

RUSALKA

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CLARKE



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By Corporate Clarke

clarkesfiction.blog

Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink”

John 7:37

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PART 1

Benji

I don't realise that I am in another microsleep until I come out of it and nearly commit suicide. My first instinct is to pull the car into the left hand lane where the oncoming traffic is travelling at a relative speed of 140 miles per hour. In a fraction of a second I correct it. We're alive until my next microsleep at least.

I thought Russia was supposed to be cold. Nobody told the month of May. The windows don't wind down fully and are ajar like a knackered stove. That might be a blessing judging from the number of insects crushed onto the windscreen and being mummified by the shitty wipers. No air conditioning, naturally, just a stale breeze of air from the blowers that smells like hangover breath. The airflow knob is turned all the way down to the coldest blue of the dial, like so many things about this car it's merely a performance. Nothing works in this 90s VAZ-2107 hatch-back except the engine and the steering wheel. It was £450 but we were probably ripped-off.

It was my idea to get the Russian car. Daniel said we could get a modern European car within the £500 budget. I said if we were going to do the London to Ulaanbaatar Rally, we had to do it properly in a car that would look the part. Since most of the journey would be in Russia, that meant a Russian car. This was the only piece of shit we could find on the UK market. It didn't take long for authenticity to get old. The only music we have is a Simply Red cassette we found in the car – we've already tangled it in the cassette player.

So instead we mostly listen to unintelligible Russian talk radio. I can barely hear it over the road noise but it is fading out. Daniel reaches forward and tries to retune it, but the signal seems to be getting weaker. "I'll try and find something else," he says, but nothing is tuning properly.

The E road we're driving on is a single carriageway the width of two cars and a hair more. Every time we go past an articulated truck I have to steer against the back-draft. Daniel has told me to slow down more times than usual today. I remind him that we are in a race. He reminds me he wants to finish alive. I fear we're already too far behind. We haven't seen any of the other participants since we left London. Daniel is convinced that

we're still where we should be, but I think we're easily two days adrift of the pack.

I am driving the car as fast as I dare. But every time there is a gap in the traffic someone overtakes us. The overtaking car is often older than ours and usually driven by a septuagenarian.

I see a sign for a rest stop, "I need to stop, I'm falling asleep with my eyes open."

"No worries," he says, with no emotion. Is he annoyed we're stopping again or relieved? I can't tell. He sounds tired as well.

Daniel

Benji pulls the car into the patch of wasteland labeled as the rest-stop car-park. There is a petrol station and a strange cafe-cum-charcuterie-cum-vodka-bar attached. It advertises in pictures that it sells Russian meats, vodka by the shot and wide cups of 'cappuccino' that are just shots of espresso topped with whipped cream instead of foamed milk, if they're anything like the other cappuccinos we've been having. Vodka seems to be sold everywhere. I try not to think how many drivers we are

passing who have had a shot of vodka or two. Next to the cafe are three abandoned and browning attractions from a travelling fair. One is a small ghost-train style ride called Green Week. The front is painted with images of naked, feral women sitting in trees, looking down at the crusty carriages hungrily.

We've stopped early. I think Benji should have done another hour of driving. I wonder if he intends to carry on or wants to swap. I can't blame him for stopping. Driving in another country is exhausting in the same way your first driving lessons are. You have to be consciously competent. Constantly alert. Every detail of the environment pulls on your attention with equal force. My neck still aches from my last stint of driving. Being a passenger in that oven is no rest.

"I'm just going to stretch my legs," I say.

"Do you want any coffee?"

"Thanks." That may have sounded ungrateful. I'm too tired to know.

Beyond the dust-bowl car park I find a field. Beyond that is a loose scattering of trees hiding a shallow but wide river. That river shouldn't be there – we're off track.

I don't have the energy to explain this to Benji. We made a pact to stay positive but it seems we had different expectations about the race. How can I explain it to Benji without sounding like I'm making a point?

A cool breeze is coming from the river and dampening my crusty face. I follow it through the line of trees and down to the bank. At the edge of the water I submerge my hands and splash some onto my face.

"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink," someone says. A woman, naked in a patch of long grass, her feet dipped into the water. She stands, picking up her dress, turning away from me slightly, but not enough. She reveals her athletic body of off-white, almost sandy skin. Teardrop breasts with coffee areolas. Her lower body is wider than her torso, uneven like a gymnast. Her thighs touch at their thickest point.

"John, something or other," I say.

"John 7:37." She smiles, her high cheekbones squeezing narrow eyes, "It's rude to stare."

Benji

I put the two coffees on the roof of the Vaz carefully, expecting them to dent the rotting bodywork. They're both huge and mostly cream. I've also bought some snacks for the next portion of the drive. Vaguely penisy looking cured meats of some kind. Some wrapped in pastry. All of them vacuum packed. I open one and instantly regret it. It smells as fleshy and salty as it looks. This is the last thing we need in the car.

I open the driver's door to cool the car. A gust of even hotter air comes out. Where is Daniel? We need to get back on the road. We've overslept and taken extra stops almost every day. Driving this piece of crap for five hours non-stop is tough, but we must've lost close to sixteen hours of our planned driving time. We haven't seen any other participants in the rally. We could be so far behind already that we don't even finish within the four weeks time limit. But Daniel doesn't seem to care. He keeps talking about "enjoying the adventure" and saying we're in danger of "turning it into work".

This was my idea, Daniel wasn't convinced – until his girlfriend dumped him. Then he showed interest. "I need to push my comfort zone," he said. I didn't realise that it would be this

draining and... I hate to admit it... boring. I thought there would be more camaraderie with the other drivers. That we'd make friends, go to parties. We booked into all the recommended rally motels but we've not met any other racers. Maybe Daniel is right, we need to chill out and enjoy the adventure more. But we're never going to finish unless we keep to the plan and if we don't finish it will all be a waste of time.

