

A Tragedy In Three Acts (St. Petersburg Blues)

by Andrew Trent

Act I, Scene I

She's as much Lysistrata as Clytemnestra, Foster wrote frantically in his notebook. Using her sex as well as her wrath to get what she wants, and to punish those who stand in her way. She's the perfect tragic heroine... Outside, the wind of St. Petersburg drove snow against the smoked glass windows of his smoky flat. The shot of whiskey nearly drained, the stub of a French cigarette smoldering in the ashtray, the cat curled on the bed dreaming of Florida warmth in the cold of Russian nights. And why does she dance slowly with that fool Jackson, seeing himself as Prometheus (in those awful glasses) while I play the sideline — not myopic in the least. Volumes, leather—bound and careworn threatened to shatter the shelves. Lattimore and the rest, holding council on the acropolis of Foster's mind. Eye and I, with hindsight, will hold her when the fire has burned away, as it always does.

Act I, Scene II

His thought was shattered then by the horrible grind of the telephone in the hall. Surely not for me, he thought. One of the other tenants has a friend who's landed vipivka, no doubt after 39 straight days of hunt. Booze is so damnably hard to find here, forced to pay exorbitant prices or else make your own. Unless you thought to bring enough when you came in the first place... And then the knock on his door, "Foster! The telephone is for you! Foster! Wake up or stop scribbling! The telephone!" Koslov, the landlord's son—in—law, half-assed manager, and all around waste, bellowed. "Alright, I'm coming..." damnit, I was on a roll.

Act I, Scene III

The dark hallway; the one bulb that still worked had been painted over with a deep indigo by one of the more existential tenants several weeks ago. He shuddered as the draft touched his bare shoulder, his breath visible even in the blue darkness.

"Foster here..." he spoke into the ancient receiver.

"Good man! Glad you're not asleep! Come down to Amerikan, Foster! Everyone's here, even the old man in the corner! Get a coat on and move!"

"Damnit, Sands, I'm working. I can't rush out just for your drunken sake..."

"Shut up, Fos... you're not working, you're moping and you know it. Besides, it'll just break Deirdre's heart if you don't show up..." his voice was edged with sarcasm, or drink.

"Fine, it'll be a while, though" he added, hoping to stall past their exeunt.

"Where else are we going to go in a storm like this, man? We'll be here." And the phone went dead.

Act I, Scene IV

Back in his room, Foster shuffled the loose pages of a letter to Connie in Austin and felt the room swirl just a bit. Good Bushmills vertigo. You had to stay drunk in Petersburg to survive. He never understood the rationale behind booze and cold until now. Texas was never like this. But what other place was even close to here? Nothing compares to this fictional city; this mad Czar's hallucination. This home to the ghosts of idiots and conmen and kohl-eyed prostitutes. It was hell, and he knew it, but just surviving the damnation would count for something in the end. Especially if he managed to gain his Eurydice and the summit of his dreams. And I'll dedicate the entire cycle to them all. A fitting remembrance for

these legendary foolish mortals. Perhaps Prometheus is presumptuous... ostensibly Odysseus is better. His hubris will be the death of everyone but him, damnit. And he'll still come home to Penelope and the boy. He downed the last of the glass and pulled on the ancient army coat, the one his grandfather had worn as he walked through the streets of Berlin after the war, wasting his heart on the frauleins when his frau was waiting in Georgia. I know this coat must carry the blood of 30 men, and the Eumenides will find me someday... because any blood crime is a family crime. With a fresh pack of Gitanes in his pocket & the Zippo ready to go, he dropped a few morsels in Moab's bowl and shut off the light. I'm really leaving the warmth... I'm really going down to that garish place to drink with those lotus-eaters... Surely I am mad. The door shut behind him and he was down the steps into the bleak November night.

Act I, Scene V

Amerikan Style Hamburger was a short walk up Nevsky Prospekt, but not short enough to keep from running into someone you wouldn't want to see. In this case, Natasha the Danish drag queen was in evidence tonight. If I walk fast, she might not see me. But she spotted him from three blocks away. And was immediately drawn into his orbit. They always were.

"Foster... I need your help."

"What is it Tasha? I'm very busy."

