

CHAPTER ONE

We played table-tennis outdoors, not far from the beach, until after midnight because even though the white nights had passed it still didn't get very dark. Those with the best eyes played last; the rest of us lounged against the wooden railing, watching the game and correcting the score. After midnight, when everyone had gone to bed, leaving their bats on the table to get drenched by a shower before dawn, I didn't know what to do with myself – I didn't feel like sleeping. I would wander for a while around the gardens of the Writers' Retreat (it used to be the estate of a Latvian baron), go as far as the fountain, which spurted from a group of stone dolphins, then track back to the 'Swedish House' and on down to the Baltic shore. The nights were very cold and quickly chilled you to the bone.

I did much the same thing almost every evening. On fine days, the mornings and afternoons went by quickly, with swimming and sunbathing, but evenings were dreary, and most of the residents were quite old. Almost all of them were VIPs, with titles galore, but that didn't stop evenings being dull, especially as I happened to be the only foreigner staying there.

As dusk drew in we would take our cameras down to the beach and set them so they were ready to snap at the moment the sun sank into the sea. The Baltic turned a slightly different colour each night, and we used to try to fix each successive sunset on film. Sometimes a couple of distant strollers along the waterline wandered into the shot. When we developed the film, they appeared as meaningless smudges in the endless vista. After dinner we got together again around the ping-pong table, and as I watched the small white ball going back and forth, I could feel my whole being adjusting to its pace. I would try, but usually fail, to pull myself back from the ball's metronome effect. Only every so often, in short, rebellious bursts, would I manage to break free from my enslavement to the little white sphere, whose jagged leaps, small diameter, and sharp, metallic noise when it hit the table almost succeeded in sending me into a trance. But at those instants when I recovered my lucidity I would jerk my head towards the shore, and every time I turned, like a sleepwalker, towards the water's edge I hoped to spy in the far distance, at long last, something different from what I had seen the day before. But the seashore at dusk was merciless. It had nothing to offer but a view it had probably been rehearsing since the dawn of time: silhouettes of couples walking slowly by. They probably came from the other residences in the vicinity, and after passing our house, they scattered in directions that seemed to me quite mysterious, towards resorts whose beaches bore the names of the little stations on the electric railway line, strange-sounding names like Dzintari, Majori and Dubulti. They were names I had previously read

on perfume bottles and tubes of face cream in shop windows in other places, without imagining they might be the names of stations or holiday resorts.

Old men, who knew there was no point in trying to get to sleep, stayed on the benches until well after dark. As I walked around I could occasionally hear their whispers and coughs or, when they finally got up, the tapping of their sticks as they walked towards the 'Swedish House', where the oldest and most distinguished of the residents stayed.

I would carry on sauntering aimlessly, wondering how almost all of these old men could be famous writers and frequently the dedicatees of each other's works. Most of the children who ran around noisily in the daytime had had poems and stories dedicated to them by their parents, and you could tell that some of the youngsters had read the works in question. As for the older women, who chatted among themselves for hours every evening after dinner, I knew that quite a few were still stepping out on the pages of some books as good-looking girls in high heels, under the mask of initials such as D.V. or N. or even their first names. The men sometimes appeared beneath the disguise of initials in books written by women, but less often. As a rule, those men had stomach ailments, and in the dining room you could see they were on some special diet or other.

Some evenings I went to the post office in the hope that the line to Moscow would be open so I could call Lida Snegina. But the telephones were usually busy. You could only be sure of placing a call if you booked it a day in advance.

Lida was the young woman I had been seeing in Moscow. She'd come with me to the station on the gloomy day I'd left for Riga. Before the train departed, we paced slowly up and down on the rain-wet platform along with many other parting couples, and she'd said, with her eyes averted, that she found it difficult to go around with foreigners, especially foreigners from far-off lands. When I asked her why, she told me about a friend of hers who had got involved with a Belgian who had disappeared overnight, just like that, without even telling her he was going. Of course, she added, 'It may well be that not all foreigners are the same, but they often bolt without leaving so much as a word.' At least, that was what she'd heard people say.

I really ought to have riposted, but only a few moments remained before the train would depart, and the time available was much too short to quarrel and make up. So I had to choose between argument and appeasement. I chose the latter: I swallowed my pride, and declared that in any circumstance, and come what may, I would never slip away, like a thief in the night. I wanted to add that I came from an ancient Balkan land with grandiose legends about the given word, but the time left was disappearing fast and would barely permit a synopsis, let alone the full story of Kostandin and Doruntine's ghostly ride.

I liked to walk to the post office and back on my own. It wasn't a particularly scenic route – in fact, it was rather desolate, with only scraggy reeds, small piles of sand and plump thistles on either side. All the same, that particular path, like some women who, though not beautiful, possess a hidden charm, was conducive to my having new thoughts.

