next door. "We've been having a bit of a fracas over you," she said, looking round.

We were kept at the police station till well past midnight, and in the taxi afterwards Silvia, released on bail, after not uttering a word throughout most of the journey, finally told me that her application for a visa to visit Moscow had been turned down. I said she should attach no importance to it: it could be rejected today and granted tomorrow. "That's not what I'm worried about," she said. "You know, I feel as if a whole age has passed away. It's as if I've been living in another country since last we met, another city, somewhere like Moscow." And going into her flat, she said without a break in her words, "I've shaved my legs again."

"Who's the lucky man?"

"Guess," she said and began to take off her tights. The lesson cricket teaches us is that after every run you must get back to your wicket: your bat has to reach the crease, or you might be run out. Anyhow, those are rules. That was all words. Or thoughts, without words. But I was beyond words, or thinking, for that matter.

A moment later, I saw before me again the green nap of the cricket pitch glistening damply in the sunlight, but turning and thickening in color to such a velvet darkness that I was afraid to miss the ball. I clenched my teeth and concentrated as it seemed to grow in size in front of my eyes. It bounced off my bat with a dull smacking sound, and I hit it mightily, striking straight up, far away into the sky, where it burst amid the blue like the egg yolk of the sun, its rays spraying through the heavens. And I knew that now I could make as many runs as I wanted.

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Translated by Bernard Meares

AN UNINVITED GUEST

by Zinovy Zinik

NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME, I HAD CONTRIVED TO SIT OUT A national disaster abroad. I heard about the London hurricane on the radio, just as I was giving myself up to melancholy in a bay of the Atlantic under a Portuguese sun. My initial reaction to the news was a complacent smirk: what luck, being here and not there. To hell with them and their hurricanes. Then the mental carriage-bar shot back—what about our London roof, and the giant chestnuts opposite? The huge old tree outside my windows seemed to breathe its last as I thought about it: a massive top like that, its furrowed, hollowed-out trunk—I could picture it collapsing of its own accord from the sheer weight of its ageing body. But I found out later that it is these old reprobates whose roots go down scores of feet, while those of the patriarchal and morally staunch oak tree had spread out over the surface. The hurricane had laid hold of its crown and turned it upside down in two seconds flat.

A tree torn up by the roots is a dreadful sight—doubly so if the tree is of vast size. You stand there at a loss, stunned and ashamed; it's like seeing someone elderly fall over in the street. It's as if you were to blame for not having leapt forward in time and grabbed them by the elbow. Strangely enough, not one of the toppled giants had damaged the nearby houses. They had all fallen in the opposite direction. Evidently the walls of the buildings had deflected the blast of the storm, causing the trunks to be hurled away from them.

Nevertheless, not even my melancholy Atlantic retreat could escape the gales and torrential downpour; but by then I

didn't connect that catastrophic night on the shores of the Atlantic with the hurricane in England. It's easy to shuffle the past and make it into something meaningful and symbolically significant in the light of some later disaster. Let the catastrophe happen as long as it has some edifying lesson to impart. But there was no such significance in that early autumn. It was the merest chance that had brought me to that Portuguese township on the Atlantic seaboard: Varvara von Lubeck (her family were White Russian émigrés of Baltic German baronial stock) had offered me her villa for the traditional peppercorn, because her usual summer tenants had died. For my part I agreed, because I needed to get away like a snake needs to slough its skin, though it's hard to say whether the snake actually does transform itself in the process or just wriggles out of its former wearisome situation.

That month the news of my mother's death finally reached me. According to my friends and relations, the news had arrived a month late because of the machinations of the Soviet censors. The same Soviet organs were to blame, it seemed, for the fact that it was impossible to get through to London from Moscow. When you've lived in London for a dozen years you realize that chaos in the post office or on the telephone isn't always inspired by a malignant bureaucratic system. The depressing absurdity of these belated obsequies lay in something else entirely: I had finally managed to compose a postcard to my mother—a very rare occurrence in all these years, since my relations with my parents, generally speaking, had never been established in a verbal sense. The postcard had been sent to one already dead. Still, like all émigrés, I had been deprived of Soviet citizenship and black-listed; I knew when I left Moscow that I would never see any of my close relatives again and had accordingly reconciled myself to the idea that they had already died, so to speak, as far as I was concerned. Someone who quits his homeland for ever looks on it as the beyond,

"the other world" tucked away behind a gothic iron curtain. And this feeling is reciprocal: we regard those over there as living corpses. They regard us as phantoms.

The news of my mother's death did not evoke any feeling whatsoever, apart from an adolescent sense of shame at my own lack of feeling. What's more, as I recalled her face, her voice and gestures, her ways, manners, and habits, I experienced a kind of relief that I would never see them again. I would never have to witness her petty family scheming, the incredible torrent of talk and her fondness for the melodramatic gesture, her habit of interrupting everyone, her impudence and her total conviction that everyone around her was obliged to see to her wants—because of her supposedly grave bodily infirmities, which did not, however, prevent her trailing off to the four corners of the earth if she had taken it into her head to have a gossip with some old friend, or stroll round the second-hand shops to look over their bric-a-brac, of which we had enough in the house to sink a battleship. I pictured our abode: the cup of coffee masked by a brassiere, the nylon stocking used as a book-mark, her habit of eating with her fingers, the way she used to appear half-dressed at dinner time, her hair all over the place as she bent over me to tick me off for my usual boyish scruffiness, tousling her head as the hairs rained into my plate. Recalling all this, I gasped with the hatred that was stifling me, and caught myself thinking that even this spasmodic panting was an ideological repetition, an imitation of her asthmatic breathing. As the years went by, the hateful details of her image became ever more so, because I was recognizing them ever more clearly in myself. All that is good in us comes from God, all that is bad comes from our parents. I sighed in relief: her death had freed me from my self-hatred. Just as long as the reverse wasn't the case, when, with the death of the parent, the entire legacy of the character traits you detested, those mannerisms, that intonation, passes

on into the sole custody of the offspring. The fateful lot of a surviving twin.

