

DEATH AND RECKLESS BEHAVIOUR IN LENINGRAD

Galina Kogan completed the documents to record her mother's death. She filled out forms to stop wages, cancel benefits, and nullify identity papers. She parted with a week's pay for a coffin, and when told that transport from the state mortuary to the cemetery would be delayed several days, another fistful of notes solved the problem. A few more roubles here, a few more there, and her mother would be laid to rest the following week.

It was now official: Lidiya Yuryevna Kogan had died at 8.37, on the morning of Wednesday, 27th November, 1985.

Galina gathered up all the documents. The bag was bulging with her mother's belongings, so she shoved the papers down a side pocket. She fixed her mother's watch to her own wrist, surprised to see it was already four o'clock; this day of her mother's death had passed without her noticing. She hefted the bag over her shoulder and hurried along the corridor to the stairs. She made a brief phone call in the hospital foyer to say she was on her way home, and finally emerged through the doors into the fresh air outside.

Winter had powered in during the last weeks of her mother's illness, weeks stretched by death's determined assault against her mother's steadfast grip on life. Fully occupied by the struggle

playing out before her, Galina had given no thought to the weather. But now as she entered the street, she slammed into the cold. Her winter coat was still packed away in the trunk — the rest of life so callously undisturbed while her mother lay dying — and her jacket, the one she had worn every day since her mother's stroke, was no match for the weather. Yet, despite the chill, and despite there being a trolley bus in sight, she needed time to think, to collect herself, to pull together a life that had just lost its centre.

She wrapped her scarf about her head and knotted it at the neck, thrust her hands deep in her pockets, and set off through the sombre streets. The smell of the hospital lingered, and she wondered if she'd ever be rid of it. She quickened her pace, but her legs resisted; she tried to order her thoughts, but her brain had turned to slush.

She was heading home, although her mother's death had already stripped it of homeliness. There'd be relatives and friends waiting, and food and drink and an explosion of memories. But Lidiya had provided a sense of home that went beyond their flat, beyond the old books and the new TV, beyond the table where they ate and worked, beyond the sallow green stairwell with its human reek, beyond the building itself, only twenty years old and already frayed and weary. Lidiya had been sanctuary.

And what now for the future — *their* future, which had just shrunk to *her* future? What now for emigration? They knew when they submitted their papers they were signing over the right to change their minds — not that it mattered then, as they had no intention of doing so. And in the months since, despite Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*, despite his heralding new freedoms and greater prosperity, they'd not wavered. Her mother had scoffed at Gorbachev's promises. The trouble with Russia, she'd said, was that nothing fundamentally changed. Thaws were followed by crack-downs, crackdowns were followed by thaws, so why should it be any different on Gorbachev's watch?

'We've an opportunity to leave. Best to go when we can.'

Officially they were emigrating to Israel, the only permissible destination for Soviet Jews, yet they had no Zionist yearnings nor religious stirrings; in fact, they lacked all but the most rudimentary knowledge of how to be Jewish. But given the push and snarl of Russia's chronic anti-Semitism, not a day passed without a reminder that ethnically they were Jewish. This was such a common aspect of life in the Soviet Union that Galina had accepted, with neither rancour nor resentment, that the bribes she'd had to pay for her mother's funeral were more numerous and hefty than those extracted from Russians. It was, simply, the way things were.

They had planned to change their destination from Israel to America once they got to Vienna. Or was it Rome where they were to make the change? Galina's head had fogged up. Vienna or Rome? She couldn't remember. Her mother had died, and it seemed that memory and reason had cut and run. How was she going to manage? Whether here or elsewhere in the world, how would she manage the future alone?

Her breath was drawing short and harsh. She stopped by a canal, pulled the air into her lungs, and forced out a slow exhalation. She felt faint, and leaned against the iron railings for support. The metal was sharp and cold against the bones of her hips; she pressed in harder. The surface of the water was an oily, dark opalescence — strangely beautiful, she found herself thinking. Garbage bobbed against the canal walls, ducks poked about looking for spoils, a barge and a smaller boat chugged past. She closed her eyes and slipped into a gentle, muted world where life seemed to have stopped. It was a brief respite, however, for intruding into this twilight zone came her own clear voice: *You're twenty-four years old, Galina Kogan. You're an adult, and you're on your own. So pull yourself together.*

She opened her eyes, took one last deep breath, pressed her hands to her chest as if that would squeeze the terror out, and set off again.

