

## 2

‘What time are you coming home?’ the voice on the other end of the telephone whined.

‘I’m very busy, and um.’

‘But this is your last night here. I thought I might do something nice, you know, pelmini.’

‘But Vanya is doing chicken tonight and I promised him that I’d come. He’s very um, lonely, you understand, his wife being all the way in the Ukraine.’

‘I don’t like that man.’

‘For fuck’s sake.’

‘You always come back drunk whenever you’ve seen him...’ her voice trailed away.

‘That’s a laugh, there’s not a night I don’t come home when you’re not half cut.’ There was silence. ‘And anyway pelmini isn’t special it’s what my mother used to cook. What about a bit of sushi or an emu steak or even just a little pasta with olive oil, truffles and black pepper?’

‘You know I can’t get those ingredients and anyway I don’t like foreign food.’

‘Just forget it Lana. I’ll see you later.’

‘Andre!’

‘Oh and don’t forget to pack my things...’ But Lana had hung up. Thank God I’m leaving tomorrow, thought Andre Valov, this time I’m staying longer than nine months.

‘So, this is the point in the evening when we must decide whether we bravely go on, or,’ Vanya Pelevin turned to face Andre, ‘we fuck off home.’

‘Go on, go on man,’ shouted Grigory, stamping his feet under the table. It was strewn with the remains of the chicken, an almost empty jar of pickled fish, a gherkin, half a plate of salted slices of pork fat and

a large, mostly untouched, mountain of Winter salad which had gone slightly yellow at the edges. Five empty vodka glasses were dotted around the table. Petri and Dima had already gone home. The air was warm and stuffy as sunlight poured in through the ceiling to floor windows that ran along one wall of the studio. Vanya grinned at Andre and held the two empty bottles up, one in each hand.

‘I’ll go,’ said Andre and got up. ‘I won’t be long.’ He crossed the studio floor and went out the door.

‘Now,’ said Vanya. ‘I want to show you these paintings I’ve been doing of George and the Dragon fighting Russian Orthodox saints,’ and he started pulling out large canvases that were neatly stacked up against the wall. ‘If you place them all together they form an scene from the Old Testament, a sort of post-Soviet religious frieze.’

‘You’re a fucking genius Vanya,’ said Grigory as he leaned over the centre canvas of a dragon flying over an ark.

‘Oh Vanya, these are great,’ lied Andre. He had returned from the shop, a bottle of vodka in each hand, and was standing at end of the hall looking in at the canvases spread all across the studio floor.

‘Yeah, I did them this winter. The fucking dark sends you a bit crazy so I thought I’d just go with it and this is what I produced. Do you think they’ll sell?’

‘Well, I um...of course, but er, do you have to buy the whole lot? I mean they wouldn’t make any sense on their own.’

‘Yes, and they’re going to be costly, forty thousand roubles at least.’

Andre made an impressed face even though he made more than that a month, but it was a fortune to Vanya. ‘Have you sold anything recently?’ he asked.

‘Erm, not exactly...no, but Olga has, you know, in the next studio. She is considered to be one of the finest colourists in Arkhangelsk.’

‘He’s fucking her,’ said Grigory.

‘Are you?’ Andre was surprised, Vanya had a wife

back in the Ukraine who was sturdy but not unattractive. He had met her once when she stayed with Vanya and she completely dominated the conversation. She was good fun, totally different to Lana.

‘She’s nearly sixty too. Grey hair, saggy arse, bad teeth, it’s disgusting.’

‘Yeah well, I was bored, you know. It gets so fucking dark up here in the winter. What is there to do? In the Ukraine I could go out for a walk at least and anyway Natalya is coming up soon, so I’ve stopped all that. But Andre, don’t tell me that you travel all over the world and don’t...’

‘Course he does,’ interrupted Grigory.

Andre smiled and poured out the vodka. ‘Let’s have a little drink to Olga and her saggy arse.’

‘And her painting, lets not forget that she sold that painting,’ added Vanya. The three men raised a toast and downed the vodka. Andre filled the glasses again and sat down at the table deliberately not speaking. He lit a cigarette.

‘Well?’ said Vanya.

Andre picked up the gherkin and bit it. Then he pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his sweaty brow. ‘I can’t understand why I’m always sweating, he thought, deliberately delaying his moment of truth for dramatic effect and because he was a little unsure of whether to actually tell it. ‘Of course,’ he said slowly. Which was true, but what he never did quite explain that he always paid.

‘I knew it, a woman in every port, I bet.’

‘Not quite, Grigory, but it is very easy to meet women when you’re a sailor.’

‘Where’s the best place then Andre?’ asked Vanya. ‘I mean you must have fucked a lot of different women, where’s the best port?’

Andre smiled uneasily and looked at the two men. They were expecting some story about wild nights with a load of Brazilian beauties who couldn’t get enough of him or something. But that wasn’t the case, Andre did sleep around, that much was true, but he liked the Russian women best. He knew were he was with them,

and they knew what to expect, which wasn't much.

