



PARTING GIFT

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The tiniest of flickers. There. In the corner of her eye. Always the left eye.

Alla lies corpse-like in bed, a single white sheet draped over her thin body.

Diesel fumes leak into the room from the traffic stuttering along Aleksandra Nevsky Square. A pink blur of daylight filters through her eyelids and the flickers become more insistent, flashes of lightning.

She opens her eyes to the harsh light of a Leningrad summer. Squinting, she makes out the bathroom door over in the corner of the room, the yellowing gloss paint flaking off at its edges. The painkillers in her sponge bag; they might help. She slips out of bed trying to keep her movements smooth but on her way to the bathroom she stubs her

toe on the carpet; threads escape the tight brown weave and it is rumpled, easy to trip over. She hopes her tour group have better rooms; she's fed up dealing with complaints.

As she goes into the bathroom, she glimpses her face in the mirror. She can't resist looking closer. It is the same as always, bits of her face obliterated by spots of darkness. The first time she saw this, she was terrified, thought she was about to die. Now it intrigues her. She can tell how bad it will be by how much of her face is missing. Only two small spots today; that's good, the painkillers should work. Her hands tremble as she turns the screwcap and shakes two out of the bottle. One falls onto the floor, rolls into a dusty corner. She leaves it there; bending down might make the pain worse.

Taking another pill she goes back into her room where she pours some boiled water from the kettle into a cup. The tang of chlorine rises up reminding her of Yuri, her son, a keen swimmer. How she misses him. Still, only one more day and night to go and they'll have a whole two days together before the next tour starts. The pills are huge in her throat as she gulps them down, trying not to gag. Exhausted, she falls back onto the bed.

Some of the group are waiting at reception when Alla finally manages downstairs, early risers who've already had breakfast. The migraine hasn't come to anything but she feels queasy. Saliva rises into her mouth; she swallows it, forcing a smile.

'Good morning, everyone. You slept well?'

Someone sniggers. Damn, she must have got the grammar wrong again. Her eyes are heavy and tired and she blinks to try to refresh them. Her smile doesn't waver.

'Today we spend at the summer palace, Petrodvorets. Is some

way from Leningrad, by the sea.'

A groan from one of the party; she ignores it. 'After breakfast we meet here and the bus will take us there. It is not long to get there.'

'Do we have to go?' one of them says.

Alla raises her eyebrows. 'Of course not. If you want to do something else then please do so. This is a free country.'

They all laugh. That sort of joke goes down well with western tourists. She looks around her group. 'So are we all clear about what to do? You want to come to summer palace, we meet in one hour at front door.' She watches them disperse and then goes into the restaurant. Although she still feels sick she knows she has to eat or the migraine will return, worse than ever.

She sits at the long table reserved for the group, nodding at the few people who were still there. How she hates this endless socialising and in a foreign language too; she should be at home with Yuri, playing one of his complicated pretend games. Space games, those were his latest, ever since he'd heard about his namesake at kindergarten. He'd use his building bricks to build rockets and then shout, 'Mama, mama, look we're going to the moon.' Whenever there's a full moon, he stands at the window of their little room and gazes at it, asking if it's true that the Americans have really been there. 'One day I'm going there, mama,' he'll lisp. Alla isn't sure if he means America or the moon and she never asks. Both seem impossible.

Alla slices the top off a boiled egg, gags at the smell of sulphur; it must be days old. She pushes it aside and helps herself to some cheese instead. Further down the table, two of the men, Mark and Bill are arguing. Alla hears her name. She listens hard; it's difficult to make out what they're saying. No one is taking any notice of her so she

edges nearer.

‘We should give her the money’, Mark says, ‘there isn’t much we can buy her here. She’ll have it all already.’

‘Well, I don’t agree. I think she’d be insulted if we gave her money.’ Bill’s face is red, his forehead glistens with sweat. ‘There are some lovely things in the shops.’

Mark frowns, ‘That’s nothing but overpriced tourist tat. If we give her sterling or dollars, she can buy much more. Anyway, Intourist guides get an allowance of certificate rubles. They can use them in the Beriozka shops to buy all that stuff.’

