

*Two.*

I rise at seven and head for the showers. The bathroom is colossal, and along the walls there are basins in various states of disrepair. Some are heaps of rubble, most have burst pipes and all are caked in muck. The toilets and the showers face-off from either side of the shell, none of them have locks, none of them have doors either. Picking through the water, I pass an archway that leads into an equally huge room - it is bereft and the floor looks like pavement. At the very centre a fat, bearded man, sits cross-legged next to a tiny gas heater and blows warmth into his hands. When he vacantly returns my gaze it is as though he is looking straight through me, I don't shower.

Back in the room I pack my bag. The Ukranian doesn't want me to leave, but I shake free of him, head down to reception and ask to use the phone.

"Hi Alexsei."

"Tom! How did you sleep?"

"Very well." A lie.

"Look Alexsei, I think I'm just going to go to the station, buy a ticket and leave."

"But there are no trains to Moscow until tonight."

"Yeah...but...err..."

"You don't want to meet me?"

"No, it's not that." Lie number two. "I'll go to the ticket office... buy the ticket and... if I see you... I see you."

"Ok Tom!"

I take a taxi through the thick white-sludge and buy a ticket to Moscow for tonight. Then I head for the waiting-room of a dilapidated coach station, and buy a pizza and a sausage roll from a haggard kiosk. Both items have been nuked in a microwave, packaging and all. The plastic film burns my hands as I struggle back to the train station.

"Tom!"

It's Alexsei, walking arm-in-arm with a pretty young girl. She wears a woolly jumper and a white hat with the flaps pulled down over her cheeks, "This is my wife, Katrina."

I tuck the plastic food beneath my arm and shake her gloved hand.

"Did you get your ticket?"

"Yes."

"Can I see it?"

I pass him the cardboard wallet.

"It looks like we'll be neighbours!"

"Pardon?"

Alexsei takes his own ticket from the inside of his jacket, "I'm going to Moscow too. Don't worry, I'll see if you can come and sleep in our carriage."

I could have sworn that last night he said he was going to St Petersburg.

"So Tom, we have a whole day, let me show you my city."

He didn't phrase it as a question and even if he did it would be impossible to say no.

"Novgorod the Great has 200,000 inhabitants and is the oldest city in Russia," swells Alexsei as we shudder towards the Kremlin walls. "Here there have been many invaders, first the Scandinavians and then the Germans, but we fended off them all. In the olden days when the attacking armies came, Novgorod's sentries stood on the turrets and poured hot oil over them." Alexsei grins - the pleasure he takes in this story is even more chilling than the weather.

We come to an abrupt stop at an eternal fire, its orange flames battle against the wind. "Defeating fascism was Russia's greatest triumph" Alexsei lectures. Then he hands me coins and tells me to throw them into the blaze in a show of respect to the heroes of World War II. I do as I am told. We stand in silence for a few minutes, then the tour continues. Alexsei points to a grey tower block, "You see this building?"

I nod.

"It's the government building - where I work."

We fight through the wind towards Sofia Cathedral. At the entrance, Alexsei and Katrina cross themselves. He tells me to remove my hat and then checks to make sure Katrina is still wearing hers. Inside, the air boils with burning incense, and a woman spreads herself on the stone floor to pray. Katrina lights candles, then hands me a golden Saint.

"What's this?"

"She wants to give you a gift Tom" interprets Alexsei.

"Thanks, that's very kind."

"She wants you to display it somewhere light in your home to keep you safe."

"Thanks, that's very kind." I hope I won't need it, I hope I haven't seen my home for the last time.

Half an hour later we are on a bus. The seats are so cold that most passengers choose to stand. Sludge rockets past my feet through the gnawed holes in the floor. "Out here in the

countryside people live off the land," Alexsei tells me.

"What do they grow?"

"Potatoes!"

I stare out at the snow and disheveled wooden huts; it's a wonder anyone can live out here and a miracle that anything grows. As the monotonous landscape gives way to a blown-out car, I think to myself "if I wanted someone gone, this is where I would take them."

Alexsei frog-marches me off the bus and we plod through deep snow towards the city's second largest tourist attraction: a village of nineteenth century log houses.

"The Fin's stole our idea" complains Alexsei, "wooden cabins are Russian - they should be our export." Everything is made from wood, from the furniture right through to the pots.