Daniel emerges from a field beyond the carpark wasteland. Someone is with him, a woman. She is laughing and talking enthusiastically. He is raising his eyebrows skeptically at everything she says, probably teasing her. This is how he acts around women who he thinks are too attractive for him. He tries to disarm them with backhanded compliments and a disinterested aura. And this woman *is* stunning. Way out of his league, but not his usual type. Her skin is the pure, ash-white that only redheads have. Her eyes are wide and green. Long, wavy, terracotta hair brushes the top of her pear-shaped breasts that swing, bra-less like kettle bells under her thin summer dress.

“This is Yana. She needs a lift to some town. She says there's a cool party there and she can get us invited.”

She smiles a big lying smile that beautiful women use when they know you're attracted to them. I feel the sting of an involuntary blush rising under my cheeks. How can I say no? "Sure." I avoid Daniel's eyes. I am not sure whether Yana will be the adventure that we have been lacking or the chisel that opens our splintering friendship. "I'll drive for another hour."

Daniel

"How come the massage has stopped?" asks Yana in her pornographic accent. Benji tries to laugh it off casually but sounds bored. I'm driving again. I was giving her a shoulder massage from the back-seat while Benji was driving. Offering a massage was a way to take the bitch-seat and make it look like my choice. Now I've been driving for over an hour and she has hinted at Benji to pick up where I left off three times. That was the most direct ask. I knew he was nervous around girls, I didn't know he was deaf.

In my peripheral vision I can see Yana looking at me – I raise my eyebrows, attempting to communicate that I don't know why he's being so prudish. But I don't want to encourage an us-and-him split in the group. He's insecure enough.

Maybe Benji is ignoring the offer on purpose. Maybe he thinks I will be jealous, that I'm interested in her and he doesn't want to step on my toes. Well I *am* interested in her. She's just my type. Dark hair. Mixed, Eurasian complexion. Small on top and thick on the bottom. She pulled down the neck of her dress for my massage and hasn't pulled it back up. Her shoulders, decolletage and the cupfuls of her cleavage are all on show. It's exhausting trying to keep my eyes off her and on the road.

But she isn't my girlfriend, she met me five minutes before Benji. OK I've already seen her naked but I wish I could tell him to chill out, grow a pair and just massage the gorgeous woman's shoulders. I don't care if she prefers him or neither of us. If I had to guess I'd say she wants us both. This is the first woman we've spoken to in days and whether she's interested in us or just using us for a lift, she's our route into a party and finally some more human contact.

I wouldn't mind Benji's prudish disinterest if he was actually pulling his weight in the conversation. I'm trying to concentrate on the unfamiliar road. I can't keep the semi-flirtatious patter going.

“So what do you guys get if you win the race?” she asks.

Benji doesn't answer so I have to, "500,000 Euros if we win, but we're not going to win. We just took part for the adventure, to push our comfort zones, try to grow, expand our horizons, go with the flow..." I cringe at the clichés but I cannot stop myself.

"And how's it going?"

"Erm, not that well. We haven't met any other racers and after seeing that river I am not even sure we're on the right road." I realise I haven't mentioned that to Benji yet. I glance at the mirror and see him glaring at the wall of trees outside the window. Maybe he heard, I can't tell.

"Well you met me," she says brightly, briefly leaning into me and putting her head on my shoulder. I glance down her dress at her sweat beaded chest, then drag my eyes back to the road, "And I'm going to take you to a party."

"So you claim," I say, and after a long pause, "What is the name of the town we're going to?"

PART 2

Benji

Just put an albatross around my neck. Daniel thinks I didn't hear him but I did. We're lost. There should be no river on our right but there is. I can see it from the road now anyway. And what's the solution? Go to some unpronounceable town because there might be a party. Great race plan. I'm driving as fast as I can but what's the point? We've lost another day of driving.

It galls me because he must think I'm stupid. Daniel and Yana are going to hook-up. Then he's going to argue that we are so far behind that there is no point carrying on. Once he gets his end away, he'll become as calm as a Hindu cow. Then he'll put on that chill-dude act he always does when he gets laid. We'll end up in the town for days.

OK, it's not going well. Yes, I guess you could say the whole point of this trip was to have fun and meet people. It just pisses me off that he turns everything into chasing women since he became single. Now the Vaz has another spare wheel.

At least the shoulder rubs have stopped now. Why was she trying to get me to do it, to make Daniel jealous? Now she knows I am from Iran because, big surprise, Daniel told her. Now it's the Persian freak show again.

“Which part of Iran are you from?”

Here... we... go...

Daniel thinks that being Iranian makes me seem exotic. What did he call it, a “conversational safety net”. Something to fall back on if the chat ever dries up. I'm still bemused by that. The middle-eastern badge never got me any higher up the food chain before.

“Tehran.”

“Mhm.”

“That's the capital.”

“When did you go to the UK?”

“A few years ago. I lived in Dubai for a while after university, but it's not great for Iranians. I came to the UK when I was 25.”

“Why the UK? You like the sexy British accent?” I swear I hear Daniel snort in the back seat.

“For freedom really.”

“Right. OK.”

She stops talking. I look in the rear view mirror. Daniel is looking out the window and shaking his head. The radio still isn't working, so we sit in silence until I forget where we're going.

“It's this exit,” says Yana. How does she know? All these exits look exactly the same.

“Are you sure? There is no sign.”

She puts her hand on my thigh and squeezes, “I'm sure, Benji.”

The exit leads to a road that thins out to a badly maintained single lane. Suspension must be optional on the VAZ. Every bump and pothole is transmitted flawlessly to my anus through the exhausted car seat. Yana is smiling. After one of the larger bumps she laughs, pushes the stray strawberry-blonde locks out of her face and holds down her chest.

“Are you trying to bounce me out of my dress, Benji?”

“No, sorry.”

Soon a town materialises out of the countryside. Still no signs. What the hell is this place doing here?

“It’s a town that was built to serve a factory. The factory is gone. But the town has stayed,” she says, as if reading my mind.

“What do the people who live here do now?”

“It’s a kind of cultural destination now. There’s some agriculture, there’s a festival, there are lots of arts and crafts.”

“And it survives from that?”

“There’s plenty of towns that survive off being cultural destinations in the UK,” Daniel chimes in, “Glastonbury?”

“Yes, this is like a Russian Glastonbury,” says Yana.

Yeah, just like Glastonbury.

