THE HOUSE OF SPECIAL PURPOSE

JOHN BOYNE

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

Russia, 1915: Sixteen-year-old farmer's son Georgy Jachmenev steps in front of an assassin's bullet intended for a senior member of the Russian Imperial Family and is instantly proclaimed a hero. Rewarded with the position of bodyguard to Alexei Romanov, the only son of Tsar Nicholas II, the course of his life is changed for ever.

Privy to the secrets of Nicholas and Alexandra, the machinations of Rasputin and the events which will lead to the final collapse of the autocracy, Georgy is both a witness and participant in a drama that will echo down the century.

Sixty-five years later, visiting his wife Zoya in a London hospital, memories of the life they have lived together flood his mind. And with them, the consequences of the brutal fate of the Romanovs which has hung like a shroud over their marriage …

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John Boyne

For Mark Herman,
David Heyman
&
Rosie Alison,
with thanks

1981

MY MOTHER AND father did not have a happy marriage.

Years have passed since I last endured their company, decades, but they pass through my thoughts almost every day for a few moments, no longer than that. A whisper of memory, as light as Zoya's breath upon my neck as she sleeps by my side at night. As gentle as her lips against my cheek when she kisses me in the first light of morning. I cannot say when they died exactly. I know nothing of their passing other than the natural certainty that they are no longer of this world. But I think of them. I think of them still.

I have always imagined my father, Daniil Vladyavich, dying first. He was already in his early thirties by the time I was born and from what I can recall of him, he was never blessed with good health. I have memories of waking as an infant in our small timber-framed *izba* in Kashin, in the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, pressing my hands to my tiny ears to repel the sound of his mortality as he choked and coughed and spat his phlegm into the fire burning in our small stove. I think now that he may have had a problem with his lungs. Emphysema, perhaps. It's difficult to know. There were no doctors to administer to him. No medicines. Nor did he bear his many illnesses with fortitude or grace. When he suffered, we suffered too.

His forehead extended in a grotesque fashion from his head, I remember that also. A great mass of misshapen membrane protruding with smaller distensions on either side of it, the skin stretched taut from hairline to the bridge

of his nose, pulling his eyebrows north to give him an expression of permanent disquiet. My older sister, Liska, told me once that it was an accident of birth, an incompetent doctor taking hold of the cranium rather than the shoulders as he emerged into the world, pressing too hard on the soft, not yet solidified bone beneath. Or a lazy midwife, perhaps, careless with another woman's child. His mother did not live to see the creature she had produced, the deformed baby with his misshapen skull. The experience of giving my father life cost my grandmother her own. This was not unusual then and rarely a cause for grief; it was seen as a balance of nature. Today, it would be unexpected and worthy of litigation. My grandfather took another woman soon after, of course, to rear his young.

When I was a boy, the other children in our village took fright when they saw my father walking along the road towards them, his eyes darting back and forth as he returned home from his farm labours, perhaps, or shaking his fist as he stepped out of a neighbour's hut after another argument over roubles owed or insults perceived. They had names for him and it excited them to shout these in his direction – they called him Cerberus, after the three-headed hound of Hades, and mocked him by pulling off their *kolpaks* and pressing their wrists to their foreheads, flapping them maniacally while chanting their war cries. They feared no retribution for behaving like this in front of me, his only son. I was small then and weak. They were not afraid of me. They pulled faces behind his back and spat on the ground in imitation of his habits, and when he turned to cry out like a wounded animal they would scatter, like grain seeds tossed across a field, disappearing into the landscape just as easily. They laughed at him; they thought him terrifying, monstrous and abhorrent all at once.

Unlike them, I was afraid of my father, for he was liberal with his fists and unrepentant of his violence.

I have no reason to imagine it so, but I picture him returning home some evening shortly after I made my escape from the railway carriage in Pskov on that cold March morning and being set upon by Bolsheviks in retaliation for what I had done. I see myself rushing across the tracks and disappearing into the forest beyond in fear of my life, while he shuffles along the road for home, coughing, hacking and spitting, unaware that his own is in mortal danger. In my arrogance, I imagine that my disappearance brought great shame upon my family and our small hamlet, a dishonour that demanded retribution. I picture a crowd of young men from the village – in my dreams there are four of them; they are big and ugly and brutal – bearing down upon him with cudgels, dragging him from the street towards the darkness of a high-walled lane in order to murder him without witness. I do not hear him crying out for mercy, that would not have been his way. I see blood on the stones where he lies. I glimpse a hand moving slowly, trembling, the fingers in spasm. And then lying still.

When I think of my mother, Yulia Vladimirovna, I imagine her being called home to God in her own bed a few years later, hungry, exhausted, with my sisters keening by her side. I cannot imagine what hardships she must have faced after my father's death and I do not like to think of it, for despite the fact that she was a cold woman and betrayed her disappointment in me at every juncture of my childhood, she was my mother nevertheless and such a person is holy. I picture my eldest sister, Asya, placing a small portrait of me in her hands as she clasps them together for the final time in prayer, preparing in solemn penitence to meet her maker. The shroud is gathered to her thin neck, her face is white, her lips a pale shade of periwinkle blue. Asya loved me but envied my escape, I remember that too. She came to find me once and I turned her away. It shames me now to think of this.

