

Stairwells and Stairways

by

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I tell you truly, we first met in St Petersburg in a café two blocks from the Moika Canal. I had just presented a conference paper on ‘Grief and Survival in Russian Literature’ and was walking back to my hotel. A few blocks from the venue, a wailing guitar and clash of drums pierced the evening stillness. “Rock-on Russia”, I mumbled, as the cobbled street opened up onto a small square. A band was playing on a makeshift stage outside a café, the vast dome of St. Isaac’s Cathedral gleaming in the distance. I sat at one of the tables. Rain and hail had washed the cobblestones clean and a chill wind danced around the square. Gas lamps fizzed, their heat deflected towards the patrons crowded beneath, searching for warmth – any warmth – as mounds of scarves and gloves and coats absorbed the feeble heat. My jumper was barely adequate under my brown leather coat, which I had bought in Florence from a grotty stall behind the Duomo. Reluctant to pay tourist prices – I am Scottish, after all, *and* educated by presbyterians – I was proud of the purchase, though the coat was a little worn. I beat down the vendor to half his asking price. Have pity, it was cold out there.

A waitress approached me and I ordered a beer, a favourite brand, imported from the former Soviet satellite state, now the staunchly independent Czech Republic. The band was a three-piece rowdy riot, dominated by the front man who played an electric violin plus harmonica – full of quirky buffoonery. In contrast, the base guitarist stood unmoving, behind him, seemingly in a musical world beyond reach. At the back, a drummer struck me as peculiarly Russian: dressed entirely in black with a fuzzy hat featuring long ear-flaps, a Rasputin-like leather coat, long to his ankles, a tattered jumper and a large golden crucifix dangling down his chest – the only splash of colour. But the harmo-violinist was the star with his endless array of frolics: playing his instrument with his teeth à la Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock (even I saw the connection), beating it with spoons, or playing it so close to the amplifier the ear-piercing wail caused shrieks and wide grins all round. Not quite Handel’s ‘Messiah’ but impressive none the less.

Please believe me, it was then that I saw them for the first time. A few tables along, a man wearing a fireman’s hat was gesticulating to the music: too wildly for comfort, even for

his girlfriend or wife or companion, whatever the Russian expression is in these days of chaotic Perestroika. I raised my eyebrows and returned to my beer. But the man caught my eye and waved. He got to his feet, grabbed his beer and before I could move, he was sashaying to my table, keeping rhythm to a Russian take on Pink Floyd's 'The Wall' – not the one torn down in Berlin, some other wall.

'Hi,' he said, poking out a rough hand, his fingernails dirty and cracked. I met his piercing eyes and he promptly sat down.

'Vunderful music yes?'

'Yes,' I said, eyeing his greasy shirt and trousers. He wore sneakers split at the sides and no socks.

'Vunderful, yes. My name Yuri.'

'Hi, I'm Jack,' I lied. Forgive me, but I was alone, and suspicious. Yuri gulped at his beer, thumped a large, half-empty glass between us, and indicated 'more' with his eyes. I acknowledged his gaze with a half-smile, shrugged my shoulders – and he promptly waved the waitress over and ordered for both of us. But who was to pay? The waitress stood, looking at me, while Yuri took another gulp, wiping froth from his lips. I pulled money from my wallet, deliberately, as if to say: okay, your life is tough and I'm an academic-come-tourist. But there's a limit, my friend, and you're right on it.

Yuri smiled, then waved vigorously to his companion. She was a large, ragged woman who stood up as if she owned the place. She threaded her way through the crowd and sat down next to Yuri. Yuri lent over, his face close to mine.

'Mary,' he said, by way of introduction. 'Mary,' he repeated, gesticulating and adding a string of syllables in Cyrillic, none of which I understood.

'We marry, long time live Ukraine. Now live here. Hi-rise, many stairs. Hard.' To me, 'hi-rise' meant a crumbling apartment building, broken lifts, dodgy plumbing, exposed wiring, no doubt built during the 'Soviet times', one of a hundred such monstrous ruins that ringed the old city. All places to avoid on a Friday night – or any night.

Mary nodded and wiped her face. She was a female Yuri: forty-something, I guessed, wearing a shapeless skirt and threadbare overcoat with a grey scarf around her neck like a hangman's noose. Her face was lined with a thick, bulbous nose and tight lips almost hidden beneath the firm set of her jaw. Her blue, vacant eyes squinted at me through fronds of faded,

blonde hair. Most striking was a mass of glitzy rings smothering her hands – black, red, yellow, silver, with flashing glass (perhaps diamonds, but I doubt it) – all tightly gripping her fleshy fingers. Our conversation evaporated, she spoke even less English than I spoke Russian, which is to say, none.

