The Death of the Russian Novel

George Blecher

PART I: COMPARISONS. Select the paragraph or paragraphs which come closest to a complete answer.

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There is something about the Russian Novel which keeps bothering me. There it stands, bigger than life, twice as vivid and twice as energetic, and it jabs its fingers in my ribs, slaps me on my back, breathes in my face, and asks me embarrassing questions about why I live the way I do. I don't know how to answer. But I have the sense that the answer is not in the soot on my windowsill. The answer is not in the deranged man masturbating on a fire escape across the street. The answer is not in war, overpopulation, racism, or any other catch-phrase. The answer is not anything with an animal's name. Perhaps part of the answer is the lack of animals.

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Rudensky touched the young stallion's flank and felt a shiver run up and down its hide. "You don't like a human's touch," he thought. "That's all right, that's good. I don't ask you to like me. All you have to know is that I'm going to be your master." He put his hand to the horse's muzzle but it flared its nostrils and jerked away, pulling its teeth back in a high-pitched whine. Rudensky waited patiently until the horse calmed down. "Good boy, good boy," he murmured. Then he touched the muzzle again, more gently this time, and blew into the horse's ear. Quickly, deftly, with the grace of an acrobat, he was in the stirrup swinging himself into the saddle. The horse was caught off-guard for a second, just enough time for Rudensky to find his seat, and then it groped high at the air with its hooves, its eyes hurt and furious at being outfoxed. Rudensky laughed and set his knees into the horse's side. "Now you know who's the clever one!" he shouted.

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Maybe food is the key to the answer. Lilly cooks a tender veal cutlet and covers it with a fine, delicate cream sauce. I should be pleased. But after I take a few bites, enough to satisfy my first hunger—just at the time when eating should be a pleasure—it becomes a duty instead. I can't taste the sauce. She says it's the best she's ever made, the most subtle. But I can't taste it.

The whole table glittered with old, heavy silverplate. At one end, lying regally on a bed of parsley, was a magnificent sturgeon smothered in fresh dill and sliced lemons. Surrounding the fish like courtiers to a queen were heaping bowls of herring, pearl onions, pyramids of red and black caviar. Toward the center were the main courses: a whole candied ham, glazed and dressed with pineapple rings like a clown's motley; a huge, dripping side of veal and a platter of steaming snipe, cooked in the French style with oranges and wine, lying on a bed of wild rice. At the far end were the desserts: a high frothy pudding called *fromage de neige* (a specialty prepared by the French cook Anton Gregorovitch had hired for this most special of occasions), and fresh fruits from all corners of Russia: apples from Petersburg, grapes from Georgia, tangerines from the shores of the Black Sea.

The guests gasped with surprise as they entered the room. They had known that Anton Gregorovitch was not a poor man, but they'd had no idea that he possessed either the wealth to afford such a feast or the generosity to serve it.

"Incredible!" said Brozhanin the banker out loud. His amazement spoke for the whole company.

Anton Gregorovitch folded his hands and smiled ingenuously. "Thank you, my friend. It does look rather appetizing, doesn't it?"

While they sat in their places waiting to be served, the guests raved about the luxury and expense of the meal, but as soon as the servants filled their plates they forgot their decorum and attacked the food like hungry animals.

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Maybe the answer is loneliness. At least I always come back to that. I'm always coming back to loneliness no matter what I do.

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Fyodor Petrovitch was the second clerk in charge of the Province of Vlosk in the Office of Provincial Records. He lived in a small, bare, unheated room off the Nevsky Prospect, on a dingy side street where the sun rarely chose to shine. He was a very solitary old man, this Fyodor Petrovitch: in the evenings he sat by himself in his room, drinking weak tea from his samovar and reading back issues of the illustrated magazines his landlady had already discarded. From time to time he went to a little cafe, but he didn't like the rough company there and he usually sat by himself in a corner, drinking as many vodkas as he needed to make the room fog before his eyes. Before he passed out, he would sometimes raise his fist and shout once or twice: "The bastards! When will they learn to treat the common man with respect?" and then his head would sink to the table. When the proprietor noticed him he'd call, "Hey, old man, this is no hotel I'm running!" But Fyodor Petrovitch was dead to the world. Soon one of the rough coach-drivers would grab him and send him flying out the door. He would climb back to his room by instinct and habit, like a dog finding its way home in the dark, and he'd pass out again on the bed. There he'd sleep until Monday.

