

# MOSCOW DOGS

by Sweeney O'Toole

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Smashwords Edition

## Part One

1

There was someone at the door. ‘...forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred. Twenty, forty sixty eighty, a hundred.’ Three taps, softly. Ivan Vladimirovitch.

He brought me tort that his mother made as well as other tidbits. He was always asking me what I was doing here and saying how he worried that I didn’t eat enough and that you had to be careful with your health here because there were lots of bad things here and was my room warm enough and did I need extra blankets. His father was a local judge and he gave to his only child beyond what was decent, mapping out a scheme for his son, a means to allow him everything he wished. I never took Ivan seriously when he told me how awful life was in Moscow, whilst at the same time he was spread out like a tired pussy cat, consoled by the extravagance of his parent’s garden ring apartment, neither when he said he had a lover, though it was notable that he never took to naming names, for the impression I duly formed, was that there was something of the queer about Ivan.

‘I’m going to London, Leo. Pradstavlayesh? We’ve spoken with Papa about the Royal College. Help me with my English. I’m going to make new friends...’

Yes Ivan, all your wonderful friends waiting for you there, waiting on Hampstead Heath after dark, in the toilets of the underground, and in Bloomsbury Square. ‘Go Ivan, quick, bistra,’ I thought, ‘they’re waiting for you and your father’s money!’ But I didn’t encourage him. I didn’t even

correct his he she mistakes. The fact of the matter was the tort was dry, dry like an old spinster's quim and it depressed me to eat such a thing and if Ivan couldn't see that it wasn't right, then all the articles and prepositions, all the phrasal verbs and future perfects in the world weren't going to make any kind of difference. He wasn't a boy, far from it. It was too late as far as I was concerned. Anyway, he got what he wanted, what they all wanted, in the end. I still had sympathy for him, even then, being as he was in a place like this, but that was as far as it went. And as for why I was here, I was here for the bad things Ivan, but such a concept you had yet to understand. So I forgot the door and his mother's stinky tidbits. I didn't have time for that anymore. Instead I continued to count and thought of Nadia.

Despite knowing the Russian types by then, I'd been in Moscow for more than a year at that point, I was nervous of Nadia, as one often is when desirous and needing. I should add that she wasn't the beauty of a magazine, far from it. She had a striking look, the product of asymmetry compounded by flawless skin, but there was something awkward and academic about her, sexless one could say. What was certain was that she gushed with youth and to that point I found her difficult to resist. I'd met her in a fast food restaurant, the beginning of summer, her wearing these fabulous little shorts and a candy striped t-shirt.

I wrote a few lines of English on a napkin and placing it before us, watched as she happily took the bait.

'A majestic present of fate' she said later in a moment of intimacy, no longer a brag of how English was her third language!

But what was particularly eccentric was the accent. Perfect Home Counties. This from a girl, who, it turned out, had slept in the same bed as her sister for years because her divorced parents, who shared the next room,

needed the single beds. For years! She had a little corner and a desk and she spent hours listening to her Oxford English cassettes and practicing her vowels while Mama and Papa screamed in the background, somehow having the discipline to do it every day so that she could stop being Nadia if she wanted and be, instead, Charlotte or Henrietta.

‘I’ve just graduated from MGU School of Languages,’ she said, ‘frankly there are endless possibilities and no end to it.’

She kept a diary and checked her schedule, happily filling in the blanks to the nearest half hour. At that time it was Korean and French. She told me about her friend, the businessman whom she met at Korean class, how he bought her gifts and took her to a Chinese restaurant, how they went to some dacha for the weekend and he got drunk and ignored her and that he was rich and wanted her to live with him and that the twenty year age difference wasn’t important, that he loved her. ‘Fucking boy,’ is how she described him, eyes like iodine.