I tried to get into a melancholy mood with traditional thoughts along the lines of your mother being the only creature in the world who loves you without thought of reward: with her death, so my thoughts ran, ended the earthly ration of disinterested love in others towards you. All these sad reflections *à la* Yesenin on the subject of my old mother failed to help: the blessed tear did not start to my eyes nor did a lump appear in my throat; the throbbing persisted in my temples, which were now parchment-dry, like an old man's. The abnormality of my condition was shown by the total displacement of my ideas about the point and significance of the most commonplace actions. Every morning I would recall with equal concern that it was time to go to the kitchen and make some tea, and not to forget to commit suicide on the way back. I did neither the one nor the other. Towards the end of the day I used to fall into a state of total paralysis.

Once I stretched my arm out towards a cup of coffee on the table and half-way there realized that I hadn't the strength to reach it: I knew that even if I did reach it, it would be all the same as if I didn't. All of a sudden it became crystal clear, not simply that everything had ended—but that it was perfectly possible *there never had been anything anyway*. Time stood still. I feared to stir. The attitude of grief is the attitude of calm, because any movement can lead to being drawn into another life, whereas grief is solidarity with death. A living creature freezes motionless when it feigns death and pretends to be a corpse; waiting till dark before crawling out of the common grave after the massacre—or seizing the enemy's throat when he turns away from your carcass. I was pretending to be dead out of self disgust. The death of someone close is like a mirror. Your own life is correspondingly diminished—to that past made up of the things you held in

common. The fact that I had not reacted at all to the death of my mother attested above all to my self-disgust. I wanted to find myself abroad—somewhere outside myself.

The villa was a stone's throw from the cliff, which led precipitously down to a vast deserted beach—the holiday season was over. The rhythmic ebb and flow of the tides was audible from the house at any time of the day or night, ceaselessly proclaiming the reassuring thought that life was going on without me. I'd be left in peace. In the mornings I would saunter along the edge of the sand as far as a rocky cove where the bay came to an end, and where the ocean used to leave a pile of jetsam on the pebbles like a sacrificial offering—Coca-Cola cans, old newspapers, a legless doll, watermelon rinds, everything the steamship passengers tossed overboard. Towards evening, incensed that even the seagulls were ignoring the refuse, the incoming tide would engulf it all again. Meanwhile, I would have spent the whole day staring at the off-white horizon under the awning of a surfing-hut, vacated after the summer, having lunched in a beach café on the inevitable grilled sea-perch, washed down, Portuguese fashion, not with white wine but red, and made my slow and pleasantly ponderous way back up the steps to the villa.

The villa itself was a rather neglected one-story house, the sort that's called a bungalow and not a hacienda, which had over the years accumulated an endless maze of little rooms, with verandas and inner courtyards, box-rooms and stairs up to the balustraded roof. The great virtue of the house lay in the fact that this jumble of apartments was so delightful that there was no need to go outside, apart from sunning oneself in the rocking chair of an afternoon out on the lawn, fanned by the sea breeze, with a glass of Portuguese wine in your hand and a pointless book on your knee. I would be far from sober by this hour of the day and, gazing at the treetops turning pink as the sun sank in the sky, I was inclined to turn sundry

philosophical conclusions and syllogisms over in my mind—that year they revolved around a comparison between the English eighteenth century gothic novel and the phenomenon of the third wave of Russian emigration. This metaphysical conundrum, pleasantly fuddled with alcohol, found an illustration in the never-ending arabesques which the semi-wild cats would perform in front of me with the zeal of harem women. These cats, who carried on a polygamous existence in all the hutches and sheds of the house's enormous garden, used to appear in the hope of finding something to their advantage every time I sat down in the chair. They created the sense of contrast I needed—a balletic impression of perpetual motion, convincing me that my condition of inner paralysis was not an illusion.

The uninvited visitor appeared towards the evening of a thick, sultry day. It wasn't the traditional seasonal heat of the Portuguese coast, it was a hazy heat presaging a thunderstorm. Everything was still, creating an illusion of expectancy, which in turn produced a feeling of being on edge. When the iron gate clinked and she appeared at the end of the garden walk, I thought that some prying little local girl had wandered into the villa grounds out of curiosity. Her plaits, bound with silk ribbon, at once caught my eye. She clacked along the stone slabs in heavy leather sandals

"What a marvelous garden you've made here—figs, if I'm not mistaken? And ripe figs at that!" She began walking round the garden, eyeing each edible fruit she encountered with a predatory keenness. It was only now I noticed the old-fashioned panama hat she was holding and the cheap hippy necklace; its bony beads clattered as if to drown the creaking of her rheumatic joints and the chirping of her bright little voice.

"Pardon?" I recovered myself, asking her, English-fashion, to repeat the question she had not yet put in Russian.

