

David Bezmozgis

The Free World

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David Bezmozgis was born in Riga, Latvia, in 1973 and emigrated with his parents to Toronto in 1980. His first book *Natasha and Other Stories* (2004) was described by the *Observer* as 'quietly astonishing fables of unmistakable brilliance' and was widely compared to the work of Babel, Roth and Saul Bellow.

Natasha was shortlisted for the *Guardian First Book Award* and the *LA Times First Book Award*, was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, won the Commonwealth Writers' Regional Prize for First Book and the Toronto Book Award, and has since been translated into over a dozen languages.

His stories have also appeared in numerous publications, including the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Zoetrope All-Story* and *The Walrus*, been anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories 2005 & 2006* and broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and its equivalents NPR in the US and CBC in Canada.

David has been a Guggenheim Fellow and a MacDowell Fellow and is currently a Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Fellow at the New York Public Library.

He is also a film-maker, whose narrative and documentary films have played at festivals internationally, from Sundance to Shanghai. His first feature film, *Victoria Day*, premiered in competition at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival and was later nominated for a Genie Award for Best Screenplay in Canada.

In 2010, he was selected as one of the *New Yorker's* '20 Under 40', celebrating the twenty most promising fiction writers under the age of forty.

The Free World

1

Alec Krasnansky stood on the platform of Vienna's Western Terminal while, all around him, the representatives of Soviet Jewry—from Tallinn to Tashkent—roiled, snarled, and elbowed to deposit their belongings onto the waiting train. His own family roiled among them: his parents, his wife, his nephews, his sister-in-law, and particularly his brother, Karl, worked furiously with the suitcases and duffel bags. He should have been helping them but his attention was drawn farther down the platform by two pretty tourists. One was a brunette, Mediterranean and voluptuous; the other petite and blond—in combination they attested, as though by design, to the scope of the world's beauty and plenitude. Both girls were barefoot, their leather sandals arranged in tidy pairs beside them. Alec traced a line of smooth tanned skin from heel to calf to thigh, interrupted ultimately by the frayed edge of cut-off blue jeans. Above the cut-off jeans the girls wore thin sleeveless shirts. They sat on their backpacks and leaned casually against each other. Their faces were lovely and vacant. They seemed beyond train schedules and obligations. People sped past them, the Russian circus performed its ludicrous act several meters away, but they paid no attention. Alec assumed they were Americans. He guessed they were in their early twenties. He was twenty-six, but he could pass for younger. In school and university he had run track and had retained a trim runner's build. He also had his father's dark, wavy hair. From the time Alec was a boy he had been aware of his effect on women. In his presence, they often became exaggerated versions of themselves. The maternal ones became more maternal, the crude ones became cruder, the shy ones shyer. They wanted only that he not make them feel foolish and were grateful when he did not. In his experience, much of what was good in life could be traced to a woman's gratitude.

Looking at the two girls Alec had to resist the urge to approach them. It could be the simplest thing in the world. He had studied English. He needed only to walk over and say, Hello, are you Americans? And they needed only to respond, Yes.

—Where in America do you live?

—Chicago. And where are you from?

—Riga, Latvia. The Soviet Union.

—How interesting. We have never met anyone from the Soviet Union before. Where are you traveling to?

—Chicago.

—No. Is this true?

—Yes, it is true. I am traveling to Chicago.

—Will this be your first time in Chicago?

—Yes, it will be my first time in Chicago. Can you tell me about Chicago?

—Yes, we can tell you about it. Please sit down with us. We will tell you everything about Chicago.

—Thank you.

—You are welcome.

Alec felt Karl's hand on his shoulder.

—What's the matter with you?

—Nothing.

—We have seven minutes to finish loading everything onto the train.

He followed Karl back to where their parents were arranging the suitcases so that Karl and Alec could continue forcing them through the window of the compartment. Near them, an elderly couple sat dejectedly on their suitcases. Others worked around them, avoiding not only helping them but also looking them in the face. Old people sitting piteously on luggage had become a familiar spectacle.

—I see them, Karl said. Move your ass and if there's time we'll help them.

Alec bent into the remaining pile of suitcases and duffel bags on the platform. Each seemed heavier than the last. For six adults they had twenty articles of luggage crammed with goods destined for the bazaars of Rome: linens, toys, samovars, ballet shoes, nesting dolls, leather Latvian handicrafts, nylon stockings, lacquer boxes, pocketknives, camera equipment, picture books, and opera glasses. One particularly heavy suitcase held Alec's big commercial investment, dozens of symphonic records.

First hefting the bags onto his shoulder and then sliding them along the outside of the train, Alec managed to pass them up to the compartment and into the arms of Polina and Rosa, his and Karl's wives.

Karl turned to the old couple.

—All right, citizens, can we offer you a hand?

The old man rose from his suitcase, stood erect, and answered with the formality of a party official or university lecturer.

—We would be very obliged to you. If you will allow, my wife has with her a box of chocolates.

—It's not necessary.

—Not even a little something for the children?

Karl's two boys had poked their heads out the compartment window.

—Do as you like. But they're like animals at the zoo. I suggest you mind your fingers.

Alec and Karl shouldered the old people's suitcases and passed them into their compartment. Alec noticed the way the old man looked at Polina.

—This is your wife?

—Yes.

—A true Russian beauty.

—I appreciate the compliment. Though she might disagree. Emigration is not exactly cosmetic.