Well, one day Fyodor Petrovitch was going by a store which specialized in antique jewelry. Among the many items in the window was a large cameo brooch he'd never noticed before: a portrait of the most exquisite young woman he'd ever seen, a shy young countess (or so Fyodor Petrovitch imagined) with large eyes and her hair swept over a long, swanlike neck. For weeks he passed the store, hoping that the brooch would be gone and he would be free of his strange obsession, for such is what it had become. He thought about her constantly, in every waking moment and in his dreams as well. Her face even floated before his eyes when he did his figures: a seven would remind him of the curve of her neck, and in a nine he would recognize the roundness of her cheek.

One icy morning when he passed the shop, he noticed that the brooch was gone. Immediately he broke into a sweat colder than the freezing wind. He ran into the store and seized the clerk. "It it sold? Did you sell it?" he demanded.

"Sell what?" said the clerk.

"The brooch! The one with the girl's head on it!"

"Oh, that one," said the clerk slyly, smiling to himself. (He had noticed the look in Fyodor Petrovitch's eye every time he passed the shop, and he'd decided to trick the old man.) "Someone is very interested in it," he said. "However, I could let you have it for, say . . . a hundred rubles?"

A hundred rubles! It was almost everything he'd saved in all his years at the Office of Provincial Records! But he knew he had to have the brooch; a voice said to him, "You will die without it."

So he ran home and cut open his straw mattress, then ran back to the clerk. He thrust the money triumphantly into his face. "There it is! A hundred rubles! Now give it to me!"

"Easy, easy, old man," said the clerk as he counted the money in an agonizingly slow fashion. "You certainly are anxious to have it, aren't you, old fellow?"

But when the clerk finally produced the brooch from a side drawer, Fyodor Petrovitch seized it out of his hand and ran out of the store.

A year passed. Fyodor Petrovitch went to work as usual, and every day he came home and climbed the steps to his room. Nothing at all seemed to have changed in his humdrum life. But he was never seen again in the little cafe; instead he spent even the weekends in his room, and it was rumored that he had sworn off vodka forever. Then one day in the middle of the week he neglected to come to work. The Chief Clerk, a kindly soul, assumed he'd had an attack of his usual arthritis. But after three or four days his landlady noticed a strange smell as she passed his door. She knocked, but there was no answer. Finally she called the porter, and when there was again no answer, she ordered him to take the hinges off.

They found Fyodor Petrovitch dead, lying on his mattress with a peaceful, contented smile on his lips. His hands were held close to his chest. When they pried them open, they found a large cameo brooch pressed tightly against his heart.

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There are times when I'm completely in love with Lilly: when I remember how beautiful her breasts can look in leotards; when I ask her how in God's name she can put up with me, and she answers, "Are you crazy? You're the warmest man in the world!"; when she gets up in the middle of the night and paints a whole canvas, then tumbles, happy and exhausted, into my arms; when she turns her body in a certain shy way and I realize that no woman can make me as happy as she.

But I get distracted. Sometimes anyone with a cute behind or a glint in her eye can make me stop in my tracks and hate myself. The times I've been unfaithful, well, they were times that seem to recede into anecdote before I know it. The second meeting is always a disappointment. She is just a woman too, this second one, and love is as complex and difficult as ever, no matter how hard I try to simplify it.

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Maria Petrovna sat on the velvet couch, her coal-black eyes burning defiantly at Alexy. Like a connoisseur examining a painting, he studied the milk-white skin above her breasts; her smooth, tapering arms; her waist, still narrow as a schoolgirl's; and her rich, thick chestnut hair. She would marry him, that was clear. She didn't know it, of course, and neither had he until this moment, but now, as she looked at him with a hate as pure and clear as the crystal chandelier above her head, Alexy knew there was no escaping her: only such a woman could be his wife!

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The fear of death rivets me to the sidewalk. I start falling and spinning, and I have to grab hold of something and breathe through my mouth until it passes. Yet it doesn't change my life at all; it doesn't make me live better.