It was my second holiday at a writers' retreat and I knew most of the ropes, as well as the oddities of the inmates. The previous winter I had spent some time in Yalta. My room had been next to Paustovsky's. The lights stayed on in his room until late; we all knew he was writing his memoirs. Whenever I went out into the corridor I encountered the *starosta*, our course leader at the Institute, Ladonshchikov by name, who was forever watching the light in Paustovsky's room. Whenever he came across somebody in the hall, he would confide in them with a sigh and the beating of his breast, as if he were reporting the worst news in the world, that the aforementioned Paustovsky was bringing all the Jews back to life in his memoirs. What I remembered of Yalta was uninterrupted rain, games of billiards that I always lost, a few Tatar inscriptions, and the permanent look of jealousy on the utterly insignificant face of Ladonshchikov, despite the solemn air he wore of a man concerned for the fate of the Fatherland. I had hoped that life in the Riga retreat would be less sinister, but what I encountered were some of the people I had seen at Yalta, table-tennis instead of billiards, and intermittent rain, confirming Pushkin's *bon mot* about northern summers being caricatures of southern ones. The similarity of faces, conversations and names (the only ones missing were Paustovsky and Ladonshchikov, oddly enough) gave me a sense of constant *déjà vu*. The life we led there had something sterile about it, like an extract in an anthology. At Yalta, in this rather odd world, I was aware of leading a hybrid existence, where life and death were mixed up and overlapping, as in the ancient Balkan legend I hadn't

managed to recite to Lida Snegina. The idea was imposed on me by the equation I could not help making automatically between the people around me and their doubles – the characters of novels and plays I knew well. An irrepressible and somewhat diabolical desire to compare their words, gestures and even their faces to those of their originals had arisen the previous winter in Yalta, where for the first time I realised that most contemporary Soviet writers virtually never talked about money in their works. It was like a sign. Now, in Riga, I was learning that alongside money there were many other things they did not mention, and reciprocally, many of the topics that filled whole chapters or acts of their works barely impinged on their real lives. The contrast made me constantly uneasy. Besides, there was something abnormal about being cut off from the world like that, and it brought to mind the monstrous beings I had seen preserved in glass jars in the Natural History Museum.

I'd tried a few times to break away from this frozen landscape, which seemed to me more and more like some kind of obsolete monument, but all my efforts came to nothing and brought me back to billiards in Yalta, then to ping-pong at the Riga retreat. In both settings, at the weighty winter billiards and the flimsy summer ping-pong, I only ever lost.

It was Saturday. As always we were playing in the dim but sufficient light of the evening, and although I was cheered at the prospect of winning the third set after losing the first two, I felt beside me a presence that was both new and familiar.

It was a kind of ash-blonde smudge that reminded me of Lida's hair. The impression was so strong that I put off turning as if I wanted to give the stranger enough time to become Lida. In that brief moment I realised that, without knowing it, I had long been yearning for her to come through the sky and across the steppe, as silently as the setting of the moon, to be beside me at the table-tennis table.

The little ping-pong ball, with its irritating rebound, scraped my right ear, and as I bent down to pick it up I stole a glance at the visitor, who'd not been seen before in the gardens of our writers' retreat.

She had come up quietly and stopped amid the keen observers of the table-tennis matches, the people who put the score right when others got it wrong. Let me not make some ridiculous gesture, I thought, since the match seemed to have turned against me irrevocably. The silent ash-blonde smudge among the noisy spectators held me in its sway.

I dropped and abandoned my bat in disgust. Though I was cross I went towards the stranger and wiped my brow with a handkerchief. I was annoyed at losing three games in a row and I had a feeling someone had fiddled the score. As I wiped my face, I looked at her: she had her hands in her trouser pockets and was gazing at the table with a supercilious pout.

Night had fallen some time ago, and at the water's edge the strollers, as if they had lost their faces, had now turned into outlines, but we knew they were the people we had caught on our film an hour earlier.

My annoyance subsided and I looked more attentively at the wonderful hair of the young newcomer. In this part

of the world hair like hers was not uncommon. Sometimes it reminded you of autumn sadness: it was, so to speak, not of this world; it was as if its owner had come from the moon. But this girl's hair reminded me especially of Lida. One of my Yalta colleagues had tried to persuade me that there was a kind of dog that reacted to such hair with stifled yelping, as if it was greeting the full moon out on the steppe. Subsequently, when I thought back on those words, I became convinced that, however absurd such tall tales might seem, they contained a grain of truth. Obviously it wasn't referring to real dogs howling, but to humans. My Yalta colleague must surely have gone through something like that himself. But it couldn't be a matter of screaming out loud, it must have been more like a silent, internal yell, arising from an infinite quivering that was on the point of turning into – why not? – a symphony.

'Are you having a dance here tonight?' the young woman suddenly asked, with a lively turn of her head.

She had beautiful, serious grey eyes.

'There are never any dances here,' I replied.

She smiled tentatively. 'Why not?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know. All we have here is fame.'

She laughed, her eyes on the table, and I was pleased with my witticism, which, though entirely unoriginal, seemed to have had some effect. I'd heard it the day I arrived, from the mouth of a taxi driver, whose licence-plate number had remained fixed in my memory, like so many other superfluous things.

'Are you from abroad?' the girl asked again.

'Yes.'

She stared at me curiously. 'Your accent gives you away,' she said. 'I don't speak perfect Russian myself, but I can tell a foreign accent.' She told me that she'd been among her own folk forty-eight hours before; that she was staying in a villa right beside our retreat; and that she was bored. However, she seemed surprised when I confided that I came from a distant country and was therefore much more bored than she was. She had never set eyes on an Albanian before. What was more, she had always imagined they were darker than Georgians, that they all had hooked noses and were keen on the kind of Oriental chanting she hated.

'Wherever did you get those ideas?' I asked rather crossly.

'I don't know. I think it's an impression I got from the exhibition you held last year at Riga.'

'Hm,' I muttered. I wanted to drop the subject.

I'd noticed more than once that ordinary Soviet citizens were much given to comparing foreigners from other socialist countries to the natives of their own sixteen republics. If you were very blond, they would say you were like a Lithuanian or an Estonian; if you had a curved nose they would think you had a Georgian look; if you had sad eyes, you must be Armenian, and so on. Some even thought that Turkey was a province of Azerbaijan that had been left on the wrong side of the border by a quirk of history. And on one sad afternoon a tipsy Belarussian tried to convince me that Armenians were really Muslims: they pretended to be Christians only to enrage the Azeris, and it was high time to sort things out down there . . .

