

# AN APARTMENT IN KIEV

## *'YOU HAVE TO LIVE'*

1992

### THE JOURNEY

As a rule, people's photos lie. They show a side most flattering to the sender. At first meetings I experience a shock of not quite recognizing the person.

Andrei's photos showed a man of many moods; an actor who enjoyed posing and playing different parts. In reality the movement of a shy smile, and fiery flicker in the eyes indicated that the masks did not conceal but revealed steely determination and narcissistic self-confidence.

'At last!' Andrei murmured, coming straight up to me on the platform of Kiev station and speaking into my ear so that the lips brushed my skin.



Andrei was twenty six years old, a trained computer-programmer whose last full-time job came to an end with the collapse of the country's economy following the disintegration of the Soviet Empire.

He then worked in a restaurant where the boss refused to pay any wages and set thugs on him when he complained. He survived on tips, which were sufficiently generous to keep him going until fear of what the thugs might do forced him to leave. For the next months he took whatever job came his way: sitting in galleries, decorating flats, part-time work in cafes. It became a matter of survival from day to day.

Meanwhile he wrote to magazines in England and America, placing an ad which read: 'Young, attractive Ukrainian with a good body, seeks intelligent friends. Visit. Perhaps this year.'

He received over fifty replies. They needed careful sifting and he took his time. He chose me and threw the rest away. The main point in my favour was that I wrote in Russian: Andrei's English being so rudimentary he needed the help of his friend, Misha, to decipher the other letters.

Andrei was shocked by the sexual candour of many letters of those he discarded. Some included full-frontal snapshots. One showed an erect cock. Another letter expressed the desire to 'choke on your cum'.

I was sensitive about the age-difference and made it clear I only expected friendship. I had learned Russian in order to visit the East, Kiev being a destination where a contact would be welcome. My letter included a snapshot of myself, greying at the edges, standing outside my home in the country.

The enthusiasm of Andrei's reply surprised me. The letter included a number of facts about his life, his work, family and what he liked doing – and mentioned that his birthday would be towards the end of that month. The enclosed photo showed an attractive young man smiling flirtatiously from under long eyelashes. I replied and enclosed a birthday present of ten dollars. This made Andrei happy. Ten dollars were more than the average monthly wage in Kiev.

The correspondence developed, neither of us waiting for immediate replies which might be held up in the post. Knowing I was an artist who included nudes in my work Andrei began to send naked snapshots, posing on a secluded beach by the river Dniepr in Kiev. Here was a man at ease with his body and happy to be admired. This enthusiasm pleased me and I reasoned to myself: 'Andrei may well be only interested in what I can do for him and in my money. But then he has need of it. I'd be a fool to think there is anything more to his interest in me. I've found a contact in Kiev who will be a handsome guide and companion. If more should happen - who am I to complain? I'd be so lucky!'

After several phone-calls, arrangements were made for a visit to Kiev. This required patience. Everything depended on receiving an official invitation from Kiev. Andrei organised this quickly. I applied for a visa, the passport received a special stamp and at last I was able to book a journey by train.

'Perhaps I'm making the biggest fool ever of myself,' I thought. 'Who cares? This is too good an opportunity to miss - and if I find friendship with some fun - well then! If nothing happens, what the hell? I'll have been to Kiev. This is my last big adventure. Then I'll go home and straighten out my life.' I tried not to think about suddenly being unemployed, money running out, and future prospects looking bleak. I did not tell Andrei, mainly because his own situation was far worse than mine.

Lurking at the back of my mind was the notion that this strange journey might provide a solution to this dilemma.

As the leaves began to turn colour with the onset of Autumn, I packed my bags, mostly with gifts for Andrei and his family: clothes, chocolates, tea and coffee, and caught the Victoria train to the continent.



I arrived in Russia sooner than I thought. The journey to Berlin had been comfortable and smooth. I then had to take an interminable cab ride to the Lichtenberg station at the other end of what used to be the former East Berlin. From there trains left for Poland and beyond. Once the cab had crossed what used to be a concrete wall border, the uniform greyness of the long boulevards was in marked contrast to the garish affluence of West Berlin, the drabness emphasised by occasional bright lights from newly installed bank points, like toadstools flashing warning colours.

The train to Kiev comprised two wagons stuck on the end of several others going to Moscow. There did not appear to be many people waiting on the platform. The few individuals and small groups were surrounded by masses of luggage: boxes and square-shaped plastic suitcases, all tightly packed and seeming to be exceedingly heavy.

When the time came to board the train I tried to enter my compartment, pushing past the two guards who were taking everyone's tickets, examining them and deciding where each would sit. I assumed that my seat reservation was fixed, but the guards would have none of it. We were all shunted around and settled in whatever compartments the guards decided were most convenient. The reason became clear as the journey progressed. A number of passengers had not booked seats let alone made reservations, and this provided the guards with extra income in the form of bribes.

Everyone spoke Russian, I being the only Englishman in the carriage, probably on the whole train. The train stood in a suburb of Berlin, but I unexpectedly found myself already in Russia.

The guards made me share a compartment with an elderly couple who were able to speak some German. It turned out that they were indeed Germans, but had spent most of their life in the Urals. During the war they had been sent to help colonise the East,

then in 1945 were taken prisoner and forced to work the land there. Eventually they moved to the Ukraine where they settled their family of two sons and two daughters and became nationalised. For over forty years they lived and worked on alien soil until the fall of the Iron Curtain when it became possible for them at long last to return home. However their family, which now included several grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, refused to go West, feeling themselves to be more Russian than German. Not even the temptation of a rich and comfortable life could persuade them to uproot themselves. So the grandparents made the move on their own. They soon felt like fish out of water in a world so different from what they were used to and were unhappy. Nostalgia for family exerted a far greater pull than fatherland.

Poverty meant their family could not afford to travel to them, so this elderly couple had to make the journey East. This was an important visit: most likely the last they would make in their lifetime. The babushka sat with folded hands, patiently and sadly, while the little grandfather cracked weak jokes about the unlikelihood of the train ever arriving. These jokes could not disguise the melancholy of their situation. Their expressions were those of unsettled people poised between two places in neither of which they felt completely at home.

The train did in fact move slowly, stopping frequently and for long periods on the relatively short distance to the Polish border. Occasionally a young woman would join the babushka, having adopted her as a mother during the journey. Natasha was a pretty Muscovite travelling to Kiev with numerous large bags that completely filled her compartment. She did not explain their contents except to say they were materials for a business acquaintance there. Natasha, an artist, had managed to sell some of her work on the streets of Berlin and saved up to two thousand DM. I had never met a more self-possessed young woman. Nothing ruffled her grave calm. Not even the problem of carrying such heavy baggage, which included a large TV set. With quiet persuasive charm she persuaded the guards to stow it all away for her and even I found myself heaving some weighty sacks onto the luggage racks. Natasha had an attractive smile and the penetrating gaze of someone who has seen and been through everything in life, yet still seeming innocent as though everything, however bad, flowed over without affecting her. The babushka beamed at becoming her confidante.

Natasha sat wrapped in a warm fluffy jacket and complained about the unwelcome attentions of the guards. 'One of them sat right next to me, snuggling up and asking to kiss me, pushing himself on top of me. So I've come here!'

No wonder the guards were keen to alter the seating arrangements, I mused.

'I've bought something especially beautiful,' Natasha said to the babushka and showed her a large weighty art book devoted to the Barcelona architect, Gaudi.

The babushka slowly turned the pages and looked uncomprehendingly at the extraordinary shapes and colours. 'Lovely paper,' she commented, stroking the smooth pages as though they were an expensive fabric.

I explored the train.

I first visited the toilets and saw they had not been cleaned for many journeys, for years perhaps. Shit caked over everything; it would be unhygienic to sit down. And I could find no paper or running water.

'Cholera in Kiev,' said the guards, as explanation.

Hot water was available from a samovar in the guards' room, but only people with their own cups were allowed any. 'Cholera in Kiev,' the guards explained again brusquely.

'You're in Russia now,' I told myself and wandered down the corridors of this old train where the wagons were connected by swivelling platforms with joints that shrieked.

I arrived at an empty restaurant car. A woman with peroxide hair sat guard at a small table, took note of me entering and signalled to a young waiter. She was in the middle of a game of patience and took sips from a tall glass of hot lemon tea, a cigarette lodged between her fingers.

The restaurant car looked smart, with ruche curtains over the windows and tiny, decorative lamps at each table. I planned to stay here for as long as possible. The woman informed me that the restaurant car would be disconnected at Warsaw and a new one be joined to the train at Brest in Byelorussia, early next morning.

I ordered supper, vodka and tea, and soon found out why no one else bothered to eat there. Fleeting glimpses of lavish feasts spread out in compartments on the way down the train, told me that the other passengers had wisely prepared themselves for the

long journey by providing their own food: roast chicken, tinned fish, salami, cooked salad, and bottles of vodka. Here in the restaurant car the waiter served something unrecognizable, like cardboard in a sour sauce. I remembered the doleful phrase: 'Cholera in Kiev,' and decided to be abstemious. Meanwhile the accompanying pop musack had been turned up, presumably for my benefit. It sounded like a Russian version of 'Those Were The Days, My Friend'. But in place of the anaemic voice of Mary Hopkins, Slav singers roared and stamped as though their lives depended on it. Each chorus became a cue for Cossack dancing and full-throated heartiness.



The train hurtled through Poland. I stared out into the pitch blackness and began to reflect on the folly of this adventure. In the pause provided by the lengthy train journey I began to think I'd made a mistake. This was just an embarrassing continuation of mid-life crisis, a dread of the approaching half century. What part did Andrei play in this? I had not thought beyond the journey, though aware of the possible dangers, and toyed with them without considering consequences. Being robbed and murdered certainly provided one solution, even this being absurdly self-dramatizing. Perhaps the invitation to Kiev was a devious plan to seize my documents and money. Whatever dreadful scenario I conjured up in the loneliness of the dining car, initial panic calmed into fatalism. The darkness rushing past the train window became a pit into which I willingly fell.

Meanwhile I made note of a couple of young men who kept returning to the restaurant car, once every half hour, although they did not sit down to eat. They bought vodka. This seemed to be a complicated procedure. First they paid a large wad of notes for a single can of coke, after which the waiter solemnly presented them with a free bottle of vodka. Passing my table they gave me friendly and meaningful looks, pitying my solitude and shaking their heads at the dreadful food.

As Warsaw drew close I returned down the corridors of the rattling, screaming train. Before entering the compartment to join the babushka and her little husband, I hung about outside, studying the itinerary written in Russian and pinned to the wall. Suddenly the door of the compartment next to mine was flung open and one of the guards ran out, flushed, happy and quite drunk. To my astonishment, the formerly hostile guard flung his arms round me, kissed me roughly on the cheek and dragged me back with him into the compartment. Three men and a woman were having a feast. I recognised two of the men as the vodka buyers.

'This is my dear English friend,' burred the guard, slurring words and grinning at me as though he were in love. 'Please make him welcome - give him some of your excellent food; and vodka, of course!' They all smiled delightedly and made me sit down at the table in the corner where they could surround me. 'Eat! Eat!' they insisted ( 'Kushay, kushay!') and poured me a large beaker of vodka, as though it were water. Since I had not dared touch the dining car food for fear of cholera, and because it was inedible, my appetite could cope with all the food now pushed in front of me.

They introduced themselves; first Anatol, whom they nicknamed Tolik, a tall well-built man with a smooth face and high cheek bones; then Sasha, compact and athletic who turned out to be husband of slim attractive Lila, mistress of ceremonies and first to welcome me like a dear friend, constantly urging me to eat more of the smoked fish and sausage on the table. Another young man, Serghei, as drunk as the guard, spoke little and spent the whole time looking at Lila with lovelorn hangdog eyes. Sasha did not seem to mind since he focused all his friendly curiosity in my direction. Tolik however took sole possession, forcing vodka on me, eyes brimming with devotion. These eyes never left me for a moment, not even to check the flow of vodka which he poured staring straight at me and stopping with assured expertise just before the beaker overflowed.

I must have been the subject of conversation. Tolik and Sasha were amused and curious to see this Englishman sitting alone in the restaurant car and having to eat there. They planned a way of getting me to join them so they could give me a proper feast. Their curiosity was boundless. I felt like an endangered species being protected, the last of the Giant Pandas.

These four friends had just returned from a successful business deal in Poland and on their way home to Kharkov in the Eastern Ukraine, were celebrating their good fortune. They had been selling technical equipment of the kind apparently not much produced in the West but in high demand. I never learned its precise nature and assumed it was property stolen after the collapse of communism. Instead of saving the profits, the four friends had gone on a shopping spree in a West Berlin supermarket and filled their empty bags with dozens of tins, jars, bottles and packets of meats, sausages, fish, cheeses and salads. As they emptied the contents of each package they bent down beneath the seat and brought out another which they just as swiftly demolished. Meanwhile the vodka bottles emptied one after the other and Serghei and Lila took turns to buy more from the restaurant car. Since it was illegal

on the train to sell vodka by the bottle, they had to pay the price of the vodka for a can of coke. The bottle would then be handed over free. I could not understand the logic of this transaction. Would not the bottles be found missing at the end of the journey? Already being too tipsy to solve this puzzle I simply said to myself: 'I'm in Russia!' Meanwhile Sasha kept grinning at me and repeating: 'Prazdnik! (It's a party!)

Never in my life had I been made to feel so welcome by complete strangers. I felt the need to comment on this.

'It is our custom,' Lila explained, squeezing my knees between her own. 'However poor we are we HAVE to share, even the little we have, with you. Now there is plenty; it is a party. But if you were to visit me at home and all I had was a tiny piece of cheese,' she indicated the size of a postage stamp on my knee, 'I would cut it and give one half to you; gladly, with all my heart. This is our custom!'

The hand pouring vodka shook and I felt a damp patch spreading over my trouser knees. Serghei was swaying unsteadily and wanting to lay his head in Lila's lap. She and Tolik seemed to be the only ones remaining sober. Sasha waxing sentimental, came and sat as close as possible to me. I could feel his steely thigh muscles flexing against mine. He began to murmur incoherently in my ear, at which point the bottle of vodka fell over and drenched us both. I seized the moment, leapt up and wished the disappointed company a good night. 'The folk in my compartment are elderly. I don't want to disturb them too late,' I explained.

It was a feeble excuse and to be truthful, I did not really want to join the babushka and her little husband, who would probably be snoring loudly through the night. It would be more fun with my new friends. But they were drunk and I felt alarmed.

The babushka and her husband were already tucked up in their bunks with the lights turned off. I struggled up to the upper bunk, without the help of rails or ladder which had been removed many years ago. I heard the babushka, watching me in the dark, stifle a giggle. The blankets and sheets were damp and mouldy; they had outlived their use. I dozed off for a while listening to the parties carrying on up and down the carriage. A warm glow suffused my spirits as I recalled the warmth and generosity of my new friends. This was a different world, a different way of life. 'This is Russia,' I murmured to myself, smiled and fell asleep.



Suddenly the lights were switched on brightly in the compartment, a radio blared loud music and the door was unlocked from the outside, flung open and a guard entered shouting: 'Wake up! Passports!'

It was 2.00 in the morning, pitch black outside and cold. The heating had been switched off throughout the train. Several customs officials moved from compartment to compartment. The babushka looked frightened. One of the officers examined my passport closely.

'You have no transit visa,' he said disapprovingly.

I explained that the consular services in London had told him this would not be necessary as long as I did not get off the train in Byelorussia.

'You were wrong,' muttered the officer. 'Get up and dress.'

The officer was followed by an elderly man in the same predicament, pathetically complaining and harrying the officer with piteous excuses. Sasha quickly appeared at my side. There was a look on his face which warned me that trouble lay ahead. 'They only want your money,' he whispered confidentially. 'That is why they are causing you trouble.' Now I understood why the guards had been hostile to me at the start of the journey. I had ignorantly omitted to give them a bribe to protect me from just such an inconvenience. 'This is Russia,' I thought bitterly, not used to these customs.

'Put your coat on,' the officer ordered, 'It's cold outside.' He then promptly disappeared with my passport. Rushing to find something warm, in my alarm I could not immediately lay hands on a jumper. The officer strode quickly ahead with my passport. Where to find him? The guard had indeed vanished. I flung a jacket around my shoulders and felt panic rising.

'Help me!' I shouted at the guards, who simply shrugged their shoulders and kept silent, not wanting to get involved.

'He has my passport. Where has he gone?' Another shrug.

I peered out into the murk of Brest station. Apart from a couple dragging a heavy suitcase over the footbridge I saw no one. A cold mist moved along the platform, the

lights were dim and faltering. The train stood silent. It seemed as though we had arrived at the end of the world. Panic now gripped me. Where was the passport? How would I find the officer and not lose the train which was probably about to leave for Kiev?

