic eyes. Others garb themselves in identical hoods screened with atrocious glyphs, which evoke the baroque and the antique fused with mindless, gilded graffiti, soulless slogans, the music of the thugs.

A World of Excrement made by living fecal Statues for their grub-like spawn. The Underground is covered with signs advertising decay,

The Fearful and Wonderful Phantasm of Time

insect infestations, cancerous organs and genital diseases. The Demons cover themselves with tattoos appropriated from a fearfully dimwitted concept of tribal and Celtic culture, idiots all, ink-covered pigs. How repulsive they will look in a few more years – if the city remains.



My hatred grows and ferments until I could drink it like Black Wine.



They wave their flags and unite as a tearful gang of victims, cowards with cheap knives and plastic tulips.

The Devils let their Elders freely decay and crawl amongst themselves. They have a horrible respect and pride in their clan. The care for the woman from whose rancid loins they spurted, and the urine-stenched old men loiter and haggle waving their antiquated war-flags in the gutters of Hades.



Creativity, Beauty and Nostalgia are the Greatest Enemies here, in Hell.



On every street corner shrines are built which house mite-covered Virgins. Annual parades provide excuses for the sweating youths to drunkenly chortle and babble conjoined and lazy languages, whilst consuming sausages fresh from their subterranean slaughterhouses. A prophet named Bierce once wrote something about the wisdom of NOT speculating what is put into these urban sausages.



I have tried to document and photograph the shrines but the other day, a man instantly loomed in his cheap grey suit and I felt his frozen eyes somehow divine my hidden purpose. Chilled, I moved on. Yet, at the last instant, I saw a hinge at the base of the enshrined statue's glass dome, as if it could revolve and display another statue after the polluted dusk arrived.

Charles Schneider

This bears further investigation, though the risk increases, I am sure.

The Devils have their own businesses, own Devil Factories, Satanic Schools in which the fetal scum are indoctrinated in Death, from Birth.

They no longer need to hide their Evil for it is all-pervasive, indeed, celebrated in their Cinema, flesh and gun magazines, toxic candy wrappers and vinyl furniture. Even their Popes sit, pious pimps on drug lord thrones shaped into lacquered black panthers and poorly sculptured and gilded nudes stolen from an old world masterpiece which they perceive as being very tasteful.

DAY TWO

As I write this I am sitting in a coffee shop called the Zoya's Grill. Why I continue to eat here I can not explain. There are so many happier and healthier choices, even in this neighborhood. Perhaps my very taste buds have lost all memory of pure and clean, real food.

Perhaps I've grown wed to the Devil's Menu. Even their garish, horror filled tabloids reported of intestinal parasites in the city tap water, guaranteed to make you excrete blood. When the love-hungry dwarf waitress serves me radiated tea, the surface swirls with oil like matter, some toxic, mind-altering plankton.

My few contacts here are swiftly vanishing. Dear Mara died of a Diabetic attack a month ago. Her wake was profound and I strode the streets with college comrades thirty years past. They were still beautiful, for they do not live here. They gave me hope of escaping, of a world beyond this Damning Inferno.

Warning sirens sound each day at four in the afternoon. Shrill and frightening, blaring from rusted horns on barely noticed cold-war artifacts, still functional preparing the walnut-brained Demons for Post-Infernal Apocalypse of Evil.

Even the kindness here is cruel. It holds a candle made of human tallow to the infinite blackness with false warmth which briefly encourages the terrified outsider. A grey mother who dispenses a tasty molasses of Death.

The Fearful and Wonderful Phantasm of Time

Unmarked trucks and filth caked vans come and go, unloading stolen wares. Swarthy, cruel-eyed men, often in striped jumpsuits, carry boxes of contraband day and night. Half of these thugs shave their heads, so as not to be as readily incriminated. An army of bald, flesh-insects, whose genetic origins are bewildering.

In many ways I am no better. Royalty in exhale. Yes, Russian in spirit, Austrian by Fate. I've committed half a century of errors and evils in other worlds. Could this be my punishment? Am I already dead.

Reborn in a stinking and soiled Hell?

I doubt it. The worse is yet to come.

Hell is but Heaven for another Hell, and Another!

To think it's been nearly a year in inconceivable. I am almost acclimated to the virus-filled air. They pump the toxins in like Freedom. My ancient Dog has not been swimming. Nor known a field of emerald grass in ages. The moment we escape I shall find a green valley with a crystal pond and set her free. But for now I must plan and plot my coming breakout.

Oh please let it be soon and sooner.

Mara's treasure box took years to build into the gorgeous chest of dreams it was. An old acquaintance, now one of the DEMON minions, stole it all, claiming it a fated and fortuitous quirk of Kismet, to be appropriated for an uninspired Art Project. Ughh...I hope to liberate Mara's artifacts and magically free them in an agrarian sanctuary within days.

Or toss them into the Black Sea when we get there.

I know that walking past the demon's headquarters is foolish, even dangerous, but I can't help myself. It is so Romantic. Ahem. Curiosity kills more than cats, and if I perish let be known it was not by my own hand, for I love the world beyond, and crave the mysteries that sing to us beyond the blinding hills, past the skin and smoke. It was THEM. It was HIM what did me in, Guv.



Even in Hell there are angels, yet they work in Freak Shows. Carnivals where the Gaffs of God squeal for release in cobbled pine viewing pits.

Charles Schneider

Some have one wing left. Others have rotting feathers, plagued by tiny red vermin, the same which flock to the bedding, cinemas and genitals of all citizens here in the Devil Town. The Centropoli of Hades.



In the Devil City the contents have all been correlated, hence this ultimate unmercifulness, hence my encroaching Madness. I have days left before this mental decay becomes unstoppable.

Where to flee? Where is our safe haven, even in a lesser Tartarus? Even the former country hearth has gone mad with grief and demonic ruin. The stark pureness of those sweet climes now tainted with fiery blood, arsenic and murder most abominable cruel.

Even there, former companions defend the killer's lapses of reason, visit him in prison with sympathy, to absolve their guilt. For they know he was troubled, watched and let him kill the sweet old man. The beating of his not-so-hideous heart I'd replace with my own black organs if I could. The listless children of the long dead daffodil-generation have turned into knife-wielding practitioners of corrupted Yoga.

I must not go back there. Where heirs to exterminating empires play puppeteer to sad goats and ducks, how the funny animals walk in formation as the bumpkins applaud.



Where then shall Dog and this Messiah Gypsy flee to?



Not that there are not good souls here, like minded scholars and writers on similar silver roads to sweet oblivion, the endless horror is alleviated by our infrequent walks and teas-takings, our visits to the shrines of past priests of the finest outré.

THE CARTOGRAPHERS OF BLACKEST AND BEAUTIFUL SPACE.



Despite alignments rare soul friend, I must flee - perhaps today!

The Fearful and Wonderful Phantasm of Time



TODAY! I have discovered “A Lady Of Sorrow!” by James Thomson, author of “The City of Dreadful Night”. A last minute snatch at Abaddon Books off of Abaddon Avenue. The purple cover and Hogarth print attracted me. Escape is near. He speaks to me across Time, obliterating all Space.



Evil breeds evil, Demons suckled on shriveled teats from which they harvest liquid amphetamines and plague thick blood. Hell has its own hospitals, built atop burnt hollow bones, from which the marrow has long ago been sucked by ancestors of bedbugs. The Marrow my mother fed to me upon black Russian toast.

ART.

Vomited thoughtlessly onto a canvas or exhaust-caked brick and in a blink, vomited into the black grave, a pit soon forgotten yet watered by they tears of useless friends; friends who secretly envied their bilious expressions and spoke ill of them as soon as their hunched and tattooed backs were turned.



Once I saved an asthmatic’s life. We were forced by time to enter Woodhell, the Hideous Hospital of the Great and Glorious Satan himself. I must needs pen, create a new Alphabet of the abyss, letters barbed and furred to speak of this living abomination, an architectural sin against all long forgotten earthly good and mother’s milk.

Why could we not wait for Hell. Why must it come to us? Tell me do.

No mesmerist nor sacred soap shall ever scald my mind of what I witnessed there, alas. An artist named Dix drew what he saw during War, unable to banish the images for the rest of his life.

So it is with Moscow, the Hog People here and that hospital, or shall I call it, that cesspool of verminous corruption and anti-healing, that disease-factory and narcotic dispensary.

Today should I have been surprised to see Zoya’s Grill closed with a sign from the Official Office of the Master Pertaining to Cleanliness

Charles Schneider

and Mental Health? I only patronized the diarrhetic sty because the characters and living caricatures fascinated, me as one might study, with horrified awe, an exotic and repulsive new species of poisonous and massive, hairy grub worm.

Every cough, every honking horn seems a code amongst the criminals. Am I paranoid or do these sounds signal “he’s left his home,” or “make a note of his comings and goings.” I am just a little man. Yet, if so, why are they after me? Why does the man wear such a long coat in hot weather, growling like an animal, a barking human waiting to blast at me with that hidden weapon?



The young woman, beautiful and arrogant, for a heartbeat...



The Newspapers; a litany of the utmost folk horror. The torture of the innocents. Why? Drugs and madness are one motivation, but in Moscow one needs no purpose for living like bald animals in black suits. Evil. Raw, flayed evil is its own purpose, desire and design. Humorless and grotesque are the clothing stores hawking dumbed-down, fifth generation American knock-offs for haute couture.



“I did not say anything. Do you know what I mean?”

It is impossible not to inhale cigarette smoke, for the Demons all consume these black sticks endlessly here, and they drink like whales, the glassy evidence of last nights debauchery sits bagged and bottled in the maddening glow of tomorrows broken promises.

I was hit in the face by a flicked cigarette, hot ash sparking off. If I’d yelled at the man, he’d have murdered me, I am sure of it.



Springtime brings a flurry of gardening, but the urban and liberated “farmer” is a tasteless breed, planting the most common and vulgar blooms. My brief attempt at tomatoes resulted in a mutant strain with cancerous fruits which shriveled like bloody prunes, and I dare not

The Fearful and Wonderful Phantasm of Time

touch nor eat them. The sun and rain and air are thick with the Breath and Death of the Eternal Black hand.



No need for codes anymore. If an eatery advertises where friends and families meet. There are no lines to read between. Gangster headquarters with food on the side.



I've always judged human beings by their shoes. They are funny to me. Protective outer hooves or animal skin or compacted oil, garish massive faux toenails which the gold-chained simians truck about oh so proudly in, brand names boasting the self-esteem and competition amongst their hulking, acne-scarred companions.



I am not afraid of anyone or thing here, although I should be. All I fear now is a drawn-out death or years of artfully applied torture. Even then, that would one day end.

Confidence is a mask for Fear
Jesus is a Mask for Satan
The Flesh is a Mask for the Bone
You are a Mask for Eternal Nothing.



Hoped to redeem the city at my last supper by feasting at Peter Teofania's steakhouse on my last night here. The mutton-chopped Maitre-D told me that without reservations I'd have to wait two hours. Yet another disappointment. "Do you have any Idea who I am?," I thought to myself as I trudged home. "Do you know that I could buy your soul for half a penny, and devour your cancerous heart if the thought was worth thinking, which tis not?"

I went without dinner out of spite and fed my Dog some veal cheeks obtained, to go, from Dressler, up the stupid street. Baby lamb cheeks, what a barbaric feast, they looked like what they were, tender and spongy jowls. She gobbled them up and wagged her ancient tail.

Charles Schneider

That was the highlight of the day. Second best part of the night: The cover of my copy of the complete poems of Count Stenbock incredibly matched the floridly ornate grilling of Dressler's decor. Such an aesthetically perfect mating of book and bar beggared me not to exit, for so rarely does the Universe harmonize, even in Hell.

With the years, I finally grow a tad wiser, a tadpole who might have become a wizened, bloated and macabre bullfrog before I croak. Stupid joke.



I detest the laziness of the New Culture Gobblers. The Factory which tells them they must read the latest book, which all read upon the trains or in their expensive weekend escape hovels of gold and grass and sand.



Got up three times last night to peer out of my bedroom window. I am sure they are onto me. The sly thief is probably using others as assassins. The kind of two-footed slime who would stab a nun for as hymn, or cut your throat for finishing this very sentence. URCKKKc!

Yesterday I saw a police van slowly cruise past The Azazello Brothers Coffee and Pastry shop. One of the many mindless, yet Death-Dispensing, thugs stood gaping on the street corner. He does not look like a typical gangster. He has stringy long dirty blonde hair and those horrible beige work-boots which some thugs seem to find so popular these days. I was comforted to see the cops van slowly prowl past, gently suggesting to the fiends that they are not at total liberty - or were they just collecting a payoff to look away for another month of Red neckties and urban Grand Guignol?

If you balk that this is a racist screed, a hateful rant against "shrewd" immigrants ala our beloved master beyond the Fields We Know, ye be mistook. There is an innocent evil even in the purely good and unflawed beauteous.

True evil can not recognize itself. It lives in the lie, the skin- the soul. Morality and conscience were buried at birth with that strangling umbilicus. My own silver cord has strengthened and I THINK THAT BY tomorrow I may finally, finally set myself and the old, old Dog free.

The Fearful and Wonderful Phantasm of Time

Rip Van Winkle was a lucky man, for he was spared memory of those two decades, yet he must have dreamed, as do bears in hibernation. A year of honeycomb raids. Variations on murdering the industrious wife.

How will I die? Who will be there? How many sweet friends have recently fallen. They whisper in my ear for a day or so later. I fear lengthy haunting, but no – the voices sadly depart and I am left alone with my own living ghost.

Alexander Chic
John Shteiger
Mother and Father
Mara Garment
Blake Ivanovich
Who will be next?

Synchronicity and coincidence can happen so often that science is simply phased out unless Einstein had a doppelganger. Why have the young men grown big, thick beards and why do they shave their heads. How horrible if the two trends merge. We'd have armies of walking, doltish phallic symbols, complete with lice filled pubic bushes. Another reason to exit Babylon immediately, even though it is spring time and beauty, art, and Hell's history books threaten to engage and enchant me, make me give up the country-life and become a city man forever.

How odd to have no home, how fortunate to have a choice, freedom to flit on this splotch of dried muddy bone.



My family have also turned into devils full of sugary rage. I must avoid them as well.

To have dwelt in the countryside for three years with my Dog _____, and the only music was the rustling of the grove of sacred friends, the birds, the distant Dog park, the wind and now the tattering, the hideous words of Others, the vanity of the individual, unable to shut it out, often the healthy and the white talking about what their rent might be, or choices concerning sleeping on futons. As

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the train brakes squeal into my brain and bones and gums at an unbearable shrill grating

They talk talk

The people never stop

Anger, madness, passions vile and sweet are overheard in snippets.

They may speak to themselves or on devices, so acclimated to the push of the masses they are less guarded in expressing the foul Truth.

They have no choice.

There is nowhere to hide to speak. Of delicate things.

I can not understand a culture that celebrates pain.

Bootleg movies sold on tables in Lubyanka square consist of crime crime and crime.

Devils watch Hell movies, witches watch witchy movies and the boys watch American gangster pictures, while I am at my home, weeping and watching the 1918 silent *The Bluebird*.

These huge cities hold a fascination for writers and artists, for those inclined toward the fatal within light, the decay of the exquisite, the embodiment of decadence, these huge cities become very difficult to depart from once ensnared but oh what a glory To depart from but oh what a glory it is as the miles part between metropolis and the green green green gate oh yes then the wide eyed soul must feel safe. Far away from concrete-sprouting Nightshade.

A Warning. Does he know that the great Black Sea to which he journeys is but a copper basin filled to overflowing with ancient *aqua tofana*. How exquisite was she who gave her name to that noxious brew?



The absolute Surety and Faith of the indoctrinated is frightening.

ТИЗ БЛДСК ЛИЦП ОФ ФАЗСАД

Allyson Bird

Ilf and Petrov – sat side by side. Ilf huddled over one primus, cooking the meat dumplings, and Petrov over the second primus which heated up the Ukrainian cocktail that consisted of honey, berries and spices boiled in vodka. The meal might have been modest and the smell of it revolting but most would have been glad of it that winter. Ilf and Petrov comforted themselves in the fact that they made sure they never ran out of alcohol. Meat was expensive and the dumplings had very little of it in. In the Odessan winter of 1929 Ilf and Petrov got by – just.

Suddenly Ilf could contain himself no longer... he rose abruptly from the chair almost knocking over one of the two primus stoves on the low table. The room was very small. A truckle bed just about fitted under a higher bed. Petrov had claimed the highest bed.

“This isn’t how it was supposed to be for me. I’m an artist – I know about being poor but I shouldn’t be this poor. I was designed for salons, poetry evenings and a little bit of finery. And what happens? I have to share this common apartment given to the common people for the common good. There is no justice I tell you, Petrov – no justice at all!” he then sat down again, crossing his legs and arms, nearly knocking over the nearest primus once more.

Petrov didn’t bat an eyelid. He had heard it all before and although he felt sorry for himself and Ilf, as he stared around their tiny apartment, which must have been nothing more than storage space in grander times, he knew that it was harder for other people. Many had lost much more than “comfortable surroundings and fine dining”.

Allyson Bird

The cocktail was warm enough. Petrov poured it out into two small glasses. “Be careful. Don’t burn your tongue like last time. You do shout too loudly for my ears, but I wouldn’t wish that on you.”

When the hot liquid hit the back of his throat Ilf gulped and reared from his chair again, this time even closer to the primus that contained the meat dumplings. Petrov quickly pushed his elbow into the stomach of his friend. With an “oof” Ilf fell backwards over the bench, the empty glass flying across the room. It failed to break, however, as it had been crudely made. No fine glass for them, now.

Recovering himself but remaining seated on the shabby floor Ilf waved his arms in the air and launched into the next volley. “We need to sell something. We should have stayed in Moscow. Why did I come back? We have no money left from *The Twelve Chairs* and we haven’t sold the other play yet.”

“Be patient, Ilf, any day now the theatre manager will get back to us.”

“He’ll keep us hanging around until a better offer comes in and that will be full of ‘partymindedness’ and we’ll be put out in the cold.”

“Things change, Ilf, one or two months might make all the difference. We’ll see.”

“We’ll see us starve before we sell another play. We need to find the money to go back to Moscow, we need...”

There came an abrupt knock on the door of Apartment 22 on the fourth floor, of one of the communal apartments off Deribasovskaya. Ilf and Petrov didn’t move. The person knocked again.

“Answer the door, Ilf.”

“You answer it, the dumplings are going to ruin.” Ilf carefully fiddled with the primus and glared at Petrov.

Petrov reluctantly put his glass down on the table. “Why is it always at meal time that someone calls?”

Petrov opened the door. The woman from 22A stood before them. Larisa clutched to her breast a well thumbed copy of the book he had written with Ilf. He could clearly see the title, *The Twelve Chairs*, and the names of the authors in gold on a green background.

“I have read your play.” Larisa said almost triumphantly as if an ordeal had been fought and finally won.

The Black Swan of Odessa

The smell of the meat dumplings wafted into the corridor and Petrov thought he heard the door of 22B open too. Petrov could also hear his stomach rumbling. There was a time for literature and a time for food and his meal was ready.

“My dear Larisa I really can’t talk about my work right now, stories fly out of my mind when I’m hungry. Fiction does not feed my body.”

“But that’s just it... it isn’t a fiction. I’ve heard this story before. It isn’t a story. I’ve heard about the chairs.”

“Larisa. That can’t be true. Ilf told me himself that the story came to him in a dream and we worked on it together.”

Ilf concentrated hard on the dumplings.

“I tell you I have seen the twelfth chair. The others – well god knows where they are, but the twelfth chair is being used as a throne at the theatre. The design on the tapestry of the chair is the same as the one in your story.”

Ilf turned off his primus and dished the dumplings out into two bowls. He reached up to a shelf for a third. Petrov turned to talk to him, a frown quickly spreading on his face, when he saw Ilf place the third bowl on the table.

“Ask her in, Petrov,” said Ilf.

Petrov threw him a look of surprise and didn’t say anything.

“Ask her in,” repeated Ilf.

Petrov reluctantly stepped to one side and Larisa smiled and glided by him. Her skirts rustled around her knees as she did so. Larisa favoured her own style and made up her own dresses which usually involved reams of taffeta. A friend could get it for her – no questions asked. She wore the blue dress with tiny snow droplets made out of white glass beads sewn around the hem. Her dark hair tied back from her oval face with a blue ribbon. Even in a city where some frowned on fine clothes there were women who would wear what they wanted.

Larisa settled herself on one of the beds and Ilf smiled under his thin moustache. He backed away glancing over his shoulder to guarantee that he would not fall. He turned on the spot with a flourish, picked up his bowl of dumplings and sat down a little too abruptly. This caused one of the dumplings to plop out of his bowl and skim across the tiled floor, and under the bed that Larisa was sitting on. If Larisa noticed,

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she was kind enough not to say anything and began to eat daintily from her bowl.

Trying to ignore the burning sensation from the spilled hot broth that was rapidly soaking into his trousers, Ilf grimaced slightly in pain, and plunged his spoon into the stew. No sooner had he put a whole dumpling in his mouth because he didn't want to lose another one, and was dealing with the consequences of the heat from that, than someone knocked on the door again.

Larisa placed her bowl on the table and with a swirl, a rustle, and the clink of glass upon glass, for she caught the side of a glass with the glass beads on her skirt, she made to open the door.

"I'll get it – you both eat. You have been kind enough to me. Shall I send them straight away?"

Before Ilf or Petrov could answer Larisa was at the door. She opened it but there was no one there. She popped her head out and looked up and down the corridor – nobody there at all. The corridor resembled a baggage office as the occupants of the apartments stacked their trunks along the length of it.

"Strange," she said as she sat down and resumed eating.

Ilf tried not to stare at her but he found it difficult. In the few months that they had been in Odessa Ilf and Petrov had managed to lose most of their money on many speculations and whilst awaiting the decision of the manager of the theatre about their latest production, Larisa had been kind to them more than once, sharing what she had with them. She earned her money, quite wonderfully Ilf thought, as a ballet dancer. He stared at the glass beads on her skirt.

"Did I tell you I saw Olga Korshunov a few weeks ago?" said Larisa.

Ilf shook his head. Neither Ilf nor Petrov had any idea of whom she was talking and they both waited patiently for the conversation to turn to the chair.

"A few years ago she was a *burzhuiķa*. She went through clothes and men at an equal rate. I am proud that I keep myself although working as a dancer is very tiring. What she does doesn't go down well with the women's department. Mind you when did that ever bother me? But some of the others would have slapped her. I've come to terms with the fact that she was just doing what she was able to do as she could

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do nothing else. She caused so much trouble in the theatre. Then there was the time she accused Tanya Tsepkenko of stealing her fur coat. Made such a fuss about it and then she remembered that she had left it in a café. Of course when *she* was then caught stealing the manager had to let her go.”

“A few years ago we were all very much better off,” said Petrov.

“We haven’t starved yet,” replied Ilf coming to the end of his bowl of dumplings and trying to decide whether he should fish the last one out of the pan or leave it for Larisa.

Petrov pointed at the pan. “Not far from it with all this rubbish. Do you remember when we had chocolate from Riga and pies with pastry peacocks on them? Such luxury... and now we are to have coupons for bread.”

Larisa looked down at her last dumpling, wondering what on earth he was complaining about, as she never remembered pies with pastry peacocks under the old regime. She shrugged and attempted the slippery dumpling. She had found out that you couldn’t nibble at them, you had to put them in your mouth whole or they would escape.

When they had all finished Ilf and Petrov looked at each other, then at Larisa. Larisa glanced at the cocktail pan and cleared her throat.

“Cocktail – Larisa?” asked Ilf.

“Thank you. That would be very fine for me.”

Ilf poured and handed her a glass.

“Be careful it isn’t too hot for you. I...”

Larisa’s head shot back and she emptied the glass quickly. Ilf held his breath but when her head tipped forward again, and her ribbon fell from her hair onto her lap, she held out her glass again and smiled. Ilf refilled the glass making the mental note that ballerinas not only had strong legs but had strong constitutions too.

Petrov began to run out of patience. “The chair... Larisa?”

Regaining her composure, Larisa explained. “Everything is coming together nicely at the same time. We are rehearsing *Swan Lake* at the theatre and the props man brought in this wonderful chair to use at Prince Siegfried’s birthday party, for him to sit on. The audience will see the beautiful embroidered swan on the chair back. The props man said he found it in a small shop off the Primorsky Boulevard and

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thought it would be ideal for the set. Did you know that the set designer came from Riga where the choc...

Petrov speculated that if Larisa's dancing was anything like the control of her narrative she must have danced herself off the stage and into the audience at least once in her life.

"The chair, Larisa... the chair..."

"Many people have read our play, perhaps it was made in honour of it?" said Ilf.

Larisa tucked her tender chin down and was about to say something rude when Ilf carried on.

"Petrov, there was something I always meant to tell you about the story behind the play."

"You told me it was part of a dream."

"I told you that because I know you too well."

"What do you mean?"

"Well. Instead of us writing the play and doing what I wanted to do, you would have gone after the chair. You would put money before art."

"But if it is only a chair why would I... you mean... that the treasure is supposed to be in this chair, as in our story?"

Ilf remained silent which Petrov took as a positive answer.

Petrov flopped down on his own chair and wrung his hands. "How could the writing be more precious than money? So the treasure is the jewels – pearls, the emerald diadem, the serpent bracelets? Exactly as in our story?"

Ilf nodded.

"Why didn't you say? Did you ever consider that the story could be true? Who told it to you?"

"Two people." Ilf looked upset.

"Two?"

"I heard it from Isaac at the Chess Café in Moscow and from a gardener who used to work for the owner of the chair when we got here."

"Two sources? And one who worked for the owner of the chair. Are you completely mad?"

"I was convinced that it was only a story and now the story within our story seems to have some truth in it. I had thought that if the story

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was real the treasure would have been found after the Revolution or be in the house of some party member by now. ”

“You mean this gardener told you it might be in Odessa? And you didn’t think to tell me after the work has been written and we are actually *in* Odessa?”

“I still don’t believe the story. Who would be stupid enough to conceal treasure in a chair?”

“Who would be stupid enough not to act on information that could lead to a fortune?”

“Even if we found it we would have to give it up to the state,” said Ilf.

“I’d like to see someone take it away from me. We’d go to America.”

Petrov looked up as if to gaze longingly across the sea to America, but of course there was no window in their apartment.

“And how could we do that?”

“I used to work for the Criminal Investigation Department. If I can’t find someone to help get us out of the country illegally there, with a bit of bribery, where else could you look?”

“Are you suggesting we will find someone corrupt there?”

“Those who live with swine long enough become... what do they become Ilf?” Petrov’s face became redder with every exchange.

Ilf opened his mouth without thinking, “Pigs?” He immediately regretted it when Larisa gave him a judging look.

“Not all people who work for the state are corrupt you know. I knew a nice one once.” Larisa kept her eyes on the spider above her head as she commented. The spider had caught a fly between the pea-green dowdy wall and the dingy cracked ceiling.

“We all work for the state now,” said Petrov.

The silence, within the very few seconds it lasted, became oppressive.

“I’m going down to the Opera House,” burst out Ilf in an exasperated tone.

“What for? Do you plan to steal this chair or rip it open right there?” said Petrov.

“You can think about the chair. I want to look at something beyond these walls, something fine besides L...”

The blush that flooded to his face rivalled the pale shade of red lipstick that Larisa wore. Ilf reached for his coat and hat and was out

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of the apartment before Petrov could say anything else. The door of Apartment 22 made a resounding bang and that echoed along the dull hallway, dislodging decades of dust in its wake.

Petrov put on his overcoat, Astrakhan hat and made sure that both the primus stoves were out before he got to the door.

“There is no need to rush, Petrov,” said Larisa.

“And why is that?”

“The theatre is closed tonight. Wait for me to get changed. I know a way to get in.”

“I’ll wait here for you. Just one more thing – why did you tell us? Why not sell the jewels yourself?”

“I’d get caught. My only contact deals in fine taffeta not fine diamonds. I thought that you might know the right people. I remembered our little discussions about your old job at the Criminal Investigation Department.”

Larisa was only gone a few minutes. When she returned she wore a high collared plain green coat. She knew that she didn’t look bourgeois, not that it mattered. Only the odd female worker in the city wore the red scarf. None who moved in the circles Larisa moved in – bothered to dress down.



Once at the Opera House Ilf stared lovingly at the Italian Baroque façade and at the allegorical stone sculptures of the Goddess of Tragedy, in a chariot drawn by four panthers. Along the pediment there were stone busts of Glinka, Griboyedov, Gogol and Pushkin – they were Ilf’s gods, and he fell down upon his knees before them. Ilf closed his eyes and made a silent plea to the goddess. By the time Petrov and Larisa had arrived they found him shivering on a stone bench. Larisa took one of his arms and Petrov the other.

“It will be easy for me to get inside,” said Larisa. “I know the caretaker. He chats to me occasionally. I’ll tell him I want to rehearse for an hour. I’ve done it before. If I pop my head into his office he’ll not see you go by. Once in, quietly go through the door directly in front of you.” At this point Larisa paused and took something out of her bag. It was a small oil can with a cap on the top.

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Both Ilf and Petrov look puzzled.

“The door to the stage nearest to the caretaker creaks; everyone has been complaining about it all week. He won’t see if I block his view. Be sure to use it on both hinges.”

Larisa smiled and seemed pleased with herself that she had thought of that detail. She reminded herself that the devil was in the detail or was it God? She could never remember.

“Wait for me on the other side of the door. It will be dark so don’t move around until I get through. I’ll meet you there. Then, you come with me whilst I change and we will go to the stage together. When we are there I will practice whilst one of you keeps a look out. The other can search for the chair.”

Larisa thrust the oil can at Petrov. He took it reluctantly.

“Ilf – come on!” said Petrov.

Ilf stared up at Pushkin again. Petrov knew that stare. It usually happened just before an “episode” when his friend would dissolve into a heap and cry. Writing was the only thing that ever brought him out of that. If he didn’t need Ilf inside the theatre he would leave him there. Doubt clutched at Petrov’s heart.

Unsteadily Ilf got to his feet and Petrov led him away, followed by Larisa.

Everything went according to plan. Larisa greeted Ivan, the caretaker, and obscured the view through the small waiting area and Petrov used the oil on the door. They got through soundlessly although Ilf stifled a sob at one point.

Once through the door they waited in the darkness for Larisa. She wasn’t long and with the flicking of a few switches they made their way to the dressing rooms. Larisa was understudy for the principal ballerina who played Odette and Odile. Once in a dressing room Larisa went behind a screen. Upon the screen was a depiction of a scene from *The Sleeping Beauty* – where the prince stoops and gently kisses the princess. Her blue satin gown – a thousand red roses around the bower. Ilf brushed a tear away.

Larisa quickly changed into the costume she never got to wear, as the principal ballerina never became ill and never had an accident, so Larisa didn’t see the need to take care of her costume that much and

Allyson Bird

it was rather wonderful. It consisted of a black satin bodice with black tutu (black swan feathers were also attached to the waist) such beautiful work. Larisa tied up her black ballet shoes and came out from behind the screen. Ilf caught his breath and couldn't help himself from staring at her – her petite waist and the velvet appliqué in the shape of wings on the top layer of the tutu. Ilf adored detail.

“Beautiful. You are simply beautiful.”

Larisa smiled at him.

Petrov started to look nervous. “Come on, you two. Let's get on with looking for the chair.”

Ilf shot Petrov a foul glance and they followed Larisa to the stage. Another flick of a switch and she put the small stage lights on – just enough for her to dance by.

The chair was not on stage and Larisa told Ilf to keep a look out for the caretaker whilst Petrov looked in the theatre wings. She went over to the phonograph which was used for rehearsals when the orchestra could not be brought in. Larisa put it on and peered over the grooves. She always guessed to find the part she wanted to dance to – most of the time she was spot on. She would practice the thirty-two pirouettes. The hardest of all the choreographed movements, but one she had learnt to master well, hence her being understudy to the principal.

The music abruptly filled the theatre and Larisa pointed her black ballet shoe. She immediately flung herself into the music, no warm ups just straight in and of course Ilf could not take his eyes off her. Meanwhile Petrov fumbled for a light switch and searched backstage for the chair.

Whenever Larisa danced as Odette it was adagio – controlled. There was perfect balance, sustained movement and beauty. As Odile her demeanour became more sinister and seductive. She danced in ever faster pirouettes. Ilf could not take his eyes off her spinning and the circle that her wonderful foot made as it launched into the next pirouette and the next and the next... then she stopped abruptly.

She stared into the wings and saw Petrov holding up something that sparkled in the low light. Her eyes grew wide. He had the diamonds *and* the emeralds. Then, slowly ... he backed away into the darkness.

The Black Swan of Odessa

Ilf jumped when she screamed and he ran onto the stage.

“He has the jewels, but he has vanished. Quick! After him!” shouted Larisa.

They could hear Petrov falling over obstacles in the darkness, but then Larisa found a switch quickly enough and they could see that he must be making his way around the back of the stage, as a door just banged shut before them, and he was heading in the direction of the caretaker’s office.

“Ivan! Catch him!” screamed Larisa.

The caretaker stuck his head out of the small opening in his office and Petrov flew by him and out of the stage door. Once in the street the full moon illuminated the way easily, but Petrov did not see the raised cobblestones, and he didn’t see above him that the place where the Goddess of Tragedy stood was strangely empty. She had answered Ilf’s plea. Petrov flung his arms out to save himself, a futile act and the jewels hurtled through the air. The serpent bracelets snaked immediately out of sight and were caught one in each hand by a tall woman. The emerald diadem fell lightly onto her raven black hair. Petrov still had the pearls clutched to his chest. With a touch as cold as ice and with a hand the colour of white marble the tall woman took the pearls from him. When Ilf, Larisa, and the caretaker caught up with him they could see that Petrov was dead, his eyes fixed on the statue of the Goddess of Tragedy high above him on the Opera House.

Larisa was inconsolable. “I never meant for this to happen. Not this. Did he hit his head?”

Ilf said nothing.

“There is blood on his head and the cobblestones,” said the caretaker.

After they realised that they could do nothing for Petrov, Ilf led Larisa away. “I’ll look after you – don’t worry.”

As Larisa turned away quickly, one black feather flew into the air, and then gently landed on Petrov’s heart.

ТИЗ ИЗДЯТ ОФ Д МДП

Justin Isis

The production of souls is more important than the production of tanks... and therefore I raise my glass to you, writers, the engineers of the human soul.

Joseph Stalin, Speech at home of Maxim Gorky,
26 October 1932

Kolesnikov, ensconced for years in the office of the *Mir* journal, had long been famous for his negative reviews. His trademark stance was a kind of wounded forbearance – the writer under consideration had slighted his sensibilities, it implied, but he was not beyond a certain arch forgiveness. The sharpness of his wit veiled in stoic acceptance, Kolesnikov made writers feel as if he was a benevolent parent they'd disappointed. It was a sensation producing great resentment in those he imposed it on: or, as he was likely to put it, those who imposed it on themselves.

In his middle age Kolesnikov had grown weary of books. Apart from a few obscure French works he had managed to import, nothing in recent literature interested him. His own tastes were at fault: he had always preferred the extravagant and experimental to the merely dramatic, and he had little patience for the new school of proletarian realism. He had become unfashionable, he realized, but his reputation preceded him, and it was too late now for him to do anything else.

As he sat at his desk assembling notes for a new column, Kolesnikov heard the sound of the door. He looked up and saw Bukosky entering the room. The editor had short, bristly hair and a ratlike face. His thick

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figure had been squeezed into a drab brown suit. Only his shoes gave any indication of his position: they were, as always, immaculately polished.

"The word's come down from above." Bukosky said. "There aren't to be any more negative reviews."

"What are you talking about?"

"They're found to be detrimental to our writers' morale, and by extension, detrimental to the state. Our writers are displaying the complexities and triumphs of the socialist experiment. It's been decided that any unnecessary negativity would be discouraging, subversive perhaps."

"You're serious."

"Perfectly."

"You want every review to be positive."

"No." the editor said. "Not just positive. Jubilant. Ecstatic."

"Ecstatic."

"Yes."

Kolesnikov made a show of stacking the papers on his desk. When he had finished he opened the drawer where he kept his cigarettes, took one, and lit it.

"If every review is ecstatic, then none of them can be. The characteristic of a masterwork is its exceptional quality. I can't be ecstatic about every single book."

"I'm surprised, I thought you'd have known better. After all, no two books are alike. The individual nature of each masterwork is its defining trait. By extension, since every book is different, every work is a masterwork if received as such."

"Clichés." Kolesnikov said. "Unoriginality. These things make all inferior books the same. All great writing is distinct, it succeeds in an infinite number of ways, but all bad writing is bad in a limited number of ways. I'm being optimistic. Lately I've been surprised at the innovations in terrible prose..."

"Great writing, what makes for great writing?"

"Originality. Depth. Elegant language. You know this."

Bukosky smiled.

"I just find it strange to hear you talking about originality. How can any work be original, if a writer is the sum of his influences? A book is a reconstitution."

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“Yes. Some reconstitutions are more successful, more original than others.”

“More original at being reconstitutions. A nice contradiction.”

“You know what I mean,” Kolesnikov said, a little tired of the discussion.

“Listen,” the editor said. “I want you to review books with complete sincerity. Imagine yourself in the mind of a reader sympathetic to the book. If you find your review lacking in any way, if it does not convince sufficiently, you are to revise it. I’ll see to any further revisions myself.”

Kolesnikov crushed his cigarette out in a little ivory ashtray.

“What about someone like Maisky? How can I praise his style?”

“Turn defects into merits. If the style is weak, commend it for its suppleness. If the characters seem poorly drawn to you, praise the writer for his mastery of psychology. It’s really very simple: you begin with the premise that each book is a masterpiece, then you proceed to explain how this is so. Failure to do so is only a failure of your own creativity.”

Kolesnikov looked at the editor, then turned back to his papers.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll do my best.”

Bukosky smiled, showing his close-set teeth.

“I knew you’d understand.”



That night Kolesnikov attended a party with his wife and her lover. As they passed through Prechistenka Street they were careful to keep a certain distance from each other, so that an observer would not necessarily know they constituted a single party. Marya Kolesnikova wore leather boots and a heavy black coat with a fur collar. The young man, Simonov, was dressed in the latest fashion: a long narrow jacket down to his knees, extremely baggy trousers and unnaturally wide glossy shoes with toes like hooves. In his hands he held a cane and a hat with a pointed top. Between them Kolesnikov looked underdressed; he had not bothered to change his suit, and had only a woollen scarf to protect him from the cold.

They turned into a side street and continued for a long time, passing through a series of obscure back alleys, until they came to a

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decrepit old flat with boarded-up windows. As they approached it they could make out a faint glow pulsing from within. Marya Kolesnikova strode up to the door and knocked three times. After several moments they heard the sound of the latch, and were ushered inside by a servant in a brown robe, an old man with pale, cloudy eyes.

Thin red candles filled the room, their flames wavering in the draft from the open door. Kolesnikov became aware of a great density of human bodies: there were at least thirty people present. Some were stretched out on couches next to opium lamps. Others stood in pairs, carrying on whispered conversations, or else consulting strange cards and diagrams. Still more were seated around a wide circular table, its surface covered with a red silk cloth. Kolesnikov recognized most of those present: inhaling opium fumes on one of the couches was Viktor Kazan, the Ukrainian sensualist, whose works had been banned for their grotesque excesses; next to him was Bulgakov, the author of *Notes on the Cuff*, which Kolesnikov had read and enjoyed, although not without some stylistic reservations; there in the corner was Bartnev, the defrocked priest, talking to Yelena Orlova, the acclaimed young dancer. And there were others, faces he had seen before but had no name for, Marya's friends and acquaintances: poets and painters, mystics and Monarchists, aging dandies and anonymous subversives.

As soon as the servant led them in, a squat, toadlike man in a red cassock approached and took Marya's hand.

"Good evening, Madame," he said. "It's so good to have you with us again."

"It's always a pleasure, Grigorion."

This man, Kolesnikov thought, was the worst kind of fraud: a cut-rate Rasputin, a drunkard and a liar whose séances swindled rich women out of their husbands' money. As Grigorion pulled Marya towards the table, Kolesnikov retreated to the couches. Viktor Kazan had begun to nod off, his hands still limply clutching his pipe. The acrid smell of opium filled the room.

Kolesnikov took a seat next to Bulgakov, who was wearing a stiff white shirt and bow tie, his hair neatly combed back.

"How are things at *Mir* these days?" the writer asked.

Kolesnikov shook his head.

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“That bad, is it?” Bulgakov leaned forward. “I’m not surprised. But listen, Kolesnikov, I’ve just had an idea for a story. Would you like to hear it?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“It won’t be long, I don’t think – a short piece, something for the magazines. It’s called ‘The Heart of a Man’, and it professes – this is the snare – to be a manuscript written by the Devil.”

“I’d like to read that. Does it give away any of the great Secrets?”

“There are no secrets. It’s quite straightforward. The message is merely that everything is going according to plan.”

“Whose plan?”

“Well, the Devil’s. The human heart is the Devil’s greatest triumph. If a human heart were to be placed inside any other creature it would corrupt them beyond measure. Think of the simplest, most faithful animal: the dog. That’s the story. The Devil tempts a scientist into transplanting a human heart and pituitary gland into the body of the dog – it will be a bourgeois dog, of course, good with children and all that – and it proceeds to become a real monster, turning on its owner, attacking strangers. Eventually it learns to talk – well, I won’t give the whole thing away.”

“Ridiculous,” Kolesnikov said. “It wouldn’t work, not even as satire. A dog with the heart of a man? It’s ridiculous.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Bulgakov said.

“You’re wasting your talent. Now, if you were to treat the theme of the Devil seriously, you might have a story. You’d have to –”

Here Kolesnikov stopped, as he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw Simonov looking at him expectantly.

“Excuse me a moment,” he said to Bulgakov, then followed the young man to the other side of the room.

“What is it?”

Simonov’s eyes glimmered. “It’s what I mentioned earlier. I wanted to tell you about it before, but I couldn’t with Marya there. She knows, of course, but... well, I wanted your opinion.”

“Yes, I remember,” Kolesnikov said. “Well, tell me.”

“*The Death of Stalin*,” Simonov said. “You know it, of course?”

Kolesnikov nodded. *The Death of Stalin* was a manuscript that had been making its way around the channels of underground literature.

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It depicted a hypothetical world resulting from Stalin's assassination, which it placed one year in the future. After a few initial chapters of short-term social changes, it jumped forward a hundred years and described a 21st century Russia controlled by the Church, a kind of technocratic feudalism. Only a few copies of the manuscript were known to be in circulation, and possession of it was – officially or not – a crime.

"Well," Simonov said. "I wrote it."

Kolesnikov placed an arm around the young man's shoulder and led him to the far corner of the room, close to one of the boarded-up windows.

"You shouldn't say such things – especially not in public."

"Public... are we in public now?"

"We're always in public," Kolesnikov said. This he believed. For the most part these decadent parties weren't politically important, but they gestured towards subversion, and so the GPU would be monitoring them. Kolesnikov had heard stories of counterintelligence campaigns in which front organizations – Monarchist, Anarchist, Democratic, whatever the persuasion – were established abroad and used to contact enemies of the administration. A number of foreign agents had been lured to Russia and executed in this fashion. Therefore, he was careful never to voice an opinion too strongly. He was cautious of leading remarks – a "...don't you think?" added to the end of a statement could be the hook intended to catch him. Since he could not be sure those present were who they claimed to be, he tried to remain as inoffensive as possible.

But Simonov was obsessed with provocation; if he had been born during the Middle Ages he might have written a heretical tract just to risk being burnt at the stake.

"*The Death of Stalin*, really," Kolesnikov continued, shaking his head. "Are you suicidal?"

"I might be," Simonov said. "I'm bored with almost everything."

"Wait until you're my age before you decide that."

"I'm not afraid of Stalin."

"Then you're a fool."

"What is Stalin? Just a jumped-up gangster. It would be better if someone did kill him. But you know what I mean, don't you? I was

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only trying to make people pay attention. Don't you see that the administration really cares nothing for the proletariat?"

"And you do, I suppose?"

Taken off guard, Simonov paused before answering.

"It's true that I've never worked in a mine or swept the streets. I just can't stand people believing in anything, since it all comes to nothing in the end. The Church, the Revolution, it's all the same. All frauds, all guilty."

"Perhaps," Kolesnikov said. "But be prudent, that's all. Be prudent."

The brown-robed servant came over with drinks on a silver tray. Kolesnikov took a glass of red wine and walked back to the couches. His advice to Simonov was hypocritical, he supposed, since in his youth he had praised works similar to *The Death of Stalin*, and even tried to write them himself. But as he aged, he felt his fear increasing, although outwardly he had little to lose. His vitality – what was left of that? The war with the Japanese in '05 had left him wounded – limping and impotent – and age had taken care of the rest. His finances were unexceptional: enough to keep him alive, but not enough to provide Marya with the luxury she desired. All he had was his name, and what did that matter in the long run?

