

Café

Maracanda



Patricia le Roy

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Prologue

A STATE OF GRACE

August 1990

Igor is sitting alone at a café terrace. He is wearing a black silk shirt. On the table beside him are a pair of sunglasses and a glass of what looks like Campari. His expression is undecipherable. There is no way of knowing whether he felt love or hatred, scorn or affection, for the person taking the photo. He is neither smiling nor frowning. There is nothing to indicate what was going on in his mind. At the instant the shutter clicked, was he weighing his options and planning his escape route? Or was he simply enjoying his drink and admiring the architecture? Looking at the picture, it is impossible to tell whether he already knew, all those weeks earlier, what he was going to do, nor whether any shadow of regret had crossed his mind.

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Splendid restored farmhouse surrounded by vineyards. Spectacular views over Tuscan landscape. Large swimming pool. Property is secluded but not isolated and lies 900m off the road. House retains original character with arches, ceiling beams, fireplaces. Attractively furnished, with some antiques and pine. Sitting/dining room opens on to terrace with pergola for outdoor dining. Spacious, well-equipped kitchen. Two double bedrooms, each with en suite bathroom, one leading to private terrace. Siena 15 km, Florence 55 km, Arezzo 80 km.

*

It was Camilla who found the house, and Davey who had had the idea of sharing it with Igor and Rachel. At first, Camilla had demurred. Davey had been playing tennis after work with Igor Strugatsky for two or three years, but she herself hardly knew him. As for Rachel Stern, neither of them had exchanged more than two words with her in all the years they had been working at the Radio. They knew who she was, of course. They had seen her stalking down the corridors with her preoccupied frown. They had observed her in meetings, where she rode rough-shod over anyone who disagreed with her. Within the Research Department, she had a reputation as a serious intellectual who spent her summers discussing the affairs of the day in the beer gardens of Munich, and her winters holed up in the library researching ancestors who had emigrated from the Pale of Settlement at the end of the nineteenth century. She had a German husband no one had ever seen. It wasn't a good idea, Camilla objected, to go on vacation with people you didn't know well (and

who might give you lectures on anti-Semitism under the Tsars over breakfast). A month was a long time.

But no one else was free to join them. All their friends had plans. For that matter, they had had plans themselves. They had intended to go to Moscow to see perestroika at first hand, but in late May the trip fell through, and it looked as though they were going to have to spend August visiting their families in the States. It was then that Camilla made a stand. She couldn't face another summer shuttling between Massachusetts and Indiana, she announced. If they couldn't go to Russia, they would go to Italy. To Tuscany. She had visited Florence with her parents when she was young, and had been dying to go back ever since. They could drive down from Munich in half a day, it wasn't far at all.

Unfortunately, most of the rental houses in Tuscany had been snapped up months ago. Camilla's thoughts were beginning to turn resignedly to the beach house on Cape Cod, when suddenly there was a cancellation. A villa with a swimming pool, north of Siena. Camilla was euphoric. The location was perfect and the photos looked wonderful. The problem was that it was too big and expensive for the two of them on their own. Camilla spent a few days pondering the evils of sharing a swimming pool with a Russian cultural journalist and an English bluestocking, and decided that in the interests of economy and marital harmony (she had already said yes to the rental agency and Davey was furious) she had better give way. In any case, she was beginning to have doubts about Davey's willingness to endure a serious investigation of Renaissance art. She knew what would happen. He would linger and delay and find iron-clad excuses for not leaving just yet, and she would end up missing half of what she wanted to see. But if someone else was there, she could leave them all behind and go off on her own. When Igor and Rachel came over for a drink one evening in July, she showed them the map and told them where she intended to go.

"We will come with you," said Igor, smiling at her. "We cannot let you go all that way alone. Isn't that so, Rachel?"

"Um," said Rachel. "Petro della.... What did you say he was called?"

"Piero della Francesca." Well yes, of course. As trivial pursuits went, Renaissance art was clearly an all-time winner. Camilla gritted her teeth. We can't all have persecuted Lithuanian-Jewish ancestors. "He was born in about 1420 and died in 1492. He's one of the most important painters of the Quattrocento."

"Oh yes?" said Rachel.

"There are paintings by Piero all over Tuscany. His main work is a series of frescos in a church in Arezzo. That's here." She pointed to the map. "And from Arezzo, you can follow what's called the Piero Trail to Monterchi, here, to Sansepolcro, and on to Urbino. That's what I'd like to do."

"It sounds very interesting," said Igor. "Urbino, of course, is too far away. Have you looked carefully at the map? It's a twisting road, and the drive will take longer than you think. But we can certainly go to Monterchi and Sansepolcro."

He looked up and smiled at her again.

"Oh ... well ... er ... great," said Camilla.

*

The Villa Tolomei stood at the end of a long dirt track on the edge of a hill. To the east of the house, the ground fell away sharply and the windows looked clear across the valley to the opposite hill. From her bedroom window, Rachel could see a wide swathe of forest and, further away, the

sloping outline of fields and olive groves, dotted here and there with square harmonious Tuscan farmhouses. Behind the straight rows of vines, directly opposite, rose the graceful shape of a campanile. Higher up, on the crest of the hill, stood a long row of cypresses. Rachel was mesmerised. She felt as though she had been looking for this landscape all her life, without even knowing it. From below, the voices of Igor and Camilla drifted faintly up to her. Something about food for tomorrow and the supermarket in Siena. Rachel paid no attention. Food didn't interest her: it never had. Leaning against the window sill, gazing across the valley, glimpsing a patch of blue down to her right that could only be the swimming pool, she began to feel that it might have been worth coming.

When Igor had broached the idea of spending August in Italy with Davey Morton and Camilla Stacey, Rachel had been first disbelieving and then horrified. Davey and Camilla scared her to death. Tall, blond and smiling, they looked more like brother and sister than husband and wife, with their vitamin-fed American good looks and their clear confident voices. Davey was big, and possessed the physical assurance of big, handsome men. Apparently he had been a high-school swimming champion. Certainty radiated from him like an aura. He was so big and so blond that Rachel found it difficult to look him in the eye. As for Camilla, with her exquisite clothes and beautifully crafted sentences, she was even more daunting.

Everywhere they went, they were conspicuous. Every time Rachel emerged from her office, she seemed to catch sight of one of them striding down the corridor, pausing to greet an acquaintance, chattering with cronies in the canteen, or lounging with a stein of beer at a shady table at the Chinese Tower. The golden couple. They were so visible it was amazing they had time to get any work done, but Camilla produced elegantly written, closely argued papers on Soviet military matters nearly every week, while Davey edited a daily summary of events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Handsome, intelligent and talented: how could they not intimidate her? Rachel was dark and pale, with a tendency to put on weight. She had heard that Camilla's father was a diplomat, and that Davey's was a prominent surgeon. Rachel's father taught woodwork in the local comprehensive. What in God's name would she say to people like that?

For a while, she considered refusing to go. Especially when she discovered that, on top of everything else, she was supposed to be on first-name terms with Renaissance art. The Quattrocento and the Piero Trail. Why spend a month feeling inadequate? She could go home to the North of England and see her parents instead. Her mother was always complaining that she didn't visit them enough.

But in the end, she gave in. Igor had set his heart on it, and she couldn't bear to refuse him what he wanted. Trust me, it'll be fine, he said, and she believed him.

*

Rachel had met Igor one December evening in the Radio canteen several years earlier. She had finished work for the day, and Günther was expecting her at home. But Rachel had recently realized that being at home bored her. She had more fun at work, where there were dozens of people whose horizons, like hers, were bounded by the activities of the Politburo and the Central Committee, and who were obsessed, like her, by the inner workings of the greatest metaphysico-administrative system of the century. Instead of going out into the cold to wait for the bus home to Arabellapark, she went downstairs to the canteen.

The room was full. Spotting a couple of Russians she knew, she went to join them. There was a third man at their table. She had never spoken to him, but she knew who he was: Igor Strugatsky, who did a cultural programme called *From Under the Rubble*. Nobody introduced her: that was not the kind of thing they bothered with. They were talking about Academician Sakharov, who had returned from exile to Moscow the day before. Why had Gorbachev liberated a prominent dissident? how would the conservatives react? what would be the effect on arms control negotiations? After a while, Rachel's gaze was drawn to Igor Strugatsky. He had brown hair and brown eyes and a droopy brown moustache. His face was lined and slightly doleful, though he couldn't have been more than thirty-five or so. According to him, bringing Sakharov back to Moscow was a logical step in the process of perestroika. Gorbachev needed the support of the intelligentsia and the dissidents. Nadya and Vanya didn't agree. They thought it was part of an intricate manoeuvre aimed at deceiving the US government and the Western press.

"Deceive them why?" said Rachel irritably. She had been listening to Russian conspiracy theories all afternoon.

"Because that's the way they operate," said Vanya, puzzled by the question.

"You're Rachel Stern, aren't you?" said Igor. "I read your paper on the Aral Sea. It was quite thorough, but you should have paid more attention to infant mortality figures."

He started to tell her what she should have said about infant mortality. Rachel didn't listen. By now she had worked out that the mournful look was due to the lines which went from his nose to the corners of his mouth. The smile didn't take them away, but it mitigated them. Yes, it seemed to say, I know the ways of the world, but I can live with them. She was fascinated. The canteen seemed suddenly stuffy and smoky. She wanted him to take her away and show her how to become as resigned as he was. She wanted to explore the secrets of his controlled melancholy.

But it was hardly something she could tell him, not right now, so instead she said, "Interested in environmental issues, are you?"

"I'm interested in the Aral Sea. I went there once, and what I saw shocked me so much that now I pay attention."

"You went out there? To the Aral Sea?" They were gazing at each other unabashedly across the table by now. "Tell me about it!"

"Not now." He glanced at his watch. "I have to be on the air in ten minutes. Some other time, if you like."

"When?" said Rachel.

*

Camilla was woken at half-past seven by the light sliding through the shutters. Davey was still asleep. Silently she slid out of bed and groped for her running shorts. The bedroom opened on to a terrace edged with lavender and rosemary bushes. Camilla stepped outside. Layer upon layer of mist-swathed hills undulated into the distance. The morning air was fresh and sweet.

By the time she got back from her run, Davey was pottering round the kitchen organizing coffee and toast. The table on the terrace was already set with plates and cups, jam and orange juice, fruit and yoghurt. A fig tree murmured at the corner of the house.

"You should have waited for me," said Davey sulkily.

"I didn't want to wake you."

"I'd have come with you."

"You can come tomorrow."

"Jesus, you're not going running *every* day?"

Camilla leant over and touched his hand. The sun was warm on her bare leg, she was feeling too good to quarrel. "Don't worry, sweetie, there'll be plenty of time for what you have in mind. It gets pretty hot here in the afternoon. We'll need to have nice long siestas."

"That's a thought," said Davey, cheering up.

"But you can still come running with me if you want to."

"Yeah, I will. Wake me tomorrow. I'll definitely come with you."

Camilla leant back in her chair and savoured her coffee. A lizard scurried across the edge of the terrace. There was no sign of Igor and Rachel. She glanced at her watch.

"We need to go to the store to pick up some groceries. What time do you think Igor's going to get up?"

"Oh pretty soon, I guess."

"We shouldn't leave it too late. Everything here is bound to close for lunch."

Davey dragged his gaze away from the distant hills and scowled at her. "Cut it out, Mill, you're on vacation. Relax, for God's sake, and give us all a break."

*

Camilla and Davey had been married four years, and it was starting to become uncomfortably clear to both of them that their union was not the perfect fusion of love and reason they had thought it would be. They were not as compatible as they had expected. Lately they had been grating on each other more and more, though neither was yet willing to admit this. Camilla was beginning to see that it had been a mistake to think that love, conjoined with similar backgrounds and shared interests, was all it took to make a marriage work. In theory, it had all seemed ideal. Privileged backgrounds, cultured families, Ivy League universities. Davey had gone to Yale like his father, Camilla to Harvard like hers. The problem was that she and Davey were temperamentally poles apart. She was driven, compulsive, hard-working. Davey was nonchalant, careless, disorganized. She suspected that he might even be lazy -- which for a workaholic like Camilla was a major sin. On the other hand, it would have been an even worse mistake to marry someone like herself. The result would have been disciplined, humourless, totally without charm. She had gone out with someone like that in college for a while: to look back on it now made her shudder. There was nothing wrong with frivolity, Camilla believed, just as long as it stayed within limits.

*

In the Middle Ages, Siena was a wild hilltop city divided between quarrelsome nobles, who built high towers to defend themselves and fought pitched battles in the streets.

On first sight, it looked as though nothing had changed. Under the sharp August sun, the city was an urban labyrinth of red and ochre brick, with high-walled palaces and narrow alleys. Every passage and square was jammed with a seething, shoving mass of tourists. It took nearly ten minutes to locate a café table on the city's main square, the Piazza del Campo. The visit to the supermarket had not been a success, and the collective mood was tense.

"You really gotta want it," said Davey, collapsing on a chair.

"Isn't it going to be expensive here?" said Rachel.

"Look," said Camilla, pointing to the opposite side of the square, "that's the Palazzo Pubblico."

"Why don't we look for somewhere cheaper on a side street?" said Rachel.

"The guidebook says it's one of the marvels of Italian Renaissance architecture. It dates from the fourteenth century."

"Prego, signori?"

"What are we having?"

"Mineral water?"

"What's going to be cheap?"

"Davey, what do you- ?"

"Well, a beer- "

"We will all have Campari," said Igor, and gave the order. For a few moments no one spoke.

"I can't believe we spent all that money on food," said Rachel crossly.

"Was it really that much?" said Camilla nervously.

"Obviously you've never had to worry about money," said Rachel.

"Well, I, that is ..." Camilla squirmed unhappily in her seat. "Extra virgin olive oil does make a difference, you know. And real buffalo mozzarella."

Rachel sniffed disbelievingly. In her mother's house, olive oil was kept in a tiny bottle in the bathroom cabinet and used for curing earache.

Camilla said no more. Igor, slouched in his plastic chair, looking for all the world like an Italian film director in his white linen trousers and black silk shirt, ignored them all. In the end, it was Davey, conciliatory by nature, who broke the silence.

"So, Rachel, what do you think of the Campo?"

Rachel cast a glance round the unbroken stone facades. "It reminds me of a bull ring. I don't like it."

Camilla looked up. "Oh but, surely- "

"Bit overwhelming, isn't it?" Davey agreed. "Be better with some trees in the middle."

"I hope it's not all going to be like this," said Rachel.

"Of course not," snapped Camilla. "This square is unique even in Tuscany."

"Good," said Rachel, and even Davey was reduced to silence.

*

"She's impossible," said Camilla, brushing her hair with hard, irritated strokes.

"She's categorical," said Davey.

In the heavy heat of the afternoon, the bedroom was white and inviting. Davey lay on the bed, watching his wife go back and forth to the bathroom.

"What does she bother to come here for if she's going to run everything down? There aren't enough trees, there's too much brick, there are too many tourists."

"It's too expensive."

"Why do we need it?"

"Why spend money on decent wine?"

"What's wrong with rot-gut?"

"But she was all right once she'd drunk some of it."

They were both laughing. Camilla dropped on to the bed beside Davey. He put out a hand and ran a contemplative finger down her forehead, her nose, her chin. Across her neck, down to her breast. She stopped laughing. Her heart sank slightly. But she said nothing, and she didn't brush his hand away. She watched him gravely, waiting.

*

"Dushenka, you must learn to give a little," said Igor, unzipping Rachel's skirt.

"Me? What about *them*? They want everyone to think like them, behave like them-"

"You have to remember they're Americans. They can't help it, they were born that way. It's their mission to save the world from communism and bad wine."

Rachel giggled. "I must say the wine was pretty good."

"Of course it was. You must learn that saving money isn't everything. Sometimes we need to spend it too."

"My mother would have a heart attack to hear you saying that."

"I must have a talk with your mother one of these days." He had finished with her clothes. Rachel stood pale and naked in the single ray of light from the part-closed shutters. Dust motes swirled in the air behind her. Igor regarded her through narrowed eyes. Rachel without her clothes never failed to surprise him. She was not beautiful, she would never turn heads in the street like Camilla, but beauty was not necessarily what Igor wanted. Undressing Camilla, he imagined, would hold no surprises. Camilla unclothed would be as glossy and predictable as Camilla clothed. Undressing Rachel, he had to be constantly alert for the moment when the outward sheath of aggressivity and awkwardness fell away to reveal her inner vulnerability and an unexpected grace. They had been living together for over three years, and he hadn't caught it yet. He was beginning to think that he maybe never would.

*

Igor was a man who knew what he wanted. The first time he saw Rachel, he knew that she was the one he had been waiting for, and that no one else would do.

Without her, he was incomplete. When she was away, visiting her parents in the North of England or her friends in London, he suffered from insomnia. He could not sleep in their bed alone. Sometimes he slept on the sofa in the living room, in a nest of quilts and pillows he made to try and reassure himself. More often, he stayed awake. He read poetry aloud in the empty room, and pretended she was there listening to him. He read Akhmatova's *Requiem*, which was her favourite, and Zhivago's poems to Lara, which were his. Sometimes, during the day, he was seized with the need to sleep, to make up for what he was missing at night, and when that happened, he plunged into sleep with terrifying swiftness, plummeting into darkness as if into a pit. After ten or twenty minutes he would open his eyes again, but it would take him a long time to clamber back up to wakefulness, and he would feel dull-witted and heavy for hours. At night, there was none of that. He was light as air, nothing held him to the earth. His fear of going to sleep, he knew, was a fear of dying. He was afraid to die without seeing her one last time.

He had persuaded her to leave her husband and move in with him only a few weeks after they met. He couldn't bear the idea of her having a separate life in another part of Munich. He had never

understood why she married this German dentist she met in London. Rachel claimed she needed to convince her parents she was never going back to Southport. Igor suspected there was more to it than that. His theory was that she married Günther for his family. Günther's mother was charming and well read and treated Rachel like a daughter. His sister Gudrun had a degree in philosophy, and a journalist husband who worked for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. After years in a household where no one read books, Rachel fell in love with a cultivated dinner table where the menu included Kant and Goethe and Ostpolitik. Rachel did not live on bread alone. Igor himself had seduced her with the Aral Sea. He sometimes wondered if she agreed to move from Günther's flat to his because she knew she had found a place where she could talk about books and ideas twenty-four hours a day.

For Rachel did not talk about herself. It was not something she knew how to do. Where she came from, emotions were not taken seriously. They were suppressed or disguised or laughed at. Rachel, in any case, had never paid much attention to the emotional side of her life. She had always been better at books than at people. Igor had to admit that this had its advantages. Since Rachel was so absorbed in her work, she paid less attention to his own comings and goings than she might otherwise have done. He had had to explain this several times to his masters in Moscow, who were not at all happy with his living arrangements. He made a point of maintaining a separate life and encouraged her to do the same. Partly to safeguard his freedom of movement, and partly because he knew that if they spent too much time together, she would not be able to take it. The strength of his love would be too much for her. So he used Zhivago, his alter ego, to tell her what he dared not say himself, and he brought her to Italy in the hope that her angular, adolescent, scholarly nature would be awakened by sun and light and idleness into self-awareness, and the passion he desired.

*

The swimming pool lay below the house, on a patch of flatter ground, reached by a long flight of stone steps winding through pines and olives. First down in the morning was Davey. He spent ten minutes skimming leaves and insects off the surface of the water, a further ten doing an idiosyncratic form of gymnastics, and then dived into the pool and swam several lengths, very fast. Not as good as he used to be, but it wasn't bad for a guy who didn't train. He stretched out on a chaise longue, anointed himself with Coppertone, and went to sleep.

Next to arrive, an hour or so later, was Camilla, or sometimes Igor. Igor travelled light: Camilla did not. Camilla arrived at the water's edge loaded with books, magazines, sun lotions, mineral water. Like everything else in life, she had thought this through. Frowning slightly, she selected a chaise-longue, pulled it into position, placed her paraphernalia around it, unfolded her towel, rubbed on her sun cream, immersed herself first in the letters of Vaclav Havel and then, as her reward for diligence, in *Vogue*. Igor watched this ritual with undisguised fascination, Davey ignored it. Both men were installed by then under the awning at the far end of the pool. Igor never sunbathed, though this didn't prevent him from becoming steadily more tanned as the holiday wore on, while Davey had a tendency to burn.

Last, about half-past eleven, came Rachel, a serious late-riser, marching past the lavender bushes with her fast ungainly stride, intent on getting her dose of sun. She waved to the men, who were by now deep in conversation, demanded to know the topic of the day, and on hearing that it was Pushkin or Lermontov or the Future of Russia, she smiled in satisfaction and settled herself beside Camilla.

*

When Rachel and Camilla started talking to each other, it was as though the floodgates had opened. Neither of them had ever talked this way before. Girl talk, Camilla called it, an expression that was strange to Rachel. She had never realized such a thing existed, but she took it in her stride, along with pesto and pecorino and Ambre Solaire -- all things her mother would have dismissed as ideas above her station, and to which she was slowly succumbing.

Of course, it took a while to reach this degree of intimacy. On the second day of the holiday, Camilla watched Rachel arrange herself on the neighbouring chaise-longue with apprehension. After what had happened in the supermarket, Camilla was inclined to keep her distance. She eyed Rachel's appearance with foreboding. The one-piece black swimsuit was pretty much what she expected. Lithuanian-Jewish intellectuals on holiday in Tuscany did not go out and buy themselves frivolous yellow bikinis like Camilla had done, nor were they going to read *Vogue*, another expensive, intellectually lightweight item. Camilla squinted sideways at the sober binding of Rachel's book. Some serious work of Baltic history, no doubt.

"God, it's hot." Rachel put the book down on her knees and Camilla caught a glimpse of the title. *Death on Red Square*. "Should I put on some cream, do you think?"

"Definitely," said Camilla, surprised to have her opinion solicited. "I'd use something stronger than that though," she added, as Rachel produced a tube of Nivea Sun Cream Factor Four.

"But it's all I've got."

"Use mine, if you want." Camilla passed it over.

"Fifteen?" said Rachel doubtfully. "I'll never get brown if I use that."

"Of course you will. But you have to take it slowly. The sun's very strong and your skin isn't used to it." Rachel was listening intently, apparently hearing this information for the first time. Camilla had seen in the office what happened to people who gave Rachel Stern unsolicited advice, but Rachel, who had the idiosyncrasies of the non-Russian nationalities at her fingertips, seemed a lot less familiar with the mysteries of her own skin. Camilla was emboldened to continue.

*

"And you never noticed anything strange? You never had any suspicions?"

I must have asked that question ten or fifteen times in the course of the following fall. They grew as tired of it as I did, but their answers never varied.

No, William, we didn't. Everything was normal. There was nothing strange to notice.

I didn't believe them. There was something here I didn't understand. Something that didn't add up. The four of them, for a start. The Soviet defector and the English bluestocking and the WASP princess and the Indiana high-school swimming champion. An unlikely combination. All together on a hilltop in Tuscany, noticing nothing.

Given what had just happened, I suggested their blindness was odd. They looked at each other and shrugged. When pressed, they provided the ingredients of their recipe for oblivion. The charm of the villa, its isolated site. The sun, the swimming pool, the air, the landscape. None of their lists accounted for everything. I grew more and more exasperated. In the end, I asked if they had a magic potion that bewitched them all.

I saw at once that I was on to something. Davey and Camilla exchanged glances. Even Rachel smiled.

Of course we did, Kavanagh, and it's true we drank a lot of it. *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*, *Brunello di Montalcino*, *Carmignano*, *Monte Antico*, *Palazzo Altesi* -- we must have tried every wine in Tuscany. We started drinking on the very first day, as soon as we got back from Siena. The effect was miraculous. By the end of the afternoon, the women were speaking to each other again, and the men had fallen comfortably back into their old Munich habits of politico-philosophical discussion. Rachel had been lectured by Igor, Camilla had been supported by Davey, irritations had been soothed by sex and sleep. Tempers had cooled and, surprisingly, they stayed that way. Admittedly, for the next few weeks, we were drinking for most of the day. Starting before lunch, trickling on throughout the afternoon, getting serious in the evening. Rarely enough to be drunk, sufficient to keep lucidity at bay.

"So you drank. Okay, fine. What else did you do all day?"

Well not a lot, really. We spent a lot of time lying by the pool. It was hot, you know. We made lunch, we ate on the terrace. We didn't go out until late afternoon when it cooled down.

"And then where did you go?"

We went sightseeing, we visited the hill towns. We went to Arezzo, we went to Florence, we went to Chiusi. Camilla looked at paintings, and so did Igor. One day they went to Sansepolcro to see the Pieros. In the evenings? Well, sometimes we'd go out for a drink or dinner. Or else we went to concerts. But most of the time, we stayed at the villa.

I couldn't understand why they had spent so much time sitting around the villa. Why go all the way to Italy just to stay home? When I remarked on this, they tried to explain, and that was when things began to make an odd kind of sense.

The villa, they said, was our enchanted domain. It was Grand Meaulnes territory, it was the forest of Brocéliande, it was the Sleeping Beauty's castle. No one came near us, no one saw us, no one heard what we said. We were alone, just the four of us, to spin what webs we wanted. We had pricked our fingers on the spinning wheel, and the spell had taken hold of us.

"Okay," I said cautiously, "so you were ... bewitched?"

Of course we were, William! Don't you see? It's the only explanation. How else could an English bluestocking have become best friends with a WASP princess? At the Villa Tolomei, all things were possible. It was an enchanted kingdom, ruled by a sorcerer, and the spells he used were *bruschette* and *bel canto*. Igor solved disputes, cut off arguments, made decisions. His authority was never challenged. He appointed himself master of ceremonies as soon as we arrived, showing us round the house, though he had never set foot there before, allocating the bedrooms, and organizing dinner in the nearest village. For the next four weeks, he stayed firmly at the helm. It was he who decided where we should go, and what we should do. When the question of visiting Florence came up, it was Igor who weighed the evidence, overruled complaints of heat and crowds, and decided that the trip would take place.

"We will go early, before it gets too hot. Everyone will pick the thing they most want to see, and we will confine ourselves to that."

"The Uffizi," said Camilla.

"The lines will be terrible for the Uffizi. It would be best to think of something else."

"I don't know what there is to see," said Davey.

"I don't want to see anything," said Rachel. "I ought to buy a present for my mother."

"There's a market at San Lorenzo," said Camilla.

"Excellent," said Igor. "We will arrive by eight, and make a tour on foot. Maybe we will stop in a few of the churches. After that, Davidka and I will visit Dostoevsky's house, the ladies will go shopping, and by two o'clock we will be on the road home."

Igor managed us beautifully. Without him, the holiday would have fallen apart in no time. He gave us music to listen to, pictures to look at, and topics to discuss. Probably it wasn't all that difficult to keep us happy. As he pointed out once himself, intellectuals are easily neutralized with plenty to drink and enough to talk about.

"So you drank and you talked and you visited churches. What else did you do?"

We cooked. We ate. After a few hours of idleness in the sun, a little manual activity was not unwelcome. When we came up from the pool in the early afternoon, Camilla and Rachel would make for the kitchen, Davey would stay outside to light the barbecue, and Igor would head for the antiquated record-player in the sitting room to choose the music. What he preferred was Italian opera. We cooked against a background of love and death and tragedy. Igor was preparing us even then for the more desperate shores of life.

*

After the hot bright air outside, the kitchen was cool and airy, with blue and white tiles, and a door leading out to the terrace. Even Rachel, who had prided herself all her life on her inability to cook and her indifference to food, discovered it was possible to take pleasure in slicing vegetables, chopping basil leaves, grating parmesan, with a wine glass beside her, *Tosca* or *Turandot* drifting through from the sitting room, and the soft scented wind from the terrace playing around her shoulders. With every day that passed, Rachel's priorities were changing, and her vocabulary was expanding. The sun and the wine and the landscape were opening her up to an aspect of life she had never known existed. She was learning the meaning of words like 'taste' and 'smell' and 'flavour.' Her life was taking on a whole new sensory dimension.

And this, of course, was due to Igor too. When the mood was upon him, he would cook; when it was not, he delegated culinary responsibility to Davey. Davey was the master of the barbecue, navigating his craft through tricky cross-currents of air and fire, with skills he had honed in the yard at home for years. Igor kept the steersman lubricated with red wine and provided food for thought. Chekhov's view of women, Tolstoy's view of life. Davey flipped over the steaks, and listened respectfully. Also present at these seminars was the black cat from the farm down the road, sitting under the fig tree with its paws tucked under it, watching Davey's every move as he swaggered across the terrace, rocked back on his heels, flipped over the meat, and wiped his hands with satisfaction on his baggy khaki shorts. Davey used to throw it scraps of meat to make up for what it was missing at home. Igor pointed out that the reason it was over here was that it wasn't missing anything at home.

And then, in the evening, Igor took over the kitchen. His cuisine, like his music, was Italian. He cooked instinctively, using whatever was to hand, pasta and vegetables, meat or fish, tasting, adjusting, calculating, getting it just right. None of us had tasted anything quite like it. If Radio Liberty folded, now the Cold War was over, Igor would open a restaurant, we decided, and we would be his kitchen slaves. He was training us already. Camilla chopped the tomatoes for bruschette, Davey cut slices of ciabatta bread to precisely the right thickness, and Rachel grilled the

slices of bread in the antiquated toaster to precisely the right degree of toastedness. It was a high-precision performance, but the result was perfection, and the effort was worth it.

The restaurant, said Igor, would be in Tashkent, when defectors were welcomed into the fold, the death sentence against him was rescinded and he could go home again. We wouldn't mind moving to Uzbekistan, would we?

*

Igor had defected to West Germany in 1984. He had traveled to Hamburg as the interpreter for a troupe of Uzbek folk dancers, contriving to slip into a police station and request political asylum two days before he was due to go home. His parents were Russians living in Uzbekistan, and he had spent most of his life in Tashkent. He joined Radio Liberty in March 1985, on the very day that Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

From the outset, he had been an enthusiastic supporter of the new leader and his policies. Perestroika, he claimed, was Russia's last chance. Russia had been ruined and plundered by corrupt Party officials, and radical reform measures were the only way it could survive. Igor frankly acknowledged that perestroika was his own last chance too. He wanted to go back home one day and he could only do that if the regime abrogated the law making 'Flight Abroad' a crime of high treason. He had a personal stake, he admitted, in Gorbachev's survival.

*

In the summer of 1990, the map of Europe was changing. Six months earlier, the Berlin Wall had opened, and the totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe had fallen, one by one. The Cold War had been declared officially over. The occupying forces were laying down their arms, the tanks were going home.

For people like us, employees of a radio station that had been one of the few Western voices to penetrate the Iron Curtain, bringing, so we liked to think, truth to the information-starved masses, it was a heady time. For nearly half a century, Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe, broadcasting from Munich, had been telling the peoples of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that they had the right to determine their own political future. In the space of a few months, our goal had come suddenly closer. Communism had been ejected from Eastern Europe, and now the Soviet Socialist Republics were metamorphosing from grey imitations of Moscow into distinctive national entities. Belorussia had opened Sunday schools, Moldavia was setting up a banking system, Lithuania had declared independence. Every day there were newer and deeper cracks in the monolithic structures of the totalitarian state. Democracy and the free market seemed just over the horizon.

Only Igor had reservations about the turn events were taking. Independence from Moscow was all the rage that year, but Igor was an Empire man, and he made no bones about it. Democracy and the free market were inappropriate, he declared, for a nation in such dire need of spiritual renewal as Russia. Russia, in any case, should not try to follow Western models. It belonged to neither East nor West, it should find its own path. Finally -- and here his voice rose in exasperation -- it made absolutely no sense for the non-Russian republics to secede from the Soviet Union. How would they survive economically, would we tell him that?

Remarks like this came to be counted as part of the summer's entertainment. Concerts in the hill towns, lectures on Russian nationalism. Igor's quaint imperial notions disconcerted and amused us in approximately equal parts. None of us took him seriously, not even Davey. In 1990, Soviet

citizens were travelling abroad, giving interviews to the Western press, setting up joint ventures with the capitalists. Spiritual renewal did not rate high on their list of priorities. They seemed to think that democracy was renewal enough, and so did we. We saw Igor as fighting a rearguard action, a losing battle. Sooner or later he would realize that the Russian Soul, like the Russian Empire, was a lost cause. History was against him. What choice would he have?

*

Piero della Francesca was born around 1420, in the heyday of the Holy Roman Empire, since defunct. Piero was the man who had brought Camilla to Italy, and he did not disappoint her. What she liked most were the paintings he had left scattered across the Tuscan countryside, along what art historians called the Piero Trail. Madonnas, Dukes, and resurrected Christs. There were no saints, that wasn't Piero's thing. He liked to concentrate on the main players. His personages had round, handsome, serious faces and heavy-lidded eyes. Camilla could have spent hours staring at them. Something about them fascinated her. Their flesh was convincingly solid, but their bodies, it was plain, were a burden they would rather be without. This life, they seemed to imply, was beneath their contempt. They were in it but not of it, their eyes and their minds fixed on some remote, unguessable other world. They fulfilled their obligations, they did what was expected of them -- Christ rose from the tomb, the Madonna dispensed Misericordia -- but with barely veiled impatience. If they had had the choice, they would not be here now, and they would not be doing this.

It wasn't until several months later in Munich, on a long, snowy winter Sunday, examining the postcards she had bought in Italy, that Camilla suddenly understood why it was familiar to her, that faint air of boredom and exasperation, that hint of having other things to do. She had seen it before, and more recently than the fifteenth century.

It was the way Igor looked, during that summer in Tuscany, when he talked to us about Russia.

*

A light wind rustled through the leaves; cicadas jabbered. The air on the terrace smelled of rosemary and lavender and warm scented earth. Russia, said Igor, was a unique geopolitical civilization, which needed to develop in its own way. Communism had failed, and capitalism would not work either. Capitalism, said Igor, was contrary to the Russian character.

"Nonsense," said Rachel, "what do you mean by that?"

"In Russia, it's very cold," said Igor.

"Too cold to count your money?" said Rachel.

"What does the climate have to do with it?" Camilla leaned back in her chair and tossed her hair back over her shoulder. A couple of weeks in the sun had deepened the tan she had been cultivating in the Englischer Garten all summer, and her skin was a glowing golden brown.

Igor glanced at her thoughtfully, and smiled. "In Russia, winter is not a season, but a state of mind. Winter takes hold of us in October, it seizes us in its grip, and it crushes us right through to April. The trouble with Russia, Milenka, is that all our energy is taken up by the mere struggle to stay alive."

Camilla leant forward again, with her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. Her yellow plastic earrings (astoundingly expensive in a chic Munich jewellery boutique, but a perfect match for her new yellow bikini) swung as she moved.

Igor's gaze stayed on her as he spoke. "We spend over half our time defending ourselves against the climate. Compared to that, the tsars, the Party..." He waved disdainfully in the air: a fly-swatting gesture. "The tyranny of nature has made us indifferent to the tyranny of man."

"So what's the solution?" said Rachel. "Russians are climatically predisposed to tyranny, so bring back the Bolsheviks?"

"Under Stalin we had law and order and the climate knew its place?" said Davey.

Igor's face took on what Camilla, five months later, would recognize as the faintly contemptuous smile of a Piero Madonna.

"Naturally, no one wants to bring back the Bolsheviks. Communism has been a disaster. But Russians are not suited to capitalism either. The climate has moulded our character in certain ways. We aren't used to going out on our own and taking risks, we don't like to see other people doing better than ourselves. Capitalism won't work in Russia. We have to find some other way."

*

Igor had already picked out a location for his future trattoria: right in the centre of Tashkent, near the Hotel Uzbekistan, where all the foreigners went. No one had been to Tashkent, so no one could argue.

The next step was to think up a name. Camilla suggested naming it after the chef. Igor's Bar. Igor's Pizzeria. Or maybe Chez Igor would be classier. Davey said this smacked of the cult of personality and proposed Mozzarella for the Masses. No, no, said Igor, horrified. You'll never attract the mafia with a name like that.

"Do we want to attract the mafia?" said Davey, alarmed.

"Of course we do," said Igor. "They're the ones with the money."

"Il Giardino Inglese," said Camilla. "To remind us of Munich."

"We don't want to be reminded of Munich. How about the Silk Road Café?"

"La Strada della Seta."

"Seidestraße."

"Igor's Silk Road Pizza Joint."

"I think we will wait and discuss it when the time comes," said Igor diplomatically.

*

The Piero Trail lay eastward: Arezzo, Monterchi, Sansepolcro and Urbino. Igor and Camilla pored over maps and made plans. Rachel announced that nothing would induce her to drive round Tuscany looking at death and religion, and Davey decided it wasn't fair to leave her on her own. Camilla received the news without surprise. Rachel and Davey were getting on pretty well these days. What had started out as a tacit anti-pictorial alliance was expanding by the hour. A lot of this was due to the change in Rachel. After a few days in the sun, her aggressiveness was melting and her awkwardness was dissolving to reveal a smarter, funnier, less serious personality than either Davey or Camilla had expected.

What did surprise Camilla was the fact that Igor was not only willing to accompany her, but apparently eager to do so. Camilla had never paid much attention to Igor before, but she was beginning to look at him more carefully. He was a large, rather rumpled man, with brown hair and a brown moustache, both beginning to go grey. A few years older than the rest of them, Camilla estimated. She was thirty and Davey was thirty-two, Rachel was about the same, while Igor was closer to forty. On first sight, he seemed slow and ponderous, but Camilla had seen him on the tennis court, and knew he was capable of unexpected turns of speed. At the Radio, he had carved out a comfortable little cultural empire ranging from poets who died in the Gulag to the Festival de Cannes. In Munich, he wore black, the colour of culture, and shaved regularly, but under the Italian sun he sported designer stubble and a linen-trousered, silk-shirted look that he could only have picked up at Western film festivals. It's his Fellini look, said Rachel disrespectfully. Camilla wondered idly if the Fellini look was going to rub off on Davey, along with the Slavophile philosophizing. (She had been wondering lately where some of Davey's ideas about Russia were coming from – well now she knew.)

After a certain amount of discussion, it was decided that Igor and Camilla would go on their own to Monterchi and Sansepolcro, and that a separate excursion would be made to Arezzo, where there was more to see than paintings, and which could be safely visited by all. Urbino was abandoned, just as Igor had predicted. Igor had a knack of predicting what could and couldn't be done. With such a talent for making people see what was good for them, Camilla was surprised Igor wasn't running the entire Russian Service by now. Apparently he had been sounded out for the post of Chief Editor and turned it down. Igor, like Piero's Madonnas, felt that administrative tasks such as doling out Misericordia were beneath him. He preferred to concentrate on the Destiny of Russia.

*

The heat was affecting us all, making us slower, more idle, less demanding. Our senses were unfolding and blossoming in the golden haze of sun and light and warmth. Under the influence of leisurely siestas, our bodies were replete and satisfied, our minds languid and at ease. Our capacity to sit in the sun and do nothing grew daily. Camilla had given up fretting about shop hours, and rarely went running. She had abandoned Vaclav Havel for a novel about Zanzibar that she found on the shelves in the sitting room. The cover showed a couple locked in rapt embrace in front of an exotic flowering tree.

The change in Rachel was even more marked. Davey first became aware of it on the day we went to Arezzo, though there had been signs before, and he had in fact been noticing things for several days without quite registering them. After the red walls of Siena, Arezzo was cool and green and spacious. The main square was less enclosed, the alleys wound with less sinister intent. Igor and Camilla set off on a serious itinerary of frescos and palaces and cathedrals, leaving Davey and Rachel to thread their way nonchalantly through the town, heading wherever the fancy took them. Rachel was wearing one of the dresses that Camilla had talked her into buying in Florence. It was burnt orange with a long loose skirt. The material clung and flowed around her body. Her long dark hair had been released from its usual tight knot, and was loose on her shoulders. After two weeks in the sun, her skin had taken on a new depth and luminosity. The way she moved was different too: more langourous, less jerky. She no longer stalked down to the pool in the mornings, she glided, lazy and dreaming, and there was something enclosed and secret about her as she stretched herself on the chaise longue and gave herself up to the sun.

Wandering past Petrarch's house, they got on to the subject of Rachel's Jewish great-grandparents, who had arrived in England in 1895 with their two-year-old daughter, whose name was also Rachel. In 1903, they had a second child called Daniel. Daniel was Rachel's grandfather, the black sheep of the family. He had married an English girl called Doris and converted to Methodism. When his father found out, there was a big row, Daniel and Doris moved north to her parents in Bolton, and Daniel never saw any of his family again.

Rachel pushed her hair back from her forehead. Davey watched how the light shimmered on her tanned brown forearm.

"I didn't find out about the Lithuanian connection until I was fifteen. By then I already knew I wanted to go away to university and study Russian. My parents wanted me to stay near home and study something useful. But then I found out that my great-grandparents came to England on a boat from Vilnius in 1895, and that made sense of everything I felt. It made me see that I didn't have to spend the rest of my life in Southport if I didn't want to. I was only doing what they had done a century earlier: leaving home and looking for something better."

"Did you ever track down your great-grandparents?"

"No. They died before I was born. But I did find Rachel. After the big rift, she was forbidden to communicate with her brother, but she managed to write occasionally. Then the house she was living in was bombed during the war, and they all lost touch with each other. She didn't know what had become of her brother or his son, and she didn't know I existed until she was eighty-eight years old. I found an R. Shtern in the phone book at an address in Hackney, so I went to see who it was, and it turned out to be her."

"That's amazing," said Davey enviously. "What a story."

*

Davey, despite his robust good looks and athletic demeanour, was a hopeless romantic. He dreamed, though he would never admit it, of duels and gambling and lace at his throat. He swore by the dying fall of Pushkin's love poems, and the tragic wives of the Decembrists. He was a sucker for people like Igor and Rachel, who had been branded by Russia in the flesh, and whose opinions commanded an authority he could never match. Throughout his years in Munich, Davey had retained a sense of wonder at the distance he had travelled. How could it be that he, an ordinary guy from Indianapolis, who spent his youth setting off stinkbombs in shopping malls, was now sitting in an office in Munich, West Germany, discoursing on equal terms with intense East European intellectuals? To be taken seriously by someone like Igor was, to Davey's mind, the ultimate accolade. And that wasn't all. Davey had joined Radio Liberty in the early Reagan years, and though he took care to express due liberal scorn at presidential references to the Evil Empire, the concept had nonetheless taken root in his mind. Defending the Free World was a job description that at some level appealed deeply to Davey.

Of course, it wasn't his original vocation. Really, he should have been writing. Back when he was in grad school, he told Rachel, his ambition had been to write the seminal study of nineteenth-century Russian literature. Then, when he realized that the ground had already been pretty thoroughly covered, he had considered switching to something more contemporary. The trouble was finding the time. Especially since he had been offered the Daily Report.

The breeze drifted lightly under the pergola, and the heavy heat of mid-afternoon shimmered round the distant campanile. Davey cast a cautious glance at Camilla, sitting reading a magazine at the far end of the terrace. Soviet political life was so interesting these days that it had been hard to pass up. Still, editing had its advantages. Other people did the research, all you had to do was clean up their English, take out the invective-

"Invective?" said Rachel, startled.