—Absolutely false. The Russian woman blossoms under toil. The Russian man can drink and fight, but our former country was built on the back of the Russian woman.

—What country wasn't?

—That may be so, but I don't know about other countries. I was a Soviet citizen. To my generation this meant something. We sacrificed our youth, our most productive years, our faith. And in the end they robbed us of everything. This is why it does my heart proud to see your wife. Every Jew should have taken with him a Russian bride. If only to deny them to the alcoholics. I'm an old man, but if the law had allowed, I would have taken ten wives myself. Real Russian women. Because that country couldn't survive five minutes without them.

The old man's wife, the incontrovertible product of shtetl breeding, listened to her husband's speech with spousal indifference. There was nothing, her expression declared, that she hadn't heard him say a hundred times.

—To women, Alec said. When we get to Rome we should drink to it.

Alec helped the old couple onto the car and scrambled up as it began to edge forward. He squeezed past émigrés in the narrow passageway and found his family crammed in with their belongings. Perched on a pile of duffel bags, his father frowned in Alec's direction.

—What were you talking about with that old rooster?

—The greatness of the Russian woman.

—Your favorite subject. You almost missed the train.

Samuil Krasnansky turned his head and considered their circumstances.

—The compartments are half the size.

This was true, Alec thought. Say what you want about the Soviet Union, but the sleeping compartments were bigger.

—You want to go back because of the bigger compartments? Karl asked.

—What do you care about what I want? Samuil said.

Samuil Krasnansky said nothing else between Vienna and Rome. He sat in silence beside his wife and eventually fell asleep.

2

Somewhere south of Florence, Polina lifted Alec's head from her shoulder and eased it into a cleft between two lumps in the duffel bag that functioned as their bed. As she lowered his head, Alec opened his eyes and, after the briefest moment's disorientation, regarded Polina with an inquisitive smile. This was Alec's defining expression and it had been the first thing she had noticed about him. Before he had become her husband, before the start of their affair, before she knew anything about him, Polina had seen him in one or another of the VEF factory buildings—loping across the factory floor, accepting his tray at the cafeteria, delivering documents to the mechanical engineering

department—always looking vaguely, childishly amused.

—If Papatchka offered me life on a silver platter maybe I'd also go around grinning like a defective, Marina Kirilovna had said to Polina when Alec made his first appearance in their department.

Marina Kirilovna occupied the desk beside Polina's at the VEF radio-technical factory's mechanical engineering department. In her mid-forties and a widow twice over, men evoked in Marina Kirilovna only varying degrees of contempt. They were sluggards, buffoons, dimwits, liars, brutes, and—without exception—drunks. The tragedy was that women were saddled with them and, for the most part, accepted this state of affairs. It was as though they had ingested the Russian saying "If he doesn't beat you, he doesn't love you" with their mothers' milk. As for her own departed husbands, Marina Kirilovna liked to say that the only joy she'd had in living with them had been in outliving them.

Later, when Marina Kirilovna began to suspect Polina's involvement with Alec she had admonished her.

—Not that it's my business, but even if your husband is no prize at least he's a man.

—It isn't your business, Polina had said.

—Just know that it will all be on your head. No good can come of it. Believe me, I'm not blind. I see him skipping around like a boy with a butterfly net. And if you think this business might lead to a promotion, then half the women at the factory are eligible for it.

At the word "promotion," Polina had almost laughed. The suggestion of some ulterior motive, particularly ambition, was risible in a way the widow could not have imagined. First, the mere idea of ambition in the factory was ludicrous. Thousands of people worked there and—with the exception of the Party members—nobody's salary was worth envying. But, beyond that, it could be said that it was ambition—though not her own—which had led her to consider Alec's overtures. That ambition—insistent, petty, and bureaucratic—was her husband's. In the evenings she was oppressed by his plots for advancement, and on the weekends she was bored and embarrassed by his behavior at dinners with those whom he described as "men of influence." By comparison, Alec was the least ambitious man she had ever met.

One afternoon, as she was preparing to leave work, Alec had approached. He was accompanied by Karl.

—My brother and I are going out to seek adventure. We require the company of a responsible person to make sure that we do not go to excesses.

—What does that have to do with me?

—You have a kind and responsible face.

—So does Lenin.

—True. But Lenin is unavailable. And, at the risk of sounding unpatriotic, I am sure we would prefer your company.

Even now, with her forehead pressed against the cool window, it was hard to believe that this invitation had led to this humid passageway on a train bound for Rome. Straining to see beyond her own reflection, Polina marveled that the predawn countryside she saw was Italian countryside, the black two-dimensional cows Italian cows, and the geometry of houses Italian houses, inhabited by Italians—and that when the train sped past the rare house with a lighted window, it seemed barely comprehensible that, awake at this hour, there were real Italians engaged in the ordinary and mysterious things Italians did in their homes in the earliest hours of the morning. She regretted that she didn't have a quiet place to sit at that very instant to compose her thoughts and set them down for her sister.

In Vienna she had already written to her twice.