Neither did he care much for Simonov's welfare. The young man who shared his wife's bed was talented, but also conceited and presumptuous. He had wormed his way into Kolesnikov's life on the pretense of seeking literary advice and now refused to leave. No, it was only the fear that had made him speak as he had, the fear that had become a physiological force, wholly out of his control.

Kolesnikov turned his head at the sound of someone clapping. He looked and saw Grigorion taking a seat at the table. The others followed his lead, and when the table was full Grigorion called for the servant to put out half of the candles. Soon darkness filled the room, broken only by a few solitary flames. In their light Kolesnikov caught the glint of a ring on Marya's hand as she waved him over. He took a seat next to her, and before long Simonov joined them. Once everyone had sat down and linked hands, Grigorion spoke.

"My friends, we have gathered here today to commune with our Holy Guardian Angels. The surface of time is like a still pond in which

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past and future alike are reflected. Time itself ripples around us, but still we perceive distinct events. This is the true meaning of the Fall.”

Grigorion pulled back the red silk cloth. Beneath it was a circular mirror covering the top of the table.

“But now we gaze upon the time known to our true selves, those who watch over us always. Do not think in terms of events. Here, we may know only symbols. Look into the depths and remember.”

As Kolesnikov examined his face in the mirror, it seemed that a ghost was staring back at him, the ghost of his father. The greying hair and mustache, the clear blue eyes and slack expression... these were his father’s features, so how had they become his own? The face floated before him, thin and spectral in the dim light of the candles. He found it intensely sad.

At once he felt a sharp pain in his right hand, felt Marya’s nails pressing into his flesh. Then he heard her scream, a sudden flare exploding in his ear, and when he turned he saw that she was looking at the mirror and trembling, her face rigid with fear.

“What did you see, Marya?” Grigorion asked.

“A shadow in the corner of the mirror.”

“That’s all?” Kolesnikov asked.

“It was death, I know it,” Marya said. Her eyes moved around the room rapidly. “Although it couldn’t be a literal death – it must be a symbol, like you said. A death of the old ways. I know these shadows are often present at times of great change.”

“Yes,” Grigorion said. “The world is changing, and our circle must change with it. There is nothing to fear.”

At this moment of high drama, Kolesnikov found himself drifting into a reverie. He remembered hotels in Paris... breakfast in the cafes, croissants and coffee... the fly boats passing on the Seine below. It would be a good place to vanish: better than England, with its rain and fog.

After Marya’s outburst the members of the circle found it difficult to regain their concentration. Kolesnikov excused himself; he found the crowded, dimly-lit room oppressive. Outside, he leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette, feeling the cold night air penetrating his clothes. After a while the door opened again and a tall figure emerged, a bald

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man in a thick black coat. Kolesnikov had seen him inside, but did not know his name or profession.

“You’re Kolesnikov,” the man said.

“Yes.”

The man’s face was strangely ageless: smooth like a youth’s, but with a certain focus and gravity that Kolesnikov had never seen in a young man before. It was a face that would have been handsome had it not been for this singular intensity, and for its most outstanding feature: where its right eye should have been, there was only a dark lashless pit circled by scar tissue.

“Kolesnikov the critic,” the man continued. His remaining eye, dark green and piercing, never strayed from Kolesnikov’s face. “I’ve read your reviews. I wonder... what direction will they take next?”

“Propaganda,” Kolesnikov said. “Reviewing inferior books as if they were masterpieces.” He instantly regretted this rash statement, although the man was almost certainly not a GPU agent: he was too direct, too strange for that. Then again, perhaps it was deliberate? There was no way to tell.

“If you describe an inferior book as a masterpiece for long enough, it will eventually become one,” the one-eyed man said. “In fact, everything eventually becomes its opposite.”

“A dialectical materialist, I see. Very orthodox.”

“I am not a dialectical materialist, except to the extent that my philosophy encompasses dialectical materialism as a part of its own dialectic.”

“And what is your philosophy?”

“My philosophy is not something I can share without a price,” the one-eyed man said. “And it is something which must be experienced rather than explained.”

Kolesnikov felt like laughing at this supremely cryptic and grandiose statement.

“What’s the price, then? I should warn you, I’m hardly rich. And even if I paid you, what then? I’d have to be initiated, I suppose – sign my name in blood, or blindfold myself and spin in circles?”

“No,” the one-eyed man said. “Look for the slow people and follow them to us. In your heart you know the price already.”

And with this he turned and walked off into the night.

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A week later Kolesnikov received a visit from Boris Maisky. He had not expected this, but he was not surprised either, since his review of Maisky's *Hearts in the Night Sky* had recently appeared in *Mir*. This novel, which concerned factory workers struggling to build a blast furnace, had inspired in Kolesnikov an impassioned disgust. It was clearly modelled on the works of Zola and Gorky, but Maisky, while sharing their defects, had none of their talent. The concluding scene – in which the leader of the workers delivered a five-page monologue comparing Western capitalist society to a malfunctioning toilet spewing out products like backed-up sewage – had at least made him laugh, but the rest of the book was more tedious than amusing.

But Kolesnikov had done as Bukosky instructed; he had written an honest assessment of the book and then inverted it, replacing every word of disdain with its laudatory antonym. He had commended Maisky for his stylistic and spiritual integrity, had praised the way he depicted the workers' struggle. He had expected his usual readership to respond with disbelief, but so far not a single skeptical letter had arrived.

Now as Maisky sat before him in his office, Kolesnikov struggled to continue the conversation. He was certain Maisky would detect his insincerity, but so far the writer showed no signs of noticing it. If anything he was effusive, thanking Kolesnikov again and again for the favorable notice.

"So how did you get the idea for it, anyway?" Kolesnikov asked.

"I was coming to that," Maisky said. His eyes, Kolesnikov thought, had the true fanatic's glow. "The truth is, I made up very little of it. Most of it was taken directly from life."

"Really?"

"Well, I invented the odd character here and there. Kozlov the butcher, for example – he's completely fictional."

Kolesnikov remembered that this character had been particularly unconvincing.

"But apart from that, they're all real. The story of the workers building the blast furnace was taken straight from the newspaper – it happened

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out in Arkangel last year. I interviewed some of them, and they agreed to let me dramatize their story.”

“Proletarian literature taken straight from life...”

Maisky became suddenly animated. “Exactly. You understand – I could tell from your review that you understood. It’s the next step – non-fiction novels. If literature is to be accessible to the proletariat, it must concern the proletariat. My characters are my friends and neighbors, the workmen I pass on the street.” He finished the whisky Kolesnikov had poured for him. “I never expected you to understand me, but then, I tried never to read the critics. I thought, what can a critic know, it’s the masses who judge, the reader that’s important. I never wrote for critics.”

Kolesnikov gave a meaningless smile.

“But I can see now that you understand,” Maisky said. “And that’s why I came here. I want you to join us.”

“Us?”

“The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers. We need more support from the critical quarter, especially now.” He leaned forward and smiled. “And I should let you know, we have some important contacts. If you get in with us now, with the way things are shaping up... well, it would be very beneficial, if you understand what I’m saying.”

When Kolesnikov spoke again, his own words surprised him.

“Maisky, you and your organization have my complete support. But I can’t promise I’ll be around much longer.”

“Why?”

“I’m not well,” Kolesnikov said. “There’s... something inside me.”

“Cancer?”

“Something inside me,” Kolesnikov repeated.

At this unexpected turn in the conversation, Maisky’s mood became grave. But even as his features expressed the appropriate sympathy, they remained somewhat over-animated. Kolesnikov regretted not sending him away sooner.

“You’d have access to the best doctors, I’d imagine,” Maisky said. “But – well, how bad is it?”

“I won’t be able to continue in my present capacity for much longer.” He indicated the papers on his desk. “I want to leave this behind, leave

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everything. I've always had an attachment to France – I want to go there and vanish.”

Maisky looked troubled. “I should let you know, it might be difficult. Leaving the country, I mean. Of course, I can't claim to understand your reasons, but... it seems to me that you'd be better off here, on Russian soil. The link to the soil itself is very strong, I find, among our people.”

Kolesnikov said nothing.

“Have you told anyone else? I assume Bukosky knows...”

“No, I haven't told anyone yet.”

“Then I thank you for taking me into confidence. I feel that ... well, if you really do retire, it will be a terrible loss...”

There was an awkward silence. Kolesnikov poured more whisky for them both. He had succeeded in deflating Maisky's enthusiasm, but it seemed an empty victory, as he had given too much of himself away. When the writer at last left, with many more thanks and promises of eternal friendship, Kolesnikov was exhausted. After working on his column for another hour, he left the office and headed for the Black Rooster Cafe.

This was a cafe Kolesnikov frequented because it was unknown to the literary world; the regular clientele were factory workers and tradesmen. It was the sort of place Maisky might have used as a setting in one of his books, turning the bored-looking patrons into selfless revolutionaries. But to Kolesnikov the Black Rooster was neither interesting nor inspirational; it was merely somewhere to be alone. He had never met any of his acquaintances here before, and so he was greatly disappointed when, after ordering coffee and taking a seat away from the other patrons, he looked up to see Simonov coming towards him.

“I thought I'd find you here.”

“Have we met here before?” Kolesnikov asked.

“Yes, just last month. It was when I showed you my first draft of ‘The Inverted Shadow’. Don't you remember? I've revised it since then, of course.”

“That's right,” Kolesnikov said. He had completely forgotten this incident.

Simonov sat in front of him. “I wanted to talk to you about something else, although I suppose it's related.” He took out a cigar case

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and offered Kolesnikov one, but the critic refused. "I think I'm being investigated."

"What makes you think so?"

"I keep seeing the same people everywhere," Simonov said. "And late at night, there are always men in the street below my apartment."

"You're just being paranoid."

"I thought so too at first, but now I'm not sure..."

Kolesnikov narrowed his eyes.

"You've been deliberately reckless, handing out subversive books and badmouthing the administration any chance you can get. If you really are being investigated, I can't say I'm surprised."

Simonov smiled.

"You're right, and it doesn't bother me, but Marya is worried."

Kolesnikov noted with little surprise that his wife had mentioned none of this to him.

"Is that so?"

"We were discussing it today, and she wanted me to go directly to your office. I went there, but you'd already left. Marya thinks you could talk to Bukosky and put in a good word for me, since he seems to have the right acquaintances."

"Very well," Kolesnikov said, "I'll mention it to him tomorrow."

But he had already decided to do nothing of the sort.



Kolesnikov awoke the following Sunday morning from a night of uneasy dreams, none of which he could remember in any detail. All that remained in his mind was a vague underlying sadness. As he got dressed and made tea, he noted that Marya had already gone out.

For a while he sat in his study, considering what to do. There were any number of new books awaiting his attention, but the thought of confining himself at home repelled him. He decided to go for a walk, hoping that the fresh air would relieve his unease.

Outside, the clear winter sun shone through a cloudless sky. Kolesnikov took his lunch in a restaurant and then strolled along Myasnitskaya Street, inspecting any stores that interested him. When he tired of this he continued to walk, following the general drift of the crowd.

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As a young man Kolesnikov had not been particularly observant. Focused on the abstract material of his studies, he had paid little attention to his surroundings. But now he took great pleasure in noticing the inhabitants of the city and how they carried themselves. As he turned the corner, one person in particular stood out for him, a tall young woman with pale skin and red hair, standing close by the intersection. Her appearance was striking, but it was her pace that struck him most, in that it seemed unnaturally slow. Kolesnikov was walking slowly himself, but the young woman was barely moving, taking small, light, deliberate steps, as if she were stalking something. She was moving so slowly that he soon overtook her, despite having sighted her from some ways off. As he passed by her, she turned and fixed her gaze on him. Kolesnikov stopped instinctively, and the woman took his hand.

“No,” Kolesnikov said, a little disappointed. “I’m not paying for anything.”

The woman continued staring at him, her expression unreadable. Her eyes were open, but there was a peculiar blankness to her gaze, as if she were sleepwalking.

“Kolesnikov,” she said.

At the sound of his name, Kolesnikov felt his fear return.

“Do I know you?”

“Yes,” the woman said. “We’ve met before.”

“Where?”

Instead of answering she turned and pulled him along after her, still moving at the same deliberate pace.

“Where are you taking me?” Kolesnikov asked. “Tell me how you know me.”

The woman said nothing. Her hand tightly gripping his wrist, she led Kolesnikov across the street, away from the thoroughfare.

The extreme slowness with which they moved had a strange effect on Kolesnikov. At first he paid close attention to everything, becoming acutely conscious of the streets, the shops, the people moving around him. But eventually his focus narrowed and he registered only his own movements and those of the woman beside him. He felt as if they were moving underwater. Now and then he tried to pull away, but her grip remained firm.

Justin Isis

Hours seemed to pass. At last the woman stopped in front of a large wooden building. It looked to be of recent construction, and had no sign outside. Through its windows Kolesnikov could make out stools and tables, and a long wooden counter.

“What is this? A tavern? I told you I’m not paying for anything.”

The woman turned and looked at him again, her expression as blank as it had been before. When Kolesnikov looked up from it, he saw a man about his own age emerging from the building. He wore old faded trousers and a butcher’s apron.

“It’s this way,” the man said, gesturing to the door. He smiled what looked to be a genuine smile of welcome, although there was something subtly offputting about his expression. Perhaps it was that his smile was too open; to Kolesnikov he seemed flat somehow, childlike. This impression contrasted with the man’s obvious age and coarse features.

Kolesnikov found himself with little choice but to enter the building. Once he stepped inside he saw that he had been correct; the stools and tables were laid out in the manner of a tavern, although there was no one tending the bar, and only one table was occupied. Two men were seated across from each other, and Kolesnikov recognized the one closest to him; it was the one-eyed man from the party. The red-haired woman and the man in the butcher’s apron sat next to him, while Kolesnikov took a seat beside the other man.

The first thing Kolesnikov noticed about this other man was his extremely unnatural posture. He sat rigidly upright with his hands on the table, and he did not at first acknowledge Kolesnikov’s presence. Only after he had been seated for several moments did the man’s head turn, and Kolesnikov found himself looking into a face even more blank than the red-haired woman’s. But while her face had the blankness of a sleepwalker’s, this man’s face seemed all but unfinished. Its features – the small dark eyes, the flattened nose and thin lips – did not seem to amount to any recognizable human expression, not even one of repose. He wore a dark, tight-fitting suit with a hard white tubular collar that covered his neck like a brace.

“I’m glad you could join us,” the one-eyed man said. Kolesnikov felt himself coming under the scrutiny of the man’s single, prying eye. Dusk had not yet fallen, but the lights in the tavern had been turned

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up, so that a hard, unnatural brightness surrounded them. In this light the one-eyed man's face appeared strangely white, bloodless.

"I didn't ask to join you and I still don't know who you are," Kolesnikov said. "Any of you."

"I'm Kozlov," the man in the butcher's apron said, smiling his open-faced smile again, which Kolesnikov now found supremely unpleasant.

The man seated next to Kolesnikov spoke next, in a voice preceded by a short exhalation of breath, a sharp wheezing sound. The voice itself was dry and devoid of emphasis.

"I am St. Christopher."

Kolesnikov started to laugh.

"What are you then, a troupe of actors?"

"They're only servants," the red-haired woman said.

Kolesnikov turned to her. "And you – who are you?"

The woman said nothing, but he sensed a faint downturn in her lips, a suppressed frown.

"Now, Kolesnikov," the one-eyed man said, "At our last meeting you asked me about my philosophy. You are familiar with dialectical materialism, but not with dialectical immaterialism."

"Dialectical immaterialism?"

"Yes. There are no categories, no substances, no parts. The reality you see around you is not even a reflection of the Ideal, since Real and Ideal are not at all separate."

"An absurd misinterpretation of Hegel..."

The one-eyed man ignored him. "In terms of mere appearances, the souls, the names, have made the skin of the world by stepping from eternity into time, from undifferentiation into differentiation. But the reverse is also true. There are no events, no processes."

"Then why dialectical? Why not just plain immaterialism?"

"The dialectic is with dialectical materialism, which it encompasses, and by which it is encompassed in turn. Within each apparent unity is a corresponding duality, and vice versa. The apparent distinctions and the awareness of matter and movement all result from sensory restrictions."

"I'm glad you could clear that up," Kolesnikov said. "This is all nonsense – a joke, I take it. Whoever you and your friends really are, I want nothing to do with you."

Justin Isis

“Fiction is not even fiction, since there is nothing else,” the one-eyed man continued. “Every day when I wake up, I write what will happen to me on that day. And it all happens, exactly as I’ve written it – exactly as I knew it would before I started writing.”

“That must be nice ...”

“There is no magic and no sorcery. You begin writing with yourself in mind – that is all.”

“What’s your name?” Kolesnikov asked. It was the most direct, impolite question he could think to ask.

“I don’t have one,” the one-eyed man said. “By which I mean I have destroyed it.”

“You’re not the first I’ve met like that.”

“This is something else entirely. They all remember their names, the names their parents gave them. Their names are secrets they carry within them. I’ve destroyed mine. It no longer exists now, and it no longer exists in the past. No one among the living and the dead can call me by it.”

There was a sudden yelping sound, and Kolesnikov felt something heavy brush past his leg. A moment later a large white dog emerged from beneath the table. With three people seated across from him, it was difficult for him to imagine where this animal had concealed itself, especially given its size. Its snow-colored fur was covered with raw red patches, as if it had been burned. Its bloodshot eyes stared up at him with horrible intelligence.

“I had the heart of a man once,” the dog said, its jaw flapping slowly. “Until I saw the real Throne, the atomless space outside Form. Now I’m all words, like our Lord God and King Money!”

It was a kind of ventriloquism, Kolesnikov thought: some new, unknown kind. Ventriloquism and conditioning – he had heard of the new experiments with animals. He looked again at the raw patches on the dog’s skin. Perhaps it had been tortured into acting this way, moving its mouth as if it were speaking. He felt a great revulsion.

The dog began walking in circles. Kozlov rose from his seat and petted its fur, his heavy hand brushing past its wounds. Kolesnikov turned back to the table, where he saw that the red-haired woman had averted her gaze. The one-eyed man had not moved at all, and the

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being that had identified itself as St. Christopher was staring at him with eyes like polished glass.

“You know what we offer, and you know the price,” the one-eyed man said. “We’ve had this conversation before in dreams – the dreams you had before you were born.”

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken...”

The one-eyed man looked at Kolesnikov almost contemptuously, then smiled.

“When the time comes, pay the price. That is all.”

Kolesnikov started to reply, but the red-haired woman reached across the table and placed her hand on his.

“It’s time to leave,” she said.

At the touch of the woman’s fingers Kolesnikov felt like jerking his hand away, a response that had not occurred to him before. But the atmosphere had become unbearable. It was different from that of the séances and Spiritualist circles: there, even if the darkness became oppressive, it was at least a human darkness, warmed by hope and fear. But here there was only a terrible, brightly-lit bareness. The faces across from him were pale like those of corpses. Even the red-haired woman’s beauty seemed poisoned somehow, her skin too smooth, as if it were artificial. As Kolesnikov followed her out of the tavern he did not once look back at the table, keeping his gaze focused on the afternoon sky outside.

After the red-haired woman returned inside, Kolesnikov walked off on his own, eventually finding his way back to Myasnitskaya Street. He felt as if he had emerged from a nightmare. If the tavern was a GPU front, then it was one beyond his understanding. He wondered why they had contacted him. Perhaps it was his association with Simonov, or perhaps he was the victim of some psychological experiment. Whatever the reason, he found it impossible to forget what he had seen. A dull fear gripped him, and as he walked he found himself rubbing his wrist at the place where the red-haired woman had touched him. He felt unclean somehow. He decided to return home at once.

When Kolesnikov arrived he found that his wife was still out. As he was crossing the threshold he saw that a letter had been slipped under the door. He inspected it and saw that it was addressed to Marya, with no return address.

Justin Isis

Ordinarily Kolesnikov would have placed the letter on the table for Marya to read, but something about the impertinent scrawl of his wife's name across its front – he recognized Simonov's handwriting – irritated him. He took it up to his study and, after some deliberation, pried it open. Contained within was a single brief message.

Marya my Love,

Many apologies for the recent lack of contact, but the path has become difficult, and my preparations demanding. I assure you the negotiations are nearing their end, and I am expecting an answer soon. And I've spoken with K. but he has become a real bore. I can't wait to leave with you. I know everything will go as we've planned.

Your Pyotr

Kolesnikov read the message several times, examining it a sentence at a time. He was struck by the arrogance – bordering on carelessness, given the way the letter had been delivered – with which it referred to some imminent elopement. This was characteristic of Simonov. And the “K” mentioned was obviously himself. Even as he considered this, he did not feel anything like anger, only a great sadness. He could think of no way to address this feeling, and he began to dread Marya's return.

For a long time Kolesnikov sat staring at the message, then he carefully tore it into shreds. He threw the remains away and took a book of English poems from the shelf, which he flipped through distractedly until he heard Marya ascending the stairs.

“Where did you go today?” he asked when she entered the study.

“Don't you remember? I had lunch with Tatiana.”

“That's all?” Kolesnikov said.

“And in the afternoon we went to the park.” She took off her coat. “I hope you weren't in here reading all day.”

“No,” Kolesnikov said.

Marya sensed his mood, and she looked at him uncertainly.

“Simonov,” Kolesnikov said. “Do you love him?”

Marya paused for a moment, but only to collect her thoughts; she did not seem surprised by this abrupt question.

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“He’s an extraordinary young man.”

“Yes, he is,” Kolesnikov said. “But do you love him?”

“I’m not sure what you want me to...”

“No, it’s nothing,” Kolesnikov cut in. He spoke more rapidly. “I seem to have failed you somehow, but maybe I failed myself first. I know that I can’t... I know that I’m not like I once was ...”

“Vasily...” Marya said. “If you’ve changed at all, it’s only that you’ve become even more sentimental than you used to be.”

“Maybe I have.”

“You told me you wouldn’t do this. You remember – no jealousy. That you thought of him like a son.”

“You know I never said that.”

“But you should,” Marya said. “It’s how I think of him, so often. You know I always wanted a son.”

“I’m sorry that I –”

“No, there’s nothing to be sorry for. Vasily, don’t you see that he’s learned so much from you? You should be proud of that. He’s capable of so much.”

The word “capable”, with all its implications, stirred in Kolesnikov a sudden hatred; at last he felt his emotions flaring. But outwardly he displayed no change. He stood and walked to the door.

“I’m taking a bath,” he said.

As Kolesnikov stepped into the hall, he felt the cold pressing against his skin.

Later, as he slipped into the water, an idea took shape in his mind. But rather than consider its implications, Kolesnikov forced himself to think of sentimental scenes from his past. Briefly he recalled the pine grove outside his childhood home; the face of his brother, now long dead; and the white of Marya’s wedding dress. There seemed nothing remarkable about these memories other than that they remained with him, and as they passed before him he realized that all of them had taken place in the nineteenth century. The past twenty years seemed to have passed instantaneously.

Lost in thought, Kolesnikov paid no attention to the time. When he at last stepped from the water, his skin was soft and wrinkled.

By the time Maisky arrived, Kolesnikov had moved onto his third cup of coffee. The Black Rooster was not crowded, and a waiter was hovering around his table watching him. Kolesnikov stared at the man until he left, then he took out the materials he had prepared: two folders, each containing manuscript pages.

At last he looked up and saw Maisky approaching, carrying a slim brown briefcase. Kolesnikov stood and shook his hand, and then the two of them sat down.

“I’m glad you could come on such short notice,” Maisky said. “But they were interested in confirming what you told me, and they wanted the evidence as soon as possible.”

Kolesnikov said, “I’m glad to hear that. I’ve prepared my closing statement – it’ll give your movement all the credence it needs.”

Maisky waved his hand. “We’ll talk about that later. For now, just show me the evidence.”

Kolesnikov handed him one of the folders. “These are drafts of his stories,” he said. “You can match the handwriting to the front page inscription on this copy of *The Death of Stalin*.” He held up the other folder. “Simonov is the one you’ve been looking for.”

Maisky flipped through the pages.

“You’ve done us all a great service. My contacts recognize that, and that’s why they agreed to your request for this... transfer. But they still need your help.”

“I thought they might,” Kolesnikov said.

Maisky nodded. “When you get to France, you’ll change your name. You’ll make friends with other émigrés – especially those with Monarchist tendencies. Find out what they’re up to, what connections they have. There’ll be a man you’ll report to – I’ll give you his details. Here, you’ll be covered up. I’ve spoken to Bukosky – he’s considering writing reviews and publishing them under your name. Would you agree to that?”

Kolesnikov imagined Bukosky taking over his desk, his stubby fingers rumpling his papers, tapping away at his typewriter.

“Would that be necessary?” he asked.

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“You’re the best critic we have,” Maisky said. “And your name counts for more than you know. In fact... well, you’re the first person I’m telling, but... I’m including you in my new non-fiction novel.”

Kolesnikov stared at the writer with incomprehension.

“Kolesnikov, the great critic,” Maisky continued, “who sees the error of stagnant, bourgeois literature – the literature of those fellow travellers who prefer treading mud to saying anything positive, taking any kind of stand, and then go on about their ‘ambiguity’ and ‘atmosphere’. You start off as a real caricature of those ‘90’s types – Huysmans and all that garbage. But I gradually make you more sympathetic. You end up helping out the protagonist, getting him onto the right track.”

“And who is the protagonist?”

Maisky looked more excited than ever.

“The protagonist is myself. I’m finally collapsing all distinctions – this will be the most authentic thing I’ve ever done.”

As he left the cafe some time later, Kolesnikov wondered if he had compromised himself – but then, it seemed that there was no one he knew who wasn’t compromised.

A light rain was falling. As he headed for the train station, he wondered how long his name would live on. He would be forgotten soon, he hoped: mercifully forgotten. But if history remembered him at all, it would only be as a name: Kolesnikov the critic, champion of proletarian literature. He stepped onto the platform and considered the years left to him, imagining his name rising behind him like a great cloud, enveloping him.



Simonov and Marya Kolesnikova walked down Krasina Street, following the directions they had received. Part of these directions was the order to intentionally become lost, so they took their time, strolling at an unhurried pace, sometimes turning back and retracing their tracks in the fresh-fallen snow. The street lamps were all alight; and around them people were rushing home from work or else heading out for night jobs. As they walked they remained silent; some great matter seemed to weigh on their minds.

After a while they noticed a beggar woman detach herself from the sidewalk ahead of them. As the people hurried around her, this withered old woman, her body clad in rags, moved at a slow, unnatural pace,

Justin Isis

as if she were crippled. Simonov and Marya Kolesnikova moved to either side of her, and she led them down a narrow passage, away from any street they recognized. This in itself was unusual, since they both knew this part of Moscow well. Perhaps it was the effort to walk so slowly that disoriented them.

The house they at last stopped at, a nondescript brick building with a series of windows running up its side, resembled a hotel more than a private residence. The door was unlocked, and the beggar woman showed them into the foyer, where they sat down on a dirty-looking leather couch. Inset in the wall in front of them was a single wooden door, painted a dark red. The beggar woman approached it and knocked once, then, silent as ever, turned and left the building.

Simonov and Marya Kolesnikova sat together waiting. Apart from the couch, the room had no other furnishings. Faced with this bareness, they turned and looked at each other, but could find nothing to say. Their silence took on a solemn quality. At last Simonov reached over and took Marya's hand, which was trembling.

Finally the red door opened, and the one-eyed man emerged. He regarded them for some time, his solitary eye appraising them sternly.

"Well," he said. "You know the price."

Simonov heard a soft whimpering sound. When he looked over he saw that Marya was crying.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Then she made a sudden movement, and he glimpsed something silver flashing towards him. Simonov grabbed her wrist and forced the knife from it. A moment later his hand was around her neck. Marya's eyes widened in fear, but Simonov forced her to the floor and wrenched both hands around her throat. Her face reddened and her eyes bulged. Even then, it took a long time for her to die. When he finally moved away from her, Simonov was exhausted. He staggered back and collapsed on the couch.

"Did she want what I want?" he asked at last.

"No," the one-eyed man said.

"What, then?"

"Secrets. Power, and knowledge. She believed there were secrets, when there are none."

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“Is that all?” Simonov asked. His body was drenched in sweat, and his hands felt numb.

“Yes, that’s all. Did you feel anything?”

“No,” Simonov answered. “It’s the same as always. Since I was a child – I can’t feel anything because of the words. Everything that happens, I have to describe it. It’s happening now. Or it isn’t happening. I’m looking at her face. I’m framing it in my mind.”

He stood, feeling suddenly animated.

“I’ve had to be Simonov the writer for too long. St. Simonov of the Desert! I wanted to be a saint of evil – I had such faith in evil, because I thought it would let me feel something. I’ve been looking for the Devil my whole life – are you the Devil?”

“No,” the one-eyed man said. “I am no one.”

“A pity. When my classmates lay awake at night dreaming of love, I dreamed only of evil. I tried crime, and whores, and opium, and felt nothing. I’ve sent men to their deaths before. Kolesnikov reporting me – I’ve reported twenty men! When I was seventeen I killed an old man, hoping to feel guilt, but I felt only boredom. What peace Marx must have known, Marx and the Buddha, never dreaming of the Devil!”

The one-eyed man waited calmly for Simonov to finish.

“This is something other than suicide,” he said. “You realize that.”

“Yes,” Simonov replied. “Although I have no fear of death. I’ve always wanted to take something greater than life.”

Simonov looked down at the corpse, at its dead eyes and face swollen with blood.

“What happens to Kolesnikov?” he asked.

“Kolesnikov has been rewritten. He will come back to us – he is with us. Time means nothing.”

Simonov felt the one-eyed man staring at him, and as he returned the gaze he felt himself encompassed, drawn into the depths of that single staring eye. Even as it remained fixed and unblinking, it seemed like a whirlpool inexorably drawing him in.

“Are you ready?” he heard the one-eyed man say, his voice sounding as if from a dream.

“Yes,” Simonov answered.

He took a step forward, so that he was now level with the eye.

Justin Isis

“Tell me how to kill my name. Show me how to destroy my soul.”

In response the one-eyed man stepped aside, so that Simonov was confronted with the red door. He moved forward and turned the handle, and without hesitating he stepped through.

Simonov found himself inside an enormous room – one that the facade of the red brick hotel seemed scarcely large enough to contain, although he did not let this impossibility faze him. The walls were uniformly white and free of any decoration. To his right was an enormous fireplace within which a steady flame flickered; in front of him was a long, lacquered wooden table upon which rested a thick book with a bound leather cover.

He opened the book and began flipping through it. It seemed to be a kind of registry, as its pages contained only names – Russian and foreign ones alike, stacked in two neat columns per page. There was no apparent reasoning behind their order, and no explanation or commentary. Now and then Simonov came across names that seemed familiar to him, but he could not connect them to any definite faces. He continued turning the pages for a long time, certain that he would find what he was looking for.

At last he came across it at the bottom of a page midway through the book: his own name, printed in the same tightly-spaced block capitals as the rest. It seemed to have been hiding within the heavy leather book, awaiting his arrival. He stared at it for a long time, until he knew what he had to do. He placed the book back on the table and held out the page containing his name. Gently, so as not to disturb the names around it, he tore the paper until the fragment with his name came away in his hand.

He looked up. The room seemed larger the longer he stayed in it. As he walked to the fireplace it seemed to have retreated from him, and the red door appeared further away than before. Although nothing had moved, the walls too seemed to be receding, stranding him in the middle of the room. He felt a faint dizziness. Steadying himself, Simonov carried his name to the fire and let it fly in, a little scrap like a fluttering insect. It landed on the grate and soon became ash.

He knelt down and stared into the fire. He had come to this place outside the world, the place he had been looking for all his life. As his

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name joined with the ashes surrounding it, he felt his thoughts drifting away.

He could not be sure how much time had passed. He might have sat there staring into the flames forever, but the sound of movement startled him, a faint rustling behind him. He turned and saw nothing, but decided to approach the table anyway. On it was a heavy leather book and a handful of manuscript pages. He took the latter and inspected them. Only the first page contained text:

As he was about to kill Marya Kolesnikova, Simonov found that he was only capable of disarming her – or perhaps it would be better to say that they disarmed each other, two conspirators who had been bound together by a third man, one they had succeeded in dispatching. At the precise moment they reached to kill each other, they realized that the transcendence they sought was not greater than their awareness of each other, that their opposing desires – the one for attainment, the other for annihilation – arose from an equivalent fervor. Had they succeeded in killing each other, the fulfilment of their desires would have been marred by the realization that an equally strong fulfilment eluded them, that of the other's desire, which they could not have imagined alone. But now both desires remained alive and suggestive, and what they had been seeking outside of life manifested itself in each other's eyes as they embraced.

When he looked up from the manuscript, he wondered what, if anything, this paragraph signified. It seemed to be a fragment of a romance, but whether it was taken from a biography, a history, or a piece of fiction, he couldn't tell. The names, too, were unfamiliar to him.

He heard the sound of rustling again, and when he looked up he saw a man standing by the fireplace. He was tall and middle-aged, with grey hair and a neatly-trimmed mustache. In his hands he held a manuscript, which he was peering at intently. After a while the man looked up and noticed him, although he did not seem startled.

"You were reading too," the man said as he walked over to the table.

"Yes."

"What was it about?"

Justin Isis

“Two lovers, Simonov and Marya. They had planned to betray each other, but at the last moment they realized... well, I’m not sure I understand it completely. They decided they were alike, I suppose, very different but alike in some deeper way, and so they couldn’t stand to lose each other.”

The grey-haired man considered this.

“Marya, I know that name. It was in the story I read too.” He held up his manuscript. “It was about a critic, Kolesnikov – a great promoter of underground literature, the decadent and the fantastic. He was tasked with promoting books that served the state, but instead he distributed surrealist stories in pamphlets and privately-distributed publications, until he was finally arrested by the GPU while trying to leave the country. Decades later he became a kind of rallying point, very popular among students – an idealist, you might say.”

“A great man, then. Tell me – who are you?”

“I don’t know,” the grey-haired man answered. “I seem to have forgotten my name. Perhaps I never had one, although that seems absurd.”

“I can’t think of mine either.”

He looked down at his manuscript and read through the paragraph once more, but he understood it no better than before. The story affected him, but he could not see how it related to anything. He walked back to the fireplace and looked into the flames.

“These mysteries are beyond me. I don’t know what it would mean to love someone like that – like this man, Simonov...” He paused. “But there may not have been such a man, and no Marya either. Perhaps they are only stories. In that case, it would be better to burn them.”

The grey-haired man looked at him uncertainly, as if overcome with a terrible sadness. Then he read through his own manuscript again, and when he looked up, there was a faint smile on his lips.

“No,” the grey-haired man said, “Manuscripts don’t burn. I heard that somewhere – in a dream, perhaps. Now, I don’t know whether the stories are true or not. But it seems to me that they are true, and that Kolesnikov and Simonov lived heroically and for love. I feel that if we could meet them, we would know what to do next.”

He stared into the fire, turning these words over in his mind. It would be easy enough for him to throw the manuscript on the flames,

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and himself along with it. He was certain no one would mourn him. But if the grey-haired man was right, then there were still mysteries left, and if so, he would follow them. When he at last stood, there was a new determination in his eyes.

“Then we’ll search for them here, or all over Russia.”

“Or all over the world,” the grey-haired man answered. “For the rest of our lives, if it takes us that long.”

“Yes. We won’t rest until we find them.”

They left through the red door, taking their manuscripts with them. Outside, the night sky was clear and full of stars. A light snow was falling, but they did not feel the cold, warmed as they were by the fire of their new resolve. The moon shone on the street before them, and together they set off into the night, dreaming of the great men who would save them.

СИДСФПЗ

Nina Allan

They had told her Orest was alive. She had that, at least. Alena thought about the woman at the army information bureau, the way she had sighed as she lifted the brown manila folder from the stack in the corner. Alena had thought at first she had sighed from indifference; she decided later that it had most likely been embarrassment. When suddenly she stopped scanning the lists of names and begun tapping at one of them in particular with the tip of her gnarled forefinger Alena had experienced a sudden disorientation accompanied by the blurred vision and dizziness she had been mostly free of since the siege. Once the feeling had passed she leaned across the counter, trying to see the list for herself, but the woman had snapped the file shut before she could do so.

“Top secret,” she muttered. “I shouldn’t even have let you stand there while I looked.”

Alena scraped ash and half-burned leaves from the belly of the stove. Her hands were numb with cold, her fingers big and clumsy with it. She tried to concentrate on these sensations, to inhabit them fully with her mind as well as her body. She had learned during the siege that an awareness of discomfort was a proof of the desire to go on living. Here as in most places the supply of discomfort seemed ample. It was not just the cold; the place was filthy. The board floors, which had once been the colour of honey, were caked with dirt and stippled with footprints, the ghosts of soldiers’ boots, she supposed, though whether the soldiers had been German or Russian she could not tell. The beds, both the large one in the main room and the narrow cot in the strange little windowless back room they called the cupboard, had been stripped of their linen, though she had been lucky enough to find two moth-eaten

Chaconne

horse blankets, rolled messily together in the bottom of the real cupboard next to the bathroom. The bathroom stank and she had not yet dared to go in there, but at least the dacha's roof and windows remained intact. If she could only light a fire she would be all right.

She knelt on the floor by the stove and opened her suitcase, the same suitcase she had brought out of Leningrad and more recently out of Tashkent. In Tashkent she had been billeted with the Shigaevs, he a railways engineer, she a dance choreographer. Martha Shigaeva was beautiful, with long, double-jointed fingers and slanted golden Tatar-looking eyes. She hugely resented the invasion of her home, and once, in the early days of her exile, Alena had overheard Martha referring to her to husband Lyonel as the dumpling. She could not bear to look at anything ugly, and shuddered openly when she first saw what had happened to Alena's hand.

Eventually they had become friends. Once, when Lyonel was away working in Voronezh Martha asked Alena to share her bed.

"I'm afraid to be alone," she said. "I don't know how you stand it, night after night."

Alena stroked her hair, not knowing quite what was expected of her. Martha talked and talked, about her childhood in the Caucasus, about an affair her husband had had once with an industrial chemist visiting from Moscow. Then at the end of what seemed like hours she had turned in Alena's arms and began making love to her, bringing her to a swift, taut, back-arching climax that was so unlike anything she had experienced with Orest that she had never been able to decide whether it counted as a betrayal or not.

It had been Martha who packed her suitcase.

"Please don't go," she said. "There's no need. You can stay here for as long as you like. At least stay until you know you have somewhere to live."

"I have to go," said Alena. "I have to find Orest. I know you'd feel the same if it were Lyonel."

Martha looked away. "Perhaps you're right. It's just that I'm going to miss you so much."

"I'll miss you too." It was true. She felt close to Martha Shigaeva in a way that reminded her of the way she had been close to her sister

Nina Allan

Sofie, although Sofie and Martha weren't even remotely alike. Martha filled her suitcase with small, pretty luxuries, sweet biscuits and silk scarves, two bars of chocolate, a flacon of French perfume. Somewhere just east of Kiev Alena left her suitcase for five minutes to go to the toilet and when she returned she found the lock had been forced open and all Martha's presents were gone. The theft distressed her, but she was more relieved to find that her travel documents and music case had not been touched. The music case, together with the things inside it, was now her most valued possession. She knew she had been lucky to be evacuated so soon after her injury. Being away from the city, not just from the hardships but from the memories, had given her the chance to recover. In Tashkent there had been plenty to eat. She spent her days teaching musical theory to a class of children at the Conservatory's preparatory school, and her evenings in her room at the Shigaevs, working on what she thought of as her first serious attempts at composition: a violin sonata that she dedicated to Martha Shigaeva, and the short, rather stern *Interlude* for flute and string orchestra that was later performed by some of the students at her school. She had won prizes for her music before, once at the Central Music School in Kiev when she was just seventeen, and then in her first year at the Leningrad Conservatoire. But she had thought of composition then as a sideline, something she practised more for the discipline than out of any attempt at personal expression. Now it was everything, and the difference that made in her work became apparent almost at once, at least to her.

The journey from Tashkent to Kiev had taken more than a week. She took a tram from the station straight to the street not far from the centre where she had lived with her mother and Sofie before going to live with her Aunt Catherine in Leningrad and taking up her place at the Conservatoire.

When she rang the bell a strange woman opened the door. She took one look at Alena and then fled, disappearing into the main room of the apartment where, Alena knew, tall windows overlooked an odd-shaped patch of sloping garden and a twisted lilac. A moment later a man appeared. He was middle-aged, with long grey moustaches, and spoke with a peculiarly rasping tone as if he had suffered some kind of injury to his throat.

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“I can’t let you in,” he said. “This is our home now. We have the documents to prove it. My parents are here, and our young daughter. I’m sure you understand that I have to put my family first.”

“Can I at least come in and sit down, just for five minutes? I promise you I won’t try to stay.”

The man seemed apprehensive but in the end he relented and after about five minutes his frightened-looking wife brought her a cup of tea. Alena sipped it slowly, looking out over the strange little garden where the sons of the doctor who lived in the flat below had so often played. She had no love for the place, at least not now. Sofie had died in the flat, a victim of typhoid, and almost immediately afterwards her mother Varvara had volunteered for a resettlement programme and gone to live in a small village on the north shore of Lake Baikal.

“They’re short of teachers, and so long as you don’t mind the climate it’s very good money,” her mother said to her over the phone. They had not spoken since because the war meant there had been no long-distance telephone service, although they had exchanged several letters when Alena was in Tashkent. Alena often thought about how it was almost certainly Sofie’s death that had saved her mother from being in Kiev when the Germans marched in, although she had never spoken these thoughts aloud.

“Where will you go?” the woman said softly. Alena started. She had forgotten she was there.

“My father’s place,” Alena said. “Don’t worry.” She smiled, trying to reassure the woman, who she sensed was vulnerable in ways she could not begin to guess at. She did not add that the place she spoke of, a two-roomed shack in the woods a mile or so beyond the city boundary, had never been weatherproofed. As she walked along the dirt road that led to the dacha she wondered if she would even find it still standing. It was only her relief at the sight of its dark bulk, rearing up at her from the shadow of the trees, that made her realise how deeply anxious she had been.

The lock was broken, but whoever had been there last had thought to secure the door with a loop of rope. It was this single action that had prevented the dacha from becoming a ruin.

Alena reached into her suitcase, moving her clothes and books aside and hunting for the box of matches she had secreted right at the bottom.

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Carrying matches was a habit she had developed during the siege. She had come to believe that matches were the most valuable commodity of all, more valuable than bread even. You never knew when you might need them, when they might save your life. She also had newspaper, two *Pravdas* that had been given to her by the woman in her flat, together with an ancient camp light half full of kerosene. She took several sheets of the newspaper and began twisting them into pretzel shapes. She laid them carefully side by side in the base of the stove then looked around for something she could burn. There were some pieces of furniture missing and she assumed they had been burned by the soldiers but there were still plenty in the dacha she could use for firewood.

No, she thought. *You're not going to burn these things.*

She was surprised at the strength of her feelings. She had thought the siege would have made her immune to the loss of possessions, but she found that the idea of destroying these last fragments of her childhood had a fatal sense of finality about it, as if she would not just be burning the things but her memories too.

Outside it was beginning to get dark. The woods appeared to have spread, the massed larches a navy scrawl against the sepia sky. An owl hooted and Alena shivered inside the patched army greatcoat that had been given to her by the stationmaster at Voronezh. There was a place under the house, a narrow crawl space where they used to store wood for the stove, cut logs and smaller kindling which they would bank about with leaves to keep dry. She bent down and peered inside. There wasn't much. She was not surprised to discover that most of the wood and kindling had been burned or carried away long before. But the dozen or so pieces that remained, small oddments of wood that had been overlooked or discarded, were at least enough to see her through the night.

She went on her hands and knees, easing herself into the crawl space. On the inside it seemed larger, like a secret underground room. There was a musty smell, the brown odour of earth and old leaves, and Alena remembered with a sudden jolt of pain how she and Sofie used to hide there sometimes, whispering together in excited voices, waiting to spy on anyone who might come calling. There had been so many summer picnics, summer nights. She and Sofie had shared the back room then, the cupboard, sleeping top and tail in the narrow bed.

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“I wonder what we’ll all be doing in ten years’ time?” Sofie was fond of whispering into the darkness. Alena thought it was only not knowing the future that made it possible to go on living.

She began to gather the logs together into a pile, setting aside the driest to bring in first. It was inky black inside the crawl space, and when something hissed at her out of the darkness Alena jumped back, knocking her head painfully against one of the wooden support beams. The idea that something was in the hole with her, had been there all along without her realising, filled her with quiet horror. Her mind turned at once to things she had seen during the siege, dead things, the old man she had come upon lying on the pavement outside the bombed-out Church of St Andrew, his whole body frozen solid and his legs sawn off at the knees, presumably so his boots could be recovered once the flesh had thawed. She thought of the soldiers she had seen trying to rescue a comrade from a burning food depot during a bombardment, the burning scraps of their uniforms flying from the upper windows like golden rain.