'Have you been to Riga?' she asked me. 'What did you think of it?'

I told her I liked that sort of town.

‘Isn’t it too grey for you?’

I nodded.

‘And what are your cities like?’

‘White,’ I replied, without thinking.

‘That’s odd,’ she said. ‘I’ve always dreamed of seeing white cities.’

I could easily have told her our towns were blue – as I once had to a gullible Ukrainian girl at Yalta last winter – but she was too attractive, and I was beginning to watch my step. She was listening to me with an odd expression, half attentive and half haughty, as she stared blankly into the distance with a smile that seemed to be a response to something happening at least twenty metres away.

We chatted for quite some time, leaning on the wooden balustrade, while the others created a commotion around the ping-pong table, getting the score wrong and squabbling over it, as if the stake really mattered.

‘Do you see that fat lady with a shawl, talking angrily to her son over there?’ I said.

‘The one with grey hair?’

‘Yes. She’s the dedicatee of the famous poem that begins “When sunsets were blue, quite blue . . .”’

‘Really? And how do you know?’

I told her where I had got the information. But instead of being glad in the slightest degree to pick up a morsel of literary gossip, she pouted. ‘Why did you tell me that with a sort of satisfaction, almost cynically?’

‘Cynically?’ I protested. To be honest, I’d been glad that the old lady had provided me with a topic of conversation,

but never had I thought I would be accused of gloating over a woman's ageing.

My first instinct was for self-justification, but then I thought that, in cases of this kind, attempts at explanation can only give rise to yet more misunderstandings. So I decided to say nothing.

Her face had resumed its expression of supercilious indifference.

We said nothing for several minutes, and as time ticked by we were steadily and very rapidly becoming strangers once again.

Damn that fat old woman! I thought. Why ever did she cross my path? Now this girl is going to go away and she'll leave without even saying goodnight. And I really don't want her to leave! Half an hour ago I hadn't even known she existed, but now her departure would be like an eclipse of the moon. I didn't understand why I felt so anxious, but it was undoubtedly connected to the wearisome sameness of vacation days spent among initialled individuals dotted around like statues on plinths, and with the spiritual disarray I had been suffering for some time. At last a living being had turned up in the museum! What was more, the visitor's hair and smooth neck were amazingly reminiscent of Lida Snegina's.

The ping-pong ball bounced around like a little devil and its weightless vacuity obliterated all possibility of thought. Silence between us persisted beyond endurance and I repeated in my mind: There it is! She's going to leave and I'll be all alone in this archive dump.

But she didn't go. She carried on watching the table-tennis, with distance and disdain. The light reflected by her

ash-blond hair continued to fall on me, like an accidental sunset, and my mind wandered back to the howls or, rather, to the canine symphony I'd been told about in Yalta last winter. At one point I was tempted to drop her there and then, but I thought better of it: women in those parts were like that and, anyway, compared to easy-going Moscow women, girls from anywhere else in the world seem sour.

'Shall we go for a walk?' I asked bluntly.

'Where to?' she answered, without turning her head.

'That way. Maybe there's somewhere further on that we can dance.'

She didn't reply but started walking towards the shore. I followed her. Sand scrunched beneath our feet. She still had her hands in her pockets, and now her mauve blouse looked black.

The sea stretched out on our left-hand side; on the right, the black outlines of pines and, further away, rest houses and the little stations on the electric train line were scattered about. Here and there through the trees you could see tiny churches with spires higher than any I had seen before. I'd been struggling for a while to find a topic of conversation, and as I tried, I couldn't help fondly recalling the image of the Ukrainian girl in Yalta who had not only lapped up the most outlandish stories but responded to any nonsense you fed her by throwing her arms gaily around your neck.

But the silence between us grew heavier, and I had almost lost hope of establishing a dialogue when suddenly she asked me about Fadeyev. I couldn't have wished for a more

suitable question, and when I told her that in Moscow I passed his apartment every day she uttered an 'Ah!'

'There are a lot of rumours about his suicide,' she said, and then, after a pause, went on. 'You're from the capital and perhaps you heard more about it than we did.'

'Of course.'

In Moscow literary circles I had indeed heard a lot of talk about the suicide. I shared with her the most interesting pieces of gossip that were going around. She listened without responding. Suddenly it occurred to me to tell her about Fadeyev's treatment in the Kremlin hospital. It was a sad story I'd heard one evening after dinner in a Moscow suburb. It was the writer's very last attempt at getting cured. The method was to have him imbibe vodka in increasing doses day by day until his whole organism rejected it in disgust. Every morning, in the silent corridors of the hospital, there could be seen a man of considerable height dressed in an inmate's gown moving along like a sleepwalker, with unfocused eyes and unfocused mind, blind drunk, mistaking doors for people and people for objects. In little groups, hiding at the ends of the corridor or behind the doors, nurses whispered, 'Today we gave him three hundred cl, tomorrow we'll increase the dose,' and they watched him with curiosity. Some felt sorry for the man; others felt the satisfaction of ordinary people when they see a great man brought low; they were really curious to see the pride of Soviet literature turned into an unrecognisable wreck, his skull now filled with nothing but alcoholic haze.

I tried to make my story as true to life as possible and thought I had succeeded because when I finished my legs

were as wobbly as if I were drunk too. She put her arm in mine and leaned on me ever so slightly.

‘But why? Why?’ she asked softly.

I was expecting the question and answered, with a shrug, that I had no idea. Yes, indeed, why in spite of everything had he killed himself the day after his discharge?

