

Summertime

The warm and windless evening in the capital prompted much opening of doors and the setting up of tables in the courtyard. The brown awning which had been shading out the sun that afternoon was hauled away while a trellis was erected to give guests privacy from the boulevard. The famous Griboyedov jazz band had set up in a corner, and a square of flooring been laid before it for dancing. It was in this space that the strangest of human sights had suddenly materialised, having passed through an opening in the trellis. Stopping sturgeon-laid forks in mid-air, the intruder in underpants, knocking over a candelabra and shouting at the diners, had lurched from one table to another; at each table the lace-draped lamps lit a desperate expression and mouth wide like a shark. Now the big waiter who a moment earlier had been gliding mesmerisingly forth with a silver platter of *côtelettes de volaille* held the apparition's arms until he shrieked in pain, while another tied him to a brass rail with dishcloths. Merrill smoked. Apparently—after darting this way and that as if seeking someone in particular, though he hadn't bothered her—the stranger thought it vital to convince the guests God was great, or at least have people say he was great. Why, why did God have to hear he was great all the time? That alone proved God was no woman. Having to be told such a thing was definitely a man's idea, the desperate need of a man.

A few tables away, as if to point out to her that all was under control, a man she thought could have been the producer Maskayev nodded at her. He sat, like her, at a table with an empty chair. Yes yes, *God*, we've all heard now. Once again the stacks of china bowls waiting to be filled with *potage printanière* vibrated to the woody, brassy enthusiasm of the band playing its 'medley of the latest and greatest'. The possibly-producer-Maskayev now smiled at her, and after glancing uninterestedly away in the direction of the

kitchens she laid down her cigarette and went back to her soup. Her eye caught a candle being lit at his table; a woman had arrived. Wasn't she the *parfumière* Adelfina Buzdyak? Where was that Artmonsky man? Damn him. They could have been dancing by now, ducking under the waiters carrying their mugs of beer; or off where the air was fresher, like the little café by the river they'd enjoyed the month before.

Checking Alexey was not at that moment coming through the doorway, she pushed the soup bowl aside and took out the photo of him on a horse with a rifle slung over his shoulder. He looked faintly ridiculous. One day, *one* day, she would have *herself* photographed on an equally handsome horse with a rifle tucked under her arm. She would look anything but ridiculous: an Englishwoman knew how to look; confident but relaxed. She would have the photograph enlarged and hung somewhere very public, it would shock men and the sight of it would start turning the world upside down. Where was that Artmonsky? Alexey had angled to meet at a particularly late hour, only to fail to show up on time.

With a yank the big waiter, deliberately acting roughly—it looked like he had done this before—applied a gag to the troublemaker, whose head and face reminded Merrill of some politician, or was it an opera star, or from the theatre, she couldn't think who. Was there a politician or an opera star so concerned to shout about God, Allah, or any of that? Real life was bizarre. She watched the smoke from her cigarette thin into nothing before reaching, not reaching, never reaching a chandelier. How did they get a chandelier up there? Where was he? Whatever had made her get mixed up with Alexey Artmonsky? If it wasn't for him she wouldn't be here, but where would she be?

She drew on her cigarette, quietly contemplating the stranger. The man—boy—man—would glare in one direction, then suddenly face another. What made one person a statesman and another a lunatic? He's a rebel, she decided, a rebel from the south. Another bizarre act: a member of the kitchen

staff who had come out with a cleaver thought to wipe blood from the man's face. *Was* that the *parfumière*, with such ringlets? Before normality returned entirely, a woman in green satin stepped up to the microphone to sing an American song. Merrill fancied she'd heard it before, perhaps on the radio. *And the livin' is easy*. In summer it was easy, said the song, and fish jumped, and cotton grew.

