

CHAPTER 11

We Found Each Other In The Dark //

Meet Me In Montauk // Dead Hearts

*** We Found Each Other In The Dark ***

Her hair of fire, red as rust, and something in the way she carried herself: as if she was light, unweary, like a fairy or elf or like how children are before they learn what's really happened to the world. She didn't belong there; in that house broken down and decaying. The very air smelled of age. Age and wet and tobacco. And she was young. We sat in the lounge and she brought us tea, already too old for her bones. Roman kicked back and didn't say much.

'Did he tell you why I'm here?' I said.

'Something about your wife.'

'I'm hoping Mary-Ann knows how I can find her.'

(The girl drank her tea with both hands, seemed skeptical. I remembered the connection between you and her.)

'I heard you were in the Red Square,' I said.

'Oh that,' she said.

'My wife was there too.'

'Yeah?'

'That was why she left me,' I said. 'I think... She's been gone a year now.'

'But you're still married?'

'She was there when the attack happened and came home and said she needed to leave, needed to go to America, to Alaska to find her sister. And then she went and I let her go because that's what you do when you're in love.' (I thought.) 'But I was wrong and I've been trying to figure it out: why? what happened?...' (I took a moment and inhaled and blew on the tea, studying the ripples as if an answer - your answer - could be found in them.) 'You were there,' I said to the girl. (Maybe she'd had similar feelings to you.) 'Does that make sense? That she'd leave?'

'It could,' she said. 'Kind of.'

'But?' I asked.

'But I'm not your wife.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I'm just worried about her.' (About you.)

'Mary-Ann's not coming till tomorrow,' she said. 'It's just me here. Unless you're wanting something, I'm confused.'

'You're a friend of hers, right? Mary-Ann?'

(The girl didn't answer.)

'So Roman here suggested I should say hi to you, that with you and her being friends maybe it might smooth things over, make me seeing her not so abrupt or threatening. If you think I'm ok, then she might think I'm ok and she can help me.'

(The girl sipped at her tea and thought for a while, curled a loop of hair behind her ear.)

'And you're not here for anything else?' she asked.

'I just want to find my wife.'

'You sure?'

'Yes, of course I'm sure.'

'What if I don't think you're ok? That you should leave?'

'Do you?'

(She considered me for a moment. Her eyes were the brightest blue. Like

gemstones even in the dimness of that room.)

'I'm not sure yet,' she said.

'If you want me to leave, then I will leave. No pressure,' I said. (I tried relaxing, tried not to think of you. And the girl did not speak for a long time. It was only then I noticed how cluttered the room was. Rugs upon rugs on the floor. Piles and piles of books and magazines in the corners and on the side tables. Expired candles blackened and burnt in dusty cups on top of cabinets and the coffee table. One of those dream-catchers from her stall hung among lace and purple fabric covering the window.)

'Why'd you wait so long to find her?' she asked. 'Why now?'

'I didn't know how I *could* find her,' I said. (The words came quickly through me as if a reflex, as if rehearsed. I cringed inside.) 'Not until the other day when I remembered Mary-Ann did I realise there was a chance.'

'Do you think your wife got there?'

'Alaska?'

'Yeah.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I don't think so.' (I can only see you on the floor of that house, bound with the others from your caravan and waiting, waiting for me. I can see no further.)

'Do you think she's dead?'

'No, I know she's not.' (You're still with me. I know it)

The girl sat back. (I tried to put you from my mind, maybe I was coming across as too intense, manic even.) Eventually she said: 'I was there to see my mum.'

'In the Red Square?' I asked.

'For so long I swore I would never see her again. Not look her up. Not answer her letters or messages. Even in the years when she disappeared and I thought she had finally done it, killed herself, I didn't look. Life was life, you know? Then one day I was between places, in Norway sleeping on cardboard

and old newspaper in a bus shelter, and there she was, her photo right on the page in front of me like a different person. Piloting a spaceship to save the world it said. Russia it said, and I knew I had to see her. There was no reasoning or why. I had to go.'

'Did you get to see her? Say goodbye?'

'No. She was up there, and I was down here.'

(At least we have that, you and me: a last parting.)

'I'm sorry,' I said.

(And then the girl turned and looked at me and her face changed, like a contentment or calm had come over her. I had to look away.)

'You weren't with your wife in the Red Square were you?' she said.

'No,' I said. (Why didn't I go?) 'I was so stupid. That place...what do they call it? Atrus?...I didn't believe that we could like...a miracle, like on a jet plane leave and start a new life there. As if it's all just: Out with the old in with the new, as they say. I refused to even talk about it. I wanted our lives to be here, peaceful, easy. To grow old together; if that was even a dream we could have achieved. I didn't want anything to change. I was selfish.' (So selfish.)