My dear Brigitte,

On our way to an appointment with our caseworker this morning we saw a little girl and her brother vomit in the pensione courtyard. These same two also vomited in the courtyard yesterday morning. Both times, their mother, a woman from Tbilisi who seems incapable of opening her mouth without shouting, raced out into the courtyard, swinging her slipper. This woman comes in from the market every evening with a bunch of spotted bananas roughly the size of a large cat. But you can't blame her. It takes everyone a few days just to get accustomed to the bananas. They are not expensive, but if you want to economize you can buy ones that are overripe. They are even cheaper than apples. You'd think they grew them in Austria. I can't begin to describe the pineapples, or the chicken and veal in the butcher's shops. All the émigrés, including me, walk around overwhelmed by the shop windows. It doesn't seem quite real, but rather like something in a movie. And considering how little money we have, it might as well be a movie. The second evening we were here, Igor and I explored a street lined with clothing stores. There were stores for men and for women. We were there at the time when the stores were closing. Austrians were rushing in and out carrying bags and boxes, all of them dressed like the mannequins in the store windows. Compared to them we looked like beggars. I was wearing the pale yellow dress Papa brought from Stockholm. The dress is almost four years old. You remember how excited I was when I got it? I'm embarrassed to think of it now. Wearing it in front of all of those people, I wished I were invisible. That way I could admire everything but avoid people seeing me and the horrible dress. Any single article of clothing worn by the Viennese would be the envy of all Riga. And it isn't only a question of the latest styles. It is the materials, the quality of the work. Naturally, I expected this. What I hadn't expected were the colors. There were dresses and blouses in colors I had never seen. How strange it is to think that I had lived my entire life without seeing certain colors. In one display there was a silk blouse of a deep lavender I associated with exotic flowers. I was so taken by it that

I lingered too long by the window. Igor encouraged me to go inside and take a closer look, which I didn't want to do. He teased me and pushed me playfully to the door. This attracted the attention of a saleswoman. She was in her forties, dressed very smartly. I suppose she was amused by us. She spoke to us in German, some of which Igor understands. She wanted to know what it was that had appealed to me. Igor pointed to the blouse and the saleswoman invited us into the store so that I could try it on. She was very kind and wanted to help us but I literally had to wrest myself out of Igor's grip to avoid going into the store. I wanted to apologize to the woman for my rudeness, but I don't know how to say even that much in German. She must have thought I was crazy. But all I could picture was trying on the blouse and somehow damaging it. If that had happened, I don't know what we would have done.

Because she wasn't accustomed to using the aliases, Polina had had to rewrite parts of the letter two or three times. To refer to Alec or to her sister by a different name still felt ludicrous. It seemed like a children's game, playing at spies and secret agents. Her sister, however, embraced the game. When she met Polina in Kirovsky Park to say goodbye, she came armed with a list of preferred alternate names.

—I never liked my name anyway. It's so average. Nadja. It's the name of a cafeteria clerk.

They had met on a bright Sunday afternoon. Polina had arrived first and claimed a bench under a linden tree, not far from where the men played dominoes. This had been a week before they left. All week, all month, she and Alec had been getting papers notarized, valuables appraised, haggling with the seamstresses who sewed their custom duffel bags, supervising the carpenters who constructed the shipping boxes, and arranging clandestine farewells. All this time she had slept poorly. In the mornings she would open her eyes overwhelmed by the tasks ahead of her. Polina realized, as she sat on her bench, that it had been weeks if not months since she had last had such a moment to herself. The day was warm and cloudless, a rare treat in Riga even in late June. Along the paths, young mothers pushed buggies, and grandmothers shuffled after their grandchildren, trying to entice them with a flavored wafer or a peeled cucumber. All around her were the fellow inhabitants of the city of her birth, each one possessing the individuality and anonymity of a city person. Polina derived pleasure from the sensation that, at least at that moment, she was indistinguishable from them. No one could identify her as a traitor to the motherland, a stateless, directionless person. She smoothed her skirt and looked up through the branches of the tree. Feeling the warmth on her face, Polina considered herself as if from the sun's perspective. Observed from such a height, she imagined that she could pass for a green leaf among green leaves or a silver fish among silver fish floating in the common stream.

From a distance, she recognized Nadja's buoyant, fidgety walk. In low heels, wearing a skirt, and swinging a small handbag, Nadja, at twenty, looked like a girl experimenting with her mother's wardrobe. Because of their age difference and because of her sister's nature, Polina harbored feelings for her that were more maternal than sisterly. To friends, their mother often remarked that, unlike other children in similar circumstances, Polina had never rebelled against the idea or the fact of a little sister. Although she was eight years older than Nadja, Polina's own memory did not extend to a time before her sister's existence and so she couldn't say who had exerted the greater influence in forming the character of the other. Had she become maternal because of Nadja, or had Nadja remained childlike because of her? In this sense Nadja shared something with Alec, the difference being that Alec's childishness seemed to protect him from the world whereas Nadja's seemed to expose her.

—I've always liked the name Anastasia, Nadja had said. That or maybe Brigitte or Sophia.

She had dropped down beside Polina and set her small handbag on the grass at the base of the park bench where she was liable to forget it. The same people in the park who would not have been able to identify Polina as a traitor to the motherland also would not have been likely to identify the two of them as sisters. Polina had inherited their father's coloring: pale skin, blond hair, gray eyes, and angular face. Nadja resembled, if anyone, their mother: dark hair, wide mouth, hazel eyes, and a starburst of freckles on her nose and cheeks—though her chief distinguishing feature was the slight gap between her two top teeth which she displayed whenever she smiled or laughed.

—I suppose you can choose any name you want, Polina had said.

—What are you choosing for yourself?

—I don't know. Something simple.

—And Alec?

