

THE ARCHIVIST'S STORY

Travis Holland



R A N D O M H O U S E

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Archivist's
Story*

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For Amy

You took away all the oceans and all the room.

You gave me my shoe-size in earth with bars around it.

Where did it get you? Nowhere.

You left me my lips, and they shape words, even in silence.

—OSIP MANDELSTAM

I have only one request: that I be allowed to complete my last work...

—ISAAC BABEL

Final statement before NKVD Military Tribunal
January 26, 1940

1

It is a small matter that brings them together. A story, untitled, unsigned, and by all appearance incomplete, which the arresting officers in their haste have neglected to record in the evidence manifest. A year ago, when the Lubyanka thrummed with activity, when all of Moscow seemed to hold its breath at night and every morning brought a new consignment of confiscated manuscripts to Pavel's desk, such a discovery would have hardly warranted a second look, let alone this face-to-face meeting the archivist frankly dreads. Babel has confessed: One story will not change that, nor will it save him. Still, Kuttyrev has insisted the matter be formally resolved, and since Pavel must now answer to the ambitious young lieutenant, the question of authorship is to be settled, if only for the record. Already an empty office upstairs has been reserved for the purpose. In due course the appointed morning comes. Just as the first heavy drops of rain are beginning to fall onto the dreary courtyard below, a guard raps once on the door. Babel enters.

"I was about to make tea," Pavel offers. On the bureau beside the window sit an electric samovar, serving tray, tea glasses and spoons, a darkly tarnished tin, all left behind by the office's previous occupant, absent now. Behind the desk, where a row of pictures once hung, the plaster is noticeably lighter; only nails remain. "Would you like to sit down?"

After a moment, as if Pavel's voice has only now reached him, Babel nods, then sits. He is unshaven. A bruise is fading under his right eye, and a faint film, like dried salt, coats his lips. The wilted wings of his shirt collar lie crookedly across the lapels of his wrinkled coat. And this finally, which Pavel finds most disturbing: The writer's glasses are gone. Somehow he had expected Babel to appear as he once did in his dust-jacket pictures.

Pavel lifts the empty teapot from the samovar. "I'll just get this filled."

At first the young guard standing watch outside merely stares dully at the teapot, as if he has never laid eyes on one before. He is at most twenty, with the sleepy eyes of a peasant. Some displaced farmer's son, perhaps, come to Moscow to better himself. Whatever he is, the expression on his face is familiar enough. "Water," Pavel sighs, handing the teapot over. He might as well be back at Kirov Academy, standing in front of a classroom of boys hardly younger than this guard, reading aloud lines from Tolstoy. *Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible*. Sons of want and privilege alike, born in revolution's shadow: It is his former students' generation now joining the numberless ranks already marching under the banner of collective progress, which their former teachers reconcile themselves to silence. In the two and a half years since he

appointment to the special archives, where until Kuttyrev's arrival this past May he was alone, Pavel has become painfully aware of just how fortunate he once was, how blessed. He would give anything to be standing before his students again, book in hand.

With the rain has come a kind of false twilight. All week the weather has been like this. Sitting at his desk, Pavel pulls the brass chain of the desk lamp, which clatters softly against the green glass shade. "I keep hoping we'll get a little sun soon," he says, trying to hide his nervousness. It is not every day one meets a writer of Babel's eminence. He asks, "Are you hungry? I'm sure I could have something set up, if you'd like."

"Thank you. No."

A high, almost breathy voice: Babel will not even meet his eye. Pavel stares openly at the bruise on Babel's cheek, then looks away. The guard returns with the teapot.

At the window again Pavel fills the samovar. Next door a telephone rings once, is answered. A watery, pale light cups the rounded side of the warming samovar, spilling over Pavel's hands as he unpries open the tin. Only a little tea remains, the blackish, powdery leavings like a kind of sand he tips into the waiting teapot. Tilting the tin toward the light, Pavel catches a glimpse of his own blurred reflection in it. Then he returns to the desk.

"Might I ask a question, Comrade Inspector?"

"I'm not an inspector," Pavel says quickly. "I work down in the archives." Leaning forward, he wipes the green cardboard of Babel's file folder with his fingers. A pink ribbon, neatly tied, holds the folder shut. "Actually," he adds, "I used to be a teacher, believe it or not. I taught your stories."

"My stories."

"From *Red Cavalry*." When one could teach them, Pavel thinks. When it was acceptable. Safely. "Some of your later work as well. 'Guy de Maupassant' is a personal favorite of mine." The opening lines of Babel's story, which he has never tired of reading, return to Pavel:

In the winter of 1916 I found myself in St. Petersburg with a forged passport and not a cent to my name. Alexey Kazantsev, a teacher of Russian literature, took me into his house.

A teacher of Russian literature—the irony stings now.

Babel squints at the green folder with an expression of dull, somewhat dazed perplexity, as if Pavel has conjured it up out of nothingness by some sleight of hand. Then his dark eyes empty again.

"May I ask," Babel says finally, "what day it is?"

"Tuesday."

“Is it still June?”

“July.”