We walked on for a long time without saying anything. I felt my mind going numb. It had wandered back once more to the folk ballad with its legendary horse ridden simultaneously by the Quick and the Dead.

‘It’s such a sad story,’ she said. ‘Let’s change the subject.’

I nodded agreement and we put an end to the conversation. We remembered we were looking for a place where there was music, then realised we had wandered a long way from my residence. The empty beach stretched for ever beside the water where, from time to time, something seemed to be stirring in the darkness. It was the flickering phosphorescence of the waves. On our other side, through the pines, we could see shapes that were white and oblong, like stone belfries. A train whistled somewhere in the distance. My mind went back to Lida seeing me off on the train at Rizhsky Voksal, the Moscow terminus, and to the legend I’d not managed to recite to her.

‘A penny for your thoughts?’ she asked.

‘Have you read Bürger’s “Lenore”?’ I enquired abruptly. She shook her head.

‘And Zhukovsky’s “Ludmila”?’

‘Oh, yes. We studied it at school!’

‘It’s the same story,’ I told her. ‘Zhukovsky just translated Bürger’s version.’

‘I remember vaguely our teacher telling us about that,’ she said. ‘Although Russians don’t like to mention that sort of thing.’

She had no great sympathy for Russians and barely hid it.

‘But Bürger didn’t make anything up either,’ I went on. ‘He borrowed the story from others as well and, like Zhukovsky, distorted it.’

‘Bürger was German, wasn’t he?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who did he borrow it from?’

I opened my mouth to say, ‘From us,’ but held back so I did not resemble those spokesmen for small nations who are forever intent on saying ‘we’ or ‘our people’ with the kind of pride or bluster that makes my heart sink, because even they barely believe what they are saying.

I was cautious about what I had to say next. I explained that the Balkan Peninsula, even though more or less everyone – even the Eskimos! – detests it, was, whether it ruffled you or not, the home of outstanding poetry, the birthplace of many legends and ballads of incomparable beauty. It was one of those, the legend of Death who rises from his grave to keep his word, that had inspired Bürger to write ‘Lenore’, though he had made a pretty dismal job of it. I added that all the Balkan peoples had invented variations on the legend. She should not take me for a chauvinist, but our own version was the most moving and therefore the most beautiful. Even a Greek poet who was on my course in Moscow had agreed with me on that.

‘I believe you,’ she said. ‘Why might I think the Greek version better?’

‘Because of Homer,’ I said. ‘Because he belongs to them.’
‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘But please tell me what the legend says!’

I was expecting her to ask for it. Straight away! I thought. You’ll get to hear it right now! It seemed I just had to tell the story that summer, come what may. If I’d not managed to do it at the station when I was saying farewell to Lida Snegina, it was probably because my brain hadn’t yet processed it well enough to enable me to restore it to perfection. But I felt that the moment had now come. I took a deep breath, summoned my skill with words, concentrated my energy, and launched into an explanation of what it meant for an Albanian mother of nine to marry her only daughter to a man from a faraway place ‘over the seven mountains’. I sensed that my companion was listening to me, but also that the Baltic, that body of foreign water, was helping me along as it lapped that northern shore. The mother didn’t want her daughter to marry so far away, since she knew the girl would never be able to come home for a family wedding or funeral. But her youngest son, Kostandin, made a promise that, whatever came to pass, he would set out and bring his sister home, however far he had to go. So, the mother gave her approval and married Doruntine to a foreign knight. Alas, a harsh winter soon came, with a bloody war; all nine sons fell in battle and the mother was left alone with her grief.

‘I don’t remember any of that!’ my listener exclaimed.

‘Of course not. They cut it all out!’ I said, in a menacing tone, as if Bürger and Zhukovsky were horse thieves.

She couldn’t take her eyes off me now.

‘Kostandin’s grave was nothing but mud,’ I went on, ‘because he had broken the *besa*. In our land a promise is sacred, and breaking it is the deepest shame that can befall anyone. Do you understand? It’s said that if even an oak tree betrays a secret, its branches will wither and die.’

‘How enchanting!’ she cried.

I went on with my story. One Sunday the mother went as she usually did to visit the nine graves of her sons, lit a candle for the first eight and two candles for her youngest. Then she called to Kostandin: ‘Kostandin, have you forgotten the promise you made to bring my daughter back if there should be a wedding or a funeral?’ And then she did something that Albanian mothers do very rarely indeed: she cursed her dead son. ‘O you who have failed to keep your word, may the earth disgorge you!’ And when night fell . . .

Scarcely had I uttered those words than my companion grasped my hand and exclaimed, ‘How terrible!’ Then, after a pause, as if she wanted to bring the conversation down to earth, she pointed out that none of what I had just told her was to be found in ballads in this part of the world.

‘Don’t mention those thieves to me ever again!’ I blurted out almost angrily. ‘So, when the night was deep and the graveyard lit by the moon, the lid of Kostandin’s tomb rose, and from the grave, his face quite white and his hair a muddy tangle, the Dead Man cursed by his mother came.’

Her hand was shaking but, regardless, I went on, ‘Kostandin rose from his grave, because, as it is said in our land, the given word makes Death step back . . . Do you understand?’

The quivering had moved up from her hands to her shoulders, so I told her then about Kostandin's moonlit ride to the far country where his sister had married. The young man found Doruntine in the middle of a feast and hoisted her onto his horse to take her back to her mother. On the way she kept asking, 'Brother, why are you so pale? Why do you have mud in your hair?' And he replied every time: 'It's from weariness and the dirt of the road.' They rode on together on the horse, the Dead Man and the Living Girl, until they got to the village where their mother lived. Kostandin brought the horse to a standstill outside the church. Behind the surrounding wall, with its iron gate, the church was almost entirely dark. Only the nave was faintly lit. Kostandin said to his sister, 'You go on. I have something to do here.' He pushed open the iron gate and went into the graveyard, never to emerge from it again.