Sometimes I sit down with myself and say, "Look, you're thirty now. At best, you've got fifty years more. But what are you doing with it? You drag yourself from day to day, you spend most of your time wanting, wanting, but what you have is never any good and what you don't have is marvelous. Why don't you eat your cutlet, man? Eat it with pleasure and joy. Love your wife. Make your babies. Love your friends and have the courage to tell those who seek to diminish you that they are the devil and you want no part of them. Courage, man, courage and appetite!"

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Arkady Simonovitch was dying. The pillows were piled high around him, and the doctors hovered nearby with spoons of bitter, amber liquid which they kept dangling in front of his nose. He waved them away like flies. Enough, he thought, enough, enough! He had lived seventy-seven years, had fathered five legitimate children and God knows how many bastards, and now he was being treated like a sickly child. No, he'd had enough of it. Let the world be taken over by the New Generation, the Weak Ones. Let them see how difficult it was to be a man!

He looked at his youngest son, Gregor. He was staring out the window at the tall, waving oaks, one hand on his hip and the other cradling his chin. A dandy, scowled

Arkady Simonovitch, nothing but a dancer at balls! But in spite of himself he had to admire the handsome lad: the cut of his suit was good, the material was selected with a certain fineness of taste, and perhaps with his inheritance and a little cleverness, he would get along quite nicely.

By his bedside sat Varvara, his youngest daughter. She was too plump and matronly for such a young woman, and she read too many books, qualities which would not serve her well in finding a man. Yet Arkady Simonovitch admired her too. She brought back to him his wife Lubskaya, the same patience and intelligent irony in her eyes. Underneath her matronliness there was strength, and with strength even the plainest of women could make herself attractive.

So it was not so hard to die after all, he thought.

Arkady Simonovitch coughed loudly. The doctors turned their heads, but he closed his eyes and ignored them. He had settled most of the business of his life, financial and otherwise, and what there was left could be taken care of by the priests and accountants. He thought back to an afternoon like this one, bright and chilly, the sun a brittle diamond in the autumn sky. He was a young man, out hunting in the woods, when he heard a woman laugh; he looked around and saw in among the trees a peasant girl. She was far more desirable than the spindly-armed schoolgirls he suffered to dance with at balls; this one's breasts were like young melons in her blouse, and her eyes sparkled gaily. She had been washing her feet in a stream, but when she saw Arkady Simonovitch, she grabbed her sandals and bounded away like a roe-deer.

"Hello," he called out, "why are you running?"

"Because you come too close, Arkady Simonovitch!" She peered at him from behind a tree, her eyes smiling.

"But I don't want to hurt you!" he said.

"I know that, Arkady Simonovitch. But if you caught me, what *would* you want to do to me?"

He tried to come closer, but she darted behind another tree. "At least tell me your name," he called.

"My name is Never Enough!"

"Never Enough? That's a strange name."

"No, it isn't. It suits me perfectly. No matter how much you get of me, it's Never Enough. Now good-bye, Arkady Simonovitch. Don't forget me!"

And she lifted her skirts to him, exposing her thighs, and ran away. He tried to find her, but the woods grew too dark to see, and he went home, aroused and fuming with desire.

"Never Enough!" Arkady Simonovitch thought to himself. He felt a smile come over his lips. "I'll find you," he said, "and when I do, *then* you'll know what I want of you!"

When the sun started to fill the room with the long, purposeful rays of late afternoon, the doctors noticed that Arkady Simonovitch was dead.

PART II: THE DEATH OF THE RUSSIAN NOVELIST: COMPARE AND CONTRAST. Read the following incidents carefully. Note how people choose their own ways of dying. Compare and contrast them to modern examples.

Alexander Pushkin, a man who was afraid of getting old, died in a duel with a young baron over his wife's honor. (She was a beautiful but empty-headed girl who would probably have been better off with the baron than with Pushkin; Pushkin knew it too; but the possibility of a duel came at just the right time, when his financial and artistic troubles were piling up around him, and a duel must have seemed so dazzlingly simple in the midst of his more dreary and prosaic problems.)

At any rate, they went out on a freezing cold morning to the outskirts of Moscow. The snow was up to a man's waist, and the sky must have been a blue so deep it was almost purple. The snow was completely fresh—it took the seconds an hour to trample down a proper dueling-area—and the field itself must have reflected some of the blue of the sky, making it look the color of icebergs. Trees with a thin coating of ice tinkled like wind-chimes. A splendid, unforgettable day!