"Serafima Bobrik-Donskaya," she bowed, bobbing at the knees. Her large button-like eyes stared unblinkingly, while her mouth seemed to open of its own accord, as if it were worked on strings, bringing her pendulous cheeks into play. Her face seemed ready to purse itself tearfully at any moment. Some very old ladies do have infant-school faces like that, especially when their plaits hang down at either side. Noticing the bewilderment in my expression, she started chattering away again. The gist was that she was Varvara von Lubeck's best friend and, chancing to be passing, had decided to look round the villa, as she was intending to spend the following summer here with her son and was looking out for a bigger house than she was renting at the moment, not far off, without her son, though it was the first summer holiday she had spent without him, incidentally, without her son, all on her own.

"I fixed myself up here in Abufera, quite near. Charming little *shpot!*" Since she was chewing on some figs she'd picked during all this, every "s" turned into a lisping "sh" sound.

Abufera (quite near, to be sure) was one of those frightful little holiday resorts which had sprung up in the last few years as a result of the tourist boom. Concrete high-rise buildings with balconies now dominated the little hill overlooking the fishermen's huts and the grimy nooks and crannies of the old center. "I found a wonderful little room in old Abufera. I breathe the scents of ancient Portugal. I enjoy myself on next to nothing, it's just incredibly cheap. You and I are English, so it's *à notre avantage:* the sterling exchange rate is incredibly high—strike while the sterling's hot, as the saying goes, do you travel much yourself?"

I didn't at once realize that I had been asked a question.

Naturally, I made no reply. That was her way: say something, some nonsense about herself, then shoot a question at you. It was a poorly-laid stratagem: nosing out my habits and preferences, relying on a reciprocal frankness on my part. The main thing was not to answer questions, not to allow myself to get involved in social intercourse, however innocent the question might seem at first glance. I watched her in silence with the sort of expression you have when you don't know whether your narrow-eyed grimace means you're trying to put on a benevolent face, or you're just incapable of concealing the hatred and exasperation tearing you apart inside. I sat in my chair without stirring, contemplating her large dragon-fly head in the panama hat, her thin legs in their masculine sandals, the unceremonious nature of her appearance; her manner, very common in émigré circles, was so out of place under this Atlantic sky, that it transformed her into a kind of apparition. It only wanted for me to sit out the whole evening with her in a spiritualist séance: this ghost of three emigrations from Russia was clearly looking forward to a heart-to-heart conversation with a fellow-countryman. The evening had been ruined; the walk along the Atlantic beach in the sunset, then later, in the rocking chair, lending half an ear to the tidings of distant disasters, one squinting eye drooping in a half-doze over a boring book. The evening had been destroyed, the night had been destroyed, and the next day; my hermit-like peace had been destroyed—everything, because I had to sit, listen, and nod assent to this incessant lisping, chattering, and twittering.

"Personally, I'm an inveterate traveller. I've emigrated three times. Where haven't I been over the years? I remember once in the Sinai desert the roof over my head was the shell of an abandoned motorcar. We were wakened by the crying of camels. All around, bloodthirsty Bedouins were waving their scimitars: apparently a rusting car chassis means as much in

prestige to them as a brand new Rolls-Royce to a London *nouveau riche!* Did you come out through Israel by any chance?" Finding no response in my face, as stony as the tablets of Moses, she went on: "I'm at home everywhere. I'm an internationalist. As opposed to our English folk, I sense a kind of mystical kinship with everyone. Do you sense a mystical kinship with other peoples? When I'm sun-tanned, people in England take me for a Pakistani woman—that comes from my Ukrainian-Romanian blood. Talking of the East, incidentally, in Morocco, after the war, we refugees built an orthodox church. Wood is terribly hard to get hold of in Morocco—so we run about like little kids, one brings in a cardboard box, a lump of wood to tack on, or a beer crate. So then, the Moroccan lads there spoke to me in Moroccan, taking me for one of their own. With my Eastern European pronunciation, my *parlez-vous français* sounded just like Moroccan. You didn't get to know Varvara Von Lubeck at Father Blum's, did you?"

Another pause. She was unembarrassed.

"I find a common language with everybody. I got off the bus in Abufera and I was offered a room straightaway. The owner of the house said I looked like a Portuguese—otherwise he wouldn't have offered me the rent. I can easily make myself understood in Spanish, so I'm very familiar with the Portuguese roots. If it wasn't for their idiosyncratic accent, those 'sh' and 'zh' sounds—and still they say that 'zh' is exclusive to Russian, ha! But really, what a nice family they are. They do everything their own sweet way. Delightful room looking out on the sea. True, the other window has a view of the kitchen next door. Sometimes the owners sit up late in there, and you just can't sleep. On the other hand you save on the electricity—you don't need a table-lamp: just lie there and read in bed, it's as bright as day through the window. Of course I have to go in and out through the kitchen. But there's advan-

tages in that too: you can always grab something—an olive, say, or a bit of fish. The fish here is wonderful. The Portuguese are a fishing people—do you like fish? My son and I always eat fish according to season. It's on the dear side in London, but it's dirt cheap here in Abufera. They don't let me use the stove, though, but there's a charming Portuguese on the beach and he grills grey mullet over a fire—or is it sardines? He sometimes lets me grill one or two fish on his fire. In Abufera, you know, all the quays have little tables and the fishermen, fascinating simple toilers of the sea, catch the sardines literally in the depths of the waves and fry them before your eyes. All hell breaks loose, everybody getting photographed. I don't really understand why they have to be photographed—what's so specially exotic about a fried sardine? No, you know, when you're a long way from home, the most commonplace things seem extraordinary. Would you like to regale yourself on fried fish? Just imagine, my son loves bony flatfish—he's absolutely mad about them! While I'm away, I expect he's found himself some really skinny wench."