—Igor.

—I never saw him as an Igor.

—When he was small he had a friend named Igor whose father could bend nails with his teeth.

—What was his friend's father's name?

—I didn't ask. But he didn't want to be the father. He wanted to be Igor. He wanted to have a father who bent nails with his teeth.

—I wouldn't be surprised if Alec's father could bend nails with his teeth.

—Probably. If he had to.

—And what will we call Mama and Papa?

—Mama and Papa.

—That won't create problems?

—I don't think so.

—We could just call them Him and Her.

—I'd rather not. Things are bad enough as they are.

Even if her relations with her parents had not soured, Polina supposed that their father, a Party member and a sea captain, would have objected to having her letters addressed to their apartment. She planned to post her letters to Arik Farberman, a friend of Alec's and a refusenik who had been trapped in Riga for the last five years. Arik served this function for other émigrés who left behind family members—Party officials, esteemed professionals, or just the habitually cautious—who did not want letters from the West arriving at their homes. The false names were in case the mail was seized.

When she and Nadja had embraced, Polina felt her sister's hair against her face and the sharpness of Nadja's silver seashell earring against her cheek. When they drew apart, the earring had left an impression that Nadja pointed out so as to avoid the subject of their separation. Polina also did not want a dramatic scene. She saw them meeting in another lifetime, two old women at an airport, straining to recognize each other.

When they rose from the bench and started off down the path, Polina noticed that Nadja had forgotten her purse. Nadja doubled back to retrieve it.

—There's nothing in it anyway except the paper with the fake names.

—Who will remind you now not to lose your purse? Polina had said.

—Every time I lose my purse I'll think of you, Nadja had said and smiled.

3

—This is Rome? Samuil Krasnansky heard a man his age inquire in the hall.

Slight variations on the same question rippled through the car.

—Can this be Rome?

—Such a small station for such a big city?

—Do you see a sign that says Rome?

—You can read their language?

The train came to a halt and radiated its heat into the heat of the early morning.

—It's not Rome, Karl said when he returned to the compartment. Rome is another hour. But someone from HIAS is here. We're to get off the train.

Samuil Krasnansky looked out his window and saw Italian militia with their submachine guns lined up the length of the platform. He did not like being under foreign guard, but he preferred the Italian militia in their blue uniforms to the Austrians in their green. The Austrians offended his sensibilities.

When last he had seen Austrians like these they had been marching in long, dejected columns under Soviet command. He had been a young officer then, a revolver on his hip and the soles of his boots worn down by the rubble of Eastern and Central Europe. Men still chose their words carefully when addressing him. Fussy women with clipboards had not felt entitled to pry into

his thoughts and personal business.

Once again the baggage had to be deposited onto the platform. The same method they had used to get the baggage into the train was now reversed. His daughters-in-law descended and stood waiting beneath the windows. His sons wrenched the bags and suitcases from the floor and the sleeping berths and lowered them to their wives. Samuil and his wife, Emma, were assigned the task of looking after the grandchildren. Emma held each boy by the hand. At first, still half-asleep, they were obedient. But that lasted only a short while, until a suitcase slipped out of Rosa's grasp and crashed loudly and heavily to the cement. From the train, Karl cursed and Rosa responded that he had handed her the suitcase improperly. She could not be expected to manage all that weight if he practically dropped it on her. She wasn't going to risk her head for souvenirs and tchotchkes. She had the boys to think about. Did Karl want the children to grow up motherless orphans? If that's what he wanted then he had nearly succeeded.

At the sound of the word "orphans" the boys started to revolt. They didn't want to be orphans. They didn't want their father to cripple their mother with the suitcases. They thrashed in Emma's grip and tried to free themselves to assist their mother.

—Stay, don't move, Samuil instructed them, but they didn't heed him.

—Boys, you can help your mother by behaving, Emma said.

Just then another bag fell from the window and somehow wedged itself between the train and the platform. This time it had been Alec who had released the bag. It was one of the duffel bags, extremely heavy and unwieldy, and Polina tried in vain to dislodge it.

—Why even have them down there if they can't catch the bags? Samuil said.

—They're doing their best, Emma said.

—I could do less damage with a hammer.

—With your heart don't get any ideas.

—I can't stand here and watch their bumbling.

When Emma spoke again in protest, Samuil glowered at her and said, Not another word. He stalked to the train. Awkwardly, grasping for decent handholds, he and Polina ultimately managed to free the bag.

—Now let's have the rest, Samuil said, his face crimson with the exertion.

Karl gazed down from the window, wordlessly.

—What's the matter with you? Samuil demanded. You forget what you're doing up there?

—For God's sake, be careful, Emma implored.

—Don't speak to me as if I'm an invalid, Samuil snapped.

With three of them receiving the bags, the job progressed faster. Soon they found themselves before another woman with a clipboard at the doors to the bus. Meanwhile, Italian porters appeared and heaved their belongings into its belly. A Russian interpreter accompanied the woman and called out

the names of the émigrés. One after another they passed before him to be counted and checked off the list.

—You think terrorists couldn't attack the buses? a gaunt, intellectual-looking woman said to Samuil.

—Rumors. Fearmongering, Samuil said.

—They'd hire all these soldiers because of rumors? the woman asked.

—Attacks have already happened, a man behind Samuil offered. That's a fact. Palestinian terrorists.