None of this may have happened, of course. The lives of my mother, my father and my sisters may have ended differently: happily, tragically, together, apart, in peace, in violence, there is no way for me to know. There was never a moment when I could have returned, never a chance that I could have written to Asya or Liska or even Talya, who might not have remembered her older brother, Georgy, her family's hero and shame. To return to them would have put them in danger, put me in danger, put Zoya in danger.

But no matter how many years have passed, I think of them still. There are great stretches of my life that are a mystery to me, decades of work and family, struggle, betrayal, loss and disappointment that have blended together and are almost impossible to separate, but moments from those years, those early years, linger and resonate in my memory. And if they remain as shadows along the dark corridors of my ageing mind, then they are all the more vivid and remarkable for the fact that they can never be forgotten. Even if, soon, I shall be.

It has been more than sixty years since I last laid eyes on any member of my blood family. It's almost impossible to believe that I have lived to this age, eighty-two, and spent such a small proportion of my given time among them. I was remiss in my duties towards them, although I did not see it like that at the time. For I could no more have changed my destiny than altered the colour of my eyes. Circumstances led me from one moment to the next, and the next, and the next, as it does with any man, and I followed each step without question.

And then one day I stopped. And I was old. And they were gone.

Do their bodies remain in a state of decomposition, I wonder, or have they already dissolved and become one with the dust? Does the act of putrefaction take several generations to complete or can it advance at a faster rate,

dependent on the age of the body or the conditions of burial? And the speed of corporeal decay, does that depend on the quality of the wood from which one's coffin is made? The appetite of the soil? The climate? In the past, these are the types of questions that I might have pondered over while distracted from my night-time reading. Typically, I would have made a note of my query and researched it until a satisfactory answer had been arrived at, but my routines have all fallen apart this year and such investigations seem trivial to me now. Indeed, I have not been to the library for many months, not since before Zoya became ill. I may never go there again.

Most of my life – most of my adult life, that is – has been spent within the tranquil walls of the library at the British Museum. I began my employment there in the early autumn of 1923, shortly after Zoya and I first arrived in London, cold, fearful, certain that we might yet be discovered. I was twenty-four years old at the time and had never known that employment could be so peaceful. It had been five years since I had shed the symbols of my previous life – uniforms, rifles, bombs, explosions – but I remained branded by their memory. Now it was soft cotton suits, filing cabinets and erudition, a welcome change.

And before London, of course, was Paris, where I developed that interest in books and literature that had first begun in the Blue Library, a curiosity that I hoped to pursue in England. To my eternal good fortune, I noticed an advertisement in *The Times* for a junior librarian in the British Museum and I applied in person later that day, hat in hand, and was immediately taken in to meet a Mr Arthur Trevors, my potential new employer.

I can remember the date exactly. August the twelfth. I had just come from the Cathedral of the Dormition and All Saints where I had lit a candle for an old friend, an annual gesture of respect to mark his birthday. *For as long as I live*, I had promised him all those years ago. It seemed

appropriate, somehow, that my new life was to commence on the same day that his own short life had begun.

‘Do you know how long the British Library has existed, Mr Jachmenev?’ he asked me, peering over the top of a pair of half-moon spectacles, which were perched uselessly towards the base of his nose. He didn’t struggle even slightly with my name, which impressed me since so many English people seemed to make a virtue out of being unable to pronounce it. ‘Since 1753,’ he replied immediately, giving me no opportunity to hazard a guess. ‘When Sir Hans Sloan bequeathed his collection of books and curiosities to the nation, and thus the entire museum was born. What do you think of that?’

I could scarcely think of any response other than to praise Sir Hans for his philanthropy and common sense, a reply which Mr Trevors wholeheartedly approved of.

‘You’re absolutely right, Mr Jachmenev,’ he said, nodding his head furiously. ‘He was a most excellent fellow. My great-grandfather played bridge with him regularly. The difficulty now, of course, is one of space. We’re running out of it, you see. Too many books being produced, that’s the problem. Most of them written by half-wits, atheists or sodomites, but God help us, we’re obliged to carry them all. You don’t have any truck with that faction, do you, Mr Jachmenev?’

I shook my head quickly. ‘No, sir,’ I said.

‘Glad to hear it. Some day we hope to move the library to its own premises, of course, and that’ll help matters no end. But it’s all down to Parliament. They control all our money, you see. And you know what those fellows are like. Rotten to the core, every last one of them. This Baldwin chap’s frightfully good, but other than him …’ He shook his head and looked as if he might be ill.