It was not yet dusk, but with the low, swarthy clouds it might have been night. Street lights glowed with that frosted halo that hinted at snow; noises were smudged as if coming from a great distance. There was no wind. Galina felt weirdly disconnected from the world, a world that had moved into the future while she sat in limbo with her dying mother. And yet she'd made an attempt to keep up with events, had read *Leningradskaya Pravda* to her mother every day, and when her mother no longer responded, had read to pass the time. A volcano had erupted in Colombia, killing twenty-five thousand people—and why, she wondered, was her own single death so much more weighty than all those dead Colombians? She'd read about bomb attacks in Paris, and hijackings in the Mediterranean. Then, a week ago in Geneva, General Secretary Gorbachev and President Reagan of America had met for the very first time. It had been rumoured that the situation of Soviet Jews was on the agenda, along with arms control. There was no way of knowing whether Soviet Jews had, in fact, been discussed. As for arms control, it simply made no sense, not after years of being told of the necessity of a great Soviet arsenal as security against the war-mongering, untrustworthy Americans. But then so much in the Soviet Union made no sense. It gave traction to her mother's joke that Soviet citizens, while starved of the comforts of life, were gourmands when it came to swallowing absurdities.

No more of her mother's jokes now.

They had been told regularly of the Soviet Union's superiority in nuclear weapons—it was anyone's guess as to whether this was true or not—but what every Soviet citizen knew without a skerrick of doubt was that America was the land of plenty, the émigré's El Dorado. They were told that poverty was endemic in America, that education and housing were in a parlous state, that only the very corrupt or the very rich could afford to be sick, that photographs of shops full of goods were not real shops, but rather staged sets for the

cameras. Yet despite the official line, every Russian knew there was plenty of food in America, and huge stores filled with clothes and household goods. It was not just the American films they saw, the Soviet Union's thriving black market was proof of the quality and range of American goods.

There had been a photograph in the paper of Gorbachev and Reagan standing together surrounded by their advisors, the Soviet team clearly distinguishable from the American, and film of the meeting had been shown on the *Vremya* news, so that aspect of the report—that the leaders were meeting—was true. Gorbachev, stylish in his Italian suit, looked like a Westerner. As to what had been discussed, she'd learned from her mother always to be suspicious of reports in the official press.

A year ago, such a meeting between the two leaders would have been inconceivable, but then a year ago it was equally inconceivable that her mother would suffer a massive brain haemorrhage. Some changes, like having the bathroom tap fixed at the communal apartments or being allocated your own flat, seemed to take years. Other changes, like the gas explosion in the block near her old school, or the death of her fifty-seven-year-old mother, were shocking in their suddenness.

It wasn't that she wanted her mother alive again, not in the dreadful state the stroke had rendered her. She wanted life as it had been before the stroke, their papers to emigrate submitted, the two of them sifting through their possessions trying to decide what to take, and both of them managing to save as much as possible because as soon as their request to emigrate was approved, they knew they'd be forced to leave their jobs (and if their application was refused, they'd lose their jobs anyway). In short, they were living for today while making preparations for tomorrow: a new life in America, where everyone was equal, where her mother, a translator and teacher of languages, would find work that matched her experience and abilities, and where Galina, herself, could draw what she liked,

confined only by her own artistic limitations and not by the state. She was a Soviet Jew and a Russian illustrator. The irony had long struck her: both the Jew and the artist were censored here.

Galina pulled her hand from her pocket and brushed her face. Just when she thought things couldn't get worse, it had begun to snow, only a few wet flakes at the moment, but gearing up for more. If she believed in a god, she'd think she was being punished. But for what? Nothing in her twenty-four years would warrant the illness and death of her still-young mother, nor the twenty-year absence of a father she couldn't remember, nor an impending blizzard on a day when it already took all her energy just to remain upright and moving.

She tugged at her scarf, shoved both hands deeper into her coat and continued on her way. And suddenly she was on the ground, pitched forward on the uneven brick paving. A sickening pain filled her knee.

She needed to move, she couldn't move.