The band struck up again: a rocky blues number, the guitarist riffing a magic line I knew instantly. It resonated with me but I couldn't for the life of me put a name to it. It'll come, it will. Yuri too was distracted by the front man, now playing his two instruments all at once: violin gripped under his chin, harmonica against his lips supported by a cradle strapped around his neck, Bob Dylan style. Leering and laughing, he produced rasping, dissonant chords, presumably a hilarious musical joke, but not pleasant to hear. Nothing like Bach's 'Ave Maria' which you will know so well. But the audience went berserk. One woman in particular, dancing alone close to our table and wrapped in a tattered, red blanket, screamed her support, laughing and joking with Mary. Around us, couples of all ages sat close, tapping feet, bobbing and swaying, smiling at the harmo-violinist's antics. The crowd was in holiday spirit. Indeed, it was Friday evening, the end of the working week, and I for one appreciated an opportunity to sit amongst the locals, to sense the flow of the city as it paused to listen, to watch, to party, with nothing particular in mind.

Mary and I exchanged glances but said nothing. In any event, we had nothing to say. Meanwhile, that song, it's ... it's ... Goddam, excuse my française but you'll certainly know it. The band ended in a riotous climax, nothing like the original, a bellowing cacophony of, well, noise. Yuri seized the moment, and leaned forward.

'Vunderful, vunderful.' He smiled broadly. 'You like?' I nodded, up-and-down, up-and-down, still cradling my half empty, first beer. My second beer, ordered by Yuri, sat untouched. Who was to drink it, but I? And what was supposed to happen, I wondered, when Yuri's glass, already reduced to suds, became obviously, unquestionably, empty? Yuri searched my eyes with a peculiar intensity. Please believe me when I say that I felt him ask: 'Why shouldn't you sit with me and my Mary? Let's drink, as Russians do, 'til we all collapse. That's our custom. And hey, damn it, why else are you here?'

I saw all that, yes, I understood that much. Lord, it's come to me: it's by Led Zeppelin, that song, it's ... it's called ... You know. You of all people will know.

The band took a break and, as if on cue, the waitress strode forward. The moment had come. I gulped the rest of my beer and looked at my second glass, still full, now quietly resting, its initial froth and excitement gone. I shook my head at the waitress. Yuri shifted in his seat, his face jutted forward inches from mine.

‘Yas, yas,’ he bellowed. ‘We drink, more, more, we enjoy.’ He indicated with a raised finger to the waitress. The gas heaters fluttered. I was trapped. Then, I admit, anger welled within me. Forgive me, but I thought: ‘What, another rip-off? Am I supposed to shout every drunk in Petersburg? No. Just piss off!’ I say to you, with a heavy heart: all this flashed through my mind as I sat, trapped, irritated, and suddenly freezing again.

I looked hard at Yuri and shook my head. He glared back at me, unflinching. Then he stood and quickly moved around the table to sit with me, up close, his mouth next to my cheek. I barely moved, wondering: is this a violent man? He was thin but wiry, his eyes were dazed. He stank of beer and vodka.

‘We talk,’ he said, his breath moist in my ear. ‘You help me, you know?’

‘Yes, sure, we can talk.’

‘No, we talk. You help me?’

My drinking buddy, this music-lover who frequented tourist hot-spots was no more than a miserable beggar, hustling for money, food, beer - anything. The enthusiastic greetings, the party-prattle: all pretence, washed away in that instant of foul breath. Perhaps he hadn’t eaten for days, his ‘hi-rise’ was probably dark, icy cold, overcrowded. Here was a man, I suspected, fractured from his inner self: hurt, dismayed, trying to survive amid the grit and rubble of that decaying apartment. And how could Mary, so obviously over-weight, climb the dark, stinking concrete stairs?

‘You help me?’ he pleaded, again.

I placed a hand on his chest, gently but firmly. Thinking back on it, I tell you, I’m surprised at my resolve but ashamed at my selfishness and embarrassed by the Visa cards and dollar-bills hidden in my second-hand leather coat. But to be fair, what was I to believe? Who was this guy? God damn, this was Russia, St. Petersburg, a city of revolution, apparatchiks – and poetry, of Pushkin. Why, a café bearing his name was just up the Moika Canal, on the corner of Nevsky Prospect. And beyond that, a few blocks to the east, a place close to your

heart: the miraculous Church of our Saviour of the Spilled Blood, built on the very site where a tsar was assassinated, shot through the heart. Suddenly I felt overwhelmed.