I stopped.

'How gripping!' she said.

'Did you really like that version of the legend?' I asked.

'Yes, a lot. It's so different from the one we learned at school!'

'So don't mention those wretches to me again!'

We had walked quite a distance as I told the tale and now we could hear a band.

I felt astonishingly unburdened by having at last told the story of Kostandin and Doruntine. As I was glad she had liked it, I was tempted to tell her the other great Albanian legend, the one about the man who was buried alive in the pillar of a bridge, but I held back for fear of overdoing the folklore.

We were walking towards the source of the music and soon we found ourselves in front of a restaurant's illuminated sign.

'The Lido,' I read aloud. 'Shall we go in?'

'Wait', she said. 'It must be expensive. And I don't like the look of it.'

I stuck my hands into my pockets and pulled out all the change I had. 'I've got a hundred and ten roubles. Maybe that'll be enough.'

'No, no. I really don't like the look of this place. Let's go somewhere else.'

I knew my resources wouldn't be adequate for the Lido, so I didn't insist.

Further on we heard more music. We wandered towards another place where a dance night had been organised by the veterans' and workers' holiday resorts. Nobody stopped us at the door. We went in. People were dancing. Others sat drinking at tables set around the dance floor. In the lamplight my companion looked even prettier and we found nothing better to do than to dance. There was a lot of noise. Now and again customers who were drunk were shown the door. In an environment where we were both outsiders, we felt closer to each other. She was serious yet casual, which I liked. We went up to the bar and ordered two brandies. She had style, and drank with confident movements. At a nearby table three middle-aged men were talking in Latvian. They looked at us inquisitively, and one of them, the oldest, asked my companion a question. I didn't understand a word of the language, but I grasped that he wanted to know what nationality we were. Obviously they'd

guessed I was a foreigner, and when she answered them, they showed some interest, smiled at me, and one got up to fetch two more chairs.

So, we made their acquaintance. They were veterans of the Russian Revolution, and we started a conversation, my girlfriend acting as interpreter. All three seemed relatively well informed about Albania but they had never met an Albanian before. They kept repeating that they were very happy to have the opportunity of meeting me. I was pleased that at least they didn't imagine every Albanian had a bulbous nose and a Zapata moustache. However, for some reason they thought we were all plump and round, which my own figure certainly did not bear out.

'Are you two engaged?' the oldest of them asked.

We shook our heads, then looked at each other, and from that point on she seemed even closer to me, for we were now connected by a small secret, our first, that these three men didn't know we had only just met or that we were still using the formal *вы* to say 'you' to each other.

They'd been soldiers in a Latvian regiment that had had the task of defending the Kremlin after the Revolution. I'd heard a lot about the 'Latvian Guards', as they were called. A few days before, I'd seen the impressive cemetery in Riga, with its hundreds of graves laid out in straight lines beneath a huge fresco showing Nordic horses and horsemen leaning over the dead. It hadn't occurred to me then that I would ever meet survivors of that regiment, let alone sit down at their table with a girl and share a drink.

Now and then they spoke to me in Russian, but it was very odd Russian. I guessed if you learned a language in a

fortress of the Bolshevik Revolution, subjected to alerts and White Russian plots, kept at your post by hatred of the old regime, it was bound to turn out rather strangely.

‘Did you know,’ one asked, ‘that near here, on the Riga coast, at Kemer, if memory serves me right, one of your kings bought a villa and lived in it for a few months?’

‘An Albanian monarch?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ he said. ‘I remember reading it in a newspaper, in 1939 or 1940, I think.’

‘We’ve only ever had one king,’ I said. ‘He was called Zog.’

‘I don’t recall the name, but I remember very well that he was King of Albania.’

‘How odd,’ I said, feeling the irritation that arises when you bump into a tiresome acquaintance in some foreign land. His two friends were also aware that an Albanian royal had bought a beach villa at Kemer. The girl’s curiosity was aroused and she began talking to them excitedly.

‘Oh! So it’s true!’ she said, clapping her hands. ‘How interesting!’

For the first time that night I thought I saw her face go dreamy, and I scowled. Ahmet Zog, I said inwardly, why did you have to come all this way to mess things up for me?

‘Are you upset?’ she asked. ‘Does it annoy you to know that he came here?’

‘Oh! I don’t really care. I never had much interest in him anyway!’

‘Well, well. You’re full of yourself, aren’t you?’ she riposted.

Oh dear! I thought. Now she thinks I’m jealous of the old king. To be honest, I had felt slightly jarred when her

eyes, which had been grey and serious up to that point, had lit up at the mention of the former sovereign. I tried to hide my feelings from her by addressing myself mainly to the three veterans: 'He must have come here after he fled. He had a lot of enemies and was very cautious. Maybe he thought this was far enough away from Albania.'

'Oh, yes, it is a long way,' one man said.

If only this conversation were over, I thought. We raised our glasses and toasted each of us in turn, starting with my girlfriend. They were tipsy. They said they would like to see us dance, and as we moved around the floor they watched us with kindly eyes and smiled at us from time to time.