In the silence that followed, I could think of nothing to recommend myself other than to speak of my admiration for the museum, which I had spent a mere half-hour in

before my interview, and the astonishing collection of treasures which were gathered inside its walls.

‘You’ve worked in a museum before, Mr Jachmenev, haven’t you?’ he asked me and I shook my head. He appeared surprised by my answer and took off his glasses as he questioned me further. ‘I thought perhaps you were an employee of the Hermitage? In St Petersburg?’

He did not need to qualify the name of the museum with its location; I knew it well enough. For a moment I regretted not having lied, for after all it was unlikely that he would seek proof of my employment there and any attempt to seek references would take years to achieve, if they arrived at all.

‘I never worked there, sir,’ I replied. ‘But of course I am very familiar with it. I spent many hundreds of happy hours at the Hermitage. The Byzantine collection is particularly impressive. As are the Numismatics.’

He considered this for a moment, trilling his fingers along the side of his desk, before deciding that he was satisfied with my response. Leaning back in his chair, he narrowed his eyes and breathed heavily through his nose as he stared at me. ‘Tell me, Mr Jachmenev,’ he said, dragging each word out as if their elocution was painful to him. ‘How long have you been in England?’

‘Not long,’ I told him truthfully. ‘A few weeks.’

‘You came directly from Russia?’

‘No, sir. My wife and I spent several years in France before—’

‘Your wife? You’re a married man, then?’ he asked, appearing pleased by my admission.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Her name?’

‘Zoya,’ I told him. ‘A Russian name, of course. It means *life*.’

‘Does it indeed?’ he muttered, staring at me as if my statement had been entirely presumptuous. ‘How

charming. And how did you make your living in France?'

'I worked in a Parisian bookshop,' I said. 'Of average size, but with a loyal client base. There were no quiet days.'

'And you enjoyed the work?'

'Very much.'

'Why was that?'

'It was peaceful,' I replied. 'Even though I was always busy, there was a serenity to the atmosphere that appealed greatly to me.'

'Well, that's how we run things here too,' he said cheerfully. 'Nice and quiet, but lots of hard work. And before France, you travelled extensively throughout Europe, I expect?'

'Not really, sir,' I admitted. 'Before France was Russia.'

'Escaping the revolution, were you?'

'We left in 1918,' I replied. 'A year after it took place.'

'Didn't care for the new regime, I suppose?'

'No, sir.'

'Quite right too,' he remarked, his lip curling a little in distaste at the thought of it. 'Bloody Bolsheviks. The Tsar was a cousin of King George, did you know that?'

'I was aware of that, yes, sir,' I replied.

'And his wife, Mrs Tsar, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria.'

'The Tsaritsa,' I said, carefully correcting his irreverence.

'Yes, if you must. It's a damn cheek, if you ask me. Something should be done about them before they spread their filthy ways across Europe. You know that chap Lenin used to study here at the library, of course?'

'No, I didn't,' I said, raising an eyebrow in surprise.

'Oh it's quite true, I assure you,' he said, sensing my scepticism. 'Sometime around 1901 or 1902, I believe. Well before my time. My predecessor told me all about it. He said that Lenin used to arrive every morning around nine and stay until lunchtime when that wife of his would arrive

to drag him off to edit their revolutionary rag. He tried to smuggle flasks of coffee in all the time but we were on to him. Nearly got himself barred over it. You can tell the kind of man he was from that alone. You're not a Bolshevik, are you, Mr Jachmenev?' he asked, leaning forward suddenly and glaring at me.

'No, sir,' I said, shaking my head and glancing down at the ground, unable to meet his piercing stare. I was surprised by the opulence of the marble floor beneath my feet. I thought that I had left such glories behind me. 'No, I am definitely not a Bolshevik.'

'What are you then? Leninist? Trotskyite? Tsarist?'

'Nothing, sir,' I replied, looking up again, a determined expression on my face now. 'I am nothing at all. Except a man recently arrived in your great country who seeks honest employment. I have no political allegiances and seek none. I desire nothing more than a quiet existence and the ability to provide a decent living for my family.'

He considered these remarks quietly for a few moments and I wondered whether I was debasing myself a little too much before him, but I had prepared these lines on my walk towards Bloomsbury in order to secure the position and thought them humble enough to satisfy a potential employer. I didn't care if they made me sound like a servant. I needed work.

'Very well, Mr Jachmenev,' he said finally, nodding his head. 'I think we'll take a chance on you. A trial period to begin with, let's say six weeks, and if we're happy enough with each other at the end of that time we'll have another little chat and see if we can't make the position permanent. How does that sound?'

'I'm very grateful, sir,' I said, smiling and extending my hand in a gesture of friendship and appreciation. He hesitated for a moment, as if I was taking a tremendous liberty, before directing me to a second office where my details were recorded and my new responsibilities outlined.