She seemed not to be addressing me as she spoke that last sentence. As if at the mention of fish, the cats began circling round her: they had immediately recognized in her one of their own. She proffered them a partly-eaten fig. The cats rushed for her hand, necks outstretched, only to recoil in disappointment after one sniff. She, meanwhile, was gradually pushing me back into the house, advancing upon me as surely as if she had a knife in her hand, with her constant recitative and feline accompaniment. I was retreating into the kitchen. When she reached the threshold, she pointed somewhere above my shoulder to the shelf, where some china roosters from the Portuguese market were flaunting themselves.

"I keep looking at those things, I just can't take my eyes off them. That bright-colored rooster takes me right back to my beloved Ukrainian steppes or the Carpathian forests. You're

flying, you know, like in Gogol, then comes the sound of a string plucking in the mist and you look down at the ground and, good gracious, but it's Portugal!" She began relating the legend of how the rooster became the national emblem of Portugal; about the holy pilgrim who was accused of stealing and was about to be burned at the stake, and how he beseeched God and God transformed the gnawed bones on the judge's dinner plate into a live crowing rooster. The hackneyed legend came straight from the pages of some dog-eared guidebook.

"I read about the rooster in my guidebook—it's an astonishing bible of facts, published by a most respectable firm, it's where my son works. It is our wont to read aloud to one another, I have to do most of the reading—well I'm the mother, when all's said and done! You like reading aloud to one another? My son works as a translator in this very respectable translation firm, translating into foreign languages, never stopping. But we always have breakfast and supper to ourselves. We pour out our hearts to each other; talking away, we forget there's a world outside. You see, they're the only times when we can talk to our heart's content. Though I'm the one who does most of the talking, old chatterbox that I am."

I pictured the son to myself, coming home and sitting down to table on a squeaky chair. Suspenders, patches of sweat under the arms. Sunset on a hot day, the clock ticking, the radio on low.

"But what about something to get the teeth round? It's all these bus changes, I'm just talking my head off: not so much as a crumb has passed my lips, not a bite since brekker." As she talked, little snatches of slang kept surfacing unexpectedly, picked up no doubt on the railway platforms, trains, and in the station buffets of her three emigrations, a mixture of countries, decades, and generations. She was looking at me

expectantly with those wide bulging eyes, which made her face look tiny. She was certain I would offer her supper. That was all I needed. We would sit as the sun went down on a stifling day. The chairs would creak slightly. The clock tick. The radio be on low. She would fill up the ringing vacancy in my temples with her ceaseless émigré gossip and gibberish about the past, present, and future of Russia.

Through the refrigerator door, which seemed just to have become transparent, I could see the piece of smoked ham I had been intending to fry up with some eggs for my supper—with a bottle of harsh, heavy rioja, not to mention the tin of octopus and a glass of medronia, a kind of Portuguese grappa. I licked my lips. It was then I noticed her wind-reddened eyes and mouth half open in expectation. She loudly gulped down her saliva.

"Let me organize something lovely and tasty for you. The Warsaw dissidents thought a lot of my lazy curd dumplings, as I remember. Do you have any cottage cheese?" She reached out for the refrigerator and the door opened part way as if magnetized, but I flung myself at it like a hero of the fatherland covering a machine-gun barrel with his chest, and slammed it shut. I mumbled something incoherent about not cooking here, just eating in the local restaurants, but today I'd had a late lunch and didn't intend to have supper at all, so don't judge me too severely and so on and so forth.

"Oh, don't bother yourself," she said unexpectedly, though I hadn't moved a finger. She'd understood, apparently. "I'll drop round to the café; I noticed a charming little glass-sided place just a minute away. Won't you accompany me? Appetite grows with the eating, *mon cher*. If you change your mind, you're welcome to join me in the beach institution," she said with the playful manner of the society lioness, and swinging her traveling-bag coquettishly, made her way along the stone slabs to the gate, masculine sandals clacking as she

went. In those sandals, her thin bare legs reminded me of nettles growing through stout collective farm fences.

As soon as the latch on the cast-iron gate clicked behind her, I raced to the phone to ring the owner of the house in London. Varvara von Lubeck had difficulty in recalling Serafima Bobrik-Donskaya. According to her, they could only have met once at an Orthodox charity tea at Pushkin House. "She's a scrounger, that Serafima. And her son's an oaf, tied to his mummy's apron strings. I never promised her anything. Throw her out neck and crop," said the old woman, and concluded by swearing with aristocratic refinement.

I felt I had just got rid of some hateful school exam and drank off a large glass of burning medronia. I felt famished. I cut off a huge slice of smoked ham and began tearing at it impatiently with my teeth, swallowing down the partly-chewed pieces, afraid she would be back any minute. After the conversation with von Lubeck, I was half looking forward to her return—a confrontation with this unceremonious parasite. When I had exposed her lies about her relationship with von Lubeck, I would have an excuse for saying: I'm sorry, but in the circumstances I can see no possibility of carrying on our conversation. I pictured myself getting to my feet, leaning my hand on the chair-back, insolently hanging over the table in a half-bow, saying: "In view of everything that has been said, I consider it impossible to continue our conversation," then adding something brief and polite, chillingly neutral. In the light of my imminent release from this tiresome uninvited guest, and the growing conviction of being in the right about recovering my hard-earned freedom, my temples were buzzing joyfully. Apparently my feeling of depression was passing off—as usual, because of an incomprehensible and half-accidental chain of trivial events, restoring self-confidence and hope for the future. I walked out onto the asphalt path leading

to the beach to spy out the land: what could my visitant be doing in the dark?