"You must take me to the hospital. I want to take my life, but I mustn't. My mother is coming to visit next week..."

I do not need this. Certainly not anymore than I even need to be out tonight. Away from the text.

"Are you sure about this, Tasha? You know what happened the last time you

made someone take you to the hospital."

"But they know me now; I will not confuse them. I need to be safe, Foster. Please."

She sounded so weak and helpless. And he knew her well enough to know that she would jump into the Moika in half a heartbeat when she was like this.

"Why do I need to take you?" he asked "Can't you just go on your own?"

"I will not see the end of the street if you leave me alone, Foster. I can't trust myself. Let me trust you..."

Damnit! I should have stayed inside tonight. But if I heard she'd killed herself...

"Follow me," he said and set out towards the psychiatric ward, walking briskly to fight the chill and to discourage any more conversation. She followed obediently, weeping softly through the wind.

Act I, Scene VI

"You'll take care of her, won't you?" Foster asked the charge nurse, who seemed in need of a little therapy herself.

"Oh, he will be fine in a day or so. Suicidal people usually just need a hot meal and little time in someplace even more depressing than their normal surroundings. Don't worry about him."

Tiresias, how you have changed in the eyes of the world. They revered you for your doppel-knowledge. We scorn you for the same.

"Call me if she needs anything, please."

"Certainly, Mr. O'Brien. Dasvedanya. Have a pleasant evening." I'm certain it can't get much worse. And the power of just being able to think that makes it untrue.

Foster nodded politely and once again stepped out into the night.

Act II, Scene I

Amerikan Style Hamburger, the ironic home to all the expats and those who wished they were. And surely the owner was a clever little Muscovite who knew the clientele in Petersburg would have

enough Americans to make his investment good. The chef, if one dared to call him that, had taken correspondence courses from McDonald's. That was the only explanation. And dear god the décor! Not even Disney could match it for trashy vulgarity... but even the most diehard exile could tolerate borscht only so long before the grease of the States called to him even in his sleep. A masterful stroke of post—wall greed... Foster brushed the snow from his coat as he entered the splash of light and warmth, shivering more at the thought of Jackson making him into a buffoon than from the cold. But there was nothing to be done.

"Foster!" she cried from the back booth, seeing him first. The darkened smile on her dark face and the heavenly shine to her eyes. Her short black hair an invitation to mornings with pancakes, eggs, and bacon. And coffee, sweet and strong as her love.

This is worth the pain, this is worth the sacrifice.

"Hello, everyone... Hello Deirdre. How are y'all?" Damn Texas accent... I can speak Greek, Spanish, Russian fluently, but still the drawl...

"Happy to see you, man," Jackson smirked his traditional irony as he spoke, "We were just about to call you a no good no show."

"I ran into a little adventure on the way. You know Natasha, right?"

"The filthy drag? Of course..."

"Jackson, be nice. She's perfectly lovely." Deirdre protested.

"For an ugly man with too much makeup, sure..."

"Stop it! You know how you look in drag..." she seemed pleased at a joke of her own. "Don't remind me. Unless you're prepared to repeat the performance..."

oh dear god! make them stop. I do not need to hear this...

"Shut up, the both of you. Your sicknesses do not need to be shared," Yuri spoke for everyone in the room with that. "We'd much rather retain what little of our sanity you would be so kind as to leave us with."

"But Foster, tell us what happened," Deirdre chimed in with excitement.

"Well, she was there on Nevsky, threatening to kill herself. She insisted I take her to the psychiatric hospital. Again." "God, even after what happened last time?" Yuri seemed stunned.

"I'm afraid so. I hope they focus on her suicidal thoughts this time. I don't think another week of trying to grind her back into men's clothes will do anyone any good."

"Except him..."

"Jackson!"

"I just don't understand it, Deirdre."

"And therefore it is wrong? Does anyone bother you about your obsessions?" "But the machine is different! It's art! It's poetry! It's..."

a fucking waste of time, you moron. and it makes you bitter and it makes you blind to the beauty at your side. it makes you unpleasant to suffer and insufferable to bear...