"Oh you'd be surprised how many people have their own agenda," said Davey darkly. "My feeling is that it's counter-productive. The Sovs are trying to change, we shouldn't react too negatively. What I really like about the Radio is that you know what you're doing is useful -- fighting for perestroika, helping the Soviet Union open up to the world, facilitating the rise of democracy."

"Fighting for perestroika? Is that how you see it? But perestroika isn't our problem, it's theirs."

"Well, sure it is. But the point is that by helping them, we're helping ourselves too. Ultimately, we're serving the United- We serve the West, put it like that. The Free World, and I'll have that in capitals please."

*

Not that damn book again! Camilla flicked tetchily through the pages of *Newsweek*. For years, she had been dazzled by that book. Davey knew more about contemporary Russian literature than practically anyone in the West. With a job like his, he was made to write that book. Camilla had believed in him, encouraged him, stored up ideas for him -- until the Research Department was reorganized, and she found herself assigned to an office across the corridor from Davey. From where she sat, she could hear everything he did. Her illusions were shattered within a week. Davey spent his mornings reading and talking on the phone. After lunch, he would announce that he was going to Work, and Camilla would hear him ferociously shuffling papers and marshalling files. But solitude, almost at once, would prove too much for him. After ten minutes, she would hear the whirr of the telephone dial. Or he would call out to someone walking past. Camilla began to understand why his research papers were never more than a couple of pages long. The book would never be written.

When she got married, Camilla knew that Davey was not like her. She thought she would be better with someone who would calm her down, and make her treat life as less of an obstacle course. But it hadn't worked that way. Instead, she was becoming increasingly irritated by Davey's flippancy and indolence -- not to mention his capacity for self-delusion. Lately she had been observing Igor and Rachel. Once or twice she had come upon the two of them alone together, out on the terrace, or down by the pool. Each time they had looked up and greeted her with no apparent constraint, but each time she had the feeling she was interrupting something profoundly intimate. Maybe it was the way they looked at each other. Maybe it was the fact that they spoke Russian together. Igor never spoke Russian to Westerners, not even Davey, whose spoken Russian was excellent. Camilla suspected that whatever they had, it was what a marriage should be. She knew by now that she would never achieve it with Davey. Thinking about her relationship with Davey sank Camilla into despair. She had married a man who lacked focus and discipline and judgement. He would never make anything of his life. In the course of the last four years, she had lost all respect for him. She was not yet ready to leave him, but she was coming to think she would not be able to stay.

*

"So you looked at pictures, and you talked about the Russian Soul. What else did you do?"

Well that was about as good as it got. Most of the time, we just lay around and did nothing. You have to remember, William, it was hot. As the summer went on, it began to wear us down. We developed an aptitude for doing nothing, thinking nothing, writing nothing, simply being there, mindless as lizards in the sun, soaking up warmth and colour and light. Which was why we paid no attention when Igor, about halfway through the summer, developed a need for solitude. He began to take walks on his own. Once or twice, on visits to the hill towns, he slipped away without warning. We turned around and he was gone, generally reappearing after a few minutes, round a corner, through an archway, smiling his Piero smile, behaving as though nothing had happened. At first we were disconcerted, but after a few days, we got used to it. You know, William, at the time, it didn't seem important.

After several days of questioning, I was beginning to believe them. I had talked to them separately, I had talked to them together. Their stories never varied. When you had three narrators telling the same story, you could generally expect three completely different versions of the facts. But not this time. They remembered different things, of course, and the details overlapped, sometimes contradicting, sometimes clarifying, but for the most part it all blended together to form a composite picture, to the extent that I couldn't always remember who gave me which fact.

But I was still missing something. And I didn't know what it was. After some hesitation, I asked Rachel how Igor behaved when they were alone together. Was anything different? Anything at all? I knew I shouldn't ask, but I had to try. Her answer, of course, was no. I apologised for asking. Rachel said she understood.

*

Maybe she shouldn't have lied, but what else could she say? Should she have told William Kavanagh that she had never been as close to Igor as during those weeks in Tuscany? Should she have revealed that what she was waiting for, preparing for, all day, under the sun, in the fragrant air, were the evenings, the nights, and the long slow siesta hours? That all the time she was talking, or drinking, or eating, or chopping vegetables, her head and her body were filled with nothing but Igor, and that it was the same for him? That being with Igor in Italy had brought a new dimension to her life and changed her forever? That Igor, who had never said he loved her, had told her one night he felt blessed to have her, that the past four years had been the best of his life, that there was a bond between them that nothing could break?

It wouldn't have helped the investigation, and it wouldn't have helped her either.

*

By now Rachel had said everything she was prepared to say. She certainly wasn't going to tell Kavanagh about the Etruscans and the spirit of the place. If Davey or Camilla wanted to tell him, that was their affair. But she doubted they would. It wasn't something you could explain to a person who wasn't there. Rachel didn't understand it very well any more herself. All she knew was that it seemed a fitting culmination to the time they spent together, a consecration of the closeness they achieved. At the time, it seemed right. It even seemed necessary.

She had first read about the Etruscans years ago, in a battered school edition of *The Lays of Ancient Rome*, that had once belonged to her father:

*Lars Porsena of Clusium,
By the Nine Gods he swore
That the great house of Tarquin
Should suffer wrong no more.*

Halfway through the summer, she remembered the poem, realized where she was, and proposed a visit to Chiusi, formerly known as Clusium. Igor decided it was feasible. Settling herself under the awning by the pool, Rachel spent a morning studying the guidebook in preparation for what Davey had christened the L.P. Trail. It was a pity, she said, that the Etruscans had been swallowed up by the Romans. They deserved a better fate.

"It was historical inevitability," said Igor, looking up from his biography of Alexander the Great. "What they deserved has nothing to do with it."

"Igor likes empires," said Camilla, sprawled in the sun a few yards away. "Look at the books he reads."

"The history of mankind is the history of empires. It's the natural form of human government."

"Empires are tidier," said Davey. "You go out and conquer all these messy little countries, and then you put some barbed wire round them to keep them in order, and you colour them pink and call them the Russian Empire. Or the British Empire. Or the Macedonian Empire. Whatever."

"Pink is the British Empire," objected Rachel.

"Red then," said Davey. "You give them a viceroy or a First Secretary to run their affairs, and you make them pay a tribute of five thousand virgins and a million tons of cotton every year. It's a great system."

"Until it starts to collapse," said Camilla.

"Until they declare independence," said Rachel.

"If people would only show some good sense," said Igor, "no one would declare independence, and empires would never collapse."

*

The Etruscans were the dominant power in Italy for perhaps three centuries, starting in about 700 B.C. Their origins are mysterious, their language belongs to no known linguistic group. No literature survives them, no cities still stand. All that is known of them comes from the paintings on the walls of their tombs, and the ornaments found there. All that we have of them is in their death. After several centuries of skirmishing, they were finally conquered by the Romans around 250 B.C., their culture absorbed, and their values remodelled along lines of duty and honour and imperial conformity. The sensuous gaiety of their funerary paintings was no match for the sober single-minded warriors and virtuous matrons who set out to conquer the world and to found the Roman legend.

But the Etruscans, we came to see, live on. Their spirit endures in the broken stones of their cities and in the curve of their hills. The air is alive with the rhythm of their dance. The vitality and tenderness of their paintings speak to us down the centuries and through the dark. The spirit of the landscape proved too strong. After Rome declined, new city states rose on the ruins of the old

Etrurian capitals. In Siena, Arezzo, Perugia, the vigorous spirit of the pre-Roman past revived. Under the brushes of Giotto and Masaccio, the mysterious vividness of the ancient funerary paintings was reborn. The Renaissance was the rebirth not just of Greece and Rome, but of Etruria too.

Roots live on under the earth. There are resonances in old stones and voices in the wind. The rich, ordered peace of the Tuscan hills has been three thousand years in the making. Those mellifluous configurations of vines and houses are older than we know. The solemn grace of the cypresses had a cause we can never even guess at.

*

When we reached Chiusi, it was late afternoon. The heat had not yet begun to fade. The sun surrounded us like a wall. The Etruscan tombs lay outside the town at the edge of a dusty white road. A path wound across the grass between the cypresses and we followed it in single file, treading docilely behind the guide, first Rachel, then Davey, then Camilla, with Igor bringing up the rear. Camilla was wearing a pale blue sleeveless dress that fell straight to her ankles and showed off her tan. Her hair hung down her back in a thick blond braid. Halfway to the tombs she stopped. Igor came up beside her and put his hand on her shoulder. Camilla turned her head to look at him. He looked back. They studied each other. Nothing was said. After a moment, they walked on.

*

On the night of the Beethoven concert, Siena was hotter than usual. The narrow street that ran behind the Campo was airless and oppressive. Rachel, chivvying her flock along, paid no attention. Music to her was what pictures were to Camilla. Her family's most cherished possession was a large and cumbersome piece of furniture called a radiogram, which combined a radio and a four-speed gramophone in a polished wooden cabinet the size of a small freezer. Rachel had grown up with the BBC Third Programme and the classical composers, and when she discovered that the hill towns were given to organizing nocturnal concerts, she made sure we attended them. Bach in San Gimignano, string quartets in Montevarchi, and, most recently, the classical accordion, clumsily played by an intense, black-clad young man, who discoursed at great length about the significance of his art, and finally drove us out into the street, giggling in boredom and looking round urgently for gelati.

Mindful of this fiasco, Davey, whose own tastes ran to folk and country, insisted on a pre-emptive visit to the gelateria. But halfway to the Palazzo Chigi-Saracini, Camilla felt a sudden wave of nausea and dropped her ice cream into a litter bin. In the courtyard of the palazzo was a sign pointing up a flight of gilt-laden stairs. The concerts were usually held outside, but tonight there was no cool white-walled cloister, only a stuffy, overcrowded room inside the palace. Camilla's stomach rebelled.

Five minutes later, she was sitting on a bench in the courtyard being looked after by Igor, who had developed a sudden distaste for Beethoven sonatas. He had dispatched Rachel and Davey to hear the concert, and arranged to meet them after it finished.

Camilla breathed deeply and the sickness slowly subsided.

"If you feel better, we will walk over to San Domenico," Igor announced. "The air will do you good."

They set off decorously, walking two feet apart. Behind the Piazza del Campo, the crowd thickened, the street narrowed, and they were forced to move closer together. Igor took her arm. Camilla was barely conscious of the people milling around them. When they emerged from the maze of narrow streets on to the open space in front of San Domenico church, she threw Igor a questioning glance. The church was closed at this hour. What were they going to do now?

Igor knew exactly what they were going to do. A path led round the back of San Domenico, down past the towering walls of the church into a narrow, leafy garden on the side of the hill. He took Camilla's hand and guided her. Above them, on the crest of the neighbouring hill, they could see the floodlit Duomo with its striped campanile. Lights shone out from the houses huddled beneath the cathedral, but by San Domenico, it was dark and silent. There was nobody there but themselves.

Igor drew her against him in the shadow of the church as confidently as if he came here every night of the week.

*

In the summer of 1990, the map of Europe was changing. The countries in the centre of the continent were no longer coloured red. The Empire was close to collapse. The Army had lost the countries it won in World War II, the KGB was being challenged openly in the press. Eastern Europe had gone, the Baltic states looked like being the next to go. In the corridors of the Kremlin, the hardliners were tightening their belts and preparing to fight back.

It was obvious, if you thought about it, that the situation would not be allowed to continue. The warning signs of a conservative riposte were everywhere, provided you wanted to see them. The shadows were lengthening. That winter, in the space of a few months, economic reform plans would be abandoned, hardliners would replace liberals in Gorbachev's entourage, the tanks would roll at last into Lithuania.

1990 was the summer before the dark.

*

Once the sun had gone, the night came quickly. The sky became less blue and the trees less green. Slowly they lost their distinctness and blended into each other. Over to the left, the full moon was already visible in the deep blue sky.

For supper, Igor had made linguine alle vongole. The meal began with tart red tomatoes drizzled with olive oil and sprinkled with basil, and it ended with sweet melting plums that Davey had picked from the tree behind the house. The moths flickered in the lamplight and darkness thickened in the valley. Tuscany sank slowly into the night.

"So where shall we go next year?" said Davey.

"Can't we come back here?" said Igor.

"Next year we're going to Lithuania," said Rachel.

"If you want to go to Lithuania, you'd better go before next summer."

Igor's speech was slower than normal, and his words just a trifle slurred. Possibly he had drunk more than usual, but we had all drunk a lot, and it was hard to say.

"What do you mean?" said Rachel.

"This time next year, Lithuania will be one big concentration camp."

"They wouldn't dare," said Camilla.

"Who wouldn't?" said Igor.

"Well, Gorbachev, of course."

"Gorbachev will do what he's told to do."

"Are you saying you think there might be a putsch against Gorbachev?"

"I don't *think* there'll be a putsch," said Igor. "I *know* there'll be a putsch. It's a matter of time, that's all."

"Highly unlikely," said Camilla. "There's absolutely no precedent in the army- "

"Not the army. The KGB."

A short, shocked silence.

"The Union is falling apart. It's time to put things in order. Clamp down on civil unrest. Show the republics who's boss. And the place to start is clearly Lithuania."

"I thought the KGB supported the reforms," said Davey uncertainly. "I thought that was why Gorbachev got as far as he has."

Igor sighed, visibly pained by such obtuseness. "The reason the KGB has supported reform for the past five years was to save the empire, not dismantle it. Surely you must have realized that?"

*

Davey sat alone under the pergola. The moon had risen, high and bold, and the terrace was flooded with cold white light. Dinner had been cleared away and washed up. Davey was wearing a sweater against the night-time chill, though the stones at his back were still warm from the heat of the day. From inside the house came the strains of music. Igor was listening to *Don Carlo*.

Amor per me non ha! amor per me non ha.... Smoking one of the cigarettes Igor had left on the table, Davey stared into the darkness. He felt as if he had just awoken from a long sleep. What the hell had he been doing these past few years? How had he got into such a mess? Why had he listened to Igor?

The door opened and Camilla came out. Davey wondered if she was going to ask what he was doing there, but she sat down without saying anything. They sat side by side, eyes fixed on the moonlit valley. The black cat crept past, intent on some urgent midnight mission.

"It's so beautiful," said Camilla. "I'm going to miss this so much when we go back to Munich."

Munich. The mere mention of the word made Davey's heart plummet like lead. What was he going to do when he got back to Munich? He cast a surreptitious glance at Camilla's absorbed profile. Sooner or later, he would have to tell her. If he said he wanted to leave Munich, she was going to ask why. He would have to tell her. He repeated the idea mentally, getting himself used to it, and he didn't like it one little bit. But too bad, he would tell her, yes of course he would, tell her all about it, make a clean breast, get off on the right foot....

Only not just yet.

*

On the last day, we stayed by the pool, husbanding energy for the drive north, and sun for the winter. It was the last day of August. Already the sun seemed slightly less strong, and the wind a trifle cooler. Under their awning, the men had less to say to each other than usual. At the edge of the

pool, the women too were silent. Rachel was absorbed in a book about the Etruscans that she had found in Siena. Camilla turned the pages of *Vanity Fair*.

"The Etruscans had a fairly complex society," said Rachel suddenly. "In some ways more sophisticated than that of Rome."

"Yes?" said Camilla.

"The independent position of women is particularly interesting. They weren't just passed around by their menfolk to cement alliances, they had considerable social and economic influence of their own."

"Mm?"

"They made their own choices about who to go to bed with. Who they wanted, when they wanted. None of those fancy Roman notions of marital fidelity."

Camilla realized where this was going and began to pay attention.

"There was an Etruscan settlement at Siena, and another at Arezzo. We're on Etruscan land here, the northern limits of Etruria. They were here before us thousands of years ago."

She turned her head and looked Camilla in the eye. Camilla was nodding even before she spoke.

"We should respect the spirit of the place."

*

For dinner on the last night, Davey presided over a final barbecue, and Igor made tiramisu. We had planned to drive into Siena for a last drink on the Campo, but the shadows thickened and the black cat watched us from under the fig tree, and no one seemed inclined to move. Davey licked the remains of the tiramisu from the bowl, and Igor opened another bottle of wine.

"This time next week, we're going to be sitting in Munich in the rain wondering if we dreamt it all," said Camilla.

"Sooner than that," said Rachel.

"This time tomorrow, if the Autobahn isn't too crowded," said Igor.

"Why look on the bright side?" said Davey.

"I'm going to start on the washing up," said Rachel, and got to her feet.

"Now?" said Igor.

"I think so, yes." She brushed his hand; a look slid between them. "Will you give me a hand clearing the table, Davey?"

"Sure." Davey began piling dessert plates together.

"Leave the glasses," said Igor, refilling Camilla's glass and his own.

"If you want," said Rachel, "but we're taking the bottle."

"I'll come and help dry in five minutes," said Camilla.

"Don't worry, we can manage," said Rachel. Camilla looked up at her. Rachel touched first Igor's shoulder, then Camilla's, and then picked up the bottle of wine and disappeared into the house. The kitchen door closed behind her. Camilla and Igor were left alone on the terrace.

*

Igor had a small digital alarm clock on his bedside table and Camilla had no difficulty making out the figures: 4:07. Carefully, she slid out of bed and tiptoed across to the window. She opened the shutters and looked down the hillside. It wasn't the same view as on her side of the house: she

saw nothing she recognized. There were no lights: darkness was visible. She could hear Igor breathing quietly behind her, but she couldn't see him. She had crossed the frontier into an uncharted land with no familiar landmarks. There were no stars that night: she had nothing to navigate by.

*

NIGHT FALLS

So there you have it. A month with the enchanter on a golden hilltop in Tuscany. Stones oozing charm, black cats casting spells, magic potions courtesy of the wine merchant in Siena. And, unless I was very much mistaken, sex, and plenty of it, and not necessarily with the right person. But that was something no one was admitting.

Davey, Camilla, Rachel and Igor. As unlikely a foursome as you could hope to find. At the time of their vacation in Tuscany, I didn't know any of them well, particularly the women. My path and Rachel's had never crossed. Camilla, who regarded people in my profession as an inferior species, avoided me. I had had a drink or two with Davey, but that meant nothing. Davey was incurably sociable, and had been out drinking with the entire Radio at one time or another. The one I knew best was Igor, whom I used to waylay in the corridor on the pretext of discussing Russian literature. The responsibilities of the Security Office included keeping tabs on former defectors. Since the Radio was full of them, it was quite a job. Igor, however, had come to our attention in other ways. For him, we made an effort.

But, in the end, he outwitted us anyway. No one saw it coming. Not the woman who loved him, not the friends he had spent a month with in Tuscany. Not one of them had suspected things were not what they seemed. They all said the same, and I could find no cause to doubt them. They all had the look of people who had learned the truth too late, and whose lives would never be the same again.

*

Igor disappeared on a sunny September morning about three weeks after they got back from Italy.

Rachel left the apartment at 8.45 a.m. to cycle over to the Radio building. Igor was in the bathroom shaving. She called goodbye, but there was no answer. About an hour later, he was seen by a neighbour, crossing the landing with two suitcases. Frau Brückner held open the door of the lift for him, followed him in, and asked if he was going on a business trip. Yes, said Igor, he was going to Delhi. At the ground floor, Frau Brückner got out. Igor continued to the basement garage, stowed his suitcases in the car and drove to the airport. That was the last anyone in Munich saw of him.

It was later ascertained that a man matching Igor's description travelled to Vienna on an Austrian Airlines flight using a Swiss passport made out in the name of Franz Joachim Gerlach. Attempts to chart his onward progress from Vienna were unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, his absence from work was duly noted. Yevgeny Novikov, his immediate superior, remembered someone bringing it to his attention around 11 a.m. Attempts were made to call Igor at home, but no one thought of contacting Rachel Stern in the research department, and so Rachel was

unaware of anything amiss when she got home that evening. She was not surprised to find the apartment empty. Igor often went off to play tennis or have a drink after work. Rachel herself was planning to meet up with some of the Lithuanians. If she had not decided to tidy the bedroom before she left, she would not have realized Igor had gone. As soon as she opened the closet, her eyes were drawn to the empty space where his clothes had been. She stared at it in perplexity. Then she set off round the apartment to see where Igor had decided to put his clothes. That was when she discovered that his shaving tackle had gone from the bathroom, and his papers from the nineteenth-century pedestal desk he had bought at vast expense from a Munich antique dealer.

Rachel sat down on the carved wooden chair behind the desk and examined the empty drawers. Then she went into the hall and dialled the Mortons' number.

"Hey, Rache! What's up?"

Hearing Davey's breezy greeting, Rachel managed to convince herself for fully ten seconds that nothing had happened, and it was all some kind of misunderstanding. Everything was fine, what could go wrong?

"It's odd," she said in a rush, "I just got home, and all Igor's things have gone, I just wondered, have you seen him, has Camilla seen him?"

"His things have gone?"

"Yes, everything, there's nothing here at all, it's very odd, I wondered if he'd been kidnapped or something."

"Kidnapped?" Davey's voice sounded as though it was coming from the far end of a tunnel. "Do you really think-?"

"Well, I don't know, but it's so odd, the whole thing's so odd, is Camilla there, does she know where he is?"

Davey relayed the question. Camilla didn't know. Stay there, he told Rachel, don't move. We're coming right over.

By the time they arrived, Rachel had got her thoughts sufficiently in order to realize that she did not think Igor had been kidnapped. How could he have been, when everything had been removed so tidily and methodically, and without any sign of a struggle?

She took them round the flat and showed them the evidence.

"Jesus," said Davey, when she had finished. He was very pale, and there were beads of sweat on his brow. "You got anything to drink in here?"

"Beer," said Rachel, "in the fridge. Unless he took that too," she added, making a pathetic attempt at a joke. No one laughed.

"This is so weird," said Camilla. Her face above her neat linen suit was grey, and her hands were shaking.

"Did he go to work today?" said Davey, coming out of the kitchen with three cans of beer, but before Rachel could answer, the phone rang.

"There," said Camilla, "maybe that's him now."

Rachel picked up the phone. "Igor? What? Who is this? Oh, Zhenya, it's you. No, he's not. No, I don't know. You haven't seen him all day?" She turned and looked at Davey and Camilla with round frightened eyes. "I don't know. I don't know what's happening. I just got home and all his stuff has gone."

Zhenya Novikov alerted the Security Office, and I arrived at the apartment an hour later with my assistant Karl. We questioned Rachel first, then Davey, then Camilla, and then Rachel again. We

took the flat apart, but discovered nothing more interesting than several stolen library books and some ashes in the kitchen sink. We talked to the neighbour, Frau Brückner, and heard about the suitcases and the business trip to Delhi. We double-checked with Novikov to make sure he had not, in a fit of absent-mindedness, sent Strugatsky to Delhi. Why would I send someone to Delhi? said Novikov irritably. There's nothing going on there, for God's sake. We left at midnight. Davey and Camilla both sensed we knew more than we were saying. Rachel, by then, was in no state to notice anything.

For some days after that, nothing happened. Various wild theories circulated round the Radio. At some point, the German police demanded a recent photo, but when Rachel went to look for one, it turned out they had all gone. She assumed he had taken them with him, but analysis suggested they had been part of the ashes in the sink. A week later, she found one in her handbag, but by then it was too late. That was when I mentioned that we had had our eye on Strugatsky for some time, and hinted that there was reason to believe he wasn't all he said he was. Rachel just stared. She hadn't eaten for a week and the flesh was dropping off her alarmingly.

"Go see a doctor and get yourself some sleeping pills," I told her, "you look terrible. He'll turn up, you'll see."

"Where?" said Rachel. "In a ditch somewhere?"

It was plain she hadn't understood what I had just been telling her. Normally I didn't care to say such things en clair, but I could see she was in a bad way, so I made an effort to give her an answer.

"No, nothing like that. According to our information, your friend is alive and well and living in Moscow."

"Then they did kidnap him!"

"No, Rachel, he seems to have gone back voluntarily. In other words, he redefected."

She was speechless, so I spelled it out for her. "He's been in contact with the Sovs for some time, you know. Seems to have had some rather unsavoury acquaintances over at the consulate. The thing is, Rachel, there's a good chance the original defection was a set-up."

*

RADIO LIBERTY JOURNALIST DEFECTS TO USSR

Moscow, 30 September 1990 (Reuters). A Russian-born journalist for the American-run Radio Liberty returned to the Soviet Union this week and said the station was run as an intelligence operation to subvert the Soviet Union.

Mr. Igor Strugatsky, 37, appeared at a press conference ten days after he disappeared from his job in Munich. Reading from a prepared statement, he described his six years in the West as a "nightmare."

Mr. Strugatsky claimed he had been taken in charge by the CIA and offered a job at Radio Liberty, which he said was a department of the CIA. He said he returned to the USSR of his own free will after contacting a Soviet embassy, and had not been a member of the State Security Committee. "At a time like this," Mr. Strugatsky said, "every patriotic Russian should be with his own people."

Radio Liberty and its sister station Radio Free Europe were set up after World War II to broadcast to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe respectively. The stations served as a surrogate home service for Soviet and East European audiences throughout the Cold War,

providing millions of listeners with news and information not available from Communist-run domestic media.

Mr. Strugatsky's statements were similar to those of returning defectors in the pre-perestroika period. In 1984, a journalist called Oleg Bitov said he had been forced to live in London and write a book. Similar claims were made the same year by Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, who went back to Russia after 17 years in the West. However, on her return to the United States in 1986, Ms. Alliluyeva said that her text had been dictated by Soviet officials. Both Mr. Bitov and Ms. Alliluyeva said their time in the West had been a nightmare.

In a black roll-necked pullover and dark trousers, Mr. Strugatsky appeared at ease during the press conference. One of the two officials accompanying him, V.V. Malkov, has been identified as a high-ranking KGB official.

Western diplomats and journalists here expressed dismay at the press conference and Mr. Strugatsky's statement. One Western official said, "This was the worst kind of Soviet claptrap from the worst days of the Cold War. There's been nothing like this for years."

*

In Munich in late September, the nights were already cold. The heating in the Mortons' apartment on Georgenstrasse had not yet been switched on, and the air was damp and cheerless.

"I don't understand it," said Rachel. "I don't understand how he could say those things."

"He just said what they told him to say," said Camilla.

"How could he have done that?"

"Rachel, it doesn't mean anything."

"He said he was living a nightmare all the time he was here. I never knew he felt like that! I never even suspected it."

"Honey, it's not true. Everything he said was skewed. It was aimed at the Soviet public. It's what they want their people to hear. It doesn't mean a thing."

"How could I have been so blind? I thought we understood each other. I've been fooling myself for years."

Camilla sighed. It was ten o'clock at night, and they had been going over the same ground for hours. She and Rachel were sitting in the living room of the apartment. At least, Camilla was sitting. Rachel was huddled against the back of one of the armchairs, wrapped in a cashmere shawl that one of Camilla's aunts had given her for Christmas. The building management would not turn on the heating for at least another week. Not that it would make much difference if they did, for Rachel's coldness came from inside, not out.

"What he said doesn't mean anything," Camilla repeated, for the fifteenth or twentieth time. "He wasn't talking about you, he wasn't talking about anything real. Look at that nonsense about the Radio being some sort of spy operation. It's all just a fairy tale, Rachel."

"How could he have said that? He knows it's not true. He's worked here for five years."

"Of course it's not true. Nothing he said was true. It's all fabrication. We shouldn't take any of it personally. It's nothing to do with us. All it shows is that the hardliners in Moscow are trying to turn back the clock, and they're using Igor's return as part of their campaign."

Rachel looked up and glared at her. "How can you just sit there calmly and analyze it?"

Camilla glared back. "Because it's the only way I can deal with it," she snapped. "Otherwise I'm going to crack up, just like you!" She tried to hold Rachel's gaze, to keep that spark of anger alive.

Anger, anything, was better than this frightening passive incomprehension. But the moment had gone, the will was lost, and Rachel's gaze dropped defeatedly to the floor.

"Do you think he was really working for the CIA? He never said a word to me about it."

In the few days since Igor left Munich, Rachel had aged ten years. Her skin had gone sallow overnight, and her body sagged in pain. And now her mind too was disintegrating under Camilla's eyes. They had been there all afternoon, just the two of them, ever since they saw Igor's press conference on Moscow Television, asking the same questions, giving the same answers. The depth of Rachel's inability to understand what had happened was infinite, and so was Camilla's capacity to repeat the same futile words of comfort and rationalization over and over again. Partly because it was inconceivable to both of them that they should say or do anything else. Even getting up and going into the kitchen to prepare food was out of the question. Anything, even this pointless series of questions and responses, was better than silence.

Camilla was doing her best not to examine her own state of mind, though she could not block it out entirely. From time to time she got flashes of herself, as if she was looking through the far end of a telescope, a shaky little creature teetering helplessly on the edge of a pit. Why had Igor done this? Why had he said those things? During all this time, she had heard nothing from Davey. He hadn't called, he hadn't come home. Later she learned that he had spent the whole day drinking in a succession of bars. He couldn't remember which ones. He finally got home in a taxi in the early hours of the morning.

"Of course Igor wasn't working for the CIA," she told Rachel. "That's just a line. That's what they want them to hear in Ivanovo and Saratov. The imperialists trying to undermine the country. That's all."

"Ivanovo?" said Rachel blankly.

"Out in the Russian heartland, I mean. The whole thing was set up for domestic consumption. They knew perfectly well that no one in the West would swallow it."

"But why did he go without me? Why didn't he take me with him?"

"To Moscow? You'd have gone with him to Moscow?"

"Of course I would," said Rachel, and Camilla was silent.

*

The first time Rachel tried to kill herself, it was Davey who saved her, Davey who got worried when the phone didn't answer and drove across town and persuaded Frau Brückner to open the door with the spare key.

For a few months after that, Rachel was fine. She had scared Davey and Camilla, and she had scared herself too. The three of them managed to prop each other up for a while, but the strain of it wore them down, and they drifted apart. Davey was drinking more and more heavily. Camilla took to spending evenings and weekends at the office.

As for Rachel, she had drugs to keep her going. Pills to calm her down, pills to cheer her up, pills to help her sleep. Pills to help her get through a day in the office. Pills to help her cope with the people who were talking about her. That was the worst thing, the people talking about her. There were so many of them, and they were everywhere she went. Not just at the Radio, in the corridors and in the canteen, but outside, on the street, in the U-Bahn, everywhere. She had overheard snatches of conversation. "Four years, imagine that..." "She didn't notice a thing...." "She's sorry now, of course...." It was clear that they were spying on her. With technology these

days, you could do anything. Radio Security and the KGB would have planted bugs all over the apartment, that was only normal, but ordinary people could do that too. She had heard there were shops where you could buy espionage equipment over the counter, no questions asked. They might not even need to do that. You could pick up all kinds of things on ordinary radio frequencies, you could even listen through walls with a stethoscope. But why would they want to do that? asked Dr. Fischer, her psychiatrist, smiling gently. You're not passing information to the KGB too, are you? He tittered gently, trying to make her see the lighter side of things. Rachel shook her head impatiently. That wasn't what interested them, the people in the street. It wasn't their problem. What they wanted to know was how she could have lived with a KGB agent for four years without ever suspecting his true identity. At Hale in Liverpool, not far from where she grew up, was the grave of a man who had been eight foot tall. When she was young, her father had taken her to see it, and it had made an indelible impression on her. It seemed to her that she was not much different from the Child of Hale. She too was a freak of nature, a curiosity, a circus act.

The truth, as she finally confessed, first to Kavanagh, and later to Fischer, was that there were plenty of things she could have noticed, if she had only had a mind to. The fact that Igor seemed to know Moscow so well, though he said he had spent his whole life in Tashkent. Or the trips he made to Frankfurt, every two or three months, to attend the meetings of some group interested in Russian experimental literature. Rachel never asked about the group, or the subjects discussed. She didn't even question him when one of her Lithuanian friends saw him in Salzburg one weekend he was supposed to be in Frankfurt. She told the Lithuanian he had been mistaken, and put the incident straight out of her mind. Another time she ran into Igor in the street with another Russian, not someone from the Radio, someone she had never seen before. She did not ask who it was. Igor had his life and she had hers. I trusted him, you see. She could hear how pathetic she sounded. She could guess what Fischer was thinking, she could understand why people stared at her in the street. How could she have behaved so negligently?

She tried to explain to Fischer that she hadn't thought it mattered. Igor's life outside the apartment was unimportant. What counted was what they had together, the two of them, late at night, sitting in the dark, with her head against his knees, and a single light shining on the open book, when the words he was reading merged into everything she felt for him, everything she could not express, making it unnecessary for her to find words of her own because it had all already been said. Except, she added drearily, that that was where she had gone wrong. If she had tried harder to express herself, he would never have left. But she had failed him. She hadn't loved him enough, she hadn't given him enough, and that was why he had gone back to Moscow and left her behind. It was all her own fault. It served her right. No wonder they laughed behind their hands when they talked about her in the bus.

Dr. Fischer sometimes suggested that she should look for another flat in another part of Munich. Rachel always told him that the flat was fine. It wasn't by moving that she would get rid of the watchers. They would simply follow her. In any case, there was no way she could cope with a move. Finding a new flat, dealing with rent and landlords and phones and electricity, organizing movers, getting used to a new place: it was beyond her strength. In her more lucid moments, she sensed that it was not a good idea to go on living the way she had done with Igor: taking the same routes, going to the same places, shopping at the same store. But she didn't see that she had any choice. One day she broke down and cried in the supermarket because they were out of her usual

brand of cereal. How was she going to cope with a whole new supermarket, with different prices, all the shelves arranged differently, and maybe not even stocking the brands she was used to?

Rachel's life with Igor had not been particularly well organized. Alone, she found herself in need of a more structured existence. By Christmas, she had developed a routine that kept her busy every day, at every single moment of the day. She worked out a timetable, stuck it on the door of the fridge, and followed it obsessively. Eat breakfast at 8.25, wash dishes at 8.35, brush teeth at 8.40, leave for work at 8.45. The same thing in the evening. Before she had the timetable, she had found herself once or twice sitting staring into space, with no notion of how long she had been sitting there. She suspected it had been several hours. The lapse of consciousness frightened her badly. The timetable kept the vacuum at bay, and stopped her forgetting things. At least, to some extent. She still found herself with no milk or coffee in the house from time to time, or with two weeks' worth of rubbish beginning to smell in the kitchen. And it didn't help with her work. She still forgot deadlines, delivered papers late, or simply forgot to write them. She was so tired all the time, it wasn't surprising that her memory wasn't functioning properly.

Of course, she wasn't sleeping either. Sometimes the pills worked, and sometimes they didn't. Sometimes she wasn't even sure whether she'd taken them or not. When that happened, she would either take another one and sleep through the alarm, or else she would find herself awake and alone, washed up on some deserted shore, when the whole of Munich was asleep and the dawn was hours away. Since she found it hard to read, she was left alone with her thoughts. Oddly enough, it was during those long winter nights that she could see most clearly what was happening to her. Sometimes, when the moon was high and the night was clear, she could comprehend what Dr. Fischer was trying to say to her, and she could even summon up the desire to do something about it. But then the moon waned and the day broke, and the flat was still and empty, and no one played *La Traviata* any more. *Addio del passato, bei sogni ridenti....* Rachel forced herself to get up, at 7.50 like the timetable said, to go through all the steps she had prescribed for herself and to leave for work. Daylight drained away her lucidity and sapped her energy. *Farewell to the past, farewell to bright dreams...* It was all she could go to keep going. Changing anything was out of the question.

She made her second suicide attempt some time during the summer of 1991. She wasn't absolutely sure when. Towards the end of August, probably. The whole of August had been a bit of a blur: she had even missed the putsch. This time it was Dr. Fischer who called the police and had them break down the door. He had been alarmed by her mood earlier in the day. Mindful of all the pills she had lying around, he had called to see how she was that evening, and decided to assume the worst when she didn't answer. Not that she would have died. Apparently modern drugs were so designed that you needed an awful lot of them to do away with yourself. They pumped out her stomach, which was not an enjoyable experience, and Dr. Fischer, taking no chances, saw to it that she remained in the clinic where he worked for several weeks. Davey and Camilla both came to see her. Davey brought roses, Camilla brought a book called *The Star of Vladivostok* which Rachel had read some years earlier, though she was a hundred and fifty pages into the book before she realized this. They did not come together. Rachel had drifted out of contact with them over the past months. She had more or less lost contact with everyone. It took all her energy to hold herself together: she had none left over for social relationships. Now and again she went to the beer garden with the Lithuanians; sometimes William Kavanagh took her to the cinema. Davey, who had occasionally come by to see her after Igor left, had not done so for months. As for Camilla, she

didn't go anywhere any more, from what Rachel had heard. Apparently she was planning a book on the Soviet military.

There was no question of returning to work. At least, not straight away. When Rachel was well enough to leave the clinic, Fischer delivered her into the care of her parents, who conveyed her solicitously back to Southport to convalesce. They treated her like a fragile piece of china, and told hushed tales of overwork and nervous strain to relatives who phoned to find out what was going on. Rachel could see they did not know what to make of her. Suicides and nervous breakdowns were outside their frame of reference, and so were people who re-defected to the Soviet Union. They were upset, but they were also intimidated. In the end, she managed to tell part of the truth to her mother. Enough to make them understand why she had convinced Davey not to tell them about her first suicide attempt, enough to reassure them that she was not going to try again.

It had done her good, Rachel realized later, to get away from Munich. She had been staying on there in case Igor came back, though she hadn't been aware of it at the time, and living in the same flat so he would know where to find her. While she was away on sick leave, the Radio housing department assigned her flat to someone else and put her furniture into storage. She returned to Munich in January 1992, planning to resign from the Radio and return to England as soon as she could. But it didn't work out that way. The first person she saw when she entered the Radio building was Camilla, standing in the corridor in the midst of a small crowd, looking so drawn and haggard that Rachel almost didn't recognize her. Camilla caught sight of her, pushed through the crowd, and fell into Rachel's arms. Clearly some kind of catastrophe had occurred. Rachel knew at once that she would have to stay.

*

SELECTIVE TRAVELS DOWN THE SILK ROAD

September 1997

I flew to Central Asia in the fall of 1997. My first stop was Almaty, the capital of Kazakstan. Rachel had taken a job there some years earlier. At the time, I had thought nothing of it. Lately, I was beginning to wonder if her choice was as fortuitous as it seemed.

By then I had moved on too, and was working in Washington. It was years since I had thought about Igor. He had stayed about a year in Moscow, leading a quiet patriotic life in the service of his country. He went to work at the same time every morning, and rode home from the conveniently located Dzerzhinski Square metro station. Shortly after the putsch, he disappeared again. We had no idea where he was. We didn't even know if he was alive or dead. No doubt we could have found him if we had tried, but we had no reason to look. Legally, Igor had committed no crimes.

There would have been nothing to connect him with the reports coming in from Samarkand if I hadn't remembered the Silk Road Pizza Joint. It was Davey who had told me about Igor's post-Cold War career plans. Double cheese with mushrooms in the wilds of downtown Tashkent. In 1990, the idea was so incongruous that it got us both laughing. Mascarpone à la Marx, linguine à la Lenin. Grapes painted on the ceiling, and Verdi playing in the background. Davey talked it up for me, planned the menu and invented the decor, relieved at the chance to let off steam after a long afternoon of fruitless questioning.

Back then, of course, it seemed like a harmless little fantasy born of sun and idleness. Intellectuals playing Marie Antoinette on a Tuscan hilltop. Igor was no more going to spend his life stirring saucepans than Camilla was going to spend hers waiting tables. But seven years later, things had changed. By 1997, the Land of the Soviets had a pizza joint on every corner. Some of them were laundering money, some of them were engaged in other things, and Igor's whole concept looked a lot more plausible.

Rachel and I had always got on well, which was surprising when you consider the circumstances that brought us together. When I went out to Central Asia, it was only natural for me to look her up.

*

Almaty is one of those places on the margins of history where events change names, but not much else. The Russians built a frontier post here in 1854, and called it Verny, meaning Faithful. Back then, it was the last outpost of civilization, out on the edge of the Tsarist empire, hard by the border with China. Since then, its name has changed twice, its population has grown, and it is now

the capital of newly-independent Kazakhstan, the seventh most corrupt country in the world. But deep down it is still a garrison town. At dusk, when the traffic has thinned and the streets are emptying, Rachel can sometimes detect a flavour of the old Russian fort on the fringe of the empire.

Rachel has been living in Almaty for nearly three years. She doesn't dislike it. Although the predominant architectural style is Soviet egalitarian, the risk of earthquakes has limited the quantity of progressive socialist high-rises. The wide, tree-lined avenues open on to squares and fountains, and the rows of featureless buildings are camouflaged behind an abundance of foliage. Rachel has a flat on the south side of town, a good building in a nice neighbourhood, just a ten-minute walk from her office. Her windows overlook a vast, scruffy courtyard full of trees. The outside door is broken and the stairwell is unpainted, but every stairwell in town is like that. She doesn't notice that kind of detail any more. The flat itself is decently decorated and furnished, the fridge and washing machine both work, and the cockroach population is relatively small.

Rachel lives a frugal, disciplined and solitary existence. The alarm goes off every day at ten past six. She gets up, puts on her running shorts, and drinks a glass of water from the saucepan she boiled the previous night. (Mineral water is expensive. Rachel hasn't changed.) Outside, the traffic is sparse and the air is fresh. She always takes the same route, up Prospekt Abylai Khan towards Republic Square, moving slowly, waiting for her muscles to warm up. The mountains gleam in the distance behind the presidential palace. Later in the day, when the traffic gets going, the air will turn yellow and the mountains will disappear. Early morning is the only time to run. After half-past seven, she won't be able to breathe. And she needs to run: it's turned into a drug. She can't do without it. Running calms her down, it takes the edge off things. She does six miles a day. As she runs, her head empties of everything. The further she goes, the emptier it gets.

She's getting into her stride now, finding her rhythm, breathing steadily. There are other runners on her route and she greets some of the familiar faces with a nod or a wave. A Kazak squatting on his haunches under the trees watches imperturbably as they all thud past. The Kazaks were nomads until they were forced by the Bolsheviks to abandon their herds and move into town. Even though the city is finally theirs, it seems to Rachel that they're still wondering what to do with it. Almaty is curiously bland. It lacks bustle, dynamism, purposefulness. It moves at the passionless rhythm of the steppes. On the whole, Rachel finds this congenial. At this stage in her convalescence, passion would be more than she could bear.

She turns left on Satpaev, and heads straight across Dostyk towards the Malaya Almatinka river. The Russian founding fathers laid out the city in a grid system, which makes getting around easy, if unadventurous. That suits Rachel fine: she hasn't felt adventurous for years. People think moving to Kazakhstan was an adventure, but it was more like going to ground. Rachel's cover story is that it was a logical career move. When Radio Liberty moved to Prague in 1995, it seemed like a good idea to try for a job in the former Soviet Union. She looked for an opening in Lithuania, and failed to find one. She refused two jobs in Moscow. Finally, she accepted an administrative position with the European Union Environmental Council in Almaty.