When the signal was given, the baron strode quickly to the line (he was an excellent shot and Pushkin, for all his bravado, was not so hot), took aim, and shot Pushkin in the stomach. A terrible moment. What had happened to the purity of the day, the sharpness of colors? Now everything had become business again. Seeing Pushkin fall, the baron started to walk away. But Pushkin shouted, "Wait! Give me a chance!"—words which must have hit the young baron right in the pit of *his* stomach. According to the etiquette of dueling, however, he had no choice: he had to stand. But if he had been a reckless enough young man to pursue the wife of a poet whose bad temper was famous throughout Russia, at least he was not a complete fool; so he turned sideways to avoid a shot in the heart. Pushkin raised himself on one elbow and took aim—for two full minutes, some say. There it was, the father taking sweet revenge on the son: for isn't it likely that during those two minutes the baron thought to himself, "What right has he got to be angry at me anyway? He's just jealous that I'm younger than he is." And Pushkin must have thought, "I'm going to shoot that little bastard right in the balls."

Finally Pushkin pulled the trigger, and the baron collapsed in the snow.

The day was suddenly bright again. "Bravo!" shouted Pushkin.

Then he fell into blackness.

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At the age of eighty-two, Tolstoi woke up one night and decided to escape from his family. He packed a knapsack and left a note saying that he was going away to seek Truth. At eighty-two, to seek Truth! How he must have driven his wife Sonya crazy with all that Truth-seeking! Well, when she read the note the next morning, she must have known what he was up to. She must have felt a panic that turned her body into one strummed nerve. For she and Tolstoi had been at each other's throats for years; he was growing weaker and his secretary was stealing from his diaries and selling the material to the papers; and now their youngest daughter Sascha babied and coddled Leo with an intimacy he'd never allowed his own wife. So she knew when she read the note that things had gotten too much for him; he had gone away to die in peace.

Those days before he collapsed in a little railroad station in the middle of nowhere seemed to Tolstoi the most glorious in his life. He was free again, finally free. Of course he wasn't any more or less free than he had ever been, but for Tolstoi illusion was all. He would have made a great salesman, that Tolstoi; he could convince himself of anything. Even when his life started to sputter out in the station, he was dreaming. He talked about getting well and continuing his pilgrimage, of signing over all his lands to Sonya and starting all over again. It was no wonder that when she showed up, he wouldn't let her into his sickroom. She was Reality, and Reality was Death.

When he was a boy, Tolstoi's oldest brother Nikolai told him about a green carved stick buried in the woods of their parental estate, Yasnaya Polyana. (What poet ever put together those wonderful sounds!) There were magic words inscribed on this stick which contained the secret of universal love; with it, evil could be banished from the face of the earth, and all men would become brothers. The little boy Leo cried every time Nikolai told him this story, and he cried whenever he thought about it the rest of his life. Picture the eighty-year-old in a peasant's shirt, his long lion's face marked with a perpetual scowl, sitting in his garden and crying. When he died, they brought him back to Yasnaya Polyana and buried him in the woods where the green stick was hidden.

* * *

Chekhov's death was almost too Chekhovian; but then so were his later plays a little overripe with melancholy and the erosions of time. With his young actress-wife, he took a vacation to the Black Forest, though the vacation was a sham: both of them knew he was dying. It was like being in a play. They sat each evening talking or reading to each other, pretending they were like any other couple. The lights were dim, their voices hushed, the trees creaked outside their windows. Both of them were professionals; they were each other's loving audience as well as actors in the same play. The pale but healthy girl sitting by a lamp and reading Shakespeare; the middle-aged newlywed Chekhov lying on his couch with his wispy beard and glowing tubercular eyes—it is not hard to picture them on stage. If they hadn't been actors, it might have been depressing or heartbreaking to go through with this charade. But not these two—make-believe and reality had finally become congruent. They were the leading characters in the final Chekhov play.

On one of those nights Chekhov called from his couch for champagne. "It's been a long time since I've had champagne," he said, paused for an actor's two heartbeats, and drained the glass. A little while later, he whispered, *"Ich sterbe!"*—something a Wagnerian hero might utter on stage. He turned his back, the last exit, and passed away.