I remained in the employment of the library at the British Museum for the rest of my working life, and after my retirement I continued to visit almost every day, spending hours at the desks I used to clear, reading and researching, educating myself. I felt safe there. There is nowhere in the world I have ever felt so safe as within those walls. My whole life I have waited for them to find me, to find us both, but it seems we have been spared. Only God will separate us now.

It is true that I have never been what you might term a modern type of man. My life with Zoya, our long marriage, was of the traditional variety. Although we both worked and returned home from our jobs at similar times in the evening, it was she who prepared our meals and took care of such domestic chores as laundry and cleaning. The idea that I might help was never even considered. As she cooked, I would sit by the fire and read. I liked long novels, historical epics, and had little time for contemporary fiction. I tried Lawrence when it seemed daring to do so, but I stumbled over the dialect, Walter Morel's *dosts* and *nimblers* and *threp'ny bits*, Mellors' *nivers* and *theers*. Forster I found more attractive, those earnest, well-intentioned Schlegel sisters, the free-thinking Mr Emerson, the wild Lilia Herriton. Sometimes I might feel moved to recite a particularly affecting passage aloud and Zoya would turn away from the sweating of the roast or the broiling of the pork chops to rest the front of her hand against her forehead in exhaustion and say *What, Georgy? What is it you're telling me?* as if she had half forgotten that I was even in the room. It seems wrong that I did not play a greater part in the running of our home, but this was how family life was conducted in those days. Still, I regret it.

I had not always intended my life to be quite so conservative. There were even moments, fleeting instances

over more than sixty years together, when I resented the fact that we could not stand clear of our parents' shadows and create our own individualized lifestyle. But Zoya, perhaps in recognition of her own childhood and upbringing, desired nothing more than to create a home which would fit in exactly with those of our neighbours and friends.

She wanted peace, you see.

She wanted to blend in.

'Can't we just live quietly?' she asked me once. 'Quietly and happily, behaving like others behave? That way, no one will ever notice us.'

We made our home in Holborn, not far from Doughty Street, where the writer Charles Dickens lived for a time. I passed his house twice every day as I walked to and from the British Museum and, as I became more familiar with his novels through my work at the library, I tried to imagine him seated in the upstairs study, crafting the peculiar sentences of *Oliver Twist*. An elderly neighbour once told me that her mother had cleaned for Mr Dickens every day for two years and that he had presented her with an edition of that novel with his signature upon the frontispiece, which she kept on a shelf in her parlour.

'A very clean man,' she told me, pursing her lips and nodding in approval. 'That's what Mother always said about him. Fastidious in his ways.'

My morning routine never changed. I would wake at half past six, wash and dress, and step into the kitchen by seven o'clock, where Zoya would have tea and toast and two perfectly poached eggs waiting for me on the table. She had a miraculous technique for preparing the eggs so that they retained their oval shape outside of the shell, a talent she put down to creating a whirlwind effect in the boiling water with a whisk before plunging the albumen and the yolk inside. We said little to each other as I ate but she would sit at the table next to me, refilling my mug of tea

when it ran low, taking my plate away the moment I had finished and rinsing it beneath the tap.

I preferred to walk to the museum, regardless of the weather, in order to take some exercise. As a young man, I was proud of my physique and I worked hard to maintain it, even as middle-age approached and I became less enamoured by my reflection in the glass. I carried a briefcase and Zoya placed two sandwiches and a piece of fruit inside it every morning, alongside whatever novel I was reading at the time. She took such good care of me and, through the nature of daily repetition, I rarely thought to comment on her kindness or offer her my thanks.

Perhaps this makes me sound like an old-fashioned creature, a tyrant making unreasonable demands of his wife.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact, when we were first married, in Paris in the autumn of 1919, I could not bear the idea of Zoya placing herself in a servile position towards me.

‘But I am not waiting upon you,’ she insisted. ‘It gives me pleasure to take care of you, Georgy, can’t you see that? I never imagined I would have such freedoms as this, to wash, to cook, to maintain my own home as other women do. Please don’t deny me something that others take for granted.’

‘That others complain about,’ I replied with a smile.

‘Please, Georgy,’ she repeated, and what could I do but accede to her demands? Still, I remained uneasy with this for some years, but as time went by and we were blessed with a child, our routines took over and I forgot about my initial discomfort. The arrangement suited us, that is all I can say of it.

My shame, however, is that she has looked after me so well throughout our life together that I find myself unable to cope with basic responsibilities now that I am alone in our home. I know nothing of cooking and so eat cereal for

my breakfast every day, flakes of dry oats and bran, fossilized currants made soggy by the addition of milk. I take lunch at the hospital at one o'clock when I arrive on my daily visit. I eat by myself at a small plastic table overlooking the infirmary's unkempt garden, where the doctors and nurses smoke side by side in their pale-blue, almost indecent scrubs. The food is dull and bland but it fills my stomach and that is all I ask of it. It is basic English food. Meat and potatoes. Chicken and potatoes. Fish and potatoes. I imagine that some day the menu will offer potatoes and potatoes. It can excite no one.

