

Two stories

Cathy Sweeney

The majesty of the night sky

It is a tableau – a plywood box painted crimson and gold. The curtain swishes back and a thousand hands clap. Entertainment deserves the smacking of one hand against the other; smack, smack, smack. The figures are attached by powerful cables to a pulley system somewhere in the sky. It yanks them from the seat of their pants and makes them look ridiculous, but all the more real for it. One of the figures is thin with a thin moustache and glasses; it is Yuri. The other figure is Alexander, a man of appetites that eat him; he is prone to jocularly and depression and has a fat gut. There is a woman, but she remains undeveloped as a character.

The scene is a flat – Alexander’s – in Pushkin Street. Yuri is staying there. From one window of the flat, a cathedral can be seen, and

from another a launderette. Above the launderette is a brothel. At night Yuri chain smokes and listens to light opera. He is an out-of-work engineer, recently divorced. Alexander is a failed writer (deservedly so) who drinks in the bars of hotels. The men have been friends since their student days.

One night Alexander insists that Yuri go to a bar with him. Alexander has been paid for writing articles in a compendium and is eager to spend money. While Yuri shaves the outline of his beard, he reads over a letter his ex-wife has sent him. His daughter is engaged to a man he does not know. *They are as happy as young people in love should be*, Yuri reads. He folds the letter, places it between the pages of a large dusty book, and dries his face with a towel.

As they walk, the men’s boots shatter the shapes cast by the moon. The trees and telephone wires, the leaves rolling in drains, the bark of dogs – they all seem to suggest that the future exists in a few black hours. They turn into an alleyway with three yellow lanterns set at intervals along a stone wall. Alexander gathers pace. Yuri stops to light a cigarette. If happiness is a leavening of emotions, then Yuri, in the low glow of the lamp, with his lungs drenched in nicotine, is happy. He quickens his pace and catches up with Alexander. At the corner of Pushkin Street a hotel glistens. The men step into the bar and sit in a red booth. Alexander orders a carafe of pastis while Yuri wipes his glasses with his handkerchief.

“Have you ever experienced fear?” Alexander asks. He moves the

vase on the table to clear space between himself and Yuri.

“Of course,” says Yuri. He flicks open his metal case and puts another cigarette in his mouth while he roots for matches.

When the two men were students and Alexander would ask such questions, Yuri would place his hands on either side of his friend’s head and exclaim “Enlighten me!”

“There is a powerful connection between fear and beauty,” Alexander says.

Alcohol throws a silk cloth over Yuri’s weariness. He listens as Alexander continues. Yuri taps ash into a glass dish on the table and smoke wafts in Alexander’s direction.

A young woman walks by. Despite his myopia, Yuri notices she has a large bosom. She places a bottle of wine and two glasses from her tray onto a small circular table at which a couple sit. Her bosom drops low to the young woman. Their nipples are moments apart, Yuri muses, and yet neither woman entertains such a thought. The young woman laughs at something the man of the couple says and the laugh jellies her bosom. Alexander is still talking, but Yuri is not paying any attention. The woman turns in a blur of skirt that causes Yuri’s longing, for a moment, to abstract the female form until, with absolute clarity, his eyes focus on the idea of a young woman moving across the wooden floor of a bar, aware of the eyes of men around her.

“Do you know her?” asks Yuri.

Alexander glances up. “One of the girls from across the way,” he says, and prods the air in the direction of the launderette. “She waits tables here sometimes.”

The men pour more pastis, each serving himself and then adding water until the mixture clouds. They drink quickly. Alexander talks while Yuri feels sweet collapse all around him.

Alexander calls to the young woman. She brings a fresh carafe to the table and tops up their glasses. Yuri almost touches the woman; his imagination makes everything loose between them. She has, he notices, pockmarked cheeks when her face comes under the lamp. Alexander pauses to chew invisible words and then speaks again.

“Fear keeps you alive. Only when man is free of fear can he think about other things, like why he is alive.”

“You are right, my friend,” Yuri replies, without listening. “But who wants to hear truth? They are all dogs. Did I tell you Breshnov is going to publish the poet?”