Daniel

The town glints like a new penny on the banks of the river. Maybe the same river where we met Yana. I have a bad habit of not paying attention when I’m the passenger. We could be anywhere. The town is made of stone, low-rise buildings with tall, narrow windows and roofs coloured with emerald or ruby slates. The streets are wide and unmarked. There’s no pavement. Parked retro cars are dotted along the edges of the streets, marking an unofficial sidewalk. Our car looks inconspicuous

here. The town has a bohemian, arty feel. Scruffy hipster types are hurrying along the streets and a few of the walls are painted with murals. One is a mural of a forest with creepy, naked women in the trees. A wave of deja-vu makes me shiver.

The town has a square and a chapel at its centre. An oxidised, bronze gateway cuts through the skyline in an ornate, sea-green pattern. A black, wooden block, in the likeness of a man's head, wearing a fez, is perched on the gateway. I don't draw Benji's attention to that.

"Just park the car here, Benji" says Yana. "You can explore the town. I'll go to the guesthouse and see if my friend can get us rooms for tonight. It should be fine, I think it's still the off-season."

"Where shall we meet you?" I ask, stumbling out the back seat.

"It's only a small town, I'll find you." When she smiles, her eyes narrow. They look like beads of jet. She leaves us.

I pull on the front of my t-shirt, trying to waft some air up it. "It's roasting already. When is their on-season?"

"How long do you think we're going to stay here?" asks Benji.

“I don’t know.”

“We should only stay one night. Get a good night’s sleep then get back on the road.”

“Get a good night’s sleep? We’ve been invited to a party.”

“We’re supposed to be in a race, Daniel.”

“No, we’re supposed to be on an adventure. I never expected to win. The website says only 10% of the racers ever finish.” Benji is quiet, it makes me feel guilty. I try to speak as neutrally as possible, “What are your expectations for the race... well for the whole thing, this whole adventure, vacation... whatever?”

“I think we can still finish. I want us to commit to the race and try to finish – for us.”

“I think we’re four days driving behind where we need to be just to finish in the four week time limit.”

“Me too. That’s why we need to make up time.”

“We’ve been saying that since the start. We haven’t made up a single hour. I don’t even know if we’re on the right road anymore. That river isn’t supposed to be there. Who knows how much time we’ve really lost.”

“Well what do you want to do, Daniel? Quit? Stay here and chase women? Try to get into Yana’s knickers.”

I’ve never heard Benji frustrated before. He’s usually so measured. I pause for a moment, nod and wonder if Yana is even wearing knickers. “I’m not saying let’s give up. I’m not saying stay here for more than one night. But let’s just be realistic. We haven’t seen or spoken to anyone except motel reception clerks and service station workers. We’ve not seen another racer since we left Calais. We’ve just been slogging away in a smelly Russian death trap. Now we’ve met some crazy, sexy hitch-hiker who might get us into some party. The adventure is about to begin. Let’s not throw it away. The race is a lost cause.” Ben is looking away. But he’s nodding. “Look, you don’t have to decide now. Let’s try and get a real cappuccino and see if we can find a snack that doesn’t look like a penis.”

Benji

“We had fun in that weird hotel in Germany,” I say. But Daniel is right. I don’t know why I am arguing with him. I don’t *really* think we can finish the race. I’m not *really* annoyed at him or Yana. I’m just sour that we have failed so quickly. I imagined us weaving in

and out of other racers on the Autobahn, not sitting on my sore arse for 16 hours a day, staring down a dull Russian E road, trying to fight off sleepiness so we don't paste ourselves onto the front of an oncoming lorry.

"That was fun actually," says Daniel, looking at something I can't see, "But that was days ago now."

"Over a week."

"We've been going over a week?"

"Yes."

"We've been going over a week. Wow. It all feels exactly the same."

"So what do we do if we can't finish the race?" I ask.

"You mean after tonight? We just keep going but with more of an open mind. When we see a town let's stop there even if we're not due a stop. If we see a hitch-hiker, pick them up. Then when we only have a few days of our annual leave left, just find the nearest airport and try to get home."

"What about the car?"

"What about the car? Just give it to someone or abandon it. Did you want to take it home?"

“Well it does seem to be a pussy magnet.” Daniel’s laugh is spastic and echoes around the square. A couple of the hipsters look over at us and frown. I laugh too. My shoulders ache. My arse aches. I might be tearing a hemorrhoid, but I can’t stop. I realise we haven’t laughed in days. Daniel is crying. I can’t breath.

After that I feel almost post-coitus. I haven’t relaxed since we set off. I tongue my teeth. I’ve probably been grinding them while driving. I need to chill out. Daniel is right. The race is just a canvas for our adventure. Who cares where we end up. But where are we? The ‘no smartphone’ rule was another dumb idea by me.

“You need to hook-up with Yana tonight, mate,” I say. He stares. “What?”

“*You* need to hook-up with her.”

“Nah. She’s into you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She keeps flirting with you.”

“She’s *trying* to flirt with you. You’re ignoring it. She can’t make it any more obvious.”

“What, so you think she wants us both?”

“I have no idea. She’s probably just flirting with us because we gave her a lift. But you need to chill out. Just flirt back. You don’t have to marry her because you flirted with her. I don’t care if either of us hooks up with her or not. But she clearly enjoys the attention and so should we.”

“Right.”

Daniel laughs, “I think she wants to break you if I’m honest. But that’s irrelevant. She’s hot. Hot girls get invited to cool parties and know other hot girls. Just give her some attention without looking desperate and let her open some doors for us.” I am still suspicious I will end up as the third wheel, but I nod. Daniel continues, “Once we’re at the party, we’ll be the most interesting people there. A couple of guys rallying across Eurasia. We’ll be the centre of attention. Trust me. The hardest part of this whole journey was going to be finding the parties and getting invited. Yana has done that. Once we’re in...” Daniel makes a scooping motion with his hands.

“Alright I get it.” I exhale. “She’s not really your type anyway.”

Daniel

“She’s not my type?” My voice rises in a goofy intonation.

“I didn’t think you were into pale girls.”

“Pale? Yana’s not pale.”

Benji shrugs, “I don’t know, mate. I’m Persian. Everyone looks pale to me.”