As was fitting, his death had two more acts. The first came on the train which carried his body back to Moscow. Somewhere along the way it got mixed up with a shipment of oysters; when the workmen unpacked the crates, they found ninety-nine crates of oysters and one crate of Chekhov. And there was more coming. The same train carried a Russian general who had also died abroad. Both funeral processions pulled up next to the train station. By accident the two coffins were exchanged, and until the mistake was discovered, Chekhov was led through the hot, dusty streets of Moscow by a full military marching band and a red-faced policeman high on a white horse.

Gorky, who was there, thought it was a terrible affront to the great writer. Poor Gorky. He never did have a sense of humor.

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Ernest Hemingway, a man who was afraid of getting old, spent all his life trying to find the ideal duel to fight. He fought everything he could find: bulls, lions, his fears, his wives, Gertrude Stein; he even read all his critics and went a couple of rounds in his head with each of them. Looking at it one way, a fight or a duel provides company for a lonely man. When someone bares his teeth, points a gun, or swings an evil fist at your gut, at least you know he cares. A duel is a dazzlingly simple moment of human contact. But Hemingway never found the duel he was looking for. No one loved or hated him enough to make him feel wanted. On that morning in his pine-paneled den with the chill, impersonal barrel filling his mouth, he must have felt so lonely, so utterly alone. Isn't it possible that if he'd let himself bawl like a baby and at least feel the loneliness, someone upstairs would have heard and come down to save him?

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E. M. Forster died at the venerable age of ninety-one. The papers said that he died in his sleep, just like that, no fuss or fury, he just went to bed one night and let himself be taken away. But then he had never been the sort of man to make a fuss. For several decades he'd been content to live in a little apartment in Cambridge, listening to his gramophone or talking quietly to friends. The few interviews he granted portrayed him as a reserved, somewhat untrusting man, unwilling or unable to reveal very much of himself to strangers—even reverential ones.

That is a strange kind of man to be a novelist. Self-revelation, not of facts but of deepest fantasies, is part of the novelist's business. And I thought I knew a lot about this man through his books: I knew the magnitude of his sentiment, I knew his small prejudices, I knew about his sense of the mystery beneath the ordinary. So at what point did he decide to close up? Why did he choose to live the rest of his life like a ghost? What great fear told him, nay *demanded,* that he never publish another work of fiction the last forty-six years of his life?

* * *

Like many Russian novelists, Jack Kerouac, a man of Tolstoian appetites, died in St. Petersburg. But what a St. Petersburg! The America he had crossed so many times (the ghost of which now lay somewhere under the new superhighways) had shrunk to a wretched, sweltering place in Florida where the old and unloved go to roast in the sun like barbecued chickens.

There was a logic to it. There always is. When he died, he was prematurely old. He had lost his fantasy. He felt neglected, unloved. It was so sad to watch him resurrected briefly on television the year before he died. Do you remember how handsome he used to look on his first book-jackets? Now he was pudgy and sullen. He sat before the TV cameras, swiveling in his chair, denouncing his past friends, his past illusions, squinting at the bright lights, his arms moving dreamily with the sluggish grace of an alcoholic. Movingly, shamelessly, he complained that the present was shit.

After his death some of his friends wrote poems about him. These poems tended to be too long and almost incoherent. He had gotten through to his friends; he had made them feel guilty, but the source of the guilt wasn't clear. No one could say exactly why he died.

PART III: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. Use the following stories as examples for your own reflections on the general topic of the exam.

I have a friend who used to remind me of people in Russian novels. On the surface he seemed colorless, but underneath his soul was Russian.

We were both graduate students one winter in Paris, and we shared a chilly, expensive apartment in a little street near the Pantheon. At the beginning he seemed like the most proper guy you'd ever want to meet: he wore dark suits, horn-rimmed glasses, attended his classes with a sense of duty, and kept his hair short. I didn't like him at first—his agreeability annoyed me, and the routine of his life seemed insanely dull. But then I started noticing a laugh he had. It was the most poignant, tinkling laugh I'd ever heard. It was like a little girl's giggle, high and melodic, and he seemed so relieved and happy when he laughed that he made me happy too. I realized how shy he was. His eyes would glimmer like those of a child who's been left out of a joke; when you laughed with him, it was like accepting him, allowing him to be close to you.