Afterwards we wait in a bus shelter, also made of wood - where bus times have been hand-printed onto the beams with black felt-pen.

"You're hungry aren't you Tom?" Before I have a chance to respond, Alexsei finishes the conversation he started, "Don't worry, I know a really good place."

We sit in a rustic restaurant and eat Borsch, served with crunchy potatoes that are dipped into lumps of sea salt. Alexsei was right, this is a good place and as we eat I begin to relax. Maybe my mind has been polluted by all those warnings - from the moment I met him Alexsei has shown me only kindness. I watch Katrina laugh as she eats, and having let my guard down, notice for the first time what has probably been staring me in the face all day - they are a charming couple.

With the meal finished, Katrina wraps herself in a big down coat.

"Where's she going?"

"She has to go home to make our dinner."

"We've only just eaten."

"Yes but she is also a mother, she needs to see our child. Usually she spends every hour with her but she wanted to meet you, today is a special day." My ears prick up - the woman, that woman with the iced bun, she was the doorkeeper to my special days, and now, thousands of miles away from home, I am responsible for someone else's. Does a person's happiness always rest on the shoulders of another person? Is that why we place such importance on relationships? No, the link between these two scenarios isn't that we're all human, but that the other person is completely oblivious to the enjoyment they are providing. Beauty and love are about connections not detachment and confusion. With no answers, I return to my beer.

Katrina grins goodbye and Alexsei and I turn to the television, which airs highlights of the English Premier League. After a few minutes of stilted football chatter, I muster the courage to ask the question that I've wanted to ask all day.

"Alexsei? What do you actually do?"

He shunts his chair forwards, and with this simple movement transforms the table into an office desk, "I work with the young patriots of the party, in fact, I am the leader of this group."

"What do you mean by young patriots?"

"The party wants the young to be proud of their country, because our generation will have the biggest role to play in the successful transition from the dark times."

"Yes, but what do you do?"

"A lot of things - we have many actions. We encourage children to avoid alcohol and drugs, but most of the work involves helping the elderly. These are the people hardest hit by the country's transition - these are the people who are really struggling to adapt to the new democracy."

"And what do you mean by democracy?"

Alexsei runs his finger around his glass and thinks for a long time, "We want to give our people choice," he tells me, raising his arms like a politician at rally. "They should have access to the big American brands, but there should also be products that are distinctly Russian. Can you think of any Russian exports?"

"Russian dolls?"

He puffs out his cheeks, "The party motto is 'No Time Wasting.' We want to create opportunities for people who are willing to work hard. For example, we now have an education system in which the state pays half the fees. If a student performs well then the state will pay the other half too."

"So it's cash rewards for attainment?"

"Exactly."

"Doesn't this stigmatize the less gifted students?"

"Maybe, but we believe that if someone works hard then they will be successful - everyone has the ability to achieve."

Alexsei sips his beer, "You know Tom, at the moment some Russian people are ashamed to be Russian - they want to tear down the statues of Lenin and forget about the past. But my President, and me, believe that we need to embrace our history, because like it or not, it's how we have arrived here and it has shaped our culture."

"You can't dwell on the past" I tell him, thinking myself very clever.

"But you can't completely forget about it either," he shoots back, instantly defeating me.

"So what's the party's vision? Where do you want Russia to be in ten years time?"

He responds smartly, formally, "Now is a very difficult time for Russia, we are a nation in transition, but in the future we want Russia to be part of globalization. We want the country to shed its negative image, and no longer be feared and apart."

I stare down at my drink - these are exactly the pre-conceptions I've been harbouring ever since I set foot in his country.

"Tom? Are you ok?"

"I'm fine" I tell him, and I mean it.

In the frosty streets, we pass a camping bed replete with a quilt and pillow. Alexsei makes a bee-line for the young women who dole out badges next to it, "These are my friends," he tells me, "The election is coming up and they are doing an action."

"What's the bed for? Don't tell me they sleep out here?"

He puffs out his cheeks, "It's symbolic, remember the motto: No Time Wasting."

The girls are as striking as all the others I have seen roaming Russia's streets. Russian women are surely the most beautiful in the world and spend a lot of time preening themselves. In fact, a Russian girl once told me that she refuses to let anyone see her face in the morning, since the age of fourteen no-one has seen her without make-up, including her parents.