“Already—” At least that is what Pavel thinks he hears Babel murmur. *Already*. It has been barely two months since Babel’s arrest, two months since the customary unmarked car carried him at dawn through the enormous black gate of the courtyard below. Has he lost his grip on time? Or perhaps Pavel imagines, Babel is simply, quietly stunned: that he could be brought down so fast, so completely. That in only two months he could become the battered, cowed shell of a man now sitting in this all but abandoned office. Pavel remembers his own first months at the Lubyanka, themselves a stark revelation, though it is obscene to compare his experience with Babel’s. He has not suffered on a tenth the torment Babel has likely had inflicted on him: days without sleep or food or water, threats, beatings.

Pavel says, “I’ve been asked—ordered—to clear up a discrepancy in your file. It’s just a formality.”

“What sort of discrepancy?”

“A manuscript my supervisor happened upon while reviewing your file. A story. Quite a remarkable story. There’s no record of it in the evidence manifest, which means it can’t be officially attributed to anyone, yourself included. Which means, officially speaking”—Pavel shrugs uncomfortably—“it doesn’t exist. As I said, it’s just a formality. If you could perhaps take a look, tell me if you recognize it. Can you read without your glasses?”

“Barely. I was told they would be returned to me,” Babel says. “If I cooperated.”

Cooperated. Confessed, he means—and in doing so, likely implicated others. Nowadays one cannot simply confess, one must also denounce. Acquaintances, colleagues, friends, even one’s own family. Whom, if anyone, has Babel drawn into the net that has now fallen over his life? Eisenstein perhaps? Ehrenburg? Pasternak? A man of Babel’s prominence would be expected to name others at least as well-known as himself.

I spent my mornings hanging around the morgues and police stations.

The line, another from “Guy de Maupassant,” echoes through Pavel’s brain as he walks once more to the window, where the samovar has begun to boil. Steam shimmers on the glass. “I’m afraid we’ll have to make do without sugar,” he apologizes, filling the teapot. A sedan is just then pulling into the parking space in the courtyard below, wipers briskly slapping away rain. The wipers cease, the driver’s door swings open. An umbrella emerges, blooms: a black peony. Morgues and police stations, Pavel thinks—that is what this age will be remembered for, that is our legacy. “Sugar?” Babel asks. As if the word were new to him.

“For the tea.”

Babel is silent.

“I could send for some,” Pavel offers, though the prospect of facing the young guard again leaves

him tired. No doubt it is also Kuttyrev's dreadful, pointless errand that has left him disheartened. For months now the junior officer has seized upon practically every opportunity to drive home his authority over Pavel, like a dog lifting its leg on even the most neglected patch of garden, marking its territory. More than once Pavel has come close to telling Kuttyrev that he needn't bother. He is welcome to the archives, right down to the last folder. Pavel hands Babel his tea glass. "Mind, it's hot."

Babel holds the steaming glass of watery tea near his chest. "You were a teacher," he says after some time.

"Of literature, yes."

"Literature." Spoken without irony, without bitterness. He straightens slightly in his chair. Perhaps Pavel thinks, the tea has revived him. "Did you enjoy teaching?" Babel asks.

"Very much," says Pavel.

Rain taps at the window. Absently Pavel brushes back his hair, feels something hard. The partial husk of a seed comes away in his fingers: It must have fallen from one of the lindens near his building as he walked to the bus stop this morning. He lays it on the desktop.

"Your *Red Cavalry* stories," he tells Babel, "they were always quite popular with my students. Boys, you know. They tend to be drawn to war. Your stories fascinated them."

Twenty-nine volumes of Maupassant stood on the shelf above the desk. The sun with its fingers melting dissolution touched the morocco backs of the books—the magnificent grave of the human heart.

He cannot get Babel's story out of his head. He notices that the fingers of Babel's right hand, spread on his thigh, are twitching ever so slightly, as if a faint current of electricity were coursing through them. Suddenly Pavel is struck by the realization that the very lines from the story floating in his brain once flowed from that hand, those fingers. He imagines that the lucky few train passengers who managed to catch a glimpse of Tolstoy, dying in that railroad stationhouse in Astapovo, must have felt a similar sense of mingled awe and disbelief.

From the corridor outside comes the faint rhythmic jingling of keys. Regulation at the Lubyanskiy requires that guards with prisoners announce themselves—either in just this manner or by clicking their tongues—so that no two prisoners ever accidentally meet. An institution built brick by brick upon secrecy, a world unto itself. Still, try as he might to avoid them, the stories have nevertheless trickled down to Pavel, like water leaking from a poisoned well. Mandelstam, weakened by months of abuse, muttering fragments from his own poems to the guards who stormed his cell after he slashed his wrists with a razor. Pilnyak, sobbing like a child, slumping against the cold cellar wall when the executioner touched the pistol barrel to the back of his neck. *Wait, wait.*

Pavel asks, "Would you like more tea?" The writer's fingers, he notices, have stopped twitching.

"Yes."

As Pavel is filling the writer's glass, Babel says tentatively, "I was wondering if I might be permitted to write a letter. To my wife."