Then a door opened suddenly into a narrow compartment where the guards had their office. The officer sat calmly together with the elderly man striking up some kind of a deal. The officer rose nonchalantly, eyeing me with scornful amusement having clearly heard the uproar in the corridor. Enjoying the drama, he led the way along the platform, the mist swirling as in a screen thriller, the night chill intensifying. We descended into a subway, and after many twists and turns, passages, footbridges and further tunnels arrived at the Customs Hall.

It turned out to be a large room seething with a mixture of armed uniformed police and plainclothes officials wearing black leather jackets. The police and officials stared at me with suspicion and hostility. At the rear of the Hall a section had been cordoned off, behind which a group of thin young men were being held for questioning. They too stared at me. The officer directed me to a large box, like a Punch and Judy show, behind which an official sat, hidden from view below the opening. He was painstakingly filling out a form. I could only think about the train on a distant platform about to depart with all my belongings. I then had to fill out a form. In my nervous frame of mind, with officers prowling around and eyeing me suspiciously I spelt the letters of my name and address out aloud. At which point a man also waiting by the kiosk introduced himself - an American who had also failed to organise a transit visa through Byelorussia. We immediately bonded in adversity. The American was accompanied by a pale, frail Russian girl with large, anxious eyes. The girl calmed me with the important information that the train would not be leaving Brest for several hours. Apparently the wheels needed changing to fit the different rail gauge in the East. 'The officer could easily have told me that!' I fumed. So there was no hurry; just as well, since the officer in the kiosk appeared to be copying out War and Peace on our forms. It took almost two hours to complete the formalities.

The three of us then proceeded to the main waiting room of Brest station: a large, cavernous hall. Though still only four in the morning, the place was packed with people. They sat in rows on benches, silently and mournfully. It looked like the waiting room of hell, everybody sullen and dejected. Occasionally a plainclothes officer in the now familiar black leather jacket slipped between the rows of hunched masses, flashing a suspicious eye in all directions.

For a further two hours I stood and shivered together with the American and his girlfriend. As dawn approached our train eventually arrived at a different platform. I hurried to my compartment, not believing it could still be there. The wagon was dark and silent, people sleeping, but warmer and less sinister than Brest station where the air had frozen with particles of despair and people seemed to be waiting for eternity. I opened the door to my compartment and found the babushka and her husband staring intently out of the window, evidently looking out for me. There followed a happy reunion and much explaining. Sasha had apparently come every half hour to check on the situation. The whole wagon had apparently been in an uproar about the 'Englishman'.

I hauled myself into bed and lay staring at the grey light of dawn breaking as the train trundled through Byelorussia. I could not make a journey like this again. What awaited me? Was it going to be worth it? It felt like a 'no turning back' with a long spiral down into a bottomless pit.

The babushka could not sleep either. She propped her head on her hand and stared at the white frost on the edge of the rail-track, mist hanging over forests and fields.



The train had travelled scarcely an hour through Byelorussia when the lights came on again, the radio blared loud music and the door flung open with another crash. 'Passports! Ukraine!' shouted the guard.

I sat up angrily. 'You mean I went through all that rigmarole for just a few miles on this bloody train in this fucking country!' I yelled, to no one in particular. The babushka was not listening anyway because a panic had seized her and her husband. Their own passports might not be in order. This turned out to be the case. The officer, a large, well-muscled, strikingly handsome, blonde beast of a man, took their passports away with him, making a dark observation about some discrepancies. The babushka and her husband sat trembling with anxiety. I became even angrier. Did this elderly couple look like criminals?! Was it necessary to put them through such torment? Eventually the passports were returned without a problem. I lay back and reflected on the madness of officialdom.

The train stood a long time at the border post, which was no more than a tiny village. Hens were beginning to scratch for breakfast in the customs yard. A German shepherd dog snuffled his way along the track. Then the officers descended from the train. There being no platform, they strolled along the railway line in single file and disappeared into a small stationhouse.

'This is Russia,' I realized and suddenly felt excited.

At last I had arrived in the mysterious country of my dreams. Now of course Ukraine resents connection with Russian, but then, so shortly after the collapse of communism, the republics of the former Soviet Union were still considered part of a Russian empire.

No one had understood why I had been so keen to travel by train rather than by air. I had wanted to experience the sense of arriving East, observing the subtle change of landscape and manners. I had not expected to arrive there so soon - the train itself being a piece of Russia. Now I looked out at the real thing.

I could not sleep anymore. The heating remained turned off and a bitter cold seeped in through the damp sheets. I tiptoed out into the corridor, noticing that everybody still seemed to be fast asleep. The guards lay exhausted on their bunks, as though they had fallen where they stood and were oblivious of me taking hot water from the samovar for a shave in the shit-encrusted toilet. Having tried to freshen myself up, I went in search of breakfast.

Entering a different restaurant car I knew for sure I had arrived in a totally strange country. Gone were the ruche curtains, table lamps and old-fashioned décor: everything looked spare and simple. Thin strips of white cloth were strung across the windows. Early risers sat in groups drinking vodka along with glasses of hot lemonade, slurped soup noisily and munched thick slabs of bread with salami.

By the kitchen area a table had been decked with bottles of fizzy drink and packets of cheap biscuits. The cook, an elderly peasant woman with a scarlet kerchief tucked round her head, stirred soup which everybody consumed with relish. I risked a bowl but immediately spat out the first mouthful. Not only did it look like the soaked ingredients of the lavatory pans on the train, but tasted of them too. I now understood why everybody drank vodka along with the soup. At the bottom of the bowl lurked a slab of grey meat, something that had died so long ago no one could be sure what

animal it came from. The cook looked upset so I had to explain that I came from England where people did not eat soup for breakfast and ordered one glass of hot lemon tea after the other to keep out the cold draught blowing down the length of the train, numbing my feet, and stared out of the window at the mile on mile of forest in a flat monotonous countryside. Occasionally the train would stop at nowhere in particular, but people did disembark. I watched solitary figures hauling heavy bags into the woods with the confident air of knowing where they were going.

The restaurant car filled up with people tucking into the soup and devouring plates of assorted cooked salads arranged round a peeled hard boiled egg. I chewed on some sour rye bread and began to consider whether it might not have been wiser to decline the transit visa through Byelorussia and catch the next train back home.

At that moment Tolik appeared looking solemn and full of sympathy. He settled down opposite me and began to comfort me for the alarms and unpleasantness of the previous night. Tolik eyed the lemon tea scornfully and gestured to the cook to bring a bottle of champagne.

'We are inviting you to breakfast,' he said. 'But first we drink to friendship!'

The champagne cost just half a dollar but it had a pleasant effect, particularly at this moment when so many doubts were seizing hold of me that all I wanted to do was return home straight away. I cheered up after the first glass. By the time Serghei and Sasha came to announce that breakfast was ready, I had drunk the whole bottle. Tolik simply watched and poured.

Back in the compartment, Lila had laid out another feast of open jars, tins, bottles and packets. The room was tidy the way only clever people know how, making the tiny space snug and clean. All expressed sympathy for the horrors of the night before and seemed to take it personally, as a poor reflection of Russian character, which called for an extra effort of hospitality to make up for it. They settled me comfortably in the window seat and my four new friends sat around me protectively.

For several hours we ate through the provisions and discussed the state of the world, particularly the relationship between East and West, the economic collapse of the East and plans for the future.

Above all, they began to organise my visit to Kharkov. 'We will look after you; drive you wherever you want - even into Russia. It is very close and there will be no difficulty crossing by car. You will not need a visa. We will come and fetch you from Kiev. You will need no money while you are with us. All you have to do is telephone us as soon as possible and let us know when.'

I told them about Andrei. They were immediately suspicious.

'What does he want from you? Be careful! There are bad people in the world today. They only want to take advantage of you. If he has no work, it is because he is lazy and wants you to look after him. That's what these people want from the West. The world apparently owes them a living. They are not to be trusted.'

I explained that I had got to know Andrei quite well from his letters, but they were not convinced. 'If he is not there to pick you up, we will take you straight away with us to Kharkov. We have everything, even a sauna. You can stay with all of us.' There then followed a friendly argument about who had the best home. Tolik ran a small business outside Kharkov and had a house all to himself there. His wife had remained in Poland for some reason, so everyone agreed I should go and stay with him first. Tolik also had a car. 'It will be one big party!' exclaimed Sasha, grinning again and excited at the prospect.

I eventually tired from the effort of conversing in Russian. They noticed this and quietly talked amongst themselves to give me a moment's peace. I gazed out of the window and began to reflect that it might be wiser to take them up on their offer. Perhaps Andrei really was up to no good. Here I had met people who were demanding nothing from me and only wanted to show me their country and offer their hospitality. I considered their circumstances and realised the extent of their kindness and generosity. They must have spent most of the profits from their business in Poland on the feast in the train. 'What else should we do?' asked Sasha. 'What is life for if we cannot enjoy ourselves and celebrate each day we have together? What is the point of making money if we can't spend it and have a good time?' By their standards, I was probably a rich man, and yet they were treating me as a guest in need. Would this happen in England? Would I ever be as generous to a complete stranger?

Tolik had also spoken about the precariousness of business life in the East. His business might come to an end at any day; the economy being so poor, no one was buying from him. Yet work and insecurity were less important issues than living each

day as it came. I then thought that perhaps I should stay with Andrei for a while and help him out. I could visit Kharkov later.

The train passed yet more forests. Farmers and peasant women carried large baskets full of mushrooms.

Suddenly exhaustion overwhelmed me and after thanking my new friends, returned to my compartment to prepare myself for Kiev.



When I entered the compartment Natasha was sitting with the babushka and her husband. She noticed me carrying my wallet and passport in my hands, as I always did and immediately flew into a rage. 'How stupid can you get?' she shouted. I sat down stunned by this stormy greeting. 'It is extremely dangerous to do what you are doing,' Natasha went on. 'People will be on the look out for fools like you. If you don't take care you won't last long in Kiev. There are robbers everywhere. They pick on silly foreigners. You must take care to hide everything. And don't make such a fuss! Last night I heard you shouting. So stupid of you. You should always be cool, calm and collected. Never show people what you are feeling. They will take advantage of you....'

Natasha went on for several minutes. I was too stunned to respond. Eventually she calmed down and, before leaving to prepare herself for arrival, apologised for being hard on me. I assured her I would take heed of her advice and began to wonder what kind of a place I was visiting: robbers everywhere and cholera too. So far I had only met kind, generous people. The guards had been unfriendly because I did not bribe them. It was all confusing. What did robbers look like?

Towards the end of long journeys, people tend to talk more animatedly to each other, even to strangers. Suddenly I found myself hearing the whole story of the babushka's life. All the relatives were described. It had been a difficult decision to return to Germany - forty years on. The changes there were more than they could cope with. Worst of all was being separated from children and grandchildren, none of whom could come West even if they wanted to. The prospect of this last meeting overwhelmed them both with emotion. A strand of grey hair now fell loosely over the babushka's face. She took no notice of it. The unruly hair reflected the turmoil in the neat order she had tried to make of her life. She spoke of her history - the labour

camp after the war, the settling in the Urals and later in the Ukraine, becoming Russian and being assimilated into everyday Soviet life. But the pull of the fatherland was great. The children had refused point-blank to go with them, though they had apparently been offered the choice. They were two elderly people making a difficult journey, laden with gifts for children who they would probably never see again in their lives.

Night fell as the train rushed closer to Kiev, to Andrei and to the babushka's family, the outskirts of the city hidden in darkness, few lights anywhere. On unlit suburban stations masses of people waited for transport, moving about in the murk.

In the corridor packed with luggage several young women were tormenting the guards with complaints. 'You should pay us back for the toilets!' they shouted. 'And the cockroaches!' Cockroaches had been a new experience for me. I had watched them running along the walls of the compartment and the babushka had regularly crushed them with a fist wrapped in cloth. 'Where did it go?' she would mutter as another one avoided her blow and scurried into a crack. 'Off to fetch mother and father,' I joked, at which the babushka fell about laughing. This joke had been repeated all the way to Kiev, and each time the babushka laughed until tears streamed from her eyes.

After several false stops the train eventually drew into Kiev station. There were no lights on the platform. I made out small groups of people in the gloom outside. Two impatient teenage boys leapt on board, not waiting for people to disembark. 'It's them!' cried the babushka. The grandchildren were aglow with excitement and love. They shouted out and embraced the elderly couple, showering them with affection. I watched deeply moved: where in the West would grandparents receive such a passionate welcome?

On the platform there was no sign of Andrei. I stood with Sasha, Lila and Tolik whose face had crumpled with grief. Serghei had disappeared. 'Be careful,' whispered Lila. 'Thieves everywhere.'

A young man in a blue jacket now pushed his way through the groups of waiting people. He came straight up to me, smiled shyly, eyes slightly downcast, and looking nervous.

'At last!' Andrei whispered in my ear, and took my hand.

There followed several awkward moments. I had to take leave of my friends and start a new acquaintance. They all looked crestfallen and Andrei felt momentarily ill at ease. Tolik explained to him about my trouble in Brest. 'Terrible, terrible,' muttered Andrei in a soft voice, listening politely but impatient to take me away.

Addresses had been exchanged earlier and I now took a group photograph. After a quick hug with each of them I had to hurry after Andrei who was already carrying my bags into the darkness. Thousands of people packed the cavernous spaces of Kiev station. I had never found myself among so many people before, all tightly milling around and only just managed to keep up with the eager figure of Andrei pressing ahead into the thickest part of the throng. There was no going back now.

Later I discovered there had been no film in the camera. I also lost the addresses of the four friends. The book in which they were written slipped out of my hands somewhere in the Kiev crowds. As the week progressed it would seem a fateful loss. I was alone with Andrei.

## THE APARTMENT

A small vestibule led first into the main room which looked out onto a bleak landscape of identical tower blocks. A kitchen, toilet and bathroom completed the flat. For a whole family this would be a crush. For myself on my own at just sixty dollars a month, it was more than I had expected.

The light fittings and electric points looked dodgy - all fixed haphazardly with naked wires glistening. The toilet did not flush and a bucket stood handy for water from the bathroom. Andrei seemed familiar with this state of affairs, filling the bucket without fuss. In the kitchen a small tap on the wall provided gas for the cooker. The fridge contained several jars of unidentifiable solids. These may have been permanent residents there and looked months if not years past their consumption date. A small covered balcony beyond the kitchen had a clothes line and a box with some potatoes and onions.

The flat had belonged to a young man killed recently in a road accident. Andrei was a friend of the family.

When it came to handing over presents Andrei arranged them into separate piles judging who would prefer tea, chocolates, soaps and other items. 'This is for the girl friend who is letting the flat,' he said, taking one pile away with him.

Gone for several moments I realized we had barely met. On the crowded metro Andrei had simply smiled and whispered a greeting. The flat was situated in a distant suburb of Kiev. We had emerged from the metro station into pitch black night. In the distance flickered lights from the myriad flats in numerous tower blocks. We picked our way in the darkness along a maze of pathways. I lost all sense of direction. Andrei meanwhile hurried along in front not explaining where we might be. He seemed to choose a tower block at random. We entered a draughty lift which rose to the seventh floor. 'Do not speak to anyone,' muttered Andrei. 'No one must know you're a foreigner. And never open the door to anyone. It is dangerous.' So not only did I not know where I was, I could not talk to anyone, even for help.

Along a dark corridor were several flats. Andrei picked one and opened the door with a series of strangely shaped keys. On entering he immediately unpacked a pair of slippers. 'Wear these!'

I assumed Andrei would be staying, so unpacked and took a shower before settling down for a fuller encounter with the strange good-looking man who watched me steadily from one of the two small armchairs in the room. Then to my surprise Andrei suddenly rose and announced he had to leave. 'Remember not to open the door to anyone,' Andrei said with emphasis on 'anyone'. 'I shall be back in the morning. When do you normally wake up?'

Andrei failed to explain the reasons for suddenly leaving me. His father was dying of cancer; his mother waited for him. Most of all, the mother must not know of the nature of our relationship, not even to have the slightest inkling. In fact he had invented a wife for me. This surprise was yet to come, but for the time being Andrei kept silent, assuming I would take this all in my stride.

'You're upset!' cried Andrei, not displeased at realising I wanted him to stay. 'Don't worry! I'll be back in the morning and we can spend all day walking round Kiev.' Exhausted and still suspicious I suddenly felt angry. I had landed in a strange place, no one knew where I was. My four friends on the train had not yet arrived in Kharkov for me to be able to ring them. Without explanations I was being abandoned. Suddenly my doubts and anxieties redoubled. I looked at Andrei with mounting suspicion. Who was this man, after all? I did not really know him, let alone trust him.

'All right,' I said brusquely, wanting to be on my own as quickly as possible, in order to decide how to proceed, what to plan. Andrei, upset at my change of mood, went out quickly without saying goodbye and disappeared down the corridor towards the lift. I shut the door, double locked it and began to shake. I sat down on the bed, head in hands and felt the panic rise.