'You were being a realist,' Rowen said and she looked at me, saw something and let it hang there between us as if it was built of an energy you could touch, hold, see, linking me to her but I couldn't hold her gaze. I changed the subject:

'Have you made many friends here in Lugovaya?' I asked.

'A few boys have come and gone but not really.' (Then her face crinkled a little.) 'The women here seem very protective, or cagey and they don't want to talk to me for some reason, I don't know why. They look at me like I'm an alien.'

(You used to complain of this, could never understand it was their way of accepting difference, being curious yet cautious, wary of what you might

bring to their lives.)

'Have you been into town? It's different there.' (Roman, who I had thought asleep lifted an eyebrow at this.)

'The city?' she asked.

'Yes, the city.'

'Not since the bombing.' (The bombing...) 'Mary-Ann doesn't like going anywhere near the square.'

'I haven't been back since it happened either.'

'Because of your wife?'

'Yes.'

'It's not easy is it?'

'No.'

(Something in this - the idea of ease and that I had wanted things to be so with you and me, easy - rings true and opens up a hole in me.) I noticed Rowen looking into her mug sad as well, becoming somber and she was too pretty to be somber.

'I can take you around, I said. If you'd like. Not back to the square I mean. To the city... Unless you want to go back. We could go wherever.'

'Now?' she asked, in a way I wasn't sure was a proposition or a misunderstanding.

'I guess,' I said, shrugging my shoulders. 'I mean ration isn't until the new year, we could go after then.'

(I expected a confident No, a repulsion. In truth I don't know why I offered, it just came out.) She leaned forward and holding her cup studied me. 'Alright,' she said. 'Let's go now. How far can we go?'

(How far?) 'Maybe an hour,' I said. 'Thirty to forty kilometres maybe. Have you got somewhere in mind?'

'I want to go back,' she said. 'To the Red Square. I need to see again, to feel being close to her, my mum. I need to know what happened - that place - that

it's wasn't something I just made up like a dream. You know what I mean? '

I didn't answer. (I was already picturing the square, the emptiness, trying to hold you to me, imagine what you were doing after the woman abducted you.)

'And I think you need to go too,' she said.

*** Meet Me In Montauk ***

And so here we are. It's snowing again. (Was it snowing that night?) I have forgotten how vast and empty this place can feel in the daytime. As if I am standing in view of an immeasurable plateau bordered by mountains hazed and blued in the distance. (That night would have been different, full with the crowd and the stalls and the Christmas trees, the buildings of the Kremlin and the Cathedral and the State Museum underlit in the night as if some fantastic bordering sepulchre, I can almost picture it. Almost.)

Away from me Rowen points. 'That's where it happened,' she says.

Where she gestures there is a cordoned off area before Lenin's tomb, a heap of wreaths and toys and flowers and placards and unlit candles part buried beneath the gathering snow. (Were you there or close by when it happened? Savouring the warm sweetness of a mulled wine and looking up at the spaceship? In which spot were you? In which particular place?)

The sky is grey and blank, as if a sheet has been cast over the city protecting us from dreams of things we should never want.

'Here,' Rowen says, finding a spot. 'He blew himself up here.'

Where she is standing there is only snow. She begins kicking the white,

sliding her foot to get to the paving beneath. I join in, scraping with my feet. It is black under the snow. Scorched. We must appear insane. Like a bitter couple angry at the Earth. With quick work we expose an area of a hundred square feet or so and even this does not show the fullness of it. What is surprising however is at ground-zero it is not black but clean and pale, as if the heat and power had cleaned the stone and made it new. Rowen looks up.

‘And my mother was right there,’ she says. ‘Up there.’

I lift my head and try and imagine in the greyed firmament a vast craft, what is supposed to lead us to the future. (In truth, I never saw the spaceship. From our home that night it was a vague dot on the far horizon. I remember laughing at the dogs as if they could understand: *That* is supposed to save us?)

‘You know what?’ Rowen says, arched right back and looking upwards. ‘— Don’t you think it looked a bit like a mosque? Like a black, fucking, mosque? I remember wondering if they knew when they were building the thing, or if anyone else noticed.’

I pretend to smile and say nothing.

In the cleared paving already growing dusty again with new snow I can see red there, a blood staining of the old ground that no amount of treading or marching or fleeing footsteps could ever erase. (Why haven’t they replaced it yet?) On the far side through the haze, tiny but discernible, a figure is hunched over, lifting and lowering in the way of the cathedral as if in prayer, the small shape of their body almost invisible with snow. (And the snow falls heavier, tickling my nose and gathering over my shoulders and arms and I wonder what you saw. What changed your mind about us that night.)

