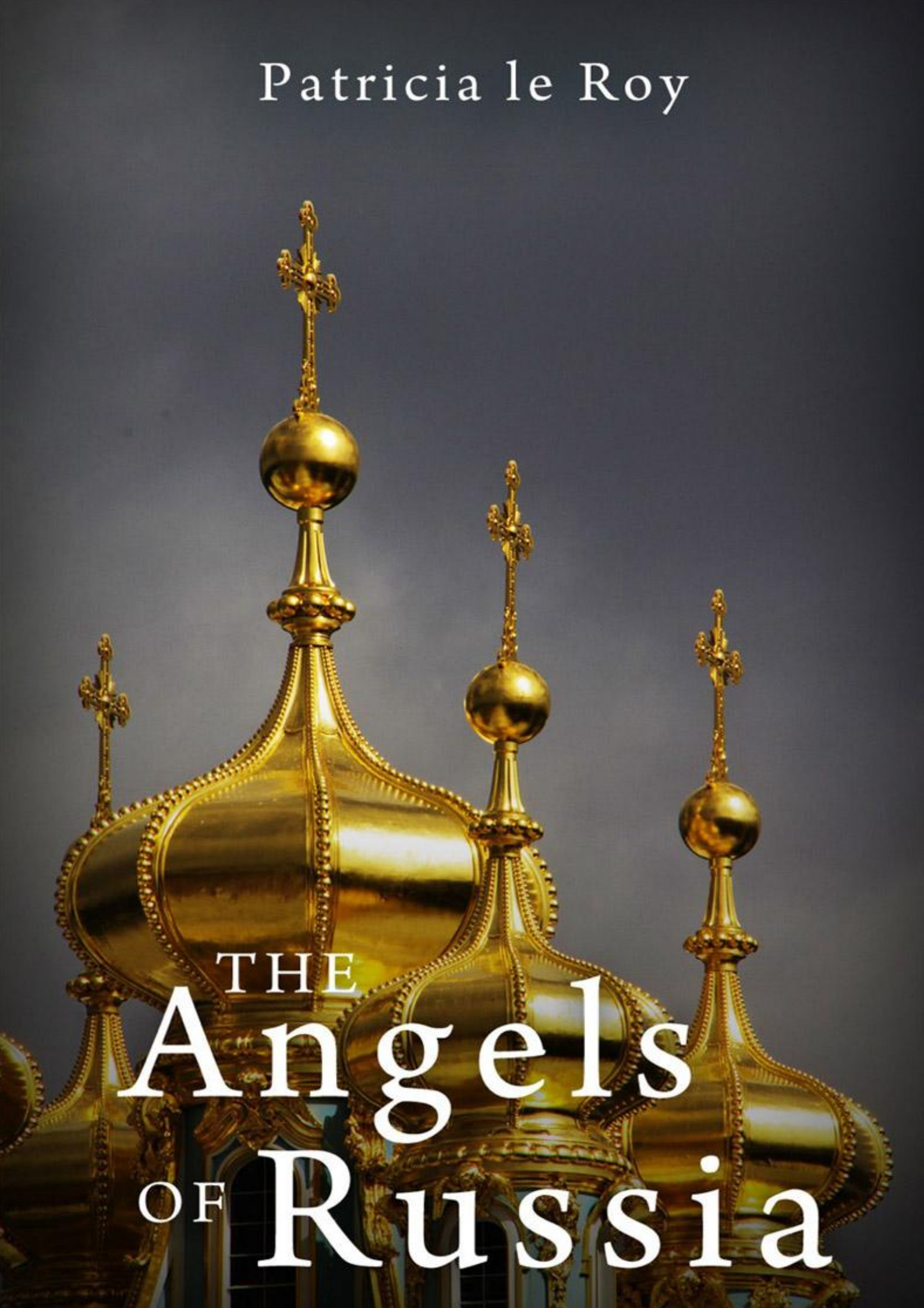
Patricia le Roy



THE Angels OF Russia

THE ANGELS OF RUSSIA

Patricia le Roy

- 1 -

WHITE NIGHTS

I love you Peter's creation, I love your stern
Harmonious look, the Neva's majestic flow..
..the transparent twilight and
The moonless glitter of your pensive nights.
- A.S. Pushkin, *The Bronze Horseman*

My cousin Stéphanie arrived in Leningrad in February 1986. It was her first trip to the Soviet Union. Russia had possessed her since she was a child, not the grey utilitarian empire of Lenin and Stalin, but a romantic fairytale Russia of izbas and palaces, haunted aristocrats and mad gamblers, golden domes and white nights. For nearly all her life, Russia had been the meeting point of her mind and her emotions, as she waited steadfastly to make the journey in the flesh. But during that brief six-month stay in the USSR, the poetic soul of Russia eluded her: what she encountered instead was Lenin's ghost.

In February 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev had been in power for just under twelve months. Gorbachev was the first General Secretary for years who could walk unsupported and talk in coherent sentences: the knight on the white charger come to save the system. Fortress USSR, though still outwardly imposing, was mined on the inside by mould and dry rot, over-centralization and inertia. Gorbachev's first twelve months in office had been spent cleaning house: clearing the old, dead-wood Brezhnevite officials out of the Party lumber room, urging the population at large to drink less, work more, and to speak out openly about any societal shortcomings that had caught their attention.

Stéphanie had not paid attention to any of this. She was not in the habit of taking notice of trivial things like the deficiencies of the Soviet economy, nor was she going to get excited over a bout of hiring and firing in the Central Committee. Stéphanie had come to Leningrad to research her master's thesis on Pushkin, and she spent most of her time in the nineteenth century. Gorbachev's attempts to mobilize the masses passed her by completely. Glasnost and perestroika left her unmoved. Even the explosion of Reactor Number Four at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant failed to make much impact on her -- a triumph, of course, for Soviet media coverage of the event, which had been designed with precisely that in mind. It was three days before the television news got around to mentioning that a reactor had been "damaged" and that measures were being taken to "eliminate" the consequences of the accident. Why alarm people by telling

them that fifty tons of radioactive fallout have been released into the atmosphere and that the fire is still burning?

The wind blows north from Chernobyl towards Sweden, passing not far from Leningrad on its way, but it was several months before Stéphanie discovered that the reactor had burned for five days and that thousands of people had been irradiated. Foreign newspapers were hard to come by in 1986 in Leningrad, and she had no radio set on which to tune in non-Soviet radio stations. In any case, she lived in a pre-nuclear age. Nothing that happened after World War I held any importance for her. This was a recurring source of aggravation at family dinners, and my father, Stéphanie's uncle, sometimes got quite annoyed about it. But Stéphanie was nothing if not obstinate. The books she read were by nineteenth-century authors, the concerts she attended were by nineteenth-century composers -- in both cases, preferably Russian. When Sergei saw her for the first time, standing alone in front of the Philharmonia Theatre in Leningrad, she was waiting to hear the *Symphonie Pathétique*.

It was a Sunday evening in May. On Arts Square, next to the Philharmonia, the tulips were in bloom. Sergei could tell she was a foreigner just by looking at her. The clothes, of course, were an immediate giveaway. The pullover was cashmere, not acrylic, and the trousers were of a cut and shape never beheld in local emporia. But more than that, there was something about the way she held herself, and her skin too had some kind of inner glow that Soviet faces didn't have.

He went on watching her. The pavement around her was emptying, the concert was about to start. She was looking around, biting her lip, craning her neck for a glimpse of the friends who had failed to show up, casting occasional irritated glances at her watch. The latter looked expensive, even from a distance. Probably Swiss, thought Sergei, glancing at his own battered Soviet model. Five minutes to eight. The concert was about to start. Time to make his move. He left his observation post by the statue of Pushkin in the middle of the square, and sauntered towards her. She was searching for something in a capacious leather bag. By now the pavement was deserted. She caught sight of him and, to his astonishment, marched decisively towards him.

"Excuse me, do you have a dvushka?"

In 1986, dvushki were like gold dust in Leningrad. They were the two-kopek coins that you needed to operate public phone boxes, and people hoarded them jealously. In spite of himself, Sergei hesitated before digging in his pocket and reluctantly handing one over.

"Here you are." He managed a smile, and she smiled back. Her long dark hair fell like a curtain round her face, her features were perfect, her cheeks were smooth. There was something luminous about her. None of this had been evident on the photo they had shown him. Sergei watched her walk over to the phone box with a distinct feeling of dismay.

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There was no answer at Misha and Irina's apartment. Stéphanie let the phone ring fourteen times, and then hung up. Irina's mother, who lived with them, hardly ever went out. If she wasn't there to answer the phone, something was almost certainly wrong. Maybe she had been having heart problems again. Stéphanie checked the time: it was ten past eight. By now the concert would have started. There was nothing for it but to go home. She stepped out of the phone booth, and saw that the young man who had lent her the coin was standing a few yards

away, watching her. Presumably he wanted his dvushka back. She walked across and held it out to him.

"No luck?" he said.

"There's no reply."

He slid the coin back into his pocket and gave her an appraising stare. Stéphanie had had plenty of those in her time, but there was a slight wariness about this one that set it apart from the usual run-of-the-mill inspection of the merchandise. "Vous êtes française?"

"Oui," said Stéphanie shortly, and because something about him and his look had thrown her off balance, she added more rudely than was justified, "Ça se voit?"

She knew it was a stupid question as soon as the words were out of her mouth, but her aggressivity seemed to amuse rather than offend him.

"Yes, I'm afraid it does." He had reverted to Russian, however. "It's the clothes, you see." He looked them over too. "That sweater is a very pretty colour. I don't think I've seen anything like it before." He took a step backwards and continued his scrutiny from a different angle. "On first sight, one might take you for the daughter of some very high official. From the City Party Committee, something like that. Someone responsible for steering us towards our Radiant Future, someone with access." *Blat*. He emphasized the word deliberately. After three months in Leningrad she knew exactly what he meant. "But when one hears the accent, there's no mistaking it. No one on the City Party Committee has an accent like that. I'm very fond of French accents." He gave her an unexpectedly charming smile which transfigured his rather ordinary face. "And I like the French."

Stéphanie looked at him more closely. Brown hair, brown eyes, open-necked shirt, tweed jacket. No visible distinguishing marks. His conversation suggested either a black-marketeer or a would-be seducer (and possibly a bit of both), but his face, on careful examination, had a lot of interesting planes and angles which, along with his slight air of watchfulness, made her think more of a persecuted poet. Maybe not as unexceptional as he seemed on first sight. She wondered if he was about to make an offer for her pullover. It wouldn't be the first time.

"So you like the French?" she said, playing along. "And have you met many of us?"

"Oh yes, I have always had a lot to do with France. You know, it's nearly twenty past eight. I think your friends must have forgotten you."

"I expect they had a problem," said Stéphanie non-committally.

"What a terrible impression you will have of the Russians. We are late, unpunctual, we forget the time, we forget to come. Are you going to go and listen to Tchaikovsky without them?"

"I can't, I don't have the tickets."

"In that case, I will take you for a walk and show you Peter's City. Tchaikovsky you can hear anywhere, but Leningrad is the most beautiful city in the world." He took her arm and led her in the direction of Sadovaya Street. Stéphanie, never able to resist a persecuted poet, went along unprotestingly. "Especially at this time of year. Soon the white nights will begin and you won't be able to tell whether it's day or night. It's a very strange sensation. Have you been here at this time of year before?"

"This is my first trip to the Soviet Union."

"I see. And what are you doing here?"

"I'm a student. I'm here to research a thesis on Pushkin."

"Pushkin, naturally! What better place to do it than here! What is your thesis going to be about?"

"Pushkin and the Decembrists."

"The Decembrists?"

"What's so odd about that?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. On the contrary, a very interesting topic."

They walked past the Summer Garden, with its classical layout and eighteenth-century statues. Stéphanie eyed the entrance to the garden, alert for ghosts. On a warm spring evening like this, Aleksandr Pushkin would have walked along those formal allées with his friends, his mistresses, maybe even the Decembrists themselves.

"And what are your conclusions on the subject?"

In Russia, questions like that were to be taken seriously. Even coming from black-marketeers, although this was the first fartsovshchik Stéphanie had encountered who was interested in discussing literature. "I think Pushkin's association with the Decembrists earned him the mistrust of Nicholas I, and it was this that led to all his later misfortunes."

To her surprise, the young man shook his head. "You're quite wrong. Pushkin's misfortunes were caused by his own character. The same weaknesses that led him to associate with the Decembrists in the first place caused all his problems with the Tsar later on."

His tone was so categorical that Stéphanie was too taken aback to contradict him. "Oh, do you think so?"

"Yes I do. Our own human weaknesses and failings are at the root of all our problems." His face had taken on a bruised and shadowy air: Stéphanie watched him, intrigued. "People go through life digging holes that are too deep for them ever to climb out of, and then they jump into them and there they stay."

Were they still talking about Pushkin? Stéphanie wondered, but he glanced at her and said, in a lighter tone altogether, "Have you never noticed that? Well, maybe you are too young."

"I'm twenty-four."

"Are you really?"

"So how old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Well then."

"Only four years' difference," he agreed, forbearing to point out that lifetimes are relative. "My name, by the way, is Sergei Inozemtsev. What's yours?"

"Stéphanie Villers-Massenet."

"My goodness, what a mouthful. That will be very difficult for me to pronounce. But Stéphanie is a very pretty name."

Stéphanie wasn't sure if he was making fun of her or not. "And what do you do, Sergei?" she demanded. "Apart from being a francophile, that is?"

"Francophilia is my profession, Stéphanie."

"What does that mean?"

"What it says. Translations, French lessons. Some of the time, anyway."

Stéphanie decided not to inquire what he did the rest of the time. They had reached the Neva and were walking across the Kirov Bridge in the direction of the Petrograd Side. The Kirov Bridge was to Stéphanie's mind an aberration: a twentieth-century monstrosity bearing the best

and noisiest of Soviet truck production across the Neva into the heart of the serene tsarist city. But at this time on a Sunday evening, the traffic was mercifully thin.

"Look," said Sergei, flinging his arms wide to indicate the Peter and Paul Fortress, "didn't I tell you Peter's City was beautiful? That's where they put the dissidents before the Bolsheviks moved to Moscow and Dzerzhinsky took over the All-Russian Insurance Company."

He leant on the parapet and gazed out across the water, and Stéphanie followed suit. In the opalescent haze, the fortress seemed far too insubstantial to house anything as solid and potentially troublesome as a political prisoner, but the leaders of the Decembrists had been among the "dissidents" imprisoned in the fortress, after their abortive stand against the Tsar in December 1825. She had already made several visits to the fortress, lingering in the cells where they had been held, imagining their confusion and despair....

Sergei's voice broke into her thoughts. "Naturally, this is the basic requirement of every Russian regime. Priority number one: a place to put the political prisoners. Why do you want to come and spend time in a country like this?" he demanded, turning towards her. "How can you breathe here after what you've been used to?"

With an effort, Stéphanie jerked her thoughts back to the twentieth century, and eyed him carefully, as another possible identity crept into her mind. "I'm only here for a limited period of time," she said neutrally.

"Yes, that's right. You come here just to look us over and then go home again. A sociological tourist, come to look at the animals in the totalitarian zoo."

Stéphanie stepped back from the parapet. This was turning into a game she didn't want to play any more. "Wrong. I'm not a sociological tourist, I'm a cultural tourist. I'm not interested in your bloody social system, I'm interested in Russian literature." She grasped her shoulder bag, preparing to walk away. "Communism, as you just pointed out, is your problem, not mine."

Without warning his hand shot out and grabbed her shoulder. Stéphanie took a step back. His grip tightened. Their eyes met. Stéphanie opened her mouth to protest and then closed it again. She was unable to tear her eyes away from his. The aura of secrecy that surrounded him suddenly intensified into something altogether more perilous and demanding, and she had the sensation that she was being dragged across the frontier of some remote and violent land. *In my soul, awakening trembled.* Without her consent, something irrevocable was happening. She had read about this, it had happened to Pushkin, but it had never happened to her before. For a few seconds, neither of them moved. Then a lorry rumbled past and the spell was broken. Sergei released her, and she rubbed her shoulder where his fingers had been biting into the flesh.

"Come on," he said curtly. "I'll take you home."

Too shaken to answer, Stéphanie fell into step beside him. This time he didn't take her arm. Whatever had happened, it wasn't part of the game. He was as confused as she was: of that she was certain.

They were nearly over the other side of the bridge when he said, with the kind of remote courtesy practised at the Parisian cocktail parties she had been to with Philippe, "And where did you learn such good Russian, Stéphanie? Surely this isn't really your first trip to the Soviet Union?"

It took Stéphanie a minute or two to reply. "I have a Russian ... friend in Paris," she said eventually. "Sometimes we talk Russian together."

"A friend? I see. A White Russian?"

"No," said Stéphanie. She wasn't going to discuss Marina's antecedents with a complete stranger, especially one whose own origins were so unclear. Come to that, Marina had warned her against discussing them with anyone at all "over there."

Sergei glanced at her, no doubt surprised by the brusqueness of her reply, and then shrugged. "We're nearly at your hostel," he announced, and she thought she could detect a hint of relief in his voice.

"How do you know that's where I live?"

"I don't know, I guessed."

"No doubt that's where most of the foreign students you pick up live," said Stéphanie, and listened, appalled, to the shrewish note in her voice. Where on earth had that come from? She had known this man for just under one hour and here she was sounding exactly like a rejected lover. She started apologising, stumbling over the words in her confusion, but he cut her short with the same distant graciousness as before.

"Please don't worry, it's not important. How much longer will you be in Leningrad?"

"Till September."

"Then maybe we will meet again." They were outside the hostel by this time: he stopped a few yards from the door and raised her hand to his lips. "Good night, Stéphanie. Sleep well."

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In the days that followed, the encounter with the black marketeer lingered in Stéphanie's mind. She was unable to rid herself of the feeling that something momentous had happened, though she would have been hard put to say what. Sitting dutifully in the National Library, poring over early nineteenth-century documents, her thoughts wandered constantly to the interlude on the Kirov bridge. *In my soul, awakening trembled.* But no new insights into its significance were forthcoming; on the contrary, the episode grew steadily more unreal, and she ended up wondering if she hadn't imagined the whole thing.

Misha called to say that Irina's mother had had a slight heart attack the day they were supposed to go to the Tchaikovsky concert. She was better now, but still weak, and it would be difficult for them to arrange another evening out for a week or two. He would call back when she could be safely left and they would fix up another concert. Was Stéphanie very annoyed with them? Oh, she had guessed what had happened. Well, fine, fine. He hung up, sounding relieved.

"There are three possibilities," said Juliet, a British student living down the corridor, to whom Stéphanie confided her inconclusive tale. "Sex, trade or human rights. Take your choice."

This was Stéphanie's own diagnosis, but it was comforting to have it confirmed by someone else. "It could have been any of them," she agreed. "But he never got around to making his proposition. That's what I don't understand. Why did he get cold feet all of a sudden?"

"Search me," said Juliet, who was in any case unlikely to come up with the correct answer, since Stéphanie had voluntarily omitted certain aspects of the encounter from her narrative. There was no way she could explain the episode on the bridge without sounding like a Soviet version of Harlequin Romance. "Maybe he suddenly spotted the KGB on the horizon."

"Maybe."

"Or," said Juliet ominously, "there's a fourth possibility."

"That he might be KGB himself? I know, I thought of that."

"He could be a dissident. But they don't usually criticize the regime quite so energetically until one knows them a little better. I think you have to consider the possibility that he might have been some kind of provocateur. And for some reason he decided that you weren't what he was looking for. It sounds to me as though you're well out of it."

She was right of course. The KGB was one complication Stéphanie did not need. Dealing with Soviet life was bad enough as it was. Stéphanie's emotional and intellectual horizons had been bounded for so many years by nineteenth-century Russia that, when she finally obtained a grant to spend six months in Leningrad, she had overlooked the fact that the city was situated neither in Russia nor in the nineteenth century these days, and that it was ruled, not by a Tsar, but by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In theory, she knew what to expect. Repression, denunciation, harrassed dissidents, persecuted Christians, refuseniks, camps, slogans, alcoholism, newspapers with no news in them, food stores with no food in them, communal apartments, housing shortages... What she had failed to foresee was that she would have to deal with any of this personally. Worse, that the pervasive nature of these phenomena would prevent her from getting to grips with the true Russian essence that, to her mind, still existed beneath the unprepossessing Soviet exterior.

Encouraged by the warmer weather, Stéphanie went for long solitary walks round Leningrad, attempting to recapture the spirit of its Imperial past. Heart whole and fancy free, in search of St. Petersburg. No, that wasn't quite right: both her heart and her fancy had supposedly been left behind in Paris in the safe keeping of Philippe. But St. Petersburg was proving more and more elusive. Revisiting Pushkin's sombre little house on the Moika canal; lingering in Senate Square, where the rebellious Decembrists made their stand against the Tsar on a bitter winter day in 1825; wandering through the opulent salons of the Winter Palace, where Pushkin, as a Gentleman in Waiting, had been a reluctant participant in court rituals with his beautiful, vapid, unloving wife, Stéphanie felt her powers of imagination slipping away. She had told Sergei -- if that really was his name -- that she was a cultural tourist, and now, ironically, it was turning out to be true. Maybe, she thought despondently, you could only ressuscitate the past from outside the country, away from the greasy restaurants with their unwashed plates, the hostel with its intermittent visitations of bed bugs, the bathroom with its taps that gave you electric shocks, the depressing, all-embracing clutch of Soviet reality.

"Listen to me, Stephanusha, it is time you met some real Russians," said Tanya, one of the three Soviet students with whom she shared a room.

"I know you," said Stéphanie. They were in the kitchen on the third floor of the hostel. Stéphanie was washing her cup and plate, and Tanya was stirring some unidentifiable tinned mess in a saucepan on the stove.

"This is true," conceded Tanya. "Who else do you know besides me?"

Stéphanie cited a few names, prudently restricting herself to other students from the hostel. It was common knowledge that the Soviet students reported on the activities of the foreigners living there. There was no point in making things easier for them.

"No, no," said Tanya, "that is no good. No good at all. Tonight you must come out with me, and I will take you to meet some friends of mine. Then you will see real Russian life."

They took the bus from the hostel at Gorkovskaya to one of the working class areas in the north part of the Petrograd Side. Tanya had back-combed her hair with more than her usual ferocity and painted on a double layer of make up. She kept up a running commentary all the

way: what a pain it was having to go over to the university canteen on Vasilevsky Island to eat, and how awful the food was when you got there; why did no one in the hostel ever clean up the communal kitchen (except for Stéphanie, who did her washing up, she added, putting an apologetic hand on Stéphanie's arm), how hard it was to listen to the Voice of America with four other people living in the same room, how difficult it was to get foreign clothes (eyeing Stéphanie's blue cashmere pullover meaningfully), how hard it was to see foreign films, although she knew someone whose cousin had been invited to a private screening of *Doctor Zhivago*.... Was this Real Russian life, wondered Stéphanie, and was forced to admit that, yes, it probably was.

The apartment was on the fifth floor of a fairly new high rise block. The lift was out of order and they had to walk up the stairs. There was the usual cabbagy smell in the hall and the usual peeling green paint on the walls. Tanya pressed the bell, and then banged loudly on the door when there was no reaction from within. The door had never been painted in its relatively short life, and the wood was warped and dirty.

The door opened a crack and an eye peered out at them. After a scrutiny that lasted several seconds, the door opened wider and a male figure stood aside to let them pass. Tanya advanced confidently into a gloomy hallway, Stéphanie followed more dubiously, and the doorkeeper slammed the door shut. For an instant, they were plunged into pitch darkness, and then the light went on.

"Privyet, Tanya! So this is your foreign student. Privyet, Stéphanie. How nice to see you again."

"You two know each other? Stephanusha, you've been keeping secrets from me," said Tanya, and brushed past them into one of the inner rooms.

Left alone in the hallway, Sergei and Stéphanie looked at each other. "What a coincidence," said Sergei. In the shadowy light, his face seemed leaner than the last time she had seen him, and darker, and more marked by secrets. "Please come in." He led her into a room opening off the hallway to the left. Tanya was not there; she had gone in the other direction. The room was full of people all talking at once. When Stéphanie appeared, they fell silent and stared at her. Intimidated, she avoided looking back at them and examined her surroundings instead. Like most of the Soviet apartments she had seen, it was small and cramped. There were bookshelves from floor to ceiling on three of the walls, and a table strewn with papers took up most of the wall under the window.

Sergei made the introductions. "Stéphanie, a student from France, who is doing research on Pushkin..... Boris, Ivan, Alexei, Nina, Yarik."

Yarik, who seemed to be the householder, offered her tea; Alexei offered her a hard wooden chair; those of them who had stood up to greet her sat down again wherever they could find space to do so. For a moment, no one said anything. Stéphanie felt more and more uncomfortable. What on earth had she stumbled into here? And where had Tanya disappeared to? She looked uncertainly at Sergei, who at least wasn't a complete stranger, but he was sitting perched on the edge of the table gazing inscrutably at the opposite wall.

"You are doing research into Pushkin?" said Yarik at last.

"Yes, that's right. I spend all day sitting in the library reading early nineteenth century documents. So far I've got as far as 1822." She could hear her French accent coming through

strongly, as it always did when she was nervous. With the way they were staring at her, it was surprising she could string together a sentence at all.

"Stéphanie is researching Pushkin and the Decembrists," announced Sergei. His tone seemed to be meaningful in a way that Stéphanie couldn't understand, and his words triggered a response that she failed to grasp. Someone laughed; some else said, "Ha! the Decembrists, very interesting!" A current of reaction swept obscurely through the room.

"So you're interested in military matters?" said Alexei.

"Not really, no," said Stéphanie, puzzled.

"But the Decembrists were all military officers!" he retorted, and everyone burst out laughing, except for Yarik, who frowned.

Tanya bounced back into the room, followed by a man in a black leather jacket who looked like the closest thing to a punk that Stéphanie had seen in Leningrad. "This is Sasha," she told Stéphanie. "We're off now. See you back at the hostel, Stephanusha. Poka!"

The door slammed behind them, leaving Stéphanie fuming inwardly. What on earth did Tanya think she was doing, leaving her with a group of strangers who obviously wanted nothing to do with her? She sipped her lukewarm tea and wondered how best to extricate herself. Nina started to tell Ivan about something she had heard on Western radio. Boris went out of the room. Yarik took a book down from the shelves and began to read it. Alexei started tidying the papers on the table. Merde, thought Stéphanie, this lot wouldn't care what excuse she made. She put the cup down on the floor and stood up.

"Thanks for the tea. I'll be off now." She walked out of the room without waiting for a response. There was an elaborate system of bolts on the front door, and while she was fiddling with it someone came up behind her.

"Here, let me do that." It was Sergei. "I'll go with you to the bus stop."

"You don't have to do that. I know where it is."

"Don't be silly." He ushered her on to the landing, closing the door behind him. They walked down the five flights of stairs in silence.

Once out on the street, he said, "I'm afraid you came at a bad time."

"So I gathered."

"I cannot explain further. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," said Stéphanie, understanding nothing at all. Not black marketeering and not the KGB, but something illicit by the look of it. Samizdat, maybe?

The bus stop was only just round the corner. While they waited for the bus to arrive, he said, "Tanya should not have brought you, not today at any rate. But I am glad she did. I was pleased to see you."

The bus came into sight at the end of the road. "So am I going to see you again?" said Stéphanie daringly.

Sergei appeared to consider the matter. For so long, that she wondered if he hadn't heard her question. The bus was two yards away and she was about to repeat it, when he said, "If you like I will see you on Thursday. At ten past two, at the Moscow station." He didn't ask if she was free. The bus stopped and he turned away without waiting to see her get on it.

"Until Thursday," she called after him, but he kept on walking and gave no sign that he had heard her.

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Thursday was the first of June. Almost overnight the temperature soared, and it was suddenly, unexpectedly hot. Stéphanie decided to walk down Nevsky Prospekt to the Moscow station, but she had misjudged the distance, it was further than she had thought, and she got there at twenty past two feeling tired and hot.

There was no sign of Sergei. She was only ten minutes late; surely he couldn't have left already? She hovered uncertainly outside the main entrance, dodging passers-by with shopping bags. Half the suburbs seemed to have come into the city to shop for food. How on earth were they supposed to find each other in this crowd? Three men walked past, clearly drunk, swaying slightly, totally self-absorbed. An elderly woman, wrapped up despite the heat in a brown belted raincoat, glowered at her mistrustfully. Stéphanie watched the trams swirling across Insurrection Square and became progressively more nervous. He wasn't going to come, she could feel it; perhaps he had never intended to come in the first place. Most likely he had only set up a meeting to get her off his back. Two little girls aged about six and nine came out of the station carrying packages wrapped in newspaper. They wore identical outfits: sky-blue sandals, orange flowered trousers and raspberry cardigans. Stéphanie was on the point of giving up and going back to the library, when Sergei came up behind her and grabbed her arm.

"Quick, this way." He dragged her across the square, nearly getting her run down, and bundled her on to a trolley.

"What's happening? Where are we going?"

"We're going to my place. I have had enough of people for one day. I am tired. We will make tea, and we will talk."

"Oh," said Stéphanie. It was the first time she had been invited home by someone she had met here, as opposed to someone whose address she had been given by friends in Paris, and Sergei was a long way from having established his credentials. But then curiosity got the better of her -- why else had she come to meet him, anyway? "Well, all right." He certainly looked tired. The bruised look that had struck her on his last meeting was more in evidence than ever. His shirt was damp with sweat, and he was clutching a battered briefcase that probably weighed a ton, to judge by the way it was bulging out in all directions. She wondered what was in it -- black market video cassettes? typewritten copies of *The Gulag Archipelago*? -- but she had learned by now that there were things it was better not to know.

They found a seat and sat down. "What have you been doing all day?" asked Sergei. He pushed his hair back off his forehead and turned to look at her with that unexpected, oddly charming smile.

"Nothing much. Taking notes in the library."

She was sorry that she had nothing more exciting to confide to him, but he seemed to regard the information as a significant piece of news and pondered it gravely before replying.

"Are you still in 1822?"

"I got as far as 1823."

"Then you still have a long way to go. But why are you so interested in Pushkin? In my opinion Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are both far more interesting writers."

"But neither of them could have done what they did if it hadn't been for Pushkin. He was the founder of Russian literature. Before Pushkin, there was no Russian literature, and practically no Russian culture either."

"That is a very sweeping statement-"

"I also find him a much more interesting person than either Tolstoy or Dostoevsky."

"Oh I'm sure you do. The gambling, the debts, the scandals, the duels, the mistresses -- I can see that all that must be very appealing. Would you have liked to be one of Pushkin's mistresses, Stephanusha?"

The question brought an abrupt rush of colour to her face; both his casual adoption of Tanya's diminutive for her name, and the question itself, since in her wilder moments of high romanticism that was exactly what she would have liked. *God grant you find another who will love you As tenderly and truthfully as I.* Where was the flesh and blood, twentieth-century lover who could match up to that? She was suddenly aware of Sergei's thigh pressing against hers on the narrow seat, of his hands lying idly on his briefcase, inches from hers, of his eyes on her face, and of her own voice, replying with a coolness that belied her inner turmoil, "Oh, I don't really think so. I can't quite see myself in that kind of role. Nobody thinks like that any more, do they?"

"This is where we get off," said Sergei.

He lived in a run-down building at the far end of the Moika canal.

"Here we are. Just down the street from Pushkin. I assume you visited his house already."

"Three times."

"Is that all? You surprise me."

"You must have a wonderful view of the canal."

"Yes," said Sergei, opening the street door for her. "But a view of the Seine would be better. For many reasons."

They climbed the uneven wooden stairs to the second floor. The building was a couple of hundred years older than Yarik's, but there was an identical stale smell in the hallway. "Do you live here alone?" said Stéphanie, in what she hoped was an off-hand tone, as he unlocked the door.

Sergei looked at her quizzically. "Of course not. Nobody lives alone in the Soviet Union. If they did, there would be no one to spy on them. Please, go right in."

There was no entrance hall in the apartment. Stéphanie found herself standing in what appeared to be the main room. Like the room she had seen in Yarik's apartment, the walls were lined with books. There was a red vinyl couch on one side of the room with a poster of the Eifel Tower on the wall above it. From the graphics, and from the clothes of the people standing in front of the tower, Stéphanie could tell that the poster was at least twenty years old. A cabbage and a typewriter were perched side by side on the table in the middle of the room on top of several precarious layers of papers, books and journals. Definitely not black market, Stéphanie decided. Although she had never actually visited any fartsovshchiki, it seemed unlikely that they would live in a place like this. The linoleum on the floor was stained and worn, and the net curtain across the window hung from a bit of sagging wire: curtain rods must be either unobtainable or unaffordable. The room was empty, but the sound of a typewriter came from the next room.

"I live with my mother," said Sergei, closing the door. "She is working right now."

Although not what she had been expecting, this statement was certainly in the realm of the believable. Everybody she had met in Leningrad lived with their parents, and some of them with their grandparents too. "What does she do?"

"She's a translator, like me."

"Are those French books over there?" asked Stéphanie, recognising the familiar yellow spines of Classiques Garnier. She moved over to examine them: Voltaire, Ronsard, Racine, Flaubert, Pascal. Many of the same titles, in probably the same editions, stood on the shelves in her father's old study at home. Their presence was oddly reassuring: her uneasiness began to dissolve. "So you really are a translator? From French? "

"I was brought up in France." Sergei dropped his briefcase on a pile of clothes and disappeared into a recess on one side of the room which appeared to be the kitchen.

"You were?" Intrigued, Stéphanie followed him. The kitchen contained nothing but a sink, a small stove and an old-fashioned sideboard in a kind of 1950's design that was just beginning to creep back into style in some of the chic-er Parisian household goods stores.

"Not literally, of course. In this apartment. When my father was alive, it was almost like living in France. My parents talked French to each other, and to me. I went to a special school where the classes were taught in French. Often we had French visitors. They brought us books, records sometimes, newspapers."

"What did your father do?"

"He taught at the university. French too, naturally." He had put water into a saucepan to boil, and was measuring tea into a cracked blue china teapot. "Both he and my mother came from families where French was spoken before the Revolution. It's a family tradition that we've managed to keep alive, in spite of everything."

In the next room, the typing had stopped. Stéphanie went over to the window to look out -- they did have a good view of the canal -- and turned round when the door opened. Instinctively she looked across the room at head height, but then her gaze was drawn downwards. Her eyes widened in surprise. The woman in the doorway was sitting in a wheelchair.

"Mama," said Sergei, and the affection in his voice was plain. "I was just going to call you. I brought you a visitor. All the way from Paris. Mama, this is Stéphanie. Stéphanie, may I present my mother, Anna Serafimovna Inozemtseva."

Anna Serafimovna propelled herself forward to shake hands.

"I'm delighted to meet you, Stéphanie. You're really from Paris? Do sit down, don't mind me." She had a mass of white hair drawn back in a patrician little knot at the nape of her neck, and the same lively, dark brown eyes as her son. Despite the heat, she was wearing a black high-necked sweater. "Sergei should have told you about me; I always ask him to warn people in advance."

"I was going to," said Sergei, "but I didn't get the chance."

Anna Serafimovna cleared her throat and switched the conversation into French. She spoke with a fairly strong accent, and sometimes had to search for her words, but she made almost no grammatical mistakes. "I have never been to France," she announced. "Once I nearly had a chance to go, but it fell through at the last minute. But I have translated many French authors into Russian. Jules Verne, Victor Hugo, Balzac, Zola. And now I am working on a translation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau."

"Tea, Mama?"

"Thank you, Seriozha, just put it there." With her own credentials established, Sergei's mother began to ask Stéphanie about herself and the reasons for her presence in Leningrad. Stéphanie dealt as best she could with the barrage of questions. Yes, she really was from Paris: she lived with her mother on rue Raynouard in the sixteenth arrondissement. Yes, that's right, she agreed, a little taken aback, Rousseau had lived in the same street, and so had Balzac. Yes, you could visit Balzac's house: no, actually, she never had. Her father? He was dead, he had died of lung cancer three years ago. He had been a surgeon. No, her mother didn't work, she explained, smiling a little to herself at the idea, but her father had left them comfortably off, and there was no need for her to do so. As for Stéphanie herself, she was studying Russian literature at the University of Paris. She had finished her licence and was working on her maîtrise. It was extremely difficult to get a scholarship to study in the USSR, but she had had an amazing stroke of luck. They had created a new award for French students of nineteenth-century Russian literature only last year, and she was the first person to benefit from it. She had been here since February doing research into Pushkin.

"Ah, Pushkin!" said Anna Serafimovna. "What a wonderful choice. The writer closest to the Russian heart. Pushkin moves us in a way that Gogol, Tolstoy, even Dostoyevsky do not. Pushkin speaks to our souls. Do you feel this too, Stéphanie?"

"Oh yes, absolutely." Stéphanie lost her self-consciousness and leaned forward. "So many Russian writers wrote about specific social or political conditions, like the three you just mentioned for instance, but Pushkin has no particular axe to grind, and-"

"How can you say that when you're writing about Pushkin and the Decembrists?" interrupted Sergei, speaking, like his mother, in surprisingly fluent French. "The tradition of liberal dissent to the regime originated with the Decembrists. One might even call Pushkin a direct forerunner of Sakharov."

"Nonsense," said Anna Serafimovna, "Pushkin was a poet, not a politician."

"I'm not sure how far he actively shared the ideas of the Decembrists," said Stéphanie. "He believed in the ideal of liberty, certainly, but I don't know if it went much further than that. He was interested in people, not ideas. I'm inclined to think his liberal opinions were more his friends' opinions than his own."

"Of course they were," said Anna Serafimovna. "And he certainly wasn't a dissident. He was a Gentleman in Waiting, for heaven's sake, how could he be?"

Sergei made a disclaiming gesture. "All right, I can see I'm outnumbered."

"How nice to have an ally at last," said Anna Serafimovna, smiling. "How long will you be in Leningrad, Stéphanie?"

"Until September. And then I go back to Paris and start to write my dissertation. It has to be submitted in June next year."

"And after that? Will you get a job, or will you continue your studies?"

Stéphanie hesitated. "I'm not sure. I, that is, I would like to do a doctorate, but my, that is, I ... " She stopped and took a deep breath. "The thing is, I'm going to get married, and my fiancé isn't too keen on the idea."

Anna Serafimovna smiled at her benignly. "You're engaged to be married? How delightful."

"You don't wear a ring?" said Sergei, eyeing her ringless fingers. "I thought it was the custom in the West to wear an engagement ring."

"I left it at home in Paris. I was afraid of getting it stolen." She shot a sidelong glance at him, but his eyes were fixed on his tea and she couldn't see his expression.

"What does your fiancé do?" inquired Anna Serafimovna. "Is he a student of Russian too?"

"Oh no, nothing like that. He's in public relations."

Mother and son exchanged glances. "Public relations," said Sergei, "what is that?"

Relations publiques : of course there was no equivalent Russian term. No one in Russia had ever felt the need for such a thing. "Well," said Stéphanie, "let me see. It's to do with communication basically." They went on looking blank: communication was another thing the Soviets didn't go in for. "It's a question of projecting an image of yourself, of a person or a company, that is, to the public. In the West," she added, with a flash of inspiration, "people say that Gorbachev has a talent for public relations. He knows how to project a favorable image of himself, to make people think he's more liberal and open than previous leaders."

"Yes," said Sergei. "Unfortunately he had a little setback recently. Chernobyl, remember? Maybe he should ask your fiancé for advice on what to do next."

A slight frown had appeared on Anna Serafimovna's face, but she was still looking at Stéphanie inquiringly, so after a moment's hesitation, she went on, "My fiancé works for a small couture house in Paris called Manuel Berger. His department is responsible for making sure that the house is in the public eye, that it's getting talked about in the media, and that it's getting good publicity rather than bad, of course."

At the word "couture" Sergei's air of disapproval deepened, but his mother was clearly fascinated. "Manuel Berger, yes of course. How exciting! But doesn't your fiancé mind your being away so long?"

"Well, he wasn't very pleased," Stéphanie admitted. "But I'd wanted to go to Russia for so long that I couldn't let the chance go by. It was the first time I've managed to get a visa, you see. Philippe isn't interested in Russia, he doesn't want to come here. And once we're married, I don't suppose he'll let me come back without him."

She looked up and met Sergei's cynical dark-brown gaze.

"I still don't understand why you were so anxious to come here in the first place."

"Because I've been fascinated by Russia for as long as I can remember. When I was about four or five, Marina, my, er, my Russian friend, used to tell me Russian fairy tales. I don't know why, but I really loved those stories. I made her tell them over and over again. Tsarevich Ivan and the Firebird. The Sea King and Vasilisa the Wise. Ilya Muromets and the Dragon. Marina told me about Russian customs and superstitions, she cooked me Russian food, she taught me to read the alphabet, she told me about Russian history, she started me reading Pushkin and Lermontov. As soon as I could, I started to study Russian at school... And here I am."

Anna Serafimovna was looking at her with sympathy, but Sergei said maliciously, "If only you had stopped cultivating your little Russian soul for long enough to notice what was going on in the world around you, you would have realized that with a less repressive political system you would have been able to travel to the land of your heart's desire a long time ago."

"Well yes," said Stéphanie, "but at least things are getting better since Gorbachev came to power. Everything seems to be opening up at last. Take me, for instance, and this new scholarship they set up to study in Leningrad."

Sergei smiled sceptically.

"And it works two ways. They're trying to get intellectuals and artists who left during the Brezhnev years to come back. People like Baryshnikov, Neizvestny, Tarkovsky."

"That's just propaganda. An attempt to legitimize the regime. Stalin did exactly the same thing in the 1920s. You'll notice that none of them have been imprudent enough to accept the invitation."

"Sergei, please!"

"I'm sorry, Mama. Do you want some more tea? Stéphanie?"

"I must get back to work," said Anna Serafimovna. She pushed her wheelchair back from the table. "Goodbye, Stéphanie, I enjoyed meeting you. I hope you will come and see me again."

"Don't work too long, Mama. Did you rest after lunch?"

"Of course I did. I always rest after lunch. As a matter of fact, I fell asleep and that's why I have to get back to work now. Don't fuss, Seriozha! I'm old enough to take care of myself."

The door closed behind her and the typewriter started up again.

"So you're planning to get married, Stephanusha. You didn't tell me that. Have you been engaged for long?"

"Since Christmas. It all happened very fast. When I found out I was coming here, he...well, er ... we decided it would be a good idea."

"I see." Sergei transferred his attention to his cup, turning it round in his hand as attentively as if it were part of Catherine the Great's dinner service from the Hermitage.

"What happened to your mother?" said Stéphanie, hoping to divert the conversation into other channels. "How long has she been in a wheelchair?"

"Twelve years. She was knocked down in the street by a car." Sergei put down his cup and got to his feet. "I am sorry, I must go out now. I have an urgent call to make." He stacked the tea cups in a neat pile and took them out to the kitchen. Stéphanie watched him in silence. She was being dismissed. Well, that made one thing clear at least. It wasn't human rights, and it wasn't trade. She collected her things and walked over to the door. Sergei held it open for her.

"I hope you will come and see my mother again. She enjoyed your visit."

Stéphanie looked at him uncertainly. A reprieve? "Are you sure I won't be interrupting her work?"

"Her work isn't urgent. What she needs most is to see more people. She's been too isolated since my father died. A lot of her friends have left, others are dead. She gets lonely sometimes. She would enjoy talking to you about French couture and public relations."

Stéphanie met his eyes. "In that case, we'd be boring you!"

"In the name of glasnost, I will try to put up with it. Who knows, I may even understand at last what Gorbachev is trying to achieve. Public relations and disinformation, that is the same thing, no?"

*

Chernobyl is the Ukrainian word for wormwood, and the best place to read about wormwood is the Book of Revelations: *There fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of*

the waters, because they were made bitter. April 1986, as it turned out, wasn't the end of the world, not yet, but it was the beginning of the end for the Bolsheviks.

The explosion itself surprised no one. People in the Soviet Union were used to accidents caused by negligence, inadequate maintenance, lack of spare parts, disregard for safety procedures. It was all part of the pattern of Soviet life. Workers at agro-industrial plants got food poisoning, workers at nuclear plants got irradiated. Lenin said: "Whatever serves communism is moral." The origins of Chernobyl were rooted in a disdain for human life and well-being that was fundamental to the Soviet state and had been one of its guiding principles since its inception. (Read some of Lenin's throwaway remarks about shooting kulaks, intellectuals and Estonians, if you don't believe me. Take a look at mortality statistics under Stalin.)

The Chernobyl nuclear plant was situated dangerously near to populated areas. It was built with low-quality materials. It was poorly designed, potentially unstable, and hard to control in case of operator error. The operators were not informed of the narrow margin of error. Nor did they realize that the routine electrical test they were performing on the night of April 26 could bring the reactor close to explosion. They failed to comply with established safety procedures. They circumvented the automatic emergency systems, which would have shut down the reactor if necessary. They used eight rods instead of thirty to maintain reactor control.

What shocked people about Chernobyl was less the accident itself than the sheer scale of the catastrophe, and the way the authorities dealt with it. In the aftermath of the explosion, the plant management denied that radiation leaks had taken place. Workers at the plant were told that the radiation dosage meters were damaged. Soldiers and firefighters worked without protective clothing. Evacuations were delayed for a day and a half. Lies, denial, concealment: time-honoured tactics to be sure, but a little incongruous at a time when the General Secretary of the CPSU was calling for a break with the obfuscations of the past. Chernobyl was a public relations catastrophe both at home and abroad. "Does he mean it?" This was the question people had been asking themselves ever since Gorbachev started to talk about glasnost. The effect of Chernobyl was to make them think he did not.

On the other hand, it has to be admitted that the General Secretary was in something of a dilemma. How could he tell the truth about what happened at Chernobyl without revealing that the society founded by Lenin was not just economically backward but morally bankrupt too?

*

The day Stéphanie arrived in Leningrad, the sun was shining on the blue and gold Rastrelli domes of St. Petersburg, and the palaces that lined the banks of the Neva glittered with mystic northern charm. *Flaunt your beauty, Peter's City, and stand unshakeable like Russia....* Stéphanie was enchanted: she was treading in the footsteps of Pushkin: after years of failed attempts, she had reached Russia at last.

The second day, there was a snowstorm, the golden domes were blotted out, and the Soviet Union came -- symbolically, she later decided -- into its own.

She was walking down Nevsky Prospekt on her way to the Anichkov Bridge, although her chances of seeing anything once she got there were small, since visibility was just about nil. The rare pedestrians who had ventured out were bundled up shapelessly, timelessly almost, and the noise of the late twentieth-century traffic was muffled by the snow. Stéphanie, daydreaming

vaguely of the young and dashing Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin, notorious Petersburg rake, gliding through the snow in a troika on his way to a rendezvous galant some one hundred and sixty years earlier, was brought down to earth with a bump when she all but collided with one of the timeless bundles, which had halted in front of her, barring her path.

"You shouldn't be out like that, you know." Stéphanie found herself staring into the barely visible face of an elderly woman. "Those shoes aren't suitable for the snow. And you should be wearing a hat. You'll catch cold if you aren't more careful." The woman's tone was half concerned, half scolding. Stéphanie glanced down at her feet. It would have been more sensible to wear boots, now she came to think of it. "You aren't in your country now," the woman went on, pulling her scarf up over her chin.

That much was certainly clear. It would occur to no one in Paris to upbraid stray passers-by on the appropriateness of their footwear, far less to worry about their health. The woman was looking at her expectantly. Clearly some kind of response was needed. Stéphanie mumbled something about going home to change, and the woman stood back, apparently satisfied, and allowed her to proceed.

Incidents like this multiplied fast. Daily life in the USSR seemed to be governed by a multitude of unspoken rules, which were enforced by the generation of grandmothers, the iron regiment of babushki, who considered it their duty to regulate the way their fellow citizens ran their lives, and brooked no resistance from anyone. We walk on this side of the street. You should be wearing a warmer coat. Don't lean on the wall of that building. It wasn't the nineteenth century, and it wasn't the West. It was a different country, with different rules, and it was unlike anything she had ever encountered before.

To begin with, she managed to keep her distance. For a few months, she succeeded in compartmentalizing her life into separate, non-overlapping, hierarchical layers. In one compartment, relegated temporarily to the back of her mind, was Paris, the West, her friends, her family, everything that made up her previous existence. In another, stationed off to the side, ready to be referred to if necessary, was Soviet reality: the hostel, the library, the canteen, each with their own set of behavioural norms that had to be respected, yet essentially peripheral. Finally, in the forefront of her consciousness, St. Petersburg, enchanted city of the mind, peopled by princes and musicians, Grand Dukes and gamblers, the city she tried to enter every time she set foot on the street. This is the house where Peter the Great lived while the city was being built, this is the room where Catherine received her favorite, Grigory Orlov. Here I am treading on the ground where Pushkin fought his duel, maybe this is the very spot where he fell, mortally wounded. On this square in December 1825, Nicholas I sent out his cavalry to crush the rebels.

When she became a regular visitor to the house on the Moika, all that changed. Time and geography became inextricably confused: the past, the present, the West, the East. The walls of Stéphanie's pure literary fortress crumbled before the assault. The worlds that she had kept apart began to merge into one. The demarcation lines began to move, and then to fade, before finally disappearing altogether.

The process worked both ways. Sometimes, unwittingly, she helped it along herself. On her second or third visit to Anna Serafimovna, she brought along an old copy of *Elle* that the customs men had somehow overlooked when she entered the country. She produced it tentatively, from under her notebooks, far from sure that a member of the intelligentsia would be interested in such frivolity, but Anna Serafimovna put down her teacup and pored over the magazine with as much

absorption as if she had been presented with the Dead Sea Scrolls. Even more disconcerting were the reactions of Sergei, who arrived while his mother was exclaiming over a photo of the notorious Monsieur Manuel himself, lips grazing the cheek of a French film star, eyelashes fluttering in the direction of the camera, arm round a skinny model wearing one of his latest creations. The caption under the photo said, "Elegance is the product of an authentic process of construction." Stéphanie braced herself to withstand a shower of sarcasm, but was amazed to see Sergei position himself behind his mother, leaning over her shoulder to study the revealed Western truth, too impatient to wait his turn. With an identical scowl of concentration, mother and son perused the text of advertisements for skin cream and hair conditioner, gazed disbelievingly at a feature on lingerie that would have got the magazine impounded on pornographic grounds if Customs had noticed it, and stared mesmerized at the fashion photos.

"'Anti-time solution,' what does this mean?" demanded Anna Serafimovna, gazing at some miraculous new anti-wrinkle cream with a well known name and implausible price. "Four hundred francs, that is how much in rubles?"

"In Paris, people dress like this?" said Sergei, his voice rising in incredulity.

So Stéphanie was forced to admit that, no, they didn't all wear knee-length Indian cotton skirts over fringed suede trousers with Red Indian feathers in their hair. And then she had to explain why magazines published photos which didn't correspond to reality, eerily conscious as she did so that her own grasp on reality was sliding implacably away. The Western world of clothes and cosmetics and consumer goods that she had always taken for granted, flipping idly through the pages of magazines like this while gossiping on the phone to her friends, seemed more and more remote and improbable. Seen from the Soviet Union, where people stood in line for half the day to buy the bare necessities of life, where lipsticks arrived in limited quantity from Hungary once every six months and telephones were located mainly in the street, she began to share the Inozemtsevs' disbelief at the sight of a whole double-page spread of different coloured lipsticks. It wasn't possible that something like that could really exist. It was a figment of some journalist's imagination, bearing no more relation to reality than the skinny model in her pseudo-Indian outfit a few pages earlier.

But what really shook her was the discovery that Soviet reality was more than a stream of dates and Party congresses, social oddities and political repression. It was not just banned books, non-colour-coordinated clothes, and posters saying Glory to Labour. It was three-dimensional and non-literary and it affected people's lives: the way they spoke and thought and lived and died. Take, for instance, the Siege of Leningrad, still a painful memory in the minds of the city's older inhabitants.

"Germany invaded the Soviet Union on the twenty-second of June 1941," said Anna Serafimovna. "They started to evacuate the city right away. Factories, museums, research institutes were all sent away out of danger. Part of the contents of the Hermitage was packed into trains and taken out of the city, and the rest was hidden. They dug trenches in the Summer Garden and the statues were all taken down and buried. The spires of the Admiralty and the Peter and Paul Fortress were covered in protective tarpaulins. The golden dome of St. Isaac's Cathedral was painted grey. The statue of the Bronze Horseman in Decembrists' Square was covered with planks and sandbags. During the summer, the Germans moved north through the Baltic States and attacked Leningrad. But the city held out. Finally, at the beginning of September, the

Germans cut the last railway lines linking us to the rest of the country. Leningrad was under siege. They had decided to starve us into submission.

"Of course, I was only eight years old, Stéphanie, I don't remember everything. Some of it I only learned afterwards. What I do remember was the shelling. There were times when it went on day and night, hour after hour after hour. Once they shelled us for twenty-six hours without stopping.... They shelled the whole city, not just the factories and the public buildings, but the residential areas too. You never knew where they were going to strike next. Often they concentrated their fire in the morning or the evening, when people were moving around, going to and from school or work, but sometimes it went on all night. Sundays and holidays were favorite times too, when people were out walking on the streets. At night, they used to concentrate on the most heavily populated districts, and they used a different kind of shell, the kind that would break down walls and kill people in their beds. Sometimes an alert would be followed by a long pause, twenty or thirty minutes. People would think it was all over, they would start to come up out of the shelters, and then the bombing would start up again.

"My aunt Vera was killed like that one night. The day after her twenty-second birthday. We'd just come up from the shelter. It was winter, pitch dark, we couldn't see a yard in front of us. And it was quiet, so quiet. There were people all around us, but no one said a word. All you could hear were the sound of footsteps shuffling in the snow. People going home. And then suddenly the guns started up again, part of a wall in front of us was blown away and Vera pitched forward in the snow. It must have been the very first shell they fired. It had blown off half the left side of her body. I... it was terrible, the blood on the snow, the fragments of flesh, clothes, someone screaming, I... Forgive me, even after all this time... Thank you, yes, another cup.... It was my mother screaming. The shock. She couldn't stop. She cried for two days. I didn't scream, it took me the other way, I was literally struck dumb. I don't remember it now, but apparently I didn't say a word for weeks. Vera had been holding my hand, on her other side. She dragged me down with her into the snow....

"My mother died a few months later. She starved to death, like so many people then. The first winter was the worst, the winter of 1941-42. There was hardly any food in the city, bread was rationed, and the bread they made wasn't even proper bread. It was a peculiar brown colour, I remember. I don't know what they put in it. After a while you got used to being hungry all the time: you didn't notice it any more. You felt weak, a little light-headed, especially if you were sitting down and got up too fast. I remember a kind of floating sensation, I don't remember actually being hungry. But at night, I found it hard to sleep. Whichever way you lay down, on your side, on your back, it felt as though there was something poking in you. You couldn't get comfortable whatever you did. But there wasn't anything there, it was just your bones sticking out....