Almaty? Camilla had said doubtfully. Are you sure that's a good idea? but Rachel had no such reservations. Camilla was urging her to join the Audience Research Department and move to Washington, as she herself was doing, but that wasn't what Rachel wanted. America was a promised land, and Kazakhstan was a land of exile. Dostoevsky had been sent there under the tsars, and Solzhenitsyn under Khrushchev. It felt right, somehow.

After three years, she has no inclination to move on. Almaty suits her. Its peculiar blend of East and West means that everyone, to some extent, is on the outside looking in. It's exactly what she needs. Her status as a foreigner insulates her from the nastier aspects of post-Soviet life such as unpaid salaries and electricity cuts, and affords her a good position from which to view the republic's attempts to turn itself into a brand new country. This, by the look of it, is going to take some time. Kazakhstan was the most Russified of the former Soviet republics, and still has a large Russian population. There is no Kazak literary or cultural tradition. Educated Kazaks barely speak their own language. Russian remains the lingua franca of business and government circles.

Rachel observes the process of de-Russification with the intentness of a former analyst, and the irritability of someone who is forced to deal with these people on a daily basis. Administration is not her forte. Renting rooms for seminars, arguing with Kazak officials, dealing with visas for European Commissioners -- all that is fairly tedious. She misses shuffling round in the archives, collating facts, making connections. She still prefers papers to people. Sometimes she regrets not staying with the Radio, but that's the way life is. You don't always get what you want.

God knows, things could be worse. Her job is well paid and sometimes interesting. She has an occasional lover, a Russian, the former director of a medical institute, who now works in a pharmacy. Vadim is married with two children and visits her once or twice a week. She has a number of Western acquaintances and one good Russian friend, Tanya, who invites her now and then to her dacha in the mountains. She is close to no one, she is part of no one's life. She stays in touch with Camilla by e-mail. She listens to music, runs every day, and reads books sent from England by mail order. In her bad moments, she reads Russian poetry, usually Pasternak: Zhivago's poems to Lara. When things get really bad, she translates them into English. It's a way of pushing aside the memories they contain and concentrating only on the language.

Life is on an even keel. That's really all she asks.

*

From: William Kavanagh
To: Rachel Stern

hi rachel, how are things? i'm planning to visit for a few days in late september doing research for a book on central asia. prospective title: selective travels down the silk road. will you be around?

best, william

*

From: Camilla Stacey
To: Rachel Stern

Dear Rachel,

I wanted to let you know right away that I'm going to Samarkand in early October for a focus group on radio listening. I'll stop off for a couple of days in Almaty. Got to run and pick up Thomas. More tomorrow. Can't wait to see you!

Love, Camilla

*

Since she moved to Almaty, Rachel has had no visitors. None of her colleagues from the Radio has been to see her, none of her friends from university, none of her family from Southport. Almaty is a long way to go, assuming you know where it is, which most people do not. Kazakhstan does not figure on most mental maps of the world, which is one of the reasons Rachel chose it. And now two visitors at once. Coincidence? Sitting at her desk on a hot morning in August, she prints out the e-mail messages and examines them for signs of complicity. It's very bizarre. Even odder is the fact that neither of them is being honest about their reasons for visiting. Camilla's job does not oblige her to travel. It can only mean she has volunteered to go. But why does Camilla want to go to Uzbekistan?

Kavanagh is different. William is the kind of person you expect to show up out of the blue on some mysterious errand. The book, she assumes, is a cover. William has never told her precisely what he is doing in Washington, nor whom he is working for, but Rachel doubts that his job description includes travel writing.

*

"Selective Travels Down The Silk Road" by William S. Kavanagh

In its heyday, the Silk Road ran from Europe to China, linking the two edges of the known world. For fifteen centuries, camel caravans carried silks, ceramics, carpets and spices across the heart of the world. They had to contend with wolves and bandits, sandstorms and landslides, baking heat and paralysing cold. The trail was marked with mythical cities: Baghdad the Beautiful, Bukhara the Noble. Most famous of all was Samarkand: Alexander's Maracanda, Tamerlane's capital, the Fourth Paradise, the Garden of Souls, the Glittering Summit of the World.

With the discovery of the sea route to India in the fifteenth century, the Silk Road fell into disuse. Only two Europeans got as far as Samarkand in the next four centuries. Tamerlane's glittering capital became a forgotten market town in the depths of the desert. Weeds pushed through the cracks in the turquoise domes. For a while, Central Asia remained an isolated feudal society ruled by squabbling petty khans. Finally, in the nineteenth century, the Russians moved in. The Russians looked on Central Asia in much the same way as Americans viewed the Wild West: a land of adventure and opportunity, which was theirs more or less by right. Central Asia was integrated into the Russian empire, but social and religious structures remained largely untouched.

That changed with the Bolshevik Revolution. Central Asia was divided into five Soviet Socialist Republics, which in theory provided a national territory for the five major ethnic groups, but in practice were a cunningly contrived hodge-podge of different nationalities. Divide and Rule. The commissars aimed at controlling every facet of public and private life. Mosques were closed, and religious practices forbidden. The alphabet was changed, not once, but twice: from Arabic to Latin, and then to Cyrillic. Political control stayed in the hands of Moscow, and economic development was determined by the Centre.

Since independence, the Central Asian republics have been confronted with the need to build nation states where none existed before. It's a daunting task. Kazakhstan has placed its hopes in

Western investors and a market economy. Uzbekistan has returned to traditional values and authoritarian rule. What they have in common is the desire to open up to the outside world. The Silk Road is reviving. The presence of massive oil deposits in the landlocked Caspian Sea has transformed this once-forgotten region into the new strategic crossroads of the world.

The Silk Road of the new millenium is of course an oil pipeline.

*

The arrivals terminal at Almaty International Airport is a vast concrete shed with unpainted walls and vicious neon lighting. There are no bars, no shops, and no seating. Rachel shifts uncomfortably from foot to foot. It's one o'clock in the morning. Kavanagh's plane landed ten minutes ago. A frowsy late-night pall hangs over the terminal, and the talk bounces tiredly off the dirty walls. The room is crowded with drivers, minders and coordinators waiting to take charge of the arriving passengers. Foreigners can't cope with Almaty on their own. The language and the bribes are too much for them. Rachel wonders how good William's Russian is. She has never heard him speak anything but English, but that's not to say he doesn't have other languages up his sleeve. William is nothing if not enigmatic.

Rachel thinks of Kavanagh as a friend, but there's a lot about him that she doesn't know. He has made it clear, without actually saying so, that certain areas of his past and his person are off limits. Occasionally he talks about his boyhood in Boston, or his college days at Columbia, but there's a period of about seven years between 1982, when he got his Master's from Georgetown, and 1989, when he joined the Radio, about which she knows nothing. Radio rumour hinted at dark doings in Afghanistan, but William has never said anything either to confirm or to deny it.

The door from the customs hall slides open and the passengers dribble out. Rachel looks them over with a practised eye. A corporate executive with a navy blue blazer, come to dine with a few ministers and grease a few palms. A geologist with a serious anorak and stout shoes, heading out for another round of prospection. After ignoring the newly-independent states of Central Asia for several years, the West has suddenly realized that those obscure nations are sitting on several billion barrels of oil. Half the passengers on the flight are probably out to line their pockets with black gold in one way or another -- and that goes for Kavanagh too. After reading the first chapter, Rachel is more convinced than ever that his book is a pretext. William is in Almaty for the pipelines.

Pipelines are hot news in Central Asia these days. The question currently exercising the strategic classes is where to build them. All the possible routes are threatened by political malcontents of one stripe or another. Chechens, Kurds, Taliban: in this part of the world there are dangers everywhere. Local conflicts are being evaluated, political stability is being assessed, assassinations are occasionally attempted. Pipelines have become the Great Game of the late twentieth century. Having a pipeline is the next best thing to having the actual oilfields. One, you can charge royalties, and, two, you can cut off supplies if someone does something to displease you. The combination of hard-currency earnings and political leverage is irresistible. Russia, Turkey and Iran are manoeuvring for control of the pipeline routes. Cabals are forming, support is being gathered, deals are being cut. Moscow is pursuing its national interest but Washington is determined to have a say in the matter. And that, Rachel assumes, is where Kavanagh comes in.

William is one of the first passengers to appear. He looks surprisingly alert, considering he left Washington some twenty hours earlier, with a change of plane in Frankfurt. His hair is longer than

it used to be, and he's wearing a dark green anorak. Rachel gives him a hug, before remembering that invasion of personal space is another no-no, and backing off. William likes people to keep their distance. Since he is often bad-mannered and frequently abrasive, they generally do. Rachel finds William's little eccentricities amusing, though admittedly she's not usually on the receiving end of them. William has always been very nice to her. She senses he was shocked by what happened with Igor, though he has never said as much. Not everyone, however, is so tolerant. Camilla can't stand him, and William isn't very fond of her either. She thinks he's an ill-mannered boor, and he thinks she's a spoiled bitch. It's a good job their visits are a week apart.

She leads William out to the parking lot, and ushers him into her antiquated BMW. The road into town is studded with potholes, and street lamps are few and far between.

"So how are you?" he asks.

William is one of the two people in the world to whom Rachel is prepared to tell the truth. "Oh I'm surviving," she says.

Displays of affection are not William's thing, but he looks at her with concern. "Surviving? Is that all? After seven years?"

"It's always seven years," says Rachel lightly. "Don't you remember the fairy stories?" In fact, it's seven years exactly. She celebrated the anniversary two days ago with a bottle of whisky and a night of insomnia.

"Maybe that means your handsome prince is due."

Rachel knows better than to think he's hinting at himself. "Pigs might fly," she says tartly, and William grins.

"Still no news of Igor?"

"Why should I have news of Igor? He doesn't know where I am."

"With his connections, he can find out."

"Why would he want to? If he ever intended to talk to me again, he wouldn't have left like that."

"He might have changed his mind."

"I doubt it, William." She slows for a traffic light. "So you're writing a travel book, are you?"

"Right," says William blandly. "A geopolitical travel book."

"Oh is that what it is? But why 'selective' travels?"

"Well that just means that I go where I feel like going."

Rachel looks at him. "Where you *feel* like going? Where else is the fancy going to take you, then?"

"Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara. The Silk Road. You know."

"Maybe you'll run into Camilla."

"I'm counting on it," says William. "Is she bringing her son?"

"Of course not, William. You don't bring five-year-olds to Central Asia. He's staying with her parents in Bethesda."

"He was a nice little boy. I always liked him."

"There's no oil in Samarkand," says Rachel. "Nor in Bukhara. You aren't really interested in the Silk Road, are you?"

A pause, as William registers that she's second-guessed him. "Well, you could say that the Silk Road is mainly a literary device."

"Oh a literary device."

"Basically what I aim to do is get out there, check out the scenery, talk to the man in the street. Take the pulse of the Zeitgeist. You know the kind of thing."

*

So here's the intrepid geopolitical traveller striding down Silk Road Street in search of the mysterious East.

Almaty had changed a lot since Soviet days. The Russians were leaving, and the West was moving in. English-language hoardings advertised the Bank of Texas and Kazakhstan. Red and white umbrellas bloomed on every street corner, buskers with a saxophone and an accordion were playing *La Vie en Rose*, the shops on the new pedestrian street offered T-shirts and toasters. The pizzification of Almaty was well under way. The Coca Cola sign on the old *Kazakhstanskaya pravda* building pretty well summed it all up. I ate lunch in a restaurant where the menu included Chimichangas and Beef Burritos. Just as I finished my pizza, the dust storm started. The wind howled, leaves were torn off the trees, the air darkened and filled with dust. It was the first Kazak thing I had seen since I got to Almaty. Dust filled my lungs, my eyes, my hair. The sun blurred to a silhouette shining faintly through the gloom, and the air filled with murk.

When the dust had subsided, I went back to Rachel's for a shower and took the opportunity to search her apartment. I found nothing that shouldn't have been there, but frankly I hadn't expected it. I had known my suspicions were unfounded as soon as I laid eyes on her. She looked better than she had in Munich, but she didn't look that good. It was clear she wasn't meeting Igor on the sly. I doubted she knew where he was.

Camilla was another matter. I had a nasty feeling that Camilla and I were going to Samarkand for exactly the same reason.

*

At the end of the afternoon, I walked over to the Embassy. Jeff had been down to Uzbekistan a couple of weeks earlier, and he was waiting to brief me. As far as he knew, it was my first time in Central Asia. He took me for a drink in one of the city's new five-star hotels. The clientele ranged from Kazaks in suits to Westerners in tennis shoes via dressed-down yuppies from Moscow. The less you have to prove, the worse you dress. Jeff ordered bourbon, and I did too.

"So who are all these guys?" I asked.

"Who knows?" said Jeff. "Some of them are political and some are business, and usually they're a bit of both. You can never tell who's involved in what in this city. The point is that they're all Party trained, so they do business the Party way."

He took a slug of bourbon.

"You see the dust storm this afternoon? Think of that as a metaphor for the Kazak business climate. Very very murky. This country has vast oil and gas resources. These guys are here to sell the country's assets to the highest bidder, and make sure the proceeds get transferred to their very own Swiss bank accounts. Millions of dollars of oil revenues are disappearing from the national budget in the time it's taking you and me to drink our Jack Daniels." He raised a hand to a passing waiter. "You want another? Great."

The waiters scurried round with the cocktails. The Swiss banks accounts grew fatter. The noise level rose. I thought of Rachel alone in her grubby little apartment with her Russian poetry books, and Camilla alone in Washington trying to raise her son and pay her mortgage.

"Anyway," said Jeff, "what we've really come here to talk about is the Café Maracanda. Right?"

"Right," I said. Rachel didn't know why Camilla was on her way to Samarkand, and I wasn't going to tell her. I would leave Camilla to break the news herself.

*

DINNER WITH THE MAFIA

Central Asia is the last place Camilla ever expected to set foot in. She had her fill of exotic destinations as a child. Moscow, Damascus, Jakarta: that was more than enough. If she had the choice, she would not have come. It's early afternoon in Almaty, and she has been awake for an hour. Rachel has gone to see her friend Vadim, who is having some kind of emergency. When she comes back, they are going to have to talk. Camilla is not sure what she's going to say.

She stares at herself in Rachel's bathroom mirror. The longer she looks, the harder it is to recognize herself. The woman in the mirror has short hair and a wary expression. She wears no jewellery, she does not smile. You never relax, her mother complains, you never smile any more. Would you be smiling in my place? Camilla wants to retort, but she says nothing. In her mother's scale of values, appearances are more important than feelings. The argument will cut no ice.

Before leaving home, she took out the album and looked through the photos of Tuscany. Siena, Florence, Arezzo. The towers of San Gimignano, the hills of the Monte Amiata. Davey and Igor by the barbecue, Camilla and Rachel on the terrace. Davey forever frozen in eternal youth, Rachel before she started to go grey, Igor expressionless at a café table. And that woman with the flowing blonde hair and confident gaze -- was that really Camilla herself? She couldn't believe how much she has changed since then, how closed up and withdrawn she has become.

Of course there's a reason for it. Since the days she sat idly on a terrace sipping wine, she has watched Rachel fall apart and Davey slide steadily into alcoholism. It's a long time now since she was torn out of her self-absorbed existence with a fat pay-cheque, no dependents, and a closet full of clothes. She had one miscarriage after Igor's defection, and she nearly had another after Davey's accident. She has lost most of her self-confidence and all of her expectations. Yet, of the three of them that Igor left behind, she has come out the best. She is alive, she is healthy, and she has Thomas.

Thomas has just turned five. His birthday was last month. Camilla loves him desperately, in a way she has never loved anyone else. She would give anything to have him with her now, walking gravely round the apartment, examining the fittings, asking why there's only one tap to serve both the washbasin and the bath. Wandering back into the sitting room, which is doubling as her bedroom for the weekend, she remembers the pictures she brought for Rachel and gets them out of the suitcase. They were taken a couple of months ago, on holiday in Maine, with friends who have a daughter Thomas' age. Woods, barbecues, lakes, lobsters. Camilla and her friends in front of the cabin, Camilla and Thomas setting the table in the clearing, Camilla on her own beside the lake. Her mother's right, she never smiles. The only pictures where she is smiling are those taken with Thomas.

Thomas is beginning to grow up. He's lost his baby fat and his air of bewilderment. He poses for the camera with a slightly knowing air. When Camilla told him she was going to see Rachel, he

didn't know who she meant. He hasn't seen Rachel since he was two: he has forgotten who Rachel is. This is something that is going to have to be remedied. For Thomas is Rachel's child too. Officially, she's his godmother; unofficially she's a lot more. Without Rachel, Camilla doesn't know how she would have survived those long solitary months of pregnancy. Rachel sent her to the doctor, made her look after herself, dragged her round the shops to buy baby clothes, found an apartment for them all to share. Rachel drove her to the hospital and hung around in the waiting room all night. Rachel lined up Günther's mother's cleaning lady's daughter to babysit when Camilla went back to work. Rachel got up on occasion to dispense the dreaded two a.m. bottle, took Thomas to the park, and read him stories by the hour. Camilla has a debt to Rachel she can never repay.

She takes the photos into Rachel's bedroom to put on the bedside table. The room is neat and empty, with the shoes arranged in a line, and the clothes put away out of sight. On the bedside table is a pile of books, some in English, some in Russian. The one on the top is in Russian. *Dr. Zhivago*. At the sight of it, Camilla stops short. Rachel once said Igor used to read poetry to her. Zhivago's poems to Lara, late at night. Does she still read them now? Camilla picks up the book and leafs through it. A piece of paper falls out. For a moment, she is baffled and then she realizes Rachel has been trying her hand at translating Zhivago's poems. The paper is a mass of crossings out. *All my dear ones are gone. Those that I love are scattered. Those dear to me have gone.* A shiver goes down Camilla's spine. She goes on reading. *My heart is filled with loneliness. All my life is loneliness.* She turns to the flyleaf. The dedication is in Russian too, in a confident black scrawl. *You are engraved in my heart for ever. Munich, March 1989.* No signature. Apparently he didn't think it necessary.

Camilla drops the book and sits down on the edge of the bed. Shit, shit, shit. Igor, you shit, you prick, you motherfucker, you masturbator. She finds herself swearing out loud in Russian, using words she didn't even know she knew, words she must have picked up from Davey, who took a collector's interest in Russian obscenities. Somehow she has stored them away in a corner of her mind in case of need. By the time her repertoire runs out, she is half laughing and half crying.

She gets a grip on herself, blows her nose, and tries to think. Rachel will be back soon, and then they're going sightseeing. At some point during the afternoon, she had planned to tell Rachel the real reason she is going to Samarkand. Find a good moment, break it gently. Her gaze drops to the book on the floor. On second thoughts, it might be better not to break anything at all.

*

The oldest building in Almaty is the Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Panfilov Park. Rachel isn't sure when it was built, but that doesn't matter, because its main claim to fame is that it was one of the few buildings in Almaty to survive a 1911 earthquake that levelled the rest of the city.

"A sign from God that the Russians were meant to be here?" says Camilla sardonically.

"Of course. But what really kept it on its feet is the fact that it's all in wood and built entirely without nails."

"Probably God liked the colours too. Do you remember when we visited the Duomo in Siena?"

"And Davey said it looked as though it came from Baskin Robbins?"

The cathedral is painted pink and green, in sharp contrast to the greys and beiges of the rest of the city. It sits in the middle of the park like a Little Gingerbread Church in a fairy tale. Camilla goes to take a look inside, and Rachel sits on a nearby bench to wait for her. It's a warm, grey

autumn day. The air smells of dust and tastes of metal. On the bench opposite, an elderly Kazak in a wrinkled suit is staring glumly at his feet. Further away, a woman in headscarf and ankle socks is lying face down, either passed out or sleeping it off. Rachel half wishes Camilla had gone direct to Samarkand. Camilla is the person she is closest to in the whole world, but they share too many bad memories. She doesn't want Camilla here, stirring ashes that are nearly cold. She would rather have been left alone, with the drunks and the desperate, to lick her wounds.

Camilla appears at the top of the steps and glances around with an air of wondering what she is doing here. They will look at the war memorial, Rachel decides, then get down to brass tacks.

The war memorial is a Gorgon-like creation with implausible bronze muscles, set amid trees at the far end of the Park. It was built to commemorate twenty-eight men of the Panfilov division, all born in Almaty, who died fighting off Nazi tanks on the outskirts of Moscow in 1941.

"Isn't there anything Kazak to see?" says Camilla.

"There's a museum of musical instruments if you want. Most of them don't work, but it's quite nice in there."

They detour round the schoolchildren. Rachel takes a deep breath.

"All right, Camilla. How about telling me what you've really come here for?"

"I told you. The focus group."

"Supervising focus groups is not your job. You told me when you moved to Washington that there was no travel involved. Strictly nine to five, you told me, and at five you'd be out of there to pick up Thomas from the babysitter. You loathe travelling, you loathe roughing it, you loathe places like this. You're hiding something! Tell me what it is."

"I assure you I'm not."

"Camilla, I've been lied to enough in my life. Don't you start lying to me too."

"Oh God."

"Tell me."

"Rachel, I really don't think- "

"Tell me."

They keep on walking. Two steps, three. Then Rachel finds her arm being gripped and her footsteps directed towards the nearest bench.

"Come and sit down. I've got something to tell you."

"What's going on? Has somebody died?"

"No. Listen. I think, that is... Somebody told me, it sounds like... Oh damn, I don't know how to say this. Rache, I think I've found Igor."

"You mean he's alive?"

"Did you think he was dead?"

"How did you find him?"

"Friends who were passing through Samarkand. They met someone who sounds like Igor."

"But they don't know for certain."

"No, they can't be sure."

"Then what does it matter -- did you say Samarkand?"

"Yes."

"He's in Samarkand?" Her voice rises. "He can't be! I thought he was in Moscow. I've been to Samarkand myself! I could have bumped into him in the street!"

She's trembling, her heart is beating faster, she feels as if she's going to be sick. Camilla puts an arm round her shoulders.

"Rache, calm down. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have broken it to you like that. Let's go and get a drink somewhere, and then I'll tell you the rest."

"No, I'll be all right. Tell me now."

"You're sure you don't want a drink? You look awfully pale."

"Tell me."

"I was over at my parents' house a couple of months ago and I met some friends of theirs who had just come back from a trip to Uzbekistan. They told us about a bar they discovered called the Café Maracanda."

"Yes?"

"It served Italian food and played music from Italian opera. A lot of Puccini and Verdi."

"Lots of people like Puccini. That doesn't mean anything."

"The speciality of the house was bruschette con pomodoro."

"Lots of people know how to make..." Her eyes meet Camilla's and her voice trails off.

"Someone pointed out the owner to them. He was a Russian. They gave me a description. It's vague, of course, but it could be Igor."

"And the name of this place was the Café Maracanda?"

"Yes."

There is a long silence. The school children are leaving. They walk decorously past, chattering animatedly. One or two are still writing in their notebooks. Rachel sighs deeply. The sickness is beginning to recede. Deep down, she has always known this would happen.

"You remember that book he was reading in Italy?" she asks.

"The one about Alexander? Yes, I know. The Maracanda connection. I thought of that at once."

"I turned down two jobs in Moscow because I thought he was there. I came all the way down here, and now I find he's living right on my doorstep. A few hundred miles away, that's all."

"He always used to say he wanted to go back to Uzbekistan."

"So that's why you're going to Samarkand? You set up this focus group on purpose?"

"Well, no, we-" Under Rachel's accusing glare, Camilla breaks off. "Yes. Pretty much."

"What are you going to do when you get there? Walk into this place and see if it's him?"

"Yes, I guess so. Yes."

"And then what?" demands Rachel, but discovers almost immediately that she doesn't want to know the answer. "Tell me about it later." She springs to her feet and starts to move away. "Come on, Camilla, hurry up. We've got to see the museum before it closes."

*

After the museum, they stay on the move for the rest of the afternoon. Rachel sees to that. When they've had enough of the nostalgic twangs and flutings of Kazak musical instruments, they embark on a serious programme of sociological tourism. She marches Camilla along Silk Road Street, and then takes her grocery shopping. In the supermarket, foreigners and a few well-dressed locals browse among gleaming racks of cans and bottles and packages imported from Turkey and France. Rachel buys German yoghurt and Finnish crackers.

"Do the Kazaks eat this stuff too?" asks Camilla, gazing in perplexity at a row of American cake mixes.

"Of course not," says Rachel. "They can't afford it. They shop at the market. We'll go there next."

Rachel doesn't normally patronize the farmer's market. She finds it depressing. You need to cultivate the art of not seeing too much when you live in a place like this. In any case, she is no fonder of cooking than she used to be. She continues to regard unprocessed vegetables with disdain, and is devoutly thankful for the convenience foods in the fake Western supermarkets. But today she is determined to show Camilla the real Almaty: not monuments, not museums, but Real Life, crude and unaesthetic, with all its ragged edges and unpleasing colours. She has to keep Camilla's mind away from Igor, get her thinking about other things. Rachel can't talk about Igor, not right away. She needs a breathing space. She had managed to convince herself that Igor no longer existed, and now it turns out that all this time he has been walking the earth and breathing the air, making bruschette and listening to *Don Carlo*. She needs time to adapt to this shocking new knowledge.

The market is a different world. Drunks swaying in the corners, destitute old ladies begging at the entrance, and country Kazaks squatting on their heels in the dust. Camilla stares at the sad heaps of dirty vegetables and makes no comment. When they get back into the car she says, "Even if people are less well off materially than under the Communists, surely the psychological climate is better? Things are more honest. Aren't they?"

"Perhaps," says Rachel, "but they've fallen into another kind of dishonesty. It's not psychological corruption any more, it's financial corruption. What you have to realize is that everyone in Almaty who has any money at all is compromised in some way. It's impossible not to be. People can't live on their salaries any more. Either the salaries aren't big enough, or they get paid months late. This means that there are certain things you have to do if you want to feed your family. There's no choice."

"But they do have the choice to make," Camilla argues. "They see what reality is, and they make their choice. Before, they had no grasp on reality. What was real? What you saw for yourself? Or what the Party said you ought to see?"

"It's because they had no grasp on reality under the Soviets that they have no moral sense now. They have no basis for knowing what they should do, and what they shouldn't do. It doesn't just appear, you know, once the controls are lifted, once the Party is abolished. It has to grow from something, it has to have roots."

They eat dinner in one of Almaty's new Western-style hotels. Rachel does not consult Camilla, who will insist on trying local delicacies but is unlikely to actually swallow horsemeat and noodles when it comes to the crunch. Rachel herself is in need of comfort food. While the Rachat Palace will probably not serve baked beans on toast, they will definitely have potatoes, and they might run to chocolate cake.

"We're not eating here, are we?" says Camilla, as they turn into the streamlined forecourt.

"Certainly," says Rachel, pulling into a space between two Mercedes with tinted windows. "I thought you'd like to see a little local colour."

The lobby of the hotel is international glossy and the restaurant is done out in something sleek and non-threatening. Rachel surveys the buffet. The chocolate cake looks a bit synthetic, but she can make do with lemon meringue pie.

"That's quite a spread," says Camilla.

"Yes, and the price is reasonable too."

"Oh but this is on me," says Camilla hastily. "I insist."

"Good. Charge it to Igor when you see him."

"Rache, I'm really sorry. I'd decided not to tell you, and then--"

"How about a bottle of wine?" says Rachel, signalling to the waiter. "It won't be very good, but I think we need it."

Camilla orders a bottle of Côtes du Rhône. As Rachel predicted, it's a trifle vinegary. They both drain their glasses.

"Why do you want to do this?" says Rachel.

"I want to talk to him."

"What about? The things he said in that phony television discussion? Is that what you want to talk about?"

"Yes. I need to know why he did it."

"What difference will that make? Whether he was acting on instructions, or he thought it up all by himself, it doesn't change anything. He did it, and now it can't be undone."

"I just feel that if we knew more, it would be easier to come to terms with it."

"Because you think you're going to come to terms with it one day?"

"I would like to, yes."

"You're deceiving yourself, Camilla. You can never come to terms with something like that. You're going to have to struggle with it all your life long."

They finish eating in silence. Rachel's attention strays to the next table, where a group of five men are deep in earnest discussion, but they are too far away for her to make out what they are talking about, or even what language they are speaking. Three of them are clearly Kazaks. The others are probably Russian.

"So where's the local colour?" says Camilla.

"Right there," says Rachel, sliding her eyes in the direction of the five men.

"Those guys there? What about them?"

"Mafia bosses," says Rachel, lowering her voice.

"What?"

"Keep your voice down. They're the ones who run things. They own all those bullet-proof Mercedes in the car park. The two with the strange haircuts at the table behind are probably bodyguards."

"How do you know that?"

"In a place like this you fall over them all the time. One of the side-effects of privatization. Never privatize unless you have a decent legal system -- you'd think one of those sharp Harvard economists would have thought of that. Look over there, next to the flower arrangement. See the guy with the black shirt and the pony tail? He'll be a drug dealer. Are you ready for the main course?"

The main course is lasagne or roast beef. Rachel helps herself to roast potatoes, and continues the briefing.

"The little Kazak guy with the tarty girlfriend is a government official. The table behind you there. Pretty low level, judging by the suit."

"How can he afford to come here then?"

"Bribes," says Rachel. "This is what I was telling you about earlier. It's the only way to make ends meet."

They return to their table, Camilla looking nervously round at the other diners.

"Enjoy your meal," says Rachel cheerfully.

"My God, I didn't realize. They all look so normal."

"Appearances are deceptive, Milenka. We should know that by now."

"Don't call me- " Camilla stops short. Rachel meets her eyes.

"Are you sure there's nothing else? You don't have another reason for wanting to see him?"

"No. Like what?"

"He told me he ran into you one night after we got back from Italy."

Camilla goes white. She lays down her fork. "Oh God, the bastard. He told you that?"

"Igor told me a lot," says Rachel. "Not the things that mattered, of course."

"Well if you know that," retorts Camilla, "then you also know nothing happened."

"Precisely. And that's what I'm wondering about now."

Camilla glares at her. "Look, Rachel, if you're wondering whether I am still sexually interested in Igor after seven years, then I can definitely tell you the answer is no."

Rachel starts to eat again.

"Okay. Fine. I just had to make sure."

"I could have gone straight to Samarkand without telling you. I didn't have to come here."

"So why did you come here? You know I've been trying for years to forget him. Why did you come here and stir it all up again?"

"You had the right to know what I was planning to do."

"Just because you have a *right* to know doesn't mean- "

"I also thought I could persuade you to come with me."

"Out of the question."

"Yes, I see that now."

There is a sudden wave of movement around the next table. The mafia bosses are ready for dessert.

Rachel waits till they are out of earshot. "I still don't understand what you hope to gain by it."

"You said you're trying to forget what happened, but I can't do that. It won't let go of me. I have to find out exactly what he was doing in Munich."

"What he was up to with Davey, you mean? Don't we know that already?"

"We know they had something going on. We don't know what it was."

"We can guess, can't we?"

"I need to have it spelled out for me. I need to hear it from Igor in person."

"I hope you won't regret hearing it."

"Of course I'll regret it! How could I not? But I have no choice. One day I'm going to have to tell my son about his father."

Rachel's head jerks up. "You're not going to tell him- ?"

"No, of course not. But I need to know what Davey did. I need to understand."

Rachel looks at her hard and is about to speak, but then she changes her mind and eats a forkful of lasagna instead.

"I'm sorry. I'd go with you if I could."

"I understand. I shouldn't have asked."

"I trusted him entirely. I looked on him as part of myself. He trampled on that, he tore it up and threw it away. He tore me up, and I don't think I'll ever be able to put myself back together again."

Camilla says hesitantly, "What about your friend here? Vadim?"

"No." Rachel dismisses Vadim with a gesture. "What I had with Igor I can never find again. He took it away. I've never understood how he could do that. It was like amputating an arm or a leg. And he did it to himself too. His life isn't the same any more, any more than mine is. He's missing a part of himself, just like I am."

Camilla is silent. Rachel watches the mafia bosses straggling back to their table with heaped plates. One of the Kazaks, anxious to miss nothing, has a plate in each hand.

"If you find him," she says crisply, "remember one thing. He's out of my life and I want it to stay that way. I forbid you to tell him anything about me. What I'm doing, where I am. I don't want to see him and I don't want to hear from him. As far as I'm concerned, Igor is dead."

*

CHAMPAGNE AT THE CAFE MARACANDA

*Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
And softly through the silence beat the bells
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.*
- James Elroy Flecker

"Selective Travels Down The Silk Road" by William S. Kavanagh

Samarkand does not live up to its reputation. How could it? The ruined imperial city, lost amid the sands of the desert, rich and perilous and strange -- did it ever really exist? Tamerlane and his capital fired the imagination of Marlowe and Goethe; the Silk Road and the mythical city inspired a minor British poet to write of golden journeys across the desert, but part of the romance of the place lies in the fact that few people have ever been there. One person who did visit, the fourteenth-century Arab traveller Ibn-Battuta, described it as 'one of the largest and most perfectly beautiful cities in the world.'

That was a while back. Late twentieth-century Samarkand is a grey socialist city, charmless and ugly. If this was once the glittering summit of the world, it doesn't show. The fabled turquoise domes are stranded amid vast stretches of Soviet residential wasteland, and the three great madrassahs on the Registan are set off by a nasty yellow apartment block on the fourth side of the square. The Bolsheviks knew how to keep history in its place.

But since independence, history is changing. Tamerlane, formerly a class enemy, is now an Uzbek hero and the father of the nation. Monuments are being restored, and school parties tread respectfully in the footsteps of the man they call Emir Timur, the Emperor Tamerlane. The fact that Timur, in his fourteenth-century rampage across Asia, killed seventeen million people, walled up his victims in towers to die, and left pyramids of skulls outside the gates of conquered cities, is discreetly passed over. The Emir is being positioned as a lawgiver, a humanist, and a military genius.

Uzbekistan's choice of role model is no accident. Dictators are the only political constant in this part of Asia. Democracy gets in the way of running the state. Karimov, the current President, values nothing so much as stability, and he isn't alone. The citizens of this predominantly rural, deeply conservative society are wary of change.

Tamerlane died of a fever in 1405, as he was setting out to invade China. His body was brought back to be buried in Samarkand. "Only a stone, and my name upon it," he is said to have whispered as he lay dying. They respected his wish. They gave him the biggest slab of jade in the world, they placed it in the elaborate mausoleum erected for one of his grandsons, and they called it the Gur Emir, the Tomb of the Emperor.

*

Tamerlane's grave lies at the end of a quiet street lined with low traditional houses. Mulberry trees droop overhead. Children play on the pavement, an old man stumps past with a stick. Camilla puts her feet down carefully. She isn't sure if she's touching the pavement or not. She did not expect Samarkand, remote and golden, to offer anything as prosaic as this peaceful residential district. Her head is spinning, less from jet lag than time warp. She got off the plane from the twentieth century only an hour ago. Tamerlane's capital has not had time to grow from myth into reality.

The street rounds a corner and opens out on to a small square. The mausoleum stands before her, its graceful Islamic arches rising in the darkening air to an astonishing turquoise dome. Camilla takes a few steps forward and hesitates at the entrance to the courtyard. She is standing on the threshold of legendary Samarkand, but there is no one to admit her. The door of the mausoleum is closed. It's seven o'clock in the evening. Visits are over for the day. If she wants to see Tamerlane's grave, she'll have to come back tomorrow. She's about to turn and leave when a figure appears in the doorway of the mausoleum and beckons vigorously. Camilla approaches. This must be the caretaker. He is young, and wears an unbuttoned uniform jacket. Otkuda? he demands. Where is she from? Amerika, says Camilla, and he ushers her inside, past his own cramped living quarters, through an antechamber, and into the mausoleum. She looks around in wonder. The conqueror of Central Asia lies in state amid marble and alabaster. Gold shimmers softly in the twilight and soars high overhead. The patterns intertwine with ethereal mathematical beauty. She steps forward to examine the tombs. The jade, says the caretaker, is the tomb of Emir Timur, and the others belong to members of his family.

Camilla feels a sudden surge of elation. She has travelled across time zones, nations and forgotten empires. She has penetrated the heart of the mythical city. Even though she hasn't come from Baghdad in a caravan, only from Tashkent on a rickety Uzbek Airways Tupolev, she swells with a distinct sense of achievement. She is standing in the presence of Timur the lame, the nomad son of a minor chieftain who laid waste a continent and conquered an empire. At the end of her journey, she's found Tamerlane. There is no reason she should not find Igor too.

*

The Café Maracanda is just round the corner. An elegant two-storey building, painted white, with wrought-iron bars on the windows and a heavy carved door. Even before Camilla sees the sign, she knows this is it. The sign is written in white letters on a turquoise background. Latin characters, not Cyrillic. She stops a few yards away and stares at it. So it really does exist. Just as Jim and Marjorie had said. A stone's throw from the Samarkand Hotel, very sophisticated place, might almost think you were in New York City. All kinds of people, very cosmopolitan, even get a decent Margarita. So it's a tourist bar, Camilla had said, puzzled. Oh no, Marjorie said, the locals go there

too, there are more local people than tourists, in fact. The more affluent ones, of course, Jim added. I guess the prices are a bit steep for most of them.

And now here she is, standing right in front of it, this upmarket Uzbek watering-hole, transplanted to darkest Samarkand from Manhattan, or Munich, or Florence, or any one of a dozen cities that Igor would have visited in the course of his career in the West. Camilla goes on looking. She has absolutely no reason to assume it has anything to do with Igor. Lots of people know that Maracanda was the name of Samarkand in the ancient world. Lots of people read about Alexander the Great.

The door opens and two of the sophisticated cosmopolitan clients emerge. Middle-aged men, formally dressed in dark suits. A doorman in white shirt and black tie holds the door respectfully open and wishes them 'Dobry vecher.' They do not return his greeting. They cross the street to where a chauffeur is holding open the doors of a gleaming Mercedes. Doors slam, the Mercedes drives off. The whole street, Camilla realizes, is lined with fancy Western cars: BMWs, Mercedes, Volvos, and a wide range of designer Jeeps. One or two of the drivers are standing chatting beside their vehicles. Another is talking urgently into a cellular phone. Their gaze drifts over her and away again. Emboldened by their lack of interest, Camilla propels herself forward. A menu is posted up near the door, and she stops to read it.

The menu consists of two sheets of paper, one in Russian, one in English. The drinks section lists an impressive variety of American cocktails. Zombies, B-52s, Martinis, Manhattans. The food, however, is not American, but Italian. Spaghetti con funghi, penne al formaggio, bruschette con pomodoro. Camilla feels dizzy. Her forehead is damp and her spine is cold. Oh God, he's really done it, he's gone back to Uzbekistan and opened his trattoria. It's in Samarkand, not Tashkent, but otherwise he's done exactly what he said he was going to do and if I go in there now I'll find him standing behind the bar toasting slices of ciabatta with the same frown of concentration he used to have, making sure he gets them just right, neither overdone nor underdone, and he'll look up and ask me how many tomatoes we have left -

Camilla turns on her heel and walks away fast. Almost running, she rounds the corner into Boulevard Gorky and leans on the nearest wall, gasping for breath. Her knees feel shaky. She has a dinner appointment with Rustam, the focus group coordinator, and she's late already, but it's several minutes before she feels strong enough to start walking back to the hotel.

*

From: Camilla Stacey
To: Rustam Usmanov

Dear Rustam,

We are planning to hold four focus group sessions on Radio Liberty Uzbek programming in Samarkand in October. Respondents should be ethnic Uzbeks, aged between 20 and 55, with technical or higher education. Radio Liberty listeners are preferred. Participants should not have any connection with the moderator of the discussions or the personnel of the institute. No one should be an official representative of any political party or faction.

Participants will be asked to listen to three days of Uzbek broadcasts and to evaluate the programming. Four discussion groups, each lasting approximately two hours, will then be held.

The discussions will be conducted according to guidelines provided by this office. Finally, the moderator will write a report analyzing the results of the focus groups, and backing up the findings with exchanges from the discussion.

I plan travel to Samarkand to monitor the discussions and look forward to meeting you then.

*

Rustam is a large affable man some ten years older than Camilla, with greying hair and a studiously Western appearance. Last night for dinner, he wore an ordinary suit. This morning, in his office, he looks set to leave on safari. He's wearing a many-pocketed waistcoat over a denim shirt and denim trousers, both of which are fitted out with yet more pockets and loops and tucks. All the pockets are bulging with essential equipment. There's a mobile phone poking out from one breast pocket, and a calculator from the other. Rustam has a checklist on his desk, and he works methodically down it, explaining to Camilla what he has done, what he has still to do, and what cannot be done.

The focus groups are going to be held in a seminar room at the university. In Rustam's opinion, it's an ideal setting for this kind of discussion, neither too official, which might intimidate the participants, nor too relaxed, which might make them disinclined to work. The moderator is a woman psychology lecturer, who has worked for Rustam before. There will be three groups of six people, and one group of five. This is slightly fewer than planned. Recruitment, Rustam explains, has not been easy. Only five women will be taking part, because Uzbek women are not interested in politics and only listen to the radio while they are cooking. Camilla raises her eyebrows. He returns her gaze. Two people agreed to participate and later changed their minds. Radio Liberty has been criticized on several occasions by the government, and so... He shrugs resignedly.

Rustam's office is messy and busy, strewn with reports, reference books, maps, cassettes. In the corridor, the office secretary, a young woman dressed in a sharp red suit, is feeding a fax into the machine and keeping an eye on the photocopier at the same time. Telephones ring, machines hum, people come and go. The office is crammed with computers, fax machines, scanners and printers. It's hard to believe that this is Uzbekistan, and not New York. When she expresses surprise at how well equipped he is, Rustam beams proudly.

Rustam is confident, pushy and ambitious. He began his career conducting surveys on educational problems for Samarkand University. That was back in 1986, when survey research was a bourgeois science that could only take place under strict Party control. In 1991, he set up his own institute, with offices in Samarkand and Tashkent. Since then, he tells Camilla, he has done surveys for the World Bank, Unilever, the European Community, and the US Information Agency. He has spent time as a visiting scholar at Harvard. He has attended sociological conferences in Frankfurt, Edinburgh and San Diego. He has been to Disneyland and Universal Studios. Rustam is going places (under the protection, Camilla has heard, of some relative on the old Central Committee). She is suitably impressed by this shining example of Uzbek upward mobility.

He is also efficient. The preliminary work for the focus groups has been completed. The participants have been instructed to turn on their radio sets at six p.m. every day, listen to the one-hour Uzbek broadcast which goes out at that time, and fill out a questionnaire asking what they thought of it, so that when they attend the discussion they will have the programming fresh in their mind. One of Rustam's assistants has made follow-up phone calls to ensure that the listening is being done, and to check that everyone will be present at the group discussions later in the week.