Our ascension from hamburgers to the Hotel Maskva was more complex than might be imagined. It was a pilgrimage, which spun out over weeks. There were promises; lies; commandments; half-truths; restaurants; apologies; threats; theatres; even signed agreements. Eventually though, one Sunday evening, we arrived on the 11th floor of that Soviet monolith, which according to the brochures in the lobby is in the centre of the centre of the city. Everything was perfect. Even Nadia’s insistence on turning off the lights as we soaped up in the shower was, for me, a simple idiosyncrasy, a curious expression of innocence.

I imagine myself on my knees, the panorama of Manezh Square and the Kremlin out the window, back lit for the tourists at night, more Hollywood than Mosfilm, Nadia on the sill, bare legged in a Benetton top,

knees hunched up by her breasts, words worth the work, drooling from my mouth, 'you are bejewelled Nadia, how come you shine and shimmer, in the name of the father, and of the son and of the holy ghost, Amen... Then no words, words worth nothing, the back drop, the room, the moment, an escape. A few dollars, a few words then...

But already... Already we are ahead of ourselves and I've barely written a page or two. I must stop right there and go to where this story starts. To the beginning.

2

The fact was I was a prisoner, a consequence of my past. I was the guest of Svetlana Yevgenyevna, a middle-aged former colleague from a school where I'd worked. She hosted me on the condition we spoke English. She was a robust enough type with an engaging smile and good teeth who paid careful attention to her appearance and in comparison to her peers was in fair shape. Above all else, when her husband had flown the nest on the wave of new money, she had managed to cling on to a piece for herself. As a price for agreeing to the divorce she had assumed complete ownership of a four room mansion on Prospect Mira, the building dating back to Stalin's time, with high ceilings and hot water in the summer, the windows looming over and above the inaptly named 'Prospect of Peace, Prospect of the World.' I knew as soon as I arrived that I was well suited, as much to the place as to the owner. My imagination ran wild. The city, which is the tramp of Europe, was finally below my feet, it's inhabitants, like little mice, scurrying back and forth before me, like a show for my satisfaction. And

satisfied I would be, with such an address. I adored the walls, the little white cherubs on a cool pale blue, the clean Swedish desk which sat in the corner, the great white bed from where you saw the sky.

It was a different world up there, free from the stench such that the stench could be abstracted and discussed over good wine. Perhaps in a thousand years the historians will look back and wonder how there ever could have been such a place, just as we look back to Carthage and the Carthagians looked back to Gomorrah. As for Svetlana, whether it was her husband's leaving or not I don't know but there was a bitter edge to her which left her more capable than you might have expected. A qualified doctor as well as a background in education and administration and the network of her former husband's colleagues, she had recently begun co-ordinating the transfer of Russian orphans to homes in the West and I helped her with the enquiries, which we solicited by phone and e-mail. Often the children were actually there in the house and with the prospectives who came to view (I'm drawn to the ones from Lawrence, Kansas, the would-be mother the size of a small elephant) we had pirok and ice cream as well as other things that made up an evening feast. My business was selling children and I found I had a talent for it.

Svetlana Yevgenyevna, as I found out once when the imported Bordeaux was flowing, was of Belorussian descent. White Russia. Her family were originally from Brest, but when the great war of the motherland came along and the Nazis rolled up looking for oil to fuel their tanks, the resulting siege took the lives of three uncles, two aunties, two grandfathers and a grandmother. 'A dirty business,' she said, eyeing her manicure. 'Only my mother and Auntie escaped, They hid in a mail truck going to Moscow. Nazis, you know. She paused and shook her head. 'There was no food.

People ate people. Oozhus. ‘Anyway,’ she continued casually, ‘they went to Minsk. The militia found them and I remember my mother saying they had bread and potatoes and that it was the best meal of her life. From there they went to Sverdlovsk, it’s Ekaterinburg now. It was because they had small hands! They made the lighters for the bombs.’

‘Fuses,’ I said.