The modernist glass cube of the establishment on the shore was neon-lit from inside, seeming to accelerate the onset of darkness all around. It was deserted in there. The bored waitress informed me that the lady had not ordered anything. She had simply wrapped up in her napkin the things which are put out with the knives and forks according to the rather odd Portuguese custom; self-opening tins of fish, butter in a little plastic container, and a dryish bread-roll—something like a tourist's breakfast, or a bite to eat when three tramps split a bottle. Actually, one was supposed to pay for these odds and ends as well, but the waitress had assumed that the lady vagabond was my guest and set down the loss to my account. The old Russian stinginess when traveling: always at someone else's expense, never staying in hotels, always with some friend or relative up to, and including, slight acquaintances of forgotten slight acquaintances. That went for food too; they either carried it with them, tucked away half-rotten from home, or half-stolen, pocketed for nothing as occasion offered.

Out of doors the wind was rising and the sky was beginning to fill with nocturnal clouds in the last rays of the sun. The lonely light on the parapet in front of the café, reflected off the whitecaps, invited one to jump, before it was too late, onto that improvised luminous ladder leading to the horizon. That was where the clouds were coming from: they would halt, snagged on the mountain peaks, then move backwards, as if having second thoughts about emigrating. A fishing-smack, or schooner or felucca—God knows what sort of vessel it was—lay half a mile off shore. It was only an old rusted hulk, beached on the shoal many years before. In the evening light, the skeletal wreck looked like some romantic Flying Dutchman. I was moving along the edge of the cliff above the

beach, searching for my ill-starred impostor in the thickening twilight. By now I was really angry with her, not only for disturbing my own funereal vigil, but for making me worried over her disappearance. At length I caught sight of her panama hat on the rocks of the cove where the tide used to deposit the detritus of civilization. Serafima Bobrik-Donskaya had obviously not seen all the Coca-Cola tins and ripped polythene bags—or had haughtily ignored them and seated herself in front of the incoming tide, rolling up her skirt as she carelessly dangled her sandals in the sea. She was chewing on her roll, holding her panama on with one hand as the wind got up.

After a while, she got down from the rock and, picking her way carefully, approached the tide-line as if it were a caged beast. With an access of lyrical sadness totally absurd at such an hour in such weather, she had started to break off bits of bread and throw them into the ocean. Who was she feeding? The seagulls? The sharks? The clouds, perhaps. The more she swung her arm, hurling the fragments of bread, the thicker grew those night clouds, shrouding the inky sky. She took her shoes off and sat down on the pebbles by the very edge of the surf. I couldn't make anything out in the darkness, apart from her white panama. Then came the sound of her singing borne on the wind. At first, I imagined the voice was coming from the café, or one of the villas on the shore had started playing an old cracked record. The harsh "r", the "kh" sound and the hard "i" in among the sibilants sometimes combine to produce a phonetic resemblance between Russian and Portuguese. But phonetics apart, I now began to make out the words too. The words were Russian—"But our years are flying, our years like black birds are flying"—she was howling out the long-drawn phrases in the manner of Claudia Shulzhenko, the Russian Vera Lynn. At social gatherings, I sometimes liked to come out with my (at first sight) paradoxical

notion, that we émigrés had to get used to the idea of lacking a single past and realize that there were many pasts. However, her nostalgic excursions into émigré folklore from Siberia to Morocco had irritated me by their incoherence, although she herself felt no sense of split personality. *But the years are flying, our years like black birds are flying.* A pause ensued. She had faltered. Either she'd run out of breath, or she'd forgotten the words, or the words had been carried out to sea by a gust of wind. *And they have no time to look back.* This *ba-a-ack* sounded hoarse, cracked and unnatural. I was convinced that it was no longer singing I heard, but rather a suppressed weeping, almost a groan.

I went back to the villa and started putting the lights on. In the maze of rooms which had accumulated over the years, a child's construction of cardboard houses, there were recesses, corners, doorways at every step in a chaotic agglomeration, like reflections in a shattered mirror. In every niche, every nook and cranny, there was the inevitable lamp. Standard lamps, night-lights, electric candelabras, and ordinary naked electric lights lit up the enfilading rooms with positively theatrical inventiveness. Whether the owner of the villa conceived of life as a series of mysterious theatrical stages or was simply mortally afraid of the dark, the effect was that, in the evenings, the house used to shine out like a huge lampshade. My visitor appeared like a moth to the flame.

"You should have joined in my riotous living, young man. They're so marvellously romantic, these Portuguese! They sang me some lovely romances to the guitar, the fado—they remind me so much of our gypsies. I had some wonderful fish assorti with cockles and mussels and all kinds of meat. Then I sat by the shore of the ocean, admiring the moonlight scenery. Marvellous reflexes on the water!"

"Reflexes?"

"Well, you know, the mirror reflections made by the moon. Marvellous reflexes!"

I winced. She'd dragged in the moon as a bit of phoney romance—I'd seen it with my own eyes: there was no moon, the sky was completely clouded over. That émigré habit of telling lies and being in ecstasy over everything, to justify the cost of the trip, so to speak; after all, if we've sunk so much effort into getting here, everything must be ideal once we've arrived—or at least appear so. That must be the logic of optimists in general; the secret fear that their efforts in living should turn out not to be justified. Breakfast on the grass turns into a dry roll and fish on bare rock in the darkness.

