SHYLOCK ON THE NEVA

by GARY SHTEYNGART

Issue of 2002-09-02
Posted 2002-08-26

I awoke one day to a phone call from the painter Chartkov, a recent graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts, a lean, sallow fellow with a flaxen goatee and the overearnest expression of the Slavic intellectual—yes, we all know the kind of person I'm talking about. Bloodshot eyes? Porcupine hair? Uneven bottom teeth? Great big potato nose? Thirty-ruble sunglasses from a metro kiosk? All of it.

How did I wake up? I felt a sexual vibration in my pocket and realized I had fallen asleep with my pants on, my mobilnik still lodged next to that conclusive organ everyone cares so much about. "Af," I said to the painter Chartkov. What else can one say under these conditions, this damn modernity we all live in? May it all go to the Devil, especially these tiny Finnish phones that nuzzle in your pocket all night.

"Valentin Pavlovich," the young painter's voice trembled.

"Oh, you bitch," I said. "What time is it?"

"It's already one o'clock," the painter said, then, realizing he was taking too many liberties with me, added, "Perhaps, after all, if it's not too much of a bother, you will still come and sit once more for your portrait as we have previously arranged."

"Perhaps, perhaps," I said. "Well, why don't I wash myself first? Isn't that how the civilized people do it, in Europe? They wash first, then they sit for a portrait?"

"Mmm, yes," said the painter. "I— You see, I honestly don't know. I've never been to Europe. Only to Lithuania, where I have an uncle."

"Lithuania," I said. "All the way to Lithuania? Such a worldly artist you must be, Chartkov." I instructed him to await my arrival patiently and then turned off the phone. Do I sound unkind? A typical New Russian? Well, let me assure the reader: I'm a very nice person, but on this particular day I was feeling a little out of sorts, a veritable crab.

The culprit was crack cocaine. On the previous night, I had the pleasure of meeting three Canadians at the Idiot Café, two boys and one girl. They had been brave (and idiotic) enough to bring a few rocks of the stuff into our drug-addled city and we adjourned quickly to my house to smoke it.

It was my first time! Bravo, Valentin Pavlovich! What was it like? Not so bad, much like going into a dark, warm room, where, at first, some pleasant things happened, a steady tingle to the nether regions, a flood of happy tears and gay sniffling, and then some very unhappy sensations, probably having to do with the miserable past we all share, the youthful beatings by parents and peers, and the constant strain of living in this Russia of ours. Yes, these are the sorts of things one babbles about the morning after he puffs on the crack pipe—"Russia, Russia, where are you flying to?" and all that Gogolian nonsense.

I retired to the parlor, and discovered that the Canadians were still there. They were sprawled out on the divans, lost beneath thick worsted blankets my manservant, Timofey, must have thrown over them. I could make out the shape of the Canadian girl—twenty-one years old, and with legs and thighs as powerful as a horse's—and hear her piercing snore. In the West, even the drug addicts are healthy and strong. I considered falling in love with the girl, just for some extra Canadian warmth in the morning. But what foreign girl would want me? They're very psychologically adept, these girls, nothing like ours, and I can't fool them with my money and good English.

So I went back to my bedroom to see my cheap, fatalistic Murka, still asleep, coughing her way through the midday slumber, her pincerlike legs folded up. Poor girl. I rescued her from some collective farm on a biznes trip to the provinces a few years back. She was seventeen, but already covered in pigshit and bruises. On the other hand, you should have seen how quickly she installed herself in my flat in Petersburg and fell into the role of rich, urban girlfriend—asleep most of the day, drugged out at night, weepy and sexless in between. To see Murka with a shopping basket and a charge card at the Stockmann Finnish emporium on Nevsky Prospekt, yelling brutally at some innocent shop clerk, is to understand that elusive American term "empowerment," the kind of thing the foreigners teach you at the Idiot Café. I kissed Murka tenderly, washed myself as well as I could and called for Timofey to dry me off. My manservant, a big Karelian peasant, beat me with a twig to improve my circulation and then strapped me into an Italian lamb's-wool suit jacket, the kind that makes me look ten years older than my age and fat into the bargain. Oh, what a business is fashion!