'Um, well, South Korea,' he said quickly. 'Busan.'

'Asian ladies, I get you.'

'No Grigory. Russian women, there are a lot of Russians in South Korea.'

'But Andre, I would have thought you...'

'They're not like here, they're different, you know, more sophisticated, er, more open minded.'

Grigory was shaking his head. Andre had disappointed him. He liked to rely on Andre for his idea of the outside world, not ever having travelled further than Moscow himself. Andre always came back with amazing stories of the storms he had seen, of the cities he had visited, the food he had eaten and Grigory had assumed that there were lots of exotic women he had fucked too. A women in every port, of course, that's why one became a sailor, why else would you want to be away from home, from the mother land, for so long.

'So let's drink to the Russian whores,' shouted Vanya, raising his glass.

'Russian whores!'

'They're not whores,' Andre said quietly. But they were.

Vanya filled the glasses again and started to pick at what was left of the chicken. He crunched the gristle on the end of a leg joint and then pointed it at Grigory. 'Grigory, tell us about your latest business venture.'

Andre lit a cigarette and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. Grigory had had numerous businesses which had all failed. Archangelsk was not a place to be starting businesses, it was a crazy dying city. The month of daylight in the summer and the month of night in the winter made people act strangely. Anyone who could, left as soon as possible. What remained was an elderly population, those that were too poor to leave and a few loony people like Vanya who seemed to thrive in the harsh conditions. As soon as he had had the chance Andre had joined the Russian navy and then transferred to the merchant navy. This was one of the only ways, pre-perestroika, that you could legally leave the country. First he was an able bodied seaman and had worked his

way up to Chief Engineer. Each year he came back for fewer and fewer months to Arkhangelsk to visit his wife who refused to live anywhere else.

‘Mobile phones,’ announced Grigory.

‘Ah,’ said Vanya loudly, ‘the future!’

‘You’re opening a mobile phone shop?’

‘Yes.’

Andre groaned inwardly, it would never work. Nobody had any money in Arkhangelsk and so there was no money to make. ‘A drink to Nokia then!’ he said, and raised his glass.

‘Nokia!’

‘Who the fuck is Nokia?’ said Grigory as he wiped the vodka from his chin.

And the night progressed. The sun was still pouring in through the enormous windows when Andre stumbled out of the studio at midnight. He left Grigory asleep on the sofa and warmly embraced Vanya goodbye, knocking over some empty bottles and standing in the Winter salad.

The next morning Andre Valov had sat himself on a bench on the promenade that ran alongside the Dvina River that formed a boundary to the west of Arkhangelsk. The Dvina River ran into the White Sea, which ran into Atlantic Ocean up above the Arctic Circle. The sky was bright blue and cloudless that morning. In the night he had been waken by a car alarm at three a.m. and the day had looked exactly the same, even at that time. It had played for ages, every ten seconds or so the tune changing. Everybody had these car alarms nowadays, scared stiff of someone nicking their Lada. He had watched from his balcony as the owner had finally walked over to the car and turned it off and then have a cigarette. Andre Valov couldn’t understand it, who the fuck is going to nick a Lada? For some reason it reminded him of Andre talking about mobile phones last night.

Andre’s head throbbed and his mouth was dry and furry. He squinted in the bright sunlight and yet shivered

when the wind blew strong from the White Sea. He had had a fantastic time last night but he was paying for it now. He had even managed not to wake Lana up when he got in, or so he thought, and she had left for work already when he got up. I'll say goodbye to her tonight, he resolved, the train doesn't leave until late wiping his brow with a dirty handkerchief.

The sand on the bank of the river was covered with rubbish, mostly broken beer and vodka bottles. Every so often there was a metal umbrella poking up, too low in the sand now to be useful, sunk from the many high tides. Metal changing bays, also sunken, poked out of the brown fast flowing river catching plastic bags, broken birch and larch branches and tiny ice bergs. Men with nowhere to go stood around on the bank staring out to sea. A woman was walking her white Afghan through the rubbish on the beach. The dog looked majestic, almost regal, its carefully combed white hair blowing back in the sea breeze.

Andre coughed the long raspy chokes of a professional smoker and drinker, bringing up a large glob of phlegm that sat on the pavement in front of him looking like some newly discovered life form. Without thinking, he automatically reached for the red Marlboro packet in his shirt pocket and lit up. Just along the promenade a group of people, in the twenties Andre thought, drank beer and smoked and laughed. The empty bottles were left on the ground and the plastic bags they brought them in blew down off promenade onto the beach. Andre ran his hand through his thinning ginger hair and looked past the group towards some school children that were exercising with their teacher. They ran up and down the concrete steps, from the promenade down to the banks of the Dvina and back up. Other's were performing jumping jacks and shuttle runs between the lamp posts whilst the teacher shouted at them.

