

Part one

The arrival of Volodia

(1)

It must have been the end of 1990 when I first saw Volodia. He was being chased by Anya around our prefabricated concrete apartment block that sways in the wind above Moscow. If I remember rightly, I was returning from a midnight visit to the rubbish chute, no doubt, for a drop of vodka. As I paused on the dark stairs beneath the radiator, which gurgled like a broken accordion, he charged past me and into apartment 303, with Anya close behind. It was a comical sight as he was smeared with cream and bits of blackened cucumber, looking as if he'd just been thrown out with the rubbish. Unusual for these parts he was also twice the size of Anya. I guess to her, beneath it all, he wasn't bad looking. He was certainly the biggest cockroach I'd seen for some time. I was pleased they'd chosen the third floor though.

A few weeks later they decided to move into my apartment: number 503 on the fifth floor. Apparently, despite the old and innocuous inhabitants of 303, there was no food. They weren't the only ones; all over Russia this new absence was causing all sorts of upsets and migrations. I heard them arguing outside the door.

"What's wrong with this one?" Anya demanded.

"Nothing. It looks fine..." Volodia sounded unsure. "But can't you smell something?"

I was in the hall, knee deep in dust. Everyone else was asleep. Old Nadezhda was making more noise than a tank rolling through Red Square so it's a miracle really I could even hear them.

"What smell?" Anya persisted.

"I don't know. A sort of flowery smell," Volodia said.

"Smells are the least of our problems. We haven't eaten for a month."

Another voice intervened. "I wouldn't move in there if I were you." The croaky voice belonged to Nosya from across the hall in 504. Nosya, the nosey old bag.

"Why not?"

"It's cursed," Nosya said.

"Well, where else am I to go?" Anya asked, adding, "In my condition."

Nosya, ignoring Anya, reiterated her warning and disappeared into her own apartment.

Cursed indeed. As for flowers, I had never smelled them. I was going to run out and reassure them that the apartment was fine but, to be truthful, I didn't know if I wanted them here. I had so far managed to avoid any serious upsets with the human inhabitants and I wasn't sure if I was prepared to have strangers upsetting things for me. Added to which, Volodia was huge in comparison to me. He would need to eat twice as much as I did. As for the eggs Anya was carrying, before long, there could be hundreds of them. But then, I reasoned with myself, I lived a fairly lonely existence in a crowded world; perhaps it would be nice to have some company. As it happened, I didn't really have any choice in the matter.

"I'm sure it's fine," Volodia said again, but Anya had already marched into the apartment, glared at me and shot straight to the kitchen.

I watched Volodia creep in after her. As I saw him close up, he really was a roach in shining armour.

"What to do?" Volodia said, but he, at least, looked apologetic.

They were here now. "Come in, come in. Welcome." I said, graciously.

We followed Anya into the kitchen. She was already in the pantry depositing her egg box.

"That's better," she said, coming out almost half the size she went in.

As it was night-time and the other inhabitants were asleep, I offered to show them around the three-roomed apartment and, of course, the kitchen.

"Where have you come from?" I asked when we were back under the kitchen table. Fortunately, the old man had knocked a few sugary crumbs on the floor. Anya said that she'd come from the top floor but she'd found Volodia in the basement when she'd been looking for some rubbish. Volodia nodded.

"But you're not from Moscow are you?" I asked him.

"Aren't I?" He looked surprised. "For as long as I remember, I lived in the basement. I don't remember anywhere else."

Anya looked at him, and then me.

"Where's he from then?"

"I don't know. Asia perhaps. I think you are oriental. Perhaps you arrived in a package or a box that was then thrown into the basement. You know what good travellers we are."

He clearly didn't. I noted that Volodia had only just got his wings. He was young and didn't seem to care where he was from. His dark, polished eyes gazed in deep admiration at Anya.

"It must be a better place," Anya said, "if they are all as big and strong as Volodia."

I was about to explain that I thought she'd missed the point, that he was a different species, but then I saw her antennae trembling as if she was suppressing laughter. I smiled. Perhaps I would enjoy their company.

I did. Over the next few months we got to know each other well. What Volodia lacked in memory and experience was made up by his great strength, kindness and predilection for vodka, while Anya kept us in order. But our friendship was to end one terrible March night when it was, indeed, the smell of flowers that separated Volodia and Anya, driving him out into the big world and into the dreams of the Ants and the CIA.

The Truth (2)

There was too much going on in the apartment for the humans to notice the arrival of Volodia and Anya. Hovering between one world and another, life in Moscow was becoming especially intolerable. Everyone moaned.

Dear Nadezhda, the snoring matriarch of the apartment, who had grown so wide she waddled rather than walked, used to bake cakes and pirogi. But that winter, as the nightmare froze between 1990 and 1991, all baking stopped when she took up moaning. Nothing anyone did could persuade her otherwise. "Why is it," she would begin, deaf to all protestation, "that young girl who works in the state shop wears nylon tights and lipstick but has no kolbasa?" or "Why is it that Russian vegetables disappear from the shelves before they even arrive?" The moaning turned her grey hair greyer, but still she wouldn't stop. Every time she wheeled in the brown trolley from outside, clutching at empty string bags, she began again.

Meanwhile her daughter, Sasha, not to be outdone, took to bemoaning the fate of the youth of Russia, whom she believed cared neither for the past nor the future. Sasha was an intelligent woman, as far as humans go, but should have known better than to point to her own son, Dyma, as a prime representative of this 'degeneration west' as she called it. "They have but one principle," she said, "and that is how to be unprincipled." But it would be wrong to blame Sasha alone for the events that followed. From what I saw she had to look after the whole family as well as lecture at the university, while her husband, Misha, also lectured at the university but was rarely seen in the kitchen. He used to teach English to Russians. More recently, he taught Russian to a few English students who would breeze into the living room and sit at a dusty table. They'd splutter for an hour or so, until the stale air shut them up.

Sasha hated the idea that her husband was bringing those guilty of creating the 'degeneration' west into her home, but they were the ones who, paradoxically, kept them from starvation. Sasha hated paradoxes. They made the little black moustache which grew above the sides of her mouth twitch. Her black eyes would dart around the room as if in search of some explanation.

Dyma, her son, kept out of the way. He slept in the living room which he often had to share with his grandfather - due to his grandmother wanting nothing to do with her husband - so the young boy had nowhere to go other than out. I believe he was seventeen in 1991. A difficult age in a difficult time. When he was at home he refused to join in either moaning, drinking vodka or playing chess. Sometimes he would go into his little sister's room and move the piano across the door so that no one could get in. If his mother was at home she would yell at him and pound her heavy fists on the door. More and more Dyma would stay away from the hell house as he called it.

Oddly, grandfather or 'the old man' - as he was more widely referred to - was the only one who knew better than to moan. He sat at the kitchen table and played chess with a neighbour, Nikolai Andreevich. They would, at times, sing and smash their cups down on the table but, for the most part, the old man remained silent. As if he'd run out of words. The other members of the family, especially Nadezhda, his wife, began to talk about him in the third person.

"Look at the old man, Sasha," she wailed. "His veins no longer carry blood, but pure spirits."

"Leave him alone. He's happy enough."

"Happy? You call those tears happy? They're not even salty. Look! They're lemony like the vodka he drinks."

"If he wants to be silent, then let him be. At least he doesn't moan," said Misha, looking up from his newspaper, *Pravda*, 'The Truth'. "Give him a notebook, maybe he'll start writing again."

In another life, the old man had been a writer of sorts. At least he'd written one novel. It had been hailed as a comical Faustian satire in which evil protagonists infiltrate the great Soviet Union and buy up Russian souls for packets of Marlboro and jars of Nescafe. The novel was published as the president at the time thought he had a sense of humour, but when

he realised that no one else laughed because the comedy was in fact a tragedy and the Faustian satire was of a Soviet kind, he sent it, and anyone found reading it, to a gulag in Siberia. Nevertheless, the words circled underground Russia in the form of samizdat. I once found an old copy behind the back of a dusty chest in the living room. I was dying to open it but, to be perfectly honest, it gave me stomach ache.

