I

Perhaps there must eventually come a time when your own future holds little interest, when the only remaining mystery is whether you will be granted a swift and merciful end or be forced to endure prolonged suffering, when not even the present can hold your attention, and your thoughts are always drawn back to the past. Or perhaps I can only speak for myself. Regardless, my mind is caught in a tape loop; I am the ghost who doesn't know he is dead. Even a mundane incident can shimmer with traces of an identical occurrence now lost to my fading memory. I have the sensibility of an old violin, and every note drawn from my belly is accompanied by a series of involuntary overtones.

Where, then, should I begin, to make sense of it all? What can I point to and say, with any conviction, that this particular event upended my dull, predictable life, rendering all that preceded it to be mere backstory and leading to joy and sorrow, love and betrayal, in unequal and confusing measures?

Back when I wanted to be a novelist, I believed that a strong opening should be pregnant with its own unique ending: the matryoshka doll nesting within. This always crippled me with indecision. The newborn with the defective gene, the child with the fatal virus, the hero with the grievous character flaw – each may have only one preordained ending, which life will hurtle towards as ineluctably as a Shakespearean tragedy hurtles towards the final scene. Only later, much later, I finally accepted that for most of us our destiny is uncertain.

If, indeed, we have any destiny at all.

Despite some misgivings – I have prevaricated far too long – I will start with a letter I received more than half a lifetime ago, on the other side of the world.

When I arrived home late one Thursday evening, there it was on my bed: a letter from Lenin Press, one of Moscow's foremost publishing houses. I had already received countless rejection letters for my novel, and I was in no hurry to open yet another and spoil what had been, at least until then, a tolerable day. It was preferable to enjoy the tantalising prospect of success, no matter how illusory, than be condemned to certain defeat. So I hung up my overcoat and went to the kitchen in search of leftovers.

As soon as I left my room, I was accosted by Olga Vasilyevna, the formidable war widow who ran the hostel. 'There you are! Have you opened the letter?'

She was six-foot tall, with the arms of an East German shot-putter and a row of ferocious broken teeth, and made it her business to know everything about her lodgers, collecting our mail and monitoring the phone. Although she had always been affectionate towards me, even protective, I'd always been careful not to offend her and to follow her rules, lest I suffer the wrath she routinely visited on others. No smoking or drinking indoors, no noise after lights-out.

‘It’s not the sort of news I can take on an empty stomach.’

She blocked the kitchen doorway with her ample bulk and eyed me suspiciously. ‘You can’t keep me in suspense.’ She grimaced, as though each of my rejections had affected her personally.

I had spent years writing the novel, on the old typewriter she had set up for me on a rickety table in the hallway. Not for me the luxury of a private bedroom, still less a private study. I had to share a room with the temperamental Petya and the boorish, at times insufferable Kolya, and there wasn’t enough space for a desk. So I felt indebted to Olga Vasilyevna, and she knew it.

Reluctantly, I went to my room, picked up the envelope, and slid my index finger under the seal. It cracked open as though it had been hermetically sealed and for centuries had enclosed an ancient relic.

Dear Leonid Maximovich, it began, *thank you for submitting your manuscript. I read it with great interest.* A positive opening – still, I had read a number of polite rejection letters. My gaze skittered across the page like that of a beggar scouring the pavement for coins. *There are some problems that prevent it from being published in its present form. As you show promise, however, I would like to meet with you to explain those problems, and give you the opportunity to address them. Please contact my office to arrange a suitable time. Best wishes, Boris Ivanov.*

That was it. Just a few lines that raised my hopes, dashed them, and raised them again. Ivanov was a puppeteer, and

I was his marionette. What were the problems he'd referred to but had deliberately left unstated? And what choice did I have but to meet him, listen to his advice and then redraft – possibly ruin – the manuscript I had worked on for so long, with the promise of publication left dangling just beyond my reach? That had happened to countless other aspiring writers, who had now renounced their dreams and been consigned to monotonous, dead-end jobs.

'Well,' asked Olga Vasilyevna, 'what does it say?'

'It's … good news, I guess.'

She snatched the letter out of my hand. 'But that's wonderful!' She hugged me so tightly that she wrenched my neck, as if I were the son she'd never had.

'But what if I don't agree with his advice?'

'Nonsense! Who are you – Tolstoy? No, you'll do exactly what you're told.'

The following week, I had my first appointment at Lenin Press. I was frightfully nervous. If I managed to impress Ivanov, I could secure a contract for my novel, leave my job at the music store, and finally become a serious writer.