What if a wounded man had crawled in beneath the dacha? There was no one here to help her if he turned out to be dangerous. The thing made a kind of dull rasping sound, like an ancient door creaking on its hinges. Alena put out her hand, half expecting it to be seized and bitten. The thing recoiled, making the dry leaves rustle as it tried to get away from her. Dimly she could see something moving. It was too small to be a man.

She reached all the way to the back, and in the angle between the dacha’s support posts and the damp dirt floor of the crawl space she felt fur, greasy and matted together like an old travelling blanket. The thing hissed again, and faintly beneath her fingers she felt it shiver.

“Snow,” she said. “It’s not possible.”

Snow was their cat. He had been named by Sofie, who had wanted to call him Snow Maiden, after the princess in the opera by Tchaikovsky. By the time they realised he was male the name had stuck. Snow was a Turkish Van, pure white all over except for his ears and tail which were a fiery red. Although they had been told that Turkish Vans liked water and that in their native Anatolia they were known as the swimming cat they had never seen Snow demonstrate this unusual proclivity. Sofie used to say that Snow was too proud to show his true nature in front of

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humans. His pride notwithstanding, he had been intelligent and beautiful, and exceptionally loyal to their mother. Varvara Nikitina had not mentioned Snow during that last telephone conversation and Alena did not dare ask what had happened to him. The idea that he could have survived alone in the woods seemed too unlikely to be considered. Alena had never known him catch so much as a wood mouse, though she supposed that if left to himself he would quickly have learned. Cats were natural born killers, after all. It was easy to forget that, but it was true.

“Snow,” she said again, half to herself. She knelt in the dirt, reaching forward with her hands as far as she could. The creature made a tiny, struggling movement, though whether towards or away from her she could not tell. She slid both her hands underneath it and drew it carefully forward into the light.

The cat’s body was so emaciated it appeared to have halved in size. Its skeletal structure was clearly visible, the bars of its ribs standing out like iron railings. The long white strands of its fur had matted together to form a greyish wadding. It tried to raise its head, but fell back at once, too weak, its front limbs twitching. Alena felt sure the beast recognised her. She realised she had nothing to wrap it in, and she was afraid to hold it too firmly in case she hurt it. Quickly she gathered the ragged bundle against her chest and backed out of the crawl space, then moved at a hunched-over run towards the door. Once inside the dacha she laid the cat on what remained of the newspapers, spread out on the floor in front of the stove.

“Wait here,” she said. She hoped the cat might be calmed by the sound of her voice. She felt less tired suddenly, less cold, and she supposed this was because she knew the cat was depending on her. Her Aunt Catherine had depended on her, and she had died. Alena gathered an armful of the logs and stumbled back up the steps. The coming night lowered, deep indigo, between the trees.

The cat was in the same position as she had left it, stretched on its side with its eyes closed. It lay so still that Alena thought for a moment it was dead, that the shock of being moved had killed it, but when she put her hand against its ribs she could feel the weak rise and fall of its chest as it took in air. It seemed not to register her touch, though once again Alena felt certain it knew she was there, that she was trying to care for it.

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“Hold on, Snow,” she said quietly. “You’ll feel better once we have a fire going.”

She used one of her matches to light the lamp and then began to make up the stove, laying the smallest, driest pieces of kindling directly over the rolled up newspapers and then criss-crossing larger logs on top. She lit the corner of one of the newspaper pretzels then swung the stove door to, leaving a narrow opening to draw the air. After a couple of minutes the bottom layer of kindling began to burn strongly, setting the largest of the logs on fire. A hesitant warmth began to radiate outwards from the stove, which like all stoves in the Russian winter had begun to take on a living aspect, the dragon-prince that must stay fed in order for its human subjects to stay alive.

There was a story about that in a book she and Sofie had when they were children, a collection of Russian fairy tales with illustrations by Leonid Pasternak. She later discovered that Orest had owned a copy of the same book when he was a boy. There were many similar shared memories between them, even though Alena had grown up in Kiev and Orest many hundreds of miles away in Tallin, on the Baltic coast. Orest was half German, a flaw he tried to minimise by being one of the first to volunteer for the civilian defence battalions that prevented the Nazi armies from overwhelming the city of Leningrad during the first weeks of the war. Later on he joined up for real. He had been among the troops that made the final onslaught on Berlin.

The woman at the army information bureau said that Orest had lost both his legs in a shell blast.

“They thought they could save the left one, but there was gangrene. In the end they had to amputate or he would have died. He’s quite well now.”

Quite well now. Alena had heard of cases of mistaken identity, women who had been told their father or son or uncle had been horribly injured and later discovered they were perfectly all right. She supposed it might be like this with Orest, although she knew equally of instances where someone who was meant to be alive turned out to be dead. On balance, she hoped the man with the amputated legs was Orest. When she asked about his exact whereabouts the woman refused to say.

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“It’s a military hospital. You’ll have to apply for a special pass if you want to visit.”

“Can I fill in the form for that here?”

The woman shook her head. “We’ve run out.”

Alena had turned aside, anxious to get away before she did or said anything she might regret. If she set this woman against her she might be deliberately obstructive later. She knew people in the city that might help her, old friends of her father’s, if they were still alive. She would begin making enquiries the next day.

She bent over the cat, stroking its head very lightly with the tip of one finger. Its skin was stretched tight, the shape of its skull so prominent it was almost like touching bare bone. Snow stirred slightly on his bed of newspapers, responding to the warmth of the stove, perhaps. Alena reached for the small supply of food she had in her suitcase, a string carry bag containing a heel of bread, a canister of water, a few slices of pork sausage that was all that was left of the generous package Martha had thrust into her arms when they said goodbye at the station. She unwrapped a little of the sausage and held it out to Snow, wafting it beneath his nose so he could catch the scent of it. For an instant she saw the tip of his tongue protrude from between his grey lips and then it was gone again. She continued to offer the meat, hoping that the cat might respond again more strongly, but it remained still. Alena dipped the tip of one finger into the water canister then gently rubbed the wetness against the cat’s mouth. Still Snow did not move. Alena could not tell if he was relieved by the water or not.

She knew that if she could not persuade the cat to eat soon it would die. During the last three days of her life her Aunt Catherine had refused to eat anything. On the last day, Alena had gone to stand in line for their bread ration at the feeding station as usual and when after four hours she came to the head of the queue there had been a surprise, a measure of onion soup thickened with oats. Alena had taken the soup in her dented kettle and made her way home to her aunt. By the time she arrived back at the flat she had already eaten her half of the bread but managed to stop herself from touching the soup. The closer she came to home the more important the soup seemed to be, a magical elixir almost, a substance like blood or plasma that would not just

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provide her aunt with physical nourishment but that would restore in her the will to fight on.

She kept imagining how she would reheat the soup on the stove, how she would feed it to her aunt, one slow magical spoonful at a time.

“You have it,” Aunt Catherine whispered. “I’m honestly not that hungry.”

Alena spent ten minutes protesting but in her heart she was secretly glad. She consumed the soup slowly, making it last, feeling its warmth inside her like the life of another. When she awoke the next morning her aunt was stiff and cold in the bed beside her.

Alena folded one of the horse blankets to make a soft pad then lifted Snow on to it. There was still a weight to him, but it was a hollow weight, like the weight of an empty basket or dry leaves. She moved the blanket closer to the stove. Orest used to call Snow Old Hippopotamus, or Behemoth, after the demon in the novel by Mikhail Bulgakov. Orest had met Bulgakov in the mid-thirties, when he was touring the theatres in Moscow trying to persuade them to put on his work. Bulgakov read the play Orest had written about the death of Pushkin, and spoke some encouraging words. After that Orest had tended to regard the writer as something of a hero. He had taken Alena to see *The Days of the Turbins* when it was playing at the Central Theatre in Kiev. Alena liked the play, although she liked it even more that Orest had found someone to inspire him and who he could look up to. Bulgakov’s last novel had still not been published, but a number of illegal copies were in circulation. The book was about a disgraced writer known as the Master and his lover, Margarita, and told the story of what happened when the devil turned his attention to the city of Moscow. He brought a retinue of demons with him: a whey-faced ex-choirmaster named Koroviev, a monster called Azazello with sticking-up red hair and a protruding fang, and Behemoth, who sometimes appeared as a man but more usually took the form of an oversized cat.

“You mustn’t call Snow a demon,” Alena had protested, laughing. “It’s not fair on him. And don’t forget that Behemoth was black.”

“But Snow has red ears, which makes him rather suspect if you ask me. All cats are demons, anyway. They always prefer the company of witches to real human beings.”

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“Are you calling me a witch then, comrade?”

“Certainly I am. If I didn’t love you so much I’d be scared of you. I’m always afraid you’re about to tell me off.”

“And what would I be telling you off for?”

“For being secretly in love with Sofie, of course.”

Alena laughed at his joke, and then they made love, but his words had often come back to her in the years they had been forced to spend apart. Orest loved Bulgakov’s novel, insisting it was a masterpiece that would change the course of Russian literature. Alena had loved it too. She loved the book’s wit, its dialogue as taut and dangerously spiky as barbed wire. The characters had a life to them, a hot, raw spirit that could only be described as infernal.

Perhaps they really are out there, she remembered thinking. *Perhaps they leapt right out of the book and scurried off down an alleyway into the world.*

She found the idea oddly unsettling. And much as she admired it there had been things about the book that annoyed her. She could not accept the fact, for example, that Margarita had nothing to do, no work or career of her own, that it was enough for her to love the Master and revere his genius. Alena could not imagine setting aside her own work for anyone.

There was also the matter of Latunsky’s piano. Latunsky was the literary critic who destroyed the Master’s career, and in an act of revenge Margarita broke into his apartment and destroyed his piano. She destroyed many other things too, but it was the piano Alena remembered, the way it had wept and moaned as Margarita battered it with a hammer. *An innocent Baecker* was how Bulgakov described it. Baecker pianos were made in Russia. Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov and Scriabin had all composed on them. Whatever this Latunsky had done, Alena could see no point in taking it out on the piano, and she couldn’t forgive Margarita for having done so. To Alena’s mind, anyone who treated a musical instrument this way could have no real love for music, and although Bulgakov’s novel was strewn with musical references, with characters named Berlioz and Rimsky and Stravinsky, she remained unconvinced.

Her aunt’s piano had been English, a Broadwood. Its tone had been wayward, raindrop-bright but overeager, but in the end she had

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mastered its ways, coaxing from it powers of subtlety and restraint that made her begin to understand why Beethoven himself had prized his Broadwood piano above all others.

In the end, once they had burned all Aunt Catherine's books and dining room furniture and the mahogany sideboard that stood in the hallway they had been forced to burn the Broadwood. It was either that or freeze to death. Alena asked Oleg Medvedev, one of her aunt's neighbours, to come round and chop it up for them because she could not bear to do the deed herself, even though this meant they had to give him a share of the wood. She could still remember the smell it had given off as it burned, the richly pungent aromas of varnish and wax.

Six weeks later her aunt was dead and Alena was evacuated to Tashkent together with other musicians and teachers from the Conservatoire. The Shigaevs had a piano, a scarred little Rippen, brusque but very nimble and always in tune. It had been some time before she could bring herself to touch it, not only because of her hand but because of the shame and guilt she felt on account of the Broadwood.

It was one of the things she felt she would never get over. Her hand she had already come to terms with. She was surprised at how easy this had been.

She had asked Oleg Medvedev to help her with her aunt's body because she was too weak by then to manage on her own. Alena wrapped her in one of the bedsheets and they dragged her down the stairs and into the street.

"We should leave her here," said Oleg Medvedev. "They'll come by with the truck at the end of the week."

The army had made provision for collecting the bodies. The trucks worked in rotation, visiting each district in turn. The city's citizens had been told not to panic if a corpse could not be picked up immediately; the nights were so cold the dead froze solid, like sides of beef, and there was no significant risk of disease from them. Alena knew all this, yet still she could not bear the thought of her aunt lying out in the gutter. In the end Oleg Medvedev helped her load the body on to one of the low sleds that were normally used for transporting firewood. Aunt Catherine was so light that even in her weakened state Alena had been able to drag her as far as the communal cemetery out by St Peter's Fields.

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On the way back she tripped over one of the large ruts made by the army trucks and went flying on the icy ground. She was so shaken by the fall that she simply lay there, unmoving, not knowing how to get up. She must have lost consciousness for a time, because the next thing she knew there was an old woman shaking her shoulder and breathing the stink of beetroot into her face.

“On your feet, girlie,” she said. “You can’t give up the ghost here, you’re blocking the road.”

Beetroot, thought Alena. *Where on earth did she get hold of that?*

The old woman’s face was obscured almost entirely by the quilted head covering she wore, but her green eyes gazed out at her with a desperate pity that entirely belied the harshness of her words. Alena could never get free of the idea that those eyes had been her aunt’s, that her aunt had come back from the dead to save her. She knew she had been terribly lucky. If she had lain there much longer she would have certainly have died. As it was she suffered minor frostbite, and lost the upper joints of the third and fourth fingers of her left hand. She could still make use of the piano, enough to go through scores at least, but her days of playing in public ended there.

Irina Seshkova, who had been a pupil of Janacek and who was her piano teacher and mentor at the Conservatoire, did not let her waste time on self-pity.

“Maestro Janacek struggled for years trying to decide between composing and performing,” she said. “You’re lucky. You’ve had the decision made for you. It’s not everyone that has your talent. If this hadn’t happened you’d most likely have wasted it.”

The brutality of her words brought tears to Alena’s eyes. It was only later she realised that Seshkova had been trying to help her and that she was right. She felt something shift within her, something that caused her grief at first because she saw it as a letting-go, a capitulation to circumstance, but that later, throughout the journey to Tashkent and the long, fruitless weeks of trying to find out what had happened to Orest, did more than anything else to help her survive. The vacuum left inside her by her inability to play became gradually filled with something else, a new energy that was less urgently addictive but more sustaining. To perform a sonata of Beethoven or Scriabin was the most

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intense expression of the continuing present Alena could imagine. When she played she inhabited the present so entirely and with such insistence the past and the future ceased if not to exist then to matter. The only thing that compared with it was making love with Orest, and even then could she swear there had been no moments when her mind had drifted, preoccupied for whole minutes together not with the sensations of her body but with the left hand fugal passages of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* sonata?

Writing music was something different, less visceral in the moment of attack but more satisfying in the aftermath and without that pressing, ever-present desire for the keyboard, for the instrument itself, and the feeling of incompleteness that sapped her spirit whenever she had to be away from it.

It left the body not so much satisfied as vindicated. She knew now that written notes were live things, round with memory or jagged with grief, that they had a life of their own away from the piano, which she saw now more as a doorway than as a goal.

A written score was no less a poem than any work by Rimbaud or Akhmatova. Sometimes, placing her hand on a score by Medtner or Debussy, she seemed to feel the notes pricking her fingers like pine needles, like the terse, creased-browed couplets of Mayakovsky, similarly insistent on being heard.

It occurred to her suddenly that Bulgakov had done more to fill his novel with music than simply littering its pages with the names of musicians: he had given importance to sounds as well as intentions, and no sound was more insistent or more terrible than the shrieks of the Baecker piano as Margarita brought down her hammer.

Alena decided she may have been a little hard on Margarita. The woman had shown courage after all – you only had to look at the way she stood up to that demon Behemoth – and a refusal to compromise that Alena could only admire. Most marvellous of all, she had persuaded the devil himself to release the Master. Alena thought how good it would be to have a friend like that. She could certainly do with her help in finding Orest.

Alena ate the piece of sausage she had offered to Snow and then another piece, chewing it slowly with some bread. The stove was now

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exuding a steady, bright heat that seemed to bring new life into even the darkest corners of the dacha. Snow lay motionless on his blanket. When Alena stroked his side he made no response but he was still breathing and Alena hoped he was at least aware of being safe and warm. She felt glad of his presence. She knew the cat was close to death, and yet in spite of his helplessness Alena had the sense that he was watching over her, perhaps precisely because his spirit was already inhabiting a realm that she could access only through music.

She drew a chair up close to the stove, an ancient leather armchair that had once, long ago, been her father's. She had few memories of him, just the smell of his pipe in the evenings and the record he used to play for her, Chaliapin singing *Once at the Evening Hour* from Boris Godunov. His chair had been gutted, slit straight up the back and disembowelled. The person that did this had presumably been looking for valuables, although there had been nothing inside but the horse-hair and cotton wadding through which the chair's springs and struts now protruded, obscene somehow, like the entrails of a corpse. When Alena sat in the chair a puff of damp air rose up, filled with the mingled dusty aromas of ashes and leaves. She slipped another log into the stove then wrapped the remaining blanket about her shoulders. She was fiendishly tired but something – the close presence of the woods, perhaps – made her afraid to sleep.

She sat with half-closed eyes, drifting in the warmth from the stove and looking down at Snow where he lay on his blanket. She thought how like a sleeping child he looked, lying on his side with his back arched and his shoulders bunched up, and then she saw she had been mistaken all along. The creature was not a cat at all, but a person, a white-skinned naked man less than two feet in height. In spite of his size he was perfectly proportioned, his smooth limbs long and sinewy, his feet high-arched and graceful, like a dancer's. His face was mostly hidden by a mass of pale hair. As Alena watched the creature stretched out both arms, extending them at right angles to his body just as Snow used to do when waking from an afternoon nap. The ice-white fingers flexed like claws, and the thing's body seemed to flow into them, expanding like a rubber balloon being pumped full of milk. Alena watched, horrified yet fascinated. In less than half a minute the thing was full-sized.

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He rolled on his back and yawned, covering his mouth demurely with the back of his hand.

“It must be getting late,” he said. “It feels like I’ve been asleep for half an age.”

He turned to face her. His deep-set eyes under heavy lids were entirely colourless. With his prominent nose and narrow lips he looked like a bird of prey.

Raptors, thought Alena. *Those birds are called raptors*. She glanced down at his body, the narrow chest, smooth as marble except for a fine band of pale hairs running from his navel to his groin, the penis, small but well-formed, a curious bluish-white.

She looked away again, embarrassed. The only man she had ever seen naked was Orest.

“Oh come off it,” said the man. “There’s no need to come over all blushing virgin on me.”

He tugged at the blanket, pulling it from beneath him and tucking it around his waist like a bath towel. “Is that more acceptable in what they choose to call polite society? Personally I don’t see anything polite about it. A cage of thieving magpies, more like.”

“I’m sorry,” Alena said. “You scared me, that’s all. I don’t even know your name.”

“I thought you might call me Snow. A touch prosaic, perhaps, but I must say I prefer it to Snow Maiden.”

“That wasn’t Sofie’s fault, she wasn’t to know. It’s difficult to tell sometimes with kittens.”

“I forgave her a long time ago. Your sister’s irresistible, did you know that? In any case, I have many names: Azazel, Satan, Baphomet, Beelzebub – I like that one, don’t you? It sounds like a fizzy drink. Leviathan, Voland, Old Nick, Old Scratch – where on earth did that one come from? I ask you, the things they come up with. The only one I’m keen on really is Lucifer. I’ve always thought it such a beautiful word, like a poem all by itself. It actually comes from the Latin, and means *light-bringer*. Not a lot of people know that.”

“Is it because of the light that you are so pale?”

He turned his colourless eyes upon her, chips of glass from which everything but brightness had been removed. Looking at them made

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Alena's mind fill up with terrible things. She remembered the stories she had been told about the Ladoga Lifeline, the army of supply trucks that had driven across the frozen waters of the lake to relieve the siege. Some lost their way in the dark, straying on to thin ice and then plunging straight to the bottom. The trucks were full of food and evacuee children. The people that made it to the other side said the water was so cold that the children would have died almost at once, from shock or from heart failure. Alena had always hoped this was the truth. The thought of drowning while your lungs turned to ice was so terrible she had never talked about it with anyone.

"You foolish woman. I am pale because I am snow, and because snow is hell. I would have thought you of all people would have learned that by now. You are dangerously kind, you know. You have to be careful of kindness or it may kill you. So often it's just another word for foolishness. Do you realise you could have died in the street because of that lump of dead flesh that used to be your aunt? She would have rotted just as well in the gutter, and you wouldn't have lost half your hand." He got to his feet, holding on to the blanket with one hand and resting the other on top of the hot stove. Alena watched, mesmerized, half-expecting the creature's flesh to melt away in front of her. She could see clearly the delicate bone structure of his hand, the long finger joints, the smoothly elongated ovals of his nails. A beautiful hand. She felt herself beginning to blush.

"Why did you come here? Do you want me to change places with Sofie?" She imagined Sofie alive again, her narrow hands and golden freckles, the way she looked down at her feet whenever she smiled. Alena loved her and still grieved for her, and yet in that brief instant she realised an awful truth, that if this creature wanted her to exchange her life for her dead sister's then it would have to take her by force. Lucifer had called her kind, but he had reckoned without her egoism. There were still so many things she wanted to do.

"Don't ask me about Sofie." He flashed her an icy glance and Alena fell silent at once. "I'm not here for you. I was just passing through, that's all. Why should this be about you? You people have such delusions of grandeur." He took his hand off the stove and began moving about the room. He touched things as he went: the empty bookcase, the iron

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bedstead, the low table she and Sofie used to play cards on and that now lay propped against one wall with its legs broken. Alena could see his breath in the lamplight, curling up from his lips like smoke.

“I loathe war,” Lucifer said. “It makes such a mess.”

Alena remained silent, not daring to contradict him. Bizarrely she found herself thinking of the devil in Bulgakov’s novel, who used similarly seductive words, who pretended to be a reasonable man when really he was something else entirely. *Perhaps that’s who he is*, she thought. *He’s jumped out of the book, just the way I always thought he might. I wish Orest was here to see this.*

“I can see you don’t believe me,” Lucifer said. “You think this is all my fault, the siege, the children, those disgusting camps everyone is talking about. You think that’s the kind of thing that lights my fire. Well I’m telling you you’re wrong. The thing I enjoy most is *argument*, the interplay of words and ideas. The best arguments take place in the mind, in the head – ask Alekhine, ask Newton, ask any half-decent chess player or mathematician. Is it my fault if some power-crazed idiot tries to put his half-baked ideas into practice? That’s the problem with you lot, you’re always looking for someone else to blame. What you see here isn’t my doing, it’s the residue of bad ideas, the leftover rubbish. It has nothing to do with me.”

He waved his hand, at the broken table, the filthy floor, the bleeding armchair and all the desolate countryside beyond. He curled his upper lip, as if the sight of it offended him.

“But what if it was you who put the ideas in their heads in the first place?” said Alena. She was shaking all over, though whether from terror or anger she could not tell. She would have liked to believe that this was her way of speaking up for the children who had died in the freezing waters of Lake Ladoga, but if she was honest she knew it wasn’t so, that she had spoken up only because she could never resist an argument either. Orest had once told her it was lucky she was a musician and not a writer. Now she thought she was beginning to understand what he had meant.

“Ha! If I told you to jump in the fire, would you do it?”

“I don’t suppose I’d have much choice.”

“I love artists, they’re always so arrogant.”

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He came and stood before her, then hunkered down in front of her chair. For the first time she became aware of the smell of him, a tarry, not unpleasant odour, the scent of warm pitch. “Do you think you could care for me at all?” He reached towards her face, brushing the tips of his fingers across her cheek. She was surprised at the warmth of his touch. He leaned closer and then rested himself against her, covering her body with his own. She became aware that he had removed the blanket from around his waist, that he was naked again. She struggled beneath him, trying to extricate herself, but instead she found that she was touching his penis. It was hard as marble, and somewhere in another universe he was fumbling with her coat buttons. She felt herself sliding downwards in her chair.

It’s been a long time, she thought. *That time with Martha Antonovna hardly counted*. She stroked the thing’s hard flesh, thinking of the long, comfortless years, closing her eyes and breathing in the aroma of boiling tar. She remembered the first time with Orest, their nervous struggles, and suddenly she found that she could see him. He was sitting up in bed, a metal cot not unlike the one in the small back bedroom of the dacha, the room they had called the cupboard. He was propped up on pillows, the bedclothes oddly humped where his knees should have been, stretched over a wooden cage-like structure she supposed was meant to keep the blankets from chafing his stumps. The light was dim, the yellowish glow of oil lamps, yet she could see where his head had been shaved, the angry patch of scarring below his right ear. Beside him on the night stand was a tin cup half filled with water, and beside that the folded pages of a letter he had just finished writing. She knew without any doubt it was a letter to her.

She made a soft sound, almost a groan, and felt salt tears filling her eyes.

“Oh hell, I should have known,” said Lucifer. “Next thing you’ll be telling me we’d regret it in the morning. I can’t abide that.” He drew away from her, covering himself again with his blanket. Alena drew a long deep breath. The air tasted cold and dark, like lake water. She found the way her visitor had snatched at the blanket almost comically prudish. “What would I want you for, anyway?” he was saying. “A great lumpy girl like you, when I can have anyone I want?”

Chaconne

“You don’t want me,” said Alena. She felt suddenly very drowsy, and it was an effort to speak. “You want my music.”

“Your music,” said the devil thoughtfully. “That’s a new one.” His eyes took on a faraway look. “He’s all right, that chap of yours, if you want to know. In full working order, if you get my meaning. Only he’s terrified you won’t want him, now that he has no legs. It’s taken him the best part of a week to finish that letter. Strange, wouldn’t you say, for somebody who calls himself a writer?”

“What letter?”

Lucifer narrowed his eyes and made a short, dismissive gesture with one hand, as if warning her not to make him lose his patience. “Don’t ask stupid questions. If you want to land yourself with a cripple that’s up to you, but never insult your own intelligence. Such behaviour is unworthy of you.”

He slipped the blanket from around his waist, folding it in four and replacing it on the floor by the stove. Then he crossed the room to the door. “Thank you for bringing me inside,” he said. “It’s a cold night out.”

The next second he was gone, bounding into the darkness, quick as a cat. Alena stirred and came fully awake. She could feel a freezing draught at her back, as if the door had come unfastened, but when she turned to look the loop of string was still firmly tied. The stove had burned down low, and the air seemed suffused with a great quietness. Snow lay on his blanket, unmoving.

Alena put another small log on the stove, watching as it caught alight. She felt uncertain of what had just happened, and already the details were fading, as even her most vivid dreams so often vanished as soon as she woke. And yet she sensed a continuing presence in the room, an aftermath. Perversely, the thought that she was not alone there comforted her. Quite suddenly she felt like working.

She took the manuscript pad from her music case, opening the pages carefully across her knees. In her final weeks in Tashkent she had begun work on a piece for full orchestra, a single symphonic movement in the form of a chaconne. She had taken her inspiration from the final movement of Brahms’s fourth symphony, a stately three-four progression that seemed to hover somewhere between noble endeavour and

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famished despair. She had heard Mravinsky conduct it once, and the symphony remained with her as an ideal, a perfect expression of both the passion that engendered creation and the discipline that was required to bring it about.

She thought of her chaconne as a requiem, but had been unable to decide who it was for. At first she intended it to be a simple expression of grief for her aunt, but as she got deeper into the work she wondered if she ought not to be writing about the children in the ice, about the things she had seen in Leningrad during the siege. The thoughts made her feel both guilty and inadequate. What had happened to her aunt was still too present, too awful to be anything to her yet other than the flat, hard recitation of the facts that came to her whenever she tried to think about it. And as for the other deaths, the children in the lake, the soldiers in the burning warehouse, she did not feel she had earned the right to comment.

In the end she decided to dedicate the chaconne to her sister Sofie. Sofie's death had happened far from her and in her absence and in that sense it was still an abstraction. It was the living Sofie she remembered. She found this made her easier to think about. She had scored double basses and low wind for the ground, then a latticework of violins over the top, the lines of music spiralling together like snowflakes in fugal progressions. She had come to think of the piece as her snow-fugue, even in the heady late autumn sunshine of Tashkent she had thought of it that way, and now that she had returned to the mud-splattered highways, the dense yellow fogs and bitter frosts of Ukraine in mid-November it seemed to her that the work as well as she had truly come home.

Just before leaving Tashkent she had decided to rework the piece slightly in order to include a part for solo cello. The cello had been Sofie's favourite instrument. For a while, when Alena first started to do well with the piano, Sofie begged to be allowed to have cello lessons. Their mother had eventually conceded, but Sofie hated to practise and soon gave up.

Alena wanted the cello to carry the fugue's main subject, to weave its way through the violins in a strong, dark, angular line, like a narrow but well-defined path through a dense tract of snow-bound forest. None of this, she saw now, was very like Sofie. Sofie had been diffident,

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ambiguous, her sensitive intelligence concealed beneath a cloak of shyness. She hated the rigours of winter almost as much as she had disliked practising the cello. Tashkent, with its fruit markets, its smiling women in their brightly-woven headscarves, was far more her spiritual home than the wastes of Ukraine.

The chaconne had more to say about Alena herself than it did about Sofie. Perhaps all art, in the end, was at least partly about the artist. Orest once told her that Bulgakov had put all of himself into his portrait of the Master, not just his own beliefs but the despair and frustration he suffered at the hands of the critics. Perhaps Margarita's destruction of Latunsky's piano was a justified literary expression of Bulgakov's pain.

Alena had seen Bulgakov once. Orest had pointed him out to her in the foyer when they went to see *The Days of the Turbins*, a tall figure with gaunt cheeks, wearing a beautiful lavender-grey suit and a blue silk bow tie.

"You wouldn't know it to look at him, but he's actually very ill," Orest had said. "He was badly wounded during the war. The pain would stop him from working if it weren't for the morphine. They say he's addicted to it, that it's slowly eating away at his insides. I suppose that's why he's grown so thin."

The playwright was surrounded by admirers, and Orest had not dared to approach him. Yet to Alena he had seemed like a shy man, withdrawn from the world in spite of the attention he was receiving. Not at all the kind of man who would smash up a piano.

An image came to Alena then of Margarita, not when she was trashing Latunsky's flat but immediately afterwards, riding her broomstick high above the roofs of Moscow, heading out of the city like an arrow shot from a crossbow, caught in the radiant gleam of a million lights. Bulgakov had described Margarita's night flight as a toboggan ride, and Alena understood what he meant, the broomstick bucking and dipping in the updrafts of air like the runners of a sled over the icy roots of trees as it careered downhill. Margarita's miraculous journey had taken place on a warm spring evening, but Alena found she could imagine it just as well and if not better in the depths of winter, because snow *was* hell, her visitor had been right about that. She had learned that during the siege.

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Her mind's eye opened wide, and she seemed to see Margarita in the midst of a snowstorm. Her broomstick had become a war horse, its heaving flanks the colour of ashes. *She was hell-bent*; the words came to Alena suddenly and clearly. Hell-bent on saving the Master, on living and dying in a way that felt like truth to her. Alena remembered how at the end of the novel the Master and Margarita were granted peace but not light. Perhaps this was because the truth really did have more of hell about it than it did of heaven.

Alena took her pencil and began sketching in the notes that would make up the cello line, a bold, continuous arc of sound, a broad triangular melody that swerved and coasted high above the prickly needle-fine jitters of the violins before swooping out of sight beyond the horizon. She worked on, fighting her tiredness, until she had drafted the part from beginning to end.

Snow-Fugue, she wrote on the title page. *To Margarita*. She was so exhausted by then that all the letters canted to the right, threatening to slide off the paper and into her lap.

The stove was almost out. Alena banked the embers with ash. She thought it best to conserve her supplies until she could be certain of getting more. The cat on his horsehair blanket lay very still. Alena lifted him in her arms and folded him inside her coat. If the little creature had to die that night at least he would not be alone and perished from cold. She leaned over and extinguished the lamp. In the moments before she slept Alena remembered a scene from *The Days of the Turbins*, in which Elena Talberg lamented over a tea service, its delicate porcelain china figured with gold. Before the war it was brought out only on special occasions but in recent months they had fallen into the habit of using it every day and several of the beautiful cups had been broken or chipped. It felt like that now to Alena, that the ruined armchair and Sofie's death and Orest's injuries were things that they, the people of Russia, had brought on themselves. It seemed to her that Snow, filthy from neglect and grown too weak to be saved even by love, was the last fragment of the life she had known before the war. Tonight it was breathing its last. Tomorrow she must let it go.

She smoothed the scant fur on Snow's head, remembering Lucifer leaping out into the night.

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She woke to cold, and a fine rain pattering against the windows. The stove had burned out completely. The light inside the dacha was a listless grey.

Snow lay dead in her arms. His tiny form seemed still further depleted, a collection of bones held together only by the skin that contained them. Alena did up her coat and took him outside, placing his body far back at the rear of the crawl space, where she had found him. She had once read that people in ancient Rus used to bury the body of a cat in the foundations of a house as some kind of good luck charm. Alena did not believe in such things, but it seemed important that Snow should be laid to rest close to his home.

She secured the door of the dacha with the loop of string and then set out to walk the two miles to Four Corners, where she knew there was a telegraph office that also doubled as a grocery store. The woman who ran it, Agafya Simonovna, had been serving behind the counter since Alena was a child.

“My God, Alenushka, it really is you, then,” she exclaimed. “The Milyukovs said you were back but I didn’t dare hope. We’ve had some potatoes delivered, can you believe it? They’re good ones, too. And there’s a letter just arrived for you this morning.”

She reached under the counter and brought out a square brown envelope. It was covered in date stamps and post marks, and looked as if it might have been opened, but it carried the stamp of Orest’s unit across the back.

“That new postman Timofeyka is so careless,” said Agafya Simonovna. “This envelope’s filthy. He must have dropped it or something.” She held the letter in her hand, turning it this way and that. “Those marks look just like paw prints, don’t they? Anyone would think he’d got that mangy old tomcat of his sorting the post for him. Goodness knows he’s lazy enough.” The old woman sighed. “Nothing would surprise me these days. Nothing at all.”

ТИЗ ТУДЯПД'У ШПТЗЯСОФТ

D.F. Lewis

The woman stood on the windswept platform with two children either side of her, both clasping her hands, it seemed, for dear life. Occasionally, she lowered her head to listen to their words which would otherwise be lost to the wind, or to exchange with them her own choice of words, in evident mutual encouragement.

The children knew they waited for a train: more likely to spot its smoke first, snaking above the nearby hills, even in advance of the hooting whistle being conveyed to them, even now, upon the driving wind. They also retained a beady eye for scrutinising the silver runners of the track for any telltale sign of the clacking's coming.

From behind the derelict station house, I approached the solitary threesome (guessing that such a few could sometimes feel more solitary than being truly alone as one). I could see the woman's wintercoat was weatherworn, but a bright yellow scarf at her neck relieved the dowdy appearance somewhat. She wore a large silver brooch depicting, I thought, a lizard, which secured the scarf against the cold's onset. The small children were dressed in khaki jerkins, tangled laddered stockings and threadbare berets with bobbles of hair poking through. They shivered visibly. They failed to see me, since I now crouched in the old ticket collector's booth, untenanted for decades – yet I could still sense the reek of that ticket collector's rank shag doing its best to conceal the ripeness of his soiled undergarments. Scattered around me were a number of clipped platform tickets, among which I had long since ascertained were no residue of used journeys from far off Leng, Samarkand and St Pancras. Yet, who'd ever disembark at this railway halt's neck of the woods? Surely, nobody.

The Tsarina's Wintercoat

The wind, in the interim, had died down to allow me to catch a good share of the threesome's words together.

"We'll be there before you can say 'Knife'. A roaring fire right up the chimney and you'll toast your hands – with Nanny's stories all stocked up, just waiting to be told..."

"Shall Nanny be pleased to see us?"

"She'll be so pleased, she'll dance a jig of joy and give you both big kisses on your rosy apple cheeks."

"And shall we stay there... to live for ever and ever and ever?"

"We'll live there so long into the future that the end will always be too far away to worry about."

"Look, I think I see black ghosts in the air."

"That's from the train's funnel. An ancient train by the look of the dark smoke it's giving off, but a warm one, with an endless corridor."

"I can't hear it yet. Is it really coming?"

"Yes, it'll be all darkness inside and those passengers in the Third Class will just have the reddening ends of their ciggies to watch."

Listening to them, I smiled to myself. I had feared that life outside my little world had not subsisted, ever since they closed the station waiting-room, the steamy buffet and the dark dripping Necessarium. I had been solitary for too long and the vision of such happiness was a tonic to my old heart. It was a pity that trains never stopped at this particular halt any more.

Momentarily losing interest in the threesome, I nibbled at one of the discarded tickets with my teeth, the taste of rich train smoke seeping to my lowest tongue of all. I slumped back in some meditative trance which was more than a little self-indulgent, because, by the time I looked from the web-choked cubicle again, the platform was deserted. Since I needed to keep exercising my limbs, I scuttled to where the threesome had stood. The wind was filling its own cheeks, I sensed, to fetch the tuggiest gust.

I picked up the lizard brooch that the woman must have accidentally dislodged from her scarf as she hustled her charges aboard before the train slid past them into the trundling echoes of darkness. The brooch wriggled and its tongue flickered quicker than any eye could see. Not a lizard brooch at all, but a large glistening insect the like of

which I'd never seen before, slugged out by the sudden arrival of winter. But I was wrong. In the hazy lights of the compartment it turned into a horned lizard again, now in the form of a brooch. I asked myself – what if on the reptile's back there was actually a tiny brooch? Wrong again. No, not a brooch but a sort of emblem laden with glory and decline – a crooked cross. The White Cross of St. Vladimiri. Mute spies or perhaps living souvenirs for those who were forced to go into exile. The only treasure a lady White was allowed to take with her on her last one way journey. Whatever it was, I've put it carefully on my tongue and let its golden fire warm my tired blood. A sweet taste of an ancient atonement oil stuck to the back of my mouth, impure and soothing. It is not well to spend such symbols in less than a providential way.

Nanny, awaiting the children's arrival, sewed long stitches into a battered wintercoat – listening to the wind howling the length of the chimney. Or was it the sound of those spiny creatures with sticky wings that haunted her dreams, now attempting to reach her in real life down that very flue? She was pleased that she had the fire roaring in the grate, serving both to warm the room and to keep such unwelcome chimney visitors at bay. Still hemming, she moithered over mythic miscegenations, versions of competing history, regal heirs and graces playing Russian Roulette with Fate, tentacular monsters who, in the same way as human beings, had insect-pests with which to contend – and, if only in her mind, she plucked unwanted fruit off the well-mulched family-tree. The clock pendulum swung idly to and fro in rhythm to her stitches. She still heard the mothballs clacking in the wintercoat's lining where she'd sewn them, but Nanny didn't know that I watched her from behind the clockcase, whereto I'd scuttled, black as coal, before she'd ignited the fire.

The two children watched the wreaths of black smoke billowing past the train window, as the wheels churned them through a wintering dusk. The leather strap that was used for raising and lowering the carriage window swayed gently with the clack-clack of bogies over runners. They knew the woman sat between them, still in wintercoat and yellow scarf, for the cold would have seeped otherwise into her every bone. I could have informed her charges that if she had doffed such impervious garb, she would have allowed the cold to seep out again.

The Tsarina's Wintercoat

A mature woman, at least, should show some semblance of common sense. The children felt her shudder in tune with the train. On either side, they had their hands tightened within hers. If they let go, they sensed they'd never see her again. Or was I sensing it on their behalf?

The train entered the darkest tunnel. I lit a cigarette, so that they could see I was there. There was no corridor, only autonomous carriages – so I knew for sure they were still there. The train hadn't stopped since they boarded it in the middle of nowhere.

I knew exactly how long the train would take to pass through the tunnel, having been on this journey, one way or another, for as long as I could remember. But they were new to its foibles. I listened to the children speaking, despite the surging tunnel.

“Why don't they have lights on trains?”

“Is Nanny still expecting us? Won't her fire have gone out?”

“Why don't you answer?”

The train emerged into light, too quickly for a blink, and revealed the answer. The two children were hand in hand, the wintercoat lying like an empty rhinoceros skin between them. I had scuttled to the window where, with jaws clacking, I pressed my suckers to the stained glass to keep myself steady, as I stubbed my ciggie on the 'out' of 'don't lean out of the window' and stropped my beetle pincers on the door's leather tongue.

With its heart of fire driving steam-power towards the almost prehensile pistons, the Victoria-Vienna-Moscow-Kadath Express screamed through the bewintered bewildered heritage of history: into another horizontal chimney of smokes and spooks, this time, so far, an endless one.

ТИЗ ЗЖОЦИТИЗ РЯФСЗЛЛ ФФ ГДЛА ГЛДАКФВ

R.B.Russell

When I heard the knock at the door on that Friday afternoon in early December I was in my workshop at the back of the house. I was carving some panels that were to form the backs of a set of chairs and the last thing I wanted was an interruption. Still, I thought, the caller might be for Anna rather than for me, and I decided to ignore the summons. After putting off the job for several weeks I had finally got down to the work and I was hoping to finish at least one panel before I gave up for the weekend. It was a surprisingly bright afternoon and I was enjoying not working by artificial light.

A slight change in pressure in the workshop told me that my wife had opened the front door at the other end of the house. There was almost immediately a distant exclamation of surprise and I could hear her inviting the visitor inside. She was talking excitedly to somebody as she brought them through the house, inevitably heading for my workshop. I looked up with annoyance, but when I saw that the caller was Nikolai Bednyi I put down my tools and told him how genuinely pleased I was to see him.

“I know I should’ve written to tell you I was coming...” he said.

I walked over and I gave him a hug that seemed to make him feel uncomfortable. It wasn’t the kind of thing we had ever done back when we had known each other so well at University.

“Is Maya not with you?” I asked him.

“He wouldn’t explain,” said Anna, concerned.

Nikolai looked from me to my wife and then took hold of her hand.

The Exquisite Process of Gala Gladkov

“I thought I should tell you together. Maya’s dead,” he announced.



It would have been an awkward reunion even without Nikolai’s tragic news. Somehow we had remained distantly in contact with him and Maya since University at Petersburg some thirty years earlier, but it was inevitable that the intimate friendship of the past had been neglected. When we had all acted together in the Theatre Group in the early 1900s we had been very close. We had witnessed the troops firing on the striking workers in 1905 and had believed that we would never see anything so horrific again. But then came the war, just as we were settling to marriage and jobs. Somehow Nikolai and I both survived when so many didn’t, and I settled in Toksovo with Anna, while he came back for Maya and returned to his family farm somewhere outside of Strelna. Perhaps we should have made the effort to see each other, there were opportunities, but the upheavals and uncertainties brought about by political terrors and years of shortages meant that we all had little concern for anything but our own survival. This was the first time, for instance, that Nikolai had ever visited us in Toksovo, and yet we had been living there for fifteen years.

In addition to the sad news we also had to come to terms with the fact that Maya had died six months earlier and Nikolai had not told us before.

“I was so upset,” he said. “Her family had to arrange the funeral. I forgot to let them know about old friends like you two. I should’ve written.”

“Don’t worry,” I told him. “It’d been a long time.”

We did understand and besides, we weren’t going to add to his distress.

“Would you mind if I stayed for a few days?” he asked.

“Of course we don’t.” My wife and I had replied almost in unison.

“We’d love to have you here,” added Anna. “How are you coping?”

“Not well, actually. There’s something I want to talk to you about,” he said to me. “But not now, not just yet.”

“Shall I leave you two?” asked Anna.

“I’m sorry,” he said, obviously realising that he sounded rude. “I have to do some thinking first.”

“Take as long as you like,” I assured him. “The room at the front of the house is all yours. We’ll make you up a bed there.”

“I think, perhaps, that I’d like to do some walking. I can get out into the forests easily enough from here?”

“Yes, just continue on up the road and there they are... Not that you’ll have many hours of daylight for walking, not at this time of year.”

“Thank you, thank you both,” he said, slightly pathetically.

Anna showed Nikolai to his room while I tidied my workshop and then cleaned myself up. When my wife came back I could hear her putting the kettle on the stove in the kitchen before coming out to talk to me.

“We’ve lost so many friends over the years,” she said. “And Maya was a friend so long ago, but time doesn’t mean anything. If she’d arrived with Nikolai it wouldn’t have mattered that we’d not talked in years.”

“I know,” I said, and we held each other tight. “I’m really upset, but I’m not sure if I have a right to be, not after all this time, not after everything we have all been through. But we’ll do what we can for Nikolai.”

“I’ll go and talk to him,” I said, and Anna unwillingly let me go.

“We will,” she said.

I kissed her forehead and went into the house, where I found Nikolai in the front room, staring out of the window.

“Six months isn’t long enough to come to terms with it,” I said.

“I still find it hard to believe she’s gone. The stupid thing is that every now and again I forget she’s dead. I’ll turn around to tell her something and be surprised that she’s not there.”

“I’m sorry. If there’s anything we can do...?”

“Thank you.”

“And please treat this place as your own.”

He lowered himself into one of our shabby armchairs. “As I said, there’s something I want to talk to you about, but I need some time to get it all sorted out up here,” he tapped his forehead with his index finger.

“Of course,” I said, resolving that I would be patient with him.



