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## ICE, NO CREAM

Lisa Selvidge

*As the USSR began to crumble, a tenuous infrastructure mercilessly unravelled leaving the Russians clinging to whatever flotsam they could grab hold. In this passage from her satirical novel, *The Strange Tale of Comrade Rublov*, Lisa Selvidge explores Moscow, in the final days of the Soviet Union, through the eyes of a cockroach.*

This was the first time Volodia had been out of the apartment block and, as he later told us, he immediately regretted it. A small hole in Dyma's pocket revealed the floor of a city, held together by ice and partly covered in snow. Hundreds of padded human feet trudged over the slippery and rugged mountainous surfaces where deep ruts cut through the pavement and metal lines jutted out of the packed ice and snow. Even the chocolate was hardening fast, much to his horror.

He quickly took a mouthful before it was too late and crept near the top of the pocket and nearly fainted. As Dyma crossed over a road he saw the human world in all its horror. Faded tin cars and trucks bumped along the wintry roads spitting out blue-grey clouds of noxious vapours. An army of humans, wrapped in fur, stood in the middle of the road and waited for – what looked like to Volodia – a moving apartment block tipped on its side, thundering down the metal lines, its trapezoidal antennae flashing blue sparks of lightning. Dyma tipped his fur hat further over his eyes so that only his nostrils were visible. Volodia tried to block his antennae by stuffing them into the bits of fluff which gathered in the pocket so he wouldn't be able to hear, smell see or feel.

'What number is it, comrade?' someone called out.

'Number 18.'

Despite the bits of fluff, Volodia could still feel Dyma getting onto the tram, crammed with humans. Their frozen breath must melt on expiration and formed

rain clouds that poured down the inside of the windows as Volodia found his integument squashed against wet glass. He had to heave himself to the top so he could breathe.

The doors swished together and the tram gave out a faint 'ding' before it plunged towards Preobrazhenskaya Ploshad' (the nearest metro station to the apartment), past the shops, the kiosks, the white sports stadium, and the hundreds of identical concrete housing blocks which rose up behind the long queues and empty shop windows. On the tram, tickets passed from glove to glove to the person standing nearest the ticket stamper with only the occasional murmuring of 'spacibo'.

After a few stops, Dyma squeezed out of the tram and descended underground where, despite the cold weather, hundreds of bouquets of flowers were blooming. "The flowers stank," Volodia told us. "Just like the smell outside the apartment." The smell made him queasy. Although, by this time, there were so many horrors that he didn't know which was worse. He dreaded to think where he was going or if he would ever make it back. Even if he did make it back, he knew Anya would be furious with him. His antennae drooped over the edge of the pocket in shame, blending in with the frayed strands of cotton.

Dyma stumbled through heavy wooden framed doors, filled with finger smeared glass, past a uniformed woman and down into the warm underworld of Moscow where trains were pumped as continuously as water from a running tap. Humans surrounded him in all directions, some dressed in fur and cashmere, others in gingham and canvas. Many of them clutched and stared at folded squares of The Truth which Volodia recognised from the apartment. The underground train stopped and the doors sighed and swung open. People swarmed onto a platform guarded by stone soldiers clutching guns. Emblems of hammers and sickles were engraved on the walls and great chandeliers hung from the painted ceilings. Dyma made his way up a long moving staircase towards a large painted dome.

Volodia watched as four strange shoes with tassels, pale blue jeans and a sports bag on a floor covered in ash came closer. This did not look promising. Idiot, he told himself and vowed never again to be allured by chocolate. He crept deep into the pocket but he still had to listen.

'Hey Dyma.'

'Hi Krak, Bolshi.'

'Bad news?'

'Yeah.'

'Me too. When?' Krak replied.

'5th March.'

'Great. They'll shave our heads, give us a pair of boots two sizes too small and then send us to have our legs blown off in fucking Georgia or Chechnya or some other hell hole.'

'Oi, shut it, Krak. We'll think of something,' Bolshi said.

'There's no way I'm going,' Dyma muttered.

'It's all right for you. You're already clear,' Krak hissed at Bolshi.

'Yeah and you will be soon too. Take some drugs – high blood pressure.'

'Maybe. It doesn't work for everyone though. You were lucky.'

'Well, whatever you gonna do, we're gonna need money and I spot a hatless foreigner in a nice pair of boots. Go Dyma.'

