

#### 4. LET THEM BE FAR

Why starving widow, Elena Solyieff, sacrificed herself for a cat.

A mountain, exuding eucalyptus, dreaming in the sun. A cone of untouched bush, isolated, abrupt. Mount Buninyong, they called it. Dreaming in the sun. Close enough if your bike had gears but far enough from town to be ignored.

Nothing there. Five houses. Leaning fences gapped by shrubs. A blank-faced shop with loose weatherboards scissored on the side. An overgrown park with a rotted entrance-arch. The stump of a water bubbler. Trees propping lantana spears. Central bench in shin-high grass.

On the bench, in winter coat, an old woman sitting erect.

An abandoned park.

A woman dreaming in the sun.

**Porcelain eggs and parlour maids and pearl buttons the oil lamps made shine. Croquet on the lawn and tea and jam on silver trays. Silver stirrups hanging from high saddles, hooded carriages. Troika bells. Scrollwork white and gilt. Uncut books and lithographs of saints.**

'She sits in that park,' his mother said. 'You say hello. She stares through you. You feel mad. Then guilty, damn it. No way she'll let you help her.'

His father said, 'Why guilty? She's got to be on a pension. She'll survive.'

'There was an auction van there last month.'

'She's leaving?'

'No sale sign on the fence.'

'Couldn't sell that place. No one wants it next to that park. House falling down. Worth the land value. That's it.'

'Keep feeling I should go in. But she'd say there's nothing she wants—like she did when her husband died.'

'Russians. She's a recluse.'

'You know her coat? Winter coat with the fur collar? It's in the second-hand store. I'm sure it's hers.'

He looked up at his parents. 'Is she poor?'

His mother said, 'No one knows, dear.'

His father said, 'New Australians,' and pulled a face. 'You know how, if you hurt an animal, it's scared of people all its life? Well she's like that. Scared. God knows what she's been through.'

'She lets John play in there,' his mother said. 'He's the only soul who's been in that house.'

'To see the parrot,' he said proudly. 'Just one time.'

**Sour cream for the herring. Strips of volba, to suck. Diamonds and lace. Gold studs. Top-boots, corsets and shawls. Maples, birches, lime trees. Jasmine climbing on the wattle fence. Sochi and Rostov. Rice porridge and the Christmas tree.**

He played huntings in her garden. Her garden, his special place. She gave him lemonade. Lemon-sweet that didn't fizz.

He heard the parrot squawk one day and asked to see it. She took him to a lofty

room. Heavy furniture, tall mirrors, damp and dust. The drapes on the curved-topped windows hung from curtain rails thicker than his arm, and had wooden rings as big as quoits. That impressed him a lot. The room's dark grandeur seemed from a time he'd never known, a time nothing to do with the mountain and the street outside.

The parrot's cage hung from a stand. The bird's talons, with delicate care, enclosed a bar. Its hooked-beak-framed tongue seemed more alive than its button eyes. She crooned, 'Yuri, ya ljuble tebjja. Ya ljuble tebjja.' She said it was very old. It was bald.

She let him pour seed into its scoop. Some fell to the floor and studded the velvet-grey dust.

He'd asked about the parrot since. Last time, she'd said it had died.

For months he hadn't seen her much. Just sometimes sitting in the park.

**Her silver and leather toilet set. Her dog sled. Carrying icons to the school. Her writing table and wash-stand. Her brother in the cadets. Her Russian father's insistence that his wife handle the family funds, a concern to her Estonian mother who thought that was a husband's task.**

The cat's meow was a gasp. As it rubbed against his leg, he felt its ribs. Huge eyes, caked fur. He lifted it. It stank. He took it home.

His father said, 'It's sick and pregnant. Put it back where you found it. Now!'

His mother wouldn't let him feed it. 'No. We'll have six kittens next.'

He took it outside and put it down. It leaned against his legs. He searched in the bin for last night's chicken, found the carcass and thrust it into his shirt. Then he lifted the cat, which smelt the chicken and tried to claw his chest. He hurried to the old woman's home. There was a spot for it under the tubs.