The anxieties of the journey to Kiev began to bubble to the surface. The stress at Brest, the warnings of Natasha, the doubts of Lila and Tolik about Andrei now crowded my brain.

The silence in the flat became oppressive. I could hear people scuffling past the door in the passage, whispering, slamming doors and later on, shouting drunkenly, hitting

the door as they fell against it. I switched on the television. Better to listen to the news in Ukrainian, understanding nothing, than to worry about the noises outside.

For an hour I lay on the bed with its elaborately patterned quilt, staring at the pale electric light bulbs in the ceiling and the twinkling lights from the rows of tower blocks outside the window. Could I trust Andrei? Would there be a knock on the door and Andrei be back with several thuggish accomplices to do me over? Who would know about it? The telephone in the room might be a help if I knew how to reach the operator on it. I dialled Tolik's number in Kharkov, but there was no connection - just a loud signal grating the ear to tell me I could not reach outside Kiev. I then planned to move out as soon as possible in the morning, find a hotel, stay for a few days in the city centre and catch the direct train back to Brussels which only ran once a week on a Friday. I packed my bags, found a bottle of whisky I had forgotten to give Andrei, lay on the bed, drank several swigs and tried to calm myself.

Andrei should be home by now, I thought, and picked up the phone. Andrei's mother replied, anxious that her son had not come home yet. I began to worry again. What was he up to?

The pale light in the room irritated me. I lit a candle, attached earphones to my Walkman and listened to a tape of Pavarotti and Caballe duets - another present for Andrei who had raved about the singers in a recent letter. The plangent tones soothed, but the operatic mood only exacerbated my unease. It was like a melodrama: the candle-light flickering, the whisky bottle and sinister bumps in the corridor outside.

When the tape had finished I rang Andrei again. The voice at the other end sounded subdued. Certainly something had gone wrong. I asked whether Andrei was disappointed. 'Not at all,' replied Andrei, surprised. 'If you are,' I went on, 'I can move out to a hotel and you don't have to worry about me for the few days I stay in Kiev.' I was planning to get in touch with Tolik and spend time travelling in Russia. Shocked, Andrei had not expected this. 'I'm coming right over...I'm coming...' he kept repeating, as he sensed my mounting hysteria. Andrei realised he had made a mistake not giving me any explanations. Mother hovered behind him. 'There's something wrong in the flat,' he told her. 'He can't fix the electricity - there's been a fuse.' 'Get over there straight away!' cried the mother, 'Go and look after him. He's a guest here - you can't leave him alone. Stay with him, for goodness sake!' Surprised and relieved at her response Andrei returned to the flat with speed.

He found me lying on the bed half-undressed in the dark, the candle almost burnt through. Andrei noticed the whisky bottle and winced. He remembered his father's heavy drinking and became worried, sat next to me and put his arm round me repeating: 'Calm yourself. Calm yourself. Don't worry - I'm here now. I'll not leave you - not for a moment. Calm yourself. There's no need to drink now. Put the bottle away. I'm here.'

'I thought maybe you were disappointed,' I told him. 'That's why you rushed off without telling me why. I'd quite understand - but I couldn't ring and talk to anyone. I've no idea where we are. I don't even have the address. If you don't like me, I can easily go to a hotel for a few nights and then go back home on Friday. Just help me find one.'

Alarmed, Andrei realised the journey must have worn me out, particularly the stressful night at Brest. How to bring things back to normal; how to make up for the mistakes of their first hours together?

I looked up and was amazed to see Andrei standing in front of me absolutely naked revealing the athletic body from the photos. The skin glowed, bronzed from months of summer sunbathing, muscles flowing over rounded shoulders, down sturdy arms, curving into the lower back and spreading along strong thighs to a pair of sculpted calves.

Andrei crouched over me on the bed, then flung himself about, groaning, and reached a climax so fast that I could only lie back unable to keep up as the whirlwind passed over me. Large splashes of snow-white cum shone on Andrei's dark skin, pumping out of the large round head of Andrei's cock as though there would be no end. Then Andrei kissed me softly and disappeared into the bathroom. Minutes later he returned, crawled under the quilt and wrapped me in his embrace like a child hugging a teddy bear, not letting me go for the rest of the night.



I slept fitfully not used to sharing my bed with a beautiful stranger. In the pale light of early morning I looked at Andrei still deep in slumber. First I observed the grey, straggling hairs on my own arms and torso, the age and wear of my pale loose skin setting off Andrei's youth which glowed confidently, bursting out of the space containing it like the sun radiating heat and light. Fresh dark hairs on the chest caressed silky skin like the current in a gently flowing stream. They came to an abrupt end just above the nipples, which stood erectly in tiny pools of deep crimson. The smoothness of the skin seemed to accentuate these fierce colours. Well developed muscles flowed over the midriff down to the deep-indented belly button beyond which more dark hair held lovingly close to the abdomen and bunched passionately around the sleeping cock which had burst so furiously out of its foreskin and released the fountain of cream only hours earlier. Andrei turned over in his sleep and I noticed the dark hair creeping up in a barely visible layer over the heavily muscled thighs, so fine a covering as to make the legs seem almost as smooth as the ivory back. The hair lay like a haze over the curves up and over the round buttocks coming to rest abruptly at the base of the spine. His shoulders dipped suddenly into his neck and bulged like the regular slope of a hillside over the upper arms.

Andrei snuffled, snorted and opened his eyes. Their pale blue was highlighted by an immaculate pair of eyelashes and the most delicate line of lashes on the lower lids, as dark as the rest of the hair on his body. So fine was this line, no cosmetic could so effectively and subtly have highlighted the serene blue of the eyes. 'How clever nature is,' I thought, finding myself mesmerised almost paralysed, like a prey before its predator.

Andrei smiled for a moment then suddenly leapt out of bed and made a beeline for the television. 'Wild Rose,' he explained. After expertly manoeuvring the aerial, expertly twiddling several knobs on a machine, the image on the set improved slightly. Andrei returned to bed, settled himself and blocking my view remained intent on the programme. It was a soap opera. Mexican but dubbed into Russian. Since most of Russia from end to end as well as former satellite countries, tuned into this programme, it would have to be one of the most viewed and successful soap operas of all time. It displayed a complete absence of production values. The sets were cheap and flimsy, the filming skills those of a clumsy amateur and the acting rudimentary. The script was fortunately so basic I understood almost every word, even in the original Mexican which could be heard slightly in advance of the dubbing voices, stumbling along like instantaneous interpreters at a conference. Each scene was introduced by a violent zoom as though the cameraman had suddenly woken up and

rushed the process creating a startling but meaningless effect. The scenes were thankfully brief and sliced haphazardly so that actors were cut off in mid phrase. They were sufficiently trained in the art of soap acting to hold a moment of emotional crisis long enough for the words not to matter. Several cameras trained on different sets in a small studio and the director simply seemed to switch from one to the other on a whim. Leading the familiar roster of soap-opera characters, Rosa was the tough little woman fending off predatory males. In this episode she used a soda-siphon and flamboyantly sprayed several gentlemen who stood before her like zombies wearing identical suits so I could not tell the difference between them. One seemed to be a wayward husband, another a suitor and the rest lawyers, fathers, associates and doctors (what would a soap be without hospitals and doctors?) but as they all looked alike and were equally expressionless I gave up trying to identify them and was surprised Rosa could tell the difference. She sprayed each of them and they simply brushed their suits, opened the set-door carefully before going out so that the walls would not collapse around their ears. What the men lacked in emotion the women amply made up for in a competitive round of exaggerated histrionics. The majority spent every scene ringing their hands and weeping copiously. A Joan Collins-type bitch enlivened the proceedings. Thoroughly lacquered and spotlessly groomed she taunted the weeping women and had mastered the camp art of entering and exiting.

This morning's episode dealt with an insane old woman wandering around in a dimly-lit studio, tear-stained and muttering: 'Rosa, Rosa, where are you?' Everybody else was looking for the old woman. The men looked vaguely concerned, hovering paternally behind the women who tried to outdo each other in quantity of waterworks. 'Where is she? Where is she?' This was fun, I could understand every word. Joan Collins swished nonchalantly in and out of rooms past elaborate flower arrangements placed in front of large mirrors, announcing to her sobbing sisters that she had wonderful news. 'I'm getting married. Can you guess to whom?' teasing a woman lying fully clothed on a bed. The camera zoomed like a vulture on a corpse. The prone woman lay in a state of shock, trying to remember which of the identical men might be the lucky spouse. Joan Collins swished out again, touching her perm which sat on her like a helmet and grateful for a part which involved hours of preparation, fittings, hairdressers.... The shadows of actors in the wings, waiting to come on, fell across the set. 'Silly cow!' Andrei would occasionally shout at one of the tear-drenched women. As the credits rolled, flying onto the screen from every direction, covering stills of characters in mid-expression, Andrei jumped out of bed to prepare breakfast. The morning ritual over, the day could start. 'They repeat it in the

evening,' he shouted. Like prayers, I thought - the two moments of the day the whole nation gathers in silence and worship.

Television was now given over to national folk-songs. A woman in heavy costume wandered through a forest, pulling aside branches and lip-synching to one tune after the other.

From the windows of the flat I saw tower blocks stretching in every direction. Below lay children's playgrounds, sandpits, rough grass and clumps of bushes growing out of piles of discarded paper and rubbish.

'Breakfast is ready!' Andrei called from the kitchen.

He had spread a table with cold meats, cheeses and pickles, several dishes prepared by his mother and a loaf of fresh crusty bread. Andrei was already tucking into the food, placing thick slices of sausage on slabs of bread, pouring a thick layer of tomato ketchup over and manoeuvring chunks into his wide mouth. 'Eat! Eat!' he insisted, waving a knife in the direction of the table and not pausing to explain what some of the dishes might be. A strange cake which looked like chocolate turned out to be of liver, sandwiching a kind of cream with chopped gherkins and cooked vegetables. I admired a dish of aubergines stuffed with grated carrots and plenty of garlic - strong stuff to start the day. 'My aunt made those,' explained Andrei between hefty mouthfuls, shovelled in at the point of a knife. 'She's a good cook, but not as good as my mother. You'll see. We're going home for supper tomorrow.' Sitting there naked, occasionally rising to fetch tea from the stove and padding around the kitchen on his powerful legs, still carrying the knife, he resembled a panther on the prowl. Andrei scolded me for not eating what had been specially prepared. 'I'm always hungry,' he said. The food entered his full lips, mouth munched, throat swallowed and hand rubbed the smooth-skinned belly as though to help it all descend safely, welcoming the desired contents. 'Eat! Eat!' Andrei kept repeating, almost like an order, thinking, 'I'll eat it if you don't!' Finally he rose, burped loudly and announced we had business to attend to.

I needed to be registered officially as a guest in Kiev.

'Never speak here,' Andrei whispered as we went down the corridor and entered the lift. 'People are not to know you are English.'

In the privacy of the small space of the clean, smoothly-operating lift Andrei fooled around, jumping on me, tugging, pressing his bum into my crotch. But whenever the lift stopped and the doors opened, Andrei stood poker-faced, the model of good behaviour, hands in pockets.

Outside, Andrei hunched into himself, turning into just one of the crowd, not wanting to be noticed. 'What are you smiling at?' demanded Andrei, worried at the impression his beloved city was making on his guest. Whatever comment I made would be relayed to parents and friends - particularly appreciative remarks. Andrei would later tell everyone, in solemn tones, how well the Kiev Underground compared with London. The Kiev Underground was a work of art, efficient, smooth, spacious and gracefully designed. Each station had its own character and look, escalators descended directly to the platform and the lamps along the often lengthy stretches glowed soothingly. People stood rather than hurried, grateful for the few moments pause before the noise and crush of crowds on the street. A marked absence of advertising created a reflective atmosphere as in a gallery or church.

The entrance halls of the metro stations were packed with kiosks and groups of people, single babushkas, young entrepreneurs and beggars selling small amounts of produce: a few turnips, some home-baked bread or a cake, books or filched belongings. Andrei was self-conscious about the beggars. 'They are worse in England,' I assured him. 'Here no one has any money to give them, after all. In London the situation is different.'

Andrei was anxious for Kiev to make a good impression. He need not have worried. Kiev is a famously beautiful city. The large buildings had either survived the devastation of the last war or been rebuilt to the same design, the boulevards were as wide as in Paris but with far less traffic and everywhere trees, like walking through a huge park. The city was almost hidden by the green, now on the point of turning to autumn gold. The air seemed therefore fresher than in any other city I knew. But poverty lay everywhere like an invisible smog: the roads grey with neglect, the tramlines rusty and in need of repair. But when business improved, cafes would open on to wide pavements and the city be ready for the attentions of delighted tourists from all over the world. The buildings needed to be repaired, their mass of idiosyncratic architecture, embellishments, towers, turrets, balconies and pillars buffed and re-painted. For now, Kiev remained a sleeping beauty of a city.

But first we had to attend to the important business of changing money and acquiring a special stamp for permission to stay as a guest in the Ukraine. Kiosks lined the main roads, all selling currency, but offering different rates. 'Not here,' muttered Andrei with tiresome regularity as we trudged for miles to find one where the rate might be favourable. Eventually we reached a kiosk where a crowd of people were peering into a tiny aperture, handing in notes for exchange. Andrei pushed his way to the front and began haggling with the girl sitting in the cramped space. She shrugged as much as to say, 'If you don't like it, go somewhere else!' 'Do it here,' said Andrei, suddenly becoming shy. He watched me take out several dollars. This was money he rarely saw. The others in the crowd were also fascinated and gathered around me, all eyes glued to the notes being handed over like gold through the kiosk window. I felt their hot breath on my neck and muttering in my ears. I dared not order them to move away. They might have lynched me. So I snatched the thick wad of Ukrainian coupons being handed back in exchange for the few dollars and followed Andrei with all speed into the safety of the open road.

We found the office issuing 'guest permissions' tucked away in a large building, down a dark corridor, damp, musty and with a floor so pitted that I tripped up several times. Two young women sat in an office just large enough for them both to sit on either side of one table. Several sad people were waiting outside. As an Englishman I had priority. There was much curiosity about the unfamiliar passport. Then the command came to go to a special bank where I had to pay in the equivalent of £3 for the privilege of a guest stamp. I needed to go there first and then come back for the passport which would be ready and waiting.

The trek to find this bank took the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon. Andrei had no idea where it was. We wandered down long boulevards, across wasteland untouched since the last war and asked several people who gave conflicting advice and directions. Occasionally Andrei stopped to pee against a tree trunk, regardless of passers-by or propriety, surprised at my amused reaction. 'What else should I do?' he asked, irritated.

Eventually we found the bank, concealed in the corner of a dingy courtyard, as though ashamed of itself. Paying money into this bank proved complicated. Several forms had to be filled in and counter-checked.

When the operation was completed and the passport returned, I longed for a quiet cup of tea or coffee. Andrei was used to these procedures. He had spent many such days

arranging my visa. We continued to walk down long boulevards, past parks, colleges and blocks of flats - for miles. There was not a cafe to be found until we had almost walked round the whole city. Cafes are clearly not a Kiev tradition. Eventually we stopped at a supermarket which sold mainly bread and large jars of oil. People leaned on a counter drinking fizzy fruit juices. We continued the trek into Kiev centre and eventually found a restaurant where people queued for coffee and open sandwiches. The coffee was prepared in Turkish style: a teaspoonful of ground coffee put in a conical pot, hot water poured over with a teaspoon of sugar and heated to boiling in a traditional hot sandpit. As the liquid rose to a rolling boil it was stirred, re-boiled and then poured into a cup.

The tables in the restaurant were plain formica-topped and the place had no decor to speak of. People came in from the shops next door, unwrapped buns they had purchased there and needed only to buy themselves a drink. When I asked for a bun at the counter the servers told me to cross the road to a bakery.

Our spirits revived, we continued the long walk into the city centre and passed several stalls selling single commodities: bananas, aubergines, peppers.

'May I buy a banana?' enquired Andrei shyly, as though asking a big favour. The seller weighed a single banana on the scales and Andrei paid carefully from several small notes in his pocket.

By late afternoon my legs were beginning to give way. But this would be the pattern of my stay in Kiev. I had hoped to complete all chores on one day: fixing the visa, booking a return ticket home, organising a transit visa through Byelorussia - all these tasks would require a separate whole day each.

There were more provisions to buy. Andrei refused to go just anywhere. He knew where the best bargains could be found. As night fell we wandered from shop to shop, buying here a sausage, there a loaf of bread. Andrei paused sorrowfully in front of a brightly lit shop - a place from which he would normally be excluded, the only acceptable currency being dollars. An armed guard stood at the door to keep the locals out. Andrei introduced me as a foreigner with money to spend. Inside, Western European food stacked to the ceiling - biscuits, tins and bottles. The girls at the counter treated me with respect but chatted amicably with Andrei. They too, after all, were locals who probably did not earn enough to buy anything in the shop they worked in. All this shopping made Andrei high. Outside were stalls selling expensive items, but for Ukrainian coupons. We filled another bag with delicacies.