"Then there was the cold. You can't imagine what the cold was like, Stéphanie. For me, the cold was worse than the hunger. I can still remember the cold, even now. Since there was no fuel in the city, we had no running water, no heating, no electricity. We were living in an apartment down the street from here: my aunt, my mother, my grandmother, my grandfather. My father was away at the front. We burned the furniture, piece by piece, and then we burned books. After Vera was killed, we burned all her books. She had been studying French at the university, and we burned all her French books. My mother cried while we did it, but we had no choice. It was the only way to keep warm. Once or twice my grandfather and I went out to look for wood.

We pulled down fences, anything we could find. But that was dangerous because there were patrols in the streets to look out for people who had collapsed from inanition and take them to hospital. If they had caught us, they would have arrested us. So we didn't dare to do it very often.

"Fortunately, we weren't cut off completely. In winter, there was a way into the city across Lake Ladoga, across the ice. Doroga zhizni, we called it, the Road of Life, because the trucks drove across the ice and brought us food. Of course, it wasn't enough. Over 600,000 people died of starvation in Leningrad. My mother was one of them. She fell down in the street one day and didn't get up again. My grandfather took her out to the cemetery at Piskarevskoye on my child's sled. A few weeks later, he was dead himself. My grandmother and I were the only ones who survived....

"Have you been to Piskarevskoye, Stéphanie? No? They had to bury everyone together in common graves. So many people were dying, from hunger, from cold, from the bombs. The earth was frozen for much of the year. Those that were left alive didn't have the strength to dig proper graves. They had to blast holes with explosives, and the bodies were all put in together.... I don't know where my mother is buried, or my aunt, or my grandfather.

"The Siege lasted 900 days."

"And when it was over," said Sergei, "they made Stalin a Marshal of the Soviet Union in recognition of his military skills, and they made Leningrad a Hero City of the Soviet Union to reward those who managed to stay alive despite Stalin's military skills."

"I have to leave," said Stéphanie. "I must go... I..I just remembered. I can't stay. Forgive me."

*

"I was so ashamed," she told Juliet, later that night, sitting on the river bank by the Peter and Paul Fortress. "I hardly even knew there was a siege of Leningrad, I've never heard of Piskarevskoye. I didn't know what to say."

"You should go and see Piskarevskoye," said Juliet. "It's worth a visit. Rows and rows of huge earth mounds, all unmarked. It would be quite impressive, but of course they've gone and turned it into a monument to Socialist Sacrifice. The trouble with communists is that they can never leave things alone. They've put up a statue holding a tasteful bit of laurel and they play music. Real socialist kitsch, you know the kind of thing. On second thoughts," she went on, peering at Stéphanie over the rim of her glasses, "you probably don't. The museum's quite interesting, though. They have the diary of a little girl of eleven who records the deaths of her whole family, one by one. A death on every page nearly. At the end she writes, 'The Savichevs are dead. They are all dead.'"

All Saint Petersburg was spread out before them: the Hermitage floating green and gold in the dying light above the Neva, the palaces crouching low along the river banks. "Like Anna Serafimovna and her family," said Stéphanie. "They all died in the siege too."

"I should think a lot of families did. Take a day off from Aleksandr Sergeyevich and go out there some time."

"I feel so inadequate. I should never have come here. I don't know anything about World War II. I hardly even know what happened before it."

"History runs down in 1917, right? Lenin's in Zurich, Stalin's in Siberia, the Tsar's in his palace, and all is right with all the Russias."

"Oh God."

'You know about the Nazi-Soviet Pact at least? No? Ribbentrop-Molotov? Oh dear. Well, in 1939, Hitler needed to be sure of a little peace and quiet to the east so he could invade Poland in comfort. He signed a pact with Stalin in August 1939, and invaded Poland ten days later. Then, after a couple of years, when he'd dealt with Poland and a few other matters, he invaded the USSR. Stalin never saw it coming. Apparently he sank into depression and did absolutely nothing for about a week. Obviously that didn't help."

"So that's what Sergei meant about Stalin being responsible for the siege."

"You could say that, yes." Juliet gave her a shrewd sideways glance. "And how is the mystery man?"

"I don't see much of him. He's usually out when I visit Anna Serafimovna."

"Out doing what?"

"Giving French lessons."

"I see. And what else?"

Over to the West, the dome of Saint Isaac's gleamed in the gathering dusk. A woman walked past them, picking her way carefully over the grass in red high-heeled shoes.

Stéphanie lowered her voice. "Samizdat, I think. Some sort of unofficial literature."

"Definitely a persecuted poet, then? Good. I couldn't see you with a black marketeer somehow."

"Look, I'm not going out with him or anything."

"Of course not. By the way, I'm meeting Alyosha and Dmitri tomorrow at half past five at Gostinny Dvor. We might go to the cinema. Do you want to come?"

"No, not tomorrow. I have to go back and see Anna Serafimovna."

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"I want to apologise," said Stéphanie. "What you told me yesterday about the siege was a... a revelation. I really feel ashamed of myself. I don't know anything about twentieth century Russian history. Soviet history."

"You don't have to apologise." Anna Serafimovna stirred her tea. "If you've chosen to specialize in the nineteenth century, it's perfectly understandable. Take me, for example. I know very little about French history before the eighteenth century."

"It's not quite the same." She looked away uncomfortably, and her eye fell on a book lying on the table. *The Siege*. Kiril Kazakov.

"Oh." She reached out and picked it up. "Is this about the siege of Leningrad?"

"Yes. Take it and read it if you'd like to. He's an excellent writer. He used to be a good friend of my husband's, but he lives in France now."

"Yes, I know, he's a friend of- He's a friend of someone I know, but I've never met him myself. I've never read any of his books, either." She turned the book over thoughtfully. "Anna Serafimovna, there's something I have to tell you. When I was coming here, I really didn't understand what I was letting myself in for. I'd read so much about St. Petersburg in the nineteenth century, all the writers and musicians, and what they did and how they lived, not just Pushkin, but Dostoevsky, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky... I thought it was St. Petersburg I was coming to, not Leningrad." She looked up from the book and met Anna Serafimovna's serene

brown gaze. Her eyes were exactly the same colour as her son's. "I suppose that sounds ridiculous."

"No," said Anna Serafimovna, "I know what you mean. If I went to Paris, I think the same thing would happen to me. I've spent so much of my life looking at photos of Paris and reading about it. I know Paris through the eyes of Balzac, Flaubert, Proust.... Good writers impose their own vision of a place on you. Even if I could travel now, I wouldn't go. I wouldn't want to take the risk. Paris has been a part of my mind for too long. It's too vital -- I can't let it be destroyed..."

For a while they sat in silence. Stéphanie drank her tea, feeling obscurely comforted.

"Illusions are important," said Anna Serafimovna after a while. "Sometimes they're the only thing that makes it possible to carry on. Are you sorry you came here?"

"No." Stéphanie smiled slowly to herself. "I like it here. I wouldn't dare tell Sergei that, but it's true. In some ways I feel much more at home here with the Russians I've met than I do in France. The only thing I regret is that I'll never be able to come back."

The smile died on her face. Anna Serafimovna studied her with perplexity and slight concern.

"Your fiancé really isn't interested in Russia? No? Well, no doubt you share other interests?"

It was impossible not to answer, but Stéphanie wasn't sure what to say. What exactly did she and Philippe have in the way of shared interests? Of course, they knew a lot of the same people. She had been at school with Philippe's sister. Their families lived only a few streets away from each other in the sixteenth arrondissement. But that wasn't interests exactly. She tried to think of something else, but her mind was a blank.

"Oh, well, the fact is, you see, Philippe and I don't really have an awful lot in common."

Anna Serafimovna's frown deepened. Stéphanie forced a smile to her face and rushed on, "But I don't think that's necessarily essential for a successful marriage, do you? If both sides have their separate interests, that's not necessarily a bad thing, is it?"

*

Some of the events in this book I was a witness to, some I was told about, some I invented. Like Anna Serafimovna during the siege, there are things I did not know about at the time they happened. Some of them I only learned later, some I read about in books, and some I have convinced myself are plausible. At some point, I believe, during that chilly Leningrad summer, the following conversation between Sergei and his mother must have taken place. This, or something very like it. I imagine Sergei preparing food, perhaps, or washing up after a meal, while Anna Serafimovna is sitting in her wheelchair, a book open on her lap, watching her son covertly, waiting for the chance to speak. He's in trouble again, she knows, he's up to something. He's been wearing that preoccupied air for weeks now, trying to put a good face on it, but sinking into gloom whenever he thinks she isn't watching him. She doesn't think it's to do with Stéphanie, it's been going on too long for that, but she can tell how he feels about her, and it's perfectly clear that Stéphanie has no desire to marry this Philippe of hers. In spite of, or perhaps because of, her years spent translating Jules Verne and Emile Zola, Anna Serafimovna is a romantic. Sergei is unhappy, and she's come to feel a lot of affection for Stéphanie. It seems to her that there might be a relatively simple way to solve everybody's problems.

"Seriozha?" she says tentatively.

"Yes, Mama?"

"It's none of my business, but..."

"But what?"

"I've noticed the way you feel about Stéphanie-"

"Mama, I don't feel any way about Stéphanie. She's a nice girl, but-"

"What I wanted to say was that, she may be engaged- "

"Exactly."

"-but from what she's told me, I don't think her heart's really in it. Her fiancé doesn't even speak Russian."

"He speaks French."

"Sergei, don't be so obtuse! She has a Russian soul. How can a marriage like that possibly work out?"

"A marriage involves considerations other than soul."

"Why won't you admit what's right in front of your eyes? Haven't you seen the way she looks at you?"

The tone is rising, she's starting to get exasperated. How does Sergei respond? He knows exactly what she means, of course. He too has seen the way Stéphanie looks at him, and it's getting harder and harder not to respond in kind. Still, as his mother can tell, he has no intention of acknowledging it. What he probably does at this point is break off the conversation. Change the subject, invent an appointment. Or maybe there's an interruption of some kind. A knock at the door. The physiotherapist visits Anna Serafimovna twice a week: it might well be one of her days for calling.

Anna Serafimovna hears the knock and glances at her watch. "Ah, that must be Marya Lvovna. Well, too bad, we'll discuss it later."

"There's nothing to discuss, Mama." Sergei dries his hands and goes to open the door. "If Stéphanie's in love with anyone, she's in love with Pushkin, and I'm certainly not going to compete with him."

As far as it goes, he has a point, but he's not being entirely honest either. He has an inkling of the way Stéphanie's mind is divided up, not least because compartmentalization is part of his own modus operandi, and he has sensed that lately the St. Petersburg compartment has been down-sized and shunted sideways, while the Soviet Reality compartment is expanding, forming new cells, multiplying and prospering. Sergei could force Pushkin into early retirement any time he wants -- but that's the last thing he's going to do, either now or in the future. He waits till his mother is closeted in her own room with Marya Lvovna and then gets out his papers and settles down to work.

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If we take divination one stage further, we may conclude that it was on that same afternoon that Stéphanie finally discovered the nature of Sergei's work. Certainly, the physiotherapist was there on the day it happened. She remembers it distinctly.

She arrived at the apartment on the Moika earlier than usual, and Sergei opened the door to her. He was unshaven, she recalls, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He did not seem particularly pleased to see her.

"Oh it's you. I didn't know my mother was expecting you." When the two of them were alone, he always spoke Russian, although his mother continued to talk to her in French.

"How are you?" said Stéphanie timidly. "I haven't seen you for a long time."

"I've been busy. The physiotherapist's here right now." He jerked his head towards the closed door of Anna Serafimovna's room. "You'll have to wait a while. Unless you want to come back later."

"If you don't mind, I'll wait. I just walked over from Vasilevsky, and I don't think I could walk another step."

"Sit down then." He motioned her towards a chair and sat down himself on the other side of the table. He picked up a pile of typewritten sheets and began to read, paying her no further attention. Stéphanie sat in her chair for a while, digesting the snub, but the physiotherapist showed no signs of leaving, and she grew restless and looked around for something to read. The table was covered with all kinds of papers, journals, books and folders. She picked up a copy of *Literaturnaya gazeta,* and started to look through it, but it was an old one and she had seen it some weeks ago already. She put it down again, and it was then that her attention was drawn by another journal that had previously been hidden. *Novye Dekabristy* said the big black lettering at the head of the page, the New Decembrists, and of course the word Decembrists immediately attracted her attention.

"What's this?" she said, picking it up.

"What's what?" said Sergei, without looking up.

"This journal here. *Novye*- "

She was surprised by the rapidity of his reflexes. With one hand he pulled the paper out of her grip; with the other he put a finger to his lips and then pointed up towards the ceiling.

"*Novoe vremya*," he said. "Have you never seen it before? It's a foreign affairs magazine. Have a look through it. I think you'll find it interesting."

Meanwhile, he was busy stuffing the other journal, whatever it was, back underneath the mess on the table. The old Decembrists had an island named after them, these days, and a monument too: the new ones were apparently less sure of acquiring official sanction. The door to the other room opened and the physiotherapist appeared. Sergei looked up.

"Have you finished, Marya Lvovna? How's she doing?"

"She's fine." The physiotherapist was a small, plump woman with a tired face. "Nothing to worry about. I'll see you on Friday, Sergei Maksimovich."

She nodded to Stéphanie, who sat as if turned to stone. He wasn't just reading samizdat himself, passing it round to other people, and maybe typing it up in his spare time, as she had vaguely imagined. He and his friends were writing it and putting it out themselves.

"What are you saying about me?" demanded Anna Serafimovna from the inner room.

"Stéphanie's here, Mama."

"Wonderful! Make the tea, will you? I'll be out in a minute."

What about Anna Serafimovna? Did she know her son was mixed up in this? If the KGB picked him up, what would happen to her? Sergei's father had been dead for four years and there were no surviving relatives. They had all died in the Siege. Who would look after her?

Sergei placed the teapot and two cups on the table and began to gather his papers together. "Seriozha, you're not leaving? Aren't you going to have some tea with us?" said Anna Serafimovna, wheeling out of her room.

"Sorry, Mama, I just remembered, the time of one of my lessons has changed. But I'm sure Stéphanie will stay for a while. I'll see you this evening."

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He was waiting downstairs when she left, half an hour later. He fell into step beside her, and they walked slowly along the edge of the canal. He seemed disinclined to say anything: in the end it was Stéphanie who was the first to speak.

"What's going on, Sergei?"

He shrugged. "Do I really need to explain? You've seen the journal. You've met the people involved in it. You can guess the rest."

The detached, almost censorious, tone was more disconcerting than anything she had encountered from him yet.

"Why the title?" Stéphanie inquired, meeting coolness with coolness. "The same ideas as the Old Decembrists?"

"Well no, not exactly. Some things have changed, you know, in one hundred and sixty years. They were fighting for a Constitution. We already have one. Our aim is that the Constitution be respected."

The sun was shining peacefully and some tourists on the far side of the canal were busy taking a photograph. Stéphanie realized that she was shivering even though it was a warm afternoon. She had strayed into another country, with different rules. She was light years away from the parking tickets and over-imaginative tax declarations which had up till now constituted her sole acquaintance with illegality, and most of it by hearsay at that.

"What would happen to you if you were caught?" she demanded, carefully using the conditional tense, although in her imagination, he was already languishing behind barbed wire somewhere.

"It depends," said Sergei off-handedly. "It could be ten years in the camps. At the worst, of course," he added. They could have been talking about someone else. A casual acquaintance, a stranger, a name read in the newspapers. "Stéphanie...?"

From the uncertain way he said it, Stéphanie realized that if he was behaving like this it was because he didn't know what her reactions were going to be, and whether he could trust her to keep her discovery to herself.

"Don't worry about me," she said. "I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Thank you," said Sergei. He reached out and took her hand. "Don't look so frightened, Stephanusha. We've been very careful. We won't get caught. Not this time." Now what did that mean? she wondered.

They walked on a few paces, out of the range of the amateur photographers. "Will you still come to see my mother?"

"Does she know what you're doing?"

He shook his head. "My mother isn't interested in politics. I don't say she wouldn't sympathize, but she wouldn't understand. The less she knows about it the better. It would only worry her."

"But what would become of her if something happened to you? Have you thought about that?"

"She has her work. Her pension. She doesn't need me to support her."

"Not in the material sense, maybe! But-"

"Listen, Stéphanie, every one of us who is engaged in the struggle is in the same situation. They have mothers, wives, children. At some point, you have to make a decision: you have to choose between them. I know this is going to seem unfeeling. I know what you're going to tell me: that my mother has rights too. Rights on me. But ultimately it's for her that I'm fighting too. Her rights as an individual, and those of millions of other individuals too. "

"Your mother needs you more than the fight for human rights needs you!"

"This is simply not true. I assure you, my mother will come to no harm because of my activities. We aren't living under Stalin now. On the other hand, we need every fighter we can get. We are so few, fighting against so many. Try and see it in perspective, Stephanushka."

He looked at her searchingly. "The trouble is, your eyes are glued so firmly on the past, I don't think you realize what the present-day issues really are. If the USSR is ever to develop into a democratic country, we need to develop the rule of law. We need a democratically elected head of state, a democratically elected parliament, and an independent judiciary. Naturally, none of this is possible without depriving the Communist Party of its privileged status and abolishing the secret police."

Stéphanie realized her mouth was hanging open. She shut it with a snap. Were all dissidents as crazy as this? Even she, with her inadequate political education, knew that as reform programmes went, this one was totally unrealistic. "The other thing," Sergei swept on, "is to open up people's minds and encourage them to think for themselves."

Compared to getting rid of the KGB, that sounded relatively easy. "But surely that's what Gorbachev is trying to make people do?" she suggested. "Surely with glasnost-?"

Sergei shook his head. "The purpose of glasnost is not to make people think for themselves, but to think the way Gorbachev wants them to think. He doesn't want to change the system, he wants to save it. All he cares about is the historical destiny of the USSR. He's not interested in the psychological well-being of the Soviet people, none of our rulers are. They despise us too much for that. They tell us what we must think, where we may live, what we should read. They tell us who our friends are, who our enemies are. We have no right to express our own opinions. We belong to the Communist Party to dispose of as it pleases."

He broke off and looked at his watch. "I must leave you here. I really do have a lesson to give. But I would like to see you later. Have you seen Peter's City by night yet?"

"Since the white nights started? Yes, I've been out several times. I find it hard to sleep when it never gets properly dark."

"Good. Then we will walk till you feel sleepy and I will try to convince you that what we are doing is right. And necessary. Ten o'clock on Senate Square, Stephanusha. We will see if we meet the ghosts of the Decembrists."

*

On 14 December 1825, a group of aristocratic army officers and the troops under their command occupied Senate Square in the heart of St. Petersburg and refused to take an oath of allegiance to the newly created Tsar, Nicholas I. Their goal was to establish a constitutional system and basic freedoms in Russia, and to abolish serfdom. After a stand-off lasting several hours, the Tsar ordered his artillery to disperse the rebels. Sixty or seventy of them were killed. By nightfall, the insurrection was at an end. Nearly six hundred people were subsequently

brought to trial. Five leaders of the Decembrists, as they became known, were executed, others were condemned to hard labour, some were deported to Siberia.

The fate of dissidents in tsarist times was something Stéphanie had at her fingertips. She even knew that Lenin had been exiled to Siberia, where he had spent his time in cosy seclusion, writing pamphlets, ordering books, and even organizing himself a wife. But the status of dissidents in the age of perestroika eluded her completely. Under Brezhnev, they had been sent to the Gulag: under Gorbachev, she had no idea what was happening to them. Was Sergei really liable for ten years in the camps? Hadn't she read something a few months back about the dissident Anatoly Shcharansky being released from prison and allowed to emigrate to Israel? If Gorbachev was serious about reconstructing his country and improving relations with the West, he couldn't go on persecuting dissidents, could he?

Stéphanie didn't have a clue. The trouble was that the whole of Soviet life was lived on the fringes of illegality, which made it difficult for an outsider to figure out what was serious and what was not. If the framework of existence was made up of a mass of rules and regulations, both spoken and unspoken, its essence was composed of elaborate ways to circumvent those rules. All the young people she had met seemed to regard Soviet life as an intricate game played with the ultimate goal of beating the system. A few weeks earlier, she and Juliet had gone out for the evening with some Soviet students who ushered them proudly into a small Zhiguli.

"You have a car," said Juliet admiringly. "How did you manage that?" The question was deftly evaded, but in such a way as to make both girls think twice about the wisdom of repeating it.

Later the same evening, they were sitting in a cafe discussing Western rock music. The place was almost deserted, but then two men came and sat at the next table. Dmitri and Alyosha exchanged glances. "Come on, girls, time we were going." They were already on their feet, signalling to the waiter. KGB, they explained in the street outside. But how can you tell, persisted Stéphanie. There's just something about them, said Alyosha finally.

Recalling this episode, it occurred to Stéphanie that possibly Sergei and his friends were in no deeper waters than Alyosha and Dmitri with their car of uncertain origin. Sergei was right: she didn't know enough about the Soviet Union to make a judgement. She could have asked Juliet, who had rock-hard Soviet credentials thanks to a thesis topic concerning readers' letters to Soviet newspapers, and a brother-in-law who had spent four years as Moscow correspondent of a prestigious London newspaper, but she was unwilling to betray Sergei's confidence by discussing his situation with anyone else.

Not for the first time, she began to regret her insistence on concentrating on the tsarist period. Somewhere along the way, she had made an error of judgement. Either she should have stayed at home with her dreams of St. Petersburg, or else she should have found out what she was letting herself in for by coming here. The past was dead, and there was no bringing it back to life. Meanwhile, the present was arousing problems that she was ill-equipped to deal with, even though Sergei had now taken over her education and she was learning fast.

They were well into the white nights by now, and he took her for long walks round the city in the middle of the night. At three o'clock in the morning, the streets were empty of everyone but a few romantically-inclined couples. No doubt that was what they themselves resembled, in that ghostly half-light, in the eyes of some casual stranger, but the purpose of their nocturnal wanderings was purely educational. Sergei seemed determined to inculcate in her a basic

knowledge of Soviet power, uses and abuses thereof, and the fact that he had decided to do this in the most romantic surroundings available was fortuitous. His manner, studiedly correct at all times, made it clear that his mission was to raise her political consciousness, not to satisfy any other yearnings. Yet sometimes he would compliment her on her clothes or her hair. Just so she knew he wasn't oblivious to the material world; just enough to keep her guessing. When they met and when they separated, he sometimes kissed her on the cheek; occasionally, he took her arm or her hand to cross a road, but as far as physical contact went, that was it.

Stéphanie concealed as best she could her thwarted expectations. More than once she was on the brink of asking him pointblank what the purpose of these excursions was. What was in it for him? What did he want from her? Where was it all headed? What was he waiting for to suggest that they repair to the nearest convenient park bench, dark doorway, or one of the other refuges Russians used to make love, given the housing shortage. Couldn't he tell that, although parks and doorways were not usually her thing, she would have gone like a shot? Once or twice, wondering half-guiltily what would have happened if she had not mentioned the fact that she had a fiancé, she started trying to tell him how different life was from the West, how remote her previous existence seemed, and how hermetic the two worlds were. But each time Sergei, as if divining her true intentions, headed the conversation into a general discussion of how life in the West differed from life in the Soviet Union. Compare and contrast, placing particular emphasis on respect for human rights, observance of legal codes, and freedom of thought.

Stéphanie spent the days yawning in the library, waiting for evening. Pushkin and Tsar Nicholas, the former companions of her waking hours, paled into insignificance beside the prospect of a few hours of Sergei's company. The feeling of excitement and danger that he aroused in her intensified: when she was with him she had the impression of being on the verge of huge discoveries, the frontiers of a new territory, the edge of the white rapids foaming downwards into the unknown.

About Philippe, she tried to think as little as possible. In fact, it proved remarkably easy to keep him at a safe mental distance, due largely to her growing sense of unreality. Six months ago, she had been whizzing round Paris nightspots with Philippe in Porsche and pearls. Here she was now, walking round Leningrad with a dissident intellectual, discussing whether the Soviet state could possibly survive the dissolution of what Sergei called the Cheka (aka the KGB), and waiting vainly for him to suggest adjourning to the nearest convenient repair for an attempt at some less cerebral union. It was hard to say which of these existences were more unreal, and it was impossible to believe that one could have any impact on the other. Nothing that happened in this mysterious, twilit Baltic city could ever have repercussions on her implausible future in clear-cut, pragmatic France: at no point could the two existences and their respective protagonists ever interconnect.

In her more lucid moments, other arguments presented themselves too. For one thing, she wouldn't put it past Philippe to have an affair or two on the side while she was away -- God knows he met enough eligible women in his line of work -- so why shouldn't she do the same? She was unlikely ever to see Sergei again once she left Leningrad in September. The more she learned about his dissident record, the more improbable it seemed that he would ever be allowed to travel to the West.

One night, she asked Sergei what had drawn him to human rights in the first place. It took him a long time to reply, and she cursed herself for her stupidity in posing the question in such an

obvious way. He was going to tell her that human rights were, or should be, an object of concern to any right-minded person, and that would be that. But in the end, he said, "It was in 1976. After the signing of the Helsinki Agreements. I was a student at the Faculty of Romance and Germanic Languages. The parents of one of my friends had founded a group called Group for the Protection of Human Rights. Gruppa zashchity prav cheloveka."

He shrugged. "Not a very original name, I suppose. Several of my friends became involved with the group's activities. We used to meet irregularly in people's apartments. We kept a fairly low profile. The guiding idea of the group was not to make protests and embarrass the authorities, but to make people realize that something must be done. Political consciousness-raising, if you like. So we used to go out and talk to the people around us about this. Anyone we came across, anyone we thought would be receptive. In other words we were practising glasnost before Gorbachev decided to make it socially acceptable."

He gave her a sad, ironic grin, and she had to restrain herself from reaching out and running a finger round the edges of his face and rubbing away the sadness. "We invented glasnost, you see, not him. Unfortunately, some members of our group ran up against people who weren't foresighted enough to realize that glasnost was the wave of the future, and who denounced them to the authorities. But it still seems to have taken the Chekists a while to work out that they weren't just isolated invididuals, but that there was a whole group of us. In any case, the group survived until 1981, which is an excellent record. And then, in March 1981, they burst in on a meeting and arrested everyone there and charged them with anti-Soviet activities. The lightest sentence handed out was two years in prison, and three people were sent to the camps for ten years." He fell silent.

"And you?"

He looked at her with an odd little smile and turned his head away, watching a lone pedestrian flit across Palace Square in the faded grey light. "I wasn't there."

"Why not?"

"I had flu."

"Flu?"

"Don't you believe me?"

"Of course I do. Why wouldn't I believe you?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I have doubts myself. It was the purest of chances." He shifted restlessly on the hard wooden bench. "I had intended to go, I nearly did go, but at the last minute I just didn't feel up to it."

"And so you feel guilty because the rest of them got rolled up and you didn't?"

"I suppose so."

"What happened next?"

"You know what the Big House is?"

"KGB headquarters?"

"That's right. I was called in there about a fortnight later for a little chat with some Major Something-or-other. Apparently, someone had let my name drop, but that was all. They couldn't pin anything on me, so they let me go again. Or maybe they figured they had enough to be going on with and they were saving me for later."

"And since then they've left you alone?"

"Not entirely. We've had two or three more little chats, and last January they did a house search. That was after we started *Novye Dekabristy*. So far there's been nothing tangible, just threats, warnings. One day they say, If we find anything to link you with this fascist rag we will send you to Afghanistan on the next plane. Then the next day, there's a letter from OVIR -- that's the agency which handles exit visas -- saying, We hear you are suspected of dissident activities, how would you like to emigrate to the West? They keep you perpetually off balance, that way you can't be sure how much they really know about you, and they hope that in the end you'll crack and admit everything."

"My God, Sergei!"

"Don't look like that. It's not as bad as all that. "

"But how can you be so calm about it? It sounds terrifying!"

"I shouldn't have told you about it. I didn't mean to frighten you. For me it is just a fact of life, something one has to live with. To a greater or lesser extent, this is true of every Soviet citizen, you know."

Stéphanie doubted whether this was entirely true, but she said nothing. The dissident view of reality, as she was learning, was strictly two-tone: black or white with nothing in between.

"Besides, all these ... incidents have been spread out over a long period of time. Five years. It didn't happen the way I just told you about it, bang, bang, bang, one thing after another. It happened slowly enough for me to get used to it."

"It still sounds like a dangerous way to live."

"Maybe I like living dangerously," he observed, but there was something about the way he said this that immediately made her think it wasn't true. In a profession like his, living dangerously was an occupational hazard, and he would have to accept it. Liking it, however, was an entirely different matter, and she had the feeling that he didn't like it at all. More disinformation, she assumed, to throw pursuers, both sexual and political, off the track.

Maybe her best hope was to get together with the Chekists and compare notes, she concluded gloomily, lying in her midget-sized bed at the student hostel an hour or so later. If they all pooled their information, maybe they would begin to penetrate the layers of ambiguity with which Sergei surrounded himself. When he had kissed her goodnight, holding her lightly by the shoulders, she had turned her head, as if by accident, so that their lips met. For an instant his grip on her shoulders had tightened as he kissed her mouth, and she felt herself beginning to sway dizzily against him, but he kept his lips closed, and released her almost at once. "My mother is expecting you this afternoon, I believe," he said, and walked away, leaving her to creep upstairs under the irritable stare of the dezhurnaya and wrestle with her frustration and guilt in the seedy light filtering under the curtain until she fell asleep.

*

But when she arrived at the house on the Moika at her usual visiting hour the following afternoon, the KGB were there.

Outwardly, there was no sign of anything amiss. No black Volgas parked in the street, no guard posted at the street door. She walked upstairs and knocked on the apartment door. There was a vague kind of commotion coming from inside the apartment: it ceased immediately, there

was a low exchange of voices, and then a man she had never seen opened the door, looked her up and down, and asked, quite politely, to see her papers.

Stéphanie knew at once what had happened. The man took her papers inside the apartment, leaving her outside on the landing. The door was slightly ajar. Stéphanie could see Anna Serafimovna sitting in her wheelchair. Her face was impassive and she looked neither at Stéphanie, nor at the pile of books that had been taken down from the shelves and thrown on the floor beside her. There was another brief exchange of voices, too low for Stéphanie to distinguish what was being said. Then someone said in a slightly louder tone, "Get rid of her," and Sergei himself appeared in the doorway with her papers in his hand. She had a brief glimpse of a wider disorder, more books strewn over the floor, a man kneeling beside a pile of papers, clothes and bed linen in disarray, and then Sergei pulled the door closed behind him, and held out the papers.

"I'm afraid it is not convenient to visit us now. Please come back another day." He pulled her towards the stairs and added in a low urgent voice, "Nevsky Monastery. Writers' Graveyard. Tomorrow. Three o'clock. Wait for me."

*

The Aleksandr Nevsky Monastery was at the far end of Nevsky Prospekt. To get to the Writers' Graveyard, you had to go up a rustic little lane and over a bridge. Stéphanie paid sixty kopeks to a weedy youth in a black and red checked pullover and was admitted to the Nekropol. It had been raining all day and the atmosphere was dank and gloomy. The graveyard was nearly empty except for a few German tourists trying to decipher the famous Cyrillic names on the moss-covered tombstones. She looked at her watch: she was early. No matter, she would wait all afternoon if she had to. Then she saw Sergei standing at the end of an alley next to the Tchaikovsky Memorial. He came to meet her, looking wan and tired. He gave her one of his best smiles and kissed her cheek.

"Thank you for coming, Stephanusha."

"What's happened? Who was that in your apartment yesterday?"

"What do you think of Tchaikovsky's monument? All those soaring angels? Personally, I consider it most inappropriate. Angels have no place in Russia. They don't stand a chance."

"Sergei-"

"Let's go and sit down over there. Try not to look so anxious."

He led her towards a damp bench and for a moment they sat in silence. Stéphanie studied him covertly. There were dark lines etched into his cheeks that hadn't been there before, and he looked as if he hadn't slept all night. She had the feeling that if she as much as touched him, something would snap.

"I'm afraid you came by while the Chekists were paying a house call," said Sergei, speaking French and keeping his voice low.

"What did they want?"

"They were interested in my ... research into the Decembrists."

"But they don't know for sure that you're involved with it, do they?"

"Of course they do. They've known for a long time. I told you the other night, feigning ignorance is just part of their tactics."

"That's not exactly what you said."

"Know it, suspect it - it comes to the same thing. You see the man communing with the soul of Dostoevsky? Blue jacket? He's been following me on and off for three months."

Stéphanie looked, and then gasped aloud. It was the man who had walked past them in Palace Square the other night.

"I see you recognise him."

"You never told me about that."

"There's a lot I didn't tell you."

"What about the search? Did they find anything?"

"Nothing of importance."

"Is your mother all right?"

"Yes. They left her alone. After they'd gone, I told her they were looking for samizdat. I don't know if she believed me."

There was a short silence. "What will they do next?"

"Keep looking till they find what they want. Draft me and send me to Afghanistan. Arrest me and send me to the camps. I haven't the faintest idea, Stéphanie."

"Is there anything I can do?"

There was a short pause before Sergei replied. "What would you consider doing?"

"Whatever you tell me to do. Maybe I could hide something for you in my room at the hostel."

"Your room at the hostel? Are you serious?"

"Get in touch with a Western journalist, then. The Embassy. I don't know! What do you want me to do?"

Sergei said slowly, "There is something you might be able to do for me. But I don't know ...." He stared at her intently.

"Go on."

He averted his eyes. "I don't know if I have the right to ask you such a thing."

"Tell me what it is!"

His voice dropped to a whisper. "Help me get out of here."

Stéphanie stared at him. "How?" she asked, almost mouthing the word.

Sergei took her hand in his. "If I had a foreign wife, I would be able to leave the country."

"A foreign wife.... You mean you want me to marry you!"

"It wouldn't be a real marriage of course."

"A marriage of convenience?"

"Fiktivny brak, yes. What else?"

"But what about Philippe?" she blurted out, and immediately felt ridiculous. This wasn't tax evasion, and it wasn't parking tickets. This was life and death they were talking about.

Sergei gestured helplessly with his free hand. "I know. I know I have no right to ask you this. If there was anyone else ...." She was silent: right then there was no way she could have opened her mouth and pushed words out of it if a squad of Chekists had appeared beside them with a warrant for Sergei's immediate transfer to Kolyma. "Look," said Sergei, "forget it. Don't worry. Just forget I ever said such a thing. There must be other ways. I'll think of something."

The muscles finally obeyed her and she got her mouth to open. "Just tell me. What does this mean exactly? What would I have to do?"

Sergei looked at her hard, and seeing the sudden gleam of hope in his eyes, she knew that this was it. There was no going back. Even though he kept his voice deliberately flat and business-like. "First, we apply to the authorities here for permission to get married. Then we leave for France. We arrive in France, we go our separate ways. I would do my best not to be an ... imposition on you. I would apply at once for French citizenship. Once I got my papers, we would immediately be divorced."

For maybe a whole minute, neither of them said anything. The trees dripped dispiritedly around them. Another day or two and the lilacs would be finished. Stéphanie realized that Sergei was still holding her hand, absently stroking it. She was suddenly seized with an overpowering desire to throw herself into his arms. She removed her hand.

"I need to get out of here. Let's walk."

The drizzle had eased, although the banks of cloud massed above the city promised more rain to come. They walked slowly up Nevsky Prospekt. Stéphanie turned up her collar and thrust her hands in the pockets of her raincoat, where she encountered the sharp corner of the letter she had received from Philippe the previous day. Abruptly, the real world -- one of them -- came cascading back. Was she finally taking leave of her senses? How could she even think of getting involved in anything as problematical as a fiktivny brak? How could she even think of treating Philippe like this?

The letter had been gay, charming and affectionate. He was missing her, he wrote. The weather was wonderful, he had been to the country every weekend, but without her it just wasn't the same. He had even enclosed some snaps of lunch at someone's house in Deauville. Six or seven people sitting round the table in their Lacoste T-shirts and Rolex watches, wine and pâté on the table, roses in the background, smirking at the camera with various degrees of self-satisfaction. Remembering this, Stéphanie let a wave of nostalgia wash over her. She could almost smell the pâté, touch the roses. How wonderful it would be to be back there with them, with nothing more serious to worry about than how to avoid the Sunday evening rush hour on the way home. That kind of thing was much more in her league: she was right out of her depth here with dissidents and samizdat and KGB harrassment and the ambiguous passions of the white Russian night. Time to put an end to all this and get back to real life.

"Look, Sergei, what makes you think they'd give you permission to marry me? What makes you think they'd let you leave the country afterwards? It's not as easy as that, you know. Some people have to wait for years."

"This morning, I had to go to the Big House. It was ... indicated to me that, should I initiate proceedings to leave the country, no obstacles would be put in my way."

"Why don't you just apply to emigrate then?"

"Emigration is for Jews. We Russians must do things differently."

He put his arm round her, which was something she'd been wanting him to do for weeks. The images of the rose-covered cottage receded, and she was back in Peter's City, haunted by repression and rebellion, with a militiaman on every corner, and a babushka in the standard raincoat staring with outrage at Sergei's arm across her shoulders.

"Stephanusha, listen. They have caught me like a rat in a trap. I must leave, I have no choice. You were right, you know. I should have listened to you."

"Right about what?"

"About my mother. I can't subject her to this. If I stay, we'll have to put up with this harrassment indefinitely. And then, if they send me to Afghanistan, what will she do? Or to the camps?"

Stéphanie said nothing.

"I should have thought of all this earlier, but I suppose I didn't want to face it. And now I have no choice. I have to leave - and be thankful they're offering me a way out. It's more than many people have had."

"And why do you suppose they're giving it to you?"

"You mean to say you don't know?" For a second, the old ironic grin was back in place. "But it was you who explained the principle to me in the first place. Promoting a good public image of oneself."

"Public relations?"

"Exactly. This regime is not like the others. It worries more about public opinion: Western public opinion, in particular. Rather than sending another dissident off to the camps, it is much better to be able to tell everyone that Inozemtsev has left the country because he married a foreigner. The regime does not wish to keep people here against their will, and it has graciously given permission for him to accompany his wife to the West. You understand?"

"Mm."

"From abroad, I'll be able to write to my mother, send her money, parcels. We can still stay in contact. Maybe I could even get her out too in time, who knows?"

"She wouldn't come."

"Don't you think so? To Paris? Of course she would!"

"Paris is in her head," said Stéphanie. "The Paris she lives with isn't the Paris that really exists. She knows that. She wouldn't want to take the risk. She's not like me, she's too sensible to risk seeing all her dreams capsize."

"I'll convince her," said Sergei confidently.

They crossed Decembrists' Square and reached the Neva. There was a little boat going past, vaguely reminiscent of a miniature Bateau Mouche. Sergei started to say something, but very quietly, under his breath almost. Stéphanie leaned closer to try and catch his words, but even so it took her a minute or two to realize that he was not confiding some item of compromising information. He was not talking to her at all. Instead, he was quoting Pushkin.

"*I love you, Peter's creation. I love your stern/Harmonious look, the Neva's majestic flow.../The moonless glitter of your pensive nights....*"

He turned away, his shoulders shook, and Stéphanie realized he was weeping. The words were out almost before she realized it.

"All right, Seriozha. I'll do it."

*

They were married two months later at the Palace of Weddings in Leningrad. Yarik and Nina were the witnesses, and Juliet had come along to lend moral support. Sergei wore an ill-fitting wool suit he had borrowed off Boris, and Stéphanie wore a low-cut cream silk dress from Manuel Berger that Philippe had given her as a going-away present. It was much too grand for Leningrad -- she had known that the minute she set foot in the place -- and it had spent six months locked in

her suitcase at the hostel. It was too grand for the Palace of Weddings too, but it was the only dress she had with her.

"Go on, wear it," Juliet had said, "it's your wedding day, after all. A real live Russian wedding and a real live Russian bridegroom. This is what you've been waiting for all your life, isn't it?"

"We'll be divorced within a year," said Stéphanie, eyeing her reflection in the grimy mirror.

"Yolki palki," said Juliet dismissively. "Tell me another."

"I mean it," said Stéphanie, and in fact she did. Her unrequited passion for Sergei had evaporated as mysteriously as it had come. Stifled by the turgid workings of bureaucracy, no doubt. The uncharted terrain which had fascinated and intrigued her when first they met had been mapped out and defined by marriage contracts and exit visas, and it was no longer possible to fall off the edge of some unmarked precipice into the stormy waters below. What she wore to get married to Sergei was of no importance at all.

But in the end she wore the dress anyway, and she had to admit it was worth it for the smile on Sergei's face when he saw her, and the gleam of admiration in Yarik's eye. Nina fingered the fabric reflectively and the other brides queuing up to be married -- they were the twelfth couple out of twenty-seven -- scrutinized her with eagle eyes. Even the Director of the Palace of Weddings, a middle-aged lady wearing a full-length gown and a red sash with the slogan "Proletarians of the World Unite" gave her a close, assessing stare.

"The Executive Committee of the Soviet of Working People's Deputies of the City of Leningrad has empowered me to register the marriage of Inozemtsev, Sergei Maksimovich and Villers-Massenet, Stéphanie Catherine Élisabeth." The Director stumbled over the unfamiliar foreign words. They signed the marriage papers and exchanged rings: Sergei kissed her formally on both cheeks: a Strauss waltz struck up, and they were ushered out. The whole thing took about five minutes.

"You didn't tell me you were named after half the empresses in Russia," said Sergei.

"She had Russian fairies at her christening," said Juliet.

From the Palace of Weddings they went to the Tomb of the Revolutionaries on the Field of Mars. "I want something about this wedding to be traditional," Sergei announced, so Stéphanie deposited the bouquet he had given her on the tomb, watched approvingly by a little troop of Pioneers in red ties. There was a man standing there watching too, despite the light drizzle that had begun to fall. Odd how people liked to stare at bridal couples, as if they were a different kind of species. Sergei glanced up and saw the man, and she had the impression that he recognized him; a look passed between them, and she waited for Sergei to make some kind of sign, or go over to greet him, but nothing happened. "Right, that's enough, let's go," said Sergei, turning away, and they all trailed after him. Stéphanie forgot about the incident almost immediately. Sergei had lived here all his life; the man was probably just someone he knew by sight. Or maybe one of his old teachers. With his long ascetic face, high domed forehead and gold-rimmed glasses, he could easily be a scholar of some kind. Sergei put his scrubby wool jacket round her shoulders to stop the rain spoiling her dress, and they set off back to the house on the Moika, where Anna Serafimovna had prepared Georgian champagne to toast the newly-married couple.

*

The General had been waiting for this moment for years. This, or another very like it, for in 1964, when he began to formulate his plans, he had no means of knowing what form his vengeance would take, nor what instruments he would use to achieve it. Watching the French girl with her white dress and her bouquet of flowers at the Tomb of the Revolutionaries, the General allowed himself to savour a brief moment of triumph. There she was at last before his eyes, his creation, his tool. His access to Marina. The operation had been eighteen years in gestation and four in preparation. And now, at last, it was finally under way.

When the little group had left the Field of Mars, the General turned on his heel and walked away in the other direction. He would be returning to Moscow in a few hours, but first he needed to see Mironov, and go over what would happen when the bridal couple reached the West. He crossed the Fontanka canal and walked the few blocks up Liteiny Prospekt to Mironov's office in the huge red and yellow building that was known locally as the Big House.

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- 2 -

LENIN'S GHOST

It is essential and urgent to prepare the terror in secret.
- V.I. Lenin, 1920

If you stand at the entrance to the Russian cemetery in Sainte Geneviève des Bois, you see rows upon rows of crosses stretching away before you, rather like those military graveyards that mark the sites of former battlefields. Fallen for their country, rest in peace. But these are Orthodox crosses, with their three horizontal struts: one short, one long, and one diagonal, and the dead who sleep in this foreign field are not warriors, but exiles and emigrés.

It's very peaceful here. When you walk into the cemetery, it's like walking into a forest. Birches and firs, the trees of Russia, sway in the wind between the tombs. Some of the graves are decorated with blue or gold domes, some carry etchings of the deceased, some bear inscriptions in old Cyrillic characters. One, uncharacteristically, has an inscription in French: *Toutes les séparations du temps ne sont qu'un rendezvous pour l'éternité*. The French graves on the far side of the cemetery are sealed with slabs of marble, but the Russian graves are planted with bushes and flowers.

Russians have been buried in this graveyard for over a century. After about 1920, this was probably not by choice. Some of them had fled to Paris, and some of them were sent. If they ended up here, the old soldiers, the princes, and the refugees, it's mainly thanks to one man -- one god, I should say, the god of Soviet Power, who promised his people a new kind of society and a new kind of man, a kingdom of Socialism on earth, and a kingdom of Communism in the radiant future.

What amazes me is that Lenin's myth endured so long. Even sustained by the logic of the axe. All right, I know, people need their illusions. The longer they've had them, the more they need them. When you've spent your whole life expecting to build socialism, bury the West, hang the capitalists with their own rope, and so on, you can't just quietly drop the whole project and take up consumerism instead. And that's just the practical side of it. How do you come to terms with what's going on in your head when they tell you that the last seventy years were all a mistake? How do you take in the idea that you've lost your grandparents to collectivization, your father to the camps, and your sons to the war in Afghanistan, all for nothing?

Sometimes I feel even worse about those ordinary Soviet people, who worked hard all their lives and believed that they were doing the right thing, than I do about those people who were part of my own life, and who simply happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. If it is hard

to go to a cemetery and visit a loved one's grave, it's even harder to look around you and know that your whole country is a cemetery, and that the graves contain the whole of your past and everything you had ever hoped for.

In Memory of the Radiant Future
1917 - 1991
R.I.P.

*

Marina Villers-Massenet had never had a great deal of sympathy for dissidents. Human rights groups were, in her view, on a par with Sisyphus and his stone. The regime was all-powerful, and she was inclined to think there was little point in fighting it. That the Bolsheviks had managed to seize power in the first place was an aberration: that they had succeeded in spreading and maintaining their power throughout that huge land mass was another. Clearly they could have done neither without wholesale recourse to coercion and terror. Although the climate of the Union was not what it had been under Lenin and Stalin, the underpinning of violence was still there, institutionalized now, personified in the grey bureaucrats of the Communist Party and the darker grey ones of the KGB, tentacular, all-pervasive, regulating every aspect of Soviet life. The dissidents knew exactly what they were up against, and they had a pretty good idea what was going to happen to them if they persisted in stirring up trouble. Thus, when they got themselves imprisoned, or deported, or sent to Afghanistan, this was nothing very surprising, in Marina's opinion, and certainly nothing to become indignant about.

But the news that she was about to be confronted with an ex-Soviet dissident in the bosom of her own family disturbed her considerably. Of course, strictly speaking, it was not her family any more, but even after eight years her ex-husband insisted on inviting her to family gatherings, for the sake, he claimed, of Nicolas, their son, who would otherwise fall victim to the 'dangerous side-effects' of a broken marriage. André was a man who liked to have his own way. Even though he had remarried since their divorce, even though Gisèle, his new wife, viewed Marina's presence at these gatherings with as much distaste as Marina herself, there was no escaping it. Wife Number One and Wife Number Two: only a man as obsessed with family unity as André was capable of overlooking the overtones of the harem and regarding the presence of both women at the same table as perfectly natural. But the result of André's bullying was that she was going to have to meet this Sergei, and once she had met him it was more than likely that ethnic coincidence would force them into some kind of relationship. The more Marina thought about it, the more she disliked it. The fact that Sergei's ticket to the West had taken the form of a marriage certificate did not in itself alarm her. The ways of the regime were unfathomable. What alarmed her was the identity of Sergei's fictitious wife. Could the choice of Stéphanie really have been pure chance?

The proofs of her new book were supposed to be returned to the publisher as soon as possible. Leaving them uncorrected in her workroom, Marina drove across Paris to discuss things with Kazakov.

Kiril Kazakov lived in the same one-room apartment that he had rented when they deported him to Paris in 1975, and for ten years his flat had kept the same air of impermanence. Exile had

been the regime's way of dealing with literary troublemakers at that time, and Kazakov was following in illustrious footsteps: Nekrasov, Sinyavsky, Solzhenitsyn... Marina had met Kiril Stepanovich years earlier in Moscow, at some kind of cultural reception. She couldn't have been much older than Nicolas back then, while he was already in his forties and a well-known writer. But they had had a long talk at the reception, and he had found her number and telephoned her when he got to Paris. Marina avoided emigré circles out of both prudence and lack of interest, and Kazakov was the only Russian she knew.

Somewhat to her surprise, he seemed inclined to dismiss her fears. It had been a long time, he pointed out, they had probably forgotten about her by now, most likely it was just coincidence. Marina raised her eyebrows. Kazakov had had a long and eventful relationship with the KGB, both before and after he left the Soviet Union. Surely he knew that they had a long arm and a long memory? He was getting old now, admittedly, he must be past seventy, but surely he wasn't losing his memory? Could he have forgotten that every file in their archives was marked To Be Preserved For Ever?

She swallowed her impatience. "Probably you're right, Kiril Stepanovich. But if you still have contacts in Leningrad, I'd be grateful if you could check that this man is genuine. It would set my mind at rest."

"Of course, Marina Vladimirovna. I'd be happy to. What's his name?"

"I don't know, Stéphanie didn't say. Sergei something, that's all I know. I'll let you know when he arrives."

"No hurry," said Kazakov, "I can't do anything for a week or two anyway." Marina looked at him inquiringly, and he added, a little too casually, "I'm going into hospital tomorrow."

Marina had noticed already that he wasn't looking well. He had lost weight since she had seen him last. His clothes hung off him, and his skin had a greyish tinge to it.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Cancer. They want to operate on Friday."

"Cancer? Oh no! Are they sure? How bad is it?"

Kazakov shrugged fatalistically. "How would I know? You can never tell with doctors. They say if I have the operation now that I'll live a few more years. How can I be sure if they're telling the truth or not?"

"I hope they are."

"So do I," said Kazakov, and the old energy and irony glinted briefly in his eyes. "Things are beginning to get interesting. I wouldn't want to miss finding out what happens next."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the ice is melting in our planet of the snows. I mean that things may be changing at last."

"Because of Gorbachev? Well yes, a little bit, maybe. I heard that they're easing up a little bit on literary censorship-"

"They certainly are," said Kazakov. "They've published poems by Nikolai Gumilev and some of his correspondence with Akhmatova; they've published an excerpt from Nabokov's memoirs-"

"In a low-circulation chess journal," said Marina, eyeing him curiously. Why so much enthusiasm over a poet who had been shot in 1921, and an emigré writer who had left Russia in 1919? When were they going to publish Solzhenitsyn? Pasternak? Kazakov himself, come to that?

"It's a start. It's a step in the right direction. Gorbachev can't go too far too fast, you know that as well as I do. And there's more than that, Marina Vladimirovna."

He had been pacing around the room, but now he sat down in a battered red vinyl armchair and leant towards Marina confidentially. She waited, intrigued. The room was as always scrupulously neat. Papers piled tidily on the table where he worked, clothes out of sight in the cupboard, the portrait of Stalin in its place on the wall opposite the table.

"They've asked me to go back."

"Go back?" Marina instinctively lowered her voice. "What do you mean?"

"Someone from the Writers' Union contacted me. One of my old comrades-in- arms who used to sign petitions against me. He was in Paris not long ago. We happened to meet." He shrugged delicately, as if to underline the non-accidental nature of the encounter.

"What did he say?"

"That my place is in my homeland. That I can write what I want, publish what I want. The past will not be held against me. The slate has been wiped clean."

Marina gazed at him doubtfully. She had heard that they were making overtures to well-known emigrés: what was surprising was that Kazakov was apparently giving the offer serious consideration. "Do you believe them?"

"I don't know."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Kazakov sighed. "I'm not sure yet. Probably nothing. Reason tells me it's too big a chance to take." His eyes strayed to the portrait of Stalin on the wall. "I don't want to be ambushed at the airport and sent off to a camp."

"They'd hardly do that."

"The KGB can do anything they want," said Kazakov, sounding suddenly like his old self again. "Look what they did to people who went back in the Forties. Look what they've done to that American journalist, Daniloff. And to this dissident friend of Stéphanie's too."

"Assuming he's genuine."

"Assuming he's genuine," agreed Kazakov reluctantly. "Well, you're right, I suppose, he might not be. It could be a set up."

"The ice is melting. It's true that it's beginning to melt, and it might go on melting. But how far can it go? Gorbachev can shake up the bureaucracy a bit, he can loosen press controls, publish a few banned books -- but after that? If he goes any further, if he attempts any serious political reform, he's going to come up against the Party, and that'll be the end of it. No one's tried to reform the apparat since Khrushchev twenty years ago, and Gorbachev won't have forgotten what they did to him."

"I know." Kazakov sighed again, and his gaze wandered round the room, lingering on the French post office calendar, the box of soap-powder marked Persil lave plus blanc, the jumble of chimneys and rooftops against the grey Paris sky outside the window.

"You're right of course. Reason tells me I should turn them down. But my heart is tempted, Marina Vladimirovna. I don't want to die in a foreign country."

Marina reached out and put a hand on his. "Give it time. See how things develop."

"Time," said Kazakov wistfully, and they were both silent for a while. Then he got up and put water in a pan to boil.

"When's he arriving, this dissident of yours?"

"Saturday."

"As soon as that? Well, if you really think he's a KGB provocateur you'd better avoid him for a few days, till they let me out of hospital."

"No chance of that," said Marina gloomily. "André's making us all go to lunch on Sunday to look him over."

*

In March 1988, when Gorbachev had been in power for three years, and glasnost and perestroika had been under way for just under two, the conservative Party paper *Sovetskaya Rossiya* ran a 4,500-word letter from a Leningrad chemistry teacher called Nina Andreyeva. The letter expressed distaste for religious tolerance, sexual promiscuity and emigration. It denounced recent media attempts to link Stalin with the rise of fascism, and urged the Soviet people to overlook his occasional 'mistakes' and focus instead on his role in providing the nation with collectivization and saving it from Hitler. Andreyeva lamented the demise of the class struggle and the failure of the workers to oppose world capitalism. She sniped at Jews, Trotsky, intellectuals, imperialists, capitalists, emigrés and left-wing liberals. The article was called *I Cannot Forsake Principles*.

Gorbachev was in Yugoslavia when this nostalgic little tract appeared, and Aleksandr Yakovlev, his main liberal ally in the Politburo, was in Mongolia. Presumably no coincidence. Yegor Ligachev, the Party's Chief Ideologist and the number two man in the Politburo, invited leading newspaper editors and broadcasters to read and reprint this 'wonderful document.' A lot of them did. After that, silence. For three weeks, there was no further official reaction. Infighting intensified in the Politburo, intellectuals joked half-seriously about knocks on the door in the middle of the night, Kremlinologists in the West awaited developments with bated breath. But no one was really surprised. "I was already wondering how much further the reforms would be able to go," Sergei's friend Yarik told me, several years later. "Gorbachev was taking things so much further than Khrushchev had ever tried to do. It was inevitable that sooner or later there would be a reaction and then everything would grind to a halt. When I read the Andreyeva letter, I simply assumed that this was it. The reforms were over."