—Italian Fascists, corrected another man. Shot up a train compartment. A woman from Odessa, mother of three, lost an eye. A tragedy.

—They always change the routes, Rosa said. I heard it from HIAS in Vienna. Sealed orders. Even the train engineers don't know where HIAS will meet them until they get to the station.

The interpreter called out "Krasnansky" and Karl cleared a path to the front of the line. The others fell in behind him.

—You're one family? the interpreter inquired.

—Three families. Same last name, Karl said.

—But related?

Karl withheld his answer.

—No point playing games. It's all in the files.

—Who's playing games? Karl said.

—Don't worry, there's no penalty. You have three family heads. Go find your seats.

Samuil and Emma settled for a pair of seats near the back. Once they were on the road it became evident that the bus lacked proper ventilation. For relief Samuil slid his window open but encountered resistance from the woman behind him.

—I have a young child, sir, do you want her to catch pneumonia?

—We're elderly people, you'd prefer we suffocate?

—Citizens, let's be civilized, another voice chimed in.

—We could exchange seats, Emma suggested.

—And wake my child? the woman said.

—If your screeching hasn't woken her, moving won't either, Samuil said.

Samuil thought, as he had time and again, that the Soviets had wisely managed to rid themselves of the least desirable elements. In his long life he had never had the misfortune of being cast among such a lot of rude and unpleasant people.

Gradually, the bus approached the suburbs. Up front the Russian interpreter assumed the role of tour guide. The road they were on was called Via Flaminia, built by the ancient Romans. Those familiar with the famous saying "All roads lead to Rome" might be interested to know that they were now on such a road. It was interesting to consider, the interpreter continued, the traffic that the road had conveyed over the centuries. Roman legions used it when returning from their campaigns against the Gauls. Merchants from

across Europe traveled its length from antiquity through the middle ages. Barefoot pilgrims walked it for hundreds of kilometers on their way to the Via Conciliazione, at which point they crawled on their knees to St. Peter's Square. The carriages of kings and aristocrats had passed here, as had convoys transporting Italian troops to the Alps during the First World War. And during the Great Patriotic War, German Panzers had descended this way from the north to occupy Rome after the Italian king sued for peace with the Allies. It would not be an exaggeration, the interpreter said, to propose that the history of Western civilization could be plotted along this road.

—Their history: imperialist aggression, dogmatic theocracy, totalitarian monarchy, and fascism, Samuil muttered to Emma.

When they penetrated the ring road that circumscribed the city, the interpreter announced that they had officially entered Rome.

—Rome: the word tolls like a bell, the interpreter said.

Their route took them through a neighborhood called Parioli, the interpreter explained, home to many of Rome's wealthiest and most powerful people.

Morning found these people emerging from their apartments. The boulevard was bordered at either side by a wall of pastel-colored stucco buildings. Trees in full leaf dotted the boulevard and nearly every window was ornamented by a flower box. Here and there, Samuil noticed young men in tailored suits holding open the doors of black sedans for older men in tailored suits. The superior quality of the suits and the cars was the only exceptional thing about this scenario. Not eight months earlier he had himself been a man with a sedan and a personal driver. For twelve years, he had stepped from his building promptly at seven in the morning to find the black Volga at the curb. Rain or shine, Arturs preceded him to the rear door of the sedan. The man always executed his duty with proper decorum—neither too formal nor too familiar. He also provided for Samuil that day's editions of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, folded neatly on the backseat. Before Arturs, Samuil had had a Russian driver who was far less reliable. Felix had been the man's name. His mustache always looked greasy and he had a pronounced stutter that intensified when he was nervous. Nothing had tried Samuil's patience so much as enduring Felix's excuses for his tardiness. Most frequently, he blamed a neighbor in his communal apartment.

—H-h-h-h-he oc-oc-oc-occupies the tah-tah-tah-toilet with nahnah-nah-no re-re-re-regard for others.

—You've informed him that his behavior is compromising your job?

—H-h-h-h-he resp-resp-resp-responded in a ru-ru-ru-rude manner.

—Well, either straighten him out or wake earlier.

When Felix had shown no improvement Samuil had dismissed him.

He had experienced none of these problems with Arturs. Samuil had observed that, broadly speaking, compared to Russians, Latvians possessed a superior regard for discipline. Samuil attributed this to the years of German

influence. One could criticize the Germans for many things, but it was difficult to fault their commitment to discipline. Arturs had been a good man; Samuil did not blame him for his denunciation, which, in any case, had been rather pro forma.

Samuil preferred not to think about that day. He had had no defense. In fact, he had, in principle, agreed with his accusers. He had attended similar meetings in VEF's main theater and had also furiously denounced traitors to the state. Given his position, he neither expected nor received mercy. He prepared himself for the worst. He even allowed Emma to press upon him his blood pressure pills. He had carried the pills in his trouser pocket and had not felt the need for them until Felix with the greasy mustache rose in the front row, pointed his finger, and cried: Hyp-hyp-hyp-hypocrite!

On the street, the stucco apartment blocks gave way to large, gated villas. Palm and poplar trees jutted above the gates. Samuil saw garden terraces on the rooftops; on a balcony, gathering the wash from a line, he saw a maid in uniform; on the walls of another villa Samuil saw what was unmistakably a swastika graffito.

—Imagine, another passenger said, they do not even remove such filth from the walls.