A waiter came, raised his eyebrows. Merrill ordered the *filets de perche au naturel* and indicated to him not to remove her bowl. After another glance at the doorway she found herself drawn again towards the man, the rebel, who she detected was now struggling to establish a semblance of dignity. His dirty blond hair went dark at the roots. Under it all he was, or could be, rather attractive. But it was pointless to look at him, for whatever would come of it? Whoever you are, she thought, you're gagged now. Gagged, not even he could say God was great. And by the way—so she imagined herself relaying her thoughts to Artmonsky, if he ever showed up—if no one was saying this, did this make God less great? And would less praise make him angry, fire up that notorious *wrath*? Would he make the roof cave in, and the ceiling, so the card players from the room above crashed dustily down among them with all their hats and coats and banknotes and portraits and photographs from the walls? And I ask you Alexey, is God everywhere, listening to everyone? If so—the world population had apparently recently passed two billion, she'd read—he would need to have the most astonishingly complicated, sophisticated mind.

In another sudden development, orange and blue torchlight swept over the courtyard, dipping across the women in silks, the glistening foreheads, the young men who were down to their shirts in the sweltering air, to go flashing off the crystalline glass and the panes and brass behind the little bar. The rebel, the student—not a politician or an artiste, so surely a student?—had his wrists handcuffed together and was tossed a blanket, which fell to the flagstone floor. The man with the cleaver picked it up and drew it around his

shoulders. The gag stayed on. Men at their tables, some gingerly and some less so, stood to watch him being dragged—roughly—away. The bartender went hurriedly around persuading his custom to stay, saying repeatedly that such an incident had not happened before and could not happen again.

—We made a mistake coming here, a tubby, very round man with a moustache argued. It's not safe for the ladies.

—I assure you, said the bartender more loudly. The restaurant happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time—once, only once. That's all there is to it. You are not in the wrong restaurant.

Artmonsky appeared, wearing a cloak. Merrill stubbed out her cigarette.

—You're late.

—I have something to say.

—About what? Merrill said.

—But first, what was happening there, why is that man in the blanket? Isn't that Usanov? It certainly looks like him.

—He came in screaming at people. Something about God, and the devil—his Majesty is back, I think he was saying, he'd been seen strolling in the park. The bartender ... I couldn't see everything. He—Usanov, is it?—tried to stab him with a fork.

—Well, that's Moscow.

—But who cares? You're late. What are you looking at?

—Your blue sequins. What a blue. Dark. Like from under the sea.

—Maybe.

—Ostentation is asking for trouble. It'll be the death of you. If you've the wealth you'll disappear, all of you, one by one. Be made to disappear. Me too perhaps—

He took hold of the menu and tapped on it.

—so best you go somewhere for a while. Perelygino for instance. Spread your wings and go. Your friend Tamara Polumesyatz has gone already. She's at Klyazma I hear. No one here can be trusted these days. Not—

—The things you people in government know. But to get more to the point, aren't you going to tell me you love me?

He hadn't even reached out for her hand. Instead he flicked a finger at the menu.

—before long all the parrots will have flown. You'll remember my words then.

—That's not the right answer, Alexey. And I never remember your words. I've forgotten them already. I've run out of cigarettes.

—You know the metro bans that now.

—I don't care, I'll do it anyway. I have to have fire. I go where the fire is. Or what's the point? Have you got one?

—No. This city isn't the place to be. If I were you I would think about leaving for the country already.

—Leave for the country! What I could afford wouldn't match the size of this table. Certainly not of your office. Not that I've ever seen it, or ever will. You people in politics and your secrecies.

—That's right I'm in politics. Which is why I never talk about it.

—And why you're so far away, in the distance, behind clouds. You know what I call you, what I think of you as?—that Artmonsky man. And as for a retreat to the country, never. A life in the shires. My father called it that—I remembering him saying. I was a little girl with him, walking about London, listening to bells pealing. A life in the shires, absurd. But there was something you wanted to say?

—Me? Was there? I've forgotten.

—Look, that man in the underpants left something behind. That scrap of paper.

—What man in underpants?

—Him, under the blanket. He wore nothing but underpants. As far as I could see.

—Why?

—How do I know why? It's a warm night. I don't know. Allah decreed it.

—Allah? Here. Look. English. Your province, do you say that? Here.

—Don't toss it. You're with a lady so behave, I don't care how important you are. Not in my soup with it.