Does this make things clearer to you? Do you understand better now why perestroika aroused so much scepticism? Reform in Russia is a fragile plant with shallow roots, easily ripped out of the earth and trampled on. Nikita Khrushchev, Gorbachev's predecessor on the reform path, had been unceremoniously removed from his post and pensioned off twenty years earlier. Gorbachev was taking on not just the old men, the apparatchiks, the entrenched bureaucracy, but the very roots of the socialist myth. Stalin Without Whom Industrialization Could Not Have Been Achieved. Collectivization Which Was A Necessary Sacrifice. The Proletariat Which Plays A Leading Role In Society.

'Does he mean it?' By 1988, the initial doubts as to Gorbachev's sincerity had more or less abated. It was clear that he meant what he said, but equally clear that he was encountering considerable resistance from the Party hardliners. 'Can he get away with it?' As it turned out, Gorbachev repelled this first onslaught with relative ease. The affair was settled in a matter of weeks, via the accustomed channels. A counter-article by Yakovlev in *Pravda*. Reprimands to Ligachev and the editor of *Sovetskaya Rossiya*. Party men fighting other Party men. The General Secretary knew how to deal with apparatchiks and Stalinists. The trouble with perestroika was

that it unleashed forces which Gorbachev had not anticipated, and had no idea how to handle. Thirty years in the apparat had taught him how to deal with opponents in the Politburo and the Central Committee. But the real enemy was elsewhere. When protesters began to spring up in the streets, the mines, the national republics, Gorbachev was lost. His skills in backroom manoeuvering were useless in the face of nationalists demanding independence and workers demanding democracy. He had been trained to fight ideological battles, not real ones. He began to flail around and lose direction, veering first left, then right, then left again.

And that, of course, was when the putschists took a hand in things.

*

André had conceived the idea of a family gathering to welcome Stéphanie back from Leningrad several months earlier. It would be a good way to welcome her back into the fold, to show one held no grudges against her, but at the same time make it absolutely clear that she had had her little Russian fling, and now it was time to get her priorities in order and start to pull her weight in the family circle. She couldn't go on studying for ever, it was high time to get married and settle down. Such a pity her father had died when he did. Jacques was the only one who could ever make Stéphanie see sense, but it was no good crying over spilt milk. It was André's duty now to take the place of his elder brother and make sure Stéphanie did what was expected of her. (One certainly couldn't rely on her mother to do that. Monique had always let Stéphanie do exactly what she wanted provided it didn't interfere with her bridge games.) Towards the end of the summer he had explained his requirements to Gisèle, and she had worked out the menu and drawn up the guest list. And then Stéphanie had telephoned her mother six days before she was due to come home to announce that she had contracted a mariage blanc with some dissident who was being hounded by the secret police.

André's initial reaction was amazement (on aura vraiment tout vu!) followed by rage (quelle petite conne, enfin!). His first impulse was to cancel the lunch. But on reflection he decided to go ahead with it. A reminder to Stéphanie of her duties and obligations was more necessary than ever. Over Gisèle's protests, he decided to include the dissident as well. It would be just as well to look the fellow over, see if he seemed the sort to cause trouble, and take immediate measures if necessary. An invitation like this would show him that one was not insensitive to his unfortunate situation, while at the same time making it absolutely clear that he had no place in the family and that Stéphanie's rightful husband was poised to take his place as soon as he got his affairs in order. Philippe would naturally be present, as would his parents and his sister Louise, who had been a friend of Stéphanie's since they were at school. There was another friend too, André recalled, they had gone round in a threesome for years, might as well invite her too. In a situation like this, it did no harm to close ranks. Marina and Nicolas would also attend, he would insist on it, and maybe this would at last bring Marina to her senses and make her realize the harm she had wrought by indoctrinating Stéphanie with Russian fairy tales at age four, encouraging her to study Russian at school, and finally dispatching her to Russia in an attempt to assuage her own emotional needs. André could only congratulate himself that he had prevented her from infecting their own son in the same way.

The next question was where to hold the reception. André owned an apartment on Rue de Passy, in the sixteenth arrondissement, and a country house in Rambouillet. (There was the villa

in Dinard too, but one was hardly going to drive out to Brittany just for Sunday lunch.) After due consideration, he opted for the country.

The house in Rambouillet had been purchased thirty years earlier by André's father. It was a square nineteenth-century building sitting solidly in the middle of a sloping expanse of lawn. It spoke of substance and wealth and an assured place in the world. André knew that: it was the reason he wanted the dissident to see it. Sunday was a fine, warm day: the whole month of September had been unseasonably warm this year. Juanita laid the table on the terrace under Gisèle's supervision: nothing too elaborate, because this was after all the country, but with a certain elegance. André read *Le Journal du Dimanche* and watched the proceedings with approval. If his first marriage had been an impractical, youthful mistake, his second was an unqualified success. One could always count on Gisèle to strike the right note.

By the time Stéphanie and her mother arrived with the dissident, most of the other guests were already there. André had made sure of that. As Monique's car started up the drive, there were no fewer than eight people sitting on white garden chairs on the lawn or lounging against the balustrade at the edge of the terrace. The car drew up at the front entrance. André signalled to Gisèle. Side by side, they went forward to greet them, the prodigal niece and the cuckoo in the nest.

*

Sergei could not understand why he was being invited to meet Stéphanie's family. In the circumstances, he had expected them to ignore his existence altogether. Especially in the light of what Stéphanie had said about them on the plane the day before, with the enchantment of Peter's City fading into the mists, the enormity of what she had done beginning to dawn on her, and the first stirrings of panic creeping through her mind. But when she came to collect him on Sunday morning at his borrowed flat, with an unfamiliar hairstyle and a sleek white dress, looking nothing like the naive little girl he had known in Leningrad, he had the first glimmerings of comprehension, and when they arrived at the uncle's house and he saw the grey stone mansion and the manicured lawns, it all became perfectly plain. He was uncomfortably aware that his shirt collar was frayed and his old brown corduroy trousers needed pressing. For the first time in his life, he understood why Lenin had attached so much importance to the class struggle.

He got out of the car and had just time for a brief look round before the forces of the bourgeois avant-garde were upon them, firing expensive cologne and veiled contempt.

"Stéphanie! My dear child!" With greying hair brushed back from bronzed temples, André was an imposing figure. He was a lawyer, Stéphanie had explained, with an office in the wealthy eighth arrondissement.

"So this is Sergei." Loud voice, firm handshake, stern appraisal. The set of the mouth was that of someone used to getting his own way. "Welcome to France. You and I must have a chat later, young man."

"Welcome to France," echoed his wife, Gisèle. Blonde streaks, limp handshake, weak smile. "My dear Stéphanie, surely you've lost weight? You don't look well at all."

"Come along and say hello to everyone," commanded André. "They're all longing to see you."

Taking Stéphanie's arm in his, he steered her round the corner of the house on to the terrace. Monique had gone ahead. Sergei and Gisèle drifted uneasily behind.

"Such wonderful weather for the time of year."

"Beautiful."

As they approached, everyone turned to look at them. Sergei had the impression that they had moved closer together since he had caught sight of them from the drive: the group joining forces to repel the intruder in its midst: and then they began to detach themselves and move forward one by one.

"Nicolas, good gracious! You're taller than I am! Sergei, this is my cousin, Nicolas."

"Enchanté." Seventeen or eighteen, Sergei judged, dark-haired, brown-eyed, the same assessing stare as André, his father, but more curious, less hostile, and something else about him too that was oddly familiar...

"Louise! I didn't know you were going to be here! How's the baby coming along? How are you feeling? Antonin, how are you? Sergei, this is Philippe's sister and her husband."

Sergei shook hands with a trim, slightly horse-faced blonde in the early stages of pregnancy. "So this is...Sergei." She tried out the unfamiliar name on her tongue and grimaced slightly at the taste. "Good heavens," she said, and her hand dropped like a dead weight by her side.

A distinguished-looking couple in their fifties trod regally across the terrace. The others fell back before them. André took over the introductions. "Sergei, I think you should meet the Vicomte and Vicomtesse de Feucherolles."

"Philippe's parents," murmured Stéphanie, moving forward for an obligatory but distinctly glacial embrace. "Bonjour, Isabelle. Bonjour, Édouard."

A maid carrying a tray of glasses appeared by André's side. "Champagne, my dear? To celebrate your safe return."

"Oh, how nice," said Stéphanie brightly. She took two glasses off the tray and handed one to Sergei. "Here, taste this. The real thing. Nothing like that Georgian stuff we drank at our...er...the other day."

"Georgian champagne? How curious."

"Soviet Georgia, Gisèle. Marina, there you are!"

Sergei opened his eyes a little wider. Marina? Was this Marina? The woman coming towards them was thin and dark with a stylish-looking haircut and a dress even sleeker than Stéphanie's. Nothing distinguished her from the rest of them; nothing seemed to set her aside. Her clothes, her jewellery, her manner all seemed to indicate that she was as French as any of them. She wore the same gold chains around her neck, the same clinking bracelets on her wrists. She had the same self-assured manner, and Sergei would have been prepared to bet that when she spoke it would be with the same high-pitched, sixteenth-arrondissement drawl. Yet she hugged Stéphanie warmly and answered her in Russian. "Dobro pozhalovat!" No, there was no mistake. This was definitely Marina, and Stéphanie had taken her arm and was leading her towards him.

"Sergei, I want you to meet Marina. My aunt. Nicolas' mother." The forced smile she had been wearing since she got out of the car had disappeared, and a real one had taken its place. "Without Marina I-"

Two more people came into sight round the corner of the house, and she broke off.

"Darling, here's Philippe," said Monique. Sergei had already guessed who he was. Stéphanie's fiancé had the face of a film star and hair the colour of spun gold. He appeared on the sunlit terrace like an angel of light in all his limpid glory. It was easy to see why she had fallen for him: any woman would.

"And Caroline too," said Marina. Without a word, Stéphanie left the group and went towards them. Caroline was wearing a man's white silk shirt tucked into a tight white mini skirt. Tendrils of long blonde hair curled round her shoulders and down inside the neckline of the shirt, like the mane of some prowling, irrepressible animal. Sergei wondered how such an obvious predator had found her way into this decorous gathering.

"So you fell foul of the KGB?" said Marina.

He switched his attention back to her. "That's right."

"Human rights?" She was looking him over with shrewd grey eyes and making no attempt to hide it.

"Yes. To begin with, I was in a group that got rolled up in 1981. I lay low for a while after that happened, and then some friends and I started a newsletter. One thing led to another, we expanded it from one page to two, and then to three. Maybe the tone of what we were saying got a little bolder. And eventually they noticed our existence and started taking an interest in us."

"Is that what you think?" said Marina, and the scepticism in her voice was so strong that Sergei stopped talking and looked at her inquiringly.

"What do you mean?" he asked, deliberately lapsing into Russian.

"From what I've heard, the KGB is very well informed about what goes on in Leningrad dissident circles." She spoke in French. "I've even heard it said they control most dissident activities themselves."

"There are something like twenty samizdat publications in Leningrad," retorted Sergei. "It's inevitable that some of them should come to the attention of the Chekists. But they certainly don't control everything."

"How did they get on to you?"

"We think it was an informant outside the group. Other people knew what we were doing."

Marina smiled with polite incredulity.

"Sergei," said Stéphanie, and there was a distinct edge to her voice, "this is Caroline, who is longing to meet you." Sergei swung round and found himself looking into the ample cleavage revealed by the generously opened shirt. "Caroline is an old school friend of mine. She and Louise and I have all known each other for years and years and years."

"How do you do, Sergei?" She had the voice that went with the look: low and husky. "Is that how you pronounce it?"

"More or less."

"Serg-ay, not Serg-eye," corrected Stéphanie.

"Serg-ay," repeated Caroline, without taking her eyes off him. "I do think this is exciting, I've been so looking forward to it. I've never met anyone who managed to get away from the KGB before. You must tell me all about it."

Stéphanie said, "Do you mean you knew other people who didn't manage to get away?"

"I'd be delighted," said Sergei.

"Stéphanie? What are you doing?" Philippe had appeared behind them. His voice was light and imperious: simply by listening to it, Sergei could imagine how he had grown over the years from spoiled child to wilful youth to arrogant, self-absorbed young man. Stéphanie swung round to face him.

"Philippe. Darling." Side by side, they made a striking couple: Philippe so blond and Stéphanie so dark, and both of them with looks well above the average. "I'd like you to meet Sergei."

Sergei forced a smile to his lips and held out his hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Is that so?" Philippe looked down at Sergei's outstretched hand and made no move to take it. Instead he turned away to greet Monique. "And you, chère amie, how are you today?"

Stéphanie bit her lip and avoided Sergei's eyes. Monique, who had noticed nothing, returned Philippe's greeting. Sergei looked thoughtfully at Philippe's back. So his mother had been right.

André put an arm round Stéphanie's shoulders and raised his voice. "I'm told that the table is ready. Shall we all sit down?"

*

Stéphanie's reunion with Philippe had taken place the previous night, at the well-known Paris restaurant Chez Jean. The previous winter it had been the trendiest place in town, and six months later it was still ahead of the competition. The decor was vaguely Belle Époque, the walls were beige and the tablecloths were dull pink. Thick carpeting muffled the tread of the waiters and the hum of voices. There were fresh flowers on every table. The lighting was perfectly gauged for the diners to look their best, yet still see what they were eating. Crossing the room in her Manuel Berger erstwhile wedding dress, Stéphanie forgot her nervousness long enough to inhale with pleasure the calm, cossetted atmosphere. Leningrad suddenly seemed a long way away.

Philippe was waiting at his favourite corner table. He stood up to greet her, kissed her aloofly on both cheeks and ordered two kirs without consulting her. It had been their traditional apéritif the previous winter. Stéphanie said nothing. The waiter withdrew. They eyed each other warily. Under the table, Stéphanie's hands were shaking.

"So, Stéphanie, I hear you're a married woman now?" said Philippe.

The tone was light, but there were dark circles under his eyes, and the strain was evident in the lines of his face. Seeing him there face to face, after six months of unsatisfactory letters, Stéphanie was submerged by a sudden wave of guilt. They had had such a good time the previous winter, he had taken her to all sorts of nice places, and look how she repaid him! What on earth had she done? How could she have behaved so abominably?

"Oh no. No I'm not. Not really." Philippe raised his eyebrows: her voice began to wobble. She clutched her hands together and tried to get a grip on herself. She mustn't make a scene, especially not here, Philippe would never forgive her. "In name only," she said more steadily. "It doesn't mean anything, Philippe. You mustn't think that. It's merely a matter of administrative convenience."

"Convenience?" said Philippe. "Whose convenience? Certainly not mine."

"Well no, I do appreciate that." She lowered her eyes to the table.

"You've put me in an impossible position, Stéphanie. Totally impossible. I've been living in a dream since I heard the news. First Grandval's heart attack and now this. Monsieur Manuel has asked me twice what was wrong."

"I know. I had absolutely no right to do this to you, please don't think I don't realize that."

"Then why did you?"

"Sergei was being harrassed by the Chek- the KGB. If he hadn't left, he'd probably be in prison by now. And this was the only way for him to leave."

"I daresay it was, but why did you have to get involved? There must have been plenty of other foreigners around to help him out of his predicament."

"It's not easy for Soviet citizens to get to know foreigners."

"Then how did he get to know you?"

"Oh... we were introduced. By friends. One of the girls I shared a room with."

"One imagines, nevertheless, that for him to make this kind of proposition he must have known you rather well," said Philippe, and Stéphanie felt herself flushing. "I want the truth. Have you slept with him?"

"No. Never. I've never even kissed him. It was never that kind of relationship."

She looked him straight in the eyes: this time it was Philippe who lowered his gaze.

"I used to visit his mother a lot. She's a very nice lady: I'm sure you'd like her. It was really on her account that I agreed to do this for Sergei. She's an invalid, and she's not in good health. The KGB was harrassing them, there were house searches, phone calls, Sergei was being followed in the street. It was a lot of strain on her."

"Oh. I see. Well." He was clearly disconcerted. "An invalid. Well, even so, I...." He looked at her more closely. "Isn't that the dress I gave you before you left?"

"Why yes it is. How clever of you to remember. It's the first time I've been able to wear it, actually. There wasn't much call for this sort of thing in Leningrad."

"I must say, it's one of the best things Monsieur Manuel's ever done. The cut of the neckline, those tucks in the sleeves... It suits you too."

The waiter arrived with the kirs.

"We'll skip the toast, I think," said Philippe, picking up his glass. "I'd like to know exactly where I stand in all this. What do you propose to do now?"

Stéphanie took a large gulp of kir. "Sergei can apply for French citizenship in six months' time. We'll have to make a couple of visits to the Préfecture, but other than that I won't need to see much of him. As soon as he has his papers, we'll file for divorce. In eighteen months, everything should be back to normal."

"Eighteen months!" Philippe gazed at her bemusedly. "Eighteen months? My dear Stéphanie, you surely can't be serious? What am I supposed to tell people? You realize what it could mean for my career if this got out? As far as Monsieur Manuel is concerned, I'd be finished, absolutely finished."

"But, darling, why would Monsieur Manuel ever find out?" Stéphanie took another large swallow of kir and leant conspiratorially across the table. "Who's going to tell him? No one will know anything about it, apart from our families."

"Eighteen-month engagements are a little rare these days."

"Couldn't we say we're waiting till I've finished my thesis?"

There was a long silence. Stéphanie finished her kir. "Well I suppose it's not totally unreasonable. One could certainly give it a try. God knows I've already got enough to worry about with Grandval out of commission. I really don't need any more problems just now."

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André was sitting at the head of the table with Stéphanie on his right and the Vicomtesse on his left. Philippe was on Stéphanie's other side, and Sergei found himself at the far end of the table,

between Monique and Marina. The first course was lobster, which was not a dish he had previously encountered. Marina identified it and told him how to deal with it in a few terse sentences before getting involved in a conversation with the Vicomte on her other side. Monique was busy bemoaning the difficulty of finding good servants with her sister-in-law, Nicolas and Antonin were talking about computers, Caroline and Louise were discussing some literary bestseller he had never heard of, and Sergei was left to himself. He had drunk too much champagne and was feeling a little light-headed. He rarely touched alcohol: his father had seen to that. Down at the other end of the table, Stéphanie was entertaining her future in-laws with selected episodes of her adventures in Leningrad. Sergei listened briefly, but it sounded nothing like any Leningrad he had ever known, and his sense of unreality grew. What was he doing here? Who were all these people? With their smooth, tanned skins and their smooth manners, it was hard to tell them apart. The men wore the same kind of pastel sports shirts and the women nearly all wore white. Monique, in shocking pink, was the only one who stood out. Louise, Caroline, Gisèle, Marina, even Stéphanie seemed to have melted chameleon-like into the crowd. Their gold chains glinted in the sunlight, their bracelets clinked and jangled when they moved their arms, their earrings sparked and dazzled when they turned their heads. Stéphanie had sprouted an enormous diamond ring: the long-lost engagement ring presumably. If she had looked like that standing on Arts Square six months earlier, Sergei knew he would never have had the nerve to walk up to her. André had filled everyone's glass with white wine. Against his better judgement, Sergei picked up his glass and began to drink.

"Homesick?" said Marina, and he realized she must have been watching him.

"A little. All this is very strange."

"I can imagine. When I first came here, I had culture shock for ages. But don't worry, one gets over it very fast."

"I hear your boss had a heart attack last month," said André to Philippe. "Amazing thing. Can't be more than about fifty-five, can he?"

"Fifty-seven," said Philippe. "Too many high-cholesterol lunches, if you ask me. And too many years holding Monsieur Manuel's hand through four collections a year."

"The best thing about the Third World," said Gisèle, "is that they need the jobs. They aren't going to walk out on you because their children are ill or something, there's none of that nonsense."

"You must have read *Le Parfum Du Sphinx*?" said Caroline.

"Oh yes, I simply adored it," said Louise.

"What about now?" said Sergei. "Do you never get homesick?"

"Good heavens, no. I've been in France over twenty years, you know." Marina gave him a distant smile. "My home is here now. My career, my family, my friends."

"Of course, Marina's the person best qualified to give us an opinion," said Louise.

"On *Le Parfum Du Sphinx*? I have to confess I only got through two chapters. I've always found him quite unreadable."

"Marina, you can't be serious," said Antonin. "The *Sphinx* is one of the most significant books to have come out of Eastern Europe in the past ten years."

"Well it could be, I suppose. I'm just not terribly interested in reading about the sexual fantasies of a violin teacher in a small Carpathian town in the 1950's."

"1956," corrected Louise meaningfully.

"You can't reduce it to mere sexual fantasies. *Le Monde* said it was a negation of the totalitarian attempt to destroy the political and cultural universe of the European adventure."

"I'm sorry, Antonin, but it bored me. What's more, it's badly written."

"Oh well, if you're talking from a professional viewpoint," said Louise crossly. "Did you see him on television last week, Caroline?"

"Oh God yes. All that white hair. So impressive. One wouldn't mind investigating a few of his sexual fantasies oneself."

"Are you a writer too?" said Sergei.

"Yes," said Marina. "I write for children."

"It's vitally important for me that things run smoothly while Grandval's away on sick leave," said Philippe. "There's a rumour, you know, that he might take early retirement."

"Juanita's always been very reliable," said Gisèle. "She can cook too, which a lot of them can't."

"As I was telling Stéphanie last night, all this has blown up at rather a bad moment."

"What have you been doing since you got here?" said Marina in Russian.

"Just walking," said Sergei. "Looking at things. Shop windows, people on the street, those big advertising posters. At home, a poster that size would say, The Communist Party Is The Glory Of The Motherland. Here it says, La Vie Est Trop Courte Pour S'Habiller Triste. Everything's so light and bright and colourful - I never, ever imagined it could be like this." He was talking too much, he knew, but the wine seemed to have unlocked his tongue and the words were pouring out of their own accord. "I went into a Russian bookstore, and there were rows and rows of books, all in Russian, things that people at home would sell their souls for. There was a book my mother tried to get hold of for months, and I saw three copies of it just sitting there. I couldn't believe it. It made me dizzy, just looking at them. When you're used to passing books from hand to hand, furtively, and having to read them in one night... It's just too much to take in."

"What are you two jabbering about?" demanded Nicolas, and Sergei looked at him in mild surprise.

"Sergei's describing his first impressions of the West," said Marina.

"Oh," said Nicolas.

"Oh really?" said Monique, turning towards him. "So what strikes you the most, Sergei?"

Sergei smiled at her. Monique was a nice lady, which was quite a rarity round here. She had come to fetch them at the airport the previous day and she had been very kind to him, considering the circumstances. She had dropped him off at the flat Stéphanie had borrowed from friends who had gone to Ankara, insisted on climbing six floors to "make sure it was all right," expressed concern about the stain on the ceiling and the state of the plumbing, and invited him to stay with her and Stéphanie for a few days, an offer he had turned down immediately. It wouldn't be fair to Philippe, he had told her, and she had smiled a sweet, guileless smile, and said that she was sure he and Philippe would get on wonderfully together. Now that he had met Philippe, Sergei was beginning to suspect that Monique was a little short on perspicacity, but nevertheless she was well intentioned, which was more than could be said for the rest of his fellow guests.

"There's so much of everything, that's what surprises me most. Food, books, clothes -- it's too much for a Soviet person to grasp. Especially food. I went into a supermarket and I didn't know

what to buy. All those cans, packages, jars... There were six different brands of jam and ten different flavours."

Philippe and André had broken off their conversation to listen.

"How many were you expecting?" said Philippe. The faintly contemptuous undertone was impossible to miss.

Sergei shot him a brief glance, but continued to address Monique. "When you've seen people standing in queues to buy food all your life, you can't conceive that there should be so much of it freely available, and you can't conceive that you should have a choice." He turned to Marina. "Didn't you find that when you first got here too?"

For some reason, Marina looked uncomfortable. "It wasn't so noticeable twenty years ago. That is... I ... the difference wasn't so marked."

"How extraordinary to have to queue up for everything," said Gisèle. "Like during the war, or something."

"It's deliberate," said Sergei. "If people are kept busy queuing up for the necessities of life, they won't have time to think about overthrowing the regime."

"Oh," said Gisèle.

Marina said, half-amused and half-exasperated, "You talk as if overthrowing the regime was a concrete possibility."

"Of course," said Sergei.

"But that's impossible-"

"The impossibility is in people's heads."

"Except for the dissidents."

Sergei said, "If the liberal intelligentsia like yourself supported the dissident movement a little more actively, the outlook would be a lot more favorable. If you all got down off the fence and came out in support of the views you claim to profess, the situation in the Soviet Union would be very different. What hampers the dissident movement is the lack of numbers. If the intelligentsia would only rally to our cause instead of sitting around denigrating it, there would be real pressure on the regime to make changes."

"Maybe," said Marina, "but you're wrong about one thing." He had spoken in Russian and she answered him in the same language.

"What's that?"

"Your categorization of me. In Soviet terms, I do not belong to the liberal intelligentsia."

"Don't tell me you're from a working class background?" His eyes went ironically to the heavy gold chains around her neck.

"No, though my father was." She hesitated. "Didn't Stéphanie tell you about me?"

"No. All she told me was that she had a Russian friend who had aroused her interest in Russia and the Russian language. She didn't even tell me that the friend was part of the family."

"I see. Well, my father belonged to the nomenklatura."

"The nomenklatura?" Sergei stared at her. "But I ... I don't understand, I thought- But then how did you get out?"

"Me? Oh, I defected," said Marina nonchalantly.

"What on earth are they talking about?" demanded André.

"Riddles wrapped in mysteries wrapped in enigmas," said the Vicomte, and chuckled at his own wit.

"Family antecedents," said Stéphanie, and they both glared at her.

"I must say it's a bit much when one can't understand what people are saying in one's own house."

"I suppose Nicolas speaks Russian to his mother?" said Philippe.

"He certainly does not," said André. "I put my foot down. There's no contact with Marina's family in Russia, what does he need to speak Russian for? I have an old friend who lives in the north of England and Nicolas goes there every summer. Fluent English, that's what you need these days."

"Oh absolutely," said Philippe.

"Stéphanie used to go there too when she was younger."

"Oh really? What a good idea. So anyway, you see, the person I need to convince is Monsieur Manuel. He doesn't think I have enough experience to take over from Grandval."

"I thought it was his brother who ran the place, not him?" said André.

"Monsieur Gérard? Yes, of course, but it's Monsieur Manuel who has the final say when it comes to personnel changes. Claims he can't work if the people around him aren't on the same wavelength. These creative people get away with murder."

Gisèle signalled to André down the table and he got obediently to his feet. "Time to deal with the barbecue. Will you excuse me?"

"We were thinking of getting an au pair to look after the baby," said Louise. "But it's so hard to find someone reliable."

"My sister used to have au pair girls," said Caroline. "She had an Irish girl who got homesick, an American girl who packed all her bags and sneaked out in the middle of the night, and an English girl whose boyfriend showed up out of nowhere one day to sweep her off her feet back to London."

"God, what a bore," said Louise.

The maid removed the dirty plates and the lobster debris. The smell of grilling steak came from the barbecue at the far end of the terrace. The maître de maison had donned a butcher's apron and was presiding over the cooking. Antonin came around with a bottle of Bordeaux in each hand. "Drink up your Muscadet, Sergei. We're switching to red for the main course."

Reluctantly, Sergei complied. He would end up with a splitting headache if this went on. Meanwhile, he was becoming more and more intrigued by Marina, the daughter of the nomenklatura who had defected to France. There was something here that didn't add up.

"How long did you say you'd been out?" he asked her.

"Since 1964."

"You defected in 1964? But you must have been very young?"

"Young and in love," said Marina. Her eyes strayed to André, flipping over steaks in his pale pink Lacoste polo shirt, with his well-bred forehead creased in concentration. There was an undertone of incredulity in her voice. They were speaking Russian again.

"How very romantic," said Sergei, baffled.

"Romantic? No, not really. That's the wrong word. It was dramatic: melodramatic, even, one might say, but it wasn't romantic."

"We Russians are not romantic," Sergei agreed. "Sentimental, yes, but not romantic."

"Russians?" said Marina as if she'd never heard of them. "Maybe you're right."

"Do they have computers in the Soviet Union, Sergei?" demanded Nicolas, apparently intent on breaking up the conversation. Was it true, Sergei wondered, that he didn't understand a word of Russian?

"Not many."

"Can't they afford them, or something?"

"In a state-controlled economy, you can afford anything you like, Nicolas. It's simply a question of allocating the necessary funds. The reason we don't have computers is because it would mean giving people too much access to information the authorities don't want them to have."

"And that of course is why you people are so far behind the West," said Antonin, pouring wine on the other side of the table. "Economically speaking, I mean. You simply don't have the technology to keep up with us. It's lucky for you that you finally have someone who's prepared to come out and admit all this, and try and do something about it."

"It's not lucky for us," retorted Sergei. "It might be lucky for the Party if it helps them stay in power a bit longer."

"What about video games and stuff like that?" insisted Nicolas.

"If people in the Soviet Union had personal computers, the last thing they would do is play video games on them."

"That doesn't sound much fun," said Nicolas.

"Nobody said it was fun," said Sergei.

"Working with Monsieur Manuel isn't always easy," said Philippe, "but one can't avoid the fact that the man's a genius. He knows how to redefine his vision of women according to the prevailing mood of the times. You see it with every single collection."

Sergei noticed Stéphanie stifling a yawn, and he smiled at her across the table. He had stopped caring whether anyone noticed or not. The family agitprop session was a resounding success as far as he was concerned. It was perfectly plain that he and they belonged to different worlds, and what was more, he was heartily thankful for it. Stéphanie smiled back. For a moment, their eyes held. She had been looking increasingly unhappy as the meal wore on. Of course, this whole ordeal was his fault. He hadn't had the slightest idea what he was exposing her to. But then, how could he? He hadn't even known that people like this existed. He sensed that Marina had intercepted the exchange and was looking speculatively from one to the other of them. Well, that was too bad. She could think what she liked. Her home was here, she was one of them. She looked like them, dressed like them, behaved like them. As for Sergei himself, she didn't trust him and she didn't like him. He found it hard to imagine that after today he would ever see her again.

*

After the steaks came salad and cheese, and then ice-cream from Berthillon, a shop on the Ile Saint Louis which apparently sold the best ice cream in Paris.

"How on earth do you find the time to go over there?" asked Louise.

"Well, naturally," said Gisèle, "I don't go myself. Juanita goes over in a taxi to collect it."

Marina said to Sergei in Russian, "Berthillon is the one place in Paris you might have to queue. But naturally one doesn't go and stand in line oneself."

"Do stop talking Russian, Ma," said Nicolas.

"You should learn it yourself," said Sergei pleasantly. "It's a beautiful language -- and very convenient when you don't want to be understood."

There was a sudden nervous silence all around them. He glanced at Marina, wondering if he had gone too far, but she appeared to be smothering the tail-end of a grin. Her hostility towards him seemed to have vanished, and he wondered why.

The Vicomte patted his lips delicately with his napkin and inquired whether Sergei was going to be able to find work in France.

"Yes," said Sergei briefly. He was tired of these people who thought of nothing but au pair girls and promotions: it was too much of an effort to be polite to them any more.

"Oh? What will you do?"

"Translations. Journalism. Possibly Russian lessons. I have the names of people to contact at various emigré publications. I don't foresee any difficulties."

"Good," said Philippe. "The sooner you're able to look after yourself, the better. Stéphanie says he should be out of our lives in eighteen months at the latest," he added to André.

"Oh no," Sergei contradicted him. "Much sooner than that."

"Really? Stéphanie was telling me last night that the formalities-"

"I shall be out of Stéphanie's life in eighteen months. But after today there's no reason why I should trouble any of the rest of you with my presence again." He smiled courteously round the table and his gaze came to rest on Philippe. Cher ami, she's all yours. If she wants you, which I doubt, because it's me she wants, I know it and she knows it, but she may have to settle for you in the end, so make the most of your good fortune. "I appreciate your inviting me here to meet you all, but I don't believe there's any need to prolong the acquaintance further." From the glazed looks on all their faces, he gathered that this was not the kind of thing that was said in polite society. At least, not by intruders. Maybe it was time to leave. He took his napkin off his knees and put it on the table.

Marina put a restraining hand on his arm. "Don't leave," she said urgently in Russian, "you'll only make things worse."

"Seriozha-" said Stéphanie, and it was impossible to miss the imploring note in her voice.

"Well I appreciate your attitude, young man," said André. "I'm glad to see you view things so, er, constructively. But don't forget that we are Stéphanie's family. Her situation, her future prospects, her, er, happiness are a matter of intimate concern to all of us. After God and one's country, one's family is the most important thing in one's life. If one cannot look to one's family for support in times of trouble and moral guidance in times of doubt, where can one look? I'm sure even you as a communist must agree with that?"

There was a long tense silence. Juanita came out of the house and whispered something in Gisèle's ear. Sergei considered the idea of taking her aside and giving her a quick briefing on the class struggle. Meanwhile, André was waiting for an answer.

"Actually, I'm not a communist," said Sergei. "Not yet."

*

There was some hitch with the coffee: it would be served in just a few minutes, Gisèle announced with an irritated smile. People pushed their chairs back and got up to stretch their

legs. André bore off Sergei for a stroll in the rose garden. Philippe took the opportunity to confer with his mother and father. Stéphanie, Louise and Caroline wandered off towards a small wood on the far side of the lawn.

"Darling, congratulations," said Caroline. "That Russian of yours is pretty hot stuff."

"Good heavens, do you really think so?" said Louise. "He doesn't seem to me to have any style at all. So aggressive. And those clothes!"

"I'm not talking about style," said Caroline. "I'm talking about sex appeal."

"What?"

"Oh yes. On first sight, you don't notice anything much, but if you pay attention, there's definitely something smouldering away in there somewhere."

Stéphanie frowned but said nothing.

"Of course the performance might not live up to the advance publicity," added Caroline delicately.

"How would I know? It's a business relationship, remember?"

"You mean to say you were never tempted to-?"

"No."

"Are you trying to tell me you survived six months in Leningrad with no sex?"

"I don't think six months' fidelity is too much to demand of people who are engaged," said Stéphanie self-righteously.

"Is that what you call fidelity?" snapped Louise.

"What do you mean?"

"This ridiculous bloody marriage, of course! Quite frankly, I think you'd have done better to find someone to screw for six months, rather than come back and plunge poor Philippe into this totally absurd situation. And I'm pretty sure I'm speaking for him too when I say that. Have you any idea just how embarrassing it is for him? For all of us? Really, Stéphanie, you've disappointed me. I would never have thought you had it in you to be so unfeeling!"

"Why, Louise, I...."

"What you've done is unforgiveable, surely you must see that?"

"I would have thought it was better for Philippe to suffer a little embarrassment than for Sergei to face a prison sentence."

"I'm not arguing with that, Stéphanie. It's simply a question of priorities. And given the way your priorities seem to be stacking up, I can't help but feel you'd be happier joining Amnesty International than marrying my brother. I'm going back to the house," she added, and turned abruptly on her heel.

"But, Louise, I don't- Oh for God's sake!"

"Don't worry," said Caroline, "she'll get over it. Come on, we'd better go back too. I think they've got the coffee organized." They walked back to the terrace in silence. André and Sergei were returning from their constitutional with expressionless faces that gave nothing away. Louise and her husband were huddled together in a corner. "Well, darling," said Caroline, "if you're sure it's no skin off your nose, why don't I offer Sergei a lift back to Paris?"

*

By unspoken consent, coffee was taken standing up. No one had any desire to regroup around the table. Blocs formed, alliances emerged. The Villers-Massenet family, the Feucherolles family. Philippe and Stéphanie, standing on their own, with Philippe doing most of the talking. Caroline and Sergei deep in conversation a few yards farther on. Marina sat alone at the far end of the terrace, lit a cigarette, and watched them all. Nicolas had disappeared. She hoped he hadn't gone too far: she wanted to leave fairly soon so she would have time to drop by the hospital. Kazakov's operation had gone well and they were allowing short visits. She would have liked a chance to talk to Stéphanie, but it didn't look as though that was going to be possible with Philippe sticking to her like a leech. Marina didn't know what he was telling her, but it seemed to be less than absorbing. Stéphanie's eyes were straying across the terrace to where Sergei and Caroline were standing, and the way she was looking at Sergei confirmed all Marina's suspicions.

She blew a cloud of smoke into the air and relaxed. Philippe had forced Stéphanie's hand on the matter of the engagement, she knew that already. And now, unless she was very much mistaken, Stéphanie was striking back. Why else, after all, would she have risked the family's wrath by undertaking such a misguided humanitarian act? She must have known what she was letting herself in for by agreeing to participate in this Soviet political charade. No, this unprecedented plunge into human rights was nothing less than an attempt to supplant a mariage de raison inside the family circle by a passionate alliance with her outlawed first love: Russia.

Sergei and Caroline were still standing together, but they had fallen silent. Without surprise, Marina watched Sergei's gaze drift across to Stéphanie. Their eyes met, and his face softened. Marina drank her coffee unhurriedly. The KGB had nothing to do with the way those two were behaving, and nor did human rights. She would wager her last centime that the fictitious marriage would rapidly be transformed into a real one -- if of course it hadn't already.

She put down her cup and looked around for Nicolas. To her surprise, she didn't have far to seek. He had rejoined the group on the terrace, supplanted Caroline, and was deep in conversation with Sergei.

*

What impressed me most about Sergei on that first meeting was the laconic way he sent the whole family to hell. It was a skill I had been dreaming of perfecting for years, but with little success.

I had gone to Rambouillet determined to detest on principle this Russian that Stéphanie had brought back with her. For the first half of the meal I succeeded, if only because he spent so much time talking to my mother in a language she had never bothered to teach me. I was eighteen years old, I knew ten words of Russian and no words of glasnost. I was furious with myself for being so ignorant and -- naturally -- with most of my family too. Living alone with my mother for eight years had set me apart from my father and his social entourage: the trouble was that Marina had given me nothing to put in its place. She seemed to have slid quite happily into the position of a semi-outsider, the foreigner on the fringes of French society, but where did that leave me? If Marina was less than French, she had other resources to put in the place of the things that were missing (even though she would never talk about them), but I had nothing.

When Sergei appeared, it seemed like the perfect solution.

*

Unlike Kazakov, my mother was not particularly worried by the idea of dying in a foreign country. She had been saying for years that she had no desire to set foot in Russia again. She had given up on the place, or so she claimed, and I am inclined to believe that this was true. For years, she had relied mainly on Kazakov for information on what was going on there, listening to his tales with only half an ear at that, until her curiosity was aroused by the advent of Gorbachev -- Sisyphus Mark II -- and she began belatedly to pay attention, studying the USSR with the intentness of a scientist with a microscope and sniffing disdainfully behind *Le Monde* as she drew her conclusions. Glasnost had engaged her interest but not her emotions. Whether it worked out or not was of no concern to her.

Nevertheless, in the days following Stéphanie's return from Leningrad, Marina had an obscure feeling that things might be about to change. Sergei's arrival had somehow stirred the air: she could feel Russia on her skin and in her mind. Maybe because he had brought it with him, it had become vivid, immediate, and more threatening than it had been for years.

The morning after André's lunch party, she tried to call Stéphanie several times, but the line was constantly engaged. Stéphanie was clearly much in demand. Marina resigned herself to putting off their discussion for a day or two. If there was anything to worry about, Stéphanie would have told her already. But about half-past two Stéphanie showed up in person, declined coffee, requested tea, and settled herself in the kitchen to drink it. Before she went to Leningrad, they had been in the habit of drinking coffee in the living room. Marina dug the tea-bags out of the cupboard and refrained from commenting on the new modus operandi. Tea on the Moika with Sergei's mother -- she knew about that from Stéphanie's letters -- but the habit was clearly more ingrained than she had realized.

"The phone's been ringing all morning," said Stéphanie. "First André, then Gisèle. Then Philippe's mother to say that she thinks it might be wiser to cancel the dinner she was planning to give for us next week. Philippe himself three times. I think I'm going to go mad. So what did you think of him?"

"Philippe?"

"No, Sergei, of course. The two of you seemed to be getting on like a house on fire."

"Yes, I thought he was quite interesting. Where did you meet him?"

"One of my room-mates introduced us."

"It's not like you to get involved with someone so politically minded."

"Just chance, I suppose."

"Chance, or chemistry?"

"Well, chance, of course. Don't smirk like that, Marina!"

"You always said yourself that Philippe wasn't serious. At least with this one, you won't have to explain who Pushkin is."

"Marina, this is a marriage of convenience. Anyway, how are you? I didn't get a chance to talk to you yesterday. How's Luc? I thought he might have been there too."

"Certainly not. I don't take anyone to family reunions, you know that. In any case, Luc's not around any more. We broke up last month."

"I'm sorry. I always liked Luc."

"Well, so did I, but we weren't exactly made for each other. All those advertising slogans he used to take so seriously. Stéphanie, look, we need to talk. While you were over there, was there any sign of -?"

"No," said Stéphanie, "nothing and nobody. No one followed me, no one tried to blackmail me, no one pulled me in for questioning. They didn't even bother to search my stuff in the hostel. I was right, Marina, there was nothing to worry about, it was all right to go. They've forgotten all about you."

Marina put her cup down. "Stéphanie, get one thing straight. They're never ever going to forget me. Not after what I've done to them. I don't mean the KGB, I mean my own family. If you saw no signs of anything unusual, then it simply means they aren't in a position to take action against me. Not yet. But I can't exclude the fact that one day they might be. I have to be on my guard against them for the rest of my life, Stéphanie, and if you ever go back to Russia, then you will have to be on guard too, just like I told you last time."

"I don't know when I'm going to be going back to Russia seeing that Sergei's just got himself thrown out."

Marina smiled slyly to herself. "I thought you said it was a marriage of convenience."

Stéphanie concentrated on stirring her tea. "Whatever makes you think it isn't?"

"The way you two were looking at each other yesterday, one would have to be blind not to think so."

"What?" Stéphanie looked up in alarm. "You're not serious, are you? Did anyone else-"

"No, don't worry. I'm pretty sure no one noticed a thing. What does it matter anyway, if you're going to break off the engagement?"

"That is the last thing I'm going to do."

"Why ever not?"

"Marina, how many times have you told me you were going to refuse to go to any more family gatherings? And as far as I can remember, you've never missed a single one."

Marina sighed. "I see what you mean. André knows how to wear one down."

"I can't go through all that again. Not after yesterday. I'm not going to be free to get married for a year and a half. Philippe doesn't like that at all. Possibly he'll get tired of waiting and he'll be the one to break it off. If that happens, there'll be trouble, obviously, but it won't be half so bad as if I turn him down."

"Ye...es."

"In any case," said Stéphanie airily, "I don't know for sure that I don't want to marry him. You know how fast we got engaged. I never had time to think about it properly."

*

This remark so dumbfounded Marina that she was able to repeat it to me word for word several years later. Apart from the first sentence, mind you, it wasn't inaccurate. Stéphanie had made her spiritual move to Peter's City several years before physically boarding the plane to Leningrad, and consequently paid little attention to the tribal rites and customs being enacted around her. She went through the usual upper-middle-class socio-cultural rituals on automatic pilot. Dinner parties, cocktail parties, weddings, christenings, concerts, exhibitions -- none of them affected her directly, unless the gallery was showing Russian art, or the Kirov was

performing *The Queen Of Spades*. She travelled round Europe with Lermontov in her luggage, and read Turgenev by the swimming pool of people's villas. She allowed men to take her out to dinner or the cinema, occasionally slept with them, and rapidly got bored with them. She had never had to end a relationship. One by one, the prospective suitors sensed her lack of commitment and withdrew without regret. There was something about Stéphanie that prevented anyone forming an enduring attachment to her. Experience slid over her like water over stones. No one made any lasting impression on her, because they were not what she was looking for. She was biding her time, waiting for the real thing to show up, waiting for Russia.

The first and only person to take up the challenge was Philippe.

She had come to his attention at Louise's wedding, six months before that fateful Aeroflot flight to Leningrad. Obviously they had known each other for years, but from a distance, for Philippe was six years older than Louise and treated his sister's friends with amused condescension, when he bothered to notice them at all. But by 1985 Stéphanie had lost interest in pop stars, her spots had gone, and Philippe was distinctly intrigued by the news that she was doing a master's degree in Russian literature.

That autumn was a trying time for Stéphanie, waiting nervously to hear whether she had got her scholarship for Leningrad, and Philippe was a welcome source of light relief. His job at Manuel Berger required him to keep a high social profile, and there seemed to be somewhere to go nearly every night. The haute couture cocktail circuit was unlike anything Stéphanie had encountered before, and for a while she enjoyed getting dressed up, being driven round, talking about nothing more strenuous than vacations and hemlines, and occasionally stopping the show when she announced that actually she wasn't going skiing this year, she was going to Leningrad instead. Neither Monsieur Manuel, nor Monsieur Gérard, nor any of their acolytes had come across anyone like her before, and she intrigued them, but that, as she ironically remarked to Philippe one night, was only because she was decorative enough not to be at too much of a disadvantage among Monsieur Manuel's own models.

Philippe frowned, and took his time replying. "Monsieur Manuel is a very fine and sensitive person, Stéphanie. I would not underrate his intelligence."

In retrospect, she realized, she should have paid more attention to this statement. It should have served as a warning, especially in the light of some of Philippe's own more spontaneous remarks about Monsieur Manuel. But by then it was, unfortunately, much too late. Meanwhile, she continued to look at it all from a certain amused distance. Soon she would be leaving for Leningrad, and that would be the end of it.

Which was why she was singularly unprepared for Philippe's reaction when she received the confirmation that she had won the newly-introduced scholarship for students of nineteenth-century Russian literature, and that the Soviet consulate was prepared to grant her a visa.

The news came through on December 23rd, and she broke it to the family, who had been summoned to celebrate Christmas at Rambouillet, on the evening of the 24th. Wonderful news, she told us, and we all smiled at her indulgently -- until she told us what it was, and then of course all hell broke loose.

"Oh dear," said Monique. "I wonder what your father would have said."

"I do feel," said André, "that as head of the family I should have been notified first."

"Leningrad?" said Gisèle. "Good gracious me."

"Leningrad?" said Marina. "Do you really think that's wise?"

"Leningrad?" said Philippe. "Can't you cancel it?"

Stéphanie was dumbfounded. Like I said, she spent most of her time on Planet Russia. I don't suppose she'd taken a good hard look at any of the people in that room for years, with the possible exception of Marina.

In the end, André quieted them down and took her aside for a sober, fatherly lecture. "My dear child, as the head of the family, I think you should know that I feel a certain responsibility-"

"Uncle André, please listen to me. I've been studying Russian for twelve years, I've been trying to get a visa for six years, I'm not going to change my mind now." She turned to Marina, hoping presumably for moral support. "Marina, you at least, must understand what it means to me!"

"Well, of course," said Marina, with a distinct lack of enthusiasm, "I'm terribly pleased for you. But I hope you haven't forgotten that-"

"I know what you're going to say, but if they've given me the visa, don't you see, that means it's all right."

It was at this point that Philippe made his move. Like everyone else in that room, he must have seen from the look on her face that she wasn't going to budge. I've never known anyone as obstinate as Stéphanie when she made up her mind about something. They'd been on at her for years to learn something 'useful' like Spanish, and she'd never yielded an inch. Philippe couldn't have known this, but he may have sensed it.

"Excuse me, Marina, André," he said gracefully, and whisked her off to the far end of the room for a so-called private word: private to the extent that we couldn't actually hear what he was saying, but we could get the gist of it - which of course was exactly what he wanted.

Stéphanie was too upset by now to be aware of considerations like this. She was gearing up for a full-scale face-to-face argument, and she never saw him sneaking up from behind.

"I take it there's nothing I can say that's going to change your mind?"

"Philippe, I'm sorry, I-"

Philippe was nobility itself. "I'm not going to oppose your decision. You've committed yourself to this research project and I understand that you want to see it through to the end. I respect that, Stéphanie. In fact, you have a great many qualities that I respect, as I think you know, and I think you feel the same way about me. However, six months is a long time, and so I think it would be a good idea for us to announce our engagement before you leave."

If she had turned him down flat there and then, she might have got away with it. They were already upset about the trip to Leningrad, and a little more uproar would have been neither here nor there. But by the time he had finished speaking she was incapable of saying anything at all. She was just standing there with her mouth open, gaping at him. To say that the proposal stupefied her would be putting it mildly. She had always assumed that Philippe regarded her in the same way as she did him: a passing fancy whose attraction was rooted in unfamiliarity. Pushkin and the Decembrists were as exotic and alien to him as haute couture was to her. The two worlds might enjoy a brief flirtation, but they were too far apart for anything more durable to be created. She had always expected him to melt away like everyone else when she lost interest in him. It never occurred to her that he might have his own agenda -- and let's not forget that she had no experience getting rid of unwanted suitors either. Especially not in the middle of Christmas dinner, in a room full of people, some of whom had been hoping for months to have the problem of Stéphanie's future resolved in this highly satisfactory way. The champagne was being poured and the toasts being made before you could say Aleksandr Sergeyevich.

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"They forced you into it," said Marina, pouring more tea. "Is that what you mean?"

"Well, not exactly. I mean I don't dislike Philippe, or anything like that. There's no real reason I shouldn't marry him, is there?" Marina looked at her speechlessly. "The thing is," said Stéphanie, with sudden candour, "André will never be happy till he sees me safely married off. So why shouldn't I marry Philippe? I'm sure we can work out an agreement so I can still do a doctorate if I want."

Marina went on watching her.

"If you're thinking of Sergei, there isn't ... there's no reason... it's true, you know, there's nothing between us. He's not interested in me."

Marina raised her eyebrows, remembering the smile she had intercepted yesterday. "Does he have someone in Leningrad?"

"Not that I ever discovered. But that doesn't matter. He has someone here now. Caroline thinks he's the hottest piece to come her way for years and she gave him a lift home last night."

Marina digested this in silence. "You know," she offered after a while, "since you were already engaged when you met Sergei, he may feel he doesn't want to rock the boat."

"I suppose that might be possible."

"Break off the engagement, Stéphanie. It's your life, not André's. You have to tell Philippe you can't marry him."

"But I don't know that-" Stéphanie was beginning, but she got no further. The phone rang, interrupting them, and any further discussion was out of the question for the rest of the day. The hospital was calling Madame Villers-Massenet to inform her that her friend Mr. Kazakov, who had seemed to be recovering normally from his operation the previous day, had had a relapse during the night and had died at half-past ten that morning.

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The Russian Orthodox Cathedral of Saint Aleksandr Nevsky stood in golden-domed splendour halfway down a sober residential street in the eighth arrondissement, an incongruous little island of Russianness in one of the staidest parts of Paris. Some of the nearby streets were named after Russian rivers and emperors, and there were two Russian grocery stores-cum-cafés just across from the cathedral, but it was far from being a Russian quarter. None of the present wave of immigrants could afford to live there, though their tsarist predecessors might have done so. Marina was hard put to imagine what the residents of the Rue Daru must make of the periodic Russian influxes for services, weddings and, like today, a funeral.

Kazakov was certainly getting a lavish farewell. Marina was surprised to see how many people were attending the funeral. Since he had been in Paris, he had lived such a modest existence between the poky apartment in Issy-les-Moulineaux where he wrote and the cafés of the Boulevard Saint Germain where he conducted his social life, that she sometimes forgot he was one of the better-known of modern Soviet writers. Of course he had also acquired a certain notoriety from his tribulations with the regime: awarded a Stalin Prize in 1948 for *The Siege*, he had been denounced in 1969 by *Pravda* as an anti-Soviet writer after *A New Start* was published

in the West, and had finally been forced to emigrate in 1975. Many of his fellow Soviet writers in exile were present, and a certain number of French literati too, as well as large numbers of friends, acquaintances, admirers and assorted hangers-on. Coming out of the cathedral, blinking in the light that poured through the glass of the wide porch, she found herself standing next to Sergei.

"Marina Vladimirovna. What a surprise."

"Sergei," said Marina coolly. "What are you doing here?" The funeral service, with its incense and solemn chants and grieving liturgy had upset her, and she was in no mood to swap expressions of loss with a comparative stranger.

"Like everyone else, I've come to pay my last respects."

"I see. Well...." Marina turned up her coat collar. She would walk home, she decided, even though the weather had changed and the September afternoon was damp and cold. Now that Kazakov was gone, it felt as though her life had altered irrevocably. Some part of it had gone for ever. She needed to be alone for a while to come to terms with her loss.

"Kazakov was a good friend of my father's," said Sergei. "He used to come to the house a lot at one time. Did you know him too?"

Marina looked at him properly for the first time. "Yes I did. How curious that you..."

"He spent several years in Leningrad. Haven't you read *The Petrograd Side*?"

"It's my favourite."

The crowd, prodding gently from behind, pushed them down the steps and out into the courtyard.

"Are you going to the cemetery?" said Sergei.

"No, I didn't bring the car. In any case, I don't know if I would have gone. The service already... I..." She stopped and swallowed hard.

Sergei put his hand on her shoulder and drew her aside into the lee of the church, out of the path of the crowd. "Let's go and get a drink somewhere. It'll make you feel better."

*

"He used to come to our house in Leningrad quite often. This would be in the late Sixties, early Seventies. There were a lot of people visiting our apartment at that time. Kazakov was just one of them. To tell you the truth, I don't remember him all that well. They would sit round the table till all hours of the morning, drinking vodka until it ran out, and then whatever they could lay their hands on, and talking. At some point, someone would remember my existence and send me to bed, and the rest of them just went on talking..." Sergei stared into his glass. For a moment, Marina had the impression he had forgotten where he was, and who was with him. Then he added, very softly, "I had been looking forward to seeing him again."

"A link with the past," said Marina. Even though Sergei admitted that his memories of Kazakov were hazy, she could understand his wanting to see him again. Kazakov himself had felt like that. He had arrived in Paris with a long list of people to contact, but he had called her too because she was one of the few he actually knew.

"A link with the good part of the past," said Sergei. "It wasn't always like that. My mother had an accident a year or two later and after that things started to fall apart. After a while, no one came any more. My father was drinking, my mother was paralyzed...."

"It must have been hard."

Sergei drained his glass. "It was better than this."

"Leaving your mother behind? Maybe they'll let her join you at some point."

"Maybe," said Sergei, but the prospect seemed to cheer him, for he added in a lighter tone. "One never knows what they will allow. The best way is to take one's fate into one's own hands, as you did." He refilled their glasses and met her eyes across the table. "Let us drink a toast. To your new life as a Frenchwoman!"

Deliberately, Marina raised her glass and drank.

"I meant it, you know, Sergei, what I said the other day. You don't seem to believe me, but it's true. I speak in French, I think in French, I dream in French. I've lived over half my life in France. I don't feel Russian any more, I feel French."

Sergei ran his finger down the side of the carafe. The glass was cloudy with cold and the trace vanished immediately.

"But the Russian part of you was born, Marina Vladimirovna. It was foreordained. Destined. No, don't laugh, it's true. The French part was mere chance. You met a Frenchman, you fell in love, you defected. You didn't choose the country deliberately. You might just as well have met an Englishman, a Japanese, a Moroccan. And then would you be sitting here telling me you are Japanese?"

"It wasn't just a question of meeting a Frenchman. That came later. And don't call me Marina Vladimirovna, we aren't in the Soviet Union now." But they had been speaking Russian on the cathedral steps, all the way down the street and into the café, she realized. Sergei had spoken in French to the waiter, but that was all. She hadn't even noticed until now.