—In Leningrad such outrage would never be tolerated. Rome was a city divided, the interpreter went on. Parioli, being home to wealthy and powerful people, was traditionally a Fascist neighborhood. Other neighborhoods were Communist in nature. Typically, one could identify them by their graffiti. Fascists or Communists, all Italians liked to write on walls. This should come as no surprise given the Italian origin of the word “graffito.” That said, it was illegal to deface public property and any émigré found doing so would risk criminal charges. But this was getting off topic. A complete list of things that were forbidden to them would be provided at the first Joint meeting. Meanwhile, if they looked out their window to the right they would be able to see a section of the Villa Borghese park. It was a good place to go for a walk or for a picnic. It also contained a museum with an impressive art collection. Not to be missed was *The Rape of Persephone*, a masterpiece by the sculptor Bernini.

In Vienna, Alec and Polina had had a tiny, but private, room. In Rome they had no such luck. Karl, Rosa, and the boys were given a room of their own but Alec and Polina were directed to share a room with Samuil and Emma on the fourth floor of the hotel. The elevator was either broken or off limits, it wasn't exactly clear which. On the ground floor, a sign composed in both Russian and Italian had been posted on the elevator doors. In one script was written, *Elevator is not functioning*, though in another script someone had scribbled

the words “*For Russians*” before the word “*Elevator*.” To ensure that nobody misunderstood the prohibition, the hotel’s manager planted himself in front of the elevator doors. He was a grim little man, his face a mask of blunt suspicion. To Alec he seemed like a bad comic actor. The effect was reinforced by the man’s red hair, which he styled in a pompadour roughly the size and hue of a cheap fox fur hat. Who could get angry at an Italian gnome with a red pompadour? Alec mentioned this to a man who lurched past him, crippled by the bulk of two suitcases. The man hissed curses at the manager as he mounted the stairs.

—Swine. Son of a whore.

—What’s the point? He’s a clown.

—How many floors do you have to climb?

—Four.

—So who’s the clown?

Theirs was one of the rooms not equipped with a toilet. A shared bathroom was down the hall. It served three other rooms, each occupied by four people. Karl, who helped Alec bring up their bags, recommended the use of their bathroom. It would demand climbing another flight of stairs, but at least they would not be hostage to the bowel and hygiene peculiarities of a dozen strangers.

When Karl returned to his room, Polina stated to Alec that she’d rather take her chances with strangers than ask Rosa’s permission every time she had to pee. From his parents’ half of the room there was silence. Alec didn’t need to look to confirm the magnitude of his father’s disapproval; he was an expert in the many tones of his father’s silences. He could have written a dissertation about them.

—We had it much worse during the evacuation, Emma said. People would have paid anything to have such a room for even one night.

Samuil remained silent. He refused to respond to Emma’s pacifying overture, even though the war was one of his favorite subjects.

—You know, I’ve thought about it, Emma said, and what is this except another evacuation? Emigration, evacuation; I don’t see such a difference. During the war we left thinking we would never return; now the same. At least this time everyone is together.

—Think before you speak, Samuil said. In the war you ran from the enemy. Now who are you running from?

To Alec’s relief, this interlude of family harmony was interrupted by a knock on the door. Alec hopped over a suitcase, opened the door, and was greeted by the momentarily startled face of Iza Judo. Alec, whose own expression must have mirrored Iza’s, could not at that instant imagine a less likely visitor. He said the only thing that came to his mind.

—Iza, how did you know we were here?

Iza shrugged ambiguously.

—I heard, I guess.

Alec had never been so happy to see Iza Judo—hadn't supposed that the sight of Iza Judo could bring him happiness. They had never been close friends. Sometimes they socialized in the same company. In the summers, they played soccer together on the beach in Jurmala. He'd never particularly liked Iza, preferring Iza's brother, Syomka. The two were identical twins, although nobody would ever mistake one for the other. Iza had shaved his head when he enrolled in the Institute of Sport, where he specialized in judo. Syomka grew his hair long and studied engineering and languages to become a translator of technical literature.

Alec tried to think back to when he would have seen Iza Judo last. He remembered a small party at the dacha of a friend. There had been half a dozen men and four women. Alec and his friend had met two girls at a café and invited them back to the dacha. Iza had arrived later with other friends and two girls. One of the girls had been very drunk and she had wedged herself at the kitchen table with a guy named Robik. Robik presumably held something in a closed fist and the girl kept whining, incessantly and mind-numbingly, for him to show her what it was. *Robik, show me. Come on, Robik, show me. Robik, show me.* At the same time Iza had been trying to make headway with the other girl. The girl was slight and dark. She wasn't particularly pretty, but she had an idea of herself. Part of this idea included the belief that she was too good for Iza Judo. She was also sober. When she was no longer willing to tolerate Iza she tried to leave. Iza blocked her way and then, somehow, managed to catch her head in the door. That nearly ruined the evening. The girl threatened to call the police, but eventually she calmed down, accepted a drink, and spent the night with Alec's friend. Alec spent the night with the girl he met at the café. He no longer remembered her name. Mainly what he remembered was that as a child she had owned eleven pet bunnies. Even then, when he spoke of her, he referred to her as Eleven Bunnies.

Alec invited Iza in and cleared a place for him on the bed. Iza seemed to deliberate over the invitation. Hanging from his shoulder by a vinyl strap was a medium-size valise. Iza eyed this valise before he finally accepted the invitation and picked his way through the bags to take his seat.

