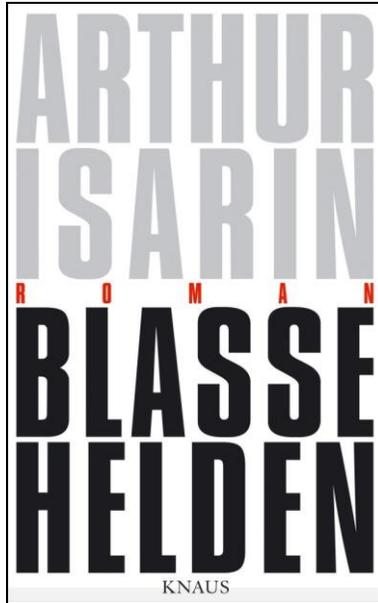


Arthur Isarin

# PALE HEROES

[Blasse Helden]

## Outline + Sample Translation



Fiction

Knaus

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Post-Soviet Russia in the 1990s: a country descending into chaos; in the hands of unscrupulous racketeers, pervaded by privatization, oligarchs and criminality. This is the setting for Arthur Isarin's *Pale Heroes*.

When the 32-year old German Anton moves to Moscow in the early 1990s, he is hired by Paul Ehrental. The shady entrepreneur is looking for a reliable Mr Fix-It for his risky commodity dealings in the rapidly disintegrating Soviet Union. Anton is the ideal man for the job – he has no political affiliations, asks no moral questions, and remains emotionally detached. His only interests are women and the grand culture of Russia – and money so he can afford both. Before long Anton has gained access to the new elite of the country. He is a drifter, leading the bizarre life of a "pale hero" amongst cultured bandits, artists, secret agents, fantastic frauds, corrupt managers, cocottes and penniless beauties. In the winter of 1999 the scales turn: Putin comes to power and Anton has a choice to make – join in or leave everything behind?

As an insider with an intimate knowledge of this epoch, Arthur Isarin tells the story of Anton, a young man leading an easy-going, carefree life beyond morals and ideologies. He is only interested in money, women and the grand culture of Russia. As an outsider, Anton becomes a chronicler of a frenzied decade in which the cry for a new "strong hand" paves the way for the autocrat Putin.

## About the author:

Arthur Isarin is a pseudonym. The author was born in Munich in 1965 and studied philosophy, politics and economics. He has worked in England, the USA, Russia and Kazakhstan and now lives in Queensland, Australia. *Pale Heroes* is his first novel.

## Summary:

When the German Anton moves to Moscow in the early 1990s he arrives to a dissolving country in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to a society in the midst of redefining itself. It is here in the “Wild East” where 32-year-old Anton hopes to find the ease and freedom he failed to attain as a number cruncher for global companies in the West. He is not one to brood, instead choosing to enjoy life’s sensual offerings while maintaining a fatalistic streak. He does not share the German fondness for principle, and he rejects any kind of idealism as both ridiculous and dangerous.

Anton comes to Moscow on the initiative of the enigmatic Paul Ehrenthal, a commodity trader in need of a reliable Mr Fix-It to help him with his risky and amateurish deals in times of radical privatisation, hyperinflation and rampant corruption. Anton is the ideal man for the job. He has no political stance and poses no moral questions. With little to no career ambition, it is easy for him to remain as emotionally detached from his work as possible. He does not strive for personal fulfilment, but is simply looking to finance his expensive lifestyle. The Russian Sergei becomes his most important ally in the company; the mining engineer guides him through the grotesque thicket that is the post-Soviet world. As an economist who learnt his trade in the West, Anton is aware that the advantage this gives him over the natives will last only for a certain period and he is not hesitant to use it.

Anton enters the country as if through a hidden door, rapidly gaining access to the artistic, economic and new political elites. He is a drifter, leading the bizarre life of a “pale hero” amongst cultured bandits, artists, secret agents, fantastic frauds, corrupt managers, cocottes and penniless beauties. All he really cares about are women and elevating life through culture. But even the most flaming love affairs burn out quickly. Only in opera and concert halls is Anton able to experience true happiness, and his strategy for coping with the banalities of everyday life includes daily doses of beauty and aesthetics.

Anton stays in Russia for nine years, and we come across him at different times and in different places. At first the reader ambles through the nightlife of Moscow with him, tagging

along to the private homes of intellectuals, where wasteful feasts are thrown in celebration of the new-found freedom, and to restaurants and clubs where the nouveau riche blatantly displays its stolen wealth. In 1993 the old forces revolt once again, but are shot down by Yeltsin. By then the triumph of uninhibited capitalism appears inevitable. Oligarchs seize Russia's state assets and pillage its resources. Faced with the unfathomable extent of environmental destruction, Anton, like many Russians, seeks comfort in idolizing Mother Nature. But the increasing impoverishment of the people eventually takes its toll on him. When a business trip takes him to the destitute South of Ukraine and a cholera outbreak prevents him from returning to the glitz of Moscow, he begins to have doubts. And when the terrorism linked to the Chechen conflict reaches Moscow, he considers returning to the West for the very first time. At that point, events spiral out of control. Putin enters the scene, and Anton has a choice to make: Should he conspire with the Chekist or should he leave everything behind? He decides to flee. One last time the romantic Anton is redeemed by a lover. He leaves Moscow the same way he entered it nine years ago and knows that these were the best years of his life.