It took Nikolai several days before he would say anything. He did go out for walks, but he seemed singularly indifferent to the scenery or the weather. When we were able to observe him indoors he seemed

The Exquisite Process of Gala Gladkov

very preoccupied and at first we tried not to leave him to his own thoughts. He had told us that he wanted time to think, but it seemed natural to try and stop him from dwelling on matters that obviously upset him. When he decided to talk to me he chose an awkward time, but perhaps he realised that if he didn't say something at that particular moment then perhaps he would not say anything at all.

I was in my workshop still trying to carve the stylised foliage into one of the panels. The party official who had commissioned them was very embarrassed when he said what he wanted, but I was pleased that they weren't going to be entirely utilitarian. To make the panel match the preceding example took a lot of concentration, but Nikolai suddenly asked if I remembered us acting in a play by Ostrovsky.

"I do," I said, looking up. "And we weren't very good! It only ran for one week, to poor audiences? And on the last night the whole cast got exceedingly drunk in some awful bar."

"Something happened that very night," he said.

"Like what?"

"I don't know how to explain it. But something did, or so I'm told."

I laid down my tools, not realising that this apparently random recollection was the matter that he had come over from Strelina to talk about.

"Are you telling me that our bad performance was what persuaded you to take up your career in farming, and mine in carpentry?"

He was lost in thought, not registering my lame attempt at a joke. Then, as though this preamble was totally unrelated, he said: "Two months ago, one Saturday evening, I was at home. It was almost midnight and I was ready to go to bed when there was a loud knocking at my door. It was completely unexpected. The fire had burnt down in the grate and my eyelids were heavy. I think I'd been determined to finish the book I was reading, but I was about to admit defeat and turn in for the night."

Nikolai was staring out of the window at the view out towards the forests, but I don't believe that he saw anything.

"It was an appalling night," he continued. "The rain was lashing at the front of the house and I did wonder whether I hadn't imagined it. But no, three distinct knocks came again."

“Now, you may think you’re pretty isolated up here in Toksovo, but a visitor to our house at any time of day is a rarity because we’re so isolated, even though we’re only a few miles from Strelna.”

Then he shook his head and said “I keep saying ‘we’...”

“It’s alright. Carry on,” I assured him. I swept away the shavings and sat on my bench.

“A caller so late on a winter’s night was almost unimaginable. I got up warily, sensing trouble, or bad news, and went into the hall. When I opened the door I did so cautiously. I found on the step a man I didn’t recognise who was probably a little older than me. He was wearing a large waxed coat that didn’t appear to be very effective in the driving rain, and he was very apologetic. He asked if I knew a blacksmith or a wheelwright because his carriage was damaged and needed repair.

“I explained that it was some miles to Strelna and he was quite upset. He asked if there was any accommodation locally, and I said no. I was loath to ask him in, he was a complete stranger, but then he said that his wife was still sheltering in the stricken carriage. He said she was unwell and I had no choice but to offer them a bed for the night. I asked if I could help him bring his wife up to the house.

“‘Oh no,’ he thanked me. ‘She can walk.’

“I felt a little strange letting him back out into the wild night, and it was some time before the knock came again at the door. By then I’d stoked-up the fire and in the kitchen I’d put on the kettle.

“I found my visitors standing on the doorstep looking forlorn and miserable. I insisted they both immediately go through to the front room while I found some towels.

“When I got back the woman said to me, almost inaudibly, ‘We are very, very grateful.’ She looked much older than her husband, and moved slowly, but no slower than any other elderly woman might do. They took the towels and agreed to let me make them coffee. I offered them vodka but they said they didn’t drink alcohol.

“When I returned ten minutes later with hot drinks he was drying the woman’s hair for her and put the towel down to take both of the cups. ‘I know these roads a little, by daylight,’ he was saying, ‘but on a night like this...’

The Exquisite Process of Gala Gladkov

“I told him that there was a blacksmith I could recommend just three miles away. It wasn’t really that far to walk normally, but on a night like that...”

Nikolai seemed to register my presence suddenly. “You’ve not visited us out near Strelna, have you?”

I shook my head and he admonished himself again for saying “us”.

“You should come over,” he said absently, and then resumed. “And then I noticed the woman. She said something very quietly like ‘We don’t want to impose,’ and she was staring at me intently in a manner that I found very disconcerting.

“The man said that they didn’t want to cause any trouble; they would stay in the front room until morning. I told them I had a second bedroom and I only needed to get out some clean sheets. He didn’t seem to know whether to be pleased or disapprove, but the weather outside had turned more violent.

He insisted on helping his wife to sit down in a chair, and he draped the towel around her shoulders. Then he moved her cup of coffee on to the table beside her.

“ ‘My wife suffers from an obscure form of premature aging,’ he said.

“I tried to sympathise, saying something about my mother and her aches and pains, but he was having none of it:

“ ‘My wife’s symptoms are quite extreme,’ he said, effectively putting an end to my bland attempt at sympathy. He said that she was only forty-nine, the same age as me! This left me flailing around for an appropriate reply. She looked at least thirty years older.

“ ‘I’m sorry,’ I replied, as simply and as levelly as I could, and all he could say was ‘Yes, well...’ His tone was confrontational and made me feel uncomfortable.

“ ‘Do you live here alone?’ he asked.

“I said that I did, and was about to explain that I was recently widowed when he said ‘It seems like a very large house for one person.’

“I told him about Maya, wondering why I had to explain this to a complete stranger. ‘My wife and I used to have a large farm and farmhouse,’ I explained, ‘but we had to move here.’

“ ‘Much more equitable,’ he said, and, really, I know I shouldn’t complain, but to be lectured by him when I was offering him my hospitality!

“ ‘You were married?’ asked the woman with such a tone of surprise that I was rather taken aback. Her husband changed the subject. ‘You have some expensive-looking paintings and ornaments.’

“I explained that our nicest pieces were there in the front room, to show them off.

“ ‘It isn’t in keeping with the new, modern Russia,’ said the man. ‘You’re clinging to a past that is no longer relevant.’ ”

“It’s something one hears all too often,” I told Nikolai, remembering the family pieces that Anna and I had been forced to part with.

“I decided that we should start again,” said Nikolai. “I said that we hadn’t introduced ourselves properly and that my name was Nikolai Bednyi.

“ ‘Vasili Gladkov,’ he replied, and walked over and gave me a curiously formal handshake. ‘And my wife is called Gala.’

“I said something about it being good to meet the both of them, in spite of the unfortunate circumstances. It was really very awkward because Gala Gladkov was still staring at me, as though desperate to catch my eye or communicate with me. I noticed that she was not drinking her coffee and I explained that it wasn’t the real thing, of course, but I hoped that it was to her taste.

“ ‘It’ll be fine,’ Mr Gladkov answered for her. ‘Gala can’t very well pick it up, and certainly shouldn’t try to when it’s hot.’

“I apologised and he insisted that it wasn’t a problem. But he’d dismissed my thoughtlessness rather too quickly, and an awkward silence followed. To alleviate it I asked:

“ ‘Were you travelling far tonight?’

“ ‘Back to Leningrad, from visiting friends in Petrodvorets,’ he replied. ‘We were horribly delayed.’

“ ‘I used to know the city when it was Saint Petersburg,’ I said, attempting to be friendly. I made a joke about it having been a completely different city in between, Petrograd, but he didn’t share my sense of humour.

The Exquisite Process of Gala Gladkov

“And then she said something like, ‘It’s such a shame.’ She said it so quietly that I wasn’t sure I’d heard her correctly, and I certainly didn’t know what she was referring to.

“ ‘Calling the great city after Lenin is fitting! It is just!’ said the man, and I would’ve been inclined to tell him to go and wait in his carriage if I hadn’t felt so sorry for his rather strange wife. But, really, she was making me feel very uncomfortable as well. She’d returned her absorbed gaze to me.

“ ‘You don’t approve of the glorious Revolution?’ her husband persisted, annoying me further.

“I think I told him that our country was a better place for it, but the discomfort of the situation increased. He walked over to his wife and proceeded to help her drink the coffee. He lifted the cup to her lips, with a handkerchief at her chin to catch any drips, and none of us spoke. I didn’t feel inclined to make any more small-talk, and anyway, I wasn’t sure that it would’ve been appropriate while he was carefully helping her.

“I went and prepared their bed. It was easily done and when I returned I told them that I was tired and that they were welcome to retire for the night whenever they wanted to. To my great relief they agreed to do just that. I showed him the room and explained the other arrangements, and he went back to help his wife out of her chair.

“Later, before we all retired, I passed her on her own in the hall and said goodnight. In reply she quietly said: ‘You really don’t know who I am, do you?’

“I wasn’t sure that I’d heard her correctly because of the sound of the rain and wind, and I didn’t have the chance to reply because her husband appeared and wished me good night.”

“Did she get the chance to explain her comment?” I prompted Nikolai, and he nodded.

“Eventually, yes. The following morning Vasili Gladkov set off to find the blacksmith and left me with the company of his wife. I asked her if she thought she knew me and at first she was so tearful she was almost incoherent. She asked if I remembered all kinds of things, and when I denied all knowledge of them she became upset. She said we’d

first met in Petersburg. She said that she was staying there with other students who had come up from Moscow. While she was there she'd seen an amateur performance of a play by Ostrovsky..."

"Not our production?"

"Apparently, yes."

"What a coincidence."

"I didn't know what to think about it. Apart from anything else, I was certain that the poor old woman was mixing me up with another person entirely. All the details, except those of the play, seemed to be sheer fabrication."

"She'd have been our age?"

"Having seen her in my house thirty years later it was hard to believe, but yes."

"And this is the business that's been troubling you?"

"Yes. It's related to Maya, though not in any way you can possibly imagine."

At this point in his narrative we heard the front door open and Anna coming into the house.



We didn't resume the conversation until later that evening. I told Anna that Nikolai had started to talk to me about what was troubling him and she decided to go up to bed strategically early. Nikolai and I were alone in the front room and we had started on a bottle of vodka that he had brought with him.

"The prematurely aging woman?" I prompted him.

"Ah yes. And that play..."

"Didn't you have some romantic intrigue with a girl that last night of the play?"

"I did, and that was Gala Gladkov."

"Then, apart from the coincidence, what an amazing memory the woman had. Imagine her recognising you all these years later."

"I said to her that it had been a long time ago," Nikolai continued. "And she replied that it had been twice as long for her as it'd been for me. When I said that I didn't understand she managed to compose herself, and started to explain.

The Exquisite Process of Gala Gladkov

“ ‘I don’t know if it is really much of a coincidence coming across you?’ she said. ‘I’ve spent the last thirty years looking at every face in every crowd, hoping to see you again. I moved to Petersburg in the hope of finding you, hoping you were still there. I knew it was probably a forlorn hope. In all these years so many people have died, or moved... But I’ve never really given up looking, and then, last night, you let us into your house. But you didn’t recognise me.’

“At which she started to cry.

“ ‘You don’t remember how we met?’ she asked. ‘No, why would you remember? As far as you were concerned we talked for a half hour, kissed briefly on the Bank Bridge...’

“ ‘The one with the griffins?’

“ ‘That’s right, over the Catherine Canal, although we now have to call it the Griboedov Canal. We kissed, and then I stormed off into the night with my friend Tonya.’

“She looked into a bag she was clutching and pulled out a photograph unmistakably of herself when younger.

“ ‘That was me at about the time we met.’ And it was a bit of a shock looking at it, you know? It was then that I suddenly remembered that I *had* kissed a girl on that bridge with the griffins on the abutments, and that she *had* run off into the night after acting very strangely. I had a feeling like vertigo. But after all this time, dredging the event up from where it had lain undisturbed for so many years in my memory, I couldn’t recall any of the details... I admitted this and she became upset once more.

“ ‘I was Gala Krylov back then,’ she said.

“ ‘I’m really sorry,’ I told her, as carefully as I could. ‘We obviously did meet, but I’ve a poor memory.’

“Eventually she calmed down, but then she started claiming that she’d never called me Nikolai, and there were tears in her eyes. ‘It’s silly,’ she said, ‘but your friends called you Bednyi and I stupidly thought it was your first name. I always called you Bednyi after that.’

“I asked her if this was on the night we’d met.

“ ‘Yes, and *afterwards*,’ she said, and paused. ‘I know that you have a long scar on your left arm, from an accident on your family’s farm as a child.’ ”

“She’s got one hell of a memory,” I suggested to Nikolai. I had seen the scar.

“‘You used to love the music of Tchaikovsky,’ she told me. ‘You prefer to sleep on the right hand side of a bed, no matter whether you are at home or staying somewhere different. When you were about thirty-two your wisdom teeth gave you so much pain they had to be removed.’”

“She asked if I was right and I said she was. I asked how she knew all this.

“Her answer was ‘Because, my darling, after that night on the bridge with the four griffins in Petersburg we went to Moscow and lived together for nearly thirty years.’”

I shook my head: “It’s alright Nikolai. You aren’t going mad. I can attest to the fact that for thirty years you were with Maya, not this other woman.”

“Thank you,” he smiled weakly. “But she then told me that I’d probably still have my late father’s cufflinks. They’re not real gold, but I do wear them on special occasions. And she knew other things.”

“Presumably she had some way of finding all of this out?” I asked.

“I don’t know how. She told me that I collected cigarette packets.”

“Well, you used to.”

“I did, but Maya was never particularly impressed, so I collected stamps instead. But this woman, Gala, claimed, ‘I was always very happy for you to collect cigarette packets. In fact, I encouraged you to...’”

“I remember,” I said to Nikolai. “After the play we were drinking and you went outside with this girl. You said you’d kissed her, but then she’d started accusing you of all kinds of strange things. She was really very angry with you, but she seemed to’ve mixed you up with somebody else. Back in the bar we made fun of you for trying to kiss a madwoman.”

“But thirty years later, in my house near Strelna, this woman said that after we kissed she’d smuggled me back to the hostel where she was staying with her friends!”

“She was fantasising.”

“Perhaps, but then she said some more things that worried me. She said that I’d been writing light operatic pieces.”

“Well, you used to in those days.”

The Exquisite Process of Gala Gladkov

“She said there was a song about a woman called Nadezhda.”

“I remember it.”

“And another that was a kind of sea-shanty.”

“It was called ‘Breaking Point’.”

“And another very beautiful song, apparently, called ‘The Saddest Eyes’.”

“I don’t remember that one.”

“No, nor do I! But she insisted it was written afterwards, in a life that we’d lived together.”

“She’s clearly very confused.”

“Is she?”

“You don’t mean that you gave credence to her story?”

“I met her again last week. Gala says that when we first met we fell passionately in love and our relationship lasted for thirty years... Don’t shake your head like that until you’ve heard me out...”

“Gala said that in the last year or so of us being together there were misunderstandings and arguments. In a fury one day she insisted that she wished she’d never met me all those years ago. She said that she knew a way of turning back time and she was so angry with me that she did just that. She found herself nineteen again, back on Bank Bridge in Saint Petersburg, and instead of inviting me back to her hostel she shouted at me and ran off into the night. She remembered what had happened before, but as far as the rest of the world was concerned those thirty years with me had never occurred. In the confusion of suddenly being back in Saint Petersburg, and being nineteen again, she went back to Moscow where she met Vasili Gladkov. By the time she’d really understood all of the implications of what had happened, she’d also realised her mistake in leaving me behind on that bridge. But it was too late to track me down.”

“And you’d gone on to meet Maya...”

“Exactly.”

“And you believe all this?” I asked him.

“I don’t know, but she does. She says that she was pleased to be young again, but she found herself aging at twice the normal rate. At thirty she looked forty, at forty she looked sixty, and so on. It’s taken its toll; it seems that you can’t turn back time with impunity.”

“If she’d lived with you for thirty years and knew you as well as she says she did, then of course she’d have been able to track you down. She’d know where you lived, where your parents and friends came from.”

“Gala says that at that moment on the bridge my two alternative lives diverged markedly. The first time around, the life she experienced with me that I wouldn’t remember, I had success with my songwriting and acting. We moved down to Moscow together and I really made a name for myself. We were successful and busy and didn’t see anything of old friends or relatives, and then the war came and we got through it comfortably. We did well under Stalin, and managed even to be favoured by Lenin.”

“So, do you really believe that you might have had another life with this woman?”

“It’s theoretically possible.”

“But practically it’s impossible.”

“She’s told me how it might be done. In theory I could go back to that time on Bank Bridge. I could run after her and beg her to stay. I could see what that life might have been like, with her, with success.”

“And what about your life with Maya?”

“Or I could go back to that bridge and live my whole life again, with Maya. I’ve been agonising over what choice I would make.”

“But why put yourself through the agony? You can’t go back so there’s no reason to worry about choices.”

“Gala entrusted me with the secret before she died.”

“She’s dead?” I asked.

He nodded. “Once she had explained her process she insisted on going out of the house. It was still raining and I wasn’t inclined to follow her. I watched her from the window as she walked across the back yard towards the well. I had no idea what she intended to do. She sat on the side of the well and allowed herself to fall backwards into it.”

“How horrible!”

“She did it just as her husband returned with the carriage repaired. We got her out with trouble, but it was too late.”

“But if she really knew how to turn back time, why didn’t she do it again? And then a few years later do it again, and again?”

The Exquisite Process of Gala Gladkov

“She said that after you’ve done it the first time you realise that it’s only available to you the once. She said that if I ever tried the process then I’d understand.”

“You’re not seriously thinking about trying it?”

“Why not? What’ve I got to lose?”

“Everything that you have here!”

“But there’s nothing here for me without Maya.”

“Well, I’m not sure how I’d feel about you wiping out my life for a start! I assume that nobody else gets to go back with you? What happens to this thread of history if you return to Bank Bridge thirty years ago? What makes you think you won’t start a whole new third thread in which you end up without either Maya or Gala?”

“I’d take that risk. At the moment I have neither of them.”

“But I’m quite comfortable here with Anna and my carpentry. And you’re happy to destroy that through snapping your fingers?”

“If I do manage to go back and make my choice, then you’ll inevitably be back there in Petersburg with me, only you won’t remember any of this.”

“But will you remember? Would you be able to make an informed choice?”

“Gala says that I’d know. And as for you, you’ll still meet Anna and become a carpenter and come to live here. The only thing I’ve got to decide is whether I want to go back and watch Gala run off into the night, or follow her.”



I didn’t know how to react to Nikolai’s story. I was about to laugh at it all when I realised that he was completely in earnest. I did gently suggest that he ought to talk to a doctor, but he was upset at the suggestion that he was ill and needed help. We did discuss the matter further, going around in circles because, as he said, there was a very simple method of ascertaining the truth. All he had to do was start the process that Gala Gladkov had explained to him. If it failed then he said that he would know himself to have been a fool. But if it worked...

I went to bed that night annoyed with my old friend, but also interested by the theoretical questions posed by his story. I wanted to discuss it all with Anna but she was already asleep.

Waking up the next morning I still had his story going around my head and walking past his room I saw that the door was open. The curtains had not been drawn and the bed did not appear to have been slept in. I had an awful presentiment of what might have happened.

Nikolai had obviously walked out of the house at some time during the night, and he never returned. His bag was still in his room with his clothes, his papers and some money. We informed the authorities and there was an extensive search, but nothing was ever found of him. A dog tracked him into the forest but then the scent suddenly stopped.

I had to explain what his state of mind was to a detective who quite rightly dismissed Nikolai's preoccupations with the stories of Gala Gladkov. Some time later, though they did confirm that the woman had recently died in an accident at Nikolai's place in Toksovo.

I don't know if Nikolai Bednyi ever reappeared or was officially pronounced dead. It wouldn't matter to him, Anna grimly joked one day; presumably the thread of time we inhabit was no longer of any interest to him.

I do not believe his story, but I do not know what happened to him. I do think, though, that he was convinced that Gala's process, whatever it was, would work. And I'm intrigued to know what decision he would have made: to live his life quietly again with Maya, whom he obviously loved, or to take a chance with Gala and follow a potentially successful career. I didn't really know him well enough, not in recent years, to be able to suggest which thread he would have chosen to follow.

СДІЗ' МФЯРИПІЗ

Eric Stener Carlson

Benjamín looked out of the coach window with blurry eyes, as the train lurched to a halt. Snow was falling softly on the platform outside, the flakes illuminated by three cones of bright, electric lighting, rocking gently in the wind. Outside those cones, everything was darkness.

As the train let out steam, the snow within its reach instantly evaporated, and, for a moment, even the falling snow disappeared. But then the steam dissipated, and the snow started falling again and began to cover up the recently-made puddles on the platform.

Benjamín started shaking off the stupor of the journey. Snow? It was July, for God's sakes. How could there be snow?

Then he glanced at his wristwatch. It was three o'clock in the morning. Where were they stopping now? It must be somewhere mountainous, for the cold. He was sure they'd gotten somewhere beyond the eastern frontier of Poland. Ukraine? West Belarus? East Belarus? Time and place were such a muddle in his head.

The train had stopped so many times, and without any explanation whatsoever. And, since all the platforms looked the same to Benjamín, for all he knew, they could be stopping at the same platform they'd stopped at four – or was it six? – hours ago. Perhaps they'd circled back to pick up more coal.

His eyes began to swim, and his hands began to tremble. He looked up at his suitcase in the luggage rack above him and thought of that small, rectangular, wooden box, with the little, brass catch. It would be so easy.

But, no, he couldn't, not with those two men on the bench opposite him watching. He glanced over at them. They were still gesticulating

passionately and yammering away in German – and sometimes French – about some philosophical argument of which Benjamín only caught fragments, ever since they'd bundled themselves into the wagon in Berlin, in identical grey overcoats, wearing identical gray mufflers and grey, woolen caps pulled down to their bushy eyebrows. In fact, they were similar in every way, except that one's heavy, brown mustache was rather unkempt and the other's was trimmed neatly.

Benjamín had silently dubbed them, “Esteemed Herr Doktor Professor Eins” and “Esteemed Herr Doktor Professor Zwei”, and they hadn't addressed a single word to him the whole journey long. If only they'd been speaking Arabic or Urdu or some other language Benjamín didn't know, then it would have been more bearable. But their Hochdeutsch was so close to his Yiddish that he couldn't block it out, and, out of the drone of incomprehensible, philosophical jargon that formed the background of that night's struggle to sleep, stark fragments would suddenly emerge out of the darkness to assault him.

Some time in the middle of the night, Benjamín was jolted out of his sleep by the phrase, “But Kant is very clear that space and time are *a priori* intuitions, and can only be such!”

From what Benjamín could gather, this came from Herr Doktor Professor Eins, to which Herr Doktor Professor Zwei responded, “Enough of your Kantian nativism!” However, in the darkened wagon, it was hard for Benjamín to distinguish which one was which and from where, exactly, the voices were coming.

“Kantian nativism!” responded the bushy moustache (it seemed to Benjamín). “Kantian nativism!” he repeated, and from the tone in his voice Benjamín imagined that the bloated face around that moustache was turning purple with indignation. “Then what have you got to say about the Heidegger galleys. Yes, Heidegger! I'll write my article yet.”

“Oh, don't you dare mention those galleys to me again! Your editor should never have sent them to you. Never!”

“Yes, I *will* mention to them, because I'm going to build my article around the most important phrase, and I quote: ‘If our access to God is faith...’”

“Stop! Stop! I can't take it any more,” said the first moustache (or was it the second?).

Café Morphine

“You will hear me out! You will,” said the first. “After all your drivel about Hegel all the way from Luxembourg: ‘If our access to God is faith and if involving oneself with eternity is nothing other than this faith, then philosophy will never be able to employ eternity methodologically as a possible perspective in which to discuss time.’”

“But the revolution cannot admit even a *reference* to God!” retorted the other.

To which, the other replied, “Exactly! Then you agree with me!”

Benjamín felt like his head was about to swell and burst, but then the two moustaches mercifully lapsed into Latin, and he could start blocking them out, lengthy conjugation by lengthy conjugation.

If he could only take his bag and go to the bathroom... But the latch on the bathroom door was broken, and he couldn't be assured of privacy. No, no. He would have to wait. He would have to wait until they stopped for a certain amount of time, and then he could get out and do it.

After all, it wasn't like he *needed* it. He rubbed his shoulder and prodded the old place with his fingertips. A little stiff, but it wasn't bothering him as much. Then again, if he could just get to his little box, it would help him deal with the stress of the journey. And, after the journey, he'd promised himself he would stop for a week, a full week without it. By then the conference would be in full swing.

“Oh, the conference!” he thought, and his shoulder suddenly ached. He'd wanted this. He'd volunteered for this... but now he didn't know.

The journey had started out well enough two months ago, with a clear sense of direction. But it was now such a jumble in his head.

The steamer from Buenos Aires to Paris. (He'd been sick most of the crossing, but even that part of the journey had a feeling of *Direkt Aktion* to it, a feeling that he was doing something tangible for the proletariat.) Then, the train ride from Paris down to Madrid...

As he thought of Madrid, Benjamín pressed his head to the window pane, and it felt ice cold. A shiver ran through his whole body, and he wondered whether the window really was that cold, or whether his forehead was hot. Was he feverish?

He sat back in the bench and thought, “Yes, Madrid was fascinating.” He'd just stared and stared at Goya's *Los Fusilamientos del 3 de*

Mayo in El Prado for he didn't know how long. And then there was el Teatro Real. Even the streetcars, how they clanged furiously up and down the street, and everyone seemed to be going somewhere important, to a speech or to a rally. The PSOE was poised to join the Comintern, he was sure of it, and then there'd be one more ally in Europe.¹ All the time in Madrid, he'd run after the crowds, seeing if he could join in.

In his ears, he could hear the clang-clang of the streetcars so clearly. He could smell the *tortas* and the *empanadas* from the bakeries off the main streets, he could feel the cobblestones under his shoes. It was as if he was back there again.

Then interwoven between the sights and sounds, he felt the guilt again, and he chided himself for having taken this "vacation" like a petite bourgeois, while workers were fighting back in Argentina, while workers were dying. But he tried to console himself with the fact that he *had* to wait for the RILU² to process his papers, and he couldn't get into Moscow without them.

And he had tried to do something *meaningful* with his experience, tried to write down his impressions and send it to the editors of *The Red Lighthouse* in Brussels.

But his attempt at writing was a complete failure. All he'd accomplished was to fill his *pensión* room's waste basket with a mountain of crumpled balls of paper and two nubs of broken pencils. And he was filled with such feelings of vacillation. Why couldn't he enjoy himself doing nothing? And why couldn't he take advantage of opportunities to act when they presented themselves?

Then his mind returned from the Madrid to his immediate surroundings. Maybe he had just enough time to find a bathroom on the platform?

Benjamín cleared his throat and leaned towards the two philosophers. "*Wie lange haben wir hier Zeit?*" Benjamín asked, and, suddenly,

¹ Partido Comunista Obrero Español, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party.

² The Bolshevik "Red International of Labour Unions" (RILU) was established in 1920.

Café Morphine

the eyes of the two philosophers bulged wide. They turned their faces to him and looked in astonishment. Then they said in unison, “Where did you come from?”

“Where did I come from’?” Benjamín repeated. “You mean my country of origin?”

“No, no,” they continued in unison. “Where did you just appear from?”

“What do you mean ‘appear from’?” Benjamín said, and he immediately felt foolish for repeating everything they were asking him. “I’ve been sitting across from you for at least the past 24 hours, while you were discussing Kant and this Heidegger fellow.”

“Esteemed Herr Doktor Profesor Eins” and “Esteemed Herr Doktor Professor Zwei” exchanged horrified glances, and the one with the well-trimmed moustache demanded, “How long have you been eavesdropping on our conversation?”

“E-eavesdropping?” stuttered Benjamín, getting flustered that he was still repeating what they’d just said. “I’d hardly call it eavesdropping. I’ve been sleeping through most of it, but I must say your conversation was hard to ignore. You do have some nerve!”

Just as the bushy moustache was about to make a retort, the car door wheeled open suddenly, and the conductor poked his head in. He looked from the two moustaches to Benjamín, pulled out his pocket watch on a heavy steel chain and said something totally incomprehensible – at least to Benjamín – in Russian.

The two men stood up, picked up their coats and began to back up towards the door, eyeing Benjamín suspiciously.

Benjamín, for his part, asked the conductor, this time in English, “How long are we stopping?”

The conductor screwed up his face and, again, said something incomprehensible in Russian.

Benjamín responded, “*Deutsch? Español? Italiano?*” but each word elicited a blank stare. Benjamín shook his head, raised his shoulders and pointed to his watch; in response, the conductor held out ten fingers twice.

“Twenty? Twenty minutes?” Benjamín asked.

“*Da, da,*” the conductor said and disappeared through the door.

Benjamín jumped up, grabbed his overcoat and, glancing around to make sure no one was watching, he opened his suitcase, pulled out the small wooden box and surreptitiously hid it under his coat.

The whole wagonload of passengers was pushing their way to the platform, a long stream of grey coats to the door. As he was coming down the metal steps, he saw the two moustaches whispering to a guard in a long, grey overcoat and a faux-fur hat with a red star pinned on it. They gestured towards Benjamín, and then they rushed off into the dark interior of the station.

Benjamín braced himself for it, and clutching the little box even tighter under his coat, he reached with his free hand to pull out his documents.

He'd only taken two steps from the train, when the guard stopped him.

"Papers, please," the guard said, matter-of-factly, just like the plain clothes cops back in Buenos Aires when they filter through a protest making arrests.

"Of course, my good man," Benjamín said, and then he immediately regretted what he'd said, when he saw the stony grimace on the guard's face. "I mean *c-comrade*. Of course, comrade," Benjamín said, and to his horror, he could feel the wooden box slipping out from under his arm, but he tried not to call attention to the fact.

"Name, please," the guard continued, although he had just examined Benjamín's passport in minute detail.

"Benjamín Aaron Bertollini Hempel," he said, and wiggled his arm a bit to keep the box in place.

"What nation are you from?"

"Argentina."

The guard looked up from his passport and studied Benjamín's face, like an algebra teacher who's sure he's just caught a student glancing at another boy's exam. "No," he said. "You are a Jew."

Benjamín replied, his voice quavering a bit, "No, I'm *not* a Jew. I am an Argentine, because I was born in the Argentine Republic. You see," he said, pointing emphatically at his passport, while clamping down tighter on the wooden box to keep it in place, "there it is."

The guard continued in the same monotone, "Hempel is a Jew name."

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Benjamín felt his forehead suddenly burning up, and now he was sure he had a fever. If only the guard would stop pestering him, so he could get to the bathroom! But Benjamín decided to bite his tongue and said “Yes, yes, quite right, my good... *comrade*. My father was a Jew – Hempel – but my mother – Bertollini – is Italian, so, technically, I’m not Jewish. Anyway, the point is *academic*, because I don’t believe in any religion. The only thing I believe in is in rights for all working men and women.” God, thought Benjamín, why did that just sound so phony coming from him?

The guard cracked a faint smile, as if he’d caught Benjamín in another lie, and asked, “So, you say you are an academic? At what institute do you teach?”

“No, no,” Benjamín said, getting flustered. Glancing over the guard’s shoulder, he saw a light flash in the dark interior of the station, and, for the briefest of moments, he heard the clinking of glasses and the scratching of metal chairs being pushed back on wooden floors. “*I’m* not an academic. The *point* is academic about whether I am a Jew or not, because, since my mother isn’t Jewish, then the Jews, according to their laws, wouldn’t accept me as a Jew... if I were interested in being one, which I’m not. I’m an Argentine.”

Oh, God, Benjamín thought, here was one of the great ironies of life. Back in Argentina, any time he got picked up for interrogation, he’d always try to convince the authorities he wasn’t a “Russian” (meaning an anarchist) but a Jew. And now, he was trying to convince the Russians that he wasn’t a Jew but an Argentine. Then he told himself he’d better calm down, for his own sake. God bless the Russians, he thought, shaking his head, whatever their faults, at least they call a Jew a Jew.

“But your name...” the guard began.

Benjamín felt his hands trembling and his mouth going dry as sandpaper. He thought about the light flashing in the depths of the station and was sure it was a café. “You know what, *comrade*?” Benjamín asked, “You’re right. *I am* a Jew. But if you’ll just take a look at my letter of introduction, you’ll see I’m also a union representative. You see, it’s signed by Andreas Nin, himself, Secretariat of the Red International of Labour Unions in Madrid. I’m here for the RILU’s first organizing

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conference in Moscow on July 3rd, 1921. I am the *Argentine* delegate to this conference, and I am an *invited guest* of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, so I sincerely hope you let me pass in the name of the workers,” he ended with an unexpected flourish.

The guard looked from the letter, to Benjamín’s passport photo, and then to his face. Then he asked in the same monotone, “So you no longer deny you’re a Jew?”

Benjamín stifled a moan and said between his teeth, “No, I no longer deny I’m a Jew.”

The guard looked past him for a moment, as if he was staring into empty space. Then, looking back to him, he said, “Good. Next time, it will be faster, if you just answer the question.”

Then the guard folded up Benjamín’s papers and handed them back to him, saying, “Move along,” and then walked down the platform with his hands behind his back, whistling *Flight of the Valkyries* softly under his breath and staring up at the falling snow.

Benjamín stood still for a moment, looking after the guard, perplexed, and then he rushed off into the darkness.

After feeling his way along with the tips of his shoes for several meters, trying not to fall on the slippery surface, Benjamín came to a wall with a rectangular halo of light around it. He groped for a door-knob or a handle, but the surface felt strangely soft and furry. Then he decided to just push as hard as he could with his shoulder, and the furry thing gave way, and he stumbled forward into the shining-bright interior of a café.

Blinking painfully under the electric lights, Benjamín now understood what the flashing light had been. A heavy curtain – that furry thing – had been pulled across the entrance to keep out the cold, and any time someone passed in or out, the light from the inside blinked out onto the platform and then disappeared like a will-o’-the-wisp.

The café was rather more posh than Benjamín had expected. The whole interior was full of dark wooden paneling, the white tablecloths had been crisply starched, and the waiters – all of a respectable age – were bustling to and fro, wearing hunter green waistcoats and bussing trays with large tankards of beer. In fact, it looked less like a café somewhere at the back of a forgotten railway stop in Eastern Europe than

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a Bavarian hunter's lodge, as clean and neat as something out of a book. As if to prove the point, here and there along the wall, heads of antelope, deer and wild boar were mounted on wooden plaques bordered with green felt the same shade of the waiters' waistcoats.

The place was absolutely packed, and Benjamín noted with some chagrin that Moustache #1 and Moustache #2 had already installed themselves in the depths of the café, near the warmth of a cheery, wood-burning stove and at a rather ample table with four chairs, upon two of which they had thrown their coats.

No, he couldn't sit down with them, not after they'd ratted him out to the guard as some sort of suspicious, foreign national. But there was no other table free...

But wait! There was one small table with two chairs, set into a nook in the wall, almost invisible from the front of the café. Thanking his luck, Benjamín hurried to the table, plunked down his hat and coat and carefully lodged his small, wooden case under one of his armpits.

Then he called to the nearest waiter, "*Toilette, baño, WC?*", and the waiter pointed him to a door under the small staircase...

When he returned from the bathroom, Benjamín had somewhat regained his composure. He was no longer so nervous. His hands weren't trembling, and he felt that old, familiar assurance, kindling the fire of hope inside of him.

He wasn't hungry now, as often happened afterwards, but he knew he'd have to eat something. On the crossing over in the steamer, he'd fainted once, having forgotten to eat for two whole days.

When he got to his table, he buttoned his shirt cuff and bent down to hide the wooden box amongst his things. When he looked up to take his seat, however, he was somewhat taken aback to see a smallish man, with a closely-shaven, very round face, sitting in the chair across from him.

Benjamín was so surprised by this that he about to exclaim, "Where did you come from?" but it sounded so stupidly similar to what the two professors has asked him earlier in the train, that Benjamín just sat down and pursed his lips, while he collected his thoughts for a moment.

As he did this, the man smiled at him, a pleasant, disarming smile and looked at him with such sparkling, sky-blue eyes that Benjamín

felt at ease immediately. This was very strange for Benjamín, because he generally distrusted strangers, and even more so since his journey began. Colleagues who had traveled to the Soviet Union before had advised him to be on his guard against anyone who appeared friendly: they were most probably spies, or secret police or counterrevolutionaries. But, in spite of these warnings, there was something about the man that Benjamín immediately liked. In some strange way, he even seemed familiar to him, although he couldn't say where he might have seen him before.

The man was dressed in a rather odd, old-fashioned way, in a black frock coat with a lace handkerchief – Benjamín thought he sniffed a light scent of lavender – stuffed halfway up one of his sleeves, and a black, felt, broad-rimmed hat wedged down over his forehead. As the same time, he had a rather gaudy, violet-and-gold silk scarf knotted about his thick neck, giving the impression he was something of a mix between a country parson and a Turkish sailor. But a small sailor he'd be, for the man's legs barely reached the floor.

Just as Benjamín was about to make some remark about his having thought the table was unoccupied, the odd, little man said "Please do forgive the *impolitesse*, citizen, but all the other seats were taken. Then again, it is rather *gemütlich*, with all the passengers who probably haven't exchanged a single word during the whole trip, sitting so close together and chatting like old friends, don't you think?"

Benjamín couldn't help but look around the café, and he saw that, yes, everyone seemed to be chatting in a most congenial way. At the closest table, some two or three meters away, a very thin, very tall, elegant-looking old woman with the dried-up face of an ancient baroness, was exchanging pleasantries with a red-faced, potbellied man who looked like a door-to-door snake oil salesman. Someone had obviously just made a joke, because she was tittering in a very restrained, lady-like way, tugging delicately at the string of pearls at her throat, and he was guffawing so unrestrainedly, showing a large, glittering gold tooth in the front of his mouth, and slapping his ham-like leg so forcefully that the floorboards shook underneath Benjamín.

Then Benjamín turned to the little, old man with a puzzled expression on his face. For a moment, Benjamín wasn't sure in what language

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he'd addressed him; however, upon reflection, he was sure it had been in perfect – although, neutral – Spanish. Not as an accusation, but merely out of wonder, Benjamín responded, “How in the world did you know I was a Spanish speaker? It's the first time I've heard anyone speak my language since I left Madrid.”

With his eyes sparkling pleasantly, the man said, “Oh, there's no mystery there, citizen. I'd just overheard you mention it to that dolt of a station guard who couldn't tell his Argentines from his Assyrians. But, oh, my goodness... I hope you didn't think I was eavesdropping?” he asked in such an innocent, half-offended tone, that Benjamín immediately replied, “No, no, not at all.”

But then Benjamín thought for a second longer and said, “But I'm sure I was alone on the platform. No one else was around.”

“True, so true,” conceded the little man, “but words carry fast in the cold, especially at night. As I was coming through the café entrance, I heard your words as clear as crystal, and I said to myself, ‘It's like the boy is talking directly into my ear.’”

For some reason, that seemed like a perfectly satisfactory response to Benjamín, and he thought nothing more of it. In fact, the more he sat, looking at the little man in front of him, the more he felt a sense of contentedness spreading over him. “So, you're Spanish, then?” Benjamín ventured.

The little man's eyes seemed to twinkle even more, as he responded, “Oh, no. Would that I were, would that I were. To have it as your birthright to set off ‘on a ride across the *campiña*... one of those vast plains common in Spain, where for miles and miles there is neither house nor tree.’ But, sadly, neither a Christian nor a Moor.”

That's strange, Benjamín thought. That was a quote from Washington Irving's *El Alhambra*, his favorite book growing up as a boy. In fact, it was the exact same phrase he'd underlined in an old dog-eared copy he'd kept by the side of his bed until he was at least 12 years old. He'd often dreamed of that plain, whipping his black stallion across a never-ending expanse, although he hadn't thought of it in years. It was almost as if the little man in front of him had looked into his memories and snipped... But as soon as the thought had come, it vanished, and, again, Benjamín thought nothing more of it.

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“You are an Italian then?” Benjamín continued. “Perhaps from Piedmont, as your accent in Spanish is...”

“You know,” the man said and leaning towards him, “you’re getting closer, but still incorrect, although I couldn’t really say what the correct answer *would* be. It’s not that I’m trying to be evasive, but it’s just that I’ve wandered so much about this world – Calcutta, Budapest, villages in East Africa that don’t even have a name – that I can hardly say with any conviction that I’m actually *from* any, exact spot. Although a very long time ago, I did start my life in the mountains of Greece.”

Then winking at him, the little man said, “But I’m being rude for not introducing myself immediately,” the little man added. “I’m called Vrykolakas,” he said, and he extended a hand toward Benjamín’s and shook it firmly and warmly, as if they’d been friends their whole lives.

“So, Mr. Vrykolakas,” Benjamín said, noncommittally, trying to catch the eye of a passing waiter, “what brings you to...”

“I beg your pardon,” said the little man, “but I must needs correct you. I am not ‘Mr. Vrykolakas’”.

“*Professor* Vrykolakas or *Dr.* Vrykolakas, then?” said Benjamín, thinking even this pleasant little Greek man – if, he was, indeed, Greek – had succumbed to the European penchant for titles.

“No, wrong on all counts, I’m afraid. It’s just that Vrykolakas isn’t my name.”

“But you just said your name was...”

“Tut-tut,” the little man said, beaming. “I said people *call* me Vrykolakas. But that’s not my name. It’s a sort of *professional* designation.”

“Like a shop steward in a union?” Benjamín suggested, finding this conversation increasingly entertaining.

“Yes, perhaps you’re right. Perhaps being a Vrykolakas is like being a member of a trade union, or a guild. A very small one anyway. Regardless, you may simply call me Vrykolakas. Everyone does... eventually,” and he smiled again so ingratiatingly that Benjamín wondered how anyone could smile like that without seeming the least bit unctuous, which the little man didn’t seem in any way.

As Benjamín was still trying to catch the eye of the waiter, the little man said, “Oh, he’s much too busy, Union Leader Hempel, to take

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your order. I think the staff is completely overwhelmed. But, please, since you've done me the goodness of sharing your table, please do me the honor of sharing my fare."

Benjamín looked at the table and was surprised that he hadn't noticed before the array of hors d'oeuvre, and, strange ones at that, considering the country and the climate. There were luscious-looking, sugar-coated dates the size of his thumb and large, black olives, (each stuffed with a clove of garlic), long strips of candied orange peels, and an abundance of many other delicacies.

The little man beckoned good naturedly, "Please, to taste," and, in order not to seem rude, Benjamín picked up a large, sun-dried tomato soaking in shimmering olive oil and took a nibble. Immediately, there was an explosion of flavors inside his mouth, and Benjamín saw a vision of a wizened old woman bending over a well-tended tomato bush in Apulia, pulling a prized, meaty fruit off the vine and holding it up to the sun to admire it.

"My goodness!" Benjamín exclaimed. "That's simply amazing. How in the world did you...?" And then he remembered another incongruity. "Did you just address me as Union Leader Hempel?"

"Why, yes, I believe I did," said the little old man, choosing for himself a round, toasted bruschetta and popping it in his mouth.

"But I never said I was in a union."

Trying to puncture an olive – that was eluding him – with a small silver fork, and then just giving up with a sigh and picking it up with his fingers, the little man said, "I *supposed* you were in a union, because you used the analogy of a union steward to explain what a Vrykolakas was, so, obviously, you had unions on the mind, and, I hazarded a guess that you actually *were* a unionist. Is that or is that not the case?"

"Well, yes, that *is* the case, but..." said Benjamín, feeling that he had never been quite so hungry before or found appetizers more satisfying. Then he stopped what he was about to say, as a nagging idea came to him. "What *is* a Vrykolakas after all?" he asked.

The little man dabbed a bit of olive oil off his upper lip with a corner of his napkin and said, "Oh, it's a vampire. Now, would you be interested in a real treat? If you're finished with the salty bits, I just ordered some fig pudding that..."

“A vampire?” Benjamín repeated.

“Oh, yes, a vampire” said the little man. “Although I can understand your confusion, as the origin of the word literally means ‘werewolf’, as wolves and vampires were closely associated in Ancient Greece. Although, please, banish from your thoughts the idea that I’m going to start sprouting pointy ears and a hairy snout. It’s just one of those historical misnomers.”

Now, what struck Benjamín as absurd at this point in the conversation was that it didn’t strike him as absurd that the little man in front of him confessed to being a vampire. He felt, somehow, that it *should* strike him as absurd, but the little, old man was really so pleasant, and the appetizers were so tasty and the general environment, was, as he’d said, so very *gemütlich*, indeed, that why not let this pleasant, little man retain the illusion he was a vampire? After all, he thought, we all have our eccentricities.

“Oh, and by the way,” the old man said, “You’re a Vrykolakas, too. You just don’t know it yet.”

Now, that comment *did* strike Benjamín as absurd, and he let out a loud guffaw, at which the thin baroness, and – more particularly – the ham-joweled snake oil salesman looked at Benjamín with disdain. “I’m sorry, so sorry,” Benjamín muttered to them, and then to the Vrykolakas he whispered, “But you just can’t show up in the middle of a train station, and, over hors d’oeuvre at that, and inform me that I’m a vampire and *not* expect me to laugh.”

“You don’t like the appetizers, then?” the Vrykolakas said, again, that half-offended tone in his voice.

