

# A TUPOLEV TOO FAR

## By Brian Aldiss

I know you want fiction for this anthology, but perhaps for once you would consider a true story. I offer a thought in extenuation for what is to follow: that this story is so fantastic and unbelievable it might as well be science fiction.

Well, it would be SF except for the fact that there is no scientific explanation for the bizarre central occurrence—or none beyond the way bizarre events occur with regularity, as vouched for by Charles Fort, Arthur Koestler, Carl Jung, Jesus Christ and other historic figures.

Unfortunately, the story is not only bizarre but raunchy. It is the sort of tale men tell each other late at night, in a bar in Helsinki or somewhere similar. It has no moral and precious little morality.

Sex and lust come into it. And murder and incest and brigandage of the worst sort. There are some insights to be gleaned regarding the differing natures of men and women, if that is any consolation.

Another thing I have to add. This is not my story. I heard it from a friend. One of those friends you know off and on throughout life. He always enjoyed talking about the bad times.

We'll call him Ron Wallace. And this is what he told me.

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This helping of agony took place in 1989, which had turned out to be a better year for Ron than he expected — and for much of Europe. He had been unemployed for a while. Now he had a good job with a West Country firm who made safes and security equipment employing the latest electronic devices. Ron was their overseas salesman. The Russians approached his company, who were sending Ron out to Moscow as a result. The managing director, who was a good guy, briefed Ron before he left, and he set off on the flight from Penge Airport in good fettle. His wife Stephanie saw him off.

Ron flew Royal Russian Airlines. Which, after TransAm, is regarded as the world's best airline. Plenty of leg room, little engine noise, pretty hostesses.

It was a brief flight. On the way, he picked up an in-flight magazine which had an illustrated article on the Russian Commonwealth and on modern Moscow in particular. There were photographs of Czar Nicholas III with the Czarina opening the grand new Governance of Nations building, designed by Richard Rogers, on White Square, and of the redecorated Metro in St Petersburg. Ron dozed off while leafing through such commonplaces and was woken by a terrific bang.

The aircraft was passing through a ferocious storm, or so it seemed. Lightning flashed outside and the airliner began to fall. It shook violently as it fell.

Ron sat tight. He remembered his grandfather's account of the terrible firestorm which had partially destroyed Berlin in July 1914. His grandfather had been working in Berlin at the time and always talked about the experience. The old man claimed that was the first occasion on which all Europe had united in a major rescue operation; it had changed history, he claimed.

These thoughts and less pleasant ones ran through Ron's mind as the plane fell earthwards.

'I'll never screw Steff again—or any other woman,' he said aloud. To his mind, that was the biggest bugbear regarding death: no screwing.

For an instant the plane was bathed in unnatural light. Then all became calm, as if nothing had happened.

The plane pulled from its dive. Cabin staff in their white uniforms moved down the aisles, soothing the passengers and bringing them drinks.

Everyone started talking to each other. But only for a few minutes. After which, a silence fell over them; they became uncannily quiet as they tried to digest their narrow escape from disaster.

Twenty minutes later, they landed at Sheremeteivo Airport.

Ron was surprised to find how drab and small everything was. He was surprised, too, to see how many men were in uniform — unfamiliar uniforms, too, with mysterious red stars on their caps. He had no idea what the stars stood for, unless for Mars, on which planet the Russians had just landed.

Of course, Ron had got down as much whisky as he could, following the

alarming incident on the plane. His perceptions were possibly a little awry. All the same, he could not help noticing that most of the planes on the ground belonged to an airline called Aeroflot, of which he had never heard. There were no Royal Russian Airline planes to be seen.

When, at the luggage carousel, he asked a fellow passenger about Aeroflot, the man replied, 'You ask too many questions round here, you find yourself in the gulag.'

Ron began to feel rather cold and shaky. Something had happened. He did not know what.

The whole airport, the reception area, the customs area, gave no sign of the high-tech sheen for which Russia was renowned. He felt a sense of disorientation, which was calmed slightly when he was met by his Russian contact, Vassili Rugorsky, who made him welcome.

As they passed out through the foyer of the building, Ron observed a large framed portrait dominating the exits where he might have expected to see a picture of the graceful young Czar. Instead, the portrait showed a thick-set, almost neckless man with glittering eyes, a mottled complexion and an unpleasant expression.

'Who's that?' he asked.

Vassili looked curiously at Ron, as if expecting him to be joking.

'Comrade Leonid Brezhnev, of course,' he said.

Ron dared ask nothing more, but his sense of unease deepened. Who was Brezhnev?

He was shown to a black car. Soon they were driving through the city. Ron could hardly believe what he saw. Moscow was always billed as one of Europe's great pleasure cities, with smart people, and a vivid nightlife staged amid elegant buildings — fruit of Russia's great renaissance in the early 1940s, when the Czarina Elizabetha Ship Canal had linked Baltic with Black Sea. Here Parisian panache thrived among Parisian-type boulevards. Or so the legend had it. As they wound through a dreary suburb, he saw lines of dowdy people queuing at shops hardly worthy of the name. The buildings themselves were grey and grubby.

Red flags and banners flew everywhere. He could not understand. It was as

if the whole place had been hit by revolution.

But the men he dealt with were agreeable enough. Ron prided himself on his powers of negotiation; his opposite numbers were cautious but amiable. He gathered to his mild astonishment that they regarded British technology to be in advance of their own.

'Of course, the KGB have all latest Western equipment,' one man said jokingly as the contracts were signed. Ron did not like to ask what KGB stood for; he was clearly expected to know. It was all peculiar. He wondered if the electric storm he had flown through had affected his mind in some way.

It was on his second day that the contracts were signed. The first day was given over to discussion, when Ron often felt that the Russians were pumping him. At one point, when he had occasion to mention the Czarina Elizabeta Ship Canal, they all looked blank.

Even more disconcertingly, the Russians asked him how he liked being in the Soviet Union, and similar remarks. Ron belonged to an electronics union himself, but had never heard of a Soviet Union. He could almost fancy he had arrived in the wrong country.

Nevertheless, the contracts were signed on the second day, on terms favourable to Ron's company. They were witnessed in the ministry at three in the afternoon, following which the parties involved got down to some serious drinking. As well as Russian champagne there were vodka, wine and a good Georgian brandy. Ron was an experienced drinker. He arrived back at the Hotel Moskva, contract in briefcase, just after 6.30, still more or less in control of his wits.

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I'm trying to tell you this story as Ron Wallace told it to me. When he came to describe the Hotel Moskva I had to interrupt him. I've stayed in that hotel a couple of times. Once I took the Camberwell-Moscow Trans-Continent Express on a package tour which included three nights in that very hotel. It was the pleasantest place in which I have ever stayed, light and airy, and full of elegant people. In fact, a few too many of the Russian aristocracy for my simple tastes.

It was not the dowdiness and gloom of the hotel about which Ron chiefly complained, or the uninteresting food, but the lack of beautiful women. Ron was always rather a ladies' man.