It was a typical November morning. Low, heavy skies, and so cold that the cobblestones chilled my feet. Any day now, surely, the first snows would fall. Although the streets were crowded, no one was talking, or smiling, or even acknowledging one another: there was a pervasive sense of gloom.

The offices of Lenin Press were in a magnificent stone edifice just around the corner from the Old Arbat, that historic strip now apparently infested with souvenir shops. The district had once been home to the bodyguards of Ivan the Terrible, then the preferred residence of the aristocracy, and then the bohemian quarter where Pushkin himself lived. No doubt this building had served both as prison and palace, and was haunted by all manner of feuding ghosts.

When I opened the enormous wooden portal, I was accosted by a security guard. I showed him Ivanov's letter and he told me to follow the stairs to the top floor. After climbing four flights, I was short of breath. I paused, collected my thoughts, and knocked politely until an elderly man let me in.

Although this was a publishing house, it was an organ of government, not an artistic retreat. Dozens of men in drab suits were scribbling away at their desks, which were lined up in several rows along the windows and the hallway. They were so utterly absorbed in their work that they didn't even notice me.

The girl at reception flashed me a welcoming smile and I headed towards her. She was an attractive brunette, younger than me, perhaps around twenty, wearing a red dress that was the only dash of colour in that entire office – the drop of red paint spilled on a monochrome canvas.

'Good morning,' she said. 'And you are?'

'Leonid Krasnov,' I replied in my deepest, most authoritative voice.

'And what,' she asked, 'are you here for?'

'I have an appointment.'

She lowered her gaze and frowned at my patched-up coat and my old grey suit. It occurred to me I was horribly dishevelled, but I didn't have anything better to wear. My shoes were falling apart and the heels had all but disappeared, in spite of my efforts to walk on the balls of my feet. This was a trick

I'd learned from Gogol's impoverished clerk in *The Overcoat* – at least it had given the shoes a few extra months of life. Who said the classics weren't useful anymore?

'With Boris Antonovich,' I added.

At first she didn't respond, but instead leafed through the pages of a large leather notebook. After an interminable delay, she replied, 'There must be some mistake. Boris Antonovich is extremely busy. He doesn't have time for any appointments.'

I was undeterred. 'There is no mistake. He asked me to visit him today.'

She shrugged, muttered something I couldn't quite catch, and strutted away to another room. Eventually she returned. 'As I said, Boris Antonovich is busy.' She pointed to a seat in the hallway. 'But if you wait here, he will find time to see you.'

I waited for at least two hours, perhaps even three. It didn't bother me, because I'd taken the day off work. Besides, we were all so accustomed to waiting that it still surprises me *Waiting for Godot* wasn't written by a Russian. We would queue for groceries, for train tickets, for anything. And here, at least, I could sit down. On the coffee table there were some back-copies of *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and *Ogonyok*, those venerable rags, and I leafed through them to catch up on the latest controversies. I particularly remember one article lambasting another journal, *Novy Mir*, for disputing the glorious history of the Red Army.

Finally, the receptionist approached me. 'Boris Antonovich can see you now.' She led me to an ornate pair of doors. 'No need to knock – he's expecting you.'

It would not be accurate to describe his room simply as an office: it was almost as large as a ballroom and decorated as lavishly as a Hermitage salon. Parquetry floors, gilded walls, frescos on the ceiling. There was a ceramic fireplace in the corner, radiating an almost wasteful amount of heat.

‘Leonid Maximovich! Humble apologies for keeping you waiting.’

My first impression of Boris Ivanov was somewhat underwhelming. I was expecting him to be an imposing, patrician figure, befitting the high office of a leading publisher, and it was hard to reconcile that stentorian voice with the overweight, hairy figure seated behind his Napoleonic desk, dwarfed by the obligatory Brezhnev portrait. Then again, perhaps anyone would look ordinary surrounded by all that opulence.

He stood up and walked – or, rather, waddled – towards me. Certainly, he was unusual. Not much taller than five-foot and almost the same circumference. He would have been in his fifties, with an unruly thatch of grey hair and a thicket of a beard. He had threadbare trousers and a jacket with patches on the sleeves, which reassured me about my own clothes. Evidently he was absent-minded, because he had mismatching shoes. Still, it was bewildering that such an important man had granted me a personal audience.

When he held out his hand, I shook it deferentially. His palm was sweaty, and I quickly disengaged.

‘Come and sit down,’ he said. ‘You are a talented young man. We have so much to discuss.’

He retreated behind his desk, nestled into his enormous armchair like a mollusc retreating into its shell, while I perched on the uncomfortable wooden chair opposite. On his desk, just out of my reach, was a copy of my manuscript.

