RETURNING HOME

By Ian Watson

Thank God, the runway was clear. An Aeroflot crew had apparently touched down just moments before a radiation bomb went off overhead. But the pilot's nervous system lasted long enough for him to steer his plane off the concrete onto grass—unless he had merely swerved.

Anyway, our landing was a pushover. As well it needed to be, with upwards of thirty million displaced Americans pushing behind us. There were two hundred of us packed into our plane—with a second Ilyushin to follow some hours later.

Most wonderful of all, there was no reception committee of Chinese waiting for us. So those Canadian bastards hadn't been lying after all. The Chinese hadn't flooded over the frontier to fill up this spur of the Soviet Union. And yet somehow we hadn't *believed* that the Chinese would. It was as if the spirit that impelled us toward the East had promised us this land and had preserved it for us.

Leaving Group Red at the airport, the rest of us rounded up some brand-new buses, got them going, and drove in convoy into downtown Khabarovsk — ending up outside the Far East Hotel on Karl Marx Street, which seemed as good a place as any other to billet ourselves for the time being.

There weren't too many shriveled mummies in the streets. The streets themselves were reasonably clean and neat. The human animal seemed to prefer to die in its burrow, if it could get there in time.

I'd just told Hank Sullivan to take a fatigue squad round the hotel to clear all the bodies they found into a single room and was getting the others organized, when Mary cried out, "Greg, come over here."

She was waving the handset of an old-fashioned-looking telephone, farther down the lobby.

I hadn't been meaning to bring Mary in on the first flight. Strictly the two hundred of us were a technical spearhead, and Mary wasn't a sailor or mechanic or locomotive driver. But she was a fine survivor, and if dishing up fish and chipmunk stew or nettle-and-mushroom soup without a single pot or stove isn't a technical accomplishment, then I don't know what is.

So when she'd insisted, we'd compromised by leaving little Suzie in good hands up in Magadan for later delivery, and Mary came along as our provisions officer. She was still looking fairly gaunt—as were we all—and her blond hair had all grown out a mousy brown. But I loved her even more dearly after all that we'd been through.

"What is it?"

"The phone works, Greg."

I ran to her, while everyone turned to watch us, and it was then — when I got my hands on that phone and heard it humming—that it really all came home to me: *We had won through.*

Because the goddamn lovely old phone was receiving power. No doubt from some hydroelectric scheme that was still churning out electricity automatically.

"Hey, Billy Donaldson," I called across the lobby, "get your ass behind that check-in desk and find another phone along there. Call out your number."

Hitching up his Soviet Army greatcoat, redheaded Billy stepped over the assorted wizened corpses in their crumpled, dusty suits and dresses, careful not to soil the garments with his boots.

As the first pioneer group to cross the Bering Strait, we'd all got rid of our bark-and-straw boots and our stinking dog- and cowhide coats as soon as we reached the first Soviet outpost. The other scraggy survivors still converging on the tip of Alaska, this summer after the War, would have to wait just a little longer for proper clothes.

The phone box had a slot for two-kopeck pieces, but I guessed that you didn't need money for a call inside the hotel—almost as if the phone was telling me how to use it.

Billy bawled out a number, and I dialed.

"Hullo? Can you hear me, Billy?" I said.

"Sure thing."

And I saluted the phone. This was a real fantasy moment. I could

almost believe that I was phoning home to the States. Only, of course, there were no phones left over there. Or cities, for that matter. But still!

"General Greg Berry reporting. We've reached Khabarovsk. We're on the route of the Trans-Siberian Railway! Group Red will set up an air shuttle service to Magadan tomorrow. Group White will take a train down to Vladivostok, and if there aren't any Chicoms there, either—and, so help me, I know so deep down in me there won't be any, it's as though God has told me Himself—then Group White'll sail the biggest warship they can handle out of the navy yards up to the Bering Sea. And Group Blue will get the locos rolling across the Siberian railroad. We're in business!"

We horsed around on the phone for a while like a couple of kids. But of course every word of it was true. As Mary watched, the first grin in ages appeared on her face.

* * * *

It was a damned shame about last year's war, but at least now we knew that we'd won it—and forever.

As the culmination of the US. government's search for nondestructive nuclear weapons, which wouldn't wipe out the treasures of the world, we'd just deployed the Super-Radiation Bomb—which was as much an advance upon the neutron bomb of the Eighties as the neutron bomb was upon the unwieldly hydrogen bomb.