Camilla realizes that she will have practically nothing to do. Possibly this is what Rustam wants. He has started to give her a rundown on Samarkand's sightseeing opportunities: the Registan, the Shah-i-Zinda, and the Bibi Khanym. Religious schools, a burial ground, and a mosque. All very interesting, he tells her, looking expectantly over his reading glasses. Foreign visitors are better out and about, catching up with what Rachel would call death and religion, than hanging around the Uzbek Research Centre getting under Rustam's feet.

"I'll need to talk to the moderator," Camilla says, but she needn't have worried. She has an appointment with the moderator at the Samarkand Hotel that very day. Rustam has thought of everything.

*

The appointment with the moderator is at five o'clock. Camilla leaves Rustam's office in plenty of time to walk back to the hotel. But it's further than she thought, and the weather is hotter than she expected. When a cluster of red and white umbrellas comes into view on one of the streets leading off the boulevard, she heads instinctively towards it. She is a few feet away, checking for an empty table, when she realizes that the tables are the property of the Café Maracanda, whose business is doing so well that it is spilling out on to the pavement. But by then she has acquired sufficient momentum to take her past the tables, through the open door and into the courtyard.

The inner courtyard is cool and tiled, laid out in traditional Uzbek style. It has trees, flowers, and a fountain trickling harmoniously. The windows overlooking the courtyard are obscured by latticed screens that hide the inner rooms from view. One corner is occupied by a group of Western tourists in jeans and trainers. In another, two dark-skinned young men in leather jackets are drinking Coca Cola. Otherwise the courtyard is empty. Camilla has a dozen tables to choose from, but she keeps on going. She has avoided thinking about Igor all day. She was planning to psych herself up and contact him later in the week, but she seems to have taken herself by surprise. The double doors at the far end of the courtyard lead into the main room of the café. Camilla glimpses a bar at the back of the room and a barman in a white shirt wiping a glass and chatting to a client. She mounts a short flight of steps, and pauses on the threshold to look around.

The bar is tiled too, in cascading patterns of turquoise and blue and white, and there is another fountain, although this one is silent. Arches on either side lead into adjoining rooms. Camilla has a brief impression of dim carpeted interiors, but that is all she has time to see, because she realizes that the man wiping glasses behind the bar is not a barman, it is Igor himself. Her advance is cut short. She stops halfway across the room and stares at him. He hasn't changed. His brown hair is still going grey, his moustache still droops, he looks as resigned as ever to the ways of the world. He's heavier, maybe a little wearier, but that's all.

Camilla's first reaction is disappointment. For seven years, she has been picturing Mephistopheles, and here he is, just Igor. Just the same. She has no time to think further. Igor has seen her too. His glass goes crashing to the floor, and his cloth after it, he leaves his customer in mid-word and comes rushing round the end of the bar and across the room towards her. Camilla is rooted to the spot. She is unable to move, either towards him or away from him. She finds herself enfolded in his arms and pressed to his bosom, while he mutters something emotional into her neck. Camilla is taken aback. She has spent considerable time during the past few days pondering Igor's likely reaction to her unannounced appearance. Cool, glacial, flustered, casual? It has occurred to her that he might pretend not to know her. The one thing she has not foreseen is enthusiasm.

"Camilla! I can't believe it! Is it really you?"

He doesn't wait for an answer, but shouts an order to another white-shirted man who has appeared out of nowhere and taken charge of the debris behind the bar.

"Come and sit down. It's so wonderful to see you."

He takes her arm and shepherds her into one of the rooms leading off the bar. It is dark and intimate in here, with carpets on the walls and deep comfortable armchairs, and a limited amount of light filtering through the latticed windows from the courtyard. The waiter arrives with a silver-plated champagne bucket and a bottle of Laurent Perrier. Frantsuzskoe? he says questioningly to Igor, and Igor waves his hand irritably, yes, French, of course. The champagne is poured, Igor raises his glass, and Camilla finds herself raising her glass too and grinning at him like an idiot and drinking her champagne. She can't remember afterwards if they made a toast. If they did, it's hard to imagine what it could have been.

"Milenka! It's so good to see you." Igor beams at her, leans forward and touches her hand. "Drink, please. It's good French champagne, none of that Georgian rubbish, and there's plenty more of it in the cellar."

Camilla drinks. Igor looks her over. He really does look pleased to see her. "I can't believe it's you," he repeats. "How long has it been?"

"Seven years."

"Seven years! Is it that long since we've seen each other?"

He sounds mildly reproachful, as if she should have come looking for him earlier. Camilla wonders if he remembers their last meeting, in the Radio building in Munich, the one he told Rachel about. She hopes not. A rather shameful episode, on the whole. He goes on looking her over with a proprietary air.

"You've gained weight," he says, though not disapprovingly, "but, Milenka, your beautiful hair! Why did you cut it all off? You shouldn't have done that."

Camilla's hand goes up to hair level automatically. She has forgotten that Igor has never seen her with short hair. It has been like this for so long that she can hardly remember what it was like before.

"Easier to manage," she says vaguely. "I got tired of it."

"Then I'll just have to get used to it," says Igor sadly, "won't I?"

He grins at her and she grins back. The oddest thing about all this is the fact that she is also pleased to see him. A warm glow is spreading through her, and it isn't only alcohol. Suddenly she remembers the long braid that hung down her back the day they went to Chiusi.

"What brings you to Samarkand?" says Igor, still smiling.

"Take a guess," says Camilla.

"Alexander, of course," says Igor. "Why else would anyone want to come to Central Asia?" and Camilla laughs with sheer relief.

"Naturally, Alexander. I'm doing the Alexander Trail through Sogdiana and Bactria, and I've come to see you for a guided tour of Maracanda."

"Maracanda is a city of the mind," says Igor regretfully. "There is nothing much left of it now. We might have to make do with Timur. Tamerlane, you know? His empire wasn't as big as Alexander's, but he did quite well." He pauses. They both drink. "What else, Camilla? Why else have you come here?"

"I'm here on business."

"Business?" He sounds faintly incredulous.

"Audience research. I'm here to organize a focus group."

"Ah." Igor considers this. "Do you still work for Radio Liberty?"

"Yes."

"And what is the ... purpose of your focus group?"

"To discuss programming in the Uzbek language. What we're doing right, what we're doing wrong, what else we should be doing. You may remember the kind of thing."

"Well, yes and no," says Igor politely. "What is a focus group exactly?"

Camilla looks at him. The Audience Research department did a focus group study of Igor's own programme, *From Under the Rubble*, over a year before he left the Radio. She knows, because she looked it up. Igor must have seen the report. He must know exactly what a focus group is. But radio programmes and focus groups apparently belong to a previous existence, and he is sitting with a look of interested attention on his face, waiting for her to explain it to him. So she does. "Focus group is a market research term. It involves bringing together a group of people, ordinary members of the public, who are willing to sit around a table for two or three hours and discuss a product of some kind. Soap powder. Brands of champagne. Or, as in this case, radio broadcasts."

"That must be very interesting," says Igor, still on his best behaviour. "How long have you been working for Audience Research?"

"Three years."

"You got tired of the military?"

"I needed a change."

"More champagne?" Igor refills her glass without waiting for an answer. "So what do you think of the Café? It was originally a private mansion, you know. It was built at the end of the last century for a tsarist official. He brought in master craftsmen from Bukhara and Khiva to do the tiling. Later, they converted it into a hotel for Party functionaries. When I found it, it had been closed for several years. The roof leaked, it was damp, the tiles were coming off the walls. It had to be redone completely. But the rooms are still the same. I kept the same basic layout and the original tiles."

"Do you have a hotel here too?"

"No, I was never interested in running a hotel. Only a restaurant."

"Yes, I remember you used to talk about it. I never thought you were serious though."

"You didn't take me seriously?" says Igor, with a sudden note of mockery in his voice.

"Not seriously enough. None of us did."

Their eyes meet briefly and flicker away again, stepping back from the brink of a conversation that neither is yet ready to hold.

"It's an excellent location," Igor continues. "Not far from the main hotels."

"Do you get a lot of tourists?"

"Of course. There's nothing else of this standard in Samarkand."

"And who else comes?"

"Mainly local businessmen. You've heard of the New Class in Russia, I suppose? Well, it's the same thing here. Not always very cultivated people, but what can you do, they're the ones with the money."

So Igor is into making money these days. Just like everybody else. With a past like his, it seems something of a comedown. Camilla is disappointed. She would have expected something more high-flying. More duplicitous.

"Why did you come here rather than Tashkent?"

"Samarkand is the Centre of the Earth." There's a peculiar little smile on his lips. "That's what they called it in ancient times, and it hasn't changed."

Camilla stares. This backwater? What on earth does he mean? She assumes it's some obscure way of fobbing her off, but to her surprise he starts to give her a run-down on the advantages of local geography. Samarkand is conveniently located on the route which runs south to Kabul, and east through Tashkent and Almaty to China. What's convenient about that, Camilla wants to ask: does the New Class drive over from China just to grab a Margarita? but Igor hasn't finished. The road west out of Samarkand leads through Turkmenistan to Iran and the Caspian Sea. Finally, connections north to Moscow are relatively simple through either Tashkent or Almaty.

"Great," says Camilla, totally baffled. She looks at her watch. It's quarter to five. "I'm afraid I have to go. I have a meeting in fifteen minutes."

"For your focus group?"

"Yes. I'm meeting the person who's going to moderate the discussions."

"Oh yes? And who is he?" says Igor casually.

"Someone from the university."

Igor looks at her sharply. "You don't have to-"

"Yes?"

"Nothing."

For a moment they look at each other. The masks are down. Yes, Igor, things have changed. I haven't seen you for seven years, I don't trust you an inch. My hairstyle's changed, and so has my job, and so has everything else about my life. As I'm sure you already know. I notice you haven't asked me how my husband is, and you don't seem anxious for news of Rachel either.

Camilla stands up. "I must be going."

"Do you know which way to go?"

"I'm only going to the Samarkand Hotel."

"In that case it's easy. Turn left when you get out of here and left again at the intersection with Gorky."

Camilla nods obediently. Igor hasn't lost his habit of organizing people. He escorts her through a labyrinth of interconnecting rooms to the street door. On the threshold of the Café Maracanda, he takes her hand and holds it. "When will you come back?"

"I don't know," says Camilla. Exhaustion has suddenly gripped her: she feels unable to face the prospect of going through this ordeal again any time soon. "I'm here for a week."

"Come back tomorrow. Are you free at lunchtime? I will make bruschette con pomodoro. Especially for you."

Camilla draws her breath in sharply. Igor says nothing. Camilla glances at him briefly and looks away again.

"All right."

"Good," says Igor. "I'll be waiting for you."

*

Samarkand, Monday, 23:45

So it's happened. The past is returning. If Camilla is here, you can't be far behind. Are you in Samarkand now? Rachel, Rachel. I can't wait to see you. There is so much I have to say to you, and so little time. Let me start at the beginning.

I came here from Russia after the putsch. Moscow was in uproar, and I needed to disappear until things died down. I had no desire to be seized with a sudden desire to kill myself, like some of my former colleagues, and nor did I want to end up in prison. Uzbekistan seemed like a good place to ride out the storm. I had friends here, I spoke the language, I knew my way around. Tashkent was several degrees warmer than Moscow, and the atmosphere was more tranquil. Continuation was the order of the day. The First Secretary of the Uzbek SSR had altered his title to President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the Party had changed its name too. Aside from that, it was business as usual. The KGB was monitoring the democrats, demonstrations were banned, and the Russian-language television channel had been silenced for subversion. Karimov had never had a high opinion of perestroika. I got hold of a car and drove down to Samarkand to see my sister.

The idea of settling in Uzbekistan had already crossed my mind. The empire in its present form was doomed, but if it was ever to revive, they would need people like me in the southern republics in the years to come. Meanwhile, I was in need of gainful employment, and there were opportunities to be grasped. Central Asia, remote and landlocked, had always had difficulty communicating with the outside world. Until now, everything had gone through Moscow, but this was about to change. New channels of communication were required, and I was in a good position to set them up. I had the knowledge, I had the contacts. Samarkand was ideal for the staging post I envisaged.

I found the Maracanda on my way to Sonya's house. It stood on one of the wide tree-lined avenues built by the Russians in the nineteenth century. I saw at once that it was exactly what I needed. With its handsomely tiled courtyard and discreet inner rooms, it was perfect for my requirements. When things calmed down after the putsch, Karimov was certain to start expanding tourism, and Western tourists, speaking for the most part no Russian, far less Uzbek or Tajik, would provide good cover, while remaining oblivious to the establishment's other activities.

The Café Maracanda opened for business in the summer of 1992. It was excellent timing. Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, there were all kinds of newly-available commodities looking for a market, and the business community flocked to my door. The tourists, relieved to find a stylish, alternative to the bar at the Samarkand Hotel, were not slow to follow. Some of my clients have things to sell, some are looking for things to buy, and some just want to talk.

I imagine Camilla falls into the last of these categories.

*

ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE

For three weeks after returning from Tuscany, Camilla thought of nothing but Igor. She looked for him everywhere, hoping perpetually to run into him in the corridor or the canteen. Every time the phone rang, her heart began to thump. But Igor was nowhere to be seen. Rachel said there was a panic on in the Russian service, and he was late home nearly every night. According to Davey, he didn't even play tennis any more.

Camilla was, by turns, furious and desperate. She had never felt this way before. Obsession was foreign to her nature. For the first time in her life, she had let herself be lured into something whose pros and cons she had not carefully weighed beforehand, and now it looked as though the spirit of the place had led her seriously astray. What did she want from Igor anyway? Sex? Love? A night? A lifetime? She had no idea. What made it worse was the knowledge that, whatever she took, she would be betraying the others.

"It's a gift," Rachel had said. "From all of us to each other. Because we're here, and only for tonight. It's a celebration of a state of grace."

A light Etruscan wind shivered across the hills. The fig tree murmured at the corner of the house. Igor looked serious, Davey looked stunned, Camilla tried to hide her anticipation.

"Tonight is outside time," said Rachel gravely. "Tomorrow it's as if it never happened."

The following morning, everyone overslept. In the rush to pack and leave the house, there had been no time to discuss the previous night's sleeping arrangements. That had been left for each couple to do, in separate cars, on the six-hour drive back to Munich. What Rachel and Igor had said to each other, Camilla never learned. She and Davey had disposed of the topic in a brief exchange between Florence and Bologna.

"So what about last night?" said Davey, breaking a long silence.

"I'm not sure it was a good idea," said Camilla.

"Maybe we should just forget about it."

"Yes, I think so."

"Water under the bridge, right?"

"Definitely," Camilla said -- only to find that it wasn't quite that simple. At least, not for her. Davey and Rachel resumed their old camaraderie with no apparent trouble, and spent hours in the canteen fantasizing cheerfully about next year and accordion concerts and the L.P. Trail. But Camilla found herself unable to behave naturally with Rachel. A new constraint had crept into their relationship. Girl talk was a thing of the past. They eyed each other warily, and took care not to refer to what had happened. Camilla avoided Rachel, and stayed away from the canteen. Instead, she pursued her lovesick vigil in the corridors.

She finally waylaid Igor one night in the Radio building, contriving to walk past the studios at the time she knew he would be taping a broadcast. He came out of the studio with another journalist. As soon as she saw him, Camilla's insides started to churn. She kept him talking until the other man had gone. When Igor too showed signs of wanting to be off, she suggested they have a drink after work one evening. That might be difficult, he said, things were busy right now.

"Igor. Please. I need to see you." Something in her voice must have got through to him because he looked at her properly for the first time. Then he put an arm round her shoulders and pulled her into the empty studio and closed the door. He didn't ask any questions, just took her in his arms and kissed her, with a tenderness that was both consoling and humiliating. She could tell his mind was elsewhere the whole time. He left her after five minutes, looking abstractedly at his watch, and promising to call.

That was the last time she saw him. Two days later, he took the plane to Vienna. She has been feeling cast-off and dirty and degraded ever since.

*

STRUGATSKY NAMES CIA AGENTS AT RADIO LIBERTY

Transcript of round-table discussion with Igor Strugatsky and journalists from TASS, Pravda and Izvestiya. Moscow Television Service in Russian 1650 GMT 13 October 1990.

Moderator: Igor Borisovich, I would like to hear about how Radio Liberty is used to conduct various kinds of anti-Soviet actions. Listeners may ask, How can you conduct espionage while sitting at a microphone? How would you respond to such a question?

Strugatsky: We have to remember that only a tiny minority of the station's employees actually sit at the microphone and speak on the air. These people are only the tip of the iceberg. Most of the other departments of the radio station work directly for the Central Intelligence Agency. One such is the so-called Research Department. Special instructions come in from Washington, and material is prepared with the information requested. Let us say the American special services wish to know how experts at Radio Liberty assess the risk of certain Soviet republics requesting independence from the Centre. The person responsible for such forecasting is a Jew from Lithuania, Rachel Shtern [transcribed as heard]. This person is an opportunist of the worst sort, who renounced British citizenship in order to travel to Germany and engage in anti-Soviet activities for international Zionism. Before taking up her duties, she was thoroughly vetted by the Radio Security Department, working in conjunction with the Bundesnachrichtendienst and Allied Special Services, in order to verify her credentials. Shtern and her department provide information on Lithuania and other Soviet republics to the authorities in Washington, and they also advise American Intelligence on how best to stir up anti-Soviet sentiment among dissident elements in the republics. I do not think it would be an exaggeration to describe this person as an enemy of the Soviet people.

TASS: What you have just described are links between the radio station and the CIA. Tell us, please, Igor Borisovich, do such links exist with the Pentagon also, and what is their nature?

Strugatsky: American military intelligence relies extensively on these research materials. The Research Department has a military subdepartment staffed by people whose task is to collect military information from Krasnaya Zvezda and other military journals. The military subdepartment is overseen by Kamila Stacei [transcribed as heard], who is actually a staff officer of American military intelligence, although her cover is that she is a graduate of Harvard University. Working from special premises in Georgenstrasse in the centre of Munich, Stacei gathers information on the Soviet armed forces, that is to say, how large are our armed forces, how many of our troops are serving abroad, how many tanks do we have, how many submarines. Naturally, this material goes straight to Washington, to the Pentagon, and it is also disseminated by secret channels to the CIA, for use against the Soviet people.

Izvestiya: Igor Borisovich, please give us your opinion, how many of the station's employees work for the CIA?

Strugatsky: The radio station's executive staff includes many serving U.S. intelligence officers. The director of Radio Liberty is a seasoned member of U.S. military intelligence and his deputy is a seasoned C.I.A. staffer. The Radio has whole sections collecting special information about the USSR. Many of these work under direct CIA control and are staffed by seasoned CIA officers. One such is Major David, who is the head of a department responsible for collecting special information on the Soviet Union. Nothing is too unimportant for him. Every single day, material he has gathered is put into a report and sent to Washington using a special computer. The Radio has a special network of computers, and every person who works in the research department has one. This is to allow them to synthesize information on the Soviet Union in the fastest way possible. Major David, who incidentally may often be seen in the corridors of the station wearing the uniform of a US Central Intelligence officer, is a former expert in psychological warfare methods. Major David is periodically summoned to America, directly to Langley, where he gives lectures.

Pravda: Igor Borisovich, does the CIA control directly or indirectly all the activities of the station?

Strugatsky: I am certain it does. Even the broadcasting operations of the station were affected by orders that came directly from Washington. I can tell you about this because I experienced it personally. As the journalist responsible for conducting programmes on cultural matters, I was regularly instructed on what kind of subjects I was to prepare. These instructions came directly from elements in the special services. The person who relayed them to me was Major David.

*

For the first eighteen years of his life, Davey was pretty sure of himself and his place in the world. He was David Whitney Morton, son of Dr. John Morton, the noted heart surgeon, and his mother was the former Cornelia Whitney. He lived in a five-bedroom colonial-style house in a nice part of town and he attended the best private day school in Indianapolis. He got straight A-grades in most subjects without even trying. He was bright, athletic and good-looking. His interest in Russian gave him a hint of deepness and mystery that set him apart from the crowd. Davey thought he had it made.

This changed when he got to college. The main reason Davey chose Yale was that his father went there. A secondary reason was that it had a good Slavic department, and he thought he might like to major in Russian. Davey had opted for Russian in high school at the age of fourteen because he liked the way it sounded. He had been top of his Russian class for four years straight, and considered himself something of an expert on Russian literature. His illusions were shattered when he got to Yale. Davey was shocked to discover that Yale was full of people as smart, if not smarter, than him. The students in freshman Russian class spoke better Russian than he did, read more, and worked harder. Some of them came from Russian families; all of them were highly motivated. In Indianapolis, they looked at you wide-eyed when you told them you had read Dostoevsky and Chekhov. Yale was full of intense teenage intellectuals discussing modern authors Davey had barely heard of. He was sufficiently shaken to consider switching to pre-med, as his father was urging, but pre-med by all accounts was pretty hard. In the end, Russia won out over organic chemistry, but this first encounter with self-doubt was a blow from which Davey never quite recovered.

At Yale he had fallen among strangers. People on the East Coast had a slickness and a complexity that you didn't find in the Midwest. They seemed to have seen more and lived faster, even if they were only eighteen years old like he was. The guys from New York had a veneer of worldliness unequalled by anyone Davey had ever met before. Among his fellow students were people who slept through classes, people who had tried heroin, a self-avowed lesbian, and a guy who lived with two women and was frequently seen on campus with an arm round both. All of these deviates from the Midwestern norm shocked Davey deeply. Indianapolis was not good training for life among the juvenile sophisticates of the East Coast. Davey took after his mother, who had an innocent streak and could never quite believe the wicked ways of the world. There were moments when he knew damn well he should have stayed at home and watched the corn grow.

Instead, he found his passion for Russia tempting him further and further afield. Yale led to Radio Liberty, Radio Liberty led to Munich, and Munich led to Igor Strugatsky. The primrose path to the everlasting bonfire. At first, the academic world seemed pretty cool. At Yale, the most serious problem you were likely to encounter was not finding the book you needed in the library. In Munich, life held nothing worse than trying to interpret the Kremlin line-up at May Day parades, and keeping yourself fed in a country where grocery stores closed at six in the evening. Even marriage made no great impact. Not until the age of thirty-two, when Igor left for Moscow, did Davey finally encounter real life.

Real life, he found, had little to recommend it. It was rather like walking underwater. Grey amorphous masses pressed against him when he moved. It was hard to lift up each foot. For years he had walked from Georgenstrasse across the Englischer Garten to the Radio building every morning. After Igor left, he wasn't always sure of making it as far as the tram stop. Especially in the mornings, when the nausea was at its worst. He had felt sick to his stomach every day since Igor left. Camilla seemed to think it was something to do with a hangover, but Davey knew that wasn't true. It was left over from the sickness that had invaded him the day of Igor's round-table discussion. He had had to leave the television room to go and throw up in the nearest men's room. "You okay, Major?" someone said when he got back, still shaking and sweating. Davey managed a grim smile, and said he was. The round table was over, the atmosphere in the room was tense, people were discussing what Igor had said. The attack on the Radio was nothing new. Radio Liberty was denounced daily in the Soviet press as a propaganda organ of the imperialists, or the fascists, or the Zionists, or the military-industrial complex -- whatever was flavour of the month in

Moscow ideological circles. So if this time it was the CIA, that was no big deal. What was new was the personal angle. No one could remember individual staff members being singled out so viciously as enemies of the people before. Rachel and Camilla were surrounded by a knot of solicitous colleagues in the middle of the room. Rachel was sitting as if turned to stone, and Camilla was sobbing. No, it was not okay, Davey realized. It would never be okay again.

Still, it took him several weeks to grasp just how bad it really was. In the beginning, what Igor had said distracted him from what Igor had done. The corridors of the Radio were swept by a wave of hysteria. People recalled the freelancer in Paris who had died in a bizarre accident involving a record-player, the Bulgarian journalist for the BBC who had been stabbed with the tip of a poisoned umbrella, and the bomb that had wounded two staff members right there in Munich a few years earlier. Who knew what the KGB might have in store for the people Igor had fingered? Both Davey and Camilla were thoroughly spooked, spending as much time as possible shut up in their apartment, and flinching whenever the phone rang. For three days, Camilla refused to go out. After a while, the corridors calmed down, the speculation dried up, and they began to realize that their fears were illogical. The Cold War was over, they were not in physical danger. Davey was beginning to breathe again when, one day, crossing Franz-Josef-Strasse on his way to work, it struck him what Igor had done. It felt like a punch to the stomach. He stopped dead in the middle of the street, unable to move, and stayed there for five minutes, oblivious to the horns of the passing cars and the stares of the pedestrians. In the course of the week that followed, Camilla miscarried, Rachel tried to kill herself, and Davey began to drink.

To begin with, he assumed he was drinking to cushion the shock. Probably he was drinking a bit too much, but that was only natural. You had to deal with things somehow. Igor had been his best friend, at least that's what he thought. But he couldn't have been Igor's friend, or Igor wouldn't have treated him like this. You didn't lie to your friends, did you? You didn't drink and play tennis and discuss the future on Tuscan hilltops with your best friend, and then run off to Moscow with never a word of warning and go on television to tell him he's an asshole when you get there. Did you? So what did it mean? Had Davey been fooling himself all these years, or had Igor been quietly leading him up the garden path?

It was all his own fault, of course. He had gone too far, flown too high, presumed too much. Instead of letting himself be dazzled by Russia, he should have stayed in Indiana where things were simpler. You planted your corn, you watched it grow, and then you harvested it. What you saw was what you got. For a hayseed like himself, that was the most you could ask. Look how long it took him to suspect that Igor might be using him, look how he had to struggle to piece together the damage he had done, look how long it was before he understood that he could neither repair things nor make amends. All through the winter of 1990, the Soviet Union drifted slowly to the right, and Davey watched, baffled, trying to make sense of it all. The brave new world of perestroika that Igor had promised him was floating away out of reach. What was Davey to do now? Which way could he turn?

It would have helped to have someone to talk to. But Rachel, who had listened to him sometimes in the beginning, was sliding slowly into her own darkness, and Camilla seemed bent on denying the whole thing. There was only one thing to do and that was to drink. After the first two glasses, the edges of reality were blunted and the pain was dulled. Another two and there was no reality and there was no pain. So why stop there?

By the summer of 1991, Davey was spending pretty much the whole day drunk. He had stopped regarding alcohol consumption as a problem some months earlier. He could still function, couldn't he? With a bottle stashed in his desk to keep him afloat, Davey got the Daily Report out more or less on time nearly every day. Until August 19, and the KGB putsch -- which Igor had so obligingly warned them of one whole year earlier. So this was what Igor had stood for. During the three days of the putsch, Davey called in sick. After Camilla had left for work, rushing out as soon as she heard the news on the radio, he went down to the store to lay in a supply of liquor. And then he returned to bed, and drank himself into a stupor.

In the months that followed, things went from bad to worse. It became increasingly difficult for him to function. The Daily Report became shorter and less grammatical. There were days it did not appear at all. The Personnel Department discovered the existence of the bottles in his desk and issued a series of reprimands. Camilla stopped pretending nothing was happening. Davey found her concern hard to cope with. Now that it was too late, she began making various suggestions for their removal from Munich. Long-term projects involving jobs got discarded pretty fast on grounds of non-feasibility, while Davey expressed such ferocious opposition to short-term projects such as vacations that she was obliged to drop them too. He refused to apply for a six-month sabbatical, he refused to spend Christmas in the States with either her family or his. That was when she suggested they went skiing.

Davey saw at once that this was the solution he had been looking for. It was becoming increasingly clear that he couldn't go on like this. Something would have to be done. Preferably in a way that would upset people as little as possible. He pretended to hesitate.

"Yeah, we could maybe do that."

"I think it would do us both good."

"I guess we could go up to Kitzbühel for a week or so."

"Sure. If that's what you'd like," said Camilla, and Davey smiled at her. It felt like the first time he had smiled in months. Kitzbühel would be fine. He knew the perfect spot.

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The October sun filters through the mulberry leaves into the courtyard of the Café Maracanda. The air is pleasantly warm, perfumed with cooking smells: meat and rosemary and the sharp tang of lemon. The plashing of the fountain mingles gently with the rise and fall of voices, the scraping of cutlery, the occasional ripple of laughter, and the passionate illusions of the deceived Butterfly. *Un bel di vedremo...* Camilla knows it well: it was one of Igor's favourites in Tuscany. The lunchtime clientele is divided between Westerners and locals. The courtyard is a well-dressed yuppie haven from the dirtier, harsher world beyond its gates. This has its advantages. Camilla could not sit on her own with a glass of wine in the corner of one of the local tea houses waiting for her lunch companion to arrive. In the Café Maracanda, the rules are international. She knows the ropes, she's in control, no one will hassle her. Her gaze wanders idly over the relaxed tourists and the confident businessmen and comes to rest on a man sitting alone by the fountain with a beer and a laptop. He has his back to her, but there's something familiar about him. Has she seen him before? In the hotel, on the plane?

Before she can work it out, Igor comes out of the bar and ambles across the courtyard towards her, greeting one or two of the clients as he passes. One of them is the man with the laptop. Camilla doesn't catch what he says.

"Milenka. How are you? I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

Igor still favours the Fellini look. Today he is wearing white linen trousers and a black silk shirt, the same ones, Camilla could swear, that he was wearing all those years ago in Siena the night he took her off for a quick grope behind the Chiusa San Domenico. He is smiling the same smile too. Tender yet mournful, deploring in advance all the bad things he's going to do to her.

He pulls out the chair next to her, tops up her glass and fills his own.

"Here's to old friends," he says, and meets her eyes without a trace of uneasiness.

"Old friends," echoes Camilla.

"How do you find the wine?"

"Good. Not as good as the one we used to drink at the Villa Tolomei, but still very nice."

"You mean those bottles we got from that little place in Siena? Oh come now, Milenka, it wasn't that great. You have to remember the taste of everything improved fifty percent on that terrace with the view over the hills. If we had the same two wines here today on the table, I really don't think you'd say that."

"That wine was exceptional. I remember it distinctly."

"From seven years ago?"

"I always remember good wine."

"You do, don't you? You once told me about the wine you drank at dinner on the first day of your honeymoon."

Camilla looks up sharply.

"We were in a restaurant in Sansepolcro, just the two of us. We'd just seen the Pieros in the museum and we were having lunch. Do you remember? It was in a little courtyard somewhere."

"Yes," says Camilla. "I remember." Her chest hurts and she's having trouble breathing. "Their wine was no good at all, but they had great penne al formaggio."

The waiter who was here yesterday appears beside them with bruschette on a blue and white plate. He places the plate on the table. Camilla stares at it. Four slices of bread, each topped with a little mound of cubed tomatoes, fragrant with garlic and basil and olive oil. She can taste it already. She hasn't eaten bruschette since Tuscany. Her head begins to swim, time shivers around her. For a moment she is back in Italy, in the courtyard in Sansepolcro with the climbing vine, the red and white geraniums, the faded green shutters, the plate of bruschette. Had they eaten bruschette in Sansepolcro? Yes, they had, she was almost sure they had. She stretches out a hand and takes one, bites into it-

"Obviously they aren't Italian tomatoes," says Igor regretfully. "The soil here isn't the same, so the taste won't be either."

Oh yes, she remembers that day. By the time the coffee came they were holding hands across the table. Emerging from the shady courtyard into the heat of the day, they had paused an instant on the threshold, taking in the heat rising like waves from the empty streets, a dog lying panting in the shade, the cool inviting entrance to a deserted alleyway. They crossed the street and plunged into the alley and began to kiss. Their first kiss, yes, she remembers it well.

"I'm glad you haven't forgotten the penne al formaggio," says Igor. "That's what we're having after this."

Camilla stops eating. The tomatoes suddenly taste bitter, and the bread too dry.

"What are you trying to do to me, Igor?"

"Nothing." He looks surprised. "I thought you'd be pleased to try your old favourites again."

He meets her eyes with a surprised, slightly inquiring smile. Camilla is confused. She takes another bite of bruschetta.

"How do you find the bread? I can't get ciabatta here, of course. For a while I tried having it flown in, but it wasn't a success. So now what I do is-"

"Igor," says Camilla, more violently than she intended, "I did not come here to talk about bread!"

Igor sighs. He puts down his half-eaten bruschetta, places his elbows on the table top and steeples his fingers.

"Camilla, I know you must be angry with me. It's only understandable. If I put myself in your place, I know what you must have felt." He gazes at her mournfully. "But, you know, it's over now. It's finished, there's nothing more we can do about it."

"But, Igor, you- "

"The press conference was a total charade, of course. It was unnecessary and even stupid, but that's the way things were back then. Our leaders were cut off from reality by their ideology. Fortunately, those days are gone."

It takes Camilla a moment or two to respond.

"So what you're saying is that it's all in the past and we should just forget it?"

"Exactly." He seems relieved that she has got the point so fast. "It's all finished now, so we just have to accept it. You know, I doubt it had much impact even at the time."

"What?" says Camilla disbelievingly.

"In political terms, I mean."

She resists the urge to pour the tomatoes over his elegant silk shirt. "What about personal terms? Or doesn't that matter?"

"I don't understand."

"Igor, you ruined us! All three of us. Me, Davey, Rachel. We trusted you, and you betrayed us. I was lucky, I got off lightly. But Rachel and Davey -- you destroyed them, Igor!"

Igor doesn't think much of Camilla's word choice. He makes a critical little moue.

"Don't you think you're exaggerating a little? I mean I can understand that it might have been a shock, but-" He breaks off. "By the way, where are they now? You and Davey split up, I assume. Is he in Prague? What about Rachel?"

Camilla stares at him. She is incapable of responding.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh my God."

"Camilla, what is it?"

"You mean you don't know? You don't know what happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you had any news at all from the Radio?"

"Not since I left. Though I heard they'd moved to Prague."

A group of men enters the courtyard, four or five young toughs in dark suits clustered round an older man with an authoritative shock of white hair. People stop eating, waiters fall back respectfully, and a man in a red shirt steps rapidly forward to greet them. Igor does not appear to notice them. A slight frown has appeared on his face. For the first time since Camilla walked into the bar yesterday afternoon, he seems less than totally in command of the situation. Can he be telling the truth? Can he really not know?

The hubbub round the man with white hair intensifies. Camilla marshals her thoughts as best she can. Having to tell Igor what happened is the one eventuality she has not envisaged. In the circumstances, she doesn't consider herself obliged to break it gently.

"After you gave your press conference, Rachel had a nervous breakdown. She was ill for months, off work, in and out of psychiatric hospitals. She made two attempts to kill herself."

Igor's gaze locks on to hers with an intensity that is frightening. "And now?"

"She's all right physically. Psychologically, she'll never be the same again."

White Hair is looking round impatiently, and Red Shirt is trying to catch Igor's eye. Igor is oblivious to the commotion.

"And Davey?" he demands.

"Davey had a skiing accident. He skied into a tree halfway down the mountain. In 1991, the day after Christmas. Davey's dead, Igor."

*

THE GLITTERING SUMMIT OF THE WORLD

Shamor Azamova is half-Uzbek and half-Tatar. For a while she was married to a Russian, and she spent seventeen years living in Moscow. After her divorce, she returned to Uzbekistan because she had grown up there. It's my home, she tells Camilla, with a disbelieving grimace. When things get bad, people need to go back to their roots. Shamor is the moderator of the focus groups. She has been around, and seen a lot. This is a terrible country, she says, with a rueful lift of her eyebrows. A poor rural society with a ruined economy and an archaic social system, whose people have no idea how to adapt to the modern world, and whose leader models himself on the nineteenth-century khans.

Camilla finds Shamor's scepticism restful. From what she's seen of Central Asia, it's more appropriate than either Rustam's ebullience or Igor's urbanity. She waits, shuffling papers, while Shamor concludes a phone call. Today they are meeting in Shamor's office at Samarkand University, a dismal cubbyhole with a view of a brick wall. Shamor is neat and dark and businesslike. At a guess, she's in her mid-fifties. Unlike Rustam with his trendy Western clothes, she wears dull, almost dowdy suits, with discreetly coloured blouses and calf-length skirts. Professional but not intimidating, said Rustam, when they discussed the question of the moderator's appearance. Just what it takes to reassure the respondents and convince them of her discretion.

Moderating a focus group is hard work, particularly in a place like Uzbekistan. Among the peoples of the oases, it is considered gracious to obey, impolite to disagree, and treachery to oppose. It doesn't sound like the ideal terrain for lively discussion. Shamor will have to put the participants at their ease, get them talking, and convince them to share their opinions with a group of total strangers. She will have to get them to argue and dissent, while at the same time making sure that the exchange keeps to the point. Shamor can do all this, according to Rustam, she's a psychologist, she knows the techniques. How to provoke answers, how to reassure. How to soothe fears of impoliteness, how to steer clear of treachery. Rustam has worked with her before, on a project for the World Bank, and found her highly professional. The World Bank was very satisfied, he added, shooting Camilla a sharp sidelong glance to make sure she is impressed with his name-dropping.

Camilla runs through the discussion guide with Shamor just to make sure. The main thing, she tells Shamor, is to avoid a Soviet-style round-table discussion with prearranged questions and prearranged answers. The groups should be as free and spontaneous as possible. The moderator is allowed to combine questions, change questions, omit questions that aren't working, as long as she investigates all the issues covered in the guide.

"This list under question three, for instance. You should work through it, point by point. Revival of traditional values, Islamic fundamentalism, ethnic tensions. If possible, you should try to get a consensus on each of these issues."

"That might not be easy," says Shamor. "The re-traditionalization of society, for instance, is unlikely to be seen in the same way by men and women."

"You mean because it works to the disadvantage of women?"

"Of course. It was much easier for me to get an education and pursue a career thirty years ago than it will be for a girl leaving school today."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. Thanks to the Bolsheviks, women were far less restricted in Soviet Central Asia than in other Islamic countries. But now that the Russians are going and no one believes in communism any more, there is no longer any reason to consider us equal. You see?" She returns to the guidelines. "Should I make sure everyone has answered each question before moving on to the next?"

"No, it's a group discussion, not a group interview. But if someone stays quiet for two or three questions, then, yes, try to bring them into it, ask them what their opinion is. Your job is to say, Do you agree? do you disagree? whatever it needs to keep the discussion moving."

Shamor seems to understand. She listens intently, takes notes, asks the right kind of questions. As they work through the discussion guide, Camilla begins to relax. It's ridiculous, she knows, for someone like her to come down here and tell people how to run a focus group. She speaks no Uzbek, she knows next to nothing about Uzbekistan. Her knowledge of Central Asia covers troop strengths and military bases. If it hadn't been for Igor, she would not have had the nerve to muscle in on this project.

For the same reason, she doesn't see how she could have done otherwise. Having accidentally located Igor, how could she pass up the chance to go and talk to him? The way Camilla sees it, it wasn't a matter of choice. As the one who best survived the catastrophe, she feels it's her duty to confront Igor on behalf of all three of them. It's her chance to make amends. The danger is that she might screw up the focus group. Fortunately, Shamor and Rustam seem to know what they are about. With luck it will go off smoothly.

*

So here's the intrepid geopolitical traveller sitting in the courtyard of the Café Maracanda observing the action.

The courtyard was full, but the waitress had kept me my usual corner table where I could sit with my back to the wall and watch what was happening. After ten days hanging out in the Maracanda, I was beginning to get a fairly good idea of who was who. Sometimes, when I drew a blank, Igor would help me along. It seemed to amuse him. The clientele was pretty varied. On an average evening you might get a trafficker from Afghanistan sipping cognac with a narcotics official from the Samarkand city police, a Saudi courier bearing cash for the Chechen rebels, a Ukrainian drug dealer discussing commission with a courier from Pendjikent. Usually there would be a couple of representatives of various Tajik and Afghan warring factions, looking to purchase arms from the former Soviet army with the income from their heroin sales. Sometimes they dealt with the military men directly, and sometimes with the mafiosi who had strong-armed their way into the business. The Talibs never stayed around for long. They did what they had to do, picked up the merchandise, and headed back to the front. Less pressed for time were two unsmiling Kazaks, who had become a fixture of the place even in the short time I had been there. They were selling enriched uranium from one of the nuclear plants left over from the Soviet Union, and I heard they were driving a hard

bargain. Most of their clients seemed to be Iranian, and that, I have to say, kind of pissed me off. From the point of view of U.S. security, the less nuclear know-how Iran had, the better. A few years back a supply of bomb-grade uranium stocked in an insecure Kazak warehouse had been shipped to Tennessee to stop the Iranians getting their hands on it, but Kazakhstan was full of poorly guarded warehouses, corruptible security personnel and inadequate accounting procedures. The world is a wicked place, especially when there's money to be made.

I looked round the courtyard, but Igor wasn't there, and there was no one I knew well enough to sit and shoot the breeze with. Rasulov was too busy holding court at a table near the fountain -- from where I sat, I could see his white head inclining graciously in the direction of each new postulant -- and in any case the Minister and I were not about to advertise our acquaintance.

It was a pity Dmitri had left. Dmitri Telnikov was one of Igor's old comrades-in-arms from Moscow. They had had a big reunion dinner one evening: Igor and Dmitri and their old friend General Malkov, who had flown down from Moscow for the occasion. They had tasted all of Igor's best Italian delicacies, drunk sizeable quantities of wine and vodka, and toasted the past, each other, and Eternal Russia. The following day, there was a big row. I didn't grasp the cause of the disagreement, but Dmitri withdrew to Tashkent in a huff, and Malkov returned to Russia with a very grim look on his face. I had come across Malkov before. He was a general in the KGB, the son of a Politburo member who had fallen from grace in Khrushchev's time, a man soured by family dishonour and the loss of Soviet power. I was particularly intrigued by his parting admonition to Igor: something to the effect that things had gone far enough, and that it was time to put an end to it.

Dmitri had come to Samarkand for discussions with a Turkmen Deputy Prime Minister, whose hobby was illegally exporting his country's gas. Dmitri was a worldly fellow with Gucci shoes, smooth manners and no false modesty. In between long, involved discussions with the Deputy Prime Minister, he had told me all about his villa on the Côte d'Azur, his apartment in London, his banking contacts in Luxemburg, and his import-export company in Ashkhabad. Dmitri had a good many irons in the fire, but his main source of income was laundering drug money. That was the purpose of the company in Ashkhabad. Dmitri knew Turkmenistan well. He had done his military service there during the Seventies, acting as German-language interpreter in a training camp for international terrorists, and had kept up his contacts while fulfilling unspecified functions with the KGB's Second Chief Directorate. At the present time, he was persona non grata in Turkmenistan. I couldn't really ask why, but it did explain why the Deputy Prime Minister had to drive over to Samarkand.

When the waitress brought my drink, I asked if Igor Borisovich was around tonight. She said she didn't know. I had found out a lot about Igor's business activities in the past few days, but I had drawn a blank on his private life. According to the files, his parents were dead, and his only close relative was a sister currently residing in Tashkent. Igor had apparently never married, and there was nothing in the file about long-term girlfriends, except during his years in Munich. At present, to the best of my knowledge, he lived like a monk in a small apartment overlooking the courtyard of the Maracanda.