'Now tell me, please.' He studied me with dark, unblinking eyes: the eyes of a hypnotist, or a sorcerer. 'What made you want to write this story?'

Whenever I was asked to describe my novel, I would invariably call it a factory drama. This was an established genre, and there were many such novels on the bookstands. One might be about a heroic worker who had invented a new way of manufacturing steel, and another about a collective farmer who had discovered a more productive method of harvesting crops.

'Boris Antonovich,' I began, 'I wanted to write a book that would celebrate the glory of the Soviet people.'

Was this true? Most certainly not. But it was my standard answer, in a world where standard answers were necessary to avoid scrutiny and even persecution. Publishing was controlled by the Party, and it was beyond debate that a novel – like other art – must never question the communist ideal. If it did, it would never be published, but that could be the least of your problems.

'Yes, I understand …' He stared at me with those bewitching eyes. 'This is no ordinary novel. Tell me, really. What else did you have in mind?'

I was flattered, because I had never intended my novel to be mere pulp. Rather, it was (at least so I believed, at the time) more nuanced and sophisticated than most other novels in the shops. It was about a young man in an automotive factory who falls in love with a girl working on his production line, only to be falsely denounced as a traitor by his boss, a love rival. The young man is put on trial, but escapes prison by reason of the tireless efforts of the girl who, at considerable personal risk, manages to expose the boss's corruption.

Still, there was every chance that his question was a trap, so I answered with another platitude. ‘I wanted to demonstrate that good things happen to good people.’

Ivanov laughed. ‘You’re a cautious fellow!’

There was nothing in my novel that was critical of the Soviet system. The only villain was the boss, and he was eventually punished, proving that the system was capable of fixing itself, much like the human organism can shrug off the common cold.

‘You come from a good family,’ he continued.

That meant he had asked someone to research my family. I had expected this and had nothing to hide. ‘Yes, I do.’

He stood up, wandered over to the window, and stared outside. ‘Tell me, who are the writers you most admire?’

‘Well …’ I hesitated. ‘There’s Tolstoy, and Turgenev. And Chekhov.’ I thought about mentioning Dostoevsky but decided against it. Even though he wasn’t banned, back then he wasn’t widely read.

‘What about modern authors? I expect that Dudintsev has been an important influence.’

Not by Bread Alone, Dudintsev’s first novel, had enjoyed great success until it was condemned by Khrushchev. It was about a school teacher who invents a new method of building drain pipes. I never understood why it had caused such controversy, simply because I didn’t believe it merited literary debate.

‘Not really,’ I replied.

He turned to me and narrowed his eyes. ‘What about Alexander Solzhenitsyn?’

If it hadn’t already, the conversation now veered unmistakeably from the literary to the political. ‘I have read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.’

'And what did you think?'

'I was only a teenager and don't remember much about it.'

Only the first half of this sentence was true. Like many of my friends, I read it when I was at school. It was radically different to anything I had read before. A strange tale of a gulag inmate in Siberia, and his struggle to survive one long day of his ten-year sentence.

'Have you read anything else he's written?'

'No, I haven't.'

At first, *Ivan Denisovich* was lauded by critics and became a literary sensation. Shortly afterwards, though, Khrushchev decided it should never have been published, especially when thousands of other writers inundated publishers with their own tales of woe about Stalin and the gulags. This had to be stopped, so none of those other manuscripts made it into print, while Solzhenitsyn himself was vilified. And when Brezhnev and his hardliners came to power, they made sure that Solzhenitsyn was never published again – at least not officially. But that didn't stop him writing, and there was a black market for his work. *Samizdat* was the name for the carbon copies of banned books, articles and manifestos that were shared between friends, each copy possibly passing through hundreds of pairs of hands. You could be jailed for having a copy of the wrong sort of book.

'Really? A young fellow like you?' Ivanov peered at me over his spectacles.

'No,' I insisted. And this was true. Although I did have some curiosity about *samizdat*, this didn't extend to the works of Solzhenitsyn. I had never been particularly interested in gulags, and reading *Ivan Denisovich* hadn't caused me to seek out any more literature on the subject. Not only was

I too young to have suffered under Stalin, but none of my immediate family had suffered. On the contrary, they had prospered.

Ivanov smiled, as if he suspected I was lying. Not that he would necessarily hold this against me. I was entitled to have my own private opinion about a writer, and it was entirely decent and honourable for that to differ from my public opinion.

'I trust,' he said, 'that you agreed with the decision to expel him from the Writers' Union?'