I am handed a party badge, and Alexsei helps the girls load the camping bed into a truck. Then we head for one of the city's glum housing estates. Alexsei seems nervous, "Listen Tom, my house it's...small. Actually it's not my house at all... it's Katrina's parents. In Russia, when a daughter marries, it's usual for her to move back into her parent's house and live with her spouse. Russian houses are very expensive but in six years time, when I am thirty, I hope we will have our own."

In the second-floor flat, I dump my shoes on a dresser which is piled with oddities that have been discarded by people on their way in. The flat is made-up of four small rooms; it doesn't feel like I'm entering a house, it feels like I am entering a home.

In the stuffy kitchen, Katrina washes dishes at the silver basin. I squeeze past her and sit down at the small dining table in an effort to get out the way. The curtain beside me rustles and I pull it back to reveal two pet mice.

"We are about to eat," Alexsei tells me, "You need to use the bathroom?"

The bathroom doubles up as the smoking quarters, a carton of cigarettes sit in their own special holster beneath the toilet roll. When I return, we eat thick mashed potato, bright red caviar served with brown bread, tomato quarters smothered in thick dressing and huge meat balls. Katrina watches us devour the food, but doesn't touch a thing.

"Why aren't you eating?"

"She ate earlier."

"These homemade meatballs are amazing, what's in them?"

"Oh, you know, cow and pig."

A bowl of chocolates are produced from a bare cabinet, and Katrina pours tea from her best teapot which has a strainer fixed to the spout. The tea is served in mis-matched mugs on saucers. Alexsei watches me drink as though he is witnessing an important custom, "The English must have tea at five o'clock or they go crazy, right?"

I laugh, "Something like that."

With the meal finished, Katrina and Alexsei show me their room. It is about ten-by-six, the floor is tiled with grey plastic and the walls are bare, save for a framed collage of Australian scenery – its photos neatly snipped from magazines. "Katrina is very house proud, in Russia it's very important for a woman to be a good wife."

I pat my stomach, "Maybe I need a wife like this."

Alexsei laughs, "We need to go - we don't want to miss the train." Katrina reaches behind her pillow and passes me a pair of thick knitted socks, "No honestly," I protest, "you've already been kind enough."

"She likes giving you gifts!"

She passes me a second present, a Russian atlas for seven year old school children. "Now you won't get lost again."

I flick through the pages, "How far is Novgorod the Great from Nizhny Novgorod, anyway?" Alexsei smirks, "Only about fifteen hours."

I am waiting at Novgorod station for the fourth time in two days. If things carry on like this, the station-manager will be forced to award me a plaque and a bench. I am surrounded by Alexsei's cronies - they are all members of Putins' youth movement and highly politicized. A student with a face like a wind-worn cliff, tells me that for his University thesis he is comparing rosettes of political parties around the globe. He is explaining that in England, Labour is red and Conservative blue, when a man who must be at least six foot five interjects, "What party do you vote for Comrade?"

I stare up at the talking mountain, "In England, we don't like to say."

"Maybe we can come to England and give you communism."

They all howl with laughter, I don't.

Twenty minutes later the mob charge down the platform and I am swept up in it. The giant unravels a huge party flag - the political zeal of these men, none of whom are older than me, is so intense that it is disconcerting. I wish I knew more about their youth movement, but something is holding me back from seeking the answers I crave.

"Tom?" asks the University student.

"Yes?"

"Why are you travelling alone?"

I reply in a rehearsed manner, which demands respect, "I thought it would make for more of an adventure." He responds like a nursery teacher, talking to a two-year-old, "You are mad."

"You are lucky," says Alexsei, as he and Kolya usher me into their carriage, "There's a spare bed in here for you." As I heave my backpack onto the top bunk, the train wheezes forwards and our comrades wave us away. I watch them disappear from view until they are a legion of ants, clothed by a communal flag.

By this time, our compartment which is built for only four people, is housing over ten. The gruff man in the bunk beneath mine is clearly in the mood to party. Soon the air is thick with stale smoke, alcohol and body sweat. Around me Russian labourers fight to be heard. These men travel to Moscow because there is no work in Novgorod - they are also men, whom if they wished, could crush me in the palm of one of their calloused hands. Pouring vodka into plastic cups to well over half-way, they follow each shot with a beer chaser, then snort a lump of hard soda bread.