An old-fashioned band was playing old-fashioned music in the hotel restaurant. It was a period piece, like the hotel itself. He could not credit it. The dining room was cavernous, with stained-glass windows at one end, and a faded style of furnishing. The band lurched from Beatles' hits to the 'Destiny' waltz. The place, he said, was a cross between the Cafe Royal in the 1920s and Salisbury Cathedral in the 1420s.

As Ron told his tale, I kept thinking about the concept of alternative worlds. Although the idea is at first fantastic, there is, after all, a well-attested theory which says that whatever is imagined moves nearer to reality. Edmund Husserl, in his pioneering work on phenomenology, *Investigations in Logic*, shows how little the psychological nature of historical processes are understood. Turning points in history—generatives, in Husserl's term—occur in greater or lesser modes related to quantal thought impulses which are themselves subject to random factors. The logical structures on which such points depend exist independently of their psychological correlates, so that we can expect subjective experiences to generate a multiplicity of effects, each of which bears equivalent objective reality; thus, whether or not signatures are appended to a treaty, for example, is dependent on various epistemological assumptions of transient nature, while the results of signing or non-signing may be multiplex generatives, giving rise to a spectrum of alternative objectivities, varying from slight to immense, affecting the lives of many people over considerable areas of space and time. I know this to be so because I read it in a book.

So it seemed clear to me—though not to Ron, who is no intellectual and consequently does not believe in variant subjective realities—that the electric storm which hit the Tupolev had been a Husserl's generative, causing Ron to switch objectivities, and materialize in a parallel version of objectivity along the spectrum, where history had at some point taken a decided turn for the worse.

Feeling a little weary, Ron decided not to go up to his room immediately, but to eat and then retreat to bed, in preparation for his early flight home the following morning.

Diners were few. They could scarcely be distinguished from the diners in a provincial Pan-European town, Belgrade, say, or Boheimkirchen, or Bergen. There was none of the glitter he had expected. And the service was terribly slow.

The maitre d' had shown Ron to a small table, rather distant from the nearest light globe. From this vantage point, he looked the clientele over while awaiting his soup.

At the table nearest to him, two orientals sat drinking champagne. Their mood was subdued. He judged them to be Korean. Ron spared hardly a glance for the man. As he told me, 'I could hardly take my eyes off the woman. Mainly I saw her in half-profile. A real beauty, clear-cut features, hawkish nose, dark eyes, red lips . . . Terrific'

When she smiled at her partner and raised her glass to her lips she was a vision of seduction. Ron dropped his napkin on the floor in order to take a look at her legs. She was wearing a long black evening dress.

He said his one thought was, 'If only her husband would get lost...'

His desires turned naturally to sex. But he had sworn an oath to his wife, Steff, on the subject of fidelity. As he was averting his eyes from the Korean couple, the woman turned to look at him. Even across the space between their tables, the stare was strong and disturbing. Ron could not tell what was in that stare. It made him curious, while at the same time repelling him.

He took a paperback book of crossword puzzles from his briefcase and tried to study a puzzle he had already started, but could not concentrate.

A memory came back to him of his first love. Then, how innocent had been her gaze. He could recall it perfectly. It had been a gaze of love and trust; all the sweetness of youth, of innocence, was in it. It could not be recovered. No one would ever look at him in that fashion again.

The Korean couple had decided something between them. The Korean man rose from the table, laid down his napkin, and came across to Ron.

'My God,' Ron thought, 'the little bugger's going to tell me not to ogle his wife ...'

The Korean was short and sturdy. Perhaps he was in his mid-thirties. His face was solemn, his eyes dark, his whole body held rigidly, and it was a rigid bow he made to Ron Wallace.

'You are English?' he asked, speaking in English with a heavy accent. 'We saw you dining here last night and made enquiries. I am on official duties in the Soviet Union, a diplomat from the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea.' He gave his name.

‘What do you want? I’m having dinner.’

‘Meals are a source of fear to me. I can never rid my mind of one dinner in particular when I was a child of five. Someone from political motives poisoned my father. A servant was held responsible, but we never found out who was paying the servant. The servant did not tell, despite severe torture. My father rose from his place, screamed like a wounded horse, spun about, and fell head first into a dish— well, in our dialect it’s *pruang hat*, I suppose a sort of kedgeree, though with little green chillies. He struggled a moment, sending rice all over us frightened children. Then he was still, and naturally the meal was ruined.’

Ron Wallace took a sip of mineral water. Although the Korean was white and trembling, Ron would not ask him to sit down.

The Korean continued, ‘I should explain that there were four of us children. Three of us were triplets, and there was a younger sibling. My mother was demoralized by my father’s death. I have to confess she was of the bourgeois class. Never a very stable personality, for she was an actress, she suffered illusions. One starry night, she jumped from a tall window through the glass roof of the conservatory to the ground. A theory was that she had seen the stars reflected in the glass and thought the conservatory was the Yalu river. This was never proved.

‘We children were handed over into the care of an uncle and aunt who ran a rather poor pig and sorghum farm in the mountainous area of our land. My uncle was a bully, given to drink and criminality. He committed sexual atrocities on us poor defenceless children, and even on his farm animals. You can imagine how we suffered.’

He looked fixedly at Ron, but Ron made no reply. Ron was aware of the avid gaze of the Korean’s partner, back at the table, smiling yet not smiling in his direction.

‘Our one consolation was the school to which we were sent. It was a long walk away, down the mountain, a cruel trial for us in winter months when the snow was deep. But the school was run by a remarkable Englishman, a Mr Holmberg. I have been told that Holmberg is not an English name. I cannot explain how that came about. In the world struggle, there are many anomalies.

‘Mr Holmberg had many skills and was unfailingly kind. He taught us something of the world. He also explained to us the mysteries of sex, and kindly drew pictures of the female sexual organs on the blackboard, with the fallopian

tubes in red, despite a shortage of chalk.

‘The day came when the ninth birthday approached for us three poor orphans. There we sat in the little classroom, stinking of sorghum and pigs, and this wonderful Englishman presented us with a marvellous gift, a kite he had made himself. It was such a kite as Koreans made in dynastic times to carry the spirits of the dead, very strong, very large and well decorated. It was, for us, the first gift we had received since our father was poisoned. You can imagine our delight.’

He paused.

‘Where’s my bloody boeuf stroganoff?’ asked Ron, looking round for a waitress.

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Greatly though he desired something to eat, he desired much more the absence of this little man who stood by his table, telling his awful life story unbidden. Ron had never heard of the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea, and did not much want to. It was another department of the terrible world into which he had fallen.

He tried to think of pleasant English things—Ovaltine, Bob Monkhouse, cream teas, Southend, the National Anthem, Agatha Christie, the *Sun*, Saxby’s pork pies — but they were drowned out by the Korean’s doomed narrative.

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‘We had a problem. We feared that our cruel uncle would steal the kite from us. We resolved to fly it on the way home from school, to enjoy that pleasure at least once. Halfway up the mountain was a good eminence, with a view of the distant ocean and a strong updraught. The three of us hung on to the string and up went the grand kite, sailing into the sky. How we cheered. Just for a moment, we had no cares.