Through the gate hanging by one hinge, to the house draped in shrubbery and vines. The wide verandahs were imposing still, but sky glared through holes in the curved iron. He trotted around the rotten board-walk to the laundry shed at the back.

He dropped the cat and opened the pocket-knife he'd swapped for a potato-gun at school. He cut the last shreds off the carcass which the starving animal gulped.

He found a box and placed it under the tubs on its side. He found a tin, filled it with water, put it by the box.

Her back door was shut. Perhaps she was in the park. He looked through the gap in her fence. An empty bench.

**Cards, billiards, dancing. The aroma of cigars. Her fat uncles telling stories as they smoked around the spittoon. Dashing reserve guards officers kissing her mother's hand. She, peeping from the conservatory, then tip-toeing back down the hall. The slow tick of the grandfather clock. The howl of wolves in the woods.**

Many moments she had lived—hours of moments, years. Her mind was the archive of those years, her flesh their fusion, their epilogue, her heart. Of those years, the stretch of her time. Nine by nine.

She sat in the park each day because the leaking roof made the house dank. The sagging plaster depressed her. The park matched the ruin of the house.

She sat, acknowledging no one, resenting neighbours who tried to help, tired of miseries, needs, hopes, failures, deceptions, retreats. She didn't fear the last sacrifice. How could one fear such relief? She prayed,

'Let others be far from me. Let them be far.'

Next night, he stole into the kitchen and cut two slices from the leg of lamb. In his

dressing gown, feet bare, he unlatched the back door, crept outside. The street was alabaster and the mountain herded clouds against the moon.

The woman's garden was a grotto. The laundry light didn't work but a small rasp-like tongue licked his fingers. Out in the moonlight, he cut the meat into squares. Head and neck jerking, back legs shaking, the cat gulped.

'Good cat.'

He wanted to give it more water but there wasn't any in the tap—as if the washer hadn't released. He thought, next time I'll bring milk.

'Vat are you doing?'

He jumped.

She stood by the back door, disembodied head and pale hand.

'It's a cat. It's starving. Going to have kittens.'

'Vy you here middle of night?'

'Cos they won't let me keep it at home. Cos they say I'm not to feed it. So I have to pinch stuff and come when they're asleep. Wus goin' to tell you. Honest.'

The ghostly head, cheeks triangle dark, didn't move.

He said, 'It's yours if you like. Now the parrot's dead and all. I can keep it here, can't I?'

'No one vant a cat.'

'It's thirsty. But the tap's no good. Nothing comes out.'

She hobbled forward. She had a kettle. She poured water into the tin. Her wrist shook. Her fingers were bones.

He said, 'Can you help me feed it, then?'

'I not help. You do by self.'

'Well can she stay here, then?'

'Can stay. But you feed.'

He pointed to the shed. 'Your globe's bust. I could get one from home and put it in.'

She said, 'Globe vork.'

'Switch's bung, then.' He wanted to help but couldn't fix that.

She shuffled to the back door, went inside. She didn't put on a light, as if she could see in the dark.

**Her father's death. Sober voices. Relatives she hardly knew. Hats with crepe. Funeral pancakes. The procession through the market square with the hearse wheels rattling on the cobbles in fifteen degrees of frost. And the long journey to Estonia, where her mother's family had a farm.**

She'd paid rates as long as she could. For years, she'd starved to pay. Dangerous to attract attention. Once they knew your business—tshuk! You were taken away to some place, kept in a bed and drugged. And they sold your home. But they'd never get that. She wanted nothing from this country except to be left alone.

She had managed it so carefully, terrified they might take her away. Now no more money and nothing more to sell. In this land of her foreign husband, his photo yellow, his clothes moth-shreds, his boots white mould. She refused to sell his clothes.