“There is no work of art without beauty,” Alexander says, stoking up a tiny epiphany, “but to achieve great beauty, fear must be suppressed.”

The young woman pauses at the table, her bosom dropping to Yuri’s eye level.

“Another carafe?”

“Yes,” said Alexander, smiling at the woman. “And have a drink yourself.”

The young woman's skin between her breasts is white. As she moves away from the table, happiness dissipates in a swirl of red and white. To stem the absurd sense of loss (once it starts there is no end) Yuri plunges back into conversation.

"You are a fool, Alexander. Fear has nothing to do with beauty."

Alexander catches the black reflection in Yuri's eyes and opens his palm in an effort to attract an (invisible) audience.

"Take nature. There is beauty in nature, but the preservation instinct forces man to tame nature. Yet how much more beautiful is nature when it is frightful to our senses?"

Yuri nods. So long as he does not look at his friend, he can take pleasure in the conversation.

"Yes, yes. But you were talking of art, not nature."

Alexander's pupils dilate. He has arrived at the epicentre of his thesis and is caught between the desire to surge forward and the sense to hold back.

"For a work of art to possess great beauty, fear must be suppressed; fear of chaos, of depravity, fear of evil."

Yuri's mind is uncharacteristically dull, as though ether has soaked through his memory. He can only muster examples that testify to Alexander's thesis; an alarming thought.

Yuri moves his small heavy glass counter-clockwise in his palm.

"The sublime!" says Alexander. He bangs the table and takes a single cigar from his inside breast pocket. The cigar had been in-

tended for smoking after a trip to the launderette. This is how Alexander chooses to live; from one gratification to the next. Yuri takes off his glasses and wipes them in a napkin while Alexander, exposing layers of crumpled cotton and tweed, reaches into his trouser pocket and takes out a Swiss knife. He neatly chugs the end of the cigar, lights it, and fills his cheeks with smoke. The smoke steals towards Yuri, and with it the knowledge that the night is over; but the carafe is still half full, and so the men talk some more. The conversation settles on people they know – Breshnov, the poet, the old woman who lives below them – until an invisible rapprochement is reached and the men can part on the same terms (or similar) as when they entered the bar. Alexander tops the half smoked cigar and places it back in his breast pocket.

Yuri looks at his watch and sees that time has disconnected itself from memory. Dark thoughts blot his mind. He goes to the lavatory. When he comes back the chairs are upturned on the tables and a boy is sweeping the floor. The young woman is long gone. Outside, the night air is still. Alexander jiggles his hands in his pocket while Yuri exclaims the majesty of the night sky. They bid each other goodnight and Alexander turns in the direction of the launderette.

The street is empty and the future has resigned itself to beginning again. His thoughts turn to his wife, to the daughter he no longer knows, to the woman who ruined him; each image administering a higher dose of melancholia until the wind is nothing but human

sighs. He leans against a brick wall. Such sweet thoughts; to be alone, drunk, cold, in the dead hour, with such thoughts; fate had singled Yuri out to understand suffering and of this he could never be deprived.

The epilogue takes place in the morning. Yellow light exposes the figures. Yuri sits at the table drinking black coffee and reading a day-old newspaper. He is dressed in the same clothes as the night before. At intervals he grimaces at what he reads. It is a symbol. Yuri feels contempt for his failure to be faithful to suffering. Alexander, wearing a dressing gown, is ravenous. He pushes wurst around a blackened pan while throwing out comments about corsets in an attempt to extend his pleasure, but he has no audience. Yuri finishes his coffee. He looks out the window at the cathedral, which is golden now, and out the other window at the slumped outline of the launderette.

The station

Ten men lost their job in the city, then a hundred, then a thousand, then a million. Every man who lost his job went to the station. The first time Mikhail Pavlov went to the station he was in an upbeat mood. The spring sun was warm on his back and glinted off the mica schist in the granite steps leading to the station. All his life Mikhail Pavlov had harboured proletariat dreams and now, as the wave of need spread through the city, he could not suppress the belief that here at last was an opportunity to bond with his fellow man. It was an uplifting image – worker and clerk, blue collar and white, shoulder to shoulder under the metal framed roof of the station. Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite. And so, in a state of tiny rapture, Mikhail Pavlov ascended the granite steps and found himself on the concrete platform. Momentarily his eyes were clouded by gusts of steam but when they cleared – what a sight; a thousand men, most of them, it should be noted, in blue overalls, standing together in broad-shouldered clumps, smoking butts of cigarettes, shuffling their heavy boots and, from time to time, spitting globs of yellow into the firmament. In a moment of doubt Mikhail Pavlov reached into his brain and found

the following: *Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart.* He was reassured and took his place in the line.