—I wish we had something to offer you, Emma said. But as you can see . . .

—Don't trouble yourself, Iza said.

—I'm surprised you're still here, Alec said.

—Australia. Even the embassy is run by kangaroos. We've waited seven months.

—Before you left, Syomka mentioned an uncle in New Jersey.

—He lives in a home for geriatrics. We've never even seen a picture of him. If we'd gone to visit him and a nurse wheeled out the wrong old Yid we wouldn't have known the difference.

—So why Australia?

—First, Syomka heard good things. Second, for America, they fly you out of

Rome in about a month. But Syomka thought, We're in Italy, what's the hurry? So I thought, All right. New Jersey or Sydney: once we get there it will be all the same shit. Pardon my language, Emma Borisovna. And what about you?

—Chicago.

—You have relatives?

—My mother's cousin from Vilnius, Alec said. They settled two years ago.

—Chicago's a big city. I don't know much about it. But people go there.

The conversation then hit an uncomfortable lull. Iza sat on the bed, at something of a loss. Alec kept expecting him to give some indication as to why he had come to see them, but Iza offered nothing and looked instead as if he was hoping that someone would explain the same thing to him.

Eventually, Emma eased the awkwardness and asked Iza about his parents.

—Still there. My brother-in-law doesn't want to leave. He's the transport coordinator at the fruit and vegetable terminal. They live well. Everywhere he goes he carries a watermelon. My sister has the two kids. Our parents don't want to leave without them. Me and Syomka, they're happy to be rid of. They figure we'll settle somewhere first and then it will be safer for the others to follow. We're like the minesweepers.

—I'm sure that's not what they think, Emma said.

—Maybe; maybe not. In any case, they didn't want to be separated from the grandchildren. I don't blame them.

—Of course not. A family should stay together, said Emma, intoning what had effectively become her anthem.

—And how do your parents feel about Australia? Samuil asked.

—They are getting used to the idea.

—You didn't consult with them before you decided?

—We are here, they are there, you understand. If the day comes when they are able to join us—and I hope it will—then they will have to come to Australia. Or, if they don't like it, they can always go to Israel. This may not sound very nice, but it's the truth. Now, of course, you are traveling as one family and so, naturally, it is better.

—Naturally nothing. It remains to be seen what is better, Samuil said.

With that, Iza rose and excused himself. He had enjoyed his visit but had to attend to some affairs. For practical advice, he recommended settling in Ladispoli instead of Ostia. Ostia was overrun by Odessans. Ladispoli was populated more by people from Moscow, Leningrad, Latvia, Lithuania. In short, it was more civilized. But both towns were on the seashore. Both were close to Rome by train. If they liked, he would make himself available to help them find an apartment. Having lived there for seven months, he knew the system. He could protect them from the *meklers*, the unscrupulous apartment brokers. And, if they required, with his experience, he could also help in other ways. For instance, if they had optical equipment—cameras, lenses, telescopes—to sell, he could secure them a much better price than they would get on the open market.

—That's very generous, Emma said, as Alec accompanied Iza out of the room.

In the hallway, when Alec said goodbye to Iza, he noticed a handful of men roaming from room to room, knocking on doors each with his own shoulder bag.

—Well? Samuil said, when Alec returned.

—Well, Alec replied.

—Glad to see your friend?

—What do you think?

—I just hope you didn't agree to sell him anything.

—Of course not.

—Or tell him what we have. All the time he sat there, his eyes were on our bags.

—I said, Thank you and goodbye.

—With a character like that, what he can't buy he'll steal.

—I wouldn't worry about Iza, Alec said. I know him. If he poses a danger to anyone it's to himself.

They had no other visitors. After they put the room into some semblance of order, Samuil reluctantly followed Emma up the steps to see Karl and the grandchildren. In their former life, Alec had never seen his father do anything reluctantly. He did what he wanted or he did nothing at all. Almost in spite of himself, Alec couldn't help pitying his father—even knowing that the only reason Samuil consented to follow Emma and climb a flight of stairs was that he preferred to sit in a room with Karl, Rosa, and the boys than to sit in a room with Alec and Polina.

—Quick, Alec said, before they come back.

—I haven't slept. I haven't washed, Polina said.

—Sleeping, washing. You're the most beautiful woman in Rome.

Polina gazed at the squalid, overheated little room.

—This is Rome?

—We could open a window.

In the afternoon, everyone was called down to the cafeteria for lunch. Since the Joint Distribution Committee had yet to provide them with Italian currency, the meal was furnished by the hotel. Two Italian waitresses shuffled through the cafeteria, dispensing bread rolls and apricot preserves. For families with *bambini* they also brought milk. After the rolls were exhausted the waitresses disappeared into the kitchen. It soon became evident that the rolls constituted the entire meal.

—This must be a mistake, Rosa said.

Later, when they were served a dinner of lettuce followed by macaroni, a former dissident circulated a petition among the émigrés. He promised to file a formal grievance with both HIAS and the Joint. A number of people signed, though Alec declined and Karl forbade Rosa from adding her name.

—These people control our fate and you want to antagonize them because of a salad? Karl said.

When his turn came, Samuil sneered at both the petition and the petitioner.

—I didn't sign your petitions before and I don't intend to start now.

—What do you mean by "your" petitions, *comrade*? retorted the dissident.

—You know very well what I mean. It's lucky for you we are no longer back home, because, over there, I assure you, no Zionist agitator would be so quick to call me *comrade*.