—You could have waited.

—I did wait. I had to wait. See: the ice is even floating in the wine-bucket. And now the *côtelettes de volaille* has all gone, the perch—serves you right.

—What does it say?

—It says, wait a minute. 'What will the beautiful young architect do if Josef asks her to dance?'

—Well, that's English for you.

—Meaning what?

—It's a code. Everything English is in code—

Artmonsky unfolded his serviette.

—why is there so much English around here? French, then English.

—Better hand it to the authorities.

—I'll do nothing of the sort.

—Hurry. They're all still outside.

—Could you sit Merrill, please?

—But look.

—I see, so they are. It looks they're trying to push him in and he won't let them.

—It means *something*. It might shed light on what he was doing. Josef is *someone*. I know a beautiful young architect, Semeikin-Hall. It might even be her.

—No. It doesn't mean a thing. And that's enough. Have you ordered a main course? Well you would, wouldn't you. Let's not get involved with any of this Merrill, there's no time. I'm hungry. And I've got us the Stravinsky again. The top room.

—What if I don't come with you?

—And get waylaid on your way home, run into a gang? Have to explain yourself to the police, the authorities? I don't want that.

—What's got into you, where is that brave man I thought I'd encountered? That fine mind? 'That's Moscow' you were saying just a minute ago. Don't collapse on me. And aren't you going to take off your cloak? I will eat here, come what may. Take me or leave me. As I am. And don't have the chops, they're said to be poisoned.

—You do dance particularly well.

—Because I enjoy it Alexey. I could go round half the night long.

—When he came in, did he come near your table? Might he have been looking for me? Was he armed?

—I told you, he used a fork. Look at *him*, dancing with the woman in the orange silk. His face is all lilac from eczema.

—That's Vitya Kuftik from Rostov. He's a surgeon.

—Well at least he's not an assassin. You see everywhere isn't populated by assassins like you think.

—He could be. He could have set of knives in a pocket. In a little wallet. The way other people carry pens, or cigarettes.

—You do like to make dramas out of things, don't you?

—As if you didn't. Besides, there was a real drama here apparently. The devil, God, Allah—nothing but trouble. How I like how you swing around when we come to the corners.

—I like to see the horses.

—What horses?

—On the ceiling. See? Lilac horses.

—You can't see they're lilac.

—I've seen them in the daylight, they are.

—I don't know why they put them there.

—They're fun. That's what you need, Alexey, fun. Less of your intrigues and murders and assassins, as if that was all there was.

—What time is it?

—You know what I think? It's not the God-fearers that are the problem. It's the men and the women. Why does no one photograph *me* on a horse? I'm much better looking.

—So why bother with us, if we're the problem.

—I wish I knew. Why have you stopped?

—I can't help feeling something is going to happen.

—It is happening, we're dancing. Come on, Alexey. Again, once more around the room.

—Let's stay in the middle. We'll stay in the middle.

—Don't spoil things Alexey. Keep dancing. There's the Stravinsky. Don't say you've forgotten.

—I've a terrible premonition.

Light from an unidentifiable source picked up a swathe of sequins where her dress lay casually, carelessly across a chair. Merrill had insisted the candles were doused and the window left open. Artmonsky didn't like the fan turning, it was too noisy: someone at the door wouldn't be heard. Who? Merrill had said. Never mind, he'd replied irritably. As a result the air stood still. It soon smelled as much of asphalt as musk. Lighting a last cigarette, she tried assuring him—the Artmonsky man, as he became again once they were out on the boulevard—and who after signing in at the Stravinsky immediately walked them around the corner to the Spaso—that no one would rope their way down to the second floor or attempt a climb up a ladder.

—What's that in the corridor? he said raising his head in the dark.

—It's the Spaso, they—

—Sh!

—The sea lions.

—Can you believe there are sea lions galloping around? The trainer was drunk, useless. He'll wake up to find he's out of a job, that's if he's lucky. What an idea, decadent idea, to have zoo animals carry champagne on a tray.

—It's the modern way Alexey. Enterprising.