The heat must be getting to Benji. There’s little shade in the square and we haven’t eaten for hours. The town seems to be preparing for something, “I thought those were just discarded twigs at first, but I think people are leaving them outside their properties on purpose.” I point around the square.

“And what’s with the fried eggs on plates?” asks Benji.

There is something just under the surface of this town. Everyone we see is distracted. On the phone with one hand, carrying groceries or bottles in the other. Few of them are smiling. Maybe it’s just the Russian demeanor. I think Yana is the only person we’ve seen smile since we got to Russia.

“Maybe we’ve stumbled on some sort of event,” I say. “Did you see that the trees on the way in were decorated?”

“I did”

“If we’ve stumbled on some sort of town festival...”

“I know.”

“We deserve this, Benji.” I slap him on the back.

I find a cafe with a takeaway service window. I tell Benji it’s my round. They have real, iced-americano, Danish pastries and rye-bread sandwiches with meat and yogurt fillings. I order in broken Russian, pointing at pictures on the menu. The woman who takes my order seems bored. She recaps my order in fluent English. I confirm it through a blush. Benji and I set up an impromptu picnic on a wide, concrete bench in the square.

“Maybe Yana knows there is something going on. Maybe she was just underselling this party. Is it some sort of special religious day? Have we missed something?”

Benji takes a moment to swallow, “It’s Friday.” He shrugs. “Do you think Yana will have got a room?”

“There don’t seem to be many tourists here.”

“Speak of the Devil,” says Benji.

Yana sways toward us. The summer dress reveals a matte, wholemeal, trunk of a thigh popping out of the cut of the skirt with every second stride.

“Do you think I’ve tanned?” She twirls revealing more thigh. Her black hair whips across her naked back.

“Compared to what,” I laugh. “We’ve only known you a couple of hours.”

“Compared to when you met me,” she says, while making a show of inspecting her arms. “Maybe you can’t tell now I’m dressed.” I try not to smile but I can’t stop it. She sees it and grins victoriously.

“I’ll treat you to some SPF 50 sunscreen if you’ve got us a room,” I say.

“And will you apply it?” I shrug, “Well, pay up, because we have a place to stay.”

PART 3

Benji

I'm annoyed, that I'm annoyed, that Daniel has landed us on our feet. This was the best outcome. But I'm annoyed. The guesthouse Yana has taken us to is a brick oasis. The room is at the top of the five floors. Unreachable old spiderwebs hang in the corners of the ceiling. The lamps have thick fabric shades that seem to absorb all the light. There's a four poster bed with layers of blankets like baklava. There's an oak vanity desk that is so polished that the mirror is redundant. There's a luxury trunk, possibly stolen from the last Tzar's luggage. The large settee probably allows this room to sleep three.

"The honeymoon suite," says Yana, "for the boys."

"Do you want to share the bed with one of us or take the couch? Ladies choice." Daniel says. I find a shower in the bathroom and it makes me want to cry.

"The bed is big enough for three," says Yana.

"Shotgun not in the middle," he says.

“There’s a shower,” I say, trying to be relevant.

“Good,” says Yana, “you both stink. If I take you to the party like this, you’ll ruin my reputation.”

“Oh, you have a reputation?” says Daniel.

“A reputation for being cool and having cool friends.” She playfully sweeps her copper hair back.

“How cool is this party,” I ask, “we don’t have many clean clothes.”

Daniel is poking around the wardrobe and pulls out a dinner jacket. A visible corona of dust floats off it as he shakes it. It is luxe but dated in style. It has three buttons and lapels that would look large on a clown suit. “There’s a full tuxedo in here, some sort of smoking jacket, morning trousers, loads of stuff. We would look amazing in this.”

“Really?” I ask. I wonder if I can rinse my Ralph Lauren Polo and dry it with the hairdryer before we set off. Doubtful.

“Definitely,” says Daniel, “we’re gonna stand out anyway. They’re a bit wide though.”

“Let me check the drawers in the vanity table for safety pins,” says Yana, “we can pull it in.” Daniel puts on the jacket but we could both fit in it. Yana finds pins and starts playing the part

of tailor. She stands behind Daniel, pulling in the jacket, calling him ‘Sir’ and generally using it as an excuse to touch his body and flirt some more.

“I’m going for a shower,” I say.

“Great, we’ll do your fitting after,” she says. She catches my eye from behind Daniel and blows me a kiss. I force a smile, look away, then look back at her quickly. I swear her eyes were black. No, they’re green. She’s smoothing out the jacket on Daniel’s back. She licks her lips. No, she licks her teeth.

The shower is strong and gets hot. It scales the skin of dried sweat off me. When I feel clean, I turn the tap down to cold to forget the humidity for a few seconds.

There are thick robes in the bathroom. I throw one on after drying myself. I tie the towel around my head to dry my hair, think better of it and sling the towel around my neck instead.

Back in the bedroom Yana is massaging Daniel’s shoulders, pressing her chest gently onto the back of his head. She looks me up and down, “Nice robe,” she says, “maybe you should go in that.”

I check her eyes again. They’re still green.

Daniel

Yana crushes the tension in my shoulders like cloves of garlic under her thumbs. I'm looking down, staring through the carpet. I can hear the drone of the shower. The carpet seems to swirl, like water slipping down the plug. Yana hums a vague melody that I hear in the back of my skull like a memory. My feet feel wet. Water is rising through the carpet.

The bathroom door opens. Benji comes back into the room. Yana slides her thumb out of my shoulder, releasing the pressure. I am waking from a trance. A vague memory of water lurks in my mind. How long have I been sitting here? Benji has finished his shower, so twenty minutes at most.

“Mind if I go next?” asks Yana.

“What? No.”

She hops off the bed and in one smooth movement she bends down, pinches the hem of her dress and peels it off. She smells the dress, shrugs, then throws it over the couch. She twists her body, inspecting herself. So she is wearing knickers.

“Do you think I need to lose any weight Benji?” she asks.

“I don't know.”

“What do you think, Daniel?”

She's facing away from me. I look her up and down slowly, hopefully showing that I am not embarrassed by her stunt. "Bench presses would improve your posture." She grabs a towel and storms into the bathroom in mock offence.