Pale Heroes is a compelling study of Russian society before Putin, a portrait of the chaotic and gaudy Nineties, as told from the perspective of a wandering stranger. It is also the story of a young man who, of all places, eventually finds happiness on the burnt-out star that is the former Soviet Union.

(The title refers to the novel *A Hero of our Time* by Lermontov, published in 1840, that focuses on the superfluous man Grigory Pechorin. But Anton, as well as his contemporaries, is nothing more than a pale hero of his time, a Pechorin light.)

## Sample Translation:

by Eva Bacon

### The Dancing Bear

Whenever general manager Igor Pavlovich visited their office, the department of natural resources tried to come off as highly motivated. He alone decided the monthly quantity and

price of the steel that would be delivered to them from one of the largest manufacturers. Anton was dismayed to notice that he, too, became submissive when dealing with the Siberian.

Everything went according to the usual routine. In the beginning, the conference room was full of Anton's coworkers, who stood ready to answer Igor Pavlovich's questions. Anton silently followed the walkthrough of logistical details. In another half hour it would be his turn. This was his ninth month in Moscow.

He had entered the city as if through a hidden door. He had been supplied with a small apartment from the 1930s in the comparatively small Bryusov street between Tverskaya and the Tchaikovsky Conservatory. The tall gray building in a prime location had been designed by the same architect as the Lenin Mausoleum, which was taken as an explanation for the dark rooms. Under Stalin the house had been reserved for renowned artists. A mural on the wall facing the street was a remnant of this time. The apartment on the third floor had two rooms that were about as high as they were wide. Through the windows you could see poplar trees and a residential building from the 1920s. During the summer he sometimes waited on the clunky concrete balcony for the bell of the conservatory before walking over. It took him 10 minutes by car to get to his office in Kitay-gorod, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Moscow. It couldn't have been more different from his last office in Manhattan, where he had worked in auditing for an insurance company. Then he had been on the 28th floor, overlooking Wall Street. Now he was on the second floor of a small office building that had only recently been erected in the midst of a rundown apartment block.

He had spent November of 1989 with friends on the Berlin Wall, and when it finally collapsed, he had felt the strong desire to immerse himself in the East.

Back in New York, he started taking Russian classes, made friends among the immigrants and on the weekends, ate borscht in Brighton Beach. An uncle of his who was a lawyer in Cologne connected him to one of his clients from Moscow, and on his next visit to Germany he met Paul Ehrenthal for the first time.

The slightly stiff businessman of Baltic-German descent, who carried himself with a definite air of self-aggrandizing, he had arrived in Moscow in the seventies, working as a sales rep. Since its inception, the Soviet Union had tolerated only a few private enterprises to arrange essential imports. When the economic reforms of the late eighties kicked in, these commercial structures had a remarkable head start over their competitors who were just entering the market. They already had the capital, the organization, the network. Yet some of them got entangled in boisterous overactivity, resulting in silly investments. Ehrenthal, too, tried to jump on bandwagons that were too fast for his own good. Initially he managed to score some wins in the resource sector, but more recently he was being pushed out from the more lucrative areas by smart young Russians. Being as inert and hesitant as he was made him an easy target.

He liked to refer to himself as an honest hanseatic merchant. At heart, he remained a bean counting sales rep. Not a good fit for the new Russia. And so he fled into nostalgic reverence for the Soviet Union of the seventies. He fed on the crumbs of the real oligarchs and distinguished himself through constant complaints and frequent smart-assery.

What Ehrenthal needed was a trustworthy fixer, someone to consolidate his widespread and foolish investments in Russia. The Soviet Union was crumbling rapidly, and Anton

accepted the challenge, unable to resist the temptation of all the characters and their stories awaiting him in the new world. He was 32 years old. The barren landscape of the east had a remarkable resemblance to his mental state. There he hoped to find a lightness that, if he was honest with himself, he had never really experienced.

The employees left the room one by one, until only Igor Pavlovich and Anton were left sitting across from each other. Ehrenthal had just popped in to say a quick hello. He always said the same thing: “My dear Igor Pavlovich, the world doesn’t follow a linear course.”

Upon which the Siberian always nodded silently, and Ehrenthal left them alone again.

On the surface, everything was already sorted out. To continue benefitting from the Chinese, who were desperate for steel, the state enterprise would increase its delivery quantities. Now they transitioned to the unofficial part of the meeting by way of some small talk. Igor Pavlovich had taken up big game hunting. He spoke about the difficulty of shooting East Africa’s Big Five. Elephants and rhinos were equally challenging. This was followed by a delightful retelling of their clandestine export of trophies in a private jet to Siberia.

The interlude of inconsequential small talk was reaching its end. In a moment, the general manager of the metal state enterprise would bring forth a detailed wish list. The distribution of bribe amounts was always the highlight of the quarterly meeting. Nothing was left to chance in terms of the amount. Anton had spent the last few weeks simplifying the process. Transparency was now of the highest order. He had done away with the ambiguities that had created so much extra work in the past.

Igor Pavlovich had managed to keep the top spot in the state enterprise for almost two years now. This was not due to his professional competence. It was because he shared his kickbacks with all those who in turn kept him alive.