Naturally, I have grown to recognize some of my fellow visitors, the widows and widowers in waiting who wander the corridors in terrified loneliness, deprived for the first time in decades of their favourite person. We have a nodding acquaintance, some of us, and there are those who like to share their stories of hope and disappointment with each other, but I avoid conversation. I am not here to form friendships. I am here only for my wife, for my darling Zoya, to sit by her bedside, to hold her hand in mine, to whisper in her ear, to make sure she knows that she is not alone.

I remain in the hospital until six o'clock and then I kiss her cheek, rest my hand on her shoulder for a moment, and say a silent prayer that she will still be alive when I return the next day.

Twice weekly, our grandson Michael arrives to spend a little time with me. His mother, our daughter Arina, died in her thirty-sixth year when she was hit by a car as she returned home from work. The scar that was left by her absence has never healed. We had been convinced for so long that we were unable to bear children that when Zoya finally became pregnant we thought it a miracle, a gift from God. A reward, perhaps, for the families we had lost.

And then she was taken from us.

Michael was only a boy when his mother died, and his father, our son-in-law, a thoughtful and honourable man, ensured that he maintained a relationship with his maternal grandparents. Of course, like all boys, his appearance changed constantly throughout his childhood, to the point where we could never decide whose side of the family he favoured the most, but now that he has reached manhood, I find that he reminds me very much of Zoya's father. I think she must have noticed the similarity too, but has never spoken of it. There is something in the way that he turns his head and smiles at us, in how his forehead furrows unexpectedly when he frowns, the depth of those brown eyes that combine a mixture of confidence and uncertainty. Once, when the three of us were walking in Hyde Park together on a sunny afternoon, a small dog came scampering towards us and he fell to his knees to embrace the puppy, allowing it to lick his face as he gurgled delighted inanities in the dog's direction, and as he looked up to grin at his doting grandparents, I am sure that we were both taken by the sudden and unanticipated resemblance. It was so unsettling, it caused our minds to fill with so many memories, that the conversation immediately grew stilted between us and an otherwise pleasant afternoon became spoiled.

Michael is in his second year of studies at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, where he is in training to become an actor, a vocation which surprises me for as a child he was quiet and withdrawn, as a teenager sullen and introverted, and now, at the age of twenty, he displays an extrovert's talent for performance which none of us had ever expected. Last year, before she became too ill to enjoy such things, Zoya and I attended a student production of Mr Shaw's *Major Barbara*, in which Michael played the part of the young, smitten Adolphus Cusins. He was quite impressive, I thought. Convincing in the role. He seemed to know a little about love too, which pleased me.

‘He’s very good at pretending to be someone he’s not,’ I remarked to Zoya in the lobby afterwards as we waited to offer our congratulations, unsure as I said the words whether I meant them as a compliment or not. ‘I don’t know how he does it.’

‘I do,’ she replied, surprising me, but before I could respond he introduced us to a young lady, Sarah, Major Barbara herself, his on-stage fiancée and, as it transpired, his off-stage girlfriend. She was a pretty thing but seemed a little confused as to why she was being forced to make small talk with two elderly relatives of her lover, and perhaps a little irritated by it too. Throughout our conversation I felt as if she was talking down to Zoya and me as if she believed that a correlation somehow existed between age and stupidity. At nineteen years old she was full of pronouncements about how terrible the world was, and how both Mr Reagan and Mr Brezhnev were entirely to blame. She declared in a harsh, condescending voice, which put me in mind of that awful Thatcher woman quoting St Francis of Assisi on the steps of Downing Street, that the President and the General Secretary would destroy the planet with their imperialist policies, and spoke with deluded authority of the arms race, the cold war, matters that she had only read about in her student magazines and about which she presumed to lecture us. She wore a white T-shirt which made no attempt to conceal her breasts; a dripping, blood-red word – Solidarność – was scrawled across it and when she caught me staring – at the word, I swear it, not her breasts – she proceeded to deliver a sermon about the heroic nature of the Polish ship-worker, Mr Wałęsa. I felt utterly patronized by her, insulted even, but Zoya linked arms with me to ensure that I remained composed and finally Major Barbara informed us how absolutely marvellous it had been to meet us, that we were perfectly adorable, and vanished off into a sea of

grotesquely painted and no doubt similarly opinionated young people.

I didn't criticize her to Michael, of course. I know what it is to be a young man in love. And, for that matter, to be an old man in love. Sometimes I find it absurd to consider the fact that this magnificent boy is now experiencing sensual delights; it seems like such a short time ago that he wanted nothing more than to sit on my lap and have me read fairy-tales to him.

