

1.

*Berlin*

Sasha is the front-man in a Russian punk rock band. He speaks English like he probably sings; a few lines of ragged English scattered with emphatic swear words. Pulling off his fleece, he tucks his beer belly into his combat trousers. When I entered the train-berth moments ago I was hit by a wall of dank air - now the source of the smell is confirmed.

Sasha's arms are tattooed from wrist to shoulder, he watches me and I watch the floor.

"Where do you go?"

"St Petersburg."

"Me also."

He fixes me with a look that says should I kill him now or wait until we've crossed the border, "In St Petersburg, lot of crime, if you no job, you no money."

"You don't have benefits?"

He leans in towards me, "If you no job, you no money! Lot of thief. Be fucking careful!"

Bundling into the corridor he puts an abrupt full-stop on our first conversation.

For the last six weeks, warnings are all I've heard - the record is so broken I'd rather listen to Sasha's back catalogue on a loop. "Don't leave your rucksack anywhere or people will fill it with drugs," "Don't use the internet in Russia or you'll get arrested," "Don't have sex (there's AIDS)," "Don't eat the fruit...or the meat." And my favourite: "Don't talk to anyone."

The final warning came when I was panic-buying at the army surplus store. The bulldog behind the counter was decked out in full military garb, he watched me rifle through thick socks and flap-ear hats.

"What do you need all that for?"

"I'm going to Russia."

"You know its winter?"

"Yes."

"Do you speak any Russian?"

"No"

"Ah well, you don't need to - all you've got to do is this."

I laughed as he raised his hands like a felon resigned to arrest. Then he grabbed his chest and feigned being shot over and over again, his body writhing in time with the bullets. I laughed again, I don't know why.

Boarding the Eurostar at Waterloo, I had a backpack full of army gear and a head full of warnings - it didn't feel like I was going traveling, it felt like I was going to war. After a swift change-over in Brussels I took another train to Berlin. I shared the slick sleeper with a Korean teenager who wore silk pajamas on his body and terror on his face. The only words I managed to draw from him were "Night-night" as he scrambled for the light. Maybe someone had warned him not to talk to anyone too.

I smell Sasha coming long before he returns to our eight-by-four cell. He clutches two mugs of sweet tea, hands one to me and blows his drink cool. I study his arms: his body is a Curriculum Vitae and the tattoos mean 'prison.'

"You like tattoos?"

"When I got my first one, my Mum said, what the fuck? What you doing? You come here with tattoo, you been in jail!"

He never moves the glass more than a few inches from his lips - as though he hasn't drank anything for weeks, and isn't quite sure when the next drink is going to come along.

"Because they used to mean jail, but now? Me, my friends, we all get them because they are a sign of freedom, a way of saying that like Europe we are free too."

Smacking the bottom of the glass, he empties the last drop into his goblin mouth. "I want to read book," he yawns, "I want to make my place."

Sasha folds the back of the padded bench upwards to create a middle-bunk.

Awkwardly climbing onto this, he grunts rhythmically as he makes his bed on the third-tier. Ripping the bedding from its plastic sheath he thumps the sheet flat. Then he throws on a second thinner sheet and hurls the other blanket on top. Finally he shoves his pillow into its ill-fitting case and spreads the red fleece on top. Watching Sasha make a bed is like watching a military drill.

With Sasha reading, I peer out at the darkness and let the bounce of the train rock me to sleep. I find train travel relaxing, probably because there is always a sense of forward momentum, people become anxious when they feel that 'they are not going anywhere,' on trains that's all taken care of so you don't have to lift a finger, and whatever else you're doing is multi-tasking.

A few hours later the door is flung open by a man in a black trench coat and knee-length boots. He stands bolt upright and his eyes fume - as if a smile would shatter his world. Sasha leaps from his bed, hands over his Passport, stands to attention and smiles. The Policeman scowls and points to Sasha's case, which is stored beneath my bed. Sasha mops the sweat away from his forehead. He gabbles words and finishes up with a face-cracking laugh, which trails-off when the Policeman doesn't join in. My cell-mate is acting like a naughty school-boy; he is trying so hard that even I can tell he is hiding something. Sasha desperately points at me, forcing the Official to acknowledge me for the first time.

"Tourist?"

"Yes."

"Passport."

I hand it over.

"Stand up!"

I oblige.

He glares down at the Passport, then back at me, "Look at me!"