"What is going on?" asks Benji.

"I'm not sure what that was, but I didn't want to rise to it. She caught you out, bro."

"Not that. Before that, when I came out of the shower."

"Oh right," I pause. "I don't really remember how that started."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really," Benji raises his eyebrows. "Benji, the weirdest thing happened when she was touching me?"

"That's called an erection, Daniel. I'd say she did get a rise out of you."

I reposition myself on the bed, "What's up, Benji? You're worried."

"I'm not worried, Daniel. I'm not mad. Look, I hate to say it, but you were right. This was a good idea. But she wants to hook up with you. So just give me the nod when you think it's

going to happen and I'll try to find a way to be away from the room for a while.”

I sigh, “When we get to the party you'll see she probably acts the same way around all the guys. She's just a flirt. Most of it is just an act to see if we react. And you're reacting. ‘Um – I dunno if you need to lose weight’.” I laugh. “Chill out Benji. The ideal scenario tonight is we both meet someone else and neither of us has to come back here.”

“No. She's into you. She was almost drooling on you while massaging you.”

“I can't really remember anything about that.”

“You don't remember her double-Ds resting on the back of your head.”

“What? Those aren't double-Ds. They're more like Bs.”

“No Daniel, your ex was more like a B cup. Yana's are bigger.”

“They're exactly the same size. She just had them out in front of you, didn't you have a look?”

The bathroom door opens and Yana emerges, “Benji, I wasn't serious about going in the robe”

Benji

My mood has been a shambles on this trip. I feel like one of the colourful ties we can see in the trees around the town, fluttering in the breeze. It must be all the repetitive days. It's unhealthy. But I'm psyched up now. Human contact is incoming.

Daniel is right, the best outcome is that we all meet someone else. We'll be the most interesting people there. Travellers always seem more mysterious than they deserve. Have you ever met one of those guys who goes travelling after university for a year, but then they don't return for five or six years? You meet these guys at parties when you're in your mid 20s. You expect them to be interesting but they're vegetables. Being a British guy living in Cambodia makes you interesting enough to carry you through every social situation and so you never develop a personality. Well now that's us. Except we're doing something actually meaningful... I suppose.

I've heard in Russia there are more women than men and this is why you see stunning Russian women settling for ropy guys... apparently. I've heard there are dating companies that match Russian women with the oversupply of men in China. It's one of those things that *sounds* right but who knows. It might

explain why Yana seems to be into us. She would have guys falling over her in the UK. She wouldn't look twice at us. Maybe Daniel would have a chance. He got the number of a Mexican glamour model once in Leeds. But it took an hour and I don't think it went anywhere after that. Maybe there just aren't many options in the Russian wilderness. Maybe I'm overthinking the entire thing and she really does just need a lift.

I can't drag my eyes off her. She found a shrunken wool skirt in one of the drawers and is wearing the other dinner jacket Daniel found. She's pinned it in tight against her body making it look burlesque.

On the walk to the party we see more twigs, fried eggs and other offerings out in front of the buildings. From some attics above us there is the noise of gatherings. It spills down like an unintelligible angel song.

“What's the occasion?”

“It's Green Week,” says Yana. Daniel shrugs.

“It's Green Week,” I say.

We get to a small commercial estate with shuttered units. The throb of a party is coming from one of the properties. Yana bangs hard on one of the shutters and it rolls up to waist height.

The sounds from inside widen and bounce out into the estate. A gaunt hipster pokes his head under the door, exchanges a few words in Russian with Yana, then raises the door to chest height so that we can step under.

It's a warehouse. Empty now but with some of the shelving, pallet lifters and miscellaneous containers arranged in tables and benches like an edgy fashion shoot. Some of it has been used to construct an ersatz stage. Someone is performing on a set of modular synthesisers. They're dressed in black robes, a black hood and a papier-mâché mask with a long beak. The music is downtempo, smooth but melancholic. At one of the tables there are women weaving garlands and sipping on beer. At another someone seems to be doing a tarot reading. All around the space there are more branches, eggs and garlands hanging.

Yana introduces us to a few people nearby but most of the names slip my memory immediately, if I even hear them at all. Everyone is wearing dusty old jackets or gowns. Yana and Daniel fit in. I look out of place in my Fred Perry t-shirt and jeans.

Daniel

There are so many stunning women and average men. I have to suppress a laugh. Benji might actually shut-up about the race. No more sitting in the urinal on wheels wondering if we're in six-thousand-nine-hundred-and-twenty-third or six-thousand-nine-hundred-and-twenty-fourth position.

Yana is introducing me to people with such unusual names I cannot tell which part of the sentence she's saying is the name. Benji looks like he has finally got the fence post out of his arse and is starting to chill out.

I ask a guy I get introduced to, "What is this music?"

"Modular synth." I wait for him to expand but he doesn't.

"OK, cool." So the guys have great personalities as well as great looks.

Yana snakes an arm around my waist and enters the conversation, insofar as there is one, "Ambient music is really popular here. A famous musician came from this town." She tries to sway my body with the music, "It's hypnotic, just vibe with it." The guy looks at me, looks at Yana, shakes his head and walks away.

"Don't you like the vibes?" asks Yana.

“Yeah yeah, I love it. But what was wrong with that guy?”

“Russians.” Yana shrugs.

I try to mingle but whenever someone discovers I'm with Yana the conversation abruptly ends. Yana floats between Benji and me. I notice that when she's not pushing herself into one of our conversations, she doesn't talk to anyone herself. She just sort of hovers on her own like she is adrift between two banks of a river. She'll push herself into my conversations and make a point of touching me, especially if I'm talking to women. Maybe Benji was right and she does have a thing for me.

It's bad logistics. We need to get Benji to hook-up with someone so things don't get weird back at the guesthouse. But she seems to be ruining his chances with anyone as well. Maybe she's into Benji too. That would make things simpler... in a way.

A few sentences into another conversation and Yana slides up to me, feigning falling into me and I'm forced into catching her. One of my hands slips up her jacket and onto the small of her tiny back, the other catches her enate hips. Her physique is so erotically uneven. I hold her until she regains her balance.