A little tea accidentally sloshes over the rim of the glass. "Sorry," Pavel says.

"Please. It would ease her mind."

"I don't think that's possible," Pavel says after a moment. The weariness that has dogged him all morning suddenly presses on his heart. "If it were permitted—" He sets the teapot down on the samovar with a clatter, nearly spilling more tea. "I'm sorry, comrade." The word—unforgivable, given the circumstances—is out of his mouth before Pavel can stop himself. *Comrade*. He adds nervously, "Understand, it's not a matter of whether or not I'd like to help you. I would. I'm married myself."

He breaks off, looking down at the skin of oil floating on the surface of his tea, which reminds him, quite inexplicably, of ice. The river in spring, the dirty ice beneath Krymsky Bridge shearing off in chunks, carried away. He remembers that afternoon in January before his wife, Elena, left for Yalta when they walked along the winter-black river beneath Lenin Hills. How she had told him she could not wait until April, when the ice would finally melt. "I'm so sick of winter. Sometimes I think how wonderful it would be to never have to come back here." At the station later, embracing, Elena had touched his ear with her lips and whispered, "Come with me, Pasha. Please." The rabbit collar of her coat brushed Pavel's neck, light as breath. Impossible, of course: They both understood that Pavel could not leave Moscow just then, not without permission from his supervisors. Still, she had asked, she had tried in her way.

Pavel feels Babel regarding him, waiting. "What I mean is, I was married," he tells Babel now. "My wife passed away last January."

Babel meets this with silence.

Pavel takes a deep breath, then unties the pink ribbon and opens Babel's folder. In it, faceup, lies a loose sheaf of unlined paper covered in tight, neat script: Babel's unfinished manuscript—if indeed he is its author, as Pavel has every reason to believe. Even incomplete, the writing here is as beautiful and vivid as anything Pavel has ever read. A treasure, perhaps among Babel's finest work. Pavel clears his throat. "I suppose we should get started," he says. When he looks up he sees that Babel has turned toward the window.

"Is it raining still?"

"A little, yes," Pavel says.

A silence settles over them, which Pavel finds himself unexpectedly reluctant to disturb. The almost tenderly, he asks Babel, "What is your wife's name?"

"Antonina."

Absently Babel lifts a finger to his mouth, thoughtfully rubs his lower lip. The light from the window lies like a dusting of snow on the shoulders of his coat, which doubtless he has slept in since

his arrest. The full-lipped, almost sensuous mouth, those dark eyes, the high wide dome of a forehead with its single pronounced worry line: All at once Pavel is struck by the simple miracle of the moment, which nothing in his life could have prepared him for. The cooling samovar ticks like a metronome, roughly in time to the pulse Pavel can see beating faintly in Babel's throat.

"I promised her we would see each other again," Babel says. "Will they let her visit me, do you think?"

"I don't know."

"I wouldn't want my last words to her to be a lie."

"Of course not." *Come with me, Pasha. Please.* To which Pavel had replied: *I will see you soon.* Her last words to Elena. The memory is enough to drive Pavel from his chair—he cannot face Babel. At the bureau he sets down his tea glass, then thinks, I wish I had gotten on that train.

As if picking up on this, Babel asks, "How did your wife die?"

"She was on her way to Yalta. The train derailed."

"An accident."

"The police suspect it may have been sabotage. Something laid across the tracks." Pavel must gather himself before continuing. "From what I was told, she was thrown from the carriage when it broke apart." A pumpkin, Pavel thinks: The image has stayed with him all these long terrible months. The line of wrecked carriages split innocently open like pumpkins on the snow. It is easier to envision this than to confront the images Pavel has repeatedly driven from his mind. Elena spilled out in the field; Elena in the back of a truck, wrapped in a sheet; Elena at the mouth of the crematorium, the train beneath her trembling on its casters as the morgue attendant pushed her into the fire.

"I can't imagine people intentionally doing that," he says. "Can you?"

Babel stares bleakly down into his glass. "You've read my stories," he says finally, looking up at Pavel. "Your colleagues, when they came to arrest me at my dacha, they dragged my wife along. Do you know that? They made her knock on the door. In case I resisted. Can you imagine how she must have felt, to have to do that?" An edge of bitterness has crept into Babel's voice. "You are not the only one who has lost his wife."

Pavel turns away. A sob rises in his throat and is out before he can stifle it. For a moment he cannot overcome with a desire to sweep the samovar onto the floor, to knock his empty tea glass and the tin flying—the temptation is so strong Pavel must clutch his hands together, forcing them down.

"They shouldn't have taken your glasses," he says quietly.

I read the book to the end and got out of bed. The fog came close to the window, the world was hidden from me. My heart contracted as the foreboding of some essential truth touched me with light fingers.

The hidden world, Pavel thinks absently. This office, this prison. He wishes he had never stumbled upon it. Picking up the sheaf of unlined paper from the desk, he asks Babel, "Did you write this?" Babel holds the manuscript out, moving toward Babel until their knees touch.

"Mine," Babel says finally. His whole body seems to sag. "It's mine."