‘Our little brother begged to be allowed to hold the kite. As we handed him the string, we heard the sound of shots being fired farther up the mountain. Our anxieties were easily awoken. In those lawless times, bandits were everywhere. Alas, one can pay for one moment’s carelessness with a lifetime’s regret. We turned to find that the kite was carrying away our little brother. His hand was caught in the loop in the string and up he was going. He cried. We cried. We waved.



‘Helpless, we watched him about to be dashed against the rocks. Fortunately, he cleared them as the kite gained height. It drifted towards the north-east, and the ocean and the south-eastern coast of the Soviet Union. That was the last we saw of him. It is not impossible that even now he lives, and speaks and thinks in the Russian language.’

The Korean bowed his head for a moment, while Ron tried to attract the attention of a distant waitress, who had lapsed into immobility, as if also overcome by the tragic tale.

‘We were upset by this incident. We had lost our valued gift, and a rather annoying little brother as well. We fell to punching each other, each claiming the other two were to blame. Then we went home, up the rest of the mountain track.

‘My uncle was in his favourite apple tree, quiet for once and not swearing at us. He hung head down, a rope round his ankles securing him to one of the branches of the tree. His hands were tied and he was fiercely gagged. His face was so red that we burst out laughing.

‘Since he was still alive, we had a splendid time spinning him round. He could not cry out but he looked pretty funny. Then we got rakes and spades from the shed and battered him to death.

‘Our aunt had been thrown in the pond. Many and dreadful were the atrocities committed on her body. We dragged her from the water but, so near to death was she, we put her back where we had found her.

‘The house had been looted by the bandits whose firing we had heard. Those were lawless days before our great leader, Kim Il Sung, took over control of our destinies. We were happy to have the place to ourselves, especially since my uncle’s two huge sons had been shot, bayoneted and beheaded by the bandits.

‘Unfortunately, the bandits returned in the night, since it had begun to rain. They came for shelter. They found us asleep, tied the three of us up, put us in a foul dung cart, and promised to sell us for slaves to a foreign power in the market of Yuman-dong. Next morning, down the mountain we bumped. More rain fell. The monsoon came on in full force. We were crossing a wooden bridge over a river when a great rush of water struck the bridge.

‘The bandits were thrown into confusion or drowned. We were better off in the cart, which floated, and we managed to get free.

‘We ran to Yuman-dong for safety, since we had another uncle there. He took us in with protestations of affection, and his elder daughter fed us. Unfortunately, the town was the headquarters of the brigands, as we soon discovered. My uncle was the biggest brigand. The three of us children were made to work at the degrading business of carting night soil from the village and spreading it on the fields. You can imagine our humiliation.’

The Korean shook his head sadly and searched Ron’s face for signs of compassion.

‘Where’s my bloody food?’ Ron asked.

‘But fortune was as ever on our side. It was then that our great leader, Kim Il Sung, became President of our people’s republic. My uncle was awarded the post of local commissar, since in his career of bandit he had harassed rich oppressor landlords such as my late uncle and aunt up in the mountain. Much celebration followed this event and everyone in the village remained totally drunk for twenty-one days, including the dogs. Three died. Maybe four. It was during this period of joy that a dog bit off the left ear of one of my brothers.

‘Those were happy times. Under my uncle we marched from farm to farm along the valley, beating up the farmers, threatening and exhorting the workers. There was nothing we would not do for the Cause. Unfortunately, much misery was to follow.’

‘Don’t tell me — let me guess,’ murmured Ron Wallace.

‘But you cannot guess what befell us triplets. It was discovered after many years that the brother who had lost an ear was a capitalist running dog and had been associating secretly with the enemies of the state, who varied from time to time. Sometimes the enemies were Chinese, sometimes Russians. My brother had associated with all of them. I felt bound to denounce him myself, and his wife. A terrible vendetta of blood then started—’

In desperation, Ron stood up, waving his book of crossword puzzles.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I have to finish this page. It is a secret code. I am employed by MI5.’

‘I appreciate your feelings,’ said the Korean, standing rigid. ‘We must all exercise our duties. However, I tell you something of my history for a reason. The

remarkable Englishman, Mr Holmberg, who taught me at school, stays ever in my mind as an example of decency, morality, fairness and liberalism. It is no less than the truth to say that I have modelled my life on him.

‘Unfortunately, however, during the revolutionary times of the Flying Horse movement, it was necessary to have Mr Holmberg shot. A tribunal convicted him of being a foreigner in wartime. To me befell the honour of carrying out the execution with my own hands. I have a small souvenir for his family back in England which I wish you to carry home to present to them. Please come to my table and I shall give it to you, concealed in a copy of *Pravda*.’

Ron Wallace hesitated only for a moment. All he wanted was his dinner. But if he went over to this madman’s table, he would be able to snatch a closer look at his companion. He rose.

At the Korean table sat the remarkable person with the bright-red lips and shoulder-length black hair. The full-length gown swept to the floor. Diamonds sparkled at the smooth neck. A cigarette in a holder sent a trail of smoke ceilingwards from a bejewelled right hand. A look of black intensity was fixed on Ron. He bowed.

‘I’m pleased to meet your wife,’ he said to the North Korean.

‘My brother.’ The Korean corrected him. ‘My sole surviving brother. Here is the souvenir for the Holmberg family—in fact for the small daughter of the son of the man I knew, who was convicted of the crime against the state. Her address is enclosed. Please take it, deliver it faithfully.’

Ron had been expecting to receive the head of the late Mr Holmberg, but it was a smaller object which the Korean passed over, easily rolled inside a copy of *Pravda*. He bowed again, shook hands with the Korean, smiled at his brother, who gave him a winning smile in return, and returned to his table. A waitress was delivering a boeuf stroganoff to his place.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘Bring me another bottle of wine and a bottle of mineral water.’

‘Immediately,’ she said. But she paused for a second before leaving the table.

Setting the newspaper between his stomach and the table, Ron unrolled it. Inside lay a wooden doll with plaits, a savage grin painted on its wooden face. It

wore traditional dress of red and white. Tied round its neck was a label on which was written the name Doreen Holmberg and an address in Surrey. He rolled it up in the paper again and shut it in his briefcase.

He began to eat without appetite the dish the waitress had brought, forking mouthfuls slowly between his lips, staring over the bleak reaches of the restaurant permeated by the strains of 'Yesterday', and avoiding any glance towards the Korean table. He sighed. It would be a relief to get home to his wife, although he had some problems there.

The waitress returned with the two bottles of wine and mineral water on a tray. She could be sighted first behind a carved wooden screen which partly hid the entrance to the kitchens. Then she was observed behind a large aspidistra. Then she hove into full view, walking towards Ron's table, a thin middle-aged woman with straggling dyed hair.

He had been too preoccupied with the Koreans to pay the waitress any attention. As he scrutinized her in the way he scrutinized anything female, he saw that her gaze was fixed on him, not with the usual weary indifference characteristic of a waitress towards diners, but in a curious and not unfriendly fashion. He straightened slightly in his chair.