"Forget the damned machine tonight, Sands. We are all here in the light of our friends, with the snow so gentle and nocturnal. We, brothers in art, sisters in heart, soldiers in the dream..." Carlos was just moments from a true, radical eruption. "Shut up, Carlos! If I want your revolutionary poetry, I'll..."

"Just drop it, all of you," was Deirdre's weak reply. "Let's just talk and drink and dance like human beings instead of dream—drunk artists for once."

is that is her tragedy... terrified of the other arts because she has abandoned her own... and to know she is the center of all of ours...

"She's right, guys. If I wanted to be swallowed by creation tonight I wouldn't have left my apartment. So, Jax, you wanted me to come and drink, let's drink then."

"Fine. But don't think I'm letting you off this hook, drag hag."

"Fuck you. Now buy me a shot or two...sailor."

Act II, Scene II

By 11:30 they were all grandly drunk; turning madly about the small wooden dance floor and whirling in each other's minds, swirling in

eyes — reflected on the water of living. Deirdre spun from partner to partner, first Sands, now Carlos, then on to Foster and away again the way she forever seemed to be. But always coming back to Jackson. he is Athens to her archipelago... ever the center even when its glory has begun to fade... the way we all cling to desperate rafts when drowning... she is drowning and no one tries to stop her... When closing time came, the edge of the early evening was gone. They passed tremendous hugs amongst themselves, with faint flirtations emanating from Deirdre to all the boys, who all felt them unique, too drunk to see the rest of the spiral arms of desire, though minor. Sands alone saw these, and was glumly humble about them. The redness of his ears the only indication of the depth of his anger.

“Good night then, friends,” Deirdre proclaimed as they headed off to their own sad flats. Different directions down Nevsky, different gravities pulling the passing on their paths. Some would sleep, some could not. my labors here are nearing the end, Hera. Release me to freedom once again when I wipe the last of the sweat from my brow. Odysseus' bow will be my last challenge. The cat will be hungry again, for my warmth and for a few more bites. I, too, need one last taste before I resign for the night... Foster wrapped himself tighter in his coat and began the walk home.

Act II, Scene III

Grey Petersburg daylight filled his eyes, cutting through the curtain he'd only partially drawn, dizzy as he'd been when he fell onto the bed. The clock showed 8:30 and his stomach said 9. The cat lay blissfully by his side and the cigarettes were too far too reach without ruining that peace. Forgive me, Moab. I hate to awaken you for these sinful works & days. But, like Hesiod I have things to say...He rose from the covers and walked to the coffee pot, lighting the cigarette as he slid the filter into place. Waiting for the blend to brew, he flipped the switch on the old tube radio and tuned to the morning's avant garde epiphany. At least the radio is better than in

the States... After the pot gurgled its last gasp at the grinds, he sat down with his notebook again and began to unwind the tight knots of notes he laid down before he lay down. It's ready to be written, finally. I'll need to buy that typewriter and some paper now. But only after I have a proper breakfast. The engine needs fuel before it begins... Foster closed the book and got up to dress, patting the again sleeping cat's head and stubbing out his smoke. He took the pressed shirt, unworn until now, saved for this occasion, and the vice—like wingtips from the closet. The pants would have to remain the same. He pulled on his coat and headed out into the world.

Act II, Scene IV

Pawnshop... haven't dared to enter one of these since Austin... he thought as the bell rang his entrance. The old Royal was still there, as he was certain it would be. No one truly grasped the power of a classic machine, not anymore. Now it was all cut & paste, spell check and print. Dear god, would half of the “modern classics” have been written if these lazy bastards had been forced to carve them in stone? The store stank like piss — just another overflowing Petersburg toilet doing its best. The florescent bulbs gave a deathly blue cast to the already cadaverous clerk, who recognized the customer with barely a glance.

“You are here for the writing machine, yes?” he more nearly stated than asked.

“Yes, I am. How much are you asking for it now?”

“Same price — 500 rubles.”

“Are you kidding? It's been here for six months. No one is buying at that price, comrade. I'll pay you 300 and you'll be happy to be rid of it.”

“475, and not a ruble less. It is a famous machine, my friend. Konstantinov wrote all of his anti—socialist papers on it.”

“Then why the hell do you have it? 325.”