"Why do they do that?" I whisper to Alexsei.

He relays my question to the group, "Because even a builder's hands smell better than the vodka."

The carriage erupts with thigh-slapping howls, and from then onwards, with Alexsei as my interpreter, I begin to loosen up.

The old man pressed against me has a beak-nose and wears a tweed jacket over his stained vest. His hand is tattooed *Victor*, and his skin is almost as tough as his glare. I ponder whether Victor is his own name or the name of one of his victims, I give him the benefit of the doubt. When I announce that I am going for a smoke, I feel his hot vodka breath against my cheek. Grabbing my arm, he produces his own cigarette carton and points to the

disclaimer: *6mg of nicotine*. I show him my packet of Marlborough Reds (I usually smoke lights, but when I woke up in hell this morning I decided that today I definitely needed something stronger). Victor matches up the two boxes, then gazes at me like a bewildered child, "I was a soldier, I have had a tough life." He jabs a filthy talon accusingly at me, "And him! All he has done is study! And he smokes stronger cigarettes than me!"

When I return from the corridor, shivering into my coat, Victor glares at me, "Are you cold?"

"Of course, I am English."

He reaches for the vodka bottle and fills a cup to near the top. Having taken one for himself, we chink plastic, "Chin chin." "Chin chin," he slurs, as we pour the gasoline down our throats. When I claw for the stale bread, the others pound their fists against their thighs. I'm not cold anymore; probably because my face is on fire.

A man with red-stained eyes appears at the doorway, rocking from side to side. Pointing to a hunched figure near the window, he shouts: "You are from England?" The man stares back at him straight-faced, then replies in text-book English: "No I am from Russia." Victor doubles over with laughter and gets up to shake the wag's hand.

Alexsei turns to me, "They want to tell you a joke."

"Ok."

"What is a fish you can't beat?"

"I don't know, what is a fish you can't beat?"

He delivers the punch-line with a loud yapping laugh, "Ersh."

Everyone's eyes are on me, Victor glares at me as though if he looks at me hard enough I'll crack into hysterics. Finally, Alexsei's voice crashes into the dazed silence, "Of course! He doesn't understand!" Then he explains that in Russian, Ersh is a combination of beer and vodka as well as a species of river fish.

Pointing to a glass tea-cup, the man next to me asks if they have them on English trains. I tell him that if we had goblets like these in England, people would steal them. He studies me tragically for a moment, then stuffs the glass into my backpack.

"This is a gift, from us to you."

"Do you promise to stand up in court and say that when I get arrested for theft?" Everyone laughs.

"What do you drink in England?" Suddenly it is question time.

"Beer... but in Devon many people like cider."

A man sighs philosophically, "Never drink cider again...for the rest of your days."

Bored of waiting for someone to leave, the man who has been swaying at the doorway plonks himself down, pretty much on my lap.

"Why you come to Russia?"

"For an adventure."

"You want adventure? You come live in Russia - every day is an adventure."

"I went to India once," he continues, as though the statement belongs in the conversation.

"What did you do there?"

"I smoked a lot of dope."

"Any sunbathing?"

He whoops and rips off his shirt to reveal a ghostly torso, "Of course! Look at my tan."

"Where are you going after Moscow?" asks a sloshed teenager, hidden beneath bodies.

I reach into my bag for the map Katrina gave me, and Victor grabs it with an agility which until now I would never have dreamed him capable. "This is for school-children!" He cackles.

My face reddens as Alexsei throws in: "He thought Novgorod was Nizhny Novgorod."

The carriage shakes with laughter, "You're right" I concede, "Maybe this map is too advanced, have you got anything for nursery children?"

When I tell the group that after Moscow, I'm planning to take a train to Mongolia, they cannot believe what they are hearing.

"How long is that going to take?!"

"About five days."

"It's a prison sentence!"

Over the next few minutes the conversation descends into an aggressive shouting match.

Alexsei diplomatically concludes: "No-one thinks going to Mongolia is a good idea. The Mongolian food is bad and the place is very dangerous - you should stay in Russia longer instead."