The uninhibited plundering of the enterprise that had been placed in his care was highly rational. His expulsion could happen any day. His stock package and contract didn't change this. Nothing was ever truly yours. This was the case during the Soviet era just as much as today. If you didn't snatch up everything you could right away and make it disappear untraceably, you were seen as a fool. Igor Pavlovich was no fool. If he managed to keep his job for another six months, his net worth would amount to roughly 50 Million US dollars.

As always, he carefully pushed a slip of paper with notes into the middle of the table between Anton and himself. Anton nodded conspiratorially.

“Igor Pavlovich, how should we proceed this time?”

Detailed instructions regarding transfers to accounts of offshore firms followed. The recipients rarely changed. The governor, two ministers, a KGB cover organization, two senior managers of the state enterprise, a local union official and a few bankers who made decisions on creditworthiness. Next came the accounts of his wife and lover in Zurich and Geneva – to prevent them from meeting. This had become his running gag.

After that, Igor Pavlovich's specialty: the quarterly order list for new cars. Who gets which model as an appropriate token of appreciation? This could be taken as a reliable indicator of the current power configuration in both Moscow and the provinces. Then came the peanuts, a couple of the cheaper Rolex-models and two dozen individually engraved

Montblanc fountain pens. Souvenirs for the infantry of the ministries, whose cooperation was crucial for smooth processing.

Up until this point, none of the Russian's requests were problematic. Anton began to relax.

"And one last favor. You know my son Pjotr, right?"

The German nodded sympathetically. Family members spelled out potential catastrophes.

"A clever child. We want him to go to Atom," said the general manager.

"You mean Eaton."

"Whatever. He is talented. So, starting next month."

"Does he speak English?"

"A bit. The rest he can learn there."

Anton agreed. "There are agencies that can help. But it does take some effort. You should expect two hundred thousand dollars to start with."

"The boy is worth it."

Anton had a vague memory of the hyperactive boy he had met in the general manager's residence in either Moscow or Siberia. A part of the sum would have to go into a reserve: pain and suffering money for the teachers. He could warn the Siberian; outsourcing the offspring to prestigious boarding schools inescapably leads to discord in the family. On their first visit home they will identify their parents as nouveau riche social climbers whose table manners are too problematic to allow for further association. Igor Pavlovich's plan was remarkably miscalculated. He hoped to prepare the kid for a future role in tomorrow's Russia. But once

socialized in Oxbridge or at the LSE, the brats never returned to the country of their coarse ancestors. Naturally, Anton kept all of this to himself. This wasn't family therapy. It was a good old-fashioned steel business. Besides, he was a bit upset about the Siberian's stories of the rhinoceros. Anton had thought that rhinos only lived in zoos these days.

He accompanied Igor Pavlovich to his convoy in front of the office. Not even a secretary of state was accompanied by this amount of flashing blue light and sirens. The two made a small gesture resembling a hug. As the convoy drove away, Anton drew in the sharp cold air. He shivered with relief. For the eternity that was three months, thousands of steel-laden train cars would once again roll into the harbors. Assuming Igor Pavlovich could keep defending his position and Eaton didn't put up too much of a fuss.

Anton returned to his desk to plan an evening that would serve as a contrast to the culture shock he had just experienced.

Out of spite Sergey, a shrewd smart ass who had long become his most important ally in the company, had put a newspaper clipping with a report of Igor Pavlovich's enterprise on his desk. A list of usual complaints: wages owed for months, thousands of jobs cut, violent strikes, horrendous tax debt and astronomical demands of energy firms.

"Not to mention serious quality defects and a complete lack of new investments over the last twenty years," mumbled Anton, who had long since tired of the topic, as he dialed the number of the poet Viktor Jefimovitsch Landtsman.

Viktor was one of the most cultured people Anton knew. In his mid-thirties, lank, protruding ears, small nose and glowing eyes. Of course, he couldn't make a living with his poetry, so he--like many other artists--ran a *business*. Among other things, he imported

schnapps from Finland, which he sold as an *elitist* water-additive for sauna aromatics. *Elitist* was the next level of *exclusive* and meant *very expensive*, a common sales argument that successfully implied quality. Viktor lived happily in a run-down apartment building with his wife and daughter, and Anton was under the impression that this small Jewish family incessantly played music, read to one another or cooked unbelievably bad food. This was how they successfully combatted the brutal bleakness of the satellite housing developments in their three rooms. Viktor's life was better than ever. A few years ago, when he was still in the navy, he had lost a kidney to consumption of contaminated water on a warship. Compared to his life in the military, he considered his current life paradise.

His poems were about characters from Shakespeare's plays, displaced to modern Russia, where they meet real or fictitious characters from the 19th century. Puck met Gogol in a McDonalds on Tverskaya. Viktor had the slim volumes produced in tiny print runs and convinced shop owners to take them on commission. Thus he kept his honor as a *published* poet. Sometimes Anton would spot such a volume in the window of a kiosk in between porn movies and pepper spray.

"This is Anton. What's going worse, your poems or your commercial sins?"

"What a wonderful surprise to hear from you. Poetry and commerce are going splendidly, but that doesn't matter anymore."

"What happened?"

"Gut renovations!"