From what I know, the old man swapped the pen for the bottle and spent the next twenty years in relative oblivion. By 1991 it had been a while since the men in black fur hats, dark overcoats and leather boots had stood below the apartment block watching him until their noses turned purple. Even so I could often smell a sort of lemony fear emanating from him. But he was harmless enough and took to spending his nights in the kitchen with us. Staring. He would sometimes mutter that everyone has their own way of dealing with life here, that only the unbelievable is believable. Nothing was really what it seemed. Whatever that meant. No one took much notice of him.

So there were six people in the apartment including little Lena who wanted to be either a ballerina or a pianist; both aspirations discouraged by her older brother who would shout if she woke him with her vocal practice in the mornings. Three generations in a three-roomed apartment. Not including myself. Or Volodia and Anya.

After Anya gave birth, the kitchen was even fuller.

"It could be worse," I said.

Volodia and Anya didn't answer. What was there to say? They tried to get used to Sasha screaming at her son, Dyma yelling at everyone, Nadezhda moaning at everything, Misha teaching empty Russian words, and the old man's nocturnal staring. Then, when the old man began to talk to us, even I started to get slightly concerned. He'd never really bothered me before, but those nightly monologues were irksome. Not least because he was so drunk they were incomprehensible.

The good thing was that despite the opacity of mumbled words in the kitchen, Volodia never did detect that smell of flowers again, and he rather got to like the sweetly sickly smell of vodka. Lemon was also Volodia's favourite. Then pepper. We had some good times drinking until dawn before falling off the table in a drunken stupor to be chased away by Anya.

"You'll pickle your brains if you drink like that," she'd admonish. "And then you'll die." She'd then stop talking to us.

I thought this was a bit harsh but that was Anya all over. After such a pickling, Volodia would tilt his head to the side and look upset. It usually worked: Anya would start talking to us again. We'd then spend many dark and sober hours all gathered around the samovar, drinking tea and eating kasha - warm, lumpy porridge.

Volodia and Anya had been there for a few weeks when the beginning of the end happened. Or perhaps it was the end of the beginning; the narrative complication. Whichever, it all began when one day, the young boy, Dyma, fed up of hearing his grandmother Nadezhda moaning, gave her twenty dollars.

"But where did you get it from?" Nadezhda asked, her eyes gleaming.

"Shush, it's a secret. A little deal I did. Don't tell Mama."

Nadezhda, in great excitement, grabbed the trolley and went shopping without moaning once. The others should have guessed something was up. She wasn't gone for long and she came back with chicken, fresh vegetables, a tin of caviar and a bottle of vodka.

"Where did you get all this from?" Sasha exclaimed. She poked and pinched each item.

Nadezhda shrugged. "I was lucky."

Chicken was a rare smell in Moscow in those days. Not surprisingly, except for the old man and his neighbour, Nikolai Andreevich, who were still playing chess, everyone in the apartment was mad with excitement. Nadezhda and Sasha busied themselves in the kitchen roasting the chicken, making cream salads with eggs, cucumber and beetroot, boiling cabbage and frying garlic mushrooms. Misha came in with some freshly baked bread, and soon there was more food on the old kitchen table than there had been for months.

I was too old to get overly excited but I could tell Volodia and Anya were having difficulty containing themselves and even more difficulty with the youngsters, who were at

that annoying age. Neither could little Lena control herself.

"Lena, stop jumping around," Dyma yelled from the living room where he had been sent as there were too many people in the kitchen. "I can't even hear myself think."

Lena ignored him and continued waltzing from room to room with a worn out doll whose eyes hung from loose pieces of cotton. As she slid and pirouetted across the wooden floor the soles of her cream feet turned black. Like the doll, Lena had white ribbons in her dark brown hair and had unevenly painted her lips pink. She started to sing as she danced. Then the apartment door slammed and everyone in the apartment, and possibly in other apartments, heard Dyma's distant footsteps stomping down the hollow concrete stairs. Lena stopped mid-pirouette and looked worriedly at her mother.

"It's all right Lena. Dyma's just in one of his moods. It's his age... Look at this feast. I can't imagine how babushka managed to get us all this. She must have spent her life's savings."

Nadezhda had gone to the bathroom at this point and when she returned Sasha got some glasses and put them on the table.

"Now Mama, let us have some vodka for a change - before these drunkards drink it. We don't have many celebrations anymore."

They drank a toast to the New Year and then began to shovel the food into their hungry mouths. They crunched and chewed their way through the various dishes. Then the drinking began again.

"To the end of moaning," Misha said, raising his glass.

Little Lena, bored of sitting at the table, declared that she was full.

"Well, go and play us something," her mother said, clearing up some of the plates and putting them in the sink.

Lena slid out of the kitchen, holding her stomach, and headed to her room where she sat down at the piano and threw open the top. As the older generations drank more vodka and ate more food, the sound of Lena playing the piano came from the next room. After another glass, Misha shouted out.

"Lenochka, play *Kalinka*."

"She doesn't know how."

"Of course she does."

As the sound of a few random notes came from Lena's room I began to feel unease. I wasn't sure why. I had never seen the family looking so happy. Only Volodia and Anya looked miserable and I knew why that was.

Lena began to play very slowly. Misha accompanied her by clapping his hands and Nadezhda and Sasha began to sing. *Kaaa-linka.... Kalinka.... Kalinka moya...* The old man and Nikolai Andreevich continued to stare at the kings and queens, but underneath the table their feet jolted into spasms of movement as they tapped to the old song. The tempo speeded up, until Nadezhda and Sasha were lulled from their seats onto the wooden floor, stained with years of pickled vegetables. They began dancing in circles, arms raised above their heads, clicking their fingers, slowly at first, then faster and faster until the clicks became claps. Sasha dragged Misha away from his chicken. *Kaaa-linka, kalinka, kalinka, moya...*

As Lena banged the piano top down and slid into the kitchen, the women burst out laughing: a sound I was not used to hearing and one which I thought ominous.

"Another toast," Sasha called, pouring more vodka into the small glasses. "To prosperity! Next year may we have beluga as well as caviar."

The old man and Nikolai Andreevich were too engrossed in their kings and queens to pay much attention to the prospect of prosperity, but almost imperceptibly drained their glasses of vodka every time a toast was called.

"Oi, I tried to get into the berioski shop to buy some caviar and they wouldn't even let me through the door." Nadezhda slammed her hands on her hips, knocking her glass.

"Of course, they won't let you. It's all in dollars anyway," Misha replied.

The old man took one of his neighbour's bishops. Nikolai Andreevich cursed himself for making that move.

"I had dollars," Nadezhda babbled on, her tongue freed by the vodka, "but still the swines wouldn't let me in. In the end I had to ask a foreigner to buy for me." She noticed that everyone was looking at her in surprise. "What?" She stared defiantly from eye to eye.

"Where did you get dollars from, Mama?"

"I found them." Her face glowed as pink as the chicken salad.

"Dyma gave them to you, didn't he?"

Nadezhda denied the claim by vigorously shaking her head, but now no one believed her.

"What the hell is that boy up to?" Sasha muttered.

"Where is he anyway?" Misha asked Sasha, cutting up the tvoriak pie.

"Oi Misha, how should I know? You heard him slam the door. And look what a mess you're making. Let me do it. So where did he get the dollars from?" Sasha asked Nadezhda as she slithered a piece of pie onto her plate.

Nadezhda shrugged.

"How much did you spend Mama?"

"Twenty dollars."

"Twenty dollars? You've spent it all?"

"What do you mean? Twenty dollars is twenty rubles. What's the difference?"