"Maybe, but people who had never been to Russia before warned me that it would be dangerous. Don't you think that it's the unknown that people assume dangerous?" My words are met with a shower of grunts, rolled eyeballs and shaking heads: a unanimous "no."

Kolya has spent the evening alternating between two mobile phones, he hangs up for an instant and crosses his arms. I ask Alexsei why everyone here has two mobile phones.

"Each time you enter a different city you need a different SIM card to get cheap calls. Many Russian people have more than two phones." Kolya pulls a third, then a fourth phone from his leather jacket to exemplify his friends point.

The men finally stop drinking to pass an enormous chicken leg along the line, as they take it in turns to gnaw it from the bone, the conversation shifts to Moscow. Its population is ten million but Muscovites joke that there is actually only one million. It's a continuous cycle of commuters - the city has more temporary residents than permanent ones.

I am handed a beer and clunk bottles with the man opposite, "Nazdravym," I say ("to good health"). He eyes me wearily, "Never say that, not when we drink beer and vodka like this, our life is hard, this is not good health it is bad."

A stout woman brings an end to the complaints, when she arrives at the doorway, hawking alcohol. Every tooth in her mouth is capped with gold and her tongue is black, I wonder how many drinks she'll have to sell before she can afford to have that capped too. The men tell her I'm English, she thinks I look Russian, everyone seems very pleased with this. I look around at the screeching faces, and realize that I feel more comfortable with these people than I do with people in England who I have known for many months. They make everyone feel welcome and for the duration of the journey, age, rank and even nationality don't matter; everyone is equal. That or they have got me very, very drunk.

In the early hours the party disperses. We take turns to wait in the corridor while each man makes his bed; the sway of the train is only slightly less erratic than the drunks spreading their sheets. "The train arrives at 6am," Alexsei tells me, "but don't worry, I've spoken to the guards so we can sleep in until nine. What do you think of the people you met tonight?"

"I thought they were very friendly."

Alexsei laughs, "You really are very lucky Tom, these are tough men but for some reason they seemed to like you. Whenever new drinkers entered you were introduced as a "good guy."

I don't ask Alexsei what he meant by "for some reason." You've got to pick your battles, I've been riding lady luck all day and I don't fancy slapping her in the face. Minutes later I am sweating beneath hot blankets and chewing down stale air. I wake up many times in the night and each time Alexsei and Kolya are speaking to one-another in frantic whispers.

"Tom!" I rub my eyes and give the carriage a once-over to isolate the danger. "What is it? What's wrong?" Alexsei and Kolya stand over me like a pair of presenters on a Channel Five travel show, "Welcome to Moscow!"

All that remains of last night is the smell of stale alcohol and cheap vodka bottles, which sit used and dejected on the sorry window desk. "Come on!" cries Alexsei, half dragging me from my bed, "We're late!"

"Late for what?"

"We have a meeting."

"What meeting?"

"Business meeting," nods Kolya.

That's that cleared up then.

Wind gushes through the corridor and bristles over discarded blankets. We stumble through the debris, and still yet to see a soul, crunch down the steel steps onto the slushy tracks. Resting my hands on the high stone platform I lever myself onto it.

Alexsei tells me that I should find somewhere to store my bag, and before I have the chance to ask "where?" they are gone. Alexsei shouts that they will pick me up in an hour.

I empty my bag in a decrepit café to search for my guide book. After twenty minutes of frenzied pick-piling, everything I own is on the table in front of me: everything apart from my guide book. From behind the gigantic mound, I wonder what I was thinking of when I bought all this expensive and frankly unnecessary equipment. Stuffing it all back from where it came, the appearance of my favorite piece of kit raises my spirits. I knew I had to have it the minute I laid eyes on it, "Ah good choice" said the Bulldog as he slid the spork into a plastic bag. A spork is a plastic spoon, but it's also so much more than that - the handle is shaped like a fork, which is serrated to form a rudimentary knife. "Our boys love these" he told me, "They're great for meat."

Studying the picture-menu, I try to convince my body it's hungry, fooling no-one I order a sausage pancake. The surly waitress hands me a plate which is marginally less greasy than her face. When I pass her plastic cutlery back and brandish my spork, she looks at me with pity rather than the envy I had anticipated.