She set the bottles down on the table. Was there something suggestive in the way she fingered the neck of the wine bottle before uncorking it? She poured him a glass of the wine and a glass of the mineral water in slow motion. He caught a whiff of her underarm odour as she came near. Her hip brushed against his arm.

'You're imagining things,' he said to himself.

He raised the wine glass to his lips and looked at her.

'Enjoy it please,' she said in English, and turned away.

She was tired and in her late thirties, he judged. Not much of a bottom. Not really an attractive proposition. Besides, a waitress in a Russian hotel restaurant...

However, after a few more mouthfuls of the stroganoff, he summoned her across the room on the pretext of ordering a bread roll. She came readily enough, but he saw in the language of her angular body an independence of mind not yet eroded of all geniality. A spark of intent lit in his brain. He knew that spark. It could so easily be fanned into flame.

She did look worn. Her face was weathered, the flesh lifeless and dry, with strong lines moving downwards on either side of thin lips. Nothing to recommend her. Yet the expression on her face, the light-grey eyes—somehow, he liked what he saw. Out of that ugly dress, those hideous shoes, she would be more attractive. His imagination ran ahead of him. He felt an erection stirring in his trousers.

Her breasts were not very noticeable as she bent to place the bread by Ron's side. No doubt she ate scraps in the kitchen off people's plates. A fatty diet. No doubt she had taken orders all her life. It was a matter of speculation as to what her private life could be.

He asked her if she ever did crosswords.

The shake of her head was contemptuous. Again the whiff of body odour. Possibly she did not understand what he said. She smiled a little. Her teeth were irregular, but it was an appealing smile.

Watching her hips, her legs, her ugly shoes, as she retreated, he told himself to relax and to think of something that a candle did in a low place, in six letters.

But a long dull evening stretched before him. He hated his own company.

Over the sweet, he extracted a few words from the waitress. She spoke a little German, a little English. She had worked in this hotel for five years. No, she cared nothing about the work. The lipstick she wore was not expertly applied. But there was no doubt that in some measure she was interested in him.

When she brought him a cup of bitter coffee, he said, 'Will you come up to my room?'

The waitress shook her head, almost regretfully, as if she had anticipated the question. It did not surprise her; probably she had often been asked the same question by drunken clients.

Her glance went to where the impassive maitre d'hotel stood, guardian of his underlings' Soviet morality. No doubt he had awful powers over them. She left Ron's table, to disappear into the kitchens.

Ron looked down at his puzzle.

When she came to pour him a second cup of coffee, he suggested that they

went back to her place.

The waitress gave him a long hard look, weighing him up. The look disconcerted him, inasmuch as he felt himself judged. He saw himself sitting there, secure and decently dressed, possessor of foreign currency, about to return to the strange capitalist world from which he had come. Not bad-looking. And yet — yet another man out of thousands, with a vacant evening before him, just wanting a bit of fun.

‘There is difficulties,’ she said.

The words told him he was halfway to his desire.

Elation ran through him, not unmixed with a tinge of apprehension. Again, the stirrings of an erection. He told her she was wonderful. He would do anything. He smiled. She frowned. She made a small gesture with her hand: Be quiet. Or, Be patient.

As if she already had her regrets, she left the table hastily, clutching the coffee pot to her chest. Ron observed that she said something to an older waitress as they passed on the way to the kitchens.

Now he had to wait. He tried to think of an uncomplicated curative plant in six letters.

The waitress had disappeared. Perhaps he had, after all, been mistaken. When his impatience got the better of him, he rose to his feet. She appeared and came over. He had a sterling note ready—of a modest denomination, so as not to offend her.

‘Where and when?’

Their faces were close. Her foreignness excited him, nor was he repelled by her body odour. She barely responded, barely moved her lips.

‘Rear door by the wood hut. Midnight.’

‘I’ll be there.’

‘Will you?’

He nodded a curt goodnight to the North Koreans, and retreated with his

case to the bar. He sat alone, apart from a group of what he guessed were Swedes, getting heavily drunk in one corner. He had three hours to wait.

Idly, he picked up a newspaper printed in English and started to glance through it. It bewildered him utterly. For a while he entertained the thought that his company was playing an elaborate joke on him.

According to the newspaper, there was no Liberal government in power in Britain. Nor was there any mention of Bernard Mattingly. The Prime Minister, it was said, was a Mrs Thatcher, head of a Conservative government. This piece of information disturbed him more than anything he had encountered so far. It seemed that the President of the United States was not Alan Stevenson but someone called Ronald Reagan.

In a medical column, he read that the whole world was being ravaged by a sexually transmitted disease called AIDS. Ron had never heard of it. Yet the column claimed that thousands of people were dying of it, in Africa, Europe and the United States. No cure had been found.

Just as disturbingly, an editorial on disarmament moves appeared to be saying that there had been two wars involving the whole world during the twentieth century.

Ron knew this could not have happened. There was no way in which Albania and Italy or England and Germany — to take two instances — could possibly attempt to destroy each other. What it all meant he did not know.

With a sudden uneasy inspiration, he checked on the date of the newspaper. It read September 1989 clearly enough. The idea had entered his head that he had been caught in a time warp and was back in the early years of the twentieth century, before the days of the reforming Czars. Such was not the case.

He hid the newspaper under the table and clutched his head.

He was going mad. The sooner he got home the better.

After an hour, the Korean couple entered the bar. They ignored him and sat with their backs to him.

He thought of his wife. Their marriage had been a good one. Both had ruined it by their infidelity. Both nourished hurt feelings and a desire to get their

own back. One of them was always an infidelity ahead of the other. Yet Steff had remained with him, had put up with all his drunkenness and bullying and failures. Now they had a little place of their own, heavily mortgaged, it was true, and were trying to build a better relationship. Ron had vowed never to hit her again.

The best advice he could give himself was to forget about that slut of a waitress and enjoy a good night's sleep in his comfortless single room. He had to catch the early flight from Moscow's Sheremeteivo Airport, to be in time for an important meeting with Bob Butler, his boss, tomorrow afternoon in Slough. He might get promoted. Steff would be pleased about that. She would also ask if he had been fucking other women.

He could lie his way out of this one, particularly if the promotion to sales manager came through.

Besides, this creature might give him some insight into what was happening. Perhaps she could tell him who Brezhnev was and what KGB stood for.

By this time, Ron — not an imaginative man — began to realize he had somehow got on an alternative possibility track. The shabby city that surrounded him felt heavy with sin—no, with sinfulness. It was as if some terrible crime had been committed which everyone had conspired not to discuss. And this secret had weighed the population down, so that the cheerful Moscow of his own time had sunk down into the earth from human view.

God knows what weird versions of clap the waitress might be carrying round with her. He had no idea what he was getting into.

Still, the thought of a woman's company in this miserable place was greatly attractive.

He tried to look at it all as a great stunt, a caper. How his pals would laugh when he told them. If he ever got back to them.

He smoked cigarettes and eked out a beer. The Swedes grew louder.

Came 11.30, Ron put on his coat, grabbed his case, and went out into the streets. Everywhere seemed dark and depressing. It was as if he had somehow crossed a border between day and night, between yin and yang, between positive and negative.