Dyma ambled across to where the girl was standing. As Dyma bent down to pick up a pen, Volodia couldn't help but see a young female looking through newspapers and grainy postcards laid out on a table. She had long dark hair and wore a grey duffel coat, a matching woollen hat and gloves and boots; all very different to the kinds of clothes that were in the apartment. Dyma stood up and greeted her in Russian, holding out the pen.

'Nyet, spacibo,' she replied, glancing at him.

'I only asked if this is yours?' Dyma asked in English, making Volodia pleased he had devoured the English textbooks.

'Oh, thank you. I am sorry, I thought you wanted to change money.'

'Izvinite pozhaluista! A pochemu vy stoite zdes'?' A large woman barged between them. Volodia felt the full force on his integument.

'I think we're in the way here,' the young girl said.

'If we were in an empty field, we'd still be in the way for her.'

The girl laughed.

'But my friends are standing over there. Would you like to join us?'

'Okay.'

Recovering from the force of a babushka, Volodia glanced out at the mass of regurgitated human bodies being delivered by the escalator and to where Krak and Bolshi were standing with the sports bag. This all looked less than promising.

'Change...?' Bolshi asked the girl as she approached. Dyma told him in Russian to shut it; this one was different. Bolshi muttered, 'the different ones aren't going to keep you out of the army, friend.'

'Are these your friends? I've seen him in the Post Office. He does change money,' she said, accusingly.

'Do you want an ice-cream?' Dyma asked.

'What here?' The girl looked round.

'No, but we can go and get one.'

'Sure.'

'What's your name?'

'Karen. What's yours?'

'Dyma.'

'Dyma? That's a strange name.'

'It's short for Dmitrii.'

'In English, 'dim' means 'not bright'.'

'I know. But it's not Dim, it's Dyma.'

Krak and Bolshi groaned, picked up the bag and trailed reluctantly behind Dyma, out through the heavy doors and into the streets. Volodia, also reluctantly, watched. Massive solid stone buildings, decorated with emblems and slogans, loomed up all around. Statues held postures of victory up into the grey skies. The temperature was freezing and dropping. But, despite the coldness, Volodia could smell a tantalising aroma of mouldy cabbage and tobacco. However, even that couldn't compensate for the now frozen chocolate in Dyma's pocket. For the first time in his short life, Volodia felt deeply unhappy.

They entered an ice-cream parlour. It had pink letters painted on the glass front. On the inside there were dull aluminium coloured stools and tables. However, there was a queue outside and even Volodia had learnt from the humans in the apartment, where there's a queue, there's hope. Not that Volodia would have quite called it that. Neither, it would seem, did Dyma's friends.

'Bullshit, we're not queuing,' Bolshi declared and went to speak to someone on the door and, within minutes, they were inside.

'How did you manage to do that?' Karen asked Bolshi. Bolshi looked sulkily at Dyma for a translation.

'The same way you manage to get anything done in this country,' Dyma replied for him. 'You bribe them.'

'But that's not fair. What about the people who can't afford it?'

'They don't get in.'

'I thought you had a Revolution to get rid of that sort of shit.'

'Did you?' Dyma asked in surprise.

'Yeah, well what do you want?' Karen asked. 'I'll get them.'

'No, you'll pay more.'

'Well, take this then.'

Bolshi took the twenty-five ruble note that Karen held out and went to order. Krak pulled out a packet of Kosmos cigarettes and offered them round.

'So where you from?'

'London, but I've just come back on the Trans-Siberian train from Beijing. Before that I was in Tokyo.'

Dyma translated for Krak and then they were silent for a moment.

'What did you do in Tokyo? Vacation?'

'No Japan is very expensive. I was working.'

'Doing what?'

'In a nightclub.'

Dyma raised his eyebrows in surprise. Krak asked him what was the matter and Dyma told him. Krak asked if she was a prostitute.

'Are you a prostitute?'

'Because someone works in a club, do you presume they're a prostitute?'

Everyone nodded.

'Here in Moscow all the girls want to work in the clubs so that they can be prostitutes and earn hard currency,' Dyma said.

'Yeah well, in Japan it's a bit different. All you do is serve drinks and talk.'

'Talk?'

'Yeah, talk. Like we're doing.'

'You get paid for talking?'

'Yeah.'