“No, no, they’re wonderful,” Benjamín said, crunching down on a luscious olive, feeling his mouth sting with garlic. “It’s just the vampire bit that’s odd... isn’t it?” he added, not really convincing himself that it was all that odd.

“But Comrade Hempel,” the Vrykolakas rejoined, “this is the way it’s always been done. We’re wanderers, you, I and the rest of the race of Vrykolakai. We’re either *on* a trip or just preparing to make one. It’s not like I can call up your secretary at your offices on Avenida Santa Fe between Maipú and Esmeralda and say, ‘Could I please come on the 24th of next month to make an appointment? Yes, yes. What’s it about?’

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Well, it's about Comrade Hempel's latent vampirism. Yes, 'latent' with two t's. All, right. All right, I'll see him on the 24th."

Benjamín's mouth gaped open and said, "H-how did you know where our offices are located?"

"Oh, well," the Vrykolakas sighed, but not in a condescending way, like an old chum who puts up with his drinking partner's old tricks because he finds them endearing. "I'd rather for once in my life someone actually believed me that I was a vampire from the beginning. But that's quite all right. It's only natural you have your questions. So, why don't you ask all your questions now, all in a row, like in a press conference, and I'll try to be as to-the-point as possible?"

"All right," Benjamín said, trying to concentrate, but his thoughts were dancing along merrily in his head, without any sort of order. "Well, uh..."

"Perhaps you'll find you can better order your thoughts if you write them down?" the Vrykolakas suggested politely and handed him his Mont Blanc from the breast pocket of his coat.

"Yes, yes, good idea," Benjamín replied, and started scribbling away on a paper napkin, while the Vrykolakas dipped the tip of a red pepper in dill sauce and took a bite.

Benjamín put down his pen like an obedient student after the exam bell had rung, and he offered the list to the funny, old man in front of him.

But the Vrykolakas declined to read the napkin with a wave of his hand. Then he cleared his throat and said, "In answer to question #1, 'Because we've met before'; #2, 'Because I like garlic – don't you? – and, actually, I find the basis of any real meal is garlic *and* onions'; and #3, 'I never touch the stuff – and, besides, it would be really rather unhygienic, and it wouldn't help, anyway, because we don't suck blood, but time'. And, in answer to your fourth question, which you didn't write down, but you're thinking right now, 'I didn't have to read your questions, because – in reference to my answer #3 – I used some stolen time to sneak up behind you, look at your questions, then sneak back, and you weren't even aware of it.'"

Although these answers came out like the barrage of a Maxim rifle, and, in other circumstances, Benjamín would have found them quite

strange, he took them at face value, simply nodding to himself. Handing the pen back to the Vrykolakas, he said, “Well, you really have answered all my questions. But what is this stuff about stealing time?”

“I’m so happy you asked, my friend,” the Vrykolakas replied. “Time is like that saying in the Bible, ‘My Father’s house has many rooms in it.’ Well, some people fling open each and every door they come across, and they step over the thresholds greedily. Take Leonardo Da Vinci, for example... Painter, architect, fantastic dreamer of the unknown, he lived dozens of lives all at once. Yes, when old Leonardo was laid to rest, you couldn’t wring one drop of time from his dry bones.”

Then the funny little man snorted, and said, “But then there are those who find themselves in that very same house, and instead of opening the doors, or even peering through the skylights, or putting their eyes to the keyholes and peaking to the other side, they tramp along the corridor of life without looking left or right, going down a set path as if preordained by the Almighty. They’re bloated with time, literally overflowing with it, and it oozes out of their nostrils and ear canals, so that if you took a sip or a even a long drag, as if through a sharp-mouthed, silver straw, they’d never miss it. For what they’ve settled for in life – yes, “settled” is the word – they shan’t need more than a thimbleful.”

Benjamín continued nodding his head, impressed at how the Vrykolakas explained difficult concepts in such a refreshing, straightforward way. He really should get him to lecture on the intricacies of class consciousness at a rally one of these days.

The Vrykolakas continued, “For lack of a better word, we ‘steal’ their lost opportunities. For example, from someone like that over there,” said the funny little man and gestured towards a very stiff-looking gentleman, who was very meticulously taking sips from his teacup and wiping his impeccably-combed moustache with his white napkin after each sip, and consulting his pocket watch, in a rhythmic cycle. “Apostol Kjukukov, works for the Bulgarian National Bank. He’s married to a very cold – one would not hesitate to use the word *‘frigid’* – wife named Snezhana. She’s more interested in polishing the silver than in making love, and she keeps such a firm grasp on the household budget, Comrade Kjukukov hasn’t seen meat in a month.

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“Now, he has his eyes for the office typist, a rather voluptuous redhead – called Rositsa – who smells of camellias – and he dreams of seducing her one evening and running off with her to be a writer of Western dime novels where life is not so full of rules for the *avante garde*... perhaps Latvia!”

Benjamín furrowed his brow skeptically, and the Vrykolakas replied, “Yes, it’s true. But will he ever make the moves on that red-head? No. Will he ever leave his wife? Again, no. Because, for all his fantasies, he wants Snezhana, he needs her, he loves the confines she puts upon his life, he loves the fact that she does all things like clockwork, even when they join together – every second Wednesday of the month – like two overwound mechanisms, getting their cogs caught in each others’ parts, because this routine comforts him, reassures him that there is order in the universe.

“For all his daydreams of becoming a writer, and in *spite* of the cache of dime novels he keeps hidden behind a wobbly brick in the wall of his cellar, he doesn’t know the first thing about being a writer of Westerns. He wouldn’t know a Winchester repeating rifle from a Smith and Wesson revolver, but he dreams... ah, yes, he dreams. What little good it’ll do him, though.”

As this information was hurtling through the fog of Benjamín’s brain, an awful thought occurred to him. “But wait a minute,” he said. “If you rush ahead like that into their future and suck out the time you *suppose* they’re not going to use, what if... what if you make a mistake and take away an opportunity they really *were* going to take. And what if,” and Benjamín turned pale at this thought, “by your one action, you affect another life and another and another. Why, future grandparents may never meet, never fall in love, never marry, never conceive their children, and thus prevent their children and so on and so on.”

The little man sighed and took a sip of jasmine tea. After a moment, he reflected, “Well, being a vampire is really more art than science, so I suppose anything could happen.”

The man’s phlegmatic reply made Benjamín blurt out, “Why, the effects could be catastrophic. It would be mass murder!”

“Mass murder?” the little man looked back at Benjamín, quite taken aback. “What on earth are you talking about? It’s not as terrible as all that.”

“Well, what about the b-butterflies?”

“Butterflies? What do you mean about the butterflies? Are you having a fit of some sort? Should I ask the waiter to get you some Schnapps?”

A bit dazed, Benjamín said, “No, I really shouldn’t drink after... but, no! That’s not the point. Didn’t someone say once that a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the Atlantic can cause a hurricane on the other? Or was it something else about a butterfly... Yes, that, by killing a butterfly, you kill endless generations. Oh, I’m getting all muddled, but it has to do with butterflies... I think.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” the little man retorted, losing, just for a moment, his congenial smile.

“Wait, wait,” Benjamín pleaded. “It wasn’t about butterflies at all. It was about throwing rocks in a pond. That’s it. And the rings in the water it produces spread out, farther and farther, affecting everything else. Yes, it was the rock metaphor, I was thinking of, I’m sure of it.”

Benjamín saw the little man turning red in the face as he finished his sentence, and then he burst out, “Balderdash and poppycock, I tell you. Whether its butterflies and hurricanes or rocks making waves in a pond, it’s pure and utter nonsense! When did you ever become an expert on Time? Have you ever read *de Causa contemptûs mortis*? No, you haven’t. Were you there at the Council of Limoges in 1031 when the Bishop of Cahors explained his excommunication of a knight, thus condemning him to become a living corpse? I didn’t think so. So, please confine yourself to speaking of things you know about, like, I don’t know... union organizing and petition-writing and all that other rot!”

Benjamín was somewhat taken aback by this outburst, but even more by the absolute disregard paid him by the other patrons in the café. It was as if they didn’t register his presence at all, or, perhaps, they were just being exceedingly polite, thought Benjamín. Europeans could be so very inscrutable.

Then the small man took a few deep breaths, and his smile returned. Then he said, “I know this is a lot to take in all at once, but time is *not* like water, young man. It’s more,” he said and then looked around him for some sort of visual aid. Then he settled down on the

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plates in front of him and said, "It's more like pudding." Then he plunked a teaspoon into the middle of a bowl of pudding for effect.

"You see?" the Vrykolakas asked

"Do I see what, exactly?" Benjamín said hesitantly.

"Why, the pudding. The pudding. You see, striking the center of it just affected the center, nothing else. No concentric rings moving outwards, affecting life upon life in the pudding world. No. Time is stiff and resistant. And that's because human beings have an over-inflated notion of their own importance in the universe. For example, if your mother hadn't met your father, you'd've been born somehow, in some *reasonable* combination, and you'd still have ended up taking this train to Moscow and meeting me on your way. True, you might have been a Nubian or an Eskimo, but things would have pretty much marched on the same."

"But, but I'm just an average sort of chap," said Benjamín. "I've never done anything of real importance, so a change in my life wouldn't much affect the rest of the world. But... but take someone important, someone like... Lenin. Yes, Lenin, for example. Say, he'd fallen ill just before he made his famous speech at the Finland Station in 1917. Why the revolution might not have happened, or, if it *had* happened, it might have failed."

"Oh, now you're getting melodramatic," the little man said, and then he muttered under his breath something like, "Shouldn't have used the pudding example." Then, coming to himself he said, young man, if it weren't Lenin, then it would have been someone else who took his place, and, please trust someone who's had experience with these sorts of things, this *glorious* revolution – such as it is – isn't really going to make much of a difference in the grander scheme of things."

Benjamín gasped and look horrified. Then he whispered over to him, "You... you can't say things like that, especially in the Soviet Union. It's *counterrevolutionary*."

"Oh, come, come now," snorted the little man, still keeping hold of his smile. "Don't be such a pedant. Look at yourself. You've come half-way around the world for this meeting of the RILU. You've suffered seasickness. You've been philosophically assaulted by those two moustached gentlemen over there, and you've been insulted by that bigoted railway

guard. And all so that you can stand up at the podium and decry the abuses heaped upon the backs of the Argentine proletariat.”

Here, the little man filled his lungs with air and continued, “And yet...in your heart of hearts, you know it won’t make any difference. You know that the RILU, the Profintern, will eventually fall apart. By 1937 it will fold, and everything it tried to achieve will disappear. (You’re enough of a Vrykolakas already to sense that.) And, in the end, the glorious Revolution of which you speak so fervently, will be tossed upon the rubbish heap of history.”

Benjamín’s mouthed gaped wide open for a minute. He tried to talk but was too astonished to form any words. Then he finally blurted out, “But, the implications of what you’re saying are absolutely monstrous. Besides what you said about the Revolution – which is bad enough – the larger implication is that nothing we do affects anyone else’s life, that we’re just solitary strangers going about our lives, disconnected, ineffectual. Automaton.”

“Come, come,” chided the Vrykolakas. “It’s not all that grim as you make it out. Remember the house with many rooms? What you do in life affects yourself and those *immediately* around you – in the room next to you, let’s say – like you and me, sitting here tonight, for example.

“This conversation was timed to occur at this very second, when the Big Bang happened, oh, I don’t know how many billions of years ago. But the way you are reacting to this conversation – although I must say I didn’t expect you to be such a *puritan* about the Revolution – is entirely your own experience, your own choice. And that choice has affected me tonight in small, but meaningful, ways. So, you see, you make a difference in the *molehills*, if not the *mountains*, in life, which, in the end, is a good thing, because the molehills are really much more interesting. Your Caesars come and go. And your Brutus’s too. And your Molotovs and your Lenins and the whole blasted bunch of gangsters. But your feelings from tonight will remain with you forever.”

Then the Vrykolakas’ smile returned in all its grandeur, and he said, “All your life, deep down inside, you’ve known you were a Vrykolakas. Remember that boyhood dream of yours, racing across the endless Iberian fields? Well, it wasn’t a dream. It was really you, and you were

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really there. You'd probably sucked some time away from your mother or father, unconsciously, when they kissed you goodnight, and you used it to transport yourself to that magical place. And when that brief bubble of stolen time popped, you found yourself back in your bed, with your hands gripped tight around those now-invisible reins and your thighs still sore from riding bareback across the plains."

"But this can't be true," Benjamín said. "I-I feel dizzy. You're lying to me." Then he picked up a soggy sun-dried tomato and examined it closely. "You've drugged me."

"Oh, that's rich, coming from you," said the Vrykolakas, and he produced the little, wooden box from underneath the folds of his coat and placed it between them on the table. "Do you mind explaining to me what this is?"

"No!" Benjamín shrieked and snatched the box away. The man and the woman at the table closest to his shot him a glance that clearly showed they believed he was drunk. Then, involuntarily, Benjamín fumbled with the latch and opened it to check the contents. To his shock, he saw it now contained two crystal champagne glasses with long, fragile stems, set in little recesses covered with a rich, red velvet.

"I don't understand," Benjamín said. "This is *my* case. You see, it has this little scratch here by the hinge. It was just under my coat. How could you...?"

In response, the Vrykolakas replied, "You've known something was out of sorts for a very long time, but you've been seeking refuge in the wrong box. You told yourself it started in 1919, when the police picked you up after they busted the metal workers' strike, and they worked on you for three days, with lengths of rope and buckets of ice water."

"And telephone directories..." Benjamín slowly drawled, surprised by the sound of his own voice. "Don't forget the directories. They used to bash me upside the head with them, because they were heavy and flat and left almost no marks."

"Quite, quite," the Vrykolakas said, and for the first time during the whole evening, he had a sad look on his face. "I know. I saw it all. I was there with you in the cell when you were delirious. Between the torture sessions, I fed you little tidbits of time like breadcrumbs to pigeons in the park."

Through the fog of his brain, Benjamín was remembering. “That... that was you, wasn’t it? For the longest time, I told myself you were just an illusion. But you talked to me, didn’t you? You told me down to the hour and the minute when I would be released. And the knowledge that it *would* end filled me with hope.”

Nodding his head, the Vrykolakas said, “Yes, you called out to me in your desperation, as all members of our race do. And although it wasn’t my time to explain things to you yet, I comforted you as best I could. After you were released, you began to find other ways to regulate yours pain. But truth be told, and tonight we must tell the whole truth, you haven’t needed it for over a year now. It’s not against the residual pain that you feel the need to self-medicate, but against the residual emptiness bred from your inability to manipulate time like the rest of your kind. And that’s why I’m here tonight.”

Then reaching his hands towards the wooden box, he said to Benjamín, “With your permission,” and he gently removed the champagne glasses from their recesses. “And now we drink the drink of life.”

“Do, do I have to cut myself,” Benjamín asked with some trepidation, “or do I have to *drain* you through some major artery? I’m afraid I wouldn’t know where to start. I never was very good in biology class.”

The Vrykolakas’ beamed a gentle smile and said, “My word, no. How repulsive! I really wish that movie *Nosferatu* had never been made. It’s put so many strange ideas into people’s heads.”

“Nosfer what?”

“Nosferatu,” the little man said. “It’s a... No, wait, it’s not going to be released until 1922. Never mind.” Then he snapped his fingers, and a waiter appeared immediately at this elbow, saying “The Lafite Rothschild ‘98, as you requested, Monsieur.”

“Just uncork it and set it on the table, my good man,” said the Vrykolakas.

“That’s it?” Benjamín asked, incredulous. “You’re going to make me a vampire with a glass of champagne?”

The Vrykolakas smiled his wry smile and said, “Would you prefer some Chablis? No, seriously, my good man, it hardly matters *what* you drink, but *that* you drink. You see, *intention* is what vampirism is all

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about, the intent of sharing. In some culture's it's a loaf of bread, in others it is a bit of sheep's liver. I, myself, prefer the champagne, because this year is really rather good. The rest is just old formality and custom.

"Do you know, in Germany," the Vrykolakas continued, "when old business colleagues of forty years or more years finally feel they know each other well enough to dispense with "*Sie*" and start addressing each other as "*Du*" that they have a little ceremony? It's an ancient, Germanic custom, just like this. Each raises his glass, entwines his arm in the other's and says, "*Wollen wir uns nicht duzen?*", and then they drink. And nothing especially magical happens, except the fact that they treat each other, now and forever afterwards, as friends. That's what this initiation ceremony is all about."

"So, you give me some of your time?" Benjamín wondered.

"Well, yes. Although it's really not *mine*. It's time I've gathered up and stored for just such an occasion. In fact, a bit of it's on display here now," he said, gesturing to the walls and ceiling of the café. "You see, the reality is this place is much more humble than it appears. I've modeled it after a Bavarian hunting lodge you once saw in a picture book at school... don't you remember?"

"Yes, yes, I do," Benjamín recalled.

As the Vrykolakas poured out the champagne, Benjamín gave voice to the last doubt that remained, "But what about your *victims*? What if they don't share your same intent? Do you have to... *harm* them, bodily I mean?"

Topping off the glasses, with some foam running down the side, the Vrykolakas said, "Oh, please, you and your arcane beliefs! Most people (and I prefer calling them *clients* instead of *victims*, as we are doing them a service, like a handyman cleaning out their house gutters clogged with leaves) are so used to giving up their time – especially in Russia – in the queue at the boot stores and the cooperatives and the bakeries, that they hardly ever twig to the fact it's being taken from them. My goodness, there's no need to do them any harm, bodily or otherwise. In fact, if they truly *wanted* to hold on to their time, if they were willing to fight you for it, then it wouldn't be *wasted*, would it, it wouldn't be ripe for the plucking, and they could jolly well keep it."

Then he placed a champagne glass in Benjamín's hand, and it felt nice and smooth. For a moment, Benjamín held it to his forehead, and it was cool against his skin, and he realized his fever had disappeared.

As he reached out his glass to toast the Vrykolakas' health, time seemed to slow down, like a moving picture camera, cranked very slowly by hand, frame by frame, or like the many blinks of a slow-moving eye. The distance he moved his glass until it clinked with the Vrykolakas' felt like it took a long, long time to span, like the first, sultry summer days when school vacation begins, when there's no hint of work or studies, just thoughts of friends and comic books and bronze-colored girls by the pool.

Benjamín felt himself letting go of all the worries in his life, the train trip, the conference, and the guard on the platform. Then, after a long, aching moment, the glasses clinked, and he drew the glass to his mouth. At the first sip, he was filled with such joy, such euphoria, as if every bubble in his glass were seconds, minutes, hours and days, spent in leisure and hope, daydreams and listlessness.

There was nothing but time filling his glass, filling his mouth, and, for the first time since he was very young, Benjamín did not feel that he should be elsewhere, doing something else, but sitting in that café with the Vrykolakas.

"Now, if you'll please pardon me," the Vrykolakas said. He struggled a bit to get off his chair with his short, little legs, and then he made a very low, formal bow to Benjamín. "I have a date with a certain railway guard who daydreams of being a custodian at the Moscow Art Theater, and, thus, seeing all the acts for free. But, as both you and I know, he will never leave this train station, and, thus, he's in no need of all that extra time."

"Fine, fine," Benjamín said from the depths of his glass. "Adieu, adieu." Then, after a little while, he put down his glass, and the bubbles cleared from his eyes and nose, and he began to notice how things around him had changed. The Bavarian hunting lodge motif had positively disappeared. The walls were now white plaster, with cracks and moisture stains running up and down them. The heads of deer and antelope were replaced by an old calendar, an ancient time table and a photograph of some movie starlet torn from the pages of a magazine

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and stuffed into an ill-fitting frame. The waiters, too, had lost their luster, wearing dingy, grayish smocks now, stained along the sleeves, and they chatted and smoked at the bar amongst themselves, generally ignoring the passengers who sat huddled around stark metal folding chairs and tables.

From close by, Benjamín heard three long, sustained whistle-blows and, slowly, all the passengers began to pick up their things and trudge back to the train, grumbling and griping in a myriad of languages. The thin, aristocratic lady, let out a huffing noise, and the ham-legged gentleman sneered back at her, both of them obviously relieved they no longer were forced to sit together.

Soon, Benjamín was bundled back into the train, with the two moustaches whispering amongst themselves on the opposite bench and eyeing him suspiciously.

But buoyed up by his first taste of stolen time, Benjamín leaned forward and addressed “Esteemed Herr Doktor Professor Eins” and “Esteemed Herr Doktor Professor Zwei”.

“My dear Comrades,” he said, feeling the sweet demeanor of the Vrykolakas fill him. “I’m afraid we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot. I should have introduced myself at the very beginning of our journey. People call me Vrykolakas. I was on my way to a union conference in Moscow, but I think I’ll take the opportunity to do a bit of travelling in this marvelous country while I’m here, and, then, perhaps, take some time to visit Turkey and Egypt. I so very much enjoyed your philosophical discussion, although, being a rather uninstructed man, I must confess I understood very little.”

As Benjamín spoke in his melodious tones, he could tell from their faces that their distrust was starting to melt away. “Perhaps we could each share a glass of an excellent champagne I just picked up at the station, and you can tell me all your plans for the Heidegger manuscript.”

By the way the moustaches twitched pleasantly, he could tell they were falling under his power.

Opening the catch on the small, wooden case, Benjamín said, “But I really must apologize in advance that I only have two glasses. We’ll just have to toast to each other one at a time.”

Eric Stener Carlson

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ТИЗ РИЛФФФРИУ ФФ ТИЗ ДДМПЗД

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There was a time before the Great War when Petropol was the most fashionable resort in the Crimea. If you arrived by steamer, you would have disembarked onto a stone jetty that extended a long grey arm into the oily smooth waters of the Black Sea. Having made your way along this you would have encountered a row of open carriages awaiting you on the broad esplanade which curved in an elegant parabola around the bay. Before conducting you and your baggage to your hotel, their drivers, unless expressly ordered not to do so, would have taken you on a tour of the town of which they were justifiably proud.

Petropol had been laid out somewhat in the French style, with wide, tree-lined boulevards. Princes and Archdukes owned high-walled villas by the sea while their yachts rode at anchor in the bay. The poorer districts lay in the foothills behind the town where no-one but the poor needed to visit them. There was a little casino, like a miniature palace made out of pink sugar, a monumental and severely classical town hall and the famous Botanical Gardens whose collection of rare plants was said to have been unmatched East of the Carpathians. Lovers of pleasure might resort to the celebrated – some would say notorious – Turkish Bath House; and lovers of the arts would undoubtedly be directed to the Imperial Opera House in St Basil's Square. This was an imposing neo-baroque construction faced with white marble whose green copper dome was surmounted by a gilded statue of winged victory.

All these features were still there in 1919, but they had lost their lustre, and some of their function. The elegant promenades and gardens

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were no longer thronged with fashionable leisure seekers, aristocrats and the higher grades of the Imperial Russian Civil Service with their families on holiday. Those happy and prosperous times had existed little more than five years before, but already they were beginning to seem like a generation away.

They certainly did to Asmatov, the manager of the Imperial Opera House, so much so that he sometimes wondered half seriously if the good times had been a figment of his imagination. Then he would look round his office and see the posters. Here was a visit from the Mariensky Opera Company in *Carmen* and *Boris Godunov*; there was the Bolshoi with *The Nutcracker* or *Swan Lake*. Ismailov had played Hamlet here; and the great Eleonora Duse herself had once appeared on his stage as D'Annunzio's *La Gioconda*. She had played the role of course in her native Italian; nevertheless the citizens of Petropol had packed the theatre and shown their sophistication by declaring her performance "exquisite".

In 1919 no European Theatre Company would have ventured within a hundred miles of Petropol. Companies from the great cities of Moscow or Petersburg (or was it now Petrograd?) were not venturing this far South if they were venturing at all. A civil war whose politics and strategies baffled the citizens of Petropol was raging. For some months the town had been nominally in the hands of the White Russians but nobody had troubled to inform the Petropolitans and they had been reluctant to enquire too deeply into the matter. They tried to go about their business as normally as possible and waited for events in the larger world to take them wherever the larger world wanted them to go.

Meanwhile the Imperial Opera House stood there in St Basil's Square like a great white wedding cake waiting to be eaten, and the Petropolitans needed to be entertained from time to time. Asmatov did his best with the very limited pool of local talent among singers, musicians and performers at his disposal, but they were not a great success. He made some money by hiring out the theatre to political rallies and meetings of one kind or another. One by one he had to dismiss his faithful staff so that by the beginning of November of that year he was left only with his faithful Matriona who ran the ticket office, and old Sivorin, keeper of the stage door and general factotum.

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Asmatov was a smallish, stout, bald man with no obviously remarkable outward qualities. He dressed neatly; he kept his moustache in order; he was scrupulously punctual and polite. He was, above all, a man who believed in preserving his self respect, even, and indeed especially, in these times of uncertainty. Every morning, having breakfasted with his wife and daughter in their apartment opposite the Opera house, he would take himself across the square to his office in the theatre. The citizens of Petropol, seeing his neat, round figure in its black swallow tailed coat, as he strutted across St Basil's Square, felt reassured. They knew they could set their watches by him and that, as soon as he had mounted the steps of the theatre and touched the door handle of the great glass panelled front portals, the hour of nine would strike. And so it did that morning in November of the year 1919.

Inside the foyer Asmatov found Matriona, as usual, tickling with a feather duster the marble bust of Melpomene which stood on a plinth to the right of the great staircase which led up to the Grand Tier and his office. Asmatov and Matriona exchanged cordial greetings and he told her, as he often did, that she reminded him of Shakespeare because, like him, she served Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy, so faithfully and well. It was a pleasantry which never failed to please.

Having mounted the stairs he turned to his right and opened a door, thereby leaving behind the gilded plaster and marble of the main building. The corridor he entered was panelled in wood and lit only by a window at one end. About halfway down this corridor was the entrance to his office, but Asmatov never called it "his" office, always "The Manager's Office", as if he were only its temporary occupant. He had inherited from his itinerant Jewish forbears a sense of impermanence, of being a "passer-by". This feeling, far from troubling him, was, he felt, his natural condition and defined his peculiar sense of self.

A figure was standing in the corridor just outside the office. Despite the dimness he recognised the figure of old Sivorin standing, cap in hand. Asmatov wondered if he was about to hand in his resignation. Sivorin had been paid – Asmatov had seen to that – but his duties had become both more onerous and increasingly menial as his underlings had been dismissed.

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“Begging your pardon, sir,” said Sivorin.

“Come in to the office, my dear fellow.”

“No, I have only this to say, honoured sir. There is a gentleman called who wishes to see you. He came earlier when you were out and left his card.”

Sivorin handed him the card with a quick movement as if he had been anxious to be rid of it. Asmatov felt the pasteboard and noted that the words on it had been engraved not printed. He felt the slight roughness as the ink from the lettering stood proud of the card, black and shiny. He studied the words.

COUNT BELPHAGORE

*And his Company of Apocalyptic Comedians
Notable for Tragedy, Comedy, Tragicomedy, Farce
and Operatic Mime*

What on earth was “operatic mime”? thought Asmatov. The man was clearly a charlatan. “Did he say what he wanted?” he enquired.

“No, master, only that he would call again once you were here.”

“I see.”

Sivorin shuffled off towards his own territory back stage. He had almost welcomed the diminution of the theatre’s staff, being one of those people who are quite content to work harder provided that they can work alone.

Asmatov entered the office, sat down heavily in his chair, and contemplated the prospect of entertaining a possible lunatic for the rest of the morning. Then he reflected, ruefully that at least it was preferable to staring at the ceiling or the ever mounting pile of unpaid bills on his desk.

Five minutes later there was a sharp knock at Asmatov’s door. Asmatov gave the abrupt order to enter and rose to greet his visitor.

Anyone familiar with the theatrical world at the beginning of the twentieth century would have instantly guessed the profession of the man who stood in the doorway. He seemed to be the very archetype of the impresario, as depicted in the illustrated magazines. There was the Homburg hat, the coat with the astrakhan collar draped with apparent nonchalance over the shoulders, the pair of lemon-coloured kid gloves flapping in his right hand, the silver topped ebony cane, the diamond

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stock pin. The man was dressed with the kind of opulence that is deliberately calculated to demonstrate wealth and success, and can therefore be deceptive. Asmatov felt a kind of glow of familiarity: he knew how to handle such men; it was his business.

“Count Belphagore?” He enquired. The man nodded.

Yet, even as Asmatov helped to relieve the Count of his astrakhan coat, he began to feel some slight prick of doubt. It was as yet nothing that he could define to himself, but his unease was no less real for that. The nearest he came to an articulate objection – though it was hardly rational – was in the matter of hair.

Count Belphagore had red hair, and a great deal of it. He had a full head of it though its redness was relieved by a curious white streak just above the left temple. Was this a conscious homage to the famous “white flash” of the great Diaghilev, Asmatov wondered? The Count sported substantial side whiskers too, of the kind that had been the fashion twenty or thirty years before, but were now rarely seen, other than on the cheeks of elderly military men. Red hair almost like fur sprang from the man’s immaculate white cuffs and stretched its fine orange tendrils across the back of his hands. Count Belphagore’s complexion was pink and white, his green eyes under bushy eyebrows brightly protuberant; he might have been in his mid thirties, or a little older. He had the look of a fresh-faced satyr. For all his smartness, there was something disconcertingly antique about the Count’s appearance.

After the initial courtesies had been exchanged the Count explained that his Company was in the vicinity, having been stranded by the vagaries of war and was anxious to secure a temporary engagement at a theatre. He said that Mr Asmatov’s Opera House had been highly recommended to him.

Asmatov, who was used to this kind of self-serving flattery, merely nodded and enquired of the Count what kind of entertainment he had to offer the citizens of Petropol. Asmatov added that while the Petropolitans valued high culture; they were particularly fond of the latest fashion for English Musical Comedy. A production of *The Geisha* had recently enjoyed considerable success there. The Count nodded.

“My little company,” he said, “is, I dare venture to say, one of the most variedly talented in Europe. I am surprised that a man of wide

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culture and theatrical expertise such as yourself, Signor Asmatov, has not heard of us.” Asmatov made a little deprecating gesture and urged the Count to continue.

“We can offer you the most diffuse variety of material. Comical, musical, dramatic, balletic, pastoral, ‘scene indivisible or poem unlimited’, as the English bard Shakespeare has it. We accommodate all tastes from the trivial to the profound. One thing, I must specify at the outset, however. All the material that we use is our own. It is devised entirely by and within my company. Our production in your theatre will be an altogether new drama entitled *The Philosophy of the Damned*. Then, if that enjoys success, we may return with other, even rarer *divertissements*.”

Asmatov remarked mildly that *The Philosophy of the Damned* did not appear to him to be a very appealing title for a play. The Count seemed quite indifferent to Asmatov’s objections. He merely smiled blandly.

“We have the bill material prepared. We cannot change the title now. I can assure you of a first rate production in all particulars, full of course of the most astonishing effects. It is, I can assure you, a truly outstanding piece of theatre which has been admired by many of the crowned heads of Europe.”

“There are a good deal fewer of those these days,” remarked Asmatov drily.

“And some of them might have retained both their crowns and their heads, had they paid heed to the voices of my actors, I assure you!” said the Count. All Asmatov’s suspicions were now confirmed: the man was a charlatan, and not a very convincing one at that. But then, the theatre was a profession for charlatans, and, besides, what choice did he have?

“I shall offer your theatre initially three performances on three successive nights. Shall we open on Thursday next? Would that be satisfactory?”

The Count rose and offered his hand, but Asmatov had not been shaken from his customary caution.

“One moment, my dear Count! We have yet to discuss terms. You must understand that in these difficult times I am unable to offer you

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a guarantee. My best offer is a division of the box office takings: twenty percent for your company and eighty for the house, as we say.”

At this the Count seemed somewhat taken aback, as if he were unused to such mercenary transactions. Whether this was a pose or not was hard to tell. There then followed a long discussion at the end of which a seventy five twenty five split in the theatre’s favour had been agreed upon. Asmatov had been prepared to take only seventy, but he had maintained his firm yet courteous demeanour throughout and, he flattered himself, had outfaced his opponent. All the same, he reflected ruefully, he was still purchasing *un chat en poche*, as the French say, or “a pig in a poke”, as the English have it. Moreover Asmatov did not even know whether the animal in question would be a cat, a pig, or some other still more exotic creature.

“I promise you Signs and Wonders, Signor Asmatov,” said the Count as they finally shook hands on the deal. “Signs and wonders!”

On the Monday of the following week Asmatov woke to find the little town of Petropol in something of an uproar. Deep in the previous night Petropol had been invaded and every conceivable empty space or wall, or hoarding – even the pillars of the town hall, even the trunks of the exotic palms that were such a picturesque feature of the town’s elegant sea front – had been smothered in posters advertising: *COUNT BELPHAGORE, and his Celebrated Company of Apocalyptic Comedians* and their astonishing new entertainment *The Philosophy of the Damned*. As he walked across the square to the theatre after breakfast Asmatov was assailed by several outraged citizens, but he noticed that they stopped short of asking him to do anything in particular to assuage their indignation. He suspected that secretly these people were quite relieved by the onslaught. The ominous quiet in which Petropol had been enveloped for some months was over. The doldrums were passed and wind was beginning to flutter in her sails.

When Asmatov entered the theatre he found it full of restless movement. Matriona stood by the bust of Melpomene. Her duster was in her hand, but she was doing nothing with it. She was watching a pair of dwarves who were engaged in a mock battle with wooden swords up and down the grand staircase. Asmatov enquired politely who they

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were and what they were doing. They stopped, bowed low to him and informed him that they were in Count Belphagore's company, then they resumed their battle.

Asmatov negotiated his way past them and up the stairs. When he entered his office he found it already occupied. The room was heavy with cigar smoke and the Count was at his desk and using his telephone.

Asmatov was too astonished to be indignant. He waited some time before the Count noticed him. When he did, he merely said: "Do not be afraid. I am here to help you," and then continued with his telephone conversation. Asmatov left the office and went to the pass door which led directly back stage. He drew out the key on his key ring to unlock it, but then tried the handle. It was unlocked.

Back stage he found Sivorin beside the prompt corner scratching his head while all around him men and women from Count Belphagore's troupe thronged, some putting up or hanging scenery, others rehearsing scenes or snatches of song, others trying on costumes or tuning musical instruments. Asmatov looked on as puzzled as Sivorin. He had seen many companies come and go in his theatre, but none so ceaselessly energetic as this, and with so little apparent purpose. He saw a drop cloth depicting a heavy cloud-strewn sky with a castle on a hill in the distance being pulled up and down, up and down several times for no ostensible reason.

A couple of young boys – or possibly young girls – in tights and spangled jackets began a tumbling act. Asmatov watched them as if hypnotised until he felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Matriona.

"Someone to see you. He waits outside the theatre."

"Then tell him to come in."

"He cannot. It is the Starets Afanasy."

Asmatov understood. It would have not have been suitable for a Starets to set foot inside a theatre. Starets Afanasy had been for many years the Abbot of the nearby monastery of St Basil, a man renowned as a spiritual teacher and for the harshness of his ascetic practices. Recently he had resigned his position as Abbot to become a hermit and was living in a cave a mile distant from the monastery, seeing only the

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novice who brought him his meagre rations of bread and water. His appearance in Petropol was therefore an extraordinary event.

Asmatov left the theatre by the stage door and came round to the front where he found the Starets standing erect under a pillar of the great portico. He was attired simply in the black robes of a priest with only a crucifix for ornament. His hair and beard were grey and straggling. There was something wild about him in the eyes and – what was that scent he gave off? Asmatov noted that all men and women, whether they be drunken derelicts or holy ascetics like the starets, who spend most of their time alone, exude this same odour, the odour not of sanctity but of isolation. When Afanasy looked at Asmatov it was with the intensely curious but alien stare of a wild animal encountered on a mountain path.

Asmatov did not quite know what to say. He thought that extreme formality was the best course:

“To what do I owe this honour?”

The Starets was not looking at Asmatov, but he was perfectly aware of his presence. “I have watched over this town long enough to know when disaster is coming to it.”

“You mean the theatre company? You wish to forbid their performance?”

The Starets smiled. “I can forbid nothing. I am too old.”

“Then why have you come to me?”

“To awaken you if you wish to be woken.”

“Woken? To what? What is your counsel to me?”

“The same as I give to others: to keep your mind in Hell and despair not.”

With a little inclination of the head the Starets began to walk away from Asmatov across the square. Asmatov, knowing that the man had no more to say to him, remained for a while trying to make sense of the incident. When he had failed abjectly to do so he went back inside his theatre where in the foyer he met the Count furiously puffing on a cigar.

“Where have you been, Signor Asmatov. Who have you been talking to?”

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“Why do you wish to know?”

“I believe I am entitled to ask this of my theatre manager.”

“*Yours*, Count?”

“*Mine*.”

“That is not how I see it.”

“You very soon will.”

“Perhaps so, Count, but until such time I would be obliged if you did not use my office and my telephone without permission.”

The Count appeared to ignore Asmatov’s last remark. He dropped his half smoked cigar on the marble floor of the foyer, but no move was made to crush its glowing end with his foot; he merely left it there to smoulder. Asmatov found himself staring at the Count’s face which was tilted upwards and wore an abstracted expression. He saw the Count’s nostrils dilate as if he were scenting the breeze.

Asmatov suddenly remembered how as a child he was taken by his parents for a picnic in the woods above Petropol one summer. In the somnolent aftermath of the feast he had wandered away to explore the forest for himself. He was eight at the time, just old enough to understand the meaning of danger and the consequences of solitary pleasure. Suddenly he broke into a clearing where stood a stag in a shaft of sunlight. For a moment the two stared at one another. Asmatov remembered the inscrutable look with which the stag had gazed at him, its casual, contemptuous curiosity, before it had raised its head to scent the air, as the Count had done, stamped its foot on the forest floor and ambled away into the shade of the trees. How was it that the Count was so like and so unlike the Starets he had just spoken to?

“I have a right to know your intentions,” said Asmatov.

“My intention is to astonish.”

“With what precisely? I demand to know.”

“It is best you should not,” said the Count suavely, “I do not deny your right, but you have to remember that the greatest weapon in our armoury is surprise. Let us do our best.”

From that moment Asmatov abrogated his responsibility towards the theatre, and it would seem that his services were barely needed. The company itself had seen to the publicity; they were even happy to relieve Matriona in the ticket office.

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Several times during the three days that followed Asmatov was approached by some concerned citizen of Petropol and asked about Count Belpagore's company. Was the theatrical fare that they were offering suitable for the delicate sensibilities of the young, the elderly, the ill-educated and unsophisticated? Asmatov noticed with some amusement that each of these persons was concerned not for his or her own morals or feelings but for those of some element in the community to which the enquirer did not belong. He concluded that the chief motivation behind their expressions of concern was curiosity. This he could understand because he was himself curious and, despite his best efforts, his curiosity remained unsatisfied until the performances began. Whenever he made an attempt to slip into the auditorium to witness rehearsals he found his efforts thwarted. Someone was always on hand to draw him away with a vital request for his services in another part of the building.

One curious incident occurred on the day before the first night. When he came into the theatre that morning Asmatov was informed by an agitated dwarf, one of the Count's company, that a pig had escaped from the theatre.

"A pig? What pig?" said Asmatov indignantly. Had he known that the Count had brought pigs into the theatre he might have thought fit to object strenuously.

"A small black pig which answers to the name of Ilyich," said the dwarf, "He must be found and returned at once."

"Why is that, pray?" said Asmatov with a touch of irony in his voice.

"He is a Learned Pig," said the dwarf, "a remarkable animal. He can identify and point out letters with his trotter, even the signs of the Zodiac!"

"And what am I supposed to do about it, sir?"

"Institute a search immediately!" said the dwarf.

Asmatov was taken aback by the fellow's impertinence, and he responded coolly that he could take no responsibility for livestock which had been brought into the theatre without his authority. He then went in search of Count Belpagore who, needless to say, was nowhere to be found.

Asmatov heard much that day about the pig Ilyich. It had been seen all over Petropol: trotting along the esplanade, in the famous Botanical

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Gardens where it had dug up and devoured an unusually rare orchid, even in the Turkish Baths where it had caused serious annoyance to several prominent members of the Petropol Chamber of Commerce. Three times it had been waylaid by the dogs of the town, but on each occasion it had rounded on its tormentors and routed them. A Borzoi belonging to the town's homeopathic doctor had had its ear bitten off by the savage creature.

Eventually Ilyich was lured back into the theatre by several members of Belphagore's company and a large dish of potato peelings. These had been rather reluctantly supplied by Madame Asmatova. Potato peelings, she was informed, were the only things that would tempt the Learned Pig into any kind of subservience.

Asmatov began to wonder whether Ilyich had been deliberately let loose in the town to drum up further publicity for Count Belphagore's company. Certainly the incident had a marked effect on the ticket office. Bookings which had been rather sluggish increased rapidly. Matriona in her office was overwhelmed with requests for the "best seats available" so that by the opening performance almost every seat had been taken for all three performances by the Count's company.

On the opening night Asmatov took his usual stand, beneath the bust of Melpomene, to welcome his audience into the theatre. Despite the gratifying numbers who passed through the doors and up the grand staircase, Asmatov did not feel, as he usually did on these occasions, the satisfaction of a genial host welcoming his guests to a party. He was distinctly apprehensive. He noted with dismay rather than delight that the good people of Petropol had put on their finest clothes to witness the Count's extravaganza: jewels sparkled, white shirt fronts gleamed. There was a susurrus of furs as they brushed the balustrade leading up to the Grand Tier. The air of expectation was palpable, but Asmatov knew neither what the customers were expecting, nor what they were about to receive. Acquaintances would nod and smile at him when they passed him by, as if to say: "my dear Asmatov, I know you will not let us down."

As Asmatov took his own seat in the company box, he was pleased to find that a competent little troupe of musicians were in the pit busying their way competently through a selection from Meyerbeer's

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Robert le Diable. He had barely glanced at the program for the opening performance of *The Philosophy of the Damned* before the lights had dimmed and the heavy red curtains embroidered with gold had lifted to reveal a brightly lit stage within the proscenium.

Asmatov had lived with the theatre a long time but he never failed to be excited by this moment. The raising of the curtain on the first act was to him like the coming of dawn to a traveller by night, an event of unblemished hope. The scene disclosed was both unexpected and reassuringly familiar. It was a conventional urban drawing room, Western European in appearance, and well decorated if not perhaps in the very latest style. Asmatov heard a murmur of satisfaction from the audience: he and they knew, or thought they knew, what they were about to enjoy: a drama or perhaps a comedy of bourgeois life, probably taken from the French. Asmatov read in his program that we were in the apartment of Monsieur and Madame Fadinard. The play began with two bankers, Messieurs Fadinard and Fontrevault discussing arrangements for a night on the town in which they would escape their wives and resort to a house of assignation in which, they discovered to their mutual surprise, they both had a mistress. The play proceeded at first in a leisurely and genial fashion. There were little ripples of laughter which increased as the complications of the bankers' intrigue began to escalate. Madame Fadinard appeared accompanied by her five year old daughter Francine, played, Asmatov thought, by a dwarf, but he could not be sure. There was a slightly curious incident in which Madame Fadinard's father, a white whiskered old General in full military uniform, presented his little granddaughter with a miniature coffin in which to put her doll and she ran off in tears, but otherwise the play was proceeding very much on expected lines. A casual remark and a dropped letter arouses the suspicions of Madame Fadinard. She summons Madame Fontrevault to her aid, and by the end of the first act they are conspiring to pursue their husbands to the house of assignation. Finally Madame Fadinard says: "And if I find that Fadinard is up to something I'll kill him!" With that she pulls out a pistol from her pocket and fires it at a vase on the mantelpiece which shatters into a thousand pieces. There was a stunned silence from the audience and, with the sound of the pistol shot still ringing in their ears, the curtain fell. It was a good

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ten seconds before the applause began, but it was full and enthusiastic. The audience had been shocked by the gun, but they had evidently decided that they were in for an evening of uproarious comedy and had responded accordingly. Asmatov was not so sure.

By the middle of the second act Asmatov was a baffled man, uncertain whether he was witnessing a farce or a tragedy, or something that was quite horribly neither. The scene was laid in the house of assignation where one of the male clients has just died. The police appear, and an undertaker with a coffin. A horribly real corpse appears on stage, white and bloated in a bloodstained night-shirt and proves to be too large for the coffin. A bigger coffin is ordered. One of the bankers hides in the coffin and is assumed to be dead by his wife who shoots the undertaker and kills him. The corpse is manhandled in and out of coffins and hidden under tables and in cupboards. The other wife attempts suicide. By the time the curtain fell, half the audience were weak with laughter, the other half in a state of shock.

The curtain for the third act went up on Monsieur Fadinard's bourgeois home again, but it was a scene of desolation. Coffins and corpses were being delivered to it, for no apparent reason, and the place was beginning to look like a charnel house. By the end of the act most of the main characters were dead, either killed by some bizarre accident or by each other.