Anton was startled. In peacetime, this was the worst fate that could befall a person. The loathed authorities commanded the clearing of an apartment block to be left to thieving

construction crews, giving them uninhibited access to the furnished apartments. Sometimes there were official decrees that prevented the former residents from coming back. The resettlement into even more unattractive apartments was then justified with construction deficiencies. There had recently been more and more reports of crooks who, in this manner, took over entire apartment blocks to then quickly sell them off.

“You’ll have to tell me more. Should we go out to eat tonight?” asked Anton.

“With pleasure. Afterwards I would suggest attending a birthday party in Eduard’s apartment.”

“With what kind of people?”

“The usual crowd. Destitute people of the mind.”

“Sounds good. I’ll pick you up at eight at the corner of Kropotkinskaya,” Anton said before hanging up.

He was looking forward to an evening with Viktor. This was a way for him to escape the melancholy that always crept over him after being exposed to post-soviet general managers for a few hours. The moral squalor of people like Igor Pavlovich always reminded him of his own, which is why he had assembled strategies for diversion after exposure. The company of Viktor was a proven antidote. More pedestrian measures included a bottle of *Grange* and Tatiana Samoilova on TV playing Anna Karenina or, failing that, the company of two or three talented cocottes, but these didn’t come with any guarantee that he wouldn’t feel even worse afterwards.

The interior of the restaurant in the city center was modeled after a popular Soviet movie that took place in a central Asian desert.

“My poor family wanted to wait it out in the *dacha* until we could move back into the apartment,” said Viktor.

“How long will the exile last?”

“At least eight weeks. Or three months. Impossible to say with our barbaric construction brigades.”

“Have they looted everything?”

“One of the foremen warned me. I gave him a bunch of money so they wouldn’t immediately break into our cupboards or steal the kitchen.” Viktor made a tormented face, shook his head and broke into resigned laughter. “But then I found out he wasn’t the one in charge of our apartment, so I had to pay again, to the right guy.”

“Yeah, I’ve been there. We’re constantly bribing the wrong folks in the administration.”

“The same old lack of *glasnost* in the state operations.” Viktor sighed.

“Is the *dacha* winter proof?”

“Not really. We fled back into the city. Now the wife and daughter are with her parents in their tiny apartment.”

“And you?”

“Here and there. It’s all better than being out in the countryside. It’s crushing out there.”

“You mean no one there is interested in your poems.” Anton grinned.

“The conditions there only seem humorous from afar. The collective drinking habits of the villagers are animalistic. At some point they always attack each other.”

“That has a long tradition.”

“You have no idea. They go from house to house, raping everything that moves and looting each other’s possessions.”

“But everyone knows that. How does it affect you?”

“They come to our door, demand money for vodka and get aggressive. The usual delusional group dynamics. Occasionally, someone is beaten to death. In the countryside the widespread alcoholism leads to a level of brutalization thus far unknown. We just got scared out there. The romanticizing of country living is a misconception that’s deeply rooted in the Russian people.”

“And not just the Russian people. A German friend of mine bought a farm three years ago and is slowly losing it. He’s now brewing his own Kefir. Before moving, he wrote remarkable papers on Schnittke.” said Anton.

“Life in the countryside leads to nothing but tragic stupefaction. Here and abroad,” Viktor concurred.

“A humane existence is only possible in big cities.”

“It was Tolstoy who planted this idea in our heads of the cleansing country life .”

“And yet nowhere is more vulgar than out in the country,” added Anton, who had never lived anywhere but the big city.

“Precisely. Taste this wonderfully marinated sturgeon with pomegranate sauce.”

They ordered more Pouilly-Fumé and lounged on oriental cushions. The restaurant might have been designed by the production team of a local theatre in crisis. The bright midday light of Central Asia shone through a wooden window frame onto white brick benches. A fountain centered the moorish courtyard. It was a mash-up of the Soviet western *White Sun of the Desert* and *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. Assiduous waitresses in fantasy uniforms served delicacies. Restaurant culture in Moscow already had surpassed that of western metropolises.

Afterwards they slowly drove through the city on their way to the party. The conversation flowed effortlessly. The wine had done its part in fading out the adverse elements of the day. Anton kept taking wrong turns. From the cozy interior of the car they watched the bustling avenues. Details of the poorly lit streets were only visible at very slow speeds. A light snowfall set in. Hundreds of women stood shivering on the side of the road. Police cars pulled up and disappeared again. For days the papers had been full of stories reporting the controversy within the police force about the protection money the prostitutes paid.

“I read somewhere that eighty percent of fourteen year old girls list “call girl” as their career aspiration,” said Viktor.

“High time that normal salaries catch up to that of prostitutes. Even those on the side of the road make more in two nights than a professor in an entire month.”

“What are they all going to do when things get back to normal?”

“Most are going to get married and try to carry on somehow. Just like people did in Germany after the war.”

“With scarred souls.”

“Yes, with scarred Russian souls,” Anton agreed. Their conversation was repeatedly interrupted by strange scenes outside. Under the columns of the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall two girls were crouched next to each other, peeing and chatting. One of them laughed and waved at them as they drove by.

“The Russian soul was a stroke of marketing genius by a few 19th century writers. It catered to foreign readers’ soft spot for exoticism,” said Viktor.

“How prosaic. But I hang onto it anyway.” Anton looked at him pensively.