Sergei's finger stopped in its tracks. "I don't understand. I thought you defected to marry a Frenchman. To marry André."

Marina realized too late that she had said more than she should. Damn. That was what came from drinking vodka in the middle of the afternoon. In honour of Kiril Stepanovich, Sergei had said, but it maybe hadn't been such a good idea after all.

"What actually happened," she said cautiously, "was that I defected first. I only met André later. S'il vous plaît," she signalled to a passing waiter, "vous pouvez m'apporter un verre d'eau? What I told you is the official version -- their version. The French and Soviet authorities cooked it up together to save diplomatic face. I found it convenient to adopt the same story too."

The water arrived on the table. Marina drank deeply. Sergei divided the last dregs of vodka between their two glasses. The Russian cafés near the cathedral had been overrun by mourners, so they had ended up in a French café on the Boulevard de Courcelles instead. "What really happened?"

"I was in Paris with my father, and I took the opportunity to defect."

"Ah," said Sergei, picking up his glass. "And what were you doing in Paris?"

"My father was on an official visit here -- well, semi-official. He was Khrushchev's personal emissary to General de Gaulle."

Sergei looked at her. "Khrushchev's personal emissary?"

"That's right."

"Tell me, Marina Vladimirovna ... Marina, what post exactly did your father occupy in the nomenklatura?"

Marina looked at him quizzically for a while. In the end she said, "He was a Secretary of the Central Committee. Responsible for Culture and Ideology."

Sergei set down his glass so abruptly that some of the liquid splashed on to the formica surface. "Bozhe moy!" My God, I don't believe it! First the fiancé and now this. What else haven't they told me? What the hell is going on here?

"Don't look so scared," said Marina. "It's not contagious."

Sergei got a grip on himself. "And what were you doing here? Shopping with Madame de Gaulle in the interests of Franco-Soviet cultural relations?"

"No, no. Mine was a private visit. My father got permission for me to accompany him."

"I see. And so you liked the climate and you decided to stay?"

"That's right," said Marina. "Is that so eccentric?" she added, when Sergei said nothing. "I would have thought it would be obvious to someone like you. I was stifled in Moscow. I couldn't take it any more, I wanted to be free."

Sergei picked up his glass and drained it. It was getting harder and harder to hide his incredulity. An eighteen-year-old, the daughter of one of the most powerful men in the USSR, everything the Soviet state had to offer at her feet, and she wanted to be "free"? "You were already a lot freer than most Soviet people," he observed.

"But that's exactly what disgusted me! " said Marina. "That cosy little cocoon of privilege. My father hadn't set foot on the streets of Moscow for years. He went to his office by car on weekdays, to his dacha by car at weekends. He had no idea how ordinary people lived. For a long while neither did I, because I was driven round all the time too. It wasn't until I was seventeen that I started moving round Moscow on my own. And when I did, it was a real eye-opener. I had no idea how hard it is to get from one day to the next in the Soviet Union."

"So you defected."

"That's right."

Sergei decided to let it drop. She was going to stick to her story, there was no point pushing the matter. Probably it would be safer to back off altogether for the time being, but his curiosity had been aroused and he decided to try another tack.

"Are you still in contact with your family in Russia?" he asked.

"Of course not. How could I be? Assuming any of them would ever want to speak to me again, which I doubt."

"They don't have a lot to thank you for, do they? What happened to your father? Did they send him off to Kazakhstan to hoe the Virgin Lands?"

Marina scowled. "He has a dacha in Peredelkino."

"Then it could be worse. Twenty kilometres from Moscow, in a writers' colony, entirely surrounded by culture. Fortunate man!"

Marina laughed and then scowled again. "I doubt he thinks so."

"You surprise me. I thought he was responsible for Culture and Ideology. Next you will tell me that he wasn't interested in ideology either, and my disillusion with the leaders of our progressive society will be complete. Please, comrade, let us drink a toast. To the Radiant Future. Ours, not theirs."

"To the Radiant Future," said Marina, amused in spite of herself.

Sergei smiled at her. Today she was wearing a sober navy-blue raincoat with no jewellery, and he had had more trouble than he expected picking her out of the predominantly Russian crowd at the funeral. "Now that Kiril Stepanovich is dead, you realize that you are my only remaining link with the past. I hope you will let me see you again."

*

There must have been something in the air of Paris that autumn. Within a few weeks of Sergei's arrival we were all of us knee-deep in counterfeit and deception: we were all of us leading double or, in some cases, even triple lives. The first to capitulate was Stéphanie, who inaugurated her new modus vivendi just six days after returning from Leningrad to the bosom of her family.

It had been a particularly trying day. André had come by yet again to make sure she understood how deeply she had failed in her duty to her family. Gisèle had called to ask after her health, as though she had contracted a particularly mortifying disease. Philippe, as always, had called several times, once to relay a conversation he had had in the corridor with Monsieur Manuel's secretary, once to instruct her to meet him at his office at seven o'clock that evening, and once to let her know her that he had discovered that one of Manuel Berger's most important clients, the Baronne de Boissy-Caradec, was a cousin by marriage of his godfather, and that he planned to mention this to Monsieur Manuel as soon as he got the chance. Louise had not called all week, and neither had Caroline. Sergei, whom she had tried to reach the previous day, during a brief absence of her mother's, had been out.

After her third conversation with Philippe, Stéphanie changed her clothes, informed Monique that she was meeting Philippe early, and took a taxi over to Saint Sulpice, hoping fervently that Philippe would have nothing urgent to impart for the next one and a half hours and feeling mildly irritated by the need for subterfuge. It wasn't as if she were sneaking off to a lover's tryst, for heaven's sake. Sergei was all on his own in a strange country. It was the least she could do to find out how he was managing.

To her relief, Sergei was at home and clearly pleased to see her. He kissed her cheek, took in her chignon and cocktail dress with slight bemusement, and told her she looked very nice.

"We're going to a reception at Maxim's later," said Stéphanie, looking curiously round the room. Despite its shabbiness, she had always liked this apartment. Claude and Emmanuelle were lucky to have it. Through the living room window, you could see the towers of Saint Sulpice church, and if you leaned out far enough you could see the square below. Saint Germain des Près was at one end of the street, the Luxembourg Gardens at the other. Sergei hadn't quite got his view of the Seine, but the river was only a few minutes' walk away. She was amused to see that in five days, he had managed to transform the flat into a virtual replica of his mother's apartment in Leningrad. The Cyrillic typewriter stood on the table, with a pile of dictionaries next to it, and papers and books were strewn over every available surface and half the floor.

"I can't stay very long, I'm afraid. How are things going? Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course. I'm fine. Everything's fine."

Stéphanie looked at him more closely. He didn't look fine. He didn't sound it either.

"You must be missing your mother," she said tentatively, knowing that unrequited personal inquiries would be met with a chilly smile and a change of subject. "Didn't you say that she was getting a phone? When are they going to put it in?"

But the Arctic front was not in evidence today. "Some time in the next few weeks. You know what it's like over there. You're right, it'll be much better when I can call her. Anyway, why don't you sit down? Can you sit down in that dress? Do you want some tea? Do you have time?"

"I'd love some."

"Good," said Sergei, and went off to the kitchen to make it. Stéphanie looked round for somewhere to sit. The sagging sofa was a bit low - he was right about the limitations of her dress - and the beanbag was out of the question. She chose the upright chair by the table and looked curiously at the page of text in the typewriter. *Why Glasnost Is A Sham* said the heading.

> *A Soviet citizen, Gennady Zakharov, was arrested for espionage in New York City last month. One might think that, in these days of glasnost, the KGB would admit its guilt and make its apologies. Not a bit of it! In an attempt to ensure Zakharov's release, the KGB have arrested an innocent American journalist, Nicholas Daniloff, the Moscow correspondent of U.S. News and World Report and have faked charges of espionage against him. It is not the first time the Soviet authorities have tried to force the release of one of their intelligence agents by arresting an American. Throughout the Cold War period, this has been fairly standard practice. What is surprising is that the practice should continue under the Soviet regime's new policy of openness. Who is Gorbachev opening up to, one may wonder? The West? The ordinary Soviet citizen? Or the KGB?*

"Who are you writing this for?" she asked, as he came back into the room with two cups.

"*Kontinent*. After that I've got a piece to write on Leningrad dissident groups for *Russkaya mysl*."

"Goodness. You haven't wasted much time."

"The KGB send you to the West, but they don't give you a pension to live on."

"I suppose not. And you're learning Uzbek too, are you?" she added, noticing a Russian-Uzbek dictionary on top of the pile of books.

"It seems a bit late to do that. I just found it on the shelves." He sat down opposite her. "Who did you say my landlords were?"

"They're Central Asian specialists. Emmanuelle is writing a thesis on Islam in nineteenth-century Turkestan, and Claude's is something to do with Muslim communists in the 1920's."

"Is that why they've gone to Ankara?"

"Yes. Claude was offered a teaching job there. It's the closest they could get to Central Asia for an extended stay."

"I see. And how are you, Stephanusha? Are you all right? I'm sorry it was so difficult for you the other day."

"You're sorry? It's me who should be apologizing to you. I never dreamed they were going to be so appalling."

"Never apologize to me, Stéphanie. Without you, I don't know where I'd be now. I have a debt to you that I can never repay. Unfortunately, I simply didn't realize what it would involve for you."

"It doesn't matter. It'll be all right. Don't worry, they'll get over it. At least this way you aren't sitting in prison somewhere."

"Oh yes, that's one good thing," Sergei agreed, and Stéphanie was startled by the dryness in his tone. Clearly they were heading into a no-go area, though she couldn't for the life of her imagine what it was. Time to change the subject.

"Where were you yesterday afternoon? I tried to call you."

"I went to Kazakov's funeral."

"Your mother told me that you'd known him in Leningrad. Did you see Marina?"

"Yes, I noticed her on the way out. Which reminds me." He put down his cup and looked at her accusingly. "You forgot to mention who it was told you all those Russian fairy stories. Why did you never tell me you had a real live Russian in your family?"

Stéphanie grinned uneasily. "A real live defector, don't forget. I was given very strict instructions not to mention her existence to anyone over there."

"I can imagine. When I found out who she was-"

"She told you that? She told you about her father? But she never tells anyone about him!"

"No? How many Russians does she know?"

"Not many. None, in fact, apart from Kazakov. You're right, I suppose, French people wouldn't really know what a Central Committee secretary is."

"I'm surprised you know. They didn't have them before 1917."

"Juliet told me about them," said Stéphanie smugly. "There are two parallel power structures in the Soviet Union, the Party and the government. A Central Committee Secretary is the equivalent of a government minister, only more important, because the Party is more important than the government. There, you see, I'm not as stupid as you think I am."

"I don't think you're stupid," said Sergei, and there was something in his voice that made Stéphanie look up and meet his eyes. *In my soul awakening trembled*. She put her cup down clumsily, splashing tea on to the table, her other hand moving blindly across the table towards him.

The phone rang, startling them both. Stéphanie snatched her hand back. Sergei looked at the instrument distrustfully for a moment and then got up to answer it. A short cryptic conversation in Russian ensued. "Yes. Yes. Yes it is. No. No. Yes, of course. Right, Friday at two."

He hung up without saying goodbye, Stéphanie noticed with amusement. Telephone etiquette was something Russians didn't bother with. Marina tended to behave the same way. "Do you want some more tea?"

"Yes please." Stéphanie held out her cup for him to fill. "Who was that?"

Sergei looked at her. She could see him wondering whether to answer. In the end, he said, "That was Misha."

"Who?"

"Misha."

"Sergei, we aren't in Leningrad now. There are no microphones in the ceiling. It's perfectly safe to tell me who Misha is."

"He works for *Russkaya mysl*," said Sergei, switching prudently into French. "They may have an opening for a part-time archivist."

"But that's wonderful!" said Stéphanie, and realized that she had said exactly the same thing to Philippe a few hours earlier, when he had told her about the Baronne de Boissy-Caradec. Mais c'est merveilleux! In an attempt to avoid confronting the implications of this, she looked at her watch. Quarter to seven. "Sergei, I have to go."

Sergei watched her gather her things together. "Come again some time. Stay a little longer if you like."

Stéphanie looked up, startled. It was the first time in their relationship, including the afternoon at the monastery, that he had expressed the desire for her company without introducing a third-party alibi (democracy, his mother, or her own political improvement) to camouflage his feelings.

"All right, I'll come tomorrow," she said, before he could change his mind. "Tomorrow I'm going to start working in the library, I can't get a thing done at home. I'll come and see you on my way home."

*

To my mind, the Daniloff affair was Gorbachev's second Chernobyl. For the second time in six months, the credibility of glasnost was threatened by the lawless traditions of the past.

What happened was this: In August 1986, the KGB arrested an American journalist working in Moscow in the hope of forcing the FBI to release a Soviet citizen detained for espionage in New York. Eventually Daniloff was set free, Zakharov was allowed to return home, there was a further skirmish of expulsions on both sides, and the furor gradually died down. But the timing of the incident was, to say the least, unfortunate. In the run-up to the Reykjavik summit with Ronald Reagan, a bout of KGB body-snatching was not what the General Secretary needed. Put yourself in his place. Here he is, a man of good will, preaching openness and democracy and contemplating a little arms control, trying to convince the West that he's a reasonable man with whom business can be done, who will pay for his purchases by American Express, and refrain from banging his shoe on the table to make his point. And there *they* are, the Cold War thugs with their Leninist reflexes fighting spy-playground games of tit-for-tat in their time-honoured way. It's enough to open a man's eyes. "The problems that have accumulated in society are more deeply rooted than we first thought," Gorbachev was to confess a few months later. "The further we go with our reorganization, the clearer its scope and significance; more and more unresolved problems inherited from the past come out."

Since he became General Secretary, Gorbachev had purged the Party, the army and the militia, while leaving the KGB largely untouched. The reason for this was simple: without the security organs he could not stay in power. Nevertheless, it must have occurred to him, during the three or so weeks that the Daniloff crisis lasted, that the KGB too was going to have to clean up its act. If he was aiming for international respectability and economic prosperity, he was going to have to break with the coercive habits of the past. Normalizing foreign relations was not just a matter of signing a few treaties; increased productivity could not be achieved by mouthing a few slogans. He needed to instigate the rule of law, impose a new code of etiquette on the security organs, and stop the KGB from grabbing who it wanted, when it wanted. He had to countermand the standing orders laid down by Lenin in 1917 when he founded the Cheka and instructed its members to wage war on society.

Three weeks for reflection, three months to make plans. In mid-December a telephone was installed in Academician Sakharov's apartment in Gorky and the call was placed that would summon the Soviet Union's most prominent dissident back to Moscow from his illegal six-year provincial exile. It was the first significant break with the policies of the past, the first concrete sign that things were going to change. A major turning-point for perestroika -- and a fatal reversal of the Leninist system.

*

Marina lived in one of those sturdy nineteenth-century fortresses built to defend prosperity and respectability, situated on the edge of the sixteenth arrondissement, the wealthiest, the most arrogant, the most snobbish part of town, where the old bourgeois families and a certain segment of the new rich rubbed along more or less smoothly side by side. It had a concierge huddled in a cramped room on the ground floor, who drew back her curtain and stared at Sergei as he crossed the entrance hall, an antiquated lift in a wrought-iron cage, and a corridor of comfortless maid's rooms under the roof that could be reached only via a back staircase accessible from the kitchen of each apartment. When André had lived here with her, they had actually had a maid living up there, Marina explained, but these days it was used to store André's unused family furniture. Which was a pity, because it would be the perfect place for Nicolas to entertain his friends and play that appalling music they all listened to without driving her crazy. No family furniture was in evidence in the apartment itself. Instead there was cheap pine and a lot of green plants. Marina was wearing jeans and a man's shirt, with the neck open and the sleeves rolled up. She sat on the sofa and watched while Sergei looked over the contents of the bookshelves. On her home ground, in her working clothes, she was more relaxed than he had seen her yet. The October sun streamed in through the open French windows. From somewhere in the depths of the apartment came the sound of a guitar.

"*Tsarevich Ivan And The Firebird*, retold by Marina Villers. This is one of yours?"

"Yes. That was the first book I ever published."

"You did the drawings too? They're charming. Very original. I've never seen anything quite like them before."

"That was a talent I inherited- That's very old. Let me find you some of the newer ones."

"What made you take up writing for children?"

"Pure chance really. I used to look after Stéphanie quite often when she was small. Jacques and Monique had a busy social life and Stéphanie stayed with us a lot. When I put her to bed I used to tell her Russian fairy tales, because I didn't know any French ones. They were the stories my own grandmother used to tell me when I was small. I translated them as I went along. One night, a family friend who was a publisher came to dinner, overheard me telling Stéphanie about Tsarevich Ivan and the Firebird, and suggested I should try writing it down. So I did, André corrected my French, I added a few sketches, and Maurice published it. This is the kind of thing I do now." She took a book down from the shelves and handed it to him. The title was printed in spidery, old-fashioned lettering on a pastel-tinted background. *Céline et François et la Nuit de la Pleine Lune*. "This is the fifth in the series. They've been quite successful. The sixth is due to come out in a few weeks, and I'm working on the seventh now."

Sergei turned the pages. There was less text than in the fairy tales, and the book relied almost entirely on the drawings. They were even better than the drawings of Tsarevich Ivan. The kitchen where Céline and François were having supper was a real kitchen, with washing hanging on a line to dry, Céline's school satchel thrown carelessly on the floor near the door, a pile of dirty saucepans in the sink, and François in his dressing-gown cooking something on an archaic-looking stove. The atmosphere was deliberately nostalgic, vaguely 1930s, with not a washing machine nor a refrigerator in sight. François was a badger and Céline was a rabbit.

"This is wonderful, Marina. Really exquisite."

"Thank you," said Marina, "but please don't lean on those bookshelves. I put them together myself, and they're a little shaky."

"I thought you had a roomful of spare furniture upstairs," said Sergei, taking a step backwards. The guitar stopped abruptly.

"I do," said Marina, "but I'm not going to use it. Furniture was one of the reasons André and I had to get divorced."

Sergei waited, but she seemed unwilling to explain further. "Who was that playing the guitar?" he asked. "Your son?"

"Yes. His ambition is to be a rock star, I'm afraid."

She returned to the sofa. Sergei continued to examine the bookshelves from a respectful distance.

"Kazakov, *The Siege*. This is the one that got him the Stalin Prize, isn't it? May I borrow it? I've never read it."

"I would have thought that particular book would be easy to get hold of."

"You know what Soviet bookstores are like: as soon as anything worth reading appears it's sold out within the hour. On second thoughts, I suppose you never had that problem." He turned away from the bookshelves and selected a seat opposite Marina, on the other side of the window. "So where did a good daughter of the nomenklatura like you meet a dissident writer like Kazakov?"

"I met him in his pre-dissident days. At a reception at the Central Committee in 1963."

"Ah yes. Hosted by Secretary Malkov."

"What?" said Marina, suddenly a lot less relaxed.

Sergei smiled at her reassuringly. "I've been doing a little research into your illustrious parentage."

"Oh really?"

"Born in Voronezh in 1908. The son of a railway worker. Started off as a railway worker himself, graduated to a job on the local Komsomol newspaper. Managed to survive the purges of the late thirties-"

The scowl she had worn last week in the café was back. "My father is a born survivor."

"Ran into Khrushchev when he was working as a Red Army political instructor during the war, moved to Moscow in 1944, became one of Khrushchev's bright young men, stint as editor of *Pravda*-"

"Deputy editor."

"In 1959 he became a department head at the Central Committee, in 1962 he was appointed a Central Committee secretary. His area of responsibility was ideology and propaganda, which naturally includes culture -- and hence Kiril Stepanovich."

"1963 was still the thaw," said Marina obliquely. "There were still a great many misapprehensions on both sides."

"Kazakov didn't blot his copybook until 1965 with that piece in *Novy mir*."

"That was nothing to do with my father. He was ... out of office by then."

"You don't like him very much, do you?"

"No I don't. He was an unpleasant man. You've just recited his biography. He came a long way in a short time. He wanted to climb right to the top of the Party ladder, and nothing was to be allowed to stop him. If he made our lives a misery in the process, that didn't matter."

"Still," said Sergei, "you got your revenge in the end."

"Revenge? Yes, I suppose I did."

"What's more, you helped give Khrushchev the final shove over the edge too. They got rid of him four months after you defected." He gave her an ironic smile. "The People are doubly in your debt."

"You can't accuse me of that! " said Marina sharply. "I don't deny that what I did was grist to the mill of Khrushchev's opponents, but they were already discontented for other reasons. Khrushchev spent too much time travelling abroad. He side-stepped Party procedures and used his own people instead. He sent my father to Paris. He sent his son-in-law Adzhubei to Bonn. Worst of all, he was planning a large-scale reorganization of the Party for the November plenum of the Central Committee. That's why they got rid of him in October, before the plenum convened. Their own positions were threatened. It was nothing to do with me. They'd have done it anyway."

Sergei surveyed her curiously. "Don't tell me you've been sitting here all these years feeling guilty about it?"

Marina opened her mouth and then shut it again. She met Sergei's eyes and shrugged ruefully. "Well, no, not guilty exactly, but-"

The door opened abruptly and Nicolas burst into the room wearing a navy-blue sweatshirt with the words Dallas Cowboys emblazoned across the chest. "I'm off to my guitar lesson, Ma." His gaze fell on Sergei and he stopped short. "Oh, hello. I didn't know there was anyone here."

"You remember Sergei?" said Marina.

"The husband of convenience? Of course. How could I forget?" Nicolas loped across the room and shook Sergei's hand. "Nice to see you again," he said politely. "See you later, Ma," he added to his mother, and turned on his heel. Doors slammed behind him, and then the air fell back into place and the late afternoon calm rolled slowly back.

"Sorry about that," said Marina, "he didn't mean it the way it sounded," but Sergei wasn't listening.

"Whatever you did, Khrushchev would have gone anyway. You just said so yourself. And Brezhnev would have got rid of your father like all of Khrushchev's other favorites."

"I supppose so."

"Khrushchev was a butcher. He sent tanks into Hungary, he hounded intellectuals, he persecuted religious believers. I imagine your father was no saint either." He paused, watching her carefully. "God knows what he did to push you into defecting, but whatever it was it must have been something pretty unpleasant. To become a Traitor to the Motherland at age eighteen is a pretty big decision."

"Yes," said Marina, looking him straight in the eye, "it was. But I can assure you, I've never regretted it. A man like my father should not hold that kind of position. When I defected, I put paid to his political career. I'm glad about that."

*

The old man was nearly eighty and he walked with a stick these days, but the eyes under the shock of white hair had lost nothing of their bright malevolent gleam. He came down the hall with his stick tapping on the parquet floor and surveyed his visitor without amenity.

"Who are you? Why have you come here?"

The General had been inspecting the portrait of Khrushchev that hung on the wall, eyeing it sceptically through his gold-rimmed glasses. He swung round as the old man approached, and looked down at him with curiosity.

"Well?" said the old man.

"Comrade Malkov, Vladimir Petrovich?"

"Yes."

"Don't you recognize me, Father?"

The old man stiffened and peered closer. "Vasya. My God, Vasya. Is it really you?"

"Father." The old man's voice was thick with emotion. The son's was cooler and harder.

"It's been such a long time."

They stood a few feet apart and looked each other over. They neither shook hands, nor embraced.

"So how have you been?" The General moved past him down the hall.

"They said on the phone you'd be sending someone out-"

"I decided to come myself. Is this your living room through here?"

The furniture in the living room was distinctly shabby, and the carpet on the floor had seen better days. The General looked around in mild surprise. He knew of course that they had taken away the two-storey dacha in Zhukovka when the old man fell from grace twenty years ago. Still, he had been expecting something better than this cramped frame house and worn interior. The room contained neither ornaments nor photos, and few personal possessions. It was as if the old man was merely passing through: awaiting a return to better days that never came.

The General sat down in a faded armchair and Malkov placed himself opposite. He sat erect on a hard-backed chair with his hands at chin height resting on his cane and waited.

"You have a pleasant view here." The window looked out on to a wooded hillside sloping steeply down towards the river.

The old man's lip curled disdainfully. "I've seen better."

"That's what I've come to talk to you about."

"I had twenty rooms, you know, at Zhukovka in the old days. I had a tennis court with a view of the Moscow river. A film projection room. A library with all the latest books. There was an apiary and a chicken run and a fruit orchard. All winter long they served fresh vegetables from my own hothouses."

It was an old man's monologue, with twenty years of resentment behind it. The General could tell that he had said the same thing many times before, though he had no idea who he might have said it to. Possibly himself. From what they told him, the dacha and its inhabitant received few visitors.

"I know, Father," he said patiently. "I lived there too."

"It was a real country estate. I could have been self-sufficient, you know. Not that it was ever necessary."

"Of course not. With the Kremlin canteen at our disposal, two free meals of the finest quality every day, why would we have needed to be?"

"She put a stop to all that," said Malkov venomously. "Because of her, they took it all away from me. They were going to nominate me to the Praesidium, you know. The Politburo, that is,

whatever they call it these days. Nikita Sergeyevich had finally convinced Suslov to agree to it. Everything was arranged for the November plenum."

"But Marinka defected in June. And Khrushchev fell from power in October."

The old man's eyes closed, and his face twisted in a kind of silent agony. The General extricated himself from the chair and wandered across to the window to admire the view at close quarters. If it had been at Zhukovka instead of Peredelkino, even his father, who had always been an extremely difficult man, would be forced to admit that it was breathtaking. The leafless birch trees moaned in the autumn wind and the river at the bottom of the hill shone like an empty mirror. A rickety bookshelf with a few dusty books stood next to the window. The General glanced casually over them. The collected works of Lenin, Marx and Engels, a volume or two of Turgenev, Gorky, Gogol, all of them in battered, old-fashioned editions that you never saw these days. He took down a volume at random and opened it. V.P. Malkov, Voronezh Pedagogical Institute, 1929. Where on earth had this come from? He had never seen anything like this lying round the dacha in Zhukovka. He blew the dust off the book and put it back in its place.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing." He turned away and walked back to his chair. The 'latest books' in the library at Zhukovka must have been left behind for the next status-conscious occupant. As far as he knew, his father had never read any of them. By the look of it, he was not an enthusiastic reader even now. There was a stack of books on a table near the fireplace though, and he recognized immediately what he was looking for. There they were, the books he had sent out from Moscow. Children's books, in French, with spidery lettering on a pastel-tinted background. French was not one of the General's languages, but he had got someone to translate the titles for him. Under the old man's acid gaze, he picked a book from the top of the pile and opened it. *Céline et François et le Cadeau d'Anniversaire*.

"I don't know why you sent me those. You know I don't read French. Where did you get them from?"

"I had them sent from Paris. Don't you recognize the doll on the cover?"

"Doll? No. Why should I?"

"It's just like one she was given when she was young."

"Well how on earth would I remember that?"

"Quite." The General dropped the book back on the pile and propped himself against the grimy mantelpiece. "Are you in contact with her?"

The old man drew himself up until his head rose in the air above his cane like a decrepit bird of prey. "I am not."

"Have you ever been since she's been in France?"

"I have nothing to say to her."

"You should never have taken her with you, Father. All this would never have happened."

"You think I haven't spent twenty years telling myself that?" Briefly the old eyes flashed. "How was I to know what she would take it into her head to do? She was depressed, she'd practically dropped out of the Institute, she spent all day lying in bed staring at the ceiling, just like her mother. I didn't want another scandal on my hands."

"Why did she do it?"

"How should I know?" His eyes shifted away from his son's. The General's attention sharpened.

"Did she really want to marry this Frenchman, or was there something else?"

"There could have been. She could have been a bit unbalanced, I shouldn't wonder. Like her mother before her."

The General looked at him assessingly. Unbalanced, nothing. He was stalling. He knew exactly what had happened in Paris and, as the reports suggested, he was probably responsible for it. He wasn't going to admit it, though. Not yet. But they would get there in due course.

"Did my assistant explain to you what our intention is?"

The old man nodded.

"Will you cooperate?"

"She ruined me," said Malkov, after a slight pause. "That's not something one can forget in a hurry." The words were mild, but the General was aware of a new tension in the room.

"If you help us achieve our aim, the State will not forget you."

The old man stared at him unwaveringly, without speaking.

"Not everything. That's not possible. You can't expect to have everything you had before. But a lot. A car, a chauffeur, shopping privileges, a bigger dacha." Still the old man said nothing. The General searched for inspiration. What could they offer him at his age that would tilt the balance? He was old, probably ill- wait, that was it. "Central Committee sanatoria," he offered. "If you need it, they can fly you down to the Caucasus or the Black Sea for a rest cure. The Kremlin clinic. All the top specialists."

This time Malkov nodded, apparently satisfied. He got creakily to his feet and stumped over to the sideboard. "We should have a drink, Vasya. It's been a long time."

He took out a bottle of vodka -- a cheap brand, the General noted -- and two smeared glasses. "Let us drink to our reunion, Vasya. And then you can tell me exactly what you want me to do."

The General raised his glass. "To our collaboration, father."

"And to vengeance, Vasya, to vengeance," said Malkov, and drank.

*

- 3 -

LE PONT MIRABEAU

Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine
Et nos amours
Faut-il qu'il m'en souvienne
La joie venait toujours après la peine
- Guillaume Apollinaire

The days grew shorter, darker, colder, and autumn drifted imperceptibly into winter. The colours of the city faded into the drizzle, and the grey of the buildings merged with the deeper grey of the sky. Sergei's life began to settle into a routine. He went twice a week to the part-time archivist's job he had found at the old-established Russian-language newspaper *Russkaya mysl*. Much of the rest of his time was spent writing articles for the newer journals founded by Russian emigrés in the past ten years, doing translations or giving Russian lessons. He was earning just enough to pay the rent and buy food. His visits to Marina increased till he was seeing her several times a week. For the time being, he asked no more questions about her past, sensing that too much curiosity would arouse her suspicions. Their relationship was deepening into friendship: he sensed that she enjoyed his company, and suspected that he had replaced Kazakov as the resident Russian in her life. She wasn't homesick, she had been telling the truth about that, but the Russian part of her was still there under the French veneer, and from time to time it needed something to feed on. Sergei provided her with a light diet of ex-Soviet nostalgia: barbed remarks about the Party, dismissive observations about glasnost. The fact that his attitude to the country they had left behind was invariably negative reassured her, he noticed. Perhaps they knew what they were doing in Moscow after all. An eligible older man, closer to her own age, with a smooth line in pro-communist chat, would have found himself talking to a card-carrying upper-class Frenchwoman who would rapidly have raised the drawbridge of her sixteenth arrondissement fortress in his face. Marina had spent enough time around the bourgeoisie to play the part when it suited her, as he had seen that first day at Rambouillet, but it gradually became clear to Sergei that deep down she was neither French nor Russian. She was on the outside looking in, and she liked it that way. It was a position which allowed her to observe with amusement the foibles of the French, some of which reappeared in gentle disguise in her books. Her attitude to the Russians, on the other hand, was neither gentle nor amused.

"Distrustful," said Sergei, when asked by Volodya to elaborate. "Disbelieving. Sceptical. She thinks glasnost is an illusion, she thinks intensification and acceleration are just slogans -- all this without any help from me."

"Well, she's right, isn't she?" said Volodya. "You can't reform our country. All this nonsense about perestroika -- it's perfectly meaningless. What are you looking at me like that for?"

"Let's say I wouldn't have expected someone like you to hold views like that."

"The whole Rezidentura holds views like that. Come on, Seriozha, the whole country holds views like that! You think you dissidents have a monopoly on scepticism? Why do you think Gorbachev's so-called reforms aren't making headway? Why do you think the masses aren't rushing to support him? Because they know it's not going anywhere, that's why not. What exactly has Gorbachev done so far? Urge people to work harder, make it harder for them to buy alcohol. Andropov tried that already and it didn't work. Why should they work harder? What's in it for them? Even if they earn a bit more money, there's nothing worth buying in the shops. Now Gorbachev's not stupid, and I think he's realized this. So he's gone one step further and started telling them they have to change their attitude and think differently. But why should they do that either, I ask you?"

"Why are you telling me all this?" said Sergei warily.

"Because I can't talk about it to anyone else, what do you think?"

"I thought you just said that everyone in the Rezidentura thought like this?"

"Yes, but they don't talk about it. They're afraid to. I'm scared, they're scared, we're all scared. Fear, Seriozha, that's the root of the problem. That's why Gorbachev isn't going to get anywhere. Everyone in the Soviet Union is afraid -- with a past like ours, how could it be otherwise? -- and when you're afraid you keep your head down and your voice low, and you don't make suggestions and you don't step out of line, and by God, you certainly don't start to think differently."

"No."

"The only people who ever succeeded in making major changes in our country were Peter the Great and Stalin, and they both did it by force. Gorbachev's trying to do it the other way round. He's trying to make people think they have a stake in perestroika and get them to work at it themselves. But it's not going to happen, Seriozha. Our people have been used to getting their instructions from on high since the twelfth century. You can't reverse hundreds of years of passivity just like that. Gorbachev's not going to get anywhere. You'll see."

Sergei met Volodya regularly once a week. Never on the same day, never at the same time, never in the same place. Volodya favoured parks ("you're walking, it's easy to spot surveillance, you can't be overheard"), and they had been steadily working their way round every park in Paris. Once or twice, when the rain had been so bad that no one in their right mind would be out confabulating in a park, they had retired to a museum. The Musée Guimet was practically deserted early in the morning, and Cluny was quiet too.

Volodya had a blond beard and glasses, and a habit of peering short-sightedly around that Sergei suspected was deliberately cultivated to give an impression of innocuity. He was a couple of years older than Sergei and came from Leningrad too, or so he said. So far, Sergei had not managed to catch him out on that. For their meetings in the park, he wore jeans and a shabby navy blue jacket. All the better to blend in with his entourage, Sergei assumed, just like Marina and the designer uniform she wore for family reunions. It was unlikely he dressed like that to go to work at the Residency, or even for his evenings at home with his wife and children. Volodya

was well-educated and far from stupid. Sergei did not dislike him. On the contrary, it was with Volodya that in some ways he felt most at ease. Volodya was the only person who knew why he had really come to Paris. The only one who didn't have to be systematically lied to.

Still, it wasn't Volodya's company that Sergei would have selected, given the choice. Stéphanie dropped in to see him nearly every day, on her way home from the library or the university, just like she had visited his mother in Leningrad. From one invalid to another. Sergei was surprised her fiancé made no objection to these visits until he realized that Philippe was unaware of them, skilfully camouflaged as they were behind lectures and seminars and visits to her academic adviser. He supposed he should have discouraged her from coming so often, but the plain truth was he was glad to see her. Contrary to what he had told Marina, it was Stéphanie now who was his one link with the past, with Peter's City, his mother, his friends. Those two hours in the evening, when Stéphanie appeared, tired after her day in the library, and dropped her books on the floor and sat on the rickety sofa and drank tea, was the only time Sergei felt he might still be part of reality. Even though she didn't know the truth about him, even though he was dissembling with her too. Most of the time she was wearing old clothes, jeans and sweatshirts, with her hair tied up on top of her head. (She left her cocktail circuit persona behind during the day, he realized, and picked it up again in the evening to go out with Philippe. Another one leading a double life, another functional schizophrenic.) Sergei became obsessed with the curve of flesh between her neck and shoulder, so vulnerable without its screening curtain of hair. He would sit there arguing with her about Pushkin and wondering how that enticing little curve of skin would feel to the tongue, the lips, the teeth.

"You can't accuse Nicholas of Pushkin's death, Stephanusha. It simply isn't true. His orders to Benkendorf were to send police to stop the duel. It was Benkendorf who disregarded them." I want you, Stephanusha, I've always wanted you, you know it, I know it, what are we sitting here talking about the Tsar and his police chief for?

"Benkendorf knew nothing would happen if he disobeyed. Did Nicholas take disciplinary action against him when he found out what had happened? Of course not. So that makes Nicholas morally responsible for Pushkin's death."

Moral responsibility, ah yes, an interesting concept. Unfortunately, Stephanusha, it is my moral responsibility to stay away from you, not drag you down into the mess I'm in myself. Because if I give in, if I stretch out my hand and run my finger down your face, your neck, inside your collar, it's not going to stop there. This isn't just sex, we both know that. I haven't forgotten that weird little episode on the Kirov Bridge. I've known since then that if I let you, you could become part of my soul forever. And I can't let that happen, I owe it to you not to let that happen....

Fortunately, there was Caroline. One reason Sergei had accepted her advances with such alacrity was that he knew he was going to need someone to take his mind off Stéphanie. When she first made a play for him, he had been first surprised, then flattered, and finally amused. Clearly he was the latest in status symbols: a real live Soviet dissident lover. As far as he was concerned, that was fine. He had too much on his mind to handle a serious relationship: come to that, he had been avoiding anything but the most casual affairs for years. And the sex was fine, if a little directive at times. Caroline knew exactly what she wanted, and her instructions tended towards the clinical. Down a bit more to the left. Faster. Harder. It was a long way from his experiences with Soviet women. It left him satiated, but vaguely homesick, and her conversation

made things even worse. Listening to her talk about her diet, her parking problems and her aerobics class, Sergei felt as if he had fallen through some kind of place warp.

What was he doing here? Why had he come to France? To run down the regime, talk about Pushkin, and take walks in parks? The only thing that made it bearable was the telephone. Mironov had kept his promise: they had installed a phone in his mother's apartment a few days after he left. He called her at least once a week. She knew exactly why he had gone to Paris: she had guessed that there was more to this fiktivny brak than met the eye, and so he had told her everything the day before he left. They had written down her questions and his explanations on a sheet of paper which he had burned afterwards, and worked out a code to allow him to convey to her by phone or letter the gist of what was happening and prevent her from worrying. They never talked for long, it was too expensive, but it helped just to hear the sound of her voice.

So here he was: twenty-eight years old, living in a strange country under false credentials. He had a borrowed apartment and a fictitious wife. None of it was permanent, none of it was real. If he hit the cardboard walls too hard, the decor would collapse and leave him standing on the edge of the void. Sometimes in the evening he would buy a bottle of the cheapest vodka he could find in the Monoprix on Rue de Rennes and drink himself quietly into a stupor. How else was he to stand it? And this was only the beginning.

*

In the autumn of 1991, I drove east out of Moscow along the Yaroslavl highway to Zagorsk, formerly Trinity-Saint-Sergius, site of a well-known monastery which had been rechristened in honour of some obscure Bolshevik martyr. It was my first visit to Russia. The road undulated through birch trees and little wooden houses. The traffic was heavier than I had expected: an unending stream of olive-green trucks belching noxious black fumes, and tinny little cars weaving in and out of the trucks with hair-raising abandon. Nevertheless, I was travelling back in time. After a couple of hours or so, I found myself in Holy Russia.

The monastery was vast. Fortified monasteries had been standard operating procedure in mediaeval Russia, and solid-looking white walls surrounded an intricate complex of buildings: churches, cathedrals, watchtowers, refectories. Blue and gold domes gleamed against the grey of the sky, and babushki in their headscarves and worn-down shoes jostled to fill their cups with holy water at the fountain of miracles. Out here in the Russian heartland, I was light years away from secular, reform-minded Moscow, where entrepreneurs wheeled and dealed, democrats took meetings, and laid-back young men sold matrioshki of Gorbachev and Yeltsin on the Arbat. In the Cathedral of the Trinity a service was in progress. I stood and stared like the religious tourist I was. (My mother brought me up as an atheist, my father saw to it that I knew how to behave at Catholic social functions such as baptisms and communions, but I was largely unfamiliar with Russian Orthodoxy.) A priest led the choir in chanting while the faithful stood in line to kiss the magnificent silver tomb of Saint Sergius, pressing their lips against its top, its sides, the wall next to it, anything within reach. "How unhygienic," said an English voice behind me. What struck me most was the look on their faces as they moved away.

In Western Europe, religion has nothing to do with emotion (if indeed it ever did). God, like Family and Country, has been coopted as a pillar of society, and faith is an optional extra. But for these people, ordinary Russian peasants and workers, alienated from power, with a thousand years

of autocracy behind them, faith was everything they had. That day in Zagorsk I understood for the first time what Gorbachev had been up against. Among the books I had brought with me to Russia was *Voyage en Russie*, by the poet Théophile Gautier, who had visited Trinity-Saint-Sergius in 1867. It sounded as though nothing had changed since then. I could have used the same words to describe the scene today. *"Autour de ce bloc d'orfèvrerie ruisselant de lumière, des moujiks, des pèlerins, des fidèles de toutes sortes, dans une extase admirative, priaient, faisaient des signes de croix.... Il y avait là des têtes superbes, illuminées de ferveur et de croyance."* Faith, fervour and ecstasy - no, nothing had changed. Communism was a layer that had covered the surface of Russian society for a mere seven decades: beneath it, the dark mystical heart had lain unchanged for centuries. Revolution, war, famine, Stalinization had slid over these people without leaving a mark. How could perestroika have been any different?

*

Maxim's was alive with bustle and lights and glamour. The reception was being held in a private salon on the first floor of the restaurant. The room was already full to bursting. Pausing at the entrance while Philippe greeted an acquaintance, Stéphanie cast a practised eye over the glittering throng. All the usual crowd, Monsieur Manuel and Monsieur Gérard, a smattering of baronnes and vicomtes, a well-known film star, the inevitable socialites and semi-famous faces that filled the pages of *Paris Match*. The rustle of taffeta and the swish of silk were drowned in the clink of glasses, the babble of voices and laughter, the almost submerged ripple of music in the background.

"So how's your Russian settling down?" said Philippe, rejoining her.

Stéphanie shot him an irritated glance, but it was pointless to repeat yet again that 'her Russian' had a name.

"Fine," she said, lifting a glass of champagne off a passing tray. "I spoke to him on the phone the other day, and he seems to be working very hard."

"Splendid. He'll soon be able to go out and buy all those jars of jam he was talking about. Thibaut," he added, turning aside to greet an acquaintance, "good to see you. Give me a call, we must have lunch. Still with Caroline, is he?"

"As far as I know. I haven't seen either of them for weeks."

"Amazing that she should go for someone like that. But Caroline always did have rather eclectic tastes. Bit of a nymphomaniac too, of course."

"Well, darling," said Stéphanie, "you should know."

Philippe stopped gazing round the room in search of people to wave to. "Stéphanie, I don't think that remark was in very good taste. I do not-"

"Sssh," said Stéphanie, "here comes Monsieur Gérard."

Monsieur Gérard was rotund and self-important, in perfectly cut evening dress. "Chère mademoiselle! What a pleasure to see you back safe and sound among us. How was Moscow? Tell me all about it."

Stéphanie gave him her most vapid smile. "Leningrad, actually. It was fascinating. Such a beautiful city. The ice floes on the Neva... The light... Worthy of an Impressionist painting. If you could only see it!" She knew better than to try to explain to anyone at a reception given by the House of Manuel Berger what Leningrad was like. With no chic bars or elegant beaches to

discuss, the topic was a fortiori closed. She went on smiling and waited for him to change the subject.

"You've been giving me ideas, mademoiselle. I was contemplating making a little trip over there myself. Something different, you know."

Stéphanie took a hasty gulp of champagne. "What a wonderful idea!"

"Of course, you must come with me. As my personal guide and interpreter."

"Oh but of course. I wouldn't dream of letting you go without me."

"I'm sure you must know lots of amusing places to go."

Philippe cleared his throat, but Monsieur Gérard's gaze was already fluttering away again. "I believe that's the Baronne de Boissy-Caradec just coming in. Do excuse me, I must go and greet her. One of our very best clients-"

"The baronne is a cousin of mine, you know," said Philippe. Monsieur Gérard, on the point of moving away, stopped dead in his tracks and looked back at him with suddenly narrowed eyes.

"Is that so?"

"By marriage, of course. My godfather, the Comte de Beaucourt, who comes from my mother's side of the family, married a cousin of the baronne."

Stéphanie looked from one to the other of them. From the thoughtful look on Monsieur Gérard's face, and the smugness of Philippe's expression, it was clear that the point had been taken.

So was this to be her life from now on? Smoothing down Philippe's ill-humours, making inane conversation to people she barely knew? Getting married, giving dinners, sending the maid to Berthillon to buy ice cream, talking about vacations and restaurants?

The good resolutions she had made on returning to Paris were evaporating fast. "There are times," she told Sergei, "when I wish I was back in Leningrad."

"When you were there, you couldn't wait to leave."

"That was only at the end. The way all those officials treated us, you'd think getting married was a criminal offense."

"It is, when one of the participants is a foreigner. So why do you want to go back there? Aren't you pleased to be at home with your fiancé again?"

Clearly there was to be no help forthcoming from that quarter. Sergei listened politely to her complaints about French frivolity, but expressed neither sympathy nor advice. It was easy to see why he felt it preferable to exercise restraint, but restraint was not the quality Stéphanie wanted most from him just then. Since he had taken up with Caroline, it was becoming a little too clear what kind of response she would have liked. For a while she had fooled herself into thinking that her unrequited Petersburg passion had been merely an aberration of the white nights, but that wasn't true. Back in familiar surroundings, among her family and friends, her feelings for Sergei had not changed one whit. And neither, apparently, had his indifference to her.

In desperation, she sought consolation elsewhere, from the one man who had never failed her and, by the nature of things, could never do so since he had been dead for a century and a half: Aleksandr Sergeyevich, her lover aged 187. *God grant you find another who will love you As tenderly and truthfully as I.* Stéphanie took to spending large parts of each day in the library. In that emotionless academic atmosphere it was easy to blot out the frustrations of the present, the bleakness of the future, and tell herself that for the time being there was no need to actually do anything. On the days when she had no lectures to attend, she spent longer and longer hours

making notes, cross-checking references, preparing outlines, digging deeper and deeper into the hazardous, dissolute world of Pushkin and his friends.

Another advantage of the library was the lack of interruptions. Philippe could not call up with some minor injunction about the forthcoming evening's entertainment, and her mother couldn't come and sit on the bed to offer her coffee, ask what she wanted for lunch, or complain about the latest iniquities of the maid. Her dissertation made great strides. Ellenstein, her academic adviser, a gnome-like little man who always wore the same faded brown corduroy jacket and lived like she did with two-thirds of his mind permanently in the nineteenth century, congratulated her on her progress and began to inquire whether she was considering a doctorate. Philippe, while making it clear that her incommunicability was a major inconvenience, interpreted her sojourns in the library as evidence of her anxiety to finish her dissertation and devote herself to his well-being. He had taken to working long hours too, in the hope of impressing Monsieur Gérard.

Although it might have been the sensible thing to do, Stéphanie did not give up her visits to Sergei. The apartment on place Saint Sulpice reminded her of Leningrad, and so did Sergei's mode of existence -- at least what she knew of it. How exactly he spent his days, she had no idea. As before, his schedule remained unspecified. He worked part-time at *Russkaya mysl*, he wrote articles for various Russian-language journals, he worked his way steadily through the French novels, plays and poetry on his landlords' shelves, and he spent a lot of time keeping mysterious trysts with people who were never identified other than by vague sobriquets: Misha, Tolya, Sasha, Volodya. Who exactly these people were, and what he was doing with them, she never found out, for if she tried to pin him down he was evasive or else refused to answer at all. Paranoia, of course, was an occupational hazard in the emigré community, and Stéphanie was amused rather than offended by his equivocation. Whatever the local equivalent of samizdat was, Sergei had presumably found it.

Despite his other activities, Sergei made a point of being home in the early evening. If he wasn't there when she rang the bell, she let herself in with the spare key, and waited for him. Whoever was there first would make tea, and they would talk. They still spoke Russian to each other. Although they discussed subjects no more personal than Pushkin or Leningrad or human rights, Stéphanie began to look on these meetings as a kind of emotional oasis, and she suspected that Sergei did too. Their conversations were interrupted fairly frequently by the phone: sometimes it was Caroline. Sergei kept these calls short and to the point, and never mentioned the fact that anyone was there with him. Stéphanie drew her own conclusions. The late afternoon between five and seven was the traditional time of day for illicit encounters. Le cinq à sept. Even though their daily assignations remained resolutely platonic, there was nevertheless something much too intimate about them for either Philippe or Caroline to condone their existence.

The crisis came at the end of November. One evening Stéphanie stayed later than usual. Sergei was the first to notice the time.

"Shouldn't you be going home to change? You'll be late for Maxim's."

"We're not going out tonight, thank God. Philippe thinks he's getting flu. He's going to bed early with six different kinds of medicine to try and stave it off. If he falls ill while Grandval's away, it'll be the worst catastrophe in the history of mankind."

Sergei didn't answer. She could feel him looking at her. No doubt it wasn't what he considered an appropriate remark. Finally he said, "Stéphanie, tell me. Are you really going to marry Philippe?"

It was the last question she had been expecting, especially from him. "Of course I am! Why ever not?"

"The way you talk about him. I don't think you even realize it. It's getting worse and worse. You don't love him, you don't even like him very much. If you marry him, you're going to be very unhappy."

Oddly enough, his concerned look and sympathetic tone were harder to deal with than all his previous ostentatious indifference. To her annoyance, Stéphanie felt tears pricking at her eyelids.

"Why did you agree to marry him in the first place? That's what I can't understand."

"Because of the family. I should have turned him down as soon as he asked me, but the thing is I didn't expect it, I thought he understood that it was just a passing fling... I didn't say no right away, I couldn't, he sprang it on me in the middle of Christmas dinner at my uncle's house, right in front of everyone, and the next thing I knew his mother was calling to congratulate me and discuss dates for the wedding, and after that there was no going back. I hoped he'd change his mind while I was in Leningrad, but he hasn't, and oh God, Sergei, I don't know what I'm going to do!"

She burst into tears. Sergei put his arms round her.

"You ought to tell him. As soon as possible. Get it over with. It's better to endure a certain amount of unpleasantness rather than see it turn into a burden that's going to be with you all the rest of your life."

"Yes, I know."

"It's you that's marrying him, not your family."

She pulled away and dried her eyes.

"Yes I know. I must go."

"Where to?"

"Home to work. My mother's out, so I'll have the place to myself." She stood up and picked up the anthology of French poetry lying open on the table. "Who are you reading these days? Apollinaire?"

"You work too hard," said Sergei unexpectedly. "Why don't you stay here instead. I made a blanquette de veau this afternoon."

*

The blanquette was good. He had found a recipe book lying around, he said, and decided to experiment.

"Where did you learn to cook?" demanded Stéphanie when they had finished eating and were finishing up the second bottle of wine. Sergei was sprawled in the beanbag, and she was sitting on the sofa. With the rain beating against the dormer windows, the sitting room, lit by a single lamp, was warm and peaceful. Sergei had been at his most charming all evening: not a single disapproving stare or weighty silence, and Stéphanie was feeling more relaxed than she had in a long time.

"I started cooking at home after my mother's accident. Someone had to."

"What about your father?"

"He was more interested in drinking than in eating just then."

"The strain of the accident?"

"Not just that. It was my mother who had always held things together in our household. She decided what we'd do, and when we'd do it. She organized him, she organized me. But she was in hospital for a long time after the accident. Without her telling him what to do, he just fell apart."

"One parent in hospital, and the other one drinking. How old were you?"

"Seventeen," said Sergei. "But that wasn't the worst time. It was even worse after his death. At least he was there before, even if he was drunk, even if he was incapable. I didn't have to feel that the responsibility was all mine."

Stéphanie said, "You were aware of all that responsibility and yet you joined a human rights group?"

Sergei sighed. "You won't let me forget that, will you? Look, I was too young when I first joined the group, and then when I realized the dangers, it was too late."

"Too late?" said Stéphanie, puzzled.

Sergei looked away. "It's not easy to withdraw, you know, once you're involved. You feel that you're letting everyone else down."

"Oh, I see." Stéphanie drained her glass. "Isn't it odd," she said dreamily. "The same thing happened to you as happened to Pushkin."

Sergei looked across at her with raised eyebrows.

"In 1825, when Alexander I died, he was all set to go to Petersburg to join the Decembrists, but he stayed behind because of bad omens. And because of this, he was saved from arrest. And you too avoided being arrested because, providentially, you happened to have the flu."

If she hadn't drunk all that wine she would never have dared to voice such a frivolous idea: even so, she was surprised by Sergei's evident displeasure.

"You're being fanciful, my little Stéphanie," he said, switching abruptly into French. "It really wasn't like that at all." He looked at his watch, and began to clamber to his feet. "It's getting late."

"What time is it?"

"Nearly half past one."

"It's not, is it? Oh my God, I've missed the last metro. What am I going to do? I'll never find a taxi with this rain. I'm going to have to walk."

"You can stay here if you like," said Sergei.

"Stay here? Oh. Well. Well, yes, why not?" said Stéphanie, imitating his casual tone. "Maybe I will, if you don't mind."

"No problem. I'll make up the sofa bed for you."

"You don't have to do that."

Sergei froze. Their eyes met, and then he looked quickly away again. Once bitten, twice shy, thought Stéphanie, remembering the Kirov bridge.

"I think it would be better if I did."

"No it wouldn't. You know what's going on between us, you can feel it too, ever since Leningrad."

"Stephanusha, I'm very fond of you, I'm not going to deny that. But we come from two different worlds, you and I. If we tried to have an affair, it would be as bad as you and Philippe. In a different way, of course."

"I don't see how you can possibly know that without-"

"Believe me, I know. It just wouldn't work."

"What about Caroline? That seems to be working!"

Sergei grimaced. "For the time being perhaps. To a certain extent. But Caroline's not going to last," he added irritably. "Surely you can see that?"

Silently Stéphanie got to her feet.

"Caroline doesn't matter to me. You do. I want to keep you in my life. As a friend. And that's why it's not a good idea to ruin everything by hopping into bed together just because the opportunity presents itself."

He started to unfold the sofa. Stéphanie leaned on the bookcase and watched him. That's nonsense, Sergei, and you know it. This isn't a question of an opportunity 'presenting' itself, it's been going on much longer than that. Nevertheless, she felt a perverse sense of satisfaction. In some oblique way, progress had been made. Up until now, Sergei's behavior towards her had always remained resolutely asexual. Tonight, he had for the first time admitted the possibility of a sexual relationship. Even though it had been to rule it specifically out of court, the spectre, once evoked in words, would not be laid again to rest so easily.

*

Fate played into her hands. Philippe, fresh and reinvigorated after a medicated night's rest, called his fiancée at eight the following morning to reassure her of his well-being. Discovering from a flustered Monique that Stéphanie had spent the night elsewhere, he trapped her, when she returned his call, into admitting that she saw somewhat more of Sergei than she had allowed him to believe, and that it was on Sergei's sofa that she had spent the night.

"You told me you hardly ever saw him." Stéphanie could feel the ice coming down the line, and he was using the formal "vous" as well, which was always a bad sign.

"A little white lie," she said glibly.

"Is that so? And how many other little white lies have you been telling me?"

"ARE you going to let me explain what happened?" Stéphanie imitated the way André sometimes talked to his wives past and present, and it seemed to work. There was an acquiescent silence at the other end of the phone. "Yesterday a friend of mine from Leningrad was in Paris for the day. Juliet Mortimer, I must have mentioned her, she's English. She knew Sergei in Leningrad, so I took her to see him, he invited us to stay to supper, there were a few other people there too, and everyone was talking so much that before we knew it we'd missed the last metro. So we both stayed the night there."