Timofey brought around the usual convoy—two Mercedes 300 M S.U.V.s and one S-class sedan, so as to form the letters M-S-M, the name of my bank, for, you see, I am something of a moneylender. As we took off for Chartkov's neighborhood, the call came through from Alyosha, my well-bribed source at the Interior Ministry, warning that a sniper was set to pick me off at the English Embankment. We took an-other route.

Chartkov lived on the far edge of the Kolomna district. I hasten to paint a picture for the reader: the Fontanka River, windswept (even in summer), its crooked nineteenth-century skyline interrupted by a post-apocalyptic wedge of the Sovetskaya Hotel; the hotel surrounded by rows of yellowing, water-logged apartment houses; the apartment houses, in turn, surrounded by corrugated shacks housing a bootleg-CD emporium; the ad-hoc Casino Mississippi ("America Is Far, but Mississippi Is Near"); a burned-out kiosk selling industrial-sized containers of crab salad; and the requisite Syrian-shwarma hut smelling of spilled vodka, spoiled cabbage, and a vague, free-floating inhumanity.

Chartkov shared his communal quarters with a slowly dying soldier just returned from Chechnya, the soldier's invalid mother, his two invalid children, and an invalid dog. The painter's studio was at the very rear, his front door covered with a poster of the American superband Pearl Jam. When I arrived, Chartkov was busy being thrown out of his room by a squat Armenian landlord in a filthy nylon house gown. Remember how I described Chartkov at the outset? The great big potato nose? The flaxen goatee? Well, picture the same nose now dappled in luxuriant Russian tears, the flaxen goatee moist with dread, the red-rimmed eyes working double time to produce these ample waterworks. "Philistine!" Chartkov was screaming at the landlord. "How can you throw a painter out on the street! It is we artists who have introduced Russia to the world! We who wield the brush and the pen! We gave the world Chekhov and Bulgakov and Turgenev!"

"Those were all writers!" the dying soldier screamed, peeking out of his little hole, his invalid children clutching his leg braces as he made long stabbing motions with his crutch. "What painters has Russia given the world?" he shouted. "Throw the scoundrel out, I say!"

"Yes, indeed," the landlord said. "If you walk through the Hermitage, it's all Rembrandts and Titians. Nary an Ivan in sight. Now, if you were a writer . . ."

The painter almost choked on his considerable tears. "No painters?" he cried. "What about Andrei Rublyov? What about the famous Ilya Repin?" he cried. "What about 'Barge Haulers on the Volga'?"

"Is that the one where the little doggie is in the boat and he's standing up on his hind legs?" the landlord asked, twirling his mustache thoughtfully.

Being a patriot and wanting to spare Chartkov any further embarrassment, I decided to intervene. I proceeded to ask the Armenian the amount he was owed, and was duly informed that it was eight months' rent, or U.S. $240. I called my Timofey, who ran up with three U.S. hundred-dollar bills, and then I told the landlord that no change was needed, at which point everyone in the flat gasped, crossed themselves three times, and retreated to their miserable quarters.

I was left alone with the young painter. Chartkov turned away from me, buried his face in his hands, brushed aside his tears, and sighed in a heartbreaking fashion—in other words, did everything possible to avoid thanking me for my generosity. He shuffled into his room, where an old flower-print divan from Hungary, the kind intellectual families favored during the Soviet era, proved to be the only furniture in his possession. A series of incomplete portraits of what seemed to be whores from the National Hunt strip club were scattered about the room, each girl's smile vicious and true to life.

"Here's what I've drawn thus far," he said. He showed me a full-sized sketch, my dour, opaque face staring back at me with all the bravado of a General Suvorov, my dark hair bleached to a Slavic yellow, in the background an M-S-M Bank sign in old-fashioned Cyrillic characters—I looked ready to fight the Turks at Chesme, instead of my usual daily battle with the hash pipe and the tricky zipper on my khakis. Such nonsense!

He motioned me to the divan and proceeded to apply charcoal to paper. "So you're a fan of old Ilya Repin," I said. "Is that what they teach you at the Academy these days? A little reactionary, no?"

"I'm a m-m-monarchist," Chartkov muttered, scowling for no reason.

"Now, there's a popular position for a young man these days," I said. Oh, our poor dispossessed intelligentsia. Why do we even bother to teach them literature and the plastic arts? "And who's your favorite tsar, then, young man?"

"Alexander the First. No, wait, the Second."

"The great reformer. And what kind of art are you interested in, Mr. Painter? These days, I'm afraid, it's all showmanship, like that unfortunate Muscovite who goes around the world pretending he's a dog."