“Just like many half-decently educated Westerners, you tend to idealize everything Russian unquestioningly.”

“You’re right.”

“It’s a strange form of decadence to praise today’s Russia, of all things.”

The snow crunched pleasantly under the tires as they drove along the Moskva River. The old chocolate factory *Red October* stood on its island like something out of a Christmas fairy tale. How strange that it hadn’t yet been converted into a business center.

The apartment with a view of the Moskva was on the seventh floor of a complex from the fifties. The two inspected the impressive facade as the car slowly pulled up. The building’s socialist classicism still awkwardly projected the pride and glory of the Soviet Union. It had taken only a few years for the architectural style to make way for a flood of short, boxy Khrushchevkas. A few drinks in, Anton always viewed Moscow’s soviet architecture as a political parable: from its fantastical constructive-experimental phase after the revolution to Stalin’s Empire style to the bitter declaration of stylistic bankruptcy of the prefab housing

during the years of stagnation under Brezhnev. A consistent architectural slip into frumpishness that had reached its apex in the recent office complexes, modeled after those in the west.

They left the car in the unlit interior courtyard and felt their way forward to the open front door. Surrounded by a pungent urine odor, Viktor expertly handled the broken elevator door while Anton tried to decipher the words carved into the light brown faux-wood plastic. Prominent themes were conventional sexual practices as well as defamations of select residents. A pederast on the third floor got multiple mentions.

The door to the apartment was slightly ajar. Anton didn't know any of the people who stood in the hallway. The house had never undergone a renovation and he was fascinated by the decade-old patina that indicated a typical Russian Intelligentsia household. These apartments always bore the same traces of economic scarcity, profound education and literary excess. Stocks of small bookshelves with sliding glass fronts rose to the ceiling like honeycombs. Like the rings of trees, the books' spines offered clues about the inhabitants' past. Familiarity with tens of thousands of pages of the classics in these circles counted as a precondition for human existence. But the more interesting detail was which books weren't present. Censorship had left painful gaping holes in world literature. But Heinrich Mann, Remarque and Feuchtwanger were reliably present. Due to limited space, the recent additions of Nabokov, Schalamov and Solzhenitsyn had been placed horizontally on top of the rows of books, next to Henry Miller and Jack Kerouac. For a few years now there has been only the censorship of the market.

Anton walked sideways down the narrow hallway. Trinkets revealed more details about the inhabitants. A letter case contained matchbooks with inscriptions of restaurants in

European capitals, San Francisco and Tokyo. Souvenirs from the seventies, once prestigious trophies that presented the visitor with the ultimate status symbol as soon as they walked through the door: repeated travels to the class enemy. In the mid-eighties, an ashtray from a bedbug-ridden New York hotel could hold more value than the collected works of Dostoyevsky, even among the educated class.

Since the death of his parents, Eduard had lived here with a cast of ever-changing yet remarkably similar-looking girlfriends. Like his father, who had reached international fame in his field, Eduard had become a chemist. Unlike his father, he had never reached any kind of success, a fact he liked to bring up preemptively. He was in his late thirties, rather pale, and it was unclear how he supported himself financially. Anton suspected that he mixed toxic cocktails for gangsters or synthetic drugs for the urban youth in a remote *dacha*. In the conservatory he sometimes ran into him in the company of people who were hard to place. Eduard seemed calm, and it would have been easy to mistake him for a bore, were it not for his obsessive love for Maria Callas. His expressions of praise for the Greek soprano were universally dreaded. These episodes always began in the same way: First, Eduard competently talked himself into a tremulous fury, getting increasingly hysterical, gesticulating more and more wildly until he was reduced to a tired stammer of Paris or London recordings. Words like *Norma*, *Tebaldi* or *Scotto* could cause these outbursts and were avoided among his peers.

His goodnaturedness and the fact that he knew all kinds of interesting people who didn't have much space of their own led to regular parties in his city apartment. He prepared nothing for these occasions and took care of doing nothing but sitting in a corner and calmly observing the goings-on. Many of those in attendance didn't even know who he was and

ignored him. Smiling, he reached out a hand to Anton and Viktor, but didn't get up. Viktor sat down next to him.

The big man who collided with Anton in the kitchen studied the two bottles in Anton's hands. Pushing aside his greasy hair, he searched for words. His cheeks slowly inflated and he started laughing. "A foreigner! Our people would never bring something so nice to drink. Say something so I know where you're from. My name is Pavel and today is my birthday. Those are my..."

A slender brown-haired girl interrupted him. "Don't listen to him. Hand me those two, would you?" She pointed to the bottles. "I'm Lena and we really are celebrating the birthday of this imbecile. Doesn't matter where you're from. Do you understand Russian?"

She was wearing one of these simple Soviet gray wool dresses that had become rare and that Anton enjoyed seeing.

"A bit. I like your dress."

"Oh gosh. Then you really are a foreigner. At least it's warm. To you it must seem exotic. Are you into poor little Russian girls in Soviet dresses?"

"More than anything."

"Haha--I didn't expect to run into someone like you here." She tapped his chest with her finger.

He had the feeling that he had met her before, but couldn't place her at first. Then he realized that she reminded him of the young Petra Kelly in the black and white photos of the magazines he read when he was young. Pavel disappeared, shaking his head, singing and carrying one of the bottles.