Rowen moves excitedly, almost as if dancing in the snowfall, showing me places in the air where things had been: ‘There were screens everywhere,’ she says. ‘Giant screens, five of them. Here, and there and there and...there! I can see it like it was almost yesterday. And there was a huge decorated Christmas

tree. I came in from that way beside the State Museum.’ (She takes steps in a line towards the centre of the square as if surveying a boundary and turns back to me.) ‘I had the strangest conversation. A guy, an American guy. On the way in he asked me if I believed in God...and he asked in a real serious way, like his eyes changed...’

(I laugh at this, God and a spaceship.) ‘Really?’

‘I told him to fuck off,’ she says and looks up to the sky, ‘I was only talking to him because I’d broken up with my boyfriend and he seemed cute. You know, end of the world hook up and all that. Somehow I always find the weirdos...’

(I wait for her to offer a contraction about me: *But not you*. But she doesn't give it. She just stares off into the distance for a while.)

‘...I wonder what happened to him,’ she says.

I follow and we start walking side by side to we don't know where, hands in pockets.

‘What happened to him doesn't really matter, does it?’ I say.

‘I guess you're right,’ she says.

(But it does matter.)

You slept on the floor, bound along with the others. It had been three hungry and unendurable days, but you had endured them. Meaningless hours. Each night squares of moonlight into the room where they spun over floorboard and body and wall until the depraved morning came. You woke in the dawn as the guards re-entered with their guns as if returning from a sortie and you asked what they wanted with you, told them you had no money, nothing to give of value, and one of them with a scar on his cheek leaned in and spat in your face.

Please, the others cried, but the guards held rigid and waited.

Hours later, sometime like afternoon but couldn't have been, the woman

you'd met in town walked in with long, heavy steps, light about her head until the front door closed.

Nikolai pleaded. 'What do you want from us?'

The woman kneeled at his eyes. 'Shut up,' she said. 'I know who you are.'

'Please,' he said. 'We are poor, simple people trying to find a new home. We are gypsies—less than gypsies. All we want is to be left to go East. We are hungry. Starving.'

She nodded to one of the guards and said, *Hit him*, and the guard butted Nikolai with the rifle and then again and again. Impact after brutal impact, which must have caught him off guard for he did not scream or protest, only the wet thudding of hardwood on bone and flesh until he was limp. All the while you and the women cried and strained against your bindings, wailing and sobbing at the violence.

'He's dead,' Zinaida cried. 'You killed my husband.'

And the woman nodded and two guards picked you by the arms and dragged you protesting outside. And—

'Did you meet your wife in America?' Rowen asks as we stroll along the battlements towards the cathedral.

(And you're gone from me again.)

I reply: 'Yes. Before the Discovery; in San Diego. But we were so young then. We were different people.'

'Wow,' she says. 'I never went to America.'

'It was like a new Europe or history in the making,' I said. 'So many different people all together, united but un-united and living their lives in ways never imagined before. I wanted to stay there forever.'

'And then the Discovery happened,' Rowen says and nothing more.

'And then the end,' I say.

And from nowhere a dog appears, a husky lapping our legs, circling as if a

toddler at a game. Rowen bends and begins saying things like: *Yes, yes, you are SO handsome*; and *Where did you come from?* and *Oh look at you!* And I just stand there. I look around but the hazed square is otherwise empty, even the praying figure is gone. The dog settles and sits by my feet expectantly.

'Check if he's got a collar,' Rowen says.

'It's not a he, I say. It's a bitch.'

'Don't call him that!'

'Why are you calling it a he?'

'Don't use that word. Bitch. Just don't. He's beautiful.'

(I check about its neck.) 'There's no collar,' I say. 'And it's a girl.'

Rowen kneels by the dog, rubbing its fur speckled with snow.

'Who do you think he belongs to?'

'No one,' I answer. 'It's stray, free.'

'I've got an idea,' she says, and then she is up and running off towards the State Museum looking back, saying, 'Come doggy, come!' And the dog knowing what to do lopes in great eager bounds after her until it catches up and starts circling her legs where she trips or intentionally falls with a soft thud and then is laughing, obscured and squirming under the dog. And even from here I am in awe. It's so stupid but I can't help it. Such a sound: laughter. I stand like an idiot watching and I am laughing now too and I want to cry, and I do, laughing and crying and I try and remember you laughing, when we had last been happy enough for such a connection. I run over.

'Are you alright?' I ask.

Rowen only laughs. Giggling as she bats playfully in the snow with the dog who is doing little bounces around her as if unable to decide where it wants to be or what it wants to do, or how to contain itself within that decision.

And the sky is formless and empty.