“His widow was forced to pawn it for the money to bribe the KGB to allow him a decent funeral here in Petersburg. They were going

to leave him on the Siberian plains. 450.”

“Konstantinov died in Moscow, not in a gulag. He wasn't that important. 350.”

“That is just what they said in Pravda. He was side by side with Mnastakova. And the police were also going to imprison his widow if she did not properly ‘claim the body.’ 425, take it or leave it.”

“It was his mother, not his widow. Konstantinov never married. I'll give you 375, but you must throw in a ream of paper and a spare ribbon.”

“You capitalist swine! You defame the last great voice of true Marxism and dare to ask for a second ribbon at that price? 400 for the machine and the paper. A ribbon will make it 415.”

“Sold, you commie bastard. Now, how about some portwine to go with it?”

“You come to my shop and ask for portwine? When I am too busy losing my shirt to you to even have a drink for my own? 75 rubles will get you a bottle...”

“25, and even then you're robbing me...”

Act II, Scene V

With the Royal under one aching arm, the paper and ribbon in a plastic bag hung over his shoulder, and the bottle safely tucked in his jacket, Foster began to climb the steps of his building. one heavy machine, this is. it carries the kind of weight that a real writer needs. The narrow stairs were hard to manage, and he was thankful he hadn't taken the attic when it was offered, suddenly, three weeks ago. The ladder would have been impossible. Koslov was standing at the phone chatting away to one of his friends. On and on he would drone, about the same nothings that they all seemed to find the best conversations in.

“Foster! Foster! You are having trouble with that big metal! I will help you! In a moment, though. I am in deep discussion!”

“Sure, no rush,” he managed to grunt sarcastically as the typewriter started to slip from his grasp. He dropped to the floor on

one knee to keep the famous machine from crashing. "Son of a bitch!" he cried as he felt his ankle twist.

"Mind your language, Foster. We have families living here!"

"No you don't. You have a small band of Gypsies across the hall, but I'll be damned if they're a family. Now help me, Koslov. At least get the door for me..."

Koslov spoke a few quick words into the phone, let the receiver drop dangling, knocking into the wall, and slowly wandered over to Foster's door. "You want me to use the passkey?"

"No, I want you to use your goddamned prick! Of course, use the passkey."

"Some tenants prefer to hand me their own key, that is the only reason I ask. I understand that you are in pain, but do not be rude. My father—in—law does not care for rude tenants," he replied as he flipped through the immense quantity of keys on his ring.

But he doesn't mind inept managers

Fumbling with the key, Koslov spoke again, "You certainly are dressed nicely, Foster. Are you seeing a woman this evening?"

"No, I had errands to run. I have a lot of work to finish in the next few days, so you won't be seeing much of me."

"You are about to finish your stories, yes?" he inquired as the door swung open.

"Should be soon. Now, here, take this bag and set on the counter, please," Foster answered as he attempted to stand. The pain in his leg was nearly unbearable. He almost pulled the bottle from his coat to ease the ache before he remembered the last time the manager had seen him with booze. A wonder there had been any left for him when it was over.

Koslov returned from inside the room and bent to pickup the typewriter. "Where would you like me to put this, Foster?"

Foster bent to grab the prized burden himself, "That's ok, I'll get that."

"Are you certain? I fear you may have injured your legs when you fell. I will never forgive myself if you did. If only I had acted faster. But I was on the telephone, you see. The telephone! I must return

to my conversation!" He burst past so quickly that Foster was nearly knocked to the floor again. "I shall check in on you later."

"Don't bother," Foster hissed as Koslov moved back down the hall. "You'll just break something. Or interrupt my rhythm. Or some other Petersburg annoyance."

Holding the machine tightly with both hands now, Foster managed to limp into his room and set it down unceremoniously on the kitchen counter, cursing as his ankle throbbed. He struggled back to the door, shut it and slumped against the wall. The bottle came out and the portwine went down, as raw and fiery as he'd hoped. goddamn stuff is toxic...a wonder there's anyone left to drink it... if only that last batch had finished off Koslov... cockroaches are too hard to kill...