The plot had become impossibly confused, but the last moments of the play, though barely comprehensible, were extremely memorable. Asmatov regularly dreamed about them for the rest of his life.

The last coffin to be brought onto the stage was accompanied by a weeping Madame Fadinard dressed in black, escorted by two policemen who had, by this time, arrested her for murder. The coffin, somewhat less than half size, was set up on an almost vertical stand facing the audience. It was then opened to reveal what looked like the corpse of the child Francine, pale and still as the night, clothed in an elaborate white lace gown. Asmatov could not tell if it was a wax doll of some kind being used, or the dwarf actress. He heard and almost felt a shudder pass across the audience.

The little coffin was covered with a red cloth. There came a tremolo from the fiddles in the pit and the shape beneath the cloth began to

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grow. A monkey bounded onto the stage and tore away the cloth to reveal a full sized coffin in its place. Long strands of white hair were sprouting from under the lid of the box. For several bars of music – a military march of some kind – the hair appeared to grow and long white tresses crawled across the carpeted stage towards the orchestra pit. There was a flash, a drum roll from the pit, the monkey leapt onto the coffin, tore open the lid and revealed the corpse of the General, grandfather to the young Francine, in his military uniform with the long white hair and whiskers that had poured out of the coffin. As the curtain slowly fell the coffin was picked up by six dwarfs dressed as guardsmen and carried off stage to the strains of a solemn funeral march. There was a mutter of applause and laughter, then silence. When the curtain rose again the scene was empty of all coffins and persons. There remained only the corpse of the little girl Francine lying on the floor, dead, her doll beside her in its coffin. When the curtain fell again Asmatov wondered if there was going to be a riot. There was some applause, even the occasional “Bravo!”, but there were also shouts of protest, catcalls and boos. Asmatov himself felt exhausted; his expectations and feelings had been so remorselessly violated and confounded.

During the curtain calls that followed the hubbub died down, but there was not much clapping. The audience left the theatre in silence. Asmatov did not stay to see them out. He left by a side door and walked about the city.

He did not go into the theatre the following day. He stayed in his apartment and would not answer calls. He had felt strangely humiliated by the theatrical experience he had undergone because it had been so utterly beyond his comprehension. Besides, there was nothing he could do. The theatre was booked up for the next two nights; he must simply let events take their course.

He would rely upon Madame Asmatova, a plump amiable body whom everyone liked, to report back to him on the reaction of the town. She went out quite early that morning and returned at noon to inform him that the town was agog with last night’s events. Many people of course had not yet seen the show and some said that they would suspend judgement until they had witnessed it for themselves. Most

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people, however, regardless of whether they had seen *The Philosophy of the Damned* or not, had made up their mind about it.

A select minority declared that they had enjoyed a profound theatrical experience. Others, more sceptical of its artistic merits, remarked in a superior kind of way that, whether one liked it or not, the work they had seen was undoubtedly a sign of the times. It was noticeable that these people were a little reluctant to specify what that sign signified, and perhaps they were wise not to do so. The majority of those who had seen *The Philosophy of the Damned* or who had merely heard about it from those who had, decided that the play was depraved from beginning to end, some kind of obscene joke, and an insult to the people of Petropol.

This feeling grew after the second night and on the third day, following the final performance, Asmatov himself ventured out to hear what the audience had felt. It was a bitter cold night as Asmatov walked from café to café, from street corner to street corner, his face muffled against recognition, listening to what was being said. *The Philosophy of the Damned* was on everyone's lips and the news was not good. Asmatov suspected a riot, or at the very least a vehement protest against Count Belphegore and his Apocalyptic Comedians. It was time for him to go to the theatre and see what was to be done.

Asmatov entered by the Stage Door to find all apparently deserted. The dressing rooms were empty and looked as though they had never been used. The stage was likewise swept and bare. Everything – scenery, props, costumes – had been cleared away with remarkable thoroughness. It was odd therefore that the trap door in the centre of the stage had been left open. Asmatov approached the hole and peered in.

The light was very dim and at first he could see little beneath him, but he could hear a low murmuring and rustling sound coming from below, as of many voices and bodies in subdued but agitated restlessness. A rank smell, half-human, half-animal emanated from the trap. Quietly, Asmatov let himself down into the space beneath the stage.

It was an extensive area, deep enough for a man to walk in comfortably, but full of stage machinery and equipment and lit only by a few oil lamps suspended from the wooden uprights which supported the stage above it.

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As his eyes became accustomed to the dark, Asmatov saw that the whole of this area was crowded with vast crates or containers, most of them covered by cloths and tarpaulins. From within these containers came the sounds that he had heard. The noises troubled him because he could not quite fix in his mind whether they were human or animal. They were both; they were neither. He caught the odd articulate word, but even these were strangely enunciated, as if by a parrot or some other beast who barely understood their meaning. And yet in the depths of his being he grasped the burden of all these sounds, a burden of ceaseless gnawing agitation, the movement of creatures caught in a trap, who know they are caught and yet cannot stop struggling because that is all the life they have to offer.

With infinite reluctance Asmatov drew aside one of the cloths that covered the crates. What he saw amazed him. The crate was more like a wooden cage with the bars very close together but through them he could see that these vessels were packed tight with living beings. There were men, women, children, dwarfs, animals of all kinds, even birds and snakes and they shifted endlessly within their confines, uttering strange semi-articulate cries and grunts. Asmatov uncovered one crate after another, all packed with the same varied contents. None of the inmates of these wooden prisons took the slightest notice of Asmatov: all were intent on their ceaseless, futile inward movements, like sick sleepers who toss and turn, but never settle comfortably.

As Asmatov gazed upon this panoply of damnation, the words of Starets Afanasy came to him unbidden: "Keep thy mind in Hell and despair not." Just then he heard a sharp noise, a footstep; then he saw a light. A man carrying a bright gas lantern had entered the understage. It was Count Belphagore.

Asmatov saw him climb onto the crates and, bent double because of the lowness of the ceiling, walk across them, peering into their snarling depths. As the Count looked down at his suffering creatures, Asmatov could see his face brightly illumined by the lamp, his red hair and whiskers looking more than ever like the flames of a wind-blown bonfire. Belphagore's expression was inscrutable; it seemed to Asmatov to be deeply, almost restfully absorbed in the contemplation of his brood. Once he pushed something down through the bars of one of his prisons

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and was rewarded by an orgy of groans and howls. At that moment the Count's face lit up with ecstatic delight. Asmatov recoiled in horror, making a slight noise as he did so. The noise immediately alerted the Count. He looked up, at once fiercely watchful, like a fox who has just scented a rabbit.

Asmatov ducked down behind the crates, as above him he heard the Count leaping from one to the other, searching for him. Belphagore was muttering words in a strange tongue, not Italian, a guttural language that rumbled in the throat. Such a language, thought Asmatov, might be spoken by wild beasts one to another, could they speak. He knew now that the Count was intent on hunting him down.

Asmatov was stout, ungainly, fearful and already out of breath, but he had one slender advantage over the Count: he knew the theatre as well as he knew his own home. While Asmatov wove his way carefully around the crates he could hear, and even feel the Count leaping about above him, growling and occasionally sniffing the air. There was a little side door which opened into the orchestra pit from the understage, and it was towards this that Asmatov was tentatively crawling, trying hard to suppress his gasps for breath in the fetid air. Then he knew that the Count had sensed his direction. This was no time for caution. Asmatov made a leap for the little door and got through it with the Count hard on his heels.

Asmatov was surprised to find the orchestra pit cluttered with abandoned musical instruments. It took him only a moment to realise that he could put this to his own advantage. As the Count burst through the door to the pit, Asmatov seized a cello by the neck and advanced on him, driving the spike at its base directly against Count Belphagore's chest. The Count gave a hoarse roar as he felt himself penetrated by the cello spike. Meanwhile Asmatov had leapt onto the conductor's podium, seized the brass rail that separated him from the auditorium and, at the second attempt, had vaulted over it. As he ran up the central aisle of the auditorium he had just enough sense to realise that it might be wise to get out of the theatre by a side exit. Somewhere behind him the Count was roaring and thundering after him, but further and further away now.

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Asmatov slipped out of the theatre by a pass door at the side and into an alley. Snow was falling, a rare event for Petropol, even in November, softening the streets, robing the town in purity. Asmatov put his coat collars up and hurried along in the direction of St Basil's Square. As he approached it he began to hear the sound of a crowd murmuring. Then he was out of the narrow alley and into St Basil's.

A large number of Petropolitans, some carrying torches, others with pickaxes and other crude offensive weapons were gathered on the steps of the opera house. Around them snow was falling gently from a black sky. Asmatov kept his distance from them as he skirted the square, but he could see that one man was addressing them from the glass panelled portals of the theatre itself.

Behind the glass all had been blackness; then there was a flash of light, and Asmatov saw that Count Belphagore had entered the foyer. He was holding his gas lamp aloft, but unsteadily, and, as the light swung, the man's red hair flamed in the blackness. He staggered like a drunkard, his eyes were wild; he looked like a madman. When they saw this the crowd became frantic. They rushed for the doors of the theatre and started to smash their way in.

Asmatov saw no more. He was making for his apartment on the other side of St Basil's Square. He had a wife and child to think of.



Very early the following morning Asmatov with his wife and daughter made their way unobtrusively to the harbour and boarded the little steamer for Constantinople. A few days later the Red Army swept into Petropol. It would be idle, as well as a cliché, to say that the rest was history, because it always is, but the history of Petropol was one that Mr. Asmatov, a man who knew his capacities and limitations, chose never to read. He was attending to his own history.

By the year 1923 Asmatov with his wife and daughter had found their way to England, and he had become the Front of House Manager of the Bijou Theatre in Godalming. It was a modest modern building which boasted, for the greater part of the year, a permanent repertory company offering the good citizens of Godalming a pleasant diet of

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comedies, farces and thrillers. Every week there was a new play which was, at the same time, always exactly the same. Asmatov's daughter, Elena, had embarked on a moderately successful career as an actress and his plump wife had reconciled herself quite comfortably to the tea and small talk of an English Provincial Town. As for Asmatov, he looked back to the days of the Imperial Opera House, Petropol as another age. If he thought of Count Belphagore and his Apocalyptic Comedians, he could believe in them only as a kind of dream he had once had. But, as Mr. Asmatov, who was a wise as well as a modest man, occasionally reflected, it is often in dreams that reality begins.

ЯЗІ БЯЗІП БЛДСК ШЦІТЗ

John Howard

The colours

Red, green, black, white: the colours of the four directions and of Svetovid's four faces.

There is the deep land where everywhere is a borderland and every river and range of hills, every feature, is a frontier. Everywhere is on an edge. The edges move back and forth across the land. Shifting, their enclosed regions and districts are forever changing and being remade. Symbolising names appear, exist, and disappear. But nothing vanishes completely. Within the edges there is endurance: always the land. And at any time it is always someone's land, someone else's ambiguous country: Ukraina.

Kyiv / Kiev, February 1917

There is nothing to be done with Ludendorff, and Haig is still managing perfectly well without any help. And Svetovid recognises that he met a kindred spirit in Rasputin. Svetovid's bodied-out form even smiles again, as he thinks about his use of those alien words, but the man is dead now, a faithful and willing servant whose work is done. Now Svetovid knows that he is right to return to the East. And as ever it is all there for him: the tremendous wide spaces sweeping around the curve of the world – the plains, forests, and marshes lying between the Vistula and the Don, the remote foothills of the Carpathians and the windy dunes of the Baltic coast. The land is a gorgeous tapestry, endlessly fought over, a gift coveted and a dangerous possession, always being won and lost, and now yet again waiting to be cut up by its jealous and disputing owners and would-be owners.

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Kyiv / Kiev, March 1917

Svetovid thinks the building housing the Ukrainian Association is quite an attractive one for its type. He's seen them before, in every town and city. Built in one of the endless variants of the classical, it has a dome, and will do. Originally a clean white, the building now looks as dingy and grey as the dirty and stained snow covering the city. Svetovid bodies himself out and wanders into the main hall, and stands in the middle of the crowd of delegates waiting expectantly. The new Central Rada is finishing electing its officers; the delegates wait for it to proclaim itself in session, and begin work. As the President moves forward and takes his seat, Svetovid thinks that people must need to have big beards to get anywhere in this place.

Kyiv / Kiev, June 1917

The President is dictating an article to his secretary, who, having perfect recall, merely goes through the motions of writing down his employer's words. "The Central Rada declared Ukraina to be an autonomous part of the Russian Republic," Hrushevsky says. "But the Provisional Government is both weak and unpopular. That is an untenable combination."

"Kerensky will attack the Germans," the secretary whispers.

"What's that?"

"I didn't say anything, sir."

"Hmm. Sounded like something about Kerensky. Well. Let us continue. The Central Rada is dominated by socialist-minded parties. That is all to the good: the will of the people and the will for change within a revived nationhood —"

"Kerensky's offensive against Germany and Austria-Hungary will be a disaster. The Russian army will be shattered. The Provisional Government will not be able to last much longer."

"Young man, would you kindly stop talking when I'm dictating to you?"

"Sir, forgive me, but I did not speak."

"What? But I heard —"

The secretary looks intently at the President, and holds his pencil poised over his notebook.

Red Green Black White

“We will continue,” the President says after a pause. A new note of uncertainty begins to creep into his voice. “Now that the Provisional Government has recognized the Central Rada, this is the time for all sides to draw together, for the good of Russia and Ukrainia...”

“Don’t make me laugh,” Svetovid says.

Kyiv / Kiev, July 1917

The soldier stumbles along a back lane on the outskirts of the city. The heat is overpowering; sweat trickles down the man’s face and drips onto his dust-covered uniform. He stops at the garden gate of a tiny cottage. Sunflowers line the path to the front door, nodding in the heat. The soldier, grateful for the small amount of shade, knocks feebly on the door and then slumps down in front of the house. The old woman who opens the door a few moments later gasps when she looks down at the exhausted man. She resists the temptation to step back in disgust and slam the door shut. She bends down and takes a closer look as the soldier stares back up at her, the dust covering his torn uniform and making his face look like a mask of plaster. Then she begins to smile.

“Sergei, it is you, it is really you! Please, try to stand, come in...”

As she tries to help the soldier to his feet, she looks at him again, more closely this time. In the heat and the intense sunlight of the quiet garden the dust covering the young man’s face seems to shimmer and flow, rearranging itself. Moments later the old woman realises she is looking at a different man; not the one she first thought she saw. Acute disappointment blooms inside her, and she blinks away stinging tears. But she keeps her grip on the soldier’s dusty arm as he slowly gets up.

In the tiny kitchen the man wipes his face clean and drinks cup after cup of cold water from the old woman’s well. She gazes at him with a mixture of apprehension and pity, and places a bottle of vodka and a glass in front of him. Now she seems to see him through a haze of swirling dust; then the warm air is clear again. She says, “For a moment just then, when I first saw you, I thought you were my grandson Sergei. But now I see, well, I don’t quite know. Who are you? What are you doing here?”

The soldier coughs, and the old woman pours him a glass of vodka. He drinks it as the dust rises up from his uniform, becoming a second

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shape, one rising up from and leaving his body before filling the kitchen. "Sergei Ivanovich was my best friend," he says. "He was killed a week ago in this pointless and murderous campaign." He points at the holy ikons and the pictures and photographs of the Emperor, his wife, and Kerensky that are the only decoration on the kitchen walls. "They did this," the soldier says. "They did this to Sergei, to me, to the country, and to you. These utter incompetents, these lying murderers. The Empress is German – one of *them*. You know that, don't you?" He pours himself another drink and gulps it down.

She blinks and the haze vanishes. "You mustn't speak of our rulers in that way, and certainly not of our Little Father, God bless him. You poor boy, you are exhausted, and yet you came here to see me. But please, have respect."

"Respect?" He pours another drink. "What do they know of that? But, grandmother, Sergei was my friend and you have helped me. I came to you because Sergei gave me his last letter to bring to you, the grandmother who brought him up, in whose little house and patch of land he grew to manhood. Here."

The old woman fingers the creased envelope before slowly handing it back. "Ah, but I cannot read. Would you...? Please read it to me."

Later, in the hot and stifling twilight, the memory of the words is all that she has. With her permission, Sergei's friend – and she never did ask his name – took the letter away with him to give to a newspaper editor he said he knew in the city.



... And so all that we had held, and all that we gained and more is lost. Our early victories have proved to be illusory. And Lviv remained beyond our grasp. The German forces resisted so stubbornly that our casualties soon began to outstrip theirs. Our morale plummeted; the offensive failed due to an overdose of discussion and debate and a corresponding complete lack of action. Soldiers' Committees questioned orders and talked over everything. Orders were not obeyed, or were obeyed only after a vote had been taken. Committees took over from platoons and companies, and all the time we

Red Green Black White

were retreating over the land and across river after river, while our losses mounted and our lifeblood drained away...



Sergei will not have died in vain, she remembers her visitor telling her. Finishing the last of the vodka the old woman brushes yet more dust off the table, never noticing that some of it is now coloured by the minute flecks of powdered paint and desiccated paper drifting down in the still air from the ikons and portraits as they dry out; wood warping and splitting, paper curling and disintegrating, and leaving such spaces that she cannot remember what it was that had filled them.

Petrograd (St Petersburg), December 1917

The old peasant puts his head down against the biting wind and plods through the snow along Nevsky Prospekt. He is in the right place at the right time. The car draws up next to him.

“Comrade, where are you going?”

“I’m going to the station.”

“Let us take you there. Your bag is heavy. Come, get into the car, we will give you a lift.”

Soon they pulled up outside Warsaw Station. The old peasant looks at his new friends in bewilderment. “Thank you, sirs – I mean comrades – but it is Nikolaevsky Station I have to get to. I’m on my way back to my village, beyond Moscow. I thank you both, but this isn’t my station.”

“Tell me, what party do you belong to?”

He hesitates, but not for too long. “Comrades, I’m a Social Revolutionary. We all are in our village.”

“Are you a Left or a Right Social Revolutionary?”

This time he is quick. “Left of course, comrades. The most Leftest possible.”

“Now, Roman Illarionovich, there is really no need for you to go back to your village for the present. Come with us to make peace with the Germans in Brest-Litovsk.”

“Well...”

“Here.”

John Howard

Kamenev presses a gold coin into the old man's hand. "There's more for you where that came from. Now what do you say, comrade?"

Kreuznach, December 1917

The Crown Council isn't exciting enough for him. Svetovid, just for the fun of it, has another try at assuming Ludendorff, but finds again that the First Quartermaster-General is already possessed enough by his own brand of limitless arrogance, single-minded competence and paranoiac lust for manipulation. Svetovid does not wish to be in competition with the man. In this case he does not have to be. He knows where to go.

Berlin, January 1918

The imperial glitter had worn away. Sprawled senseless beneath an endless sky the colour of pewter, its buildings and avenues stretched out on the landscape like a comatose victim, the great city was waiting. The short days were grey, cold, and empty; the lengthy nights were colder still and full of terrors. The city was gripped by depression. Its veins and arteries were scarcely functioning: there was little heating and food. The eyes of its buildings were bleary, smeared with neglect. Newspapers were full of the names of the dead and missing; the wounded and maimed from the fronts filled the hospitals and overflowed into the icy streets. Those who were still whole were hungry. Expectancy grew with their emptiness. Anything would surely be better than this.

Svetovid bodies himself out as a prosperous factory owner or industrialist. His distinguished appearance and thick overcoat covering an apparently well-fed body draws a mixture of barely respectful and certainly hate-filled gazes from the women and old men who are paying their mark for an iron nail to hammer into the giant Iron Hindenburg. Svetovid makes sure that everyone around him can see that he also buys no more than a single iron nail, and insists on receiving the correct change for the five-mark coin he grasps tightly in a smoothly-gloved hand. He overhears whispers and mutterings. Surely someone like that could afford a gold nail at one hundred marks? Was not East Prussia worth at least that much to such a fine and rich gentleman? Or are the pillars of society finally splintering? Svetovid enjoys the discontent he is encouraging in the shivering group. Vigorously he hammers in his

Red Green Black White

nail and turns his back on the statue, walking swiftly away, slicing a path straight through the murmuring crowd.

In his office the Imperial Chancellor sighs as he lays the despatch down on his almost empty desk. He wonders why he is being informed. Supreme Command has been dealing with everything for months now. And he has no recollection of ever having seen before the secretary who silently brought the despatch to him; but young men came and went so quickly these days. Since the United States had declared war on the Central Powers nine months earlier, Germany's position had gone from bad to worse. There was still a murderous stalemate in the west, and the great successes in the east had done nothing to stave off the spectres of famine and revolution that now stalked free throughout the Empire and the Dual Monarchy. And now Woodrow Wilson had announced these Fourteen Points: a cynical ploy to hold the Allies together and to encourage surrender now because the peace settlement that would inevitably come would be worse.

The old man dreads the verbal torrent that he knew would come from Supreme Command if he suggested that even the vaguest of positive responses be made. It didn't seem to matter to Hindenburg and Ludendorff that peace – and a bread peace at that – was needed now. In a few months' time there would be no-one left to celebrate it and eat the hard-won fruits.

He picks up a document that has been annotated by the Emperor himself. This time the All-Highest War Lord hadn't even bothered to erase the accompanying sketchings from the margins. There were tiny drawings of battleships and the coats of arms of the new duchies on the Baltic and Black Seas that he still imagined would be carved out of Russia. 'The Empress herself will drive in the first golden nail!' The Imperial Chancellor fights to keep his eyes open as he thinks of coffins, and the new secretary knocks and enters the room.

Kyiv / Kiev, January 1918

President Hrushevsky nervously shuffles papers around on his desk. He shivers, and not only because of the deep and bitter cold reigning outside. He presses a button, and a moment later the door opens and a secretary appears.

John Howard

“Ah, you again,” he says. “Is Alexander indisposed today?”

The secretary nods. “I’m afraid he is.”

“Very well, clearly that cannot be helped. I think there will be a great deal of business today. I must address the Central Rada promptly at noon, for a start. Did you hear any news on your way here? I take it that the streets are safe?”

Svetovid hands the president a large printed sheet. “The newspapers are publishing special editions. The city is secure,” Svetovid replies. “The national forces are in control. The Bolsheviks have set up a counter-government in Kharkiv. What will you say?”

Hrushevsky scans the newspaper’s single sheet and gives it back. “There cannot be two Ukrainian National Republics. That much is clear. And the Bolsheviks surely think the same. We must strengthen our army, and chase the Bolsheviks out of Ukraine, and all the way back to Moscow if need be. And yet we must maintain links with Russia...”

After leaving the president to begin drafting his speech, Svetovid wanders the corridors and listens to the conversations taking place all around him. The members of the Central Rada are seriously divided amongst themselves. Some are favouring negotiations with the Bolsheviks in Kharkiv; others are in favour of seeking help from the Central Powers. Several swift assumptions and bodyings-out later Svetovid speaks in the debate, and helps to stir the Central Rada to vote for an immediate and complete declaration of Ukraine’s independence.

Kyiv / Kiev, February 1918

Svetovid likes the city. If there is to be one place in the entire vastness of the land of his four colours that he considers particularly special to him, it would be Kyiv. There is the city’s setting: the River Dnieper flowing through, with its tributaries and lakes, surrounded by woods and ravines. The grand buildings, the churches, palaces, and public buildings, the parks and squares, and gracious boulevards stretching towards the open country: the result of a gradual creation that he respects even as he could demolish it all as if it were an anthill. Svetovid surveys the scurrying inhabitants – the human ants, certainly more interesting as assumed than real ants – with a general indifference highlighted by an occasional

Red Green Black White

hint of interest, but nothing even approaching real concern. He knows that none of them lasts for long, anyway.

As the Red Army advances on the city, those of its inhabitants who have somewhere safer and better to go to, make their escape. But communications are chaotic; roads are in an even more appalling state than usual due to the winter weather, and the railway services are in a bad shape. Most citizens stay indoors, except when they make the perilous journey outside to buy food. They have no hope that the Red Army will be stopped from taking the city, but they hope that the invasion and occupation, the changeover of power, will be as bloodless as possible. People start to sever connections with the regime of the National Republic and its predecessors. Anything concerning the Provisional Government and the old Empire is suspect and open to question. Paper money changes hands furtively; gold and silver is gathered together, its existence kept secret for a better tomorrow. Hollow walls are invaded and new hidden spaces created; gardens and courtyards show signs of being disturbed.

The citizens of Kyiv begin to hoard food. Over the last few months, in the parts of Ukraine under their control, the German and Austro-Hungarian governments have been requisitioning food and sending it back westwards. The liberators take from the liberated in their one-way Bread Peace. They want more. Along with precious metals and jewels, food vanishes into the hidden places of the city.

Just when the Bolshevik army is on the point of entering the city, a fifth-columnist scare breaks out. In a queue for one of the few trams left running, where Svetovid is bodied-out as a middle-aged widow, he whispers – Rastov the baker would have had bread that day if it wasn't that he was a secret Bolshevik and giving most of what he baked to Bolshevik women who were hiding their sons in readiness for the imminent takeover.

“I saw Mariya Mikhailovna with three loaves and some small cakes.”

“Tatiana Ivanovna is a grieving widow, but every day she takes a large basket of rolls, far more than one woman can eat.”

“Rastov's ovens are always hot. There is always flour being taken into his bakery.”

John Howard

“The tree in Rastov’s back yard has been dug up. They were out there all night, despite the cold and snow, and everyone could hear the sounds of metal being dragged over the stones.”

The riot begins.

Kyiv / Kiev, February 1918

AWAY WITH THE CENTRAL RADA!

DOWN WITH THE REACTIONARY SUPPORTERS OF
IMPERIALISM!

LONG LIVE THE UKRAINIAN SOVIET REPUBLIC!

Brest-Litovsk, February 1918

Svetovid bodies himself out in a deserted room in the Citadel. There is no glass in the window: if he could feel it, the biting cold would quickly chill him to the bone unless he could find a fire. Thought of fire and flame causes him to... smile. He needs to practice. The floor is damp with melted snow and frost. Svetovid takes care to actually walk, creating footprints as he strolls along the corridor. As he approaches a staircase Svetovid generates a German uniform complete with greatcoat and helmet. Not for the first time he wonders if he needs to bother here. The contracting parties seem to be set on a course of mutual destruction without any help from him. But to him the spectacle is worth it.

That evening Svetovid assumes Stashkov again. At dinner he really enjoys himself, shocking the well-bred diplomats and stuffy soldiers with his lack of table manners and his plainly-expressed opinions. The peasant stuffs food into his mouth, getting the best delicacies the kitchens can provide tangled in his immense grey beard and spraying fragments over the table and his neighbours. He drinks toast after toast. “What stories I will tell!” he shouts.

An orderly offers him wine. Stashkov is popular with the servants: they have never before been so entertained by such antics and the discomfiture of their masters. “Thank you, comrade,” he says. “I don’t mind if I do. Stop at the brim. Listen, what’s the actual difference between red and white? Which is the strongest? I can tell you, I’m only interested in the strength of what I’m drinking!”

Red Green Black White

Stashkov drains another glass, which is immediately refilled. He is drinking his wine as if it were water – a situation reassuringly normal for the onlookers. Svetovid leaves and bodies-out as a servant, coming into the room bearing more wine and then remaining unobtrusively in the background, looking at the reddening face of the old peasant and waiting for the indiscretions and recriminations to really begin.

Brest-Litovsk, February 1918

Major-General Max Hoffmann looks the part of the archetypal Imperial staff officer: fleshy, shaven-headed, his pince-nez seeming to barely maintain its hold on the sheer slope of his nose. Svetovid finds that assuming him is hard work, though not as pointless and unnecessary as with his superior Ludendorff. So when Kiev fell to the Red Army and the Central Rada fled, appealing for help, that help came quickly. The treaty between Ukrainia and the Central Powers was signed within a day of the fall of Kiev; Hoffmann played his part, and German troops swiftly advanced deep into Ukrainia.

“The response to the Emperor Karl is as follows,” Hoffmann says. “If it is Germany that occupies the land, it is Germany that gets the foodstuffs.” He turns to the portraits of the Emperors Wilhelm and Karl on the wall. “Send it; that is all. We shall see which the young Karl needs more: peace or bread?”

Hoffmann knows the Austrians will drag themselves along in the wake of his forces, as they finalise their plans for Ukrainia.

Brest-Litovsk, February 1918

Svetovid thinks that the antics of Count Czernin and Baron Kühlmann are laughable. From the viewpoint of the orderly whom he has assumed he can see and hear everything.

“We must have peace because we must have bread,” Czernin says. “Only Ukrainia can supply our needs. Our cities, our people, will have no bread within a few weeks. We must get the treaty signed at all costs.”

“Trotsky will not accept the Ukrainia treaty,” Kühlmann replies. “But that is of no consequence. You will make the concessions?”

Czernin nods. “Yes. We accept the need to create a new Ukrainian province in the Monarchy, with full linguistic rights for the inhabitants.

John Howard

We then get food and grain from Ukrainia itself. It is our Bread Peace, thank God.”

“Russia may protest, but nothing more can be done unless Russia accepts its responsibilities and recognises the right of self-determination of Ukrainia and the other provinces and lands we have liberated. After Ukrainia, Russia has to sign, surely?”

Brest-Litovsk, February 1918

After Trotsky finishes his speech, the Bolshevik delegation leaves the room. Hoffmann shouts “Unheard of!” And later he decides that this peace is no peace. He calls over an orderly, one whom he does not remember seeing before. He starts to dictate his plans for the continuation of the war.

Petrograd (St Petersburg), February 1918

COMRADE TROTSKY'S DECLARATION TO THE IMPERIALIST INVADERS

We are removing our armies and our people from the war. . . . We are going out of the war. We inform all peoples and their Governments of the fact. We are giving the order for a general demobilization of all our armies opposed at the present to the troops of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Bulgaria. . . . In the name of the Council of People's Commissars, the Government of the Russian Federal Republic informs the Governments and peoples united in war against us, the Allied and neutral countries, that, in refusing to sign a peace of annexation, Russia declares, on its side, the state of war with Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Bulgaria as ended.

Petrograd (St Petersburg), February 1918

Svetovid can assume Lenin for only a very short length of time; but there is really no need to. As with Trotsky and Ludendorff, Svetovid finds that they are doing what he would make them do anyway.

Lenin speaks to the Central Committee, and eventually carries them with him: “If the Germans seize Livonia and Estonia we shall have to surrender them in the name of the Revolution. They may have revolu-

Red Green Black White

tionary Finland too. All the Germans are after is Ukrainian grain. I move that we notify the Germans that we are ready to accept their peace.”

Brest-Litovsk, March 1918

Bodied-out as another orderly, Svetovid writes down the message to be sent to Supreme Command and the Emperor. *The treaty with Russia is signed.*

“It is the price we have to pay for the salvation of the Revolution,” Lenin says.

Kyiv / Kiev, March 1918

As the German Army moves into the city, most citizens stay indoors, except when they make the perilous journey outside to buy food. The few that did, no longer hope that the Red Army can stop the Germans from taking the city. Nevertheless they do hope that this latest invasion and occupation, with its changeover of power, will turn out to be as bloodless as possible. Once again people sever their connections with the former authorities and try to convince themselves and others that their connections with the new authorities were always valid.

“But I have never been a Red. I have always supported the Central Rada.”

“The Bolsheviks would ruin our nation and its culture, religion, and traditions. The Central Powers will protect us.”

“What are you saying, that I sold food to the Red Army? Total nonsense, I assure you! My name is a not uncommon one. Yes, I know where my loyalties lie – let no-one say anything different!”

Anything to do with the Bolsheviks’ Soviet Republic takes its turn at being destroyed or hidden away. And old papers and documents are recovered from their hiding places, but secret gold and silver, gathered together against the future is left in the darkness of secret spaces.

AWAY WITH THE REDS!

DOWN WITH THE SUPPORTERS OF RUSSIAN
IMPERIALISM!

LONG LIVE THE UKRAINIAN NATIONAL REPUBLIC!

John Howard

Kyiv / Kiev, April 1918

In his office, President Hrushevsky paces up and down behind his desk. He whistles and hums fragments of half-remembered folk tunes and music he's heard performed in the days he had the time to go to concerts. Then he stops walking around and presses a button on his desk. A moment later the door opens and a secretary appears.

"Ah, it's you," Hrushevsky says. "Is Alexander indisposed again?"

The secretary nods. "I'm afraid he is."

"Well, I have to address the Central Rada. Please write down at my dictation."

"Don't waste your time," Svetovid whispers.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"Well then. Let us begin. Members of the Central Rada, now that the Ukrainian National Republic has been restored –"

"It hasn't," Svetovid says.

"Will you remain silent when I am speaking!" the President shouts.

"I said nothing."

"I keep on hearing you saying things, I am certain of it. Whenever you are with me in this office, and whenever I have something important to say. What are you saying? Why are you doing this to me?"

Svetovid remains sitting in front of Hrushevsky's desk. He shakes his head slowly. His mouth does not open. "I am not saying anything to *you*, and I am not doing anything to *you*. Your problem is that you do not – and cannot – see the larger picture that I can. You will never see it, and know your part in all these laughable dramas. You are not only drowning in history, you are already past, and becoming forgotten."

"What do you mean, the Central Rada is not restored?"

"You're catching on." Svetovid holds up his pen and the pristine pad of paper. "I am here as your secretary," he says. "So talk to me."

Kyiv / Kiev, April 1918

Svetovid thinks that these people cannot but help to live up to stereotype. The new German Military Governor of Ukrainia, Field Marshal Hermann von Eichhorn certainly comes under that category. Svetovid

Red Green Black White

almost assumed him in order to be able to keep a straight face; but at the last moment he assumed an insignificant staff officer instead. Eichhorn has piercing eyes and a bushy grey moustache; at a glance the governor's face (but nothing else) reminds Svetovid of that peppery little king, Victor Emmanuel III, far to the west in Italy. Eichhorn's adjutant hands him a sheet of paper.

"Thank you. Mr Hrushevsky may come in now."

The President of the Central Rada glances from side to side, as he walks along the full length of the long table to the far end of the room where Eichhorn and his retinue stand waiting for him. In spite of himself, Svetovid is impressed by Hrushevsky's bearing: after all, he must know what he is going to be told. As Hrushevsky passes him, Svetovid coughs discreetly, but loud enough to cause Hrushevsky to look at him. For a moment Svetovid causes the staff officer's face to flow into that of his impertinent secretary, and winks, before restoring it again. No-one else sees anything; the man would not have felt a thing. Hrushevsky turns pale and stumbles; Eichhorn's adjutant grasps his arm and steadies him.

Eichhorn starts to speak. "Mr Hrushevsky, I have summoned you – that is to say, asked you – to call on me this morning because I have an important announcement to make to you. As I speak, the Central Rada is being closed down. We have come to your country in peace and friendship. Ukrainia signed a treaty of peace with Germany and Austria-Hungary. We undertook to protect this bountiful land from the rampaging Bolshevik hordes that were over-running it. In return, all we asked for was foodstuffs, of which Ukrainia has abundant stock, to supply to our hungry and war-weary people. And what happened? Your Central Rada is not fulfilling its side of the bargain. So now the time has come for us to assert ourselves. Mr Hrushevsky, you are hereby dismissed. Good morning."

AWAY WITH THE CENTRAL RADA!

DOWN WITH THE SUPPORTERS OF DISCORD AND
DISUNITY!

LONG LIVE THE UKRAINIAN STATE!

John Howard

Kyiv / Kiev, June 1918

Svetovid bodies-out as a peasant, shuffling slowly along the street towards the Ukrainian Association building. He stops at the bottom of the steps, and looks up at the two German soldiers guarding the entrance.

“Pavlo Petrovich! Oh, Pavlo Petrovich!” the peasant calls out. Then he sits down on the bottom step.

The guards ignore him; in any case they cannot understand Ukrainian.

“Pavlo Petrovich! I have been sent by my village to speak with you!”

“What does that filthy old man want, Kurt? What’s he shouting about?”

“No idea. But I recognise a name. I think he’s yelling something about the Hetman.”

“The Hetman? The new boss we put in back in the spring? Why does the old fart think he’s here?”

“Hetman Skoropadsky’s not too popular these days. The previous lot who were in here couldn’t guarantee delivery of all the grain that they promised – you remember the letters you got from your Margaret? How they were almost starving back home? It’s all different now, Ernst. This new guy, the Hetman, he’s delivering. He’s reversed all the socialist crap about giving away land to the peasants, and got the landowners back, the people who know how to run things and produce food for us. People who can live up to their obligations.”

“Yes, and I suppose the Hetman’s emptying some family’s hidden granary this very moment!”

Svetovid sits in the hot sun, calling out to Skoropadsky. The guards continue to ignore him; eventually the peasant starts to whine. Passers-by stop and stare.

“The old man is hungry and thirsty,” a woman tells the guards. “Why don’t you give him a piece of bread and some water? Shame on you.”

“Help him yourself. He’s one of yours.”

The stone misses the guards; their bullets do not miss three people who turn out to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The old peasant, or his body, is nowhere to be found.

Red Green Black White

“Do you know, Ernst, that I am a socialist?” Kurt says later.

“Ha, so am I! But not here – when we get back home!”

Potsdam, July 1918

The Emperor jumps up from his chair and storms over to the window. “Can you believe this? Can you believe this?” he shouts. “The ingratitude, the base ingratitude!” He throws the notes down onto his desk. Turning to the courier, he asks, “This is genuine? Are you sure?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Svetovid says. He is bodied-out as a handsome despatch courier, sent by Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg himself. “The Field Marshal wanted you, and you only, Your Majesty, to see what the First Quartermaster-General has been planning. And of course, as you said, Majesty, you are still to be Duke of Courland.”

“How very kind of him!” Wilhelm mutters. “And Ludendorff knows I can’t do without him. He is truly indispensable. But I’ll never forget this.”

King of Lithuania: Duke of Urach (Württemberg)

King of Finland: Friedrich Karl (Hesse)

King of Ukrainia: Archduke Eugen Habsburg or Archduke

Wilhelm Franz Habsburg, through Emperor Karl

Alsace-Lorraine: claim from Bavaria – Alsace to Bavaria, Lorraine to Prussia

Upper Alsace: claim from Saxony

Pausing only to violently cross out Wilhelm Habsburg’s name, the Emperor folds the note and locks it away in his safe.

Shortly afterwards, the courier is dismissed. He strolls into a drinking den frequented by officers of the Potsdam Garrison. It is in a street close to both the Garrison Church and the City Palace; once inside, and buying the champagne, Svetovid starts to drop hints about the contents of the note, the Emperor’s response, and the contrast of it all with the harsh conditions being experienced by the brave soldiers on the Western Front. And before he leaves, he drops his wallet on the floor where it is sure to be found. It contains a copy of the note tucked in next to his signed photograph of Hindenburg.

John Howard

Moscow, July 1918

BERLIN CLEARS BOLSHEVIKS OF AMBASSADOR'S
ASSASSINATION

SOCIALIST HAND IN MIRBACH KILLING
MIRBACH ASSASSINATION: REVOLT THREATENED

Russians say that Socialist Revolutionaries of the Left attacked the Bolsheviks, Germany's allies, with the murder of Count Wilhelm von Mirbach...

SAME METHODS AS USED AGAINST THE CZAR

Kyiv / Kiev, July 1918

The newspaper would never be seen by anyone on the street.

PEASANTS IN UKRAINIA ARMED BY AUSTRIANS

German Citizens Living There Are In Their Own Hades

Conditions in Ukrainia had reached such a point that even before the assassination of Field Marshal von Eichhorn an outbreak of violence of some sort was expected...

A spokesman said that Socialist Revolutionaries of the Left attacked the Ukrainians, Germany's allies, when one of their members murdered the Military Governor, Field Marshal Hermann von Eichhorn...

Berlin, August 1918

He could almost smell the hunger. Strolling along the Chausseestrasse, Svetovid observes two women and a young boy collapse on the pavement. He wanders into a café, and makes a good scene of his disgust at the only coffee available; even the substitute made from acorns and beech nuts has run out. The only "coffee" to be had in the place is made from turnips. "How can it be possible? How can it be that this is all there is for us?" he says loudly, causing heads to turn in his direction. "Hindenburg, Ludendorff and the others, they are all drinking real gourmet coffee at General Headquarters."

Red Green Black White

Back in the street, the passengers are clambering out of a street car. “Everyone get out, everyone get out!” the conductor shouts. “The vehicle is ill!” Svetovid sees the horse lying in the road between the shafts. “Poor beast!” he says, so the passengers can hear him. He points at the horse, which seems to be barely breathing. “The soldiers at the Front at least are lucky, having those to eat! We were promised food from the Eastern territories. Where is it? Who’s eating it, if we’re not?”

“Shame!” a man says. “If only the Emperor knew.”

Spa (General Headquarters), September 1918

Yet again, almost despite himself, Svetovid is drawn back towards Ludendorff, who he could think of as also being possessed. But at last he is experiencing the results of his plans – with a small amount of help. When he hears that troops leaving Berlin for the Western Front had sung the Marseillaise and the Internationale as they boarded their trains, Svetovid thinks that now surely he will realise that things are finished. For a moment Svetovid examines the possibility that the huge number of assumings and bodyings-out that he is putting himself through is leading to too close an identification with his assumed’s problems. But no, surely not. As Ludendorff yells and screams his rage and his aides cower behind closed doors, Svetovid is away east again.

Lviv / Lwów / Lemberg, October 1918

Svetovid observes the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He bodies-out and assumes all across the crumbling Dual Monarchy. Svetovid sees through the eyes – real or created – of the Empire’s subjects from Trieste on the Adriatic to Cracow on the Vistula, and from the mountains of Vorarlberg in the far west to the mountains of Ruthenia and Bukovina in the extreme east. He is Austrians who are seeking to rally the Empire’s diverse and far-flung nationalities to the unifying Habsburg cause, and Austrians who are attempting nothing more than to keep their patchwork German Austria from disappearing off the map. He is Hungarians who want to protect the ancient borders of the Kingdom of St Stephen at any cost, and Hungarians who are willing to give away territories held for a millennium for the sake of a purified Magyar state. Svetovid is Croats and Slovenes and Czechs and

John Howard

Slovaks and Ruthenians and Poles and Romanians and Ukrainians who want their own secure lands within the Empire, or complete separation from it.

Svetovid observes the movements of the representatives as they converge on Lvov. Ukrainian members of the Diets of Galicia and Bukovina, and other interested parties are arriving to stake out their part of the corpse of the Empire, even though there is still a very feeble pulse, and the body is still just warm.

“We must proclaim our independence now, without delay!”

“The Poles will take Lviv before we can, if we wait any longer!”

“My friends, Lwów is a Polish city even though it is capital of Ukrainian East Galicia. Can we not work together in this time of struggle?”

“Across the old border Ukrainians have freed themselves from the Russian yoke. We must do the same, and free ourselves from the centuries of Austrian and Magyar rule that we have endured!”

“Lemberg is the jewel of our Galicia!”

“Long live the West Ukrainian National Republic!”

Buczacz / Buchach, November 1918

In this backwater town, Svetovid assumes a restless young man. Wilhelm – that is, although not for much longer, Archduke Wilhelm Franz of Austria – is so interesting. Svetovid is entirely familiar with many members of the sprawling Habsburg family: they have such a pedigree and once exercised so much power. Out of all those he assumes, Svetovid genuinely likes Wilhelm, and enjoys his time in him. There has never been a dull moment. At least, up to now...

Wilhelm’s enforced leisure at the monastery, and his anger at being sidelined by those he helped put into power, provides Svetovid with even more entertainment. He puts on his embroidered shirt, leaving the edges of the collar and cuffs protruding slightly from his tunic as he throws his red greatcoat over his shoulders and goes outside to pace the monastery cloister. The Red Prince, the uncrowned King of Ukraine, is in residence and is going to make his presence felt. In his mind he runs through the letters he will write to the politicians and commanders in Lviv and throughout Red Ruthenia and Bukovina. His time has come, it is *now*.

Red Green Black White

Svetovid leaves Wilhelm to his desperate plans. Even so, if it is possible for him to be touched, he is. Wilhelm's intentions are genuinely so good, from his own limited and hopelessly dynastic point of view. Now, who will be the next person to walk into his sight? Svetovid bodies himself out as a handsome young soldier, a member of Wilhelm's special rifle detachment. He wants Wilhelm to have a break from politics and enjoy himself. And tomorrow it might well be a beautiful East Galician girl who will take Wilhelm's mind off the fast-moving events beyond the baroque monastery gate.

Wilhelm takes off his tunic and slowly removes his embroidered shirt. Svetovid has never yet come to terms with the combined experiences of body and mind that he goes through, either when he is assuming or bodying-out; let alone understanding it. Yet again he wonders how they manage. Sometimes Svetovid assumes two of them. To do so simultaneously is impossible, but he can assume backwards and forwards between two so fast that it is almost the same thing. Either way, he thinks that he could stay with this one for a very long time, if there wasn't so much else going on.