Holding his gaze, I remind myself that looks cannot kill. He grunts numbers into a transistor radio, then shoves the documents back into my hands.

Sasha smiles sweetly, pulls the door shut, and with a deep sigh, slumps onto his bed. A few moments later his head pops up above me, "I was afraid" he whispers, clearly yet to recover, "I have records. They are contraband."

As we roll into Poland my mind wanders back to the Army surplus store. The Bulldog became more vocal when he realized I was going to be in there for a while.

"You going through Poland?"

"Yes."

"A few months ago a polish shop opened down the road, so I went in there to buy some polish for my boots. It wasn't until I got inside that I realised it was a shop for Poles, you know, selling their food and that."

I laughed.

"There's a lot of them coming over here these days," he continued, "Course I don't mind, they're hard workers, I don't know why everyone's making such a fuss about *those* immigrants."

I nodded. Encouraged he added: "It's the ones from the weird countries like Estonia and Belarus, they're the ones you have to watch out for: they're the ones doing the crime."

Out of the window, workmen toil the rails, they wear cloth caps, blue boiler suits and orange jackets. Most chug on cigarettes and those who don't are exhaling steam.

"What's going on?"

"They change bottom of train," Sasha tells me, "train don't fit tracks."

At this, the train is jacked upwards and we are hovering many metres above the ground. The air breathes clunks as the men go to work on the steel undercarriage. Sasha pats the window, "This train is good."

"Yes, it's ok I guess."

"Last time I was with my friend, he was sleeping on bottom bunk, all night he complained: *I can't take it I'm fucking freezing*. I told him to shut up, it wasn't very cold. In the morning he woke up and there was snow all on his blanket."

"I hope that doesn't happen to me tonight."

Sasha shrugs and smugly climbs into his top-bunk.

When the train creaks to a stop the next morning, Sasha grabs his coat.

"Where are you going?"

"*We* are going to buy fried chicken."

I follow him off the train and into the wind. A clichéd gaggle of Babushkas kick their way through the snow until we are surrounded. Their chattering lips gawk open to reveal black-stained teeth. The first offers two large sausages, the second, four tomatoes and two mushrooms, and the third, a bottle of vodka. Sasha holds his chin and shakes his head, reveling in his role as meat, vegetable and alcohol connoisseur. Then settles on charred chicken and homemade chips.

Sasha is good at two things: eating chicken and sleeping. He frequently pushes the chicken away as if he doesn't want to see it again for a very long time. Then he sleeps for a few hours, returns to the chicken and the cycle resumes. Bored, I head into the corridor to inspect the train. It is arctic and reeks of cigarettes. The stained red carpet is steeped in irony and the bathroom at the end of the 'wagon' is just rusting metal. The shower head hangs limply from its holster above the toilet as if to say: *I can't be bothered, can you?* I can't.

When Sasha wakes me the next morning it is still black outside, "We're fucking here... nearly." He punches numbers into his chunky mobile, hangs up and turns to me, "My brother picks me up. We take you."

"I think I would rather take the metro."

"Metro! Be fucking careful" he warns, as we splutter into the station.

With the sun still to rise I wander slushy streets, blindly turning corners into streets I don't know. Symbols masquerade as street names, yet I don't feel alone, I have something in common with the delivery men, the dog walkers, the insomniacs - while others are asleep, we are awake and as light beckons I find a place to sleep.

I spend the next few days shivering through the city. Behind the splendour of its show-piece attractions, St Petersburg sags with wear. Its pastel buildings are sick with decay and the smog bleaches them from the foot-up. Massive advertising boards cling to once magnificent stone buildings, shrouded by thick walls of smoke. The whole city exists in a state of flux - everything is half-finished. A detour down any side-street reveals dirty pot holes, red tape, overturned bins and graffitied walls. Green tarpaulin dominates the sky-scape and from the top of St Isaac's you can still see the blown out roofs demolished during Leningrad.

I see Babushkas in thick fur coats, drowning in sandwich boards or serving soft drinks from Coca-Cola fridges. I watch a man by the river near Kazan, bent over the rails, clucking and feeding crumbs to the cats. The rooms of the Winter Palace are packed with Picasso's, Van Gough's and Da Vinci's. These rooms must be worth billions. The next room is an empty shell and huge frames have been chucked against the wall. When I snap a few photos, a throng of Japanese tourists reason that if I see a photo opportunity there must be one here for them too. They click away as I try and fail to explain that this is not an exhibit, this is not modern art.