Nadezhda asked in a hurt voice.

"About a thousand rubles," Misha pointed out. "A year's salary for some people."

"Oi Mama."

"Well, where did you think the chicken came from? Not even the longest ruble queue in Moscow could lead to a chicken. And all the fresh vegetables. And the caviar."

There was a silence as they all digested a thousand rubles.

"It was worth it, Mama. But what the devil is that boy up to?" Sasha repeated to herself.

The old man burped as he moved his king. "Check," he said.

"I think you've had enough." Nadezhda snapped the vodka bottle out of her husband's crinkly hand. "Why is it you men have to drink so much vodka in order to get through a day?"

The old man burped again. "Check."

Just then the key turned in the lock and the apartment door opened.

"Dyma, is that you?" Sasha called.

"No, it's the KGB," Dyma shouted from the hallway.

"Do you want anything to eat? You stormed out without anything."

"No, I'm not hungry." Dyma came and stood in the kitchen. He was a pale, thin boy with long, straggly brown hair and large brown eyes.

"Where've you been?"

"Out. Have you listened to the news? They're taking all fifty and hundred ruble notes out of circulation."

Nadezhda screamed and threw her hands up in horror. "My savings!"

"I didn't think you had any savings," Sasha said.

Nadezhda's pink face reddened.

"Where did you hear this?" his father asked.

"I told you, it was on the news."

"But why?"

"Because they're idiots. They say it's because of speculators, but really it's just because they're stupid." Dyma paused and added, "like you lot."

"*Uzhas kako!* What'll I do?" Nadezhda wailed, clutching her enormous stuffed belly.

"Nothing. In a few months, nobody's savings would be worth much anyway. Times are changing. Thank God."

"But we don't have that inflating thing here. That's what they have in America, not here."

"I'm afraid it's coming, babushka."

"What rubbish. It won't come while I'm around that's for sure."

Sasha stared at her son as if trying to peer into his mind. Misha poured some vodka. The old man moved his king. "Check," he said.

"You old sod," Nikolai Andreevich said.

"Is that all you care about?" Nadezhda shouted at her husband.

"Calm down, Mama, it's not his fault the world is changing." Sasha tried to coax Nadezhda to sit down.

"No, it's all mine," Dyma muttered.

Nadezhda ignored him.

"But why can't he do something about it? All his life he's pretended to be a writer and what does he do. He sits and plays chess, drinks and does nothing. All that we have worked for, for seventy years, is being threatened by this inflating democracy thing and he just sits there. They might as well have left him in prison." She clutched her large chest, panting for breath.

"Calm down, Mama. Have some pie."

"Why can't you speak? When I'm about to lose all our savings."

"Check mate," the old man said.

Nadezhda began to wail again until no one could take it any longer and suggested she should go to bed. She yelled that when she went to bed she wouldn't get up again. Well that was the first possible good news I'd heard all evening, but then events were to deteriorate.

Lena slid into the kitchen again; one bow now hanging off her hair. She looked uncertainly at the grown-ups. Just then Nadezhda let out a scream which left even her silent. Everyone looked at her in horror, as if she'd been murdered, but she was pointing to the floor.

"Ddid you see the size of it?" she stuttered.

"What is it?" Sasha asked. "Oh, it's nothing. You're tired and upset."

Nadezhda regained the power of speech.

"You didn't see it. Now, I'll go to bed. The little ones I can cope with but when I have to share my kitchen with those big, filthy bastards, I know that it's time..." She grabbed *The Truth* from the table, rolled up the newspaper and started beating the floor.

The old man suddenly turned away from his black and white board and grabbed feebly at his wife.

"No, no, don't kill them. You'll regret it."

"Shut up you old cockroach yourself." Nadezhda started to beat him instead with the newspaper until Misha persuaded her to go to bed.

"It's the vodka," he said.

But no one looked convinced.

They all left at last. Even the old man was taken into the living room and put to bed on the sofa. Fortunately, we were all right. Volodia hid under the fridge and refused to come out. Anya went to interrogate him.

"Why did you run out like that, you idiot?"

Poor Volodia. It was his fault that the little ones had almost been beaten to death by *The Truth*. He was the big, filthy bastard.

"They were all over the place," he said, at last.

Their youngsters simply hadn't been able to control themselves any longer and had crept under the table to eat the scraps. Then they'd started crawling round the back of the chairs. A potentially fatal mistake of which Volodia tried to warn them.

"Well, don't do it again," Anya told him and went to warn the others. "This time you were lucky," she said, but they weren't listening. They had better things to do.

Later that night, the old man stumbled into the kitchen again, switched on the light and saw us on the table where some of the plates had been left out. The little ones hurried to safety this time, but I didn't bother. I knew he wouldn't harm us. He stared for so long I almost forgot he was there and continued climbing over the remains of the pink chicken salad. Then he sat down in front of his old notebook and moved his head closer to the plate. Our eyes met. His were a watery blue; the same colour as the pantry. His grey hair draped over his almost bald head like the fine gossamer looped around the cornices of the kitchen. For the first time in a long time, his words were comprehensible.

"I bet you could tell a few tales," he said.

The mysterious can

(3)

The truth is I couldn't. Tell stories that is. Which is precisely why I'm telling Volodia's. I rarely go out of the apartment anymore. I used to. But I'm too old for all that, apart from the occasional trip to the kiosk. A long time ago I found it fun trying to outwit the humans, but in those days the revolutionaries were still few and far between. These days I have no intention of going anywhere. Even now. I came to the conclusion a long time ago that, whatever we did, our relationship with people would never change, partly because we liked the same things. I no longer questioned the hatred with which they rolled up in newspapers. Or worse.

But Volodia and Anya thought differently.

"I don't understand, how can they call us dirty bastards when it's their dirt we live in?" Anya said.

"Well, what do you expect?" I asked, surprised at her naivete. She should have known better.

Volodia's antennae trailed on the floor.

Most humans could just about tolerate Anya and I as we were small. But Volodia was different, which was why I had been hesitant of his moving in. I've never quite understood the reason, but the bigger and darker we are, the more they hate us. I used to think it was a sight thing, that they couldn't see us that well (like the bugs that live in their beds), but I soon realised that this was a myth and that most of the time, they only pretended they couldn't see us. But, it would seem that, not even the greatest actor among them could pretend not to see Volodia.

Whatever the reason, after narrowly escaping being beaten to death by *The Truth*, life for us cockroaches or 'tarakani' (as we are known here) grew progressively worse. The next day coincided with the manifestation of a mysterious can in the cupboard under the sink. We didn't really pay it much attention at the time, presuming it was a new kind of air freshener to foul up the stuffy air.

"Definitely not edible," Volodia said. He had examined every part.

That was obvious, but we concluded that it wasn't important; that it was something that had been bought for the sake of buying, after having made a guest appearance in a shop.

After Nadezhda's withdrawal from the kitchen, a new routine was needed. Sasha took her place and did most of the cooking, shopping and moaning. She would appear in the kitchen earlier than before, scattering us into the multifarious nooks and crannies, where we spend most of our days. There was a useful gap under the blue pantry door, which, via the back wall, led to a tunnel of cupboards. The first two cupboards sometimes contained tins but it was the pantry that was the most important as this was where rice, potatoes, carrots, jars of compote, beet and sugar were stored. At least, they used to be. The wall units contained plates, glasses and other such utensils, which were of no interest to us. The fridge was by the window in the corner opposite the pantry providing an elaborate system of warm pipes at the back, which made a perfect hideout. Next to the fridge was the stove - still worth visiting after everyone had gone to bed, but fatal to be found on or in during the daytime. Then there was the bench that ran along the wall and jutted out into the room. The old wood, painted the same pale blue as the pantry, ran down to the faded parquet floor, but the wood was chipped and split and it was possible to hide inside the bench and even to emerge under the table. My personal favourite place was a crack in the wood at the base of the bench where I could simultaneously hide and watch the world around me. Volodia and Anya kept to the pantry.