Yes, of course.’ She paused. ‘They were happy there I think. Eta bil collective. A new family. And then the war ended and my Aunty married, she was pregnant, and my mother, how do you say, caught the eye of the manager at the factory. He was going to Moscow to study. He asked that she go with him, that they start a new life here in Moscow. He gave her daffodils and got down on his knees. My mother said Da.’

Svetlana came along eight years later, preceded by a brother who died of polio before he was six years old. Such talks left me wondering how they survived at all, how they managed to live from winter to winter, beaten by the elements, beaten by the very nature of the land, not to mention the terror, the revolutions, the wars and famines and other human failings, but my host was above such things.

‘Most don’t mind at all’ she said. ‘When I myself heard the new truth, I shouted and cried then went to protect my interests,’ and she unconsciously preened her well-groomed hair. ‘You should remember one thing,’ she said. ‘This is Moscow. This is a place to live,’ and she proceeded to fill the glasses with claret.

Perhaps Nadia could have lived there with us but there were other options. I had earned enough in the previous weeks to easily rent a flat and invite Nadia to share the flat and so, as a consequence, spend all my time with her and devote myself to her but there was a part of me...how to say...

Well, it seems to me now that I was waiting for a push, a push that, unbeknown to me at that time, would come before that day was out.

3

The door knocking stopped and was replaced with voices. They were in the living room. Svetlana Yevgenyevna had obviously invited them in, whoever they were, but I was still protected by my closed door, which decency dictated could remain so if I wished it.

Besides, I was elsewhere, by the window, watching the miracle of the sky. Everywhere, all around, all the children were smiling and their parents beginning dialogues of nostalgia, babushkas were setting off for the market with bagfuls of mittens and hats, slides were being conceived and snow queens imagined, men changed tyres and put fresh oil into the plough machines while lovers spent their seconds drawing hearts out with their fingertips.

Outside, the first snow was falling. It's strange how there never seems to be any warning before it snows, no wind or storm, no darkening of the skies. There is an inevitability about it, which needs no introduction. Yet the relief is palpable. All the grime and tar, all the filth which oozes from the city's skin like bad sweat, all the rubbish heaped up in the gutter, all vanquished in a blink of an eye, the city transformed into a precious stone, a glistening re-incarnation who boasts beauty and begs you feel welcome. That she'll rip open your chest isn't apparent; for the harshness, lies beneath, omnipresent, frozen. It was on Komergersky Pereulok that she had stopped



me in my tracks and bid me take a look. Eyes like glass. The very first snow. Olga pulling me along, sliding through the air, breath like ice, snowflakes like feathers, the thrill of Moscow pumping adrenalin, cascading, and beautiful Olga dancing and singing Zemfira songs and teaching me the words.

‘Ya iskala tibya, Leo, iskala!’ Cascading. Cascading.

I thought I wouldn’t mention Olga until later, that it would confuse you to hear her name so soon after Nadia’s, and what with old Svetlana and beautiful Ivan as well, but now she’s in I see little point in trying to avoid her. After all, it was Olga who was the first, it was with her that Moscow unravelled itself and put its arms around me.

I had met her and her husband at a school. I was teaching a class of Advanced English two evenings a week and we became acquainted. Sergei, the husband was a bore. He would go on about his trips to Rome and London and how this hotel was better than that hotel and how the English were all this and the Romans were all that. He worked for some big corporate oil company and liked to play the new Russian. He was fat swine as far as I could see, fodder for the bowling alleys, without culture or refinement, just brute force. Olga on the other hand was charming. She was from near Ekaterinburg originally and had studied Psychology and English at the University there. She was passionate about all these people I’d never heard of like Serov, Balarkirev and Bunin and I was intrigued to know what she was all about. She had met Sergei whilst he was in the Urals on business and six weeks later the two of them returned to Moscow together where he installed her into his river view apartment on Naberezhnaya. That they were a mismatch was blatant but Russian girls are, above all else, practical, and so in the eyes of her family the girl had done well. And Sergei, too, drew the

benefit of upgrading his peasant stock with something he felt was more akin to the money he was making. It was a relief to me, however, when Sergei announced his schedule no longer permitted him to spend time on his English, that he had more important business to attend to. He assured me though, that he'd enjoyed our little chats and that he thought me a good teacher and that he would like to employ me as Olga's teacher at a time that suited them both. So that was how I came to be Olga's private tutor.