As he walked along by the Moskva he observed there were none of the



cheerful riverside restaurants, no floating pleasure-boats, which he had heard were the centre of the city's nightlife. No music, no wine, no women. The river flowed dark between high concrete banks, unloved, neglected, isolated from the life of Moscow, rushing on its secretive dark way. What if I am stuck here alone for ever, he asked himself. Isn't there a science of Chaos, and haven't I fallen into it?

It was impossible to know whether the waitress was an escape from or an embodiment of the unreason into which he had fallen.

He turned on his heel and made his way warily down a back alley to the rear of the hotel. A rat scampered, but there were no humans about. He came to an area of broken pavements covered with litter, which he waded through in the dark, cursing as he trod in something soft and deep. He could not see. From a small barred window came an orange fragment of light. Spreading a hand out before him, he arrived against a barrier. Searching carefully with his fingers, he found he was touching wood. Most probably this was the hut the waitress had designated.

Feeling his way, staggering and tripping, he finally reassured himself that he was waiting in the right place. He located the back door of the hotel, tried it, found it locked.

He stood in the dark, cold and uneasy. No stars shone overhead.

Following the sound of tumblers turning in a lock, the hotel door opened. A man emerged and walked off briskly into the night. The door was locked again from the inside; he heard the sound of a bolt being shot. The Russians had a mania for secrecy. So did Ron. He understood.

Several staff emerged from the door in pairs or alone. Worried in case his waitress missed him, Ron stood out from the sheltering hut. Nobody looked in his direction.

A lorry with one headlight jolted along the alley and wheezed to a halt. Two men got out. As Ron shrank back, he saw that one of the men was old and bent, moving painfully as he climbed from the cab. They both began to sort among the rubbish outside the hotel, occasionally throwing something into the back of their vehicle.

The door of the building opened again. Ron's waitress came out. It was ten minutes past midnight. She paused to get her night vision and then walked over to

him. He pressed himself against her, feeling her hard body. Neither of them spoke.

With a gesture of caution to Ron, she went over and talked to the men by the lorry. The old man gave a wheezing laugh. There was a brief conversation, during which all three lit cigarettes the waitress distributed. Ron waited impatiently until she returned to his side.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked.

She did not reply, puffing at her cigarette.

After a while, the men were finished with the rubbish. The younger one gave a whistle. The waitress returned the whistle and went forward. Ron followed as she climbed into the back of the lorry. He had misgivings but he went. They settled themselves down among the trash as the lorry started forward with a lurch.

Once through the maze of back streets, they were driving along a wide thoroughfare lit by sodium street lamps. Ron and the waitress stared at each other, their faces made anonymous in the orange glow. Her face was a mask, centuries old, her hair hung streakily over her temples. He felt in her a life of hard work, without pride. The perception warmed him towards her and he put an arm round her shoulders. He had always loved the downtrodden more than the proud and beautiful. It accorded with his poor image of himself.

She was slow to return his gesture of affection. Languidly, she moved a leg against his. He stared down the vanishing street, as once more they turned into a dark quarter. The excitement of the adventure on which he was now embarked dulled his apprehension, although he wondered about her relationship with the two lorry men, speculating whether they would beat him up and rob him at journey’s end. He clutched his briefcase between his knees; it was metal and would be a useful weapon in a fight.

Here at least he was on familiar ground. Ron was no stranger to fights over women, and was used to giving a good account of himself. Whatever else had gone wrong with the universe, some constants remained: the art of getting the leg over, the swift knee in a rival’s goplies. He sang a familiar little song in her ear:

‘With moonlight and romance  
If you don’t seize the chance  
To get it on the sly  
Your archetype will be awry

As time goes by.'

The waitress gave every appearance of not knowing the words, and silenced him with a hand over his mouth. They bumped on in silence and discomfort for a while.

'How far to go?'

'Ein kilometre.' Holding up one finger.

He tried to observe the route in case he had to walk back. Where would he turn for help in case of trouble? He did not want to end up in the Moskva. He had a mad pal in Leeds who had been beaten up and thrown into the canal.

The depressing suburbs through which they passed, where hardly a light showed, were without visible feature. Flat, closed, bleak, Asiatic facades. At one point, on a corner, they passed a fight, where half a dozen men were hitting each other with what might have been pick-helves.

The rumpus vanished into the night. Moscow slept like an ill-fed gourmet, full of undigested secrets. The lorry stopped abruptly, sending its passengers sliding among the filth. Ron climbed out fast, ready for trouble, the waitress following. They stood on a broken road surface. Immediately, the lorry bucked and moved off.

They were isolated in an area of desolation. It was possible to make out an immense pile of splintered wood, crowned by a bulldozer, where some rough-looking men sat by the machine, perhaps guarding it, warming themselves round a wood fire. To Ron's other hand, where a solitary lamp shone, a row of small concrete houses stood, ending in a shuttered box of a shop which advertised beer. Further away, black against the night sky, silhouettes of tall apartment blocks could be seen. It was towards these blocks that the waitress now led Ron.

The heap of wood and beams was more extensive than he had thought. There were figures standing in it at intervals. It seemed to him that a complete old-fashioned village had been bulldozed to make way for Moscow's sprawl. Homes had been reduced to matchwood.

Someone called out to them, but the waitress made no answer. She led down a side lane, where the way underfoot was unpaved.

To encourage Ron, she pointed ahead to a looming block of jagged outline.

They skirted a low wall and reached the building. She went to a side door, knocked and waited. Ron stood there, staring about him, clutching his case and feeling that he needed a drink.

After a long delay, the door was unbolted, unlocked and dragged open. They went in, and the waitress passed a small package from her coat to a dumpy matron in black. Without changing her expression, the dumpy woman locked and bolted the door behind them and retreated into a small fortified office.

The smell of the place hit Ron as soon as he stepped into the passage. It reminded him of his term in jail. This institution was similar to prison. The smell was a compound of underprivilege, mixing disinfectant, polish, urine, dirt, fatty foods and general staleness, bred by too many people being confined in an old building.

The waitress led him past noticeboards, battered lockers and a broken armchair to another corridor, and on to a stairwell. The odours became sharper. They ascended the stairs.

The steps were of pre-cast concrete, the rail of cold metal, and the staircase cared nothing for human frailty. It was carpeted only as far as the first floor. As the waitress ascended beside him, Ron saw the weariness in her step. 'Some night this is going to be,' he told himself. He placed a hand encouragingly in the small of her back. She grimaced a smile without turning her head.

Smells of laundry, damp sheets, overworked heating appliances came and went. On the upper floors, he listened to a low stratum of noise issuing from behind locked doors. Despite the late hour, several women were wandering about the corridors. None took any notice of Ron and the waitress.

In a side passage the waitress pulled a large key from her coat pocket, unlocked a door, and motioned Ron to go in. As he entered, he saw how scratched and bruised the panels of the door were, almost as if it had been attacked by animals.