—Oh yes, the Spaso. Enterprising—

The cigarette smoke hung.

—like attacking someone with a fork, I suppose. Can you kill a man with a fork? You probably can.

—Sleep. Follow my instructions. Pretend nothing happened tonight the way it had. Pretend you had arrived early. You should have arrived early, you could have had the sturgeon. That producer man had the last of it. They laid it between two lobster tails.

—Tails? Or claws?

—Tails of course.

—You're right. It's been a hard day. Everything's shifting, I don't like it.

—Sleep. Nothing's going to harm you. To think I always thought you were brave. I'm the bold one. Aren't you going to wish me sweet dreams?

—Sweet dreams.

—I wanted you there, on time for once. That producer man was giving me looks. I wanted you there earlier so I'll dream you are, there—

—Sorceress.

—looking delighted at the sturgeon in a silver-plated pan. Fish not jumping, like in the American tune.

—That tune. It stays in your head.

—Doesn't it.

Merrill checked her cigarette was properly extinguished. She reached down to reassure herself there was a towel within reach by the bed. Already snorts started and stopped beside her: constant vigilance, wearing him out. Where would life go as a result of this Artmonsky man? Would it change?

Would it go anywhere different? Changes were difficult. Wasn't it unwise to meet an important man so casually? It might lead to the wrong kind of change. To *change*, did she not have to do something more drastic? What? To stand up and say God was great? That would have stopped the young man more surely than any strong arms and dishcloths. What if she had stroked his cheek and taken him out on her arm? If Alexey had arrived at that very moment, as she was escorting him outside? If he had after all produced a knife and lunged at Alexey in the doorway. Then she would surely have soon been back in the shires—a backward step? Was a life in the shires that unthinkable? Would it not be whatever you made of it? And why did she care so little for Artmonsky? Was it so little?

She lay naked in the warm air. What would it look like if the singer in green danced with the woman in orange? Slowly, singing as they went. The waiters with each other. A picture of the big waiter with the smallest amused her. With sea lions on the dance floor. Heads bobbing, they came from under the tables onto the floor, which upon lingering inspection was now green and like a lawn. Chicory, the waiter explained. Looking up, she saw all the tables were covered with Finnish tulips. She saw the cleaver fly and pin a perch to the wall. The thud gave her a mysterious thrill. As if no other sound would ever follow it, would ever be necessary. Pinned to the wall, the perch thrashed.

Producing a cigar from his waistcoat, the Maskayev man was making an obscene O-shape with his lips. Still the young man burst in. I will kill Artmonsky, where is he? he ranted in wavering English, his mouth open wide to make the words deep and resounding. I'm a rebel, he said, but you know what, I can't do this voice for ever. Everyone laughed. Droppings from an aviary which had been installed above, between the chandeliers, started spattering about the tulips—action had to be taken. Hold this ladder a moment, said a waiter to the rebel. Just do this first, he urged; once we have untied the netting you can go back to your killing, though I have to tell you I'm

almost certain the person you're looking for isn't here, you'd do better to try down the road, try the Spaso—though the food here is better, and the band is the best, and what a show we put on, look at that! He pointed to the baby bear.

Merrill turned to the Maskayev man, who was now at her table: the bear had arrived from the zoo with the birds, he explained. Tchermoeff, that's his name. Tchermoeff? Merrill said. They watched it gambol about the courtyard, whether out of joy or distress was impossible to tell. It halted to drink from a bucket of champagne. The young man caught her eye as he held the ladder. Shouldn't it be chained?—Merrill said to Maskayev—it might just walk out of here. The birds were abruptly released as a pole snagged and brought down the netting. They careered everywhere in what for them was pandemonium. Most of the diners kept eating. Merrill blew out her candles, concerned the flames might cause wings to get singed. It was just possible to identify the birds as zebra finches, and pheasants. Fluttering one minute, the next they were suddenly finding the doorway and vanishing. The band re-started. The soup bowls vibrated. The perch flapped, and was still. See? said Armonsky: I'm dead now. Tchermoeff the bear lay on his back, inebriated. Merrill followed the melody as he snorted and snored.