She was a very gifted girl, clear sighted, though she could be arrogant and given to fits of condescension, occasionally playing mind games when she was bored. She would make an appointment then fail to arrive and then, later, when I met her on the street she would patronise me before her friends with her husband's American dollars, only afterwards, apologising and blaming herself. Overall, however, she was sharp and brilliant, as conscious as she was unremitting. It was as if there was a fire all around her and one could never lose a moment that was spent with her. Sergei, I saw, became frustrated when he couldn't match her and she always had to prompt him with a word. He wanted to own her, he didn't want to compete with her. Yet Olga didn't seem to care. She was only twenty after all. Twenty and married off. We took to our lessons with vigour. She had a hundred ideas of what she wanted to do, from the stage to PR, the only thing of which she was sure being she wanted the English of the English. She loved to play with words and sounds, nursery rhymes to Shakespeare, and seemed to pick up everything without any great cost or effort. She spoke of living in London of course, but as well, of Rome and of New York and Paris, to put her money to use, with Bolgerkov in one pocket and Gauloise blondes in the other.

'I'm going to be a new kind of new Russian,' she said, as we shuffled, un-noticed in the suburbs. Poor little rich girl, that's how she played me, while with Sergei she wore another mask, I'm sure. Of her habits, she loved to buy things, anything, just to go into the shop and pick out something that caught her eye, presents for her family, clothes and jewellery for herself, small gifts for friends. The upshot of all this 'gathering' was that Sergei's old flat in the suburbs of Moscow was maintained as a storage space. And it was at this flat, far from the glamour of the riverbank that I, on several occasions, accompanied Olga. It was up near the top of an old seventies tower block, and was, generally, quite grim, with dirty floors and boxes lying everywhere, only the view giving it some kind of appeal, shedding light and air if nothing else. The prize of the 'gatherings' was a Persian rug, bought as a gift for Olga's mother and yet to be delivered out to the Urals. The first time we went there I undid the string without any fuss and unfurled the thing in the middle of the room. We took off our shoes and socks, sat down, I, upon invitation, massaging her soft pink feet, my hands both gently pressing and rubbing, the conversation staggered and tense, monosyllabic with half laughs and breaths, the smell of skin and sweat, conscious that every moment my fingers inched higher and higher until the tension in the room was such that it was impossible not to take her by the waist and undo her clothes, myself doing likewise, her mouth all mine, her body all mine, all for the first time. She looked at me almost puzzled, as if there was something she didn't understand, then suddenly, overcome by her own sex, began to tear at my shirt, at my skin, the taste of her legs, her hands and mouth on my chest, on my stomach, an aching pause as she pushed her wrists and arms along my thighs, hovering above me, uncertainty long gone, each breath now full and slow, as I arched my back towards her, willing her

closer. Her response was to sit up, her back to me and begin masturbating me.

It was good but it wasn't enough. I wanted more. For a second I thought of Sergei. Fat Sergei with his gold pen and leather filofax. He liked to stretch out when I asked him a question and answer 'fucking A,' like a halfwit American frat boy.

'Fucking A, what are we paying you for Leo if you don't have the answer yourself,' he would joke.

'Fucking clown Sergei. Look, this is the answer.'

I lifted myself up and put her beneath me, climbing in between her legs. I was inside of her. With every even stroke I gave Sergei the answer, and Olga too. I could taste blood coming from my lip where she'd bitten me. My tongue was in shreds. She dug her nails in me and moaned 'more... no...' I remember the nap of that rug was like cat's fur, that I dug my toes in and gave her everything I had. 'I'll widen the gates so the new Lexus won't even touch the sides. He won't even recognize his breeding box when I've finished with it,' on and on, xodit, vxodit, xodit, vxodit.