The same sense of something under duress was apparent in her room. The furnishings crowded together as if for protection. Every surface was fingered and stained, their overused appearance reinforced by the dim luminance of a forty-watt bulb shining overhead. The murkiest corner was filled by a cupboard on which stood a tin basin; this was the washing alcove. Close by was a one-ring electric stove, much rusted. The greater part of the room was occupied by a bed,

covered by a patchwork peasant quilt which provided the one note of colour in the room. A crucifix hung by a chain from one of the bedposts. Beside the bed, encroaching on it for lack of space, was a cupboard on top of which cardboard boxes were piled. The only other furniture — there was scarcely room for more — consisted of a table standing under a narrow and grimy window letting in the dark of the night.

The waitress locked her door and bolted it before crossing to the window and dragging a heavy curtain over it. By the window and under the bed were piled old cigarette cartons, all foreign, from Germany, France, England, China and the States. He knew instinctively they were empty—probably saved from the hotel refuse bins. Perhaps she liked the foreign names, Philip Morris and the rest. Well. He was up to his neck in the unknown now, and no mistake. Still. Nothing was ever going to be a greater shock than his first day at the orphanage, when he was four.

He was beginning to enjoy the adventure. He said to himself, 'Now then, Ronnie, if you can't fight your way out of trouble, you'd better fuck your way out.'

He set his case down and pulled off his coat. She hung the coat with hers on a hook behind the door, then went to the cupboard and brought out an unlabelled bottle with two small glasses. She poured clear liquid and passed him a glass. He sniffed. Vodka.

They toasted each other and drank.

He offered her an English cigarette, then handed her the pack. As they lit up, she gave him a smile, looking rather timid. Turning abruptly as if to hide weakness, she recorked her bottle and put it back in the cupboard. That was all he was getting in the way of alcohol.

'An instinctive liking,' he said. 'I mean, this is how it should be, eh? Friends on sight, right?' They sat side by side on the bed, puffing at their cigarettes; he laid a hand on her meagre thigh.

Two cheap reproductions hung on the walls facing them, one of birch forests lost in mist, one of a woman looking out of a deep-set window into a well-lit street. He pointed to it, saying he liked it.

'Frank-land,' she said. 'Französisch.'

She threw down her vodka, rose, pulled out a stained and tattered

nightdress from under her bolster. It was or had been blue. She smoothed the wrinkles with one hand, while looking at him interrogatively.

‘You won’t need that,’ he said, and laughed.

She paused, then threw the garment down on the end of the bed.

Suddenly, in her hesitation, he saw that she considered saying no to him and throwing him out. He dropped his gaze. The decision was hers. He never forced a woman.

Thoughts of Steff came back to him. He remembered the bitterness they went through after his trip a few weeks ago to Lyons in France. Steff had discovered that he had gone with a prostitute. A row had followed, which rumbled on for days. She had poured out hatred, had made the house almost unlivable. In the first throes of her fury, she had coshed him with a frying pan when he was asleep on the sofa. He had become terrified of her and of what she might do next. Finally, he swore that he would never go with other women again.

Yet here he was, settling in with this strange creature with the disgusting nightdress. The little whore in Lyons had been pernickety clean, a beauty in every way. Steff was always clean, always having a shower, washing her hair. This poor bitch had no shower. Her hair looked as if it had never seen shampoo.

Stubbing out her cigarette, the waitress paused by the light, then switched it off. The room was plunged into darkness. She had made up her mind to let him stay. He heard the sounds of her getting undressed, and began to do the same.

As his eyes accustomed themselves to the dark, he saw her clearly by the corridor light shining under the bottom of the door. She pulled off soiled undergarments and threw them on the table. Fanning out, the light shone most strongly on her feet. They were grey and heavily veined, the toes splayed, their nails curved and long like bird claws. He saw they were filthy. They disappeared from view as she threw herself naked on the bed and pulled the quilt over herself.

An icy draught blew under the door. Ron put his clothes neatly on the table, trying to avoid her dirty undergarments, and climbed under the quilt beside her. She lifted her arms and wrapped them round his neck.

A rank odour assailed him, ancient and indecent. It caught in his throat. He almost gagged. It wafted from her, from all parts. She was settling back, opening her legs. He could scarcely breathe.

He sat up. 'You'll have to wash yourself,' he said. 'I can't bear it.'

He climbed off the bed again, fanning the air, rather than have her climb over him.

'You not like?' she asked.

When he did not reply, she got up and went on her grey feet over to the basin. Her toenails clicked on the floor covering. She poured water in the basin and commenced washing. He pulled open her cupboard, to drink from her vodka bottle, tipping the stuff down his throat. The waitress made no comment.

She rinsed her armpits and her sexual quarters with a dripping rag, drying herself on a square of towel.

'And the feet,' he ordered, pointing.

Meekly, she washed her feet, dragging each up in turn to reach nearer the basin.

\* \* \* \*

This is Ron's story, not mine. But I had to ask myself if there wasn't, in this sordid lie he was telling me, something I deeply envied. I mean, not just the tacky woman, the foul room, the filthy fantasy world of 'Brezhnev's Russia', whatever that meant, but the whole desperate situation, something that took a man up wholly. This wish to be consumed. The whole romantic and absurd involvement. A hell. Oh yes, a hell all right.

And yet — we work away to build our security, to get a little roof and pay the rates. Still there's that thing unappeased. Don't we all secretly long, in our safe Britain, to take a Tupolev too far, to some godforsaken somewhere, where everything's to play for ... ?

I only ask it.

\* \* \* \*

At length she came back to the bed, standing looking at Ron in the deep gloom, as if asking his permission to re-enter.

At this point in the proceedings, he was again tempted to call the whole thing off. As he struggled with his feelings, to his reluctance to pass by any willing woman was added his kind of perpetual good humour with the other sex, quite different from his aggressive manner with men, which urged him not to disappoint this unlucky creature who had so far exhibited nothing but good will.

The waitress had started all this by encouraging him at the dinner table. He did not know if there was danger involved in this escapade but, if so, then she probably had more to lose than he. Men might not be allowed in this — lodging house, or whatever it was. He would hardly be sent to the gulag if he was caught, but no one could say what might happen to the waitress. He supposed that at the least she might lose her job; which would bring with it a whole train of difficulties in Brezhnev's Russia.

\* \* \* \*

I should explain where I was when my friend Ron was telling me this story, just to give you a little background.

We met by accident on Paddington Station. We had not seen each other for about a year. I had come up on the train from Bournemouth to consult my parent company in Islington, and was crossing the forecourt when someone called my name.

There was Ron Wallace, grinning. He looked much as usual in a rather shabby grey suit with a cream shirt and a floppy tie — the picture, you might say, of an unprofessional professional man working for some down-at-heel outfit.

We were pleased to see each other, and went into the station bar for a pint or two of beer and a chat. I asked him where he was off to. This is what he said: 'I'm off to Glastonbury to see a wise old man who will tell me where my life's going. With any luck.'

It was an answer I liked. Of course, I had some knowledge of how his life had been, and the hard times he had seen. I asked after his wife, Stephanie, and it was then that he started telling me this story I repeat to you. Just don't let it go any further.

\* \* \* \*

So there he was stuck in this poky little room with the waitress. Torn between compassion, lust, boredom and exasperation. The way one always is, really.