Days passed, nights passed, until Mikhail Pavlov stood at the wooden hatch and marked a crooked x (for he was very tired) against his name (signatures having recently been ruled inexpedient by politicians). He received his rations and emerged from the station, walking down the granite steps in a jerky motion that put one in mind of a long-legged insect. The granite steps no longer shone; and Mikhail Pavlov, a man in a soiled white shirt who had recently lost his job, walked down a city street with horns blaring and women in high heels.

The next time Mikhail Pavlov went to the station it was summer. All along the boulevard awnings were stretched taut to protect the espresso crowd from the sun. Strolling in the direction of the granite steps it occurred to Mikhail Pavlov that he was not one of the crowd and so he did not stop to sit under an awning, but continued purposefully to the station, where in all probability the mica schist shone, but on this, his second visit to the station, stepping into steam and cloud and the close proximity of a thousand blue men smoking cigarettes, Mikhail Pavlov made a discovery: there was not one white shirt among the blue. He had washed and ironed his white shirt and now it stood out among the blue and the smoke and the yellow globs of spit almost, one might say, like a flag of surrender. And just then,

standing on the concrete platform, Mikhail Pavlov experienced the same sensation he had experienced as a boy when visiting the bazaar, that nothing was real; and suddenly whatever chance Mikhail Pavlov had of objectivity crashed into his boyhood self.

Days passed, nights passed, until again Mikhail Pavlov stood at the hatch ready to mark a crooked x (for he was very tired). And so it was with great surprise, muted by sleep deprivation and low glucose levels, that Mikhail Pavlov learned that the marking of x had been ruled unproductive by politicians. A pint of blood was now required. Mikhail Pavlov rolled up his sleeve and put his arm through the mouse-shaped hole in the hatch where a woman's fingers took it, strapped it, slapped it, put a needle into it and withdrew the requisite volume of blood.

The third time Mikhail Pavlov went to the station he wore an old blue shirt that had survived entirely for the purposes of changing the oil in his car and winter hedge cutting. He had lost weight, and walking in outsized strides he saw nothing – no awning, no mica schist, no espresso crowd. He saw only himself. Bones and skin, and between the two, summer fruit; flesh that must be fed or fed on. Summer had died in the city, and need ran through the sewers and up into apartments. But when Mikhail Pavlov stood on the platform of the station a temporary ecstasy ruptured through his pores giving rise to a sensation, powerful in its realism, of his existence as a former self. Aware of the delicacy of memory and the counter-production of

strain, he stood still as a light box so that the sensation might linger.

The fourth time Mikhail Pavlov went to the station it was under the cover of night. The cover was not a weight of silk cut through here and there with paper stars; it was the heavy lid of a black pot and it stank of old metal and old men and things we want to forget. Mikhail Pavlov had brought with him a knapsack. The station was crowded with a million blue jellyfish men washed up on concrete sand: boys hardening their pubis against futures of procreation and wurst; lone men standing at exit points watching the unfurling of value systems, clinging to the inner eye, aware that there is nothing else. Mikhail Pavlov thought back over the time that had passed since he first visited the station. Life is not soft, he wanted to shout, and without marking x or queuing for days he signed up to suffering as the only way left for a free man to assert free will.

It would be years before the truth would touch Mikhail Pavlov's cheek on a windy morning trip to the market and by that time he will have fallen victim to the abacussing of the poor; his brain softened by eternal calculation; two roubles by pi plus infinity; his lips tightened, a lost tolerance for sun. But on that morning, when Mikhail Pavlov's thoughts turn to mica schist and summer and espresso and awning, all the brain in the world will not stop him from sitting on a rusted bench to watch a line of white sheets waving in the wind.

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