“Too much vodka?”

“Nah.”

She looks up at me, pressed against me, the lapels of the jacket slide across her chest. She can stand now but I hold her tighter. Sorry Benji, I can't resist.

PART 4

Benji

Most of the people here are as reserved as I want to be. It's forcing me to do most of the talking. I'm finally vibing with a small group. Yana hasn't come over to interrupt this one. I'm explaining our journey to three women and the man who let us in. The women are nodding and laughing at the right places. The man, who appears to be the host or organiser of this, is making me feel like I am on trial.

Since I am the centre of attention, I ask him, "Is everything alright? Are we not welcome here?"

"No, everything is fine," he says, "as long as you don't leave anything behind."

One of the women pushes him to break his stare, "He's not being rude, he just doesn't smile. I think he likes you."

"I sympathise with him. He's here with Yana." There is silence for a moment. The temperature of women's faces seem to drop. They look past me and not at me.

“I didn’t know Yana was here,” says one of them. The host jerks his head in the vague direction of where she is. They don’t turn to look.

“How do you know Yana?” asks one of them.

“I don’t really. We met her at a rest stop earlier today and gave her a lift here.”

“How did you meet?” Her eyes narrow.

“Daniel met her first. He said she was sunbathing by the river behind the rest stop.”

“So you didn’t see her first? You don’t know if she was *in* the river?” she asks.

“No, why?”

“Was she naked when Daniel saw her?” another asks.

“I think he would’ve said if she was... but she did take her clothes off in the guesthouse before getting in the shower,” I smile, showing how cool I am with it. She just looks at the host. He shrugs. Everyone is avoiding eye contact for a moment.

“How do *you* know Yana?” I ask the group.

“She was engaged to someone who lived here.”

“Was?”

“It didn’t work out. She hasn’t been back to town for... a while”

Across the warehouse a movement catches my eye, Yana fake falls into Daniel forcing him to catch her. Such a blatant move, but he’s holding her longer and harder than he has to. She is whispering into his mouth but neither of them moves the final centimeter for the kiss. Both too proud to make the move. Both wanting to be the one in control. They deserve each other.

I don’t want it to bother me but this has a gossomar of spite about it. He knows I like redheads and he was telling me I had a chance with her. This just looks like he’s marking territory, showing he can have anyone.

“Why are there sticks and eggs and garlands everywhere?” I ask, heaving my attention back to the people in front of me.

“It’s Green Week,” they say in chorus.

“Of course, Green Week.” I raise my arms and smile. The women smile back. The host blows air out of his cheeks and walks away.

“You’ve never heard of Green Week,” one of them says.

“I have not.”

“It’s the week where we honour the unclean dead. The dead that died before their time.”

“What about the sticks and eggs and bracelets?”

“Branches from birch trees. Birch trees hold the spirits of the unclean dead. The eggs are just yummy.” The other women laugh.

“Fertility symbols, probably?”

“Exactly. See he’s not a total idiot.” She raises her arm, “The bracelets seal friendships.”

“Friendship bracelets?” she cringes.

“It’s spiritual, it’s a promise.”

“What promise?”

“To keep each other safe from the unclean dead.”

Daniel

The music suddenly stops and I’m shouting, “That’s why The Master and the Margarita is more of a supernatural farce than a work of modernist literature.” The guy I’m lecturing seems relieved to have a reason to exit the monologue.

The warm kiss of intoxication has me ranting at strangers. I haven’t seen Yana since she brought me that last vodka. She

was joking that Benji was messing up his chances with the girls he was talking to and the only way to save his night would be to have a threesome. I laughed it off and said he wouldn't be up for it. Then she vanished and I finished up talking about Russian literature.

Almost everyone has slipped out of the warehouse already. There's always an afterparty and we could try to get invited, but I feel like we've constantly been the outsiders here. Yana is talking to Benji by the door. Nobody who I've spoken to has said goodbye. They just left. Nobody is saying goodbye to Yana either. It's like she barely knows these people. I don't think I've seen anyone talk to Yana all night except for Benji and me.

"Did you have a good time?" Yana asks, as I approach.

"Yes, very cool. Interesting people. Good music, modular synth apparently. What's happening now?"

"Nothing," says Yana.

"No afterparty?"

She smiles, "Not unless we arrange one at our room in the guesthouse."

"There's no modular synth though," I say.

“I’ve got a few more drinks for us though,” says Yana. She kicks a fabric bag at her feet and it clinks.

“More drinks?” I look at Benji, he shrugs.

We duck under the half opened roller-shutter-door. Outside a circle of a dozen of the party guests are speaking but when we emerge they stop and look at us silently. I can still feel the vodka weighing down my wit, so all I manage to say is, “Thanks for the afterparty drinks.” I sling the bag over my back and the bottles smash into my spine. They just stare. Benji is already walking away. Yana is suppressing a laugh. She grabs my arm and pulls me away. As we leave the estate I look over my shoulder, they’re still staring.

We walk back to the guest house. The only sound is the uneven percussion of Yana’s heels on the pavement and the bottles rattling. Every window in town is dark. Even the guest house looks abandoned. Not even a lamplight to guide the travellers home.

Back in our room I dump the bottles on the vanity table. Benji starts pouring beer into the small glasses he found in the bathroom. Yana sits on the bed, takes off her heels and stretches out, letting the hem of her skirt ride her thighs a little bit. “My

legs are killing me,” she says, “I need a massage.” She goes into the bathroom, locks the door and I hear the toilet seat slam down.

“Yana said you wanted a threesome,” whispers Benji.

“Oh really,” I laugh.

“Don’t use me in one of your games, Daniel.”

“Shut up, Benji, I’m trying to get us both laid. When she comes out she will flop down on the bed. I’ll offer a four hand massage. We’ll see where it goes.”

Benji

“Don’t we have to talk about, you know, who’s going to do what?” I shout-whisper.

“No.”

The toilet flushes.

“No?”

“No.”

Yana emerges, stretches and flops down face first onto the bed, just as Daniel said she would. “My muscles are stiff,” she mumbles into the pillow.

“Do you want a four hand massage?”