—My luck then, *comrade*, the dissident said and moved on.

Alec, Samuil, Polina, and Emma retreated to their room. In one suitcase, Emma had stashed several dozen packets of dehydrated chicken noodle soup. In the same suitcase, she also found a box of crackers. Polina had several cloves of garlic, four potatoes, and a Spanish onion which she had bought in Vienna. There was also half the salami that she'd packed for the train. Alec withdrew a pot from one of the duffel bags and lined up with his neighbors by the bathroom to fill it with water. Everyone in line held either a pot or a kettle. Back in the room Emma set the pot to boil on a glowing hot plate. On another hot plate, Polina had placed a frying pan into which she deposited sliced onions and potatoes. The water had just started to boil when the lights in their room dimmed, flickered, and then cut out entirely. Immediately, shouts and curses rang through the hotel. Alec waited a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the dark, and then, by the vestigial glow of the hot plate, sought out the bag that contained their flashlights. The flashlights were jumbled in with windup, skittering toy chicks; tin Red Army soldiers; pocket knives; abacuses; miniature wooden chess sets. As a mark of Soviet ingenuity, the flashlights did not require batteries. They were mechanical, powered by a long metal trigger. One repeatedly pumped the trigger, thereby generating light and a faint buzzing sound.

Pumping his flashlight at the rate of a quick pulse, Alec stepped out into the hallway. Other people emerged from their rooms also pumping their little flashlights. The effect was reminiscent of the countryside at dusk. It was as if, one after another, nocturnal insects were awaking to pursue their nightly business. Before long, Alec could no longer distinguish individual sources. The buzzing lost all cadence and dominated the hotel. Alec heard it from the floors above and below and, all around, he saw the flitting yellow halos cast by the low-wattage bulbs. Not far from him, crouched against the wall, a boy spooned soup from a metal bowl which his mother illuminated by flashlight. Alec looked the length of the hallway and saw doors open to every room, the occupants peering out or congregating in groups. At the end of the hall, a man strummed a guitar and sang the first line of a melancholic war ballad: *Dark night, only bullets whistle on the steppe*. Interspersed throughout the hallway, other voices joined in and obliged him to continue. Alec passed an elderly woman who leaned against the railing, like a bygone movie heroine, singing, immersed in sentiment. For the first time, a sense of community pervaded. People suspended their quarrels and commiserated about the shitty hotel: no elevator, no food, no power.

As Alec turned back toward his room he heard the familiar piercing voices of his nephews. There was a bounding on the stairwell and two darting beams of light. The boys raced down the steps and then along the hallway, shining their lights into people's faces. The boys were seven and five; the two-year age difference half that of his and Karl's. Yury, the elder, and the more reserved of the two, looked like Karl, square and sturdy, and tried to emulate Karl's laconic manner. Zhenya, on the other hand, though only five, showed the ill effects of his mother's and grandmother's coddling. He was overfed and impudent—qualities that Alec hoped he would outgrow. Emma was fond of pointing out that he had been a hundred times worse than Zhenya at that age.

After irritating half of the people in the hallway, Yury pointed his flashlight into Alec's face.

—Looking for someone? Alec asked.

—The captain, Yury said.

—What captain?

—The *submarine* captain, Zhenya chimed. Can't you see we're going down?

—I knew we were in trouble.

—The captain is wounded, Yury said.

Before the boys could run away, Karl descended the steps and called to them. Grudgingly, they scuffed over to him. Karl led them to Emma, who had arranged four bowls on the floor near the entrance to their room.

—Sit, Karl said.

The boys slid their backs along the wall and dropped down.

—Eat, my darlings, Emma said. Grandmother made a tasty soup.

—How are we supposed to eat it? Zhenya demanded. There are no spoons.

—I'm sorry, darling, Emma said. Grandmother couldn't find the spoons.

—Lift the bowl, drink, and don't complain, Karl instructed.

Alec stood beside his brother and directed his flashlight at the wall immediately above Karl's left shoulder. The wall, a grimy offwhite, diffused just enough light to illuminate the side of Karl's face. Karl's expression suggested that he was not at all seduced by the anarchic, carnival atmosphere in the hotel. His mind operated on another plane. Alec would see a circus and want to join; Karl, meanwhile, would estimate the cost of feeding the elephants and postulate that the acrobats suffered from venereal disease.

It was going to be like this every night, Karl said. The sooner they could get out of the hotel the better.

—You know that the Joint covers the hotel for eight days, Alec said.

—You want seven more days of this?

—I'm ready to go now.

—The hotel manager has a deal with the Joint. So long as the trains keep coming, his hotel stays full. That's why he serves us slop. And so long as he serves slop, people plug in their hot plates. There's a bus driver on our floor from Tula. He's been here four days. Every fucking night a fuse blows.

—Why is he still here?

—He takes the train to Ladispoli every day. Brokers demand extortionate prices for hovels. Our bad luck. It's summer. High season. Romans want to get away from the city, lie on the beach, swim in the sea. The bus driver comes home after a day of pleading and weeps in the bathroom so his wife and children won't know.

—So what does that mean for us?

—The bus driver has a sad and trusting face. One look at his face and you want to plunge a knife in his back.

—And our faces?

—My face is whatever it needs to be. As for yours: there may be a sexually frustrated woman with an apartment available. In any event, I don't intend to come back here and weep in the washroom.