Galina is lying in a stink of urine and ancient filth. She wants to fade out, she wants not to be here. Where is oblivion exactly? she is wondering. And what is it about Leningrad paving that prises the bricks from their cement beds? Might there be tiny earthquakes occurring all over the city?

A strange man is hovering over her. His hands are flapping, and a barrage of Russian mixed with English is spilling out of him. Life as she has known it stopped this morning, and now, in full view of everyone, she's the target of a hysterical foreigner.

'Please.' She manages to find some English. 'Please, I am all right.'

The man is crouched over her, she can smell onions. 'Please, sir, move away. I need air.'

He utters a stream of apologies, grabs a scarf from his neck, rolls

it into a sausage and places it under her head. He stands back, his face bright red. He's clearly embarrassed, and so he ought to be. Not that she cares; and it occurs to her she doesn't really care about anything anymore. She turns her back to him, closes her eyes, and curls up small. The whoosh of tyres, a blitz of car horns, the stop-start wheeze of a bus come to her muffled, as if through water. It's not unpleasant, a sort of holding bay for life, and she tries to insert her mother — her healthy, vibrant mother. But the bed-ridden figure of the past terrible weeks, with the face shrivelling over the skull, the twisted mouth, the perpetual drool, refuses to be dislodged. And suddenly the abysmal thought: it might never be.

You're on your own, she tells herself again. You're lying on the filthy ground, a blizzard could be on the way, there's a foreigner fussing over you, and you're on your own. And as much as she wants to stay right where she is, she makes herself move. The stranger is watching her. The flush has left his face; his skin is smooth and unmarked — healthy skin, which for some reason makes her think of oranges.

He steps towards her. 'Let me help you.'

Tall and unmistakably Western, he is dressed in Levis and a sheepskin jacket; his blond wavy hair, clean and lush, is swept back from his forehead, he wears no hat. She guesses he is much the same age as she is, although Westerners always look younger than their years. It's impossible to know who or what he is, whether friend or foe. Not that it matters. In kindergarten, in school, in the Pioneers, in the Komsomol, at university, at work, wherever you are in the Soviet system, you're told that all foreigners are suspect, and all are to be avoided. Although now, at this moment, if anyone is watching her — and all prospective émigrés can expect to be watched — she's simply too exhausted to care.

Life without her mother is not about to wait any longer. She shoves her pains aside, stretches out her hand, and the foreigner grasps it. As he leans down, she sees the skin of his throat. It is

bronzed and unblemished, and there is a scent about him — not the onions, but something fresh and spicy; she breathes it in. He keeps his arm about her until she has regained her balance. His apologies are profuse, his touch gentle, and to her horror, she feels tears; she swallows hard, takes her time to find a steady voice, insists she is not hurt. But no amount of reassurance will placate him.

‘I could have caused you a serious injury,’ he says.

‘You have not hurt me.’ She is surprised at the ease of her English when everything else is in tatters. ‘It is not your fault. The paving is a mess, and I was not watching where I was going.’

‘Neither was I.’ The man pauses a moment before adding, ‘I’d stopped to look at the snow.’

Not simply a foreigner, but a mad one to be lingering in freezing temperatures gazing at a few miserable snowflakes.

‘I’ve only seen snow once before.’ His face is again bright red.

‘In your entire life?’ This man is clearly no spy, no enemy of any kind.

He nods.

‘Where on earth are you from?’

She hears him say Austria. But no, he repeats it, Australia, the big country at the bottom of the world. ‘Not much snow down there,’ he says. And after a moment he adds, ‘Most Australians respond to snow as you Russians do to kangaroos.’

She feels the muscles around her jaw protest: it has been a long time since she smiled. Her very first English-language book, which was also her mother’s first English book, was called *Babies at the Zoo*; and of all the baby animals in the book, the kangaroo was her favourite. Accompanying each illustration was a short poem written by the great Samuil Marshak. She can still recite the one about the kangaroo.

And suddenly she sees her mother, pre-stroke Lidiya, sitting with her younger self, and the two of them are reading this book together. She is so tempted to prolong the image, to grasp her

mother's aliveness, but knows she can't, not right now. But tomorrow and next week and next year this image, and she desperately hopes others too, of a healthy Lidiya will come back to her. For the moment she distracts herself with busyness. The bag has spilled its contents; she thrusts them back, smooths herself down, twists her hair under her scarf, and starts on her way.