“Finally, how many hints do I have to drop to get a rub? Do my legs first.”

She pulls up the hem of her wool skirt to the lip of her buttocks revealing red French knickers. The paleness of her sour cream thighs is shocking, juxtaposed to her lightly burned calves that look like they’ve been dusted with paprika. Daniel sees me staring at her and rolls his eyes. “Sorry, we don’t have any oil,” says Daniel, “but hopefully four hands will make up for that.”

“I’m sure it will.”

Daniel starts with two hands around her ankles. I follow his lead. He moves to her calf with both hands, moving them in opposite directions. Then moves to the back of her thighs, working the outside and then the inside, letting his fingers brush her underwear. I copy and notice a damp heat as Yana opens her legs almost imperceptibly. She draws in and releases a long breath.

“We need to get to your back,” says Daniel.

She unbuttons the front of the jacket, we slip it off awkwardly, then resume from the bottom of her back just above the top of her skirt.

“You guys have done this before,” Yana says,

“The customer should just relax and try to enjoy the experience,” says Daniel. He moves his hands up her back and around her shoulder blades. I stay in sync.

“Customer?” she says. “How am I going to pay you for the massage?”

“We’ll find a way,” says Daniel.

We spend a lot of time on her shoulders. Daniel says that she’s holding a lot of tension there. I have no idea if he’s making it up, he seems serious. We push harder into her shoulders. Yana lets out deep husky moans into the pillow that I feel through the bed rather than hear.

When we finish her back Daniel tells her it’s time to massage her front. She turns over, settles her head into the pillows and closes her eyes. Her moonrise coloured skin is freckled on her face and sternum where the sun has touched it, but her breasts and stomach are flawless white. She has wide, burnt umber areolas. Her breasts are so large that four hands may not be enough.

Daniel has shuffled back down to her ankles and is watching me stare at Yana’s chest. “Double Ds,” I mouth to him. He looks at her chest, scrunches his face and shakes his head.

Daniel starts massaging her feet, moving up her calves and then doing the same move on the front of her thighs, starting on the outside and moving in. My fingers brush her red underwear, now almost totally on show as her skirt is folded up into more of a belt.

We move up to her torso. They just look too big to massage. This is going to be comic. But as I reposition further up the bed, she puts her hand between my legs, slides it up my thigh and starts massaging my crotch through my jeans. I see she is doing the same to Daniel. This is really going to happen. I can feel myself straining against my jeans, hard in her hand. I can't look up at Daniel. It will put me off. I wonder who is bigger. Yana still has her eyes closed and looks serene.

“I'm almost naked,” she says, “that's not fair.”

Daniel

Yana is laying across the bed on her back, skirt hitched up into a thin band of fabric above her hips, her head facing me. She grabs my buttocks and pulls me closer, taking me into her mouth. Benji has her ankles in his hands and is sliding in and out of her. Her

legs are up, making her thighs appear even thicker and pushing her stomach into a cute little hump.

Benji's eyes are shut and his brow is furrowed in concentration. He is breathing fast, maybe hyperventilating. I reach over and touch him on the shoulder. He opens his eyes, "Hey man, calm down, where the hell did you go?" His eyes race around the room and then over Yana's body. His hips keep moving, rhythmically and smoothly in contrast to his shallow, paranoid breathing.

Yana moves, sliding me out of her mouth, "He just needs some more attention," she says. She takes him by the shoulders and lays him down flat on the bed. His eyes are still chasing shadows on the ceiling until she kneels between his legs and wraps her lips around him. She angles her body, presenting her behind to me.

I place my hands on her hips, firmly angling her to the right height, then slide them up her back. She arches in response. Her short, black, pubic hair is soaked and flat against her labia. The folds swallow me as I steer myself in with my hips, my hands holding her back in place.

Benji has opened his eyes and they are calmer now. He is smiling and looking through the ceiling. I look at the ceiling, leaning back, which adjusts the angle of penetration making me moan out loud. Yana responds by rotating her hips in little circles.

The retro, textured, spiral patterns on the ceiling seem to be moving in the low light of the room. I start laughing. Benji starts laughing too. Yana slips off us, faces me on her knees, puts her forehead against mine. “What’s wrong?” asks Yana. Benji is spasming with laughter.

“The ceiling,” I say, “it’s dancing.”

“Shh, stay with me a little longer,” she says, holding my face, forcing me to meet her eyes. Her pupils are big drops of tar. They are spinning too.

She puts her head against my shoulder tenderly, wrapping her arms around my neck. Benji is chuckling quietly now, still fixated on the ceiling. On the floor around the bed there is roughly half-an-inch of water. Branches of birch float around us.

“Something is leaking,” I say, but my words sound like they’re coming from underwater.

“Shh,” she says and kisses my neck.

“Benji, can you see the water?”

“Yes,” but I hear his voice and his giddy laughter from the other side of a wall between us that I can’t see.

“Come here,” says Yana. She turns back to Benji, holding my hand, and mounts him gently. She keeps pulling me closer until I understand what she wants. When we’re both inside her she reaches back to hold me still. She rocks her hips in a tiny movement but the sensation shivers into my belly and makes me draw a short breath. The water is rising around the bed. The walls crack as roots of a tree push through the plaster. Yana’s movements become more ambitious and violent. She yelps in a moment of pain but bites her lip and flicks her hips harder. I want to speak to Benji, but I can’t hear my own voice.

PART 5

Benji

When I wake-up my body feels sticky and my feet feel numb. I sit on the edge of the bed, surprised to find the floor dry and wait for the feeling to return through the dull cramp. I look around the room and it echoes vague memories. Far above me a tacky textured ceiling makes me feel dizzy even though it is mundane. I must be hung over.

I am naked. I am the only one in the room. I can't hear any other guests or any noise coming from outside. My bag and clothes are here but Daniel's are missing. There are some bottles of beer and wine on the vanity table. No car keys. Do not entertain that thought.

I throw on what I was wearing last night and half-stumble down the five flights of stairs. I stop at every floor, listening for any other guests. I can't hear any. There is no housekeeping and on the ground floor the reception desk is unstaffed. The breakfast room is empty, but the tables are laid with white

tablecloths, cutlery and coffee cups. When I breathe I can see my breath. Has everyone checked out? The clock in reception tells me it's 8:51.