An old woman observed the spending spree and sidled up to Andrei to show him the contents of her bag. He became excited and started to discuss terms with her. 'It's a special sausage!' So a large salami found its way into our bags. Near the metro station a woman held a brightly coloured box. 'It's a cake,' explained Andrei. 'They make it at home and sell it on the streets. Good traditional country cake.' 'We've got everything else,' I said, 'We might as well have a cake too.' Andrei haggled for a few moments. The woman took the equivalent of a few pennies from us, hurrying away with her small boy in case we changed our mind.

By the time we reached the flat in the suburbs, night had fallen. The room felt like a haven.

Andrei could not contain his delight. Within seconds he had stripped down to his underpants and was dancing around the apartment. While I lay slumped in a chair, the revived Andrei unpacked the shopping, fondling each jar, tin and bottle, barely able to stop himself from opening each and every one. He prepared supper, singing loudly in a ripe baritone which occasionally lost its focus in the excitement of the moment and became a squally falsetto. 'Doo-do-doo-do! My heavenly star!' shrieked Andrei. Occasionally he leapt back into the main room to check the Englishman with the bottomless pockets really existed, and not a figment of his imagination.

After supper Andrei pushed me into an armchair and said: 'Watch!'

He then put a cassette into a ghetto-blaster propped on the other armchair. Madonna and some other pop music played. Slowly Andrei began to dance, gyrating his hips, jutting his chin to one side and to the other in a stiff parody of Michael Jackson. Eventually the slow-motion gyrations gave way to more excited movement. Andrei grew impatient. His blood began to rise and there was no resisting his Slav nature. He rushed across the room, pounding on the floor, leaping up to the ceiling and even managing several entre-chats, quite at odds with the music. He could not understand the words of any of the songs, but followed the rhythm and sound of the music with appropriate gestures. Occasionally he would act: pouting and being dramatic whenever the music turned aggressive. At the smoochy bits he pretended to be in a soft-porn film, stripping off his vest sexily and rolling on the floor as though wanting to be ravished. He then sidled close to me then sped off across the room, shaking a finger as though to say, look, don't touch. The prancing began to irritate me; I would have liked to join in but since this was a present to me, I watched patiently to the end.

Eventually Andrei did several spins in the air and landed on the bed, legs splayed out and eying me steamily.

This erotic dancing bored me and like pornography had exactly the opposite effect intended.

Andrei sensed something wrong. He was disappointed. Perhaps I did not like him after all. Maybe I had enough. So Andrei decided to leave me alone next day and spend an evening with a girlfriend, another secret that would have to be explained eventually. She was not a 'real' girlfriend, but I might be jealous. Better to say as little as possible. I had given him enough dollars for two tickets to a Bonny M concert. Meanwhile how to retrieve the present embarrassing situation. Andrei came over and sat astride my knees, facing me, breathing heavily and rolling the whites of his eyes preparing for a few minutes of perfunctory sex. I tweaked the erect nipples so that Andrei shouted louder. 'Fuck me!' Andrei insisted and dragged me to the bed, displaying the crimson opening, as sensuous as full and sensuous as his lips and framed by a thin covering of dark hair which proceeded to cover the rest of his buttocks. Andrei felt his climax approach, pushed me away and concentrated on the final storm. As soon as it was over, he jumped up and disappeared into the bathroom. Our age difference was making itself felt. I could not match Andrei's speed and enthusiasm. Perhaps things would improve. But why did Andrei leave and wash himself so quickly after these moments of lightning intimacy? Was he ashamed? I remembered being the same at his age - impatient and selfish. I listened to the shower pouring ceaselessly, Andrei scrubbing himself clean as though I were a contamination. After several minutes I got up to see Andrei totally self-absorbed, enjoying the water pour over beautiful torso and irritated at being disturbed. I returned to the bed in a sudden surge of desire and reached a quick lonely climax: and felt depressed, knowing of the close proximity of Andrei's warm sexiness, only a few feet away, but so distant, I might as well have been at home in England.

Meanwhile Andrei wondered at my disinterest, since he had gone to such efforts to get me aroused. Perhaps I did not fancy him. Or perhaps this Englishman was only interested in one thing, then would return home and forget his Ukrainian beefcake.

There was another anxiety. Tomorrow I would meet Andrei's mother. How should I be introduced?

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## A MONASTERY, A WAR MUSEUM, AND MOTHER

Events in the soap opera WILD ROSE had not changed since the day before. The mad old woman still wandered moaning through a darkened studio muttering: 'Where is Rosa? Where is Rosa?' Joan Collins continued to provoke other women to paroxysms of distress and men were still identikit. Andrei watched the programme in rapt silence.

After breakfast at which Andrei polished off the remains of the various jars of pickled herrings and sweet corn it was time to make the trek into town again. Two important visits were on the agenda before the meeting with mother.



The Pechersk Lavra is a monastery in the middle of Kiev, on a hill by the river Dniepr. The gold domes of several churches peer out among the greenery of tall trees. The whole area is devoted to religion. Many churches in Kiev have their own park where they stand separated from the bustle of everyday city life. They are lavishly decorated with gold and bright colours. Some buildings cluster in a heap of domes, turrets and curves. Others stand solitary. Woodland surrounds them and the lawns are well kept.

On this Sunday, people packed the main church in the Pechersk Lavra standing in a tight crush while priests intoned prayers and moved around in processions to and fro behind the iconostasis. Two choirs on either side alternated vigorous chanting. The people looked devotional, crossing themselves, listening to the prayers and singing with tears in their eyes. At one moment the crowds divided in respect as an ancient priest, barely able to hold himself upright, was helped out of the church by two young priests. The old man blessed everybody as he passed. The service appeared to have no special order, no beginning, middle or end. People wandered in and out as they pleased.

The choir consisted of enthusiastic men and women. One woman with a blonde perm stood out in particular, large and busty with a powerful soprano voice, probably a singer from the opera.

The Church meant nothing to Andrei, not understanding religious devotion. But he knew how to behave, listening and looking on respectfully but impatient for me to make a gesture so we could leave. When eventually I turned and smiled, grateful for

the experience, Andrei gripped my hand and guided me through the thick crush of silent worshippers.

We passed the old priest outside taking fresh air to recover from the clouds of incense inside the church. The young priests gossiped, relieved to be taking a break from the endless service.

From the entrance tower a view stretched over the river to thick woods beyond and a distant suburb with numerous tower blocks. 'Look there,' Andrei whispered and pointed furtively at a stretch of sand on the other side of the river. 'Just the other side, out of sight, is the beach I had all those nude photos taken.'

Andrei seemed to be in a hurry to move on, constantly worrying about me meeting his mother. We had yet to discuss the invention of an absent wife so mother would have no suspicions as to our relationship. Meanwhile we walked all round the monastery, past smaller and larger churches, stalls selling icons and tourist items including ubiquitous Russian Mother dolls. Andrei seemed relieved that the entrance to the catacombs was closed, so we left for the next important tourist sight. I would have preferred to stay longer at the Pechersk Lavra, so restful and beautiful. But Andrei picked up the pace and we passed into another park, treeless but with acres of lawn and concrete.

We approached the War Museum through a colossal archway flanked by sculptures of armed soldiers preparing to enter a square. Beyond this square stood the museum, a monumental building raised above a flight of steps. From a number of loudspeakers sticking out of the lawns bordering the square, martial music encouraged a sombre mood. We entered the splendid building with its spotlessly clean marble floors and pillars: a scale of space in extreme contrast to the cramped conditions in which most Kievians lived. We descended to the museum which stretched below ground. Andrei became gravely serious, this place being more important than church with its dubious teachings, the superstitions and old ladies forever crossing themselves and weeping. Moreover Andrei disliked the Church's hypocrisy; he had been propositioned by a number of young men who turned out to be trainee priests. He even disliked the music. Here in the War Museum truth and facts about the traumatic cataclysm of the most terrible war in history were being remembered. Everybody walked with respect, overawed by the monumental design and costliness of the materials, footsteps echoing on the marble floors.

The museum was laid out on a grand scale, the intention to make the awful reality of those violent years of history as tangible as possible to future visitors, people who could have no conception of what happened and the extent of human courage and resilience. Here were the remains of tanks, the vast range of artillery, the bombshells and rusted cartridges. Visitors could peer into huts where soldiers were billeted and important war decisions made. The lives of war heroes and heroines lined the walls, packed with detail, photos of young men and women for whom there would be no growing up, nor the knowledge that their sacrifices might not have been in vain. Documents included letters to families and partners. Detailed backdrops to scenes of warfare had been painted with traditional Russian attention to the mess of everyday life, detritus on the floor, earth pitted with bomb craters, provisions scattered and burnt. Even parties of schoolboys accompanying us on the tour found themselves awed into silence.

At the end of the wide circle of exhibition halls the list of casualties and fatalities suffered in the war by the whole world covered a large expanse of wall. Way in front, of course, scrolled the list from Russia and the Ukraine. Hundreds of thousands were the terrible losses suffered by the other countries. But Russia lost twenty million and the Ukraine over six million. Such figures are unimaginable and therefore obscene. I felt ashamed and could not speak. If Andrei had at that moment turned to me and demanded my life as some kind of recompense, I felt it would have been only small and inadequate justice.

But Andrei was thinking about the restaurant above the museum. 'Excellent sausage!' he whispered in my ear as we ascended the grand flight of steps to the cafeteria. 'Better than you can get anywhere else,' he added. Normally Andrei would not have had sufficient coupons to afford such a luxury. So when I bought the strange-looking meat speckled with fat, Andrei devoured it in silent gratitude. This was better than any singing in church.



The sandwich revived Andrei. We walked out into the sunny afternoon. Lawns and concrete stretched all round. To the right lay the river Dniepr. To the left the gold domes of the Pechersk Lavra peered above the brow of a hill which separated the monastery from the War Museum. Tanks and aircraft from the time of the Great Patriotic War stood around like sculptures. Martial music played incessantly in the background. Suddenly Andrei began to sing loudly to one of the tunes. 'This is a good one!' he said and stood to attention next to a loudspeaker while he finished the

song. Andrei had gone through several years of compulsory army training, good years for Andrei. He had been posted to a quiet spot - not in Afghanistan, and before the troubles broke out during the collapse of the Soviet Empire. He had enjoyed his time in Estonia, working on anti-ballistic missile equipment, a fact which made me momentarily start, remembering that only a few years earlier we had been enemies. Russian bombs threatened to wipe out my world, just as ours threatened his. The other boys in his group were fun and had looked up to him, the clever one from Kiev, whereas they had come from small towns all over the Ukraine and were a nervous, self-conscious bunch of low-graders. No one could overtake the good looking and self-confident Andrei, always friendly, preferring to be in good humour, forever bursting into song and dancing. It was the one time in their lives these boys wore smart uniforms. People respected them. The authorities organized their lives and cared for their basic needs. Now times had radically changed. What future waited for these young men now?

'I told them at home you have a wife,' Andrei said in the bus as we squashed up close in the dense crowd. I let the bombshell drop without immediate reaction, being too busy keeping a check on my wallet. Hands, arms, legs and bodies pressed into me on every side. 'I made up a story,' continued Andrei calmly, as though this were the most normal occurrence, a tiny detail. 'We must agree on it.' I tried to imagine what this mother would be like: a ferocious Soviet style virago, arms akimbo, eyes boring right through me and with a deep bass voice booming disapproval at the slightest suggestion of something untoward in our relationship.

'Your wife had to go home suddenly on business,' Andrei went on, slightly severe in tone as though to ward off any argument about the validity of this story. 'I met you both last year in Kiev and since then you have both kept in regular touch with me and wish to help me come to England and find work there.' It seemed as likely a story as any. Besides, I had no choice since this was what the terrifying mother already knew. I kept in mind one of my closest friends, a woman I had known since school and was as likely a candidate for marriage as any. 'It might be best to invent a child too,' I suggested. Married gays were after all a common enough event in Russia; a way of concealing the truth from a hostile society. Children implied that normal sex had at least taken place. There could be no doubt after that. So a daughter was suddenly added to my life.

By the time we reached the flat on the ground floor of a large block of flats, I began to feel nervous. Andrei hurried up the pitch black corridor, forgetting I was not familiar

with the deep holes in the floor and the crooked flight of steps going up to the front door. I stumbled and almost sprained my ankle. Fortunately Andrei had quickly opened the door, in haste to get the dreaded introductions over, so light flooded the corridor and I caught sight of the treacherous steps just in time to prevent myself falling headlong into a wall.

The flat consisted of two small rooms, a short narrow corridor and a tiny toilet next to a small bathroom. The box-like kitchen stood beyond the bathroom. There the mother was apparently lying in wait.

I entered the first room scarcely big enough to swing a cat in. In the room beyond I caught sight of Andrei's father, a sickly old man who had made a polite effort to get out of bed and dress himself in honour of the guest from England. It was evident that he had not long to live, cancer draining last colour. He came out and shook my hand. Neither of us could understand a word the other spoke, until it turned out he knew some German from his years as a prisoner-of-war there. He perked up and became alarmingly animated. Immediately he wanted to talk about the war and his adventures in Germany over fifty years ago.

Then the mother entered and turned out to be the exact opposite of everything I had expected and feared.

A tiny woman smiling kindly, her eyes shone with welcome and pleasure. She immediately embraced me as though to express gratitude for my very presence in their home. Lines from years of hard work and suffering covered her face. Though cheerful and friendly, her manner could not disguise despair at a life that had cost all her energy and will to survive. Age had also wasted away the once large muscles of her strong arms.

'Sit down! Sit down!' she insisted in a soft voice. The table had already been laid, covered with food; everything had been carefully prepared in the box kitchen. A bottle of vodka stood open. After the introductions, we were left on our own to eat. The father ate separately in the kitchen, from where the mother returned carrying yet more dishes: 'Kushay, Kushay!' ('Eat! Eat!') Only food mattered, not my wife and daughter. The mother asked after her out of politeness, regretting that she could not be there as well. All that concerned her was that I be good to her son and not abuse him. Friendship mattered. She came in to drink a special toast to that.

'My mother sees everything, knows everything - nothing escapes her eagle eye,' Andrei had said. Yet here sat a gentle soul radiating kindness, her mind not on what 'might be going on' but on making my visit as pleasant as possible. 'Eat! Eat!' she kept repeating.

'Za Nashu Lyubov! To our love!' Andrei then announced loudly as soon as mother had left the room. Astonished at Andrei's boldness after all the severe warnings about keeping everything above suspicion, I clinked my glass of vodka with his, noting how little he drank, sipping the vodka with distaste and swallowing half a pint of fruit juice immediately after. Andrei rarely drank alcohol. He had disturbing memories of his hard-drinking, hard-smoking father who regularly beat his mother when drunk. Even though his father was now mortally ill, Andrei could not shake off his revulsion.

The toasts whetted the appetite which was just as well considering the feast laid out on the table: pies, meats, pickles, salads, preserved fish, cheeses, crusty bread, fruit - including the prized bananas - jars of horseradish and a large bowl of tomato ketchup which Andrei poured indiscriminately over everything he ate.

Thinking this to be the whole meal I tucked in enthusiastically. But it turned out to be just an elaborate hors d'oeuvre, traditional 'zakuski' (appetisers). The meal had not even begun. Presently Andrei's mother entered with two bowls of Ukrainian borscht, a thick vegetable soup. Then she served two plates of liver cooked in onions, accompanied by mashed potato. It would have been impolite - even unthinkable - to leave anything uneaten. The few dollars I had given Andrei helped. 'We can afford meat now!' Andrei had told me earlier.

The doorbell rang regularly. Neighbours came to peer at the foreigner. They sat for a few minutes each, silently and in awe. Among them, Andrei's elder sister brought a large cake for dessert. As kindly as the mother but too shy to speak, she preferred to stay in the kitchen while we ate the cake.

Andrei was clearly the favourite child, lord of the house. The affections and concerns of the whole family were devoted only to his wellbeing. From birth on he had been totally loved and spoiled, hence his self-confidence. The clever schoolboy had won prizes, become a respected soldier, with photo portraits of him in elaborate uniform on the dresser. Now he befriended influential foreigners who would help him establish a successful life in the world.

The father could not resist coming frequently into the room, not to sit at the table, but to stand and stare at me, hoping for some more German conversation. Andrei would have none of it and repeatedly ordered the old man to leave them in peace. 'He isn't interested in your stories!' Andrei shouted. 'You'll only spoil his appetite. Go away!' The old man looked crestfallen and obediently shuffled into the bedroom which now seemed to him the most boring place on earth. Andrei meanwhile had the calm look of a king who is used to having his own way. The mother on the other hand was making every effort not to be intrusive. She apologised, even when bringing in new dishes and removing empty ones. She had to be forced to sit with us and share another toast. 'To Mama!' I cried, already drunk and my stomach distended to bursting. She was not used to such attention and tears stood in her eyes. She sat for a short while, suddenly remembered something and hurried out again.