Preparing to slice open the pancake, I ponder how long it will be before the spork is on every dinner table in the land. I imagine kids listening in horror as they learn of an era when people had to use both their hands to eat. Then I wonder why everything we buy isn't multi-functional, why haven't designers cottoned on to the precedent that my magnificent spork has set? It doesn't take long to put these thoughts to bed. My attempt to create an incision into the sodden pastry becomes a battle as I fail to tear away a chunk. After several slippery seconds, I drive the prongs into the pancake. Spork plastic meets plate plastic and with a pathetic whine the spork snaps in two.

It takes me a while to come to terms with what has happened and for a fleeting moment I even expect the spork to magically re-heal. It doesn't. With utter dismay I turn to the waitress, who is holding out the plastic cutlery which minutes earlier I had so

flamboyantly rejected. As I gobble down the sweating mess, I console myself with the fact that the spork was not a complete waste of money. Without it I could have spent days in here, and I still wouldn't have made that mean little waitress smile.

I bin the spork along with the half finished meal on my way out and follow the luggage signs. The underground bunker that I finish up in is a silver labyrinth, void of passengers, but jammed with baggage counters. It is windier down here than it is out there and I soon become lost in its frosty arms. I have already passed several counters - I don't know what I'm expecting to find - the only thing I can compare the feeling with is when you drive into an empty car park and it takes longer to park than if there was only one space left. The problem with choice is that it makes you even more anxious to make the right one. My legs have the final say; a man chucks my bag onto the steel shelf behind him and then with similar ambivalence throws a numbered ticket onto the desk.

Outside the station, I breathe in the icy Moscow air, it stinks of onions. A woman has set up a stall near the entrance and is shaving a sack-load of them to demonstrate the peelers she is flogging. A man in a suit approaches and an argument develops. At first I struggle to follow its thread, but after a few minutes the cause of the conflict is clear. The woman wants to sell the man a peeler, the man wants to buy the ready-peeled onions; neither party gets what they want.

When Alexsei and Kolya return they push me into the subway, "We're late!"

"Late for what?"

"A meeting."

"I thought that's where you had just been?"

"Two meetings," nods Kolya.

That's that cleared up then.

It is rush hour and the escalators are rammed with bodies; a mish-mash of bums with beer, men in power suits, dolled up women in fur and kids in hoods. The only thing this disparate jumble has in common is that they like to push and shove. The anomaly is a middle-aged man who cradles a rudimentary Amstrad computer, as though it's the most precious commodity on earth.

The escalators are just a warm up; the real battle takes place on the platform. Hearing the train, the passengers who minutes before had been a picture of calm, jostle for position and try to second-guess where the doors will finish up. When most of them inevitably get it wrong, they atone for their error by making an ugly charge for the door.

At the other side, Alexsei shoves me through the gasping bodies, "Tom! Go!" Joining the race, I notice that this is no ordinary subway: it's an underground palace. Domed lights hang from sublime white arches and the benches are lacquered with thick varnish. An old man sits on one, his head framed by a stained-glass window - he doesn't look like a man waiting for a train, he looks like a King on a throne.

Alexsei and Kolya smash through the city streets, it doesn't matter what they come up against, cars, stalls or people, there is no obstacle that cannot be shooed away or pushed aside.

I am told to wait in the reception of an officious building. When Alexsei and Kolya scurry up the staircase, I lollop into a pompous velvet chair. The security guard swaggers over until his pudding-face is inches from my own, and studies me with a disgust usually reserved for public toilets. "I'm waiting for my friends," I tell him, "They won't be long."

The phone rings and he heads back to the desk to answer it. But he hasn't completely given up on me; for the next fifteen minutes I become his pet-project. When he is busy dealing with queries he leaves me well alone, but as soon as he has a free minute he shouts that my presence here is intolerable and I simply must go. Our battle ends when Alexsei and Kolya return with several business associates. I am introduced to them in turn. None of them seem to want to take the conversation any further or seem particularly interested in what I am doing there, which is lucky, because I don't really know myself.

"Today is a great day," Alexsei tells me, as we spring into the swarming high street. "Why?"

"Because today we got paid."

Who is pay-rolling this operation? Who is in charge of this youth movement? From what I've been told their actions constitute voluntary work, so why are they getting paid?

Alexsei smiles, "And next month we have a meeting with the president."

"Have you met him before?"