There was a pause, and then Philippe said, "When I called you this morning, your mother seemed to be under the impression that you'd spent the night with me."

"I haven't seen my mother all day. I went straight to the library from Sergei's. Next time, Philippe, you might make sure of your facts before making all kinds of unfounded accusations."

She replaced the phone in its cradle feeling better than she had for a long time. If Philippe thought she was being unfaithful, he would end the engagement. Obviously. The family would

not be pleased, but at least she would not have to face the torrent of reproach and accusation that would engulf her if she was the one to take the initiative. And once she was free of Philippe, there was every chance that Sergei's attitude would change too. As Marina had pointed out back in September, it was understandable that he might have scruples with regard to Philippe. Stéphanie glanced at her watch. Five to two. The rain had stopped and the sun was out for what seemed like the first time in weeks. Maybe she would take the afternoon off and go to Marina's. She hadn't seen Marina for ages, and it would do her good to talk to someone about all this.

She went back to her seat and began to pack up her books. Maybe she had overdone the self-righteous indignation with Philippe. Maybe she should have been more evasive, let him think she really was sleeping with Sergei. Although surely that idea must have crossed his mind already. In fact, now she came to think of it, it was odd that he had accepted her assurances concerning her lack of a sexual relationship with Sergei quite so easily. There was something here that didn't add up.

*

I could have set her mind at rest, since I had been privileged to overhear Philippe talking to his parents on the terrace at Rambouillet. ('Overhear' is perhaps not the right word: it wasn't as if he'd troubled to lower his voice.)

The fact is that Philippe's inactivity stemmed from a reluctance to see his carefully-laid plans disrupted. Stéphanie, as he explained to his mother, was an eminently suitable match for someone like him: she was good-looking, intelligent, articulate, and her family background was beyond reproach. Philippe had seen that with a little moulding she would make an admirable hostess, and had reasoned that her knowledge of Russian was an asset too, being sufficiently unusual to stick in people's minds and reflect favourably on both of them. Having calculated all this months ago, he was unwilling to relinquish these advantages. Naturally, he had wondered about the possibility of an ... attachment ... to this person (the Vicomtesse delicately averted her eyes) but his mind had been laid to rest now that he had seen the person for himself. The man was totally lacking in savoir vivre. Uncouth, aggressive, no dress sense, no table manners. It was inconceivable, they would have to agree, that Stéphanie could be attracted to someone who could hardly hold a knife and fork. (The Vicomte looked thoughtful.) And so, Philippe went on, he had concluded that there was no need for immediate action. The situation at the office required his full attention right now. If Grandval decided to take early retirement, he had to ensure the succession. There was no time to waste worrying about the problem of Stéphanie. After all, no one knew that she had married this Russian. Appearances were being kept up. That was the main thing.

*

Stéphanie got to Marina's apartment just before three. She ran up the stairs, smiling to herself. There was nothing like an afternoon off - she should have done this before. With luck Nicolas would be out of the way, and she would have Marina to herself. At this time of day, the sun would be pouring through the big French windows, she would tell Marina exactly how she felt about Sergei and ask her what to do. It was time to stop pretending -- not that she had fooled

Marina anyway. In the past, Marina's perspicacity had sometimes made her uncomfortable, but today it was just what she needed. Marina would know the best way to handle the situation.

Still smiling, she rang the bell. Marina opened the door with her coat on.

"Oh. You're not going out are you?"

"Yes, I was just about to leave. What's happened? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, well, no, not really, there was just something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Philippe?"

"Yes."

"How are things going with him?"

"Well that's what I wanted to.... Are you going shopping or something? Maybe I could come with you."

"Actually I'm going to the cinema," said Marina, buttoning up her coat. "But you can come along if you want to. I don't suppose Sergei will mind."

Stéphanie stared at her. "Sergei? You're going to the cinema with Sergei?"

"Yes."

"But how do you... I don't understand."

Marina looked puzzled. "What don't you understand?"

Stéphanie said tightly, "I wasn't aware you'd had any contact with Sergei since that Sunday at Rambouillet."

"I ran into him at Kazakov's funeral. Didn't he tell you?" Marina pulled on her gloves. "I've spent quite a bit of time with him, actually. He's homesick, I think. He needs someone to talk to."

"Oh. So you and Sergei go to the cinema together. How nice. And what are you going to see today?"

"*Red September*."

"But that's a Soviet film!"

"I know."

"I don't believe it!"

"Neither do I," admitted Marina. She moved through the door and out on to the landing. Stéphanie took an instinctive step backwards. "I'll tell you all about it later. Shall I call you when I get home -- I take it you don't want to come?"

"No." Stéphanie turned on her heel. "Don't bother. I won't be in anyway. Enjoy your film."

*

Red September was a film about the period leading up to the October Revolution. It had been made in 1950. The stills in the lobby did not look encouraging.

"I don't know why I let you talk me into coming to see this rubbish," grumbled Marina. "You do realize it was made before Stalin died? I hope you aren't expecting to get an objective account of the Revolution."

The usherette tore their tickets in half and gestured vaguely towards the empty rows of seats.

"Objectivity is a relative notion, comrade. In any case, that's not why we're here. Where do you want to sit?"

"Sergei, you're meant to tip the usherette, you know."

"Tips are demeaning," said Sergei, steering her down the aisle. "They show a lack of respect for the dignity of the people."

"It's the last time I go to the cinema with you."

"Nonsense. Without me to open your eyes to all these shameful bourgeois customs, you would become the dupe of imperialist propaganda, and as everyone knows, there is no fate worse than that. How about here?"

"I once met the director of this film," said Marina as they took their seats. "Abolentsev. A most unpleasant man."

"Don't worry, you won't be as bored as you think. I've got a surprise for you."

"I had one surprise already today," said Marina, watching him carefully. "Stéphanie came to see me just now."

"Did she? How is she?"

"She seemed to think it odd that we were going to the cinema together."

"Oh, really? Why was that?"

"Partly because this is the first time I've seen a Soviet film since I came to France. I never go to Soviet films: she knows that. And partly because she seemed to be under the impression that we hadn't set eyes on each other since Rambouillet."

"Ah."

"Why didn't you tell her we ran into each other at Kazakov's funeral?"

"I haven't really had a chance to. I don't see her much, you know."

"Do you expect me to believe that?" said Marina.

Sergei shot her a dubious sidelong glance and said nothing.

"I won't tell André," Marina assured him. "I won't even tell Philippe. Whether you see each other every day or once a month is none of my business." She paused, noting Sergei's sudden frown with interest. Could they really have been meeting every day? With Philippe in blissful ignorance, presumably. No wonder Stéphanie had been so put out when she heard about the trip to the cinema. The Soviet cinema. By the look of it, Marina was trespassing on forbidden territory.

"All I want to know is why you haven't told her you've been seeing me."

Sergei sighed. "I don't know. No reason really. Just habit, I suppose. Over there, it was always better to keep everyone you knew in separate compartments. I supppose I've just gone on doing the same thing here. Oh look, the film's starting."

*

Red September was even more one-sided than Marina had anticipated. Lenin, who admittedly had been in Finland for most of this period, had been relegated to the sidelines. The hero of the hour, without whom the Provisional Government would perhaps be reigning still, turned out to be one Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin, and he had apparently set alight the fires of revolution single-handed, since most of the other Old Bolsheviks who had played a major role in events were unaccountably missing from the scene. Granted, there were a lot of nameless people rushing round in the background and some interesting fuzzy camera work. Propaganda was an art form too, if you thought about it.

Sergei's surprise came about a third of the way through the film, at a meeting of the Central Committee in mid-September 1917. The camera panned round the faces of the men sitting round the table (from a safe distance, since by the time the film was made most of them had been occupying unquiet graves for a decade or more) and then moved in for a close up. Marina grabbed Sergei's arm in excitement. "It's Kazakov! Isn't it? My God, how young he looks!"

"Did you know he was an actor when he was young?"

"Yes, but I've never seen any of his films before."

It was dark when they came out of the cinema, and much colder. Marina pulled up her coat collar round her face.

"Thank you, Seriozha. That was the best surprise I've had in a long time. I'm glad to have had the chance to see him act at last. Who was he supposed to be?"

"Sverdlov. One of the few Old Bolsheviks who wasn't purged in the Thirties."

"God, it's cold. What happened to him?"

"He took pre-emptive action. He died of Spanish flu in 1919. Shall we go and get some tea?"

"Good idea," said Marina, and added slyly, "There's a Russian tea room not far from here."

"I know," said Sergei, "right next door to Dom Knigi. I have to go there too, to get some books for my mother. Give me time, Marina," he added, as they turned in the direction of the Boulevard Saint Germain. "In twenty years, I'll be like you, I won't care any more, I'll dream in French. Right now, I find it helps."

The tea room was called the Tchaika, after Chekov's play *The Seagull*. There were low oak beams and stone walls, and little tables with cheerful rust-coloured tablecloths. After the bleak autumn dusk, it was warm and cosy inside. They sat at a table by the window which overlooked the cobbled courtyard leading to Dom Knigi, the House of Books.

"Yes," said Marina, looking round ironically at the portraits of Chekhov and Tolstoy, "I can see that this would remind you of Leningrad."

"Obviously the decor isn't progressive enough for the People's Paradise, but it's something just to see Russian dishes on the menu." He caught Marina's gaze across the table. "I can't believe you never went through this yourself."

Marina stared out at the light spilling out over the cobbles and shining on the ivy on the opposite wall. "It depends what you're leaving behind. You once told me how you used to sit up round the kitchen table drinking and talking half the night. Well I never knew anything like that. People didn't just drop in, they were invited, and it was always very stiff and solemn. Nobody enjoyed themselves. I know my mother hated it. They got drunk, they talked about who was in line for a promotion or a bigger dacha or a trip abroad.... Believe me, there was nothing in my home life to be homesick for."

"Another illusion shattered. The rulers of the Soviet Union are not having a good time. They deceive and cheat and exploit 250 million people every day for their own personal enrichment, and still they aren't happy."

"They're afraid. You know communism is an empty shell, I know it, do you think they don't know it too? They have to pretend that the country is going from triumph to triumph, that the plan is being fulfilled five times over, but they know better than either you or me just how far from reality their propaganda is."

"Did they say things like that, about communism being an empty shell, among themselves, in private?" said Sergei curiously.

"Of course not. They wouldn't have dared. They had to pretend to each other, they had to pretend to themselves." She paused for a moment. "I don't know if you remember, but in the Seventies Fellini made a film about Rome-"

"*Fellini Roma*, yes, I saw it in the Latin Quarter not long ago."

"Do you remember the scene where workers digging a tunnel for the metro run straight into an Ancient Roman house?"

"Yes I do. The air from outside makes the frescos on the walls disappear."

"That's right. After the film came out, Kazakov wrote a story called *Fellini Moskva*. It was about technicians who were labouring day and night in a sealed laboratory to build a Marxist-Leninist social system. The lab had no windows, so they couldn't see out. There was one door, but they were forbidden to open it. One day, they were nearing the end of their work, the system was nearly finished and they were standing back to admire it, when all of a sudden the door was opened by mistake."

"And what happened?"

"Reality got in. Reality got in and spoiled all the experiments they'd been conducting for the past seventy years. The system just crumbled away in seconds. After five minutes there was nothing left."

The waitress appeared beside them. "Bonjour."

"Deux thés, s'il vous plaît," said Sergei.

"No vodka today?" said Marina sardonically.

Sergei paused a second before answering. "No. Although maybe we should. It's Soviet Constitution Day today, you know. Congratulations, dear comrade."

Marina laughed. "Kiril Stepanovich used to make a point of remembering all those silly little socialist anniversaries. He always called me up to congratulate me on International Women's Day." She looked past Sergei into the courtyard. "You know, I can't believe he's dead. There's a big gap in my life without him. I would never have thought I'd miss him so much. I suppose it's because part of me died with him. The Moscow of my youth is gone forever now."

"You just said you didn't particularly like it."

"But it was still part of me. I'm forty-two, Sergei. Half my life is over already, maybe more. I think as you get older you realize you have to hold on to what's gone by, even though it might have caused you a lot of pain, even though in a way it might be better just to expunge it, simply because it's all you have."

"Is it really possible to expunge the past? Surely it always catches up with you in the end?"

Marina was silent for a moment. "I think you have to find a way to assimilate it. Kazakov used to have a picture of Stalin on the wall opposite his writing table."

Sergei grinned disbelievingly. "For inspiration?"

"In a way. To remind himself that however imperfect his life here might be, what he had left behind was a lot worse."

"Not a bad idea. Maybe I'll write to the Big House and ask for a snapshot of the interrogation room. What do you have? A picture of your father?"

"No." Marina smiled mirthlessly. "I don't have any photos of my family. But sometimes lately I've been wishing I did."

"Have you ever thought of trying to get in touch with them? Now that things are loosening up a bit?"

"You misunderstand me," said Marina. "All I want is a record of the part they played in my past. I certainly don't want them as part of my present."

"I see."

"Is that so hard to understand?"

"No, of course not. Where's your mother now, by the way? You never mention her. Is she in Peredelkino with your father?"

"No, she's dead. She died the year before I defected."

"Tell me about her," said Sergei, and after a few seconds' hesitation Marina complied.

"Her name was Yevgenia, but everyone called her Zhenya. She was a wonderful person, very good, very gentle. She was a teacher when she married my father. I don't know why she married him. They were completely wrong for each other."

"In what way?"

"He was a born careerist: she wasn't. The only thing that mattered to her was her home and family. Her drawing. Her music. She would have been quite happy staying in Voronezh all her life. My father couldn't understand that."

"Why did he marry her?"

"She was the daughter of one of the local Party bosses. He was married to someone else before he met her, but they divorced after only a few years. One assumes she was not an asset to his career."

"In the Thirties, the daughter of a Party boss wasn't necessarily an asset either."

"Ah but my grandfather was like Sverdlov. A sensible man. He died of a heart attack a few months after the wedding."

"You think your father checked on his medical condition before marrying his daughter?"

"I wouldn't put it past him."

The street door opened to admit an elderly man and a girl in her teens. They settled themselves at a table near the door. The old man fussed with his scarf and his hat and his pipe, and the girl helped him stow everything away with no trace of impatience. When the waitress went over to hang up his coat and ask solicitously in Russian how he was, he kissed her hand. Marina was watching them curiously, and Sergei followed her gaze. The old man must be about her father's age, he surmised, and the girl a little younger than Nicolas.

"Would you have defected if your mother had still been alive?"

"Oh no, of course not." Marina broke off and shot him an uneasy glance across the table. "I mean, the situation wouldn't have arisen. That is to say, I wouldn't have been in Paris in the first place."

"Why not?"

Marina sighed, and thought about it, and finally decided to tell him. "After she died, I was depressed for months. I was a student at the Moscow Institute of International Relations. My marks fell off, some days I couldn't be bothered to get up and go to class, I just stayed in bed all day." She picked up the menu and began to turn it over nervously in her hands. "I cried a lot. I had outbreaks of weeping, I couldn't stop. Since my father was who he was, there was no risk of my getting thrown out of the Institute. Still, it was obvious that something would have to be done, and his solution was to offer me a trip abroad."

"Your mother must have been very young when she died. Was it an accident?"

Marina stopped fidgeting with the menu and sat very still. Sergei held his breath.

"Oh good," said Marina, "here's the tea at last. I'm dying of thirst. Shall I pour?"

*

It was Wednesday, and the Jardin des Tuileries was full of children sailing boats on the pond, scrambling for the swings, grubbing in the sandpit. The sky behind the Louvre was a tumbled mass of grey and blue, and the air was chill and damp. The children were wrapped up warmly against the cold, and Volodya was wearing a blue and green ski anorak instead of his usual shabby jacket. They paced slowly down the Terrasse des Feuillants, keeping away from the roller skates and the pushchairs, heads bent, brows furrowed, deep in concentration.

"Right," said Volodya, "let's sum up. One: she hates her father. We know that because she says so herself. Two: she won't say why she defected, but she doesn't deny that her father had a hand in it."

"Three," said Sergei, "she loved her mother. It shows in the way she talks about her. Four: if her mother had lived, she would not have defected. Five: her mother's dead, and she doesn't want to tell me how she died."

Below them, on the Rue de Rivoli, the lights changed, the traffic ground to a halt, there was a sudden screech of brakes, a thump and a clang, someone hooting, a brief exchange of shouts.

"What if her father was somehow responsible for her mother's death?" suggested Volodya.

"How could he be?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter for the time being. But it would explain why she hates him so much, even though she hasn't seen him for twenty years."

"Ye...es. And that could be why she defected -- to punish him."

"That's it, it all hangs together! That must be it! Well," he added, more cautiously, "it's only a hypothesis. But it's certainly plausible."

"How can we check on it though? I can't bring it up again. Not for a while, anyway."

"No, I suppose that would be difficult."

They reached the end of the allée and paused to examine a theatre poster. *Horace* by Pierre Corneille at the Comédie Française.

Volodya said, "Let us ask ourselves, comrades, what comrade Lenin would have thought of Ancient Rome."

"What?"

"If you wish to understand the situation described by Corneille, comrade students, imagine how you would feel if Russia were to declare war on Ukraine. For, just as Alba was the birthplace of Rome, Kievan Rus was the birthplace of Russia."

"Saveliev!"

"Of course, the situation could not arise today because the decadent warrior class that dominated ancient Rome no longer exists. Today, thanks to the teachings of our wise mentor Lenin, we have learned the value of peace and friendship among nations."

"It is no longer necessary to conquer countries by force since they now unite voluntarily under the glorious banner of socialism."

"Word perfect," said Volodya, and they both burst out laughing.

"Those speeches from Corneille he made us learn," said Sergei reminiscently. "I can still recite half *Le Cid* by heart."

"Ah, but *Horace* was his favourite. It gave him more scope to talk about Lenin."

They leant on the parapet overlooking the Place de la Concorde. A French flag fluttered on the roof of the Ministère de la Marine and another was visible over to the left on the Assemblée Nationale.

"I think Lenin would have enjoyed Ancient Rome," said Sergei. "He'd have found the Romans perfect raw material for the Revolution. They had all the correct reactions."

"Do you really think so?" said Volodya, his tone suddenly several degrees cooler.

"Absolutely. Look at Horatius. He massacres his friends if the State demands it, he kills his sister if she has the audacity to complain."

"*To save the revolution, we must first destroy the counter-revolutionaries*."

Sergei ignored the warning. Sleek Western cars rolled purposefully across the Place de la Concorde, the golden dome of the Invalides gleamed in the dying afternoon. Here, in the heart of the capital, in the epicentre of his newly-adopted country, he could say what he wanted and beyond quoting Dzerzhinski at him there was nothing they could do about it. "Of course, in the Twenties, she might have been packed off to a concentration camp instead."

Volodya sighed. "Cut it out, Seriozha, will you? We're not here to argue about Lenin, we're here to fulfil our patriotic duty as Soviet citizens. Have you started naturalization proceedings yet, by the way?"

"Not for another three months."

"That's what I thought," said Volodya. Strategic pause. "I got another signal from General Svetlov this morning."

Japanese tourists took pictures of each other beside the Obelisk, the robust facade of the parliament building loomed above the traffic, the tricolore flapped boldly in the wind. Sergei waited a moment before answering.

"What does he want?"

"What does Svetlov ever want? He wants to know why Malkova defected."

"What are you going to tell him?"

"That you're getting closer. He's not going to be pleased when I tell him we have to wait before bringing the subject up again."

"Why the rush? What's he going to do with the information once he's got it?"

"My instructions say only that we're to find out why she defected. It may go no further than that."

"So that some bureaucrat in Moscow can satisfy his curiosity and close his file? Hardly."

"If I told you some of the assignments we get from Moscow, you wouldn't believe me. I've seen far stranger things than this, I can tell you."

Sergei took a deep breath. "Do they want her back?"

"I doubt it. What would be the point? No one remembers who she is. No propaganda value at all. More likely they want to use her for some operation over here."

"Yes, that's probably it," agreed Sergei. "Why don't you tell Svetlov to dig out the file on Yevgenia Malkova? Maybe that will tell us how she died."

"That's not a bad idea. It'll get him off our backs for a bit."

"Give him something to do aside from persecuting dissidents."

"That reminds me, talking of dissidents. We got a position paper from Moscow yesterday on the situation of the dissidents, notably Academician Sakharov."

"Sakharov? What about him?"

"He's going to be released from exile in Gorky. He's going to return to Moscow."

"Under house arrest?"

"Of course not. He'll be free to do what he wants. He can resume his work, live in his old apartment-"

"It's not possible."

"It's going to be announced any day now. Gorbachev made the decision himself."

"Why would he do that?"

"Surely it's obvious? He can't claim to be following a policy of glasnost and encouraging criticism when the original critics of Soviet policy are still in prison or in exile."

"Is that what your position paper said?"

"Not exactly, no. But someone like Sakharov can be useful to Gorbachev in helping him find the best path to reform. Sakharov has one of the best minds in the country. If Gorbachev wants people to start thinking differently, the logical corollary is to release those who already see things differently."

"Ye...es."

"Gorbachev knows he's not going to get any help from the Party. They have too much to lose if the reforms go through. He's seems finally to have realized that the masses won't help him either. Our people are too conservative, too lethargic." Volodya gestured disgustedly. "They're too scared of chaos and disorder to welcome any kind of change. They might not like what they have, but it never crosses their minds to wish for anything else. Gorbachev's only hope is to call on the intelligentsia. They're the only people who'll support the kind of changes he wants to make."

They rounded the corner of the Jeu de Paume museum and the gardens opened up in front of them: the pond with the fountain arching above it in a wide spiral, the children running and shouting in their brightly-coloured anoraks, their mothers gossiping in little groups round the edge of the water. In the background, a barge moving silently down the river towards Rouen. No one queued up for food and no one was afraid. *Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine*. A cool, ordered, passionless existence. Was it possible that in twenty or thirty years Moscow and Leningrad could be tranquil and affluent like this?

"What about the dissidents who are still in prison? What's going to happen to them?"

"It's planned to release them gradually over the next few months."

"All of them?"

"Certainly."

"What about me?" Sergei couldn't resist asking. "Will I be allowed to go home too?"

"Go home?" said Volodya. "And leave that stunning French wife of yours behind?"

Sergei looked at him. "You've seen her?"

"Of course I have. We've been running a surveillance operation on Malkova since 1983, you know. I've seen her several times."

"Since 1983? Good grief!"

"Nearly four years. It's a long time. That's why they're starting to get impatient. Svetlov wants some return on his investment, as the capitalists would say."

*

Onward, onward, onward. Perestroika was beginning to acquire its own momentum and to drag its creator in directions he had never intended to go. It was not part of Gorbachev's original plan to invite Sakharov back to Moscow, release the dissidents, and relax political controls across the country. His project was to shore up the present, not investigate the past. Unfortunately, it proved impossible to do one without the other. Ghosts weighed on the collective memory. The whole of the empire was haunted.

Ghosts, so many ghosts. Seventy years of ghosts. Saboteurs, terrorists and enemies of the revolution. Starved Ukrainian peasants, deported kulaks, prominent Old Bolsheviks who turned out (when convenient) to have been spying for the British Imperialists. Political prisoners, camp inmates, repatriated prisoners of war. The list goes on and on. Half the population of the Soviet Union had a grandfather who was de-kulakized, a grandmother who was collectivized, a father who disappeared in the camps. Lenin said: "We shall cleanse Russia for a long time to come," and he was right. By the time Stalin died in 1953, Russia was very, very clean.

Ghosts, so many ghosts. Clogging the graveyard of the collective subconscious, demanding recognition, rehabilitation, exorcism. After a few months of trying to ignore them, Gorbachev yielded to the inevitable and set about reaching terms with them. At the time, it seemed like the rational thing to do. Recall Sakharov from exile, make it clear he was serious about reform. Admit the mistakes of the past, set the historical record straight. Win the support of the intellectuals, hope the economy would feel the benefits. Onward, onward, onward. In any case, he had no choice. The only other way to go was backwards. Return to Cold War at home and abroad. Do not collect improved economy. Pay several years international tension to the West. It wasn't what he wanted. It wasn't what he'd been planning during the years spent biding his time on the Politburo, waiting for the old men to die. If he wanted to get some return on his investment, he had no choice but to advance.

Foreseeing the future is not easy. Would Gorbachev have made that fateful phone call to Gorky if he had known where it was going to lead? Ethnic conflict, social unrest, economic ruin, right-wing backlash? The disappearance of his country, the loss of his job? An uncertain future in the failed politician's wilderness of foundations, consultations, lecture tours? But of course it never occurred to him, as he picked up the phone, that he had reached a turning point. He did not realize that he was putting the noose round his own neck. Gorbachev was a Party man through and through. Like his colleagues, he had been trained in omission. He was too used to regarding the people and their wishes as negligible to understand the power he was setting loose. It never crossed his mind that the intelligentsia he summoned to his aid might refuse to tailor their contributions to his requirements. That the non-Russian republics might demand more independence than he felt able to offer them. That the newly-minted democrats would presume to exceed their allocation of freedom and decline to show gratitude for the gift being made to them.

Do you remember the May Day parade of 1990? The usual row of communist dignitaries perched on the reviewing stand above Lenin's tomb, the usual flower of Soviet workers marching robustly across Red Square -- at least for a while. After an hour or so, things began to get interesting. New flags suddenly appeared: Lithuanian flags, Estonian flags, Russian tricolors from the tsarist era. New placards too.

Socialism? No Thanks!
Communists: Have No Illusions. You Are Bankrupt.
Marxism-Leninism Is On The Rubbish Heap of History.

And finally new slogans.

Down with the Party!
Down with Ligachev!
Down with Gorbachev!

It's hard not to sympathize with Gorbachev in a situation like that. What must he have been feeling? Shock, bewilderment, indignation? He had risked so much for the Soviet people -- and was this his reward? For their sake he had challenged all-powerful institutions and a barbarous system. He had admitted the truth about their past, he had laid their ghosts to rest. Did they feel no gratitude at all? He had given them liberty, but they were using that liberty against him. He had wanted them to develop minds of their own and now, it seemed, they had.

*

Snow had swept over Peredelkino in the night, blanketing houses, cloaking verandahs, muffling sound. The General and his father sat on opposite sides of the living room and watched each other mistrustfully in the cold white light.

"Are you well?" asked the General politely.

"It's hard to get through the winter when you get to my age. A villa in the Crimea would be better than this."

"If you think this is cold, you should try Magadan."

"Magadan?" The old man's interest quickened. "Is that where they sent you in '64? You know, I never imagined the organs would keep you on."

"On the lowest rung of the ladder. They demoted me, stripped me of everything, and sent me as far away from Moscow as they could. I was three years in Magadan, and fifteen in Central Asia."

"Who got you out of Magadan?"

"Andropov."

"Well, I'll be damned. So that's how he repaid his debts."

"Debts?"

"Certainly. I smoothed his path, you know, on a couple of occasions. You'd be too young to remember. I thought he might have done something for me, but I suppose that by intervening in your case he felt the matter was settled." He stared at his son resentfully. "I suppose Andropov brought you back to Moscow in '82 when he took over from Brezhnev?"

"That's right. I've been with the Fifth Directorate in Moscow since 1983."

"Ah yes," said Malkov distastefully, "Andropov's political police. Well, I suppose someone has to deal with that kind of thing. Still, fifteen years in Central Asia is a long time."

The General smiled bleakly. "Three years in Magadan is even longer."

"I can well believe it," said Malkov.

It's hard for us here in the West to understand what the name Magadan conjures up for a Soviet citizen. Magadan is in the Soviet Far East, on the very edge of the empire, as far as you can go without falling into the Sea of Okhotsk. It was the penal capital of the Soviet Union under Stalin, and for a while its spiritual capital too. It was here that the prison ships docked in the Thirties and Forties to unload their cargoes of human fodder for the camps of Kolyma. Sometimes in winter the ships would get caught in the ice and be forced to wait until spring to enter the harbour, while the rations ran out and the prisoners died and the corpses thrown overboard by the crew lay on the ice around the ship, staring back at the living for weeks, sometimes even months, until the thaw came, the ice broke up and the sea received them.

Ghosts walk the streets of Magadan. The ones who died at sea, the ones who collapsed on the shore after walking the last mile from the ship barefoot over the ice, the ones who got as far as the camps and lasted for a few months or years before succumbing to cold and hunger and inhumanity, even the ones who got out alive, the living dead, and settled as free citizens in Magadan, because they weren't allowed to live anywhere else. Three million died in the camps of the Kolyma Peninsula. That makes a lot of ghosts.

By the time Vasily got there, the worst was over. The fog was still there and the desolation and the mud, but Stalin had been dead for over ten years. Many of the camps had closed. Most of the survivors had been rehabilitated and allowed to move back west. From his point of view, mind you, this was not an improvement. In the old days, a KGB officer posted to Kolyma had a good chance of making a career for himself. In July 1964, Kolyma was a dead end. Five weeks earlier, Vasily had had a captain's rank in the KGB, a four-room apartment in the centre of Moscow, a father in the Central Committee, a well-dressed wife, and a promising career. He arrived in Magadan a divorced junior lieutenant with a disgraced father, a sister who had betrayed the Motherland, and zero prospects. He was allocated a one-room apartment on the sixth floor of a rundown building with cold running water and a stench of urine in the stairwell.

Of course, as he well knew, it could have been worse. They could have kicked him out of the organs altogether.

"Still, you're a general now," said Malkov encouragingly. "That's a remarkable feat for someone of your age. How old are you now, Vasya, fifty? Fifty-one? You've done well for yourself."

"In spite of the obstacles my family threw in my way."

"In a democratic state such as ours, one should rise to the top through personal courage and hard work in the service of the Party," said Malkov sanctimoniously.

"And I did, Father, I did. I came up the hard way, and don't you forget it."

"What about that wife of yours, whatshername, the Procurator's niece? Did she-?"

"Natalya? Of course not. She filed for divorce as soon as she heard what Marina had done." He delved into his briefcase. "This came from Paris yesterday."

"And you never remarried?"

"No."

He passed over the sheet of paper. Malkov read it and looked up.

"Well?"

"What really happened in Paris? When you and Marinka went on your trip together?"

"She met a Frenchman-"

"Don't waste my time, Father. You know as well as I do that the Frenchman had nothing to do with it. Listen to me. Thanks to you and your position, Marina had a life of privilege, comfort, everything she wanted. We all did. You've read this signal -- now just tell me what happened in Paris to make her decide to throw it all away, and pull it out from under our feet too."

Malkov eyed him with dislike. After a while he said reluctantly, "It's possible that she may have overheard a conversation between Olga and myself."

"Olga?"

"My ... secretary."

"I see. A conversation about what?"

"Zhenya."

"And?"

"I believe she must have found out ... from this conversation ...how her mother really died."

"You mean she didn't know? I can't believe that's possible."

"How would you know?" snapped Malkov, suddenly exasperated. "You weren't there. You stayed in Tashkent at your damn training school the whole time. You didn't even come back for the funeral."

"I was incommunicado on a training exercise, you know that perfectly well. I didn't find out until it was too late."

Malkov sniffed. After a moment he went on, "Marina was very young. Sixteen, seventeen, whatever she was... Well, anyway, it's an impressionable age. We thought it best to conceal the details from her."

"What did you tell her?"

"A heart attack."

The General had heard enough lies in his time to know one when he heard one. He stared at his father, and the old man stared back unblinkingly. Finally, he shrugged and produced a second piece of paper.

"It's time to send the first letter, Father. Here, take a look. I came prepared with a draft, but in the light of what you've just told me, it seems there are one or two things we might add."

*

The letter reached Paris on a cold grey day in the middle of December. Marina found it lying on the mat in the hall in the late afternoon when she came back from a shopping expedition. Dropping her packages heedlessly on the floor, she carried the envelope over to the window and looked with incredulity at the unfamiliar stamps and the upright black handwriting. Finally, with slightly shaking hands, she tore it open.

My dear daughter,

I know you will be surprised to get a letter from me after all this time. I am getting old and I don't have much time left. I have resolved to see what can be done to end our estrangement before it is too late. I hope you too will agree that it is time to let bygones be bygones.

I am living in Peredelkino these days. Alone, needless to say, for I have not seen Olga since we returned to Moscow in June 1964. I miss your mother more than I ever thought

possible. She was a good woman: I can see that now. I have had twenty years to reflect on the wrongs I did her. If I had listened to her while there was still time, perhaps things would not have turned out this way.

I have often thought of trying to contact you, but prudence no less than pride has prevented me from doing so. However, things seem to be changing nowadays. I do not believe that a correspondence would be harmful to either of us, assuming that you would be willing to enter into one.

I hope you will feel able to write back to me. I think of you often.

Your father,
Vladimir P. Malkov

She was still sitting unmoving on the couch when Nicolas got home from the lycée twenty minutes later.

"Hi, Ma, I'm home. Ma? Is something the matter? Why are you sitting there with your coat on?"

"I just got a letter from your grandfather."

"From Papie?" said Nicolas incredulously. "Ma, have you gone quite mad? He died years ago!"

"Nicolas, you have two grandfathers, you know."

There was a dead silence. "From my grandfather in Russia?" Nicolas' voice came out sounding hoarse and strangled. He cleared his throat. "From your father?"

"That's right."

"I don't believe it. After all this time? What made him suddenly remember your existence?"

"I don't know. That was the question I was just asking myself."

Nicolas came closer and stared into her face. "Are you all right? You look kind of strange."

"I feel kind of strange." She tried to smile. "In fact, I feel very strange indeed."

"What does he say in the letter?"

"He says he wants to make his peace with me before it's too late."

"Oh. Well, that's good, isn't it?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you believe him?"

"Making peace with people was never my father's style. Of course, he may have changed in twenty years."

"Aren't you going to write back?"

"I don't know. Maybe, yes. I don't suppose it can do any harm. You're right, I can't just ignore it."

She sighed and began to unbutton her coat.

"I wish Kazakov were still alive. He'd have known what I should do, and what I should say. He could have advised me how to deal with something like this."

"Ask Sergei," said Nicolas. "He'll know what to do."

*

The days were growing sadder, bleaker, greyer and the dead leaves coagulated in heaps on the greasy pavements. The sky was low behind the rooftops and the damp cut through you like a knife. Sergei found himself longing for white snow and bright colours and the vast cold sky above the Gulf of Finland. Draughts crept under the ill-fitting windows of his flat and the central heating was no more than lukewarm. During long sessions at the typewriter he had to wear an extra sweater to keep warm. The news from home was neither good nor bad. Anna Serafimovna was managing well enough in material terms. One of the neighbours shopped for her, another helped out with the housework. The physiotherapist continued to visit twice a week. At Sergei's request, Yarik dropped by regularly to make sure everything was all right. Every Tuesday morning around ten o'clock the phone rang and a deep baritone voice which identified itself as Colonel Mironov asked if she needed anything. This inquiry was answered in the negative. They had agreed before he left that Anna Serafimovna would only ask the KGB for help as a last resort. So far, this had not been necessary. Everything was fine, she assured Sergei when he called, there was nothing for him to worry about.

The trouble was, he didn't believe her. Although her manner on the telephone was lively, and she listened with interest to his accounts of life in France, although the reports from Yarik were reassuring, nevertheless he sensed that she was doing her best to deceive him, with or without the complicity of Yarik. Each time they talked, he could hear the weariness more strongly in her voice. Life was proving too much of an effort for her, and slowly she was letting go. Sergei increased the number of phone calls until he was talking to her two or three times a week. Although the calls usually lasted no more than a few minutes, it was enough, he finally admitted to himself, to know that she was still there.

"You're sure you're all right, Mama?"

"Yes, yes, I told you. Apart from the problem with Marya Lvovna, and that will sort itself out soon, I'm sure. Nothing for you to worry about. Tell me how you are. You've been drinking, haven't you?"

"Can you tell?" said Sergei, taken aback.

"Of course I can. Just be careful, Seriozha. Remember your father."

"I'm all right. I drink to keep the cold out."

"Have you had snow in Paris too? It's been snowing here for three days, but this morning the sun came out for a while. I wish you'd been here to see it shining on the canal. It was so beautiful."

Sergei rested his head on the back of the chair and closed his eyes. I wish I was there too, Mama, I really wish I was. I can't tell you how much I miss it. All those years I spent thinking I wanted to leave -- what a mistake that was. Living there was intolerable, but living here is even worse. I miss not seeing the houses across the canal when I get up in the morning, I miss not hearing Russian spoken in the streets, I miss the smells, the light, the colours, the golden dome of St. Isaac's washed by rain, the turquoise blue of Smolny that you always detested, the pastel yellow of the Admiralty where we used to walk on Sundays when I was small. In Paris in winter everything is grey. I've lost my city, my home, my friends, my past. And you too, of course, and now solitude is killing you, I can hear it in your voice, and there's nothing I can do about it.

"Sergei? Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here. I was just picturing it. We haven't had snow here. Stéphanie says it doesn't snow very often and when it does it melts almost immediately."

"How is Stéphanie?"

"She's fine. She sends you her love. Damn, there's the doorbell, I'm going to have to go."

He put down the receiver and sat motionless for a few seconds, trying to collect his thoughts. That would be Caroline at the door; she had said she might look in after her aerobics class. He hadn't told his mother about Caroline: he knew she wouldn't understand. Half the time, he didn't understand it himself. He had half a mind not to open the door, but his eye fell on the half-empty vodka bottle and he got resolutely to his feet. If he was on his own, he would only finish it. Mama was right: there was no sense in drinking himself to death. Not yet.

He was surprised and somewhat relieved to find not Caroline but Stéphanie on the doorstep.

"Stephanusha! What are you doing here so late? Why didn't you use your key?"

Stéphanie avoided his eyes. "I didn't know if you'd be alone at this time of night. I just came by to drop off the translation you asked me to look at."

"Where's the vicomte tonight? Not ill again, I trust."

"He's in Rome this week," said Stéphanie shortly, and went past him into the apartment. She noticed the bottle on the table right away. "Did you get through that all on your own? Tonight? Is something wrong?"

"Why should something be wrong?"

"Did your mother call?"

"I called her."

"How is she?"

"No worse than usual," said Sergei bleakly. "The physiotherapy isn't having as much effect as it used to. Marya Lvovna is talking about reducing the number of weekly visits; Mama thinks she may have to bribe her to keep them up. Katyusha, who does the housework, still comes down regularly but Mama suspects that Raisa Pavlovna, who does the shopping, is cheating her."

Stéphanie grimaced in sympathy. Clearly there was plenty to be depressed about.

"There's a shortage of sugar this week, she's having to drink her tea without it. Last week it was milk, the week before it was butter. Soon there'll be no food in the shops at all, by the sound of it. All Gorbachev's talk about acceleration is going nowhere. The sooner he thinks of something else to get the economy moving the better."

Stéphanie had no suggestions to help Gorbachev with his economic problems. She picked up the bottle of vodka and recorked it decisively. "Shall I make some tea?"

"If you like."

When she came back, he was slumped on the couch listening to the *Symphonie Pathétique*. She sat down next to him and poured the tea. He nodded his thanks without looking at her. They sat in silence listening to the resigned desperation of Tchaikovsky's violins.

"I should be there," said Sergei. "If I was there, she wouldn't have all these problems."

"Seriozha-"

"She's lonely too. She never says so, but I know she is."

"Doesn't anyone visit her any more?"

"Yes, of course they do. But it's not the same as having someone living there. She's never lived on her own before. Do you realize what that means at her age, with her infirmity?"

Stéphanie reached out and took his hand. It was the only comfort she could think of. His fingers closed around hers like a lifeline. The violins rose to a crescendo, and she could feel his depression growing too. She was tempted to get up and switch the record off, but she didn't quite

dare. Sergei was a lot less intimidating than he had been in Leningrad, but his reactions were still sufficiently swift and unpredictable to make her wary of provoking him.

"Why on earth do you listen to this?" she said instead. "We used to have a record of this with a picture on the cover of a church with onion domes rising all alone in the middle of the steppes; nothing else for miles around, night falling, the wind howling -- you couldn't hear it, obviously, but you could tell -- and this music is so evocative, it just conjures it all up."

"What do you want me to listen to instead? Madonna? You think I should start adjusting to my new way of life?"

"Maybe not Madonna. But you could try Mozart or something."

Sergei sighed impatiently. "Mozart is a clever little boy writing clever little tunes and jumping up and down saying, Look at me! He has no emotional depth." Stéphanie opened her mouth to protest, but before she could say anything he went on, "Stephanushka, stop picking on my taste in music! It's all I have left. I want so badly to go back, you can't imagine how much I miss it. I don't know what's going to become of me."

Stéphanie didn't attempt to answer. She went on holding his hand and listening to the bitter chords wailing above the emptiness of the Russian steppe, and wondering what he was thinking, and what the music was doing to him. Then she remembered what she had really come here for.

"I hear you've been seeing Marina."

The pressure of his hand tightened briefly and then relaxed. "Sometimes."

"I really can't understand what you find to talk to her about."

"We're both Russians," said Sergei blandly. "It's always restful to be with a fellow-countryman."

Clearly she wasn't going to get anywhere, but she couldn't let it alone. "What about your other Russian friends? Misha and Tolya and the rest of them?"

"They're not Russian, they're Soviet. They define themselves in Soviet terms, they have Soviet preoccupations. They pass their time criticizing glasnost and speculating why Sakharov has been allowed to return to Moscow. And of course, they also spend a lot of time criticizing each other. Marina has nothing to do with the emigration, she's not involved in any of their factions. I don't have to worry that by talking to her, I'm making it impossible to see someone else. Sometimes you want to be with another Russian without talking politics. In the emigration, this is impossible."

"Why don't you get yourself a Russian girlfriend then?" said Stéphanie nastily, and then realized too late that he had maybe done exactly that. "I mean... I'm sorry... that is... it's none of my business-"

"I don't want a Russian girlfriend!" said Sergei irritably.

"Why not?"

"You know perfectly well why not," he said, with so much vehemence that she turned, confused, to look at him. For several seconds, their eyes held. Then Sergei's scowl melted, his face softened, he leaned towards her and began to kiss her, gently at first, and then with increasing intensity. For several seconds, Stéphanie was too startled to react, and then all the pent-up tensions of the past few months thrust to the surface, and she flung herself against him and clutched him convulsively. This was what she had been waiting for since that moment on the Kirov bridge. She hadn't been wrong, it had been there the whole time, and Sergei, for who knew what reason, had finally decided to acknowledge it.

When the embrace ended, they were both breathless. Sergei's grip slackened and he smiled at her. The lines and shadows that had darkened his face when she came in had vanished, and he was looking younger and more carefree than she had seen him look in months. Stéphanie reached up to touch his face and see where the lines had gone, but his skin was smooth to her touch and there was no trace of them.

"You see, I was right, wasn't I?"

"Sssh. Don't say anything."

His mouth slid down to her throat and back up to her lips again. The second kiss was less urgent, more exploratory than the first. Stéphanie relaxed against him. Although it was the first time she had kissed him, she was on familiar ground. She knew instinctively that whatever move either of them made would be the right one. They knew each other's moods and reflexes from way back. Their mouths and bodies fitted together already. It was like coming home.

Suddenly, the urgency was back again, and Sergei pulled her closer to him. They were more or less lying on the sofa by now. His hand slid under her shirt to cup her breast, and her body arched of its own accord against him.

And then the doorbell rang and his arms froze around her.

"Don't answer it," she urged him, but he had stopped kissing her, and from the way his muscles tensed, she could tell he was going to get up and open the door.

"Who is it?" she demanded suspiciously.

"I don't know." He pushed her gently aside and got to his feet.

Stéphanie sat up in indignation. "It's Caroline, isn't it? Are you going to let her in?"

"I have to."

The bell rang again, insistently.

"Does she have a key?"

"No."

"So if you don't answer, she'll just go away again."

"She knows I'm here. You can see the light under the door."

"So what?" demanded Stéphanie, but he didn't even attempt to answer. He was too busy looking her over for telltale signs of passion. He even moved towards her with the idea of pushing something back into place, and then thought better of it.

"Why don't you go and straighten up in the bathroom while I let her in?" he suggested, moving towards the door. Stéphanie stared at him disbelievingly, but he had retreated somewhere too far away for her to reach him, and the shadows were back in place with a vengeance.

Since she was afraid that she might burst into tears of rage and disappointment, the bathroom suddenly seemed like a good idea. As she slammed the door behind her, she heard him saying, "Sorry I took so long to answer, I was talking to my mother."

And then not Caroline's high-pitched drawl, but Marina's voice responding, "I know it's a little late for visiting, but I've got something to show you." An indistinct mumble from Sergei. Marina's voice again, closer at hand, slightly taken aback, "Is someone else here?" They had got as far as the sitting room and she had seen Stéphanie's coat lying where she had left it over the back of a chair. And Sergei's response, as cool as you please, "Stéphanie's here too. She's in the bathroom."

The bastard! The lying, two-timing, scheming, deceiving bastard! Words failed her, and she was left with a string of comic opera adjectives. She splashed water on to her flushed face and

tidied her hair as well as she could with Sergei's comb. Before opening the door, she buttoned up her shirt, including the top button which she usually left open, and pulled her skirt down as far as it would go. Intruders, keep out.

"Marina! What a surprise." One kiss on the left cheek, one kiss on the right cheek, grabbing her coat at the same time. If Sergei thought she was going to stay around to engage in idle conversation for appearances' sake, he could think again. The sooner she got out of there and left him to consummate with Marina the process begun with her, the better. "What a pity you didn't come by earlier, I was just leaving. No, no, I really have to run. Goodnight, darlings. Sleep well."

"Stéphanie, for God's sake-" Sergei began, but the door had already slammed behind her. He took a step towards the door and then stopped and looked back at Marina, who was staring after Stéphanie with a mixture of embarrassment and perplexity.

"What on earth's got into her? Surely she doesn't think that you and I...?" Sergei didn't answer. "Listen, I think perhaps I'd better go too."

"No," said Sergei, "don't. Sit down." Making a big effort at self-control, he sat down himself, and gestured at a chair. "You said you had something to show me. What is it?"

Marina looked from Sergei to the door and back again. Finally, she sat down and opened her bag.

"Here. Read this."

Obediently he took the sheet of paper she was holding out. Cyrillic handwriting, upright and dignified. The kind of writing they taught in the schools half a century ago. Was this something to do with Kazakov? He read the salutation. 'Dorogaya moya doch.' Good God, what was this?

"Your father?" he demanded incredulously.

Marina nodded. "After twenty-two years, my father has decided he wants to make his peace with me."

Sergei skimmed the letter rapidly, and then read it again, more slowly. Those allusions to Marina's mother, the conversation he had had with Volodya -- there was no chance whatsoever that this was a coincidence. A wave of nausea rose up from his stomach, and he swallowed hard. The provenance of this letter was not in doubt. Agent Inozemtsev had supplied the information and some anonymous KGB ghostwriter had recast it in epistolary form. The nightmare was starting up again.

He was aware that there was sweat on his forehead. He hoped it didn't show in the dim light. He pulled himself together and looked up at Marina.

"Are you sure it's genuine?"

"Yes."

"You recognize your father's handwriting?"

"I'd know it anywhere."

"I don't understand what he says about your mother. Does it make sense to you? And who's Olga?"

There was a pause. The hum of traffic drifted up faintly from the square below. Closer at hand, came the sound of voices in the corridor, a key turning in a lock, a door closing. The world was driving home and going to bed. There was no one left awake but them, just the two of them in the shabby little room, in the circle of light shed by a single lamp.

"The other day, you asked me what happened to my mother. Well, I'll tell you. My mother committed suicide. She hanged herself at half-past one on a Friday afternoon. Everyone was out. I was at the Institute, my father was at the Central Committee. She was all alone."

Sergei drew his breath in, but remained silent.

"Today is the anniversary of her death. My father always had perfect timing."

"What happened? Why did she-"

"She'd been unhappy for months. I knew that. But I didn't realize it was so bad-" She stopped, took a deep breath and continued. "We lived in one of those palaces Khrushchev built for his Party bosses in the Lenin Hills. There was a whole estate of them. Reception rooms on the ground floor, sitting rooms on the first floor, bedrooms at the top. Everything surrounded by walls, and KGB guards all over the place. My mother spent all her time there. She hardly ever went out. It's no wonder she was depressed."

"Is that why-?"

"They told me she had cancer and had decided to take her own life, rather than inflict her suffering on her family."

"But you didn't believe it?"

Marina thought about it. "It wasn't implausible. But deep down I think I knew she wouldn't have reacted like that. Some people might decide to kill themselves if they had a terminal illness, but not her. She'd have told me, and we'd have faced it together. It wasn't in her character to cut me off like that."

"And it wasn't till you got to Paris that you found out the real reason?"

"Yes," said Marina. "That's exactly what happened."

*

June 1964. Vladimir Malkov and his entourage are staying at the Hotel Lutétia, five minutes away from the Soviet Embassy on the Rue de Grenelle. Since they are not on an official mission, they are not staying in the Embassy itself -- fortunately for Marina, as it turns out -- and security is relatively relaxed. There are eight or nine people in the party, including Malkov's secretary, a translator, one or two aides, and the usual KGB guards, but the whole set-up is fairly informal, and no one pays much attention to each other's comings and goings. Malkov has a suite with a bedroom and separate sitting room; the rest of them have rooms on the same corridor. On the third afternoon of their stay, Marina returns early from sight-seeing and goes along to her father's suite. The guard lets her in, but she finds the sitting room empty. Then she hears raised voices coming from the bedroom. Malkov and Olga. Olga is her father's secretary, a crafty blonde with large breasts. Marina doesn't like Olga, and Olga doesn't like her. She has suspected for some time that there is something going on between Olga and her father, and she is not anxious to know what. She is about to leave, when she hears her mother's name mentioned.

"Zhenya's out of the way now. There's nothing to stop us."

The sitting room is quiet and peaceful. The sun is shining through the tall windows, cutting the moss green carpet into squares of light and dark. A tray with dirty coffee cups, glasses and a half-empty bottle of Stolichnaya stands on the coffee table amid a mess of papers, pads, documents and files.

"Zhenya's out of the way now," says Olga, and Marina can tell by the whine in her voice that she has caught them in the middle of an argument which has been going on for some time. "There's nothing to stop us."

"My dear girl, there's everything to stop us." It's clear by the way he says it that Malkov is losing patience. If it was Zhenya, he would already have hit her. Even though Zhenya never whined.

"You're not still worried about Suslov, are you?"

"Of course I am! I'd be a fool not to. He's a dangerous enemy."

Marina senses from the silence that greets this that Olga is unconvinced. Olga looks stupid, but she must be even more stupid than Marina imagined. Mikhail Suslov is her father's arch-enemy, and has been for three years, ever since Malkov joined the Party Secretariat and, with Khrushchev's tacit support, started taking over Suslov's old role of Chief Ideologist. Is one Party big enough for two Ideologists? Marina doubts it. She has met Mikhail Andreyevich once or twice and finds him thoroughly antipathetic. He is cold, humorless, unforgiving. Unlike the rest of them, she has no doubt that he is faithful to his equally forbidding wife. She also has an uneasy feeling that he genuinely believes in the ideological force of the Party. She has never detected any sign that her father shares these convictions. Suslov is a fanatic, and she knows already from her youthful encounters in the Pioneers and the Komsomol that fanatics make the most dangerous enemies of all.

"But what can he do?" says Olga peevishly in the end. "Good heavens, it's not as if you'd murdered her, is it?"

"No," says Malkov, sighing, "I didn't murder her. But I can't disclaim all responsibility for her death either."

There is a sudden buzzing in Marina's ears, and she has to hold on to the back of the nearest chair for support. By the time her head clears, the conversation has moved on.

"-naturally I told her she couldn't see the children," her father is saying. "If she was living quietly under an assumed name in Yalta or somewhere, how would it have looked if a whole cohort of Central Committee limousines suddenly pulled up in front of the house and the children and their guards and all the rest of it got out. It would have blown the whole thing to pieces in less than five minutes."

The pitch has dropped, become less shrill, more conversational. Marina concentrates grimly on the patch of carpet in front of her.

"That must have been it. It was the children that did it. She couldn't stand the idea of not seeing them any more. Did Suslov know you planned to send her away?"

"Of course not. That's why discretion was so important," says Malkov aggrievedly. "But the stupid woman couldn't see it. I promised her she could choose where she wanted a dacha to be built; she'd have had everything she wanted, shopping privileges, medical facilities.... How was I to know she'd react like that? She always was a sentimental fool. I should have had her committed to a psychiatric hospital like I was going to originally."

Marina has heard enough. She tiptoes blindly away from the door. The main thing now is to get away before they realize they have been overheard. One part of her mind is staggering wildly in the dark, but the other is cool and calm, planning carefully ahead. Picking up a book on the Impressionists to justify her visit to the guard, she lets herself silently out.

*

"When I heard that," said Marina, "something snapped. I told you before that I didn't stop to weigh the consequences, and that's true. I just wanted to get as far away from him as I could. But maybe it's true that I wanted to get revenge too. For my mother, not for me."

"Sending her away... " said Sergei. "What a crazy idea. Think of the scandal if anyone found out who she was."

"A little thing like that wouldn't have stopped my father. He knew what he wanted, and he never let anything stand in his way. He thought he was untouchable, and for a large part of his life I suppose he was. He got away with marrying the daughter of a Party boss during the purges, and he must have thought he could get away with putting her out with the garbage thirty years later. Putting her in a dacha or putting her in a psikhushka -- it didn't make any difference as long as he was rid of her. Now do you understand why I hate him so much?"

"How did you actually do it? How did you get away?"

"I just picked up a jacket, threw a couple of things in my handbag and walked out of the hotel. I told the guard I was going for a walk up to the Luxembourg Gardens, and he tagged along behind, like he always did. I went down Rue de Sevres, across Rue de Rennes, and up Rue Bonaparte. I came right past this building. And then when I got to the police station just up the street from here, I whipped inside before the guard had time to react, slapped down my passport on the desk and requested political asylum."

"As easy as that?"

"Yes and no. The French weren't pleased at all. The last thing they wanted was to give asylum to someone like me. If it hadn't been for André's father, I think they might have handed me back. But he was a well-known writer, a member of the Académie Française, and a national figure. Marcel Massenet, you might have heard of him? He wrote a column for *Le Figaro* every week. He knew who to pressure to let me stay. Is that vodka in that bottle over there?"

"Yes. I'll get some glasses."

He got up and went into the kitchen. When he came back with the glasses, Marina was crying.

"Marina-"

"I'm sorry. I never told anyone about this before."

She blew her nose and Sergei poured her a stiff measure of vodka.

"Not even André?"

"Not even André. Back then, I just couldn't talk about it. Not to anyone. I told André and his father that I defected because of the system. Neither of them saw anything odd about that. They didn't understand that someone in my position was more likely to regard the system as an asset than a constraint."

"When did you actually meet André? Before or after you defected?"