And then we collapsed, paralysed by sex.

Our events opened up a whole new language for Olga. I suppose it was a honeymoon period. By the time Sergei pulled the plug on the lessons everything had changed and could never be the same again. I didn't regret it though, not then. It was three months later that I met Nadia.

4

'Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred; twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred; twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred.' I counted as the snow fell.

I added to it what I was owed then, with this sum safely locked away in my head, went about putting the little piles in a shoe box which I safely locked away in my wardrobe.

When I was finished I was ready for outside. My exit, however, was blocked by the sight of Svetlana Yevgenyevna comforting Ivan, who, by the redness of his eyes, was apparently, upset. They continued their line of conversation, which I failed to make any sense of until, finally, Svetlana Yevgenyevna offered me a simplified version of events. It transpired that Ivan's mother had gone into the hospital with some kind of nervous problem and that it was a serious business and they didn't know when she would be home. I realised a quick exit would have been tactless, and instead went and brought a bottle of hvanchkara, a sweet red Georgian wine which was Stalin's favourite tippie. I poured out the glasses and, on their refusal, insisted that we take it, not for ourselves, but for the health of Ivan's mother and on this all were quickly accepted and drained, such is the sense of theatre in the Russian consciousness. I refilled all around and settled down opposite the two of them, Ivan, well groomed as ever, his blond hair slicked, his Armani shirt, a signature, Svetlana with her demi-wave and fifties American bas couture, slacks and slip-ons, as if the 'Soviets' had never been.

I listened to the saga and I nodded and ummed and ahned as was fitting but what with the mood of the room and the heaviness of the wine I began to feel nauseous and my instincts told me to make my excuses and go. I drank my glass and raised the empty to Ivan who voiced an emotional 'spasiba,' in thanks.

'How is your father,' I asked, as I got up to leave.

‘He makes us suffer,’ Ivan replied, courtly and rather bitterly, his eyes coming up to Svetlana’s, not mine.

‘Nu, on ochen davolen nashei rabotoi,’ he’s very satisfied with our work, Svetlana put in, looking at me reassuringly, changing the subject as well as the language.

‘He has a dragon’s appetite,’ Ivan continued, his beautiful face so polished and dignified, the acid tone all the more biting for it.

‘You can be very poetic,’ I thought to myself, but I didn’t acknowledge it. He had too many traits that I disliked by then, and instead, I nodded in agreement, wishing to infer that it was a difficult business.

‘I’ll see you tonight?’ I asked.

‘Tonight I can’t. No,’ and he put one finger to his chin, before adding, ‘but tomorrow, yes, I think. Nu, da.’

‘I’ll see you tomorrow then, I hope,’ and kissing Svetlana three times on the cheek and whilst taking their goodbyes, I made for the door.

Outside we were in the midst of a great transformation and it was a relief to see all the filth disappearing. The black soul of the city with its dirty greasy fingers was being magicked away under a blanket of white. The rowanberry trees in our little communal garden were in bloom and the look of them, with the snow nestling all around made me think of an English Christmas card. I could feel the warmth of the hvanchkara inside me and there was a gorgeous sense of order as I jumped a passing trolley bus on up the Prospect, to VDNK. I phoned Nadia to meet me at the billiard hall near the metro and though she didn’t seem too inclined at first, she finally agreed after a little persuasion.

I decided to get off a stop early to buy a beer and to get a feel of the snowflakes, the snare of the crisp ground underfoot crishing and crashing as I went through the fresh new landscape. I was in my element; my fur-lined

boots so snug; I felt I could walk all day and I began to regret making the date with Nadia as I finished my beer and skidded and slid into the park, taking in the aspect of strangers as I went.