'You are not from here,' the woman says as the guards push you into the weeds and dirt and you are still sobbing and the air is so crisp it almost burns your throat. You can't believe he would be dead. It had happened so fast. He couldn't be dead.

'What are you doing travelling across the Ural Mountains?' she demands, then: 'I know you're an American. What use do you have of walking all this way? Who is guiding you? Where are the others? How many wagons were with you?'

All you can say is: 'The fire, the fire. There was a fire.'

And then I'm not sure if she hits you or not.

Instead, in flashes we're at the airport saying goodbye and I'm letting you go, and then it's before that: the months of not talking or not seeing each other besides glances; the sad and sullen pity sex for familiarity. And then it's the days after you decided, the make-up sex which made nothing up, and then it's that night again, the night of the bombing: you walking up our drive, bloody as if a ghost, saying, *I need to leave, Leo*.

And the sky is formless and empty.

And I need you but you're not there.

Holding her giggling laughter in my head, I scan the square again, from the shrine to the tomb to the fortress to the museum and to the cathedral and I try, but I just can't put it together. I can't link this place to that night, to you; it is as if they are two separate worlds. I'm sorry, I thought I could, but I can't understand what it must have been like: what you felt, if your decision had been building or was an epiphany. There is nothing of you here. I had hoped for an answer. I had hoped through hesitation and fear I might see reason and cast myself into that abyss of what it must have taken for you to do this to us. That I might become even more driven, content even. Instead there is nothing. This is just a place like any other. Paving and walls and air and dust. A place

like your childhood or the years and years of life before we met, a place with a history I have played no part in.

Eventually Rowen sits up. 'Gerald,' she says. 'I'm calling him Gerald.'

And I make to remind her again the dog is a *She*, but instead only say: 'Okay. Can we go?'

On the way back to the car, the sky opens to patches of clear blue from the grey and the snow ceases. The wide streets, empty in greys and forming shadows have that smell after it rains and then the distant hint of garlic cooking. The dog follows by my side and I tell myself tonight I will hold Poncho and Lainka as long as they will let me and I will try and push harder, toward the within, see where you are, what has happened to you in the house near Sarafanovo.

(Did she hit you? The woman has you right there but I can't see it. It is but a fog of impossibility and possibility, of maybes and none of those maybes seem right, it's like I'm having an argument with myself in my mind but I can't help it, I need to know.)

'Gerald won't leave,' Rowen says. 'She's following us.'

'So it's a *her* now?'

'Gerald, I've decided is short for Geraldine,' she says. 'You wouldn't understand but I always think dogs are boys, cats are girls, until I know them. It's a long story. But I know her now.' (She makes a face at the dog.) 'Yes I do, don't I? Yes. Yes. I know you I do.'

We get there at the car parked on Vasilyevski Descent and it's getting warm, the sun is full out now reflecting off the river and the windscreen, following as I cross to the driver's side making me squint and if it was not for the dust of snow everywhere one could be forgiven for thinking it a different day, a different season, a different world.

Rowen says goodbye to the dog, pointing and waving her finger and the

dog waits patiently until she is done and then without even a double take turns at her command and lopes away along the road and then is gone.

'Well that was disappointing,' she says, huffing and shrugging her shoulders.

And I think maybe that's just the way things are these days. Someone comes and then goes without any sentimentality.

Nobody is out as we drive back with the sun searing down at us. There are no pedestrians, no street-side barbers, no wheel-able stall sellers whiling their way to who knows where. From the corner of my eye as we turn and navigate our way back to the highway, maybe a fishing skiff on the river or a man down a street sweeping a footpath, but I keep my eyes on the road and so don't see. (It is always as if everyone is holed up in their homes or gone, either temporarily or permanently. You know how it is: bunkered down in their own worlds. There's maybe seven years left but most act like it's forever. I don't blame them, I was that way too. Before you left, I admit I had forgotten it was even going to happen. Life's like that in a way, don't you think? One long forgetting? Sometimes I wonder if that is what death is. The body doesn't fail. The soul doesn't ascend. It is only one final sudden loss of memory.)

The car putters and sometimes burbles and I can hear a miss in the timing I tell myself I should fix later.

'So do you work?' Rowen asks, resting her head on the window.

'I used to be a writer. A journalist,' I say.

(There is so much road. I can see a wisp of smoke rising from a chimney beyond the trees.)

'And not anymore?'

'No.'

'Is anyone still making books or newspapers?'

'Just the Moscow news as far as I know.'

'Why don't you work for them?'

'I don't know what i'd say. What I'd write about.'

'Isn't something better than nothing?'

'I saw a flyer on the step to my parents' place once.'

'What did it say?'