"The day before. I managed to sneak off to the Latin Quarter on my own, and I met André in a bookstore on boulevard Saint Michel. It was very romantic. We drank lemonade at a pavement café, we climbed up Notre Dame, we walked along the quais and he bought me a book from one of the bouquinistes. *L'Etrange*r by Albert Camus. I still have it. It was a wonderful afternoon, one of the best afternoons of my life. Of course I thought I'd never see him again -- that was part of the charm, though I didn't realize it at the time. About six o'clock, I decided I ought to go back to the hotel, so he walked back with me along boulevard Saint Germain. By then, we were

holding hands, which of course was very daring by Moscow standards." She shook her head ruefully. "When we got to the crossroads on Rue de Sèvres, I wouldn't let him come any further, so he wrote down his address on a piece of paper torn out of his diary, and I gave him my address in Moscow too. Then he said, 'We'll meet again. I have a premonition that we will, and my premonitions are always right.' Oh, it was so romantic, you can't imagine!" She laughed, a little ironically. "And of course he was right, though I don't think he expected me to show up again quite so soon."

"And then he married you," said Sergei.

Marina caught the perplexity in his tone at once. "André's changed a lot since 1964. When he met me he was going through an idealistic phase. Well, he was only twenty-two. He saw himself as the knight in shining armour rescuing the damsel in distress from the wicked communists. His family adopted me, they helped me find my feet, his father stood up for me with the immigration authorities. It was something of a foregone conclusion that André and I should get married. Of course, it was a terrible mistake, but by the time we realized just how unsuited we were, Nicolas had been born, and that kept us together for a while longer. Poor André. I think I came very close to wrecking his life completely at one point. I'm glad he's found someone who can polish his family silver for him and get as excited as he does about buying a Tiffany lamp at auction. When I met him, he was interested in ideas, he belonged to an amateur dramatic company, he even contemplated the stage as a career at one point." She was silent for a moment. "He's changed so much, you can't imagine. He finished his studies and took a job in a law firm, I got pregnant with Nicolas, we moved out of the Latin Quarter and bought the flat on Boulevard de Beauséjour, he lost interest in the theatre and started collecting antiques. I felt as if I was back living with my father again. All that excitement over material things. Objects. He used to get angry with me because I didn't take his possessions seriously enough. Well, anyway. Life sorts itself out in the end." She raised her glass. "Here's to revenge, Sergei. Long may it live."

"If you say so," said Sergei, lifting his glass. "What are you going to do about the letter? Are you going to write back?"

"I don't know. What do you think I should do?"

Sergei shrugged. "It depends whether you want to be reconciled with him or not."

Marina was silent, staring into her glass.

"You just told me you hated him."

"Yes."

"In any case, it doesn't really matter. You can make up your mind about that later. The first thing you ought to do is make sure the correspondence is genuine."

Marina looked up. "You think it might not be?"

"Look, Marina, there are two possibilities here." A sudden wave of irritation swept over him. For God's sake, couldn't she see it for herself? "Either your father genuinely wants to be reconciled with you, he thinks political conditions are appropriate to contact you, and he's holding out an olive branch. Or else some third party is using your father's name, and maybe forging his handwriting, for their own purposes."

"I suppose so. The handwriting.... It hadn't occurred to me that it might not be my father writing."

"Of course not," said Sergei more gently. "But you ought to make sure."

"How can I do that?"

"Write back and ask him a test question. Something only he would know."

*

The light was beginning to fade and the hard-edged whiteness of the December day was silvering into dusk. The Parc Monceau had been built in the late eighteenth century on the erstwhile hunting grounds of the Duke of Orleans. The animals had long been tracked down and fenced out, and their place taken by a bizarre assortment of pyramids, tombs, artificial clumps of rock and other attractions. These days only the traffic snarled on the boulevard behind the gold-tipped railings of the park.

"Sorry I'm late," said Volodya, "something came up at the office. Shall we go down this way?"

Sergei fell into step beside him. They walked round some fake Roman ruins and a rather sinister pool.

"It turns out you were right. They want her back."

Sergei drew in his breath. "They want her back? What for?"

"God knows. Don't ask me." Volodya pulled his anorak closer round his face.

"I can understand them wanting Baryshnikov. Or Alliluyeva or Nureyev. They can get a lot of propaganda mileage out of people like that. But why Malkova, for heaven's sake?"

"Quite frankly, Seriozha, I don't understand it either." Volodya was cold and cross tonight, and in no mood to speculate. "Anyway, the old man's letter is just the first step."

A woman in a fur coat hurried past clutching a poodle in her arms. A young mother with a velvet Alice band and a well-dressed baby in a pushchair walked purposefully in the other direction. *Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure Les jours s'en vont je demeure*. It's all starting up again, just like in Leningrad. How could I have thought I was rid of it? How naive can you be?

"What happens next?"

"First they'll wait till the correspondence is well established. Then they'll move on to the next stage. What that will be exactly, they haven't told me yet."

Sergei didn't answer. By now, the park was almost deserted. Soon it would be closing. A bitter little wind swept across the empty benches and ruffled the surface of the abandoned sandpit. I thought that the day I left Peter's City was the worst day of my life. Worse than the day my mother was knocked down in the street by an official Zil which roared on without stopping, worse than the day my father died, worse than the day the organs made me stay at home while they rolled up the Gruppa zashchity without me. I thought that getting on the plane for Paris was the hardest thing I had ever done. I had the sensation of being unjustly spared by fate. I was being allowed to run away, leaving my mother to manage as best she could without me, and my friends at *Novye Dekabristy* to take their chances with the KGB. Only now am I beginning to realize that fate is not quite as merciful as I imagined.

"Your reaction to the letter is basically fine," said Volodya briskly. "You can be sceptical, warn her of the risks of provocation and so on, that's perfectly in character, in fact it's a good touch. Just don't go too far, that's all. The old man will pass the test you suggested, obviously. I'd back off a little after that."

Sergei's step faltered for a moment. How did Volodya know about the test?

"Don't be too enthusiastic or she'll smell a rat, but don't be too negative either." Volodya pressed on unheeding, anxious to wrap up the briefing and get home to his wife and kids. "Remember that ultimately she has to be convinced that going back is the best thing for her to do."

For a moment there was nothing but the sound of their footsteps on the gravel path and the hum of the traffic in the distance.

Sergei said, "I was told before I left the Soviet Union that my mission was merely to find out why she defected. Nothing more."

"Is that so? Well it sounds as though they've changed their minds. The trouble with those bureaucrats in Moscow Centre is that they never know what they want. All they know is that what they want is not the same as what we've given them."

"Isn't it going to look a bit odd if I suddenly start encouraging Marina to go back to the Soviet Union?"

"No, why should it? You didn't leave voluntarily, after all."

They reached the gate and turned out on to the boulevard.

"How is your mother these days?" inquired Volodya. "Still in good health, I trust?"

*

With Christmas approaching, the cocktail circuit had shifted into high gear. Since Philippe got back from Rome, there had been engagements every night, sometimes even two or three the same evening. Stéphanie found all this activity something of a relief, not least because it meant that she and Philippe spent very little time alone. She was going to have to do something about Philippe, she knew that, but it would just have to wait a little longer. Right now she couldn't handle it. Since her last visit to Sergei, she couldn't handle very much at all. Her concentration was in tatters, she was unable to work, and she hadn't been to the library for over a week. Fortunately, Philippe had noticed nothing amiss. The social scramble was so hectic that she barely saw him during the actual functions, and he was so tired that he took her straight home at the end of the evening.

And then, on the day of the reception given by the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture, he arranged to meet her in a bar near his office before the reception began. He had something to tell her, he had announced on the phone, in tones of suppressed triumph. With a bit of luck, thought Stéphanie, listlessly ironing the Manuel Berger original he had given her as a early Christmas present, he might have got his bloody promotion at last. She was sick to death of hearing about his plans to impress Monsieur Gérard, charm Monsieur Manuel and woo the Baronne de Boissy-Caradec.

The bar had plush seats and an atmosphere of muted conviviality. At this hour it was populated by groups of sober-suited businessmen, with an occasional dignified wife or giggly secretary in attendance. They had been here once or twice before: it wasn't sharp and chic enough for Philippe's usual taste, but now and then he decided he wanted to go somewhere quiet. Stéphanie found herself stifling a yawn. Boring place, boring people. Monique had asked if she wanted to go and see the new Depardieu film tonight with Marina. It was a pity she hadn't accepted. She couldn't avoid Marina for the rest of her life, after all, and the film would probably have been more entertaining than what lay in store at the Chambre Syndicale.

"Cheers," said Philippe, raising his glass. "Here's to us, darling. My mother's consented to receive you at Megève for the Christmas holidays. She's going to telephone tomorrow morning to invite you."

"Megève?"

"Our chalet in Megève. I thought we could leave around the twenty-third and come back after New Year. It'll be reasonably quiet in the office, the last lull before the collections, you know, so it won't matter if I'm gone for ten days."

"Oh."

"I have to say I'm really looking forward to getting away for a bit. Things haven't been easy this autumn. The snow's good, so we should be able to get some ski-ing. It'll do you good too. You've been looking tired recently. The Baronne has a place there too, you know. It won't do any harm to have her over for drinks, or maybe dinner would be better. I'll have to discuss it with Mother."

Stéphanie was jolted into action. "The trouble is, darling, I really don't know if I can leave my work for ten days."

"Your work?"

"It's going so well at the moment. I'm afraid that if I stop I'll lose the thread." What a good job she hadn't mentioned the interrupted sojourns in the library. "If it keeps up at this rate, I'm pretty sure I'll be finished ahead of schedule."

"You know, Stéphanie, I hardly thi-"

"Besides, there's my mother. I can't leave her all alone at Christmas."

"I thought you'd both been invited to Rambouillet. She can go on her own, can't she?"

"Well, yes, but that's not the point."

Without taking his eyes off her, Philippe took a large gulp of scotch. The kirs had been abandoned during the autumn by tacit consent: Stéphanie had developed a predilection for champagne, preferably in large quantities. "Then what is the point? Are you sure your mother is the only person you don't want to leave behind?"

"If you mean Sergei," said Stéphanie, hoping the light was too dim for him to see how her colour had risen, "you're quite wrong. The Russians don't celebrate Christmas at the same time as we do."

"Christmas is hardly the issue, is it? There's a lot more going on between you and Sergei than meets the eye. We had the proof of that already. You're making a fool of me, Stéphanie, and I'm not going to stand for it."

He stopped, apparently giving her a chance to contradict him. She remained silent.

"Either you accept my mother's invitation for Christmas," said Philippe, "or we call our engagement off."

There was a long silence. Stéphanie stared at the table, unable to look up. She could hear the hum of voices all around them and the clink of glasses from the bar. Without being aware that she had reached a decision, she felt her hands moving under the table. The ring slid off her finger as smoothly as if it had been greased.

*

Sergei walked fast, oblivious of the cold. Along the Boulevard de Courcelles, past the café where he had taken Marina on the day of Kazakov's funeral, down the Champs Elysées, alight with Christmas decorations, across the Pont de la Concorde and down the Boulevard Saint Germain, passing not far from the cinema where he and Marina had seen Red September, but turning off before they reached the little Russian tea room where she had told him about her mother. He had been here less than four months, but the city was tainted already with the evidence of his treachery.

Back in the apartment, he couldn't sit still. He picked up a volume of Apollinaire and put it down again. The cool polished French with their precise measured cadences were no match for Russian brute force and ferocity. *Sous le Pont Mirabeau coule la Seine Et nos amours...* He had been beaten before he ever set foot on French soil. The four walls of the living room were like a prison, like that damp little cell in Leningrad where he had once spent a night so many years ago. For lack of anything better to do, and because he needed to keep on the move, he started to hunt for the microphones. Not that there was much he could do about them if he found them: perhaps de-activate them from time to time, but there was no question of actually removing them. The human capacity for self-deception is infinite. I knew all along, of course I did, despite what they told me in Leningrad, despite Volodya's protestations of ignorance. I knew all the time what they wanted, I just chose to ignore it. Push it out of my mind, put it away somewhere safe where I wouldn't stumble across it by mistake.

He worked his way methodically round the apartment, unscrewing the phone, taking a lamp apart from its base, removing the books from the bookshelves, examining the underside of tables and chairs. They don't go to all that trouble to exfiltrate an agent with impeccable dissident credentials merely to satisfy some bureaucrat's curiosity and close a twenty-year-old file. They use him as a finely-honed weapon to close in on a predefined target. They amortize his cover and exploit his skills. They use him to do what he does best in life: to cheat, lie, deceive and betray.

One bug in the telephone, another in the lamp, a third under the table. They weren't taking any chances. They knew they were dealing with a traitor, even if no one else did. I thought my life had reached its lowest point on the day I left Leningrad, but I was wrong, so wrong.

He was about to start checking the bedroom when the doorbell rang, startling him. Who the hell was that? The KGB technical services department come to find out why State property was being tampered with? Marina with another letter from her father? Caroline come to demand an explanation for yesterday morning's brief phone conversation when he had told her that he didn't want to see her any more? Or just another of the damn Algerian carpet sellers putting in some pre-Christmas overtime?

He pushed the books hastily back on the shelf and went to find out.

To his surprise, it was none of them. It was Stéphanie standing on the landing, face streaked with tears, hair falling out of its chignon, shivering like an orphan. Oh God, it couldn't be, not after the other night. An bolt of joy shot through him like lightning. He had thought he was never going to see her again. It was an effort to keep his face impassive.

"Stéphanie. What are you doing here?"

"I broke up with Philippe. I couldn't face going home. Can I come in?"

"Of course." He stood aside to let her past.

"I couldn't think where else to go," said Stéphanie, avoiding his eyes. "I thought maybe I could borrow your couch for the night."

Oh no, not the couch! She looked at him then, and he realized he had spoken aloud. She took a step towards him and he clutched her against him, imprisoning her with his arms in case she changed her mind and went running back to Philippe, planting desperate little kisses on her face, her ear, her hair, mumbling incoherently into the air above her head until she managed to free herself from his drowning-man's grasp and take hold of his head with her hands and pull his face down to hers and make him kiss her properly. Even that didn't last long, he was too impatient to wait, and so was she, because if he had been waiting for this moment for seven and half months, then so had she. She hitched her skirt up to her waist, dragged off her tights and pants, and pulled him down with her to the sofa. The fictitious marriage conceived by some ingenious KGB scriptwriter in an office in the Lubyanka some thirty months earlier was finally to be consummated.

*

Almost immediately afterwards, the practical side of things got the better of them. The springs of the sofa were sticking into them, they were both cold, and Stéphanie was worried about her dress.

"How does it come off?" said Sergei, surveying it with awe.

"The buttons on the shoulders." She put her hands on his chest. "Sergei, I want to tell you something. Just now ... it was wonderful. I've never felt like that before. I didn't know it was possible to feel like that."

Sergei hadn't known it either, hadn't even suspected it, but the second time, he was amazed to discover, was just as good, in fact it was better. With no clothes to get in the way, new dimensions of feeling opened up before them. Their bodies were transmuted into some other sphere. Their tongues, their hands, their limbs met and mingled. The world ceased to exist: Sergei was conscious only of Stéphanie, her mouth and hands against his skin. He was pure sensation, his whole body was a mass of nerve ends. Their bodies seemed to fit together like the two parts of a single whole. He heard her groaning beneath him, he heard himself groaning too. It was the stupidest thing he had said in his life, but he couldn't stop himself. "I love you."

*

"Seriozha?"

"Yes?"

"Did you mean what you said just now?"

"Yes, of course I did. You know I did."

"Then I was right. It was there from the beginning."

"Yes."

"The first time I met you. When we were walking across the Kirov bridge. Do you remember?"

"Oh yes, I remember. Love at first sight, is that what you're trying to say?"

"Don't laugh at me. Tomorrow, you can poke fun at all my romantic notions, but not tonight."

"I'm not poking fun at them." Sergei reached out across the bed and pulled her against him. Were there bugs in the bedroom too, he wondered. "Just remember that fairytale beginnings don't always have fairytale endings."

*

- 4 -

TSAREVICH IVAN AND THE FIREBIRD

"Why are you so sad, Tsarevich Ivan?"
"Because I have lost my horse."
"But you chose the road yourself.
You knew what was going to happen."
- Russian Fairy Tale

This is the tale of Tsarevich Ivan, the Firebird and Grey Wolf.

In a certain land, in a certain realm, lived a king named Tsar Demyan who had three sons. Tsar Demyan sent his sons to catch the Firebird, which had been stealing golden apples from the tree in the palace garden. All three set off in different directions. After riding for many days and many nights, Tsarevich Ivan, the youngest son, reached a place where the road branched off in three directions. He saw a stone inscribed with the following words: "Go straight ahead, and you will be hungry and cold. Go to the right, and you will lose your horse. Go to the left, and you will die."

Tsarevich Ivan decided to go to the right. After riding for three days, he came to a dense forest. All of a sudden, Grey Wolf rushed out of the trees, pounced on Tsarevich Ivan's horse, and ripped it in two. Tsarevich Ivan had to continue on foot. When he was so weary that he could go no further, he sat down on a stone to rest. All of a sudden, Grey Wolf appeared beside him.

"Why are you so sad, Tsarevich Ivan?" he asked.

"Because I have lost my horse."

"You chose the road yourself, you know. You knew what was going to happen. But I am sorry for you, so I will help you."

Grey Wolf took Tsarevich Ivan on his back and ran as fast as an arrow, past streams and forests, to where the Firebird sat in a golden cage in the garden of Tsar Afron.

"Go into the garden and take the Firebird," said Grey Wolf, "but whatever you do, do not take the golden cage."

Tsarevich Ivan climbed over the garden wall, and took the Firebird out of its cage. He started back across the garden, and then he said to himself: "How can I take the firebird without her cage? Where will I put her?" Forgetting what Grey Wolf had told him, he went back and picked up the cage. Immediately, the air was rent by a loud ringing of bells and the guards came running to seize Tsarevich Ivan and marched him off to Tsar Afron.

"How dare you try and steal the Firebird!" cried Tsar Afron, in a great rage. "The son of Tsar Demyan is no better than a common thief! I will send messengers out to all the lands to proclaim your dishonour - unless you go beyond the Thrice-Nine Lands to the Thrice-Ten Tsardom and bring me the Horse with the Golden Mane. If you do that, I will forgive you and let you have the Firebird."

Tsarevich Ivan went back to Grey Wolf, with his head hanging.

"Why did you not listen to me, Tsarevich Ivan?" said Grey Wolf. "I told you not to touch the cage. Well, get on my back, and I will take you to find the Horse with the Golden Mane."

Grey Wolf ran as fast as an arrow, past streams and forests, beyond the Thrice-Nine Lands to the Thrice-Ten Tsardom, and stopped before the stables where the Horse with the Golden Mane was kept.

"Go into the stable, Tsarevich Ivan, and take the Horse with the Golden Mane, but whatever you do, do not take the golden bridle hanging on the wall."

Tsarevich Ivan crept into the stable and took the Horse with the Golden Mane and led it out of the stable. On his way out, he noticed a golden bridle hanging on the wall. "How can I take the horse without its bridle?" he asked himself. "How am I going to ride it?"

Forgetting what Grey Wolf had told him, he took the bridle from its peg and immediately the air was rent by the ringing of bells, and the watchmen woke and came running to seize Tsarevich Ivan and march him off to Tsar Kusman.

"How dare you try and steal my horse!" cried Tsar Kusman in fury. "The son of Tsar Demyan is no better than a common thief! I will send messengers out to all the lands to proclaim your dishonour - unless you go beyond the Thrice-Nine Lands to the Thrice-Ten Tsardom and bring me the Elena the Beautiful to be my bride. If you do that, I will forgive you and let you have the Horse with the Golden Mane."

Tsarevich Ivan went back to Grey Wolf, with his head hanging.

"Why did you not listen to me, Tsarevich Ivan?" said Grey Wolf. "I told you not to touch the bridle. All you do is make trouble for yourself, and for me too. Well, get on my back, and I will take you to find Elena the Beautiful."

Grey Wolf ran as fast as an arrow, past streams and forests, beyond the Thrice-Nine Lands to the Thrice-Ten Tsardom, and stopped before a garden with a golden fence around it.

"I shall go myself this time," said Grey Wolf. "Wait for me by the oak tree out in the open field."

At evening Elena the Beautiful came out into the garden to take the air with her ladies. Grey Wolf leapt over the golden fence and seized her and ran back to the oak tree where Tsarevich Ivan was waiting. Tsarevich Ivan got on his back holding Elena the Beautiful in his arms, and Grey Wolf ran as fast as an arrow back to the land of Tsar Kusman.

Sitting on the wolf's back with Elena the Beautiful in his arms, Tsarevich Ivan came to love her with all his heart, and she came to love him. As they drew near to the palace of Tsar Kusman, Tsarevich Ivan grew sad and woebegone.

"Why are you so sad, Tsarevich Ivan?" asked Grey Wolf.

"Because I have fallen in love with Elena the Beautiful and it breaks my heart to part with her."

"I have helped you in many ways," said Grey Wolf, "and I shall help you again. I will take the shape of Elena the Beautiful and you will lead me to Tsar Kusman as his bride. Later, when you

have mounted the Horse with the Golden Mane and are far away, think of me, and I shall be with you."

Grey Wolf took the shape of Elena the Beautiful and Tsarevich Ivan led him to Tsar Kusman. The Tsar was overwhelmed and gave him the Horse with the Golden Mane and many presents besides. Tsarevich Ivan got on the horse and went to find Elena the Beautiful, who was waiting for him outside the palace. They got on the horse's back and rode to the kingdom of Tsar Afron, conversing and laughing all the way.

When they were halfway there, Tsarevich Ivan suddenly remembered Grey Wolf. "Where is my Grey Wolf?" said he, and all of a sudden, out of nowhere, Grey Wolf was by his side.

"Get on my back, Tsarevich Ivan," said he, "and let Elena the Beautiful ride the Horse with the Golden Mane."

Tsarevich Ivan got on Grey Wolf's back, and away they rode. As they drew near to the kingdom of Tsar Afron, Tsarevich Ivan grew sad and woebegone.

"Why are you sad, Tsarevich Ivan?" asked Grey Wolf.

"Because I don't want to give up the Horse with the Golden Mane in exchange for the Firebird. But if I keep the horse, Tsar Afron will spread news of my dishonour far and wide."

"I have helped you in many ways," said Grey Wolf, "and I shall help you again. I will take the shape of the Horse with the Golden Mane, and you will lead me to the Tsar. Later, when you are on the road home with Elena the Beautiful and the Firebird, think of me, and I shall be with you."

Grey Wolf took the shape of the Horse with the Golden Mane and Tsarevich Ivan led him to Tsar Afron. The Tsar was overwhelmed and gave him the Firebird and many presents besides. Tsarevich Ivan took the bird and went to find Elena the Beautiful who was waiting for him in the forest with the Horse with the Golden Mane. They got on the horse's back holding the Firebird, and set off homewards.

When they were halfway there, Tsarevich Ivan suddenly remembered Grey Wolf. "Where is my Grey Wolf?" said he, and all of a sudden, out of nowhere, Grey Wolf was by his side.

"Get on my back, Tsarevich Ivan," said he, "and let Elena the Beautiful ride the Horse with the Golden Mane."

They rode on, and by and by they came to the place where Grey Wolf had killed Tsarevich Ivan's horse. Grey Wolf stopped and said,

"I have served you long, Tsarevich Ivan, in faith and in truth. Upon this spot, I ripped your horse apart, and I have brought you back here safe and sound. Get off my back now and mount the Horse with the Golden Mane and go wherever you have to go. I can serve you no longer."

Tsarevich Ivan wept bitter tears and set off on his way with Elena the Beautiful. After a while, they were weary and stopped to sleep. As they were sleeping, with the Firebird in its cage close by, and the Horse with the Golden Mane tethered under a tree, Tsarevich Ivan's brothers rode by. They had journeyed far and wide in search of the Firebird and were returning home with nothing to show for it. When they saw Tsarevich Ivan, they fell into a rage and cut off his head. Then they rode off with the Firebird and Elena the Beautiful and the Horse with the Golden Mane.

Tsarevich Ivan lay dead on the ground and the ravens came and circled over his body, and all of a sudden, out of nowhere, Grey Wolf appeared and seized one of the young ravens. When the mother raven begged him to let the fledging go, Grey Wolf said,

"Yes I will, if you fly beyond the Thrice-Nine Lands to the Thrice- Ten Tsardom and bring me Dead and Living Water."

Off flew the raven, and by and by she came back with the Dead and Living Water. Grey Wolf put Tsarevich Ivan's head to his body and sprinkled the Dead Water on him and the head grew back to the body: he sprinkled him with Living Water, and Tsarevich Ivan came back to life.

"Oh what a long sleep I have had," he said.

"Without me you would have slept forever," said Grey Wolf. "Get on my back that I may take you home before your brother Vasily marries Elena the Beautiful."

Tsarevich Ivan got on Grey Wolf's back and Grey Wolf ran as fast as an arrow to the city of Tsar Demyan. When she saw Tsarevich Ivan enter the palace, Elena the Beautiful sprang up from the table and said," Here is my true bridegroom," and told the Tsar what had happened.

The Tsar drove out his two eldest sons and gave half his tsardom to Tsarevich Ivan.

Tsarevich Ivan married Elena the Beautiful and they lived happily ever after.

*

But that's just in the fairy tale. In real life, Stephanusha, there are no happy endings. And if thoughtless youths like Tsarevich Ivan make mistakes, well, they pay the price. That's the way it is.

I cannot deny that I chose my own road. When I set out in quest of the firebird of human rights, I was young and foolish and I thought I could get away with anything. It never occurred to me that I might be confronted with an angry tsar and given an ultimatum. But by the time I realized what I had done, it was much too late. They had got me for good: wherever I went they would find me: there was no escaping them. Neither golden horses nor beautiful maidens would placate them: there was no long-suffering Grey Wolf to help me out. I had taken a wrong turning, and was condemned to wander in a desert of feigned political activism for the rest of my life.

The truth is, Stephanusha, politics don't interest me. Like Pushkin, I prefer people to ideas. In recent years, circumstances have obliged me to keep my distance from people too, and I sometimes find this hard. (It was particularly hard in your case.) But when it comes to human rights, my personal needs are few. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of emigration: none of this is indispensable to me. The real me in my head, behind the camouflage of clothes and skin and muscle, is unfettered. I can think what I like, and there's no way they can stop me. That's the only kind of freedom that's important to me. If I were a writer or an artist, then it would be different. If you are driven by the need for self-expression, then yes, it's worth fighting society for the right to say what you want, paint what you want. Personally, I've never been driven by anything much at all. I just want to be left alone to get on with my life and think what I want to think. I'm quite content to stand aside and watch the rest of them get on with it.

This is not to say that I condemn the people who fight for those other freedoms. On the contrary, I admire them. They have more courage and less selfishness than I will ever have. Their fight is not my fight, that's all. I lack their conviction, their determination and their single-mindedness of purpose.

All I want is Elena the Beautiful, but I know already that my quest is doomed.

*

As the year drew to an end, Peredelkino was sliding ever deeper into the grip of winter. The snow had piled up along the side of the road, and the temperature was well below zero. The General stared impassively out of the car windows as the big Volga turned off the main road toward the village. Paris had sent the tape with Malkova's account of her defection by special messenger. He had played it through twice in the privacy of his office, using headphones so that nothing could be overheard, and now he was taking it out to the dacha to confront his father.

They heard it to the end in silence.

"Why didn't you tell me the truth?" demanded the General when it was finished.

Malkov had begun to fidget slightly towards the end of the recording, but he met his son's eyes unflinchingly. "What would it have changed if I had?"

"We wouldn't be wasting time like this."

"The longer one waits for revenge, the sweeter it is. Haven't you discovered that by now?"

"I've been waiting long enough already," said the General. "You don't deny that this conversation took place?"

"Perhaps not quite as she tells it," Malkov began. He looked up, read the contained fury in the General's gaze, and added reluctantly, "but in essence, yes, that's more or less what was said."

The General got up and paced across to the window. Even under the weight of the snow and the dull curtain of sky, the view was still breath-taking.

"You were really intending to send Mama away?" He turned his back on the view and leaned on the window frame. The walls of the house smelled of bitterness and old age: he wrinkled his nose involuntarily. "I can't believe you thought you'd get away with such a scheme! And what's all this about a psychiatric hospital? Mama may have had her faults, but she was perfectly sane!"

"I changed my mind about that," said Malkov self-righteously. "Suslov would never have swallowed it. I planned to announce that she had decided to live permanently in the Crimea for health reasons."

"Do you think Suslov would have swallowed that? Especially when it became clear that you had a mistress young enough to be your daughter?"

"Three-quarters of the Central Committee Secretariat had mistresses young enough to be their daughters!"

"But they, unlike you, clearly used their brains to get into the Secretariat in the first place! Why the hell couldn't you maintain the fiction of married life like everyone else?"

"Because I couldn't stand the sight of her any more. It made me ill just to look at her, to watch her cringe and suffer, to listen to that whining voice of hers."

His voice hadn't altered, the tone was calm and detached, but the General was shaken by the venom lurking below the surface. It took him a moment or two to collect his thoughts and return to the attack.

"How much time did you spend in her company? Half an hour a week? Maybe less? A little more self-control, Father, a little less arrogance, and we might all still be living in Zhukovka. Have you ever thought of that?"

"I think of it often," said Malkov. "How are your plans proceeding?"

The General took a deep breath. "Everything's on schedule. I have a draft of the next letter for you."

"Good." Malkov groped around for his spectacles. "I see your perestroika is running into difficulties, incidentally."

"Difficulties? I don't believe so. What makes you say that?"

"It's been clear from the start of course that your friend Gorbachev knows nothing at all about the national minorities."

"Oh, you mean the demonstrations in Kazakhstan."

"Demonstrations, you call them? Riots was what I heard. What on earth possessed him to put in a Russian to replace old Kunayev? Damn silly thing to do. Bound to stir up national resentment. Doesn't he know that?"

Right on, Grandfather. It was a damn silly thing to do. The problem was that Gorbachev had no notion that any such thing as national resentment existed. Like the other inhabitants of the windowless Party laboratory, he had been taken in by the Party's own propaganda and was harbouring the dangerous delusion that nationality characteristics had genuinely been dissolved in the great Soviet melting pot. When rioting erupted in Alma-Ata, capital of the Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan, it must have come as quite a surprise to him.

Kunayev, to be sure, was long overdue for purging. A former hunting crony of Brezhnev, he had been industriously feathering his own nest and those of his friends at the state's expense for years. That the Politburo should accept his resignation surprised nobody. Gorbachev's mistake was to replace him, not with another Kazakh, but with a Chuvash, a member of one of the ethnic groups inhabiting the Russian Federation, which made him, from the Kazakhs' point of view, a Russian too. Since the beginning of the Brezhnev period, a member of the titular nationality had held the post of Party First Secretary in each of the fourteen non-Russian republics, though his deputy was invariably a Russian. The Kazakhs were not pleased by this break with tradition. An outsider would disrupt the elaborate network of Party patronage and clan politics that Kunayev had constructed as a front-line defence against the incursions of the centre, and which had earned him the respect and admiration of all right-thinking Kazakhs. Stealing from the state was considered a patriotic duty in the southern republics during the Soviet period, though Moscow could hardly be expected to appreciate such a state of affairs. (These days, there's a statue of Kunayev in the centre of Alma-Ata, and he has a street named after him too: the former Ulitsa Karla Marksa, which seems somehow appropriate.) Gorbachev was guilty of not just an ethnic snub but a social faux pas. In December 1986, ten thousand Kazakhs armed with metal posts, sticks and stones came out on the streets of Alma-Ata. Police inexperienced in crowd control opened fire, several people were killed and at least two hundred were injured.

The incident should have served as a warning, coming as it did from a totally unexpected quarter, not from the Ukrainians or the Georgians, who were always ready to stir up trouble, but from one of the most deeply Russified and seemingly docile of the fourteen national republics -- Kazakhstan, of all places, where the titular nationality did not even make up a majority of the population! The experience cured Gorbachev of sending in Russians to clean up the outposts of empire, but it failed to alert him to the fact that he had fourteen little pressure cookers on his doorstep, bubbling away, building up a head of steam, waiting patiently for their lids to be lifted and seventy years of steam to escape. When Gorbachev relaxed political controls across the empire, the lids blew off. The Alma-Ata riots were the first in a series of national explosions that would blow the Soviet Union apart.

Of course, no one realized it at the time. Even my uncle, who had spent fifteen years in Central Asia, didn't grasp how serious it was.

"The General Secretary has never worked in the national republics," he told his father. "He's not familiar with conditions there. He believed that an exchange of cadres would be the best way to stamp out local cronyism. But he's not stupid. He won't make the same mistake again."

"Yes, well you would defend him," said Malkov sourly. "He's left the KGB alone up till now. He's purged the police, the army, even the Party, but the glorious Chekists have been left untouched."

"Gorbachev has an understanding with our people," said the General blandly.

"Is that so?"

"Of course it is, what do you expect? Without us, he can't run the country."

"Really?" said Malkov. "Well it looks as though he may be changing his mind about that. Releasing Andrei Sakharov is a bit of a slap in the face for your people, wouldn't you say?"

The General shrugged. "The threat posed by the dissidents is exaggerated. Sakharov and the others can't do us any harm."

"That's not what your friend Andropov used to think."

"Times have changed. Yuri Vladimirovich's policies were appropriate ten years ago, but our needs are different now. These days we have to reckon with Western public opinion. Continuing to punish political dissidents only plays into the hands of our enemies, who use it as evidence of our evil intentions." His voice hardened. "Don't worry, Father. I know what you're trying to say, but there's nothing to worry about. Gorbachev won't be allowed to go too far."

"How far is too far?" snapped Malkov. "You haven't raised a finger to stop him decimating the Party."

"The Party," repeated the General. "You know, Father, there's one thing you're going to have to realize. The Party has had its day. The people in the Party are too rigid, too blinkered, too theoretical. They're completely cut off from reality. This country needs to be put back on its feet again, and the Party is incapable of doing it."

The old man blinked convulsively several times.

"Are you trying to say that the organs are going to run the country without the Party?" He tone was one of pure outrage. "The role of the KGB is to serve the Party! The KGB can't run the country!"

"The Party can't run the country either," said the General. "In the past twenty years, the USSR has gone steadily downhill. Face facts, Father. Our economy is stagnating, we're technologically backward, we've gone from one disaster to another in the Third World, we have no prestige left abroad. At home, we have housing shortages, inadequate food supplies. The apparatus is riddled with corruption from top to bottom. The Party has been shown to be incompetent. 'The Congo with rockets' -- have you ever heard that expression? It describes our country admirably."

Malkov spluttered indignantly. The General couldn't make out what he was saying, but he could guess.

"Someone has to take over and get things back on track. Do you want us to turn into a banana republic?"

"Banana republic!"

"Of course it will never come to that. We won't allow it. Our main concern is to preserve the Soviet Union as a great power, whatever means we have to use to do it. That's the important thing, Father, surely you must see that?"

"Is this the General Secretary's view?"

"I told you already. Mikhail Sergeyevich works closely with our people. He always has."

There was a silence. Malkov's knuckles showed white where he was gripping the arms of his chair. Finally he sighed and shook his head and his grip relaxed. When he spoke, he had relapsed into an old man's mumble.

"Opening Pandora's box with this glasnost of his. Never get it closed again. Well. Your problem not mine. Won't be around to see it. Thank God. Well. Now. Show me this letter, then, what are you waiting for? Can't sit around all day."

*

What you have to understand is that the functions of the KGB were not limited to stealing American nuclear secrets and sending people to concentration camps. The KGB was a an integral part of the Soviet political establishment, on an equal footing with its more visible associate, the Communist Party. With a budget estimated at six billion dollars, some 600,000 professional officers and around twenty million informers, it permeated the whole of Soviet society. The KGB was in the air you breathed and the food you ate. It was responsible for patrolling the borders, guarding nuclear weapons, preventing economic theft, intercepting telecommunications, enforcing political conformity and knowing everything that went on. With all this intelligence at their disposal, its leaders were better informed than their Party colleagues, and considerably more aware of the country's disastrous economic situation. In light of the Party's reluctance to act, it was only natural that the KGB leaders should take it on themselves to initiate reforms.

Gorbachev's relationship with the KGB was close and cosy from the beginning. As a young man, he was a protegé of Yuri Andropov, long-time KGB Chairman, who promoted the careers of a whole bunch of bright young Party men, the future perestroikists. (Another of these was my uncle Vasily. It's a small world.) Without the assistance of the KGB, Gorbachev could not have come to power. He relied on KGB files to discredit his rivals for the leadership, and to carry out his commando raids on the Brezhnevite Party apparatus. At no point during his six-year tenure did Gorbachev attempt to slash the KGB's budget, purge its staff, or narrow its field of action. Democratic attempts to impose parliamentary oversight on the security organs were skilfully thwarted. For a while, a bizarre public relations campaign tried to convince the world that the Cheka's successor had mutated into a kinder, gentler security service. But the KGB, after six years of perestroika, was still in business.

The only time Gorbachev showed any signs of breaking ranks with the KGB was in late 1986, in the aftermath of the Daniloff affair. Sakharov was brought back from exile, political arrests plummeted, and in January 1987, on the front page of *Pravda*, the current KGB Chairman Viktor Chebrikov owned up to the unlawful arrest and detention of an investigative reporter six months earlier in the Ukraine. Not a lot, when you consider all the other misdeeds the KGB had committed during the preceding seventy years, but it was a start. It looked as though Gorbachev was preparing to cut the organs down to size -- but of course this never happened. As my uncle explained, Gorbachev and the KGB had an 'understanding.' Gorbachev had been licensed to enact reforms, but a clause in the contract gave his sponsors the right to withdraw their support at any time they wished.

Glasnost had frontiers, perestroika had boundaries. Without reform of the KGB, there could be no reform of the system. The Russian Spring was on sufferance from the start.

*

The second letter was dated December 25th. It reached its destination with the first post of the New Year.

My dear Marina,

Words cannot express how truly glad I was to receive your letter. I may as well confess that, although I have been harbouring the project of writing to you for some time, I never really expected you to answer. I was sorry to hear that you, like me, have not known the joys of a lasting marriage, but I am glad that you have your son with you. Thank you for the photos you sent me. He looks like a fine boy. He reminds me of Vasily when he was young.

Vasily works in the Ministry of External Trade now. He and his wife Sonya, who also works in the Ministry, come out to visit me nearly every weekend. They have a daughter Anushka, who will soon be nine. As you will see from the enclosed photograph, she is a beautiful little girl who looks just like her mother. She enjoys playing on the swing in the garden, swimming in the river in summer, and playing with Ruslan, the dog. (Maybe you remember the other Ruslan, the dog we had when you were young.)

I was interested to hear that you write books for children. Your mother would have been proud of you. From the sound of your letter, I am sure that you have a full and happy life, with your son and your work. So you still swim regularly? Yes, I remember how you used to spend hours in the pool when we visited Nikita Sergeyevich at Pitsunda. I am glad things have turned out so well for you in France, in spite of everything.

Marina, I have spent many hours pondering what must have prompted you to abandon your country and your family and start a new life in a strange country. It took me a long time to reach the unwelcome conclusion that it was because of me. However, I finally forced myself to acknowledge the fact that you were angry with me and wanted to "punish" me. But you were very young then and I don't believe you think like that any more. The tone of your letter makes me think that you must have gone past that stage a long time ago. For your own sake, I hope this is true. Revenge is a sterile emotion which ultimately can only do harm. Since you yourself are now divorced, maybe it is easier for you to understand my situation with regard to your mother, in circumstances where divorce was out of the question. Obviously I never dreamed that she would react the way she did. I have had twenty years to wish that I had shown more restraint in my attitude towards her.

Write back to me soon and tell me more about your life in France.

Your loving father,
Vladimir P. Malkov

*

1987 looked like starting out with snow. Stepping through the imposing wrought-iron door of Marina's apartment building on the second of January, Sergei found himself face to face with André, distinguished as ever in a navy cashmere overcoat. They hadn't met since the previous September. Stéphanie had seen her uncle when she went to Rambouillet with her mother on Christmas Eve, but had not acquainted him with the recent change in her living arrangements. Why cast a pall on the festivities? André shook Sergei's hand and wished him a Happy New Year with a reasonable amount of sincerity. Clearly, he had not yet discovered that anything was amiss.

"Come to see Marina, have you?" His gaze roamed idly round the elegantly panelled hall, perhaps to make sure that everything was nailed down, and returned to Sergei. "She seems quite set on a return to her roots, I must say. First you and now her father. Amazing. The next thing one knows, she'll be planning a trip back to Russia herself."

Sergei smiled at him. "Let's not be pessimistic. It may not come to that."

Marina was waiting for him upstairs. "Happy New Year. Thank you for coming. I hope Stéphanie didn't mind me dragging you out like this."

Sergei frowned. "No, not at all."

"I'm glad you two have worked things out at last."

"How did you know about it?"

"Monique told me. Mind you, the way Stéphanie was looking when I saw her at Christmas, I think I'd have guessed anyway."

"Ah. Well I hope she doesn't become disillusioned with me too fast. So you got another letter? So soon?"

"My father has a lot on his mind." Marina retrieved the letter from the coffee table. "Here. Read it."

Sergei dropped his jacket on the couch beside him and began to read. "Who's this Vasily who works in the Ministry of External Trade?"

"My brother."

"Really? You never told me you had a brother!"

"No." Marina frowned, as if at some disagreeable memory. "We never got on very well when we were children. There's a big age gap between us: he was nine years older than me. There was another child between us: Leonid. I never knew him, he died when he was a baby."

"I see. So Vasily's daughter is nearly nine. He must have married late."

"Sonya must be his second wife. I assume his first wife divorced him. Natalya wasn't the kind of person to stay around when the family was disgraced."

"What's all this about revenge being sterile? Did you tell him you defected because you wanted to avenge your mother?"

"No, I didn't mention it," said Marina. "He seems to have worked that out for himself."

She watched Sergei intently, but he didn't react. He looked up, met her eyes and sensed her concentration. Frowning in slight puzzlement, he returned to the letter.

"What about the test question I suggested?"

"Pitsunda," said Marina. "Khrushchev had a dacha there and we were invited to spend the weekend a few times. I was about fifteen, sixteen. The grown-ups spent most of their time drinking, at least the men did. Nikita Sergeyevich used to drink literally all day, though I don't recall ever seeing him actually drunk. I found him downright alarming. One minute he would be all smiles and good humour; the next something would happen to irritate him and he would just

blow up. So I used to spend most of my time at the swimming pool, keeping out of their way. It was amazing, that pool," she went on, grinning reminiscently. "It had a glass roof and walls which swung open when you pressed a button, and a marvellous view over the Black Sea. But of course, the whole dacha was like that. Very very luxurious."

"But justified by the cares of office," said Sergei dryly.

"Well, of course," said Marina. "Running the Cold War is an exhausting business. Gorbachev probably has one just like it."

"He knows you went swimming at Pitsunda, and he remembers the dog you had when you were small. So it's authentic?"

"I would say so, yes."

Sergei folded the letter neatly into its original folds and handed it back. "Very nice. All very cosy and harmless. Your brother and his family go out to Peredelkino nearly every weekend. Your beautiful little niece plays with the dog. No one bears anyone any ill will, and no one is out for revenge. Maybe next time around, he'll suggest you pay him a visit too."

"Come on, Seriozha, I'm not as naive as that! I'm not about to let myself be lured back to the motherland for a reconciliation with my long-lost family."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Quite frankly, I don't want to see him."

"You haven't forgiven him?"

Marina paused before answering. It was a question she had been asking herself for some weeks now. Apparently her father had forgiven her. Why else would he have written? Bygones were to be bygones, the hatchet was to be buried. Provided, of course, that she agreed, but that was something she still wasn't sure of. Even though the second letter was much like the first in tone, less self-assured and more philosophical than she would ever have believed possible. It seemed that the writer was no longer the ruthless and ambitious man she had known. To all intents and purposes, twenty years of disgrace had wrought a profound change in him, and he was what he said, an old man, close to death, living in harmony with his son, his daughter-in-law and his granddaughter, and anxious to effect a reconciliation with his estranged daughter before it was too late.

Marina found it hard to believe. And even if this idyllic picture was true, even if he really had forgiven her, she did not, she was coming to realize, have it in her to forgive him. Whatever insults and humiliations the intervening years had inflicted on him, whatever penance he had paid, the answer was no. The wound was too deep, and her capacity for pardon not deep enough.

Sergei was watching her, waiting patiently for her to answer. What role had he played in all this? What role did he still have to play?

"No, Sergei. I haven't forgiven him. I can't."

"Even after all this time?"

"No. Time has nothing to do with it. What he did was unforgivable. Nothing can change that."

"Yes, I see."

"I suppose you think I'm wrong?"

She waited to see if he would argue back, tell her to think it over, give the old man a second chance, do whatever they'd told him to do to make her take Malkov's words at face value. But he

looked at her quizzically and shook his head, disinclined, it seemed, to try and change her mind. Marina was thrown off balance. Could she have been wrong about him?

"No," said Sergei, in a voice so low she could hardly hear it, "I think you're right. Don't trust them."

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How can I explain it to you, Stephanusha? How can I hope to make you understand why I did what I did? Not to forgive me for it, no, I won't ask that. What I've done is unforgivable, no better than Malkov himself, when you get down to it. But I would like you to understand why I had no alternative. Why I felt I had to comply.

Duroc, Vaneau, Sèvres-Babylone. The métro rattles grimly onward, people get off and on, the mood is bleak. Christmas has come and gone, the New Year too, and spring feels a long way away. Mabillon, Odéon. Nearly home. What will I say when I get there? I didn't tell you I was going to see Marina: what will I tell you instead? What kind of lie will I serve up this time? More to the point, will you believe me? It's getting harder to hide things from you with every day that passes. We've been living together for a bare few weeks, and already I feel as if I'd been stripped down to the heart. You may not be Russian, but as my mother says, you have a Russian soul. I feel as if I'd known you all my life, that I can tell you anything and you'll understand.

Only that, unfortunately, isn't true at all. There are certain things it would be extremely unwise to tell you. As it is, you'll find them out soon enough, and then you'll realize I've been lying to you since the moment we met. There is no way I can justify myself to you, and there's no possible explanation I can give you. Even though I would like so much to think there is.

*

Sergei got out of the métro and walked home up the Rue Saint Sulpice. The air was still and expectant, waiting for snow. Stéphanie was sitting at the table making notes. She looked up and smiled when he came in, laid down her pen and stretched like a cat. He stood behind her chair and slid his arms round her neck, bending to kiss the top of her head. "How is Aleksandr Sergeyevich today?"

"He's fine." She leant backwards and turned her face up to his. "You're freezing."

"I think it's going to snow."

"Good. If we could get snowed up for a few weeks that would suit me just fine, before my mother has to tell André what happened. Philippe will be back from Megève pretty soon, and the word's going to get around."

"Maybe the Seine will freeze over."

"And the phone lines seize up. That reminds me. Someone called Volodya phoned while you were out."

Sergei was unable to repress a start. "What did he want?"

"You think any of your paranoid friends tell me their business when they call? He said he'd call back tonight. Why? Is something the matter?"

"No. I wasn't expecting it, that's all."

"Tolya called too from *Russkaya mysl*. They need your piece on Sakharov as soon as possible. What else?" She consulted a list scribbled on the back of an envelope. "Misha can't make it

tomorrow. He didn't say what that meant, he seemed to think you'd know. You're to call him back after nine thirty tonight."

Sergei pulled up a chair to the table and sat down. "Busy morning."

"That's not all. Here." She gave him the envelope with the list on it. "This came for you from the BBC. Do open it. I'm dying to see what they want."

"The BBC?" Sergei turned the letter over gingerly, examining the unfamiliar logo and the British postmark.

"Open it!" said Stéphanie. "I'm hoping they're going to offer you a job and we can move to London so my family can all forget about us."

Sergei opened it. "My God, that's exactly what they do want. A vacancy in the Russian service, would I be interested in submitting an application."

"Sergei, that's marvellous!" She took the letter from him and read it through rapidly. "A regular salary coming in, wouldn't that be wonderful? You wouldn't have to rely on all this freelance stuff any more."

"How much is the salary?"

"I don't know, they only give a figure in pounds sterling. We'll have to check the exchange rate. I don't suppose it's a fortune, but I'm sure it's enough to live on. I'll type up a c.v. in English for you, shall I?"

"Sure." Sergei read the letter through again, scowling over the unfamiliar turns of phrase.

"What's the matter? Aren't you pleased?"

"It means I'd have to move to London."

"What 's wrong with that?"

"You know I can't leave France until I get my nationality papers."

"It'll only be a few months. You can probably work something out."

"My English isn't very good."

"Once we're there, you'll pick it up in no time."

"I've never done any radio journalism. I'm not sure I'd be any good at it."

"For God's sake, Seriozha, that's for them to decide. All you have to do right now is send in an application. Don't be so defeatist!"

"I'm sorry." He leaned over and kissed her. How was he supposed to tell her he wasn't at liberty to uproot and move to London any time he pleased? "I need time to get used to the idea. You Westerners are used to moving around from one country to the next, but we aren't. I'm just beginning to get used to France. I'm not sure I want to start all over again in a new country."

"At least you won't be on your own this time." Stéphanie got up and put her arms round his shoulders.

Sergei leaned back against her and closed his eyes. The anguish he had endured in Leningrad was nothing compared to what he was going through now. Concealing things from people he saw once a week was child's play compared to betraying someone he lived with and ate with and slept with every day of his life. Oh God, Stéphanie, what am I going to do? My fears, my doubts, my anxieties: there isn't a lot I can hide from you any more. Day by day, hour by hour, you're getting closer to the centre. One of these days, you're going to stumble on that final core of unacceptable truth, and then what will you do?

"We'll see how you feel when my citizenship comes through."

"Seriozha, will you please stop saying that! You know perfectly well I'm not going to divorce you."

"I don't want you to feel bound by anything, that's all. Anyway, I may not get the job. There's bound to be a lot of competition."

Stéphanie let out an exasperated sigh. "If you don't get it then that's too bad. But at least you'll have tried. You can't pass up a chance like this without doing anything about it. You mustn't be so negative, Seriozha."

"All right, I'll send in an application. Just let me get an aspirin and then we'll start on the c.v. if you want."

"Have you got another headache? You've had an awful lot of them lately. Don't you think you should see a doctor?"

Sergei looked at her thoughtfully. "Yes, I suppose I have." Doctor, I'm leading a double life. For the past eight years, I've been telling lies to everyone I know. What can you give me for the pain? "It's nothing to worry about. I get spells like this sometimes. It'll go away of its own accord."

*

Blackmail. Obviously. Dead father, invalid mother, it stuck out a mile. She should have thought of it weeks ago. Closing the door behind Sergei, Marina went back into the sitting room and stared thoughtfully around. Where were they likely to be? Not in the walls. That wallpaper had been there since before André left. Maybe in the telephone, or in the base of the table lamps, or under the tables. Behind the bookshelves? No. Books got taken out and put back, there was too much risk of discovery.

She unscrewed the telephone receiver and examined its contents dubiously. What did the things look like anyway? Then she noticed a small oval object, a little like a hearing aid, that didn't seem to be attached to any wires. Cautiously, she tried to pick it up, and sure enough it came away in her hand. She rolled it gingerly round between her thumb and forefinger. It didn't beep and it didn't vibrate. But nevertheless, it transmitted all her telephone conversations and possibly all the conversations that took place in this room to unknown listeners in some undefined location. And Sergei knew it was there and so he lowered his voice when he wanted to say things that weren't in the script.

A sudden wave of nausea swept over her and she dropped the thing back in the receiver as though it had burned her. For a while she sat staring at it, too revolted to touch it, and then she got a grip on herself and forced herself to replace it in approximately the position it had been in before, screw the cap back on the receiver, and replace the telephone.

The phone stood on a low table next to the sofa, with a lamp beside it. She eyed the lamp uncertainly. Would they bother to put two microphones side by side? No, wait, that lamp had been on the other side of the room before. She had moved it last year some time. When had they installed these things, anyway? How long had they been listening to her? Since Sergei showed up? Or even earlier ? She knelt down beside the table and began to examine the base of the lamp. They had invaded her, defiled her, raped her, but she was damned if she was going to let those bastards get the better of her. How the hell did this thing come apart? She was so intent on what she was doing that she didn't hear the front door open.

"Ma," said Nicolas' voice behind her, "what on earth are you doing?"

"Nicolas! Oh God, you startled me. You're home early, aren't you?"

"The English teacher's off sick. What are you doing?"

"Doing? What am I doing? Oh...er... just dusting."

"With your bare hands?"

"What?"

"You don't have a duster."

"No, of course not. I mean, I'm just looking to see where I need to dust. At this time of year, it's so dark that you can't see where exactly you need to dust."

Nicolas was staring at her in bewilderment, as well he might. Dust was not one of her habitual preoccupations. Fortunately he noticed the letter from Moscow lying on the sofa and that distracted his attention.

"Another letter from your father? He's writing to you an awful lot all of a sudden."

"I expect he's lonely," said Marina glibly. "My brother and his family visit him on weekends, but the rest of the time he's on his own."

Nicolas sat down on the sofa and gave her a long, hard look. "He's picked an odd moment to discover that he's lonely."

"What do you mean?"

"Ever since I can remember, you've never wanted to talk about Russia. The Soviet Union. You've never told me about your life there, your family, your childhood, all that stuff. What I know about my grandfather can be summed up in about three lines. All I know about my grandmother is that her name was Yevgenia. And as for your brother, my uncle, I don't know anything about him at all!"

Marina stared at him in astonishment. He was leaning forward, glowering at her, red-faced and accusing. He clearly meant every word he said, and she had no inkling, no inkling at all, that he had ever been at all interested in any of his relatives in the Soviet Union.

"I was trying to put the past behind me, Nicolas," she began carefully. " I didn't want to-"

But Nicolas hadn't finished.

"You had no Russian friends except that old guy, the writer, and you didn't see a great deal of him. Your friends were all French. And then Stéphanie comes back with this Russian she picked up somewhere and all of a sudden you and he are as thick as thieves, and you don't see any of your French friends any more."

"Yes I do, I had lunch with Danièle only last week."

"Last week!" said Nicolas scornfully. "For the first time in how long? And that other one you used to spend hours talking on the phone to, Marie-Pierre or something, you never call her up any more. And that guy from the advertising agency, what happened to him? Meanwhile, Sergei's over here practically every day and you're having all these intense conversations about the past and your father and Khrushchev-"

"How do you know what I talk to Sergei about?" interrupted Marina. "You don't even understand Russian!"

Nicolas suddenly looked shifty. "Well actually I've been doing a little fooling round in the language lab at school."

"You've been learning Russian?" said Marina incredulously.

"In any normal household I'd be bilingual already!"

"That was your father's fault."

"Yours too. You were too busy bringing up Stéphanie as a good little Russian to bother about me. Jacques and Monique spent all their time at medical conventions and dinner parties and you could do exactly what you wanted with Stéphanie. As for me, you realized early on that Papa was going to make damn sure I was brought up as a proper little French bourgeois, and you never even tried to fight it, you just let him do exactly as he wanted."

Marina sat and looked at him in silence. He was absolutely right, of course, and there was nothing she could say to defend herself. "I didn't realize you minded," she said in the end.