Dyma sounded surprised and translated for Krak.

'How much do you get paid for talking?'

'Twenty-five dollars an hour.'

There was silence.

'What?'

'Nothing,' replied Dyma.

'Actually, thinking about it, the club I used to work in was frequented by Russians – or, at least, one Russian. What was his name? I only met him once. Didn't like him. It was a funny name... Yenov! That was it. Yenov.'

Dyma told the others and there followed an even longer silence.

'At least, I think he was Russian,' Karen added.

'How's the train?'

'It takes five days... there's usually no water and food by the third... but it's cheap. Black market tickets cost about a hundred dollars from Beijing to Berlin which...'

'What are the guards? Passport control?' Dyma interrupted. He sounded excited.

'How do you mean? Immigration? They come onto the train – usually in the middle of the night when you're sleeping and wake you up, demanding to see your passport. Except Mongolia.'

Volodia was even more horrified. Dyma sounded like he wanted to go. He didn't know where these places were but he knew they weren't in Moscow. And he suspected that they were a long way away. He wondered if he should abandon Dyma's pocket there and then rather than risk a long train journey, but he wasn't too sure about the smooth white marble floor. Besides, if he left now, he would never see Anya again. And, despite the fact that he suspected she would be furious with him, he did want to see her again.

'What happens in Mongolia?'

'There's a disco.'

'A what? A disco?'

'Yes. There's a disco on the border. It's pretty weird.'

'Weird? Do they search the cabins?'

'Sometimes, not always. Usually only if it's inconvenient, like in the middle of the night. Why? Thinking of taking a free ride? Wouldn't think it was much of an advantage going to China...' Karen shut up when she realised Dyma wasn't listening. He was talking to Krak.

Bolshi came back with three coffees and put them on the table. 'There's ice, but no cream, so I got coffee,' he said, by way of explanation. 'You like hats?' Bolshi asked Karen. He unzipped his bag and showed Karen a black fur hat.

'Yes, I do actually. How much?'

'Fifteen dollars.'

'Can I try it?'

As she did, Krak and Dyma stopped their conversation and stared at her.

'Very beautiful,' Bolshi said.

Karen blushed.



'You go back?' Dyma asked Karen.

'Where?'

'Japan.'

'Yeah, I'm supposed to be going back in the spring. There's not much in...Yai!' Karen let out a short but high-pitched scream.

'What?' Dyma asked.

Karen pointed to the floor. The boys laughed. Krak went over and stamped on something that scrunched like an eggshell beneath his tasselled shoes.

Volodia crepitated in horror. If that's what he thought it was, he'd been right about the floor.

'Shit, Krak, you shouldn't do that,' Dyma said.

'Fucking cockroaches,' Krak said, his toes still dancing on death. 'These bastards are responsible for all the scum in Moscow.'

'I doubt it. They've been around for a lot longer than we have. Did you know, they're one of the few life forms that would survive a nuclear war?'

'Is that right?' Bolshi asked.

'Even more reason to get rid of them now then.' Krak laughed.

The other two joined in.

'My grandfather reckons that they can see and hear everything. He even thinks they communicate with each other and that they know how to take revenge.'

'Yeah right. Your grandfather's got porridge for brains.'

'That's what I said, but, you know...'

'Are you serious? Come on, let's go. Shit coffee anyway,' Bolshi said.

'What are you talking about?' Karen asked.

'Cockroaches.'

'Does she want this hat or not?' Bolshi asked Dyma.

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Excerpted from *The Strange Tale of Comrade Rublov* by Lisa Selvidge.

Lisa Selvidge completed a BA in Russian Language & Literature at the University of London, with Portuguese as a subsidiary. After travelling and teaching English as a Foreign Language for several years in Japan and Russia, she went on to take an MA in Creative Writing (Prose Fiction) at the University of East Anglia in the UK. She subsequently taught at the Norwich School of Art & Design for five years and then at the University of East Anglia where, in 2001, she became the Academic Director for Creative Writing in the Centre for Continuing Education.

In 2004, she moved to Portugal where she is currently living for most of the year. She still teaches online prose fiction courses as well as doing freelance work and running workshops in the Algarve. She is the author of *The Trials of Tricia Blake* (fiction) and *Writing Fiction Workbook* (non-fiction). For more information visit [www.lisaselvidge.com](http://www.lisaselvidge.com)