"Of course!"

He passes me his phone. On the pixilated screen, Putin addresses a circle of delegates. "I've also met Noel Gallagher," Alexsei boasts, as I pass the phone back.

Turning a routine corner we emerge in Red Square. The cobbles teem with tourists, beggars and Russia's elite who strut the square in designer clobber. Kolya pounds his fist against his breast, "See this!" he shouts through the din, "this is the heartbeat of Russia!"

The Kremlin doors swing open and soldiers stride mechanically out, cracking their palms to their guns. The soldiers on duty eyeball the newcomers, then they switch; one group heading for the warmth of the Kremlin, the other taking position inside the sentry box. Amidst

the coos and camera flashes, there is a man in torn clothes with a black hat pulled down over his ears. He gabbles nonsense to himself, and shivers along at the same pace as the soldiers but without the flourish: he's probably heading for his own box, some place else.

A huge billboard of Putins' party dominates the west side of the square. Alexsei appraises the advert, like an art critic. Where is the opposition's campaign? I haven't even seen a rosette, let alone a hundred-foot banner. I think again about what Alexsei told me about the new Russian democracy, and realize that we never discussed the voting procedure itself. "The flag is at full mast" Alexsei tells me, before I've managed to put my concerns over the politics he represents to one side, "Our President is here!"

While Alexsei and Kolya discuss the flag, I take in St Basil's cathedral. Its colourful beams and onion domes appear to have been plucked straight out of Hansel and Gretel. I try to decide what is more bizarre, the brash cathedral or the sight of tourists posing for photos in front of Lenin's tomb: it's too close to call.

"What do you want to do now?" asks Alexsei.

"I don't know, what would you like to do?"

"Kolya is very religious. He doesn't drink, he doesn't smoke, but he loves to shop."

Thirty minutes later, we burst through the security checkpoint of an outdoor market. The national stadium is the backdrop for a jumble of stalls, which merge into small boutique shops at the back. The air swims with squawking vendors from Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan. Some stand behind stalls, others hang from shop fronts raised on balconies, and most sell fur hats, perfume, underwear or a combination of all three. Kolya rumbles through the stalls, buying perfumes, aftershaves, leather hats and underwear with rabid intensity. We traipse past dripping portaloo toilets, rusty vending machines and naked mannequins, then stumble into the food section where men cook pork chops. Disturbingly, the smell of the barbecue is not of roasting meat but the smell of fish.

As night beckons the dealers pack away their gear. Soon the market is empty, save for the debris strewn across the snow. Bags, plastic, crates and planks of wood mark the space where the stalls once stood. These columns are made up of ugly waste, but there is a beautiful symmetry to the trails they create - it is order - from chaos.

Kolya's thirst for shopping remains un-quenched, so we head back to Red Square and hit the expensive Boutique stores. Clacking along the marble floor, Kolya turns to me and whispers: "Here there are many beautiful shops." I gaze through the polished window at the expensive clothes. Shirts hang from shimmering hangers and even the walls look brand new,

it is neat, but is it beautiful? Then again, if I pointed to an old woman on a bench eating an iced bun, would Kolya consider that beautiful?

At a department store café, we are joined by four young patriots. They are united not only by their politics, but by their aversion to where I plan to go this evening.

"We don't understand it Tom," sighs Alexsei, "Why do you want to go there?"

"I don't know... I just do."

"You've already been to the best Novgorod."

"That doesn't mean I can't visit Nizhny Novgorod too."

"Let me make a phone call, there are more young patriots in Nizhny Novgorod - they can show you around."

"That's kind Alexsei, but I'd like to check it out for myself."

I don't want more of his friends to show me around, I don't even know what this 'youth party' is, and until I find out, I don't want my journey sponsored by it.

Alexsei puts his phone away and produces a digital organizer. As he takes my e-mail address, I notice that he has already created a file for me which includes my date of birth. I definitely did not tell him when I was born. When Alexsei snaps the organizer shut and heads for the toilet, one of his colleagues turns to me, "I don't think you understand how important Alexsei is."

"What do you mean?" I ask; sensing an opportunity to get some perspective on who I have spent the last few days with. The boy steps in towards me, and lowers his voice to a whisper, "He is climbing the ladder very quickly in the party. You wait... in the future he will be a very important man."