I leant back in my chair and sipped my Margarita. There was something about the idea of sitting in an ex-Soviet oasis with my decadent Western cocktail that really turned me on. It made me think we had won the Cold War after all. It was a pretty serious-looking crowd in here tonight, and they were pretty seriously dressed. Far less leather than during the day, and not a T-shirt in sight. Well-dressed Samarkand favoured the sober suit after dark. In Almaty, they went for Hugo Boss, but

here the suits still came from the bazaar. The mafia here wasn't as Westernized as Almaty, but its traditions went back further. The Uzbek mafia had been famous since Soviet days. These guys were the old cotton nomenklatura who were branching out and learning new trades, but hadn't yet gotten around to new wardrobes. The night air was as smooth as silk, and the Margarita wasn't bad at all. The mafiosi were concentrating on business and paying me no mind. I listened to the fountain and let my mind wander.

And then Igor arrived. The hum of conversation rose to a crescendo and then stopped entirely. For a fraction of a second there was silence, and then the buzz started up again with a new undertone of excitement. Igor had entered the courtyard at an unassuming stroll, but his black T-shirt and linen trousers were too stylish to go unremarked among all those Al Capone lookalikes. He was spotted right away, and immediately mobbed.

"Igor Borisovich!"

"Igor!"

"Privyet!"

"Kak dela?"

"How are you?"

"I thought you were in Tashkent."

"Were you in Moscow?"

"Have you come from the airport?"

"From Bukhara?"

"We must talk-"

"Will you have a drink-"

"This is the friend I was telling you-"

"I need an introduction-"

I watched the scene with fascination. No doubt about it: Igor was the rainmaker. The guy who made things happen. He played his role with consummate skill: listening, weighing, nodding, deciding. Each of the supplicants was taken aside for a brief intimate exchange. An arm round their shoulders, a look of confidence, a solemn handshake. They trusted him, and you could see why. His rates were high, Jeff said, but he always delivered.

Igor and his retinue moved into the inner room. Sasha, his driver, who had been standing two steps away from the boss during the whole of the previous scene, stayed outside and began to move round the courtyard, greeting people as he went. I signalled to the waitress for another drink. Sasha noticed me sitting there and interrupted his tour of inspection to sit down at my table.

"Dobry vecher," I said respectfully. Sasha was ninety kilos of pure ex-KGB muscle, trained in all the latest techniques of intimidation and wet affairs. He had a fondness for brightly coloured shirts. Tonight, he was wearing red.

"Still here, writer?" he demanded, and I agreed I was. Igor had taken my new profession on board without batting an eyelid, but Sasha took it as an act of provocation. I wasn't offended. Igor and I had acquired new disguises since the end of the Cold War. Sasha was the only honest one of the three of us.

My Margarita arrived, and Sasha eyed it with disgust. The waitress asked him, with manners even more respectful than mine, if he wanted a drink.

"Yeah," said Sasha, "you bring me Yankee piss, same as him."

Sasha spoke a peculiarly violent form of English, acquired during his stint at the United Nations in the 1980's. The waitress, unfortunately, had never been to New York City. She looked as if she was going to burst into tears.

"On tozhe khochet Margarita," I translated, in my best Americanized Russian. I didn't like to speak Russian around here. Speaking English, using my stepfather's name and accent, it was easy to foster the illusion that I had been born in Boston. Speaking Russian, it was harder not to give myself away.

The waitress breathed a sigh of relief and sidled off. Sasha, if he had picked up on my Leningrad accent, ignored it.

"This now Russian fate in world," he informed me, "drink Yankee piss, eat Yankee shit, lick fat Yankee ass. Ever since certified lunatic Gorbachev become our General Secretary of Communist Party, this all we good for."

There wasn't much you could say to that. Fortunately, Sasha wasn't hoping to have an informed discussion.

"Russia is become useless thorax amputated of traitor Balt republics and ingrate Central Asians and stupid Ukrainians. We give up our land to no-place countries like Kazakstan and Ukraine, we give up warm sea, beautiful holiday places. We throw it all away, we beg them take it off our hands. You are our enemy, please take all we have. We want only shit foreign drink, shit foreign film of Hollywood Jews, we want no more Russian vodka, Russian culture, Russian land. Finish, all of it. Please, abuse us, exploit us, rob us, that what we want. Kill us and eat us -- what else we good for? What else you do with people like this?"

The waitress brought his drink and left again fast. He tossed it off in one gulp, and gestured after her.

"That is Uzbek girl. Uzbek girl have many children, ten, fifteen, all Hero Mother of Soviet Union. Not like Russian girl, have only one, one point seven, no fucking good. Uzbek make fighting men, men to fight in war against Russians, holy war, like in Afghanistan. Meantime, fucking Russians, we launder money, we sell drugs, we smuggle arms, we make money transfer to off-shore account. Is all we are good for. Is best you boil us up, roast us, put us in frying pan, please, and make us into bagels." He picked up my drink and drained that too. "What you look like this for, writer?"

"I'm just interested to hear you expressing views like that."

For a moment our eyes held. A man with a long beard and a shabby suit of the sort favoured by plainclothes Talibs inched into the courtyard and sidled unobtrusively towards the inner rooms. Sasha saw him too and pushed back his chair.

"Okay. I see you another time, writer."

I had missed a signal of some sort, because by the time Sasha reached Rasulov's table, the Minister was already on his feet. They set off together in the direction of the inner rooms. I eyed the empty glasses and decided not to order anything else. My head was spinning slightly, though not with alcohol. I signalled to the waitress for the bill.

Crossing the courtyard on my way out, I noticed Igor looking down from one of the upper windows, but I don't think he saw me.

*

Samarkand, Tuesday, 22:55

I always knew someone from the Radio would walk into the bar one day. I wasn't surprised when it turned out to be Kavanagh. Do you remember William Kavanagh, dushenka? He worked in the Radio security office, and had a passion for science fiction. He got it from his father, he once told me. I think his father was a physicist. He used to stop me in the corridor and make me listen to his theories about science fiction and the Russian soul. He claimed they were incompatible and that was why there were no Russian science fiction writers. Nonsense, I told him, Russians were too busy standing in line to buy the bare necessities of life to bother speculating about a hypothetical future. But he would never acknowledge this obvious truth. He planned to compensate for the failure of native writers by writing a sub-Dostoevskian epic set in the year 3000. At least, that was what he said. In our business, no one ever tells the truth. These days he claims to be writing a travel book. An account of his journey down the Silk Road. He carries a laptop computer and talks about travelling on to Bukhara and Ashkhabad, but the book is not the real reason he's in Samarkand. People like Kavanagh come to the Café Maracanda all the time. It was for them that I opened it.

Camilla is a different matter. When she first walked in, I didn't recognize her. The picture that had stayed in my mind was a glossy golden goddess, always rubbing creams and lotions into some part of her exquisite, sun-tanned body. Camilla fascinated me. Those long smooth curves of flesh, partially hidden by the colours and textures of her ridiculously beautiful clothes. I wanted to touch and see if she was real.

But that of course was seven years ago. Camilla has become a mortal woman. And Davey is dead? That foolish golden youth? And you – Rachel oh God you tried to kill yourself? not you I can't believe it- how could you do that? after what I told you how could you do that? I thought you understood me- I thought I would be the only one to suffer but now you too all these years-

*

Waiting for Igor in the lobby of the Samarkand Hotel on Wednesday morning, Camilla catches another glimpse of the man with the laptop from the Café Maracanda. He looks in her direction as he strides towards the door, their eyes meet, and he gives her a brief nod. So he's staying here too, that must be where she- And then she suddenly realizes who he is and where she's seen him before, and she blinks after him in amazement. William Kavanagh. Rachel told her all about Kavanagh and his fake travel book, but with Igor on her mind, she had forgotten him completely.

"Ready to go?" says Igor's voice beside her. Camilla turns to greet him. Kavanagh has never been one for social graces, but he could at least have said hello. She follows Igor out of the hotel. He has volunteered to take her on a tour of the ancient sites of Samarkand. More precisely, he is insisting on it. Rachel had predicted this would happen, and Camilla hadn't believed her, but of course she had forgotten Igor's organizational zeal. *Urbino is too far away. The lines for the Uffizi will be too long.* A dark blue Jeep Cherokee with tinted windows is waiting in the forecourt. Igor ushers Camilla into the back seat, and climbs in beside her. The driver is the man who called Igor away to greet his unexpected visitor in the middle of lunch yesterday. He is short and thickset and his shirt today is bright blue. Igor introduces him only as Sasha.

"Let's go," says Igor. Sasha puts the car into gear, and Igor turns his attention to Camilla. "How do you like the car?" he asks, smiling urbanely.

Camilla is surprised by the question. She wouldn't have thought Igor was the type to get excited about a mere machine. In Munich he drove an unwashed Peugeot with overflowing ashtrays and old scripts shoved behind the seats. The Cherokee, admittedly, looks a lot more cosseted. Sasha's doing, maybe? It has sand-coloured leather upholstery and a dashboard full of gadgets. It gleams and purrs.

"I got it specially for you," says Igor, giving her a sly sideways smile. "You see, it is colour coordinated. The paintwork goes with the tiles on the madrasas and the upholstery goes with the desert."

Camilla laughs. The last time she sat beside Igor in a car was the day they went to Sansepolcro on the Piero Trail. Is this really the same man who stood in the Foreign Ministry in Moscow and accused the Radio of being an espionage organization?

"But maybe you don't care about things like that any more." He gives her another sidelong glance.

"Not really, no." Camilla is conscious that her appearance is probably a disappointment. The day they went to Sansepolcro, she wore a plain navy-blue shift set off by a belt, earrings and espadrilles all in the same shade of deep pink. She remembers that outfit perfectly. Today she is wearing a denim shirt and black jeans, both of which have seen better days. No belt, no earrings. It's been a long time since she had the energy to run round the stores looking for matching accessories. "But thank you for thinking of me, Igor."

"I've been thinking of you a lot since Monday, Milenka. But I find I have no picture of you any more. How do you live now? Tell me first, where do you live?"

"In Washington. I've been there for three years."

"You didn't want to move to Prague?"

"It would have been too complicated. I have a small house in Chevy Chase, just inside the limits of the District. My parents helped finance it. There are only two bedrooms, but that's enough. There's a big living room and a yard for Thomas to play in, there are cherry trees that- "

"Thomas?"

Camilla pauses. Damn it, she's forgotten herself. She hadn't been intending to mention Thomas.

"My son," she says reluctantly. "I live with my son."

"Then you met someone else after Davey-"

"No, he's Davey's son. He was born after Davey died."

"My God!" says Igor, turning towards her.

"You want to stop at the Registan?" says Sasha. His manner seems overly familiar for a chauffeur, but Igor doesn't appear to notice.

"Yes, of course. Look, Camilla, over to your left."

Relieved, Camilla turns to look. She doesn't feel like telling Igor about Thomas. Thomas is none of Igor's business. She has the door open and one foot out as soon as Sasha draws in to the kerb.

*

The Registan is a vast open space flanked by three huge symmetrical buildings with turquoise domes. Turquoise blue means blue of the Turks, Igor informs her, and the buildings are madrassahs, Islamic religious schools. The tiled facades rear skywards, the warm desert wind blows across the flagstones. There is not a soul in sight. The whole place has an abandoned feel to it. As if the

population has been carried off overnight by plague or epidemic, leaving only the buildings intact. They approach in silence. Camilla isn't sure what to think. It reminds her of Stalinist public buildings scaled to keep visiting humans properly nervous and respectful.

"Was this built by Tamerlane?" she asks.

"No. The Ulug Beg madrassah, which is the oldest, was built by Timur's grandson between 1417 and 1420. The other two weren't built till the seventeenth century. In Timur's day, this was the market place. It was also where they held the executions. That's where it gets its name: Registan means 'place of sand.'"

"Oh," says Camilla, who has vaguely assumed the name Registan had something to do with kings. Now she thinks about it, they're too far east for Latin roots. But she doesn't understand where the sand comes in, until Igor explains that it was convenient for soaking up the blood. Camilla looks at him thoughtfully. No doubt it was. They could have used some in Munich after Igor left.

A school group appears out of one of the courtyards and straggles towards the exit, chattering among themselves and ignoring their surroundings, like school groups everywhere. Igor has stopped to buy the tickets, leaving Camilla standing on her own. The students stare at her curiously.

Otkuda? someone asks her, where are you from, and a few of the others linger to catch her response. Amerika? Their eyes gleam with interest. They are from Namangan, a town in the Fergana Valley, where tourists rarely go. What are they doing here? asks Camilla, and several of them answer at once. They are visiting Samarkand because it is the city of Emir Timur and the cradle of the Uzbek nation.

Igor, returning with the tickets, rolls his eyes disdainfully. "They're trying to create a new national identity, with Timur as the father of the nation," he says, as they walk away.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Timur wasn't the founder of their nation, he wasn't the founder of anything. His empire fell apart almost immediately. They're trying to manufacture a historical image, but it's pure fabrication. Uzbekistan has no identity."

"Not like it did when it was part of the Russian empire," says Camilla maliciously.

"You can laugh," says Igor. "The fact is, Central Asia will gravitate back towards Russia sooner or later. They'll come to realize that they were better off in a great and powerful country than in the helpless little states they have today. You'll see, Milenka."

*

They have lunch in a chai khana, a tea house, on the far side of the Registan. It has wooden divans, loud Turkish music, and a row of serious-looking men in white coats grilling shashlyk over a charcoal barbecue. While Igor goes foraging for food, Sasha chooses a divan and gestures to Camilla to sit down. The divan resembles a bedstead with built-in table where four people can sit facing each other. Following the example of the old man at the next table, Camilla sits cross-legged, and watches the spectacle. People in traditional costume walk purposefully past with shopping bags, heading for the nearby market. The women wear brightly-coloured dresses, sometimes with loose-fitting trousers underneath. The older men favour boots, breeches and embroidered caps; the younger ones prefer Western-style shirts and trousers. The music thumps and wails in the background. The atmosphere reminds Camilla of the Middle East. It's a world away from from the Westernized clothes and muted manners of the steppes.

"It's completely different from Almaty, isn't it?" she says, when Igor comes back.

"The oasis peoples aren't nomads like the Kazaks," says Igor, putting down a teapot and two cracked Chinese bowls. "There's more Persian influence down here."

"Samarkand was Persian?"

"Yes, it was a centre of Persian culture. Stalin gave it to Uzbekistan, but now you sometimes hear the Tajiks saying it should belong to them. The Tajiks are Persians too, as I'm sure you know. Things were much simpler when we were one big family." He smiles mockingly. "I've ordered shashlyk. When were you in Almaty?"

"Oh ... last week. I stopped off on the way down."

"Another focus group?"

"No, just something to discuss with one of the institutes."

"Ah." Igor goes off again, and Camilla upbraids herself mentally. This won't do at all. It's the second mistake she's made that morning. First Thomas, then Rachel. This isn't Tuscany, they aren't having lunch on the terrace under the pergola, that isn't Davey over there manning the barbecue. She needs to stay focused.

Igor returns with several skewers of meat and two flat unleavened loaves of bread. At least today it isn't Tuscan food. He settles himself opposite Camilla on the divan, and they eat in silence. The meat is good. She watches people come and go. Working men drop in for a snack, take a seat alongside the elders who have been here all morning, and leave again. Working women, apparently, eat elsewhere. It dawns on her after a while that she is the only woman there.

"Well, yes," says Igor, when she mentions it. "The chai khana is the corner stone of Central Asian society. You sit in the shade, you drink tea, you talk. You discuss community affairs, you decide what has to be done. If you're a man, that is. If you're a woman, you stay at home."

"Not like when the Russians were in charge, and women could do what they wanted."

"Quite right, Milenka. If you want to live in an independent country, you have to put up with a few small inconveniences. You serve the men at table, and wait for your parents to arrange a suitable marriage. Right now you don't have to wear a chador, but when the fundamentalists take over, you probably will."

"The fundamentalists?" Camilla looks up from her shashlyk. "You're not serious, are you?"

"Who knows?" Igor shrugs. "The President likes to claim they're on their way -- but he has his own reasons for doing that. He uses them as a bogeyman to make us all behave. But there is a group called the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan which is based in Afghanistan and has ties with terrorist networks there."

"How can fundamentalism appeal to people who have been raised as atheists for seventy years?"

"They're not atheists here," says Igor. "The Bolsheviks didn't get rid of Islam, they just drove it underground." He picks up the teapot and refills their cups. "As for fundamentalism, it's a question of economics. When people are poor, and they live badly, and they have no jobs, and the government does nothing to improve matters, then they turn to the fundamentalists because they're the only ones with something to offer."

His mobile rings, and he breaks off to answer it. Camilla knows right away that it's someone important. Igor has adopted his most persuasive tone of voice, and is explaining something at great length in Uzbek. What's more, he is wearing the same deferential smile she first saw in the courtyard yesterday. The one he produced when he finally noticed the white-haired man. Can this be White Hair again, Camilla wonders? Who is he, anyway? Deference is not a quality she would

have thought Igor capable of. The conversation ends, and Igor's smile dissolves into a preoccupied frown.

"Is everything all right?" Camilla asks.

"Fine," says Igor. "What were we talking about?"

"The fundamentalists."

"No, that's enough of the Muslims, let's talk about you instead. Tell me about Davey's accident. How did it happen?"

Camilla looks at him, but his expression is unreadable. Yesterday when she told him about the accident, he sat for a full thirty seconds without speaking. But then Sasha interrupted them, and lunch was cut short. She has no idea what went through Igor's mind then, nor can she tell what he is thinking now.

She takes a mouthful of tea to fortify herself. She has rehearsed what she has to say several times in her head.

"After you left for Moscow, Davey started to drink. Heavily. I know he used to drink quite a lot already, but that was just wine and beer. He took to drinking hard liquor: scotch, vodka, gin, whatever he could get his hands on. I used to find bottles in the garbage every single day. And there were bottles all round the house too. Half full, a quarter full. In the linen cupboard, under the bed, behind the geraniums on the balcony. He used to spend almost the whole day drunk. He kept on working, somehow he managed to function, but obviously everyone knew about it. He kept a bottle in his desk drawer too. There was a lot of talk, he got a couple of reprimands from Personnel.

"I was at my wits' end. I didn't know what to do. Sometimes I poured the contents of the bottles down the sink. Once he found me doing it and started slapping me around. I ended up with a black eye. I tried to talk to him, but he'd closed himself off, he wouldn't talk to me. I simply could not reach him. He refused to see a doctor, refused to do anything. I thought it would be better if we left Munich, but where would we go, what would we do? No one would have hired Davey in the state he was in. I tried to get him away for a holiday at least. He refused to go to the States for Christmas, so we went skiing instead. We went up to Kitzbühel for a week.

"The day after Christmas, he went out on his own in the afternoon. The weather wasn't great, it was snowing, I didn't feel like going out, and he seemed quite happy to go on his own. So I let him go. He took a run we'd done the day before. Visibility was bad, and there weren't many people around, but Davey wasn't a reckless skier. The tree was a few hundred yards off the piste and the tracks went straight towards it. He knew exactly where he was going."

Igor looks up sharply. "What do you mean? Yesterday you told me it was an accident."

"He skied into a tree, yes. But it wasn't an accident."

Camilla's tone is calm. She is perfectly certain of what she is saying, and she can see Igor is rattled by this.

"Are you saying Davey killed himself? But that's impossible!" He glares at her incredulously. "Did he leave a note?"

"No."

"Did the police treat it as suicide?"

"No. Visibility was so bad that they didn't query the circumstances of the accident."

"Then you can't be sure."

"I have no proof, Igor, but I'm convinced that's what it was. Don't forget, I lived with him for fifteen months before this happened. Obviously I wasn't expecting him to kill himself, or I wouldn't

have let him go out alone, but when I realized what he'd done, I wasn't surprised. It was so plainly the point he'd been working up to for months. It was a few weeks before I understood what had happened, and then everything fell into place."

*

CINDERELLA MEETS HER FAIRY GODFATHER

Dear Rachel,

Here we are in Italy for a Week and enjoying every Minute of it. I know you were here a few Years ago and I thought you'd like a Card to remind you of it. Your Uncle and I are both well.

Love,

Auntie Joan.

The postcard was mailed to the head office of Rachel's company in Brussels, and forwarded to Almaty in the regular consignment. Rachel looks at the date: it has taken over a month to reach her. She turns it over speculatively. Why on earth has Joan taken it into her head to send a postcard? Is she still trying to find out what had happened during that long-ago trip to Italy to cause a nervous breakdown? She sees the picture and draws in her breath. The legend says simply "Toscana." It shows hills undulating into the mist, a farmhouse with cypresses in the foreground, another in the background. It could be the view from the terrace of the Villa Tolomei.

Rachel hasn't thought about the Villa Tolomei for years. She has trained herself not to. As she looks at the card, the darkness lifts and the sunlight comes flooding back, the ochre walls of the villa rise from her memory, the cypresses stand again like sentinels beside the white dust track. She can smell the rosemary and the lavender and the warm scented earth. The sensation is so strong that she has to sit down. The hills of Siena, and somewhere, tucked among them, Siena the Fair, shimmering in the pearly light. By the end of that summer, she knew the road to Siena like the back of her hand. She knew exactly where to expect the ruined house with the sunflower field behind it. She waited for the row of cypresses on the crest of the hill, dark and graceful and solemn. And then at last, as they rounded the final bend, the city itself, pale and ethereal, the round shape of the Duomo, the tall shape of the Campanile.

Other memories come drifting back. The wine merchant they used to go to, with the dusty little shop behind the Campo. The pool, the terrace, the Etruscan tombs. Lars Porsena of Clusium. A smile softens Rachel's face. How could she have forgotten the king of Clusium? Your friend Lars Porsena, as Davey used to call him. Maybe she had been wrong to block it all off so completely, the good things as well as the bad. Maybe she should have sorted her memories more selectively.

The fact remains, that summer in Tuscany was an enchanted interlude. A state of grace. Whatever happened before then, whatever happened since, Rachel cannot bring herself to regret it. Even though those were the last doomed days in the Garden, she would not have forgone them for anything on earth.

*

Igor drops Camilla back at her hotel in the early afternoon. He has a meeting. In any case, they have had enough of each other for one day. Camilla goes up to her room and bursts into tears. It's the tension, she tells herself, the strain of evoking painful memories, but it soon becomes clear that it's more than that. This isn't just a burst of nervous relief, she's howling like a child, flat out on the burgundy-coloured bedspread, with her head buried in the pillow to muffle the sound. She has never felt so alone in her life. She badly wants Thomas, she wants to clutch him to her the way she generally tries not to, but she doesn't even have a photo of him. Usually she carries pictures around wherever she goes, but this time she has none. The omission is deliberate. She wants to keep Thomas as far away from Igor as possible. The reason for that is nothing she would want to acknowledge out loud, but basically it has to do with hexes, jinxes, spells, charms and, yes, the evil eye. She doesn't even want a photo of him in the same town as Igor. All the photos she brought to Central Asia were left in Almaty for Rachel. Camilla would dearly like to call Rachel now to pour it all out to her: what she said and what he said and how she felt and how he seemed to feel, but even if the phone works, Rachel is at the office. But most of all, more than Thomas, more than Rachel, she wants Davey. Davey has been dead nearly six years and she can't remember missing him as much as she does right now.

Camilla's feelings about Davey are confused, to say the least. Guilt over her failure to recognize his state of mind, and her role in his death, is all tangled up with regret that he's not there any more, bitterness that it should have ended stupidly like that, a broken body in the snow; relief that he's gone and it's over, because their marriage was intolerable and his behaviour was unbearable; more guilt because of the relief; and finally anger and incomprehension at what he did for Igor. How could he have been so idiotic as to swallow whatever line Igor was feeding him? Why was he unable to surmount Igor's defection? Why has he left her alone like this?

Clutching her pillow, Camilla lets it all surge out, six years of grief and rage and misery and guilt. Beside her bed, the phone rings, but she pays no attention. After a while, the violence subsides, the tears dry up and she lies staring at the ceiling before falling into an exhausted sleep.

*

Until Igor defected to the Soviet Union, Camilla had led a privileged and sheltered life. As a diplomat's daughter, she rarely spent more than three years in the same place throughout her childhood. As a student at Harvard, as an American living in Munich, the syndrome continued. Nothing was permanent, nothing was close -- and that, she realized too late, included her marriage. Her relationship with Davey was modelled on her mother's relationship with her father. Nothing too heavy, nothing too intimate. Separate interests, and a respectful emotional distance. Camilla regarded couples like Rachel and Igor with a mixture of envy and discomfort. She knew they had something she would never have, but at the same time she didn't understand how two people could be so bound up in each other. There was something claustrophobic about it.

Academic life suited her because everything stayed abstract. Nothing spilled over into the real world. You examined an issue, you proposed a solution or, if there was no solution, you classified it as insoluble. Then you moved on to something else. Igor's defection was the first thing she had encountered that she could neither come to terms with, nor move away from. It was outside her framework for dealing with the world. It could not be fitted in. Inexcusable, her mother had

commented, on learning the news, and moved seamlessly on. Did you hear that Veronica's son is getting married? In diplomatic circles, the way to deal with a gaffe was to ignore it. Once the first physical shock was past, when her stomach stopped churning, and she stopped looking over her shoulder for Soviet hitmen, Camilla took her mother's way out. Igor was no longer present, which was regrettable. He had left in a somewhat inconsiderate manner. The best thing was to ignore his existence.

So Camilla pretended it had never happened. She refused to discuss it. If someone mentioned Igor, she changed the subject. Fortunately, there were plenty of other things to think about during the winter after Igor left. The Soviet Union veered away from reform, KGB troops went into Lithuania. Camilla read all the Soviet newspapers that came her way, she read papers by other scholars, she pondered future trends. The eyes of the world were fixed on the Soviet military. The Red Army had always been non-political. It had always been controlled by the Party, and there were no antecedents for a military coup. But now the army was upset by the loss of Eastern Europe, Gorbachev was losing his grip, the Party was struggling. Anything could happen. Camilla worked late, charted new developments, and began to think seriously about writing a book.

In the spring of 1991, Davey announced that he was tired of Munich and he wanted to leave. Camilla was horrified. Leave now? How could they do that? The Soviet Union was crumbling before their eyes. History was being made, it was the turning point of the late twentieth century. How could he give up a ringside seat? They had a major fight, and Davey gave in. Both of them were aware that he had no choice. In the Radio, people knew what he had been through and they allowed for stress. But who else was going to hire a man who drank all day? Better to wait a while, Camilla told him. Once the Soviet Union had collapsed, and the dust had settled, and he had got over his drinking problem, then they could think about looking for something else.

Davey's death came as a severe jolt to her. So did the realization, a month or two later, that she was pregnant. She had stopped taking the Pill a few months earlier, when her supplies ran out. It was too much trouble to go to the doctor, especially as sex was an increasingly rare occurrence. In any case, she reasoned, if she did get pregnant, a baby might help to patch things up. When her periods stopped after the accident, she attributed it to shock. It wasn't until she nearly miscarried that she understood what had happened. She was glad that something of Davey would survive, and perversely relieved that it would force her to come down from her ivory tower and get to grips with real life. She was going to have a child, and nothing would ever be the same again. The life of the mind was finished. From now on, she was going to have to deal with blood, sweat, shit, pus, odours.

After Davey died, her parents urged her to leave Munich and move to the States. They were moving back themselves: her father was taking a permanent job at the State Department, they had sold the old family home on Beacon Hill, and acquired a four-bedroomed house in a suburb of Washington. She could live with them while she looked for a job. The pressure redoubled when they found out she was pregnant. Camilla resisted all their suggestions. Her husband was dead, and it was partly her fault. Staying in Munich was part of her penance.

At the back of her mind was the idea that it would give her time to work out what had happened. Whatever the police said, she knew it wasn't an accident. Davey, for all his dash, was a responsible skier who never took risks and never skied off-piste. Why should he suddenly decide to do so on a day when visibility was poor, there was a risk of avalanches, and not many other people around? On the day she was feeling tired and he went out alone?

There were other questions too, which gradually took shape in her mind, as she began to think seriously about everything that had happened. Why was Davey hit so hard by Igor's defection? Why did his depression get worse instead of better? Why had he been drinking himself to death for the better part of fifteen months?

Davey would never be able to answer these questions. Already, Camilla was beginning to sense that the person she would have to put them to was Igor himself.

*

From: Igor Strugatsky
To: M. R. Rasulov

Dear Minister,

It was, as always, a pleasure to receive you at the Café Maracanda, though I regret to hear that your conversation with my friend from Kabul has failed to yield results. As I explained on the phone, it is not my policy to refund an introduction fee. However, since these are special circumstances, I am happy to be able to offer to refund you one half of the amount. I trust this will be satisfactory.

*

From: M. R. Rasulov
To: Igor Strugatsky

Dear Igor Borisovich,

I was surprised by your message. Your offer of a partial refund is quite inadequate. Allow me to remind you that I have sometimes been of service to you when questions have arisen concerning the nature of your business activities in the Republic of Uzbekistan. In the future, it may not be so easy to intervene on behalf of a foreign national.

May I suggest you visit Tashkent in person to discuss the matter. I will expect you on Sunday evening at the usual place. Kindly confirm that this arrangement is convenient to you.

*

The noise of Samarkand's early-evening rush hour brings Camilla back to consciousness. She wakes up feeling hollow but calm. Rustam is picking her up for dinner in an hour's time. She considers taking a shower, but the water is cold. Resignedly, she washes her face and changes her clothes. As she's preparing to go downstairs, there's a knock at the door. She opens it. William Kavanagh is standing in the corridor.

"So Camilla," says Kavanagh, marching uninvited into her room and dropping on to her bed, "what brings you to Samarkand? Sleeping with the mafia, are we? Running dope up to Riga? Shut the door, for God's sake," he adds irritably. "Don't want the whole goddam corridor to hear."

Camilla slams the door against its frame as hard as she can. Kavanagh winces. "Why so aggressive? Relax, princess."

Camilla leans against the closed door and folds her arms. "How are you, William? It's really nice to see you again."

"Hey, I'm sorry. Did I forget the social chit-chat?"

Close up, he looks more like the Kavanagh she knew in Munich. The hair is longer, and the clothes more casual than anything she's seen him in before, but otherwise he hasn't changed as much as she thought. The nondescript T-shirt and khakis are, she supposes, much the kind of thing a writer would wear, and he has developed a slight air of scruffiness which is perfect for the part. In Munich, he used to wear nicely pressed grey pants and sober shirts. Very much the US government official. He even wore his damn navy-blue blazer on weekends when he dropped by the apartment to see Rachel. Maybe that's what threw her off the track when she saw him yesterday. He's far too nonchalantly dressed for the Kavanagh of old. His manners haven't changed, however.

"Unfortunately," she informs him, "I was just leaving."

"Happy Hour at the Café Maracanda?"

"No."

"How's your focus group coming along?"

"Fine," says Camilla. She has never been able to understand why Rachel is friends with this guy. He's not just eccentric, he's offensive. She has never once managed to have a civilized conversation with Kavanagh. "How's your book on geopolitical tourism?"

"Coming along great. Pretty interesting down here, don't you think? How does it feel to be staying in one of the main narcotics hubs of Central Asia?"

Taken off guard, Camilla stares at him. "What, here? Samarkand?"

"Sure. You didn't know about that? Why don't you sit down for a minute and I'll tell you about it." He gestures at the unoccupied twin bed.

"William, I really have to- "

"Sit down, princess. It'll only take ten minutes. You won't be bored, I promise you."

In Munich, there was no one more tight-lipped than Kavanagh. If he is volunteering information now, it must be worth listening to. He has settled himself on her bed and is watching her. Camilla moves away from the door and sits on the bed.

"Great," says Kavanagh encouragingly. "Now the reason that Samarkand is on every drug dealer's map is geography. This town is at the crossroads of Central Asia. From here you can get south to Afghanistan, and you can go north to Tashkent and on up to Moscow. You can also go west to Turkmenistan, Iran and the Caspian Sea. You with me, so far?"

"Sure."

"We're talking about opium and heroin, basically. The opium is grown in Pendjikent in Tajikistan, just forty kilometres away from here by river. The heroin comes from Afghanistan. At night, half the chai khanas in Samarkand serve as reception centres for drugs brought in by courier from Tajikistan and Afghanistan."

Camilla opens her eyes wide, and remembers that Rustam warned her not to go out alone after dark. Samarkand by night is dangerous. This must be the reason why.

"That's going north. Going south you find what we call precursor chemicals, that is, the chemicals you need to make drugs. Acetic anhydride, for instance. That goes south to Afghanistan from suppliers in the former Soviet republics. Again via Samarkand."

"I had no idea."

"I know, princess, that's why I'm giving you a crash course in the geopolitics of the drug trade. Now, pay attention. In late 1991, a network was set up to smuggle narcotics from Afghanistan into Russia and Western Europe. The route went across the Caspian Sea up to Chechnya. The network

was organized by the KGB, with help from various local officials along the way. Mainly Russians and Chechens, with some Uzbeks too, of course."

"The KGB?" says Camilla disbelievingly.

"Who else?" says Kavanagh. "These were guys with career problems. We do remember what happened in August 1991, do we? Well then, you'll understand that they needed to recycle. And so someone had the idea of cashing in on the Afghan connection. The narcotics trade had been expanding ever since the Sovs went into Afghanistan in the early 80s, and I guess they thought this would be a great way to maintain their lifestyles."

He pauses, watching her closely.

"Now, like I said, this was a multi-ethnic concern. And so the Russian contingent needed someone on the spot in Central Asia to keep an eye on things, serve as liaison, see that things ran smoothly, and make sure they weren't getting cheated out of their share of the proceeds. But that wasn't a problem. They had a guy who'd lived in Central Asia, knew the ropes, had the contacts and, best of all, was already based in Samarkand."

He stops again, gauges her reactions. "Are you following me, princess?"

"I'm not sure."

"Are you starting to get the point?"

"I think you'd better spell it out."

"The Russians have their man in Samarkand all set and ready to go. Naturally, he needs a cover of some kind. In a place like Uzbekistan, the obvious solution is the chai khana, where all kinds of people come and go, nobody looks too closely and nobody asks questions. Only Russians don't run chai khanas."

"Instead they run cafés. Is that what you're saying?"

"Great location, nice decor, good food. The mafia like it because it looks Western, and the tourists like it because it feels like home. The couriers come and go and no one bats an eyelid. The mozzarella comes in from Italy and the opium comes in from Afghanistan. The Moscow KGB guys come through to chat, the Iranians slip in through Turkmenistan, there are Kurds, Serbs, Pakistanis, Poles. Terrorists from Kandahar, hawala traders from Quetta. Drug smugglers, arms smugglers, nuclear smugglers, refugee smugglers. Doctors from Düsseldorf, schoolteachers from Michigan. Just like in *Casablanca*. Everyone goes to Igor's."

"Oh my God," says Camilla faintly.

"Pretty neat, huh?"

"But then you're saying that Igor works for the KGB?"

"Who did you think he was with in Munich? The Red Cross?"

"Of course not. But why would he still be working for them?"

"He spent his whole career with them, why quit now?"

Camilla freezes. "What did you say?"

"I'm afraid so, princess. He was with the KGB for years before he showed up in Munich, he worked for them for a year or so in Moscow when he got back, he's worked for them all the time he's been down here."

"But the KGB doesn't even exist any more!"

"Now you're really being naive."

"But they restructured it, they threw a lot of people out, they changed its name. In any case, it was an All-Union organization. The security forces in the republics are all separate these days."

Camilla doesn't know why she's bothering to argue. She doesn't even believe what she's saying, but as usual something in Kavanagh's tone has stung her. Does he always make a point of rubbing people up the wrong way?

He regards her with amused contempt. "Of course they are. But they still talk to each other. The KGB -- all right, the former KGB -- is one of the elements that still holds the republics together. Think about it. They all know each other, they worked together for years, they understand each other, they have common interests--"

"Like what?"

"Power," says Kavanagh. "What else do people want? The KGB is interested in preserving power and making money, and they're doing pretty well at both. Look at the number of old KGB men who hold prominent positions in the republics, in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia- "

"So where does Igor fit into this?"

"He's on the money-making side. Well, I guess he's interested in power too, but the kind of power he wants is a bit of a pipe-dream right now."

"Bringing back the empire, you mean?"

"Right. That's going to take a little while, though I'm sure he's already laying the groundwork in his spare time." Kavanagh looks her over assessingly. "Let me fill you in on his career. Comrade Strugatsky first joined the organs in 1976. That's right, princess, twenty years ago. I'm sorry, have I shocked you? He worked for the Uzbek KGB in Tashkent until 1982. After that, he moved to Moscow. Not a usual career move, but Malkov, his patron in the organs, seems to have moved from Tashkent to Moscow about the time Andropov took over as General Secretary, and he took Igor with him. Igor spent a year or so in Moscow and then defected quote unquote to the West. We know pretty much what he got up to for the next six years. Then, in 1990, he redefected, claimed he'd never heard of the KGB, came out of the Foreign Ministry where he was giving his press conference and drove straight across town to his office in the Lubyanka."

"Oh my God."

"For the next few months, up until the putsch, he worked as an assistant to General Malkov, his old patron from Tashkent. At that point, Malkov was busy with damage control. Things were falling apart pretty fast by then, if you recall, and the KGB was doing what it could to ensure its own survival, and that of the Party. So Igor and his friends were hard at work concealing Party assets, investing in joint ventures, pilfering State property, dumping rubles abroad and laundering money. The Party is thought to have moved billions of dollars and at least sixty tonnes of gold abroad. It's all sitting there in numbered accounts somewhere. You remember Kruchina, the guy from the Party finance committee who jumped out of a window a few days after the putsch? He was one of the guys Igor was working with. After that, I guess Igor must have got cold feet. He left Moscow the next day. Hey, princess, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm just.... And then he came down here?"

"Yep. He came down here, opened the café, hooked up with the drug smuggling network, hooked up with a few other networks. The Maracanda serves as a kind of clearing house. People come in with something to sell and look around for someone to sell it to. Igor makes introductions and collects commission."

"I don't understand how he could have got involved in something like that."

"It was the obvious thing to do. He had the contacts, he had the access, he had the capital to set up in business. Also he needed a job, like all the rest of them."

"You mean the Maracanda is financed by KGB money from Moscow?"

"Well of course it is," says Kavanagh patiently. "Party money, originally, of course."

"Oh my God." Camilla puts her head in her hands.

"It's a natural evolution, Camilla. Power has shifted from the State to the private sector. They saw it coming early on, and they made sure they got in on it. Most of the early Soviet-Western joint ventures in the late 80s were set up either by the KGB or the Central Committee. A year or two later they started founding banks and commercial enterprises. They controlled the process of privatization and the creation of new companies from the outset. Who better to do it? They had the licences people needed, they had the influence. Obviously, it's a long way from their original vocation. But the KGB hasn't been ideological for a long time now. They left that to the Party, even in Soviet days. The way I see this is as a kind of organized retreat. They're trying to maintain a minimum structure, an operating nucleus, ready to restore the status quo ante if they ever get the chance."

"Aren't you being a little paranoid, William?"

"Entirely possible, princess. They've been putting their people into key positions all over the former Union for years -- but that could be for some other reason entirely. Ask me again in twenty years' time."

Camilla walks across to the window and surveys the traffic on the square outside. Mafia bosses in their Mercedes, drug dealers in their jeeps, precursor chemicals going south, opium coming north. Or so Kavanagh says.

"What are you doing in Samarkand, William? You're not really writing a travel book."

"Sure I am, I have parts of it sitting in the computer already. I'll show you if you like. What are *you* doing in Samarkand, Camilla? Why didn't you hold your focus groups in Tashkent?"

"We didn't want to attract too much attention from the authorities. We thought things might go more smoothly in a town outside the capital."

"But why Samarkand? Why not Andizhan? Bukhara? Urgench?"

"Well any provincial town would have done. We chose Samarkand because we were already in contact with a research institute here and that made things easier."

Kavanagh raises his eyebrows. Her slightly defensive tone has not escaped him. He studies her for a moment with a slight smile.

"So, princess, you find yourself in Samarkand. By chance. Fortuitously. You look up a few old friends, see the sights. You lunch out, you take the chance to sample Samarkand's fine Italian cuisine- "

"Oh for God's sake, William, surely it's obvious why I came here! You of all people must know why I wanted to see him again."

"Has he told you what you wanted to know?"

"Not yet."

"Is he going to?"

"I certainly hope so. Has he told you what *you* want to know?"

"Oh I'm not asking questions, I'm just looking."

Camilla suddenly remembers the casual exchange of pleasantries in the courtyard yesterday. "Does he know who you are?"

"Of course he does."

"I mean he did know you in Munich?"

"Sure. He greeted me like a long-lost buddy when I walked in there last week. Of course they probably warned him I was coming."

Camilla opens her mouth and then closes it again.

"So what do you want me to do?" she asks instead.

For several seconds, Kavanagh is still. "Why would I want you to do anything?"

"You haven't told me all this stuff about Igor and the mafia and the KGB just for old time's sake."

"You need to know who you're dealing with, Camilla. I want you to be careful. Keep an eye on that bodyguard of his. Nasty piece of work. Ex-KGB. You know what wet affairs is?"

"Bodyguard? You mean the guy who was driving us today? My God, I didn't realize."

"I know, princess, that's why your fairy godfather is here. And stay away from the Maracanda after dark. During the day it's fine, but at night it turns into a mafia ballroom. We don't want you ending up as a pumpkin, do we?"

*

TAMERLANE'S GRAVE

When she can't sleep at night, Rachel listens to music. She gets out of bed at one or two or three in the morning, puts a sweater over her nightdress, and pads into the living room. She turns up the CD player as loud as she dares. Then she puts out the light and stretches out on the living room floor and listens to music in the dark. She started doing this in Munich, when she was living with Camilla and Thomas. Sometimes, when Thomas was awake and fretful, he kept her company. Back then, Rachel was listening mainly to baroque music. Things got out of perspective in the middle of the night, and the ordered cadences of Handel or Bach brought back some semblance of control. What she liked most was Pachelbel's *Canon*, in a taut, sonorous version by a French chamber orchestra. She listened to it nearly every night. It was Thomas' favourite too: it seemed to reconcile him to his painful new teeth.

Since she reached Almaty, Rachel's tastes have changed. She has developed a need for human voices. Maybe she spends too much time alone. She began by listening to sacred music, and then she tried requiems. Finally she discovered that what she needed was choruses. She switched from Verdi's *Requiem* to Verdi's choruses without really meaning to. She had been avoiding Italian opera for years. But the secular quality of the choruses was more suited to her needs. She finds that if she concentrates she can lose herself completely in these soaring chants. They take her out of herself, they make her feel she is a part of some greater whole. The word that comes to mind is transcendence; a word with which Rachel is not entirely comfortable. Transcendence is a spiritual experience, and she has never thought of herself as being a spiritual person. She's never imagined people in Lancashire as having souls. They wouldn't know what to do with them. The island race is pragmatic and materialist. Souls are a bad habit she's picked up from the Russians.