"No, I don't like him at all," Chartkov confessed. "I'm a realist. I paint what I see. Social justice for the common man, that's what I like." And he proceeded to mumble some hodgepodge of Western art theory and comfy Russian chauvinism. "Of course, it is the Jews who have brought Russia to her knees," he whispered, interrupting his work to light a nearby candle in honor of a dead Romanov.

"And do you have a lady friend?" I asked.

He betrayed his twenty-four years by blushing crimson and throwing his gaze in the four major directions, finally settling his eyes on the sketch of two whores, both provincially pretty, yet one unmistakably older than the other; one, in fact, quite old, a telltale trail of life's third set of wrinkles forming a Tigris and Euphrates on her forehead.

"A mother-daughter act," Chartkov explained. "They're from Kursk Province. A sad story." Sad, but rather typical. I will omit the particulars, except to add that both mother and daughter were graduates of some local polytechnic institute. "Very cultured people," Chartkov said. "Elizaveta Ivanovna plays the accordion and her daughter, Lyudmila Petrovna, can quote the major philosophers."

His use of their patronymics was strangely touching—I knew immediately what he wanted to do; after all, it is the only path our young Raskolnikovs can follow. "I will save them!" he said.

"Presumably it is the daughter you fancy," I said.

"Both are like family to me," said Chartkov. "When you meet them you see how they cannot live without each other. They are like Naomi and Ruth."

I chose to let this comparison stand. "My dear Chartkov," I said. "I would certainly like to make their acquaintance. You see, perhaps there is something I can do to better their position."

Chartkov examined me through his dopey thirty-ruble glasses. "I hope you do not mean to hire them," he said.

"Good heavens, no," I assured him. And then I proposed we cut short our session and have dinner with his whorish friends.

On the way to the National Hunt club, Alyosha, my well-greased source at the Interior Ministry, called to warn me of a deadly Godzilla roll set to poison me at the Kimono Japanese restaurant on Bolshaya Morskaya. I changed our dinner plans in favor of the infamous Noble's Nest, by the Mariinsky Theatre, while helping Chartkov empty a small bottle of cognac in the back seat of the Mercedes, a car to which he warmed immediately. "I compare it to the troika of yore," the monarchist said without any irony, wiping his little mouth with my favorite handkerchief.

The National Hunt was all but empty at this time of day, with only four drunk officers from the Dutch Consulate passed out at a back table by the empty roulette table. Despite the lack of an audience, Elizaveta Ivanovna and her daughter, Lyudmila Petrovna, were up on the makeshift stage grinding against two poles to the sound of Pearl Jam. They looked remarkably like the sketches Chartkov had drawn. Immediately, I was reassured about the whole enterprise, about the innate talent I believed Chartkov possessed, and about my own hopes for immortality.

Mother and daughter resembled two sisters, one perhaps ten years older than the other with naked breasts pointing downward, a single crease separating them from the little tummy below. The mother was imparting to Lyudmila her theory that the pole was like a wild animal which one had to grasp with one's thighs lest it escape. The daughter, like all daughters, was shrugging her off, saying, "Mamochka, I know what I'm doing. I watch special movies when you're asleep."

"You're a dunderhead," the mother said, thrusting to the sound of the ravenous American band. "Why did I ever give birth to you?"

"Ladies!" Chartkov cried out to them. "My dear ones! Good evening to you!"

"Hi, there, little guy," mother and daughter sang in unison.

"Ladies," said Chartkov. "I would like to introduce you to Valentin Pavlovich. A very good man who only today has given three hundred dollars to my landlord."

The ladies appraised my expensive shoes and stopped writhing. They hopped down from their poles and pressed themselves against me. Quickly, the air was filled with the smell of nail polish and light exertion. "Good evening," I said, brushing my dark mane, for I tend to get a little shy around prostitutes.

"Please come home with us!" cried the daughter, massaging the posterior crease of my pants with a curious finger. "Fifty dollars per hour for both. You can do what you like, front and back, but, please, no bruises."

"Better yet, we'll go home with you!" the mother said. "I imagine you have a beautiful home on the embankment of the River Moika. Or one of those gorgeous Stalin buildings on Moskovsky Prospekt."