This close, Pavel can hear the writer breathing: another simple miracle, witnessed only by himself. Tolstoy, dying in wintry Astapovo, onto which for a time all of Russia, all the world, turned its gaze—that is what Pavel cannot help but compare this moment to and find it wanting. He has read accounts of how railroad engineers held back their whistles out of deference to the dying man, so as not to disturb him. The village's only telegraph office was commandeered in order to send out hourly reports of Tolstoy's temperature and pulse. Trains, packed with journalists, emissaries, priests, factory owners, plainclothes officers, peasants, slowed to a crawl several hundred meters from the platform and crept silently into the station. In the carriages a reverent hush fell as the passengers, the curious and faithful alike, crowded the windows. *I am still composing*, Tolstoy told his son Sergey between gasps for breath, even as death approached. *I am writing*.

Fourth Section's literary archives occupy a single room just below street level. Once a repository for janitorial supplies and discarded office equipment, its many rows of tall black metal shelves now bend beneath the weight of countless green folders and cardboard boxes, stacked floor to ceiling. Novels, stories, poems, plays, film scenarios—it is Fourth Section's duty to swim through this ocean of words, just as it is Pavel's duty to archive every box and bound folder that arrives on his desk, which sits, alongside Kuttyrev's desk, squarely in the shadow of the stacks. Beneath the sharp, slight sweetish scent of moldering paper another smell lingers, leftover of decades past when the Lubyanski served as national headquarters for the Rossiya Insurance Company. "Bleach," Pavel's predecessor Omry Alexeyevich Denegin, had grunted by way of greeting that January morning two and a half years ago when they first met. "They used to keep barrels of it down here, you know. For cleaning."

"I suppose," Pavel had replied, "you get used to it. The smell."

"One would suppose."

A difficult old man, Denegin. He was in his late sixties, compact, with an impressive head of white thick hair, white as salt. A full week passed before he had warmed sufficiently to Pavel's presence to divulge the workings of the place, slipshod as they were. "Simple enough," he explained, smoothing down an eyebrow. "File comes in, you check whatever's in it against the evidence manifest—the arresting officers supply that—make sure they match up." After that the job simply consisted of loading the bulging folders and boxes onto a handcart and finding room for them back in the crowded hive of stacks. As far as any filing system went, there was none. A particular author's file might take days, even weeks, to locate, Pavel soon discovered. "We're mostly left to ourselves down here," Denegin told him. Pavel noticed he had an absent way of addressing people without quite looking at them, the way a distracted priest or professor might. In fact, Pavel later learned, the old man had once taught Russian literature at universities in Leningrad and Bonn and Berlin.

"Do you ever read any of them?" Pavel asked one day. He meant the manuscripts, of course.

"A line or two sometimes. I try not to. It's a door I'd prefer stay closed. You'll find that here."

"Find what?"

Denegin, Pavel remembers, had regarded him strangely. "Doors you don't want to open," he said.

At his desk now, Pavel unwraps his lunch, only to discover he has no appetite after his meeting. The hunk of cold sausage and black bread he has brought from home turn his stomach. He is still sitting there with his lunch uneaten before him when Kuttyrev returns from the cafeteria.

“How did everything go?”

“It’s done,” Pavel says.

Kuttyrev nods noncommittally, sits. From the pocket of his pressed uniform the junior lieutenant produces a cigarette, factory-rolled, which he promptly proceeds to shred, as is his ritual. In the two months he has been here Kuttyrev has never once smoked. He is an apparent devotee of the cult of rigorous, self-congratulatory asceticism currently so popular in Soviet Russia. Every morning before dawn, whatever the weather, the young officer swims the length of a lake near his flat, then crosses Moscow by crowded bus. By the time Pavel arrives Kuttyrev is generally already at his desk, heavy cheeks blooming in vivid patches like tea roses, green tunic dark with water where his thinning black hair has dripped. At six, regular as clockwork, the young officer switches off his lamp, crosses the city once more by bus to the communal flat that he and his wife, Valentina, whose unflattering picture adorns Kuttyrev’s desk, share with another couple. He is visibly proud of his wife’s simple ugliness, proud of the equally ugly children he will one day sire, who will themselves in their turn dutifully bear their crust of daily hardship.

After the ritual of the shredded cigarette, Kuttyrev turns his attention to Babel’s file. “You’ve read him before, right? Is he any good?”

Pavel stares. “You’ve never read Babel?”

“No.” Kuttyrev thumbs through the pile of manuscripts. “What is all this, anyway?”

“Stories.” Pavel is horrified by the young officer’s ignorance, his indifference. “They’re stories.”

“For children?”

“No,” Pavel tells him, “not for children.”