Lviv / Lwów / Lemberg, November 1918

Svetovid assumes the Governor of Lemberg. Summoned from an uneasy sleep, the Governor confronts the rebel soldiers. His second-in-command is with them. "Mr Governor," the Deputy Governor says, "it is my duty to inform you that your services are no longer required. It is deep night now, but we celebrate the birth of a new state, the West Ukrainian National Republic. With the dawn, our flag shall be seen flying over our beloved city. Arrangements have been made for your safe return to Vienna, Mr Ex-Governor. In the meantime, you will be placed under house arrest."

Svetovid relaxes his assuming enough to allow the deposed Governor to put on a fine and genuine act of indignation accompanied by shouts of "Treason!" and "The Emperor will hear of this!" Then Svetovid takes full control again, and the Governor calmly and officially hands-over his powers to his erstwhile deputy. "I call upon all those present to recognise the new government. Gentlemen, farewell and good luck to you."

John Howard

While the celebrations break out throughout the city centre, in a Polish suburb to the west of the city Svetovid bodies-out successively as a teenage apprentice baker, a student, a school-teacher, and a retired engineer.

“The Ukrainians are taking over the city!”

“They have torn down the old flags!”

“We are a Polish city and demand Polish rule!”

Over the protests of his headmaster, the school-teacher opens the school. The retired engineer’s army veteran friends arrive with their obsolete rifles, and one of them takes charge. As the day advances, they settle down to wait on events. As the Ukrainians consolidate their hold on the city, they call on those in the school to lay down their ancient weapons and surrender. They would be allowed to go home.

“Don’t you believe it,” Svetovid whispers.

“What was that?”

“We can’t trust these upstarts.”

By the time the short and frosty day draws to a close, hundreds of people, many in their teens or not much older, have taken over their suburb and are blocking the streets leading in to it.

Lviv / Lwów / Lemberg, November 1918

Svetovid assumes the Ukrainian commander. Although the Sich riflemen now forcing their way into the city are experienced fighters, they do not make much progress against the areas where the Polish inhabitants are in control. The untrained defenders have the advantage of knowing the streets and gardens they control; more than anything this buys them a breathing space, time for others scattered throughout the besieged city to join them.

“They’re calling them the Young Eagles,” the commander says. “Those Polish defenders. Little more than kids, lots of them. Imagine that!” He shakes his head in an amused admiration. “You have to respect them.”

Bodying-out as a rifleman, Svetovid talks to his comrades as they take a few minutes’ rest. Out of their commander’s hearing he says, “If only the Red Prince was here, we would win. He is a fine leader. Why is he not leading us?”

Red Green Black White

“Yes, we are making the siege, but we will be under siege ourselves if we can’t break the defenders, those Young Eagles. We want our Prince Vasyl. It’s those politicians. They’re scared of him. But he’s one of us. A Habsburg, but one of us.”

Svetovid observes the city in its stalemate. In one suburb a street or a building changes hands; in another part of the city the other side makes a corresponding gain. Svetovid leaves the Young Eagles alone: neither assuming one nor bodying-out as one. He too feels a strange respect for the defenders: their cause is hopeless, and he leaves it at that. No contribution is needed from him.

During the final Polish takeover of the city, Svetovid bodies-out again and again into Pole, Ukrainian, Jew.

“The Poles are using criminals in their army. Just released from prison. They’re not soldiers, they’re savages!”

“The Ukrainians set fire to Danuta’s shop. They stole everything, and then burnt the place down. She was still inside.”

“The Jews collaborated!”

“It was that Jew.”

Svetovid observes the chaos and the pogrom. Not a large one, but it does for him. The next time he looks, street names are being changed.

Kyiv / Kiev, November 1918

AWAY WITH THE HETMANATE!

DOWN WITH THE PUPPETS OF DISCREDITED
GERMAN AND AUSTRIAN IMPERIALISM!

LONG LIVE THE UKRAINIAN NATIONAL REPUBLIC!

Assuming the janitor of the Ukrainian Association building, Svetovid mentions to one of the guards how pleased he is that the wheel has turned full circle, and that the Republic is restored. “So Skoropadsky’s out for good, then,” he says.

“You got it,” the guard said. “Except the Republic’s dead as well. The new lot are keeping the name, but the Directorate is running things, not the Central Rada. And whatever they say, Petliura runs the Directorate.”

John Howard

“Symon Petliura? I thought Skoropadsky had Petliura locked up when he took over.”

The guard laughed. “Yes, well, I think that means that Mr Skoropadsky won’t be forgiven in a hurry.”

Petrograd (St Petersburg), November 1918

DECREE

TO ALL THE PEOPLES OF RUSSIA, TO THE POPULATION OF
ALL OCCUPIED REGIONS AND TERRITORIES:

The All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Soviets hereby declares solemnly that the conditions of peace with Germany signed at Brest on March 3, 1918, are null and void...

The masses of the working people of Russia, Livonia, Estonia, Poland, Courland, Lithuania, Ukrainia, Finland, the Crimea, and the Caucasus, delivered by the German revolution from the yoke of the rapacious agreement dictated by German militarists, are now called upon to decide their fate for themselves...

The dictated peace of Brest-Litovsk is annulled. Welcome to real peace and the world alliance of the workers of all countries and nations.

Vinnytsya / Vinnitsa, December 1918

Svetovid bodies-out as a railway official waiting on the platform. When the locomotive driver joins him, Svetovid hands him a cigarette and says, “You’ve got to admire the Hetman, haven’t you? He didn’t want to give up.”

The other man spits. “Skoropadsky was a stooge of the Germans who even got into bed with Denikin and the Whites. I’m glad to see the back of him, even though the new bunch in Kyiv doesn’t seem to be much better, except they’re definitely pro-Ukrainian. Hey, this is the best job I’ve had yet, driving the train taking Skoropadsky out of the country. I’m being paid in gold German Marks, for a start.”

“You know where the gold is coming from? It’s yours already! What a laugh! You’re being paid with your own money to drive a train full

Red Green Black White

of your own money out of your own country! And you're paying the Germans for protection. You don't get anything that funny at the theatre or in the story-books." Svetovid spits as well. "There! That's what I think of the lot of you."

The colours

He watches the armies move back and forth across the land like the shadows of black storm clouds. Frontiers drift like rivulets in sand. Kyiv changes hands more often than he thinks these people can possibly manage; but he is happy with the constant surprises he receives. Governments rise and fall and their peoples are shuffled and reshuffled like greasy playing cards.

Svetovid decides to see if the Red Prince is still pining in his monastery; if not, he will body-out again wherever he is, even if that means heading west. The man's entertainment value is too great to resist.

Svetovid's four faces and the four directions, and their colours: red, green, black, white. The land endures.

ТИЗ ИМФЯТДЛ АЗДИ ФФ ІНДФОМ ІНДП ІНДФОЦИСИ

Mark Beech

“1: Objects have disappeared.”

From The Eleven Assertions of Daniil Ivanovich Kharms

There was only stumbling room in the corridors. A few sleepy-eyed passengers and opportunistic thieves were still grubbing about amongst the piles of bras and pyjama bottoms and such which had fallen and cascaded out of the racks of splitting luggage at the moment the brakes had gone on. One of the railway guards had taken up a position over the lavatory door at the end of our carriage, yelling “out of order for as long as the train is stationary!” at anyone who ventured too close. But all the same, I needed to urinate.

So I lugged my case back the way I had come.

That babbling old mental patient, Eugene was still holding court in our compartment, and it seemed now more passengers had crowded inside to park their buttocks on my bunk and listen to his insane fables. I stumbled by the glass with what I like to imagine was an air of thoroughly convincing nonchalance, though I believe I may have accidentally caught the imploring eyes of my colleague, Dmitri amongst the audience, or else he caught mine. I quite ignored him and stumbled on. What a drip he is!

I found my footing at the carriage exit, but paused once more. All around us, a maelstrom was roaring. Oh, there is nothing at all romantic about these first nights of sub-Moscovian wintertime, I reflected with a sense of hopelessness. No soft crystalline wedges collect in the corners

The Immortal Death of Ivanov Ivan Ivanovich

of our window lattices on such nights; no silent spirals of confectioners' sugar whiteness descend without to bring about in our collective imaginations the lush melancholic illustrations of children's fairytale books. Oh no! Oh absolutely no! These nights lash and buffet and howl unrelentingly about us. They whistle through keyholes and under doors. They fill the air with a smell like toxic spillways and blocked gutters. They are filthy, slushy, sleety affairs and they splatter our windows in frozen muck the very colour and consistency of bird-diarrhoea. They are incessant and ravenous.

I should never be out of town on nights like this, I grumble! My kingdom for a half bottle of vodka and a plate of Poltava sausage by my fire!

But enough whimsy! I slid the window down and with the sleet full on my face, fumbled away at the slimy cold latch on the outside, till at last the door budged. Then I seemed to be falling – and indeed I did slip and slide down the steps – into the black, featureless tempest beneath. Dead, water-logged weeds tangled around my ankles. I instinctively checked that my case had not fallen open in the struggle, and that my spectacles were still on my nose.

Where on Earth had we stopped anyway? And moreover why? The guards all had their duties of order and not one of them would speak to any of us about it. I narrowed my eyes to look down the zigzagging length of the carriages in the direction of the engine, but all I could make out were a few ghostly fleeting wisps of cinder-filled smoke – preyed upon by the gale – swirling out into a backdrop of blood red twilight an indeterminable distance further ahead of us. A crash perhaps, I thought, somewhere down the line. We might be here all night if that's the case!

I hung my head bitterly and pissed into the void. I was barely done when I became aware of a lumbering humanoid movement unnervingly close by my side. I somehow instantly knew it to be Dmitri. He had his coat pulled up over his head.

He called my name into the wind – “You'll catch pneumonia wandering about out here!”

I stepped away from him, buttoning up. He took my lapels. “You'll fall down an embankment and break your neck!”

Mark Beech

“Will you take your hands off me for once?” I cried. The man gave me the creeps. Those nearly lidless, protruding eyes; those wet, slug-like lips; and those bony fingers always, always prodding, prodding me.

He looked dejected. “If you’ll come back, the old man says he’ll open a very good vodka he has about him... By recompense he says... In your honour...”

Until that moment of course the notion of spending any longer than was absolutely necessary out of doors had not even occurred to me, but I freely admit there was a moment as I listened to Dmitri’s pathetic pleas when I was moved to consider whether what might amount to the rest of the night in his and that obnoxious old Eugene’s company was markedly more enticing than a slow death from hypothermia... The vodka however! Well, I remember thinking, that somewhat tips the scales!

In any case, as we clambered back up into the comparative warmth and quiet of the carriage, I was managing to convince myself that I had a score to settle with Eugene.

“My dear friends; my comrades!” the old man cried out to us as we re-entered our compartment, dragging our muddy boots over the piles of discarded luggage. It was more crowded in there than ever: They were as good as hanging off the luggage rails, snuggling under our blankets, breastfeeding their babies in the huddle of our top bunks. And they were all in the thrall of this man’s tall stories, this passenger who called himself Eugene, but about whom we had learned little else.

He was standing, as if to convey a cut-rate brand of majesty in the frame of the big uncurtained compartment window, from whence a constellation of multi-fractured images darted back and forth between the glass of the outer carriage. Were he not so very sartorial in his attire, I thought with some satisfaction how those craggy, weather-ravaged features might as easily look at home on the face of a common street sweeper. He smoked black cigarettes from an ivory holder. He was probably a homosexual.

“It would seem,” he said directly to me, “that you and I got off on the wrong foot, wouldn’t you say?” I didn’t know the expression, but did my best not to let it show.

“Sir,” I said sharply, “I am a proud Muscovite, of a family whose very roots were nourished in the dirt of the silent centuries...”

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“I don’t doubt it!”

“...And as you yourself have observed, I choose to bear this pride upon my chest in the form of this emblem of St George, which you may as well know belonged to my father, and to his father before him...”

“I have observed,” he said enthusiastically. “I have!” And he *had* observed! I narrowed my eyes at him. He’d observed, and he’d been quick to share his observations with his then already bourgeoning congregation.

The emblem of the Muscovite St George, he had proclaimed, belongs in a realm of a naive religiosity forever impervious to *vogue* and the heavy boot-heel of politics.

It made my blood boil even now to recall.

“I could have you arrested,” I hissed at him. He didn’t seem to believe me.

“Comrade,” he said calmly. “My intentions were never to slander your good self, much less to bring either your heritage or political allegiances into question. You are a model citizen, that much is apparent. And if you will permit me I hope I shall be able to explain that when previously I referred to your decoration as...”

“Naive religiosity,” I completed.

“...Quite... I was simply alluding to a paradox by which a perfectly legitimate symbol of worldly Russian pride might still have the power to impress upon its wearer a kind of fervour more closely associated with its religious origins.”

I gave an impatient snuffle. Dmitri’s fat hand fell on my shoulder.

The madman continued: “You, sir, as you are happy for us to know, carry about St George slaying the dragon with the same secular legitimacy and – yes – naivety with which one of our great modern poets might pride himself on the lives he draws in letters of the Cyrillic alphabet; those letters whose genus, I don’t think I need to mention, lies in the incense foggy cathedrals of Byzantium.

“My point, comrade – good citizen – my point is that the power of the primal symbolic is in its potential for immortality: That state to which all matter aspires. But only by dint of humanity’s limitless sentimentalism and capacity of interpretive abstraction – in spite of politics – is such status placed upon it.

Mark Beech

“Essentially, it relies upon our perpetual worship – and our secret envy – for its survival. Without which, it is as doomed to death and dust as the rest of us...”

At this point the madman Eugene paused, fitting another cigarette to his holder. I waited grudgingly while every other idiot in the compartment hung on the moment as gundogs on their master’s trigger finger, and I could feel the fight draining out of me in pissy yellow streams of resignation.

“I am reminded,” the madman said at last, “of a night in Moscow some years ago when I attended a dying man who’d once been immortal...”

I found myself wondering about the vodka I’d been promised.



“He called himself Ivanov Ivan Ivanovich, though the quack doctors in whose charge he was already marking off his final hours beneath the tangles of his mouse-grey and rat-gnawed bedding would later deny that any such patient had ever existed, nor even that that dismal house in Trubnaya where I found him had been a part of their facility. Simple enough lies I supposed for a bunch of villains with good pensions ahead of them. But then, even I could see that Ivanov’s was the sort of case to which no man, respectable or otherwise, would like to be seen to be too closely involved with.

“He had been admitted to the facility he told me some few days prior, or was it weeks?, at the bequest of agencies which he steadfastly refused to name (if indeed he had ever known them). It is possible I suppose that these agents were in some way affiliated with my own employers at that time; but that is neither here nor there.

“I have – he said – still a guardian angel or two in this city. I wondered if he was being ironic, but said nothing. I made us both tea and continued to keep lookout for those meddling doctors whose habit it had become to appear suddenly in shadowy corners of our room and pretend to read from upside down medical charts or examine the contents of cloudy specimen jars against the light bulbs.

“There was a time – the dying man said wistfully – when it seemed the sky was full of angels. And he propped himself up against the naked steel pipes of his bedstead and told me his story.

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“He hadn’t known his father, he said, from anything other than the most rudimentary and rain-smearred memories of early infancy; pungent, as he put it, with the musk of unvarnished floorboards strewn with dirty boots, and the taste of warm mornings refracted through coils of cigarette smoke. And another sensation dominated those early recollections, though for years he had been unable to find focus upon it. It was the odour of drying oil paint. It was the glimmer of gold-leaf. It was the image of mother and child in exquisitely rendered brushstrokes. Strange, he later thought, since he could only ever remember one picture hanging on the walls of their apartment in the years following his father’s disappearance, and that was the same pinkish, cheaply reproduced head-and-shoulder portrait which adorned the walls of every apartment in their block. For a short time he had wondered whether this man was his father, whose small dark eyes seemed warm on winter evenings, and whose dense swept-back hair and thick moustache he coveted in his scrawny adolescence. But when one day he had decided to copy the image in brick-chalk on the breakfast table, he had been beaten severely for his troubles and warned off ever expressing himself thusly again. It was then with little regret that on his 16th birthday he ran away from home.

“The world in those few brief months of vagrant freedom had spread out more perfectly before him than on the pages of any atlas, apulse with all the industrial noise and primary colours of a constructivist future, presided over by that great Russian man whose image he had mistaken for his long-gone father. He took work with forged cards in a quarry near Gorky, living on clouds of rock-dust and juvenile ecstasy at the rhythmical clangour of hammers and chisels turning out men of stone for the street corners of Moscow. When one morning that summer his reveries were broken by news that the German army had invaded his Mother Russia, he offered this man a vigorous salute, and lied his way into the army.

“As I recall, the dying man hesitated at this point in his story, though not simply for effect. There is little – he said at last through the grindings of his teeth – which I feel able to add in words to our collective memory of those years which would not be either unnecessary or trite: I have no exclusivity on that tedium of death and rancid flesh; nor the

Mark Beech

unending wait in the cold for that beautiful kind of oblivion from which it seems we alone were endlessly cheated. For myself, I simply survived, as Russia survives, because I never walked in the line of a bullet or a shell, and because I learned to understand the limits of self-sacrifice.

“He drained his teacup thirstily.

“It had been in the weeks following the war, charged though they were with a fresh vigour for vengeance and empire, that his unit had been returned to Moscow. A crippled sort of jubilation hung in the city air in those days. Young widows would bring vodka to the barracks in the night where they’d dance to Lidiya Ruslanova and cry whenever it was time to leave.

“Late one night Ivanov escaped to a cinema on Petrovka Street where he watched the old films for ten minutes before the projector broke and the face of an actress, ten feet high before him, became suddenly distorted and blackened grotesquely before burning out from its centre. Panic struck him. He flew from his seat and out through a rear door onto an unlit stretch of wasteland, hobbling over the rubble. It was raining. He tried hard to collect himself. A little way ahead of him was the shell of a large building missing most of its front wall. He stumbled and tripped inside, gasping into the blackness, until at length he found his inner-silence again. And his night vision.

“It had been a church, this building, but one long since gutted and burned out. In spots, however, especially around the corners of what remained of its blackened iconostasis he could still detect the tarnished glimmer of gold leaf, and the lines of a delicately applied paintwork.

“He began to weep then like the child he was. He wept for everything he had already lost in his short life, and he wept because this pointless life was all there was. Perhaps his father had believed otherwise, and perhaps in his death cell he had offered himself to God in the certainty of immortal sanctuary, but young Ivanov would share no such illusions. He simply wept.

“‘There’s always a price,’ a voice echoed out from the shadows. Ivanov fell immediately dumb with embarrassment. He wiped his eyes dry with his sleeve.

“The interloper yawned loudly. He had clearly been there all along, slouched in the gloom between two crumbling pillars. Ivanov could

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make out very few details; there was an unpleasant yellowing to his front teeth; his lips were chapped from too much time outdoors..

“Ivanov apologised to him, and made quickly to leave.

“ ‘If you have vodka,’ the interloper called at his back, ‘I will happily pay...’

“Ivanov turned to him with a look of amused incredulity. ‘I have vodka,’ he said, ‘and you’re welcome to it comrade. Catch! But don’t concern yourself with *payment*.’

“The interloper wrapped his hands tight around the bottle. ‘But sir,’ he said, ‘I do concern myself. I am indebted to you, and what’s more I’m the sort of man who believes in paying his way.’

“Ivanov chuckled: ‘You look lately to have paid out more than you could afford!’

“The interloper was unmoved. ‘Such is the nature of long term investment...’

“Ivanov took a step forward, but the man became no more clearly visible. ‘You are a *business* man?’

“ ‘I am, I suppose.’

“ ‘And a *Russian*?’

“ ‘As Russian as the ruble.’

“ ‘A black marketeer?’

“ ‘Nothing of the sort.’

“ ‘A war profiteer?’

“ ‘An... opportunist certainly, but there is no moral law against that.’

“Ivanov was perplexed. ‘What has morality to do with the law?’

“ ‘Why, I’m sure it has everything to do with everything. Without morality we might waste our lives wallowing in the impossibility of our desires... Will you drink *with* me?’

“Ivanov nodded tentatively, and sat himself in the bricks as far from the stranger as was possible without losing reach of the vodka bottle. The stuff tasted like turpentine and apples. It was one of the widow’s vodkas.

“ ‘You know, comrade,’ he said after the first difficult swigs, ‘you’re liable to get yourself arrested talking all that nonsense to strangers in abandoned buildings.’

“ ‘It’s always a risk I suppose,’ he said, ‘But then...’

Mark Beech

“...Then?”

“...Then... Where else would I get vodka at such an hour? *Na zdarovyel!*”

“Ha! *Na zdarovyel!* Ivanov drank. ‘You seem to me, comrade – hick! Sorry! – to be wallowing in a few impossible fantasies of your own!’

“‘Desires!’ the stranger corrected sternly, ‘I spoke of desires! Not fantasies!’

“‘Is there a difference?’

“‘Certainly, yes, of course! Though the precise distinction is relative to the individual.’

“‘Erm!... oh?’

“‘For example, the good men who once regarded this church as something more than a place to shelter from the rain... good-intentioned men perhaps I should say, lest you are thinking of having me arrested...!’

“‘Ha!’

“‘...These were no doubt men for whom the concept of an eternal soul was very far from *fantastical*. One might even say, in terms which, if you’ll forgive me, even a socialist will understand...’

“‘Hmph!’

“‘...They were men whose *desire* it was to know life beyond life; to cheat death of its final putrefying indignities. Their *desire*, sir, was to attain a state of immortality, and what evidence do we have that such wonder was beyond them?’

“Ivanov gave an uncomfortable snigger at this, and opened his mouth as though to make some glib response. But nothing came out.

“‘Do you see?’ the stranger’s voice sounded softly as though in Ivanov’s head. ‘Do you see the distinction? Yes? I wonder if you do!’ Ivanov squinted. He could just make out the glow of those yellowish teeth against the blackness, fixed in a monstrously wide grin.

“He shook his head. He snatched up the vodka bottle by its neck and wobbled to his feet. He turned to the wrecked iconostasis and took a long hard gutful of the spirit.

“‘You talk some nonsense comrade stranger,’ he guffawed, implausibly. ‘If there’s any distinction then it’s all in the spelling! That is to say – for example – were I to *desire* to know a life beyond life then

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to whom precisely would I pray? Eh? Which God officiates over Russia these days? Ha! *Fantasy*, comrade! It amounts to the same. I've seen my share of death, and whether these religious men knew it or not, I know the *nothing* which awaits us all beneath the boots of our reinforcements, as the muddy pulp and powdered bones...'

"When he turned around again, the stranger too was on his feet.

" 'I really should be going,' he was saying, coldly. He was fastening his coat. 'I thank you, sir for your company. I'm quite certain we shall meet again.'

" 'Have... I offended you?'

" 'Why, not in the slightest.'

" '...But if I have offended you ... it's the vodka, you see. I haven't eaten and... Your rebuttal comrade, please!'

"The stranger was already moving silently through the depths of the shadows beyond the pillars. 'There will be other nights, Comrade Ivanovich. Adieu... ' The noise of the rain rushed in to fill the silence.

" 'Oh! Oh yes!' Ivanov called mockingly into the darkness. 'I see!' but he didn't see anything. And many things troubled him.

"As he made his way along a weather battered and abandoned Petrovskiy Boulevard in the direction of his barracks, two odd realisations came to him in swift succession: Firstly, despite his promises, in the end the stranger had not paid for the vodka he'd requested, and secondly, the man had never actually brought the bottle to his lips.

"Soon after, he applied for demobilization, and his lieutenant eagerly endorsed it.

" 'Your mother will be waiting for you,' he sneered.

" 'My family starved.'

" 'Ah...! And what were you before this?'

" 'I was a sculptor!'

"The lieutenant burst into laughter.

"As soon as he was able, Ivanov returned to the quarry at Gorky. The rock-dust had long since settled, however. No one remembered him and none of the faces he had known had returned from the war. The authorities had cut back production, and its yards were a mismatching clutter of never completed monuments and statues encrusted with moss and bird droppings.

Mark Beech

“We already have our quota of machinists, lad,” the foreman told him.

“I was a sculptor,’ Ivanov lied. The foreman checked his papers again, but seemed unconvinced. Then he looked out over the neglected yards.

“‘You... fought?’ he asked, whimsically.

“‘Of course.’

“There was a long pause. Then the foreman pushed the papers back across the desk.

“‘You have a week,’ he said. ‘See if you can do something useful with it.’

“On his first day, he sat amongst the rows of boulders of fresh cut stone with a hammer in one glove and a chisel in the other, unable to equate the experience with any from the glorious days of his memories. No one bothered him.

“On the second day, he found a piece which he supposed had been abandoned some years earlier. It was about the size of a human torso, and had probably been intended as a bust. He went through the motions of clipping away its sharp corners. There was something satisfying in the hollow clang the hammer made against the chisel head, echoing through the empty yards; there was something in the smell of the dust. The foreman came to see him, but observed only.

“On the third day, a splendid autumn light moved over the yard. Ivanov worked until dusk, though his hands had started to blister. Every fissure and curve which his chisel uncovered – yes, uncovered! – could only now be defined in terms of their whole, driving him forward towards the bitter end. Clouds of rock-dust plumed and billowed all about, aglow with fiery light of poster-paint reds and yellows. Ecstasy sounded in the machine rhythms of his hammer.

“On the evening of his sixth day the foreman found him by torchlight sitting in the dust and shards of stone at the base of a plinth. The trails of tears ran down his cheeks. He was almost unconscious.

“‘Ai, man! You really made me jump! What’s going on? It’s after seven o’clock you know!’ He shone his light almost accidentally on Ivanov’s work. He shook. ‘My God...!’ he said. ‘You really are a sculptor!’ And he moved as if to touch the thing, but found that he could not.

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“The face, though hewn from cold and lifeless stone, might as easily have been that of Joseph Stalin himself. It was perfect. At that, he almost wept too.

“In the days and weeks which followed, word of Ivanov’s talent spread amongst the workers at the quarry, and then beyond. All across the Prioksky District there was talk of this strange young man whose eyes they said were filled with an insatiable longing, and whose genius with stone knew no limitations. During break times, there would always convene a small group of workers in the yards, picking their ways silently amongst the sculptures he had already completed or standing around him in almost reverential awe, lost to the relentless music of hammer and chisel and splintering stone; lost to the ecstasy of their own neglected reminiscences. No one ever attempted to speak to him. Some left behind them invitations to supper at their homes, but they were never accepted.

“A few of the sculptures found homes on the streets of Moscow, though it was only with a sense of desolation verging on the ridiculous that the workers bid them farewell.

“One spring day, a black limousine drove into the quarry.

“ ‘Ivanov! Take a break will you for once!’

“The foreman had entered the yards with three men in very fine suits. He was wringing his hands nervously. The visitors went amongst the sculptures with a nonchalant composure, pointing and whispering across their shoulders at one another.

“ ‘These are fine,’ Ivanov heard one of them saying. ‘Just fine. Very good in fact. But, ah, here! You see? The young man’s actual genius lies exclusively in his Stalins. Ai! Remarkable. The rest are merely fine.’

“The other men agreed. Ivanov watched and waited for them to work their way around to him.

“ ‘Ivanov Ivanovich?’

“ ‘Yes?’

“ ‘Look! He’s a child! They say you were a soldier.’

“ ‘I was, yes.’

“ ‘Were you decorated?’

“ ‘I... No!’

“ ‘Hmm? Not *once*?’ The men exchanged frowns and shrugs. The foreman wiped his brow.

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“ ‘Ivanov,’ the visitor continued, ‘it seems that quite recently one of your sculptures – a very fine likeness of our Premier – found its way into the offices of one of the new ministries in Moscow. It caused quite a commotion amongst the workers I can tell you.’

“ ‘I’m sorry!’

“The men laughed. ‘There is nothing to be sorry about, comrade! It is a magnificent piece. No one who has seen it could disagree. Magnificent!... It did, however, spark a great deal of speculation as to which of the great Russian sculptors was able to find time between their commissions to realize it, or else – should it in fact be the work of some previously unknown artist – whether that artist is... deserving of the patronage of our administration.’

“Another of the visitors took a step forward, ‘What was your father Ivanov?’

“ ‘...I didn’t know him.’

“ ‘What did he do?’

“ ‘He... was a soldier.’

“ ‘Good! You live with a wife? Your mother?’

“ ‘My family was... killed in the bombings. I share a dormitory room on Mukhina Street.’

“There was more whispering, and some satisfied grunts.

“ ‘Well, Comrade Ivanovich,’ one of them said at last, ‘we are sorry to have disturbed you. Please go on with your work. Yes! Very good indeed!’

“They headed back towards the foreman’s offices.

“ ‘This one,’ he heard one saying, “and all of these... Have them in Moscow by Monday?’

“ ‘Oh yes! Ivanov!’ one of them called to him. ‘You will be awarded two Red Stars retroactively for your services during the war. They should be forwarded to you in the morning...’

“ ‘The boy’s talent is eternal,’ another of them was saying.

“So Ivanov found fame as an artist. His likenesses of Stalin, they told him, adorned the corners of streets all over Moscow. Soon, they gave him his own workshop at the quarry, away from idle spectators. He was given his own apartment too in a better part of Gorky, where

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writers for *Novy Mir* and others came most weeks to hear the lies he told about his history and inspirations.

“The work was really all that mattered to him, and the understanding that with the chime of every hammer blow he struck, the grip of death upon him loosened.

“The seasons passed. The years passed. An invitation arrived one day from a General Ostrova to a celebration in Ivanov’s honour at the Hotel Moskva in Moscow. He did nothing for three days, then wrote back that he would love to see the city again – though he wasn’t sure that was true – and he thanked his benefactor kindly. A limousine arrived in Gorky to collect him. A new suit of clothes was waiting for him in his hotel room. He affixed his fraudulent war medals to the chest.

“The celebrations made him nervous. A procession of men and women were introduced to him by the General himself. ‘A very select bunch,’ he claimed. They shook his hand vigorously, or saluted him, before wandering away and whispering amongst themselves behind his back. A choral group sang. A vast table heaved under the weight of caviar dishes and five different colours of vodka.

“He was given a speech of thanks to read, which he did very badly, and a statement was read purporting to offer thanks from Joseph Stalin himself. Ivanov drank enough vodka to stop himself from shaking, but the heat was making him light-headed. He managed finally to escape onto the stairwell.

“The cool air from an open window touched his face. He staggered towards it and found his way onto a wide balcony.

“Quiet at last! A clear crisp Moscow night opened around him. The red stars flickered over the Kremlin walls. In the park beneath him, he thought he could make out one of his Stalins. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He hadn’t noticed that someone had followed him outside.

“ ‘Congratulations Ivanov,’ the man said. ‘I knew you could do it!’

“Ivanov snapped: ‘Do I know you?’ Shadows fell to conceal the stranger.

“ ‘Under the circumstances,’ he said calmly, ‘it wouldn’t be much of a boast for me to claim I knew *you*; though we have met before, yes...’

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“The voice settled in Ivanov’s memory. He narrowed his eyes. He could just make out those yellowish teeth, grinning back at him through the darkness.

“‘I hope you will forgive me,’ the stranger continued, ‘for not making my presence known sooner. I don’t think either of us feel altogether at our ease in the throng of the living. Do *you*?’

“Ivanov did not react. ‘You appear to be doing well for yourself, comrade stranger,’ he said. ‘That is assuming you were invited.’

“‘Ha! You are a joker, Ivanov! Of course I was invited.’

“‘Then I assume you gave up on your – erm! – capitalist dreams?’

“‘Gave up on them? Not even slightly. I am, as you have observed, doing very well off them at the moment. Business has never been better. Investments are up and the ruble is strong...!’

“Ivanov spat boredly over the ledge. ‘You need a new joke, comrade.’

“The stranger said under his breath: ‘There perhaps again we share a commonality.’ Ivanov was wrong-footed. He did not have time to recover. ‘Do you know they attempted to make plasters of your sculptures?’

“‘Who?’

“‘...But for reasons which no one seems able to explain, the results always appear somehow intangibly... queered. You know, lacking that same spark which the originals possessed.’

“‘I’m told I have a peculiar talent.’

“‘They say your work has set a standard for decades to come. They say its magnificence shall not be surpassed in our lifetimes – if ever – nor that the awe in which your name is held ever diminish. You will, they say, outlive us all...’

“‘Ah! Ha! I see what you’re getting at.’

“‘Hmm?’

“‘Comrade stranger, have you had nothing better to brood on all these years?’

“‘I’m sorry? Brood?’

“‘Would it satisfy your petty pride I wonder to know that from time to time in recent months I too have dwelt on the subjects of our previous encounter? Huh? Or that lately I’ve had cause to reconsider my hypotheses?’

“‘Ah?’

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“Ah yes! You see, I’m very far from oblivious to what they say about me here in Moscow. Nor if I’m truthful do I doubt the power of my talents. I have attained, by these hands and these eyes alone a status which few men of our age (he almost said ‘mortal men’) can ever hope to know. They are quite right you see? It is all perfectly true, comrade stranger. I *shall* outlive them all. It’s written in stone...’

“At this the stranger clapped his hands, though Ivanov could not tell if it was meant sarcastically. ‘Ha ha! What a distance you’ve travelled, Ivanov!’ Either way it irritated him.

“‘...And to what but my talent,’ he hissed, ‘do I owe such privilege?’

“The stranger shrugged amusedly. ‘A logical question.’

“‘A rhetorical question damn you! I owe nothing!’

“‘I see...’

“‘That’s as well.’

“‘...And so this was not your *desire*?’

“Ivanov was momentarily struck silent with anger. ‘Desire be damned! You suppose I owe my gratitude for what I have achieved to some benevolent granter of wishes? Eh?’ There was only the silence of the wide yellowish grin in response. ‘Which God,’ Ivanov urged a little more ferociously, ‘officiates over Russia these days? Tell me!’

“Ivanov lunged forward as if to accost the stranger, but just as he did so a noisy babble of drunken voices shot startlingly across the balcony. Several guests came stumbling out into the open air, yelling for the sculptor’s return. In seconds, he was surrounded.

“‘Take care of my investment,’ he heard the stranger say, but to whom he wondered was he speaking?

“As they jostled him back down the corridor, Ivanov took one final backward glance at that velvet black and crooked silhouette which now stood out against the night as though it were a blemish on the starry sky itself. He did not appear later at the party.

“When morning came, Ivanov called down for his driver. The air in his room smelled like stale cigars and mild concussion. His stomach ached.

“‘I want to see my sculptures,’ he told him. ‘All of them.’

“They bumped and wound their way out through the city in spirals from its centre, along the curves of its rings, and out through a *terra*

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incognita of post-war tower blocks and the new industrial regions further up the banks of the Moskva. Here and there Ivanov's sculptures rose up before his eyes like half-remembered childhood friends, on plinths at busy thoroughfares, outside municipal buildings, at the bottlenecks of bridges and looking out through the otherwise insipid frontages of government offices. One after another they rose! And they rose!

"Finally, they broke down near Sparrow Hills. The driver seemed unconcerned. Ivanov was sick into a drain.

"The next day he was returned to Gorky.

"In the afternoon, in his workshop he sat inertly for over an hour, chisel in one hand and hammer in the other, repeating to himself 'these are my hands, these are my eyes. I owe this fate to no one. I owe nothing!'

"He would later overhear the workers talking of how the rhythm of those tools had changed on that day, and how he would always hereafter seem somehow less confident with his gift, doubting perhaps his mastery of the stone, or else the visions which drove him to shape it. Given as such men and women were to a constant, gloomy brand of hearthside mysticism, Ivanov had long since learned to ignore their gossip. However, when during the closing weeks of the following winter, news was broadcast to Gorky of the death of Joseph Stalin, it troubled him more than usual to hear them suggest that these months he had spent languishing under the clouds of some grim premonition. 'Certainly he has seen this coming,' they asserted. 'But what has he seen?' He had seen nothing!

"Shortly after, a black car drove into the quarry yard and stopped near Ivanov's workshop. He watched it through a gap in his blinds. He couldn't make out the faces of the men inside, but he could see that they were talking amongst themselves.

"Often these days he kept vodka in his workshop. He would sometimes drink it in the mornings between hacking ungraciously at those great chunks of stone, straining all the while for the spark of a colour-filled memory or the swell of a kind of music which now rarely sounded. He took a swig from the bottle, and wiped his chin. These days his hands were covered with cuts.

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“After twenty-five minutes the car abruptly drove away without anyone getting out. Were they trying to frighten him? Under whose authority? He had already half finished the bottle of vodka.

“The next day he tried to contact General Ostrova by telephone, but could not be put through. He tried again almost every day for months without success. The car returned, sporadically. Occasionally, he could see it parked across the street from his apartment.

“But what did it matter, he was sometimes moved by drink and birdsong to wonder? What did any of it matter? His immortality was already assured, wasn't it? He had seen for himself that his sculptures adorned the streets in Moscow. Was it any surprise that many of his more recent works still sat crated up on the railway platform at Gorky station? There must after all only be a finite number of corners in the city over which Stalin The Great did not already preside. And did it matter that the newspaper writers did not come to interview him any more? Russia knew his story by heart, didn't it?

“Still, the shadow of doubt fell upon him whenever the birdsong stopped and the drink was gone; a black velvet and stultifying shadow which was marked by a wide yellowish grin.

“One winter morning, he noticed that the crates had gone from the railway platform at Gorky. The same day, the black car drove into the quarry, and fifteen minutes later, four men got out. Ivanov stood away from the door and waited for them to enter the workshop.

“‘Squalid! Fucking squalid,’ one of them said. ‘It fucking stinks in here!’ They spread out, kicking their way through the filth and fingering anything they found.

“Ivanov tried to stop himself from swaying. ‘Do you know who I am?’ he said feebly.

“There was a pause before all four burst simultaneously into laughter.

“He tried again. ‘General Ostrova is a personal friend of mine.’

“They went on laughing. ‘The General kicked the bucket two years ago, you lunatic!’

“Had it been over two years then?

“‘I think, Ivanov Ivanovich, you ought to come with us.’

“Ivanov instinctively lifted a bottle to his lips, but one of the men batted it out of his hand; it shattered spectacularly over the mangled

lump of stone he had been hacking at for the past six months. They led him to the car. As it pulled away he could see that there had been a fifth man, but that they had left him behind to speak with the foreman. The foreman was standing with him, outside his office, nervously wringing his handkerchief.

“ ‘Where are we going?’

“ ‘Fucking shut up!’

“The car bounced incessantly along the uneven streets of Gorky, out through the administrative quarter. Nobody spoke again. They pulled up before some complex of anodyne concrete buildings bound in overhead wires, and Ivanov was taken through a lobby. It did not at first occur to him that the empty plinth which stood conspicuously at its centre might at a time recently have supported a monument of some sort. There were nonetheless raw shards of stone jamming up the drains and gutters. The men hustled him into a tiny room and sat him at a prefabricated metal table. There was an ugly dull echo to the place.

“ ‘Am I under arrest?’ he asked calmly.

“One of the men grinned and clapped him on the cheek. ‘Why? What have you done?’ They left him, laughing and bantering amongst themselves like schoolchildren. Their voices grew indistinct, before going out all together.

“It was around dusk. A mucky yellow light filled the cell. Long icy spikes covered the tiny window slits. Ivanov dug himself inside his clothes and waited.

“Soon he heard voices again, slowly growing nearer. Different voices now. The door opened, three men entered. Two remained in the doorway. The third sat down in front of Ivanov. He wore bow tie and a smile which under the circumstances was of little warmth. He straightened his fringe with his palms and licked his teeth.

“ ‘Am I under arrest?’ Ivanov asked again.

“The man looked genuinely surprised. ‘Under arrest? You? Ha! Goodness no no no!’

“ ‘Then perhaps you can explain...’

“ ‘Explain? Of course! That is precisely my intention.’ He leaned forward with a mischievous smirk. ‘Do you know, Comrade Ivanov, that I was once quite an admirer of your work.’

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“ ‘Once?’

“ ‘Oh, it’s true, yes. At one time, though you understand this is strictly between you, me and...’ he gestured teasingly in the direction of his joyless companions, ‘...I had the job of inspecting your sculptures – checking they were to the standards of our then Premier prior to their transportation out of Gorky.’

“ ‘Really?’

“ ‘Yeeees! Not that there was *ever* a problem of course. Every one was quite quite superb as I recall, but I always enjoyed taking my time over the job; ha!’ He looked unconvincingly out into dreamy imagined horizon. ‘As a youth, you see, I too fancied myself an artist of sorts. Oh goodness yes! I mean nothing on your level; cinema posters mainly; some pamphlet illustrations. I was quite good I believed; no Mikhail Dlugach you understand. But the important thing was...’

“ ‘He paused to light a cigarette; when he looked up again his smile had vanished. ‘...I knew when my time was up... Cigarette?’

“ ‘Ivanov’s hands were shaking too much.

“ ‘There there, Comrade Ivanovich, this won’t take very long. Allow me... Time, you see, moves on. Things change; technologies; erm... political focus... *opinions!* The Soviet Union *has* changed, Comrade Ivanovich, and there are a great many things about its past – and its former Premier – which most of the Russian people would quite like to put behind them. Do you see? *Do* you see?’

“ ‘I... don’t know.’

“ ‘Ivanov... may I call you that? ...We have debated long and hard what role you – and indeed your particular art – might play in this new Soviet Union, and for the lives of us we’re stumped! The only common consensus amongst those of us whose job it is to settle such matters is that – well, Ivanov – we think it’s time you retired from art altogether. Oh please, don’t look too upset! You will be taken good care of, be sure of that. In point of fact, we have arranged – excuse me I have the papers here – arranged for your relocation to the city of Chelyabinsk – you know it? – and what I can only describe as a comfortable job of work at one of the smaller factories there. I’m sure you won’t be too disappointed by the plans. See for yourself.’

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“A pause. Ivanov looked blankly into the pile of papers on the table in front of him. The man in the bow tie looked back to his associates, then again to Ivanov.

“‘You *do* understand what I’m telling you, don’t you?’

“‘I... think... But my sculptures...? In Moscow...?’

“‘...You have no sculptures in Moscow any more Ivanov. They have been... phased out!’

“‘No. No! You’re lying!’

“‘I...? I can assure I am not lying, Comrade Ivanovich...’

“‘The people wouldn’t allow...’

“At this the man’s countenance changed with appalling suddenness: ‘The people will do whatever they’re fucking told to do! They *will* forget you! You *will* be forgotten! Do you understand?’

“‘I...’

“‘Fucking answer me! Sit down!’

“Ivanov wobbled on his legs and fell back into his chair. ‘I... don’t know! No! Yes!’

“‘Yes?’

“‘Yes. Wait!’

“‘What?’

“‘I know...’

“‘Yes?’

“‘There was a man...’

“One of the other men spoke up: ‘He’s out of his fucking mind.’

“‘Shut up!’ screamed the man with the bow tie, ‘What man, Ivanovich?’

“‘A man I think,’ Ivanov stammered. ‘He did this to me. Somehow. I can see that now, and I’ve been thinking if I could somehow just see that guest list which General Ostrova arranged...’

“‘General Ostrova? That man’s long dead!’

“‘Fuck this!’ said the man at the door.

“‘I said shut up you! What are you talking about, Ivanovich?’

“‘...There was, you see, a celebration in my honour. In Moscow.’

“‘You really don’t get it do you, Ivanovich? There was never a celebration in your honour in Moscow or anyplace else. There was never a guest list. None of these things ever happened, Ivanovich. you never existed!’

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“The man in the bow tie stood up sharply. His face was blood red. He straightened his fringe with his palm.

“ ‘Why are we even bothering?’ he gasped into the air. Then to Ivanov: ‘You will spend the night here. In the morning you will be taken to the railway station, and escorted to your new home in Chelyabinsk.’

“ ‘Ah...’

“ ‘We won’t meet again, Ivanovich. Goodbye.’

“All that frozen black night Ivanov sat up in his cell, wide-eyed to the void that surrounded him, going over the same things in his head.

“It was a lie! Surely it was a lie: A lie, instigated, Ivanov became convinced, by that same lunatic stranger with whom he had bickered all those years previous. Yes, that was it! And all this just to prove a point! It made sense, of a sort. But it would not stand! The people of Moscow were with him, and these conspirators would pay.

“Early the next morning, the same four men from the previous day drove him to Gorky station in silence. It was still dark, a razor-sharp sort of pre-dawn! Three day old snow had turned to ice on the platforms. The engines made angry, creaking noises and huffed sparks high up into the smoggy air.

“ ‘Watch him,’ one of the men said. A whistle blew. Three of them began counting their cigarettes out. Ivanov saw a chance. He lunged at the fourth and both of them went over in the ice, the man grabbed at Ivanov’s clothes, but he was already scrambling back onto his feet.

“ ‘What did I fucking say?’

“They chased him a hazardous few yards along the platform, fumbling all the time in their heavy coats. The blood was pumping in Ivanov’s ears. He hauled himself under the wheels of a stationary carriage into the confusion of absolute darkness beyond. His hands clawed at frozen metal rails. Voices rang out an indefinable distance behind him. The glaring lights of a departing goods train hit him suddenly in the face. He lurched and grabbed at the passing wagons, cracking his forearms and knuckles until finally he found purchase and was lifted bodily off the ground. Hot engine smoke closed in over him. He found his footing and toppled, shaking, into the wagon. I will see, he thought, I’ll see it for myself.