The SRB produced hardly any blast or heat damage; if air-burst correctly, none at all. But its short-term radiation yield was incredible—and without any residual radioactivity. One single SRB detonated over Moscow would kill every living thing in the city and its environs—apart from cockroaches and such—and it would leave all the factories and apartment blocks, all the offices and shops, all the museums and churches, in perfect condition.

The Soviets, of course, denounced this at once as the "Super-Capitalist Bomb," because it respected property but not persons. And they in turn unveiled their own secretly developed superweapon, which they called the "Socialist Bomb." We called it the "SOB."

The Devil himself must have had a hand in the design of this Socialist Bomb. Its effects were far more cruel.

How exactly it did it, I don't know for sure, and we never had time fully

to suss out the theory, but basically it generated a sub-atomic vibration field, perhaps at the quark level, that affected any inanimate matter that had in any way been manufactured, worked, or tailored by man, leaving a particular “signature” written in it. The SOB had no effect at all on living tissue, or landscape, or minerals in the ground, or even foodstuffs—though it put paid to the containers. But it burst the continuum, for any “made” or “shaped” article within its field. It rapidly transformed the particles in any target object into “virtual” particles so that they slipped out of existence, perhaps reemerging somewhere else in our universe, or in some parallel universe. Within minutes a thing grew soft, then foggy, then vanished away.

In other words, drop an SOB on New York City and very soon you would have no New York City at all, only an empty space with millions of people wandering around stark-naked. Yes, we would be naked to our enemies, forced to accept occupation and emergency aid.

Those of us, that is, who didn’t get killed when things grew foggy. The Soviets had said that we would have about four minutes to get clear, but how could that help the crew and passengers on an airliner? They would rain down from the stratosphere. Or the office staff on the fiftieth floor of a skyscraper? They would find themselves with no floors beneath their bare feet. Or sailors, pitched into the ocean as their ship dissolved? Or the engineer of a speeding train?

These could amount to millions.

And there the cruelty was only just beginning. How many more would die in the following weeks of cold or hunger—as food rotted away—or from lack of medical attention, or from a hundred other things?

And they had the gall to call it a “humane” bomb! Even though it would destroy all civilization we knew, all the paintings in the great collections, all the highways and gas stations, all the space launch vehicles. Every laboratory, every hospital, every surfboard, oil refinery, and shopping mall, every can of Budweiser and every TV set. The Statue of Liberty, the Golden Gate Bridge, Disney land, the lot.

Who started the War? The Soviets, without a doubt. They must have thought they could sneak up on us.

In less than an hour the U.S.A. and the USSR exchanged their entire arsenals of Radiation Bombs and SOBs.

And the Soviets were all dead.

But we were left naked, without a single possession, except what we could make with our hands subsequently from the countryside.

And nobody came to help us. God, how they must have hated us, for years! The rest of the world shunned us. They treated us as a nation of murderers, when so many of us were dying, too. No foreign ships arrived on our bare shores. No airplanes landed on our fields. The Mexicans spurned us, I hear. The Canadians fenced off their border and built a wide electrified corridor running all the way up through British Columbia into Alaska, like a double Berlin Wall. They told us to get lost.

But God has got to have been on our side. *Something*, some divine force, clearly put it into all of our heads just what we had to do, and how.

You take a nation without a penny to its name. You take that, and you take a vast country that's been completely cleaned out of people, full of empty cities and factories, airports and harbors.

You put the two things together, and what do you get?

You get a whole population marching in the only direction possible—to recover the goods they need to carry on.

You get a shivering, starving nation, dressed in dog skins and such, hauling logs north to build rafts and dugouts to cross the Bering Strait and bring back some real ships from the other side—while the first pioneers press on south, by boat or light plane or four-wheel drive, to get to *somewhere* half-decent and firm up and supply the route for all those who would follow. You get the greatest human migration ever.

And, as with animal migrations, there's an instinctive, almost *guided* aspect to it—as if our destination has been broadcasting to us. As well as broadcasting to everyone else. To leave it be! So, like superstitious peasants, it seems the Chinese have kept out of the USSR. Vladivostok is even closer to China than Khabarovsk is, but for sure we would find Vladivostok empty, too. I admit that I couldn't be one hundred percent positive of this till we arrived in Khabarovsk. But now—as I said earlier in the hotel — I felt as sure as if God had whispered in my heart. This land was reserved for us, the victors, from one shining ocean, the Pacific, to the shining Baltic Sea.

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Later, since it was a golden evening and we'd all done as much as we reasonably could, I decreed four hours R and R.