"How am I supposed to manage? Nobody even keeps the same hours," Sasha once said to her husband before even daylight had managed to crawl into the kitchen. She sat on a stool at the table, in front of a tiny mirror and gazed helplessly at the dark rings around her eyes, while the old man snored on the bench opposite.

"Get Dyma to help," her husband suggested.

"You get Dyma to help. You know damn well he's not interested in anything. That's what I keep telling you about this degeneration west; they're not even interested in democracy,

equality, human rights... all they want is Coca-Cola and hamburgers."

Misha opened up *The Truth* while the old man let out several grunts.

"The point is, Sasha, even if we had a democracy, it would not be a democratic one so maybe it doesn't make any difference."

Misha yawned.

"We have to make our own lives. Maybe Dyma realises more than we do."

"Don't be ridiculous. Dedushka, let's put you to bed." She shook the old man, whose eyes popped open brimming with tears of vodka. "Now, now, dedushka, it's all right, are you ready?"

Nearly every morning, Sasha would lead the old man a few steps away from the table before he would shout, "My book," and pick up the dirty grey notebook complete with new smudges of compote before being shuffled off to bed. Lena, who'd since exchanged her white bows for frayed pink ribbons, would pass her granddad on her way out from the bathroom and take his place at the kitchen table. Her dirty cream tights poking out of a red skirt just about touched the floor beneath the table.

"Can we go to the ballet tonight, mum, plea-ease?" she would ask her mother whilst extracting the lumps from her kasha. And every morning Sasha ushered her off to school with her friend from the next apartment, promising to try and get tickets. Then Misha and Sasha would leave to go to work - except for the days when Misha was expecting students.

For a few hours all would fall quiet until Dyma sauntered in at about mid-day and woke us with his bad moods, opening cupboards and slamming them shut again. Sitting at the table, he would drink a cup of tea and eat whatever was leftover. Then, rather than read the newspaper as the others generally did, he would take a pair of scissors and cut *The Truth* into small squares and disappear with them into the small, windowless toilet. On further investigation, we discovered that he used them instead of toilet paper. That seemed like a good idea but the black and white squares didn't taste as good as real toilet paper. With time, however, we learnt to swallow them.

When the majority of the human inhabitants were out, we sometimes crossed the dusty wooden floors into the living room where we would find dozens of textbooks showing pictures of the wonderful achievements of the workers of the union. Volodia took a liking to crawling inside the covers that portrayed people with blond hair and tanned smiling faces hard at work in golden fields, unaware that these books, containing great recitations of agricultural production, would one day be accomplices to many violent deaths.

In the corner of the living room there was a television which stood on four legs and, more often than not, talked to itself as no one seemed capable of listening to it for long without throwing up his or her hands in exasperation and walking into the kitchen. Only Nadezhda seemed happy watching it for hours on end if someone moved it into her bedroom. If it was not there, she would stare at the corner of the room and grumble to a god she had created since her savings had been confiscated by the State.

Then as the frozen nights of 1991 passed, the word 'deficit' became a hilarious joke. Sasha, whose dark rings had grown darker, declared that they had to laugh, or else they would die. The pantry got emptier and emptier.

"Perhaps we would have been better off in apartment 303 after all." Anya sighed and nibbled at a square of *The Truth*.

Signs of discontent in the great union of workers began to spill into the living room as angry marches, raised voices and the sound of gunfire boomed out of the television.

Fat old Nadezhda turned thinner and baggier. I know humans don't normally shed their skins but hers was so baggy I thought she might, but she didn't, of course. Dyma, following his grandmother's example, lay in his bed most of the time and refused to get up, declaring that there was nothing to get up for. That meant that two out of three rooms became permanently occupied.

The only good thing in apartment 503 at that time was the old man who would emit one last burp and sweep his breadcrumbs onto the floor for us before his head hit the table. Then, the old man ran out of vodka as 'deficits' hit the city. It was replaced by benzene for a while but too many stomachs burnt out (including Volodia's, who insisted on trying it, and ended up unable to eat for two days). In protest at the vodka deficit, the old man and his neighbour, Nikolai Andreevich, left their chess pieces in stale-mate, vowing not to move them again until they had a new board on which to play and a constant supply of alcohol. Without his chess and his vodka, the old man stayed awake all night and stared into his dirty, grey notebook, dripping sobering tears onto its cover.

One night Dyma came in to the kitchen, switched on the light and sat on the bench. We were all over the place at the time, not used to nocturnal visits. Volodia followed me under the table and we clung to the wood in the shadows, staring at Dyma's long, bare feet poking out of an off white towel like dressing gown. His toe nails were black.

"How can you sit here surrounded by these bastards, dedushka?" Dyma asked in disgust, flicking one of the little ones off the table.

I can't remember much about Volodia's offspring as I didn't know them for very long but, whoever it was, despite not having developed wings, flew impressively through the air and out of the kitchen into the hall.

"Don't do that," the old man said in alarm. "How would you like it if someone did that to you?"

"*Nu chto!* They don't feel anything. They're vermin..."

"They may be vermin to you but did you know that they have found fossils here in Russia dating *tarakani* to the carboniferous period which means that have been around for more than three hundred million years - unchanged? How do you account for that, young Dyma? These "vermin" are nature's oldest, most successful species. They travel around the world - more than you and I ever will. They communicate. I've watched them Dyma. See how their eyes shine? That's intelligence, that is. Look, they know we're talking about them. They watched the dinosaurs come and go, and now... maybe they're waiting for us to come and go." The old man lowered his voice. "You know that they would be the only survivors of a nuclear war, young Dyma eh?"

Dyma shook his head. "Grandmother's right - you really are an old cockroach." He slouched back to the living room.

"You be careful, young man, they know how to take revenge," the old man called after him.

Dyma grunted.

Well, I wasn't surprised by this conversation but, sadly, I can't authenticate the old man's claims. I don't remember any dinosaurs although everyone knows what good travellers we are - albeit often unwillingly. In the past, I suppose we used to be transported onto ships in boxes of bananas and sacks of rice. Now it's even easier: the bottom of a shopping trolley, a rucksack, inside a parcel to be airmailed thousands of miles, inside a coat pocket... the possibilities are endless. As for our intelligence. Let's just say some are cleverer than others.

"What's a dinosaur?" Volodia asked after the kitchen had fallen silent again and the little one had been found safe and well inside the rim of the toilet.

"There's one in the room next door," Anya replied coming to join us.

I thought she meant Nadezhda but she led us to a book beside Lena's bed where there were, indeed, a couple of dinosaurs.

"This is an apatosaurus..." A chunky creature with a long tail and legs like little trees was chewing a green plant.

"And this is an ichthyosaurus." It had a long head and tapering body, a long tail and four flippers. This one was swimming in the sea.

"They don't look half as bad as the humans," Volodia said, voicing all our thoughts.

The next morning a brown envelope summoned Dyma to the army.

"I'm not going," he told his mother, huddled under an old patchwork quilt on the sofa in the living room.

"You have to go for an inspection. Maybe you'll get an exemption certificate from the doctor," Sasha said, gathering up the textbooks. "Besides, you can't sit about here all day and hang about the streets for the rest of your life."

"I'm not going to the army and that's that," Dyma shouted. "Exemption certificates depend on money, not health. Have you got a few thousand rubles to spare?"

"Of course not, Dyma, but you seem to have money enough when you want," his mother said, "What can we do? If you had gone to university like we said you wouldn't have these problems."

"What's the point of going to university? You can't eat books."

"God help us! I have to go Dyma. We'll talk about this later. Okay?" His mother dashed out of the apartment, slamming the padded door.