'It was for a bible group at the local church to talk about the end of the world and the bombing and what it all means and that kind of stuff.'

'And you didn't go?'

'God no. It doesn't mean anything, not then and not now. Just cause and effect and maniacs wanting their stage.'

(A tabby cat scampers part-way across the road and stops and waits for us to pass. From its mouth hangs the limp body of a bird.)

Rowen asks. 'So what work do you do to satisfy the council?'

'Most of the time, not much,' I say. (And then it just comes out.) 'My father is dying.'

'I'm sorry,' she says.

'It is what it is. I help my mother look after him and to maintain the apartment.'

'Are you two close?'

'Not really. For a long time I thought I was adopted. I love them and all, but I wish there was more there between us. Some acknowledgement we are more than bodies cohabiting out of duty. Anyway, in the warmer months I'm also a farmhand for a place west of Moscow, fixing things, working the animals, collecting the harvest. An elderly couple. They have a horse and cart and pick me up and everything.'

Rowen smiles, looks to the sky through the window and then again. 'I would love that,' she says. 'Being useful.'

'You should come next season. To the farm. They are good people and need the help.'

'Maybe. I don't know. Maybe it's not a good idea.'

'Well, the offer's there if you want it.'

(I hear Rowen shift on her seat.) 'She won't help you, you know,' she says.

'Huh?'

'Mary-Ann. You're not the first to have come round looking for your family. She won't tell you. She doesn't know.'

'What do you mean? How do you know she doesn't know?'

'The wagons of people, right? Leaving from the old airport South of the city? They're gone, disappeared. She hasn't heard for ages. The people she knew that went off last year never came back and she hasn't heard since.'

(I can only see you kneeling prostrate, the woman looming above you. This image I see on the road, in the yards as we pass, among the clouds in the sky.)

'She must know something,' I say. 'Where they went, which way they took.'

'Last people who came round, she told them they could be anywhere.'

(You're dancing in the hall, smiling on our balcony, swimming in the ocean in the sun, laughing, laughing, and then you're screaming in the forest and I can't concentrate. It's everything all at once.) I pull the car over.

'What are you doing?'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'You seemed nice. I didn't want to let you down.'

(I can't think. You're disappearing from me.)

'...Goddamnit. God fucking damnit!'

'I'm sorry.'

'Get out.'

'What?'

'Get out.'

*** Dead Hearts ***

That night I dreamt I was in an airport terminal. Unknown walls, unknown ceiling, unknown light and unknown air. Everything the same and everything always on and everything everything. Everything nothing and everyone coming and going, with the things that stay all being colourless and un-intrusive nothing things. Faceless pastels. Blank brands. Hordes already imagining themselves somewhere else. And I'm walking through the aisles and on the travellators, through them looking for you, hoping to see your face in the crowd, hoping you would turn a corner. That maybe even I might find you standing with a sign saying my name, Leonid Leontyeva, because in an airport it's formal and you wouldn't walk up with just, *LEO*; that's not you, that's not how you roll. And you never liked Leonid. For some reason you thought it sounded too German and you never told me why that was a problem. But, you didn't show. You weren't there. I fell asleep along a row of seats and woke at a time that could have been anytime and the dream went on and I stayed in that place for what seemed years. Drinking the same coffee, eating the same food, reading the same stories in different books that all looked the same. I waited and watched like one waits for many things you

shouldn't wait for; you tell yourself just one more, just a little bit longer, maybe she's behind this non-person, that non-person, maybe she's at a different gate waiting for me, maybe we missed each other, maybe she already arrived and left and is somewhere else, maybe i'm too late, maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe. And then at some point I woke up - really woke up - and it was a new day and I was here in my bedroom, the same bedroom I grew up in as a kid and where I've lived since you left. I woke up longing for you and longing for answers: What happened? What was that woman going to do to you? Why were they abducting travellers from the mountain? How, If I can't find you, can you be safe? Could you really be in Sarafanovo? Should I go? Should I find a horse and make my way to you? And if I did, what would that even mean? Am I just crazy? And then I remembered leaving Rowen on the side of the motorway and I worried for her. Trembled inside. A knot that shouldn't have been there. As if I should have gone back and looked for her, gone to Mary-Ann's and apologised. But to say what?

Just say sorry, you'd say.

And I'd ask: *Is that it?*

And you'd say, *Yes. You'd say: Don't explain and just listen.*

And so it was, I said to the morning: 'I'm sorry.'

'I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.'

Silence.

Unable to stay in bed, downstairs I fed the dogs and held them close and then helped mother dust the shelves and our sparse possessions, wiped the photo frames and the crystal ornaments of little pigs and penguins and kangaroos in the display cabinet, cleaned under the vases of dried flowers that had died so long ago but were still so beautiful. I wiped behind the chairs and

along the window sills, sneezing and sneezing because I'm always too stupid to cover my face for the dust. Mother blessed me each time, but apart from that we didn't talk.