Poor Denegin. He had such faith in the dusty fortress of letters he’d erected around himself, even in the storm—the public trials and secret military troikas, the spiraling purges: that mania of collective, inexhaustible bloodletting—ragged at its walls. He believed he was safe here, unnoticed, invisible. For three months they worked side by side, and yet Denegin never once spoke of the thousands of manuscripts that filled the stacks in front of their desks, or of the writers, silenced now in one way or another, that each box, each folder represented. Even the subject of their past lives as teachers was scrupulously avoided, for which Pavel was thankful. Only once did Denegin allow that buried part of his history to surface, one snowy afternoon in late March just before he disappeared. They were both putting on their coats, getting ready to leave, when a lightbulb back among the shelves had winked out in its wire cage, leaving the narrow aisle in darkness. “The resurrection of the dead, brother,” Denegin had recited, staring penetratingly into the stacks. “First in memory and in spirit.” He turned to Pavel. “Andrei Bely, you know. A personal favorite of mine. Have you read *The Silver Dove*?”

“No.”

“Hardly anyone does anymore. He was an archivist, too. And a teacher. For a time.” He smiles slightly. “Like us.”

A joke, Pavel understood, or as close to one as Denegin would allow himself: There was no one like them.

Kutyrev announces, “By the way, the incinerator’s working. You better get down there before it breaks again.” He nudges the box beside his desk with his boot. “This one can go.”

The incinerator. Until Kutyrev’s arrival, another side of the Lubyanka Pavel has avoided. Now, once every few weeks, it is Pavel’s duty to dispose of whichever files the young officer has culled from the archives. Old cases, investigations closed and forgotten years ago. *Weeding*, as Kutyrev blithely calls it. As if the archives were a garden too long ignored. Reluctantly Pavel lifts the box of manuscripts onto the cart, makes his way down to the service elevator at the end of the corridor, descends.

Outside the incinerator room, which lies at a corner of the subbasement, a line already stretches. Secretaries, junior officers, archivists: Pavel counts almost a dozen men and women, all minor functionaries like himself, over which a grim silence hangs. Only the officers, lazily imperious in their uniforms, their high black boots, exchange small talk and dark jokes among themselves, slyly eyeing the women.

There are two incinerators, both massive oil-burners. The old incinerator, which is constantly breaking down, dates from the turn of the century. The new unit, installed only a year ago, has yet to be lit—at least that is what the elderly engineer who is constantly replacing some valve or another has told Pavel. As Pavel stands waiting with his cart, the engineer emerges from the incinerator room, wiping at his pock-ravaged face with a filthy rag.

“Any day now, comrades,” he announces cheerfully.

“That’s what you always say,” complains one of the young officers. “We should toss you into that fucking stinking thing. Old liar.”

“Patience, patience.”

Soon enough—too soon—Pavel’s turn comes. The heat from the even rows of burners pours over him, the tongues of fire dance and flicker, throwing their light across the concrete floor. Immediately the smell of burning oil fills Pavel’s nose, sickening him. It is so hot standing before the open incinerator that he must practically shield his face, and still his eyes feel as if they are shrinking in their sockets. Inside the box he discovers half a dozen folders—the manifest has been removed by Kutyrev, forwarded upstairs to Fourth Section’s main office for permanent keeping. As Pavel hurriedly throws one of the folders into the incinerator the pink ribbon binding it flies loose, spilling out paper, page after page—poems, Pavel sees, hundreds of them. On one of the pages, a sheet of onionskin through which the fire shows, sketches of tiny beautifully rendered birds crowd the margins. Pavel imagines the birds must have perched on a ledge outside the poet’s window. The sheets curl, the fire races through them. In a moment everything—poet, poems, birds—is gone. Afterward, on the

rattling service elevator going up, Pavel's hands shake.

"You smell like kerosene," Kutyrev tells him.

Pavel pushes the cart against the wall, sits.

"May I give you a little friendly advice?"

That is all Pavel needs: friendly advice from Kutyrev. "Why not?" he says.

"You should get out more, exercise. Work up a sweat every now and then. It would do you good. I noticed you didn't even eat your lunch."

"I'm not hungry."

"That's what I mean. A fellow as thin as yourself needs to eat. If you moved around a little more, it might help your appetite."

"Tell me, Comrade Lieutenant," says Pavel after a time, "I was just wondering. Now that we've talked about me. Do you read much?"

"You mean books?"

"Yes."

Kutyrev frowns. "A little. I like Gorky. To be honest, I'm not really much of a reader."

Is that why they sent you down here? Pavel wonders. Is it because none of this touches you? His gaze falls on Babel's folder, the found story, which the junior officer has yet to return to its box. Pavel imagines a morning when he will arrive at his desk and find Babel's entire file—the manuscripts, the notebooks—waiting for him.

Pavel says, "You asked me earlier what kind of writer I thought Babel was. If I thought he was a good writer."

"Is he?"

"He is a great writer."

Kutyrev is unimpressed. "If that's true, then why haven't I heard more about him? They would have made us read his books in school, like they made us read Gorky. You've seen Babel's file. There's enough in there to give a fellow a hernia. All those stories. Why aren't they in some bookstore somewhere, some library, if he's so great?"

"He stopped publishing for the most part. Some years ago." Master of the genre of silence—isn't that what Babel once half-jokingly called himself?

"Obviously he kept writing."

“Yes,” Pavel says. “Obviously.”

“For who?”

Whom, Pavel corrects mechanically. “For himself, I imagine.”