"Valentin Pavlovich runs a bank," Chartkov said, shyly but with a certain amount of pride. "He has offered to take us to a restaurant called the Noble's Nest."

"It's in the tea house of the Yusupov mansion," I said, with a pedantic air, knowing that the mansion where the loony charlatan Rasputin was poisoned would not make much of an impression on the ladies. Chartkov managed a slight, historic smile and tried to nuzzle the daughter, who favored him with a chaste kiss on the forehead.

It is no secret that St. Petersburg is a backwater, lost in the shadow of our craven capital Moscow, which itself is but a Third World megalopolis teetering on the edge of extinction. And yet the Noble's Nest is one of the most divine restaurants I have ever seen—dripping with more gold plating than the dome of St. Isaac's, yes; covered with floor-to-ceiling paintings of dead nobles, to be sure. And yet, somehow, against the odds, the place carries off the excesses of the past with the dignified lustre of the Winter Palace.

I knew that a fellow like Chartkov would rejoice. For people like him, educated members of a peasant nation catapulted into the most awkward sort of modernity, this restaurant is one of the two Russias they can understand—it's either the marble and malachite of the Hermitage or a crumbling communal flat on the far edge of Kolomna.

Chartkov began weeping as soon as he saw the menu, and the whores started sniffling, too. They couldn't even name the dishes, such was their excitement and money lust, and had to refer to them by their prices—"Let's split the sixteen-dollar appetizer, and then I'll have the twenty-eight dollars and you can split the thirty-two. Is that all right, Valentin Pavlovich?"

"For God's sake, have what you wish!" I said. "Four dishes, ten dishes, what is money when you're among friends?" And to set the mood for the evening I ordered a bottle of Rothschild for U.S. $1,150.

"So, let's talk some more about your art," I said to Chartkov.

"You see," said Chartkov to his women friends. "We're talking about art now. Isn't it nice, ladies, to sit in a pretty space and talk like gentlemen about the greater subjects?" A whole range of emotions, from an innate distrust of kindness to some latent homosexuality, was playing itself out on Chartkov's red face. He pressed his palm down on my hand.

"Chartkov is doing those nice paintings for us," the mama said to me, "and we're going to use them for our Web page. We're going to have a Web page for our services, don't you know?"

"Oh, look, mama, I believe the two 'sixteen dollars' are here!" Elizaveta Ivanovna cried, as two appetizers of pelmeni dumplings stuffed with deer and crab arrived, both dishes covered by immense silver domes.

"We're talking about art like gentlemen," Chartkov said once more, shaking his head in disbelief.

The evening progressed as expected. We drove to my apartment, taking in the sight of the city on a warm summer night—the sky lit up a false cerulean blue, the thick walls of the Peter and Paul Fortress bathed in gold floodlights, the Winter Palace moored on its embankment like a ship undulating in the twilight, the darkened hulk of St. Isaac's dome officiating over the proceedings. Here was our Petersburg—a magical set piece of ruined mansions and lunar roads traversed by Swedish tourists in low-slung, futuristic buses—and we all had to sigh in appreciation for what was lost and what remained.

Along the way, we took turns hitting the driver with birch twigs, ostensibly to improve his circulation, but in reality because it is impossible to end an evening in Russia without assaulting someone. "Now I feel as if we're in an old-fashioned hansom cab," said Chartkov, "and we're hitting the driver for going too slow. Faster, driver! Faster!"

"Please, sir," pleaded my driver, a nice Chechen fellow named Mamudov, "it is already difficult to drive on these roads, even without being whipped."

"No one has ever called me 'sir' before." Chartkov spoke in wonderment. "Opa, you scoundrel!" he screamed, flailing the driver once more.

I got the call from Alyosha, my well-placed source at the Interior Ministry, and instructed Mamudov to avoid the Troitsky Bridge, where a prospective assassin awaited my motorcade by the third of the cast-iron lamps. Why do so many people want to kill me? I'm a good man and, it should be clear by now, a patriot.

Back home it was the usual seraglio—my Murka in a half-open housecoat was dancing with herself in front of the wall-length dining-room mirror; the Canadians had fed crack cocaine to my cook, Evgeniya, and the poor woman was now running around the house screaming about some dead peasant Anton, crying black tears over her wasted fifty years. The North American culprits themselves were sprawled around the parlor listening to my collection of progressive-house records, recently airlifted out of Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg district.