'Can I walk with you?' The Australian speaks in a rush, like someone out of practice.

Galina supposes she is suffering from shock, or perhaps this is how grief and mourning feel, and she knows she needs to think about the future, but it's beyond her at the moment. She glances at the Australian, he really does seem innocuous, and besides, with night falling and the weather deteriorating, there'll be few people to observe her fraternising with a foreigner. And again it strikes her: she doesn't care who is watching because she doesn't care what happens to her now that the worst has happened. She shrugs and nods. It's permission enough and all she has energy for.

'Tell me about yourself,' she says, knowing she'll manage better if she doesn't have to speak.

There's more blushing, and his hands knot together in a white-knuckled grip. He's clearly very uncomfortable, or perhaps he's shy. A shy Westerner: it seems such an unlikely combination.

He tells her his name is Andrew Morrow, that he is twenty-five years old, from Melbourne, Australia. He speaks hesitantly, and there's a long pause before he adds, 'I've come to Leningrad to study mosaics.'

'You are an artist of mosaics?'

He shrugs. 'I try to be.'

Of all the artistic students at her *gimnaziya*, and later at the art college, none had wanted to be a mosaicist, yet mosaic was such a Russian art and, given the Australian's presence here, clearly famous across the world. He tells her he has been in Leningrad for a month. He says he has permission to view a range of sites, but most of the

next three months will be spent with the mosaicists who are restoring the Church of the Resurrection of Christ. ‘The Church on the Spilled Blood, as you call it.’ He pauses. ‘You know it, of course?’

She nods. Like most Petersburgers, she has a special fondness for this great Russian-style church in the centre of Baroque and Neoclassical Leningrad. Resilient, like the Russian people, it has survived against the odds.

He’s looking at her expectantly. What’s she to do? Talk or not talk? And does it make any difference now? And it occurs to her that nothing makes any difference now.

‘This church where you will be working has a chequered history.’ Her throat is dry and she gulps down some air. ‘At one stage it was used as a store for theatre props. Later, during the Great Patriotic War, it was used as a mortuary, and after the war when it was a warehouse for vegetables it became known as “The Saviour on Potatoes”.’ And then a wayward comment escapes. ‘Whether palace, church, or person, we fight for our survival in the Soviet Union.’

The terrible words freeze in the quiet, still air. What on earth is she thinking to speak so carelessly? And to a foreigner, of all people? But then she isn’t thinking. That’s the problem.

‘Your church has been saved now,’ the Australian says, seemingly unaware of her blunder. ‘Soon it’ll be restored to its former splendour.’

She looks around, there’s no one in hearing distance; she’s been lucky this time, but unlikely to get a second chance. She has to be more careful. The man is prattling on about the Church on the Spilled Blood; he thinks it will be one of the most beautiful churches in the world when it is finished. And perhaps he’s right, but she and her mother, like so many Petersburgers, have watched the church being brought back to life while their own miserable apartment blocks have been left to crumble. Millions of roubles have been spent on the restoration; it’s been hard to admire without envy. The cupolas are now complete, six or eight of them all clad in

brilliant blue and sun-coloured ceramics, and real gold, too, so it is said. More recently — she knew this even before the Australian told her — work has shifted to the mosaics that originally covered the entire interior of the church.

‘I love Russian mosaics.’ The sentence catapults from him. ‘Such variety in the materials — glass, porcelain, even jewels — and the detail, and the size of the projects.’ She hears a jerky riff of laughter. ‘Russians seem to be drawn to bigness.’ There’s a pause so long she is framing another question when he starts up again, in short bursts, like machine-gun fire. ‘Your Boris Anrep’ — the name is vaguely familiar to her — ‘Boris Anrep, born here, Leningrad, St Petersburg, in the 1880s, became one of Britain’s most celebrated mosaicists. His work’s in the National Gallery, it’s in Westminster Cathedral. He and your Anna Akhmatova were,’ there’s a pause, ‘they were close.’