“At length, numb with the cold and hunger, Ivanov reached Moscow. He would never be able to say how long it had taken him, nor how

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many nights it had been since he had slept. It was evening again now, and a tough and squally snow had been blowing through the streets all day. A few heavily wadded people picked their way up the snow-jammed roads; a few expressionless faces fell upon his momentarily in the sickly street-light, but revealed nothing. He slipped and shambled his way into Gorky Street, and then in the direction of Red Square.

“Through the blizzard, the greyish outlines of the Hotel Moskva emerged slowly. The guards outside looked suspiciously at him, but said nothing. He tripped through the rows of ornamental cabbages in Aleksandrovskiy Park beneath it, but could not find the sculpture of Stalin he remembered had been there. At a kiosk on Mokhovaya Street, the taxi-drivers stood about a brazier telling filthy jokes to the lavatory attendants. They eyed his approach suspiciously.

“ ‘I want to see my sculptures,’ he mumbled through frozen jaw muscles.

“ ‘Get out of here will you?’

“ ‘I want to see my sculptures!’

“ ‘Go home!’

“ ‘Do you know who I am?’ They looked in no small way irritated by his persistence. ‘My name is Ivanovich. Ivanov Ivanovich!’

“They didn’t need to think about it. ‘Tell us where you want to go or fuck off?’

“ ‘...My sculptures! Ivanov Ivanovich! You must remember...’

“ ‘Right, fuck off, you beggar!’

“They chased him across the street, and he could hear them shouting after him until he was out of their sight. Near Okhotny Ryad, he became convinced that a pair of police officers were walking after him, so again he broke into a run, into streets he had never seen. His legs felt as though they were clad in lead. The cold and a wide black nothing of dreamless death filled his aching head.

“He slipped. He staggered. He fell against windows. His whole world swung on a compass point drawing him ever eastward through the blinding white of the blizzard and the raw cold of the night. Eastward, eastward, finally in the direction of the place where he felt sure he was destined to find his lonely death. He stumbled at last onto Petrovka Street, where, between a row of new office blocks and a disused cinema,

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he found again that old patch of waste ground, unchanged, and at its centre the still crumbling ruins of the abandoned church where all those years previously he had secretly offered up his prayers to any God who would listen.

“He collapsed immediately onto his back on its mossy rubble, utterly exhausted, content at last for the blissful warmth and silence of unconsciousness to carry him away forever.

“A moment later however, a bottle clunked heavily on the stone beside his head.

“ ‘Oh,’ he said calmly opening his eyes. ‘It’s you.’

“The stranger settled down amongst the pillars, as he had done all those years before, though this time he appeared to cut a more prosperous silhouette. He carried a cane. The air filled with the scent of his cologne.

“ ‘You should take a drink, Comrade Ivanovich,’ he said. ‘It’ll warm you up.’

“Groaning with the pain of frozen bones, Ivanov sat up, and did as was requested of him. The sudden heat of the vodka momentarily cramped his stomach.

“ ‘Why did you do this to me?’ he asked sorrowfully.

“ ‘Do what Ivanov?’

“ ‘I think you know what I mean, comrade stranger, though for a long time I’ve denied it to myself. You granted my innermost desire, and for that reason I might have supposed you were an angel sent from the God of my father, except that I am certain that God died a long time ago, and so I should think his angels with him. But why? And *why* now take it all away again? To what purpose? I don’t understand.’ He took another bitter swig from the bottle.

“The stranger did not pause. ‘I took nothing from you, Ivanov. I merely gave.’

“ ‘And yet here I am, a dying man; dying in every miserable sense. And how does that profit either you or I?’

“ ‘It profits neither of us, Ivanov. Not now. What finally happened happened because of politics, and that is one area of human endeavour in which I have never dabbled, nor often have I found it necessary to dabble. I am a simple businessman, Ivanov.’

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“A profiteer.’

“An opportunist, certainly.’

“And what a missed opportunity I turned out to be.’

“Hmm. Perhaps, things might have turned out better. Or lasted a few years longer.’

“They... might! I have the desire to return to the glories of my art, and you surely possess the kind of power which...’

“Ivanov, Ivanov, listen to me; listen carefully. You no longer even know what it was which drove you toward your desires. Too much vodka and worship of false idols did that for you! I am a business man, yes, and one whom I hope you can see has found no small success in your country in the last decade or so. But let me tell you something, Ivanov which I hope you will be able to understand. One of the great tricks of a capitalist ideology is recognising when you’ve stripped as much from an investment as you ever will, and knowing at that precise moment you should simply walk away.’

“He got to his feet. Ivanov made several attempts to find a suitable response, but could not.

“‘Goodbye, comrade Ivanovich.’ The yellowish grin dissolved into the shadows.

“‘*Na zdorovye*, comrade stranger.’

“Silence fell, and darkness too. Ivanov knelt up and turned to face the ruined iconostasis. The worn and weather blistered traceries of the gold leafed panel still glimmered even through the gloom and filthy smog of the Moscow winter night. He closed his eyes. A warmth seemed to flush his cheeks, just in that second, as if blown in from somewhere distant, the sun’s heat from a very old memory, cut through with the smell of oil paint and cigarette smoke. But neither angels, nor demons came.”



“Horseshit!” I think I said.

Just then, the carriage gave a terrific jolt, knocking me off my feet. Another cascade of loose underwear waterfalled down off the luggage rails. I realised with displeasure that I’d spilled my vodka.

“Hell!”

The Immortal Death of Ivanov Ivan Ivanovich

“We’re moving!” yelled Dmitri like an excited toddler.

Eugene squatted over me with his bottle, and refilled my cup.

“You don’t approve, comrade?”

“Of the vodka I approve wholeheartedly. A fine vodka. You were not at least making *that* up...”

The rest of his audience had already begun gathering up their half-finished picnic wrappers and sleeping bundles in a daze of somnolent hush.

“...The other,” I said, “I could live without!”

“You’re a practical man,” Eugene said coolly. “We have I think already established that.”

“I’m a sane man! And I think I would remember if any of the facts of your – or this Ivanovich’s – tale were true...”

“But M____,” interrupted Dmitri.

“Shut up, Dmitri!”

“But why not? Don’t you remember how in Prague the bureau swore to us there had never been a Stalin Monument at Letná Park...”

“I said shut up, Dmitri! We were never in Prague, do you understand?”

“But...”

“We were *never* in Prague!”

“Oh! ...Yes! Of course!”

“Comrades, comrades,” said Eugene. “The matter is past, the story is told, if you wish you may brood upon all that’s been said for the rest of the night, otherwise let it slip out of your minds and into the dreamless void forever; it’s no skin off my nose. I however, if you don’t mind, think I might catch forty winks.”

At that, he dropped heavily onto the crumpled linen of his freshly vacated bunk, and immediately closed his eyes.

“Go to bed, Dmitri,” I said.

Oh, there is really nothing remotely romantic about these first nights of sub-Moscovian wintertime! Wave after wave of grit-full and filthy sleet hammers and hisses at the windows of train carriages which rush through night’s great abyss. Yet, still ahead of us and over the farthest horizon I could make out the lights of something which may have been some dreadful catastrophe; a fire which not even the sleet

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could put out. I thought of St George's dragon; instinctively I fingered my badge. I thought of the hell of the Christian bible, and of Ivanov Ivan Ivanovich's many demons.

I momentarily caught sight of Eugene in the window. One eye was open and watching me, but when I turned around, they were both shut tight again.

A self-satisfied grin spread across his stupid face.

І ЛІТЗІВІ ТФ ЛДІД СЯУІГ ІІ ТІЗ ЛКУ

Albert Power

*And in that town a dog was found,
As many dogs there be,
Both mongrel, puppy, whelp, and hound,
And curs of low degree.*

Goldsmith

It was on the seventh day out of Alma Ata, that biting cold end of October, when the group of three men and a small girl, on the trail of late water fowl, pulled up at the outermost village before the great flat where the Ili empties into lower Lake Balkhash.

The notional leader of this four, the engineer Ivars Ozolins, whose brainchild had been the expedition to bag a batch of scuttering bird before the ice caught the lake in its maw, was not the one that looked as though in charge. Instead might that role have been claimed by Pavel Sergeich Goncharev, the minder assigned by internal securities to mark the sixty-two-year-old municipal roads surveyor on late vacation – except that, dour as was his type, this fellow seemed content to hang back, hold silent counsel, and observe; or perhaps by bronze-faced, shock-headed young Baurzhan Bychko, whom the engineer had recruited from the parks and horticulture unit, for his sure sense of pace and purpose proven in forays over the great steppe, his intuitive infallibility on the crucial question of weather changes, and his unerring sensitivity to the wind-wafted scents of bird and beast. He was

Albert Power

the hired help, but the others looked to him for assurance in uncertainty. Command was a distinction that might not be claimed by the fourth person of this party – angel-faced, eight-year-old Marinitsa Yurebian. Together with her Armenian-born actress mother, Marinitsa lodged with Ivars and Aija Ozolins in their two-bedroom apartment in the multi-storey complex on Krasnin Ulitsa. The mother, busy with an Ostrovsky play in the Kazakh capital, had been content to let her fancy-free daughter follow their grandfatherly landlord on his end-of-season hunting whim.

The 1953 Kiev-constructed hired jeep had taken them with bumpy perdurability as far as this outermost point of civilisation – Quyghan village. From here, the ten kilometres or so to where the cane- and reed-mottled marsh met the shores of Lake Balkhash, and the best baggings of snipe and teal might be found, would be on foot, with knapsacks, rifles, and rolled-up tents.

Lunch had been had early: a wad of lamb *shashlik* skewered with onion and peppers. The three men had knocked this back with bumpers of *ayran*, a vinegary concoction of milk and corn husks; Marinitsa had settled for milk. Until their return, the fare must be biscuits, bread, and tins of *kazy* or horse sausage, with boiled water. That and such luxuries, pan-fried over an open fire, as their bullets might flounce from the skies.

The spirit of adventure surged in Marinitsa as, bundled in warm woollens, she perched upon the shoulders of tall Baurzhan, who led the way. Far beneath her came the clack and rasp of the man's strong legs striding through sedge, at their rear the echoing susurrus of Ozolins and Goncharev. Anon she felt a jolt as a quick crack rang out, and in her nostrils rose the tang of shot, while panicky flappings of roused birds cascaded to the distance. On and off throughout that long afternoon the sequence of crisp clack and fear-fluttered wings marked the steady tread in her wake of the man in whose spare bedroom she and her mother made a makeshift home, and of that other, the silent one, who came last.

Once only they paused, when a daub of grey was seen to streak the clear sky over Lake Balkhash; and the man who bore her set her

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down, and upwards thrust his tensing nose, as might a trapper dog in quest of quarry.

“It’ll be for snow soon,” he said, as the other two joined him, and Marinitsa peered into the concerned countenances of the men.

“Tonight?” This from Ozolins.

Bychko pressed a lick of spittle to his forefinger and held it aft. “Tomorrow, maybe. No later than the day after, that’s for sure.”

The engineer tugged at his knapsack straps and hitched his rifle into a more comfortable position. “Best make a sharper effort to bag what we came for.” He threw a glance half-arch, half-defiant at the minder. “Don’t you be so shy, Comrade Goncharev. You have to have gunned down a grouse or a goose in your time?”

“I’ve pulled a trigger,” retorted the third man, darkly.

The Kazakh guide was about to reach down and lift Marinitsa up again, when, of a sudden, he hesitated, and, moving a step or two aside, again thrust his muzzle to the air.

“Something wrong?” said Ozolins, coming up.

“There’s a smell – scent – something, yes.” Baurzhan Bychko raised his face again, and held it a long moment, sniffing without snuffling.

“More birds?” ventured the engineer hopefully.

A breath of breeze flitted through the taut silence. It bore upon its cusp a tang of ice. “Not birds,” responded Bychko after a pause.

“Not birds!” This from the minder, Goncharev, who seemed to read into Bychko’s terse reply more than the Kazakh guide had intended – or perhaps not more.

Bychko declined to dilate. Scrambling up a boulder of dried mud, he touched the edge of his hand to his brow, and peered in a long gaze towards the great lake. “Comrade Goncharev, you were there when I spoke to the storeman,” he called down. “He mentioned a shack—”

“A kilometre or so before the shore.”

The Kazakh leaned out from his podium of muck. In a slow-spiralling movement he let his gaze track from the rim of clear blue where the unfrozen depths of the lake merged with the ice-encrusted

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bulrushes at its edge, back along ridge of reeds and tall grass until, finding what it sought, it stopped.

“That’s where we’ll settle for tonight,” he declared, descending.

“Not in tents?” Ivars Ozolins sounded surprised.

“We’ll see.” Bychko reached to restore Marinitsa to the throne of his shoulders. “Possibly in tents too – we must see.”

That gash of grey which had pierced like a fissure the beaming blue sky was now smeared across the heavens like some tentacular oil slick. The crisp cold air had taken on a keener edge. Marinitsa felt herself shiver as she snuggled into her winter woollies and bounced upon the strong shoulders of the fast-moving man. That was an aspect of things which seemed different from before. There was an otherness now in the purpose that drove them on, something more than just the urge to get to the lakeside and shoot birds. The clack and rattle of reeds against her man-mount’s thighs bore the character of a runaway rod dragged against railings. The interval of after-breath, of that reflexing afflatus suggestive of recoil had quite gone out of it, as though time no longer allowed. Closer behind her than before trod Ozolins and Goncharev, like infantrymen on patrol, but unlike the discipline of soldiers, muttering to each other in low tones of agitation.

Marinitsa’s breath juddered as, breasting a hump in the morass of sedge, the man that bore her alighted on a higher stretch, and stopped. Seconds after, Ozolins and Goncharev drew up, one to their either side. Marinitsa, from her higher vantage, discharged a gasp as she beheld the fringes of the Ili debouch along the marshy expanse to her fore into the great lake which was its home. As far as the eye could see, stretched a triple-flag of contrasting hues: black flecked with grey, where the undergrowth of frozen marsh ran off; at its back a virgin-white veneer as winter’s outriders laid grip upon the rim and inner reaches of the lake; culminating in the bright blue scythe of lower Lake Balkhash which the ice-claws had not congealed.

With gentle briskness, Baurzhan Bychko put Marinitsa down. A tingle darted through her as her feet touched ground. Twenty metres ahead, close to the opposite edge of this raised clearing in the marsh grass, a low forlorn structure of creaking timber, shaky slate and corrugated metal met her eyes. Marinitsa gripped Ozolins by the hand, as the four

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shuffled to inspect. The little girl's sinking of heart was shared by the men. A shack the storeman in Quyghan had described this place. A shed might have been more apt. God grant comfort to whomsoever might have been wretched enough to subsist here once, Marinitsa thought.

Without a word exchanged, the men slung down their knapsacks and rifles, and set to erecting tents. One for Ozolins and Bychko, one for Goncharev with the guns, while Marinitsa had a little one to herself, securely installed between those of the men and the shack, whose rickety fencing engirdled them.

By the time they were finished a wind off the lake had pushed back the clouds; evening came down in a mantle of mauve and the first bright stars were twinkling, as Bychko aided by Ozolins, foraged some driftwood from the shack and snuffled up a fire. Apart from the others Pavel Sergeich Goncharev stood at the edge of this natural parapet, gazing northward across the stiff sedge, rifle crooked warily under his elbow. He had a city dweller's ineptness for the ways of outdoors, though in these moments seemingly emulous of the Kazakh as he jerked his jaw skywards, like one straining to draw in scent and sound – but of *what*? Marinitsa wondered. She had learned in school that wolves were known to rove remoter Kazakhstan, though their terrain was rather the steppe than the lakes; and the fabled snow leopard was no mere chimera for comrades whose home was where high mountains rose: the grim black bulk of Tien Shan wedged against Kyrgyzstan and China; the far-flung Altai steeps with their mystical Mount Belukha. Or was it that two-horned twin of the antelope, the saiga, for whom the apparatchik peered? But that, Marinitsa knew, was more a figure of fun than fear.

For all the boding of the elements, the four supped well on a brace of ducks brought down by Ozolins. Bed in her snug tent was an early recourse for Marinitsa, its flaps tugged tight against the icy night. Unseen by the others, Marinitsa went on her knees, as her mother since as long as she could recall had taught her to pray. She knew it was not permitted to be so seen, that God was an inner, never an outward strength. To pray was her duty. To pray was the right thing. And today, the day Marinitsa's mother had told her was devoted to All Souls, was especially a day to pray – for the souls of the departed good who might

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or might not have yet been saved. In the biting dark outside, between her doll's house miniature and the larger tents of the men, their fed fire crackled and flamed. By its side squatted Ozolins and Goncharev, while at the rim of vision stood the strong shadow of Baurzhan Bychko guarding them all. Why guarding? wondered Marinitsa, as she floundered anigh the banks of Lethe. Repose, after the rigours of the day, came in its first advance hard, and anon snatches of dialogue drifted between Marinitsa's weariness and her.

"A man like yourself, wouldn't you rather be off out there?"

Silence fell in the wake of the minder's interrogative, punctured as by a ripple of waves on summer shores by no more than the comforting crinkle of the driftwood fire.

"Away on the lake, where the slow ice grinds? Not for a ransom."

There came a cackle of rasped-up phlegm. Pavel Sergeich spat to the flames.

"Beyond, Comrade, beyond – off out upon the steppe?"

"I am a son of the Soviet Union," retorted Ozolins, suspicious of a trap. He had withstood in his time less obvious enticements to treason.

"The steppe reaches far, Comrade Ozolins."

"And the glorious Soviet Motherland further still."

Goncharev let out a laugh. "Go to – not to the land of Fritz, it doesn't reach."

"That well may be so. I came out of Latvia long before the war."

"An engineer?" A sneering inflection undergirded the words.

"An engineer."

"Roads supervisor for Alma Ata council?" The job title in his mouth was a taunt.

"Roads supervisor for Alma Ata council," reiterated Ozolins resignedly.

"So would you not be out there?" This from Goncharev again.

There was no way forward but the obvious. Ivars Ozolins took it. "Where?"

"Seven, maybe eight hundred kilometres west – at Tyuratam."

"Aah!" The dawn of recognition began to break on the expert technician's mind. "That aerodrome there they've lately built."

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“Cosmodrome, Comrade Engineer Ozolins,” corrected Goncharev.
“Nothing less.”

Ivars Ozolins exhaled a sigh; was it one of regret?

“They shot a vessel up last month, did not they? A Sputnik, I think it’s called?”

“Sputnik One, Comrade. Sputnik One.”

“Sputnik One? So Comrade Goncharev, do you tell me there is Sputnik Two?”

The man who had been appointed by the Kazakh SSR to monitor the late vacation of one of its most senior municipal engineers clapped his palms against the cold

“For sure, Sputnik Two. It is forty years soon from the Glorious Revolution. Comrade Khrushchev commands. And a dog there is shall fly in it.”

“A dog?” The engineer’s voice gave a yelp of incredulity, almost like the agitated bark a worried small animal might make.

“A little dog, a very little dog,” the man sent to watch Ozolins went on. “A wee ragged stray out of the cruel streets of Moscow. *Kudryavka* they are calling her.”

Silence again fell, splintered by the popping and crackling of the driftwood fire. Almost as a whisper came the last words spoken by Ozolins that Marinitsa could hear. “Out of the cruel streets in Moscow – to the cruel reaches of space . . . poor little dog . . .”



Marinitsa drifted away. But sleep sustained the eight-year-old ill. Sights interposed. Senses. Sounds. A long grey snout and gleaming eyes. The loll of a tongue; panting hot breath avid to eat. Now another animal face, smaller and sparer, eyes terrified and tiny, bright not with fire but fear. Awareness of tight confinement in a narrow space, bitter cold about and warm water spraying. Darkness. And the barking – hack – hack – hack . . . of terror and confusion.

Marinitsa started awake once that night, to a sound that resembled more a rifle shot than burning wood, although that rough-and-ready fire which had cooked their supper was still being served, to judge by

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the lambent pulse of orange and amber beyond the taut fabric that hemmed her in. There seemed too the sound of voices and movement, as though others were up and out . . .



Maybe it was the exhaustion borne upon unsettled sleep which caused Marinitsa to be last to wake next day. As she scraped the scales of unrequited tiredness from her eyes, the little girl could tell from the wan light which fell against the tied flaps of her tent, together with the brisk sounds without of men in movement, that daylight had taken her unawares. Yet this was not that lively light which had greeted her on springing out of bed the day before. There was a quality of torpor to it that harmonised with her weariness. The instant she loosed the cords at the tent door, and peeped forth her pretty head to the cold, Marinitsa could tell. That canopy of grey cloud was back; the ground gleamed baking flour white from a late spatter of snow.

Ivars Ozolins came up and pecked a kiss against her cheek.

“Winter’s caught us up, my child. We’re going home. Well – soon.”

Marinitsa drew on her quilted coat and wound her lamb’s wool scarf boa constrictor close before venturing out. To her dismay, on all sides around appeared a stippling of black and white. The surface of the moon bestrewn with torn cotton could not have struck her as any less inviting.

“Not immediately, Dyedushka Ivars? Not right away?”

The elderly engineer caught Marintsa’s mittened hands within his larger gloved ones and pressed them close. “Just a while – two or three hours. Baurzhan says there’s good shooting by the lake before the thicker snow tumbles. And Comrade Pavel Sergeich –” Ozolins cast an anxious eye round for his compulsory helpmeet – “he’ll stay with you when we’re gone.”

But that personage gave a stern shake of the head indicative that where the man he was primed to mind might wend, so also would he.

Ozolins implanted a kiss on Marinitsa’s brow. “Comrade Goncharev wants to come too . . .” An aspect of concern leapt into his grandfatherly eyes. “You don’t seem like you’ve slept so well. Back to bed, my child. Before you can say ‘boo!’, we’ll be all of us away.”

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As the three men sloped off westwards, rifles dangling, Marinitsa saw that the campfire was still alight. Somehow she was not sure that this fact consoled her quite as much as it might . . .



Ivars Ozolins had been right. Marinitsa badly needed to catch up on rest. Snuggling inside her sleeping bag, within seconds the little girl had wafted into repose . . .

Repose that was peaceful and void-filled, until—

A long, low rumble rolled inside her head, a rumble like far thunder that seemed to linger its growl longer than thunder should. Marinitsa sprang to her feet and darted outside. In an instinct of questing for help she strained towards where Dyedushka Ivars and the others had gone. As she looked, there shot up, on the horizon, a brilliant beam of light. In that instant Marinitsa's belly seemed to lurch to her throat, and she fell to the ground by the fading fire in a seizure of febrile shaking. She would have been sick, but that everything inside felt dry and tight – as if her stomach had not been thrust to her mouth, but the soul right out of her body, her body right out of the earth.

Her knees burning with bruises Marinitsa struggled up and fled – not westwards now, where that blinding gleam had sagged to the glimmer of wintry daylight, but north, over the rim of the raised space where they had pitched tent, across the frozen, sedge-laced plane.

Marinitsa ran on, while her brain pirouetted and her body roiled in a tumult of uttermost hot and cold. Then, advancing out of the snow-dusted waste before her, she saw – the man.

The man with his long pale face and tight brown hair, a monocle over one eye, wrapped in a shabby greatcoat. A man who regarded her with a tenderness altogether (she could not conceive it else) out of this world.

Marinitsa ran to the man, and might have pressed against him, but that something about his greatcoat, a stench of earth-sunk staleness, stayed her. Instead, she just stood there, head to the level of his breast, while the man sifted one long-fingered hand – oh, ever so pale and cold – through the tresses of her fair hair where it escaped under her

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cap. There was comfort in his touch, which was sustaining but not strong, having about it no sturdier substance than of a tendril nurtured in ice.

“Oh help me – help me; help me, gentle man,” pleaded Marinitsa in the shrill voice of a child’s terror.

“Are you sick, little one?” The man’s voice, unlike his touch, was strong, soothing too; and, in an odd way, old – though the man himself looked young, albeit worn by hardship.

“I’m sick – I’m sick – I want my Mu-m-m-y . . .” And Marinitsa, bless her, started to cry.

The man, whom in some inner sense Marinitsa felt to be a doctor, or she would never have let him lay cold fingers against her hot bare skin, ran his hand along the girl’s flaming face, and rested it, just below the knot of her scarf, upon her windpipe.

“I fixed a little girl there, just like you, so many years ago – with a steel one.” The man’s face was momentarily transfigured by a bleak smile of remembered pride.

Then the smile sank to sadness and, even without moving, he seemed to push her away. “You have to go back. To the light. To the fire. So much suffering. Oh – *live!*”

Though the man had no more than brushed her back, already a gap stretched between them – as if they were lone souls drifting, towards separate worlds.

“Help me – help me, doctor, please—”

In that instant Marinitsa was on the verge of again bursting into tears, but in that instant also she beheld a sight which immediately dispelled sorrow and turned it to dread.

It was just past the left shoulder of the man – seen somehow *through* the man’s shoulder, for there was a blurring of its outline as though the mangy greyness of his greatcoat became blended with the famished shaggy hide of the wolf. The wolf with its bowed prognathous snout, its rasping tongue and parted teeth as it loped across the flat through a gash in the high grass. And those eyes, yellow-orange and gleaming, instinct with the cruelty that famine goads.

Marinitsa stood stock still, as the creature limbered to spring.

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Then an odd thing befell. Without a word, the man turned towards the animal. In the instant that the eyes of each met, the beast halted in its tracks. A wheezing whine issued out of its throat. Its forepaw scraped soil as though in a bid to withstand some power that repelled it. A howl broke forth, as of satiety thwarted, and the wolf twisted round and lumbered away.

“Go-o-o-o . . .” cried the man, as still he faced the retreating wolf, but spoke to Marinitsa.

The little girl turned, and, scarcely mindful where she ran, scampered towards that raised place, not far off, where their tents were. Once only Marinitsa, stalling, looked back – across the tessellated waste that tapered to grey distance. There was nothing to be seen.



Marinitsa thrust through the tent flaps and collapsed inside. Alone there, it seemed long hours passed, and in all those aching hours the little girl was in torment. Fever could not be so awful as the anguish she felt – that clingy constriction, and mounting, ever mounting heat – and all around her darkness, the impermeable black of infinity. Then a burst of searing light, light eternal . . .



When the men got back, bearing two full bags of bloodied birds, an hour after mid-day, they found Marinitsa slumped within her tent, fitful with a malaise they mistook for fever. The girl made no complaint as Ivars Ozolins lifted her away, while the others disassembled tents and packed. Ozolins nestled her in his arms all the way back to Quyghan. Out of Marinitsa the only sounds were confused mutterings, of which “doctor” and “dog” alone could be distinguished.

A pharmacist dispensed powders and Marinitsa soon became well. In Quyghan’s sole provisions store, where liquor was sold, the talk was all of Sputnik 2, the launch out of Tyuratam, and the brave little dog, whom they called, and soon the world came to know as *Laika*. Some said she was alive, out there alone in cold void beyond Mars. Some said she had died, or must die soon, from lack of food or air, or cold or fear.

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Marinitsa might have assured them that for misused *Kudryavka* the worst had been awful but the worst was now done.

When they rattled out of Quyghan, two days later, Marinitsa, with Dyedushka Ivars by her side, peered through the rear window of the jeep – at the receding high grasses which the snowfall was fast turning white, and the leaden stretch of sky above the ice-blue waters of lower Lake Balkhash. Far beyond that the sempiternal steppe . . .

How glorious an end to life must that end be, Marinitsa mused, which can make of the act of oblivion no less a tribute to endurance than a living star.

ТИЗ ФДЯЩІЛЛ ЛЗТТЗЯ

George Berguño

Moscow, 10th of March 1961

Long ago, my dear Kolya, I promised to recount the details of your brother's death. Twenty-one years have flown by since Misha died, but only now do I find the strength to keep my pledge. To be sure, my story will be a strange one – and I can hardly hope you will believe me. But I am an old woman. My eyes are weak and my hands tremble without respite. Any day now the Ferryman will come to fetch me.

I first met Misha in the winter of 1928. I had recently married a high-ranking military officer, and I was neither happy nor wretched. Your brother, for his part, had married a second time – on this occasion to Lyuba Yevgenyevna. Yet, scarcely had Misha and I exchanged our first confidences than we were sucked into love like boats in a maelstrom. Our affair was the talk of Moscow, but several years trickled by before we realised that we could never live without each other.

One afternoon in the autumn of 1932, as we strolled through the birch woods in Izmailovsky Park, Misha asked me to marry him. I laughed and broke into a run, until he caught up with me by the desolate pond that encircles the Silver Island.

Then, as Misha struggled to catch his breath, I saw his eyes turn severe.

“Lyusenka,” he said, “I am destined to suffer a terrible death. Give me your word that you won't hand me over to a hospital. Promise me that you will hold my head in your arms at the moment of my passing.”

I used to believe that Misha's request was a romantic touch, like a tragic note in a symphony of love. But even after we married he reminded me of my promise. Then, in 1937, he prophesied the year of

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his demise. He would be leaving this world, he said, in the spring of 1940. I became alarmed. Naturally, I insisted that he visit his doctor. I demanded medical examinations. He complied with all my requests and the tests came back negative. But he continued to talk with an urgency that I could not grasp.

“This is my last play,” he would say, “this is the last time I read Tolstoy.”

In the summer of 1939 we travelled south to Tula and he became violently ill on the train. He had been gazing out the window, the sun dancing on his forehead, when, all at once he fell to the floor gasping, like a fish snatched from its watery home.

We returned to Moscow that same day, but, as Misha had seemingly made a remarkable recovery, we took off again – this time for Leningrad. On September 10th, as we were roaming the Nevsky Prospekt, I was jolted out of my reverie by Misha’s iron fist gripping my arm.

“Lyusenka – I can’t deceive you any longer – I’m losing my sight.”

Once again we returned to Moscow, where I arranged for Professor Vovsi, the best eye and kidney specialist in the city, to come examine Misha. And Vovsi spent hours with Misha, all along mumbling “not good, not good”.

At length the professor gave his verdict.

“Mikhail Afanasyevich, you must accompany me to the Kremlin Hospital – at once.”

Misha refused.

“But you are a doctor,” said Vovsi, “you must have a good idea of the war that is raging in your body.”

“If I must die, then I’ll die at home.”

Vovsi shrugged a shoulder, packed his instruments and bowed farewell. But as I was seeing the professor out, his eyes reached deep into mine.

“Yelena Sergeyevna, I won’t insist on taking your husband with me to the hospital. After all, he has three days to live.”

These doctors! They dare to play God! As it turned out, Vovsi was wrong: Misha lived another six months, although I never dared hope again that he might recover. Day by day his eyes grew dim, his limbs grew weak, and his skin turned ashen.

The Farewell Letter

I remember how Misha used to fall asleep around one or two in the morning and then wake up at about three or four, always terrified of his dreams. I'd sit with him and listen to his morbid jokes.

"Stay awake, Lyusenka," he would say, "I may be dead soon!"

I always steered the conversation to his writing; it was the only exchange that soothed him to sleep.

On the morning of the 10th of March 1940, Misha summoned me to his side. I could see lines of pain on his visage. Even so, he sat up in bed and proceeded to describe a conversation that he had had with Joseph Stalin many years before.



It was in the spring of 1925 – Misha began – that I received the mysterious note that transformed my career as a writer. Boris Vershilov, the Director of the Moscow Arts Theatre, expressed his wish to make my acquaintance. He wanted to discuss a number of artistic matters that were of significance to him. He hinted that it would be in my interest to meet him at the Theatre on the following evening.

When I first stepped into the Moscow Arts Theatre I was disappointed to see that it was but a small auditorium that could barely seat a couple of hundred spectators. Two dismal lamps hung from a crooked chandelier. Long shabby curtains clung desperately to the walls. But the stage! – The stage seemed vast and dark and entrancing. And upon the stage: the emblem of a golden horse prancing on its hind legs.

Soon, Boris Vershilov appeared and led me to a small circular table in a secluded corner. He talked fast and in a tone both musical and commanding. He said that he had read my novel *The White Guard*, and that he wanted to adapt it to the theatre.

I spent the summer of that year in a dacha in the Crimea and devoted all my time to writing a stage adaptation of my novel. But I had no idea of the tragedy that was stirring all around me. You see, neither Boris nor his colleagues at the Theatre had read my novel in its entirety, for the first instalment of *The White Guard* had only just appeared in the journal *Rossiya*.

As the summer locked its gates, I returned to Moscow with my first cumbersome draft of the play, only to discover that my apartment had

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been broken into. In a voice interspersed with sobs, Lyuba related how secret police had swarmed into our home one morning and ransacked my study. They had made off with my diaries, my intimate diaries, so secret that not even my wife knew of their existence. The next day the journal *Rossiya* was closed down, at a time when only two-thirds of *The White Guard* had been published. And a week later, Boris Vershilov suggested that we drop the word “white” from the title of the play.

At last my play – now entitled *The Days of the Turbins* – was premièred at the Moscow Arts Theatre in October 1926. On the opening night I sat in the balcony and allowed my gaze to wander among the spectators. Suddenly, I spied Joseph Stalin on the opposite balcony – and our eyes met. I should have bowed my head in recognition of the great man, but a weird inertia had taken hold of me.

Presently Stalin smiled and gave me a respectful nod.

The Days of the Turbins became an astounding box-office success. Moreover, it indicated the first occasion in Soviet literature that the Whites had been represented in a sympathetic light. Six weeks later, I found myself in the very same balcony. And when my eyes leapt across the theatre they alighted on the leader of the Soviet Union. On this occasion, I was quick to show my recognition, and I was rewarded with an inscrutable smile.

Later that evening, I asked Boris Vershilov for permission to consult the records of the Moscow Arts Theatre. He led me up a warped stairway and down a narrow hall, until we reached a small, dark, musty-smelling room. Boris rummaged among the stacks of books and paper trays and boxes.

“Here it is,” he said, placing a large volume upon a dusty desk.

I approached the book and extended a cautious hand.

“He was in the audience tonight,” I said, pointing to the latest entry.

“Stalin? Yes, yes – we all saw him – so what?”

I turned the pages of the old tome, my fingers travelling back in time.

“And he was here last week!”

“And the week before – and the week before that. If you study the records you’ll soon discover that Stalin has been to see the play on fifteen occasions.”

The Farewell Letter

I glanced up.

“So he likes my play? He approves? He understands my work!”

Boris took the volume from my hands in what seemed an exceedingly careful fashion.

“Mikhail Afanasyevich, everyone likes your play.”

Despite the play’s sensational success my career as a writer became untenable. My manuscript of *Heart of Dog* was confiscated by police. My collection of short stories – *Diaboloid* – was forbidden publication. My prose work *Fateful Eggs* was deemed anti-Soviet. And my next play, *Zoyka’s Apartment*, was slated by the critics as hackwork. In 1928 I submitted an application to the Moscow City Council for permission to visit my brother Nikolai in Paris. I was turned down. Soon after, *The Days of the Turbins* was forced off the stage and *Zoyka’s Apartment* was banned. Later that same year I heard that my latest play, *Flight*, was not going to be licensed for performance. And soon after that the Kamerny Theatre’s Artistic Council gave a similar verdict to another play – *The Crimson Island*. And so, in a desperate bid to recover my standing as a writer, I began work on a new play. It was to be a fresh departure, a literary creation so different from all my previous endeavours; a work that was neither modern nor set in Russia – a play about the life of Molière.

At the commencement of 1930 I submitted my latest play to the Moscow Arts Theatre. I held great hopes for this work. I dreamed a thousand dreams of success and reconciliation. I waited for a letter from the Theatre as if my entire existence depended on its verdict.

At last, in March 1930, I received a note informing me that the play could not be produced. Suddenly, I was overtaken by a blinding rage. I was at the height of my powers as writer, yet I was hunted like a wolf. The literary establishments of the USSR had clubbed together like a pack of hounds, and together they howled that the works of Mikhail Bulgakov should not exist in a Communist state. My friends advised me to dye my fur, but I refused; for a wolf that dyes his fur or clips his hair looks no better than a poodle. But even a wolf can grow weary. And so, without a thought for my safety, I fired a letter at the Soviet government, daring them to grant me permission to leave the territory of the USSR.

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On the 18th of April 1930 the phone rang and Lyuba answered. I remember how she dragged me out of my study, saying that someone from the Central Committee wanted to speak with me. I thought the phone call was a prank, and I yelled at her.

“If it’s Stalin, I will insist on leaving the Soviet Union.”

I placed the receiver against my ear.

“Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov?” – It was the voice of a young woman.

“I’m listening!”

“Comrade Stalin will speak to you now.”

I could hardly contain my amazement: Stalin had phoned me at home to discuss my career as a writer!

I heard a cough, followed by a gravelly voice.

“Good evening, Comrade Bulgakov. You will forgive me for calling so late, but I read your letter to the Central Committee. I must confess: I am very interested in your case. Do you honestly wish to go abroad?”

“I have pondered this question for a very long time,” I replied, “I have wondered whether it is possible for a Russian writer to live outside his homeland.”

“And what did you conclude?”

A long silence followed. You see, Lyusenka, I realised at once that Stalin could just as easily grant my wish as he might order my arrest.

I cleared my throat.

“It seems to me that – he cannot.”

Another pause followed; a stretch of silence in which I felt an impulse to justify my letter to the Central Committee. But Stalin was the first to break the stillness.

“If that is your view, Comrade Bulgakov, why not look for work within the borders of our great nation? Have you given any thought to the Moscow Arts Theatre?”

“I have already made inquiries there, but I was refused.”

“I see. Yes, yes, now I recall. But why not apply again? On this occasion you might want to say more about yourself, about your beliefs, your passions – in brief, how you truly feel about our Motherland. How does my idea strike you?”

“An excellent idea, Comrade Stalin – I will do as you command.”

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“Oh, this is not a command. I’m merely trying to be helpful. Look here, Comrade, I think you and I must meet one day and talk this through.”

When I heard these words, Lyusenka, a strange thrill coursed through my veins. Here was the leader of our Soviet Union offering to talk to a writer who, up to now, had been treated with derision! It suddenly bolted through my mind that my difficulties as a writer were the product of a misunderstanding. And now, the confusion would be cleared up. I would be allowed to practice my art and a well-deserved recognition would follow.

How naive! How foolishly I behaved! You know as well as I that Stalin never kept his promise. And not only did I throw away the one chance of departing from the USSR – I continued to be reviled and humiliated and persecuted as a writer, until at last I found agreement with my critics. The works of Mikhail Bulgakov could never have flourished on Soviet soil!

I know now the reason Stalin called me that evening. He was satisfying his vanity by taking an apparent interest in the career of a notorious writer. He played with me in the way a snake might play with a mouse, just before the kill. But what if I had answered Stalin’s question in another way? What if I had had the courage to insist on going abroad? Would he have granted my request? If so, would you have come with me?



I come now to Misha’s final moment.

By the afternoon of that same day Misha was dangling in and out of consciousness. By narrating his conversation with Joseph Stalin he had exerted his body beyond what it could endure. For most of that afternoon he lay gasping, and, even though the sun had not yet set, he asked for the light to be switched on.

I turned on the lamp.

When I turned to gaze at him I saw he was writhing and contorting. Suddenly, a strange yelp burst forth from his mouth. I rushed to his side. I clasped him against my breast and was struck by his breath, cold as ice.

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I kissed him – all the time aware that we were kissing for the last time.

At last I eased his head onto the pillow. I saw that his lips were cracked and I stood up with the intention of fetching more water, when – he called to me.

“Lyusenka,” he rasped – and his voice seemed to reach me from another world.

“I’m here Misha – shall I fetch some tea?” I said, knowing that the moment of parting had arrived.

“Death is a strange friend,” he went on. “I thought that I would fear the end. But now that the moment of parting is upon me, it seems as if I had always been making my way to this room, with this wretched body for a train – making my way to you.”

I continued to stand. Our eyes locked. At last Misha held out his arms, but a strange paralysis had seized me. I gazed at his tired and meagre body and – I was gripped by a terrible wave of loathing.

“Lyusenka! You promised!”

I could not move. Misha’s breathing grew frantic. He coughed violently and then sighed. His bewildered eyes remained open. At length I leaned over his emaciated body and my fingers reached for his eyes – but I recoiled.

I fled the room in disgust.

The grandfather clock in the hall read thirty-nine minutes past four.



Did it ever occur to you, dear Kolya, that a human being is the only creature that can break a promise? It seems strange to me that our philosophers have disregarded this obvious fact. You see, a broken promise reveals the depths. When Stalin failed to keep his word to Misha, he revealed his disdain for all that was beautiful about our Motherland. And when Misha failed to claim his freedom, he revealed his love for me and for you and for all things Russian. As for my own cowardice – it taught me that there are forces in our universe that we scarcely understand. Let me tell you how it happened.

The streets of Moscow that evening were gripped by fog. Though I could hear the rumbling of crawling traffic somewhere in the distance,

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I wandered from one grimy street to another without encountering a soul. My feet plunged into the gloom of night; my eyes resented the shimmering of the street lamps; my fingers tugged at the shawl about my shoulders. How long I wandered through the murky darkness, I cannot remember. But at length I grew tired of the interminable effort to see what lay ahead of me, and so I turned about and retraced my steps. But no sooner had I done so than I experienced an eerie sense of danger.

I stopped. I gazed about me. I strained my ears. But I was alone in a world without time.

I resumed my journey and the creepy aura played about my head. I tried to shrug it off. I even tried to laugh, but then I heard a sound. It was the sound of tapping and panting – and for a brief moment I feared for my safety. I looked across the street and saw – a dog.

I sniggered at my fear and took up my stride.

Presently I realised that the dog was accompanying me home. If I quickened my pace, the dog would bounce along. If I slowed, it slowed. And if I stopped, it too would stop. It seemed a wonderful game and my spirits soared into delight. When the dog crossed the street, and took its place behind me, I intensified the play. I stopped for longer periods; I jogged; I laughed. At last we reached the gate to the house and my fingers rummaged for the bundle of keys. Then – I heard a snarl.

The sound that crawled along my skin was without doubt an animal cry, but it was one that carried with it a hint of malice and disdain. I raised my eyes and peered into the darkness. Was the animal in pain? I felt an unaccountable surge of compassion for this creature.

Bit by bit, I stepped closer to the beast.

All at once I froze – I was seized by an indefinable terror – and it was a horror that I will not relive again – for I perceived at last that the creature was not a dog.

I spun about and ran. I burst through the gates and reached the entrance to the house. My hands fumbled with the keys and I succeeded in pushing the door key into its hole. To my dismay, the bunch fell to the ground. I gave a cry and fell to my knees, my hands groping in the dark. I heard the beast growling at the gate, but I dared not look around. I found the keys and inserted the door key into its slot, but,

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once again, the keys fell away from the door and rattled on the cold earth.

It was at the moment of my greatest fear that I found the courage to be still. I paused and listened, and with boundless daring I turned to gaze at my pursuer. And there – in the liquid darkness wrapped about the creature’s body, I saw two shining sea-blue eyes lingering upon my face.

To my astonishment, my hands regained the bundle, and the key found its lock. The lock yielded and I gained entrance to my home. When I bolted the door I heard a heavy weight crash against it. I ran down the hall and into the kitchen and locked the door behind me – and so I went from room to room, locking and bolting, until at length I gained the stairs – and I shot up taking three steps at a time, until I reached Misha’s study – and I locked myself within.

Somewhere in the vast silence of the house, the beast prowled from room to room. I heard the bolts snap and the doors creak. And then I heard footsteps – slow, ponderous footsteps heaving their weight up to where I lay hiding. I knew now that the creature was lurking at the entrance to the study. I backed away until I stood in the centre of the room. And the beast scratched at the door: softly at first, as if caressing my skin – and then forcefully, as if wishing to scoop out my heart.

I could endure it no longer: I fell to my knees in an outburst of tears. “Forgive me, Misha! Forgive! Forgive!”



When I opened my eyes daylight was skipping along the bookshelves. I rose to my feet, unlocked the door and made my way to the bedroom. I found Misha as I had left him, his glassy eyes peering into the unknown. But the air in the bedroom was thick with damp. I opened the window and a cool breeze caressed my cheeks. I gazed at Misha from the safety of the window, until at length I overcame my pounding heart and sat beside him. I raised his hand to my face and – I sobbed into the palm of his hand.

When my tears were spent I kissed Misha on the forehead, ran my fingers through his hair and sealed his eyes.

And now, my dear Kolya, as I bring my story to an end, I do indeed wonder if Misha and I might have had another life. Later today I will

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be posting this letter to you. And the letter will fly across the continent to reach you in Paris, the city that Misha once dreamed of calling home. And this is the last letter you will receive from me. For I know now that life is a necklace of regrets, where each pearl is a small death. That's right, my friend: I have been collecting regrets all my days. But the necklace is now torn from my collar; and the pearls, freed from their bond, lie scattered across the earth.

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