Then to my surprise Andrei suddenly jumped from his chair saying: 'Hurry! we must go now.' I thought we would stay there for the rest of the afternoon. Andrei had still not plucked up the courage to tell me about the Boney M concert and girlfriend. Besides, it had been arranged to meet Victor, one of his closest friends. The mother did not seem surprised, accustomed to Andrei's caprices. I looked sadly at the food left on the table, which seemed to be wasted. They promised it would still be there the next day when I would be welcome once again.



A quiet evening in the flat without Andrei did not seem a bad idea after this eventful day. But something niggled and I began to feel uneasy. Andrei timed the information just as we met Victor so I would not have chance to argue.

Victor, a whisp of a man with sad caverns for eyes, spoke fluent German so he and I conversed freely while Andrei waited impatiently for us to include him. 'Let's go for some tea,' he suggested. We strolled down the Kreshchatic, the main boulevard of Kiev, a wide and elegant street with tall, graceful buildings on either side, the trees making this an echo of the Champs Elysees in Paris. A mournful charm hung over this part of the city. The silence, due to the small amount of traffic, provided an unfussy frame for the elaborately decorated buildings. Groups of people walked along the pavement, buying aubergines and bananas from the numerous small stalls. A crowd gathered on the large and elegant square off the Kreshchatik where fountains played and the view took in a grand design of tall buildings, each proudly standing at the head of a series of streets fanning uphill towards other parts of the city. This was

the heart of Kiev. We wandered slowly over the vast area of steps, platforms and walkways among the fountains. Andrei suddenly became impatient for tea, remembering the evening's concert. 'It's the best place in Kiev,' he said and I imagined an elegant cafe in the European style. We crossed the wide Kreshchatik to another broad square where several grand flights of steps led to a splendid looking hotel on a hill, the Moskva.

Guards stood at the entrance, protecting foreign tourists and businessmen who might be staying there and keeping the Kiev riffraff out. They looked suspiciously at Victor and Andrei who had to explain that I was an Englishman and had enough dollars to pay for tea. The guards required some persuading. I declined to give them money, though it was clearly expected. Eventually we brushed past and entered a spacious empty hallway. From there we climbed a flight of cracked steps, the lifts being apparently out of order. The tea place turned out to be a dingy room with a self-service shelf at one end, surely not 'the best place in Kiev.' Who would bother to eat here where the light was dim and the choice poor. A middle-aged tourist – like me – sat in the darkest corner with a young and strikingly pretty girl, the first Ukrainian prostitute I had seen since my arrival in Kiev. Andrei seemed to have forgotten the massive feast we had ploughed our way through only an hour ago and ordered several platefuls of sandwiches, pies and chicken pieces, everything that was on display in fact. Victor looked as though he had not eaten a proper meal since his visit to Germany a year earlier. He was too shy to order so Andrei took charge. They moved to a dark table in a distant corner where Andrei and Victor engaged in animated conversation. I understood little and began to feel miserable. What was going on now? Were they laughing at me, this Englishman good just for paying the bill? Andrei was in fact relating in detail every event of the tour that morning, the excitement at home, the neighbours' curiosity. It did not occur to him that I might feel excluded from the conversation. The other couple whispered in the corner, the man feeling the woman up while she tried to be as charming as possible. Was I in a similar situation? .

Andrei suddenly remembered his concert and that I needed to be taken home safely. On the way out we visited the toilet. It looked as though several train toilets had been deposited there. Shit lay everywhere, smeared even on the walls. The place had not been cleaned in ages. Could this really be 'one of the best places in Kiev'? I looked aghast at Andrei and Victor who simply laughed as much as to say: 'Well, what do you expect?' The guards kept a watchful eye on us as we left the hotel. By the

entrance I noticed a corridor-like room full of fruit machines, where a number of disreputable looking men stood quietly engrossed in the games.

Outside it was quite dark, the lights from the hotel barely illuminating the car park. Below in the square groups of people took part in impromptu folk dancing. Several elderly couples moved gracefully in circles, faces beaming, while musicians strummed and blared away in the murky night.

Andrei quickly got rid of Victor, though the latter made every effort to hang on to me. 'So you prefer Victor, do you?' Andrei hissed in my ear. Andrei left me at the flat and warned me again not to leave or talk to anyone, or use the phone. A lonely night stretched ahead. The room became a prison.



The night began calmly enough watching News programmes in Russian and Ukrainian, then an American gangster film, dubbed in such a way that it was impossible either to hear the original or to make head or tail of the Russian. Bored of watching men holding guns at each other, interspersed with car chases, I switched the television off, lit a candle, poured some more whisky and lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Again there were bumps in the corridor, people falling drunkenly against the door. Andrei rang in the middle of the evening to check I had not left the flat and expressed relief to hear I was still there with doors securely locked.

I spent the next sleepless hours contemplating my situation.

The relationship with Andrei seemed to consist of an exchange of needs: Andrei's for money, mine for affection? Could friendship, let alone love, survive such bartering?

Why had I come all this way just to find that dismal fact out?

I felt my age. I considered using Andrei's leaving me alone in the apartment as an excuse to leave quickly. Andrei was also anxious, sensing my unease from a distance. He did not want to lose me. Friends and family would accuse him of neglecting his guest. Above all he wanted me to think well of him. He returned home nervous but did not ring me as he had promised. Perhaps he did not know that this small oversight would initiate a quarrel. Perhaps he wished to provoke it.

Next morning he rang to say he was on his way. 'About time!' I said. 'I've made a decision. Get over here quickly.' Andrei steeled himself, guessing a decisive moment. Far from feeling anxious he was elated. A fine rage brewed, so that by the time he entered the apartment and straight away noticed my bags packed yet again, he was prepared for the fight.

'What's all this then?' Andrei muttered, eyeing the luggage angrily. At which point the phone rang. It was Victor who had talked earlier with me and expressed shock to hear that Andrei had left me alone. 'I'll take him off you, if you like,' he said to Andrei. 'Fuck off!' shouted Andrei and slammed the phone down. He then stormed through the flat like a whirlwind. Not put off I said quietly: 'I've had enough,' and continued to sit on the bed, refusing to move. 'If I'm too much trouble, I can look after myself for a few days and go back early to England.' Andrei seethed and swore at me. The phone rang again, Victor twisting the knife again. Andrei slammed the phone down without answering. 'I don't like being alone here,' I continued quietly, explaining the language difficulties. 'You could have said!' shouted Andrei. 'I wouldn't have gone to the concert.' 'Then you would have had good reason to resent me,' I replied. 'I didn't want to spoil your plans.'

Suddenly Andrei tired of being angry. Besides, he did not care for the bottle of whisky standing half-empty by the bed. 'I missed you last night,' he said, changing the mood suddenly, switching off unpleasantness like an electric light.

Then we had sex.

The row brought us closer. I had no intention of leaving Kiev early and Andrei had no inclination to leave me alone even for a minute. But a certain reserve kept distance between us.

### **A CATHEDRAL, MISHA AND ICONS**

The making up over, Andrei proceeded to punish me with a day's programme so packed that I begged for rest long before it came to an end.

The walk took us first to Kreshchatik and my favourite cafe - a dark little room with shelves along the walls where one could lean and drink the strong Turkish-style brew. Then we returned to the square with the fountains. We walked uphill along one of the narrow streets fanning out from the square. The leaves were turning gold on the trees

that line all the roads in Kiev. The bright colours were a fitting frame for the golden cupolas of the great Sophia Cathedral at the top. Like the Pechersk Lavra, the church stands in its own park with an elaborate entrance tower and a cluster of chapels, each with its separate gold dome. At one point the group of buildings are so tightly packed that the cupolas sprout like mushrooms - all different sizes like a family. As with the Pechersk Lavra, the gardens and park around the sacred buildings were well tended, unlike the rest of the city. In the spacious gallery area exhibits lay neatly arranged with elaborate explanations and diagrams.

The walk continued, up and down boulevards, across wide and empty squares, through leafy parks and along quiet streets, eventually arriving at Andrei's favourite building: St. Andrew's Cathedral, a baroque masterpiece - something dreamed up out of a fairytale: four slim towers ranged round the central edifice reminiscent of the Taj Mahal, the gold, bright colours, fanciful shapes and structure the stuff of Russian legend. The cathedral seemed about to dissolve into thin air, even as we looked at the mysterious structure, conjured up by a 'koldun', a Russian wizard, whose click of the fingers could as easily make it vanish. There seemed to be no sense of solidity, though it sat squarely on the top of a hill which fell steeply down towards the river. The romance of the spot could not be spoiled by rows of souvenir stalls in front of the cathedral. The street was quite free of traffic then suddenly a stretched white limousine made an incongruous appearance. 'It belongs to the boss of Roxalana,' confided Andrei as the sleek white vehicle purred out of sight. 'It's the only limousine in Kiev. Everybody knows it.' A few minutes later we passed the perfume shop Roxalana, standing like a section of Bond Street London, incongruously transported to this dilapidated area where the street was in need of repair, the neighbouring buildings mostly in various stages of neglect and some completely in ruins. However the program of massive construction now in operation here would soon turn the area into as much of a tourist attraction as Bond Street itself, but with a more spectacular view. The steep street curves in one graceful sweep from the top of the hill to the banks of the river below. For the moment it was a special privilege to stand on a spot which would never be more peaceful and uncluttered.

At the bottom of the street Andrei nudged me to look back. There on top of the hill sat the cathedral, resting on a bank of trees and rearing its gold dome into the sky, ever more fantastic and insubstantial. Blink and in one moment it might disappear - a mirage on the retina.

It had only seemed moments ago that we had been walking in the heights of the city and here we were strolling along the Podol, the ancient street that runs along the bank of the wide River Dniepr. Generations of people had walked up and down the Podol for centuries, doing business, trading, entering and leaving the rows of smart houses with their elaborate facades. It seemed as though they had all left their mark – a myriad shadows on that same stretch of mile along the Dniepr.

Night fell rapidly. Lights from the many shops created a lively atmosphere of bustle, people hurrying home and doing last-minute errands. There seemed to be many exclusive shops and restaurants where only the wealthy and tourists would be welcome. Andrei wandered past them disconsolately, feeling a stranger in his own city. We returned to the river and leant over the railings to peer into the muddy depths. Behind us St Andrew's Cathedral glittered in the heights, seemingly remote from the earth, a creation from another planet. We then walked up another hill back to the Kreschatik and proceeded on another shopping spree, Andrei beside himself with pleasure, never before having experienced the luxury of buying whatever took his fancy.

We then returned home to prepare supper for Andrei's second friend, Misha.



Misha was an elegantly groomed and kindly man about my age. I felt at ease with him, though Misha insisted on speaking in rapid Russian or now and then in an English, so abstruse that it could only be understood by first translating the words back into Russian and then discovering that they had a totally different meaning. Conversation was difficult, but we nattered away as though no problems existed but I did not understand anything.

Misha worked in the Ukrainian State Gallery and was preparing the way for my visit the next day. He addressed me as though I were a man of influence who could arrange large exhibitions in the West, despite my warnings that I could do nothing for myself let alone for the Ukraine.

Andrei meanwhile laid out a feast. He opened every tin and jar, smiling at the prospect of Misha's look of surprise. Misha's salary at around twelve dollars a month was slightly above the average, but he had to care for an invalid mother as well as a wastral boyfriend who slept around but insisted on living with Misha where there was

food and security. Misha rarely if ever got a chance to eat such a feast. In the old days he had a respected position; with a well-paid job. He had been given a large flat to accommodate his collection of artefacts, but art now being relatively unimportant in the Ukraine, Misha had become as poor as the rest of the population.

Misha talked about a book he was writing. Would I know a publisher in the West? I began to feel like a useless fraud. Misha's eyes were large and warm, his nose long and the lips thin. He only lacked long sensitive whiskers to complete his impersonation of a thoughtful friendly mouse. His tall, slender body looked undernourished. Yet he did not look hungry, as though he had got used to being without food. He focussed his attention entirely on this interesting guest from the West, a rare creature in his life, someone who might be able to help them all?

'Supper is ready!' announced Andrei with a balletic flourish of the arms. Misha's eyes sparkled at the sight. Such a variety of fish and meats, of salads and pickles - Gogol would have written a rhapsody on this table. Andrei was already spooning chunks of fish into his wide mouth. Misha had old-fashioned manners and felt constrained to deliver a speech of thanks before helping himself. I lost my appetite, watching them eat with such pleasure. I felt ashamed but could not understand why, feeling useless at not being able to help them yet bringing with me the means to prepare hospitality. Meals in the Ukraine were an essential accompaniment to conviviality, conversation and the bonding of friends. Back in England, social meals are either embarrassing consumers of time or elaborate rituals, fraught with anxieties about correct presentation and not disappointing guests. Here the variety alone guaranteed there would be something to everybody's taste. Already on the train to Kiev I had learnt that feasting represented the chief pleasure if not the whole purpose of life.

Next day we visited Misha's gallery: a grand museum with steps leading up to an imposing entrance with pillars. Large sculptures of lions flanked the pathway. Neglected lawns with late summer weeds added to the melancholy of a place crumbling with neglect. Here the dust of Kiev seemed to lie particularly thick. The steps were cracked and so uneven that I tripped several times on the way up.

Misha waited at the entrance, speaking rapidly and appearing to be continuously apologising for something. I vaguely picked up that the place had fallen on sorry times and that the pictures were not as elegantly presented as I might be used to in the West.

Andrei withdrew behind the reception desk to read the papers. 'I've seen all this many times before,' he said. 'You'll be well looked after by Misha.'

For the next four hours I was slowly led round the whole museum, every picture painstakingly explained: its history, social significance and aesthetic. After only half an hour my ears buzzed with exhaustion. After four hours I swore to myself never to visit another gallery in my life.

Misha shared the guide duties with a young woman, Sonia, also eager to please. Their enthusiasm for the work in their care was so complete and they communicated it with such intensity that I felt ashamed for feeling so tired. Here were two people who could barely keep body and soul together, with none of my advantages and yet they gladly devoted their energy to revealing the treasury of paintings - as a matter of course. Perhaps they did indeed hope I would organise a major exhibition in London. I could only repeat that I had no influence. But they either misunderstood or it did not fundamentally matter.

We started with the icons - cheerful paintings, unlike the more familiar soulful Russian ones. Here the saints grinned and the colours were cheekily folksy, a resolute artlessness about all the paintings as though schooling and sophistication could be left to others. Here painting reflected a direct expression of popular vision, with lashings of violence, blood flowing from severed heads and limbs. This evidently was not artistic imagination. The atrocities had been witnessed: a fact of life. The smiles and the gore were two sides of Ukrainian culture. Hell and heaven stood cheek by jowl. The step to either could be seen right in front of us.

While Misha and Sonia were elucidating the art stretching from one large room to the other, a crowd of young soldiers poured into the museum. The visit seemed to be a part of army education. Young men in full uniform approached each icon and were momentarily silenced. They then moved rapidly and noisily on, sweeping through the museum like a whirlwind. One boy amongst them, perhaps just fifteen years old, seemed spellbound by the icons, though not understanding their meaning. He came no doubt from a distant country village and this was his first encounter with art of any kind.

Misha and Sonia paid small attention to the flurry of soldiers, though Misha cast a sly glance at the handsome ones and clearly wanted to go and introduce himself.

Ages seemed to elapse and they were only half way through the icons. Each one had to be fully explained and I noticed that neither Sonia nor Misha actually looked at them. The pictures had been committed to memory and the explanations came from deep down in their souls.

The icons struck me with a disturbing intensity. The figures and details had been refined to abstract essences, the apparent inconsistencies and distortions not the result of inept technique but a conscious effort to reach spiritual purity of expression where colours and shapes reflect the divine order. The perfection of these shapes were unexpected. I had no desire to move on to other rooms. There were several Last Judgements. For all their detail and vivid imagination, heaven and hell were so balanced as to depict the extremes of gentleness and violence as part of the same divine order. In one painting a striking umbilical cord emanated from God himself, curled like a river from the heights where saints sat on benches, swinging their legs, down past a crowd of angels and devils disputing over the fate of souls, to a fiery bloody lake where the cord ended in the mouth of a two-headed beast, teeth like a shark, on which sat a black shadow of a woman with child, an eerie echo of the Madonna pleading with God at the top of the picture. Hell fire and celestial blue were adjacent and connected.