Despite the continuing Russian freeze, that day the air in the apartment turned sour as if it had curdled from too many bad thoughts. Dyma broke his habit and got up. He wandered from one room to another, picking up books, papers and putting them down again. His grandmother lay decaying in the other room while the steady drone of a million promises of a brighter future resonated from the television. The old man lay on the sofa snorting up the sour but sober air making him cry out in his sleep.

"Shit. There must be more to life than this?" Dyma kept saying.

Volodia must have agreed as he was taking great risks in running around the apartment.

"I can smell something sweet," he said, joining me under the table.

"I would stay here if I were you."

"I'll just take a quick look." His right antenna twitched in excitement.

I knew he was onto something, but I didn't know this was the beginning of a dangerous obsession with chocolate. He climbed up the back wall leading to the table and headed towards the coats in the hall. Not a good idea. Then Misha came home complaining that there was no bread left anywhere in the city. This was bad news.

"I don't know why you couldn't go out and get some for us, Dyma. God knows, you're the only one with any time to queue. I mean what have you done today other than get up which is, admittedly, an improvement..."

Misha didn't get a chance to finish as Dyma suddenly grabbed his coat and cried in English, "Fuck you all!" and walked out, taking Volodia with him.

Ice, no cream
(4)

This was the first time Volodia had been out of the apartment block and, within seconds, he regretted it. A small hole in Dyma's pocket revealed the floor of a city, held together by ice and partly covered in snow. Hundreds of padded human feet trudged over the slippery and rugged mountainous surfaces where deep ruts cut through the pavement and metal lines jutted out of the packed ice and snow. Even the chocolate was hardening.

Fearful of the world below Volodia took a mouthful of chocolate and crept near the top of the pocket, but this was even worse. As Dyma crossed over a road he saw the human world in all its horror. Faded tin cars and trucks bumped along the wintry roads spitting out blue-grey clouds of noxious vapours. An army of humans wrapped in fur stood in the middle of the road and waited for - what looked like to Volodia - a moving apartment block tipped on its side, which thundered down the metal lines, its trapezoidal antennae flashing blue sparks of lightning. Volodia tried to block his antennae by stuffing them into the bits of fluff which gathered in the pocket.

“What number is it, comrade?” someone called out.

“Number 18.”

Dyma tipped his fur hat further over his eyes so that only his nostrils were visible. He got onto the tram, which was crammed with humans. Their frozen breath melted on expiration and formed rain clouds which poured down the inside of the windows. Volodia found his integument pressed against wet glass, petrified. He swallowed. The sweet chocolate left a bitter aftertaste.

The doors swished together and the tram gave out a faint 'ding' before it plunged towards Preobrazhenskaya Ploshad (the nearest metro station to the apartment), past the shops, the kiosks, the white sports stadium, and the hundreds of identical concrete housing blocks which rose up behind the long queues and empty shop windows. On the tram, tickets passed from glove to glove to the person standing nearest the ticket stamper with only the occasional murmuring of 'spacibo'.

After a few stops, Dyma squeezed out of the tram and descended underground where, despite the cold weather, hundreds of bouquets of flowers were blooming. Volodia had never seen or smelled so many flowers before. Flowers in the underground - just like the smell outside the apartment, - he later told us. There was something about the smell of flowers that made him feel queasy. Although, by this time, there were so many horrors that Volodia didn't know which to worry about most. He dreaded to think where he was going or if he would ever make it back. Even if he did make it back, he suspected Anya would be furious with him. His antennae drooped in shame.

Dyma stumbled through heavy wooden framed doors, filled with finger smeared glass, past a uniformed woman and down into the warm underworld of Moscow where trains were pumped as continuously as blood from a heart.

In the throbbing crowds, Volodia was unwittingly carried to the heart of the city. He peered out of the top of the pocket, his arching, black antennae, no doubt, blending in with the frayed strands of cotton. Humans surrounded him in all directions, some dressed in fur and cashmere, others in gingham and canvas. Many of them clutched and stared at folded squares of *The Truth*.

The underground train stopped and the doors sighed and swung open. People swarmed onto a platform guarded by stone soldiers clutching guns. Emblems of hammers and sickles were engraved on the walls and great chandeliers hung from the painted ceilings. Dyma made his way up a long escalator, which stretched from the sculpted viscera of the city to a large painted dome: the last refuge before the cold. After flying up and over the moving step-like mountain ranges, Volodia watched as four strange shoes with tassels, pale blue jeans and a sports bag on a floor covered in ash came closer. This did not look promising. Idiot, he told himself and vowed never again to be allured by chocolate. He had no choice but to listen.

“Hey Dyma.”

“Hi Krak, Bolshi.”

“Bad news?”

"Yeah."

"Me too. When?" Krak replied.

"5th March."

"Great. They'll shave our heads, give us a pair of boots two sizes too small and then send us to have our legs blown off in fucking Georgia or Chechnya or some other hell hole."

"Oi, shut it, Krak. We'll think of something," Bolshi said.

"There's no way I'm going," Dyma muttered.

"It's all right for you. You're already clear," Krak hissed at Bolshi.

"Yeah and you will be soon too. Take some drugs - high blood pressure."

"Maybe. It doesn't work for everyone though. You were lucky."

"Well, whatever you gonna do, we're gonna need money and I spot a hatless foreigner in a nice pair of boots. Go Dyma."

Dyma ambled across to where the girl was standing. As Dyma bent down to pick up a pen, Volodia was made to look out of the top of the pocket. A girl was looking through newspapers and grainy postcards laid out on a table. She had long dark hair and wore a grey duffel coat, a matching woollen hat and gloves and boots; all very different to the kinds of clothes that were in the apartment. Dyma stood up and greeted her in Russian, holding out the pen.

"*Nyet, spacibo,*" she replied, glancing at him.

"I only asked if this is yours?" Dyma asked in English. (Volodia recognised the language which the foreigners who came to the apartment spoke, but the knowledge didn't really make him feel any better.)

"Oh thank you. I am sorry, I thought you wanted to change money."

"*Izvinite pozhaluista! A pochemu vy stoite zdes'?*" A large woman barged between them. Volodia felt the full force on his integument.

"I think we're in the way here," the young girl said.

"If we were in an empty field, we'd still be in the way for her."

The girl laughed.

"But my friends are standing over there. Would you like to join us?"

"Okay."

Recovering from the force of a babushka, Volodia glanced out at the mass of regurgitated human bodies being delivered by the escalator and to where Krak and Bolshi were standing with the sports bag. This all looked less than promising.

"Change...?" Bolshi asked the girl as she approached. Dyma told him in Russian to shut it; this one was different. Bolshi muttered, "the different ones aren't going to keep you out of the army, friend."

"Are these your friends? I've seen him in the Post Office. He does change money," she said, accusingly.

"Do you want an ice-cream?" Dyma asked.

"What, here?" The girl looked round.

"No, but we can go and get one."

"Sure."

"What's your name?"

"Karen. What's yours?"

"Dyma."

"Dyma? That's a strange name."

"It's short for Dmitrii."

"In English, 'dim' means 'not bright'."

"I know. But it's not Dim, it's Dyma."

Krak and Bolshi groaned, picked up the bag and trailed reluctantly behind Dyma, out through the heavy doors and into the streets. Volodia, also reluctantly, watched. Massive solid stone buildings, decorated with emblems and slogans, loomed up all around. Statues held postures of victory up into the grey skies. The temperature was freezing and dropping. But, despite the coldness, Volodia could smell a tantalising aroma of mouldy cabbage and tobacco.

However, even that couldn't compensate for the now frozen chocolate in Dyma's

pocket. For the first time in his short life, Volodia felt deeply unhappy.

They entered an ice-cream parlour. It had pink letters painted on the glass front. On the inside there were dull aluminium coloured stools and tables. However, there was a queue outside and even Volodia had learnt from the humans in the apartment, where there's a queue, there's hope. Not that Volodia would have quite called it that. Neither, it would seem, did Dyma's friends.