By the time I got to the space museum my face and hands were perfectly frozen. I didn't even look up at the rocket, which attracts the tourists. Across the way the Monument of the Worker and Collective Farm Girl forlornly looked on, out of time, contemplating the unfathomable possibilities of post-soviet Moscow while the sparkling Hotel Cosmos brought to mind a night of caviar-filled cunt.

'So what,' I thought, and let the blizzard take care of the past.

5

It was the dead of my first winter when Olga made her move, coyly telling me she would be at Asterhazi at six and suggesting I might like to happen along. The temperature that day had hovered around minus eight, and I'd killed the hour before we met shivering on Manezh Square, listening to Vivaldi in the underpass there, performed by buskers moonlighting from the Philharmonic. Still having a few minutes on my hands, I decided to walk instead of taking the metro and found myself shuffling along a frozen Ohotny Riad, up past the Bolshoi theatre, all fabulous and yellow, and on to the monstrous grey stone of the old KGB building at Lubyanka and beyond to Kitai Gorod and the café.

On the stroke of six she walked in and came and sat down in the corner, next to me. She was radiant, evidently excited about something, and how she looked in her soft blue Italian sheepskin, made to measure, a square

of the finest llama wool, dyed pink, and wrapped so as to hug her throat, her high heeled thigh length boots, so pointed at the toe, that she cut the room in strips as she moved, ribbons sent flying in all directions, but held to her as if to a maypole, everything coming to spin and revolve around her, her aura like that of the celebrity, her sheen, the light of the new truth. She could barely wait for the tea and cakes before telling me her very big news.

‘Guess what?’ she said, raising an eyebrow, so confident in her comfort.

‘What?’ I said, reaching for my cup.

‘Wait, padhazhdi,’ she said, ‘don’t start yet. I want us to remember every detail. You see...’ and she took my leg under the table, her face, unyielding and performing in the public gaze.

‘What do you see?’ I asked.

She paused to re-align her thoughts.

‘My mother says I’ve become dull. Dulled by all the things she always wanted. Do you think I’ve become dull, Leo?’

I covered her out of sight hand with mine as she squeezed the muscle of my thigh.

‘Sophisticated is what you’ve become, grown up,’ and wanting to satisfy her, went on, ‘look, you’re perfect, with everything. Your mother wants your misery as penance, that’s all.’

She paused and shook her head. ‘Nyet. It’s not true. I’m her only daughter. It isn’t misery she wants.’

‘Well whatever it is, you can buy it for her. Wasn’t that the point?’ the spectre of her fat husband, as ever, unassailable.

‘I don’t know what the point was or is, I only know what I want.’

‘And what’s that?’ I asked, our fingertips touching.



‘More,’ she said, casually looking about the room. ‘I’ve always had plans.’

‘Five year plans?’ I mused.

Her glossed lips broke a half smile and she put her hands together as if to pray.

‘I’m going to America, Leo. San Francisco. Sergei has some business there. We’re going for six months.’ She was so proud, that I thought twice so as not to quip.

‘Well, I’d say it was inevitable, wouldn’t you?’ I said, finally.

‘It’s the future, prosta. I don’t know what else. I hoped you’d be pleased for me, would wish me something special,’ she answered.

‘I wish you would stay, I wish you were poor, I wish you weren’t so irresistible and I wish you wanted me. How’s that?’ I replied.

‘But I do want you,’ and she slowly and delicately ate a mouthful of her moonstone sponge cake, her eyes fixed to mine, as if recording the moment, her goal being to collect a full fan of emotions that would cool her and pretty her when she tired.

‘Let’s eat our cakes and take our tea, then go to the flat in Medvedkova,’ she said quietly.

‘And what about Sergei?’ I muttered, sarcastically, teeth clenched.

‘Sergei?’ she huffed, re-positioning herself on her seat. ‘Sergei is nothing. You must see that.’

‘He’s your husband. You belong to him,’ I continued.

‘Nyet, nyet, nyet. I belong to no one. Not you, not him, k nikhto,’ she replied, her voice remaining calm and composed.

‘Have you told him?’ I asked.

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