Michael makes sure to visit his grandmother in the hospital every few days; he is diligent in his attendance. He sits with her for an hour and then comes to lie to me, to say how much better she looks, that she woke for a few moments and sat up to speak with him and appeared alert and more like her old self, that he's sure it's only a matter of time before Zoya will be well enough to come home. I wonder sometimes whether he really believes this or if he thinks that I am foolish enough to believe it myself and he is doing me a great service by putting such wonderful, impossible notions in my stupid old head. Young people have such disrespect for the elderly, not by design perhaps, but simply by the fact that they refuse to believe that our brains still function. Either way, we perform the farce together two or three times a week. He says it, I agree with him, we make plans for things that we three – four – might do together when Zoya is well again, and then he checks his watch, seems surprised by how late it is, kisses me on the head, says 'See you in a couple of days, Pops, call me if you need anything' and is out the door, bounding up the steps on his long, lean, muscular legs, and jumping almost instantaneously on board the lower deck of a passing bus, all in the space of a minute.

There are times when I envy him his youth but I try not to dwell on that. An old man should not resent those who are sent to take his place, and to recall when I was young and healthy and virile is an act of masochism that serves no

purpose. It occurs to me that even though Zoya and I are both still alive, my life is already over. She will be taken from me soon and there will be no reason for me to continue without her. We are one person, you see. We are GeorgyandZoya.

Zoya's doctor's name is Joan Crawford. This is not a joke. The first time I met her, I couldn't help but wonder why her parents inflicted such a burden on her. Or was it the result of her marriage, perhaps? Did she fall in love with the right man but the wrong name? I didn't remark on its familiarity, of course. I imagine she has spent a lifetime enduring idiotic comments. By coincidence, she bears a certain physical similarity to the famous actress, sporting the same rich, dark hair and slightly arched eyebrows, and I suspect that she encourages the comparison by the manner in which she presents herself; whether or not she beats her children with wire clothes-hangers is of course open to conjecture. She usually wears a wedding ring but occasionally it's missing from her hand. Whenever that is the case her manner is distracted, and I find myself wondering whether her private life is a source of disappointment to her.

I have not spoken to Dr Crawford for almost two weeks and so, before visiting Zoya, I wander through the white, antiseptic-scented corridors in search of her office. I've been there before, of course, several times, but I find the oncology department difficult to negotiate. The hospital itself is labyrinthine and none of the young men and women who rush by, consulting clipboards and charts as they scurry along, biting into apples and half-sandwiches, seem inclined to offer any assistance. Finally, however, I find myself standing outside her door and knock gently. An eternity seems to pass before she answers – an irritable *Yes?* – and when she does I open it only a fraction, smiling apologetically, hoping to disarm her with my elderly civility.

‘Dr Crawford,’ I say. ‘I must apologize for disturbing you.’

‘Mr Jachmenev,’ she replies, impressing me by the fact that she remembers my name so quickly; over the years, there have been some who have had great difficulty in either recalling or pronouncing it. And there have been others who have felt it beneath their dignity to try. ‘You’re not disturbing me at all. Please come in.’

I’m glad that she is so welcoming today and step inside, sitting down with my hat in my hands, hoping that she might have some positive news for me. I can’t help but look towards her ring finger and wonder whether her good humour is a result of the shining gold band winking at me as it catches the sunlight. She’s smiling noticeably as she takes me in and I stare at her, a little surprised. This is a cancer department, after all. The woman treats cancer patients from morning till night, tells them terrible things, performs horrible surgeries, watches as they struggle their way out of this world and on to the next. I can’t imagine what she has to look so happy about.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Jachmenev,’ she says, shaking her head quickly. ‘You’ll have to forgive me. I’m just always impressed by how beautifully you’re dressed. Men of your generation, they seem to wear suits all the time, don’t they? And I don’t often see men with hats any more. I *miss* hats.’

I look down at my clothing, unsure how to take the remark. This is how I dress, how I have always dressed. It does not seem worthy of comment. I’m not sure that I care for the distinction between our generations either, although it is true that I must be nearly forty years older than her. Indeed, Dr Crawford would be around the same age that Arina, our daughter, would have been. Had she lived.

‘I wanted to ask you about my wife,’ I say, dispensing with these pleasantries. ‘I wanted to ask you about Zoya.’

‘Of course,’ she replies quickly, all business now. ‘What would you like to know?’

I feel at a loss now, despite the fact that I have been preparing questions in my mind ever since I left the hospital the previous afternoon. I search my brain for the correct words, for something approaching language. ‘How is she doing?’ I ask finally, four words which do not seem sufficient to carry the great weight of the questions they support.

‘She’s comfortable, Mr Jachmenev,’ she replies, her tone softening a little. ‘But, as you know, the tumour is at an advanced level. You remember I spoke to you before about the development of ovarian cancer?’

I nod, but cannot look her in the eye. How we cling to hope, even when we know that there is none! She has spoken at some length over the course of several meetings with Zoya and me about the four individual stages of the disease and their inevitable ends. She’s talked about ovaries and tumours, the uterus, the fallopian tube, the pelvis; she has used phrases such as *peritoneal washings, metastases* and *para-aortic lymph nodes* which have been beyond my level of comprehension, but I have listened and asked appropriate questions and done my best to understand.