After these dense visions the later icons from apparently more sophisticated schools of painting seemed crude and undistinguished. A Dark Ages of the spirit seemed to settle over Ukrainian culture. The abstract certainties gave way to portraits of sinister corrupt-looking officials, psychopathic warriors and ruthless princes. I missed the early masterpieces where gawky horses clumped over dragons. Saints seemed to have been outlined by a child, but they were elevated into noble presences to bear the weight of Jesus on their shoulders or plunge spears deep into the throat of hapless beasts, writhing and squirming dramatically at the bottom of each painting. I missed the boldness of these early figures with anatomies so distorted as to be almost ludicrous, the legs twice as long as they should be, Christ on the cross with knees like boulders, a cloth distended over a surprisingly fat midriff, vigorous and powerful, ready to leap from the inadequate cross to wreak vengeance on the people who dared put him there. Massive nails stuck through hands and feet from which blood spurted in fountains but seemed to be pinpricks in the body of a giant. Madonnas lay on the ground next to babies, within the womb of the earth itself, surrounded by neat rows of kings and shepherds, animals and angels, all depicted with equal care and with no sense of priority.

Icons from later centuries became imitative and crude; the intensity of spiritual and creative discovery giving way to a gentle folksiness where the familiar shapes and gestures are remembered as comforting signposts to homely traditions, rather than awe-inspiring discoveries about the universe. They became slapdash copies, hurriedly done as though the artists were only too aware of the ephemeral nature of their work, that savagery lurked close to the surface of fellow human beings and that the paintings could be destroyed quicker than they were created. The savagery emerged in the portraits. Unkempt faces stared out with the wide eyes of people fearful for survival, ready to hit out and attack before being wiped out themselves. Now and then a different kind of face peered out from the depressing gallery of fiends. Mournful and soulful. They were musicians, large eyes filled with tears in soft round faces, the traditional cossack quiff hanging over the shaved pate. They seemed to be cowering under the threatening gaze of their masters, invisible on the other side of the painting.

Depressed at the rapid deterioration of the painting as though the ravages of violent history were being expressed in the crude brushstrokes and colours, I reflected on the relative sophistication of Western artists who portrayed brutal events and people, with dazzling technique that shine a gloss over similar atrocities; careful and skilful depiction of gorgeous costumes, medals and elaborate settings drew attention away from the cruel arrogance of the faces. Here in the Ukraine savagery was observed and depicted unadorned.

The paintings finally reached a nadir of ineptitude, the subject matter and execution of such primitive inadequacy that there could be no excuse for them still hanging there – a great tradition intensely aware of the human condition reduced to bland imitation and wall paper design.

In the rooms beyond hung the masterpieces of Russian influenced artists of the nineteenth century: narrative and genre paintings depicting scenes from peasant life, each with a moral or witty observation, painted with such care and refinement of detail as to take the breath away. Beyond lay the moderns, a depressing display of muddle and rootlessness as though artists could not decide where, on what and how to deploy their skills. I felt now almost light-headed with exhaustion. Sonia and Misha were discussing the possibility of showing the pictures in the West and I suggested that the early icons would be of prime interest.

Andrei entered the final room. His beauty momentarily put all the portraits and pictures to shame. 'You have been here over four hours,' Andrei whispered in my ear, with that familiar brushing of the lips.

Sonia and Misha seemed quite unaffected by these four hours and were ready to start all over again. The five dollar bill I pressed into Sonia's hand represented half her month's wages.

As we left the museum, Andrei pointed out a slim young man who refused to exchange glances, keeping his head bowed. 'Meet Bogdan,' said Andrei, then explaining after that he was Misha's boyfriend. 'Not a good person,' added Andrei emphatically. 'Misha will tell you more about him later. A really bad man - have nothing to do with him.'



Back home with mother, the feast left over from before carried on for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. Andrei's mother brought in one dish after the other and we spent several hours slowly eating it all and drinking toasts. The dishes I liked most were then packed in bags for us to take back to the apartment.

The father hovered in the background, emerging like a ghost from the bedroom beyond. Death had marked him.

Back at the apartment, Andrei poured perfumed foam bought at Roxalana into a full hot bath, shed his clothes and lay down covered in foam and looked up at me with a flirtatious dazzling smile.



## A DAY IN THE COUNTRY

I asked for a trip to the countryside. The next day Andrei and Misha arranged to take me out of town. Andrei had developed a sudden cold. Perhaps the strain of looking after me and the worry about father were taking a toll. He sneezed violently and mucous flew in every direction. Handkerchiefs were a luxury and he simply used his fingers to wipe away excess.

The journey to the country was not straightforward, and started with a long ride on the metro, palatial in design to honour the people. I had now learnt how to negotiate the crowds there. The train would arrive; people surged forward in a thick mass and squeezed themselves through the narrow door-spaces. If the movement slowed down, inevitably given the numbers trying to enter, the people behind would get impatient and simply give a violent shove. The mass would find itself hurtling through the doorway, people actually lifted off their feet in the process. No one complained. A silence hung over the crowd, everyone too stunned or exhausted to utter a sound.

If the crowds were thick in the metro they were even denser in the buses. People pressed so tightly no one could even breathe and every intimate part of the body crushed against someone else's.

After several buses and picking up Misha along the way, we landed on the edge of a dismal housing estate. A final bus would take us to the country, but after several hours travel we became impatient. Misha hailed a cab. The doors were fixed with cellotape to the main body of the car and everything rattled on the verge of falling apart. The driver and his companion were dressed in well-worn black leather jackets reminding me of the sinister men in Brest. Their surly and unfriendly manner indicated we had interrupted them in some other activity. Misha discussed the fare and eventually beat them down to a dollar. The driver then manouevred the heap of scrap onto a kind of main road, so pitted with holes and cracks that the car threatened to fly apart as we hurtled along, the driver's foot firmly down on the accelerator. Swinging from side to side I shut my eyes tightly. 'Here's the end!' I thought. Then, before we knew it we were in the country.

We arrived at a heritage museum: a small village preserved as an authentic example of traditional Ukrainian country life.

A perfunctory entrance consisted of a ticket booth and a bench. Beyond lay a field sloping down to the village. We wandered in single file past a windmill and along a narrow footpath that cut across the field looking over rolling countryside with forests and low hills in the distance. But the life had been taken out of it, the houses having been turned into museum pieces, kept clean and tidy. People could peer inside and only enter the passages. The smell of everyday life was missing; the mud getting everywhere, cooking and the stench of ordure. It looked beautiful but lifeless and depressing. A wooden church stood in the middle of a village green. The inside had evidently witnessed many changes over the centuries, this one most of all. The altar had only recently been returned and old women were arranging flowers around it. Schoolchildren on a day trip crowded inside. Andrei felt uncomfortable in the church and as ill at ease as at the Pechersk Lavra monastery. The old women irritated him as well as the squealing children. Weak at the knees from endless travel we investigated one of the houses near the church which seemed to be an inn, though no sign outside to say so. Visitors seemed not to be expected though the kitchen clattered with pans and we smelt cooking. A surly waiter took us into an empty dining room where pretty cloths with simple flower patterns hung loosely over the windows. The tables were scrubbed wood. Dried flowers and vegetables hung in bunches from strings on the walls.

Andrei's cold now came out in earnest, phlegm pouring from every orifice, but he ate greedily the dishes prepared as well as by his mother. Misha displayed old-fashioned courtesy and would not touch the food before thanking me in flowery and incomprehensible prose. It had been many years that Misha had last enjoyed such a feast and the delight in his warm eyes touched me. Refreshed and feeling stronger we left the inn to the cooks, reflecting on how business could survive here with us being the only guests, a shame considering the excellence of the food. We pissed in the open, toilets being unheard of in this part of the world, then proceeded on a long walk.

The area appeared to be a string of hamlets stretching for several miles. But as no one lived or worked in them a strange sense of desolation hung over the buildings and fields as though the former inhabitants had not only died but been wiped out in a holocaust. Occasionally we came across a babushka sitting in a doorway, sunning herself and peeling a piece of sausage for lunch. At one time there would have been several of them together, children playing in the fields and animals grazing. The thick forests encroaching on the fields reminded me of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. Perhaps a pack of wolves had come and devoured them all.

We wandered up a hill then down into a valley where a beautiful lake lay calm and untouched, surrounded by trees. We stood for a while looking into the reflection of blue sky and branches, suddenly enchanted. The scene reminded me of descriptions in a Turgenev novel. Nature brought out the melancholy in Andrei. Overwhelmed, he walked on ahead and sat down in the shade of an old oak tree. Beyond it stood another ancient wooden church and some barn-like buildings with long sloping roofs and tiny windows under the eaves.

Andrei suddenly looked vulnerable and lonely. Misha might be a good friend, but had too many problems of his own. He looked at me with a penetrating gaze trying to decipher this strange Westerner. For a while we felt a slight friction and a cooling off. The walk continued along fields, past more hamlets and eventually we came to another museum, a farmstead where several caretakers watched us. Suddenly Andrei felt the need to express himself. He leapt impatiently over the rope that separated the visitors from the old farm machinery on display. Andrei seized hold of an antique plough, dancing around wildly with it and playing the fool. He waggled his backside at the old woman who rushed up waving her fists and shouting. We then fled hooting. Andrei rushed ahead, then turned to check whether I was angry and disapproving, but relieved to see me crying with laughter. Warm relations now returned he walked happily ahead on his own, dealing with the mucous that drenched him.

Meanwhile Misha told me about Bogdan.

Misha had married many years ago. In those days gay people had to do so not only to keep up appearances but to be given a flat independent of parents. He had a daughter. The wife must have found out about his preferences because she left Misha, but not without causing a scandal and returning frequently for money. Before the demise of communism, Misha's job had been well enough paid to support both her, his invalid mother and his boyfriends. Bogdan was a student who could not decide what to do with his life. At the beginning they enjoyed a passionate affair which lasted six months. Then Bogdan cooled off while Misha only felt his love intensify. Bogdan had sex with other men but kept returning to Misha, for food and a room. He told Misha that he could not love him, but that he needed a home. Misha let Bogdan use the house. But Misha's pain intensified. He longed to embrace the handsome young man who kept his body at a chilly distance. Bogdan took advantage of Misha and felt no remorse. He rubbed salt into Misha's wounds by telling him in detail about his other affairs. 'Do you love them?' Misha would ask. 'Of course not,' replied Bogdan, 'But they can help me.'

I watched Andrei walking on ahead. Money would always be an element in this kind of relationship. Andrei needed all the help he could get.

Misha continued to drone on about Bogdan, almost seeming to enjoy his suffering. At least Bogdan was honest and not hoodwinking Misha. Perhaps Misha should just count his losses and show Bogdan the door. Misha took no notice of my suggestion. 'He does enjoy his suffering,' I thought, and left it at that.

At the entrance to the museum there were two other people waiting for the last bus into Kiev. The late afternoon sun was blinding but warming. We sat together on the bench, Andrei pressing his leg against mine. We needed to reassure each other physically of our affection. Meanwhile Misha could not stop talking about Bogdan - it had become an unstoppable flow of complaint and agony.

In the bus we all pressed tight together. Suddenly I felt Andrei's strong hand seize my crotch firmly and he looked straight into my eye with almost belligerent intensity.



That evening, after bathing, I stood by the mirror in the hall, combing my hair and drying off. Andrei appeared behind me in the glass and I felt his strong arms stroking me and watched Andrei's face lost in affectionate feelings. I was aware of the fresh young skin and firm muscles in striking contrast to my own sagging skin and flesh and suddenly felt ashamed. I involuntarily laughed in mocking disbelief. Andrei shrugged his shoulders and left off embracing. His look said: 'OK, have it your own way. If you don't want to join in, I'll stop. But I'm angry.' And he moved out of the frame of the mirror.

His displeasure did not last long. As he lay on a separate bunkbed, so as not to disturb me with his cold all night long, he poured forth a string of affectionate nicknames: 'Good night my little hare, my kitten, my squirrel...'

### **MONEY AND SEX**

The following day I had to myself. Andrei went home to recover from his cold. But familiar with the city of Kiev I felt at ease wandering around the various quarters on my own.

Kiev has quite separate parts to it due to the several hills that create enclaves and districts. Without Andrei to lead the way and talk to I suddenly felt the quietness of the city. Though crowds seethed on the main streets there were many parts where hardly any people were walking. Scarceness of traffic made it easy to cross over wide boulevards without waiting for cars or buses to pass. This would change and the city wake up and thrive again one day.

Trying to find a hotel to change dollars I found myself walking miles along these empty boulevards. Approaching the Hotel Rus on one of the high hills, I observed nobody seemed to be staying there. The place had the feel of an abandoned space-station: a brand new building, put together at the last moment and still waiting for visitors. I walked all the way round to find an entrance. It seemed to be completely deserted. A couple of guards stood nonchalantly at the door. The shops in the lobby were open but no one looking or buying. In an office tucked away, as though in shame, a harassed woman was telling a disconsolate tourist that she had no coupons. I continued my trek.

It took all morning to find change for dollars. I stood by the Andreevsky Cathedral, only to find it closed for repairs then strolled down the curved street to the Podol and the river. Again all was quiet on this, one of the most beautiful city streets anywhere. I stared into the muddy waters of the Dniepr, ate a banana in honour of Andrei and began the walk uphill to the Kreschatik. Arriving at my favourite coffeehouse I found Andrei already waiting for me. 'You're five minutes late - I was really worried about you! I'm not leaving you ever again!' He looked much better, the cold now cleared, his skin glowing and eyes shining with pleasure at seeing me again.

We walked some more and then followed an unpleasant evening when Victor joined us.

Victor met us and we strolled over to the monument overlooking the Dniepr: two massive figures marching forwards, arms aloft, with an inscription that celebrated the union of Russia and the Ukraine under the years of Soviet rule. The sculpture is the centrepiece in a large arena where outdoor public entertainments take place. A few clumps of people sat watching a student ballerina dancing to a tinny tape recorder.

As night fell we wandered back into town for supper. First we entered the expensive, exclusive Hotel Dniepr and were quoted western prices. Victor and Andrei looked at

me hopefully. Angry at the prospect of forking out a hundred dollars for this meal, and at their expectation I would do so I demurred and we went in search of another place. Andrei and Victor went on ahead, chatting happily together oblivious of me. We crossed the square with fountains and passed a dingy hotel where I had been for lunch earlier in the day, sitting alone in a deserted ballroom where a boy waiter served me a cheap and ordinary meal of meat with cabbage and potatoes, a glass of vodka too. The waiter clattered his heels on the long-unpolished floor, bearing plates from a distant kitchen. The sound system had blared loud pop music and I laughed out loud as, incredibly, the long forgotten voice of Mary Hopkins herself sang *those were the days my friend, we thought they'd never end....*

We entered another exclusive place - a posh little restaurant clearly set aside for tourists and rich Ukrainians. When the menus were shown I realised I could not pay for us all and did without. They picked several pricy dishes and nattered cheerfully together, enjoying the ambience of the flash place. They then scampered off to the toilets like giggly girls at a disco to investigate the quality of the soap there. Andrei noticed my discomfort and became ever more cheerful to help clear the sticky atmosphere. The bill came and cleared me of all my cash. The boys looked on without commenting then went off on another long walk. I trailed behind, my spirits at their lowest ebb, planning how I would deal with the remaining days in Kiev.

I followed Andrei and Victor into a dark park where shadowy figures lurked, probably cruising each other. Several couples sat smooching on benches. I would have felt uneasy strolling in such a place in London, but, despite the warnings of Natasha on the train, I felt no fear. The people here were like Andrei and Victor - with not a penny between them. What was the point of mugging them? Possessions make people vulnerable. In New York people 'dress down' to look poor so as not to be molested. Kiev still seemed to belong to everybody and it would not occur to Andrei and Victor to be alarmed. The park at night was beautiful - romantic even. I slowly realized that money meant something quite different to my new friends than to people from the West like myself. Money here was a commodity whose only value was to be used and spent. Saving it meant nothing. Money in the hand immediately went on necessities. If anything happened to be left over, by good fortune, then it should be blown on a luxury: a meal, a drink, or in Andrei's case, a video cassette for his machine. Therefore my money sitting in my pocket could also be spent to the limit. Certainly not saved or hoarded. If there was enough for an expensive meal then all the better. Above all it should be shared. Friends are invited as a matter of course..

Back at the apartment Andrei quickly engrossed himself in the computer which had belonged to the previous occupier, the man who had died in an accident. Irritated by the tinny noise of the computer games, the attack of space invaders and the clatter of the keyboard I sat in the kitchen with earphones and listened to Madame Butterfly.

Suddenly I felt Andrei's arms around me. 'Don't do that!' I shouted on reflex, 'You gave me a shock!' Andrei stood for a moment in surprise then lost his temper. Hurling incomprehensible abuse he stormed back into the living room slamming the door so violently that plaster fell from the ceiling. I sat on for several more minutes until the music had finished. When I entered the room to go to bed the lights were out and Andrei lay quite still, pretending to be asleep.