"You know, I'm a traveling frog, but to me personally the exotic means nothing. Here in my breast," and she placed her little clenched fist on her chest in the Spanish communard gesture, "here in my breast lie African jungles. When finances are low, I can even be sitting in London and Portugal is in my heart. The thing is to train the imagination. I'll make a little marmite sandwich—you like marmite? My son and I adore English marmite, lovely and salty, then off on the steamer down the Thames to Greenwich. We have such jolly lunches together sometimes. We sit down under a bush with a view of the Cutty Sark—there's your jungle for you. Give me a marmite sandwich and a decent novel under a bush in Greenwich and Portugal means nothing! I've emigrated three times and I can tell you one thing, nobody wants a bore or a whiner. I always try to look on the bright side of life. You know, forget the hurts. And the wrongs. That's the way my tiny mind works anyway. I'm very lucky in that sense. I'm really a very lucky little soul. I'm all for auto-suggestion. You feel what you think. I always tell myself: everything's all right, no need to get the wind up or start crying your eyes out. You have to fire other people with your own example, not just sit and mope.

Depression does pass off, you know. 'I trust again, shed tears again, and such relief, relief . . .' as the poet said at a difficult time in his life. I want to dance all night, like Eliza Doolittle sings in the famous musical. Are you interested in the theatrical arts?"

Talking of theatrical arts, this was the most suitable moment to expose her fibbing. It was now or never.

"Varvara von Lubeck rang, the owner of this house, I mean," I began, coughing and faltering. Resting my hand on the chair-back, I went on with affected carelessness, gazing arrogantly across her at the garish roosters: "Varvara von Lubeck, by the way, knows nothing about your intention of renting this villa. Varvara von Lubeck hardly remembers you at all in fact." I heaved a profound sigh. Now was the time to say: "In view of which . . ."

"But I never had any such intention," said my visitor, not a whit discomfited; her voice was unexpectedly husky. Her face grew thinner and more pinched. "Until I'd seen the house, I had no intentions at all. I just felt I needed to see a familiar face, that's why I trudged over here from Abufera. As for renting, that notion occurred to me later. My experience in emigration has taught me to leave everything to the last possible moment. The chief thing in our existence is to make no plans and rely on nothing, so you don't get disappointed afterwards. However, my memory erases everything bad. Probably because it's so hard for the heart to bear pain and unpleasantness. At least for my little heart it is. It's just a little thing and often goes beating away, beating away. Pulpitation. Do you suffer from pulpitation?"

These blatantly sentimental Chekhovian *pulpitations* were the last straw for me. It was emotional blackmail. How long is it going to be before we Russians squeeze the last drop of Chekhov from our veins? "You know, my little heart goes pit-a-pat to the sound of the incoming tide. The sound of the tide,

the smell of grass, the whiteness of cumulus clouds—they're all different in different countries, but it's the same nevertheless: they remind you of the tide, the grass and the clouds of your homeland. I get positively drunk with nostalgia, when I hear the sound of the surf, then I looked at my watch—good heavens, all the buses will have stopped running! So much for planning the future . . ."

I knew it would end up like this. She supposedly didn't know the buses in Portugal stopped running so early: the Spanish culture after all was one of siestas and carnival nights. They sleep during the day and ride the buses from the carnival to the dance-hall. Still, in an enormous hacienda like this ("bungalow, not hacienda," I corrected her), there must surely be some corner, cubby-hole, or asylum? For just one night? She had emigrated three times and was used to the minimum of amenities. She could perhaps snuggle down on the sofa over there in the corner, or on the rugs here. She recalled the coach-loads of refugees traveling from occupied Paris to Marakech, to the tune of a gramophone record from *Casablanca*. And before that, as a charwoman alongside her interned husband: a besom broom under her head now and again, or an overturned filing-cabinet. She could use that Scottish plaid as a blanket perfectly well or there, that old coat. She slept like a mouse. She only needed a few hours sleep, like Stalin (that's a joke, she giggled). Come the dawn, there'd be no sign of her. She looked piteously at me with her washed-out button eyes.

I left her alone with the refrigerator to finish off her tea without me—my resistance had been utterly broken. She drank country-fashion, out of the saucer, hunching herself up like an old woman and blowing on it, as if to drive away the evil influences clinging to the edges. I heard her clacking off in her leather sandals into one of the little rooms—"I'll sit by myself

and thumb through my little dictionary to learn some new Portuguese words. With my knowledge of Spanish, it'll be like Ukrainian to a Russian. A new language will come in handy in the future." If she behaved like a mouse, it was a truly indefatigable rodent. I tossed and turned, listening to the constant rustling, knocking, and clanking from the other end of the house. Apparently she had decided to wash the dishes in the kitchen, attempting to do me a good turn, or else she'd started sorting out the things in her traveling-bag, throwing the stuff around the floor: or perhaps she'd decided to tidy the house up and was crashing the furniture about, or she was simply wandering through the rooms out of curiosity, assuming I was sound asleep.

I couldn't really get to sleep. Half-dozing, half-delirious, I lay between two zones—whether inside me or outside, it would be hard to say. I had to freeze into stillness, not budging, not a single muscle quivering, not a single hair stirring: otherwise I would slip into the other zone where all my innards were in uproar, where everything twitched and leapt, jostled and scratched. I wasn't sure what it was, but I knew for certain that it only needed the least error, for me to allow myself the slightest false step and my state of eternal peace would be shattered at once and I would slit her down and in, and there would be no escape from incessant fighting, struggle, conflict, head-achingly wearisome with its endless balletic repetition. I hunched up, so as not to slip down into that naked and shuddering chaos. It began to shrivel before my eyes and localize, finally, into my stomach. I couldn't relax the muscles around my navel for a second. There inside, thrashing and scratching, hammering its fists and jerking every limb was something bearing the name of Serafima Bobrik-Donskaya. She was trying to tear her way through to the outside world, to fight free of me and my fleshly envelope.