They say if you listen, listen carefully within yourself, your loved ones departed will talk to you, be with you always in your heart. But I don't hear you. I never hear you, I realise. I thought you were with me, that we were linked. But I know now it was always me, just wishful thinking, some kind of solipsistic cognitive dissonance: of pretending things would be okay if I made them okay, and they were never so...

I ended up chopping wood for most of the day and thought of nothing and it was nice to be in that place again, ignorance. Repetition and action. Simplicity and focus. Though it didn't last long. In the night I had another dream, this time of being in the Red Square again. It was daytime, though it was as though the weather was four seasons at once, everywhere I looked was different: You were there in the summer, standing, gazing upwards to the sun and blue sky. Rowen was there too, in the winter laughing in the snow with the dog. Mother was there in the springtime smelling flowers that had grown through the paving and she was humming a tune, and among Autumn Father stood resolute at attention, in uniform surrounded by leaves of every earthen colour littering the ground. You acted as if I was not there. All of you. Captivated and captured alone in your little loops of solitary action. But why did I dream of her, the girl, Rowen? I can still hear her laughter even now. When I woke, the morning was brisk and I could see my breath breathing out before me and it was one of those mornings where you feel anything is possible, that the world couldn't end, we couldn't have destroyed it, Earth is like God, permanent, immortal and ours. Day will follow day as night follows night and life will go on, of course it will. There is always hope and there will always be people to charge on ahead and accomplish and dream and live and die and love and give birth. That was how it felt. I was full of an energy and

determination and a frustration at being lonely and she had been nice to me and deserved better and I had to chance I might find you still.

So I checked the time, took my pistol and hugged the dogs and made sure my boots were comfortable and the wind low and I set out. Step after steady step. The calm morning washed around me like a gentle stream. The city quiet and empty as it is. Couples walked. Chatter murmured from windows cracked open. Birds called and occasional droplets of water fell from the trees reminding me to look around, things are always changing. It felt like I had travelled almost the entire day by the time I reached the river and the Third Ring Road. By car it had always seemed so close and so easy but my legs were burning and I found myself thinking on how it was for you in those first weeks I created and how it would have really been.

A group of scrappy children ran out from one of the houses and pestered me for a long while as to if I had any cigarettes, to which I told them I don't smoke, but they said come on, everybody has one or two, what am I saving myself for, and they laughed and laughed and wouldn't believe me and afterwards I did crave a smoke and I thought of Roman and what he might be doing.

It wasn't until the shadows were facing East that I stopped in for food. Here. The shop used to be an automotive mechanic. There are fold-out tables outside, all occupied bar one which I set myself on. Timber tables with bench seats. Families. A few couples. The pistol is hard on the small of my back. I can sense the others staring but it's okay. It's always awkward in a new district, everyone unaware if you're a freeloader or not.

The garson emerged a little while ago and asked where I was from and what I did and I told him and ordered some meats and cheese and something I would not normally order, least of all this time of day, I asked for a vodka and a coffee and he joked on if I wanted them together or not and I assured him no in all seriousness. And here he returns. I sit and drink the coffee for a

time and then eat the white cheese and krakovskaya sausage with the slices of dark rye. I look around. Across the road is a grassy berm rising to what years ago would have been a train line with cantilevered overhead electrical wires. There - as you no doubt would have seen on your journey, as it is on all railroads as far as I know - the rails have been removed and the aggregate filled in with dirt, the cleared path now a road for local horse-driven cart and wagon use. I sip the vodka and feel the day on my face and rehearse in my mind how I might say sorry to her. When I am done I thank the garson and tell him he and his house are doing the work of saving mankind, and he blesses me and tells me to go with God and presses his hands together like a Buddhist as I go.

The rest of the way is due north for hours. Most of it I spend on Dubninskaya street, admiring the huge oak trees and then I'm up on the highway, the blues of the road walls each side flaked and faded for kilometres and in some places it is knocked down. The high overhead power lines buzz as I pass and I try and picture what electricity / energy actually is, or if like air it is invisible but for its effects on us and the world. Is energy the soul and lightning the first word spoken?

Off the highway I begin to see pages on the road, strewn, torn scraps of lined notes running up and then to the grass and then back on the bitumen. A trail like crumbs. I kneel and collect one, it reads: Who are you? in flowing handwritten Cyrillic. I return it carefully the way I found it and a few steps later read the next. It asks: Where does the Earth come from? The third is a letter and reads:

Dear Hilde, Happy 15th birthday! As I'm sure you'll understand, I want to give you a present that will help you grow. Forgive me for sending the card c/o Sophie. It was the easiest way. Love from Dad.