Pavel has never forgotten the fierce look in Denegin’s eyes as he gazed into the darkened stacks the winter day—it seems a lifetime ago now. *The resurrection of the dead, brother. First in memory and then in spirit.* The words—Bely’s words—had all the austere force of an incantation, a prayer. Afterward, emerging together onto busy Dzerzhinsky Square, a dry, stinging snow pelted their faces. Denegin had turned away from Pavel without so much as a nod, the wind tearing at his collar, and slipped into the stream of pedestrians hurrying along the sidewalk. Then he was gone.

3

The metro, Pavel notices, is less crowded this evening. So is the ancient bus onto which he transfers outside Gorky Station. The rain has ended, the clouds have cleared away. The lights of Gorky Park glitter lushly on the river: its Ferris wheel, the parachute drop. A roller coaster climbs, then plummets silently into the trees. Outside the new cemetery at Donskoy Monastery, where Pavel is the only passenger to exit, the flower vendors are packing up for the night. From there it is only a block's walk to his building.

The manager stops him as he passes her office. "This came for you," Natalya says, handing Pavel a telegram. He tears open the stiff gray envelope—it is from the morgue clerk in charge of Elena's case. *Inquiries still proceeding. Hopeful. Yours. Simonov.*

Hopeful—how Pavel has grown to loathe the word. *Wait*, Simonov might as well be telling Pavel who has done nothing but wait all these long months.

"You look like you could use a drink," offers Natalya. She is a tall woman, slender, handsome in her own way, despite the long, pale scar that curves from one corner of her mouth almost to her ear. An iridescent blue scarf holds her dark hair back. The hanging red-shaded lamp illuminating the tidy little office casts a fringe of light across her face. Since Elena's death she and Pavel have shared the occasional meal together, though their acquaintanceship has never gone beyond that.

"I have to meet a friend for dinner. Another time perhaps."

From the nearby stairwell a woman's voice carries, shaky with age, gently remonstrative. "Hurry, darling, hurry." Marfa Borisova and her pug, headed down for their evening walk. Natalya's left hand, Pavel notices now, is bandaged.

"What happened to your hand?"

"I was clearing a space in the basement and scraped my knuckles on the wall. It's nothing."

Upstairs, in his flat, Pavel stands by the window, watching Marfa Borisova and her dog in the little path-lined park below. Thrushes are whirling over Donskoy, darting in and out of the pink bell tower. The last of the vendors loads a bucket of flowers into a waiting truck, departs. In the past, on her way home from hospital, Elena would sometimes salvage a handful of flowers from the litter of discarded blooms now brightening the cracked pavement, trimming away the broken stalks.

He tosses the telegram onto the table. A simple mistake: That is the story Simonov has told him a these months. Not about the accident itself but what followed, when Elena was, in the official parlance, “misallocated.” As far as Pavel has been able to decipher, a register identifying the cremated remains of the six passengers killed along with his wife was quickly discovered to be incorrect—something about the numbers assigned to each container of ashes not matching the register, or vice versa. In short, months of delays, paperwork filed and refiled, and exactly a dozen telegrams like the one, all of which have so far amounted to one inescapable fact: Elena’s remains, along with her personal effects, have yet to be returned to Pavel. Instead in her place he has been given empty assurances. Until the issue is resolved, he must go on waiting.

In the bathroom, stripped to the waist, Pavel scrubs the stink of furnace oil from his hands, the water nearly hot enough to scald. Afterward, examining his reflection in the mirror, he is struck by his appearance: his bony shoulders, the deep lines around his mouth, the receding hair at his temples. The year—he is only thirty-two but feels much older—has left its mark on him. Elena’s blue toothbrush still stands in the drinking cup on the sink, her dark blond hair still clings cloudlike to the bristles of her hairbrush. Nor has Pavel thrown away the bottles of perfume on the bedroom dresser, the dresses hanging in the wardrobe. At times, breathing in the ghost of their collective scent, which week by week grows fainter, Pavel almost expects to hear the soft click of footsteps in the doorway behind him, feel Elena’s hand touch his neck. “You came back,” he will whisper. *I never left you.* He has not given her up. If his wife were to walk into their flat tomorrow, she could go on with her life, and he with his.

The shops along Shabolovka have opened their doors, as if to welcome in the warm evening. Couples stroll along, hand in hand, children call to one another in a courtyard playground, shrieking with laughter. The strains of music—a radio—carry in the open window of the tram, washing over Pavel. *Tell the soldier of Katyusha’s love. Let him dream about their days together.* Outside the cinema, a crowd waits. As the tram shudders along, Pavel lets his mind drift.

The tram stops, Pavel steps down. A stray dog drinking from a puddle lifts its head to regard him steadily, then trots off, vanishing into an alley. Half the buildings along the street, holdovers from the last century, are boarded over, surrounded by high metal fences and scaffolding. Slated for demolition. A paradigm, as Pavel’s old friend Semyon has sourly put it, of Soviet planning and execution. The broken windows, the crumbling facades and empty, grass-filled courtyards: For over a year now they have remained untouched. The park near Semyon’s flat, once full of children and pensioners, has become a haven for drunks. Still, even as he passes along the park’s pitted brick fence, Pavel feels his mood lifted somewhat at the sight of Semyon’s building. Tonight especially he is eager for his friend’s company.