My girlfriend realised how late it was and said we should leave. We had a last drink with the three Latvians. Then, as we were preparing to go the veterans put their heads together and, apparently in my honour, began to sing very softly '*Avanti popolo*'. There was a lot of noise, and they were singing softly in their slightly hoarse baritone voices. Maybe they thought it was an Albanian song, or perhaps they knew it was Italian but sang it anyway, because I came from a faraway country next door to where the song was from, or perhaps it was the only foreign song they knew and they were singing it simply because I was a foreigner. I refrained from filling them in, and didn't ask them to explain, because none of it mattered, but I stayed to listen to the familiar tune and lyrics, which they mangled, except for the word *rivoluzione*, which they transformed into *revolutiones*, with the typically Latvian *-es* ending.

We bade them farewell and left. It was rather cool outside. In the dark the shoreline was barely visible. My companion

put her arm in mine and we set off in a random direction, as before, except our pace was slower now and the crunching of the sand seemed louder in the deeper silence all around. We walked on without speaking, and it occurred to me that we had now turned into one of the silhouettes that at the writers' retreat we captured in our snapshots of the sunset.

'Where are we going?' she asked.

'I don't know. Wherever you want.'

'I prefer not to know where I'm going. I like walking aimlessly, like this.'

I told her I also liked wandering with no destination in mind. Then we fell silent and could again hear the dull crunch of our footfalls on the sand. We didn't know which way we were going. It wouldn't have been hard to find our bearings and make our way towards our respective lodgings, but it amused us not to do so and, as it turned out, we were going in the opposite direction.

'Apart from your king, have any other Albanians come to this country on holiday?' she asked.

'I don't know. It's possible.'

'I hope not,' she said. 'I'd like you to be the only Albanian who's been here, apart from your king.'

She said the words 'apart from your king' in an intimate tone, as if the king and I were two knights-in-waiting on this deserted beach, one of whom she had deigned to favour.

'Wouldn't it be an amazing thing if you were the only two Albanians ever to have spent a holiday here?' she added, soon after.

'I can't say,' I replied. 'I wouldn't see that as particularly unlikely.'

‘I see!’ she said. ‘You think it’s more interesting to know that “When sunsets were blue” was dedicated to an old lady with a weight problem?’

I didn’t know what to say and began to laugh. She was getting her own back. I’ve lost it, I thought. A fat lady and an ex-king must surely be enough to ruin a date. Damn you, King, why did you trip me up again?

Then, as if she had been reading my thoughts, she said: ‘Do you really think I’ve got any sympathy for monarchs? To tell the truth, I think they’re all pathetic old men destined to have their heads cut off.’

I burst out laughing again.

‘Like in period films . . .’ I said, but stopped for fear of upsetting her.

‘What?’ she asked.

‘Our king was young, rough and sly, nothing like a pathetic old man.’

My words had no apparent effect on her.

‘Was he good-looking?’ she asked, after a while.

So that was what she wanted to know! ‘No,’ I said. ‘He had a hooked nose and liked Oriental singing.’

‘You sound like you’re jealous!’

We laughed, and I admitted that the monarch had actually been a very handsome man.

‘Really?’ she cried, and we were laughing again. Then we stopped talking for quite a while, with her leaning on my arm, and I felt like whistling a tune. But the shadow of the ex-king fell on us, just as Fadeyev’s had walked beside us earlier.

At one point we heard a muffled clatter in the distance,

then a light – maybe the headlamp of a locomotive – threw a pale beam from far away. Probably it reminded her of the legend I'd told her because she mumbled something about it. I asked her which part of my tale she'd liked most. She replied that it was the point when Kostandin stopped at the cemetery gate and said to his sister, 'You go on. I have something to do here.'

'I don't know how to explain this . . . It's something everybody might have felt in some form or another . . . Even though it doesn't seem to have any connection with reality . . . How can I say . . . ?'

'You mean that it expresses universal pain, like all great art?'

"'You go on. I have something to do here.'" Oh! It's both terrible and magnificent!

It occurred to me again that it was perhaps the right time to tell her the other legend, the one about the man walled into the bridge.

"'You go on. I have something to do here,'" she repeated softly, as if to herself. 'Yes, it does express something like universal pain, doesn't it? As if all people on earth . . . I don't know how to put it . . . well, that everybody has their share of that pain . . . With some left over, so to speak, for the moon and the stars . . . ?'

We held forth for a while on the universality of great art. On reflection, I reckoned it was better not to tell her the second legend: it might weaken the impact of the first.

As we chatted about art that was great or even just ordinary, we found we had got to a small station.

'It's the last train,' she said, as we paced up and down

the empty platform, our footsteps echoing on the concrete. The imposing, almost empty green train soon pulled into the station and screeched to a halt in front of us. Perhaps it was the one whose headlamp we had seen shining in the distance. The doors opened but nobody got off. A second later, as the carriages juddered into movement again, my companion suddenly grabbed my arm and yelled, 'Come on! Let's get on!' and rushed towards a door. I followed. She was brighter now than she'd been all evening. Her eyes were aflame as we went into an empty compartment, with dim lighting that made the long bench seats seem even more deserted.

We went into the corridor and stared at the thick night through the window.

'Where are we going?' I asked.

'No idea!' she answered. 'I really don't know. All I know is that we're going somewhere!'

I didn't care where we were going either, and I was happy to be alone with her that night on an almost empty train.

'If the villa is in this direction, I'd like to get off to see the place where your king spent his holidays, at his old estate.'

I smiled, but she insisted, so I gave in to avoid a quarrel. She was almost too entrancing when she was stubborn. Anyway, there's nothing more exasperating than having a row in an enclosed space like a railway compartment, where you can't just leave your partner in the hope she'll call you back or run after you to make up, the ritual of lovers since time immemorial. I yielded, but we realised we were

travelling in a direction we did not know: stations came and went at such short intervals and were so like each other that it soon became impossible to tell them apart. Nonetheless, each time the train stopped at a station we tried to make out its name in the hope it would turn out to be the one we were looking for. My companion and I remained standing in the corridor and I thought how pretty she was. There was nobody at any of the stations, and the departures and arrivals boards looked rather sad without a single traveller to look at them.