As soon as they caught sight of the mother and daughter, the two Canadian boys and the one Canadian girl understood the unique sexual situation before them. Chartkov began to protest and cry against this "inhumanity," reminding the Canadians that the mother played the accordion and the daughter could quote Voltaire at will, but I quickly took him into my study and closed the door. "Let's talk about art," I said.

"What will become of my girls?" the painter asked. "My poor Elizaveta Ivanovna and Lyudmila Petrovna," Chartkov said, eying the multitude of English and German volumes that graced my bookshelves, abstruse titles such as "Cayman Island Banking Regulations," annotated, in three volumes, and the ever-popular "A Hundred and One Tax Holidays."

"Enough of this whimpering," I said. "Chartkov, do you know why I hired you to execute my painting?"

"Because you slept with my sister Grusha," Chartkov surmised correctly, "and she recommended me to you."

"Yes, initially so. But over the weeks I've come to appreciate you as, mmm, a Christ-like figure. And I use the term loosely, because our language has become as impoverished as our country and it's often hard to find the right term, even if you're willing to pay hard currency for it. See now, you alone can paint a picture of me, Chartkov, that will guarantee my immortality. The problem is, it has to be real. Not this General Suvorov nonsense. I mean, what next? Will you portray me in a tricorne hat, riding a white mare to victory? Let's be realistic. I'm a young moneylender, aging swiftly and, like all Russian biznesmeny, not too long for this world. Also, in case you haven't noticed, I have dark hair and a broken nose."

"But I want to make you better than you are," Chartkov said. "I want to restore Christian dignity to your battered soul and the only way to do so is . . . the only way—" I could tell his attention was occupied by the piercing Russian "Okh, okh, okh!" coming from the parlor, accompanied by some heartless Canadian grunting.

"That's precisely what you don't want to do," I said. "I'm a sinner, Chartkov, and I am not too proud to admit it. I am a sinner and as a sinner you shall paint me! Look deep into my hollowed-out eyes, try on my disposable Italian suit, smoke from my musty crack pipe, befoul my summer kottedzh on the Gulf of Finland, stuff yourself with my deer-and-crab pelmeni, whip my manservant, Timofey, until he begs for his life, wake up next to my ruined provincial girlfriend. And then, Chartkov, paint exactly what you see."

Chartkov wiped some more of his infinite tears and helped himself to a bottle of sake that I now pressed into his hand. "Will this get me drunk?" he asked shyly, examining the strange Asiatic lettering.

"Yes, but you mustn't stop drinking it even for a second. Here, it goes with this marinated-squid snack. And in return for your work, of course, I will pay you, Chartkov, pay you enough for you and your Ruth and Naomi to live a comfortable life forever. Perhaps you can even 'save them,' if that's indeed still possible."

"Eight thousand dollars!" Chartkov cried out, grasping at his fragile heart. "That's what I want!"

"Well, I would think considerably more." I was, in fact, expecting to spend at least U.S. $250,000.

"Nine thousand, then!" Chartkov cried. "And I shall paint you just as you like! With horns and a yarmulke if you so desire!"

What could I say? If only I had been a Jew there would have been no need for Chartkov's services. Our Jews are steeped in familial memory and even when they die, for instance when their Lexus S.U.V. gets blown off a bridge by a well-armed rival, they remain locked in the dreary memories of their progeny, circling over the Neva River for eternity, dreaming of their herring and onions. I, on the other hand, had no progeny, no memory, and really very little chance of surviving this country of ours for more than a few more months.

Why deceive myself like the rest of my New Russian compatriots? My wealth notwithstanding, Chartkov's was the only eternity I could afford.

"Well put, Chartkov," I said. "So we are in agreement. And now let us not keep our company waiting. I shall send Timofey out to fetch an accordion. That way the beautiful Elizaveta Ivanovna can entertain us with her other talents."

"God bless you, Valentin Pavlovich!" cried Chartkov, pressing my hand to his cheek.

The next afternoon I woke up with the usual tinnitus in my left ear, a series of duck flares going off in my peripheral vision. The crack-cocaine pipe—the "glass dick," as the Canadians had called it—stared at me accusingly through its single eye. My pillow was covered with alcoholic slobber and what looked like little crack mites dancing their urban-American dance. Meanwhile, coiled up next to me, my Murka was making tragic whistling sounds in her sleep, shielding herself from phantom childhood punches with one upraised skinny arm.