‘That’s okay,’ I said, lamely. ‘Enjoy your beer. I have to go now.’ I tried to stand up, pushing my untouched beer towards him, but a strong hand grasped my wrist. He held me to my seat, firmly.

‘You help me,’ Yuri rasped again, anger tainting his voice. ‘You do this. You do this now.’

This grabbing – his nails bit into my skin – was painful, and triggered some alarm. Remember, I was alone. At this point I noticed the woman with the red blanket around her shoulders, standing behind Yuri, watching us, watching Yuri. As he held me there for a moment, panic rose in my chest. Although thin, even emaciated, Yuri was a strong man, certainly a desperate man. Perhaps, I thought, he was even a little ‘unbalanced’. Then, surprisingly, he let go. He looked at me, spat on the table, grabbed the glass of beer – my beer – and stalked back to his table. Mary, her teeth appearing for an instant, also stood up. She glared at me and said something in Russian, something emphatic, to me and, I think, to the woman in the red blanket. The words poured from her lips revealing gaping, black teeth and blood-red gums. I understood nothing, yet I have no doubt that, calling upon her Orthodox faith, she cursed me, she cursed my ancestors, and consigned my soul to purgatory.

I’m sure you’ll understand, it didn’t matter, the language barrier. I saw, very clearly, what she said, just as you did.

Mary returned to Yuri’s table and snuggled close to him, their backs to me. The band launched into Bob Dylan’s ‘The Times are a Changin’ and Mary and Yuri began to dance again, bobbing and gesticulating wildly. Once or twice, they looked at me, as if sharing a secret, unspoken joke. I got up and walked out, quickly. What was left of Dylan followed me as I scurried through the line of tables and out into the square. I set course for my hotel room on the other side of Nevsky Prospect. This took me along the Moika Canal, past the Pushkin Café, the place its namesake visited on the morning of his fatal duel. That song, Led Zeppelin ... the ... the ... Goddam, if you’ll excuse the expression. I know it. I know I know it.

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I walked and walked and, hearing a raucous laugh, looked behind. Sure enough, there they were, following me. I picked up my pace, almost stumbling, and patted my wallet – still

there. What to do, where to go, who to call? But perhaps, I told myself, I'm being paranoid here. Perhaps this is also their way home. Or, more likely, their route to another tourist night-spot, more soft targets to hit onto. I left the canal and turned right, trying to shorten my route to the hotel. I crossed a dark, silent square, passed a church (Eastern Orthodox, of course), thought about seeking shelter there but abandoned that idea (a quick, practical decision, nothing to do with doctrinal issues, believe me), glanced half-left and found them still there, in fact closing in, walking quickly, arm-in-arm. There was no doubt. They were following me, intent on who knows what. I hurried on, pretending not to panic.

Around another corner, back across the canal, and I came upon a sign – 'Raskolnikov's Retreat' – flickering in ugly fluorescent blue over a narrow doorway and beyond that, a noisy bar. I bounded up the stairs (yes, I've read my Dostoyevsky), turned into the bar, ordered a double scotch, no ice, and found a seat by the only window which was slowly frosting over. I wiped away the condensation and peered out. Yuri and Mary were across the street, standing together in the icy wind that whipped off the Baltic Sea, swept up the River Neva, then funneled along the narrow canal. They kept staring at my window, then retreated into an apartment stairwell beside a flickering street light, ever watchful. Perhaps they had guessed this grotty watering-hole was no refuge at all; that nobody here would help me; that eventually, I must emerge, negotiate their bunker and make a dash for my hotel, still several blocks down the canal. But, I thought, I'll call the police, have them arrested, bundled into a riot truck and taken away to ... to ... the Peter and Paul Fortress. Not in this country, I realised, not any more. These days, the Fortress is crammed with tourists – only tourists – and Russian police are barely trained and always underpaid. They won't intervene unless you pay them – in cash, on the spot, no questions asked. No. Police were not an option. Worse, being late, the taxis had disappeared, I spoke no Russian, and when I asked for a phone, the barman smiled a toothless grin and simply walked away.