One night last Christmas, at her parents' house in Southport, she found herself with nothing to listen to. Her father's tastes run to Beethoven, and her mother's to ballet. Neither of these is any good for transcending insomnia in the middle of the night. But then, right at the back of the stack of LPs, she came on a record of Maria Callas singing assorted Italian arias. With misgiving, she took the record out of its cover and put it on the turntable. The radiogram still stood in its corner, as it had for the past forty years. The thing was indestructible. There was no room to lie on the floor in her parents' crowded sitting room, so she lay on the sofa instead. She didn't listen to the words, she just let the voice carry her away. She stayed there listening for nearly two hours, getting up every twenty minutes or so to turn the record over. The next day, she went out and bought the CD. That's what she's listening to now in her sitting room in Almaty.

Since Camilla left for Samarkand, Rachel has been going about her daily routine, doing what she normally does, trying to behave as if nothing has happened. She has been out running every day, she has been shopping on her way home from work, she has forced herself to eat and do the laundry. She has dealt with pollution-related illnesses and irrigation schemes. She has worked on

preparations for a forthcoming international conference on the Aral Sea. It has taken her three days to realize what all this self-imposed activity reminds her of. This was the way she behaved in Munich after Igor left, grimly clinging to routine like a life-raft that would stop her sinking. Instinctively, she touches the scars on her wrists. It didn't work then, and it isn't working now. Rachel has stopped believing that it was her fault Igor left. She didn't imagine those nights with Zhivago in the dark. Igor was willing to settle for what she could give. If he left, it was for other reasons -- reasons that were more important than she was. Rachel has never worked out how to deal with that. She came to Almaty to mark time, and avoid taking decisions. Deep down, she has always known it couldn't last. She has always suspected Igor would resurface one day. Nor is she particularly surprised that it should be Camilla who assisted with the resurrection.

Under normal circumstances, Rachel and Camilla would no longer be friends. Rachel remembers with a mixture of amusement and annoyance the three weeks they spent eyeing each other when they got back from Italy. But then Igor defected, and that bonded them for life. Camilla looked after Rachel when Igor went, and Rachel looked after Camilla when Davey died. Rachel isn't angry with Camilla for destroying her peace of mind. Camilla's motives may not be quite what she admitted, but the truth is that she really had no choice. Her ties to Igor are as strong as Rachel's own, and so were Davey's. Igor made sure of that, when he branded them enemies of the people on Soviet television. The four of them are linked for eternity. The actions of any one of them affect the other three. Since Davey died, the bonds have tightened. It's becoming clear to Rachel that she too is going to have to get on a plane one of these days and go down to Samarkand and confront Igor.

Seeing Igor is the last thing on earth she wants to do. If she works at it, she might convince herself that it's unnecessary. Unlike Camilla, she has nothing to ask him. As far as Davey is concerned, she already knows what happened. It has been niggling at her for the past few days that she has never shared this knowledge with Camilla, but she consoles herself with the idea that it wouldn't have changed anything. Camilla would still have gone to Samarkand, she would still have gone looking for Igor. Rachel is unsure how Camilla thinks of her husband these days, but she doubts it would help if she knew that he and Rachel occasionally slept together in the months after Igor left, nor that he confided to Rachel the things he couldn't bring himself to tell his wife.

The light from the courtyard filters dimly through the grimy windows. The voice of Callas soars in the darkness, coming from places where Rachel, for all she has endured, has never been. There's a lot to be said for sitting back and concentrating on Kazak ecological matters while Igor and Camilla settle their accounts. The trouble is that they are her accounts too. Four years of memories, seven years of bitterness. Seven lost years. Like in the fairy tales. Seven years of plaiting nettles, seven years of exile. And now? Is the spell going to be lifted at last? If so, it won't be Camilla who lifts it. Rachel has to do that herself. She has to go down to Samarkand and find the sorcerer.

*

<triple-DES encrypted, 128-bit key>

From: Vasily V. Malkov

To: Igor Strugatsky

May I remind you that I am still awaiting the information you agreed to provide on Telnikov.

<end encrypt>

*

<triple-DES encrypted, 128-bit key>

From: Igor Strugatsky
To: Vasily V. Malkov

In the matter of Telnikov, I beg you to reconsider. We have both known Dmitri for nearly twenty years. While the matter you raised is undeniably serious, I feel sure we can find other ways to resolve it.

<end encrypt>

*

<triple-DES encrypted, 128-bit key>

From: Vasily V. Malkov
To: Igor Strugatsky

I have received your message. Your refusal to cooperate could lead to serious consequences.

<end encrypt>

*

<triple-DES encrypted, 128-bit key>

From: Igor Strugatsky
To: Vasily V. Malkov

Telnikov arrives Moscow 22:15 tonight on Uzbek Airways from Tashkent. Thursday night in apartment on Bolshoi Afanasovsky Pereulok. Friday morning: meeting in Hotel Metropol at 10:00, lunch appointment at Soho Club at 13:00, return to office at approximately 15:00. Usually drives himself in black Mercedes jeep, registration 1DMT 01, accompanied by one bodyguard.

<end encrypt>

*

Samarkand, Thursday, 02:35

The game is nearly over, Rachel. My time is running out. Old debts are being called in, old friends are no longer loyal. My insomnia too is returning. It doesn't frighten me the way it used to do. These days, I welcome it. I go to sleep knowing that in two or three hours I will be awake

again, and it will still be night, and I will not be alone. I get up, walk around. Sometimes I eat a little, half an apple, some tvorog. I sit by the window and look at the night. I listen to music, mainly Verdi. Do you remember Filippo's aria from Don Carlo?

Rachel, Rachel. My other, my double, my lover, myself. These seven years without you have been so long. But now you're back. Every night, if I wait quietly, you're there with me. Sometimes I can even convince myself that we're back in the villa, on the hilltop. I can feel the shadowed room, I can see the blackness beyond the open window, I can sense you beside me on the bed-

Old ghosts are coming back to haunt me. Dushenka, tell me the truth. Can it be true that Davey-

*

"I tried to call you last night," says Igor, "but you weren't in your room."

"I had dinner with the guy from the research centre," says Camilla. "What did you want to ask me?"

The courtyard of the Maracanda is empty this morning. From inside the building come the muffled sounds of preparation for lunch: cutlery clinking, voices raised, saucepans clattering. The morning sun is warm on her back, the fountain trickles peacefully, and Igor's coffee is considerably better than that of the Samarkand Hotel. Camilla has no reason to doubt what William told her last night. It all rings true. Not to mention the fact that William's geographical briefing coincides on all points with Igor's two days ago. Arms dealing, drug smuggling, money-laundering. Dear God. She's starting to count the days till she can be out of here.

"When do your focus groups start?" inquires Igor.

"The first one is at three this afternoon."

"Good, so you are free this morning. Finish your coffee, and we will go to the Gur Emir."

Camilla pauses, with her coffee cup in mid air. "Actually I've seen the Gur Emir already."

"Not with me," says Igor.

*

The route to Tamerlane's grave leads through what Igor calls the mahallah, the neighbourhood. Old men in traditional costume sit in the sun, a woman walks past with a bucket in each hand, a light wind ripples through the mulberry trees. Sasha, who appeared from nowhere as they were leaving the café, trails a few paces behind them.

"You know, Milenka, I have been thinking about what you told me yesterday. To me it makes no sense. People who commit suicide are usually of a certain type. But Davey was not that type. He would not have killed himself."

"You didn't know him during the last fifteen months of his life, Igor. You weren't there to see how he changed after that press conference you gave."

"The press conference? That silly little press conference?"

"The press conference and the television discussion."

"What?"

Igor sounds incredulous. He looks sincerely perplexed. He's acting, Camilla decides. How could he possibly have failed to grasp what would happen when he launched his televised rocket attacks? *Rachel Shtern is an enemy of the people, Kamila Stacei works for military intelligence, Major David gives lectures at Langley.* Camilla remembers watching the discussion live on Moscow television, Igor looking blandly into the camera, Rachel sitting frozen to her chair, Davey

standing up and shoving out of the room, emerging white and swaying from the men's room some time later.

The memories still make her feel queasy. She tries to keep her voice level and rational.

"You were Davey's hero, Igor. He thought of you as his best friend. But you lied to him. You made it clear that you had no respect for him, and no affection. And as a parting gift, you pilloried him on Soviet television as a CIA spy."

"I was merely trying to protect you all," says Igor patiently. "We'd all just spent a month in Tuscany together. The least I could do was prevent suspicion from falling on you. You'd have had Radio security on your backs for ever if I hadn't done that."

"You were protecting us?" Camilla's voice rises in fury. "Violating us, more like!"

"Milenka, what I said was nonsense. You know that as well as I do."

"You revealed our names, you singled us out as enemies of the Soviet people. We had no protection, we were totally exposed. Anyone could have found out who we were and where we lived. You told them Davey and I lived on Georgenstrasse, you practically gave them our address."

"You thought they would send someone to *kill* you?"

"For a while, yes we did."

"But that was ridiculous!"

"It's true, we weren't being rational. But when someone you regarded as a friend turns on you like that, you can't be sure of anything any more."

"I can't believe you took it so seriously."

"We took it very seriously. Particularly Davey. He was already in a bad way after you defected, but that television discussion finished him off."

"Finished him off?" There's a sudden edge to Igor's voice. "Are you saying this is what made Davey kill himself?"

"No," says Camilla. "It's not pleasant when your idol turns out to have feet of clay, but you get over it in the end."

"I may have been guilty of miscalculation. From what you say, it seems I underestimated your reaction- "

"Yes, but that wasn't the real problem. The real problem was what Davey had been doing for you before that."

Igor's step doesn't falter, but she feels him tense beside her.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, Milenka."

"Davey was working for you, Igor. He'd been working for you for months. Years even."

"Working for *me*?"

"For the KGB, if you prefer."

"Milenka, you're not making sense. Are you saying Davey was a KGB spy?"

"Of course not. What I'm saying is that you used Davey for your own purposes. You turned him into an apologist for perestroika."

"I hardly think- "

"Davey didn't have opinions of his own. He borrowed other people's. You saw that, and you took advantage of it. You fed him your opinions, you convinced him that it was the right way to think. Gorbachev the saviour, the only hope for the Soviet people."

"From what I recall of our discussions, that was Davey's sincerely held opinion. It happened to be mine as well, you're correct about that. But I'm afraid I don't see why you think this is a problem. Surely one is entitled to one's own point of view?"

"Absolutely, but one should not use one's own point of view as a basis for editorial policy. During the time Davey was responsible for the Daily Report, he made sure that the only news items published were those which put forward ideas favourable to perestroika. He took care to suppress information which put Gorbachev in a bad light."

"That's a very grave assertion, Camilla- "

"It's not an assertion. I can prove it. Davey refused more than once to print items I submitted. The same thing happened to Rachel. And to other people."

They have reached the courtyard in front of the Gur Emir. Igor stands aside to let her enter.

"Everyone must have had items rejected from time to time. And I'm sure Davey had perfectly good editorial reasons for doing so."

"Of course he did. He had a whole string of them. Probably you provided them. Davey was a Soviet agent of influence. And you were his case officer."

*

The mausoleum glitters in the morning sun. The caretaker, Camilla's guide from the other night, is lounging on a bench near the entrance to the mausoleum. Glancing at Camilla without apparent recognition, he exchanges long, emotional greetings with Igor in Uzbek. Camilla watches unsmilingly. When Igor and his friend have finished catching up on each other's news, the caretaker leads them round the back of the building. He unlocks a side door, and stands back to let them pass. Camilla sees a flight of stairs leading downwards.

"What's this?"

"The crypt. He says he didn't bring you here the other day."

"So what's in the crypt?"

Igor looks at her and smiles. "It's where they keep the funerary paintings, Milenka." He draws a finger gently down her cheek. Camilla is mesmerised. There's something so intimate in the gesture, the way he's looking at her. Suddenly she's back in Italy, on the path through the cypresses in the sun-drenched air.

"Let's go down," says Igor, leading the way.

The crypt is low and bare and secret. Seven blocks of stone lie on the dusty floor.

"These are the real graves," says Igor, putting an arm round her shoulders. "The tombs you saw upstairs are just for show. This is where the bodies are really buried. Timur's is that one there."

He draws her against him and starts to kiss her. Camilla kisses him back. Her head is spinning. For a moment when he lets her go, she doesn't know where she is. Chiusi? Siena? Sansepolcro?

"There's an epitaph engraved on the underside of the tomb," says Igor. *"If I am roused from my grave, the earth will tremble."*

"Really?" says Camilla.

"It's just a legend, of course," says Igor.

*

Still, walking away from the Gur Emir, under the protecting arch of trees, he makes a point of telling her about it. Timur has been roused once, and he kept his promise. After sleeping peacefully for five centuries, his body was exhumed by Mikhail Gerasimov, a Russian anthropologist, on the night of June 22, 1941. Gerasimov entered the crypt under cover of darkness, to avoid offending local sensibilities, and opened the coffin about three in the morning. A few minutes later, someone burst in to tell him that Hitler's armies had invaded Russia.

Camilla frowns disbelievingly, but there's more to come. Gerasimov continued his investigations, confirmed that Tamerlane had been lame on his right side, and reconstructed a bronze head of his skull. The work took nearly two years. When everything was completed, the body was restored to its coffin and reburied in the same spot as before. A few days later, the German army besieging Stalingrad capitulated. The German attempt to conquer Russia was at an end.

They reach the boulevard and cross the road, heading back to the Maracanda. Camilla is in a daze. On the threshold of the Maracanda, Igor takes her hand. Does she remember, he asks, the day they went to see the tombs at Chiusi? It was very hot. She was wearing a blue dress and she had her hair tied back in a pony tail. Camilla gazes at him, entranced. The spell kicks in. No, she says, it was a braid. That's right, a braid, he says. He touches her hair as if wondering where it went. A few early lunch customers drift past them into the café. Taking her by the shoulder, Igor steers her across the courtyard in the direction of the outer staircase. The one leading up to the first floor, where he has his own apartment. Camilla looks at him. He smiles. His arm tightens around her. Her heart begins to thud.

*

VADIM AND THE REBYATA

The Aral Sea used to be one of the world's largest inland seas. In the last half-century, it has shrunk by half. The culprit is cotton. More and more land has been given over to cotton, and more and more water has been siphoned out of the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, the two great rivers the ancients knew as the Oxus and the Jaxartes. Once, the Oxus and the Jaxartes flowed into the Aral Sea. These days, they no longer get that far. The Aral Sea has withered into a series of dried-up lagoons. Rachel has been to former fishing ports and seen stranded boats and rusting quays with her own eyes. What little river water still reaches the sea is full of fertilizer and pesticide. People continue to drink it. They cook their food in it, bathe in it, wash their clothes in it. Hepatitis and typhoid are endemic. Respiratory problems are common. Children are born deformed. Mothers are advised not to breast-feed. The infant mortality rate is over 100 deaths per 1000.

At any given time, Rachel has at least one project concerning the Aral Sea on her desk, and usually more. Today there is a project to supply clean drinking water, and a plan to save part of the sea by erecting a dyke to cut off the northern part from the southern part. She's considering the dyke when the phone rings. It's Vadim. He's in a phone box across the street, he says, and he needs to see her urgently. Can she come out and meet him right away? Rachel is not averse to getting away from her desk for a bit. Building a dyke is better than nothing, but a dyke made of sand? She turns off the computer, puts on her jacket and goes to tell Masha, the office secretary, that she has to go out.

Vadim is waiting at the entrance to the building. He looks cold and harrassed, but when he sees her his face lights up in its usual rueful smile, and he kisses her hand and then her cheek with his usual hesitant grace. There's something in Vadim of the tsarist nobleman. He has a refined pre-revolutionary air that is quite out of place in this robust post-Soviet society. His great-grandfather was a Russian military officer who got posted to Verny, and somehow stayed. His great-grandmother, Vadim claims, was a famous beauty in Verny society in the last days of the Guberniya of Turkestan.

"What happened?" says Rachel.

Vadim takes her arm, and they start to walk.

"They came to see me in the shop this morning."

"So soon? I thought you said it was all right for a week?"

"That's what I thought. But they're in a hurry."

"Does Efim Nursultanovich know about this?"

"I don't know. I suppose he must. I really can't believe he could do this to me."

"You mean it was he who sent them?"

"Well, yes, it might be. It's not impossible."

Rachel sighs. Life in Almaty is such a fog.

"What are you going to do?" she asks.

"I don't know. The price of insulin has just gone up again. She has enough for about three weeks, but after that I'm going to have to buy more. And this time I'll have to register the sale. They'll be watching me. I don't know how I'm going to find the money, and then there's all I already owe them...."

His step slackens, his shoulders slump.

"How much do you owe exactly?"

"Ten thousand tenge."

Rachel blinks. Ten thousand tenge is an enormous amount -- well, it is for him. It must be twice what he makes in a month. She calculates mentally. About one hundred and thirty dollars. Sixty-five pounds. It seems like a lot to be paying for medicine, even the expensive kind like insulin. Does he have other debts too?

"The thing is, I thought I'd found someone to buy the car, and that would have given me what I needed, but then he backed out of the deal."

Rachel wonders if this is true or not.

"If I don't pay up by six o'clock, they're going to put their thugs on me," says Vadim gloomily.

"Six o'clock? Do you mean six o'clock this *evening*?"

"Yes. So I wondered if you might be able to advance me the ten thousand, just till the car gets sold."

Rachel looks at him, but he's staring straight ahead, avoiding her eyes. He's still holding her arm, though, and she can feel how tense he is. Probably it's true about the thugs then. She wonders what they will do to him if he doesn't have the money by six o'clock. Shoot him? Not for ten thousand tenge, surely. Beat him up? Break his legs? Stories of people who crossed the mafia are plentiful in Almaty. There's only one thing she can do, and Vadim knows it. How could she live with herself if she refused to lend him the money and the rebyata, the lads, as they are casually known around town, carried out their threats?

"We'll have to go to the bank," she says. "I don't have ten thousand in cash."

Rachel's bank is on the far side of Panfilov Park, behind the war memorial. Vadim takes one look at its splendid marble exterior and announces he will wait in the taxi. The door is opened by two guards with machine guns, who greet Rachel respectfully, and usher her up the stairs to the International Department. Up here it's streamlined and modern, with plush carpets and wall-to-wall electronics. Rachel withdraws ten thousand tenge, and then, as an afterthought, another fifty thousand. She puts the ten thousand into a plain envelope, supplied with a trained smile by the counter clerk, and zips the rest into the back compartment of her shoulder bag. The men with the machine guns open the door to let her out with a polite *Do svidanya*. The taxi is waiting a few yards away. She passes the envelope to Vadim through the window and tells him she has another errand to run, but he can keep the taxi. Vadim looks rather put out. She suspects he has been preparing a delicate speech of thanks to be delivered going up Furmanov Street on the way back to her office. No wonder the tsar's men got mown down by the Bolsheviks. No wonder people like Vadim get cornered by the mafia.

The taxi pulls away, and Rachel turns into the park. Until 1991, Vadim was the director of one of the biggest medical institutes in Almaty. After independence, they gave his job to a Kazak, and he was obliged to take a job in a pharmacy. He is hurt and uncomprehending about his loss of status. Everyone lived together so harmoniously in the Soviet family of nations: why are people

behaving this way towards him? Vadim is an innocent at large in a robber-baron society. Rachel suspects that when he took the job in the pharmacy, he didn't even know that the place was mafia-owned.

She crosses the park and keeps walking north towards the city centre. The leaves are changing colour, there's a chill wind blowing from the mountains. Winter is coming. This is the second time Vadim has taken drugs for his wife from the pharmacy and falsified the accounts in the hope that no one would notice. It took him a long time to admit to Rachel what he had done, for he is ashamed of the direction his country is taking and would prefer foreigners not to know about it, but one night, when he was drunk and passably desperate, he told her the secrets of the pharmaceutical trade. The new pharmacies in Almaty were mafia-owned and they were used to launder money from the drug trade. How do they do it? said Rachel, fascinated, and Vadim, after some hesitation, explained the mechanics of the operation. What happened was that some mafia errand-boy went to a pharmacy, purchased a large amount of expensive drugs, paid cash, and received a receipt. But the goods stayed on the shelves, and the inventory was falsified accordingly. Meanwhile, the drug money had entered the legal economy.

Laundering money sounds ridiculously simple. Is he really telling her everything, or has he left out some sinister but crucial step? Rachel doesn't know. What is clear is that she seems to be turning into some kind of safety net for Vadim in his dealings with the mafia. She can't tell from Vadim's explanations whether it was Efim Nursultanovich, the owner of the pharmacy, who called them in, or someone else. The first time it happened, Vadim was vastly offended by this unfriendly act, even though he confessed to ignoring two ultimatums to pay back the money. Rachel doesn't understand why Efim Nursultanovich doesn't just fire him, but apparently that isn't the way business is transacted in Kazakhstan, and besides, the two of them have known each other for years. The whole thing is far too murky for a mere Westerner to understand, and that's assuming Vadim is telling her the truth. Rachel has known Vadim for a year and a half, and she thought they understood each other pretty well. But now she's beginning to wonder.

She emerges from the park and stands on the edge of Gogol Street, waiting to cross. The air is yellowish grey and tastes slightly metallic. A bus rounds the corner, clinking ominously. The bonnet has disappeared, the engine is in full view, and the smell is dreadful. It occurs to Rachel that she has had enough of Almaty. And of Vadim too. Noticing a pharmacy on the other side of the street, she is seized with a sudden mischievous desire to go and find out the price of insulin, and calculate just how much insulin you can buy for ten thousand tenge. But there are things it's better not to know. She walks past the pharmacy and stops again on the corner of Zheltoksan. The problem is that the way people live in this country you can't trust anyone. Everyone is looking out for themselves, everyone is concerned with their own survival, everyone does what they have to do to keep their heads above water. And if Vadim sees his English friend Rachel as the solution to some of those pressures, who can blame him? That's just the way things are.

For all Rachel knows, he might have invented the expensive medicine, he might even have invented the disease. How would she know if his wife has diabetes or not? A few days ago she read a report written by a colleague in Brussels which said that the free market was taking over and that Kazakhstan was on the road to prosperity. In Rachel's view, this is wishful thinking. Kazakhstan is on the road to nowhere. How can it be, when human relationships, which are ultimately what determine the nature of a society, are corrupt and manipulative and false? This is the second time she's lent Vadim money. Repayment of the first loan is a subject that has never been raised

between them; she assumes it will be the same with this one too. As long as she stays in Almaty, Vadim will go on borrowing money from her and not returning it. She can see exactly what he thinks. She has so much, and he has so little. Ten thousand tenge amounts to five percent of her monthly salary. Vadim is merely doing what he has to do in order to survive. Ten years ago, he would have had to inform on her to the KGB. Now that the rules have changed, he extorts money from her instead. So it goes. Rachel doesn't blame him for what he's done. She just doesn't want to be part of it any longer. She has reached the corner of Zheltoksan and Silk Road. She has been walking, without realizing it, in the direction of the aerovoksal. She marches towards the building with a determined step. Today is Thursday. On Sunday, Camilla will be in Tashkent. She will book a flight, fly down to join her, and they can talk about Igor. And then she will decide what to do next.

*

The first two focus groups go off perfectly. The respondents are articulate, intelligent, and surprisingly uninhibited. They have no reservations about criticizing government control of local radio, and no hesitation in demanding more coverage from Radio Liberty. Since the Uzbek press makes a point of assuring its readers that everything in the garden is wonderful, they consider it Radio Liberty's job to balance the images of happy cotton-pickers with factual reporting on real life and real problems: poverty, repression, unemployment, despair.

Uzbek, with its Turkic roots, is impenetrable to Camilla, but Rustam sits beside her and takes notes in Russian so she has an idea of what is being said. The rest of the time, she watches the body language. Shamor is good, there's no doubt about it. She knows how to create a friendly atmosphere that makes people want to talk. The conversation flows freely. The respondents are relaxed, and they are all joining in. No one is trying to dominate the discussion, and no one is sitting back observing the proceedings, making mental notes to pass on to the KGB.

By the end of the second group, on Friday morning, Camilla has relaxed too. After spending so much time with Igor, it's a relief to sit quietly in this dingy academic decor listening to the murmur of Uzbek voices rising and falling around her. At least one part of her trip to Samarkand is going well. At least here she can be her usual rational self. Sitting here soberly, she cannot imagine what possessed her to go up to Igor's apartment yesterday. How could she not have seen that she was being enchanted? Seduced in the literal sense? Igor had clearly intended to distract her so thoroughly that she would forget all about Davey and go home without importuning him again.

Sadly for him, the plan failed. They were interrupted almost immediately by a phone call from Moscow, a fax from Ashkhabad, and one of the waiters announcing a culinary crisis in the kitchen. Camilla barely had a chance to look round Igor's living quarters before she was being ushered back down to the courtyard, and given a glass of Orvieto and a plate of tagliatelle as a consolation prize. All she had time to see was that the apartment was furnished with unmistakable style: hand-woven carpets, antique lamps, and an English mahogany desk which must have come over the passes on a mule train in the last days of the Raj. Nothing flashy, just enough hints of refinement to corroborate the lifestyle implied by the black silk shirts. It reminded her of the apartment he shared with Rachel in Munich.

Considering this now, Camilla finds the similarity reassuring. It hints at a continuity she has been starting to doubt. It proves there is a link between the man who sat on the terrace of the Villa Tolomei, his double who talked to Soviet television cameras, and his triple who is best friends with

the caretaker at the Gur Emir, and who appears to doubt that his predecessors ever existed. What worries Camilla is that at times she doubts it herself. At times in the past few days, sitting in the courtyard of the Maracanda, listening to Igor's sly asides, drinking his wine, she has found herself forgetting what he did. Encouraged by Igor's own sceptical approach to the past, she has begun to wonder if he could be right. Maybe he did act for the best. Maybe they did misunderstand him. Things are not always what they seem. Graves are not always where you think they are. Maybe the best advice comes in the form of epitaphs. Camilla doesn't know if the legend of Timur the Earth-Shaker is true or if Igor made it up, but his message is certainly clear. Don't rake up the past. Leave the dead to sleep in peace. Let sleeping dogs lie.

*

The chai khana is on the outskirts of the city, in a garden furnished with wooden divans. Old men wearing embroidered black caps sit cross-legged with their elbows on the tables, sipping their bowls of tea, playing chess, discoursing on the ways of the world. It feels as though nothing has changed since the Russians took Samarkand from the Emir of Bukhara in the 1860s.

"So, Camilla," says William, "how are you finding Central Asia?"

"Confusing," says Camilla. "It's such a hybrid, it's hard to know what to make of it. You send off a couple of e-mails, you set up a focus group, you get people to come along and talk, you make sure they've switched off their mobiles -- and then you find yourself in a place like this and you wonder if you're still in the same century. It's like taking a step back into old Turkestan."

"This isn't old Turkestan. It's been like this all the time. You don't want to pay too much attention to Soviet propaganda. Central Asia was never as socialist as they liked to claim. The clans that used to run things under the khanates went on functioning during the whole Soviet period, and the old traditions were carried on just as before."

"How could they do that, with the Party all over the place?"

"They fused with the Party networks. The clan leaders and the Party bosses were the same people. As far as Moscow was concerned, everything was moving along nicely on progressive socialist lines, and underneath they just carried on circumcising their children, paying bride prices, slaughtering sheep for wedding feasts, and so on."

"And Moscow knew nothing about it?"

"Moscow turned a blind eye. It was in their own interest. Between them, the village elders and the regional bosses kept the lid on tight, and Moscow had nothing to worry about. Central Asian society has always been very tight-knit, not just in the countryside, in the cities too. Everyone knows everyone else, and they all know each other's business. Have you been to the mahallah around Tamerlane's grave? That's what the Uzbek neighbourhood is like. Elders sitting on their doorsteps, kids playing in the street, everyone keeping an eye on what everyone else is doing. They tell each other's kids off, they get mixed up in other people's marital squabbles. If some kid is rude to his grandmother, the whole neighbourhood has a word to say about it."

Camilla observes him curiously. "How many times have you been here before?"

"Oh, once or twice."

Within the Radio, Kavanagh was rumoured to have had a lurid past in Afghanistan, running guns and dollars to the mujahiddin, living undercover for weeks on end, thanks to a turban and a suntan, and an intimate knowledge of Pashto and Dari, but he himself would never confirm, deny or even

discuss it. Camilla wonders if he used to come up here for rest and recreation and to study the Uzbek social system, but decides not to pursue it.

"But surely things will start to change," she begins, mindful of Rustam, "once the economy gets going, and democracy begins to take hold- "

"Democracy? What democracy? This is never going to be a democratic country, Camilla. Uzbekistan is a patriarchal Islamic society, and people don't necessarily want it any other way. They aren't brought up to believe in the value of individualism like we are. Collective forms of economic and social life are the norm in Asia. That's why the clans are there in the first place. What did your focus groups say about democracy?"

"Not much," says Camilla ruefully. "They thought it was a fancy American idea that could keep until they'd finished solving all their other problems."

William grins. "What did I tell you? It's not in the Tamerlane tradition. What else did they say?"

"Some of them said Uzbekistan was better off under the Russians. I thought I was listening to Igor."

"People don't like change. They want to stay with the ways they grew up with, they don't want to do things differently."

"But the Russians left so many problems behind them."

"It's hard to break with the past, even though it might be in your best interest to do so. Human nature isn't always very logical, you know."

"Oh I know that," says Camilla. If human nature were logical, she would not be in Samarkand now. She would have got over Igor years ago. But not only has she failed to break with the past, she's beginning to see that she doesn't even want to. If she could, she would turn back time, return to the golden hilltop, and stay there forever. She has no more desire to move on than the participants in the focus groups, complaining about unpaid salaries and rising crime, grabbing vainly at the wreckage of their stable Soviet existence.

"I take it that's why you're here now," says William.

Camilla looks at him uncertainly. So far, lunch has been going rather well. For the first time ever, she and William have been having a normal conversation. He is less abrasive than she has ever known him, and he hasn't called her princess once.

"Yes," she says, "I guess it is."

William looks at her gravely. "What do you want from him, Camilla? Why did you come here?"

"I want to know why he did it. I want to know if he realized what he was doing to us, how terrible it was going to be, how much suffering it was going to cause. I want..." She hesitates, searching for words. "I want him to admit the damage he did."

William looks sceptical.

"He ruined us, William! All of us. Surely you can see that!"

"Oh, I can see it. But can he?"

"He hasn't shown the slightest sign of remorse."

"What makes you think he will?"

"He has to," says Camilla obstinately. "He can't believe I'm just going to go away and forget about him. And Rachel, what kind of state does he think Rachel's in?"

"So what you really want is an apology, is that it?"

"It's too late for an apology. I just want some kind of acknowledgement."

"How can he give it you? He can't acknowledge that what he did was wrong! He can't take responsibility for what happened to Davey and Rachel without putting his whole way of life in question -- not just what he did back then but what he's doing now, because of course it's all linked. You can't expect him to do that. You can't expect anyone to do that."

There's a long silence.

"Here," says William, passing a handkerchief across the table.

"I'm sorry, it's- " Camilla dabs at her eyes.

"Go and see him again. Tell him you want to hear his version of events. What happened between him and Davey, why he went back to Moscow. He'll probably be willing to give you a few facts. But don't expect him to tell you if he wishes he hadn't done it."

"I suppose so."

"And when you've done that, Camilla, get on a plane and go back to Washington. Get on with your life, forget about Igor, look after Thomas, write that book on the military, do some home improvements, take a vacation in Barbados. God knows you've earned it."

"Oh for God's sake, William!" Camilla is torn between laughter and exasperation. "It's a bit late for the American Dream, don't you think?"

"It's never too late for the American Dream. Have some more children. Become a Hero Mother of Maryland."

"First I need to find the Hero Father."

"So start looking. Get out there and date."

"Date?" says Camilla, surprised William knows about this arcane social ritual. In Munich, he had neither girlfriends nor boyfriends, at least not that anyone knew about.

"Sure," says William. "When are you leaving?"

"I leave Samarkand on Sunday. Monday I'm in Tashkent visiting a research institute, and Tuesday I fly out to Frankfurt."

"Frankfurt, huh? One of their horrible dawn flights?"

"God, yes, four in the morning or something ghastly."

"It's the old caravanserai timetable left over from the Silk Road. Everyone out of the stables by the time the sun comes up."

Camilla grins. Now and again, she sees what Rachel likes about William. She hands him back his handkerchief. "What about you? Are you staying much longer?"

William is suddenly evasive. "Oh I guess I'll be moving on pretty soon."

"You've been here nearly two weeks, haven't you?"

"Well, yeah, I guess I- "

"So what's going on at the Maracanda that interests you so much?"

"The Maracanda? Oh I'm just- "

"Do they trade oilfields in there, or what?"

William looks down at his tea for a moment, and then shrugs resignedly. "Not oilfields, pipelines."

"Pipelines? I thought they weren't built yet. I thought they were trying to decide where to build them."

"That's the point. Have you been following the pipeline thing? No? Well, there are three main possibilities. One, through Georgia to the Black Sea. Two, through Turkey to the Mediterranean.

Three, through Iran to the Persian Gulf. Unfortunately, they all have drawbacks. Georgia is unstable, and likely to remain so. The Turkish route would be the best bet, but it's long and expensive. The Iranian route is shorter and cheaper, but it's out of the question politically. Or else you can go through Russia, but that's what we're trying to avoid."

"I see. Pipelines mean money and influence, and everybody wants one."

"Got it in one, princess. So they're all out there trying to cut deals to make sure they get one."

"And they do that in the Maracanda?"

"Some of them, yes."

"And what are you doing there? Safeguarding US interests? Making sure we get a pipeline too?"

"What I look at is who's talking to whom. My job is to spot the really unlikely conversationalists."

"And then what?"

"Then I go home and write a report," says William blandly. "You know what working for the government is like."

*

From: M. R. Rasulov

To: William Kavanagh

Dear Mr. Kavanagh,

The meeting with Strugatsky has been arranged as you requested. I trust you will now feel able to proceed with your part of the bargain.

*

From: William Kavanagh

To: M. R. Rasulov

dear minister, thank you for your cooperation. please rest assured that my government will respect its engagements.

*

THE GOLDEN ROAD TO SAMARKAND

Samarkand, Friday, 03:20

The pack is closing in, dushenka. First Kavanagh, then Rasulov. Now Camilla. And Davey, oh God, Davey. The past is returning to trap me. It is only a matter of days.

The fountain trickles softly in the moonlight. How much longer will I be here to listen to it?

As usual, you are sitting here beside me. Lately, your outline has been getting clearer, your spectre has been putting on flesh. I cannot get rid of the notion that you are close at hand. I can almost touch your skin and feel your breath. Camilla wouldn't come here alone. Was it you she stopped to visit in Almaty?

Rachel, without you, my life would have had no sense. I am bound to you by the moon shining on the fountain in the courtyard, by nights reading poetry in the lamplight, by loss, by fidelity, by life itself. You have never left me once in seven years. I don't want to die without seeing you one last time.

*

The ruins of Maracanda stretch for miles. Its palaces have collapsed into grass-covered hummocks, its streets have become heaps of stone. The magnificence admired by Alexander can only be guessed at.

"So you're leaving tomorrow, Milenka. Are you flying straight back to Washington?"

"First I have a couple of days in Tashkent."

"More research institutes to visit?"

"Yes."

They are standing, not on the site of Maracanda itself, but in the modern cemetery next to it. Sasha is a little way off, wandering round the graves in a yellow shirt, reading the inscriptions, waiting for the boss to finish the Alexander Trail and get back to business. The sun is declining, but the air is still warm. Igor settles himself on a convenient tombstone and pats the stone beside him. Camilla glances at her watch. The final focus group is already under way, and she wants to be there for the end of the session. On the other hand, this is her last chance to ask about Davey.

Igor has his own agenda. He barely gives her time to sit down.

"Where's Rachel?" he demands.

"Who?" Camilla is caught off balance.

"Rachel. You haven't told me anything about her. Where she is, what she's doing. She's not in Prague, I've checked on that. So where is she?"

"I can't tell you that." She glances at him nervously. Igor the Sorcerer -- can he possibly know she's meeting Rachel in Tashkent tomorrow?

"Why not?"

"She asked me not to. She asked me not to tell you anything about her."

A pause, and then he says, "Is she all right?"

"Of course she's not all right! I told you that the other day. She had a nervous breakdown after you left. She tried to slit her wrists, and when that didn't work she took an overdose. How can she be all right after what you did to her?"

A shadow passes over Igor's face. "Where is she? Is she in Almaty?"

"I'm not going to tell you where she is."

"Milenka- "

"It's time to let go of the past," says Camilla nastily. "You told me that yourself."

Igor starts to say something and thinks better of it. After a moment, he shifts his position, leaning back against the headstone of the grave, making himself more comfortable. Camilla looks at him quizzically, and he gives her a chilly little smile. He knows that strategic concessions can occasionally be necessary. Igor has always been a pragmatist.

"Well then, Camilla. Let me explain how I recruited your husband for the KGB."

*

When Igor left Moscow in 1984, Gorbachev was not yet General Secretary of the CPSU, but the deal had been done in the Politburo, and it was only a matter of time before he succeeded the ailing Chernenko and instituted a programme of reform. Igor's target was Radio Liberty, and his task was to ensure that the Radio reacted to the reforms as favourably as possible. Obviously, he could not persuade the whole organization to greet perestroika with open arms. His job was to act as a counter-weight. There would be no criticism of perestroika in his own programmes. He would attempt to influence people informally inside the Russian Service, and he would recruit someone to do the same in the Research Department.

"So you chose Davey?"

"First I looked around."

"I remember you had a reputation for hanging out with Americans. Not many people in the Russian Service did that."

Igor shrugs. "Americans were better for my purpose than Russians. They were less likely to be suspected of working for the KGB."

Camilla smiles distantly. Well, quite. So you hung out with Americans, Igor, you sat in the biergartens of Munich with them, you asked them questions about Woody Allen and Arthur Miller and the American constitution, and finally -- a real stroke of genius, that -- you began to play tennis.

"My decisive encounter with Davey," says Igor formally, "took place in June 1987, when he beat me at tennis 6-4, 6-4, 6-0." After the match, they went for a drink and talked about Russian literature -- Tolstoy, maybe, or Turgenev, Igor frankly can't remember -- and from then on, there was no turning back.

"Did you let him win on purpose?" demands Camilla.

"Not at that stage. Back then I couldn't have beaten him if I wanted to. Later," he adds thoughtfully, "I got better."

But meanwhile, during that whole summer of 1987, Davey and Igor played tennis and drank beer and talked about Russia. Davey won at tennis, and Igor dominated in the Destiny of Russia. It was an equally balanced relationship, and at that stage, if Igor is to be believed, innocuous.

"I sensed right away that I could use Davey for whatever I wanted. It was simply a matter of winning his confidence."

Camilla winces. "Why did you feel- ? What was it about him?"

Igor smiles his patient Piero smile. He has no desire to be here, telling her this, and he has no reason to spare her feelings.

"Davey was at a loose end. He was bored with his job, unhappy with his marriage, and too lazy to rearrange his life."

Camilla is unable to speak. Igor takes out a cigarette.

"He reminded me of one of those characters in Chekhov who are always complaining that they're wasting their youth, or that the cherry orchard is going to be sold, but who do absolutely nothing to prevent it."

"Chekhov was Davey's favourite author."

"Then I dare say that's no coincidence."

Camilla doesn't answer. Igor snaps off his lighter.

"Milenka," he says, and there's a tinge of exasperation in his voice, "am I telling you anything you don't know already? You know what Davey was like. You know your marriage was a mistake. You married someone who was weak and lazy and directionless, and not intelligent enough to see he was being used."

"Igor, please, don't- I can't- "

"Davey wasted his life, and now you're wasting yours mourning him. You have to put Davey behind you. You haven't told me, but I assume you haven't remarried. You don't have to remain alone all your life because of Davey. He wasn't worth it."

"You're too hard on him. Davey wasn't a worthless person."

"He betrayed his country, and he was too much of a fool to realize it."

"Is that so despicable?"

"Sometimes I had the feeling he cared more for Russia than he did for his own country."

"Perhaps Russia was more in need of care."

"That's not the point."

"Nor is it fair to reproach him with feelings you were doing your best to encourage."

"Should I have admired him?"

"Did he never understand what he was doing?"

"Only at the end. When we came back from Italy, he avoided me. He was never free to play tennis, he pretended not to see me in the canteen. Didn't you notice how oddly he was behaving?"

"He seemed the same as usual to me."

"Really? Well, I suppose you weren't paying attention. You weren't very interested in Davey at that point, were you?"

For a moment, there is silence. Purmamet oglu Iles, on whose grave they are sitting, sleeps on. The wind ruffles the dried yellow grass on the tomb of Maracanda. Camilla forces herself to continue.

"What did Davey do exactly?" she asks, but Igor is tiring of the conversation.

"You know that already," he says dismissively. "You told me the other day."

"What I said was guesswork."

"Then let's say you guessed right."

"What kind of instructions did you give him?"

Igor frowns. "I think you've got the wrong idea, Camilla. It wasn't a situation where I gave Davey orders and he carried them out. Davey never did anything for me. What he did, he did for himself."

"How can you say that, Igor!"

"I wasn't putting any pressure on Davey. Everything he did, he did of his own free will. You seem to see me as some kind of puppetmaster, pulling the strings. It wasn't like that at all."

"But, Igor, you- "

"Davey was an idealist in search of a cause. What I did was provide the cause. That's all."

Igor leans back against the headstone of the grave and looks at her. His face is unreadable. William was right. He's not going to admit the truth, he's not going to accept an ounce of responsibility, he's not going to express one word of remorse for anything that happened. He can't see her, he can't hear her. It's as if the fundamentalists were already here and she was already wearing a chador.

Leaving him with Purmamet oglu Iles, Camilla gets up and walks away.

*

By the time she gets back to the University, the focus group has finished, and the participants have left. The room is empty except for Shamor. There is no sign of Rustam. The table is covered with scripts and cassettes and paper cups. Shamor is tidying up. Her face is tired above her neat brown suit. Camilla is hot and out of breath. She starts to apologise for missing the group, but can barely get the words out. She stops abruptly in the middle of a sentence. Shamor takes a step towards her, looking alarmed. Has something happened? Is she all right? Yes, says Camilla, she's fine, it was just an old friend, someone she knew in Munich and happened to run into here, and-

She breaks off to get her voice back to normal, but then Shamor places an arm round her shoulders and guides her into a chair, and before Camilla knows where she is, she is telling Shamor all about it. Shamor lets her run on to the end without interrupting. For a few minutes, they are both silent.

Then Shamor says, "You know, Camilla, this is a terrible country. I don't know if you Americans can understand just how bad it was. Under the old system, we all had to do such terrible things. And now we have to find a way to live with what we did." She pauses. Camilla waits. "All of us in this country have something on our conscience, and none of us want to own up to what we did. Not even to ourselves. Some memories are just too painful to be contemplated."