**The peasant charm of the farmhouse with its thatched roof and beamed walls. Climbing on the old stone fences and collecting mushrooms by the stream. Rice pilaf, fried sturgeon, red beet salad. Selling potatoes and carrots at the fair. Potatoes kept all winter in the cellar. And, in Autumn, when cabbage was plentiful, pickling it in barrels for the winter. Preserving fruit in interminable jars.**

No power. Now no water. Some tea remained, four tins of beans, some cheese. Each evening she filled the kettle from the park tap and found twigs for the wood stove.

She still had the mattress, blankets and her husband's leather wing chair. The chair faced the window in the lounge-room. She opened the window and sat.

A woman in a patulous chair. Long casements open to the moon. The chair's wings dwarfing her frame, its back casting a long shadow in the dust. She raised her eyes to a sky of indigo painted on glass.

**The farm commandeered by Russians. Staying with her aunt in town. Tallin, with its ancient buildings, high towers and narrow streets. Polishing the parquet floor by dancing with old socks over her shoes. To the public sauna each fortnight. Marble seats and decorated tiles. Waiting to use one of the two baths in a queue of the dispossessed.**

She sat like this for hours, staring at the moon. Blanched. Still. Everything a mystery. Explanations a card-house in a gale. Death, the antidote to memory. Or would some ghost-life steal that blessing too?

**Her feet always cold. Burning furniture for fuel. At the flea-market, bartering for food. Horse-meat. Cucumber pickled in brine. The body of her aunt, lying for days in the bare best room. The beggars outside St Basils, their hopeless faces gaunt. And the young man she'd met at the station. The young man who became her first love.**

From a gap in the heavy drapes that hid the shame of the empty rooms she watched, each night, the boy feed the needy cat. Each night he brought it something. Each day paper and bowl were licked bare.

The boy trusted her with the cat. That, one couldn't betray. Betrayal. Unspeakable. Betrayal of a child?

**Her mother sent to prison because she refused to clear the streets of snow. Not knowing who was friend or informer. Her uncle interviewed.**

**'Your grandfather in Crimea. He had eighty cows. Was this not so?'**

**'I've never been there. I never knew him.'**

**'Eighty cows. Don't pretend you don't know.'**

**Her uncle on the black list, suddenly gone one night—riding the train for three months between Moscow and Petersburg, to hide.**

She ate the last beans in the last can. Soon hunger turned her limbs to weights.

That night, she watched the boy leave, then went outside.

She leaned on the shed to recover, felt along it to the laundry door.

Rabbit pieces in the moonlight, still with meat on the bones. She could have reached down to take them. The boy would never know. The crab in her stomach was already nipping at the food.

**Travelling to Moscow in a vandalised carriage full of lice. Sewerage carts. Frost-blackened railings. Lamp-lighters in the morning dark. Horse trams in yellow slush. The smell of borsch and tar. Pie with unsweetened curds. Frozen potatoes thawed in soup.**

The cat crouched near its scraps. Moonlight bleached the shed floor. Half-stooped, saliva in her mouth, she saw slug-like moving shapes, fresh-licked, teat-seeking, helpless in the box.

The cat opened its mouth, hissed, exposing needle teeth, sensing a second hunger and ready to defend. Its blind kittens over-crawled each other, smothering weak ones underneath, craving warmth, milk, air—impelled, condemned to live.

**People starving in the streets. Cholera. War. The Famine Fund. Black beetles. No fuel. She eight months' pregnant. Ill. The only medicine, vinegar and water. Ventilators stuffed with rags. Rags, dirt, freezing weather. Huddling together to survive.**

She could have eaten the scraps, and let the kittens starve for milk. As her baby had starved. As the old man had starved for her. The old man—starving to keep her child alive.

**'Here is food, Elena Ivanovna.' Bone-thin hands unwrap the paper. Brown bread, once sweet-sour earthy, now iron-hard with the cold.**

**The smiling hole behind the iced beard. 'For you and the little one within.'**

**Her blurring tears. 'Where did you get this?' She has not eaten for three days.**

**'I traded with the devil. Bread, little mother. Bread.'**

**Almost a quarter of a loaf. He presses it into her hands then shuffles out, old man in layers of filthy clothes he is too cold and frail to remove. He lived under the stairs, in a nest of old paper with the rats.**

The animal, a starving mother. Its kittens needed milk. She ignored the gripe in her stomach, straightened and stepped back. The cat ate, watching her. How simple life was in the end. It was not her food. She must starve.