'Faster Natasha. Stop staring and get on with it Svetlana.' Svetlana was staring at two dark skinned men that were walking along the promenade.

God, its so endless, thought Andre. I used to come down here when I was at school. That was because there

was no playing field then too. He turned back to face the Dvina River and ground out his cigarette with his boot. Tomorrow I'll be heading back out there, he thought, out of this place.

The two dark skinned men had stopped behind the bench that Andre was sitting on and were looking out across the Dvina River. The smaller and broader of the two spoke in English. 'Excuse me, do you know when the train for St Petersburg leaves?'

He had a heavy accent, probably from somewhere in Asia thought Andre. He turned around on the bench and answered hesitantly back in English. He had been speaking only Russian for the past three months but was fluent once he got warmed up. 'It leaves tonight at midnight. I'm taking it myself. You're not Russian, where you are from?'

The man stared at Andre for a couple of seconds before answering. 'Oh, the Philippines. I'm er, just visiting here.'

'Wow, you never get foreigners here. I've been there, you know, Manila, it's a great city.'

'Yes, I seem to remember it is,' answered the other man. 'Say, where can we get a drink here?'

'And something to eat,' the other man added. 'Somewhere that serves vegetables.'

Andre laughed. 'You won't find anyone serving anything apart from pickled cabbage at this time of year. But there is an alright restaurant about half a mile down the river from here. They do a good range of vodkas too.'

'That sounds perfect. Can you show us the way?' Andre pointed and then decided that he'd take them there in person. He wanted to show them a little Russian hospitality, the kind that he had received in many cities all over the world, and he thought that a hair of the dog might help too.

'I'll take you there, let's get a taxi,' he said and walked over to an old black Volga, the driver asleep in the front seat. The Filipinos followed.

Fuck it's dark, thought Andre, Jesus my head is splitting. He sat up and looked around him. 'What the fuck,'

he said quietly. He was lying on a thin bunk and the roof of small room was not a foot above his head. Opposite him was another bunk and he could see the outline of someone asleep and hear their uneven snores. He swayed with the movement of the room and grabbed the handrail.

I must be on the ship, he concluded and was jolted by another movement. But then he dismissed that thought. The ship doesn't move like this. 'I'm on a fucking train,' he said under his breath.

He leaned forward and crawled towards the closed door and lowered himself down to the floor. There was a man and a woman asleep on the lower bunks. A bright beam of light was escaping from under the heavy blinds lighting up the small table. It was covered in sunflower seeds and a large salami rolled backwards and forwards with the rocking motion of the train. He turned and slid open the door letting the bright sunlight flood the compartment behind him. The sleeping woman groaned and covered her face with the nook of her arm and muttered in Russian. Andre slid out into the corridor and closed the door.

In the corridor were a half dozen people looking out of the windows and chatting by open compartment doors. Andre peered out of the window and watched an endless silver birch forest fly past. Most of the trees were still quite bare although some were showing the first signs of spring. It looked familiar. A small boy was standing next to him.

'Where are we?' Andre asked. The boy didn't know. His mother came out of the next compartment and quickly pulled the boy in. Andre called out louder to her. 'Where are we?' The woman looked at him apprehensively.

'What do you mean?'

'Where is the train going to?'

'Oh, St Petersburg, this is the Arkhangelsk train. We get in at midnight tonight.'

Andre stared at his watch. It was just after ten in the morning. Then he noticed his large, ginger freckled, bare protruding stomach, glistening with sweat down in front

of him, and just sticking out beneath it his flabby white feet. Quickly checking, he found that at least he had his under shorts on. Shit, he thought, where the fuck is my gear. He opened the door to the compartment and looked up at his bunk. At the end of the bed was his bag. He pulled it down and opened it frantically.

‘Shut the fucking door,’ the woman mumbled.

Inside were his clothes, his money bag with his credit card, airline ticket to Shanghai and his passport. There was even the new book he had bought for the trip. He grabbed a t-shirt and put the bag back and left.

Staring at the mirror in the toilet compartment he tried to remember how he had got here. He recalled sitting by the river and meeting the two Filipinos. They had gone to a restaurant. Furrowing his brow and peering into the mirror again that was all he could remember. He stared at his reflection. A large white head had appeared in the crease of his bulbous nose and his ginger moustache looked unruly. He tried unsuccessfully to smooth it flat with a finger and saliva. His grey eyes were bloodshot and there were more beads of perspiration on his freckly forehead. Running his hand through the limp strands of his ginger hair he stuck out his tongue. Yuck, he thought, what a mess. It looked green and there was a nasty taste in his mouth. He must have been sick at some point. Noticing a small piece of orange stuck in a back tooth he dislodged with his tongue. As he crunched it he realised it was a small piece of carrot.

‘Ah well,’ he muttered. ‘At least I’m on my way.’