

Dear Venus,

If what they say is true, and my country is dying, then I think I may be able to tell them why. You see, kid, the conscience is a vital organ, and not an extra like the tonsils or the adenoids.

Meanwhile, I offer my congratulations. You now join a substantial contingent of young people – those condemned to tout the festering memoirs of an elderly relative. Still, you won't have to go far: the Gagarin Press on Jones Street. Ask for Mr Nosrin. Do not worry: I won't be going the way of that fuddled deviant we read about, who sent whole rolls of his handiwork to One Hour Photo. Nosrin has been squared (and everything is paid for). Besides, he's a compatriot of mine, so he'll understand. I'd like a print run, please, consisting of a single copy. It is yours.

You were always asking me why I could never 'open up', why I found it so hard to 'vent' and 'decompress' and all the rest of it. Well, with a past like mine, you pretty much live for the interludes when you aren't thinking about it – and time spent talking about it clearly isn't going to be one of them. There was a more obscure inhibition: the frankly neurotic fear that you wouldn't believe me. I saw you turning away, I saw you turning your face away and slowly shaking your lowered head. And this was for some reason an unendurable prospect. I said my fear was neurotic, but I know it to be widely shared by men with similar histories. Shared neurosis, shared anxiety. Mass emotion: we will have to keep returning to the subject of mass emotion.

When at first I assembled the facts before me, black words on a white page, I found myself staring at a shapeless little heap of degradation and horror. So I've tried to give the thing a bit

of structure. Inasmuch as I could locate some semblance of form and pattern, I felt less isolated, and could sense the assistance of impersonal forces (which I badly needed). This intimation of unity was perhaps delusive. The fatherland is eternally prodigal with anti-illuminations, with negative epiphanies – but not with unity. There aren't any unities in my country.

In the 1930s there was a miner called Aleksei Stakhanov who, some said, unearthed more than a hundred tons of coal – the quota was seven – in a single shift. Hence the cult of the Stakhanovites, or 'shock' workers: canyon-fillers and mountain-flatteners, human bulldozers and excavators. Stakhanovites, very often, were obvious frauds; very often, too, they were strung up by their mates, who hated the ballooning norms . . . There were also 'shock' writers. They were taken off the factory floor, in their thousands, and trained to write propaganda in the guise of prose fiction. My purpose is otherwise, but that's how you'd better think of me – as a 'shock' writer who is telling the truth.

The truth will be painful for you. It has once again struck me (a subtle laceration, like a paper cut) that my most disgraceful act was perpetrated, not in the distant past, like nearly all the others, but well within your lifetime, and a matter of months before I was introduced to your mother. My ghost expects censure. But make it personal, Venus; make it your own and not the censure of your group and your ideology. Yes, you heard me, young lady: your ideology. Oh, it's a mild ideology, I agree (mildness is its one idea). Nobody's going to blow themselves to bits for it.

Your assimilation of what I did – this will in any case be a heavy call on your courage and generosity. But I think that even a strict retributionist (which you are not) would be reasonably happy with the way things turned out. It could be objected, and I would not argue, that I didn't deserve your mother; and I didn't deserve to have you in the house for nearly twenty years. Nor do I now seriously fear that you will excommunicate me from your

memory. I don't think you'll do that. Because you're black, you see. You understand what it means to be a slave.

Venus, I'm sorry that you've gone on minding that I didn't let you drive me to O'Hare. 'That's what we do,' you said: 'We drive each other to and from the airport.' Do you realise how rare that is? No one does it any more, not even newly-weds. All right – it was selfish of me to decline. I said it was because I didn't want to say goodbye to you in a public place. But I think it was the asymmetry of it that was really troubling me. You and I, we drive each other to and from the airport. And I didn't want a to when I knew there wouldn't be a from.

You are as well-prepared as any young Westerner could hope to be, equipped with good diet, lavish health insurance, two degrees, foreign travel and languages, orthodonture, psychotherapy, property, and capital; and your skin is a beautiful colour. Look at you – look at the burnish of you.

PART

I

1

The Yenisei, September 1, 2004

My little brother came to camp in 1948 (I was already there), at the height of the war between the brutes and the bitches . . .

Now that wouldn't be a bad opening sentence for the narrative proper, and I am impatient to write it. But not yet. 'Not yet, not yet, my precious!' This is what the poet Auden used to say to the lyrics, the sprawling epistles, that seemed to be lobbying him for premature birth. It is too early, now, for the war between the brutes and the bitches. There will be war in these pages, inevitably: I fought in fifteen battles, and, in the seventh, I was almost castrated by a secondary missile (a three-pound iron bolt), which lodged itself in my inner thigh. When you get a wound as bad as that, for the first hour you don't know whether you're a man or a woman (or whether you're old or young, or who your father was or what your name is). Even so, an inch or two further up, as they say, and there would have been no story to tell – because this is a love story. All right, Russian love. But still love.