After three days, it is time to move on. Standing at Central station, I clutch my ticket to Nizhny Novgorod. Novgorod is considered Russia's third capital and I won't have to travel too far from there to pick up my Trans-Mongolian train in Moscow. My train is yet to appear on the digital departure board and I am beginning to worry. When I seek assistance from passing passengers, they glean great pleasure in tracing their fingers along the English words and nodding to a platform. The problem is that each person I ask points to a different one.

My receipt is now in the hands of a man in a black leather jacket, grey chinos and flat cap. He points to the date on the ticket, then numbers off eleven on his hands. I explain that today is the twelfth but he doesn't want to know. When he begins to call out to passers-by, I reflect on the irony of it all: I am arguing with a man about the one thing on the ticket I *do* understand. I ask for my ticket back but I am irrelevant, he is heading a debate with three passengers, arguing his corner and wagging his hand as if to say: "No, no, no, you are all wrong."

Finally he folds my ticket, hands it back and as I charge towards the nearest train, numbers off twelve on his hand.

The leaf-patterned seats are warmed by archaic heaters below. When the engine stops so does the heat and it is bitterly cold again. Dusty curtains hang from wire rails at the stained windows and a soggy red carpet seals the carriage floor. Often the lights snap off and for a few seconds the wagon is plunged into darkness. When they stutter back on again, I see other passengers still reading their paper, still sending messages on their mobile phones, as if the darkness is acknowledged only by me. At platforms everyone alights but few have arrived, most pull their hoods over their heads to warm their ears as they jig from toe-to-toe and lifelessly chug cigarettes. I buy tea from the train conductor at the end of the clapped out carriage. She throws a tea-bag into a brown plastic mug and adds sugar from a family-size Necafe tin. Then she pours in water from a fraying black plastic kettle - the kind you'd expect to find in a home rather than a train. Three hours later the train slows and passengers wrestle with their coats. When I ask the crinkle-cut face opposite me whether this is Novgorod, she nods so I too alight.

Outside the station I blow steam into the freezing air. Tyres screech in the depot as taxi drivers compete over who can do the best 360 U-turn in the snow. I take the Number Two bus as my guide book advises and wait to arrive in the city centre. The fat conductress bundles along the aisle, wearing blue canvas from toe to head, if you asked a child to draw a conductress I'm pretty sure that she is what you would get. It is only when she collects my fare that I realize I am in trouble. After ten confused minutes I reach the root of her histrionics: this is the wrong Novgorod. The bus rattles past gloomy sky-rise estates - there is only one Novgorod in my map, there is no mention of a second, this is not good. When a fat finger points me back towards the station, I hail another bus and hope it takes me there. As we pass more tower blocks and teenagers lobbing snowballs at speeding cars, my heart is beating so hard I can almost hear it above the dredge of the bus's axels.

Back at the station, the ticket queue is colossal and like all workers in the Russian public service, the grim woman behind the desk is the only person who isn't in a rush. I don't know why Russia has an Army; they don't need guns, grenades or tanks, if they are invaded all the Premier needs to do is send their aggressors to the ticket-office, it's enough to bring the strongest man to his knees.

An hour later I step up to the serving hatch, jabber English, and point to my guide book. The woman shakes her head, crosses her arms, and points to the queue. A meaty man is

already shoving me aside with his shoulders. Standing my ground, I turn to the mob, "Does anyone speak English?"

Like a scene from a movie, when the air steward asks if there's a doctor on board, a man wearing a long black jacket, steps from the crowd.

With an American twang he tells me I've missed the last train and will have to come back tomorrow. I survey the ice-cold station and the bums who eat, whisper and conspire within it: I do not want to spend the night here. The man beckons me outside, and with nowhere else to turn, I reluctantly follow.

He introduces himself as Alexsei and we shake hands, "It really is a miracle we have met" he tells me, in near-perfect English.

"Why?"

"I'm probably one of the only people in this city who can speak English."

"Where are we?"

"What?"

"I thought this was Nizhny Novgorod."

"Oh no, this is Veliky Novgorod... Novgorod the Great."

A Policeman passes and Alexsei brings his finger to his lips. When the Official's boots are out of hearing distance he whispers: "If they heard you speak English they may have made some problems for you."

"Why?"

He shrugs, "Because you are foreign."

We are joined by Alexsei's friend, a man with dark skin and sunken eyes. He doesn't speak much English but announces that he likes Depeche Mode, while Alexsei prefers the Beatles. It doesn't matter what Kolya is saying - his tone of voice makes everything sound like a threat.

