Soviet

by Adam Henry Carrière

The neatly-gentrified Mtsensk District plaster buckled in all the right grey-painted places. The aged, yellowing windows rose and fell in fashionable decay. It was a well-upholstered citizen's slum, drawn to exacting state specifications.

Local housing authorities recommended the childless to abandon empty ravaging to become a true home. I found a bare mattress with a soft, sagging middle age lying in the center of the room. Upon closer examination, I was pleased to report the womb was uncorrupted by such illusions as hunger.

Smart comrades rented their own firesides to eat there nightly. Neither a heart's moist central heat nor a bloodstream's warm water could find domicile with me; I was no icon. After five doses of vodka prescribed by my black marketeer, I was a mere after-dark sight for the revolution's children.

Aurora's explosions sprawled across the walls, dreamlessly, in bourgeois fever trying to silence gunship blades echoing from the Hazarajat right through to my pillows.

The unscreened view overlooked the dingy proletarian neighbors, unauthorized residents, and a tinkling factory, where obsolete radio parts were inefficiently manufactured by unmotivated workers who over-scented the local Metro. In the bitter dawn, poverty-stricken May Day hero workers gathered round the closed windows of our privileged district, marching to the song of an infant bard, compelling unsympathetic voices to show solidarity.

Were the pain of that night *katyusha*, a great people's victory would have been assured. The unclad working class panorama would slam rusted doors on the Promised Land, ransacking determined belief from our official atheism.

I invited a young collectivist neighbor to join me in a meal.

We fed on each other's secret poetry, drinking the communal smell of our voices in the candle's scarlet; unaligned, our bodies soon formed their own brethren ministry. The neighbor overheated

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the flat, our bodies calling for vodka, the floor our towel. He left in the morning, but occupied my mind like a liberating people.

I evaded my soft job and picnicked alone in the Gor'kiy, realizing the neighboring fantasy was a careless footfall down a crooked staircase. I knew each naked picture was a counter-revolutionary flight of relentlessly westward steps no trial would slow. Yet somehow, my frightened tears remained hidden until I reached my building and found him waiting for me in my mailbox.

Our bodies took an exploitive angle under the aristocratic slump in the wall, covered with the newly-unclassified pictorial potpourri depicting the State secret of my love's childhood, from the Masurian Lakes to the Pripet Marshes. We begin to read hundreds of official pages, thousands of approved words, medal-winning chapters of caged images put down on pages torn from the closed eyes of my young neighbor, down on the brown Tajik carpeting. With conspiratorial pride, I lie beside him and gaze up at the colorful Sputniks looming over our conversations. I then lied even more, to the watchers, to the listeners, and to myself, over and over, lying about love in general, and this, my unapproved, underground love, in particular.

I felt every inch of our joined bodies being faithfully documented by the likes of Sinyavsky and Daniel; when my young neighbor finally fell asleep, I chronicled this obscurantist passion of ours in a small notebook autographed by hero-poet Zhenia[1].

The following weekend, we ate unshelled Cuban peanuts and drank post-colonial African beer. We did each other's banned homework between our committee's approved texts. We crashed down aging Tsarist staircases to dissent, and crashed back up with medal-winning heroism. But we rested, too, inside our bedded gulag, a mutual blasphemy that was one great, unobeyed ukase, our traitorous lie as yet unpunished in any Sibirskoye labor camp.

Over morning tea and bread, I mustered the courage to send my unclothed chronicles to another confidential friend at one of the State publishing houses. Weeks later, Zhenia himself mailed us a precocious reflection of my young neighbor and I. We read the

dangerously human verse over and over until our fright overcame our hunger.

With shy champion Shostakovich candle-lit in the certainty of the background, we intruded in each other's body, spending our last Decembrist night in a mutual unlight. Without the poetry of freedom, a distressingly human-like tear fell from my eyes, transfiguring the vision of my departed loved one, a brother poet steeped in our mutual mother, this once holy Russia.

Like a greedy litter, we clamored for her drooping breasts, warm with the blood of anonymous masses, sweet with the milk of our masters, our dirty hands and uneven teeth pulling, sucking and wailing as we maneuvered for more from opposite ends of the Union. Without this, our sleeping mother, life was a rocky Baltic crag, a cold memorial swept with the adolescent mysteries of a million Petersburg call-boys.

I met one such prostitute, a glorious people's achievement, along one of the Neva's crumbling bridges. Our speculative rapture was realist art, elation enough to arrange the next debased sunset, a falling curtain of scarlet irony we and the State could take enormous pride in.

At our bus stop, the exploding babushkas cast icicles at us standing among them, imaginatively naked in the March frost, dispassionately knowing we so irregular were but a pogrom away from baby Jesus.

Our continuing humiliated childhood was a village apart, not on the maps, burned to the ground in some battle no one remembers; its ashes burned my feet as I inspected a gravesite accompanied by another Komsomol hustler, who was very thorough in his feigned mourning. I think my tears made damp white imprints in the snow, but Komsomol wiped them clean, and progressed to my heart: "Death is still far off," he whispered, making me believe him with committee-scripted words made of kisses, and the even more terrible policies of his body.