Billy, Hank, and I removed a bottle of Stolichnaya vodka from the hotel kitchen and wandered out to hit the town. Mary declared she was exhausted and could do with an early night, but I think she just said so to give us boys a chance to get roaring drunk.

So we capered up Lenin Avenue to Lenin Square, admiring the silliest things: toy pedal cars on a lane around the weedy flowerbeds, abandoned ice-cream carts, rows of bright red fruit-drink machines with the syrupy goo all dried up in them, and of course a statue of *that man* with his worker's cloth cap, leaning forward into the future and looking aggressive. Hank climbed up the statue and sat piggy-back on his metal shoulders, urging him on.

We took in another public park, behind the Dynamo Football Stadium, but the mosquitoes drove us out of there. So we went window-shopping instead — which may seem a little weird for three grown men, especially as the goods in the shop windows were few and poor stuff. But, my God, actual shop windows— with *things* in them!

One of the shops was a grocer's. A *gastronom*. We were getting pretty good at picking out names of streets and buildings in the crazy Russian characters.

"I've never tasted caviar," said Billy.

"So let's find some cans of caviar," I said.

In we went. A mummy, which we took to be a shopgirl's, lay pointing a bare finger bone up at approximately the right shelf. Other mummies, in suits and raggy coats and uniforms, lay piled up against the liquor counter, and behind it; so we avoided that area. Hank scooped up half a dozen little cans, which was all there were.

"Thank you, Miss," Billy giggled nervously; so I handed him the vodka bottle to kill it. As he grabbed it, he hiccuped.

We took the cans off to a restaurant, where there weren't many corpses, and switched on the lighting, which worked, as the phone had worked, though the result was disconcertingly bright. The Russians must have like to chat to one another with searchlights shining on their faces. We sat tipsily contemplating the cans and a hand-scrawled menu, written in

pencil.

“Service is sure slow,” Hank joked. Producing a hook of a can opener from his Soviet uniform, he tossed this on the tablecloth for us. “I’m going to find something to wash these down.” He headed for the kitchen.

Billy picked up the menu while I was working on the cans. His eyes blinked like an owl’s.

“*Borsch*” he pronounced in a puzzled voice, as if that menu scribbled by a drunken spider was telling him what it said. “*Salat eez Krab*. We’d better get good at this, eh, Greg? If we’re going to be living in Russia for the rest of our lives.”

“You know, old buddy, you’re right.” I nodded. “We aren’t going to be able to alter all the signs and notices — “

“And diagrams and lists and warnings and instructions-”

“And *et cetera*. We aren’t going to be able to change them all over into English very quickly. If ever.”

Hank returned, triumphantly cradling another bottle with a red skyscraper on the label. Very like a picture of some Nineteen-thirties building in New York, except that the skyscraper was probably some state office block in Moscow, and Moscow still existed.

We caroused awhile till we heard horns hooting along the street. So we piled outside. A victory parade was heading our way. I spotted Dave Weinstock at the wheel of the leading vehicle, thumping on the horn, and glanced at my watch. Obviously Dave was heading back toward the Far East Hotel as per instructions, and he had had the bright idea of rounding up a few extra vehicles as well as sounding a bugle recall on the horns.

There were buses and trucks and a couple of private automobiles, too. I guess their radiators hadn’t cracked during the previous winter. Or maybe they had, but since they were being driven only a little way round town, this wouldn’t hurt them. There was quite a bit of fixing up to be done if we were going to own Volgas and Zhigulis, the way we had owned Chevys and Mustangs until last summer.

The parade was as noisy as a Fourth of July celebration.

Hank grinned. “Loud enough to wake the dead, eh?”

This made me frown. I was feeling just a little maudlin now, on account of the drink, in what I felt sure was a very Russian way. But I perked up as soon as we joined the parade, scrambling up onto a truck.

I took the bottle from Hank and waved it grandly.

“Here’s a toast, you guys! To prosperity, again!”

“To railroads and liquor!” Billy shouted. “To TV sets and cigarettes. To chairs and sausages. To ... to . . . cornucopia! To the horn of plenty!”

I didn’t know that my friend Billy knew words like *cornucopia*. It sounded like a Russian word, the way he said it.

“To civilization!”

I caught hold of Billy by the lapels and gripped him tight. The streetlights had come on automatically awhile back, and Billy’s big hairy face gleamed with sweat.

“We beat the Commies, Billy. The Commies took away all our property, but we took away their lives! We beat them!”

Then we laughed and wept and hugged one another. I think Major Billy Donaldson even kissed me on both cheeks, but charitably I attributed this to the drink.