"Listen Tom" says Alexsei, turning to me business-like, "You are a foreigner, you don't know where you are, you have no-one to contact, you are very lucky to have found me, I can help you. Tomorrow morning there is a train back to St Petersburg and I have to go there for work - we can travel together."

He rings his Mother's friend (who owns a hotel), and seconds later I am squashed into a taxi with three strangers. I am not quite sure where I am and I definitely don't know where I am going, no, this is really not good.

The car pulls up outside a dim building, so dim in fact that once the taxi has screamed away it is difficult to find the entrance. The receptionist peers over her glasses and demands

my passport. Alexsei intercepts it and flicks to the back page, "She needs to know where you were born."

"London."

"London," he mimics, as though the city holds a special place in his heart.

Then we climb the wooden stairs, Kolya up front, Alexsei behind.

"What phone are you using Tom?"

"Oh, just one from England."

"I can give you a Russian SIM card," he tells me, reaching into his coat pocket.

"No, I'm fine with what I've got."

"It's very expensive to use a foreign phone, here, I mean it, have one."

"Seriously, I don't want it."

Alexsei grunts; put out.

At the top of the stairs he raps on the door to my room. A small man with sickly yellow skin, wearing dungarees, answers. Alexsei snaps at him and points at me. The man rubs his eyes and groans. Kolya barges past him and shuts the door, Alexsei slings his arm round my shoulder and ushers me onto the balcony.

"Listen Tom" he warns, "There are many people here who don't like the British. You're lucky, I really do, I love English football - I watch it all the time. Your roommate is Ukranian, he doesn't speak English but you are both foreigners, so I think you have an understanding."

A man is slumped on a bed cradling a bottle of vodka and hasn't bothered to shut his door.

When he shouts at us, even this fails to wake the unconscious girl at his side. Alexsei lowers his voice to a whisper, "Tomorrow night there is a train to Moscow, I can show you around Novgorod and you can leave in the evening."

"I don't know, I haven't really decided what I'm doing tomorrow."

"Well here's my number, so you can contact me."

When he slides a business card into my hand, my heart sinks to my feet. The card is embossed with a familiar symbol - a white bear affront the Russian flag - Putin's party badge.

"I work for Putin" Alexsei confirms, "I'm part of the youth movement, you're very lucky to have met me."

Kolya emerges from the room and nods to Alexsei, "Did you give him a Russian SIM card?"

"No, he doesn't want it."

Together we head back to my 'suite.' The walls of the poky room drip with dust, and the Ukranian clears folded plastic bags from my bed onto the spare by the door. The way he works is beyond meticulous, I don't know what he is doing and I don't ask but I do notice a

change in him - initially he was aggressive - now he seems desperate to please.

"What time do you want me to pick you up tomorrow?" asks Alexsei.

"I'll sleep in until late so it might not be worth it, I probably won't leave here until at least eleven."

"I'll pick you up at eleven."

"Oh...right."

Alexsei surveys the room and his eyes twinkle as they rest on me, "I think I'll bring my friends here tomorrow." And with that, he and Kolya are gone.

I swat flies from my pillow and climb under the furry issue blankets. The Ukranian lies down in his tiny single, which is less than a metre from my own. He points to the light and seconds later all is dark, including the thoughts raiding my head.

All I can think about is the calling-card in my trouser pocket. I'm no authority on the politics of Putin's United Russia Party, and what I do know has been gleaned from a mish-mash of articles by probably biased western critics. But still, the outline I have been left with isn't exactly favourable. Putin is known for towing a hard line, which has led to some foreign critics labeling him "Stalin's spiritual heir." Under his regime a number of Russian journalists have wound up dead. As well as his alleged suppression of the media, he has replaced direct elections with a system in which candidates are proposed by him. More recently, he accused domestic and foreign enemies of wanting to see a sick, weak Russia because it is in their own interests.

These thoughts tumble around my head, then dissipate until all I can hear is a sound-byte from a travel article I read before I left England. It plagues my brain and the disease soon spreads to the pit of my stomach. "Within the party Putin has a few close allies: these people speak perfect English and have been known to shadow tourists to root out potential threats."

I wish I was at home watching the old lady eating her iced bun, (in fact, right now I'd pay a lot of money to fly over there for the privilege), anything to get me out of this. Tonight I don't sleep, I wait.