The early illusion of our beautiful slander took place, down in the Karelian pine needles, neither watched nor remarked upon by the

passing animals, cryptic time, or police surveillance; back in the city, watching an arrest sidled me with fear. Returning to my neighborless apartment gave me fatigue.

That night, less the Boyar, I slept alone, in a tomb of my genetics and the misfortune of my metaphysics. Like the lads I bartered, those sensual stretches came and went, withdrawn from the front by bumbling generalship of my warmth. How ashamed one becomes, alone in a train station lobby with censored newspapers and Kazak cigarettes, counting boys as if they were a marshal's medals, waiting for sealed trains to make me older and better versed.

I can imagine the fear, coming to the hero's cemetery to bid adieu to all the sullen dreams of the wounded. Our envious old friends were just cannon-fodder, twisted needles bound in a hellish, Teutonic haystack. Our long deceased uncle drank of this spilt blood, whole rivers, parching the livestock on the edges of our Muscovite homeland.

I congratulated the kulaks, who now part with us. In their small, untroubled villages, they were famous, but outside, in their secret files, they were the very season of grey that made the passage of depressing hours knock trustfulness from my soul, because my bureau knew, gloomily, they were the next meal for the terrible, moustached steel.

My traitorous westward letter was a lament for my imprisoned, naked brothers. Like a reminder of a sobbing infant, stripped and always in danger, their sweet light died in the marble hall, under orders, at once, at first light - unfit, unpatriotic, and unrequited. My queer brethren died, lying to the young about youth, lying to the liars about the lie. I've been reading how such pure blood falls apart. All of Moscow believed it, but stayed mute, strange to the demolished church of our lost Israel, our family's wandering pastels lost in the gilt edges of the apostolic icons squirreled away in the rain-soaked timber of the Dnieper, for children who might choose to pray in a post-nuclear future.

Despite the dangers, Komsomol kept calling me. He kept coming to the Ministry, coming every night in the laughable safety of my

arms. As a bad joke cracked over our last cigarette, I asked for every one of my roubles back.

Without his usual street-ridden suspicion, Komsomol produced them from his pants. He rolled the notes into an exotic surrogate cigarette, which we smoked after kissing through our laughter.

Komsomol wanted a honeymoon, but insisted it be kept secret. Night licked the fires in my heart silent believe me, not every love sprouts love - sometimes, it just comes, like frozen breath on the train coach window as the Finnish frontier passed, and we made criminal love for the first time, both liberated and admitted into each other.

Komsomol's young, white body was a laid-back shore that let me sweep over it, wave by wave, with the dark green and grey depths of my uniform surging behind, a grim threat to the sand castles crumbling near the edges of his well-hidden soul.

For troubled weeks, we rustled beneath the quilts of a disappeared comrade's dacha bed, like Gogol, gnawing into the boy until we became one.

The subway was really talking now. The saliva had frozen on our lips and made them red; We had put each other's overcoats on, making a bad match. Our fur hats were neither stylish nor very impressive; until the Zil limousine came to fetch us home, back to Dzerzhinsky Square, the crowd's sniggering gave off smoke in its derision. Their subsequent silence made the ensuing poetry of our whispers more expressive, hiding in the black leather luxury of the car. Each of our fingers was cold until we wrapped them up and satisfied the last side street we hadn't yet undressed.

Weeks would pass until we could make unofficial love again, on another train, perhaps this time unsealed, to Prague, to read poetry under the Charles Bridge, to feed on each other's appetite against the Hunger Wall. The mere mention of Bohemia reduces Komsomol to a swoon. But light died in the winter we called ours.

Something dangerous whispered, 'Give thanks for your tears,' before the daylight fell to pieces. The bellow of roaring tanks cursed the saltwater flowing from our bridegroom eyes, our cross of

solitudes. In no time at all, the warm country house was re-assigned to State servants of better record, higher quality, less dubious habits.

Our feeble hearts were reduced to a provisional strike. The garden's yellow flowers held fast in solidarity, but official censure soon put that to an end. All we had left were the kind ringing of the icicles that were once thrown at us with motherly love, their delicate chimes our only friend, their dissent lulling us to more obedient sleep despite the deep nonconformity of our frigid bodies.

The twentieth century sun bathed luxuriously over our garden ice, making the snow glisten like a collective growing diamonds instead of wheat. Memories of the city disappeared under the skin of the eternal ice and into the gentle white night that walked past our private illegal gulag, making Komsomol whimper in captive yet occasional despair.

What a rude sobering the spring is. Guided by solicitous fathers, advice leaked like sewage from a clover field. Dwarf birches have begun to blossom through the cracks in our bedroom window. Komsomol is very quiet these days, cast off from his fellows in the cosmopolitan train stations. He still writes a contented poem to me every day; like Osip[2], he hides it in my lunch for safe-keeping.

Something about our silent, two-comrade Soviet is brave, yet, we are betrayed. We live, and are alive. We are completely free, but, even together, we are without joy in the falling seasons.

[1] Yevgeny Yevtushenko

[2] Mandelshtam