‘We don’t have any tickets,’ I said.

‘That’s hardly a worry! At this time of night there’s no ticket inspector.’

I began to whistle. She smiled at me. We were staring at each other, and had she not also glanced at the station names we would have missed ours. Suddenly she clapped her hands and shouted a name. The train stopped and we jumped out. A few seconds later it moved off again, rattling away into the black night. Silence fell once more on the deserted platform where we stood alone.

‘So, we did get on the right train, after all,’ she said, pointing to the sign with the station’s name.

‘Makes no difference to me!’ I said. That’s true, I thought. Evenings at the residence are so mortally dull that the further away I can get, the happier I shall be.

‘It does to me,’ she retorted. ‘I want to see your king’s villa.’

‘How are we going to find it?’ I asked

‘I don’t know. But I think we’ll manage.’

We crossed the tracks and walked towards the beach.

Again she put her arm in mine and I felt the weight of her body. The beach was entirely empty. Through the darkness you could just make out the gloomy outlines of the buildings on the seafront. There were no lights on anywhere. All you could hear was the swell of the sea, which made it feel even lonelier.

We passed the locked gates and shuttered windows of silent villas, and from time to time she wondered which might have been the royal residence.

‘Perhaps it’s this one,’ she said. ‘It’s more ornate and luxurious than the others.’

‘Could be,’ I replied. It was a large two-storey house set in a formal garden behind iron railings. ‘Yes, perhaps it is,’ I added. ‘He was very rich and spared no expense.’

‘Shall we have a rest?’ she suggested.

We sat down on the stone steps, and as she’d said she was cold, I allowed my arm to wrap itself around her shoulders. I was cold too. There was a breeze coming in from the sea and strands of her hair, which were weighed down by the damp of the night, like copper filaments, occasionally brushed my face.

‘What are you thinking?’ she asked, impulsively using the more intimate ты form of the verb. Neither of us was a native Russian speaker, and the complex rules on how to say ‘you’ caught us out occasionally.

I shrugged. To be honest, there was nothing in my brain that could have been called a thought. At first I was tempted to say, ‘I’m thinking of you,’ but it seemed too banal.

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ she said. ‘You’re thinking that maybe your king sat on these steps, that maybe he

looked out at the sea just as we're doing now, and that you are perhaps the only Albanian to have come here since he did.'

'No, I'm not,' I said.

'Yes, you are!' she insisted.

'I really am not!'

'You don't want to admit it, out of pride.'

'Frankly, no,' I said once more, wearily. 'It makes no difference to me whether or not he sat on these steps. Far from stirring my imagination, as you think it does, the very idea—'

'Then you must be completely devoid of imagination!'

'Perhaps I am.'

'Please forgive me,' she said. 'I didn't mean to offend you.'

We said nothing for several minutes. Now and again I could feel her icy hair on my cheek. The arm I had round her shoulder had gone numb. It was like one of those heavy, damp branches blown down by the wind during the night that you find lying outside the house in the morning.

So we'll have to talk about the ex-king, I thought. From the moment the old interloper had been mentioned that evening I'd avoided saying anything about him, but I knew that I could put it off no longer.

I took a deep breath, feeling tired even before I began. I intended to tell her about Albania and especially its former poverty, which we'd learned about at school, where the monarch was discussed even less positively than the sultans, Nero or the tsars. I told her more or less that the Albanians who had given birth to those magnificent legends (I must

have told her about the man walled into the bridge by then) were so poor that although most of them lived near the sea they had never seen it when that man (I waved at the iron railings) had been buying himself lavish properties abroad and running around with tarts on foreign beaches. I went on to tell her that Albanians were then so destitute that in some parts of the country the highlanders owned no more than a single piece of cloth they bound around their heads, like a turban; it was a shroud that they carried with them at all times so that if they happened to be killed on the road a passer-by could give them a proper burial.

I felt her fingers running up the back of my neck, as if she was searching for a shroud, and shivered.

‘Had you ever heard that before?’ I asked.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I knew that Albania was a land of exquisite beauty but what you’ve just told me is so sad.’

She carried on running her fingers through my hair, above the nape of my neck, and after a pause she added: ‘You know what? Maybe you’re right where kings are concerned, but you still have to let your imagination roam sometimes . . . Indulge in a bit of fantasy. Most books nowadays are so boring, with their permanently smiling and always rugged heroes. Don’t you think?’

I didn’t know what to say. She was quite possibly right, but all the same I tried to remonstrate with her, saying that the Revolution had had its own beauty, such as the three Latvian Guards we’d met a couple of hours earlier, or Lenin, who had made all the kings, tsars, khans, emirs, emperors, sultans, caliphs and popes look like pygmies, like . . .

I'd let myself get carried away by the tidal wave of Lenin-worship. Encomia of that sort were common. A fellow student had told me that it was the safest way yet found to take Stalin down a notch. The two were portrayed as radically different, almost as if they had been enemies; there were even hints that Lenin had been persecuted by his successor, but that everything would be brought into the open at the right time . . .

'Yes, sure, OK,' she acknowledged, sounding tired, 'but most contemporary books about the Revolution and about Lenin are so dry and . . . I can't find the right word.'

I realised it would not be easy to contradict her.