I lay down and gave a sigh. This turned out to be all Andrei was waiting for. He flung himself upon me releasing a tornado of affection. Afterwards I lay stunned thinking: 'If rows lead to this sort of making-up, who cares?!' Andrei could not give himself enough to me - it was as though he wanted me to possess him completely. But we did not talk about the problems of earlier that evening. I began to feel guilty about being so small-minded.

When Andrei returned from the bathroom I mentioned the expense of the meal and the fact that I might not have had enough dollars; it could have been embarrassing. Unfazed, Andrei said: 'Well you should not have stayed there then,' adding: 'We would have been perfectly happy in a cheaper place.' I noted the cultural differences between East and West: back home it would be considered impolite to take guests somewhere cheaper for lack of cash. Here in Kiev such a dilemma simply did not exist. 'The place was no good anyway,' continued Andrei, 'It would have been better to go to that Georgian place on the Kreschatik next to your coffee bar. We'll never go to such a snobby, ridiculous place again. It's run by gangsters anyway!'

### **VISITING MISHA**

The following days passed quietly. Andrei had been weakened by the cold and preferred to spend time in the apartment with regular forays home and lengthy lunches which started at 2.00 in the afternoon and carried on till the early evening. In between courses I studied Andrei's photo album, tracing the maturing of Andrei from pampered baby to steamy young teenager, full of unsatisfied lusts in a body that was always beautiful. In one photo he stood beside his mother, both in swimsuits. I

pointed out his self-confidence. 'My body I have from God,' Andrei said simply and continued to turn the pages. In late adolescence he began to embrace several pretty girls joined. He acted the part of an attentive lover, protecting the fragile maidens in his muscular arms. Then suddenly he appeared under an army cap in full uniform and playing the arrogance with ease. With his soldier pals he seemed to be the leader, always fooling around. After the army years which seemed to coincide with the break-up of the Soviet empire and beginning of hard times in the Ukraine, Andrei appeared to lose weight. He danced at a friend's party, looking quite changed, slenderer and the self-confidence giving way to a self-absorbed lowering of the eyes, as though only just accustoming himself to being perpetually propositioned. 'I had no trouble meeting people,' Andrei commented dryly with a shrug of the shoulders. The dancing became more narcissistic, partners being irrelevant. There followed a series of boyfriends, including the first love of Andrei's life. Andrei began to look straight at the camera again, casting flirtatious glances from under dark eyelashes. These pictures were the Andrei I had come to know.

At other times during the lengthy meals we watched television and videos. During one of these, I found myself looking at a familiar countryside – beech trees, luscious meadows and slow-flowing streams. England. Suddenly a flat Lancastrian voice shyly intoned some prepared sentences. 'It's a video-letter to a friend of mine,' said Andrei. 'I must remember not to send one of these,' I thought, feeling embarrassed for my compatriot whose intimate thoughts I could hear all too clearly. Andrei's friend had no video and had left the tape with Andrei who, not appreciating its intimate nature played it nonchalantly to every visitor. Suddenly I felt tears prickling in my eyes. The man spoke about the ache in his heart, but not able to express it in words, not being practiced at poetry. So he just repeated clichés. 'One day we will be together again,' the dull voice said flatly but slowly with care so that in between the words I could sense the man's vulnerability. It brought home my own situation, here in Kiev with a young man who needed me and my help. On the video-letter an honest voice uttered real emotion that was as real as the Kievian's need. Could such a relationship succeed? Should material needs preclude emotion? Perhaps Andrei's friend also loved his correspondent – not hard to understand why, listening to the tenderness coming through the video, all the more poignant for being spoken in such a shy, reserved and diffident monotone. 'It's strange to think that the same sun shining on me is also shining on you,' the voice went on, 'The same rain, the same moon. But one day we really will be together and nothing will separate us.' I could picture the man putting the tape together, choosing the shots and the background music carefully,

fitting them to the words. It was a work of devotion and had probably taken weeks of preparation.

Andrei paid little attention, this had nothing to do with him, and he continued flicking through some gay magazines I had brought over from England.

Meanwhile a tragedy took a toll on him. Andrei's father began to sink rapidly towards death. Within a few days he had become a grey shadow. The mother was in perpetual sorrow. At last they took him to hospital. I looked into the open bedroom. Two beds stood head to head. The windows had been left open to air the place. The fresh breeze seemed to have blown the ghostly presence away with a gentle puff. The father did return later, and his final hours were painful. The cries would rip both Andrei and his mother to shreds. Death happened shortly after my departure. The two events were hard on Andrei. 'These days are without doubt the worst I have ever been through,' he would tell me.

Two engagements had yet to come before I left Kiev. First, Misha had invited us to supper with his invalid mother. There would also be a visit to the opera. But first came an abortive evening with Victor.

Arrangements were made to meet at his flat. Then everything changed. Victor, ashamed of his squalid lodgings, arranged a party at a girlfriend's house. I bought a cake and peach brandy. The girl turned up on the metro platform - a traditional meeting place, being both central and warm. The attractive and lively girl changed plans yet again. They would spend the evening with a mutual friend. But there were complications. After several hours waiting and holding the cake, ringing to make arrangements and walking miles through an increasingly frosty evening, crossing roads and parks, getting lost and angry with each other, we eventually arrived. Then it turned out this mutual friend had a husband who was jealous. So they had to wait till he left the flat on business. 'At this time of night?' I cried. 'He drives a lorry,' came the cryptic reply. Andrei hated delays and seethed with fury. I assumed this to be typical Ukrainian behaviour and began to enjoy the adventure. We waited outside until it grew so cold that we were forced inside and climbed to the top of the block of flats. We drank the peach brandy and ate the sickly sweet cake. Eventually the sinister husband could be heard leaving.

The flat came as a big surprise. Its elegance matched anywhere in London or Paris. Floors were a polished wood and furnishings fashionable and expensive. The kitchen

had been fitted elaborately with every convenience and gadget. Andrei and Victor proceeded to eat every piece of food that happened to be lying around. All the fruit went quickly, then chocolates and nuts. Our host, a chicly dressed attractive woman, served us coffee. Andrei leaned over to me and whispered fiercely, 'You see! We also have rich people in Kiev. Now you see how some people live here!' It transpired the women wanted to be alone together and we three men were ushered out after only half an hour. At the door she offered me caviar and vodka - a traditional gesture to guests on the point of departure. The woman found two slices of dark rye-bread, spread them thickly with black caviar and served them to us with a glass of vodka each. Andrei swallowed his portion with ferocity as much as to say, 'I'll eat everything you give me!'

Victor explained about the wealth. The husband was a French businessman who commuted between Paris and Kiev. 'And drives a lorry?' I asked myself, finding the whole story implausible. But I had now got used to mysteries and inconsistencies in the East and felt the woman could count herself lucky living in such luxury. Andrei had an angrier reaction. Not only fed up at all the delays and the wrecking of an evening, he was also jealous of the possessions he could only dream about. He rowed furiously with Victor until we split up and returned to the apartment.



The following evening's visit to Misha provided a stark contrast to the 'French' businessman's standard of living.

Misha lived in a remote suburb of Kiev. Lengthy bus journeys were required to reach it. The steps to his flat were worn with age and the steady tramp of thousands of heavy feet. The flat itself was spacious. A long corridor led off to a number of rooms full of books, pictures and sculptures. In the middle of the flat lived the invalid mother and it became immediately obvious which room from the overpowering smell of stale urine.

She sat on the edge of a huge bed piled high with pillows and eiderdowns and chopped boiled beetroot for a salad. This would be supper once it had been added to a bowl of boiled potatoes. Fortunately Andrei had persuaded me to buy some extras - salami and tins of smoked fish. These were immediately opened and laid on the table.

The mother, a grand-looking lady, had clearly been accustomed to a better life-style in the old days, when her son held a well-qualified job and respected position in the cultural hierarchy of Kiev. She had fixed a large mass of hair piled high on her head with a gigantic pin. Paralysed from the waist down, she had next to her a long stick about the size of a clothes-line prop. With this she expertly adjusted curtains and could open and shut windows over three yards away, without moving from her bed.

Bogdan entered, curious about Andrei's rich friend. He and the mother were close, Bogdan acting as nurse and confidante. Misha was lucky to have him there, despite the emotional upheavals. Bogdan could also play the piano. He had a gentle touch. Even during loud passages he kept it quiet, playing carefully. When he made a mistake he repeated the passage until correct. The delicacy of his playing indicated a depth to his character at odds with the terrible impression I had received about him from the others. The mother listened with intense seriousness and concentration. Music and company were a welcome break from the inexpressible tedium of being paralysed and alone for most of the time.

'You must play more,' I said encouragingly. This precipitated an unpleasant reaction. 'How can I?' Bogdan sneered. 'Who has time to play the piano these days? All our energy goes on trying to keep alive. You have no idea of our problems, do you!' Rightly embarrassed at my thoughtlessness I said soothingly: 'I'm sorry, you're right, I understand nothing.'

They sat down to supper. The salad that had been so carefully prepared looked like blood and potatoes. The overpowering smell of urine pervading the room took away my appetite. The others however polished everything off. Vodka fortunately helped drown the stench and embarrassment. Bogdan turned out to possess further talents as a skilled embroiderer. I offered to buy some of his work. Bogdan at last began to warm to the Englishman. But I still kept a distance, treating him like a feral animal.

Andrei left early to buy a coat. A cousin had found one for thirty dollars and I gave him the money gladly. The cousin could only be met with in the late evening. Misha would bring me home later.

We retired to Misha's private room at the end of the corridor. It was spacious and beautifully furnished with large carvings, bronzes and sculptures on every table, shelf and corner. Books lined the room from top to bottom. I sat on a divan covered with an elaborate ethnic embroidered cloth. We listened to a tape of Mozart and Misha

beamed with delight at having such a civilised guest. Bogdan meanwhile phoned various lovers. The invalid mother sat by herself, accustomed to being abandoned.

Misha eagerly returned to perpetual complaints about Bogdan and the collapse of his emotional life. 'Would anyone in England be interested in me?' he asked. Embarrassed, I seized the opportunity to discuss my own relationship with Andrei, pointing out the absurdity of conducting love affairs at long distance and outlining the history of our correspondence. 'I looked for love, of course,' I admitted. 'But in fact I did not even expect a reply from Andrei. Who can help these things happening? Here I am and I'm fond of the boy. It's going to be tough. What will I do when I'm back in England and my Andrei is still here? I don't recommend it. But in my case - it just happened that way. There's nothing I can do about it. It's mad, I know. But there it is.'

Misha fell silent, moved, and simply gazed at me, eyes shining with sympathy and admiration. But I did not dare mention my doubts about Andrei. That would be a breach of trust. Besides – my doubts might simply be unfounded.

The doorbell sounded and Bogdan entered in alarm. The visitor turned out to be one of Misha's former lovers who had suddenly surfaced after many years. A handsome young man followed behind Bogdan. He seemed to have been crying. Misha quickly but politely ushered me and Bogdan out so that he could be alone with his new and attractive guest.

Bogdan was in a state of panic. Since I could not understand a word he said, he unleashed a torrent of complaint and anxiety on the mother who listened gladly and with interest. The evening had turned out eventful for her. I meanwhile fingered the piano and waited for Misha to finish and take me home.

Waiting for a taxi or a bus, whichever arrived first, Misha smiled with unsuppressed happiness. 'You brought me luck tonight!' he exclaimed. 'How extraordinary that just as I tell you about my broken heart the big love of my life should happen to arrive.' There followed the young man's history: a hard coming to terms with being gay, trying to change, attempting suicide because of failure to do so and eventually returning to the one person who once showed him kindness and love, who had always been there for him.

We caught the metro to the apartment and had scarcely stood for a moment when Andrei rushed up, brimming with joy at the coincidence. 'I was in the next compartment and saw you,' he cried breathlessly. 'That's love!' said Misha smiling like a benevolent god. 'Souls always come together!' Andrei was not wearing the new coat. 'It needs work doing to it, it doesn't quite fit me,' he explained. 'My aunt is making the changes.' For the first time I felt we were an item.

### **WE HAVE TO LIVE: THE PINE TREE**

The time of my departure drew near. Andrei became bolder and felt it was time to air his own doubts and fears.

'You don't love me,' he announced.

I lay in the bath thinking about the journey home and the pain of leaving my new friend. Andrei came and sat on the edge of the bath. He had undressed, so I could gaze at his beauty one last time.

I had been prepared for this. 'You don't love me. You only love my body,' Andrei continued. 'I guessed you might think so,' I sighed. 'Just look at you! It must be difficult for you to think anything else. There's no denying I fancy you like crazy. Who wouldn't? But, just think: if all I had wanted was sex with you I could have stayed at home and found myself trade. A lot cheaper. What else can I say?'

Andrei was intrigued. 'What's trade? I've read about these things...' He had mixed feelings about that. Sex for cash? But this was something he knew he could not do, however much he liked sex. He had been offered it often enough. The idea did not disgust him, but he could not imagine the dynamics of such a contract. Besides - if he did not like a person Andrei simply could not be interested in sex. He looked at me lying in the water and knew he wanted sex with me. But he wanted more. He needed assurance and trust. He longed for a good father, an elder brother, a security so that he would no longer feel alone in the hard cold world. Young people were all right in small doses, but they tended to be flibbertigibbets: quick sex, occasional meetings and then on to the next person. Andrei could depend on older people. He felt sure of himself and knew what he wanted and needed. He had also known from early on that he attracted people easily. Might I only be interested in a fleeting affair or could there really be a chance of a fuller relationship - with the chance of going West and improving his life? Andrei accepted that he had used his beauty to trap this big fish;

but he considered that a fair opening gambit. Others had written and wanted him. But I had turned out to be the only one he liked who offered more. I might be a complicated, difficult and neurotic man, particularly when it came to money, but Andrei still could not help liking me. Then Andrei remembered awkward moments during the last two weeks. I had always been friendly with Misha and Victor, but sometimes been cool to him, whom I was supposed to love. Andrei did not know how to express these anxieties. 'Yesterday you were so nice to Victor,' he commented. 'You said how sad he looked; asked whether he was all right.' I remembered that Victor had looked particularly hang-dog and assumed, probably correctly, that Victor felt jealous of Andrei's good fortune. 'But you didn't notice me,' Andrei went on, building up steam. 'I was upset too! I was feeling bad! But you never asked how I felt.' Indignation now took control and Andrei rose to his feet in excitement. I stared at him astonished. 'I never noticed,' I said, 'You always seem so cheerful, strong and positive. I've never met such a self-assured man as yourself. It's why I love you so much!' But Andrei was not mollified. 'You only love me for my body,' he said, gesturing over the muscled curves, stroking the smooth shining skin over his taut midriff. Andrei now ran at full steam. 'But you don't love me for my inner self!'

He shouted these last words and pointed fiercely with forefinger into his open mouth, trying in desperation to describe what that 'inner' self might be. I burst out laughing never having seen a funnier gesture. Andrei laughed too and felt an immense relief. It would all be wonderful between us from now on.

I sensed again that tight clutch round the heart at the sudden onrush of feeling. It meant terror as well as delight. All the time I could only think of my departure, of leaving Andrei and not knowing when we might meet again.



Next day Andrei took me on a long detour before going home to mother and another long lunch. On Gorky Street stands a gallery which is one of the most elegant residences in Kiev. It had once been the home of a rich merchant who had been a passionate collector of paintings. The gallery takes over the whole house which is a masterpiece in itself. Everything is polished mahogany, chandeliers, gold-framed mirrors and large windows flooding the rooms with light, creating a sumptuous effect. The colours possess a deep glow rather than a glaring brightness.

The museum meant something special to Andrei and therefore nervous of my disapproval, since I seemed to prefer the more savage charms of the Ukrainian State Gallery.

I couldn't help notice the single men hovering around the paintings and casting furtive glances in Andrei's direction. So this must be a cruising area - an elegant and warm place to meet. I commented on them to Andrei who seemed surprised. Did Andrei really not know? Surely he must have met people here and probably frequently. Andrei seemed to notice the men for the first time. But it was true. He came here for the art. Sex happened on the beaches along the river.

Here hung his favourite painting. He knew it so intimately that he no longer needed to look. Nevertheless, every now and then he liked to be close.

He took me slowly through rooms of elegant portraits. In contrast to the rough-hewn Ukrainians here were the refined features and sophisticated styles of a different, a Russian culture. Several rooms were devoted to narrative religious paintings reminiscent of English Pre-Raphaelites, also executed in bright colours with emphasis on design and meticulous attention to detail.

In the next room I felt a sense of coming home. I was then still ignorant about much Russian art except for icons, but had always appreciated work of 19th century landscape painters. Here was one of the greatest, the pictures stretching from one room to the other. 'Shishkin!' I shouted out loud, involuntarily, so that the two women guards turned and looked suspiciously at me. 'I thought he could only be seen in Moscow,' I cried with pleasure. 'He's one of the reasons I always wanted to come to Russia.' Andrei could not believe his ears. This Englishman knew Shishkin, his favourite of all artists. 'I want to stay in this room,' I announced. 'I want to be here for hours!' 'Me too,' said Andrei quietly, because he was choked by the realisation that they had something important in common, more than sex.