“We were beginning to think you’d been kidnapped,” jokes Semyon.

“Why would you think that?”

“Vera, you know. She’s convinced the neighborhood has been taken over by bandits.” The older

man raps the floor once with his cane, then calls to his wife, "I told you he was all right." He dressed, as always, neatly if decidedly out of fashion, in a coat and vest, a striped bow tie.

Vera appears. "Hello, Pasha," she says coolly. A pair of reading glasses dangles from a chain around her plump neck. In the dim foyer her soft white curls glow like a cap. Beyond the foyer the ancient upright piano on which she has for over a decade now instructed her students stands open, as if waiting for the next lesson. Once, years ago, she would have embraced him. Now she merely offers Pavel her hand.

"Good evening, Vera," replies Pavel politely. In her eyes he became something of a pariah after the pathetic business that marked his leaving Kirov Academy. A cautious woman, always—after her father, Semyon has said, a cavalry officer under the white banner of the tsar, shot from his horse by a mob of starving, mutinous Russian soldiers in 1916. Still, she had always been warm with him, had always treated Pavel as if he were not simply Semyon's friend but a blood relation, a nephew, and Pavel had been deeply hurt when all that changed. Sadly, the years since his resignation have only pushed them further apart. "How are you?"

"Well enough." To Semyon she says, "Promise me you won't stay out too late."

"You worry too much, darling," Semyon says. He is nearly a head taller than Vera, thin, stooped shouldered. As he leans to kiss her, his trimmed beard with its touches of gray brushes her hair.

"Poor woman," he tells Pavel minutes later as they slowly descend the stairs. "She had the worst nightmare last night. Something about thieves making off with my leg."

"Your leg."

Semyon widens his eyes dramatically. "Don't you read the papers? There's a booming black market in Moscow these days for prosthetics. Mine's practically a collector's item." With every step the leg which starts just below Semyon's left knee and is held in place with a welter of leather straps and buckles, creaks softly. When they reach the street he pauses briefly to catch his breath, gazing across at the ruined park. Beyond the gates the wide path is littered with fallen tree limbs, bottles.

From Semyon's building it is only a fifteen-minute walk to the restaurant, past the park and along a line of shops, all but a handful of which have been permanently shuttered. They turn down an alley where the sweetish smell of dung from a high-fenced droshky stable hangs heavily. If it is not out with its master, the old horse will sometimes press its nose to the gapped fence boards to sniff them as they pass, breathing warmly onto their hands.

The restaurant lies one street over, off a little courtyard shaded by pear trees. Its owner, Dashenkov, grasps their hands fiercely when they enter, as if they are rescuers come to save him. "My friends," he sighs, handing their hats off to his daughter-in-law. His smile appears loosely pasted on this evening as though the slightest wind could peel it away. He leads them through a sea of empty tables, each with its own flickering candle.

"How's business?" asks Semyon.

“Always joking,” Dashenko says hoarsely. With his battered, heavy face and round shaved head, he resembles an aging boxer more than a restaurateur. He pulls a folded letter from his pocket and waves it at them. “From Central Development, in answer to the petition I sponsored. Which, by the way, Semyon Borisovich, you promised me you would sign.”

“And I did.”

“You certainly did not.” He looks round at Pavel. “And here he makes jokes at my expense.”

“You shouldn’t let him get to you,” says Pavel.

Semyon asks, “So what does Central Development have to say for itself?”

“The same thing Central Development always says. They want me out of the building. They want me to stop bothering them with paperwork. My guess is they’re hoping I’ll just shut up and go away.”

Dashenko’s daughter-in-law approaches with glasses, wine, bread.

Dashenko adds glumly, “At this rate I’ll be out of business soon. Bankrupt. Sleeping in that awful park like some bum. Which is fine now, but what happens this winter? If the cold doesn’t kill me, some hooligan will slit my throat for my coat and shoes and dump me in the river.”

“God help the thief who tries,” Semyon murmurs.

“Go help Vanya in the kitchen,” says Dashenko’s daughter-in-law, patting Dashenko on the arm.

Semyon smiles at her. “Ah, wine,” he sighs. He has become mildly infatuated with her, Pavel knows, this pale, pretty girl who is young enough to be one of his students, whom he has never seen except by candlelight. Later Semyon will leave an exorbitant tip, money he can little afford on the meager salary Moscow University pays him. *Offering up*, Semyon calls it, as if she were some religious icon into which he might pour his secret hopes.

After Dashenko slips away, Semyon asks her, “How are your studies going? Please tell me you’ve given up on this engineering nonsense.”

“The country needs good engineers. Metroproject has been to our department twice this semester recruiting. They’re constantly expanding the metro lines.”

“Shame on them.”

She walks their orders to the kitchen. “Poor kitten,” Semyon says. “When I think about her working her youth away in some cold damp tunnel, it breaks my heart. A generation of cave dwellers hammering away in darkness.”