"Bullshit, we're not queuing," Bolshi declared and went to speak to someone on the door and, within minutes, they were inside.

"How did you manage to do that?" Karen asked Bolshi. Bolshi looked sulkily at Dyma for a translation.

"The same way as you manage to get anything done in this country," Dyma replied for him. "You bribe them."

"But that's not fair. What about the people who can't afford it?"

"They don't get in."

"I thought you had a Revolution to get rid of that sort of shit."

"Did you?" Dyma asked in surprise.

"Yeah, well what do you want?" Karen asked. "I'll get them."

"No, you'll pay more."

"Well, take this then."

Bolshi took the twenty-five ruble note that Karen held out and went to order. Krak pulled out a packet of Kosmos cigarettes and offered them round.

"So where you from?"

"London, but I've just come back on the Trans-Siberian train from Beijing. Before that I was in Tokyo."

Dyma translated for Krak and then they were silent for a moment.

"What did you do in Tokyo? Vacation?"

"No Japan is very expensive. I was working."

"Doing what?"

"In a nightclub."

Dyma raised his eyebrows in surprise. Krak asked him what was the matter and Dyma told him. Krak asked if she was a prostitute.

"Are you a prostitute?"

"Because someone works in a club, do you presume they're a prostitute?"

Everyone nodded.

"Here in Moscow all the girls want to work in the clubs so that they can be prostitutes and earn hard currency," Dyma said.

"Yeah well, in Japan it's a bit different. All you do is serve drinks and talk."

"Talk?"

"Yeah, talk. Like we're doing."

"You get paid for talking?"

"Yeah."

Dyma sounded surprised and translated for Krak.

"How much do you get paid for talking?"

"Twenty-five dollars an hour."

There was silence.

"What?"

"Nothing," replied Dyma.

"Actually, thinking about it, the club I used to work in was frequented by Russians - or, at least, one Russian. What was his name? I only met him once. Didn't like him. It was a funny name... Yenov! That was it. Yenov."

Dyma told the others and there followed an even longer silence.

"At least, I think he was Russian," Karen added.

"How's the train?"

"It takes five days... there's usually no water and food by the third... but it's cheap. Black market tickets cost about a hundred dollars from Beijing to Berlin which..."

"What are the guards? Passport control?" Dyma interrupted. He sounded excited.

"How do you mean? Immigration? They come onto the train - usually in the middle of the night when you're sleeping and wake you up, demanding to see your passport. Except Mongolia."

Volodia was even more horrified. He didn't know where these places were but he knew they weren't in Moscow. And he suspected that they were a long way away. He wondered if he should abandon Dyma's pocket there and then rather than risk a long train journey, but he wasn't too sure about the smooth white marble floor. Besides, if he left now, he would never see Anya again. And, despite the fact that he suspected she would be furious with him, he did want to see her again.

"What happens in Mongolia?"

"There's a disco."

"A what? A disco?"

"Yes. There's a disco on the border. It's pretty weird."

"Weird? Do they search the cabins?"

"Sometimes, not always. Usually only if it's inconvenient, like in the middle of the night. Why? Thinking of taking a free ride? Wouldn't think it was much of an advantage going to China..." Karen shut up when she realised Dyma wasn't listening. He was talking to Krak.

Bolshi came back with three coffees and put them on the table.

"There's ice, but no cream, so I got coffee," he said by way of explanation. "You like hats?" Bolshi asked Karen. He unzipped his bag and showed Karen a black fur hat.

"Yes, I do actually. How much?"

"Fifteen dollars."

"Can I try it?"

As she did, Krak and Dyma stopped their conversation and stared at her.

"Very beautiful," Bolshi said.

Karen blushed.

"You go back?" Dyma asked Karen.

"Where?"

"Japan."

"Yeah, I'm supposed to be going back in the spring. There's not much in...Yai!" Karen let out a short but high-pitched scream.

"What?" Dyma asked.

Karen pointed to the floor. The boys laughed. Krak went over and stamped on something that scrunched like an eggshell beneath his tasselled shoes.

Volodia crepitated in horror. If that was what he thought it was, he'd been right about the floor.

"Shit Krak, you shouldn't do that," Dyma said.

"Fucking cockroaches," Krak said, his toes still dancing on death. "These bastards are responsible for all the scum in Moscow."

"I doubt it. They've been around for a lot longer than we have. Did you know, they're one of the few life forms that would survive a nuclear war?"

"Is that right?" Bolshi asked.

"Even more reason to get rid of them now then." Krak laughed.

The other two joined in.

"My grandfather reckons that they can see and hear everything. He even thinks they communicate with each other and that they know how to take revenge."

"Yeah right. Your grandfather's got porridge for brains..."

"That's what I said, but you know..."

"Are you serious? Come on, let's go. Shit coffee anyway," Bolshi said.

"What are you talking about?" Karen asked.

"Cockroaches."

"Does she want this hat or not?" Bolshi asked Dyma.

Tolstoi, Dostoevskii and dinosaurs
(5)

By the time Sasha returned, only Nadezhda was left in the apartment. From her bed, the remains of the shrinking matriarch whispered something about the dried up old fool having gone to get vodka before he died, and Misha having gone to get food before they all died. She couldn't remember what Dyma went out for.

"But it's minus fifteen!" Sasha said and stormed out after them.

An unusual silence fell into the apartment. Both Nadezhda and the television must have fallen asleep as both had shut up their babbling monologues addressed to the walls. Even Anya felt safe enough to come out of the blue pantry during the day and mournfully scour the kitchen.

"Any news?" she asked me.

I shook my head. I was tired and hungry.

"The idiot. Why did he have to go off like that?" she asked. Without waiting for a reply, she turned towards the kitchen door. Worried, I followed her.

By that time, the only thing left in the kitchen cupboards was the can of air freshener, which the old man wouldn't let any of the other humans near, and the now white nymphs who were in the process of moulting. But when I went to the cupboard earlier, even the can wasn't there; he must have taken it with him when he went to buy vodka. We had eaten even the cleaning sponge and the remaining squares of *The Truth*. All that remained were the ghosts who, once finished, would require even more food.

In desperation, I suggested to Anya that we try the books in the lounge, but a diet of Tolstoi and Dostoevskii gave us immediate stomach-ache. Next, Anya tried the English textbooks, but these, she concluded, were indigestible. Clutching our bellies we shuffled back into the kitchen.

Not long after, the door opened to the sound of tuneless singing and shuffling feet.

"Wait! Wait... wait where's NNikNikolai Andreeevich..." the old man slurred.

"He's probably asleep now. Lena, go to bed please, it's late. Come on dedushka. Let's sit you down."

"Nadezhzhda? Would you care to drink with me?"

"Keep that drunken old sod out of here," Nadezhda whispered from her bed. Her voice sounded wafer thin.

Sasha led the old man into the kitchen, carrying a jar of kvass, in a wavering hand.

"*Bozhe moi!* What am I going to do with you?" Sasha muttered.

The old man's head crashed onto the table. Then I felt the whole edifice shake as he began snoring. Sasha extracted the kvass from his fingers just as Misha came home.

"Why's the door open?" he asked as he walked into the hall. Then he saw the old man.

"There he is. I've looked everywhere for him."

"He was drinking down at the kiosk..."

"I looked there."

"...drowning himself in vodka. The great Russian solution."

Misha saw how upset Sasha was and put his arms around her.

"Well I've got milk, bread, potatoes, kolbasa, cabbage and onions. Not bad eh? But I had to go down to Sokol'niki, there's nothing round here."

On hearing this, I crepitated. This was the best news I'd heard for ages. Then I remembered Volodia and felt guilty.

"Well done," Sasha said hugging her husband as he unpacked his acquisitions into the pantry. "Where's Dyma?"

"He swore at me in English and then stormed out this afternoon after I suggested he went shopping."