"Of course I mind. It's my family too. I have a right to know about them. You're weird, Ma, if you don't understand that."

"So for language practice you've been eavesdropping on my conversations with Sergei," said Marina more sharply than she intended.

"Easy, Ma, I wouldn't call it eavesdropping. I don't understand as much as all that. Once you told him about Khrushchev sending your father to Paris. All that was easy enough to grasp: 'Khrushchev,' 'father,' 'Paris,' especially as I knew about it anyway, but after that I was lost. I didn't get the point of the story at all."

"Better spend some more time in your language lab," said Marina nastily.

"Maybe I'll just sign up for conversation classes with Sergei. Spend my afternoons with him for a few months, and see who I get a letter from."

Good God, had he even figured that out? Marina observed her son with growing amazement. For years she had assumed that his mind was entirely filled with his friends, his rock music and his baccalauréat, in more or less that order, but it seemed there was still space left over to pay attention to his mother's activities too. "What on earth do you mean?" she countered, mindful of the bugs.

"Ma, hasn't it struck you that there's something odd going on here? First Sergei shows up, and then your father suddenly contracts a burning desire for reconciliation. There has to be a connection somewhere."

"There is, Nicolas," said Marina crisply. "It's called glasnost. Things are changing in the Soviet Union, and we're beginning to see the result of it. One, instead of sending Sergei to the camps, they send him to the West. Two, my father feels at liberty to write to me, even though he's been officially disgraced for twenty years."

Nicolas stared at her in exasperation. Imperturbably, Marina stared back. She was sitting right by the telephone. With luck, the hidden microphone would have picked up every word.

*

The transcript of the conversation arrived on the General's desk some ten days later, at the same time as Marina's reply to the second letter. Mail addressed to Vladimir P. Malkov at the address in Peredelkino was routed directly to a KGB mail box, and from there to the General's office. The old man's telephone was monitored too. The General had no intention of allowing his father to betray him. Both the transcript and the letter made it clear that Marina suspected nothing. The General smiled sourly to himself. She had swallowed it hook, line and sinker. Part of the letter was devoted to an account of her writing career, and the rest was about Nicolas. The General checked the details against the file. Everything tallied. The niece, the fairy stories, the

family friend. She had enclosed a couple of books: *Céline et François Vont en Bateau* and *Céline et François et le Sapin de Noel*. One had a boat on the cover, and the other had a Christmas tree. According to the file, the one about the Christmas tree had been published the previous year, and she was due to deliver another within the next few weeks. An idea struck the General, and he went back and made a note of the publisher's name.

He turned to the part of the letter concerning Nicolas. Eighteen years old, in his last year at the lycée, due to take his baccalauréat in June, no firm plans after that, interested in journalism, but his father wanted him to study law. The General skimmed distractedly over the details. None of that was important. By June, this business would be settled, young Nicolas would have realized that his suspicions had been correct, and whether he passed his exams or not would have ceased to matter.

The General put the letter down on the desk and closed his eyes. It was late, most of the staff had gone home hours ago, and the building was almost deserted. He had switched off the overhead neon light, and the room was lit only by the circular glow of the desk lamp. The office was austere and uncluttered, although not entirely devoid of personal touches. A portrait of Dzerzhinski, the first Chairman of the Cheka, hung on one wall, and a pile of children's books sat on the desk. Beside them was a photo of a girl with long dark hair. The photo had been taken out of doors, and the girl was leaning on a wooden verandah. Something slightly dated about the pose, or maybe the hairstyle, suggested that it had not been taken recently.

The General opened his eyes, pulled a sheet of paper with handwritten notes towards him, picked up the phone and dialled.

A woman's voice answered, not overtly welcoming. "Allo?" The General smiled to himself, picturing the scene. It was quarter to ten French time, she would be reading a book or watching the television, winding down ready to go to bed, while Nicolas in his room at the far end of the corridor studied for the exams he would possibly never take.

"Marina Vladimirovna?"

A slight pause: she wasn't expecting that. Then she said uncertainly, "Da."

"Marina," he repeated. At last. After all this time. "Eto Vasily."

"Vasily?" It sounded as though he had literally taken her breath away. "Vasya! Oh my God!"

"Marinka, how are you?"

"I'm fine. Fine. And you?"

"I'm fine too."

"It's so strange to hear you after all this time.... Papa told me that you work for the Ministry of Foreign Trade."

"That's right. I have a good position there."

"And you have a little girl?"

"Anushka, yes. She's nine and a half. Natalya and I were divorced, you know. Anushka's mother is my second wife."

"Yes, I guessed that. Father sent me a photo of the two of them, but without you."

"I was behind the camera."

"Send me one of you as well. And Father too."

"All right," said the General, "I will. Marina, the reason I'm calling is that I am going to make a trip to the West. I am going to Copenhagen with a trade delegation next month, and I would like to see you. Can you travel there to meet me?"

"Copenhagen? Yes, I- Yes, of course I can. But what about you? If we're seen together, won't it harm your career?"

"Now we have glasnost, it is possible to do many things that might not have been wise before."

"Ah yes, of course, glasnost. Give me the dates, I'll write them down."

"The third and fourth of February."

"So soon?"

"I'm sorry it's such short notice. It wasn't easy for me to call you earlier."

"It doesn't matter. I'm glad we're going to have the chance to talk, Vasya. Face to face, I mean. There's a lot I feel I ought to say to you."

"Yes?"

"I'm not going to say I'm sorry for what I did, but I want to explain what my reasons were for doing it."

"I understand. You speak Russian as well as ever, Marina. You haven't forgotten your mother tongue during all these years."

"No."

"It's good to see you haven't forgotten us. Papa talks about you a lot. In fact, he doesn't talk about anything but you! It took him a long time to make up his mind to write, but now that he has, there's been such a change in him - he looks ten years younger."

"How is Papa? He doesn't tell me much about himself in his letters. Is he in good health?"

"At his age one can't expect miracles. But he's still fairly active. He reads, he goes for walks. He liked the books you sent, by the way. We all did. Anushka has them now. They are her most treasured possessions."

"I'm glad."

"I must go now. I will telephone again when I know more about our trip."

"Why don't you give me your number? It might be easier for me to call you."

"I don't think that's wise," said the General smoothly. "There are times when it would not be appropriate to receive such a phone call. Even now. Goodnight, Marinka. It was good to talk to you."

"I'll look forward to seeing you in Copenhagen. Goodnight, Vasya."

The General put down the phone, tilted back in his chair, and let out a long sigh of satisfaction. No, she suspected nothing. It had gone even better than he had hoped.

His eyes wandered to the photo. It had been taken in the summer of 1963. Marina had been seventeen. He had other photos of her too, more recent ones, taken with a telephoto lens, that showed her getting in and out of cars, crossing streets, or even standing on the balcony of her apartment, but this was the one he preferred. The one on the verandah at Zhukovka, the one that reminded him how much she had taken away from him.

After a while, he picked up Marina's books and dropped them one after the other into the wastepaper bin.

*

Even in these democratic days, the KGB does not permit ready access to its archives. There is no means of knowing whether General Svetlov's operation against his sister was state-sponsored, or merely an early foray into private enterprise. On the whole, I'm inclined to assume the latter. Private enterprise might not have been officially recognized in the period we are speaking of, but that doesn't mean it did not exist. What I do know is that, when Andropov summoned him back to Moscow at the end of 1982, it was part of my uncle's responsibilities to begin making overtures to prominent emigrés in the hope of persuading them to return to their Motherland. It seems likely that he merely decided to extend the State's hospitality to his sister too. And if anyone noticed he was exceeding his brief, it's unlikely that anyone would have objected. The KGB was not just a state within a state: to a certain extent it was the State itself.

The KGB was the true foundation of power in the last desperate days of the USSR. By the autumn of 1990, Eastern Europe was gone and the Union itself was threatened. Lithuania had declared sovereignty, Armenians were fighting Azeris, Muscovites were on the streets protesting food shortages. The political liberalization movement that had begun four years earlier with the phone call to Sakharov in Gorky had gone further and faster than anyone had foreseen. The Army was in disarray, the Party was a shadow of its former self. The security organs, on the other hand, had lost none of their authority. Just as the KGB had launched the reform movement, the KGB now intervened to preserve the empire. Gorbachev's last moment of liberal glory came in the summer of 1990, with some nifty manoeuvering at a Party Congress and an agreement on German reunification. After that it was all downhill. Unexplained military manoeuvres around Moscow. A liberal economic reform plan summarily abandoned. Party hacks appointed to the posts of Vice-President and Prime Minister. Troops firing on demonstrators at the Vilnius television tower. "We have had about as much democracy as we can stomach," said Vladimir Kryuchkov, the KGB chief who had replaced Chebrikov. The KGB had withdrawn its support from perestroika and was preparing to restore order to Soviet society.

And thus Gorbachev woke up on the morning of August 19, 1991 at Foros in the Crimea and found himself vilely betrayed by old friends and trusted colleagues.

Or did he?

Let's not forget that Gorbachev had received several warnings of an attempted coup, including one from the American ambassador, that he had known most of the putschists for years and had appointed them himself, that he was coming under increasing pressure from the newly elected Russian President Boris Yeltsin to relinquish a substantial portion of his prerogatives, and that he was due to sign a Union Treaty which would have transferred considerable powers to the republics and left the central government, including himself, with a sharply reduced political role.

Think about it. Then consider the fact that every single one of the coup plotters insisted that Gorbachev had given them the go-ahead, but suddenly backed off at the last minute and left them holding the baby. Cast your mind back to the televised press conferences of the self-styled Emergency Committee. Remember their inebriety, their shaking hands, their lack of conviction, their indecision. Their failure to sever telephone links, close down radio stations, storm Parliament, arrest Yeltsin, and take all the other steps in the putschist style manual. The look on their faces of men left in the lurch.

Obviously we will never know the truth. On the basis of available evidence, you can argue both ways. Did he know, or didn't he? Personally, I prefer to remain in doubt. Saint Gorby, Liberator of Oppressed Peoples, Undertaker to the Cold War, Terminator of the Communist Party

-- even if some of the above activities were involuntary, I am reluctant to tarnish the glittering image. I find it hard to reconcile the gorgeous flowering of the Russian Spring with the idea of a dark covenant sealed years earlier, but I know my recalcitrance is naive. In the old Soviet Union, by the nature of things, it could not have been otherwise.

In Russia, nothing is quite what it seems, and appearances can be horribly deceptive.

*

Appearance and reality was a theme that was also beginning to preoccupy Stéphanie. For the first couple of weeks after moving in with Sergei, she felt as if she had been reborn. After those three months with Philippe, she felt as if she was coming out of a tunnel into the light. There was no need to worry about what she wore and what she said and whether she was conforming to Sergei's image of what the woman in his life should be. She could talk to him about the things that interested her with the certainty that they interested him too. For the first time in her life, her intellect, her emotions and her physical desires were all going in the same direction. It was a new and heady sensation.

Her sexual relationship with Sergei was a particular source of wonder. With Philippe, she had never dared to suggest anything even mildly unorthodox, but with Sergei she had no such hesitations, and he was a willing partner in her explorations. During those short cold winter days, they spent more time in bed than Stéphanie would have believed possible. Yet, despite their physical and emotional understanding, there were parts of Sergei that remained mysterious. Stéphanie had still to meet Misha and Tolya and Volodya and the rest, although she had had quite friendly chats on the telephone with some of them. She still had no idea what he was doing or where he was going when he took off at odd hours on unexplained errands, and she made a point of not asking questions. Sergei had spent years keeping the people in his life in separate compartments and he wasn't going to change his habits from one day to the next. She had been admitted to his bed, but she was still a long way from gaining admittance to his life. One step at a time.

What troubled her most was Sergei's insistence that their relationship was unlikely to endure. Of course she could understand that he should have some doubts. She had a few herself on occasion. Was she really going to be able to handle his insatiable taste for clandestinity for the rest of her life? Nevertheless, his matter-of-fact assumption that they would divorce as planned when he obtained French citizenship alternately frightened and exasperated her. The day the letter came from the BBC was when she first began to wonder if there might not be more to Sergei's refusal to admit the possibility of a long-term future than met the eye, and to suspect that there might be some more insuperable barrier than family background which he had omitted to tell her about.

Towards the middle of January, Juliet Mortimer came through Paris on her way to visit her sister in Normandy. Stéphanie met the train from London at the Gare du Nord and brought Juliet back to Saint Sulpice. Sergei had gone out, leaving a note to say he had gone to meet Sasha and would be back later.

"What's the point of that?" said Juliet, watching Stéphanie put the Russian-Uzbek dictionary back on the shelves.

"He refuses to leave me a note on the table to say where he's gone. He says it's not secure."

Juliet began to giggle. "Paranoia Unlimited. I don't believe it! And when you leave him notes do you put them in there too?"

"Of course."

"Never a dull moment. So this is love in a garret? How romantic. I bet that roof leaks, doesn't it? What more can life hold?" She dropped on to the couch, pushing aside a stack of papers, and grinned up at Stéphanie. "So was it worth it, all those nights of frustrated passion in Leningrad?"

Stéphanie opened her mouth to answer, but before she had realized what was happening, her face crumpled up and she burst into tears.

"Steph!" Juliet sat up in alarm. "What's the matter?"

"He's hiding something from me. He says he loves me, and I believe him, I can feel it, but at the same time he's trying to push me away, I can never get close to him, I never know what he's thinking. There's something going on, but I don't know what."

"Another woman?"

"No." Stéphanie pulled herself together and blew her nose. It was a relief to voice her suspicions out loud, even though she hadn't planned to do so in such a hysterical fashion. "More likely another man. He gets all these weird phone calls from people who refuse to say who they are, and refuse to leave messages. Then he goes rushing off to meet them, and half the time he refuses to say where he's going, who he's meeting, when he's coming back."

"Or else he leaves you notes in little hidey-holes. I wouldn't worry too much, if I were you. All the Russians I know operate like that. Don't forget, he's probably spent years keeping all the different people in his life away from each other. His pupils, his friends, his parents, his human rights activities, not to mention the KGB. It can't be an easy habit to break."

"That's not the main problem. The main problem is that he's obsessed with the notion that it isn't going to last. I'm going to get tired of him, our social backgrounds are too different, he's a penniless immigrant, he doesn't earn enough money to keep me in the style to which I'm accustomed."

"Maybe he really believes that."

"He doesn't think in those terms, money and status and so on. It's an excuse, it's all part of this trying to push me away. But the thing I really don't understand is the business with the BBC. They're offering him a job and he doesn't seem to want it."

"That is odd. There are hungry Russians out there who would kill for a chance like that."

"Exactly. It's the best offer he's ever likely to get. But he comes out with a whole string of feeble excuses not to take the job. He doesn't even want to apply for it. That's why I think there's something strange going on."

"It's a little bit worrying," admitted Juliet.

"It's more than that," said Stéphanie. "Juliet, I'm frightened."

Juliet said hesitantly, "Do you remember what I said when you first met him?"

Stéphanie looked up and met her eyes. " Yes. I thought of that too."

There was a long silence. Then Juliet said, "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. What would you do if you were in my place?"

"Oh God, Stéphanie, don't ask me that. You must know I can't answer it. You haven't tried asking him outright about it?"

"I daren't."

"In case he uses it as an excuse to split up? Oh dear, you are in a mess." Juliet glanced at her watch.

"You aren't leaving already?"

"No, but I'll have to go soon. My train's in three quarters of an hour."

"But we've hardly had time to talk!" said Stéphanie, suddenly desperate. She had been counting on Juliet to help her find a way out of the problem.

"I know. Listen, why don't you come with me for a day or two?"

"To Normandy? But how can I? Your sister-"

"Oh she won't mind. It's in the middle of nowhere, but it's quite a big house. They've got plenty of room. My brother-in-law is a bit of a pain in the neck, but he's interesting when he wants to be, and I know you'll like Katharine. They're the ones who spent four years in Moscow, remember? Come with me, it'll take your mind off things."

"But Sergei-"

"Leave him a note," said Juliet airily. "Just be sure not to tell him where you've gone."

*

The note said, "*Seriozha, Juliet invited me to Normandy. Back in a few days. I love you. Stéphanie."*

Without her, Sergei was bereft. She had only moved in a month ago but it felt as if she had been there for ever. The apartment was too big without her, too silent, too empty. To make matters worse, the weather suddenly changed, the temperature soared to unseasonable norms, and it became almost spring-like. If Stéphanie had been there, they would have been able to go out together, wander along the quais, drink tea at a pavement café. Instead, he had to make do with a stroll in the Luxembourg Gardens with Volodya. Volodya was back in his warm-weather wardrobe of scuffed navy-blue, and had brought an article from *Moscow News* that purported to criticize Stalin. Sergei gazed at it incredulously.

"You see," said Volodya. "It's serious. They really want to make a new start, to strip away all the lies and get back to where we were before."

"What do you mean?" said Sergei cautiously.

"Before Stalin perverted the socialist ideal. Lenin's ideal. Because of Stalin, our country took a wrong turning. We have to reclaim Lenin's original vision, and set out from there."

Sergei looked at him in astonishment? Was he serious? Did he really think it was possible to roll back sixty years of Soviet history and simply recreate the past?

"Maybe you're right," he murmured compliantly. Today was not the day to get into an argument with Volodya and tell him that Lenin's original vision was the vision of the man who had begun the repression of political opponents, inaugurated the Gulag, and laid down the pattern of government by violence that had gripped the country ever since. Today was the day he had to bring up the subject of London.

"London?" said Volodya, when he had finished. "Of course not, Seriozha, it's out of the question. You know that as well as I do. Your place is here."

Sergei tried another tack. "How much longer will the operation last? I assume they'll use the meeting with her brother to start persuading her to return?"

"That reminds me. I can't help thinking you were a bit too negative when she told you about her brother's phone call."

Sergei had been expecting the reproach. "I'm supposed to push her into his arms? That would be completely out of character."

"It's a question of degree," said Volodya patiently. "Obviously, no one expects you to be enthusiastic about this meeting, but I really did feel you were unduly critical. Just tone it down a bit, that's all I'm asking."

"Fine."

"As to how long the operation will last, obviously I can't tell you that. We'll see how the meeting in Copenhagen goes, and what Moscow decides to do next."

"The brother is cooperating, I suppose? He knows what's going on?"

"I don't know how much he's been told, but, yes, he's cooperating. Nevertheless, the operation is likely to continue for several months. From what I've heard of Malkova on tape, it might last as much as a year. She won't be easy to persuade. And during all that time, we're going to need you here."

Sergei sighed.

"What's the problem?" said Volodya innocently. "I didn't know you had a burning ambition to be a radio journalist?"

Sergei cast him an irritated glance. "The problem is Stéphanie," he explained. As if Volodya hadn't heard those tapes, and didn't know exactly what the situation was. "I have no job, and for reasons I can't explain to her I'm turning down the best offer I'm ever likely to get."

"I can see that it's a difficult situation..." said Volodya soothingly. "Where is Stéphanie now, by the way?" He glanced round, as if he expected to see her emerge from behind a statue.

"She's gone to Normandy for a few days."

"Good. If you two stay together, we'll have to cross this park off the list of meeting places. It's much too close to your flat. Of course, it was never part of Moscow's plans for your relationship to develop to this point."

Sergei gave him an exasperated glance. "Nor mine, I assure you."

"It must be causing you a lot of stress. You know, I wonder if it might not be wiser to end the relationship now, before she finds out why you really came to France?"

"I can't do that. It wouldn't be fair to her."

"Yes," said Volodya. "Fair." They had been walking slowly towards the pond in the centre of the park: he turned abruptly away and drew Sergei into the shelter of the trees, where there were fewer people, and less risk of their being overheard. "Look, Seriozha, I understand what you mean, I know what happened with her fiancé, I understand why you felt you had to- Well." He gestured vaguely in the air. "But there's one thing I have to make absolutely clear. If there's any danger of this relationship endangering the security of the Malkova operation, I'm going to have to order you to break it off. You must realize that. And this means that you may have to break up with her in circumstances which may be even less propitious than they are today. What I'm trying to say is that I understand your desire not to hurt her -- oh yes, don't look at me like that, I know exactly what you think of me and my colleagues, but we aren't completely inhuman, we do understand that much. Anyway, what I mean is that the longer you wait, the more you may hurt her in the end. That's all. I'm not giving you any instructions, not yet. All I'm saying is, think

about it. Oh shit," he added, looking over Sergei's shoulder, "I knew this park was a bad idea. Here she is now. I thought you said she was in Normandy?"

*

Normandy was a mistake: Stéphanie had realized that as soon as she got there. Her hosts welcomed her warmly, the walks in the forest did her good, the evenings in front of the log fire playing Scrabble or Monopoly were pleasantly relaxing, but she was wasting her time. She had to talk to Sergei and find out what was wrong with his life. And then the two of them were going to have to solve the problem, whatever it was. There was no point putting it off. After two days, she made her excuses and caught the train back to Paris, resolved to bring up the matter with Sergei right away. But when she got to Saint Sulpice, the flat was empty. Sergei wasn't there. She looked in the dictionary, but there was no note. Why should there be? He hadn't been expecting her. The weather was too nice to sit around and wait. She picked up her coat and wandered up to the Luxembourg Gardens.

The gardens were packed: it was the first warm afternoon for months. Students, pensioners, mothers and children. Stéphanie bought an ice-cream and ate it strolling across the park. The sun was warm on her back and her spirits rose. It couldn't be as bad as all that, someone like Sergei couldn't really work for the KGB, it was probably something totally unimportant and his paranoid mindset had blown it out of proportion. She mounted the steps from the Senate building and suddenly she saw him, standing in the trees near the Fontaine de Médicis with another man. She slackened her pace. They were deep in discussion. Could she violate all the principles of compartmentalization and just walk up to them? The other man glanced over Sergei's shoulder, saw her approaching and said something to Sergei. Sergei swung round and saw her. His face lit up, he started to move towards her, and then he stopped abruptly, casting a sidelong glance at the other man, and waited for her to come up to them.

"Stéphanie," he said when she was still a few paces away. "I didn't expect you back so soon." He had thrust his hands firmly into his pockets and he made no move to kiss her.

Sergei had spoken in French, but his friend had the sidelong Russian way of sizing you up without looking at you directly. Even without that, his clothes and beard would have given him away. "I decided to come back early," she said in Russian, and glanced at Sergei inquiringly.

"This is Volodya," said Sergei, clearly reluctant to part with such compromising information.

"Nice to meet you," said Stéphanie politely.

"For me too," said Volodya, "this is a great pleasure."

Something in the way he said it made Stéphanie look at him harder, but he had lost interest in her. He was eyeing Sergei with a slightly worried expression, and Sergei was pretending to stare at a group of noisy American students walking past. Stéphanie felt as if she was back in Leningrad again, in the apartment where Tanya had taken her on the Petrogradskaya storona. Merde! She should have stayed in Normandy. She was about to make an excuse to leave them to their bloody little emigré conspiracies and take her unwanted presence elsewhere, but Volodya said, "Well, I think everything's clear now. Think about what we discussed and let me know what you decide."

"Sure," said Sergei negligently. "I'll do that."

"Poka," said Volodya and made a formal little bow to Stéphanie. "Au revoir, Madame." He walked away towards the gate leading to the boulevard Saint Michel. Stéphanie stared after him,

vaguely puzzled. There was something about him, the way he walked... Had she seen him before somewhere? But he turned a corner and disappeared before she was able to place it.

As soon as he was out of sight, she felt Sergei's arms go round her. He pulled her off the path into the shadow of the trees and started to kiss her. Breathing in the familiar smell of his skin, rediscovering the feel of his mouth, the tenseness of his body against hers, Stéphanie forgot all about Volodya.

After a long while he said, "Stephanusha, my God, I've missed you. Why did you come back early?"

"Because I missed you too." She leant against him, slightly dizzy.

"Let's go home," said Sergei.

*

Much later, when they were lying exhausted amid a tangle of cornflower-blue sheets, Sergei said, "How was Normandy?"

"Boring without you."

"What did you go there for?"

"Because Juliet invited me."

"Why didn't you tell me you were going."

"I only made up my mind at the last minute."

Sergei held her tighter. "I was afraid you were never coming back."

Stéphanie laughed soundlessly against his shoulder. "Don't be silly. Who would want to stay in Morigny-au-Perche for the rest of their life?"

"You know what I mean.... Stephanusha, I know I'm not always easy to live with. My mother used to complain that I never told her anything. I understand you must sometimes feel... left out. But it's just the way things were in Leningrad. And here I find myself behaving the same way, even though there's no real need to hide things any more."

"I thought there were lots of things to hide. All those secret meetings in the park to discuss important business with your emigré friends. Yes, Sergei, that takes care of it." She mimicked Volodya's worried tone. "Let me know what you decide - oh my God!" It came to her where she had seen Volodya before, and she jerked bolt upright in bed.

"What's the matter?"

"Your friend Volodya!"

"What about him?"

"He works for the KGB."

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen him before. I ran into him once. Outside Marina's house, maybe two or three years ago, he was spying on her. Sergei, you must be careful of him. Where did you meet him? He could be dangerous."

She was aware it was all coming out in jumbled, incoherent form and certainly Sergei didn't seem very convinced by it. He was staring at her with a puzzled frown. "Has he ever mentioned Marina to you?" she demanded urgently. "Why are you seeing him?"

Sergei pulled himself up in bed and propped himself against the pillows before replying. "Are you sure it's the same man?"

"Absolutely. I told Marina about it, I described him to her, and she said she'd noticed him too. Not just him, but others too. They were keeping a watch on her."

"I see." Sergei was staring intently at the sheet.

"Where did you meet him?" she repeated. "Didn't you realize he was a Soviet citizen?"

"I - no, I didn't. Someone I know introduced us. I thought he was an emigré too."

He was still avoiding her eyes and Stéphanie felt an icy chill suddenly grip the inside of her stomach. This wasn't the kind of evasiveness he usually employed to fend off casual inquiries, this was something else.

"You're lying, Sergei," she said flatly, and at that he looked up and the expression in his eyes told her everything she needed to know. "You knew he was from the KGB, didn't you?" No answer. "You knew it, and yet you- What were you doing with someone like that?" Again no answer. The ice was spreading and her whole body was freezing cold. Oh my God, this can't be! It's not real, it's not happening.

"You're not working for the KGB, Seriozha? You can't be. It's not possible!"

She waited for him to deny it, to produce a plausible explanation, to laugh at her, get angry with her -- anything, but he just went on sitting there, watching her. No wonder he had headaches, no wonder he was nervous and irritable. He was working for the KGB and he was terrified she was going to find out about it. She sprang off the bed and walked across the room to get her dressing gown. She felt cold and shaky and sick. The room was growing stuffier by the minute, and she opened the window to try and get some air. Tense and immobile, arms folded on the blue sheet, Sergei watched her.

"How long have you been doing this? Since you got here? No, that doesn't make sense. Since before you left then. In Leningrad already." The room was swaying slightly: she could feel cold beads of perspiration standing out on her forehead, and she took hold of the window ledge for support. "And that means that I- I was your cover, wasn't I? You used me to get out, didn't you? You've been using me the whole time."

A sudden wave of sickness took hold of her: she put a hand to her mouth and bolted for the bathroom. She made it just in time and knelt by the toilet bowl while it all spewed out: the ice cream she had eaten in carefree mood such a short time ago, this morning's breakfast, and probably last night's choucroute too, along with her humiliation and betrayal. Afterwards it seemed as if she was going to go on forever retching and crying and the same time, but finally there was nothing left inside and she collapsed in a crumpled heap with her head on the bidet and the tears still slipping silently down her face.

"Here." Sergei, wearing her father's old blue dressing gown, was kneeling beside her with a damp face cloth.

"Leave me alone."

"Don't be silly. Come here." He wiped her face for her and flushed the toilet and gave her a glass of water to rinse her mouth out. Then he helped her to her feet and led her back into the bedroom.

"Don't touch me!" she spat at him.

"I'm not going to. But get into bed, you're cold." So she got into bed and leant back against the very pillows he had been leaning against five minutes earlier while she was telling him his tale of treachery and pulled the sheet up to her chin and turned her face away from him. She heard

the cupboard door open and then a blanket was dumped untidily over her. "I'll make you some tea," said Sergei.

Stéphanie closed her eyes. Maybe she could go to sleep and then wake up and find the whole thing had been nothing but a nightmare. But there were whole pieces of the jigsaw puzzle falling into place with practically audible clangs, and it wasn't easy to do.

"Drink this," said Sergei, holding out a cup of tea.

"You were using me the whole time, weren't you? Right from the minute you met me. And I suppose that was prearranged too. You hauled Misha and Irina into the Big House for a couple of hours just so you'd have time to pick me up."

"Not the Big House, exactly- " He broke off under her accusing stare. "Well, all right."

"You strung me along to get me to marry you and get you out of the country with some fake tale of KGB harrassment."

Sergei looked at her without expression. He had settled himself in a chair facing the bed and was sitting, legs crossed, listening to the indictment.

"All those house searches, that man who was supposed to be following you, that was all window dressing. All just meant to convince me that you were a genuine repressed dissident suddenly being given the chance to leave the country."

Sergei denied nothing.

"What about your mother? Were the tea parties all part of the set-up too? Did she get out of her wheelchair and walk around as soon as the door closed behind me?"

His face closed even further, if that were possible. "My mother knows nothing about any of this."

"And your friends at *Novye Dekabristy*?"

"None of them had any idea what was going on. *Novye Dekabristy* was master-minded by the KGB."

She looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"As a vehicle for me," he explained obligingly. "To perfect my dissident cover."

Stéphanie flung the blanket off on to the floor. From being icy cold, she was suddenly unable to breathe again. "I don't believe it. How long has this been going on? How long have you been working for them?"

"Since 1978."

"Nine years! Oh my God. But what was the point of it all?" Sergei didn't answer. "Not marrying me: I was just a means to an end. My role was simply to get you out of the country. But why?"

She put the teacup down by the bed and tried to think. Sergei watched her, saying nothing. He wasn't drinking himself, she noticed, but that was only right. Tea was for the victims, not for the executioners. They feasted on stronger stuff.

"Marina! That's it, isn't it? Marina. It all fits together: Volodya snooping around Marina's house, Volodya hanging round with you, you spending all that time with Marina. They want her back, don't they? All these letters and phone calls, that's what it's all about. And you're helping them. You're making sure that she goes back. And if she does, have you thought about what they'll do to her? My God, Sergei, I thought Philippe was a self-serving bastard, but compared to you he's still at primary school!"

She got out of bed and looked around for her clothes. They were lying in a messy heap on the floor, all mixed up with Sergei's, lying where they had dropped them in their haste to get into bed. That had been just one hour earlier. It felt like a lifetime ago. She sorted them out as best she could and began to get dressed.

Sergei opened his mouth and said, speaking, it seemed, with an effort, "Where are you going?"

"I don't know. But I'm not spending another minute in your company. You've been making a fool of me for months, using me, manipulating me, pretending to be in love with me.."

She put on her socks, and then her shoes, and waited for his answer. It took him a long time to respond, and then he said, forcing out the words with the same effort as before, "You have to understand that I had no choice."

Stéphanie put her hand up to her eyes and was faintly surprised when it came away wet. "Then none of it was true? What you said... it wasn't....?"

"I'm afraid not," he said, in a tone that might have been genuine regret. "I'm afraid you've been deceived, Stephanusha. You've been abused and misled ever since you first laid eyes on me. The only things that were real were what you brought to it yourself. All the rest was stage decor. I'm sorry."

*

After that, there wasn't much point staying around any longer. She finished dressing, got her coat and left without saying goodbye. Sergei sat unmoving in the bedroom chair as she slammed the door and made her way down the stairs. Stéphanie's mind was crystal clear. There was just one thing she had to do, and then she would go home to Rue Raynouard. She hailed a taxi and gave the driver Marina's address.

By the time she reached Marina's apartment, night was falling and it was getting cold. Marina did not appear particularly glad to see her. She listened to Stéphanie's recital in silence, and at the end she said, "Is that all?"

Stéphanie gazed at her in outrage. Marina didn't believe her. For God's sake, surely it wasn't so hard to grasp. "Marina," she said desperately, "you have to believe me! He told me himself straight out that he was working for the KGB."

"Mm," said Marina. "With the aim of luring me back to Moscow?"

"Yes."

"Stéphanie, let me tell you something. Ever since I started getting letters from my father, Sergei has been trying to persuade me that the correspondence is being master-minded by the organs. When my brother called to suggest a meeting last week, he told me I was insane to consider going anywhere near him, that the whole thing was a set-up, that nothing is easier to arrange than a boat-ride from Copenhagen to Leningrad. We very nearly came to blows. This is the normal reaction of a Soviet dissident. It is not logical behavior on the part of a KGB agent trying to trick me into going back."

"It's just a tactic, Marina. It's just part of the overall strategy. Don't forget he's not working alone. There's that Volodya too that we saw skulking round here a year or two ago."

"That you saw," corrected Marina crisply. "I don't believe I ever saw him. I'm sorry, Stéphanie, but I think maybe your imagination is getting the better of you."

"Marina, why won't you listen to me? You asked me yourself when I came back from Leningrad where I first met Sergei, and I lied to you. I told you we were introduced by friends. That wasn't true. I'm telling you the truth now, and the truth is this. He picked me up in the street. He got the friends I was supposed to meet out of the way and then he showed up and introduced himself. He set me up, Marina. He used me as a means to get to you."

"And so, having discovered that it isn't the great love affair you thought it was, you've decided to sabotage my friendship with him too, is that it?" Stéphanie's mouth fell open. "You've been jealous of me for a long time, Stéphanie. Sergei was your personal property, regardless of the fact that you were supposed to be engaged to Philippe, and no one else was allowed near him. And now, I suppose, he's thrown you out, and you've invented this wild tale just to get back at him. It's not worthy of you, Stéphanie. If you can't handle real life love affairs better than this, you'd better stick to Pushkin."

For several seconds, Stéphanie was too shocked to move. Then she turned and went towards the door. She found she was groping her way blindly round the furniture like a sleep-walker. She found the front door and let herself out.

*

I must have just missed Stéphanie when I came home that evening. I found my mother in the sitting room, slumped by the table. No lights were on, the room was in half-darkness. I stuck my head round the door and snapped on the light and said "Hi, Ma," and she looked at me with such a strange expression that I opened the door and came right into the room. We had barely spoken to each other, my mother and I, since my disgraceful little tantrum of the previous week. I was rather ashamed of my behaviour, and I think she was at a loss how to react. I also had the feeling that she was hiding something from me, though of course I had no idea what.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

"Fine. Why?"

"You look odd. What are you sitting in the dark for?"

"Oh I- I'm tired, that's all. Did you see Stéphanie on your way out?"

"No. Why?"

"I thought you might have. She just left." There was a pause, and then she said, "I was thinking of asking your father to lend me the villa this weekend. I need to get some fresh air-"

"The villa? In Dinard? You want to go to Dinard in January? You don't want me to come, do you?"

"Well not if you don't want to, darling."

"In any case, I can't. Sophie's parents are going away for the weekend and she's giving a party."

"Sophie, ah yes. How is Sophie?"

"Fine. I don't want to miss her party."

"It doesn't matter. I don't mind going to Dinard on my own."

"Okay, then that's fine. I have to go and work now. What time are we having supper?"

Adolescents perform incredible feats of self-absorption, but of course my mother knew that. In fact, she was banking on it.

*

Sergei too was sitting in the dark. He hadn't moved since Stéphanie left. His whole body felt numb and rigid and his mind hurt. When the phone began to ring, he paid no attention, but the caller must have known he was not in answering mode and the ringing went on and on. Finally, on the fourteenth ring, he heaved himself out of his chair and groped his way into the living room to answer it.

"Sergei?" said Marina. "What are you doing this weekend?"

*

The villa was impressive, Sergei had to admit. It was a prime example of fin de siècle Seaside Gothic, a tall, three-storey edifice in granite and stone, festooned with turrets, towers, gables and balconies, and surrounded by high walls to keep out the riffraff. He wondered if André knew who Marina had brought with her this weekend. Marina turned off the car engine and told him to wait outside while she dealt with the burglar alarm. He watched her climb the steep flight of steps that led to the front door and turn three different keys in three different locks. André seemed to have a fondness for fortresses: this place was even more impregnable than Rambouillet.

"Close the gates, can you?" shouted Marina over her shoulder, and he went obediently to do so. When he turned back to the house. Marina was waiting for him on the steps, calm and collected, with the sun behind her. Why had she brought him to Dinard? What did she want from him?

*

Marina was content to bide her time. They took the private staircase down the cliff, through a locked gate with a red and white NO ENTRY sign, and emerged directly on the beach. The tide was out, and a wide expanse of sand stretched before them. Rocky islets rose out of the water and on the far side of the bay St. Malo loomed, impenetrable behind its ramparts, with huddled grey houses rising to a solitary church spire. It was amazingly mild for January: the air was soft and the seagulls wheeled raucously overhead. They walked slowly along the cliff path to the main beach, saying little. Marina played the hostess and pointed out local curiosities and Sergei responded, politely at first, and then with increasing interest, as his morosity dissolved in the sun and the fresh salt breeze. On the drive out, he had hardly spoken. It was plain that he had been badly affected by the break with Stéphanie. For the time being, Marina asked no questions. They had all evening to talk.

She waited till they were back at the villa, preparing supper in the kitchen. In André's father's day, this had been pleasantly old-fashioned, but Gisèle had had it completely remodelled. It was white and shining, full of gadgets, faintly surgical. Marina wasn't sure whether to operate on her trout or cook them. She poured them both a glass of wine, set Sergei to peeling apples for a tart, and remarked casually, "By the way, Stéphanie came to see me the other day. She told me a very strange story."

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that Sergei had stopped peeling. "Oh yes?"

"She told me you were working for the KGB, and that the KGB has mounted an operation to lure me back to Moscow."

There was a long pause. Marina went on washing the lettuce.

"Did you believe her?"

"I'm afraid I sent her packing."

"Ah."

"The reason I did that was because I found a miniature microphone hidden in the base of a table lamp a couple of weeks ago, and another one inside the telephone."

The knife slammed down on the kitchen counter, and the apple followed it. "What are you saying, Marina?"

"I don't suppose it's you who listens to the tapes of my conversations."

"I didn't know your conversations were monitored," said Sergei, but his tone was evasive.

"But you probably guessed. And your apartment is doubtless bugged from floor to ceiling as well-"

"So that's what we're doing here this weekend." Marina said nothing. After a while he picked up the apple and the knife and went on peeling. "How long have you known?"

"I've known for certain since the second letter arrived. After the first letter, I began to wonder about you, but I wasn't sure. So I ran a check. I told you that I defected because I wanted to revenge myself on my father."

"That wasn't true?" said Sergei, and Marina smiled at the surprise in his voice.

"Revenge is a very masculine notion. Sergei. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth -- it was men of course who wrote the Bible. And men who run the KGB. Either you or Volodya passed the remark on to Moscow" -- the knife clattered on to the counter again at the mention of Volodya -- "and lo and behold back it comes in the next letter."

Sergei said in a tone that was almost apologetic, "The Chekists have never been noted for their subtlety."

Marina finished putting lettuce leaves in the salad spinner and turned to face him. "What I find hard to believe is that they chose you to persuade me to go back to Russia. They may not be subtle but they aren't incompetent."

There was a long silence. Then Sergei set the apple carefully down by the fallen knife and went to sit down at the kitchen table.

"Tell me exactly what happened," said Marina. "Start at the beginning. When did you first start working for them?"

*

He had been keeping so many secrets from so many people for so long that he needed no further prompting. It began, he told her, in August 1976, with the Helsinki Agreements. In that first fine dissident fervour after the Agreements were signed, everyone he knew seemed to be involved in some kind of human rights activity. When his old school friend Sasha Belyaev told him about the group his parents had helped to found and asked if he wanted to go along to a meeting, how could he say no? And when, after attending several meetings, he began to realize that a lot of the group's activities -- articles, petitions, open letters -- were conducted more for the sake of defying the regime than in the hope of achieving something concrete, how could he tell them this? They were all such high-minded, well-intentioned people, and at that point he hadn't

fully come to terms with the fact that he wasn't like them. Put it like this, he told Marina: he didn't want to disappoint them.

He didn't understand that he was making a big mistake until he found himself sitting alone one night, on the edge of a wooden shelf attached to the wall by two thick chains, in a sweaty little cell in the basement of the Big House. The KGB had picked him up in the street on the way home from a group meeting and brought him here to brood at leisure on the meaning of life. Solitude concentrates the mind, and so do barred windows. He realized then that he wanted nothing more to do with human rights activities ever again. Probably he wasn't the first tenant of the cell to have reached that conclusion. The walls of that place were damp with repentance, but by then it was already much too late.

Of course, they refused to contemplate his dropping out. For two years after that, he was obliged to provide regular reports on the group's activities. And then, for some mysterious reason, they decided that things had been allowed to go on long enough. One day they told him to skip the group meeting and stay at home. They didn't tell him why. They let him discover for himself that all his comrades-in-arms had been taken into custody and threatened with prosecution under Articles 70 and 72 of the RSFSR Criminal Code. Article 70: Anti-Soviet Agitation And Propaganda. Article 72: Organizational Activity Directed Towards Commission Of Especially Dangerous Crimes Against The State And Also Participation In Anti-Soviet Organizations. Maximum penalty: seven years deprivation of freedom and five years of internal exile.

When she could get them, his mother took Luminal tablets to help her sleep. They weren't easy to come by, and she hoarded them for the really bad nights. Sergei knew where she kept her stock, and for a couple of weeks found it hard to stay away from them. He took to eyeing the knives in the kitchen and the water under the bridges and calculating causes and effects. Mironov sensed this and pulled him in on three successive days to remind him delicately of the deteriorating health of his father, by then a hopeless alcoholic, the chairbound helplessness of his mother, and then (dangling a scrap of carrot to make the mixture more palatable) the glittering possibility of a 'mission' to the West.

So that was what they were after. Who was going to look after his parents if he was in the West? he demanded, annoyed at this flagrant inconsistency, but Mironov waved his hands vaguely in the air and assured him that all that would be taken care of, and that it wouldn't be for some time to come in any case. First of all Sergei had to perfect his dissident cover, and to do that they had come up with an idea for a fake dissident journal. *The New Decembrists,* announced Mironov proudly, and Sergei managed to scrape up a weak smile of appreciation. In a sense it was a fairly neat parallel: the liberal opposition to Tsar Nicolas I and the liberal opposition to Tsar Leonid Ilich. Why not? And then, when the time was ripe, bring out the cavalry, the tanks, the machine guns and mow them down in Senate Square.

He didn't learn what they really wanted him to do until several years later. To begin with, of course, they didn't know themselves. All they knew was that they had a potential star on their hands. Fluent French, authentic dissident credentials, a family background that left him wide open to a little judiciously exercised pressure. Someday, somewhere, he was going to be just what they needed. And then, around the beginning of 1986, Mironov got a phone call from Moscow.

At the outset, they told him about his new assignment only in the broadest possible terms. He was going to be sent to France, where his target would be a Russian woman in her early forties.

Conceivably his mother would be allowed to join him: in any case, she would be well looked after in his absence. By then, the two of them were on their own: Sergei's father had died of liver cirrhosis four years earlier.

Sergei didn't bother to ask what would happen if he declined their proposition. On the whole, he was reassured by it. The assignment sounded reasonably anodyne. The target was a French citizen: what real harm could they do her? It could have been a whole lot worse. He was particularly relieved at the prospect of leaving Leningrad. All those years of reporting on people who considered themselves his friends was beginning to take its toll on him. More than once he had thought he was going to crack under the strain. How could he go on, week after week, month after month, leading not just a double life, but a triple, sometimes even a quadruple one? Lying to his friends, lying to his parents, lying, naturally, to the KGB too. Misleading his teachers, later his pupils, deceiving practically everyone who happened across his path. Concealing different parts of his life from different people, switching identities, swapping roles. Oh yes, when he learned they were sending him to Paris, he felt nothing but relief.

"What about Stéphanie?" demanded Marina. "It didn't bother you that they were using her to get at me? The idea of the fiktivny brak didn't worry you, even though she was engaged to someone else?"

"They didn't tell me about that," said Sergei. "By the time I found out, it was too late. I went to see Mironov and tried to back out, but of course he said it was out of the question." He paused, tracing invisible patterns on the table top with the point of a kitchen knife. "Later, I came to think that it might be a good thing. I hoped when she got back here, she would realize she was better off with Philippe than with me. That was before I met him, of course."

"Why didn't they tell you she was engaged?"

"The idea was that I would behave more naturally if I found things out for myself. They didn't tell me about you either. I didn't know who your father was or anything else about you. It was actually a very clever strategy. You aroused my curiosity and I saw it as a challenge to try and get you to talk about yourself. It was almost a game, trying to work out what you were concealing. Like trying to solve a puzzle. And then your father's letters began to arrive, and I realized that it was real, it was serious, and it wasn't a game at all."

"Why do they want me back?" said Marina.

"I don't know. That's something I don't understand. I think that's one of the reasons I didn't take the operation seriously."

The trout were cooked, the salad was made and the tart was cooling on the table. Marina had been busy while she listened to his tale. Silently, she set two places at the kitchen table and selected a new bottle of wine from the rack by the window.

And then, out in the hall, the phone began to ring, startling them both.

*

Marina put down the wine and went to answer it.

"Marinka? Eto Vasily."

"Vasya! What a surprise. You're the last person I was expecting." Her exclamation brought Sergei to the door of the kitchen. She looked at him and raised her eyebrows. Sergei shook his head. "How did you know where I was?"

"I called your flat. Your son told me where you were and gave me your number."

"Nicolas?" Marina laughed incredulously. "He told you all that? He gave you the number in Russian?"

"Oh yes, there was no problem at all. Marina, I'm afraid I have bad news. My trip to Copenhagen is off."

"You mean it's been cancelled? The delegation isn't going any more?"

"No, the delegation's going. It's me that's staying behind."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you? Is it so hard to guess? Someone came across an entry in an old file, Marina, that's what happened."

"Oh. But I thought you said none of that mattered any more, now you have glasnost."

"It doesn't matter to some people. But, you know, technically you betrayed your motherland. Some people still care about that kind of thing."

"I see."

"I can't tell you how disappointed I am," said the General.

*

The sitting room of the villa was furnished in well-heeled Parisian casual. Still solid, still dignified, but with calculated negligence as befitted a seaside house. Sergei lit the fire laid by André's cleaning lady and Marina selected a bottle of the best Calvados, eighty percent proof, twenty-five years old, made by the cleaning lady's grandmother, who had a farm on the far side of Mont St. Michel. During dinner, Sergei had told her everything he knew about the operation. Now it was time to get down to serious business. Marina had been launched on a correspondence with her father, she had received two phone calls from her brother, she had begun to make preparations for a meeting which had just been called off. What was going to happen next?

"The meeting was never meant to take place," said Sergei. "It was simply to whet your appetite."

"For what?"

"For the big family reunion. Not just Vasily, but his family too, and your father as well. And now that it's clear that it can't take place in the West, then maybe you'll start thinking about going back to the Soviet Union to see them all."

Marina thought about it. "So both my father and my brother are part of a conspiracy to bring me back?"

"Either they've been forced to make contact with you and lead you on, or else they have accounts of their own to settle with you, and they're going along willingly."

Marina swilled the Calvados slowly round her glass. "I should have guessed. I always thought Vasily would find a way of getting back at me some day."

"What happened to him when you defected?"

"I don't know. That's one question I haven't asked him yet. I can't believe he ended up in the Ministry of External Trade."

"Wasn't he working there when you defected?"

"Certainly not, he wouldn't have gone near it. He was with the KGB-"

She broke off. She and Sergei looked at each other.

Marina said in a voice so low it was almost a whisper, "Oh dear God. I always assumed they kicked him out when I defected."

"But what if they didn't ? What if they kept him on?"

"How could they? It's not possible."

"Maybe it is. The son of a middle-ranking official wouldn't have stood a chance, but someone with your brother's connections...." Sergei got up and paced round the room, too tense to sit still. "It depends what kind of patrons he had. If there was someone powerful enough to protect him-"

"Yuri Andropov, perhaps. He was a protegé of my father's, and he got on well with Vasily too. He took over the organs in 1967."

"And became General Secretary in 1982." Sergei halted by the window and turned to face her. "There could be a connection there. Volodya once told me they've been watching you since 1983."

"Have they? My God! I wonder if it's possible."

"They could have given him some low-level job somewhere. Out in the provinces, or one of the republics. And now he's made it back to the top."

"That's why they want me back," said Marina. "Now I understand. It's nothing to do with the regime, nor even the organs. Vasya wants me back and he's mounted a personal operation to get his revenge."

"I wonder... Did Vasily ever send the photo you asked for?"

"No."

"How old is he now?"

"Fifty-one."

"The general in charge of the operation came from Moscow to brief me. He was about the right age, but I can't remember what his name was. Obviously, it wasn't Malkov, or I'd have remembered. Let's see, it was.... it was Svetlov."

"Svetlov! That was my mother's maiden name!" The liquid in Marina's glass spilled out on to her jeans. The sharp heady scent of apple brandy filled the room. Marina paid no attention. "That's it. It must have been Vasya."

"I think it might have been. The first time I met Nicolas, I remember thinking he reminded me of someone."

Marina swallowed nervously. "So you've met my brother?"

"Yes. I didn't like him very much."

"You said he was a general. Fifty-one is young for a general. Oh God, what are we going to do now?"

"Play along with them," said Sergei. "It's the only solution."

"How?"

"I attempt to convince you to go home, you find all kinds of excuses not to go. He can't do anything openly, you know."

"It sounds easy enough." She had put down her glass and was twisting her hands nervously together. Sergei had never seen her so discomposed, not even at Kazakov's funeral.

"Are you frightened of him?" he asked curiously.

It took Marina a while to reply. "Once, when I was very small, three or four maybe, I drew all over one of Vasily's books. He must have been about twelve at the time, and it was one of his favorite books. He was furious, but he didn't do anything. Not right away. He waited till my

birthday, several months later. My mother bought me a new doll, a beautiful doll, the best I'd ever had. Vasily took it out and threw it against the garden wall and smashed it."

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

"All these years, he's been hiding away, biding his time. Like a spider, spinning his web, waiting to seize his chance. I ruined his career, Sergei. I ruined his whole life. He's not going to let me go."

*

- 5 -

THE ANGELS OF RUSSIA

...the angels of Russia
Freeze to death towards morning
Like sparrows in the frost
Falling from their wires into the snow.
- Irina Ratushinskaya, *The White-Hot Blizzard*

The funeral was harrowing. The chants, the incense, the black-robed priests, the stunned, silent mourners, the overwhelming sense of a life cut off in its prime. There were more people there than I had expected. Half the Russian community of Paris seemed to have come to pay their last respects. Most of my family was there too. Monique wept openly, Gisèle looked distressed, my father was pale and stoical and supported Stéphanie throughout the proceedings. Without him, I don't think she would have made it to the end. At one point, in the graveyard, I thought she was going to collapse. My father led her a small distance away and talked to her for a while in a low serious voice, while the priest intoned the final prayer. God knows what he said, but after a while the hysterical sobbing died down and she was able to come back and watch the rest of the ceremony with reasonable composure. A lot of things had recently become clear to my father. My mother had taken him aside and explained exactly what had happened and why. She felt she ought to prepare him for what was to follow.

When it was over, they straggled out in ones and twos, Stéphanie still leaning on her uncle's arm, Marina grim and unsmiling and looking astonishingly like the photo of her father that had come in the package with the fake olive branch. I hung around in the cemetery for a while after the rest of them had gone. Partly because I couldn't bring myself to leave him here, all alone, and partly because I had never been to the Russian cemetery before, and it wasn't what I expected. I had never known anything but French graveyards, vast stone deserts with wreaths of artificial flowers and little marble calling cards that said things like 'A Notre Mère Chérie,' and I never set foot in them apart from the annual Toussaint pilgrimage to inspect the tombs of my paternal grandparents in the Auteuil cemetery. This felt like a place where one could come every day, to wander through the trees, listen to the birds, sit a while on the benches scattered between the tombstones, share in the last long sleep of the peaceful dead.

I walked around for a while among the princes and the grocers, the soldiers and the taxi-drivers, deciphering inscriptions, removing a weed or two here and there. It was a dull grey day,

the kind he had hated, and when I got back to his grave, it was already beginning to get dark. There was a man standing there in the gathering dusk. I was in no mood to talk to strangers, and I halted a little way off, preparing to wait until he had gone. But he made no move to go. He was standing unmoving, staring down at the fresh earth of the grave, apparently deep in thought. I didn't recognize him as having been among the mourners present at the ceremony. Something about his neatly trimmed blond beard suggested that he might be Russian, but his sober navy-blue overcoat made him stand out from the usual run of Soviet emigrant. It was odd. And then, quite suddenly, I realized who he was, and I withdrew further into the shadow of the trees. Even though I had never seen him before, he had probably seen me, and he would know who I was. It wasn't that I felt any kind of animosity towards him. What he had done was understandable. There was no way he could have acted otherwise. But in the circumstances, I really didn't see what we could have to say to each other.

*

That night in Dinard, Sergei and Marina had stayed up late, honing their strategy, laying their plans. Sergei would continue to visit Marina at home, they decided. There would be no deviation from the patterns laid down over the past months. During their conversations in the apartment, Sergei would begin to hint that she might consider going back. He would play by the rules and do exactly what Moscow told him to do. Meanwhile, Marina, while not rejecting the idea out of hand, would raise objections. Her first line of defence would be that she had a deadline from her publisher coming up, and it was out of the question to go anywhere until the book was finished. After that, Nicolas' baccalauréat would take over. His whole future depended on this one exam, he needed her to be there, it wasn't the moment to leave him to his own devices. And by the time the bac was over, it would be July, and she would have thought of some other reason to stall. Parallel to their conversations within earshot of the microphones, Sergei and Marina would be meeting regularly elsewhere, in cinemas, cafés, maybe museums, to discuss the situation with no risk of being overheard. These meetings would function for both of them as a safety valve.

In theory, it sounded fine. Sergei had been playing the game, with variations, for years: he saw no reason why they couldn't get away with it. Marina was less sure of her ability to play a successful game of cat and mouse with her redoubtable elder brother, but Sergei convinced her that she could handle it. Over and over again, during that long night, he repeated that there was nothing Vasily could do. Certainly he could threaten her, try to intimidate her, but he could do nothing openly and he could take no action against her. There were no two ways about it, said Sergei firmly. Marina held the ultimate weapon: publicity. If she revealed what was going on, the shiny new surface of glasnost would again be tarnished, as it had been after the Chernobyl accident and the Daniloff affair, Gorbachev's policies would once more be discredited, and Vasily's position in the organs might even be threatened.

It might have worked, but for one thing, which never crossed either of their minds. They knew that the KGB had been watching Marina for years, they knew that Marina's apartment in Paris was bugged, and Sergei's too, but it never occurred to them that same might be true of the villa in Dinard.

*

The Villa Marina must have been wired for sound four years earlier, at the same time as our apartment in Paris. At that time, my mother went there regularly. She and I went out to Dinard every year in July. In August, she returned to Paris, and I stayed on at the villa with my father and Gisèle. In recent years, I had begun finding other things to do and we had both spent less time there. But no one had ever bothered to remove the microphones and the equipment was still functioning.

