BLACK EARTH

A JOURNEY THROUGH RUSSIA AFTER THE FALL

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Bolshevik past in warm hues, as a lost age when trust ruled human relations and the state breathed with the monarch's will and reason. The Russian people had suffered, he said, but suffering had become the national occupation. Suffering had bound the *narod* in a covenant with the Almighty. Now more than ever, he said, the people and the state lived in separate realms. Although he found it necessary to dispatch the occasional entreaty to the Kremlin, he tried his best not to pay any mind to the political charades of the day. Often, however, he could not restrain himself. He loathed, for instance, Luzhkov's resurrected cathedral in Moscow. "A prefabricated model" he called Christ the Savior. What was the logic, he wondered, of building a single church for three hundred million dollars when in great stretches of the country there were no churches at all? And yes, he would have preferred Yeltsin to have had the guts to ban the Communist Party. But things, he said, could have gone worse. Even given the best efforts of the governors and the president, the nation lived on.

Still, when Likhachev spoke of the future, there was fear in his eyes. Here at the end of the century the homeless children of his youth again filled Petersburg's streets. The gap between rich and poor, he said, was greater than even before the Revolution. Moreover, the terror of the Bolsheviks, bloody as it was, paled in comparison to the dangers now threatening the remnants of Russia's learned society. Today "the reserves" of the intelligentsia were running thin. Culture was on the wane, and commerce ever on the rise. Pushkin was right, he said. Ours was "the Age of Iron." The greatest threat, however, was not intellectual torpor but the moral vacuum. "We've always been a moral people," Likhachev said almost plaintively. "But how do we recover now? When education is neglected and thievery respected?" The options were limited. The country, he conceded, was not ready to revive the monarchy. Dictatorship of course was not the answer. Society needed order, but it would have to come from within.

The funeral of the Romanovs would mark the first step. "The act of the era," Likhachev called it. As the Soviet age had begun with murder, it was only fitting that eighty years hence the martyred be buried. Evil had been recognized, the historian said, and, in certain hearts, repented. A conscience, after all, he was sure, still dwelled in the country. It ruled the lives of people in towns across Russia whom nobody knew. They were not political leaders or generals or men of great wealth, but ordinary people working hard in everyday lives to keep the balance in the land. If not for them, the moral eclipse would be too great. Nothing less than the survival of the country, he warned, was at stake. "And if Russia edges over the abyss," he added, "she will not go alone." It was not a threat but a humble prediction.

FOUR

PETERSBURGERS, especially the police, liked to argue that their city's new nickname was unearned, that Moscow was the true mother of Russian crime. Body for body, they were right. Hit men, moreover, now worked everywhere in Russia. Yet in Petersburg, as Lev Lurie, local political columnist, teacher, and city historian, said, they worked "with style."

We sat in his local, a pizzeria disguised as a Mexican restaurant that was really a bar, on Vasilevsky Island. Lurie liked to have a beer here after class and kibitz about the dire state of his beloved city. The new lycée he'd helped found a few years back, Petersburg's first, where he now taught history, was around the corner. On the table were two squares of stale pizza, an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts, and two pints of Baltika, the new brew of the modern Russian. Lurie never had much love for those who led his city–then or now. He had been a dissident, and his late father, Yakov, a medieval philologist who worked under Likhachev in the Pushkin House, had suffered the strictures of Soviet academia. The son, who had never fitted into Soviet society, had matured into a man of many vocations. When he wasn't teaching, or working to raise a Social Democrat party from the ruins of the city's intelligentsia, Lurie covered politics for the local edition of the daily *Kommersant*. Few better understood the canny ways that political power and underworld muscle had joined forces in Petersburg.

Lurie kept a running total of the city's most memorable contract murders, a list, as it were, of greatest hits. A favorite was the murder of Pasha Kapysh, a local oil baron who had succumbed in his forty-fourth year on the right bank of the Neva in the summer of 1999. Pasha had long lived in fear of assassination. He traveled in an armored Chevrolet Suburban–license plate 666–escorted by a corps of bodyguards. His murder had been arranged with military precision. As his convoy came to the intersection on the University Embankment in front of the Academy of Arts, his killers triggered the light to go red. Three gunmen opened fire. Two more stood on the embankment, between the giant sphinxes delivered from Thebes in 1832, and launched a pair of rocket-propelled grenades. The bullets preoccupied the bodyguards, while the grenades pierced the armored car. "All in all," Lurie said, "a spectacular job."