“So, what do you do in Moscow?” she asked.

“I work in Kitay-gorod for a small company. Advising firms in Siberia.”

“Nice euphemism. I’m finally getting to meet one of you bagmen!” She winked at him.

“At least you don’t look like one of our corrupt pigs. You are probably highly cultured and speak four languages. What is the real reason for you being here?”

“The women.”

“Women and money, there we have it. Which of them is more important to you?”

“Money,” lied Anton.

They wound their way through the hall into the living room. For a moment the rough cloth revealed the shape of her hips. Around twenty people were gathered in the smoky heat of the room. Lena sat on a windowsill and let her legs dangle. She now resembled a cheerful girl on a swing. A few people sang along to the chorus of a popular song until the sound of conversations once again dominated the room. Next to them a couple froze in the middle of their hug.

“What are you going to do with all the money you’re making?”

To make it easier for him to hear her, she leaned forward and steadied herself with a hand on his shoulder. Delighted, he inhaled her scent and took in the silhouette of her small breasts.

“Once I’ve saved enough money, I want to make a movie. But that will take some time. I’m still writing the screenplay. And what do you do?” He thought that such a story was required for this kind of company.

“When I don’t paint I make music with friends. We live and work in a group. You could say I’m a hippie. Did you know there were hippies in Russia?”

“Yes. On Arbat Street. Professional hippies, like in Ibiza. Once again, you’re 20 years behind everyone.”

“That’s precisely the point. We have to fast forward to catch up or we might miss out on something. Just look at what happened with the Renaissance.”

She looked at him seriously. Then they both erupted in laughter. He pushed a strand of her hair from her forehead and again took in her scent.

“Did you go to the Academy?” he asked.

“No. I was a biology major.”

Were there any young people who had a normal paid job that matched their university degree? Not that anyone seemed to be bothered by this.

“Do you live in a commune?”

“Yes. As far as I know, it’s the only one in Moscow.”

They flirted in the humid warmth of the room. Lena wanted to know more about his film project, which inspired him to spin a tale so convincing that half an hour later he himself believed it. After a hasty kiss they looked at each other, amused.

Someone squealed in the hallway and ran into the room. Everyone looked up. In the doorway stood a bear, on its hind legs. It looked around, half confident, half confused. Some people took a step back, others greeted the animal euphorically. A moment later, the bear trainer appeared in the doorway as well. A wispy, lanky stableboy.

Lena rolled her eyes. “Poor papa bear. You can’t have a party these days without one of these silly interludes. Either the stupid Lenin-Stalin duo or a dancing bear.”

The bear walked around on all fours, sniffing unimpressed by the screaming. Its trainer already had a glass of vodka in his hand and yelled out commands that the bear continued to ignore. Some guests were brave enough to pet it, others pitied it. Everyone calmed down again and the bear laboriously sat down on the couch, next to a sleeping man.

Lena took Anton’s hand and they squeezed past the shelves in the hallway into the kitchen. From the open window, they looked down at the Moskva.

“What a horrible muck,” said Lena.

His first instinct was to agree with her and complain a bit about the fundamental loneliness of the individual in the world. But then he ended up keeping his well-practiced Schopenhauer lines to himself. Maybe it was the wasteland below that had moved him. The appearance of the bear had started his mind down this dark path. Now everything seemed a product of mistreated mother nature. The semi-frozen river crawled between its reddish granite banks. Daily truckloads of black-brown snow and ice were pushed down a slide into the river, but the current was too weak to wash away the pile. Further up the river, the stranded Soviet spaceship Buran peaked out of Gorki Park. It was now part of a sorry old amusement park.

Lena’s breath drifted across the scene in bursts. It was somehow comforting to know that the elf next to him must have been thinking similar thoughts. A possibility nudged him. She could be his soul mate. A few wonderful wordless minutes followed. When he was in the arms of a Russian girl the world outside couldn’t be hostile enough. They took such good care of him then, keeping him away from abysses and demons. A male need for security. He

thought the women did this unconsciously; it was their primordial gestures and kindnesses that saved him.

When they turned around, the bear trainer was sitting impassively at the kitchen table, drinking vodka and trying to draw attention by talking to himself. This somewhat dampened the intimate mood, so they sat down next to the foreign object. The foreign object nodded at them.

“How did you and the bear get here?” Lena asked him.

“We live at the Mozhayka in a *dacha*. The agency *Bears and More* lets us know if somebody books us. Then we get into my *Zhiguli* and drive to the city.”

“With Mishka in the passenger seat?”

“Yeah, he likes to sit there.” The bear trainer yawned.

He had half the air of an accountant, half that of a sex offender. He stared into his bottle, drinking mechanically and ignoring the two of them like an experienced drunk. Lena shook her head and they both got up. They made out in the hallway for a long time.

“Let’s get out of here. My car is downstairs.”

She nodded and went to fetch her bag. Then she kissed him again. “Don’t think just because I’m a hippie I’m easy.”

In the living room a few girls were getting their picture taken with the smelly bear. Viktor sat next to Eduard. They were drinking the Pouilly-Fumé and exchanging no more than five words a minute. In the crowded hallway, Lena leaned on Anton’s shoulder as she put on her boots.