It was a fine moment to be a St. Petersburg gentleman. I called Timofey on the mobilnik and he came ambling in from the next room, already dressed in his morning frock. "Did you deliver the painter Chartkov to his digs?" I asked of him.

"Yes, batyushka," said Timofey. "And a great one he was, that painter. Soused, like a real alkash, and easy with his fists, like my dear dead Papa. I had to carry him up to his flat, and once I laid him out on the divan he started hitting me with his belt. Then we had to get on our knees and pray for a good half hour. He kept shouting 'Christ has risen!' and I had to reply 'Verily, he has risen!' Such people I do not understand, sir."

"The ways of artists are beyond us, Timofey," I said. "And did you give him nine thousand dollars in ninety consecutive bills of a hundred dollars each?"

"That I did, batyushka," said Timofey. "The painter then took off all his clothes and touched himself in many places with the American currency, while whispering batyushka's name most reverently. I was so scared, sir, that I spent half the night in the alehouse."

"You're a good manservant, Timofey," I said. "Now go tend to our Canadian friends while I spend the day frolicking about."

I meant what I said about frolicking. Being a modern moneylender is not a difficult occupation. Armed with computers and bookkeepers and hand grenades, I find the work pretty much takes care of itself. My most pressing duty is showing up at the biznesmenski buffet at the T Club every Thursday and glowering across the swank airport-lounge décor at my nearest competitors, the ones that keep trying to blow me off the Troitsky Bridge.

On this warm summer day, the Neva River playful and zippy, a panorama of gray swells and treacherous seagulls, I walked over the bridges to the Peter and Paul Fortress. But unless one gets very excited about third-rate Baroque fortifications, there's really nothing to see, so instead I followed a group of young schoolchildren. In their own way, the children were sublime: destitute in their lousy Polish denim and Chinese high-tops, scarred with acne and low self-esteem, members of the world's first de-industrialized nation but still imbued with our old cultural deference, a Petersburg child's mythical respect for Dutch pediments and Doric porticoes. I watched them fall silent as the tour guide intoned about an occupant of the fortress's ramshackle prison, a revolutionary who once wiped away his tears with Dostoyevsky's handkerchief, or some other such luminary.

Can it really be true, as the sociological surveys tell us, that only five years hence these tender shoots will forsake their cultural patrimony to become the next generation of bandits and streetwalkers? To test this theory, I looked into the face of the prettiest girl, a dark little Tatar-cheeked beauty with a pink, runny nose and flashed her my standard Will-you-sell-your-body-for-Deutsche-marks? smile. She looked down at the monstrous Third World clodhoppers on her feet. Not yet, her black eyes told me.

Saddened by our children's plight, I doubled back over the Palace Bridge and pushed through the long line of sweaty provincial tourists at the Hermitage, shouting all the while about some obscure Moneylender's Privilege (droit du dollar?). I wangled a self-invented Patriot's Discount out of the babushkas at the box office by pretending I was a veteran of the latest Chechen campaign, then ran straight up to the fourth floor, where they keep all the early-twentieth-century French paintings.

I stood before Picasso's portrait of the "Absinthe Drinker" and marvelled at the drunk Parisian woman staring back at me. How many Soviet years have we wasted here on the fourth floor of the Hermitage, looking at these portraits of Frenchmen reading Le Journal, pretending that somehow we were still in Europe. In our musty felt boots we stood, staring at Pissarro's impressions of the "Boulevard Montmartre on a Sunny Afternoon" and then, out the window, at our own dirt-caked General Staff building, its pale semi-circular sweep forming the amphitheatre of Palace Square. If we squinted our eyes, or, better yet, took another nip out of our hip flasks, we could well imagine that the General Staff's delicate arch was somehow a portal onto the Place de la Concorde itself, its statue of six Romanesque horses harnessed to Glory's chariot really an Air France jetliner ready to sail into the sky.

And, let me ask you, For what all that suffering? For what all those dreams of freedom and release? Ten years later, here we were, a hundred and fifty million Eastern Untermenschen collectively trying to fix a rusted Volga sedan by the side of the road.

You know, it was best not to think about it.