"So what do you do about it?"

"We block the the memories out. We don't talk about them, often we aren't even aware of them. We rationalize the events out of existence, simply put them out of our minds."

She looks up and meets Camilla's eyes, a neat middle-aged lady with impeccable professional credentials, who has lived nearly all her life in a police state. Camilla lowers her gaze.

"He says it's not his fault. He says we misunderstood his intentions, and that he never intended to do us harm."

"He probably believes that."

"He must know it isn't true."

"He has convinced himself that it's true. People need to manage their guilt to go on living, Camilla. It's a question of self-preservation."

"But does he know that what he did was wrong?"

"Why else would he deny it?"

"How can I convince him to tell me the truth?"

Shamor looks at her gravely. "It might be unwise to try. As long as he can deny what happened, he'll be all right. If he has to acknowledge it one day, he may break down completely."

*

When Camilla leaves the University, the Jeep is waiting for her. Sasha is sprawled in the back seat like an overgrown sunflower, looking her over contemptuously. Igor, in a fresh black linen shirt, gets down and comes to meet her.

"It's your last night in Samarkand, Milenka. Will you come and have a drink with me at the Maracanda?"

There is no way to refuse. Camilla climbs in beside him.

"Are you feeling better now?" inquires Igor solicitously.

"I'm just fine, thank you, Igor."

"Did I do what you wanted? Have I spelled it all out to you? Sometimes people need to hear things said to them, even though they know it all already. I hope I have made it easier for you."

Camilla is speechless. Igor doesn't seem to expect an answer.

When they arrive at the Maracanda, it's already dark. The courtyard is almost empty, apart from several very young waitresses in tight red tops and short black skirts. Camilla hasn't seen them before. During the day, the waiters are all men. Igor settles her at a table near the fountain and goes off to organize some wine. Camilla considers him curiously while he confers with one of the waitresses. Shamor seemed to think he was in a bad way. She had discussed the chances of panic attacks and tachycardia, noted that dreams were a useful way of allowing the psyche to come to terms with unwelcome phenomena, and inquired whether Igor suffered from insomnia. Camilla had been surprised to hear that all this might be going on under Igor's cool outer facade. Justice exists, though you can't always see it. Your mind will see you get what you deserve, if nobody else does.

Igor returns with a bottle of wine and two glasses. The wine is a Montalcino red. It's what they drank on their last night in Italy.

"Taste it," he says, "and tell me what you think."

"Very nice. Where do you get it from?"

"Do you remember the wine merchant in Siena?"

"You get it from that shop we used to go to?"

"They ship it out to me twice a year. Let's drink a toast. To the past, Milenka!"

She collects her wits and raises her glass. "To the past! To the golden hilltop!"

"And now -- please -- will you tell me about Rachel?"

Camilla looks at him attentively. There is something in his voice that wasn't there before.

"I can't, Igor. I really can't. I told you that already."

He thinks it over for a minute. "Then will you give her a message for me?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Tell her that I love her. Tell her that I miss her. Tell her I've missed her every day for seven years. I tried not to think of her, but she's been there in my mind all the time."

Camilla is electrified. She has no doubt that what he says is true. *You are engraved in my heart forever.* My God, who would have thought it? She remembers what Rachel said a week ago, when they were having dinner in that five-star mafia joint. At the time, she hadn't believed it.

"She knows that already, Igor. She's always known it."

Igor doesn't answer. Camilla turns her head to glance at him, and looks away again at once, shaken to her roots by the way he is smiling, the tenderness of his look. It's as if Rachel had suddenly appeared in person before him. Camilla feels like an intruder. She shouldn't be there. What is going on in Igor's mind is too intimate for any third party to witness.

She looks away across the courtyard, and her eye is caught by Sasha, standing in a corner talking to another man. Something vaguely clandestine about the two of them holds her attention. The face of his friend is in shadow, and they are both out of Igor's line of vision. She wonders what they're discussing. Drug harvests? Kalashnikov sales? Laundering merits of Luxemburg over Cyprus? Then the second man shifts his position, the light falls on his face, and she recognizes William Kavanagh.

"Igor Borisovich?" The waitress is standing beside them. Igor is jerked out of his trance. He looks up inquiringly, she says something in Uzbek, Igor nods.

"Milenka, I have to leave you. Finish your wine, and Sasha will take you home. We will talk some more tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? But I- "

"I have a meeting in Tashkent tomorrow evening. We will drive there together. It will be more comfortable for you than the plane. I will pick you up at ten, and we will be in Tashkent by three."

*

The Maracanda has been filling up, and all the tables are taken. Most of the clients are middle-aged men in dark suits, and they all seem to know each other. There's a lot of waving and table-hopping. They sit down briefly to confer, and then move on.

The occupants of the next table get up to go. Two others take their place. A third man strolls by to say hello to everybody. He stares hard at Camilla on his way past. His look is not pleasant. It's nothing like the usual sexual summing-up, more a sort of ocular frisking for weapons. Camilla suddenly remembers the warnings about Samarkand by night. Apart from the waitresses, she is the only woman in the place.

"I thought I told you not to come here after dark." William Kavanagh drops into Igor's vacated chair.

"The owner brought me."

"Wanted to introduce you to his business partners, did he?" says William sardonically. Camilla looks uneasily over her shoulder. "That's right, princess. What you're seeing now is the real Igor. These are his friends and associates. This is the time of day he makes his money. This is how he maintains his original tiles and his charming little fountain and his imported ciabatta. And his fine Italian wine." He picks up the bottle of Montalcino and examines the label. "Why don't I join you in a glass of this excellent vintage, and then I'll take you back to the hotel."

He stops a passing waitress and asks for a glass. His Russian is atrocious. The waitress nods and moves on to another table with a tray of drinks. As she leans forward to serve the drinks,

Camilla notices that the girl's whole body is trembling with nerves. Has something happened to alarm her? Camilla stares round in bewilderment, but there is nothing to be seen. Outwardly, the courtyard is tranquil. No one is behaving oddly, no one is making threats, but the atmosphere is suddenly very strange.

"Yeah, it gets like this sometimes," says Kavanagh.

"But what's happening?" The waitresses' faces are growing blanker by the minute, their smiles tenser, their manner more deferential.

"Never quite figured that out, to tell you the truth. I reckon it's none- "

He breaks off. Camilla follows his gaze. At the entrance to the courtyard, Sasha is shaking hands with a slim middle-aged man in a well-cut dark suit. Not a local, Camilla surmises, he doesn't have the right kind of features. Nor the right kind of tailor.

"Who's that?" she asks, as Sasha ushers him inside.

"He's a Syrian. Works for Al Qaeda. Specializes in recruiting young middle-class malcontents, showing them how to handle weapons and interpret the Koran, telling them how to blend into Western cities and move money around, and then sending them out into the wicked Western world to see what damage they can do. Right now, it looks as though the good doctor has an appointment with Igor."

"Oh my God. What for?"

"He'll be here to buy arms. And to get a drink, of course. Pretty dry in Afghanistan, I'm told. So, tell me, Camilla, what did you do today?"

"Igor took me to see Maracanda."

"Did you get an apology?"

"I did not. And I'm not going to get one, I can see that now. You were right, I should never have come here."

She drains her glass. It's time to go and pack. Tomorrow she can talk to Rachel, and- "Oh my God, Rachel!"

"What?"

"I completely forgot. Igor's driving me to Tashkent tomorrow, but I'm supposed to meet Rachel there."

"Rachel's in Tashkent?"

"She's flying down tomorrow. What am I going to do? How can I make sure she doesn't see him?"

There's a slight, a very slight pause. A stirring of something Camilla can't identify.

"Maybe I can help," says Kavanagh. "What time are you meeting her?"

*

From: William Kavanagh

To: Rachel Stern

hi rachel, i hear you're coming to tashkent. camilla can't make your meeting, but i'll pick you up at the airport when the almaty flight gets in. got a proposition for you. best, william

*

THE GREAT GAME

A breeze had got up when I got back to the Maracanda, and it was too cool for comfort in the courtyard. Igor and I sat in one of the inner rooms instead. It was late, and there weren't many people left. Occasionally, someone drifted through on their way out, but it didn't matter, they couldn't hear what we were saying. Igor had an opera coming full blast over the sound system, and in any case, the inner rooms were designed for confidentiality. The tables were set far apart, and the high-backed chairs and couches increased the feeling of privacy. The lighting was reassuringly dim. The carpets on the walls absorbed the tinkle of glasses and the details of illegal drug sales. I sprawled on a couch with my feet on the table in uncouth Yankee style. Igor sat in the chair next to me, legs crossed, smoking, giving me a resume of the plot of *Don Carlo*. It sounded complicated. Opera was not my thing, though I was beginning to get used to it since I'd been hanging out at the Maracanda.

"Listen," said Igor, "this is the king coming in now. Filippo."

"Filippo?"

"Philip II of Spain," said Igor patiently. "He married Élisabeth de Valois, the French king's daughter, and now he realizes that he made a mistake. He's too old for her and she doesn't love him. He's the king, he's all-powerful, but he doesn't have the power to make her love him. It's his son she loves instead. Don Carlo."

The music rose to a crescendo. *Amor per me non ha! amor per me non ha.* "Listen," said Igor. "*She doesn't love me, she doesn't love me.* Can you hear the anguish in his voice?"

Rather to my surprise, I could.

"It's dawn," Igor went on, "he's been awake all night in his study in the Escorial Palace, he's consumed by regrets, he can't sleep. But he's old, soon he will die, and then he will sleep forever, in the vaults of the Escorial, but he will sleep alone. Listen."

*Dormirò sol nel manto mio regal
Quando la mia giornata è giunta a sera
Dormirò sol sotto la volta nera
Là nell'avello dell'Escorial.*

"It's very powerful," I said. "Who did you say wrote this?"

"Verdi. I could listen to this over and over again. At night, when I'm alone in the apartment up there, I sometimes do."

"Lying alone in the vaults of the Escorial. Ah, the futility of power. Do you think about death a lot, Igor?"

He inhaled the smoke from his cigarette and took his time answering.

"Death is with us always. It's something we have to accept."

"Especially if we play for stakes as high as you."

Igor raised his eyebrows.

"I happened to see a couple of guys from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in here the other night."

"Really?"

"As I'm sure you know, the IMU is banned."

"Is that right?"

"One of the Russian guys who sells arms was there too."

Igor gazed wearily round the room.

"And I couldn't help thinking how convenient it would be if the fundamentalists were so well armed that the Uzbeks couldn't handle them on their own, and had to call on the Russian armed forces for assistance."

Igor smiled the secular smile of someone who had never come within spitting distance of an Islamic fundamentalist in his life. Sasha put his head round the door to make sure I wasn't murdering his boss, and Igor raised a hand to indicate that everything was all right.

"You're playing a dangerous game, Igor."

"I run a restaurant, William. What people talk about in my restaurant is of no concern to me."

"Not even if they talk about ways to force Central Asia back into the Russian sphere of influence?"

"Russians would never sell arms to the fundamentalists."

"Most Russians wouldn't, that's quite true."

"Is this the plot for your next science fiction novel?"

"I also saw your friend Telnikov talking to one of the Iranians the other day. I have to say, I liked that even less."

"Telnikov is dead," said Igor.

"Dead?"

"He was shot in Moscow yesterday. Sitting in his car at a red light on the way to the Hotel Metropol. A mafia contract by the sound of it." For a moment, he stared sightlessly into his cigarette smoke. "Are you afraid Russia is going to sell arms to Teheran as well?"

"No, because you're doing that already. Plus there's a sizeable contingent of Iranians studying rocket construction at institutes in and around Moscow, and several thousand Russian technicians working in Iran."

"Regional cooperation," said Igor blandly.

"Precautionary measures to ensure that Iran has no incentive to seek better relations with the United States. A pipeline across Iranian territory is the shortest and cheapest option to get Caspian oil to the world market. At the moment, it's not feasible because relations between Iran and the US are not good enough. But if they improved, and the pipeline became a possibility, this would be good news for everyone. Except Moscow."

"The Caspian is not America's backyard, Kavanagh."

"It's not Russia's either. Caspian oil should be accessible to everyone. The rational solution is to build multiple pipelines to get the oil to the markets, but Moscow wants to keep the pipelines on Russian soil."

"I really think- "

"The Caspian is an unstable region, and Russian policy is to keep it that way. Russia has troops stationed in Armenia, Georgia, and all the Central Asian republics except Uzbekistan."

"Central Asia and the Caspian have been linked with Russia since the nineteenth century," said Igor patiently. "They're used to dealing with us, and we're used to dealing with them. America has no reason to interfere in this region, Kavanagh. The only reason you're doing so now is greed. All you want is our gas and oil."

"We see it as our responsibility to preserve the independence and economic viability of the new Caspian states. They've been dominated by Russia for a century and a half, but that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. They have the right to determine their own future."

"Central Asia falls naturally into the Russian sphere of influence- "

"The Russian area of self-interest. There are two reasons you don't want to let go of Central Asia. One: strategic. You want a band of buffer states between yourselves and the neighbouring Islamic countries: Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan. Two: natural resources. We may be greedy for oil, but you won't let go without a struggle either."

I paused. Igor lit another cigarette.

"If I were you, I'd be careful, Igor. There are all kinds of deals being made in Central Asia right now, and a lot of them are taking place under your roof. I saw that guy from Al Qaeda tonight. You're making a lot of enemies."

Igor raised his eyebrows. "Is this a threat?"

"Let's call it a warning."

Igor shrugged. "I get warnings every day, Kavanagh. Listen."

*I shall sleep alone in my royal mantle
when the final hour has struck for me.
I shall sleep alone beneath the black vaults,
in the crypt of the Escorial.*

"This is what awaits us all. What other warning can you give me?"

The aria was over. The music changed and deepened. I wondered if Igor had had a hand in the killing of his old friend Telnikov. Someone announced, "*Il Grande Inquisitor*."

"What happens next?" I said.

"Filippo asks the Grand Inquisitor if he has the right to kill Don Carlo."

"But that's his son, isn't it? What does the Grand Inquisitor say?"

Igor looked at me for a moment over the rim of his glass. "He says that the peace of the world is worth more than the blood of a rebel son. That the sacrifice is harsh, but the faith demands it."

"And does the King go along with that?"

"Of course," said Igor. "What choice does he have?"

*

When I left Samarkand, it was still dark, and the immense shapes of the madrassahs around the Registan were mere grey hulks against the skyline.

The road to Tashkent was a modern four-lane highway, running past cotton fields and squat mud villages. Once upon a time, it had been the old Silk Road. Looking out of the window at the mess

of telegraph poles and rundown factories, I found that hard to imagine. Golden journeying had succumbed to socialist blight. Still, the road wasn't bad, and the traffic was sparse. The Niva I had borrowed from the Embassy ran well. I would reach the airport in plenty of time.

Rachel's arrival was an unexpected windfall. I had known for some days now that I couldn't count on Camilla for help. I had always suspected that more had gone on in Tuscany than anyone was prepared to tell me, and her visit to Igor's apartment had confirmed my suspicions. They had left out the one ingredient that made sense of all the rest. Camilla's feelings for Igor were too ambivalent to serve any plan of mine. Rachel, on the other hand, had suffered too much. I could not be sure how she would receive my proposition, but I thought there was a chance that she would go along with it.

As far as Igor himself was concerned, I had no scruples at all. He had been playing the game for years. He knew the score. He was one of the men who had been at the top of the heap in the old system, and who had simply stayed there when the system changed. There were a lot like him in post-Soviet Russia. Some had stayed on in their old offices, some had moved sideways into the Duma or the Kremlin, and some were amassing private fortunes in banks, oil, television -- and restaurants. It was people like them who were preventing the newly independent states from making a new start. The fact that these men were responsible for wreaking tragedy on the Soviet people had never been held against them. Igor didn't deserve to flourish the way he had. He had left three ruined lives behind him when he left Munich, and there was no likelihood he would ever be called to account. I had seen some terrible things during my time in Afghanistan -- betrayals, murders, mutilations, inhumanity -- but these were people at war. In peacetime, I had never seen anything as cold-blooded as Igor's betrayal of three people who loved him. When the USSR collapsed in 1991, I had hoped that it would be succeeded by something better than the regime that had persecuted my mother, sent my father to the camps, and driven him to an early death only a year after we were allowed to leave for Boston. Most of the time I was disappointed, but now and again I got a chance to redress the balance.

*

By the time the plane is over the mountains on the Kazak-Uzbek border, Rachel is regretting the age of camels. The plane's engines make a frightful racket and have a disconcerting habit of slowing down ... but ... not... quite ... stopping ... in ... mid-air. A blowsy flight attendant passes with a tray of beer cans and chocolate bars. A few tenge notes lie on the tray, in case anyone thinks they are being offered this bounty for free. Rachel's book lies unopened on her lap. It's called *Spy's Demise*. Now that it's too late to turn back, she's trying to work out what she hopes to achieve by flying to Uzbekistan. For years, she has been doing her best to make herself believe that Igor is dead. Why has she decided to bring him back to life? The flight attendant, abandoning the attempt at profitability, is back with what seems to be an authentic free meal. Rachel examines it. Processed cheese, bread, a piece of dry Swiss roll, a tin of unidentified meat, a container of mineral water. She drinks the water and eats the bread. It'll keep her from starvation until she gets to Tashkent, and then Kavanagh can take her for a meal somewhere, and tell her about his mysterious proposition, and explain what's happened to Camilla.

Rachel is not unduly perturbed by Camilla's delayed arrival. Today is Sunday, Camilla isn't leaving till Tuesday, and one day is all they need to talk about Igor. On Tuesday, Camilla will leave

for Washington, and Rachel will get on a plane for Samarkand. Armed with Camilla's directions, she will set out to look for the Café Maracanda. And then?

Revenge, of course. It's like a clear small voice speaking in her ear, above the din of the engines. Rachel freezes, with a piece of bread halfway to her mouth. Yes, that's it. That's exactly what she wants. Somehow or other she is going to take revenge. For herself, for Davey, for Camilla. For Thomas. For the seven lost years. For Vadim, for all the rest of the poor sods that the KGB had fucked over once in Soviet days, and were busy fucking over again in mafia guise.

Unlike Camilla, Rachel doesn't have to go to Samarkand to learn the truth. What she needs is closure. And maybe, just maybe, she is going to get it.

*

The light in Tashkent is stronger and sharper than Almaty. The city is dynamic and glossy, purposeful and bustling. It knows where it's going. The traffic sweeps down the broad tree-lined avenues, the fountains have water in them, the leafy squares are shady and pleasant. Tashkent is a new town on an old site. Most of its past disappeared during a 1966 earthquake that levelled vast areas of the city. It was rebuilt with vast plazas and imposing public buildings. It has panache, if not exactly style.

Rachel finds the atmosphere invigorating. After the murk of Almaty, it's a relief to find herself in a place where the issues are clear-cut. The mafiosi in the bar opposite the Tamerlane museum are rigged out in their trademark black suits. Amnesty International issues regular warnings about the fate of political prisoners. The government allegedly boils dissidents in oil in the best tradition of the emirs. In Tashkent, you know where you are, and who is who.

William was waiting at the airport when her plane got in. They drove into town past newly-constructed banks and offices, a splendid new presidential palace, and a glittering new parliament building. On the way, William outlined his proposition. He didn't spell out the details, but it was clear what he meant. Rachel said yes without hesitating. She didn't even need to think about it. For a while, her own decisiveness impressed her, until she realized that this was how she used to be. For the first time since Igor's defection, she was rediscovering the person she once was. For seven years, she had been trying to cope with what he did to her, but now she was going to strike back.

And now here she is in a Turkish café with two Russian hoodlums called Sasha and Vasily, listening while they and William manoeuvre themselves into an understanding. Being Russians, they start off with the ideological aspects of the deal. The practical details can wait till later. It reminds Rachel of something out of Conrad, although Sasha, she suspects, would defy even Conrad's imagination.

"I tell you, writer, I am ashamed to be Russian. I am ashamed to drag my fucking Russian face across the world. To say you are Russian is like saying you come from garbage bag of humanity. Please, throw us out with the filth, this is all we are good for."

The other patrons of the café are Turkish construction workers come to sample a little home cooking, and goggle nostalgically at the Turkish television. Fortunately, they're too busy mooning over some spangled singer to pay Sasha any attention. Vasily is older, close to sixty, with a high domed forehead and an air of authority. Sasha treats him with deference and calls him Comrade General. William teeters unwillingly on the edge of respect, and doesn't call him anything. Vasily wears gold-rimmed spectacles over expressionless blue eyes. His opinions, unlike Sasha's, are cold and coherent and concisely expressed in near-perfect English.

"Our country is sinking into corruption and crime. Everyone steals, everyone takes bribes. Everyone has a file on everyone else."

As far as Rachel can see, this is nothing new. It sounds to her exactly like the last days of the Soviet Union, but she can tell it would be a mistake to mention it.

"Yeltsin good for one thing only," says Sasha, "and that is to climb on fucking tank. Only honest day work he do in whole fucking life. Yeltsin President of Russia seven years, and in all that time, what he do?"

Vasily has the response at his fingertips. "Yeltsin abolished the Soviet Union, but put nothing in its place. He gave away State property to a few corrupt men bent on personal enrichment- "

"Hey," says William, "just a minute. Let's get one thing straight before we go any further. Who exactly is your target here?"

"We are concerned only with our own," says Vasily with dignity. "The only people who concern us are former KGB officers who have brought shame and dishonour on their organization."

William catches Rachel's eye. She looks back at him without flinching.

"In that case, I really see no reason we shouldn't work together," says William nonchalantly. "We have the same ultimate goal, though for different reasons."

*

When they leave the café, night has fallen. The streets are thronged with strolling crowds. Loud Turkish music blares from the restaurant opposite the Timur Museum, and the statue of the Emperor is surrounded by admiring tourists.

"So who were those two?" Rachel demands.

"Basically they're KGB," says William. "Sasha is Igor's bodyguard, and Vasily is a big wheel in Moscow."

"And they're worried about KGB officers hooking up with the mafia?"

"They belong to a KGB anti-corruption group which calls itself Feliks."

Rachel looks at him. This is getting weirder and weirder. "Feliks like the cat?"

"No, Feliks like Dzerzhinski. The founder of the Cheka. The guy who said that a security officer should have a cool head, a warm heart, and clean hands. Vasily and Sasha think people like Igor are ruining the image of the KGB as men of high moral character waging war on the enemies of society."

Rachel laughs out loud. It's not just weird, it's surreal. She can't believe she's hearing this, she can't believe she's here. Since the conversation with Sasha and Vasily, she feels as if a burden has been lifted from her shoulders. They wander towards Sayilqokh Street, one of the many renamed and pedestrianised Karl Marx Streets that dot the capitals of Central Asia. The crowds grow thicker, the smell of shashlyk drifts on the soft autumn air.

"What about you? You're not worried about Igor's moral character, are you?"

"Nope. My goal is merely to get the Maracanda closed down."

"Why?"

"Because the deals being done there are harmful to US interests."

"If the Maracanda is closed they'll just go somewhere else."

"Ultimately, yes, but we'll have delivered our message. We'll have signalled that the Caspian isn't a Russian monopoly any more. The United States has the right to a say in what's going on, and we

are not willing to tolerate activities that undermine our position. In particular, we do not want to see Caspian oil revenues being used to rebuild the Russian empire."

How very American, thinks Rachel. Every backwoods café on the face of the earth is supposed to show proper respect to Washington, and if it doesn't, you send in the gunboats. Sayilqokh Street is lined with stalls selling hot dogs, paintings, jewellery and second-hand books. Somewhere behind them, a singer-guitarist with a heavy accent is urging the crowd to just call him angel of the morning, angel. Rachel stops next to a stall laid out with znachki, the commemorative badges that the Soviets used to distribute for anything and everything: philatelic clubs, sporting events, Great October, May Day.

"Are you into those things?" says William.

"Davey used to collect them. I'm going to buy one."

She selects a badge in the shape of a head of Lenin with a red flag behind him. William pays for it.

"Not going to wear it?" he says, as she drops it in her pocket.

"No," says Rachel. "I just want it somewhere I can feel it."

*

Davey had rung her doorbell late one night. It must have been towards the end of January 1991, four months after Igor had left. He said he was passing and had seen the light, but Rachel doubted that was true. There was an air of purposefulness about him that had nothing to do with chance. He had come there for a reason. He had something to tell her.

So he sat down, and she offered him a drink, though he'd plainly been drinking for most of the evening already. He took a gulp of whisky, and plunged right in. "I met Igor when he started playing tennis," he announced, and for a moment Rachel considered throwing him straight back out on to the street, whisky and all, because she was in no mood to listen to reminiscences of Igor, but she needn't have worried. This was no idle recollection: it had a beginning, middle and end, and Davey was merely starting at the beginning to make sure he got it all in and forgot nothing. Igor had been with the Radio for a couple of years already, Davey went on, but they had never had a chance to talk before. "Remember, I'm just a farm boy from Indiana, so I'm pretty pleased with myself when I find myself playing tennis with a real live defector. Is this living or what?"

He took a steadying swallow of whisky. "Especially when he suggests we go for a drink afterwards, and we talk about this and that, and he tells me he reads all my papers about literature and culture and he thinks they're pretty good, but that I need setting straight on one or two points- "

"Jesus," said Rachel, before she can stop herself. "Oh, Jesus!" but Davey wasn't listening, he was back there in the Chinese Tower, with the students and tourists, being set straight on Russian culture. Anyway, the upshot was that they made a date to play tennis and another date to talk, and they discovered a common passion for Chekhov, which astonished Rachel, because she had never seen Igor reading Chekhov in her life.

"This would be in 1987," said Davey. "We'd been married for about a year, I guess." Rachel looked blank, so he added helpfully, "Needed to come up for air, you know?"

The air that Igor gave him to breathe was a purer, headier draught than he got at home. Camilla made him pick up his dirty shirts off the floor and call her if he was going to be late. Igor gave him purification, rebirth and spiritual regeneration. Talk of the Russian soul moved on to spiritual ruin under the communists, to reform, restructuring, and ultimately salvation. The salvation of Russia,

Igor felt, lay in perestroika. It wasn't perfect, admittedly, it had its faults, but it was all there was. Without it, the Russian people were lost. Gorbachev had diagnosed the dangers and set the reforms in motion, but he needed all the help he could get. Fortunately, there were institutions like the Radio which were uniquely well placed to help out.

Davey paused, looked into his glass and drained it. Rachel filled it up.

"So this went on for a year or so. When the weather was too bad to play tennis, we used to meet for lunch, or a drink after work. We didn't talk about perestroika all the time, but somehow everything we did talk about seemed to be making the same point. Even though I didn't see clearly what the point was at the time. And then, things began to change. He started commenting on my papers in more detail. He'd say things like, This was very interesting, I thought you made a good point here. This was very perceptive, but I couldn't help thinking that this was a little harsh. Did you really have to say this, couldn't you have said that in another way.... "

Another pause, another large swallow.

"So I guess I started looking at what I was writing in a different way, I guess I started anticipating his criticisms... "

They were getting too close for comfort. Davey broke off, regrouped, approached from another angle. "Later he started teasing me about being anti-Gorbachev. He claimed I didn't approve of what Gorbachev was doing. He said I wanted to see the hardliners back in power. Well that annoyed me. Obviously. So I guess what happened is that I started to tone things down."

That was it, they had reached the heart of the matter. Davey surveyed the terrain and decided that camouflage was no longer useful. In other words, he explained, he was engaging in self-censorship to stop Igor needling him, and to encourage Gorby on the path of reform. Defending the Free World, of which Gorbachev had mysteriously become a part.

That Davey should have been doing things like that, that anyone at all should have been doing things like that, had never crossed Rachel's mind. "Didn't anyone notice?" she asked.

"Culture isn't important enough. Everyone was too interested in politics and the media to pay attention."

"Oh," said Rachel, and tried to think what to say next, but a detailed response was not required. They weren't finished yet. There was more to come. Davey was determined to spare himself nothing.

"Office gossip," he announced, with the air of a man crossing items off a list. "I used to pass on all the gossip. Everything I came across. He always seemed interested. I didn't think anything of it."

"The Radio runs on gossip. I can't imagine you told him anything he hadn't already heard five times over." She was trying to exonerate him, not necessarily for his own sake, more likely for hers.

"Wait. Did you ever hear that Stephen Keating had a cocaine problem?"

"Not until there was that thing in *Pravda* about narcotics abuse among the warmongering imperialists at the so-called Radio Liberty, and the notorious Stefan Keitan who as everyone knows- " She clapped a hand to her mouth. "Oh my God!"

"It wasn't widely known. There were only two or three people in the department who knew about it. I mentioned it to Igor two weeks before that piece appeared."

Rachel was too amazed to speak. Davey emptied his glass and refilled it. When he had most of the refill inside him, he continued. "Keating shared an office with Camilla. That's how she got to know about it, and she told me. When the *Pravda* piece appeared, she got really upset trying to

work out who could have told them about it. I swore to her that I hadn't told anybody. The odd thing is that I wasn't lying. I had somehow managed to forget that conversation with Igor." He drained the glass, put it carefully down on the table, and looked at her. "Do you believe me?"

"Have you told Camilla what you're telling me?"

"No, I.... Not yet. I.... I'm going to, of course." He stared silently before him for a while, and then repeated his question. "Do you believe me?"

"I don't know," said Rachel. "Maybe. All this is... "

"I've heard that spies develop the trick of compartmentalizing their minds," said Davey. "Everything is kept separate from everything else. It's the only way they can function."

"Davey, you aren't a spy!"

"Wait," said Davey, picking up his glass again and looking round for the bottle. "Wait."

Rachel waited.

"You see," said Davey apologetically, "there's the Daily Report."

Editing the Daily Report, it transpired, had been an original idea from the creative genius of Strugatsky Inc. You've been doing literature for six years, Davidka, why don't you try something else? There are great things happening in Russia. You'd be in the thick of it, you'd have your finger on the pulse. Political life is so interesting at present, what a chance to be part of it all, chronicling the new Russia! Camilla thought it was a good idea. There was no competition for the job. On the contrary, his candidacy, once evoked, was jumped at. He was an old hand, he knew the Radio, he knew the broadcasting area, he was supremely competent to take on a job like this. Davey was flattered, Camilla continued encouraging, Igor was sufficiently master of his trade to stand back and let his apprentice get on with it.

And so for nearly two years, Davey became the chronicler of Igor's new Russia, a portrayer of the international scene, a discreet contributor to the news story of the decade. Gorbachev might think he was making history, but Davey knew better than that. He knew who really made it. This was what Davey had dreamed of when he was an idealistic young student back in grad school. For years he'd just been sitting at a desk analyzing literature, but now at last he was a hero, he was struggling alongside Gorbachev against the evil old villains of the Communist Party, he was Fighting the Good Fight for new thinking and democracy and arms control. And at times, it was no mean combat. Nobody paid attention when he doctored his cultural stories, but when he doctored other people's stories, it generated a fair amount of flak. People complained about having their contributions rewritten or altered or simply passed over. Davey stood his ground. He had been working at Radio Liberty for seven years, he didn't let himself be pushed around, he knew how to justify his position. "It wasn't that important, I was running out of space," he would say. Or, "We can't say things like that, I just toned it down a little." Or else, "Your syntax was a little sloppy, do you really think this changes the sense?" And finally, when pushed, "Our job is to report events, not rumours."

People grumbled, but no one appeared to actually suspect anything, and it was in this that Igor's genius was visible. Choosing an American as his agent of influence was a master stroke. A Russian might be assumed to have some axe or other to grind, but an American was deemed automatically free of ideological encumbrances. And if Davey's resolution wilted, Igor was always there to offer support and encouragement over a hard-fought game of tennis, or a drink in their usual bar on Amalienstrasse, and his basic judgement was always the same: "You're the editor, not them, and you're the one who's responsible."

Responsible, in his own opinion, Davey certainly was. The Daily Report enjoyed a wide circulation in Washington and elsewhere, among government officials, journalists, academics, and assorted others. Davey drained his glass once more for courage and provided Rachel with highlights from the distribution list. Congress, the CIA, the State Department. The United Nations and NATO. The *Los Angeles Times* and *Le Figaro*. The Rand Corporation, the University of Birmingham, the Bundesinstitut für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien. Half the institutions of the Western world, Davey believed, were liable to have been contaminated by his KGB-inspired editing by omission.

"I've been so stupid, Rache, so fucking stupid. I don't know what got into me, I don't know why I listened to him. He manipulated me from start to finish, he wound me round his little finger. And I drank it all in, I let him do it."

"We all did," said Rachel.

"But what am I going to do about it? I can't alter what I wrote, I can't issue new reports. The damage is done, and I can't undo it."

"Davey, it's not as bad as that. The Daily Report isn't a policy document. It doesn't contain any analysis. It's just a day to day record of events. The people who read it were getting information from other sources too. They didn't make up their minds based just on what you reported."

It wasn't the right answer. "But what am I going to *do* about it? Shouldn't I tell the Security Office what I did?"

"I don't know if that's a good idea. It might get you in trouble, and it's too late to do anything to Igor."

"But surely I ought to tell someone? Kavanagh seems like a decent enough guy."

"Davey, what you did wasn't illegal. It's not a prosecutable offence."

(Much later, it occurred to her that it might have been a mistake to say that. In his own mind, Davey had committed a crime, and deserved to be punished. If his disgrace had become known and he had been sacked from the Radio, it might perhaps have saved him. He had broken no laws, but he had betrayed his own notions of honour. What he wanted now was retribution, but it was not forthcoming. When he got up his nerve a few weeks later to pay a visit to Kavanagh, Kavanagh merely shrugged. With no one willing to judge him, Davey was obliged to take things in hand himself.)

Since the bottle of whisky was just about finished, Rachel took him to bed. With all the liquor he had inside him, it wasn't a great success. In the middle of the night, she was woken by a hoarse ugly rhythmic choking sound. Davey was crying. There was a pillow over his head and his shoulders were heaving. Rachel lay there and listened, not daring to touch him.

A year later, when she learned about the skiing accident, on her first day back at the Radio after the enforced sojourn in Southport, she realized she had known for months that this was going to happen. This or something like it. Igor's contempt had struck Davey a fatal blow. Mined by self-doubt and self-loathing, he had sunk so far into his alcoholic haze that he was no longer capable of saving himself. Kavanagh was not cooperating, Rachel could not have helped even if she wanted to, Camilla never found out how deep the blow had gone.

Davey had no one to turn to. Alone, he did not have the strength to survive. The tree on the mountain at Kitzbühel was his only way out.

*

THE FLIGHT FROM THE ENCHANTER

In the middle of the night, Camilla wakes from a deep sleep. For a moment she doesn't know where she is. There are no lights: nothing looks familiar. Then a voice says softly, "Milenka?"

She turns over and sees Igor standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the light in the hall. By the look of it, he has just come in.

"What time is it?"

"Half past one."

"How did your meeting go?" Camilla switches on the light.

"Not very well. May I come in a minute?"

He sits down on the bed without waiting for an answer. His own room is at the end of the hall. The apartment is on the ground floor of a high-rise building in a suburb of Tashkent. It belongs to Igor's sister. There's a chronic drip in the toilet, and a strange smell in the shower. Camilla had intended to spend the night in the Hotel Uzbekistan, where Rachel is staying, but Igor had vetoed the plan as soon as they got to Tashkent. "It is an old Inturist hotel and very over-priced, Milenka. The Intercontinental or the Meridien would be better for you, but they are even more expensive. The best thing is for you to stay at my place overnight." Camilla had given in without arguing, even though it turned out that they weren't actually going to his place, which was off-limits today for some unexplained reason, but to his sister Sonya's rental flat in Chilanazar. She had suspected something like this would happen. It was just as well she had made contingency plans with Kavanagh.

"Has Sasha been here?" says Igor.

"No, I thought he was with you."

"I haven't seen him all evening."

There's something odd about his voice. Camilla looks at him more closely, and realizes he's trembling. His whole body is shaking. Startled, she puts a hand out towards him. He falls towards her and buries his face in her neck. After a moment, she puts her arms round him. At once, he lifts his head and starts to kiss her.

She knows right away that he's serious. He's not playing with her, he's not keeping her off balance, he's not trying to make her forget things. This time he needs her. The last time he kissed her like this was in Tuscany, on the terrace, after Davey and Rachel had gone inside to wash up and they were left alone in the dark. Camilla feels her knees turn to water in the very same way, her stomach lurch, her breathing quicken. Yes, yes, that's it, she hasn't been imagining it all these years, that's exactly how it was. In another minute she won't be able to pull back, and neither will he. In another minute, they'll stand up and he'll lead her round the corner of the house, kissing her all the way, into the unfamiliar bedroom he shares with Rachel, except that now it's not unfamiliar any more, she's done this before, she's knows exactly how it's going to be. Igor moves on top of her,

she's beginning to push aside his jacket, unbutton his shirt, his hands are sliding under her nightdress, when suddenly he mutters something under his breath.

The spell is broken. Camilla pushes him off and sits up.

"What did you say?"

Igor rolls on his side and looks at her. For several seconds, she has the feeling he's not seeing her. Then his eyes focus on her face, and he says, "I don't know. Did I say something?"

"You said, 'Oh God, Rachel'. Did you think I was Rachel?"

Igor passes a hand over his eyes. "No. It's not that. I knew you were Camilla. I thought- I thought Rachel was somewhere nearby. It's very odd. I thought for a moment we were back in Italy, at the villa- I don't know what- That's never happened to me before."

Camilla looks at him attentively. His face is grey and shapeless, and there's something dishevelled and uncontrolled about him that she has never seen before. Is this one of the symptoms of breakdown that Shamor talked about? A flashback? Blanking out? What's happening to you, Igor, she thinks grimly, is that the past is catching up with you. First me, then Davey, now Rachel.

"Why did you leave Munich, Igor?"

It takes him a while to answer. He seems to have trouble remembering. "I had no choice," he tells her. "Gorbachev was letting things get out of hand, at some point there would be a hardline backlash, and when that happened, I wouldn't be able to manage the situation. It would be impossible to present a conservative crackdown in a positive light. I asked to be withdrawn before we left for Italy."

"*You* asked to go?"

"It took them weeks to get me out. I wanted to leave from Italy, but they refused, so I had to go back to Munich at the end of August."

Camilla's head is spinning. Igor was negotiating with the KGB while they were lying round the pool discussing Piero and the Etruscans and the Russian climate? How was that possible? She remembers talk one evening about a skiing holiday at Christmas, she remembers discussing the next summer, she remembers Igor saying, "Can't we come back here?" And then she recalls Igor's absences, his solitary walks, and she realizes it's true. "How did they get a message to you at the villa?"

"Not at the villa. In Siena. I had a contact at San Domenico one evening. Don't you remember, Milenka? You were there too. The night of the Beethoven concert."

*

Camilla remembers perfectly now what happened on the night of the Beethoven concert, and it brings her out in a cold sweat. Igor's contact from the KGB: why has she never thought of that before? That was why he volunteered to look after her on the night of the concert, that was why he dragged her all the way across town, and that was why he took her down behind the church for five minutes of illicit passion, once his mission was accomplished. San Domenico was where he wanted to go because on the way they happened to run into his old friend Kolya from Leningrad, travelling to Italy with a liberated group of something-or-other, sporting a military-looking haircut and a T-shirt that said I love Firenze. For ten minutes the two of them exchanged professions of amazement and purported reminiscences, before Kolya hurried off to rejoin his group, and Igor bore Camilla off to San Domenico. It wasn't until they were on their way back to the Palazzo Chigi-Saracini to rejoin Davey and Rachel, heads whirling from suppressed lust, bodies convulsively clinging to each other,

that he happened to remark that it might be better for Kolya, from a security point of view, if she didn't mention the meeting to the others. The fewer people who knew about it the better. And then he pulled her into a dark corner and kissed her until her already shaky knees were even weaker, to obliterate the whole episode from her mind. People see what they want to see, stick their heads in the sand, tell lies to themselves, and to everyone else as well. Kavanagh had asked her several times whether Igor could have contacted someone in Italy and she had always said no. And she hadn't been lying. She had simply blocked it out. People deal with the past as best they can. What else, Camilla wonders, has she forgotten? What else has she denied and repressed and defended herself against?

She sits very still with the blankets drawn up to her chin. Igor is in the kitchen making tea. She can hear him clattering cups around and opening drawers. I did warn you, he said when he saw her expression, and she cannot dispute it. The earth is shaking just like he said it would. A lot of things are suddenly much clearer. Her own motives, for a start. She did not go to Samarkand to have things out with Igor and move on. She went in the hope of reaching a settlement. Igor would wave his magic wand and put everything to rights. He would explain away the press conference and the television discussion, produce convincing reasons for his return to Moscow, prove beyond doubt that his relations with Davey had involved nothing more compromising than Russian philosophy. He would give her back the golden hilltop and allow her to stay there forever.

"God damn it," says Camilla out loud.

"What?" says Igor from the kitchen.

"Nothing."

At least now she has to look the truth in the face. There is no way she can go on lying to herself. Igor has made it clear what his feelings are. He despises Davey, he despises her. Davey was weak and lazy and a fool. Camilla was a faithless wife, too obsessed by another man to notice that her husband was in trouble, and too blind to realize she was being used. Looking back on the past few days, she cannot find it in herself to blame him. What might have been understandable in the magical atmosphere of the enchanted villa is not justifiable here with the benefit of seven years' hindsight. For a week, Igor has been playing with her, keeping her off balance, turning her emotions on and off at will. It's time to end it.

Igor appears with the tea, and they drink it sitting on the bed side by side. Neither of them speak. Igor puts his arm round her, and she rests her head against his shoulder. When they have finished, he takes away her cup and places it on the floor beside his own. He draws her against him and kisses her cheek. She moves away.

"Igor, we can't do this. It would be like sleeping with ghosts."

"Ghosts? What do you mean? Do you mean Rachel? "

"No, not Rachel. I mean our own ghosts. The ghost of me, and the ghost of you. The way we were in Tuscany, seven years ago. When you were someone different, and so was I."

"Milenka- "

"That's a ghost's name, Igor. You shouldn't call me that any more."

They look at each other silently in the dim light cast by Sonya's ungenerous 45-watt bulb. There's no sound but the drip in the toilet. Camilla realizes that there are tears on her face. She raises a hand to dash them away, but Igor gets there first and wipes them away with his fingers.

*

By day, Tashkent is less impressive than by night. The glitzy new banks and offices turn out to be soaring above dusty wasteland and badly provisioned stores. In the bazaar in Chilanazar, the vegetable sellers are camped out on iron bedsteads rising like islands out of a sea of melons and onions.

Igor looks terrible this morning, grey and haggard, but other than that, he is his usual organizing self. Driving into town, he arranges the rest of Camilla's stay in Tashkent. "Since you have just one night left, you will sleep in the Meridien, Camilla. It's not as expensive as the Intercontinental, and it's a better location. Your company won't mind paying, just for once. You will have to leave very early to catch your plane to Frankfurt tomorrow, and the hotel will find you a taxi. We will go to the Meridien now to check in, and then I will drop you at your institute."