He lay in the bed. She stood naked before him in the half-light, looking helpless.

‘You ought to look after yourself better,’ he said, raising the quilt to let her in.

A sickly smell still pursued him. Concluding it came from the bed itself, he ignored it. She laid her head beside him on the patterned bolster. She smoothed dull hair back to gaze at him through the dim curdled light.

He stroked her cheek. When she buried her face suddenly in his chest, in a gesture of dependence, he caught the aroma of greasy kitchens, but he snuggled against her, feeling her still damp body. The waitress sniffed at him and sighed, rubbing against his thighs, perhaps excited by talc and deodorant scents, stigmata of the prosperous capitalist class. Prosperous! If only she knew! Ron and Steff had all manner of debts.

She opened her legs. As Ron groped in her moist pubic hair, he thought — a flash of humour — that he had his hand on the one thing that made life in the Soviet Union endurable. The Soviet Union and elsewhere . . . He penetrated her and she went almost immediately into orgasm, clutching him fiercely, bringing out a cry from the back of her throat. He thrust into her with savage glee.

Only afterwards, as they lay against each other, she clutching his limp penis, did her story start. She began to tell it in a low voice. He was idle, not really listening, comfortable with her against him, half-wanting a cigarette.

What she was saying became more important. She sat up, clutching a corner of the quilt over her naked breasts, addressing him fiercely. Her supply of English and German words was running out. He gathered this was something about her childhood. Yet maybe it wasn't. A horse was dying. It had to be shot. Or it had been shot. This was somewhere on a farm. The name Vladimir was repeated, but he was not sure if she referred to the town or a man. He tried to question her, to make things clear, but she was intent on pouring out her misery.

Now it was about an infant — ‘ein kleine Kind’, and the waitress was acting out her drama, dropping the quilt to gesticulate. The baby had been seized and banged against a wall—this demonstrated by a violent banging of her own head against the wall behind her. He could not understand if she was talking about herself or about a baby of hers. But the pain came through.

The waitress was sobbing and crying aloud, waving her arms, frequently calling the word 'smert', which he knew meant 'death'. Her body shook with the grief of it all.

It reached a melancholy conclusion. The story, incomprehensible and disturbing, ended with her coming alone to Moscow to work.

'To work here in this place. Arbeit. Nur Arbeit. Work alone. Abschliessen.'

'There, there.' He comforted her as he once used to comfort Steff's and his only child, wrapping her in his arms, rocking her. He was shaken by the agony of her outburst, angry with himself for failing to understand.

Of course there was no misunderstanding her misery. He felt it in his stomach, having known misery himself. Even in the pretty comfortable world he had left — to which he hoped to return on the morrow—personal tragedy was no rarity; some people always held the wrong cards. But he had fallen by accident into a shadow world, the world labelled 'Brezhnev's Russia' or 'Soviet Union', a world racked by terrible world wars and diseases. It was safe to say that whatever woes the poor waitress suffered, she represented millions who laboured under similar burdens.

He gave her a cigarette. A simple human gesture. He could think of nothing else to do.

She cried a little in a resigned fashion and wiped her tears on the quilt. Then she began to make love to him in a tender and provocative way. For a while paradise existed in the squalid room.

\* \* \* \*

Ron Wallace woke. A full bladder had roused him. The waitress lay beside him, asleep and breathing softly. In the dim light, her face was young, even childlike.

Disengaging his arm from under her neck, Ron sat up and looked at his watch. Next moment, he was out of bed. The time was 5.50 a.m. A suspicion of daylight showed round the curtains, and his flight was due to leave at 9.30. His check-in time at Sheremeteivo Airport was 8.00 a.m. He had two hours in which to get to the airport, and no idea of where he was.

He listened at the door. All was quiet in the building. He had to return to the hotel and collect his suitcase. And first he had to have a pee.

His impulse was to awaken the waitress. Capable though she had shown herself to be, she might be less reliable this morning. She would find herself in a difficult situation to which perhaps she had given no thought on the previous evening; the entertaining of foreigners in one's apartment was surely a crime in Brezhnev's Russia.

Since she did not stir, he decided to leave her sleeping. Keeping his gaze on her face, he dressed fast and quietly. He stood for a moment looking down at her, then unstrapped his watch from his wrist and laid it by the bedside as a parting present.

As noiselessly as possible, he slipped into his coat and unbolted and unlocked the door. In the corridor, he closed the door behind him. Thought of the tragic life he left behind came to him; damn it, that was none of his business. It was urgent that he got to a toilet. There must be one on this floor.

All the doors were locked. He ran from one to another in increasing agony. There seemed to be no toilet. He was sweating. He must piss outside, fast.

He went quickly down the stairs, alert for other people. He heard voices but saw no one.

His penis tingled. 'Oh God,' he thought, 'have I caught a dose off that bitch? I must have been mad. How can I tell Steff? She'll leave me this time. Steff, I love you, I'm sorry, I'm a right bastard, I know it.'

He rushed to the front door, which had a narrow fanlight above it, admitting wan signs of dawn. The door was double-locked, with a mortice lock and a large padlocked bar across it. Next to the door stood a cramped concierge's office, firmly closed. Everyone had been locked in for the night.

He ran about the ground floor rather haphazardly, gasping, and came on the side door by which, he believed, he had entered the previous evening. That too was securely locked. He gasped a prayer. At any moment his bladder would burst.

\* \* \* \*

At this point in Ron's story, I broke into heartless laughter.

He stared at me halfway between anger and amusement.

'It's no fun, going off your head for want of a piss,' he said.

I controlled my laughter. Ron is not a guy you like to offend. What amused me was the thought of a man who had been inside for GBH and done a stretch for breaking and entering in a situation where he was attempting breaking and exiting.

\* \* \* \*

After trying and failing to kick in a panel on the side door, Ron ran about almost at random looking for a way of escape.

Two steps at the end of the main corridor led down to another locked door, a boiler room in all probability. Next to the door was a broom cupboard and an alcove containing a mop, a brass tap and a drain.

With a groan of relief, Ron unzipped his trousers and pissed violently into the drain. The relief almost made him faint.

By now it must be almost half-past six.

As the urine drained from his body, he heard a door open along the corridor and a woman coughing. Her footsteps led away from where he stood. He heard her mount the stairs. Other doors were opening, female voices sounded, a snatch of song floated down; the noise level in the building was rising.

At last he was finished. He zipped his trousers, wondering what he should do to escape.

Two men were coming towards him. Although he saw them only in silhouette along the dark corridor, he recognized that they were old. They walked slowly, slack-kneed, and one jangled a bunch of keys. Ron sank back into the alcove.

The men passed within eighteen inches of him, talking to each other, not noticing him in the gloom. They unlocked the boiler-room door and went in.

Immediately they were gone, Ron came out of his hiding place and hurried back to the main door. As he went, he tried each handle in the corridor in turn. All were locked.

At the front door, he was looking up at the narrow fanlight, wondering if it would open, when he heard faint sounds from the concierge's nook. Impelled by urgency, he pushed the office door open and looked in.