**'Here is food, Elena Ivanovna.'**

**He unwinds the soiled rag. Slivers of meat, miraculously cooked.**

**Floorboards missing on the landing and new ash in the stove explained.**

**What is it?'**

**'Meat, that's all. For your baby. Eat it now.'**

**Again, the blinding tears. And the scraps pressed into her hands.**

Perhaps she could eat some grass. She pulled some out and took it inside, cooked it in a pot until it became a sodden mess. She couldn't swallow. She wasn't a cow. Grass. Had she come to this? Better to be strong. Water now—till she died. It wouldn't be long.

The world was the shadow of something, the flower blind to the seed, the seed blind to its inner pattern, the pattern blind to its life. She passed the spectre in the mirror. The girl once ripe with life was now this?

In two days, she couldn't feel her feet and her balance was disturbed.

Now her body was withdrawing movement, even thought. As it devoured itself the thought of food shrivelled with the flesh. She would starve, she thought, as had her child. She would touch her child this way.

**Cold, utter, bitter. The baby nudges her dry breast. She stumbles outside with the child into great, wet flakes of snow. She cries for help on the street, falls to her knees in the slush. Flat, stony peasant faces. Sullen soldiers. Endless queues. When she returns to the building, the old man lies dead beneath the**

**stairs. She collapses on the landing. The wailing child is blue.**

Through pain she was born. Through pain was taught and grew. Survival was pain. The approach to oblivion was pain. Sometimes she was conscious. Mostly, she slept.

Cold spread through her body until only one part of her stayed warm. As if no chill could penetrate her womb.

She warmed herself at that small hearth, no longer feeling her chilblained feet and hands.

How tentative that warmth was, disturbed by any movement of the spine. Needing refuge, she sat motionless, attending to what she had found. It was like an animal that might, at the slightest thing, take flight.

She struggled to the park and filled the kettle one last time and placed it beside her mattress on the floor. Painfully, she propped herself against the wall.

The warm place was now as dear as a child. A dearness of body and tears. An adoration more than flesh. This my body, this my blood. This tenderness melting skin. This foetal universe. She wished to prostrate herself before this melting thing, to submit. Her throat sighed soundless vowels and gold dust sprinkled her limbs. But the joy that enfolded her was cheap compared to this. How can this be, she wondered? It's as if I am loving myself.

This place, unmoved and moving. All of life resolved, merged in this exquisite nothing, cradled by dispassion without end.

Pain resolved. Resolved, the loss of her child. Years of misery, fear, resolved at this impartial place.

She felt she was dying with tenderness. Was this dying then? How could all bitterness be made sweet at this everywhere nowhere point? A delusion? A mere pulsing? Could sensation convey so much? Could sensation be intelligent? She knew in the experience alone.

Heart, throat, spine, breath, opening to receive, adore.

She could no longer find her sepulchre, was too listless to keep herself clean. She couldn't attend to the warmth or look after herself any more. She lifted the spout to her lips and tasted copper on her tongue.

It was days since she'd watched for the boy. But she refused to die messed like this in the rotting house. Sometime during the night, she crawled over the front verandah to the ground.

With her last strength, she dragged herself to the gapped fence and across the park to the bench. The coarse earth felt as soft, as cold, as numbing, as snow.

It was dawn when her head hit against the seat. Unseeing, she dragged herself up. It came when you sat straight.

They found her braced against the seat, stick-thin body beneath the coat.

A mountain, exuding eucalyptus, dreaming in the sun. At its foot, a few houses. A park abandoned, overgrown. A bench in the centre. Trees propping lantana spears. Summer-murmuring of bees. No person, change, time.

Only and always, the mountain. Dreaming in the sun.