The decision wasn't merely symbolic but denied him the right to earn a living from his work. Regardless, at the time I thought it was reasonable, and so did nearly all my friends – at least none of them told me otherwise.

'It was fair enough,' I said.

'He's just a troublemaker. And what about the latest news?' The corners of his mouth drooped with despair. 'That charlatan has been awarded the Nobel Prize.'

Russia had long celebrated its great writers, yet this news barely rated a mention in the papers, and whenever it did they attacked Solzhenitsyn, as the dupe of Western powers.

'It is most … surprising.'

Ivanov snorted. 'It's worse than that. It's an outrage. The man is a scoundrel.' He pulled out a red handkerchief and blew his nose like a bugle. 'All he can write about is doom and gloom. Negative, negative, negative. Nothing about the great advances of socialism.'

He paced around the room, his carotid artery gorged with blood. 'I understand he had a hard time in the camps … but that was years ago. He has to move on. Every bad word he writes about us gets printed all around the world, by our enemies.'

I had heard this before, and again I admit that I didn't disagree. This double-negative may sound duplicitous, but it simply means that I hadn't turned my mind to the question.

'And now,' he said, 'did you hear that Rostropovich has come out in his support?'

Rostropovich was among the most celebrated musicians in the entire Soviet Union. In the music store where I worked, many of our cello recordings were of Rostropovich. I now say this with a hint of nostalgia: we weren't living in a consumer society, so there wasn't much choice.

'Look at this.' He returned to his desk and picked up a sheet of paper, his hand trembling as though he'd caught the flu. 'The letter that cellist wrote to *Pravda* last month. The presumptuous fool. Have you heard about this?'

Another difficult question. Naturally I'd heard about Rostropovich's letter. Even though *Pravda* hadn't published it, *samizdat* copies were already accumulating multiple fingerprints around Moscow. Petya had carelessly left a copy next to his bed.

I didn't want to give Ivanov the impression that I mixed with undesirables. Then again, if I blithely denied all knowledge of the letter, he probably wouldn't believe me. 'I overheard someone whispering about it.'

He sat down and pitched the letter at me; it glided to a halt on the expansive runway of his desk. 'Go on, read it. Tell me what you think.'

I studied the first, familiar lines. Rostropovich wrote that Solzhenitsyn now lived with him on the outskirts of Moscow. He complained about Solzhenitsyn's expulsion from the

Writers' Union, said he was ashamed that the newspapers condemned famous artists, and asked why it was necessary to crush such talented people. He said there were secret lists of forbidden works, but that it was impossible to know who had decided the works were banned, and on what grounds. Each paragraph of the letter was more incendiary than the previous one.

Before I could finish reading the letter, Ivanov took it back. 'Breathtaking, his arrogance. Isn't it?'

I nodded: clearly, there was no alternative answer.

'Listen to this,' he said, glancing at the letter. 'He's asking why the final word, in literature and music, always belongs to those who are incompetent in the arts!'

He whipped off his glasses. It was unnerving, his manic stare, and I felt compelled to answer. 'He doesn't realise that art has to serve the people.'

Instantly, his expression lightened. It was as though he'd been acting, and my response had been so hackneyed, and so comical, that he had to restrain himself from laughing. 'Is that really what you believe? Don't worry, I won't bite.'

I hesitated. 'To tell you the truth, Boris Antonovich, I'm wondering why you've told me this.'

Now he laughed. It was the unrestrained and resonant throaty warble you would expect of a man in a powerful and privileged position, a man occupying such a magnificent suite overlooking the Arbat. 'Ah yes, I've been getting ahead of myself.' He leaned forward conspiratorially and placed both his elbows on the desk. 'What I am about to tell you now is in the strictest confidence. If we are going to publish your book, first – you must help us.'

'Sure, but what can I do?'

'We …' He paused. It was the first time he'd used that word, *we*, in the entire conversation. Plainly, he'd wanted to give it special emphasis, to make it clear that he had no discretion, no autonomy in the matter. 'We want you to keep an eye on Solzhenitsyn.'

I rocked back in my chair, as if he had reached across the desk to slap me on the cheek. 'You mean that … you want me to spy on him?'

'Let me put it this way. We are inviting you to serve your country.'

He might as well have asked me to be a guinea pig in the next Soviet spacecraft. 'Me? But that's impossible! I've never even met him.'

'We know a lot more than you'd believe.' Ivanov chewed his fingernails as if they were an oriental delicacy. 'We've come to the view that you're the perfect choice. And I'm sure, when I explain, you'll come to a similar view.'