The love story is triangular in shape, and the triangle is not equilateral. I sometimes like to think that the triangle is isosceles: it certainly comes to a very sharp point. Let's be honest, though, and admit that the triangle remains brutally scalene. I trust, my dear, that you have a dictionary near by? You never needed much encouragement in your respect for dictionaries. Scalene, from the Greek, *skalenos*: unequal.

It's a love story. So of course I must begin with the House of Meetings.

* * *

I'm sitting in the prow-shaped dining room of a tourist steamer, the *Georgi Zhukov*, on the Yenisei River, which flows from the foothills of Mongolia to the Arctic Ocean, thus cleaving the northern Eurasian plain – a distance of some two and a half thousand versts. Given Russian distances, and the general arduousness of Russian life, you'd expect a verst to be the equivalent of – I don't know – thirty-nine miles. In fact it's barely more than a kilometre. But that's still a very long ride. The brochure describes the cruise as 'a journey to the destination of a lifetime' – a phrase that carries a somewhat unwelcome resonance. Bear in mind, please, that I was born in 1919.

Unlike almost everywhere else, over here, the *Georgi Zhukov* is neither one thing nor the other: neither futuristically plutocratic nor futuristically stark. It is a picture of elderly, practically tsarist *Komfortismus*. Below the waterline, where the staff and crew slumber and carouse, the ship is of course a fetid ruin – but look at the dining room, with its honey-gold drapes, its brothelly red velvets. And our load is light. I have a four-berth cabin all to myself. The Gulag tour, so the purser tells me, never quite caught on . . . Moscow is impressive – grimly fantastic in its pelf. And Petersburg, too, no doubt, after its billion-dollar birthday: a tercentenary for the slave-built city 'stolen from the sea'. It's everywhere else that is now below the waterline.

My peripheral vision is ringed by crouching waiters, ready to pounce. There are two reasons for this. First, we have reached the penultimate day of our voyage, and by now it is massively established, aboard the *Georgi Zhukov*, that I am a vile-tempered and foul-mouthed old man – huge and shaggy, my hair not the downy white of the unprotesting dotard but a jagged and bitter grey. They also know, by now, that I am a psychotic over-tipper. I don't know why. I was from the start, I suppose, a twenty-per-center rather than a ten, and it's climbed steadily since; but this is ridiculous. I always had a lot of spare cash,

even in the USSR. But now I'm rich. For the record (and this *is* my record), just one patent, but with wide applications: a mechanism that significantly improves the 'give' of prosthetic extremities . . . So all the waiters know that if they survive my cloacal frenzies, then a competence awaits them at the end of every meal. Propped up before me, a book of poems. Not Mikhail Lermontov or Marina Tsvetaeva. Samuel Coleridge. The bookmark I use is a plump envelope with a long letter in it. It's been in my possession for twenty-two years. An old Russian, coming home, must have his significant keepsake – his *deus ex machina*. I haven't read the letter yet but I will. I will, if it's the last thing I do.

Yes, yes, I know – the old shouldn't swear. You and your mother were quite right to roll your eyes at it. It is indeed a charmless and pitiful spectacle, the effing and blinding of an ancient mouth, the teeth false or dropped, the lips licked half away. And pitiful because it is such a transparent protest against failing powers: *saying* fuck is the only dirty thing we can still get up to. But I would like to emphasise the therapeutic properties of the four-letter word. All those who have truly grieved know the relief it eventually brings, to dip your head and, for hour upon hour, to weep and swear . . . Christ, look at my hands. The size of cheeseboards, no, cheeses, whole cheeses, with their pocks and ripples, their spread, their verdigris. I have hurt many men and women with these hands.

On August 29 we crossed the Arctic Circle, and there was a very comprehensive celebration aboard the *Georgi Zhukov*. An accordion, a violin, a much-bejewelled guitar, girls in wenchy blouses, a jodhpured drunk who tried to fake the Cossack dance and kept falling off his stool. I now have a hangover which, two days later, is still getting steadily worse. And at my age, in the 'high' eighties, as they now say (in preference to the 'late', with its unfortunate connotations), there just isn't *room* for a hangover. Dear oh dear . . . Oh dear oh dear oh dear. I

didn't think I was still capable of polluting myself quite so thoroughly. Worse, I succumbed. You know very well what I mean. I joined in all the toasts (a miniature dumpster had been provided for us to smash our glasses into), and I sang all the songs; I wept for Russia, and stanching my tears on her flag. I talked a very great deal about camp – about Norlag, about Predposylov. Around dawn, I started physically preventing certain people from leaving the bar. Later on I did a fair amount of damage to my cabin and had to be moved the next day, in a blizzard of swearwords and twenty-dollar bills.