Alla moves away. She hopes Mark will win the argument. She’s saving up so she can move out from her parents’ flat and set up home for her and Yuri. It’ll mean bribing one of the housing officials; that’s how it works. But it will be worth it. Living with her parents, listening to their endless moans, is no kind of life. Before Yuri was born, she thought a baby might bring them some happiness. Now she doesn’t know how she could have been so naïve. Worn out from years of hardship, they resent the child. Her mother gripes endlessly about another mouth to feed and how she thought her days of looking after children were over. Her father sits motionless in the only armchair, nodding in agreement.

Alla found a nursery place for Yuri but no, apparently the family has to look after their own. Yuri is a sunny child, good natured and resilient but surely he’ll pick up on all that bitterness. If only she had somewhere just for her and Yuri. If only she could save enough to leave this job and find one with better hours. If only ... she’ll drive herself mad with her dreams. Forget it. She pushes her unfinished breakfast aside

The bus trip to Petrodvorets is peaceful and Alla relaxes as they travel through a forest of birch trees. She stares through the dusty glass, mesmerised by their swaying as they reach towards the blue sky. Sunlight plays on the bark; it shines like mercury. The shadows on the ground lull her and she closes her eyes only to jerk awake a minute or two later. Too soon, they reach the summer palace.

The group tumbles out of the bus, glad to be moving again; even short journeys are difficult on the rough roads. Alla watches as they drink in the grandeur of the buildings and gardens. When she thinks they are ready she starts her spiel about how Peter the Great built a small house at Peterhof at the beginning of the 18th century. 'Once he'd seen Versailles though, the house was not good enough and he build this great palace. He draw the plan himself.' She tells them about the construction of sea channels and fountain cascades. 'Some people at the time ask why so much expense just to send more water into an already full sea,' she says, 'and some people still ask why, but they are all in Siberia now.'

They love that, but if her bosses hear about it! She carries on with her talk as they stroll round the gardens, pointing out the golden statues on the way. Samson's her favourite. Every time she sees him, she longs to stroke his smooth golden muscles. It's a copy though. The original was destroyed during the war, like much of the palace. Rebuilding has been going on ever since. That was yet another thing for her parents to moan about. Why were the communists so keen to keep an imperial past alive? But they never bothered to come and see for themselves; didn't notice how beautiful their country was.

A few minutes before eleven o'clock, she stops the group by the Petrodvorets landing stage. 'Listen and watch,' she says, smiling at

their faces as the fountains spring up to an accompaniment of orchestral music.

‘That sounds familiar. What is it?’ asks Bill.

‘Hymn to the Great City by Gliere. Do you like it?’

No one answers; they’re captivated by the sweep of water cascading down the steps of the ‘Golden Mountain’. Even Madge, who always has a complaint, looks impressed. The water glints in the sunlight and Alla feels a twinge of pain as it catches her eye. She searches in her bag for her sunglasses and puts them on. They dilute the glare; immediately she feels better.

It’s such a beautiful day that no one wants to see inside the palace. Alla arranges a time for them to meet up in the gardens and leaves them to make her way inside. She has no desire to see any of the famous rooms: the Chinese Study with its black lacquered panels or the Picture Hall with its endless portraits of young women. All she wants is a chance to rest in the shade. She wanders through the palace, not taking anything in until she reaches the Throne Room. The light in there is intense; the combination of the white decoration, huge windows and massive mirrors is too much, and she sways as she looks at it. Someone takes her arm, asks in Russian if she’s all right. She steadies herself, nods. It’s Mark.

‘You must be exhausted,’ he says. ‘Running after us for a fortnight. I bet you can’t wait to see the back of us.’

‘No, I’m fine. I had a little headache this morning that’s all. It’s nothing.’ She carries on walking, her eyes downcast, careful not to look at the bright room, scared the migraine will come back. Mark walks beside her, still holding her arm. She is very aware of him. He smells nice, soapy and clean. She wants to draw her arm away but it

feels good to have a man touch her. They reach the front door where Mark stops, lifts her chin with his finger.

‘Sometimes, when you think we’re not looking, you seem worried.’

A professional smile, ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Yes you do. You have a crease in your forehead, from frowning.’ He strokes it with his thumb. She shivers. He’s too close; what does he want? She moves away from him, walks on ahead. For a moment she thinks he’s gone, but when she looks round he is right beside her.