The cold air outside was glorious. Arm in arm they strolled to the Mercedes, the contours of which only became visible when they almost bumped into it. As Anton stood next to her, Lena's slender body slid into the illuminated interior of the fortress. He was surprised by how much this sight turned him on.

With the engine running, the inside of the car slowly warmed. On the radio, Zhirinovsky proclaimed that the West was shamelessly taking advantage of Russia's weakness.

"He *is* right. You got me with the movie story." Lena laughed. "It's probably all a lie. But a beautiful one."

"A white lie, if anything."

On another channel, the wonderful Zhanna Aguzarova was singing about the snow. Lena seemed even smaller in the big seat. With a single smooth movement she shifted her body over his. When he kissed her neck, she shivered. He fished a coat from the back seat and draped it over her shoulders. Leaning against the steering wheel, she now sat on top of him, regarding him triumphantly. A splendid arc stretched from their first contact two hours ago to this moment.

To hide his excitement, he kissed her cheeks and began to shyly nibble on her ear. She had mercy with his painful erection, opened his zipper and massaged him with her small, cool hand.

"Stay right there until I come back," she whispered.

She slid back into the passenger seat and took off her boots, rolled down her black tights, climbed back over and sat down on him again. She looked at him benevolently, coyly avoiding his kisses. Then she sat up, pushed her panties aside and allowed him in, inch by inch.

All the while she regarded him inquisitively. When he had entirely disappeared into her, she went still for a moment and commended him on his gentleness. She said that she was always surprised, and a little proud, to discover what big dicks found space inside of her. He was jealous of the heat that held him in a tight grip. His two fingers explored vertebra by vertebra of her bent back. Then his hands grabbed hold of her ass and followed the gentle movements of her hips. She slowed down a few times to avoid him coming. At some point he lost control over his legs and pushed the gas pedal. Their orgasms were drowned out by the howling motor and laughter.

Once he had collected himself again, she playfully licked his ear and whispered: "Have you noticed that people are only truly equal during an orgasm? Usually I'm against sex in a car, but this one is more like a living room. Finally I know why guys like you drive around with tinted windows." He nodded approvingly and listened, amused, to her descriptions of sex in strange places in the face of the Soviet housing shortage.

"My first time was in a dorm during the obligatory potato harvest. What about you?" said Lena.

"In a dorm on a ski trip with school."

"Nice. Skiing wasn't in the cards for us. I'm hungry. Let's go grab some sushi," she said.

He immediately agreed. Some of the restaurants that were open all night were surprisingly good.

Lena wanted to say goodbye to her friend, and so they went back up to the party. They didn't even notice the smell of the stairwell anymore. It was half past three, but very few seemed to have left. In the hallway, two or three men sat leaning against the wall, sleeping.

Voices emerged from the living room. Lena looked for her friend while Anton regarded the people in attendance. His eyes had to adjust to the bright light. There was only one couple left standing in the middle of the room. Everyone else was sitting or lying in the midst of dozens of bottles. It all seemed very peaceful. Someone was plucking at a guitar and singing quietly. Anton nodded to him. A melancholic guitar player was always nice to have for communal heavy drinking. In Russia they appeared at dreamy locations like Pasternak's grave in Peredelkino. He would take a drive there with Lena someday. A comforting ease took hold of him, as he waited for her. He observed the peaceful scene that he would have loved to capture and preserve. Behind the sofa he spotted the sleeping bear trainer. But the bear was missing.

Anton hastily went into the kitchen and the bedroom. No bear. He knocked on the closed bathroom door, two voices protested in unison. His question about the bear was met with a resounding laughter. "Do you think he's sitting in the tub with us?"

Back in the living room, he called out: "Where's the bear? Where is Mishka?"

It took a long time for someone to react. "Where do you think he would be? At home with the drunk."

The bear trainer rose slowly, babbling. He tumbled forward, onto the coffee table, knocking over a few bottles in his fall. Despite Anton shaking him, he dozed off again.

A red-faced Pavel appeared next to Anton, laughing and swaying as he leaned down and dragged the bear trainer through the apartment by his feet, stopping at the bathroom door. It was opened after sustained knocking. A couple stood in front of the tub, he with a towel around his waist, she behind him, hopping on one leg as she quickly put on her panties. Two

candles were lit on the rim of the tub. Pavel wheezed, each hand holding a leg of the drooling bear trainer like a wheelbarrow.

“You drunk pig, where’s your bear?”

Instead of waiting for an answer, he gave short instructions to the man beside him, who quickly lifted the bear trainer by the armpits and heaved him up. The men threw the limp body into the full tub. And with that, he suddenly zapped back to life. Growing angrier, Pavel began slapping him; but as soon as the bear trainer perked up, splashing the water with his palms, he was pushed down again. The birthday boy seemed to enjoy torturing the drunk. Only Viktor, who had just joined the group, succeeded in calming him down.

By now more and more guests were crowded in the flooded bathroom, loudly talking over each other. The bear trainer desperately tried to climb out of the tub, but without so much as a glance Pavel pushed him back with his meaty hand. In the meantime, he calmly discussed the situation with Viktor and Anton.

“Let’s all go look for him. As soon as it gets light out, Mishka will run into the first *babushka* that takes her pooch for a walk. And then half of Moscow is going to lose it.”