Georgi Zhukov, General Zhukov, Marshal Zhukov: I served in one of his armies (he commanded a whole front) in 1944 and 1945. He also played a part in saving my life – eight years later, in the summer of 1953. Georgi Zhukov was the man who won the Second World War.

Our ship groans, as if shouldering yet more burdens and cares. I like this sound. But when the doors to the galley blat open I hear the music from the boombox (four beats to the bar, with some seventeen-year-old yelling about self-discovery), and it comes to my ears as pain. Naturally, at a single flicker of my eyelid, the waiters take the kitchen by storm. When you are old, noise comes to you as pain. Cold comes to you as pain. When I go up on deck tonight, which I will do, I expect the wet snow to come to me as pain. It wasn't like that when I was young. The wake-up: *that* hurt, and went on hurting more and more. But the cold didn't hurt. By the way, try crying and swearing above the Arctic Circle, in winter. All your tears will freeze fast, and even your obscenities will turn to droplets of ice and tinkle to your feet. It weakened us, it profoundly undermined us, but it didn't come to us as pain. It answered something. It was like a searchlight playing over the universe of our hate.

Now the boombox has been supplanted by a radio. I hold up a hand. This is permitted. Today saw the beginning of the siege of Middle School Number One, in North Ossetia. Some of the children happened to be watching when the gunmen and gunwomen came over the railway track in their black balaclavas – and they laughed and pointed, thinking it was a game or an exercise. Then the van pulled up and out he climbed, the killer with the enormous orange beard: ‘Russians, Russians, don’t be afraid. Come. Come . . .’ The authorities are saying three or four hundred, but in fact there are well over a thousand hostages – children, parents, teachers. And why is it that we are already preparing ourselves for something close to the worst possible outcome? Why is it that we are already preparing ourselves for the phenomenon understood by all the world – Russian heavy-handedness? For what reason are our hands so heavy? What weighs them down?

Another cup of coffee, another cigarette, and I’ll go up on deck. The Siberian expanse, the olive-green immensity – it would frighten you, I think; but it makes Russians feel important. The mass of the land, of the country, the size of the stake in the planet: it is this that haunts us, and it is this that overthrows the sanity of the state . . . We are cruising north, but downriver. Which feels anomalous. Up on deck, it’s as if the ship is motionless and the facing riverbanks are on the move. We are still; the riverbanks bob and undulate. You are borne forward by a power that is travelling the other way. You have a sense, too, that you are looming up over the shoulder of the world and heading towards an infinite waterfall. Here be monsters.

My eyes, in the Conradian sense, have stopped being Western and started being Eastern. I am back in the bosom of a vast

slum family. Now it has to fend for itself. All the money has been divided up between the felons and the state.

It is curious. To type the word 'Kansas' still seems reassuringly banal. And to type the word 'Krasnoyarsk' still seems wholly grotesque. I could of course type 'K—', like a writer from another age. 'He journeyed to M—, the capital of R—.' But you're a big girl now. 'Moscow', 'Russia': nothing you haven't seen before. My mother tongue – I find I want to use it as little as possible. If Russia is going, then Russian is already gone. We were very late, you see, to develop a language of feeling; the process was arrested after barely a century, and now all the implied associations and resonances are lost. I must just say that it does feel consistently euphemistic – telling my story in English, and in old-style English English, what's more. My story would be even worse in Russian. For it is truly a tale of gutturals and whistling sibilants.

The rest of me, even so, is becoming Eastern – re-Russifying, all over again. So keep a look-out, hereafter, for other national traits: the freedom from all responsibility and scruple, the energetic championship of views and beliefs that are not only irreconcilable but also mutually exclusive, the weakness for a humour of squalor and cynicism, the tendency to speak most passionately when being most insincere, and the thirst for abstract argument (abstract to the point of pretension) at unlikely moments – say, in the middle of a prison stampede, at the climax of a cholera riot, or in the most sepulchral phase of a terror-famine.

Oh, and just to get this out of the way. It's not the USSR I don't like. What I don't like is the northern Eurasian plain. I don't like the 'directed democracy', and I don't like Soviet power, and I don't like the tsars, and I don't like the Mongol overlords, and I don't like the theocratic dynasts of old Moscow and old Kiev. I don't like the multi-ethnic, twelve-time-zone land empire. I don't like the northern Eurasian plain.