There was something Russian about the way he brought girls home with him almost every night. Mostly they were foreign students, tall, lost girls whom we nicknamed *"La Suédoise," "L'Allemande," "L'Italienne,"* to tell them apart.

He'd spend hours sitting with them by the gas heater in the living room. They'd move their hands furiously, complaining about Paris, French men, their landladies, anything they could think of. And he sat listening attentively, his chin in his pale palm, smiling and soaking up their troubles like a kind uncle. It wasn't love he inspired in them; it was trust. So when he tried to make love to them a date or two later, they reacted as if he'd broken an unspoken agreement. Later they called up and apologized, explained how upset they'd felt that evening, but they never became his lovers. Whether they knew it or not, they had come to Paris looking for danger and excitement, and to them he appeared as pure as Sir Galahad.

As the year wore on and Paris turned gray with the winter, more of the Russian came out in him. He began to disappear for days at a time. He never announced his departures or explained where he'd been. Sometimes I'd run into him in the long subway tunnels of Châtelet. There he was at the other end of the long tiled tube, coming toward me in his tweed coat and Brooks Brothers scarf. We'd get closer and closer, I'd start to smile a greeting, but then I noticed that he didn't know who I was. I'd call him back: "Hey, where are you going?" "Oh," he'd say, and that shy, silver laugh would dance out of his mouth.

In the coldest part of the winter, he fell in love. She was a strange girl, the one he picked—dark, slight, nervous as a cat, quick-witted, and something of a nag. But he was ecstatic. He moved her into the apartment a week after he met her, and she'd cook for all of us. At least outwardly, he began to relax a little. He took off his tie and rolled up his sleeves. He talked more, cracked quiet little jokes, tried to become one of the boys; he even took to smoking cigars.

But after only a few weeks of this curious bliss she disappeared. One morning he woke up and she was gone without a note. He was frantic. He paced around the room: "Goddamn, goddamn, where did she *go*?" But then I saw him change again; the most Russian of all his selves emerged. All the stealth in his mind, all his capacity for intrigue, gathered inside him and focused on one end: to find her. He became a brilliant and methodical detective. With his hands in his pockets, his body stiffened against an imagined wind, the eyes behind his glasses small and suffering, he scoured the neighborhood. He spoke to everyone: the concierge, the shop-keepers, the street-sweepers, even the bus-drivers on the line which passed our building. Finally he found her, don't ask me how. But he had her address in a bleak city in the north of France. He went to bring her back. A week later he returned alone—not bitter, not angry, just limp and exhausted. He told me this story.

She was married, appropriately enough, to a psychiatrist. One of her neighbors told him with a trace of green-eyed envy that she left whenever she got bored, and her husband never failed to take her back. My friend stood outside her house in a gray, pouring rain, trying to decide what to do. He was soaked, he was shaking with chills. That morning he'd hid behind a tree as she went out for groceries. Her face was hidden by a kerchief, and she wore a frumpy housecoat: why had he come all this way for a little French housewife? Fantasies whirled through his head. Should he go in and rescue her? Did he really want her? What would he do when he saw her? What would she do when she saw him? Would she look past him like some blank-eyed movie schizophrenic? (But these are things that I might think, not he; after all, he was a man of decision, of dark, snaking inner drives. No, more likely if he thought anything, he thought of their nights together. His new strength, her flirtatiousness! And that moment must have been the worst for him. For he was terrified he would never be that happy again.)

He knocked on the door. The husband, a sharp-nosed man with rimless glasses, answered. Panic. He had thought she was alone. But my friend, the man of decision, had that contingency covered too. In a soft, steady voice he stared into the husband's eyes and lied: he was an American soldier whose car had broken down in the rain. Could he come in and use the phone?

She saw him. She stood in the hallway and saw him. He looked at her for only a moment, then ducked his head, but that moment was to reverberate in his mind for months afterward like a witch shrieking through a child's dreams. He started to speak, but his laugh, that lost, silvery laugh, caught in his throat instead and made him almost faint.

He groped for the door behind him and plunged into the rain.

In a way, there is a happy ending. He's married now, has a sparkling little boy, a partnership in a law firm, a future. He still laughs his laugh occasionally, but it is a ghost of the former one. He conceals the Russian from himself. The Law is not Russian. Honesty is not Russian. Justice is not Russian. Only the laugh which catches in the throat is Russian.