And now she remembers why she’s heard of Boris Anrep, although this foreigner, either due to his own modesty or in deference to hers, cannot bring himself to say that Anrep and Akhmatova were lovers.

He is walking more slowly, and his speech, too, has slowed. ‘I’d stay here longer if I could, there’s so much to learn, and my fellowship money would stretch for a couple more months. But I have to be home after our summer break, when the new term begins.’

‘Most foreign students come here in *our* summer. In fact,’ she adds, ‘most visitors of any sort come in summer.’

‘I’ve come when I was free to come. And actually, I’m not a student. I teach at an adult-education institution.’ Then more softly, ‘I love the idea of winter here.’

‘I guarantee you won’t love it in a few weeks’ time.’

‘Perhaps you’ll see for yourself.’

It sounds like an invitation, and just as she is working out a non-committal response — the last thing she needs is a lonely foreigner dragging her down — the clock tower sounds five. Andrew

suddenly stops, checks his wristwatch in the light of a street lamp, and excuses himself.

‘So sorry. I’ve a meeting at 5.30.’ He thrusts a card at her. ‘Sorry,’ he says again. ‘Have to rush.’ He nods at the card. ‘Russian contacts one side, Australian on the other.’

She points him in the direction of the nearest Metro station, and watches him dash to the corner. He pauses, then turns around. ‘Your name?’ he shouts. ‘What’s your name?’

If she hasn’t already been noticed with a foreigner, she certainly will be now.

‘Galina,’ she shouts back. ‘Galina Kogan.’

Nothing matters anymore.

The foreigner disappears from view. She shoves his card into her pocket and continues on her way. Snow is falling more energetically, yet she makes no attempt to hurry. It is as if life without her mother will begin once she is home. Until then, her limbo state will continue.

Most girls of Galina’s age have loosened their attachment to their mother, but since her father vanished twenty years earlier there had only been the two of them. Her paternal grandparents withdrew soon after her father disappeared, and the maternal grandparents, Lidiya’s own parents, were long gone, both of them arrested in the desperate days of 1937 when Lidiya herself was a child.

For years after her father’s disappearance, in the hours before her mother came to bed, Galina would make up stories about him. She needed to explain his absence and, more importantly, she needed to believe in his eventual return. One of her stories had him working on the Russian space program, another saw him based in a remote region engaged in secret weapons work; one of her favourites made him the admiral of a submarine whose mission was to stay below the surface for several years. She would imagine his joyful

homecoming, his pride in her schoolwork and his praise for her art, and she imagined most especially his promise never to go away again. Day after day, month after month, year after year, she fantasised how happy the three of them would be: mother, father and daughter together again. While she and her mother were still living at the *kommunalka*, she used to imagine that on his return her father would be rewarded for his secret work with a flat for his family: a kitchen, bathroom and toilet all to themselves. As it happened, when she and her mother were finally allocated their own flat soon after her twelfth birthday, she was so worried her father wouldn't find them, she didn't want to move. It took considerable persuasion on Lidiya's behalf to convince her that, should her father turn up, the authorities would be sure to tell him their new address.

It was the enduring hope of her childhood that her father would return, for he truly had disappeared. One day, around the time of her third birthday, he simply did not return home after work, nor the next day did he turn up at the Ministry of Education where he was employed as an overseer of resources. Later, she would concede her father was not qualified for any of the secret work she gave him in her fantasies, but as a young girl the fantasies were essential, particularly in their old home in the *kommunalka*. Here she and her mother had two rooms, and fortunately were allowed to keep both after her father disappeared. (It was Soviet bureaucratic specificity that had intervened, and the only time it had worked to their advantage: because the partition between their rooms did not reach the ceiling, it was officially designated as a single room.) They shared a bathroom and kitchen with seven other families, twice the number who had lived here when the rooms were first allocated to Lidiya's parents. It was crowded and it was noisy, and everyone knew everyone else's business. Galina learned at a young age that fantasies, make-believe of all sorts, provided the space and other luxuries absent in your real life.

Her father disappeared and no one knew what had become of

him, neither friends nor colleagues, not even his own parents—or so she and her mother believed at the time. Later, when the story of his absence emerged, they guessed his parents had known his whereabouts all along, for within months of his disappearance they obtained permission to move—to Georgia, of all places.