And this puzzles me. I continue and read the others but they avail me no further. No more letters, only notes on things like What is Socialism? What is reality? And statements like: Either something came from nothing or something has existed for eternity, one or both of these has to be true and both are equally impossible from our frame of reference.

Leaves rustle in the breeze and I am filled with a sadness, a sudden guilt and I return the letter down exactly where I found it as if it was meant to be there and stay there for someone else, to one day find it's intended recipient. Not me. I continue on and smell the air but soon find myself thinking of the letter. Where is the gift? Where did it go? What happened to Hilde? Who is Sophie?

Dusk comes slowly and the temperature drops and I change from carrying my coat to wearing it. The sky is a beautiful gradient of blue to black with yellow and pink where it finds the clouds. Familiar streets. Then the slight uphill slope and the leaning metal fence.

I knock on the door of the shack. There is mumbling inside. The door opens and before me is not Rowen but an old woman, brown from tanning, her hair un-dyed and salty with brown and grey. Lamplight glows from a room inside. She is large and imposing in the door as if a gatekeeper of ages past. I had remembered her differently.

'Who are you?' she asks in accented Russian.

I answer in English: 'Mary-Ann I assume. I think you knew my wife, Juliette...I am her husband.'

And she stands there in the doorway not saying anything. Rowen appears.

'Oh it's you,' she says. 'I didn't hear your car.'

'It's out of petrol,' I say.

'A bitter laugh. Serves you right,' she says.

'I'm sorry about that.'

'You walked all the way here?'

'Yes.'

'What do you want?' asks Mary-Anne.

(And I hear you.) 'Look, I'm really sorry,' I say to Rowen and mean it.

She doesn't answer.

'Can I come in?'

Mary-Ann looks past me to outside and I follow her gaze to the gap in the ramshackle fence where I entered, ribbed and jagged alien metal in the night.

'You're not here for any trouble are you?' she asks.

I put my hands up and reply: 'I just came here to apologise to her and I have. I'm sorry, I say again. But my wife...If I can ask you some questions about her, then I'll go. I promise.'

Mary-Ann eyes me warily.

'You owe me this much,' I say.

And I'm back in the lounge room and it's the same as it was the other day but darker, with long shadows dancing in candlelight. I sit down as does Mary-Ann who rests herself on the couch. Rowen holds back against the wall, folding her arms with indignation.

'So?' Mary-Ann asks.

'You don't remember me do you,' I say.

She doesn't answer but instead lowers her gaze to the floor, collects a bowl of sunflower seeds from under the coffee table.

'Do you remember my wife, Juliette?' I ask.

'I do,' she says and then leans forward on her elbows, bites at a seed and then discards the shell on the table and claims another from the bowl. 'I know about you. I do. You lived on the hill. You and your wife. She was from San Diego if i'm not mistaken.'

'Yes,' I say.

'Mr Head-in-the-clouds,' she says.

(Is that what you called me?) 'Yes,' I answer.

'Well?'

'Where is she?' I ask.

'How should I know?'

'What do you mean How should you know?' I say, trying not to get frustrated. 'You're why she went.'

'Now now,' she says. 'Don't be coming here and making accusations. All I did was remove a restriction that was standing in her way. That's all.'

(I breathe.) 'How can I find her?'

Mary-Anne laughs. 'She's not lost, she isn't coming back. Not ever and you know it.'

'Where is she *now*? Do you know?'

'Why do you care, you abandoned her.'

(Abandoned?) 'She's my wife,' I say.

'You *men*,' she says, and bites at another seed. 'Always wanting to be possessing things, making everything your own. And don't be telling me it's not true, look where it's gotten us. Making decisions you ought not be making. Your wife wasn't yours, she wasn't no one's. She was her own woman with her own interests and plans to accomplish and she didn't need you. Not at all.'

(And I know she's right. Of course she is. You were always that way: fiercely independent.) 'I know,' I say.

'—and you come here thinking you have a right to claim her back?'

'I know,' I say.

'What are you doing here? What do you want?'

'To make things right,' I say.

'To make things right... As if all it took was you making it so.'

'No. That's not what I meant.'

'You're not making a whole lot of sense now are you?' she says.

Rowen moves off the wall, unfolds her arms. 'He misses her,' she says. 'He thinks he made a mistake not going along with her.'

'I get that,' Mary-Ann says. 'But you need to slow down. To think. What you're not understanding is that some mistakes can't be unmade. You can't shape the world how you want it. She's gone. Long gone. If not already across the sea by now. So—'

'Look—' I say. (Wait... across the sea?)