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I have another friend who reminded me of Stavrogin in *The Possessed,* though perhaps he was more like Kirilov, a lesser character, the revolutionary incurably bound to a vision of the ideal world the real world wants no part of.

He was a very heavy, light-skinned black, built like an ex-tackle but with the shy, clumsy gestures of an adolescent. I knew him one winter when we were both floating around Europe looking for something to keep us occupied. Remember that this is eight years ago, before we were all made members of the Youth Culture and the Movement. We were in-between eras, and we had nothing but our nervous itches to keep us company. I met him in Rome in front of American Express: "Hey, baby, can you turn me on tuh-to a thousand lire? Just enough to get me straight, my man." His eyes flickered away from me and back with distrust, as if even *he* didn't believe his own con. I guess that was why he interested me; he seemed complex, self-doubting, as lost as I was. So I took out my wallet and gave him the gaudy bills. "Yeah, cool," he said, and extended his hand for me to pat. It was big and soft, a giant pudding of a hand.

Rome was a deserted place that winter. The Via Veneto was empty, the Spanish Steps glowed in the winter sunlight like dried bones, and the only people in the streets were a few homosexuals out cruising, an occasional forlorn whore, and ambitious but aimless kids like this guy and me. So we ran into each other several times. Sometimes I'd treat him to a plate of spaghetti, but more often we'd sit for a while in a deserted cafe and have a cup of sweet coffee until his restlessness (or maybe it was his guilt) took over, and he left, saying he had to meet his man.

There were times when he got nervous and abstract. The world became too much for him. He'd sit in the cafe dropping lump after lump of sugar into his cup until the surface tension broke and the coffee spilled onto the marble table top. His big hands would clench and he'd speak in his frantic, feverish stutter: "You th-think you can understand what we go through? You really do? My brothers are dying in Alabama and Mississippi and Indochina and the Dominican Republic and you're sitting on your ass in Rome digging the *ragazze*. You couldn't understand if your puh-pecker depended on it. But I sympathize with you because the grays b-been brainwashing you for years and you not expected to know. They been killing my brother for centuries. What is he? Just some stupid nigger, right? It's okay, it's cool. Shit on him, kill him, he digs it, he don't even bleed."

He would picture some rice paddy in a land which was still just a strange word (you see, he really did *believe* in Brotherhood!), and his eyes would cloud with tears. "So fucking stupid!"

"What is?"

"The colored cats! Why do they go and kill their own brothers? Them little black-pyjamaed cats in Viet Nam are their brothers, and they're too dumb to know it. They didn't do nothing to us; it's the white people who's the enemy! So why do the colored cats go there and shoot those people who could be their brothers in the Revolution? Why don't they turn around and shoot the fucking lieutenants?"

During the next year I ran into him in three or four different cities. It was always the same: he talked about making a revolution, the evils of capitalism and imperialism, and since he'd started to read hungrily, his tirades now bristled with impressive and guilt-making statistics. One time I met him in Copenhagen. It was a balmy, lax, fragrant summer, and I was having a great time. The girls smiled when they saw someone a little out of the ordinary, and the group of Americans and Englishmen who had been floating around the continent looking for a purpose now had one: to make love to as many soft, smiling girls as we could lay our hands on. So when I saw his ponderous body coming down the street like a walking conscience, I felt guilty. He made my girl-chasing seem like imperialism.

I sat down with him in a cafe overlooking a lake where swans floated on placid waters. I asked him how long he was staying.

"Not long, man. I'm on my way to Sverige. The only decent socialist country in the world. This place is just a satellite of Uncle Sam, the imperialist warmonger."

When he went into his usual speech, I got nervous. "Agreed that society is cruel and inhuman," I said. "Agreed that it should all be changed. But what are you going to do until it happens?"

"I'll be a hairdresser," he said.

"A what?"

I could see how threatened he felt. "Don't bug me, man. You're just a mocky intellectual from New Yoke. You think you can hype me like Mr. Shapiro hypes my people in Harlem."

"But you're smart, you speak five languages, why don't you go back to school so you can *do* something?"

"Fuck that, man. You got no right to talk while my people are dying."