When I finally emerged from that half-doze, half-delirium,

it dawned on me that I was suffering fearful gripes in the stomach. I'd probably got food-poisoning—or, no, it was the result of my greedy haste in demolishing the smoked ham, gulping it down unchewed while my uninvited guest was strolling about on the beach. The pain was nauseating, as if threads were being pulled inside my stomach. I started to squeal from the spasms of colic, then clenched my teeth, plunging my face into the pillow. Then at once, almost like an echo, came the half-singing, half-howling of my midnight somnambulist from the other end of the house. At any rate, that was what it seemed like to me as I passed from my bedroom into the hall: that was the way mad people crooned to themselves, those atonal trillings and senseless intonational leaps without beginning or end, so quiet and careful, seeming to compose what to them appears to be a complex and beautiful melody. Suddenly, a spurt of water from above squirted into my face. It was as if somebody standing on the roof was relieving himself, perhaps trying to bring me to my senses.

And all at once, the source of the maniacal sounds, the rustlings, and the knockings, was revealed. The huge, squat house was being rocked by the squalling wind. The draft was whistling and howling through the endless alcoves, corridors, and crannies of the house, as if it were trying to soothe an aching tooth by pacing back and forth. In an unexpected gesture of irritation, an unsteady home-made standard lamp was overturned, and to the flash of the bursting filament was added that of the lightning outside the window. In the middle of the hall stood Serafima. Her bare flaccid-skinned elbows stuck out of the sleeves of a shoddy nightgown. She had loosened her plaits before going to bed, and the tufts sticking up behind her balding pate gave her the look of a crazy university professor. The shock of the thunder shook the windowpanes, through which the fig trees were lit up as they bent before the blast, surrounded by a hail of falling fruit. The

shuddering windows found an echo in yet another shower of water from under the roof. From the next angle came an answering gurgling trill.

The squat, sturdy house had been the embodiment of coziness, of a slightly eccentric and somewhat absurd kind, somehow trusting in its architectural insouciance and confident that the forces of nature would treat it kindly. It had seemed to raise its hat in greeting to the lowering heavens as the foul weather came on—and the roof indeed turned out to be as full of holes as an old panama.

Serafima Bobrik-Donskaya stood in the middle of the hall, with a luminous socialist-realist smile on her face, stretching her hands aloft to catch the streaming rain, just like the heroine of a Stalinist film about the spring of socialism. I thought the thunder, the lightning, and the whole horror of earthly existence had finally driven her off her head. I rushed into the kitchen to get jugs, bowls, and cloths to stem the flood. My uninvited guest meanwhile had rolled up her sleeves and set to work. She was taking up the carpets and moving the sofas and chairs out of the way, squeezing out the cloths, and emptying the constantly filling bowls and buckets. Her face shone with inspiration. Now I understood why: the hour of trial had arrived, when it was clear that I couldn't cope by myself. Her self-confidence grew with every passing moment. Unlike me, she knew what to do. Bucket and cloth in hand, she took charge. Her back is etched on my memory: she was kneeling down and wiping up a huge pool of rain water on the floor and wringing out the cloth over a bucket. Up and down went her elbows, tufts of hair clung to her scalp and a rivulet of sweat ran down her bare neck. Getting up yet again to empty an overflowing bucket, she surveyed me with the triumphant gleam of one proved right: she had demonstrated that her arrival at the house had not been in vain.

"I can't see any end to this rain, and that applies to her

staying here. I can't very well throw her out tomorrow morning in weather like this, can I?" I reflected glumly as I listened to the sound of the cloudburst and the asthmatic wheeze of her breathing.

She seemed to divine the secret thought in my face and gasped as she clutched at her heart. Her knees buckled and she began to sink down and sag to one side. I seized her round the waist and like some ludicrous ballroom couple (up till now I had been afraid of touching her) led her over to a couch. She started and blinked at the lightning flashes beyond the window, which brazenly caught us embracing like clandestine lovers among the debris of what had so recently been domestic comfort, between the pools of rain water rippling in the wind. The walls seemed to have disappeared: we were standing on the stage sets of an Atlantic beach.

This time, however, she was clearly in no mood for cheap dramatic effects: her face began to take on a floury hue, whitening outwards from the nose. An asthmatic whistle broke through her wrinkled, half-open mouth. The ghostly smile had not left her lips, as if it were agonizingly difficult for her to alter her facial expression. She had obviously had a heart attack, pre-infarction condition or something of the kind, clearly something to do with the heart anyway. I started to panic and rushed over to the phone, but there was little point, in weather like this and at this hour, in a one-horse town where a Chekhovian doctor had nothing to do except put away the medronia and masticate smoked ham.

To get to the medical center in the town from our villa on the shore, you had to cross a small valley, a sort of gully. Stunted olives grew along the verges of the stony road, swimming in silver thickets, and preserving the calm of biblical camels amid the swirling wind and lashing rain, terrifying thunderclaps and occasional street-lamps. Their light rocked upwards like a

fishing-float in the torrents of water. All along the road in the surrounding murk flickered mysterious glimmerings: only when I heard a chance half-squeal, half-miaow over by the fencing did I realize that these were stray cats under the shed awnings observing my progress like an escort ready to raise the alarm at the slightest hint of moral weakness or any attempt at deviation from the appointed goal. Although the road went almost straight up a hill, I wasn't conscious of my burden at first; she seemed to weigh less in my arms than her flowered nightgown. I tried to remember some local equivalent for the word "validol" (valicordin? valium?), but she was preventing me from concentrating by going on with her asthmatic widow's twittering, perhaps trying to deaden the sound of the heavenly washing machine or perhaps the beating of her disordered heart.