As he continued to hold the head of the bear trainer with his left hand, he mused about all the possible train wrecks of this situation. And all of a sudden, everyone felt sober again.

The bear wasn’t in the stairwell either. A group of around twenty mostly younger people, felt their way forward through the pitch-black courtyard of the apartment complex. The shivering bear trainer was among them, trying to reclaim some authority by searching for paw prints with the help of a ridiculously weak flashlight.

The group quickly dissolved. As a few stragglers drank vodka and sang the so-called “Bear Song”, Pavel and a small group forged ahead and had already reached the entrance of a small park. Anton and Lena stood aside, nestled up against each other. A student reminded everyone of Turgenev’s description of a bear hunt and the bear trainer begged in vain for some vodka.

“Find your animal first!” Lena’s friend berated him. “What a stupid idea to bring a bear to Moscow.”

“Bears traditionally also live in zoos and circuses. Urban bears are not a rarity,” said the drunk.

Boris, a quiet lecturer at the academy, head-butted him. “What if your bear is hungry now? When did you last feed him?”

“When did he last eat? Let me think about that. . .” He received another head-butt, this time from Svetlana. And another one from Rita.

The bear trainer tried to regain some of his credibility. Surprising everyone, he offered zoological theories. “Generally domesticated bears do not present any harm to the general population. Potential contact people, however, have to be familiar with fundamental behavioral patterns. . . .”

This earned him multiple head-butts and a kick, which seemed to spur him on, if nothing else. He now lectured about the huntsman’s art of animal tracking.

“I should have drowned you. I guess now I’ll have to beat you to death,” Pavel yelled.

Viktor, Anton and Boris leaned against the furious birthday boy, trying to calm him down. After enduring a few more threats, the bear trainer finally staggered off.

In front of the open park gate they all reconvened and started discussing. It was cold and dark and only the moonlight illuminated the contours of a statue at the end of the avenue. The group entered the park, solemnly, as one would enter a church. A girl made the sign of the cross. Another girl saw her and shook her head. When they arrived at the statue, a discussion unfolded over the identity of the person on the pedestal, which park they were in anyway, and whether they should be searching trash cans instead. Anton thought of sushi and more sex with Lena. Someone tried to play down the danger of a bear roaming Moscow's city center.

“Let's go back. I'm sure the terrified animal will happily cooperate with the authorities.”

“Idiot. They'll shoot Mishka.”

“Nature will prevail against civilization.”

“Let's rough up the bear trainer a bit more.”

“Good idea. Let's put him back in the tub. Pavel, what do you think? It's your birthday, after all.”

Pavel thought about it. “The bear was appalled by us. So many people, stuffy air and imported pop music.”

Lena interrupted him: “You guys stay here and maybe just shut up for once. We girls will go by ourselves and whisper Mishka's name. *Gently*. We will breathe his name into the night. It's a male creature after all.”

“Sounds sentimental, but it has a certain charm,” Viktor murmured into Anton's ear.

Pavel grumbled something about sentimentality in the direction of the departing group of women. He wasn't happy about losing his leadership role. But all the men acquiesced.

Slightly embarrassed, the flock of men gathered closely and stared at the ground as the discussion of the statue started up again.

The women fanned out in all directions. A park at night in nineties-era Moscow was somewhat terrifying. Some disappeared in groups of two in the foggy darkness, others set out on their own. Most of them knew each other from university, hospital or the academy. A sales clerk and a secretary, both PhD recipients, were among them.

Beautiful and audacious, the bear sat on a small hill, gazing up at the moon. Maybe he was just tired and hungry. Either way, he was happy to be petted and whispered to. Then he was led back to the statue on a leash.

The crowd of men had grown raucous once again. One of them had brought a bottle of vodka, which was emptied right away. They only quieted down as the group came closer. The cheerful bear was surrounded by women in their highest spirits who made no secret of their contempt for the simple-minded men. On the stairs to the apartment door lay the sleeping bear trainer.

The bear was now sitting in the kitchen and, under supervision, eating all kinds of delicacies, all the while farting excessively. The living room had turned into a dance floor again and someone tried to organize a cab to get more Vodka. The bear trainer was questioned on the living conditions of the bear in great detail. He received the occasional head-butt. Someone demanded that Mishka be released, without offering further detail. Others suggested that the testimony of the bear trainer should be verified by visiting his place of residence. Victor nodded and mentioned that not far from there was a restaurant that would be a good breakfast

spot. Most agreed immediately and began discussing the details of the jaunt. The bruised bear trainer only protested quietly.

Anton and Lena had other plans. They drove through the Moscow sunrise and kissed at every red light. Over miso soup and sushi they quietly observed the guests that bore signs of a long night. A few hookers sat at the bar, staring at the fish behind the glass. Two plump traffic cops spent their bribes from the night shift on a mountain of yakitori skewers. Five underage petty criminals in tracksuits lounged in the next booth, three silent girls also at their table. The Kyrgyz cook, who was disguised as Japanese, stood behind the bar, speaking on the phone with someone in Bishkek. Due to the long distance, he screamed into the handset.

It was shortly after seven. A magical Sunday morning in the most glorious of cities. Soon they would drive to Anton's apartment, where they would spend the rest of the day in his bed and his giant bathtub.