‘Well, at this point the most that we can do is try to manage Zoya’s pain for as long as possible. She responds extremely well to the medication, actually, for a lady of her years.’

‘She has always been strong,’ I say.

‘I can see that,’ she replies. ‘She has certainly been one of the most determined patients I’ve encountered in my career.’

I don’t like this use of the phrase ‘has been’. It implies something, or someone, which is already past. Which once was, and is no more.

‘She can’t come home to …?’ I begin, unwilling to finish the sentence, looking up at Dr Crawford hopefully, but she shakes her head.

‘To move her would accelerate the progression of the cancer,’ she tells me. ‘I don’t think her body could survive the trauma. I know this is difficult, Mr Jachmenev, but—’

I don’t listen to any more. She is a nice lady, a competent doctor, but I do not need to hear or report platitudes. I leave her office shortly after this and return to the ward, where Zoya is awake now and breathing heavily. Machines surround her. Wires slip beneath the arms of her nightdress; tubes worm their way beneath the rough covers of the bedspread and find purchase I know not where.

‘*Dusha*,’ I say, leaning over and kissing her forehead, allowing my lips to linger for a moment against her soft, thin flesh. *My darling*. I inhale her familiar scent; all my memories are wrapped up in it. I could close my eyes and be anywhere. 1970. 1953. 1915.

‘Georgy,’ she whispers, and it is an effort for her even to speak my name. I motion to her to reserve her energy as I sit by her side and take her hand in mine. As I do so, her fingers close around my own and I am surprised for a moment by how much strength she can still summon from within. But I reproach myself for this, for what human being have I ever known whose strength can compete with that of Zoya? Who, dead or alive, has endured as much and yet survived? I squeeze her fingers in return, hoping that whatever feeble strength remains in my own weakened body can be passed along to her, and we say nothing, simply sit in each other’s company as we have throughout our whole lives, happy to be together, content when we are one.

Of course, I was not always this old and weak. My strength was what led me away from Kashin. It is what brought me to Zoya in the first place.

The Prince of Kashin

IT WAS MY eldest sister, Asya, who first told me of the world that existed outside of Kashin.

I was only nine years old when she breached that naive insularity of mine. Asya was eleven and I was a little in love with her, I think, in the way that a younger brother may become entranced by the beauty and mystery of the female who is closest to him, before the urge for a sexual component appears and the attentions are diverted elsewhere.

We had always been close, Asya and I. She fought constantly with Liska, who was born a year after her and a year before me, and barely tolerated our youngest sister, Talya, but I was her pet. She dressed me and groomed me and saw to it that I was kept away from the worst excesses of our father's temper. To her good fortune, she inherited our mother Yulia's pretty features, but not her disposition, and she made the most of her looks, braiding her hair one day, tying it behind her neck the next, loosening the *kosnik* and allowing it to hang loosely around her shoulders when she was so inclined. She rubbed the juice of ripe plums into her cheeks to improve her countenance and wore her dress pinned up above her ankles, which made my father stare at her in the late evenings, a mixture of desire and contempt deepening the darkness of his eyes. The other girls in our village despised her for her vanity, of course, but what they really envied was her confidence. As she grew older they said she was a whore, that she spread her legs for any man or boy who desired her, but she didn't care about any of

that. She just laughed at their taunts, allowing them to slip away like water off a rock.

She should have lived in a different time and place, I think. She might have made a great success of her life.

‘But where is this other world?’ I asked her as we sat together by the stove in the corner of our small hut, an area which acted as bedroom, kitchen and living area for the six of us. At that time of the day, our mother and father would have been returning home from their labours, expecting us to have some food prepared for them, content to beat us if we did not, and Asya was busy stirring a pot of vegetables, potatoes and water into a thick broth which would act as our supper. Liska was outside somewhere, causing mischief, as was her particular talent. Talya, always the quietest of children, was lying in a nest of straw, playing with her fingers and toes, observing us patiently.

‘Far away from here, Georgy,’ she said, placing a finger carefully into the foam of the bubbling mixture and tasting it. ‘But people don’t live there like they live here.’

‘They don’t?’ I asked, unable even to imagine a different manner of existence. ‘Then how do they live?’

‘Well, some are poor, of course, like we are,’ she conceded in an almost apologetic tone, as if our circumstances were something of which we should all have been ashamed. ‘But many more live in great splendour. These are the people who make our country great, Georgy. Their houses are built from stone, not wood like this place. They eat whenever they want to eat, from plates encrusted with jewels. Food which is specially prepared by cooks who have spent all their lives mastering their art. And the ladies, they travel only by carriage.’

‘Carriage?’ I asked, crinkling my nose as I turned to look at her, unsure what the word could possibly mean. ‘What is this carriage?’