A plump old woman with her hair in a bun was just leaving the main room to enter a cubbyhole which served as a kitchen. She began to rattle a coffee pot.

In the room lay three men, sleeping in ungainly attitudes. Two were huddled on a sturdy table pushed against the far wall, the third lay under the table, his head resting peacefully on a pair of boots. A cluster of empty bottles and full ashtrays suggested that they had had a good night of it.

The room, in considerable disarray, had five sides. It served regularly as a bedroom as well as an office; against the left-hand wall a bed stood under a shelf bulging with files. Timetables and keys hung from the walls.

The loud and laboured breathing of the men reinforced the stuffy atmosphere. Where two of the walls came to a point was a window which the old woman had evidently opened to let air into the room.

Without hesitation, Ron crossed over to the window. In doing so, he kicked one of the empty vodka bottles. It rattled against its companions. He did not look round to see if the woman had caught sight of him.

One pane of the window had been repaired with brown paper. Taking little care not to injure himself, he forced himself through the opening feet first. The ground was further down than he had expected. He landed on concrete with a painful bump. Above him, an angry old woman stuck her head out and yelled at him. Ron got up and ran round the corner. At least he was free of that damned prison, where women were locked in every night.

Then came the thought.

'My bloody briefcase!'

He had left it standing by the waitress's bed.

Cursing furiously, he marched round the outside of the fortress. It was built of grey stone. All of its windows were barred.

A pile of rubbish, including the burnt-out carcass of a vehicle, stood against one wall. Even if he climbed up that way, it led only to a barred window. He

prowled about, searching for the window of the boiler room, assuming there was one; he might be able to bribe the two old men to let him in that way.

He was frantic, and mad to know how the time was slipping away—what a fool to leave his watch with that bitch. He had to catch his plane, otherwise there would be trouble with his company and with Steff, not to mention all the difficulties with the airline — whatever it was called now... Aeroflot. And he could not leave without the briefcase. In it were his precious contracts.

Struggling to deal with his anxiety levels, he kept from his mind the more dreadful and nebulous fear: that the airliner would deliver him not to his lovely Steff and the England he knew but to some other England ruled over not by Queen Margaret and PM Bernard Mattingly but by—whoever the lady was mentioned in the newspaper — he had forgotten her name. He would perish if he was trapped for ever in a dreadful shadow world where history had taken a wrong turn.

Despite his frenzy, he remembered something else. The damned doll the North Korean had given him. He was convinced it was packed with heroin or some other illegal substance. He had not believed the Korean's unlikely story about Mr Holmberg for one moment, and had intended to throw away the doll as soon as he was outside the hotel. Sexual pursuit had made him forget.

Ron became really frightened.

Running round the building, isolated on its wasteland, he could find no low boiler-room window. He stood back, frustrated, when a stocky female figure in a black coat emerged from the building and walked off rapidly in the direction of the gigantic piles of broken wood Ron recalled from the previous night.

She had emerged from a side door. He ran to it, only to find it already locked. But even as he stood against it cursing, he heard the key turn from within, and it opened again. As another woman emerged, Ron dashed in. When an old man standing inside, key in hand, moved to stop him, Ron pushed him brutally in the chest. Other women were pressing to leave the building for the day's work, stern of face, burly of shoulder. He ran into the main corridor and hastened upstairs.

But which floor?

Which bloody floor?

He had seen from outside there were five floors.

Which floor was the waitress on?

Not the ground or first floors. Not the top . . .

Christ!

The scene was changed from a few minutes earlier. Everyone was now up and about, and women in states of undress were wandering the corridors. They yelled at him and tried to grab him. In a few minutes, they would get themselves organized. Then he would be arrested.

He tried the second floor. He ran down the side passage. First door on right. He remembered that. As soon as he faced the door, he remembered the markings on the waitress's door, the savage scratches as if an animal had been there. This was not it.

He ran up to the third floor, causing more disturbance, and to the side passage. God, this nightmare! He was furious with himself. Now he faced the door with the deep scratch marks, and hammered on it. The door opened.

Ron took a swift look back. No one saw him, though he heard sounds of pursuit. He went in.

The waitress stood there, half-dressed, hand up to mouth in an attitude of misgiving.

One reason for that misgiving was clear. On the bed — that bed! — on top of the quilt and the dirty blue nightdress, the contents of Ron's briefcase had been spread, a dirty shirt, a pair of socks, a pair of underpants, some aspirins, the crossword book, the Korean doll, a copy of the *Daily Express* from a week ago, the precious contracts, and other belongings. The case lay with a screwdriver beside it. She had managed to prise the lock open.

'Get dressed,' he said. 'Schnell. I need you to get me out of here.'

'And to get me back to that sodding hotel,' he thought.

The waitress tried to make some apology. She had not expected him back. She thought the case was a present. He barked at her. She hurried to put on yesterday's dress and fit her grey feet into her heavy working shoes, whimpering as she did so.

He hardly looked to see what he was doing as he pushed everything into the briefcase, shouting to her to move. She was now his guarantee. She could get him out of the lodging house. She knew the way back to the Hotel Moskva.

‘Schnell,’ he growled, deliberately scaring her as he forced the case shut.

She offered him his watch back but he shook his head.

‘Let’s go. Fast. Vite. Schnell.’

‘OK, OK,’ she said.

Together they hurried down the corridor and down the stone stairs, Ron with a firm grasp on her arm. Several women gathered. They called to the waitress, but when she snapped back at them they stood aside and let her pass. A younger woman began to laugh. Others took it up. Soon there was general laughter. This was not the first time a woman had had a lodger for the night. Probably, Ron reflected, this was not the first time the waitress had had a lodger for the night.

The old man unlocked the side door and they were out with a stream of other workers into the chill air. Great was his relief. He had a chance with Steff yet.

‘The hotel,’ he said. ‘Schnell. I must catch that bloody plane.’

\* \* \* \*

Ron Wallace caught the bloody plane. He rang his office from Penge. The managing director had had to go up to Halifax, so happily he was not wanted till the following morning. The day was his. He was able to go back to Steff, preparing as he went to be innocent. After all, she meant far more to him than any of these stray bitches. He would serve another stretch for Steff. He told himself he had learnt a lesson. He would never go with another woman.

Sitting on the coach going home, he was relieved to find everything was as normal. The *Daily Express* he picked up at the airport carried a photograph of Bernard Mattingly, Britain’s popular Prime Minister, opening the first stretch of a new motorway that would run between London and Birmingham. He searched for a reference to Russia. A small paragraph announced that Russia had a record wheat surplus, which they were shipping to the Third World. And the Pope had



returned to Rome from his tour of Siberia.

Everything was normal. He thought again of the strange electric storm which had bathed his plane on the flight out. Perhaps that had all been subjective, a major ischaemic event in the brain stem. He had been working too hard recently.

Nothing had happened. He had imagined that whole dark world, Brezhnev, the waitress and all.

Steff was amiable and credulous and listened to all he had to say about the boredom of Moscow. While he was showering, she even went to unpack his things for him.

He stepped naked from the shower. She had opened the briefcase. She was holding up for his inspection a dirty blue nightdress.