'—You look,' she says. 'Why did you come here? You can't be so stupid to think it's as simple as me telling you a place and you following. Do you recognise the world we live in? Mr Head-in-the-clouds? And even if it *was* that simple, what makes you think I'd tell you?'

'Please,' I say. 'Fourteen years we were married, and... Nothing is ever perfect and I know she left, I was there saying goodbye to her and I'll never forget that moment.' (Not till the day I die.) 'I just...I just want to know she's alright, okay? That she's safe. I want to be able to say sorry; to make up for how I left it. I want to see in *her* eyes, and her see in mine what I've lost and to hold her, just hold her. Do you understand what I am saying?'

'I want, I want, me, me, me,' Mary-Ann says. 'So typical.'

And Rowen interjects: 'Come on Mary-Ann.'

'Please,' I say. 'If you don't know where she is, tell me the way she went, where I can follow.'

'It's too late,' Mary-Ann says. 'It's too goddamn late.'

'Because you lost them?'

'*You* lost her.'

'You don't know where they are, do you?'

'It's not your place, not your right to go to her. Don't you get it? If she wanted you she'd have waited or she would have come back. You think we're all stupid and have no agency of our own? I didn't force her to do anything. You come in here wanting to reclaim her; to appease yourself; make you feel

like you've done something - that you're the good husband. Fuck you! I know you.'

'Mary-Ann, stop it!' Rowen says.

'I'm done. Get the fuck out,' Mary-Ann says. 'Go.'

(And then she casually resumes eating those sunflower seeds as if it's resolved and there is nothing more to say. And I feel like you're so distant, like you're disappearing before my eyes. Like a sudden amnesia is coming over me and I'm struggling to remember your face or how you would sound saying the words we only hear when our faces are close, real close, in the hours when it is just you and me. We're laying on the bed and I say your name and for an instant you're there and then you're gone, wind in the curtains and I can't even hear those words, what were they? I can't feel anything of you and my soul lunges.) And then I'm holding the pistol standing. Rowen gasps.

'Where is she?' I demand.

And Mary-Ann curses to herself and holds up her hands. 'You motherfucker,' she says.

'Just tell him you don't know,' Rowen says.

'You feel powerful now? You little shit.'

'Where is she?'

'Go to hell. Selfish pig.'

'Mary-Ann. Stop it.'

'Tell me! Get a paper, write it down, I yell. Tell me where she went.'

'Tell him!' Rowen says.

'I ain't telling shit. Fuck it.'

'Write it down!' I say.

'Come on, tell him what you told the others.'

'She's gone,' Mary-Ann says. 'It makes no matter.'

I charge the barrel. Put it to her head. 'Tell me something, anything!'

(And for a moment I think I see you but no, in a rush all of that clutter rises up to greet me and the glass of the coffee table explodes and I am winded, timber smashing into my side and I roll off the arm of the chair onto the floor and the soft carpet wispy with dust nurses my cheek and I start crying and cannot stop. My mind is blank and I am crying and all I know is this sensation of sobbing and being empty, utterly empty, as if I am crying only for myself and this makes me cry even more; for I am not looking for you and I can't see you, even if I try. I lose all sense of time and place and I just cry and cry, for me and for you, and for all of it.)

Until the crunch of broken glass and another weight shifting. Rowen's voice, saying: 'Oh fuck. Oh fuck.'

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'I'm so sorry.' Though I'm not sure if this is to you or to her or for whatever has just happened, me ruining the coffee table and making a mess, or for the other day and leaving her too.

'Fucking fuck,' she says, terrified. 'Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.'

'I'm sorry,' I say. And after a time I notice a ringing around everything, a background noise I never noticed before. I turn and sit up and there is a warm pain in my hand and I see the gun on the floor and blood up my arm and then I see her: Mary-Ann slouching back on the couch unmoving as if in a deep sleep, but that is not the red of her mouth opening and the gurgle of her snoring, that is not her mouth at all. And I look to Rowen who is on the floor too, shuddering uncontrollably.

'We have to go,' I say. 'We can't stay here.'

I collect her in my arms and lead her outside and I can hear behind the ringing, behind the houses, there is a commotion brewing, chatter and enquiry and footsteps on road. It is so cold outside and I realise I should have collected jackets but there was no time. There is no time. We stumble in the darkness holding each other down the street and she is saying nothing. Her teeth chatter and she holds me tight and I want to ask what happened back there,

but that is for another time, so I try and remember the way. The moonlight is dim and everything is different now. From behind us closer than I thought, I hear a woman scream and then she begins wailing and then the muffled sounds of a man.

‘Come on,’ I say and hold her. ‘It’ll be alright. I know where to go.’