"I rent a room on the hill. It's hard getting back up there with my asthma. But in the mornings it's really lovely running down the tunnels to the sea. You know the famous caves there, tunnels hollowed out by the mountain streams. Spring torrents. The streams have all dried up but the tunnels are still there. In the morning, because of them you can be in the sea naked in seconds. Nudism isn't against the law here, you know?" I pictured her running down naked into the sea. Tufts of hair on her head bouncing. Flesh flopping. "But I allow myself that luxury, because this time I'm on holiday without my son."

She bit her lip and gasped. Suddenly she gripped my arm convulsively and whispered in violation of all the barriers of intimacy between us: "Well, what a swine, eh? Abandon a mother on the road, can you imagine?" I didn't know who she was talking to. To nobody, seemingly. But in my alarm I took everything she said to apply to me.

She had suddenly become terribly heavy. My left shoulder was aching and I had to halt under the next olive tree to shift

her onto the other arm, like an awkward suitcase. Under a lamp, I saw a crimson stain of blood seeping through the nightgown on her chest. Or was it just an effect of the light? In a panic, I fell to my knees and started unbuttoning the nightgown, trying to think what I could use as a bandage . . . and then encountered a hard lump by the breast pocket. She was gazing past me; her button eyes were squinting as if they had been sewn on in the wrong place. The breast pocket proved to contain an unripe fig, whose juicy crimson pulp, when crushed, had spread into a bloody patch.

"That's what he said: I'm fed up with you, mother. I'm leaving you to your fate. Find somebody else to torment with your three emigrations! He left me with nothing but a handbag at the airport. He took most of the money, left me with the bare minimum and a return ticket in two weeks. In a foreign country. So I'm an expatriate again? My pockets are full of pills," she mumbled tearfully. "I've got pulpitations. I'm all alone. Nobody needs me in the whole world. Where do I go to now? Emigrate another three times? When I was the resident of a totalitarian regime at one time and dreamed of escape to freedom, I pictured such an extraordinary, inimitable world of light and ecstasy. I so wanted everything in my life to be extraordinary—even death. I fled from a grave—common, like everything else under communism, yes. But now, with you, I feel drawn to that idea—it's dawned on me: you can start your life all over again from the beginning without crying your eyes out, can't you? I've got masses of free time now, and I'm an absolutely independent creature. I could get work as a cook, you know, I'm a real culinary specialist. I can make a marvellous goulash, one of my husbands was a Hungarian, you know that? Once it was Gulag, now it's goulash."

A grimace distorted her face and it was hard to tell whether it was a lopsided ironic smile, a convulsive sob, or a

stab of pain from her heart. I suggested she keep quiet for a while and make it easier for herself. But she wouldn't subside. "How can it be that I speak practically every language on earth and at the end of my life I am left without a single person to talk to me?"

Again she became lighter and lighter in my arms. Gradually she lapsed into complete silence, her face like one asleep. I was terrified I might not get her to the hospital alive. I plunged on and on along that unseen track into the geography of that unfamiliar valley through a landscape set on end by the hurricane: the rain was lashing my face, just as it had done when my mother had dragged me to the collective farm hospital half a dozen miles from home. She had carried me on her back along a washed-out farm track through the sucking mud, wheezing asthmatically, or perhaps because I was clinging tight round her neck in fear, pain, and shame.

I remember the hair matted on the back of her skull and the stream of rain running down the back of her head and into the neck of her dress. It was hard going for her: I was about six years old then, and I was a sturdy lad. That was in the settlement near Moscow where my granddad used to work as head doctor. Some friends and I had climbed into the collective farm garden the night before and stolen a sackful of apples. The apples were small and hard—about the size of figs, green and unripe: they really set our teeth on edge, but we doggedly went on munching them, competing with one another. Because they were free, we stuffed ourselves; they were something God-given, and so we couldn't reject them. Towards evening I developed colicky pains and by midnight I was writhing in agony. Half-dozing, half-delirious, it seemed I had to freeze into stillness and not move a single muscle, because any movement would give me away and I would never get over the garden fence. The fever was just a result of stomach ache, but mother was certain it was appendicitis. I

was afraid to tell her that it would get better by itself. She would have known then that I knew what had caused the pain and I would have to confess about the stolen apples. I preferred to keep quiet. She decided to carry me to hospital as a matter of urgency. I was afraid of the hospital, but I was even more afraid of confessing about the apples. I was a Soviet pioneer and didn't want to be thought a thief. I went on pretending I had appendicitis. The way to the hospital was along a farm track, washed out by heavy rain. I couldn't go by myself because of the colic. Mother strode out into the pitch dark through the clinging mud, bent under the weight of my body. She had panted, she sounded as if she was getting an attack of asthma.

"I see the light," my visitant's voice reached me.

"Light?" I asked. I had obviously taken her words in too lofty a spirit. What light could there be in such murk? "No, no, I see light breaking through the clouds. It's going to stop raining soon, and the night sky will be clear. I'll be able to get the bus to Abufera."

1990

Translated by Alan Myers