Act II, Scene VI

Foster, his foot wrapped in a towel and propped up on an empty suitcase under the desk, sat typing furiously. Sweat rolled down his neck and stained the back of his dress shirt. His sleeves were undone and half-heartedly rolled up to his elbows. The bottle had been knocked over during an over-zealous return and what little was left of its contents was beginning to eat a hole in the varnish of the desk. The ashtray was nearly overflowing, and outside the sun was just dipping below the Moika. He was 7 hours into his work, and his red-rimmed eyes told more of his exhaustion than any motion his body made. The first hour or so had been wasted replacing the ribbon (as he knew it would be) and then getting used to typing again, especially on such an abused and ancient machine. It was nearly like driving nails with only your fingers to do the work, but every ache in his wrist was another point scored for the epic.

Phosokopolis: She is a muse, brothers. She must be allowed the respect due an honored guest. If she has killed, it is only for the glory of Athens. You do not comprehend the meaning of her suffering. You do not hear the songs she has given us! You do not

sense the words meant to bring our tears! You only see her; try to possess her! Have we learned nothing from the past?

Karilikos: Woe unto me and my family! For not having seen this truth. For having failed to heed the oath of the hosts!

Iorikos: Such folly of men is surely unforgiven by the gods!

Sandocles: My hubris will be my death!

*Chorus: The men of Greece have failed to see
The beauty of her tragedy
They only behold her, fight to hold her
They are blinded by her fair
and night black hair?*

*Deirdrepe: Why all the fuss?
I only need to be loved.*

Foster ripped the page from the typewriter, manic grin on his face, the nearly faded sun glinting eerily in his eyes. He threw back his head and howled, then slumped forward onto the table, sobbing. In a moment there was a pounding at his door. Koslov called out, "Foster? Are you alright? I hear your scream. I am coming in to help you!"

"No!" he replied. "I'm fine. I just bumped my ankle. Go away. I'll be ok in a minute."

"But Foster..."

"Leave, Koslov. I need sleep."

"I will come in the morning, then?"

"Da, in the morning."

if I haven't given up entirely by then. This is worse than any Sisyphus rock ...

Act III, Scene I

Dull sunlight beat through the windows. A crystal left hanging by the previous occupant cast its rainbow on his troubled face. The cat was curled near the top of his head, purring softly at the sensation of warmth. have to get out of here... mustn't read it again... He slid down a bit to leave the cat in peace and then rolled off the bed to the freezing hardwood floor. The cold hit him slowly, his nerves thick with depression and hangover dull. His head hollow, his soul heavy with failure, he struggled to his feet and felt the pain in his ankle again. fuck... it's broken I know it...

Foster limped over to the cardboard armoire and found the flannel shit he'd worn last week sometime and threw it on. He pulled a cigarette from the pack still in the pocket and held it slack between his lips. ...museum? park? yuri's. art of a different shade entirely... mindless abstract chatter... He managed to wedge his swollen foot into the boot, unlaced to accommodate; heaved the coat on, and headed out the door.

Act III, Scene II

"You ended it how?" Yuri asked, again.

"I told you, with a poor oblique rhyme couplet following the chorus' commentary. Awful, I know. And the names. They sounded so good in my head. But they're shit on the paper."

"You could always go back and change the beginning to 'Once upon a time.'"

"Fuck you, Yuri. You goddamned painters don't have a clue what this is like. You just throw some paint on a fucking canvass and laugh when people tell you how great it is."

"You are offending me."

"You're offending me, Yuri. People just have to look at a goddamned painting for five minutes to give you some kind of feedback. And they usually just say it's 'interesting' or some other crap like that. Not that you care about feedback, anyway. Somebody'll buy it no matter what. Just because there's the chance

you'll be famous someday."

"I understand that you are in a crisis, Foster. But you do not need to attack my form of expression. Or me. I am giving you sanctuary at this moment and you should follow the code of guests or whatever it is in that classical mind of yours."

"Ok, ok. I'm sorry, damnit. I'm just in pain and all fucked up over this thing."

and you're a fucking painter trying to tell me about classics.
you're a talentless dimwit, aren't you... admit it... hack

"Here," Yuri said, pulling out a glass and a bottle of his latest batch of booze. "This will help to put everything back into its proper perspective."