I was stuck, believe me. The standoff continued. Dosty-baby never told me about this, I thought. Am I the usurious old moneylender, about to be slaughtered? After an hour of such-like thoughts and two more whiskies, I was exhausted. The bar was now desolate and lonely. Sweet Jesus, my savior, I sat at the bar, checked out an old juke-box – a real collector's item but Led Zeppelin, let alone Handel's 'Messiah' weren't included – while my former drinking buddies were settled in their stairwell outside: cold, watchful, determined. Finally, I decided

upon appeasement: mind you, my options were limited. But I decided to offer something and hope that they would leave me alone. I buttoned my coat and took out US\$50 – a large sum for them, I figured. I paid the barman, walked briskly out the front door and marched straight up to them, battling through a swirling snowstorm.

I swear to you, on my knees: I found them slumped against a doorway, wrapped in coats, silent, motionless. They seemed to be asleep, with Yuri's upturned fireman's hat laying on the cracked pavement stones. They were begging, I figured, working while sleeping: not a bad solution, really. As I approached, \$50 in hand, I suddenly fell forwards, the pavement rushed towards me, I hit the cement, hard, head-first, right beside them. Tired, half-blinded by stinging snow, I had tripped over one of the many pavement-slabs which jut out at crazy angles throughout the city. I recall entering a cocoon of grey shadows, I passed through unseen places, my senses deranged. I felt distant, without feeling, floating outside of myself as I lay in the darkness, prostrate before Yuri and Mary.

Slowly, I regained my senses, clambered to my feet still clutching my \$50 – and nearly fell again as an icy wind funnelled along the canal. Neither Yuri nor Mary had moved, nor said a word. I looked again, wiping blood from my forehead. They lay still, propped against their stairs, Mary's head collapsed onto Yuri's shoulder, their eyes closed. Whether my 'drinking buddies' were dead, or dying or merely sleeping, either or both, I could not tell. Still shaken, dazed, I leant over and touched Mary's shoulder, whispering – 'Mary? Yuri?' – but softly, as if afraid to wake them. Mary's face, now blueish and peppered with snow, trembled, but that was all. Yuri, wrapped in his coat, did not move.

Dear Lord, what was I to do? Wake them? Call the police? Leave them to die? Place my \$50 in Yuri's hat, still on the pavement, and hope they might wake up, return to their hire, there to climb all those stairs, all the way to the fourteenth floor? Just then, a woman, wrapped in a flapping grey coat and red blanket, walked by. It was the same woman I had seen, dancing before the band, talking to Mary. She stopped, took one look at the two prostrate bodies, and began to cross herself furiously, in the manner of the Eastern Sect. She extended a hand towards them, then began to wail and moan with real feeling. Her voice was striking, clean, as if well trained, unlike that crazy band. Then she rushed past me, ignoring me, her cries receding in the storm. You heard her pleas, Oh Lord, surely you did, for they affected me, even without understanding a word.

I confess to you now: shaken to my core and unable to think, still clutching my \$50, I left them. I simply walked away from Yuri and Mary in the direction of my hotel, following the wailing woman along the Moika Canal.

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That night, I could not sleep. I got up at dawn, exhausted. Gulping black coffee, I realised what I had to do. I grabbed my coat and half-ran to the canal, hoping to find them. The weather had cleared and a pale, thin sunshine reflected off the still waters. Hesitant, I approached the stairwell. It was empty, silent, cold. They were gone, my friends, Yuri and Mary. There was nothing save a tattered red bundle of cloth – the wailing woman’s blanket, I’m still sure of it.

I walked away aimlessly until I found myself outside your Cathedral, this vast relic of a past age, built for you, oh Lord, on the site of evil, a place of assassination, the Church of Spilled Blood. So I have entered and here I kneel, in this cavernous, silent space. Christ in Heaven, will you forgive me? And if my friends, Yuri and Mary, and the wailing woman, if they have died, frozen and hungry on the icy pavement, will you now open your gates for them? Have they not suffered enough? Dear God in Heaven, will you please open your ridiculous gates and let them in? Oh, and now I remember: it was ‘Stairway to Heaven’. Great song, that one.

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As I walked towards the great western door and beyond it, the front stairs leading to the canal, a soprano’s voice, strong and pure, filled the church. I recognised it immediately: it was the wailing woman, invisible, disembodied, enveloping me in a beautiful rendition of ‘Ave Maria’, calling to me, to me alone, from beyond those gates.

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