Outside the guest house the warm air soothes my goosebumps. On the porch is a plate with a fried egg on it. Two of the friendship bracelets have been left next to the plate.

The car is where we left it but the town square where we parked is lifeless. Daniel's bags are on the back seat and the car's hood is open. The dipstick has been removed and is laid across the exposed engine. One of my feet slides. A puddle of oil is emerging from under the car. I take deep breaths until the creeping panic resides. We've probably smashed the oil dish. But I don't remember hitting anything. I crouch and try to look under the car. I don't expect to be able to find anything but I do. The oil dish is on the road undamaged and I can see at least two of the screws in the thickest part of the oil.

Back on my feet I see someone across the square, standing still with their arms by their side, looking straight at me. I brush down my jeans and look again, they are still staring. "Do you know who did this to my car?" I ask. They shake their head but they don't speak.

“Thanks,” I say, under my breath. “Where is everyone?”

He shakes his head and points toward the river. I take another slow breath. Conclusions are battling for attention in my mind but there’s no reason to think this is Yana or Daniel’s doing, yet. Find them first and check they are OK. The people in this town are starting to scare me.

I head in the general direction of the river and I see two more figures on the street. Neither of them speaks. They stare silently and point toward the river.

Daniel

Yana unbuckles her bra, covers her breasts with one arm and uses the other to throw her bra onto the river bank. Then she submerges enough for the water to cover her nipples. The river here is shallow and wide. It seems to be just over head height at the deepest point.

“It’s a bit late to play coy,” I look around, then slide off my boxers and tip-toe into the river. The water is cool and thick. It dissolves the crusty fluids off my skin and drags the hangover off my muscles.

“I was drunk last night,” she says, smiling through her dishevelled black hair.

“Oh, do you always have a threesome when you’re drunk?” I wade toward her.

“That was your idea.”

“No it wasn’t,” I laugh, she slides her arms over my shoulders and her legs around my hips.

“I was happy just having you,” she presses her forehead against mine.

“Oh really, you didn’t seem to be complaining.”

“Neither did you.”

We stay like that for a while. I hold out my arms to keep us steady. She stays wrapped around me. I feel the little iron-fillings lump of her pubic hair grinding against my lower abdomen with the gentle sway of the river.

“Stay,” she says.

“I can’t, I promised Benji we’d carry on.”

“What if you couldn’t?”

“But we can.”

“But what if you couldn’t, would you stay?”

“Well, I’d have to.”

“Would you want to?”

“Yes,” I don’t know anything about her. “But, I’ll come back.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Yes, I will,” I have no idea where we are. “The water looks so black and opaque.”

“It’s just because the sun is so low. There’s nothing in the water that can hurt you.”

“I’m not so sure,” I smile. Yana looks over my shoulder, I turn my head. Benji is on the riverbank.

“Who broke the car, Daniel?” he asks. What the hell is he talking about?

“Stay,” she whispers into my ear.

I try to ask Benji about the car, but when I open my mouth it feels like a dry, fibrous web is stretched across the top of my throat. I try to tongue it and bite it, but it becomes thicker and muscular. Yana tightens her legs around me.

“Who broke the car?” he shouts.

“Stay,” says Yana. My arms are now being held out in the water. I can’t pull them in. Something black has spiraled around them. Yana’s hair.

“You’re an asshole, Daniel. You’re an absolute asshole.”

Benji turns and walks away.

Yana’s hair is snaking around my legs, planting them into the river bed. “What if you can’t leave?” she asks me. Her eyes are swirling. I want to tell her I’ll stay. I want to scream that I’ll stay, whatever it takes for her to let go, but the sound is trapped in my throat and vibrates against the web. We are sinking. She kisses me while the water reaches my chin. She releases my arms. I try to grab her. Her skin and hair is slick like oil. The water is entering my nostrils. She grinds her pubis against me hard and digs her ankles into my back like spurs.

Yana

“What if you can’t leave?” I ask him. He’s too lost in the moment to find words. I grind myself against him. The tip of his heavy, hangover erection brushes my thigh and my buttock. He grabs at my body and hair. He wants to go deeper. I tighten my legs and grind against him harder. His mouth is gasping for mine. I put my open lips over his. I put my tongue into his mouth. His breath is hot and desperate. The water slips over our heads. I lean into his

passion. He wants me and I want to give in. I want to let go. Make me whole.

His hands fall away. His mouth slows and locks. His body is limp in the grip of my legs. I pull him closer.

He said he would stay.

I press my forehead against his.

He said he would stay.

I let go. Daniel falls away from me to the river bed. He will not even look at me. I turn away so he can't see me cry. But he will see the shudders of my heartbreak.

I lift my head above the surface to find twenty or thirty of the townspeople are on the bank of the river. Many of them are wearing those gaudy bracelets they make. One of them points at me. They are silent but they start tossing small branches into the river. One of them points to a birch tree next to the river. It is overdressed with garlands. Some of them are so long the ends trail into the river. One of them chants in a low grow, "Rusalka's soul; safe in the tree." The crowd follows the chant.

Rusalka's soul; safe in the tree.

I move closer to the riverbank, they back away, chanting more enthusiastically.

Rusalka's soul; safe in the tree.

No, I deserve to be happy.

Rusalka's soul; safe in the tree.

There is someone out there who will stay with me.

Rusalka's soul; safe in the tree.

They will love me.

Rusalka's soul; safe in the tree.

I submerge myself and let the river carry me downstream.

Beyond the river's surface some of the townspeople cry for me to come back, but it's useless now like half a memory of a dream.

The river takes me out of the town. The water holds me snug until I reach an area where the bank is covered in long grass. I lift myself up, leaving my feet in the water. Here the river is calm and looks like it has a thick skin over it, like sour milk. A few meters down the river something breaks the skin. A fishing line.

A young man secures his rod, grabs a beer out of an icebox, opens it and takes the long, deep glug of the parched throat.

"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink," I say.

He turns, startled, but his eyes widen when he realises my modesty is maintained only by the long grass.

END