"Uh, no thanks, Yuri. I had plenty last night."

"You refuse my gift? Shameful."

drop it, man... drop it now

Foster took the glass and swirled the vile violet mix around a bit.

"Ok, there. I'm being a proper guest. All better now?"

"You are still testy, my friend. Drink and get better. Or get out."

"What about the code of hosts, Yuri?"

"Not important to me. I'm trying to be tolerant, but I cannot take much more of this."

oh yes, play the fragile artist... pretend your sensitivities are that easily injured...

Foster brought the glass to his lips and grimaced as the stench took his nose by force. He swallowed with great effort and felt worse than he had in days. For a moment, anyway. And then, sick as it was, he felt just a little bit better.

"I can see it in your face, my friend. Better already. Now go back to your place and look it over again. It is not as bad as you believe. It may not be perfect, but that leaves you something to aspire to. Something is always salvageable, at least according to your friend Sands."

Sands. I do not want to think about him at a time like this. But Deirdre, my sweet muse. She might be able to provide the inspiration I need to continue...

“Well then, lets have another little drink to Sands. I think I might just limp on over to see him in a little bit.”

Yuri poured them another glass apiece, and drank his down quickly. Foster matched him as best he could, but knew already that his stomach would exact revenge in the end.

Act III, Scene III

It was snowing again, though the sun poke through gaps in the clouds occasionally, blinding the people in the streets. Foster struggled his way up Nevsky towards the building where Sands kept both art and love imprisoned. any chance he won't be there? just a few moments alone with her and I'll be fine... god don't let him be there... The imposing Petersburg architecture loomed above him with all the malevolence of Tartarus. Slaying Medusa must have been easier than risking Sands' laughing abuse. goddamn him... my Achilles' heel... ankle, ha... exposed to his arrows again... He rang the bell and prayed.

Act III, Scene IV

The air in their flat stank of acetylene and brasso. The tools of his trade, the scent of her underworld. Persephone, you never should have partaken of the pomegranate... Scattered bits of scrap metal lay in disarray across the floor, tools dropped wherever he'd been standing around this monstrosity he could not get out of his mind. Hephaestus and Aphrodite! why didn't it come to me sooner? but I'm no Ares bound for his nets...

“So, Fos, what brings you by? Oh, I bet you're looking for Deirdre, right?”

“Well, actually, yeah. I wanted to ask her some questions about some paintings I saw at The Hermitage. I mean, I could ask Yuri, but he's only good for complaining about anyone's work besides his own...”

“Aren't we all? Anyway, you're out of luck. We got in a fight this

morning and she headed off to Moscow to see her aunt. Sorry."

no. this can't be... I need her. now. he did this...

"Oh, I see. Oh well. I guess it can wait. Um, how's the machine coming?"

"Great, man. Great. You've got to see this latest bit..."

fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck

Act III, Scene V

Headed back to his flat, in the growing night, Fosters mind played over the scene that should have happened, counterpoint to the one that did. How she should have been there, without him. How she should have confessed her love for him; how they should have made love in the bed she shared with him, to spite his possessiveness. How the words should have flowed from his mouth, her breath into his weary lungs. Instead of the inane display of tinker's madness that he was forced to watch, to feign engagement in, to smile dumbly at. I could be more of a coward... I could wept like Hector, hell I don't remember Hector weeping, do I? But it sounded good... Sands just believes in the sounds, not the meaning... he casts his meaning in arch irony and cold cynicism, raging against things already not worth raging about... but me? dedicated to the dead past... no one cares about the tragedies... no one sees the majesty... He felt the cold deepening, the wind picking up, the thinness of the atmosphere, the weakness of the gravity that held him down. He felt the lack of strength to fight even that. Three blocks from warmth he heard the Moika swallow the body. He ran, cursing his leg, his luck, his life. Tasha! She's done it... she can't last long... she can't swim... neriad, burial, Hectored, specter, tragedy, trinkets, the sirens, the sea... At the river's edge he saw the body, losing life quickly, the blond wig floating nearby. He dove in and swam, legs cramping from the cold, and fought desperately to bring her back to the shore.