Shishkin was a landscape painter as celebrated in Russia as Constable is in England. His unique quality is hard to define because there is no centre to his paintings, no dramatic vista or story; just trees, fields stretching under vast skies and pieces of woodland. Everything is painted with meticulous detail, an expression of intense, almost obsessive love for the minutiae of nature. Shishkin's popularity extends from the lowest common denominator of art lovers, those who 'know what they like', to connoisseurs who can appreciate the skill and poetry which lifts the familiar clichés of

'nature scenes', forest glades, sunny meadows and babbling brooks, onto the level of the sublime. Looking at Shishkin is the equivalent of reading descriptive passages from Tolstoy or Turgenev. I love the balance in the paintings between the lower depths where tangled roots, mud and the detritus of nature lie, and the liberating expanses of sky above the sturdy tree trunks and web of branches, the fantastic cloud shapes and the skilfully refracted radiance of an unseen sun.

The women guards noticed us enthusing over the paintings. They came up to share their own feelings and tell the history of the museum. The rich merchant who built the residence and founded the collection had been a passionate admirer of Shishkin, devoting all effort and as much money as it took to persuade the painter to work solely for him. 'I love him so much,' said the older of the two women, a babushka like Andrei's mother, 'That I could just hug his work. I want to take it to bed with me!'

While they laughed at the notion, considering the monumental size of the paintings, Andrei solemnly pointed out his own favourite, shaking his head with emotion and not daring even to look at it. The painting stood out as an exception among Shishkin's other work. A solitary pine tree, weighed down by a drift of snow, leaned against a dark sky. It may be night, but maybe a deep indigo cloud threatens another blizzard. Beyond the tree, standing high on a hill, a snow-covered forested landscape stretches to infinity. The large canvas, like the others, overwhelms. In reproduction, in books, the necessity to reduce the scale of these works takes away their chief quality, their grandeur. These humble, in themselves insignificant scenes were painted on an epic scale. The effect is to draw the viewer into the process of painting, into nature itself.

Looking at the solitary pine tree I began to understand Andrei more. Paintings can reflect a person's life. I sensed Andrei's father's presence in the dark sky and the heavy drift of snow. Though the painting had no source of light coming from any angle - a bold gesture - the longer I looked the more inner glow I could make out: a world of mystery and possibility in contrast to the other landscapes where bright sun dappled even the thickest forest glades. Andrei's face burned with emotion. With a shock I realised that the air of self-assurance barely concealed a deep insecurity, an awareness of the perils of life and a desire for the safe embrace of the dark.



Lunch with mother turned out to be a mournful, painful occasion. The father still lay in hospital and the doctors had only given him days to live. Andrei prepared lunch so

that when mother arrived, exhausted and distraught, little needed to be done for her golden son and his kindly English friend. At first she could not speak, shaking her head to stifle the sobs. Later she came and sat next to me. I took her hand. She looked me straight in the eye, fully in control of her feelings. 'My life has been so hard,' she said, 'So hard.' After a pause she continued: 'All these years we struggled, fought and worked, just to keep going. There has been so much pain, so much disappointment. Every day we start early to get enough for the rest of the day - to eat, to keep warm. There were wars. I lost my first husband ... but that's another story... Then his best friend married me. I did not want another child, I was too old. But he wanted a son. Andrei came along. We put up with it all, but there is so much pain, so much disappointment.' She spoke in a firm voice without self-pity, and her words struck me forcibly. Suddenly the full reality of life in the Ukraine in 1992 was revealed to me in a way that would remain with me for the rest of my life when other memories of my time in Kiev became hazy over the years. She made me understand the hardness of her life, an abusive husband who was now dying, anxiety about the future for her beloved son whom she doubted I could help more, and above all the political and social circumstances. She had spent her life in the relative security of communism which guaranteed work and at least a place to live. I observed how she kept the modestly furnished apartment clean and fresh with beautifully embroidered table cloths, window drapes washed and ironed: a home to cherish. This had once been guaranteed, but now facing destitution and a life without hope of improvement, what with the chaos of post-communism, the rise of gangster political leaders and the destructive triumphal invasion of Western market forces, even this security came under threat. While talking to me and squeezing my hand she seemed to gain strength and determination. She stood up as though to leave the room and added, the words coming from the very depths and the word 'have' uttered with frightening intensity and emphasis: 'But we HAVE to live. We HAVE to keep on living. We HAVE to live.'

She went into the kitchen. I felt devastated.

Andrei's mother had shamed me.

In comparison to her life my own had been one of privilege, with scarcely any hardship to speak of, but so often falling into maudlin self pity about my failures and shortcomings. Here lived a woman who had every reason to give up and succumb to despair. Yet it was from her that I heard the words of defiance and hope. 'We HAVE to live.'



In the evening I took Andrei and Misha to the opera. Andrei eagerly talked about the shared enthusiasm for Shishkin. 'A nice painter,' said Misha, disappointed that I had not preferred the Ukrainian artists at his own gallery. I sensed that Shishkin had a poor reputation among the cultured elite in Kiev.

The opera house astonished with its elegance. Built on a large scale with chandeliers, corridors for fashion displays, grand staircases and large mirrors, the underlying simplicity of design nevertheless gave the splendour warmth and intimacy. I noticed Andrei and Misha drawing themselves up with pride here and also observed a number of male couples cruising the corridors. One couple hailed Andrei. It turned out to be a young priest and his boyfriend. The priest looked sad and tormented, not wanting to talk much.

I had chosen to see Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, wanting to hear an authentically Slav interpretation. Misha murmured he would have preferred Mozart, *Don Giovanni* perhaps, a greater work. Cultural snobbery evidently still thrived in the East.

The lights dimmed and Misha hurriedly began to explain the opera to Andrei. Suddenly I remembered the conversation with Andrei's mother. It had caught me unawares and touched a raw nerve. Now in the darkening auditorium her words came back to me and I found myself crying uncontrollably. Andrei noticed, looking sideways in alarm. It could not be the music. What had gone wrong now?

The music went straight to the heart, seized it and did not let go until the end of the opera. I appreciated the characteristic tight vibrato of the string playing and the rich but piercing sounds of the woodwind, the traditional sound of a Slav orchestra.

The curtain rose to depict a traditional set with painted backcloths, historic panoramas and a variety of costumes. Cobwebs, rips and patches could be seen clearly on the back-cloths. This production had evidently passed muster for many years, decades perhaps. The last thing Kiev could afford now was a new opera design. I expected this. But the music and the committed performances soon took attention away from the tawdriness. When the chorus entered, each member in a different coloured costume, the quality shone through. They sang as though their lives depended on it, which might well have been the case. I remembered Andrei's mother and thought to

myself, 'These singers are probably earning even less than the average monthly wage. There is no privilege in being an artist or musician anymore here. They probably have not enjoyed a decent meal for years. Yet they sing for all they are worth. What for?' In front of us sat an old couple. The tickets had probably cost them two week's wages and they had the look of music devotees determined to enjoy every moment of this special evening, probably a birthday treat or wedding anniversary. The woman shook her head with delight, swaying and following every familiar phrase and melody, occasionally turning to her husband to express approval.

Throughout the performance Misha continued to explain the opera loudly to Andrei. The tenor sounded anaemic and Misha criticised him in the interval but perhaps the poor undernourished fellow needed a square meal. The soprano had exceptional quality with such style to her phrasing and variety of tone that the audience applauded loudly. 'A very famous singer,' whispered Misha. The chorus were best. Whenever they entered the sun came from behind a gloomy cloud. They moved, sang and danced with a confidence and enthusiasm that seemed to indicate these people only came to life on the stage. Beyond lay a grey existence. For these few moments art gave them a reason and purpose for continuing. 'We HAVE to live!' They seemed to be singing.

In the interval the priest expressed displeasure. 'It's awful,' he said, looking with embarrassment at me, who must surely be accustomed to better productions in the West. 'There are opera queens here in the East as well as back home,' I thought to myself and went to explore the magnificent building, nodding at cruising couples - single men being few and far between and too shy to look at me, peering in every corner and enjoying the variety of vistas offered by the clever design of curved staircases and galleries.

'I noticed you crying,' Andrei commented, when I returned. 'It was something your mother said to me,' I replied to the unspoken question in Andrei's eyes. Though Andrei could only be delighted at the close relations between the two most important people in his life he did not understand. No matter, so long as I was not angry with him or disappointed.

There is an unforgettably dramatic moment in Eugene Onegin when the tenor, Lensky, apologises to the assembled guests for the quarrel which leads to a duel between himself and Onegin. Lensky sings of the welcome he always received at the home of the hosts, the parents of the woman he loves. It is a climactic moment of the

opera. The tenor soars with a ravishing Tchaikovsky melody and the whole company join in. The tenor on this occasion was too weak to give sufficient passion to the music but nevertheless it affected me so much I could hardly see the stage.

Andrei kept looking at me, almost as much as he watched the opera. My approval meant everything and Andrei could not bear the thought that I might be critical of the poor country he visited. Seeing the emotion he only felt relief. So when it ended and they came out into the cold night, Andrei could not resist giving his own performance, opening his large mouth and singing tunes from the opera in a high piercing falsetto. Misha and I had to force him into silence.

In the train Andrei and Misha entered into a serious conversation. I might not have existed for them. Andrei was in fact telling Misha about his anxieties; terrified of the departure next day and the plans we had discussed for the future when Andrei could come to England. What would happen next? Distraught, Andrei took no notice of me. Then suddenly he caught sight of me looking at another man in the train. He immediately rushed over and sat next to me, putting his arm round me as much as to say, 'He's mine. No one's going to have him but me!'

Meanwhile the music kept running through my head, in particular the tenor melody: 'Vashem domye', 'In your home...' and the words of Andrei's mother came back to me: 'We HAVE to live.'

### **A KNIFE AT THE THROAT**

My bags turned out to be heavier on departing than when he arrived. Misha had persuaded me to buy a number of heavy art books.

We walked to the station and proceeded to the same dark platform where I had arrived two weeks earlier. A group of shadowy people were haggling with the guards at the entrance to my carriage. They allowed me through. There were no lights in the compartment so we sat together in the pitch black. I found Andrei's knees with mine and we clasped each other tightly while Misha made pleasant conversation. A pall of unbearably chill sadness hung heavy. I waited impatiently for the train to leave. A young man, one of the shadowy group who had been haggling outside with the guards entered. He would be my companion for the next two days. He smiled brightly at me. Andrei observed this with a pang, so just before leaving the train, Andrei flung his arms round me and kissed me more passionately than ever, taking me aback. I

continued to feel the imprint of Andrei's lips long after the train moved slowly into the night beyond Kiev and watched how Andrei and Misha, already obscured by the darkness on the platform, vanished yet further into black nothingness.



The young travelling companion introduced himself as a student from a distant province of the Ukraine. He optimistically planned to find a job in Germany - on the off chance - with the help of a letter of introduction from his college professor. I could not imagine what help this letter might be to the student who did not speak German. He had left mother and girlfriend back in the countryside, not knowing when they might meet again. He had given all his savings to the guards to secure a seat on the train. He had just enough German currency in his pocket for a bus fare in Hanover where he intended to contact a colleague of his professor.

I drafted some letters for him in German which might be of help, but knew these were a shot in the dark, something to occupy the long hours of the journey ahead and to ease the student's apprehension.

We shared provisions. The student had been well stocked by his mother: little money in his pockets, but a bag full of salami, fruit and bread. He insisted on sharing with me and taught me the skills of acquiring both tea and hot water from the guards.

I had taken a whole day in Kiev to provide myself with a proper visa for Byelorussia to avoid unpleasantness on the return journey. The train stood for several hours at Brest, a place that looks like the end of the world. While it waited, groups of poor people gathered outside the train windows, opening their coats to reveal cooked dishes: roast chicken, hot potatoes and vodka. They haggled persistently until they had sold everything.

Outside Warsaw is a quiet station, Wladschia, where the train suddenly and unexpectedly halted. The student wanted to disembark to purchase something when he hurried back into the compartment, locked the door and sat frozen in terror. I peered out onto the empty platform. Suddenly it filled with men who hurried up and down. They looked into several compartments from the outside. One of them pointed at me. I turned to the student, who was still too frightened to speak. Then we heard loud voices in the corridor. Only then did the student explain that these were bandits and they were coming for my money. I now heard shouts in Russian I could

understand only too perfectly: 'Where's the Englishman?' How had they found out about him? The guards must have let them know.

A man on the platform pointed to me and directed his colleagues on the train to the right compartment. During the loud knocking on the locked door we kept quite still. Eventually a key turned on the outside of the lock. The guard must have given it to them. The door opened and four burly men crowded angrily into the compartment. First they locked the door behind them and drew the blind over the window. They attacked the student: 'So why did you lock us out, eh?!' They thumped him round the head then sat down as though to start serious business and were prepared to take their time over it. The bandits began to intimidate us. The student did not speak. I became sick with fear. I knew why they had come and also knew that I had nothing to give them. My last remaining dollars were with Andrei in Kiev. Eventually they forced the student to speak, while I pretended not to understand. The student told them he knew I had no money, because I had informed him of that at the beginning of the journey. The men did not believe this. I wondered where the police were; probably in the pay of the bandits.

The men turned on me. 'All Englishmen carry money with them. We don't believe you.' They bent over me. The man who had pointed him out on the platform produced a medium-sized hunting knife from his jacket and held it against my throat. 'You have a choice,' one of the others said quietly. 'We either cut your throat or we put a bag over your head and strangle you. The choice is yours...' I understood perfectly, but pretended not to. In fact fright prevented me from speaking anyway.

They turned on the student again. 'You're holding back!' and beat him some more around the head. The cat and mouse game continued with the outlook bleak for me. I sensed the closeness of death, but felt sure they would not kill me. They might injure me though - which could be worse. I kept thinking: 'Whatever you do, please do it quickly and skilfully. I don't want to suffer.' Death did not worry me, only its manner - the clumsiness and violence. The one with the knife, being only a henchman, had a black leather jacket and jeans, but the others, evidently his bosses, were well-dressed and groomed wearing expensive suits and smart shoes. Clearly they were successful bandits. I suddenly took a dislike to their smooth chubby faces and well-fed bodies bursting out of the designer clothes.

The threats and aggressive movements continued for several minutes which seemed like an eternity. I kept leaning forward, choked into silence, unable to move and now

beginning to feel sick. The bandits moved impatiently in the tight space of the compartment and accidentally dislodged a scrap of paper behind the window table. The student pointed excitedly. By a fluke, the border guards between the Ukraine and Byelorussia had forgotten to take away my currency declaration. At a glance the bandits could see they were wasting their time and left the compartment swiftly to concentrate on more lucrative parts of the train.

We sat motionless for the next hour, waiting for the train to move to Warsaw Central. That would be the sign that the bandits had left the train. Shivering with after-shock I still could not help be amused, and feel a bit ashamed, by events taking place in the next compartment. The bandits were threatening an older woman and her husband. 'You can kill me if you like!' shouted the woman, Amazon-like, 'But I'm not going to give you a penny. I haven't got it anyway!' At which the bandits obediently left them in peace.

The chief hysteria happened in the coaches from Moscow that had joined the train at Brest. The passengers there handed over thirty thousand Deutsch Marks. So the hold-up turned out profitable for the bandits.

When the train at last got under way the student embraced and comforted me. I would never forget this gesture from a young man who had gone out of his way to protect me, at even more peril to himself. He had after all taken the brunt of the violence. 'It is important not to travel alone,' he told me. 'Bandits do not harm you if there's company. But they would certainly have hurt you. On your own you would have been an easy target. But they don't like witnesses.'

As the train crossed into Germany our roles changed and I became the protector, noticing the student's apprehension. From being in charge and ably handling bandits, the student became vulnerable, an unwanted and unwelcome alien from a poor third-world country. The compartment turned cheerless and cold. I put thoughts of Andrei aside and forgot about death. I put aside vivid memories of the knife at my neck and all thoughts about the personal significance of this journey which had decided nothing simple for my life. The words of Andrei's mother thundered in my ears as I put my arm round the student, stiff and tense with fear at the approach of Hanover. I then watched him stand momentarily on the chilly platform, smiling half-heartedly but hopefully, before descending the stairs to find work and a roof for the night.

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I returned home safely and continued my life. I never returned to Kiev. The student stayed in Germany for only a few days but could not find work and went home to the Ukraine, writing to me with warm greetings from his mother, hopeful that I might find him work, but nothing materialised. Andrei visited me in England. He must have known that our relationship would not last because on that visit he told me: 'I am making the most of this. It may not happen again.' Our friendship lasted five years, and then our correspondence ceased. He is the main model in my final sequence of paintings, The Seasons.

THE END