So I returned my gaze to Picasso's absinthe drinker and this time discovered a previously elusive truth. The drunk Parisian had not been staring at me all those years, as I had romantically, egotistically supposed, but solely at the blue bottle of absinthe, her face radiating as much slyness as despair, a careful contemplation of the heavy poison before her. I do not know a great deal about Western art theory, but it seemed possible to me that this woman, this absinthe drinker, had what the American louts at the Idiot Café called "agency."

Cheered on by my deductions, I sneaked a mouthful of crack cocaine in the men's room, then sailed out of the Hermitage, through the arch of the General Staff building, and out into the hubbub of Nevsky Prospekt. I wanted very much to buy a warm Pepsi for eight rubles, just like the common people drink, and a piece of meat on a skewer. But, as I approached a food stand manned by a fierce babushka wearing what appeared to be a used sock on her head, my mobilnik vibrated with a text message from my friend Alyosha at the Interior Ministry: "Beware the meat skewers of Nevsky."

The next few weeks were manna. I drank, I smoked, I wrestled with warm-bodied Canadians. I came down with an awful itch in that conclusive place we all talk about, but what can you do? And then I got a call from the painter Chartkov. "Patron!" he cried. "Your likeness is almost ready!"

I had not expected such haste. "But we haven't even had another sitting," I said.

"Your physiognomy is imprinted on my brain," Chartkov said. "How can a moment pass when I do not think of my savior? Please, let me stand you for a drink at Club 69, and then we'll examine what I call 'Portrait of the Raven-Haired Moneylender; or, Shylock on the Neva.' I know you'll be pleased with me, sir."

I agreed to an immediate viewing, and summoned Timofey to fetch the cars. Could it be? My mortality giving way to an oily ***doppelgänger's*** everlasting life?

Anyone who can afford the three-dollar cover charge—in other words, the richest one per cent of our city—shows up at Club 69 at some point during the weekend. This is without doubt the most normal place in Russia, no low-level **thugs** in leather parkas, no skinheads in swastika T-shirts and jackboots, just friendly gay guys and the rich housewives who love them. It brings to mind that popular phrase bandied about at the Idiot Café: "civil society."

Chartkov showed up, wearing a colorful sweatshirt several sizes too big and imprinted with the logo of the Halifax Nautical Yacht Club. He'd grown plumper in the last few weeks and shaved off his flaxen goatee to reveal a little hard-boiled egg of a chin. "Looking good, Mr. Painter," I said.

"Feeling good," he said. "Hi, Zhora." He waved to a slinky boy behind the bar filling a bucket with grenadine. "How's life, cucumber?"

"Zhora's going to Thailand with a rich Swede," Chartkov said to me. "Let's go upstairs," he added, "and I'll buy you a hundred and fifty grams of vodka. Oh, how we'll celebrate!"

We sat beneath a statue of Adonis and watched a submarine captain trying to sell his young crew to a German tour group. The seventeen-year-old boys, sporting heroic cosmonaut faces and hairless ***scrotums***, were awkwardly trying to cover their nakedness, while their drunken captain barked at them to let go of their precious goods and "shake them around like a wet dog." I suppose civil society has its limits, too.

"Look what I bought today at Stockmann," Chartkov shouted. "It's a Finnish hair dryer. It has three settings. And look at the color! Orange! I'm going to do a lot of work with orange now. And also lime. These are the colors of the future. Is there an electrical outlet here? This machine not only blow-dries your hair; it sculpts it."

"What about your lady friends?" I said. "Lyudmila the philosopher and her mother with the accordion. Weren't you going to save them?"

"You know," Chartkov said, handing me a vodka from a passing tray, "you can't really save somebody until they want to save themselves. In the past few weeks I've been ***peeking*** around the English bookstore on the Fontanka. There's this one volume on how to deal with people, 'Hand Me My Cheese!,' or something of the sort, that has made a great impression on me. The problem with the modern Russian is that he is not . . . Ah, what's that word? He is not ***'proactive'*** enough."

"Also, he is frequently drunk," I added, raising my glass. "That's another problem. Well, here's to us modern Russians. May God save us all!"

"God won't save us until we save ourselves," cautioned the former monarchist. "We've got a lot of work to do in this country. We've got to start by looking seriously at our 'core competencies'—"

I grabbed Chartkov by the shoulders. "Enough," I said. "Let's go to your house."

Chartkov blanched. "Please, sir," he said. "I am not a pederast. I merely come to Club 69 for the atmosphere."

"The painting!" I said. "I must see it at once."