Although Marina and Sergei got back to Paris on Sunday night, it was Thursday before Volodya summoned Sergei and confronted him with the evidence. Presumably he hadn't bothered to check the tapes immediately. Why should he? As far as he knew, there was no cause for alarm. Stéphanie, it was true, knew more that she ought, but she could prove nothing. She would get nowhere with the police, or even the DST. Sergei was not involved in activities harmful to France's military or diplomatic situation, or to the country's essential economic interests. He was doing nothing unlawful. If Marina had believed Stéphanie's accusations it would have caused operational problems, but Marina had laughed her to scorn and sent her packing. Volodya still believed that everything was running smoothly.

When he finally got around to listening to the tapes, and his illusions were rudely shattered, what happened then?

I cannot know for sure, but I like to think that Volodya hesitated for a while before sending the signal to Moscow to warn them that the operation was unravelling. (How else can I explain his presence in the cemetery?) I see him pacing up and down his office, swearing under his breath, searching for an alternative. Volodya, remember, fancies himself as a reformer, an enlightened member of a new breed, a supporter of perestroika and a practitioner of glasnost. He has enjoyed taking the air with an other-thinker, and he views Sergei in a benevolent, if slightly patronising light. (By no means stupid, but a trifle naive.) Denouncing his companion in glasnost to Moscow Center does not come easy. But this time Sergei has gone too far. He isn't just taking verbal potshots at Lenin: this time he's fraternizing with the enemy. The agent has changed sides, the success of the operation is compromised and, worst of all, the Moscow control officer turns out to have a personal stake in events. Failure is not going to be tolerated. Meanwhile, Volodya has a family to think of. His wife Nina is warm and blonde with sleepy eyes, and his twin boys are five years old. He is not about to cross the line into disobedience and dissidence. What he has to work on now is damage control.

A couple of years later, Volodya's attitude might well have been different. 1987 was the year when the secrets of the Soviet past began slowly to trickle out, the people began to breathe more freely, and the shackles of fear that had held them for so long began gradually to erode. Criticism of Stalin evolved from that first tentative article in *Moscow News* to a speech by Gorbachev ten months later calling for the creation of a commission to investigate Stalin's victims. Unofficial movements and independent journals sprang up all over the Union. National television aired uncensored interviews with Western politicians, live "telebridges" with foreign countries, and reports on such anti-Soviet phenomena as natural disasters, airline catastrophes and political demonstrations. In May 1989, the proceedings of the first session of the Congress of People's Deputies were broadcast live on television and watched with breathless amazement by the whole country. Factories and collective farms ground to a halt. People were glued to their radio and television sets. A former Olympic weightlifter accused the KGB of running an underground

empire. Sakharov called for an end to the Party's monopoly on power. Someone proposed that Lenin's remains be removed from the mausoleum on Red Square and given a decent burial. An obscure delegate from northern Russia nominated himself to run for Chairman of the Congress against Gorbachev in the name of "political opposition and competition." The ice was melting, the fear was fading, and there was no turning back. Encouraged by the outspoken atmosphere of the Congress, the Siberian miners came out on strike, the national minorities began to demand their rights, and the whole coercive Soviet system of contempt, oppression and fear slowly withered on the stalk.

A few years later, Volodya might have dared to defy his superiors, but the point is moot, because in the interval the Soviet Union had changed beyond recognition. By 1989, the prominent exiles who had once been contacted more or less furtively by General Svetlov's old department were returning freely to their native country. Sakharov was talking openly in the Congress about the need for constitutional democracy and a multiparty system. Sergei, had he still been in Leningrad, might have been doing the same on local television. By 1989, his friends at the New Decembrists had left samizdat journals and clandestine meetings far behind. Yarik was a People's Deputy, Nina was working on a new television programme called *Vzglyad*, and Boris, who would later emerge as an economic adviser to Yeltsin, was already gravitating in circles close to the future President.

Gorbachev's greatest achievement was to take the fear out of Soviet life, even though his refusal to resort to violence (with a few inglorious exceptions in the national republics), ultimately led him to sacrifice his country, his Party and himself. Gorbachev set new moral standards that even his opponents were obliged to respect. No tanks were dispatched into Eastern Europe, no troops were invited to fire on the striking miners. Even the short-lived State Committee for the State of Emergency, which enjoyed its fifteen minutes of fame in August 1991, did not use force to bring the country back into line. Six years earlier it would have done so without a second thought. Six years of perestroika had reconstructed the world view of the Party hardliners, the glorious Chekists, the nostalgic generals for ever.

*

The meeting took place in a safe house near the Place Clichy. It was a two-room flat on the third floor of a featureless modern building. When Volodya had given him the address over the phone, Sergei had been surprised but not suspicious. The weather had turned cold again and the parks were dense with mist. He had prepared an anodyne account of the way he and Marina had spent their weekend. She was disappointed by the cancellation of the meeting in Copenhagen, he planned to say. She had even wondered aloud if there was any chance of her getting a Soviet visa. Volodya opened the door wearing a suit and tie, and Sergei knew immediately that something was wrong.

"Good day, Sergei Maksimovich. Please come in."

The small sitting room contained nothing but a cheap three-piece suite and a formica coffee table. On the table was a cassette player. Sergei eyed it uncertainly.

"Sit down," said Volodya. "There's something I want you to listen to."

Sergei obeyed. Volodya started the cassette player.

"The meeting was never meant to take place. It was simply to whet your appetite."

"For what?"

"For the big family reunion. Not just Vasily, but his family too, and your father as well. And now that it's clear that it can't take place in the West, then maybe you'll start thinking about going back to the Soviet Union to see them all."

Volodya had positioned himself against the wall where he could watch Sergei's face. As soon as Sergei realized what he was listening to, Volodya stopped the recording. Sergei looked up at him, white as a sheet, and barely able to speak.

"The villa was bugged?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe it!"

"You should," said Volodya grimly. "As Malkova herself admits, we are efficient."

"What are you going to do?"

"That depends on Moscow. I've sent General Svetlov a signal informing him of this conversation. I will let you know what we require of you next. In the meantime, you are to avoid further contact with Malkova. You are expressly forbidden to telephone her, visit her, or attempt to communicate with her through any channel whatsoever."

When Sergei had gone, Volodya took the tape into the bathroom and burned it in the sink. He had not, of course, given the General full particulars of the conversation. If Moscow ever found out exactly what had been said at Dinard that night, his career would be sidelined for a long time to come.

*

For a full day after his meeting with Volodya, Sergei did nothing. He went back to his apartment and stayed there. He neither ate nor drank. Instead he sat very still in an armchair and did his utmost not to attract attention. He did not answer the phone. The doorbell rang twice, and he didn't answer that either. Night fell, but he stayed motionless in the armchair, falling at times into an uncomfortable doze, and at times just staring blankly before him into the darkness. At last, when the bleak January dawn began to seep grudgingly across the roofs of Saint Sulpice, he hauled himself out of the chair, showered and shaved, and went out. Mindful of possible surveillance, he kept his eyes wide open. He spent half the morning changing métros, taking buses, losing himself in a department store or two, but he was careful to be as unobtrusive about it as possible, lest they should suspect him of doing it deliberately and summon up further cohorts to reinforce surveillance.

Finally, at half-past twelve, he fetched up at the gate of Nicolas' lycée in the sixteenth arrondissement.

*

I have to say that I was glad to see him. Since those letters from my grandfather started rolling in, I hadn't known what to think about Sergei, but the truth was that I was beginning to get seriously worried about my mother. Since she got back from Dinard, she had been nervous and

irritable. She snapped at me every time I opened my month, and sometimes when I didn't, subsisted on a diet of black coffee, and spent half the night pacing round the apartment in the dark. Every time the phone rang, she jumped about a foot in the air and refused to answer it. My standing instructions were to say she was out. She refused pointblank to tell me what was wrong. I wasn't sure whether to attribute her behaviour to the call from her brother, or to whatever she and Sergei had done with themselves in Dinard. My imaginings on this latter point grew progressively more lurid. My mother was forty-two, but I could see that people might still find her attractive. There had been a discreet succession of gentlemen callers since she divorced my father, but as far as I was aware she had no one at the moment. I knew that Sergei had broken up with Stéphanie (though I didn't know why), I knew that relations between Stéphanie and my mother had been tense for some time (I didn't know the reason for that either), and it was fairly easy to put two and two together and make five.

It was quite a relief to take a long frigid walk round the Bois de Boulogne and discover the truth.

*

Sergei was my friend, my sexual and spiritual confidant, my adviser on the ways of the world: the elder brother I never had, the father I felt estranged from. And, naturally, my Russian teacher too. The fact that nobody knew about this was due to me not him. I didn't want it getting back to my father. Or my mother. We met twice weekly in the maid's room occupied by one of my classmates on the top floor of his parents' apartment building. I had considered our own maid's room for the purpose, but, one, there was the danger of Sergei encountering my mother during his comings and goings, and, two, the room was really too full of furniture and its accompanying emotions for us to work comfortably in there. (As my mother had once told Sergei, furniture played an intrinsic role in her divorce from my father. Family furniture, in my father's view, commodes and écritoires and confituriers that had been in the family for generations, needed to be lovingly polished once a week, kept in an atmosphere that was sufficiently humid to counter the dry heat of the radiators, tenderly cherished. My mother forgot to fill the humidifier and polished when the mood took her. As my father grew older, and professional and social responsibility came to occupy a bigger place in his life, and the shadow of his rebellious youth began to fade, that furniture came to symbolize the gap in outlook that led to their separation. I still shudder at the memory of the scenes that took place during the last year or two of their marriage, all it seems having to do with furniture uncherished, brands of polish unbought, instructions never given to the maid, knives incorrectly placed on the dinner table -- all devastatingly trivial but all, in my father's opinion, indicative of a lack of respect for their relationship, their family, their household, and ultimately himself.)

Anyway, none of this mattered, because Jérôme was a philanthropist and willingly passed out his keys to anyone who needed them. Most of his beneficiaries had sex in mind: my purpose was somewhat more complicated, being bound up with my roots, my identity, my place in the world, my relationship with my father and, above all perhaps, my relationship with my mother. Some adolescents solve their mal de vivre by taking drugs or driving cars too fast: my solution was to learn Russian.

Sergei initiated me into the mysteries of perfective and imperfective verbs, the idiosyncrasies of numbers, the uses of the instrumental. He advised me on avenues of approach to Sophie and her predecessor Amélie, entered willingly into discussion on the nature of the bac, the arbitrariness of parents, the meaning of life, and whatever else I happened to have on my mind. I am ashamed to say that we never discussed what was on his mind. I tended to assume that he had solved all his problems by moving to France. It did not occur to me that one could be homesick for a place where there was no food in the stores and they threatened to put one in prison. I never really grasped the extent of his mother's solitude, and in any case I was taking philosophy in school that year and had been reading too much existentialism not to believe that she was entirely responsible for her own fate and must sink or swim on her own.

These robust attitudes began to wilt as the autumn wore on. Sergei changed me, like everyone else he came in contact with. I kept running into him at home, and it was clear that he was spending a lot of time with my mother. On the other hand, as far as I knew, he was seeing nothing of Stéphanie. Like my mother, it had been fairly clear to me that day at Rambouillet how they felt about each other, and I couldn't understand why she was still running round couture parties with Philippe. Finally, I plucked up my courage to ask Sergei about his relationship with my cousin. He produced a puzzled frown and gave me the official line about human rights, marriage in name only, administrative convenience, etc. etc. I didn't believe a word of it, but I could hardly say so. And then, in mid-December, things began to change. Letters started arriving from my grandfather, Sergei grew increasingly morose, my mother became increasingly tense. I think at that point I glimpsed something of the truth: that Sergei had been sent to bring my mother back to Russia, that he was acting against his will, and that this was the reason he had been keeping Stéphanie at arm's length. But then my mother announced crisply that it was all due to glasnost, and that aroused my doubts. I didn't know enough about Soviet politics to judge for myself. So I said nothing of my suspicions to Sergei, I worked hard to fathom the intricacies of the verbs of motion, I watched him closely, and I waited to see what would happen next.

That day in the Bois de Boulogne, he told me everything. The Gruppa zashchity, the cell in the Big House, the New Decembrists. My uncle the Chekist, my mother the target, Volodya the case officer. The weekend in Dinard, the bugs in the table lamps, the conversation now reposing in the KGB tape library. He told me all this in brief, matter-of-fact language. To say I was shaken would be putting it mildly. So this is it? This is life? This is the way it is? Your home is full of unseen listeners, and your mother is unable to tell you the truth because she knows there's a bug in the telephone? On that freezing cold January day, in the space of a mere half an hour, I grew up. I became a citizen of the Soviet Union. I understood that for the rest of my life I would be listening for things that hadn't been said and motives that hadn't been declared, scanning the scene to find out who was doing what to whom in order to survive.

And then Sergei started talking about Stéphanie, and I saw that things were much, much worse than I had realized. He told me how he had fallen in love with Stéphanie the first time he saw her, had considered starting an affair with her, but changed his mind when he discovered the existence of Philippe. How he had kept her at arm's length as long as he could, until it became clear that holding out was doing more harm than good, only to realize as soon as she moved in with him that their relationship was doomed.

The Russians have an expression for this kind of intimate talk: dusha dushe. Soul to soul. Sergei opened his soul to me, and I saw despair too deep for me to comprehend. I was appalled

and horrified and pitying and scared to death. But there was no time to examine any of these sentiments at leisure: the onus was now on me. I was to tell my mother what had happened and warn her to be careful. I was to watch out for any suspicious occurrences and if need be alert my father. I was also to look after Stéphanie (he turned his face away as he said this, but I could guess the expression in his eyes). She was in no danger, but I was to look after her.

"For my sake, Nicolas," he said, turning to look at me again. "I know you don't like her, but please do what you can. I've hurt her very badly."

"The way you broke up with her," I said hesitantly. "From what you said- Why did you do it like that?"

"She had a right to know the truth. I've acted despicably towards her. She had a right to know exactly what I did."

"Well, yes, maybe, but-"

"That's one reason. The other reason was that I didn't want to leave her with anything to hold on to. No illusions at all. I had to get her out of there. She had to leave. I'd been thinking about it for some time already, and I decided that was the best way to do it."

"You're punishing yourself."

"No, I'm just trying to save her. I have to keep her away from the KGB. I don't know what's going to happen to me now, but there's nothing I can do to help any more. I know it's not fair to dump all this on you, but I have no choice. You're my only hope, Nicolas."

*

Unfortunately for us all, it was already too late. That Friday, while Sergei and I were sitting on a bench in the Bois de Boulogne, watching the ducks freeze on the pond, my mother was having lunch with her publisher. He had taken her to the seventh-arrondissement restaurant he habitually frequented. She sat with her back to the wall, opposite the doorway. All through the apéritif and the entrée, she looked up every time a new client arrived and scrutinized them for signs of KGB affiliation, but gradually the familiar surroundings, the faded elegance, the waiters' deference to their habitual client, Monsieur Renard, reassured her. By the time they reached their profiterolles (Maurice's favourite dessert, which he had insisted on ordering for her too), she was feeling calmer and more able to concentrate on the conversation.

If Maurice had noticed her jumpiness, he tactfully ignored it. He had known Marina for over twenty years. He had published her first book and nurtured her career, and his manner towards her was still vaguely paternal. Over coffee, he asked when she planned to deliver the manuscript of her current book.

Marina had almost forgotten that she was supposed to be writing a book. "Oh, about another three weeks," she said vaguely.

"No later than that, if you can. Don't forget we need to get it in the shops in plenty of time for next Christmas. The earlier the better. Do you have any finished text that I could look at while I'm waiting for the completed manuscript?"

Marina forced herself to concentrate. "I think I have about half the book in final form. All the text's done, of course. I'll drop it off on Monday, if you like." For God's sake, she had a job to do. She had to stop jumping at shadows, stop screaming at Nicolas, pull herself together, get the book finished.

"Any time next week will be fine, "said Renard. "Did you decide on the title?"

"Yes. *Céline et François et le Château de Sable*."

"That sounds fine. Yes, I like that..... What about the next one. Any ideas yet?"

"I had one idea last summer when I drove down to Spain with friends. Céline and François crossing the frontier. They're driving along in a car, one of those old Thirties models, and they come to a frontier. So they have to get out their passports."

"Are they going to Spain?"

"I don't know about that. Maybe Belgium. It would be more appropriate, somehow."

"François is very stolid. I can't imagine him at a bullfight."

"Neither can I. And then Céline misunderstands the customs officers when they ask 'Have you anything to declare?' Maybe she declares that the teacher gives them too much homework. Or maybe she declares three chocolate eclairs."

"Don't you think that might be a bit complicated for such young readers?"

"I don't know. It might be, yes. The other possibility is to work on the idea of crossing a frontier, going from one country into another, with a different language, different money, and so on."

"On the contrary, I think that idea might be more difficult to handle. Six-year-olds have only a very vague notion of why one country is different from another."

Marina was silent. "Maybe. Well as you can see, the idea needs a lot more thought."

"Let me know when you have an outline." He put his cup down, dabbing his lips delicately. "Goodness, is that the time?"

They separated on the pavement in front of the restaurant. Marina headed for the underground parking lot where she had left her car, and Renard walked briskly up the boulevard St. Germain towards his office. At his age, one had to be careful of one's digestion, and a short walk in the fresh air did wonders. His stomach felt uncomfortably heavy, and his thoughts veered uneasily back and forth between the chocolate sauce on the profiterolles, which might have been just a little too rich, and the reactions of a six-year-old crossing a frontier.

A blue Peugeot drew in to the kerb a few yards ahead. Two men got out and walked purposefully towards him. Renard eyed them dubiously, and gripped his cane harder. These days you could get mugged in broad daylight even in the middle of Paris.

"Monsieur Renard?" The man was stockily built, with closely cropped hair and a brown leather jacket.

"Who are you?"

It was the second man who answered. Taller and thinner, with a foreign accent that Renard was not immediately able to place. "We are friends of Otto Kiesinger."

For a moment the world stopped turning completely. They were frozen in time, the two strangers with their faces lit by the thin rays of sunshine that filtered down on to the boulevard, the words they had spoken blocking out the dull roar of the traffic; himself, an old man with silver hair, clutching a useless cane. Then it began to turn faster and faster; the faces whirled around him, and the words, and the pavement and the trees, and the passers-by in their well-cut clothes going about their business in this secure, affluent district.

The world slowed and fell noiselessly back into place.

"I think you must be making a mistake," he said, quite coolly. "I know no one of that name."

"Of course, he's dead now," agreed Leather Jacket. "But I'm sure you remember him from the war. Vierzon, wasn't it? In 1942?"

"I'm afraid I don't-"

"Come on, Fernand! Your old boss! You must remember him."

It was a measure of his disorientation that Renard didn't immediately recognize the name they had used. "Young man, in 1942, I was working for the Résistance."

"Sure you were, Fernand," said Leather Jacket amiably.

"You were working for a lot of people in 1942," said the thin man. "The Résistance was one of them. The Abwehr was another."

And then Renard realized that they knew the name Fernand, and that must mean that they knew a lot of other things too. At the same moment, he recognised the accent. It was the same one that he had been listening to all through lunch. Marina's accent. They were Russians. His whole body began to shake uncontrollably.

*

My uncle had wasted no time. The signal from Viktor Savchenko (Volodya's appellation in the files of the KGB payroll department, which is as close to the truth as you're ever likely to get) had reached him two days earlier, and wheels were turning already. The unwieldy but efficient KGB machinery that crushed everyone in its path ground into motion. Coded signals flew across the continent, contacts were alerted, fates were sealed. At about the same time that my mother was lunching in Paris with a former Résistance member and Nazi collaborator, two of Mironov's lads from the Big House were visiting Anna Serafimovna Inozemtseva in Leningrad. They didn't harm her, didn't even touch her. They just turned the place upside down, mouthing obscenities as they went, not even pretending to be looking for anything, merely emptying drawers and sweeping the contents of the bookshelves on to the floor. Anna Serafimovna watched impassively. When they left, they warned her they would be back.

Glasnost had changed nothing, no, and neither had perestroika. Basic Chekist tactics remained unchanged. Threats, intimidation, violence, fear. A similar lack of subtlety was evident in the way they chose to signal their presence to my mother.

Marina got home from her meeting with Renard feeling better than she had all week. Her nervousness had gone, her mind was back in place, she could concentrate on her work again. The phone rang just as she was entering the apartment. Without stopping to think whether it might be Vasily calling, she picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Marina?"

"Yes." It wasn't a voice she recognized: she waited for the speaker to identify himself.

"Marina Malkova?"

Marina tensed. "Who is this?"

"Don't hang up, bitch," said the voice. Native French, brutal, uneducated. "If you hang up we'll come and blow your brains out-"

Marina dropped the phone as if it had burned her. She stood beside the phone, watching it, waiting for it to ring again. It did so, almost immediately. She stood there listening. After ten rings, the caller gave up. Marina suddenly surprised herself by laughing out loud. A little shakily,

to be sure, but laughter all the same. Good grief, was this the best they could do? Was this all they could think of to frighten her? It was exactly the same type of call she used to get at irregular intervals for a year or two after she defected, and the same kind of wording too. Quite likely identical wording, come to that. KGB Intimidating Phone Call Number 36. She hung up her coat in the hall and went into her work room to take a look at *Céline et François et le Château de Sable*. If this was all Vasily could come up with, there was less to worry about than she had thought.

*

She was wrong of course.

Maurice Renard spent a sleepless night after his encounter with the KGB. The bedroom was filled with ghosts from forty years ago, the slightest sound made him jump. The following day was a Saturday. Waiting till his wife had gone to the market, he telephoned Marina and asked her to come to his office on Monday at three. Marina sounded mildly surprised that he should be calling her from home on a weekend, but agreed readily enough. She would pull together an outline for the next book during the weekend and bring it with her. When he replaced the phone, Renard sat unmoving, head in hands, for several minutes. His wife had not yet returned and the apartment was quiet. He had known Marina for over two decades. The first time he met her, she had been in France for just six months. She wasn't just a client, she was a friend, a daughter almost, and he was fond of her. It was he who had seen her potential as a writer, worn down her objections, nursed her doubts. It wasn't just her throat that they were asking him to cut, it was his own too.

Monday morning seemed to last for ever. He cancelled a lunch appointment: he was unable to eat. Marina arrived promptly at three. "How are you today, Maurice? You look tired. Has your insomnia been giving you trouble again?"

She wore a bright blue suit and carried a large manila envelope under one arm. The manuscript of *Céline et François et le Chateau de Sable* and the outline of *Céline et François Traversent la Frontière*. For a moment Renard's heart misgave him and he wondered wildly what would happen if he simply accepted her package and let her go without saying anything. No, that was impossible. He knew what would happen. The press, the photos, the allegations, the scandal, and even, God forbid, the judicial inquiry and the trial. If the worst came to the worst, condemnation and prison. The contempt of his wife, the accusations of his children, the incomprehension of his grandchildren, the silence of his friends and colleagues. He had spent all weekend working through every possible scenario, gauging reactions and consequences. He took a deep breath.

"Thank you, Marina, I'm fine. Of course, we're all under a strain right now. The last batch of sales figures weren't good at all."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Marina, straightening her skirt. "But you told me the other day that you had a couple of hot properties scheduled for the spring. The figures will pick up, won't they?"

"They might," agreed Renard, wishing he hadn't told her that. "Unfortunately, it won't save us, even if those two do well. We're still going to have to make cutbacks."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

Renard stared at her insistently. "The children's list is going to be particularly hard hit."

Marina's gaze sharpened and a slight frown creased her forehead. "Really?"

"Marina, I'm very much afraid we're not going to be able to publish the next Céline and François."

"I don't understand."

"There are too many children's books being published right now. The market is saturated. Nothing's moving off the shelves."

"But, Maurice," said Marina, in a tone of calm reasonableness, "the book is practically finished. I'm planning to deliver it at the end of this month as we agreed. Possibly even sooner."

"Naturally you'll be receiving appropriate financial compensation according to the terms of your contract."

"And I've worked out a complete outline for the next one. The one we talked about last week." She was already delving into the manila envelope. "I brought it along to show you. Here, look."

Renard made no move to take the sheaf of papers she was holding out. "Believe me, I'm sorry about this, Marina. I'm going to miss working with you."

Slowly Marina lowered her outstretched hand. She tapped the papers against the edge of the table two or three times, clearly unsure how to react, and then thrust them abruptly back into her bag again.

"You gave me no hint at all of this last week."

"That was before I'd seen the sales figures," said Renard. It was weak, and he knew it.

"Sales figures for what period?"

"Third quarter."

"Ah. That doesn't include the Christmas sales then. How many authors are you getting rid of?"

"Oh, er, eight or ten." He hadn't expected this. He hadn't expected her to sit there, chic and confident in her business suit, and shoot all these questions at him. He had thought he was still dealing with a shy twenty-year-old, unaware of her own talent and inexperienced in the ways of the publishing world.

"Who?" she demanded. "Pierre Chabot? Nicole Duvivier? How about that woman who writes those Robert the Wizard books?"

"No, they're all staying on the list, actually."

"That's odd. I thought my sales were better than any of theirs."

"Marina, things change. You used to sell better than they did, but you don't any more. Things change, that's life. What can I say?"

"You can tell me the truth, Maurice. What's going on?"

"Nothing's going on, Marina. What on earth do you mean?"

"Oh yes there is. No one fires one of their best-selling authors on the strength of one quarter's sales figures. Especially as the figures for the first two quarters of this year were fine. Please tell me, Maurice, I want to know. What's the real reason?"

*

"Maurice Renard worked for the Abwehr from 1941 to 1943, at the same time that he was working for the Resistance. The network he belonged to was betrayed. Nobody in France ever figured out who was responsible, but we know from the Nazi archives in East Berlin that it was his doing."

Malkov nodded approvingly. "The French are always very susceptible to that kind of scandal."

"Exactly," said the General. "Even if there wasn't enough evidence to prosecute, he'd be finished professionally if the word got out."

The sky outside was iron-hard and heavy with snow and the house seemed gloomier than ever. The General tossed back the vodka the old man had offered him when he arrived. The brand had improved since his first visit, but the griminess of the glasses had stayed the same.

"Won't she find another publisher?" said Malkov.

"Probably, but it won't be the same. She's been working with the same man ever since she started to write. He's nursed her career and now he's going to drop her. It should be a severe blow to her confidence."

"So she'll be all the more receptive to anything we propose." Malkov smiled a bitter little smile. "Have you drafted another letter for me?"

The General shook his head. "No more letters. She's seeing the publisher this afternoon. Tonight, I'm going to call to say you're ill."

"So soon? I thought you planned to wait a few weeks."

The General sighed. "Unfortunately, we have no choice. I got a signal from Paris to say that the agent in place is showing signs of insubordination."

"Surely there are ways of dealing with that?"

"Obviously. Measures have already been taken. Nevertheless, we have to wind up the operation before it starts to unravel." He stood up and moved restlessly across to the window. It was his last visit to the house: he would miss this view.

"Well I suppose you know what you're doing. What are you going to do with her when she gets back?"

"Do with her?" said the General, turning to stare at him. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Just don't bring her here, that's all. She looks just like her mother on those photos she sent, and that brat of hers has a look of Zhenya too."

"Interesting thing, family resemblances. She said the photo of the little girl I sent her looked just like me."

"Whose child was it?"

"My secretary's. It was his wife on the photo too. Sonya and Anushka. As it happens, those are their real names. So you don't want to see her again?"

"I do not."

"You'll be called on to testify at the trial, however."

"Trial? What trial?"

"She committed a crime," said the General. "She's guilty under Article 1 of the Law On Criminal Liability For Crimes Against The State. What she did is high treason. Obviously there has to be a trial."

*

We are all prisoners of our past. Vasily, driving back to Moscow, with hatred in his heart and the bitterness of those twenty lost years scored deep in his mind. Malkov, alone in his cheerless house in Peredelkino, the victim of his own selfishness and arrogance. Sergei following his schoolfriend on the path of human rights, Marina diving in rage and misery for that French police station. There is no disavowing what we have done and who we have been. It always catches up with us in the end.

In the final years of perestroika, a third question superseded the other two in the minds of Gorbachev-watchers. Instead of 'Does he mean it?' or 'Can he get away with it?' the question in 1990 and 1991 was, 'Can he bring himself to do it?'

Forget, for a moment, the Party, the Army, the hardliners, embittered by the loss of Eastern Europe and the reunification of Germany. Forget the economic mess inherited from his predecessors. Forget the conservatism of the Russian people. Forget Lenin's ethnic pressure cookers simmering away in the non-Russian republics (and in countless little non-Russian enclaves in the Russian Federation too). Forget the putschists yearning for the past, and the KGB calling in its debts. Forget Yeltsin, bent on humiliating his rival and carving out an independent Russia.

In the final analysis, Gorbachev's most fearsome enemy was himself. Gorbachev the reformer was ultimately done to death by Gorbachev the communist. Like Nina Andreyeva, he could not forsake the principles that had governed his whole life. Although he started out determined on reform, socialist ideals prevented him from making the final leap of faith. He could not bring himself to accept private ownership of land, or meaningful market reforms. He could not steel himself to break with the Party, denounce the KGB and make common cause with the democrats. He could not entrust his political fate to the people he had liberated, and seek a popular mandate. Returning to Moscow in August 1991, when the putsch had collapsed and the Party was most definitely over, he continued to pledge allegiance to socialist choice and mumble desperately about renewal. Lenin had been with him all his life: at the crossroads where their paths should have diverged, Gorbachev did not have it in him to walk on alone.

Abandoning socialism would have meant betraying his grandfather who had believed in the socialist ideal, his father who had been wounded fighting against Hitler, and the twenty-seven million Soviet citizens who had been killed during the Great Patriotic War. It would have made nonsense not just of his own life, but of those of his forbears, and those of millions of his fellow citizens. What did they fight for, what did they die for, why had they suffered, if the dream had been in vain? And so Gorbachev the pragmatist, who set out on the road to reform because his head told him that socialism was not working, finally found himself impotent in the face of his heart, his past, and history itself.

People want so badly to believe in their chosen ideal that, even after it has been shown to be unworkable or corrupt or evil, they simply shut out what they don't want to see and carry on regardless.

In October 1917 we departed the old world and
irreversibly rejected it. We are travelling to a
new world, the world of communism.
Mikhail S. Gorbachev
October 1987

*

After the visit from the KGB, Anna Serafimovna cleaned up the mess as best she could. Her upstairs neighbour, who usually did the housework, refused to help. It took a long time, but by Sunday evening, the flat was more or less back to normal. On Monday morning, they came back. The same two men, with the same two sneers, and the same languid way of upending the drawers and strewing their contents on the floor. Watching them, she had to bite her lower lip to stop it from trembling. When they had finished, there were books and papers and clothes and kitchen ustensils all over the living room floor. In her wheelchair, she was unable to circumnavigate the mess. She could not move around the room, she could not get into the kitchen. The only unblocked exit was into the bedroom. They hadn't been in here yet. No doubt they were saving it for next time. She wheeled herself inside and closed the door. The sun poured through the dirty windows, and the room was flooded with light. She looked around, her eye was drawn to the bottles of medicine on the bedside table, and she knew what she was going to do. The decision made itself, she didn't have to think about it. Of course, she had been contemplating it more or less consciously for weeks. She closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun.

Later, she sorted through a few old papers, burning some, putting others aside. She made no attempt to tidy up the mess in the other room, or even to go in there. None of the neighbours came near her. She didn't eat: she wasn't hungry. It was all to the good: the pills would work faster on an empty stomach.

During the evening, Anna Serafimovna made her final preparations. At eleven o'clock Leningrad time, she called Sergei in Paris.

*

Sergei had spent most of the day at home, working on an article entitled 'Back to the Future.' The Soviet leadership had revealed the true extent of their ideological and spiritual bankruptcy, he wrote. Were they seriously proposing a return to the nineteenth-century values of Leninism as a means of taking the Soviet Union into the twenty-first century? What was the point of clinging to the past as a means of preparing for the future? he demanded, uncomfortably aware, even as he typed, that he himself was doing exactly that: continuing in his precarious state the dialogue with Volodya that had grown up during the past few months.

Occasionally, he got up and went to look out of the window, but the Place Saint Sulpice was empty and immobile in the frigid winter air. He knew he was living on borrowed time. Right now, Volodya and his colleagues would have their hands full figuring how to deal with Marina, but once they had solved that problem, they would turn their attention to him. He had no idea what they were likely to do. He went on working into the evening. At nine o'clock, the phone rang. It was his mother.

As soon as she spoke, he could tell there was something wrong. Her voice was so faint that he could hardly hear her. "Sergei? Can you hear me? Listen carefully. I have something to tell you."

"Mama? What's happened?"

"This morning, I had a visit from ... your friends."

"Oh my God! Did they hurt you?"

"No. They turned the apartment upside down, but they didn't touch me." There was a rasping note in her voice and she seemed to be having trouble breathing. "Sergei?"

"Yes?"

"I've been in a lot of pain lately. It's getting worse and worse. There's nothing they can do about it."

"You didn't tell me-"

"There was no point. It would only have worried you."

"I'll try and persuade them to let you come to France. Maybe French doctors-"

"No!" said his mother forcefully, sounding suddenly like her old self again. "It'll take months for them to agree, if they ever do, and I don't want to wait that long. It's too much, Seriozha. I can't stand it any longer. Especially with you gone, there doesn't seem any reason- Listen. I haven't been sleeping well recently."

"Don't they give you-"

"Yes, but I haven't been taking them." She paused. Sergei got the point immediately.

"Mama, what are you saying? How many have you- ?"

"Ten. It's enough."

"No, Mama! Please!"

"Seriozha, you mustn't blame yourself for this. I'd have done this whether you were here or not-"

And then he ceased to hear her. The line went dead, and there was no bringing it back to life, even though he yelled "Mama!" into the receiver as loud as he could, even though he sent vibrations of fear and pleading and despair pulsing down the wire, across the hushed European land mass and out over the Baltic Sea. Nothing responded. All he could hear was the crackling silence of the transcontinental phone link, the inaudible click of the electronic monitoring equipment, the hushed breathing of the KGB listeners all the way down the line. Although he knew it was useless, he dialled the operator and requested the Leningrad number. While he waited he closed his eyes and he found he could picture her, as clearly as if he was sitting in the room watching her. The bottle of mineral water, the glass, the pills, the swallowing movement of her throat as each one slid down into her stomach. Oh God, oh God, get a move on.

"I'm sorry, caller, the number isn't answering. Will you try again later?"

"Please let it ring a little longer," said Sergei urgently. The French operator passed on the request, the Soviet operator demurred, there was a short wrangle. The Soviet operator won, and the French operator conveyed the verdict to Sergei.

"Try this number instead," said Sergei and gave her Yarik's number, though it wasn't quite clear to him what he thought Yarik could do. By the time he got over there, it would be too late to stop her, the Chekists might already be there, it would do Yarik no good-

"I'm sorry, there's no answer either."

Nina's number wasn't answering either. No calls were getting through from Paris to Leningrad tonight, at least none originating from this particular phone. Sergei hung up. She would be lying on her bed by now, with her eyes open, staring at the ceiling. Waiting. Thinking. About him, about his father, about her sister, killed in the Siege of Leningrad, her parents, her friends. They were waiting for her and she was going to join them, but right now she was all alone.

Moving blindly round the room, Sergei picked up his coat and went out into the night.

*

The Volga cut swiftly through the dark on its way back to Moscow. The General had brought some papers with him, intending to study them on the journey, but they lay untouched in his briefcase. Soon, very soon now, little sister. A brief smile flickered round his lips, and he stared out into the night. Did you think you'd get away from me? Did you think you'd escaped my vengeance all these years? Did you think I'd forgotten you? Ah no, not me. How could I? What else is there to think about, those winter days in Kolyma when the sun never rises and the fog is so thick at noon that you can't see your hands in front of your face? What else is there to do but look into yourself and remember where you came from and where you should have gone and where you should have been now if it hadn't all if it hadn't all been taken away from you...

The headlights of an oncoming car jerked him back to the present. He looked at his watch. In Paris, it was five to ten.

*

Sergei felt as if he had been walking half the night, though in actual fact, it couldn't have been more than an hour. His feet had carried him unerringly across Paris to Monique's apartment on Rue Raynouard. Until he got there, he hadn't known where he was going. He walked upstairs to the second floor and rang the bell. Once. Twice. Three times. When there was no answer, he simply sat down on the mat in front of the door and prepared to wait. What else was there to do? Where else was there to go? After a few minutes, the hall light went out, but the shadows inside him were so thick that he hardly noticed the blackness outside.

*

After dinner, Marina waylaid Nicolas before he could disappear to his own room, ushered him into the sitting room and announced that she had something to tell him. Nicolas listened attentively while she recounted her two conversations with Renard.

"Let's see if I've got this straight. He acted perfectly normally when you had lunch with him. Three days later, he tells you you're out. But you know for a fact it has nothing to do with sales."

"Right."

"That means that between Friday when you had lunch and Saturday when he called you up, something happened to change his mind. Somebody got at him."

"Yes. Nicolas, there's something I have to tell you."

Nicolas cast an uneasy glance around the room. "Wait, Ma."

"It's all right, I went round this afternoon and got rid of them all. In any case, it doesn't matter. We aren't playing games any more." And then she stopped short and looked at him more closely. "Nicolas? How did you know the apartment was bugged."

"Sergei told me, Ma." He smiled at her reassuringly. "He told me everything."

*

Sergei had no idea how long he sat there in the dark. Once or twice he heard the slam of the street door and the sound of voices in the downstairs hallway. The light came back on and the lift went past, but no one got off at the second floor. He didn't know what time it was when he finally heard footsteps on the stairs, and Stéphanie's voice saying something in a light, bright, social tone, and a male voice answering her in the same way. They came round the bend in the stairs and Stéphanie saw him huddled in the doorway. She stopped dead on the edge of the landing, with the young man one pace behind her.

Sergei got slowly to his feet. "My mother-"

She took a pace towards him. "What?"

"I think she's dead."

"When? What happened?"

He was about to tell her, but the young man interrupted. "Look here, what the hell's going on? Who is this? Do you know him?" The voice and the tone were so like Philippe's that for a moment Sergei forgot his absorption and peered at him to see who he was, but it wasn't Philippe, it was someone he had never seen before. Same kind of hairstyle, same kind of clothes. Philippe's twin, perhaps. How many of them were there? Did she have an inexhaustible supply of them ready to call on as needed?

"I'm sorry, Marc," Stéphanie was saying, "I think you'd better go. This is an emergency. I'm going to have to deal with it on my own."

"What do you mean, an emergency?" said Marc petulantly. Sergei frowned in irritation at the man's obtuseness, and then realized that of course he wouldn't have understood: they had been speaking in Russian.

"It doesn't matter," said Stéphanie. She spoke gently, but she wasn't looking at him: her attention was all on Sergei. "Please go now."

A sudden glimmer of curiosity shone in Marc's eyes. "This isn't- ?"

"I'll call you tomorrow," said Stéphanie. She got out her key, unlocked the door, and drew Sergei inside the apartment without a backward glance. Marc retreated, with an exasperated sigh. As she closed the door, Sergei got a last glimpse of his pink, well-scrubbed face looking aggrievedly through the gap in the stair rail.

"What happened?" repeated Stéphanie.

"They gave her Luminal tablets to help her sleep. She's been taking them for years."

"How many do you need for an overdose?"

"Nine or ten. She has ten."

"You're sure of that?"

"Absolutely."

"Do you think she's already taken them?"

"She would have started taking them as soon as the call was cut off. Or maybe she had already taken them when she called me. It takes a while for them to work. She had to be sure they would take effect before someone could get over there to stop her."

Stéphanie's eyes widened. "You mean the phone's bugged? Someone was listening in?"

"Of course. The apartment in Leningrad is bugged, my apartment here is bugged, Marina's apartment is bugged."

It took Stéphanie a moment to digest the implications of this. Then she said, glancing round apprehensively, "What about here?"

"I doubt it. Even the Chekists can't be that clever. What time will your mother be back?"

"She's gone away for a few days."

"Can I use the phone?"

Stéphanie hovered uncertainly at the far end of the hall while Sergei talked to the operator, and finally withdrew into the bathroom. She left the door ajar as a compromise between discretion and moral support. She looked herself over in the bathroom mirror, reached for her hairbrush, and stared critically at her face. In the hall, Sergei was pleading with the operator to let the phone go on ringing. She reached for the blusher in its little plastic case and then put it hastily down again as the phone dropped back in the cradle and Sergei appeared behind her in the doorway.

She turned to face him. "You can't get through?"

"She's not answering. I heard the phone ringing." He closed his eyes, swayed, and took hold of the door handle to support himself. "She was all alone. I should have been there."

Stéphanie put her hands on his shoulders. "That's not true. She wasn't alone. You were with her. You were with her in spirit."

Sergei's face was white and drawn in the stark light from the bathroom mirror. The circles under his eyes were so dark they looked as though someone had physically painted them there. He looked as though he was going to drop with exhaustion on to the pink tiled floor. It seemed only natural for her to take him in her arms to hold him up. He clung on to her as though she was the last rampart between him and the precipice.

*

At half-past ten, the phone rang. Marina eyed it nervously and asked Nicolas to answer it. Nicolas did so.

"Dobry vecher. Eto Nikolai?"

"Dobry vecher. Minutushku pozhal'sta." Nicolas put his hand over the mouthpiece. "My uncle the Chekist. Now don't worry. He can't do a thing. Just play it cool."

Marina took the receiver and held it for a moment, preparing herself. "Vasya? Kak dela?" Her voice wavered slightly and then settled on to the right level of unsuspecting nonchalance. "Have they changed their minds about Copenhagen?"

"No, unfortunately not. Marina, I'm afraid I have bad news. Papa was admitted to hospital a few days ago. They've been carrying out all kinds of tests, and it seems he has cancer."

"Oh. That is bad news."

"He doesn't have long to live, the doctors say. It's gone too far, and it's too late to operate."

"I see. How long do they give him?"

"They said not more than a month. Maybe not even that."

"A month! Is that all? Isn't there anything they can do?"

"It seems not."

"This is so sudden. In his letters, he gave me the impression that he was in perfect health."

"Yes, he hadn't said anything about it to anyone, but it seems he hasn't been feeling well for some time. The reason I'm calling is that he's asking for you. He wants to see you before he dies."

"You mean he wants me to go to Moscow? But how can I?"

"Well actually I've been able to pull a few strings. A friend from the old days. That's why I didn't call you earlier. I was trying to fix it up. The Foreign Ministry has agreed to grant you a visa for one week only."

"I see."

"Go to the Soviet consulate tomorrow and ask for Second Secretary Borodin. He is expecting you."

"One week only? Then I wouldn't be able to be there at the end. Don't you think I should wait a little?"

"There's the danger of him falling into a coma."

Marina exchanged a glance with Nicolas, who was following the conversation on the earpiece. He made an encouraging gesture. Marina nodded.

"Nevertheless, Vasily, I prefer to wait. If I come to Moscow, it'll be for the funeral. Nothing else. He killed my mother. He ruined my life. I don't know what he has to say to me, but I have nothing to say to him."

"Marina, you don't understand, he's changed. He's not the man he used to be-"

"He's incapable of change. After all these years, I'm willing to bet he's still trying to justify what he did, passing off everything that happened as someone else's stupidity rather than his own arrogance!"

"Marina, I beg you-"

"Vasily, can we stop this charade? I know why you're doing this and what you hope to gain from it, and I can tell you it's not going to work. I'm not coming back."

There was a silence on the other end of the phone. Marina held her breath. He had been waiting for twenty-two years to get her in his power. How would he react to the knowledge that his wait had been in vain. She braced herself for a torrent of abuse, invective, insults, threat, ultimatums.

"Maybe not this time," said Vasily. "But one day you will. I can wait. I've waited twenty-two years already, I can wait a little longer."

There was a slight tremor in his voice, but that was all. "How did you find out?" he went on in the same level, conversational tone. "I suppose Inozemtsev told you all about it."

"No, it wasn't him. I guessed." Marina forced herself to sound calm and confident. She was in France, a French citizen, there was nothing he could do to her. He couldn't kidnap her, he couldn't murder her. All he could do was threaten her on the telephone. Abroad at least, the KGB's hands were tied. There was nothing he could do to her.

"You guessed? Did you really? I don't think you're telling me the truth, Marina. I think it was Inozemtsev who betrayed me."

Marina knew at once what his intentions were. "Vasily-" Her voice rose, high and frightened. Nicolas looked at her in alarm.

"I'll be waiting for you next time, Marinka. However long it takes, I won't forget you. The day will come when I see you face to face again."

"Vasily, wait, listen to me!"

"Are you going to change your mind, little sister? Are you going to come home where you belong?"

"No, but wait, it wasn't Sergei-"

"Then we have nothing more to say to each other," said Vasily and hung up.

"Merde," said Marina. "Merde, merde, merde!" She severed the connection and began frantically redialling.

"What did he say?" demanded Nicolas. "I didn't get that last bit. What's happened? Are you calling him back?"

"No, I'm calling Sergei. I have to warn him right away."

*

Stéphanie's bedroom had a poster of Leningrad on the wall above the bed, a row of matrioshki on the bookshelf and a samovar on the chest of drawers. Sergei had looked around with faint suprise when she took him in there, and she had suddenly seen the room through his eyes and cringed inwardly with shame. This room belonged to a little girl dreaming of Russian fairyland. She had spent six months living in a run-down Russian city, she had attended a house search and married a dissident, she had seen for herself how the secret police manipulated people, she had even been manipulated herself, yet she still kept all this garbage on her wall. And then Sergei began to talk, and it was clear that there was no excuse for harbouring even the tiniest illusion any more. Russia was no fairyland, Russia was a nightmare. Tomorrow she would throw out the dolls, the samovar, the poster, the whole dream decor, because tonight, at last, she had grown up.

"What happened between us wasn't in the instructions, Stephanusha -- God knows I put it off as long as I could. I knew that if I started an affair with you, it would never be just an affair. Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"I knew if we started living together that sooner or later you would find out about me. With some women, I might have been able to conceal it. But not with you - you understood me too well."

"Why didn't you just tell me about it?"

"How could I? Look what happened when you did find out. You walked out, and I don't blame you."

"Seriozha, the way you told the story, I had no choice. Everything you've always told me, about human rights... Is that really you? Do you really believe all that? Or was it just part of the cover?"

"Human rights are necessary, I believe that, of course. But as for being an activist myself.... If the Chekists hadn't forced me to continue, I'd have dropped out years ago. I don't have the temperament to be a committed activist."

"Oh no?"

"You need to be single-minded, courageous and totally selfless. I'm not like that. I tried for a long time to be like that, but it's no good, I'm just not cut out for it."

"Is that what you think?" said Stéphanie dryly, but he had another question to ask her and he wasn't paying attention.

"Where do we go from here, Stephanusha? Now that you know who I really am?"

Stéphanie moved closer to him in the narrow single bed.

"Wherever you want, Seriozha. Wherever we can."

*

At one o'clock on Tuesday morning, when Sergei's phone still hadn't answered, Marina wrote a note for him and sent Nicolas over to St. Sulpice to deliver it.

"If he's not there, just push it under the door. I'll go on dialling till you get back."

*

At five o'clock, Sergei made a final attempt to call his mother. It was seven a.m. in Leningrad. The phone rang and no one answered it. At that time of the morning the operators were too weary to cut him off, or maybe they had been given different instructions. It had been ten hours since Anna Serafimovna's call.

"That's it," said Stéphanie. "The KGB have no hostage any more. This time you're free."

The phone went on ringing.

*

Some of the events in this book I was a witness to, some I was told about, some I invented. I don't know exactly what happened that morning, and neither does anyone else. Even the Chekists, with their microphones and their watchers, don't know. There's no way you can get inside another person's head and see what's going on in there. As Sergei said himself, they can't get at the real you. No one can.

*

At quarter-past six, the phone rang in Volodya's apartment. It was the Rezidentura night duty officer. An urgent signal had arrived from Moscow Center and his presence was required at once. "What's happened now?" said Nina, still rumpled with sleep. Volodya didn't answer. He had been expecting something of the sort. Ten minutes later he was on his way to the Embassy.

*

At five past nine, Sergei got back to his flat and found Marina's note. At ten past, Marina, who had been dialling at intervals all night long, finally reached him. He explained where he had spent the night, and assured her that he would leave immediately, find somewhere to lie low, and get in touch when it was safe to do so.

That was the last time he spoke to her or to anyone else. From now on, it's all guesswork.

*

What I guess is this.

Sergei puts down the receiver, goes to the window and looks cautiously down towards the square. At that hour, it is still empty. He goes into the bedroom, pulls a canvas bag from under the bed and throws some clothes into it: underwear, a pair of jeans, a couple of books. And then, abruptly, he stops. He shakes his head, he says aloud: "Who am I fooling?" and he tosses the bag

to one side. (We found it, discarded in a corner of the bedroom, later that afternoon.) He goes into the kitchen, gets a glass of water, and drinks it staring thoughtfully out of the window. (We found the glass too.) Then he goes back into the sitting room and unplugs the phone. He sits down at the table, pulls a sheet of paper towards him and begins to write.

*

At the Rezidentura, Volodya decodes his signal and digests his instructions. This time there are no hesitations. Time is short, and his career is on the line. He gets down to work without delay. The first thing he does is summon the Rezidentura's chief wet affairs specialist. He makes the other necessary arrangements while he waits for the man to arrive. They set off for Place Saint Sulpice by car at quarter past ten. By then the square is covered. The watchers confirm that the target is still there.

*

It takes Sergei over an hour to write his letter. When he has finished, he reads it through one last time, folds it up and writes Stéphanie's name on the outside. He takes the Russian-Uzbek dictionary down from the shelves, and slides the note inside. That's when the knock on the door comes. Sergei smiles grimly to himself and looks at his watch. Just as he thought: they haven't wasted any time. He puts the dictionary back on the shelf, making sure it is aligned with the other books and will not draw anyone's attention. Then he goes to open the door.

*

At half-past two that afternoon, Marina called Stéphanie to ask if she had any news of Sergei. She had none. Sergei's phone wasn't answering. That was only to be expected, but Marina and Stéphanie were both uneasy. They decided to go to Sergei's flat and make sure he had got away in time. I accompanied them. We reached Place Saint Sulpice about an hour later. The door of Sergei's flat was open and his body was lying on the floor by the window. His face was peaceful: there were no signs of a struggle: the autopsy later showed that he had died of a heart attack.

The only suspicious feature was an unexplained needle mark on his left arm. And of course the letter with the day's date that Stéphanie found in the Russian-Uzbek dictionary.

*

First of all, Stephanusha, you must believe that I love you. More than I ever believed it was possible to love anyone. Making love to you, living with you, was a revelation. Both our bodies and minds seemed to fit together like the two parts of a single whole. I felt as if I had known you all my life, and that I could tell you anything and you would understand. But when I met you, it was already too late. Once the KGB have you in their nets, they never let go. This is what you have to understand now, Stephanusha. There's no point trying to run and hide. Wherever I go, they'll find me again. That's why I've decided to stay and wait for them. I've done enough betraying, enough deceiving, and now it's time to face the

consequences. Oddly enough, I've found the courage that I thought I lacked -- that deep-rooted dissident courage -- to do this. I am at peace with my conscience for the first time in eight years. My only regret is for you, and for the chance of a life together that we never had. Our past was built on a lie, our future is non-existent. All we had, for a few precious hours, was the present. It's a waste, such a waste, but there's nothing to be done about it. God grant you find another who will love you As tenderly and truthfully as I. *Think of me sometimes. I love you.*

*

Marina contacted a journalist she knew at *Libération* and the affair made headlines in the Western press. The Soviet side, in contrast, stayed uncharacteristically silent, proffering neither outraged denials nor accusations of imperialist scandal-mongering. Naturally, we never found out what happened to General Svetlov, though it later transpired that he survived the uproar. Investigations at the Soviet Embassy revealed that a diplomat named Viktor Savchenko had left with his family for Moscow on the day of the funeral. He must have gone straight to the airport from the cemetery.

*

Toutes les séparations du temps ne sont qu'un rendez-vous pour l'éternité.

*

EPILOGUE

Marina Villers-Massenet, née Malkova, wrote no more children's books. In 1988, she published a volume of memoirs, in 1990 a biography of Kiril Kazakov, and most recently a book on the decline and fall of communism. In September 1991, she made her first visit to the Soviet Union in over twenty-five years. She stayed one week. She has had no contact with her father or her brother since January 1987.

Stéphanie Villers-Massenet married a lawyer from her uncle's office in December 1987. She lives in Poitiers with her husband and three children. Her dissertation on Pushkin was never completed. She never returned to Russia.

Nicolas Villers-Massenet passed his baccalauréat and took a degree in Russian language and literature at the École des Langues Orientales. He now covers Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union for a French news magazine and travels frequently throughout the region.

Vladimir Malkov died in 1993, aged eighty-five. He got a three-line obituary in *Pravda*.

General Svetlov was removed as a deputy director of the KGB's Directorate Z (formerly the Fifth Chief Directorate) in September 1991. His movements thereafter are uncertain. In April 1994, a General V.V. Malkov was named by *Moscow News* as a deputy director of the Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK).

Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev resigned as President of the USSR on December 25, 1991. He had been leader of the Soviet Union for six and a half years. If he had not been elected as General Secretary of the CPSU in March 1985, the Soviet Union might still exist. The camps would still be full of political prisoners, the newspapers would still be printing lies. Solzhenitsyn would still be in Vermont, Nabokov would still be banned. The Cold War would still be under way, Eastern Europe would still be occupied by Soviet troops, the war in Afghanistan would still be going on. The Soviet people would still be afraid.

Author's Note

Lines from *The White-Hot Blizzard* by Irina Ratushinskaya, translated by David McDuff, are taken from *No, I'm Not Afraid*, Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1986.

The translations of Pushkin's poetry are taken from The Bronze Horseman And Other Poems by Alexander Pushkin, Secker and Warburg Ltd., London. Translation copyright © D.M. Thomas, 1982.

In writing this book, I drew on the following works: Michel Tatu, *Power In The Kremlin From Khrushchev To Kosygin*, Viking Press, New York, 1969; Svetlana Alliluyeva, *Twenty Letters to a Friend*, Hutchinson, London, 1967; Henri Troyat, *Pouchkine*, Librairie académique Perrin, 1986; Marshall I. Goldman, *What Went Wrong with Perestroika*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1992; David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, Random House, New York, 1993; Martin Walker, *The Waking Giant*, Michael Joseph, London, 1986; Dmitri Volkogonov, *Lenin: Life and Legacy*, HarperCollins, London, 1994; Amy Knight, *Spies Without Cloaks: The KGB's Successors*, Princeton University Press, 1996; J. Michael Waller, *Secret Empire: The KGB in Russia Today*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1994; Thierry Wolton, *Le KGB en France*, Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1986; *Chernobyl Ten Years On, Radiological and Health Impact*, OECD, Paris, 1996, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Reports by, among others, Alexander Rahr, Elizabeth Teague, Julia Wishnevsky and Viktor Yasmann.

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