"Did he tell you about his call up papers for the army?"

"No, he didn't."

"Well, he received them this morning. He's determined not to go and I'm afraid he's going to do something stupid."

Misha was quiet for a while. "What makes you say that?"

"Just a feeling."

"Well, this should come as no surprise. He's known it'd happen at some time. If he'd gone to University..."

"I know, I know, I told him."

"Maybe the doctor might do us a favour. His son's going to University soon. I might be able to pull a few strings."

"Shush, it's him," Sasha said as the front door clicked open.

Dyma sauntered into the apartment with red lipstick on his cheek. Both his parents were standing in the kitchen waiting for him. His granddad was still snoring on the table. He headed for the lounge.

"Dyma, can you come here please. We need to talk." His father spoke in his serious voice; the one he used to lecture.

Dyma sighed and altered course towards the kitchen. He slouched in the doorway.

"Where've you been Dyma? It's late. And what's that on your cheek?" his mother asked.

"Oh, ice-cream," Dyma said, wiping it off absentmindedly. "Is that it?"

"No, it isn't it, Dmitrii. Your mother's only just told me that..."

"Ice cream? Strawberry? Where've you been to get ice cream?"

"It doesn't matter, Sasha."

Something caught Sasha's attention on the floor. She swore and stormed over to the cupboard.

"Now, what's the matter?" Dyma asked.

I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw Volodia. He ran under the bench his legs pounding up-down as he approached. I let him squeeze into the gap in the wood, which he did ungraciously by crouching on top of me making me feel how a baby matrieshka might feel.

"Where is it?" Sasha went over to the old man and rummaged around in his pockets, but he woke up. "Oh, never mind. Just tell us where you've been." She sounded tired.

"Shit, I don't have to put up with this," Dyma mumbled.

"Yes you do because you live in this apartment and you're only seventeen," Sasha said.

"Only? You know you're such hypocrites. You're happy for me to go to the army at 'only' seventeen and get blown up, but if I come home a little late without having stood in a queue for ten hours, you go mad. Well, I've fucking had enough." Dyma shouted the last sentence before turning his back on his parents and walking out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him. Even the bench shook.

Misha went after him, but all we heard was a distant scream of frustration which echoed through the building. He called after his son but the only response he got was from other residents who opened their doors and shouted out for him to be quiet for once or else they'd complain to the committee and get them thrown out.

"Oh to hell with them," Sasha said, coming to the door and slamming it shut. They went back into the kitchen.

"When you've finished arguing, I need a pee," Nadezhda groaned from the other room.

"And I'm trying to sleep," Lena said, coming into the kitchen.

"Sorry, Lenchka. Go on back to bed now. I'll be in in a minute. And Mama, you can go for a pee."

The old man, still snoring on the table, clutched the can of air freshener.

"There it is, the old sod," Sasha cried, trying to tug it from his sleeping hands, but the old man rested his head on it.

"Here sit down. Have a drink of kvass."

Sasha sat down at the table and allowed Misha to place a glass of kvass in her hands.

"I'm sorry but Mama's right: the kitchen's overrun with roaches. Anyway what're we going to do?"

"Do about what? Dyma or the vermin?"

"Dyma. Not much we can do about the vermin in this city."

"Not much we can do about Dyma either. He'll be back."

"But where will he go at this time? And it's minus twenty out there." Sasha drank some kvass. "Yuck, tastes like fermented pee."

"Probably is."

Sasha thought for a minute. "Perhaps we should call the militia?"

"Great idea, Sasha. Do you know how many thousands of people there are 'missing'. And if they did find him, they'd arrest him and he'd end up in even more trouble. Come on, drink up and let's go to bed. He's got a key if he wants to get in."

Volodia and I, in particular, were relieved when the kitchen light went out and the human feet thumped through the hall. At last we could extract ourselves from the crack in the wood which was really only big enough for one. We waited until the sound of them gasping and spitting in salt water could no longer be heard. Only when we were sure they had gone to their rooms did we venture onto the floor. Anya came rushing over and perched in front of Volodia.

"Well?" She sounded angry, but I could see that she was pleased that he was home really.

"You wouldn't believe all the horrible things that have happened to me." Volodia looked hurt.

"What happened then?" Anya asked.

He told us about the horror of the underground, the marble statues, the millions of sour-faced humans, the stink of flowers and the murder of a fellow creature.

"Well, if you will chase chocolate, what do you expect?" Anya was clearly unimpressed.

"So who," I asked him, "was crushed on the marble floor?"

But he had no idea.

"It may have been one of the Ants," I half joked. "They like to target restaurants."

He didn't get it and began telling us that after the ice-cream parlour he had been taken for a walk in Gorkii park while Dyma and Karen talked and talked. They even got so far as planning to meet up one day in Tokyo and, finally, they parted after promising to meet up the next day.

Anya twitched her antennae as if she was about to say something but then thought better of it and ran to the pantry where the food was stored. We followed her to find the remaining twenty-five and once again dark but bigger nymphs already there.

Over the next few weeks, life for us didn't improve. Dyma never returned, the old man wouldn't sober up (even though nobody knew what he was drinking), Nadezhda still refused to get out of bed and the queues were getting longer.

"I really think we should move out," Anya said.

"Where to?" I doubted Volodia would want to go anywhere after his trip to the ice-cream cafe and walk in the park. Volodia looked questioningly at Anya.

"The rubbish chute smells good."

"It's too cold," I said before realising that I shouldn't get involved. After all it would be to my advantage if they moved out. Except I'd miss my big friend.

"Dinosaurs!" - Volodia declared. "Let's eat dinosaurs!"

Anya and I, remembering the effects of Dostoevskii and Tolstoi, were not quite as enthusiastic. Who could say that dinosaurs would be any different?

Dead flowers
(6)

We survived on a diet of dinosaurs, unwanted skin and bedbugs for a few more weeks. By this time it was nearly spring, 1991, and Volodia and Anya must have been in the apartment for three months. Then, one grey afternoon in March, when the slow thaw had at last set in, Sasha came home covered in slush, wearing tears in her eyes. String bags were looped around her arms and her hands clutched muddy daffodils. Nadezhda was wailing at the television which had solemnly declared that the cost of the beloved Metro, built on the blood and bones of millions of workers, would no longer be the five kopecks that it had been for decades. Inflation was threatening an inflationless world with a vengeance and prices were set to triple. People clamoured for the end of the hammer and sickle and the beginning of a real world.

In the kitchen, the old man stared out of the window at the distant chimneys. The yellow smoke pumped out into the grey clouds made the sky look bruised. Sometimes, when the windows were open, black ash landed on the floor and Sasha would say, "Such are the achievements of our nation."

Lena met her mother and took the flowers from her. "Mama? What happened to the flowers?"

Sasha's tears burst open and spilled down her face. "Nothing, Lenchka." She tried to smile but the tips of her mouth hardly moved. "I just thought some flowers would cheer us up, but I dropped them in the mud."

"Poor thing," the old man muttered from the kitchen.

Later, after Misha came home, they sat down to eat around the kitchen table, where the dirty daffodils drooped in a glass of water, when someone buzzed at the door. Lena jumped up and ran to open it. Sasha and Misha looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

"Ask who it is first, Lena," Misha called.

But it was too late. Lena had already buzzed open the door. She came back into the kitchen.

"They want to speak to you," she whispered to her parents. She sounded frightened.

"Who is it, Lenchka?" her father asked, getting up.

"The militia."

Sasha and Misha went towards the door, but the uniformed men were already stomping through the apartment, looking into all three rooms, leaving a trail of muddy ice on the wooden floor. Nadezhda did not look surprised to see men poking into the corners of her room but refused to answer their questions. The old man began to tremble as if this was the moment he'd dreaded all his life.