‘The horses carry them along,’ she explained with a sigh, as if my ignorance had been designed for no other reason

than to frustrate her. ‘They are like … oh, how can I put this? Imagine a hut with wheels that people can sit inside and be transported in comfort. Can you picture that, Georgy?’

‘No,’ I said firmly, for the idea seemed both preposterous and frightening. I looked away from her and felt my stomach start to ache with hunger, and wondered whether she would allow me a spoon or two of this broth before our parents returned.

‘One day I shall travel in such a carriage,’ she added quietly, staring into the fire beneath the pot and poking at it with a stick, hoping perhaps to find some small coal or twig that had not yet caught flame and which could be cajoled into providing us with just a few more minutes of heat. ‘I don’t intend to stay in Kashin for ever.’

I shook my head in admiration for her. She was the most intelligent person I knew, for her awareness of these other worlds and lives was astonishing to me. I think that it was Asya’s thirst for knowledge which fuelled my own growing imagination and desire to learn more of the world. How she had come to know of such things I did not know, but it saddened me to think that Asya might be taken from me one day. I felt wounded that she should even want to seek a life outside of the one that we shared together. Kashin was a dark, miserable, fetid, unhealthy, squalid, depressing wreck of a village; of course it was. But until now I had never imagined that there might be anywhere better to live. I had never stepped more than a few miles from its boundaries, after all.

‘You can’t tell anyone about this, Georgy,’ she said after a moment, leaning forward in excitement as if she was about to reveal her most intimate secret. ‘But when I am older, I am going to St Petersburg. I’ve decided to make my life there.’ Her voice became more animated and breathless as she said this, her fantasies making their way from the

solitude of her private thoughts towards the reality of the spoken word.

'But you can't,' I said, shaking my head. 'You would be alone there. You know no one in St Petersburg.'

'At first, perhaps,' she admitted, laughing and putting a hand over her mouth to contain her mirth. 'But I shall meet a wealthy man soon enough. A prince, perhaps. And he will fall in love with me and we will live together in a palace and I will have all the servants that I require and wardrobes filled with beautiful dresses. I'll wear different jewellery every day – opals, sapphires, rubies, diamonds – and during the season we will dance together in the throne room of the Winter Palace, and everyone will look at me from morning till night and admire me and wish that they could stand in my place.'

I stared at her, this unrecognizable girl with her fantastical plans. Was this the sister who lay on the moss-and-pine floor beside me every night and woke up with the imprint of the grainy branches upon her cheeks? I could scarcely comprehend a single word of which she spoke. Princes, servants, jewellery. Such concepts were entirely alien to my young mind. And as for love. What was that, after all? How did that concern any of us? She caught my look of incomprehension, of course, and burst out laughing as she tousled my hair.

'Oh, Georgy,' she said, kissing me now on either cheek and then once on the lips for luck. 'You don't understand a thing I'm saying, do you?'

'Yes,' I insisted quickly, for I hated her to think of me as ignorant. 'Of course I do.'

'You've heard of the Winter Palace, haven't you?'

I hesitated. I wanted to say yes, but if I did, then she might not explain it in further detail and the words were already holding a certain allure. 'I *think* I have,' I said finally. 'I can't remember exactly. Remind me, Asya.'

‘The Winter Palace is where the Tsar lives,’ she explained. ‘With the Tsaritsa, of course, and the Imperial Family. You know who they are, don’t you?’

‘Yes, yes,’ I said quickly, for His Majesty’s name, and that of his family, was invoked before every meal as we offered a prayer for his continued health, generosity and wisdom. The prayers themselves often lasted longer than the eating. ‘I’m not stupid, you know.’

‘Well then you should know where the Tsar makes his home. Or one of his homes, anyway. He has many. Tsarskoe Selo. Livadia. The *Standart*.’

I raised an eyebrow and now it was my turn to laugh. The notion of more than one home seemed ridiculous to me. Why would anyone need such a thing? Of course, I knew that Tsar Nicholas had been appointed to his glorious position by God himself, that his powers and autocracy were infinite and absolute, but was he possessed of magical qualities also? Could he be in more than one place simultaneously? The idea was absurd and yet somehow possible. He was the Tsar, after all. He could be anything. He could do anything. He was as much a god as God himself.

‘Will you take me to St Petersburg with you?’ I asked a few moments later, my voice sinking almost to a whisper, as if I was afraid that she might deny me this ultimate honour. ‘When you go, Asya. You won’t leave me behind, will you?’

‘I could try,’ she said magnanimously, considering it. ‘Or perhaps you could come and visit the prince and me when we are established in our new home. You can have a wing of our palace entirely for yourself and a team of butlers to assist you. And we will have children, of course, too. Beautiful children, many of them, boys and girls. You will be an uncle to them, Georgy. Would you like that?’

‘Certainly,’ I agreed, although I found myself growing jealous at the idea of sharing my beautiful sister with anyone else, even a prince of the royal blood.