Until the Revolution came, he floated from country to country. Not having any particular taste for women, in his way the most innocent, vulnerable, tortured person I'd ever met, all he could do was carry around his rage and tell it to anyone who would listen. After a while he settled in Sweden where he became active in a local expatriate chapter of SNCC. Once in a while I saw pictures of him in foreign newspapers, massive and wild-eyed, shouting into a microphone about racism in Europe. One year he wrote a passionate series of articles for a Stockholm newspaper. I hoped he was doing okay. But I knew better. Maybe it was his lack of humor, the suspicion which persisted in his eyes, his invincible innocence: but I knew that he would never find a place in the world. He was doomed to a loneliness so deep that even his imagined brothers would deny him. Maybe in some other age he could have been a martyr, smiling knowingly while the lackeys fanned the flames at his feet; but now it was clear that the second wave of the Revolution, the one which gets down to business, would roll right over him.

Soon there came rumors that the other people in the Movement didn't like him: he was *too* crazy, *too* tortured, *too* disorganized. A couple of years ago Bobby Seale stopped in Stockholm on a fund-raising tour. My friend suited up completely in black: black pants, black shirt, black boots, black gloves, and a black beret. He was about to be vindicated. He was about to be received into the arms of his revolutionary brothers. So imagine him before a mirror in a chilly room in a joyless city full of people who misunderstood or despised him, putting his three-hundred-pound body into the uniform of the Cause. Think of his hopes, the glow of expectation in his heart! He was completely happy then; he must have loved the world passionately for the first time in his life. A Russian moment, of course, totally Russian.

As Bobby Seale stepped off the plane with the wild, vindictive Swedish wind whipping the flaps of his coat, my friend stood at the foot of the stairs and snapped to attention. I have heard that Seale looked down on this man, this huge, unloved man in black, and said, "What the fuck is *that?*"

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This one is the hardest to tell. When I try to picture how it happens, my mind fights me every inch of the way. But I have to try, I have to understand.

So look. There are mornings, occasional mornings, when life begins for me like a Russian Novel. I wake up with tears of joy in my eyes. I was dreaming something, what I can't remember, but the feeling itself lingers. I have the sense that *my life is mine,* no one else's, mine for the short time I'm allowed to keep it. Everything in the room seems to belong to me for the first time: the white walls, the green plants, the typewriter waiting on the table, they're all mine. I see Lilly sleeping next to me. Her dreams are angry ones, she's rocking furiously on her side, her eyes clenched tight. But I'm not afraid of her. I love her. I want to tell her to depend on me, to trust me, to find her safety in me, there's enough strength in me at this moment to keep both of us alive.

So I reach out and hold her. Her body is a warm nest. Slowly she turns over, opens her eyes, and smiles at me. Now remember that this is a beautiful girl as far as I am concerned—not cool and distant, but alive, sexy, as vital as that feeling I had when I woke up. We begin to kiss like strangers, like animals nosing at each other, tentative and hungry. We feel the mystery growing between us. When I finally slip inside her, it's like coming home. But when I'm riding high in the clutch of love, during the time when nature is telling us to open, open, open more and more until we are exposed as totally as babies, we start to close up and drift away from each other. Like Forster, like my friend in Paris, we recede into private securities, backwaters of ourselves. The feeling I had that my life was mine gives way to a feeling of empty isolation.

What happens blow-by-blow in this ritual of loneliness is not necessary to go into. Suffice it to say that we have lost each other in a moment of fear so deep it cannot be felt. And the morning which began so promisingly, as if it were the first morning of my life, has now become a familiar disappointment. The consciousness of that moment in time, all that I have, that moment in time, vanishes and blurs as it never did for Pierre or Natasha, for Stavrogin and each of the Karamazovs—as it might not have for the people who dreamed them either.

PART IV: THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE. Write a heartfelt essay on the topic: "Are There Any Russians Left In Russia? Is Even Lenin Still A Hero? When They Close His Mausoleum For Repairs, Does The Cosmetics Expert Touch His Body With Love And Awe Or Does He Look At Him As Just Another Stiff? Is It Possible That The Russians Aren't Russian Anymore? Why Is Voznesensky A Lesser Poet Than Mayakovsky? Why Is Solzhenitsyn A Lesser Novelist Than Tolstoi? Why Do I Suspect That If I Went To Russia, I Would Still Come Back To New York, The City Of Separations?"