The militia were looking for Dmitrii Mikhailovich Danskoi. He had failed to show up for his army inspection after being caught during his medical with silver paper taped over his lungs. The militiaman snorted in such disgust that the hairs in his nose rippled around his nostrils.

"Tuberculosis," he condescendingly explained to Sasha. "If they have tuberculosis, they must forego the pleasure of serving our great Soviet Union."

Sasha nodded as politely as she could but she was unable to prevent her dark eyes from darting about the room. "We haven't seen Dyma for several weeks now and we've no idea where he is."

"Why didn't you report him missing?"

"Well, we didn't think it necessary."

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to accompany us down to the headquarters to fill in some forms," the one with the hairy nostrils ordered.

Sasha and Misha sighed, put on their coats and boots, and were escorted out into the darkening monotone city which, despite the attempting thaw, still only ever varied between shades of grey. As the padded door slammed behind them, dirty little streams of slush ran through the joints in the parquet floor.

Lena went into the kitchen where her granddad was still shaking.

"Dedushka, what will happen?"

"Who knows, Lena."

"But are they all right?"

"Yes, yes, Lena. Who?"

"Mama and papa!"

"Ah yes, they're fine."

"Sometimes, dedushka, you and babushka, don't make any sense."

"Perhaps that's because the world doesn't make sense to us, Lenchka. You wait until you're as old as we are and see how much sense you make."

Lena thought for a second and then said, "I'll always make more sense than you."

"I hope so, Lena. I hope so."

"Tell me a story, dedushka. Like you used to." Lena scrambled onto her grandfather's knee, even though she nearly crushed him.

"I can't remember any."

"Please."

"Well, if you go and get your old dedushka a drop of that medicine in the bottle next to your old grandmother's bed, then maybe that'll help me remember."

Lena ran into the lounge and bought back the bottle. "Here you are. She's asleep."

The old man, unable to suppress a smile, poured himself a large glass of the medicine while Lena seated herself at the table.

"*Zhyli byli*, a long time before, there was a man, his son and a dog who lived together in a wooden dacha in a village a long way away. The man went to work in the steel factory out of town and worked hard because he was convinced that what he was doing was for the good of everyone in his country." The old man took another mouthful of medicine and shivered as he swallowed. "When he finished work, often late into the night, he would take the train home and his dog would be waiting for him at the station. As the years passed, the steel works got older and the machines became antiquated..."

"Anti what?"

"Old, unreliable, and no-one ever thought to modernise the factory, yet the workers were expected to produce double the amount of steel. So the old man worked harder and harder. No matter how late he worked, his old dog used to wait for him at the station.

Then one day the man was partly blinded by molten steel in his eye, but still he continued to work. His son, disillusioned by what he saw as a wasted and boring life, went off to the city to make his living. Before long he became rich and successful in a new business and soon he was able to hand over the work to other people and spend his time eating in new expensive restaurants and going to clubs, drinking champagne, laughing at his father's generation for working so hard.

It wasn't long before the man died from lung cancer, but his old, faithful dog didn't understand death and still went to the station every evening to wait patiently for the man until late into the night before returning to the deserted dacha. Over the following years, the village grew and they built roads around the station so that cars could drive around it and yet still the dog waited patiently for the old man. Then one night the dog was run over. A few people who still remembered the dog contacted the son to tell him the sad news and ask if he wanted to bury the dog with his father but the son replied that it was, after all, only a dog and so the dead dog was left to be eaten by the crows."

"But that's horrible," Lena cried with tears in her eyes.

"Ye-es, maybe," the old man replied. "But that's why the world doesn't make sense, Lenchka."

"What do you know about sense?" Nadezhda's weakening lungs were still strong enough to be heard above the television.

"You didn't even hear. You were asleep," the old man shouted back.

"Why's babushka always angry with you?" Lena asked.

"Probably because the dog died before I did," the old man joked, but started coughing. Lena got him a glass of water. Then she went into her room and began tentatively, to play the piano as if she were playing her thoughts.

Only when the saddening notes turned into deafening snores and darkness fell around the apartment did I feel it safe to come out of hiding. The now almost adult nymphs

had already drunk the dregs of the old man's medicine and were stumbling incoherently around the kitchen floor. Every so often one of them would try to reach the samovar and Anya, but would fall off the cupboard at a crucial moment.

"Just like their father," Anya muttered in disgust.

I joined Volodia, but as there was nothing left to drink, we headed for the virtuous plates, piled with leftovers, thanks to the sudden departure of Sasha and Misha. Even Anya came over to join us.

Just as we were enjoying the cold potatoes, the door opened and footsteps thumped across the wooden floor. Before we had time to move, the kitchen was flooded with fluorescent light. I looked up and saw the belligerent gaze in Misha's eyes. My heart sank.

"The bastards! There's hundreds of them," he said.

"I told you," said Sasha, "Mama was right."

This time the old man wasn't clutching the can of air freshener and as Misha reached for the cupboard, Volodia quickly exuded a pungent retort, leapt off the plate and headed impressively over the bench and towards the fridge. Anya slid down the leg of the table while I ran down the wall and hid in my crack in the wood. The ones zig-zagging towards the pantry were the first hit. They were too drunk to smell Volodia's fear or see the murderous red cracks in the humans' eyes. I heard the hissing spray of the air-freshener and knew immediately that its fragrance was fatal; this was the smell of dead flowers, the sweet smell of death. Interspersed between the asphyxiating attacks, I heard the stomping of boots and the smashing of books crushing heads and limbs in a manic frenzy.

"What's going on? What are you doing?" the old man cried, waking up in the deadly fumes.

"Sorry dedushka. Something we should have done a long time ago. We've shared our lives with vermin for too long."

"You think this will change things?" the old man said. He looked down onto the floor in horror. There were tears in his eyes.

"Oh, don't be silly dedushka. We came home and the kitchen was overrun with them. It's unhygienic."

"But they trusted me. I taught them that it was safe to come out at night when I was there. Now, I've betrayed them..."

"Well, now they know how we feel," Sasha remarked, sourly. "Come on, let's put you to bed. I'm so tired. We've already been interrogated tonight."

"They'll come back you know, they'll have their revenge," the old man said.

"Oh, don't be silly."

Sasha and Misha went to bed but the old man sat at the table in the kitchen, looking at the shrivelled remains. The light of the moon streamed into the fifth floor window, highlighting the silver in his hair and the glister in his eyes.

Volodia, afraid to leave the security of the fridge, listened to the groans and death throes in a cold sweat. Only when all fell quiet, did he crawl out to be greeted by that potent smell of flowers in the underground and the crushed and desiccated corpses, flat on their backs, legs frozen mid-air.

I went over to meet him but he did not appear to see me. He was staring at the dismembered limbs of what he identified as the cold remnants of Anya. Elsewhere, legs poked out of the workers of the union and the English textbooks that lay on the floor. Volodia was in deep shock. He had never witnessed a mass murder before.

"A story indeed," the old man whispered, suddenly opening his notebook and beginning to write in the moonlit kitchen; the kitchen that had, without warning, been transformed into a graveyard.

Volodia turned and fled from the apartment, without knowing where he would go or what he would do. He never even said goodbye.

I followed him out. "Volodia, come back. You cannot avenge this massacre in a bottle of vodka." But I knew he couldn't or wouldn't hear me, anyone or anything. Nosya, the nosey old bag from the apartment opposite, also came out. We watched Volodia crawl under the door into the dark, bare corridors and take refuge in the rubbish chute.

"I told him that place was cursed," she muttered.

"Why?" I asked her, "Why's it cursed?"

"Because," she replied, turning her integument on me and shuffling back under the door.

Volodia crept into a half empty vodka bottle and promptly proceeded to drown his sorrows in diluted gasoline, declaring war on the enemy in the ghostly echoes of glass: "They will pay for-pay-this-pay for-this-this... "

"Volodia, come back," I called into the rubbish chute. "Make them pay for it here."
I guess he thought differently.