'Perhaps it's because Shakespeare wrote about kings,' I blurted out, without thinking. Indeed, I pondered, Shakespeare wrote about kings, but the people who write about the Revolution . . . In my mind I saw in the long procession of all those mediocre writers, eyes lit with envy (some were still jealous of Mayakovsky), who had made fools of themselves in the view of the younger generation by writing so badly about the Revolution. I could see the crimson face of Vladimir Yermilov, whom I found odious because I knew he was one of those responsible for Mayakovsky's suicide. Every time I saw him, with his ugly snout, having lunch in the dining room at the writers' retreat I was astounded that the assembled company didn't charge at him, beat him up, lynch him, drag him out to the road, then to the dunes and all the way to the dolphin fountain. Once in a while I said to myself that the absence of an event of that sort must mean that something was out of kilter in the house, completely out of true.

‘So I’m not entirely wrong, am I?’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’ I was startled. My mind was in a muddle, and I didn’t grasp in what sense my companion could claim to be right. Our conversation turned back to the ex-king of Albania, and it troubled me that she could cling to any illusions about him. I intended to describe the squalor of his court, with all its princes and princesses, the highnesses’ aunts and uncles, and the cohorts of courtiers, whose grotesque portraits I had so often seen in old magazines when I was doing research for my dissertation in the National Library. But it was too late to start a conversation of that kind, so I said nothing.

Maybe it was my not saying anything, or the way my arm round her shoulders stiffened, that made me think she’d read my thoughts, because she suddenly whispered: ‘Perhaps it’s not his villa anyway.’

‘Could be.’ I gave a deep sigh. I was worn out by this Pyrrhic victory, because I was angry with the ex-king – very angry, in fact – for having loomed up out of the past to spoil my night out. Then it occurred to me that no evening is ever entirely safe, and you can never know in advance from which forgotten depths the attack will come. But then I thought that it was perhaps no coincidence that the ex-king’s ghost had cropped up when I’d been depressed, and in this place, on deserted dunes where the dead and the living team up in pairs to ride on the horses of legend.

‘What’s your name?’ she asked, after a protracted silence.

I told her, and she leaned forward to trace my initials with her finger on the smooth wet sand.

I don’t know why but my mind turned to the initials

of the fat woman, and then to the length of the evening that had now become a whole night, just as a girl turns into a woman. In a minute we would stand up and leave to walk in the darkness alongside the rail tracks so we wouldn't get lost. Then I imagined I would walk her back to her villa, that I would kiss her and that she would slip away without even saying goodnight, and that I wouldn't take offence since I knew that was what local girls usually did after the first kiss. Tomorrow she'd come back to where we would be playing ping-pong and still be arguing over the score, and then we would go for a walk at sunset, along the waterline, exactly when the shutter-fiends would be focusing their cameras to catch it. We would slowly turn into black-and-white silhouettes and the shallow water would bounce our image back, like a catapult, to annoy people looking in frozen solitude at the far horizon. Then, like most of the silhouettes that sauntered along the shore in the evening, we would enter a dark space inside unknown cameras, and, later, when the films came to be developed, we would re-emerge from the Nordic dusk in the snapshots of strangers, not one of whom would know who we were or what we'd been doing there.

'It's very late,' she said. 'We ought to get back.'

Yes, we really should. We stood up without a word and moved off in the direction we had come from, passing in front of silent front doors with metal knockers shaped like human hands. For some reason I always imagined that crimes must be committed behind doors with that kind of knocker or behind the railings that enclosed silent gardens. At this time of night there were no trains. She said we

would have to go as far as the main road to find a taxi or a passing car. We got to the highway, but there was not much traffic and, as usually happens in such circumstances, none of the vehicles that stopped was going in our direction. At long last an aged couple on their way home from a silver-wedding celebration gave us a lift to one of the stations – I had read its name on bottles of nail-varnish and shampoo. From there, we walked.

We got back to Dubulti before daybreak. Our conversation had become intermittent perhaps because our minds were also losing clarity, as if our thoughts had been transported into the ionosphere. I escorted my companion to her door, and what I had expected came to pass. As I moved off I turned back once more and saw a hazy glow coming from one of the villa's windows, giving it a platinum sheen. I recalled the desire to scream that my comrade had spoken of last winter in Yalta, and it occurred to me that the similarity of the sounds in *platinum* and *planet* was not entirely coincidental. I'd had direct confirmation of that when my companion had started running, just as Lida had run away in Neglinnaya Street, with the same strange and almost astral aura over her head.

I'll tell you my ballad, too, as soon as I'm back in Moscow, I thought, as I crossed the formal gardens on my way back to the guesthouse. I felt as if the shape and weight of my limbs had altered, as if I was walking on the moon. As I went past the dew-drenched ping-pong table, with its two bats casually abandoned on it after the last game, I reflected that a man can encounter more marvels in a single night than his anthropoid forebears got to see in tens of thousands

of years of evolution. I went past the fountain with the dolphin sculptures, where I should have slain Yermilov long ago. Now I was walking past the chalets. All were dark and silent, and I had an urge to shout, 'Wake up, Shakespeares of the Revolution!' I was just going past the 'Swedish House', where the most eminent writers were staying, when the sound of coughing broke the lonely silence. I stood still. Those were old lungs coughing: a cough with a procession of croaks and sighs in its wake.

As I followed the path that led to my chalet I turned one last time and gazed on the unending vista of dunes that a thin northern light was beginning to whiten. Something would not let me take my eyes off the scene. Somewhere out there lay strewn the bones of the horses on whose backs we had ridden just a few hours before in the company of the dead. What a long night that was! I thought, and, half asleep, I wended my way to bed.