A car passes slowly on the street. At her tiny table just off the kitchen, Dashenko’s daughter-in-law leans over her open textbook, taking notes.

Semyon asks Pavel, “By the way, I’ve been wanting to ask. How’s your mother?”

“She’s doing fine.”

“‘Fine’ meaning ‘good,’ or ‘fine’ as in you don’t particularly feel like talking about her?”

“As in she seemed all right, last time we spoke.”

“When was that?”

“About a week ago. I was thinking of taking the train out to visit her this weekend.”

“She’ll like that.” Semyon smiles faintly. He spreads his napkin in his lap. “I worry about her, you know, Pasha. Being alone.”

“She’s not alone, Semyon. She has Victor and Olga to look after her. And their children. Alone is the last thing my mother is.”

“I still worry.”

Pavel knows what is behind Semyon’s concern. In March, on a morning when the temperature dipped well below freezing, his mother had left her flat wearing a light housedress and slippers, only to return two hours later with no memory of where she’d been. It was his mother’s flatmate who phoned Pavel afterward. “She’s safe now, that’s the important thing,” Olga said. By the time Pavel arrived, a doctor had already examined his mother and determined she’d had a blackout of some sort. Even now Pavel finds it difficult to believe—though the doctor, when Pavel pulled him aside, appeared sanguine enough. “Could have been low blood sugar, anxiety. If your mother were older, or a drinker, I might be concerned.” He shrugged. “Look, if it happens again, then we’ll worry, all right?” And in fact Pavel’s mother had seemed perfectly normal, perfectly herself.

“I worry about you too, Pasha,” Semyon says. “Frankly I can’t understand why you don’t have her come live with you.”

“I’ve told you. She likes it where she is. You know how stubborn my mother can be.”

Semyon lifts his hands, letting the issue go. “It’s funny. Just the other day I was remembering the dreadful little room off Roschin you and your mother shared with all those families. God, what a hell that was. How old were you? Eleven, twelve?”

“Thirteen,” Pavel says.

Another life, he thinks. Sheets, hung from hooks in the flaking ceiling, had divided the drafty room into three sections, each of which was claimed by a family. At night the noise—snores, coughs, the muffled groans of lovemaking—went on ceaselessly. Beside the straw mattress on which Pavel and his mother slept, a glittering white frost coated the wall on the coldest mornings. Had it not been for Semyon, who knows what would have happened to them? He remembers the afternoon Semyon first found them there, the dragging footsteps on the stairs, the cautious joy in his mother’s face as she opened the door: All autumn, as the war collapsed into stalemate, she had waited for Pavel’s father to

return from Poland, into which he had vanished without a trace, as if the earth had swallowed him. Since August no letters had arrived, no word of his whereabouts had reached them. Only instead of Pavel's father there stood Semyon, sickly, haggard in his tattered service uniform and salt-whitened boots, leaning on a cane. "I was friends with your husband, Vasily," he said. Under one arm he carried a dented metal cartridge box, which he awkwardly presented to Pavel's mother. "I thought you would want his things." "Whose things?" asked Pavel's mother. The months of waiting, the hardship of constant worry and hunger, had whittled her down to a gaunt, hollow-eyed scarecrow. "Where is Vasily?" Of course the look on Semyon's face was answer enough—she was merely delaying the blow, Pavel knew. When it came, it was like a string had been cut in her—she collapsed into Semyon's arms, nearly dragging him down: with her grief, her terror. When the metal box tumbled to the floor, Pavel stooped to pick it up. That same day Semyon returned with a sack of food—bread, potted meat, a little butter—which the three of them shared in silence. Months later, after he found work tutoring, Semyon moved them into his room—a larger room, another hanging sheet, with a war stove and a writing desk and an entire wall lined with books. "You're welcome to read whatever you like," he told Pavel. "That's what they're for, you know." When Pavel asked what he should read first, Semyon plucked a volume down. "Here. Gogol's a good enough beginning, I think." It was not long after this that Pavel's mother slipped quietly from their bed one night and crossed to Semyon's half of the room, only to return hours later, before dawn.

Their dinners arrive, small boiled red potatoes in weak butter, thin steaks curled at their corners like leaves. Poor fare, Pavel would admit. Even so, it is better than nothing. At any rate it is not the food that comes for, but Semyon's company.

Dashenko returns from the kitchen.

"How are your meals, gentlemen? May I bring you anything?"

"A bottle of vodka," says Pavel.

Dashenko's eyes brighten. "Ah." He taps two fingers against his throat slyly. "I have just the thing." He hurries off to the kitchen.

"Bad day?" asks Semyon.

"Another telegram from Simonov."

He does not mention Babel. That part of his life—his work at the Lubyanka—they have more or less tacitly agreed never to discuss. It is a testament to Semyon's loyalty that he has not shunned Pavel completely.

Semyon asks, "And?"

"And nothing. They're still trying to sort things out. Waiting for someone up the chain to move."

Semyon sighs, brushing away the bread crumbs beside his plate. "I'm sorry, Pasha. I mean, good Lord. After all this time, you'd think by now they would have—" He falls silent.

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