With her father gone, there were just the two of them in the communal apartment. In a strange way, the crowd and bustle that surrounded them seemed to connect them ever more tightly. She and her mother often joked that their home of two rooms—between themselves, they always referred to their *two* rooms—three storeys above the street, with their own south-facing window, was like their own floating island.

In the *kommunalka* they used to share a bed, but by the time they were allocated their own flat, two divans were more practical. Hours would pass with her mother sitting on her divan, typewriter firmly arranged on a square of wood, dictionaries to one side and the book she was translating perched on a stand. And on the divan closest to the window, her back supported by the wall, Galina would do her schoolwork, and when that was finished she'd draw and paint, paper clipped to a board, paints and pencils on the windowsill. Sometimes her mother would read aloud from the novel she was translating—it cultivated Galina's own interest in both English and Italian—or she might recite Russian poetry.

Yevtushenko was one of her mother's favourites. He was a great defender of Russian Jews, she said, and his 'Babi Yar' was one of the most important poems ever written. She said that even if Yevtushenko wrote doggerel—which, she added, he'd been known to do—she would still buy his books, and she would still wait in line, for hours if necessary, to hear him read his poems. Lidiya was a woman of strong passions, or rather had been a woman of strong passions—not that Galina was ready to relegate her mother to the past just yet. She doubted she ever would be.

It was six years ago that news came of her father. He had died

in Tbilisi, Georgia, where he'd been living since leaving Leningrad. A small box addressed to Lidiya had been found by his new wife (although not so new, given there was a half-sister only a couple of years Galina's junior), and she had sent it to their new flat. Lidiya wondered why Osip had bothered. The box contained the tie-pin she had given him as a wedding gift, an English pipe she had bought on the black market that had cost a small fortune, an envelope addressed to her in Osip's handwriting containing a bundle of roubles so small it would not cover food for a week, and Lidiya's well-read copy of *The Twelve Chairs*, inherited from her own father and inscribed with his name — the only item, apart from the money, that she kept. There was a scarf that Lidiya could not remember seeing before, and neither apology nor explanation.

There was, however, one positive outcome of Osip's certified death. If he'd been alive, or, more particularly, if they'd been unable to prove his death, they would have needed his written permission as husband and father for their exit papers from the USSR. With his death now official, the only permission required was from the sole surviving grandparent, Osip's mother. She'd had no contact with them for years and, as a stubbornly loyal Soviet citizen, they guessed she'd want nothing to do with two would-be deserters of the Motherland. In the end they took a calculated risk: Lidiya had not changed her name when she married, and Galina was a Kogan too, so any connection with Osip's family should be impossible to trace.

'What about your brother,' Galina asked her mother. 'What about Mikhail?'

'He's been gone a lifetime,' Lidiya said. 'And unlikely to turn up now.'

So they embarked on their plan to emigrate. It was exciting, it was nerve-racking, it was all-consuming. The easing of exit visas for Jews, begun in the late 1970s, was continuing, but for how long was anyone's guess. The crucial requirement, they'd been told, was

to be an insignificant Jew. Physicists and other scientists, dissenters and writers were likely to be lifetime refuseniks—not because the Soviet Union wanted to make use of their skills (it was common knowledge that most had been forced into menial jobs and some into internal exile), but because of the security risks of letting these people go. For ordinary people like themselves, people who were of little use to the Soviet Union and posed absolutely no danger to Soviet power, applications were being processed relatively quickly and successfully.

They made enquiries, they tapped into the information networks, and they filed their papers to migrate to Israel. But it was the paradise of America that was their true destination. They talked endlessly about American food and clothes, American TVs and stereos, American toasters and mix-masters; they talked about their American apartment, its central heating, the garbage chute, the reliable water and electrical supply, and a bedroom for each of them; they talked about the American ‘melting pot’ of Europeans and black people, of Latinos and Asians, of Catholics and Jews, all in together, everyone equal, everyone with the same opportunities. America thrilled them, America sent them into raptures. America was the destination of their dreams.

America, think about America, Galina tells herself as she walks through the darkening streets. But she is unable to think of an America without her mother. Tears again threaten, and she stops to collect herself—no time for tears, no place for weakness—presses the palms of her hands against her eyes, slows her breathing, steadies her nerves.