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Next morning we all assembled outside the hotel. Our numbers had been swollen overnight by the arrival of two hundred souls on the second Ilyushin. (The Ilyushin we’d come in, and a Tupolev, had already flown back north to Magadan.) The pilot of the second Ilyushin, a Captain Tom Quinn, had come into town to see the place and get some sleep. This rather annoyed me, since he should have stayed at the airport, but his sheer boyish exuberance won me over.

“It’s like landing on Mars! Yes, sir, on the red planet itself! You know,” he confided, “I was a bit nervous, piloting that Commie crate. But it was just as if that old plane *flew herself*, Cooool.” He was wearing some dead Soviet pilot’s uniform, with the Order of Soviet Aviation pinned to its breast.

“That’s very nice, Captain. Now please get the hell back to the airport,

would you?”

Today was railroad day. The Trans-Siberian called us. So we all piled into trucks and buses and headed off up Karl Marx Street toward Khabarovsk’s train station.

As we rode, somebody started singing “When the Saints Come Marching In,” and everyone joined in. Then, as our convoy was crossing Lenin Square, somehow the song changed itself into “Maryland, My Maryland.” Everyone seemed to have forgotten the words and just carried on humming the tune loudly in harmony.

Oh Mary, my Mary! Mary had done wonders with our breakfasts. And the hot coffee ... I kissed my fingers.

“. . . people’s flag is deepest red!” I heard a single voice sing out amidst the humming. I glared at the man, and he shut up.

There were a lot of red flags hanging about. I presumed all that kind of paraphernalia would have to stay around for a while. And this set me to thinking about melting down all the statues of *that man* into something useful, such as coins, and about how good it would be to have change jingling in my pocket again, even though everything was free for the time being.

“Hey, Hank,” I called. “What do you suppose we’re going to do about money?”

Hank pulled out a bundle of rouble notes from his pocket. He laughed.

“Use these, eh?”

“But what about *dollars* and *cents*, for Christ’s sake? Why not use *our* money?”

“Have you got any cents to make dies from? Have you got any Treasury plates to print dollars off?”

“There’ll still be billions of dollars abroad.”

“Electronic money, a lot of it. Anyway, it’ll be worth nothing now. The foreigners aren’t speaking to us, remember? And as for here”—he chuckled— “somebody seems to have hung up a real Iron Curtain, or else

the whole place would be swarming.”

“Maybe there’s been a United Nations resolution — to quarantine the USSR?” Billy suggested.

“Just like everyone quarantined America!” Hank snapped bitterly.

“Maybe they’re all scared of some smart computer firing off more Socialist Bombs?”

Hank leaned close to Billy.

“Nobody can breathe the air here but us. I *know* it.” He flourished the Russian money. “So I figure we’ll use this stuff as soon as we get organized. We can *call* the roubles bucks and the kopecks cents.”

“Be easier to call them roubles and kopecks,” Billy observed. “After all, that’s what’s printed on them. Don’t want to confuse the growing kids.”

Billy was in sheer ecstasy as soon as we climbed aboard one of the green passenger cars of the *Vostok*, sitting on the southbound track in the cavernous train station. We’d worried that a lot of trains might have been in transit at the time the radiation bombs went off and had run on mindlessly through the steppes and forests. But here was the *Vostok*, just waiting for us.

And opulent wasn’t the word. This was a veritable mobile palace of the tracks. Solid brass fittings everywhere. Mahogany woodwork. Thick Turkish carpets on the floors. Golden curtains hanging at the windows. Red plush seats—even the swingdown ones along the corridors.

“Holy Moses! It’s like some giant Cunard liner from the Nineteen-twenties or Thirties! Group White’s going to ride into Vladivostok in style.”

Billy fingered everything rapturously. Well, so did I. Here was everything that we’d been dreaming about, in a crazed way, for months. All here, just waiting for us to use.

“Of course,” I had to remind Billy gently, “the whole USSR isn’t *all* like this . . .”

“Well, hell, but even so! I mean, things, things, lovely *things*! It’s Las

Vegas and Hollywood and—everything they took away from us!"

Finally Billy tore himself away from the passenger accommodation, and we were able to go up front to get a report on the Czech diesel loco.

Group White, with Billy in command, trundled out of Khabarovsk station a couple of hours later, the CHS4 that pulled the cars hooting deliriously. By then we had manned the switch tower with—well, I was going to say with a skeleton crew. But it already had that, of course. Once out of Khabarovsk, Group White would have to stop and switch any points themselves.