He hasn't called her Milenka once this morning. That's one point that seems to have been taken.

"I will take a room too, so I don't have to use Sonya's flat again, but if I can go back to Samarkand tonight I will. What are your plans for the day?"

"Oh I'll be tied up with the institute. We've got a lot of ground to cover."

"Then we will meet at the hotel at five o'clock. In the snack bar on the ground floor."

*

When she arrives at the research institute, Camilla finds the project managers patiently waiting. They are expecting to spend at least the morning with her, discussing the forthcoming survey of foreign radio listening. Declining tea, Camilla whips out a list of points to cover. Constituting the respondent sample. Convincing reluctant respondents to participate. Recruiting interviewers. Teaching them where to sit and how to dress. She gets through the list in just under an hour, promises them a clarifying e-mail as soon as she gets back to Washington, and leaves.

The dark green Niva sedan is parked a few yards down the street. Kavanagh is at the wheel, with Rachel beside him.

*

Kavanagh drops them at an upmarket tea house with geraniums in pots and a riverside view, promising to return when he has concluded his business elsewhere.

"How does he look?" demands Rachel when they are alone.

"The same," says Camilla. "He hasn't changed."

"Was he pleased to see you?"

"Yes, I think he was."

"What did he say when you appeared?"

"He fell on my neck and brought out the champagne."

"Really?" says Rachel, enthralled. "Did he take you sightseeing?"

"Rachel, he took me everywhere. He told me what to look at, he told me what to eat, he told me where to stay. The only thing I was allowed to do on my own was run the focus groups, but that's only because he was pretending he'd never worked in Munich."

They are both grinning. Some things never change.

"So how is he?" says Rachel, and Camilla's smile fades.

"I don't know. I couldn't get near him. He blocked me at every turn."

"Did he tell you about Davey?"

"He told me a bit. Not as much as he could have. What he mainly told me about was himself. Why they sent him to the Radio, why he approached Davey, why he went back to Moscow."

Rachel raises her eyebrows. "Isn't that what you wanted to know?"

"What do you mean?" says Camilla warily.

"You knew about Davey already, Camilla. Most of it, anyway. God knows we spent enough time talking about it. All we needed was confirmation, and presumably he gave you that. It was Igor you wanted to know about. It always was."

Camilla doesn't answer.

Rachel cuts to the chase. "Did you sleep with him?"

Camilla looks at her sharply, then away again. "No I didn't. But I came pretty close."

Rachel says nothing.

Camilla sighs. "What happened was I got down here, and I realized I still- "

"You had it in mind before you ever set foot in Central Asia," says Rachel forthrightly. Camilla is looking more and more alarmed, but this has to be laid out on the table. Now. In broad daylight. No more circling round. Everything they have ever felt for Igor has to be confessed before it's too late, or it will haunt them for ever. "Admit it, Camilla, you've been thinking about it for years."

"Yeah, right, day and night, dreaming of Igor," says Camilla ferociously, but Rachel goes on looking at her, and after a minute or two she gives in. "All right, it's true, it's always been at the back of my mind. It wasn't rational, it was stupid even, but I couldn't get rid of it."

"We should never have tried to play at being Etruscans, should we?"

"It was meant as a gift," says Camilla uncertainly. "From all of us to each other."

"But what were our motives for offering that gift?"

"You think it was just sex?"

Rachel shrugs. "It might have been."

"It wasn't only that."

"Are you sure of that? Are you absolutely sure?"

Camilla studies the geraniums. Rachel drinks her tea.

"All right," says Camilla. "If I'm going to be perfectly honest. We didn't all have the same motives. From you, it was a gift. You have nothing to blame yourself for." She hesitates. "But for me, it's true, it was sex and nothing else. I wanted sex with Igor. As simple as that."

"But you gave me Davey."

"I didn't want him anyway."

"But I did."

"So where does that leave us?"

"I don't know." A pause. "How do things stand now between you and Igor now?"

Camilla thinks about it. "I'm not sure. What I feel for Igor isn't just sex. No matter how it started out. With anyone else I would say it's love. Fraternal love, friendship love. I've been trying all week to hate him, and I can't. He's been driving me crazy insisting that everything that happened is our fault not his. It baffles me, at times it makes me angry, but I can't hate him. I like him too much. At times, I find myself completely forgetting what he did. Yesterday, when we were driving up from Samarkand, it was as if nothing had ever happened. We talked about the Radio, he asked for news of his old colleagues in the Russian Service, then he asked about Thomas so I told him about Thomas. We talked about the Pieros, and then we got on to wine. It was as if those seven years had never existed."

Rachel observes her keenly. William is right. Camilla is not to be relied on. "Have you forgiven him?"

"I don't know. I can't make the connection between Igor and the man who betrayed us all. I can't believe it's the same person."

"I assure you it is."

"I know. But there's a missing piece. I can't get it to fit together."

"Then you have forgiven him?"

"Not consciously, no. Not absolutely. But if forgetting is forgiving, then, yes, at times I have."

For a moment, neither of them says anything. Then Rachel stands up.

"I'm going to get shashlyk. Do you want some?"

*

There's something different about Rachel. Since Camilla left Almaty, she has changed. The discrepancy has been nagging at Camilla all morning, but it's not until Rachel gets up to fetch the shashlyk that she understands what it is. For years, there's been something hesitant about Rachel's walk. As though she had no particular reason to put one foot in front of the other. Yet now she's marching across the courtyard with a sharp, ungraceful stride that takes Camilla right back to Tuscany. That was the way she used to walk down the hill to the pool in the morning, fast and purposeful, as if she was scared the sun would go in before she had time to get brown. Camilla contemplates Rachel in her faded black T-shirt discussing the menu du jour with the man at the barbecue. Last week, Rachel was adrift. Today, she knows where she's going. What has happened to focus her mind?

The chai khana is filling up with lunchtime clients. Most of them are Westerners, or Westernized Uzbeks. No one is wearing traditional costume, no one is playing backgammon, no one raises an eyebrow at the sight of two women on their own.

Rachel comes back with two helpings of shashlyk served on handsome dark-blue plates.

"In any case," says Camilla, "it's you he wants, not me."

"Oh yes?" says Rachel. "Did he say so?"

"He gave me a message for you. He says he loves you, and he misses you. He's missed you every day for seven years. He's tried not to think of you, but you've been there in his mind all the time."

For a moment, Rachel is silent. Then she reaches for the bread, and tears a piece off. "Yes, I know. The trouble is that *he* made the choice to go."

They eat their shashlyk in silence.

"You say you're meeting him at the Mériidien later?"

"Yes. Before he goes back to Samarkand."

"How about I go instead of you?"

"I thought you didn't want to see him."

"I've changed my mind."

"Why?"

"On Friday I resigned my job."

Camilla stops eating. "Why? Because of Igor?"

"Because of Central Asia. I'm tired of it here. I've had enough, I want to get away. I'm going to see Igor, and then I'm going home."

"Back to Southport?"

"Home is a relative concept. I was thinking further south. Tuscany."

"*Tuscany?*"

"I still have my severance pay from the Radio, and I've saved a lot while I've been here. A small house needn't cost much."

"If it's enough of a ruin, no."

"On a hill among the sunflowers. I don't mind about comfort as much as you."

"You'd still have to do it up."

"Bit by bit. You and Thomas can come for vacations and help me paint."

"He'd like that."

"I'll have a terrace overlooking the valley, and a stock of wine."

"We can go and see if they still have accordion concerts."

"You can take another crack at the Piero Trail."

Camilla shudders. "Could you really go back to Tuscany?"

"I think so, yes. I've never been as happy as I was there. "

"But- "

"I think I could settle there. I'm tired of everything that used to be the Soviet Union. I can't take it any more."

"So you're going to sit on a hill among the sunflowers -- and do what? Pursue the Etruscans?"

"There's a lot you can do on hilltops with the Internet."

"How long have you been thinking about this?"

"Probably seven years. But it's only come together in the past few weeks. Someone sent me a postcard of Siena, and that started me thinking. It was the best time of my whole life, Camilla."

"Yes, you've always said that. Your state of grace. Sitting around and sunbathing and drinking wine and talking."

"I liked myself the way I was in Tuscany. More than I ever had before. I'd like to get back to that. Or at least something close to it."

"Rachel- " Camilla stops.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You're going to tell me that even at the time it wasn't as wonderful as I thought it was, aren't you? Don't worry, I know that already."

"He was screwing all three of us all the time we were there. He was holding back on us, hiding things from us- "

"But we didn't know that at the time. You can't decide after the event that you didn't have a good time, simply because you learn things that you didn't know then. At the time, what happened was magical. It changed me completely. And the four of us were just right for each other. I got a lot from Davey, and from you too. Without you, these seven years would have been much harder."

Camilla smiles reluctantly.

"It's our memory of what happened that is tainted, not the events themselves. Igor has ruined the memory of that holiday for us, but not the holiday itself. What I want to do is get past the memory and back to Tuscany the way I felt it at the time."

A car door slams a few yards away, and Camilla looks up to see Kavanagh getting out of the Niva. There's another man with him. American too, by the look of it. They pause to confer. Rachel follows her gaze. Something moves across her face, and she turns back to Camilla.

"Listen, Camilla. Igor said things to me in Italy that he'd never said before. He told me I was the most important thing in his life. He said he felt blessed to have me. It was the night we went to a concert in Siena, I remember it exactly. It was the first time he had ever told me that he loved me. The first time in four years. And then he left. He said all that, and then he left me."

Camilla swallows. "You never told me this before."

"No," says Rachel. "I never told anybody. There was no reason to. It was between him and me. But I'm telling you now because it might make it easier for you to understand."

*

Kavanagh has lined up a young man from the American Embassy to look after Camilla on her last night in Central Asia. She isn't sure if it's because he doesn't trust her, or because he thinks she needs company at a time like this. The main thing is that he wants her well away from the Méridien. Camilla is beginning to get a fairly good idea of what he and Rachel are planning at the Méridien tonight, and it scares her to death. She feels rather like she did on the night of Igor's press conference: as though she's teetering on the edge of a pit, about to fall in. Nevertheless, she does not raise any objections. She acquiesces graciously to William's cautiously proffered mixture of mistrust and solicitude, and greets the Embassy man with equanimity. She can see she might be glad of company before the night is out.

The Embassy man, whose name is Jeff, suggests a visit to the Museum of Fine Arts, followed by dinner in a Turkish restaurant, and Camilla says that sounds wonderful. The atmosphere round the table relaxes visibly. Jeff adds that he'll be happy to take her to the airport tomorrow morning, and Camilla says that's very nice of him. Kavanagh is taking no chances. He really wants her on that plane to Frankfurt. Out of the stables before the sun is up. She considers telling him that she has no intention of warning Igor, but she knows he won't believe her.

Nevertheless, it's the truth. Ultimately, it's with Rachel, not Igor, that her loyalties lie, and the change she has seen in Rachel today is enough to convince her not to intervene. Catharsis takes many forms. Camilla wanted truth, but Rachel wants more, and who is to say that she doesn't have a right to it.

*

THE VAULTS OF THE ESCURIAL

At quarter to five, Rachel walks across the elegant glass and marble atrium of the Hotel Méridien and climbs the steps to the snack bar. She has arrived early on purpose. She wants him to walk in, looking for Camilla, and see her sitting there. She wants to be there waiting for him. She chooses a seat at the far end of the room where she can see everyone who comes in. The waiter approaches and she orders whisky. It'll be expensive here, but she doesn't care. Igor can pay. It's time he paid for something.

Igor is late. At ten past five, he has still not arrived. Rachel fingers the znachok in her pocket. She has finished her whisky, and is beginning to lose her nerve. Has he changed his mind? Has Camilla alerted him? At twenty past five, she is considering calling Camilla's room on the house phone, and then suddenly he is there. He's wearing a black leather jacket she remembers from Munich. He stands in the doorway checking the room. His glance travels over her without stopping, and then he realizes who she is and does a kind of double take. His hands fly up as if to ward her off, he takes an involuntary step backwards. There's something wild about his look.

And then the shock is past and he's back in control, crossing the room towards her, smiling as if they had separated in the flat in Munich just that morning.

"Rachel."

"You're late."

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

"Won't you sit down?"

They are speaking Russian, like they always did. Igor takes a seat and glances round. "You choose expensive bars these days."

"You chose this, not me."

He smiles at her with a mixture of irony and tenderness that takes her plunging back into the past, to Tuscany, to Munich, and to everything in between.

"Still so economical, dushenka?"

"My mother always told me to be careful."

His smile widens. "I've missed your mother. Do you want another drink? What was it, whisky? You drink whisky now?"

He gives the order and turns back to her. Neither of them speaks. He stares at her, drinking her in, taking in the changes, and she does the same.

"Oh God, Rachel."

"I know."

"How are you?"

"It's been terrible."

"Camilla told me you- "

He stops. Rachel glances involuntarily downwards. Igor reaches out, takes her wrist, pushes her cuff back, and looks at the scars. He says nothing. Rachel pulls her arm back and puts her hands on her knees beneath the table.

"You shouldn't have gone, Igor."

"I had no choice."

"If you knew what would happen, you should never have come near me."

"I know... I shouldn't have ... gone," says Igor, with visible effort. "I know it was- "

Words fail him. He gazes at her, with an oddly imploring look.

Rachel is implacable. "Then why did you go?"

"I had to- I couldn't- I didn't- "

He breaks off and looks away from her. His shoulders start to heave, his body shakes. A sob escapes, and then another one. Rachel moves round the table, puts her hand on his arm. Immediately he clutches her, pulls her against him, and sobs into her shoulder. Rachel holds him. His sobs increase. The room falls silent. People turn to look. The waiter arrives with the whisky and lurks a few steps away, uncertain what to do.

"Here," says Rachel, "give me that." She takes a glass from the tray and forces Igor to drink it. He coughs and splutters, but then the alcohol calms him, the sobs diminish, his body stops heaving, and he slumps exhausted against the wall. The waiter is still hovering, riveted by the spectacle. Rachel takes her own drink and swallows it. "Spasibo," she says, and holds out a twenty dollar bill.

"Igor, have you got a room here? We need to go somewhere quieter."

*

They ride upstairs in silence. Igor is in a daze. He does as Rachel tells him, letting her lead him down the corridor, handing over the key, waiting for her to open the door. Once inside, he makes a beeline for the bed. He lies down and closes his eyes. In less than a minute, he is fast asleep. Rachel watches, disconcerted. She removes his shoes and settles herself in an armchair.

The sleep only lasts ten minutes. Igor begins to stir, opens his eyes, takes in the room, the furnishings, Rachel sitting in the chair. His eyes focus, his memory returns, his vulnerability ebbs away. Gradually his flesh gets firmer, and his mind slots back into its accustomed structures.

When Rachel judges he's nearly back to normal, she says, "Do you sleep at night, Igor?"

"No."

"What do you think about?"

"What time is it?"

When she doesn't answer, he looks at his watch. Then he gets off the bed, goes over to the window and checks the street.

"I'm so glad to see you, dushenka," he says, turning back into the room to smile at her. "You've been in my mind the whole time."

"That didn't stop you going on television, did it, Igor? You said I was an opportunist of the worst sort. If you loved me, why did you do that?"

A pause, and then he says, "I didn't expect you to react the way you did."

"How could I survive an attack like that?"

"I wasn't attacking you."

"Of course you were."

"I didn't expect you to take it so hard."

"If you'd known what would happen, would you still have done it?"

Igor scowls at her. "You have to remember I had no choice."

"You had no choice? You were forced to single out Rachel Stern, Camilla Stacey and Davey Morton in your denunciations of Radio Liberty?"

"Well, no- I mean, I- "

"You were obliged to say that I was an enemy of the people, Camilla was a military spy, and Davey was your CIA case officer?"

Igor hesitates. "I might have been wrong to do that."

"Then why did you do it?"

Igor turns away to watch the street. "Everyone who lived under the Soviet system had to do things they knew they shouldn't do, just to get from one day to the next."

"So if they had to, they betrayed their friends?"

"It was a question of survival."

"And are they at peace with their consciences now?"

"Why shouldn't they be?"

"Do you mean they regret what they did?"

"Regret is irrelevant," says Igor sharply. "Regret isn't going to absolve you from what you did under communism. You have to see that it wasn't you, it was the system that was at fault. They tried to control you by compromising you in the eyes of other people, and in your own eyes. You have to recognize this as manipulation, dushenka, and put it aside."

He turns back into the room. They look at each other. Rachel has been wondering all afternoon if she can go through with this, but now her mind is clear and she knows what to do.

"Igor," she says, "there's something I have to tell you."

"Yes?"

"I saw William Kavanagh today."

"Kavanagh? Is he in Tashkent?"

"Did you know he works for the US government?"

"Of course."

"He asked me- " She breaks off.

"What?" says Igor, glancing down at the street.

"He wanted me to help him."

Igor turns to face her. "To help him set a trap?"

"He thought I would go along with it."

Igor stares at her hard. "So why are you telling me about it?"

"Yes," says Rachel. "Why?" She meets his gaze.

Igor breathes out slowly. "Where is Kavanagh waiting for me?"

"At a chai khana. I was supposed to take you there."

"And then what?" demands Igor. "What's he going to do then? He can't do anything on his own in Tashkent." He's talking to himself, not her, trying to figure out the angles. "Who is he working with? Americans? No, that's no good. It won't be the Uzbeks. That's not Rasulov's style. Is it Russians? Is that it?"

"I don't know. He didn't tell me anything else."

"It must be Russians. That's why Sasha's gone. Are they watching the hotel?"

"They don't know you're here. Only Camilla and I know that."

"Where is Camilla?"

"Having dinner with some people from her institute."

"Then we can leave. I've got the Jeep downstairs."

*

The desert unfolds, mile upon mile, in the headlights of the car. Igor barely registers the road signs and the oncoming cars. He knows this road like the back of his hand and, frankly, that's just as well. From time to time he steals a glance at Rachel, sitting silently beside him. Seeing her again has stunned him. He feels as if he has had a truckload of stones dropped on him, as if one of the trucks that brought stones to the Maracanda when they repaved the courtyard had tipped out its load on top of him. The stones are crushing him and he is flailing around, struggling to come up for air and claw his way out. There might have been a minute or two back in the Méridien when he literally went under. There's a lapse in continuity he can't account for, and he wonders if he might have blacked out. He has no idea how he got from the snack bar to his hotel room. Why was he lying on the bed while Rachel sat in the armchair watching him? Or had he imagined that? Since he walked into the Méridien and saw her waiting, it feels as though his head is filled with fog. He doesn't know what's real and what isn't.

Nor does he know what he is doing on the road to Samarkand. Even though his instincts are telling him to head for home, he is far from sure that his instincts are reliable. Igor is the master of strategic withdrawals: first from Munich, then from Moscow, but he has never run away before. Faced with a choice, he has always stayed to fight. This time he can't. He's cornered: they have him: all he can do is run. He would like to explain this to Rachel, but how can he? What is he going to tell her? That he has broken with Rasulov, that he has failed to find backing elsewhere, that the Maracanda is doomed? That Rasulov is too powerful, that he has the support of his clan, and that no one is prepared to incur his enmity over something as dangerous as the Maracanda? That both of the potential backers Igor sounded out today pointed out what he already knows: that the repayment of the commission demanded by Rasulov is merely a pretext, that Rasulov is playing a deeper game, one which involves outside interests? That he began by suspecting Moscow of bringing pressure to bear, but has now broadened his suspicions to include Washington?

The Jeep rolls on through the darkness. It's so strange, yet so familiar, to be here in the car with Rachel. It's as if they had fallen through a time warp. As if these seven years had never happened, and they were driving home up the Autobahn after a visit to Augsburg or Passau. The headlights of an oncoming car appear in the distance. The road bends, the light shines briefly into the interior of the Jeep, the fog in Igor's head clears, and he sees what he has to do. Confession is not his habit, but he has to try. That, he belatedly realizes, is why he has been compulsively writing things down in his diary all week. He has been practising.

*

Rachel is grateful for the silence. She has no desire to hear any more of Igor's excuses. Camilla was right: there is no getting through to him. The tears slide soundlessly down her face. Another three hours to Samarkand.

"Rachel," says Igor, "there are things I need to tell you."

"Oh yes?" says Rachel sceptically. The code for the Swiss bank account? The combination to the safe? She feels in her pocket for the znachok, the little metal head of Lenin, and she grips it as hard as she can.

"I lied to you just now," says Igor calmly. "What I said on television -- I knew it was going to hurt you. I wanted you to understand that I was out of your lives for good. I had to make that absolutely plain."

Rachel stiffens. The znachok cuts into her. "In other words, you knew exactly what you were doing."

"Yes."

"You wanted us out of your life, and you didn't care how you did it."

"Yes."

"And you didn't give a damn what the consequences might be."

"Well, I wouldn't quite say that." She is silent. He sighs in exasperation. "Rachel, for heaven's sake, I didn't want you dead!"

"No," says Rachel, "we were dead already. We died for you as soon as you left Munich. When you went you left no message. You never tried to reach us. You never tried to get news of us. You knew what was likely to happen, and you protected yourself from the knowledge of it. You chose to stay in ignorance because it was the only way to keep your guilt away."

"My guilt?"

"Yes, of course, your guilt, what else would you call it?"

"I think you need to distinguish between guilt and responsibility, dushenka. I may have a certain amount of ... responsibility in what happened to you all, but I'm not guilty in any legal sense."

"Igor, that's not the point! It was wrong to do what you did! And somewhere in yourself you must know that!" The znachok grinds into her flesh. She stops and makes an effort to control her voice. "In Italy, you bewitched us. All of us, not just me. You gave us something no one else had done. For me it was love, for Camilla it was sex, for Davey it was Russia. You gave us each other, you gave us Italy. And then you abandoned us. You turned against us, and we never heard a word from you again."

"I see now that it was wrong of me to do that. But at the time it seemed the best solution."

"For whom? For you? Igor, do you remember the night of the concert in Siena?"

"Of course I do."

"You told me there was a bond between us that nothing could break."

"I know I did. I meant every word I said."

"But Igor, you left me! You told me that, and then you left me! Don't you see how much harder that made it? If I could have convinced myself you never loved me, in time I would have got over you. But you made that impossible!"

"Dushenka, I never left you. I've been with you all the time."

"But I didn't know that."

His voice softens. "Didn't you?"

There's a long silence.

"All right," says Rachel, "maybe I did. But I didn't understand it! I didn't see how you could bear to leave."

"I couldn't stay in Munich."

"Yes you could! You hadn't committed any crimes. You just said so yourself. No one could prove you'd done anything wrong. Radio Security couldn't, and neither could Moscow."

"I couldn't stay in Munich. I'd been there six years already."

"Igor, you could have stayed with me! It didn't have to be Munich."

Igor doesn't answer. Instead he slams on the brakes, and pulls the Jeep to a halt by the side of the road. "Get out, please. I have something to show you."

Rachel looks at him. Outside it's pitch black.

"I've got a torch," says Igor, rummaging in the glove compartment.

Shrugging, Rachel climbs down to the road. Igor walks round the car to stand beside her, and shines his torch out into the desert.

"What do you see?"

"A bush. A telegraph pole."

"And beyond that?"

"Nothing."

"Precisely. Nothing. Space." He takes her hand, and leads her past the edge of the road out into the scrubland. "When I was young, I wanted to be an explorer. My father used to tell me stories about the explorers who went east from Moscow in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He told me about Yermak crossing the Urals, Moskvitin reaching the shores of the Pacific, Dezhnev sailing north around the cape of Asia. I used to come out here into the desert with my father, and we would pretend we were discovering Siberia."

"Siberia?" says Rachel blankly.

"Do you know what it means, the word 'Sibir'? It's a Tatar word, it means the Sleeping Land. I wanted to go and awaken the Sleeping Land. But I couldn't, there was nothing left to discover. I was four hundred years too late. There were no more whole continents where no one had trodden before me. There was no more empty space. You say I gave you Italy. When we were in Tuscany with Davey and Camilla, I listened to the three of you admiring the sunflowers and the cypresses and saying how beautiful it all was. I didn't know what you meant. I'd been to Italy before, and I thought I liked it. Italian food, Italian opera -- I wanted to share all that with you. But I found I couldn't. It was all alien to me, and the three of you became more and more alien too. By the end of the month, I didn't know what I was doing there with you. I couldn't understand why you liked it so much. It was so crowded, there was no space anywhere. Everywhere you looked there was a house or a church or a cultivated field. You couldn't go anywhere without seeing signs of human existence." He pauses for a moment. "Since I've been back here, I've got into the habit of driving out into the desert to watch the night fall. It's an incredible feeling. The steppe merges into the sky, the earth disappears. All the petty irritations of life fall away. You feel that anything is possible: there are no limits."

A pause, and then Rachel hears herself saying, "When I was young, I wanted to be a train driver."

"Did you?" She can hear he is smiling. "Where did you want to drive to?"

"Nowhere. I just liked trains. We had a railway line going past the bottom of the garden."

"Where did it go to?"

"Southport to Liverpool. I just wanted to drive to the end of the line. To see where it went."

"So you wanted to be an explorer too? Why did you never tell me this before?"

"They wouldn't buy me a train set though. Not even during the phase when I wore shorts every day and made them call me Raymond."

"Raymond!" He laughs softly. "How old were you?"

"About six, I think." They walk a few steps in silence. "You never told me you wanted to discover Siberia."

"Do you understand now why I couldn't stay in Munich?"

The spell is broken. Rachel drops his hand.

"Igor, don't try and tell me you left us in Munich so you could come back here and attend to your spiritual needs! They weren't dreaming of space, your explorers, they were dreaming of land. Territory. Sables. Gold. Markets. Money and power. And that's what you wanted too. Money and power, that's always what it is! And you're no better than the rest of them!"

He tries to interrupt, but she ignores him.

"There's nothing spiritual about any of this! Because of you, Davey is dead. Remember that, Igor. You have blood on your hands, you can never wipe that out!"

She snatches the torch away from him and heads back towards the road, leaving Igor to make his way as best he can. Groping in her pocket for a handkerchief, she encounters the little metal head of Lenin, the man whose ambition was to remake human beings. She flings it away from her, as far into the desert as it will go. Then she climbs into the Jeep, and waits for Igor.

He gets in and looks at her.

"And if I asked you to forgive me?" His voice is so low she can hardly hear him.

"I wouldn't do it."

"Why not?"

"Because you have no remorse, Igor. You aren't sorry for what you did. You don't see how you could have done otherwise. You don't regret any of it."

Silence. After a moment, he says, with difficulty, "I wish it hadn't had to be like that."

"It could never have been otherwise. You were brought up in a society which turned morality on its head. The system had no use for honesty or integrity. Everyone violated their own principles, everyone lied. Until you left, I didn't realize this, but the truth is that you and I never had a future together. We have nothing in common. We grew up under different systems, with different values. You've seen enough of the outside world not to know deep down that there's something terribly wrong with the Soviet mentality, but you're so mired in the Soviet way of doing things that it would kill you to acknowledge what you've done. The only way you can live with yourself is to block it out. We missed each other in time, Igor. We never had a chance."

"Don't you see?" says Igor. "That was why I left."

*

We had elected to wait in Igor's apartment. We had a good view of the courtyard of the Maracanda. We took turns keeping an eye on what was going on, but there was little to see. The usual sober-suited crowd came and went. The bartender changed the CDs. So far we had heard highlights from *Maria Stuarda*, *La Bohème* and *Tosca*. In moments of boredom, we paced round the room and examined the bookshelves. Sasha went desultorily through the desk drawers. No one

came up the steps to the apartment. We were sitting in darkness, apart from a single lamp. Best not to attract attention, said the General.

While we waited, Sasha and I worked our way through a bottle of Stolichnaya and a plate of antipasti they had sent up from the kitchen. The General did not join us. He was fasting. He had known Igor for more than twenty years, and Telnikov nearly as long. The sacrifice was harsh, but the faith demanded it. During the half hour that our targets were out of the Jeep, ostensibly admiring the desert, he eyed the bottle once or twice, but made no move towards it.

Finally we heard the slam of the doors as they got back into the Jeep. Sasha heaved a sigh of relief. The taut lines on the General's face relaxed. Igor said something too low for the microphone to catch, and Rachel said she wouldn't do it. Sasha ran his hands irritably through his hair. And then Rachel launched into a tirade about the failings of Soviet society. Sasha and the General looked faintly puzzled. But then Igor said, "Don't you see? That was why I left," and the encounter swerved off into a sphere that no one had foreseen.

*

"What else could I have done? There was no place for you in my life. I had to go, you must see that! It was the only way to keep what we had. Yes, I know I betrayed you. I had no other solution. If I had stayed in Munich, I would have kept you, but lost part of myself. And if I had lost myself, sooner or later I would have lost you too. I know I shouldn't have said those things on television, but I was desperate. I needed to lash out at the people who were hurting me, even though I had brought it on myself. I admit I avoided thinking about how you would react. It was a shock when Camilla told me about Davey. I never expected anything like that to happen. And as it turned out, none of it was necessary. If I'd waited another year, it would all have been different. I could have broken with Moscow, and gone back to Russia, and you could have come with me. But I didn't know the Soviet Union was going to collapse. No one knew that."

*

Sasha had wired the Jeep before he left Tashkent, but they had pushed the seats back and the microphone wasn't catching it all. They were talking in voices too low for us to hear. The hands of the clock crept towards midnight. The Jeep hadn't moved for an hour. In Igor's apartment, the tension was mounting. We had never expected to wait as long as this. Sasha was drinking solidly by now. Out in the courtyard, the evening was winding down. The clients had begun to drift out. The waitresses were clearing up, and the tables were emptying.

Suddenly the air was split by a tremendous blast. The whole building shook. For several seconds, time was suspended. And then the courtyard exploded into a whirlwind of flames and smoke and cries.

*

"Yes, I regretted it, of course I did, but what is there to regret when you have no choice? It's what you can bear that matters. When I was in Moscow, I used to talk to you all the time. I told you things as if you were still there. I used to store things up and think, I must tell Rachel that. I

used to go to the Belorussia Station and watch the trains leave for Europe. That was in the beginning. Eventually I trained myself not to think of you, but even when I wasn't thinking of you, I was making a deliberate effort to keep you out of my mind, so you were there anyway. Yes, of course I should have explained all this to you. I should have left a note, or written to you later. I should have told you why I had had to leave, and why I couldn't take you with me. I sat down more than once to write you a letter, but the words wouldn't come, I didn't know what to say. It's odd, not long ago I came across a quotation from E.M. Forster. It went something like this: 'If I had to choose between betraying my friend and betraying my country, I hope I would have the courage to betray my country.' Since then I've been wondering if I made the right decision."

*

I had seen bombs in Afghanistan, and I knew what it was. The shiver of breaking glass, the crash of falling beams, the column of smoke blotting out the light, the unearthly chorus of screams and wails and moans and sobs -- it could only mean one thing. Someone had not trusted us to finish off Igor, and had also decided that Igor should not go alone.

Unfortunately, Rasulov's men had miscalculated the amount of explosive necessary to blow up the whole of the Maracanda, and they had also failed to reckon with the possibility of Igor being delayed on the road.

*

They have been lying side by side for an hour on the Jeep's reclining seats, facing each other, talking. Well, mostly it's Igor who talks. As he said, he has things to tell her. Seven years of things to say. Rachel is content to listen, asking an occasional question. It's cold in the Jeep, and not very comfortable, but she doesn't mind. Igor is growing calmer as he talks: what started out as incoherent sentences is becoming slower, more complete, more reasoned. She can sense the relief he feels at unburdening himself, and she too is conscious of a growing sense of peace. The more she hears, the more she understands.

And then, abruptly, Igor's mobile rings.

Igor stops talking. Both of them stare at the phone. Igor placed it on the dashboard when they got into the car in Tashkent, but it hasn't rung once since then, and they had forgotten it was there. After several rings, Igor picks it up and snaps something into it. Rachel sighs. The interlude is over. The past is coming back to haunt them, and no doubt the future too.

Igor's conversation is in Uzbek. His end of it consists mainly of exclamations, followed by a series of monosyllabic questions. Some kind of disaster seems to have occurred. All Rachel can recognize is the name Sasha, repeated several times. And then Sasha himself comes to the phone. The conversation switches into Russian. Sasha? yells Igor. What are you doing there? When? How many? Who? Everything? Fine, I'm on my way. Yes, not far. Half an hour.

He clicks off the phone.

"What's happened?" says Rachel.

"A bomb just went off in the Maracanda. There are two dead. Several people wounded. A lot of damage. The ground floor is on fire."

Rachel blinks in bemusement. "I don't think Kavanagh would do that."

"Of course he wouldn't. It's Rasulov, God damn him."

Igor reaches for the ignition.

"What are you doing? Where are we going?"

"The Maracanda, of course."

"Igor, we can't go there!"

"I have to. There are papers in the safe."

That was what William had figured. Papers in the safe. Whatever the danger, the first place he would go was the Maracanda. Rachel suddenly realizes that she has not told Igor what is waiting for him there. She puts out a hand to stop him turning the key.

"Igor," she says, "I lied just now. The trap is in the Maracanda, not in Tashkent."

*

Time has run out. Igor hears the words as clearly as if they had been spoken in his ear. He is seized by an immense weariness. He has had enough. They have been moving in on him for weeks, and now they are ready to strike and they are waiting.

He could try to run, of course, he has the Jeep. He could drive through the night and reach Turkmenistan or Afghanistan by daybreak. But neither of those places are a solution. They might not even be a refuge. If Malkov has abandoned him, then nothing is sure.

Nowhere on earth have the stars ever been so close, the road so wide, and the night so black. The invisible company is passing with exquisite music. There is nothing left to do but say goodbye.

*

"You mustn't go back to the Maracanda! Igor, are you listening to me? They're waiting for you there."

It's the third or fourth time she's said it, but Igor isn't reacting the way he should. He isn't turning the car around, he isn't doing anything. Instead he's groping under the dashboard, apparently looking for something. After a moment, he stops scrabbling, remains motionless for a few seconds, then straightens up, and regards her with a slightly puzzled frown.

"Why are you saying this, Rachel? I don't understand."

"Because it's the truth! I was lying to you before."

She's shouting, but she isn't sure he's heard her. His frown deepens.

"If you're afraid, dushenka, I can drop you at the next chai khana. You'll find someone to drive you back to Tashkent. If not tonight, then tomorrow morning."

"I'm not afraid," she yells, "that's not the point. Igor, they're going to kill you!"

"Rachel."

There's something in his voice that quietens her.

"Listen to me, I have something to say to you." He takes both her hands in his. It takes him a minute to find his words. "Tell Camilla I'm sorry about Davey. I never imagined things would go so far. Tell her I- I accept responsibility for what happened."

"Yes, but Igor- "

"Let me finish. From now on, I don't want you to think about me any more." He presses her hands more firmly. "Forget what I said on television; it wasn't true. Forget what happened tonight; it's not your fault. This is what would have happened anyway."

She knows at once what he is saying. This is the leave-taking they never had. This time he's telling her why she can't go with him.

She looks him squarely in the eyes. "Igor, if I'm here tonight, it's not because of what you said on television."

He smiles at her so sweetly that she has to look away. "I know, dushenka. It's because of Italy. Tell me honestly. Are you sorry I made you go?"

"No," says Rachel. "I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

She reaches out a hand to touch his cheek. He puts her hand to his lips and holds it there. For a moment, they look at each other. Then he starts the engine. The Jeep lumbers back on to the road. Rachel is seized with a sudden shivering fit. In half an hour they will be in Samarkand.

*

When they reach the Café Maracanda, smoke is rising from the building, and there's a small crowd clustered on the pavement. People are coming and going, there's a lot of noise and confusion. The whole of the street is lined with official vehicles. Igor brings the Jeep to a halt in the middle of the road. "Stay here," he tells Rachel, and leaps out of the car. The screech of the tyres and the slam of the door draw everyone's attention. Heads turn, conversations halt, and the crowd opens to let him through. Rachel plunges after him, but the crowd has closed ranks again and it takes her several minutes to shove her way through. At the entrance to the Maracanda, someone bars her way, a fireman or a policeman. The courtyard is a charred black mess of twisted tables. The ground floor is dark inside and out. The only light comes from two windows on an upper floor. Smoke is rising from one of the walls. A figure is slumped groaning in a chair, two women are weeping in a corner, and a man is lying full length on the ground. Something about the unnatural way his body is bent makes Rachel realize that he must be dead. She looks away. It's oddly quiet. Out on the pavement, people are shouting and asking questions, but in the courtyard there's nothing but a lot of rustling and muttering. No one is talking above a murmur. Igor is standing in the middle of the courtyard talking to a man in black trousers and a smoke-blackened white shirt. Rachel can't hear what they're saying, but she can see that Igor is asking questions and the other man is answering them. Finally, Igor turns away and moves fast in the direction of the staircase that runs up one side of the courtyard to the upper floor. Someone calls after him, but he doesn't answer.

Out of the corner of her eye, Rachel catches a stealthy movement in the shadows of the courtyard. Her spine is suddenly ice cold and her hair rises on her head. For a moment she can't move. Oh God this is it this is it they're going to do it now. Then her wits return, she pushes aside the man blocking her way with a strength she didn't know she possessed, screams "Igor" in a voice she didn't know she had, and runs towards the staircase.

*

Igor hears Rachel scream. He looks towards her, but he doesn't stop. He goes on running up the steps, he can't stop now, the momentum carries him forward. All the choices he has made and all the roads he has chosen have led him to this place. Rachel is no longer part of his life, there are only three people left in what remains of his existence, and all he can do is to run up the stairs to meet them. The door is open, he knows they are waiting for him, but then, when he is halfway up the stairs, Sasha appears above him in the doorway, and a deep bass voice blasts out into the silence:

Amor per me non ha, amor per me non ha.

Igor stops dead.

The man in the shadows takes aim.

Igor feels the first of the bullets bite into his flesh. The impact throws him back against the wall. He sees Rachel hurling herself across the courtyard towards him. He knows exactly what is in her mind: she's going to pull him back, push him down, stop them getting to him. The fact that there has already been one bullet, that there are going to be more, is not going to deter her in the least. Rachel has always been stubborn. It's what he's always loved in her: that refusal to be deflected. Igor's face softens, he tries to smile, he can't. Another bullet meets its mark, he falls to his knees, and his body jerks in pain. His head is swimming in mist, his vision is fading, he doesn't know where he is any more, but he's not afraid. He knows he will die with her beside him, and that's all he's ever wanted.

*

Rachel is too late.

She knows she's too late, even as she rushes desperately across the courtyard. Igor's body has been thrown back against the wall by the impact of the bullets before she's halfway there, and by the time she reaches the foot of the staircase, he is tumbling awkwardly down the steps to meet her. He comes to a halt on the ground by her feet. Rachel drops to her knees and looks at him in terror. "Igor," she screams again, and grabs hold of him to see if she can't shake him back into life, in spite of the fact that there's a hole in his chest and half his cheek seems to be missing. "Igor no please don't leave me IGOR for God's sake I never wanted this I didn't know oh please oh please oh please."

The weeping woman and the groaning man are silenced. The officials and the onlookers shuffle slowly across the courtyard and regroup around the foot of the staircase. Sasha stands impassively at the head of the steps, looking down. Behind him, outlined in the doorway, is the thin implacable shape of the General.

The music continues, though someone has turned down the volume, while she pleads with him one last time. The spectators keep their distance. It's left to William Kavanagh to grip her by the shoulders and whisper in her ear and pull her to her feet and lead her out of the courtyard into the silence.

*

At this very early hour, the air is hushed and calm. No breath of wind stirs the leaves, no bird sings. There is no sound but their footsteps on the empty streets. The windows are darkened and the doors are closed. For years, Rachel has chafed at the links that bind her to Igor and the memories that inhabit her. From now on she will be free of him. He will be nowhere in the world. She will not have the comfort of knowing that somewhere he is alive and thinking of her. She will grow old without him.

William says nothing, plodding along behind her, matching his step to hers. Soon, they'll be on their way back to Tashkent. If William had his way, they would be gone already, but she can't bring herself to drive away from Samarkand and leave him, not just yet. So she is walking round the mahallah, with William a few steps behind, for he will not allow her to walk unaccompanied in a

place such as this. They round a corner and Tamerlane's mausoleum rears up before them. Rachel stops short. As she watches, the dome grows from grey to a blueish tinge. Dawn is breaking. She realizes she is cold, and pulls her jacket closer. William, most uncharacteristically, comes up beside her and puts his arm round her.

"Are you all right?"

"No, I don't think so."

"This might help. I found it in the apartment."

He holds out a notebook. Rachel takes it. It's a school daybook, with lined paper and the days of the week in Russian.

"It's some kind of diary he was writing."

She opens the book at random and peers at it in the dim dawn light. *The game is nearly over, Rachel. My time is running out.*

"I think this is where he wrote down the things he couldn't tell anyone else."

Rachel puts it in her pocket. "Thank you."

*

The phone rings in the hotel room as Camilla is about to leave. She has buttoned her coat against the morning chill. Her suitcase is packed, and her plane ticket ready to hand.

"Good morning, Camilla. William Kavanagh."

"William."

"I'm afraid I have some sad news for you. Igor was shot and killed at the Maracanda about two hours ago."

Camilla draws in her breath.

"It seems to have the hallmarks of a mafia killing."

Camilla shuts her eyes. "I'm sure it does."

"I want Rachel to fly to Washington tomorrow. She can't stay in Central Asia after this. Will you look after her?"

"Of course I will. And she'll look after me. Don't worry about us, Kavanagh. We've done this before."

*

Lying on a chaise longue by the pool, Rachel gazes out across the valley. It will soon be dark. The sky above her head is a vast deep blue, getting darker by the minute, and the trees around her are merging slowly into the night. Soon there will be no difference between sky and earth and air. The elements are changing, blending into each other. She lies back and stares at the sky. For a time, she shuts her eyes. The night washes over her. When she opens them again, the campanile has gone, and the first star is floating low down in the blue-black sky. The smell of new-mown grass comes from one of the houses further down the hill. Suddenly she is a child again, in a short blue summer frock and white ankle socks, watching her father mowing the lawn in the soft northern twilight. Other memories come, more confused, blending all the summer evenings she has ever known into this one, taking the best of them all and fusing them into an overwhelming happiness that flows through her body and her soul. She is the dusk and the dusk is her. She is all the summer evenings she has ever known. She is Igor, she is Camilla, she is Davey, she is her father mowing

the lawn, she is the child Rachel watching him. She is inside her body experiencing the flow of emotion, she is outside it, interpreting what is happening to her. Inside, she is harmony and understanding, outside, she is sadness and futility, knowing already that the moment will not last.

A step clicks on the flagstones and she turns her head. Igor is coming towards her. She holds out her arms.

*

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Invaluable Internet sources were Cenasia, FSU-Media, Johnson's Russia List, and Turkistan-N.

While some of the institutions in this book exist, I would like to stress that the characters are all fictional and their activities are a product of the author's imagination.

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