"Very well," Chartkov said. "But I paid three dollars a head for the entrance fee, so together it is six—"

"Look here, painter," I said. "If your rendering is as good as I think it is, I'll give you another nine thousand U.S. dollars on the spot!"

"We must hurry then!" Chartkov cried.

The hallway of Chartkov's communal flat was littered with paint cans, and spent bottles of Crimean port wine. "I bought the whole floor of the building for seven thousand U.S. dollars from that awful Armenian," Chartkov explained, "and the first thing I did was throw the dying soldier and his whole invalid family out on the street. That'll teach them to blacken the name of the Russian painter, may the Devil take them all! When this place is finished, I want to create a multimedia studio. I met this French guy at Club 69, and together we're going to offer painting seminars and a hatha-yoga clinic—"

"Just please hurry!" I cried as we raced through the long communal hallway.

The painter opened the door to his old room.

The first thing I saw was my own **jutting** lower lip, the one that had given me the nickname **Flounder** in Pioneer camp; then my eagle nose bent at several ***junctures*** from years of schoolyard beatings and domestic scrapes; then my hazy dark eyes, two dim ovals set way back into my skull; then my arms thick and corded, ***bulging*** with implied violence, one raised to strike my manservant, another hovering over my lap to protect myself from life's intimate dangers.

My skin was yellow and black in places, my forehead crossed by a monumental green vein. I was caught off center, staring joylessly into an empty corner of the canvas, where the painter had added his own initials.

He had me, Chartkov. He had done well, the poor idiot. There were some excesses, to be sure: I was sporting a pair of ***Hasidic*** side curls, while a copy of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" floated ***incongruously*** in the background, a ten-ruble note sticking out in the form of a bookmark. There was no point in telling Chartkov that I was, in fact, not a Judaist; rather, a mixture of Greek and some kind of Siberian mega-Mongol. If he was inspired to paint me in this manner, so be it.

"Here's what you must do, Chartkov," I said.

"What is it?" said the painter. "Should I put on some Pearl Jam? Fetch my patron some tea?"

"Just add a little detail," I said. "Paint a mobilnik pressed to my ear."

"Of course," the painter said. "It will be done first thing in the morning! Oh, but now my mind is filled with questions of an embarrassing nature—"

"Timofey will bring you another nine thousand U.S. dollars," I said.

Chartkov threw his arms around me and wept convulsively. His body felt thin and ***reedy*** compared with my own. I smelled American herbal shampoo on him, along with the stench of stale Parliaments. "If you wish," he whispered in my ear, "you may also take me from the back."

I woke up the next morning to the familiar cellular vibrations in my pocket. Alyosha, at the Interior Ministry, was warning me of a prospective assassination on Leninsky Prospekt. The day had come. I kissed sleeping Murka goodbye, leaving her the number of a colleague who would treat her no worse than I had. I climbed past the Canadians in the parlor and ordered my driver to set off for the southern suburbs.

I had spent my entire adolescence on Leninsky Prospekt. A wide Soviet boulevard filled with nineteen-seventies apartment blocks that might as well have landed from the Andromeda galaxy—long, ***cumbersome*** rows of flats, a grayish, intergalactic color, flanked by ten-story towers on which the words "Glory to socialist labor!" and "Life wins out over death!" used to lord over us in fantastic block letters.

As soon I got out of the car, my phone rang once more. A strangled sound emerged from the earpiece. On the far edge of the Kolomna district, in the studio of the painter Chartkov, my immortal double was calling out to me. He was singing a childhood song in a boy's sweet voice, breathless with Leningrad asthma:

Let it always be sunny,
Let there always be Mommy,
Let there always be blue skies,
Let there always be me.

I breathed in the real and imagined smells of Leninsky Prospekt, the factory coal fumes, the Arctic frost, the black exhaust of my mother's cardboard cigarettes. Two figures emerged from behind a burned-out milk stand and approached me. I stood there waiting for them, my hands protectively cupping myself but my jacket open and my tie ***askew***. I did not say a word to them. What was there to say? I heard them clicking their rounds into place, but my gaze fell elsewhere. I was mesmerized, as always, by the orange-yellow aurora of pollution hanging over the horizon of the contrived city, that ***juncture*** where snow banks and apartment towers meet to form nothing.

) *лит.* Шейлок 2) бессердечный, жадный ростовщик