‘You have a little boy, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Yuri. He’s nearly six.’ She hesitates; she shouldn’t really ask personal questions. ‘You and your wife have no children?’

He doesn’t answer; she looks away, embarrassed. ‘I’m sorry, that was very rude of me.’

‘Not at all. It’s just that ... well actually Fiona thinks she might be pregnant, but she hasn’t had a test yet so don’t say anything to the others.’

‘No, I won’t. Congratulations. You must be very pleased.’

Mark’s mouth is a grim line. Taking off his sunglasses he rubs his eyes and says, ‘Yes, I suppose so.’

Alla doesn’t know what to say. They walk on through the rooms in silence until Mark asks what her husband does.

Blushing, she says, ‘I have no husband now. I was pregnant but all the time he have another woman. He choose her, not me.’

Mark draw in his breath sharply. ‘Life must be hard for you.’ He touches her arm.

This is too much. Maybe he’s trying to be kind; maybe he’s trying to seduce her. She can’t decide, but either way there’s a hint of

condescension as is so often the case with westerners. They think they know all about life in the Soviet Union. Year after year, they come with their dollars, deutschmarks and pounds and judge. She is sick of it. Her eyes are cold as she shrugs him off. 'I have a good job and a child I love. Life is good here.' Without waiting for a reply she strides off.

Back in the garden, the group meet up for lunch. There are tables and benches set among the linden and maple trees and they relax in the shade. Alla has forgotten that one of the Tsar's trick fountains is set here. Her heart pounds when Madge leaps up from her table with a yelp of surprise. A jet of water has gone straight up her skirt. To Alla's surprise, Madge takes it in good humour, 'Quite refreshing, my dear. Just what you need in this heat.' More jets sprout and the more active start to run about the arbour, dodging the spray, splashing those still trying to rest. Alla feels the remaining tiredness drift away from her. There is so little time to go now. While she is sitting watching her group, Mark joins her, 'I think I offended you earlier. I didn't mean to.' He brushes back a strand of hair from his forehead. Alla smiles; he's very attractive, 'I know, it's fine.'

On the way back, someone starts a singsong ending with The Red Flag. Alla can't believe how many of them seem to know the English version. For the first time in several days she feels well.

In the evening, there is a special, farewell dinner that everyone dresses up for. Some of the women look very pretty. Alla looks down at her own clothes, a navy skirt and blue blouse, uninspiring and much too heavy for the heat. Mark's wife, Fiona, is wearing a blouse that Alla could die for. Crisp white cotton, with mother of pearl buttons and tiny pink roses embroidered on the collar; it would feel cool even on the hottest day. She shakes her head; no point in

thinking about it.

It's a good meal, a welcome change from the endless plovcs they had in Central Asia. Traditional Russian food served with Russian champagne: borscht then blinis with smoked salmon and caviar. When they finish eating, Bill stands up, strikes his glass with his fork. Alla blushes, fiddles with her napkin.

'Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please.' He waits until the chattering dies down then continues, 'I think you will all agree that we have had a magnificent fortnight here in the Soviet Union and that it has all gone very smoothly thanks to our guide Alla, here. Praise be to Alla!' Everyone laughs. Alla joins in, a little confused. Are they mocking her? No, they can't be; their smiles are kind. She doesn't listen to the rest of the speech; she's heard it all before. Instead she thinks of Yuri. Alla closes her eyes when he finally stops speaking. Please let it be a small envelope, she prays. She opens her eyes to see Bill lift a huge parcel on to the table. Her stomach twists.

'Thank you so much. You are very kind.' She makes herself smile at everyone, not looking at the parcel. Bill pushes it towards her, 'Go on, open it.'

It is well wrapped up. Gilt paper stretched round a cardboard box. She carries on smiling as she picks at the sellotape. Her bitten down fingernails slide over it. One of the women hands her a small pair of scissors and she manages to get the paper off. She lifts the lid off the box, looks inside. Whatever it is, it is wrapped in tissue. Alla lifts it out and peels back the paper. Another punch bowl, her fourth. She holds it up high to let everyone see, smiling and nodding, hoping her disappointment doesn't show. The cut glass catches the light, reflecting it all round the room. Little rainbows dance on the walls. As

she lowers it, the light changes from the gentle spectrum to a harsh shaft. She blinks but it's too late. There, in the corner of her eye, a flicker starts.

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