A short time later, she turns into her street. The snow has eased, but the sky is still heavy; a small elliptical smudge of cloud, slightly lighter than the rest, marks the location of the moon. She finds herself wishing for some sort of religion, not specifically involving God, but an afterlife, with her mother whizzing through the cosmos liberated from her stroke-struck body.

She may as well wish for wings.

She crosses the street and walks the last few metres to her building. She pauses at the threshold, then trudges up the stairs. She hears the slap of each step, she smells the ubiquitous *karbolka*, she feels her way through the dark stretches where the globes have been stolen. When she reaches the flat, she stands outside her no-longer home, unable to make the next move.

The door opens — might she have knocked? — and immediately she's drawn inside and embraced by well-wishers. Everyone is sad, everyone needs consolation, but everyone knows a daughter's loss is greater than theirs. More people arrive, and soon the flat is jammed with friendly faces and rousing memories. Despite the cold, the door to the balcony is open to draw out the cigarette smoke and the heat of so many bodies. There's plenty of food and several bottles of Georgian wine, and no shortage of vodka despite Gorbachev's absurd prohibitions. ('Not even Lenin himself would dare separate a Russian from his vodka,' Nadya, her mother's best friend, says.) People share stories about Lidiya; there's laughter as well as sadness, but with the passing hours, it's the laughter that dominates. The night deepens, the food is eaten, the alcohol is drunk.

It's close to eleven o'clock when everyone finally leaves. Nadya helps with the tidying up, then makes them some fresh tea. They sit at the table where she, Galina, and her mother have spent so much time, and where Nadya and her mother have spent so much time, but never before has it been just her and Nadya sitting here together. And it occurs to her that it is these small everyday happenings that will drive home the fact that her life has cruelly and irrevocably changed.

Nadya tucks a fresh cigarette between her lips, and reaches for Galina's hands. As soon as Lidiya is laid to rest, she says, Galina will be going back to work, even earlier if she is up to it. Work will help, she says, work will distract. She takes a deep drag of her cigarette, ash falls to the table. 'And, Galya, no more talk of emigration. It is

better to remain in the country you know. Where you yourself are known.’ And when there is no response, she adds, ‘Life must go on, Galinochka. And life here is not so bad. Not like it used to be.’

Nadya continues to talk about the future, but Galina is not listening. She is caught by Nadya’s face, a face so familiar she’s not really looked at it before. It is as if a hessian sack has been stuck to the skull and neck, leaving holes for the eyes and mouth. This rough, mustardy fabric-skin, falling in folds and creases, is the map of Nadya’s life. It reveals poor nourishment and too many cigarettes, too little money and too much vodka, too much work for too little satisfaction. She loves Nadya, but now, suddenly, looking at this woman she has known her entire life evokes a terrible fear: might this be the face of her own future?

What is left for her here? Even if it were possible to withdraw her emigration papers without penalty, even if she were permitted to remain in her job as a book illustrator, she will never be promoted beyond her current position. There’ll be nights and weekends spent in the flat—that’s if she were permitted to stay here alone—painting pictures that will never be seen by anyone other than herself. She supposes there’ll be a husband and a child or two whose own future would be as strained and stained as her own. As a Jew, she’ll never know the freedoms of other Soviet citizens, much less those experienced in the West. Gorbachev’s reforms, like all those that have preceded them, will not last. If she stays, this—what she has now—is the best she can hope for, this life stretching ahead to her own death.

Nadya must have realised that Galina’s thoughts were elsewhere because finally she stops talking. She pours more tea for them both, lights another cigarette, and when she speaks again, her voice is gentle, it is kind.

‘So, Galya, what do you plan to do?’

‘I’m still going to emigrate.’ The words come of their own accord.

Nadya stares at her. Sadness and pity are etched in the crumpled face, and suddenly she is apologising. It was wrong of her to have raised the subject of the future. It's far too early to make decisions. Lidiya has only just gone, Galya is in a state of shock.

Now Galina reaches for Nadya's hands. She holds them gently between her own. Her voice, however, is firm.

'I'm going to emigrate ... to Australia.'

The word fits uneasily in her mouth. She has decided to move to a country whose name has never before passed her lips.

Australia.