Getting the Khabarovsk station running again was all suddenly so easy. Murphy's Law seemed to fly right out the window. The machinery practically *told* us what we were supposed to do with it.

* * * *

That was all four heroic months ago.

It's been an unexpectedly long summer and unseasonably benign fall in the north of the world, and what we've accomplished matches the building of the Trans-Siberian Railway itself—or the construction of the great hydroelectric scheme at Bratsk.

We've ferried fifty million-plus survivors down to Vladivostok in the superb Soviet Navy ships. (And late stragglers were still turning up at Nome, Alaska, till quite recently. No doubt there'll be another, smaller flood into Alaska next season.)

We've settled them in Vladivostok itself, and here in Khabarovsk, and down river at Komsomolsk, and along the railroad line as far out as Chita and Ulan-Ude and Irkutsk, near the shore of Lake Baikal, and up around Bratsk. Some have even got as far as Tomsk and Novosibirsk.

Of course, everybody has to work damn hard, each according to his or her capacity. But we've all put on weight—or fat, at any rate. And we've put on a different style of clothing, too, now that the Siberian winter's here at last. We stride, or waddle about, bundled in long, thick coats, with fur hats on our heads, and earmuffs.

We've managed to reestablish a money economy, and we *are* having to use these darned kopecks and roubles.

We drink vodka and sweet champagne, since that's what the distilleries turn out. We eat black bread and pickled sturgeon and red cabbage and such, since that's what appears on the shelves these days.

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I'm stamping up and down the platform in Khabarovsk station, waiting to meet the "nine-thirty-five P.M." train from Irkutsk. Mary, whom I've begun calling Mariya lately, has a very useful and quite easy job as a conductress. (Little Sasha's in the crèche; well collect her soon.) There's snow on the tracks, and the air is full of white flakes.

Like a storm of souls blowing about.

Here she comes: the pride of Russia, headlamps aglow through the blizzard.

By my watch it's exactly four-thirty-five A.M.. As usual, the train's exactly on time.

That's Moscow time, of course. The Trans-Siberian line has always run according to Moscow time. We haven't gone as far as Moscow yet, but this fact reminds us of Moscow, and the West, awaiting us.

The *Rossiya* glides to a silent halt.

Mariya lets down the steps of her carriage, and the passengers stumble off, their breath clouding the air like so many mobile samovars. They're clutching cardboard suitcases and huge food packages tied with string. As soon as Mariya's replacement has clambered on board, she herself descends.

Beaming, though shivering somewhat in her railway uniform, she waddles to me.

"Grigori! Grigorooshka!"

Ghosts . . .

Suddenly I'm terrified, as if the snow has abruptly parted, right up to the heavens, and I have seen the skull of the moon rushing down to Earth to crush us.

For when the bomb exploded at Hiroshima, many people's

silhouettes were etched into walls, as if the shadows of the dead were photographed by the fireball.

And everything around us—railroad engines, oil refineries, lumber mills, dams and turbines, bakeries and distilleries—is likewise imprinted invisibly by the radiation, with all the Soviets dead. I *know*— for a fleeting moment—that every building and machine and thing we use is alive, possessed. Locomotives, *gastronoms*, buses and tractors, offices and ice-cream carts and rouble notes, all tell us what to do, and the way to do it. The whole environment, of Russian making, sucked up their souls for safekeeping, and now they have entered us, like dybbuks. Why else the craze among us for Russian words and phrases, and the way these seem to well up, and link up, almost spontaneously?

That's why no Chinese came here. The land didn't want them. It wanted us, so that we could have a long time to repent.

Only there aren't enough of us to go round. So well have to work hard to build up our great nation.

This brief waking nightmare fades as soon as Mariya crushes me to her in her stout arms.

Drawing back, she peers at me, a concerned look on her face.

"*Shto svami*, Grigorishka?"

"Nothing's the matter, Mariya. *Nichivo*!"

Farther down the train, the driver leans from his cab.

"So long, there!" he calls along to my wife. "*Dasvidaniya, tovarich*!" Good-bye, comrade.

America is as wild and empty and far away as it was a hundred thousand years ago before any Asians first traversed the Bering Strait to roam the American plains as Indians. America is a forgotten country. Mother Russia is our land, and we are hers.

Good-bye, several hundred million dead souls. Good-bye, and hullo.

Mariya links arms with me, and off we march. Like two puppets on a stage. But no strings dangle from the roof, directing us. By now the strings

are in our muscles and our nerves. And in our minds.