Nothing, however, had prepared the city for 2000. "A record year," Lurie called it, "even by our standards." Petersburg, it seemed, was awash in homicidal intemperance. CONTRACT GENOCIDE, a local paper called the flood in an inch-high headline. One after another, a stunning succession of *biznesmeny*, each among the city's most prosperous, met a violent death. The killing season began in early January, when the young financial director of Baltika, the Petersburg brewery and one of Russia's biggest, stepped into his kitchen to make a cup of tea and was shot by a marksman through the window. A month later the thirty-six-year-old CEO of Baltic Dawn, a timber company holding its own, went next–with two bullets in the back of the head. In March two of the city's top import-export barons went down, while April bade good-bye to the head of Russia's leading thread and yarn manufacturer as well as the chairman of an electronics plant, a former leader of Petersburg's RUBOP, the city's organized crime-fighting squad. As summer neared, down went the robust coowner of Hollywood Nights, a glittery nightclub on the Nevsky favored by Ukrainian prostitutes and Western businessmen. The club owner went to his death in swim shorts, shot on the stairs en route to the pool in the sports hall of the local Railways University.[15]

Lurie had witnessed, up close, the rise of Governor Yakovlev, the city's present ruler. Yakovlev had served as one of Mayor Sobchak's chief deputies–Putin had been the other–before running against his former boss in 1996. Yakovlev had won by twenty-seven thousand votes. "He's nothing but a *santekhnik* [plumber]," he said of the governor. Everywhere I went in Petersburg I heard the nickname. It was said that the governor, an alumnus of the Soviet school of construction, possessed an unparalleled knowledge of the city's steel bowels. To many, in a city notorious for water-borne bacteria, a plumber-governor was not a bad thing. If Luzhkov liked to talk building materials, Yakovlev could certainly talk pipe. Under his tenure, more than eight miles of new water pipes had been laid and six miles of sewage systems repaired, he liked to say. (The Danish and Finnish governments, eager to clean up the Baltic Sea, had covered a good share of the costs.) Lurie was fond of tracing the spiraling crime rate. Crime, to be sure, had begun to rise on Sobchak's watch, but under Yakovlev it became institutionalized.

If Russians elsewhere were perplexed by Petersburg's devolution, to Lurie it made perfect sense. Moscow was simple, he said. Moscow was owned by financial-industrial clans and the lesser *mafiya* groups that did the enforcement work. Petersburg, however, had languished for years as untitled land. Unlike Luzhkov, the governor here was weak. Petersburg lacked a *khozyain*, an all-powerful boss. There was only Yakovlev. Everyone in town talked openly of how his campaign had been funded by the *grupirovki*, the city's organized crime gangs. Above all, unlike Moscow, Petersburg had the port. "A giant spigot," as Lurie put it, "for instant profits."

FOR YEARS, WHENEVER I came to Petersburg, I stayed with Dariya Petrovna. She was a gentle old woman long retired, who lived alone in a rambling and drafty flat on a dark side street a block from St. Isaac's and the city assembly on Senate Square. She had gained little and lost almost everything in the years since the old world ended. She did not cry, lament, or complain but may have been the loneliest person I knew in Russia. Brodsky had understood the paradox. "This is the city," he wrote, "where it's somehow easier to endure loneliness than anywhere else: because the city itself is lonely."[16]

Dariya Petrovna had read *Crime and Punishment* more than once, but she loved the company, and so did I. She didn't know what to charge for a room but shyly accepted ten or twenty dollars a night, depending on the guest's wishes, and every morning covered the kitchen table with bliny and pirozhki served hot on rose-edged china. Her flat took up much of the first floor of a nineteenth-century house where well-to-do merchants once lived. It was a narrow but elegant house, designed by a German architect of local renown and built, it was said, for a Polish princess. The floor tiles in the foyer testified to the pedigree. "*Jahre 1884*," announced the ceramic in faded black and white.

Like many in Petersburg, Dariya Petrovna had grown numb to the Noise, as she called the crime spiraling outside her door. She did not like it, of course, that legislators were killed in her neighborhood. But innocent people, she figured, did not die such violent deaths. She didn't care what was causing the corpses to pile up. Debts, betrayal, greed, they were all the same to her. A contract murder, she knew well, cost money, so these men surely deserved what they got. "The crime in the streets," she said, "is no different from the crime in the government." The city officials, she knew from her girlfriends who worked in the assembly, had grown fat on bribes. And the corruption in the state offices, when you got down to it, wasn't all that different from the evils that plagued nearly every home she knew. Dariya Petrovna had been spared, at great cost, but all her girlfriends faced the same plague: husbands who drank. For them, she'd say, the only thing worse than a husband's disappearance at night was his return by day. So whenever the conversation hit upon crime, corruption, or the future of the Russian family, Dariya Petrovna raised her tiny hand and, with a soft wave, dismissed it away.

She had other troubles. The decade of change had been a decade of loss. She'd lost her son, her only child, her husband, and her savings, and soon, she was sure, she would lose her apartment. She had only one dream now: to meet her granddaughter. In the last year of the USSR, in "those romantic days," her son had gone to America. He'd gone on a tourist visa for a month. Ten years had passed. He'd married a Mexican woman and they'd had a child, a little girl with huge black eyes and U.S. citizenship, whom Dariya Petrovna feared she would never see.

A photograph by the phone told the story. A young man, his blond hair wavy and long, sat on a bench on a shopping street lushly lined with bougainvillaea trees. He wore shorts, sandals, and sunglasses. And held a Starbucks cup. He was a long way from the foggy black-and-white picture that hung in the dark over the bed where I slept. That photograph was an army portrait from the old days–when the boy was eighteen perhaps–the kind that adorned the walls of quiet apartments in the distant corners of the old empire where too many men had left widows and grieving mothers. Dariya Petrovna's boy had served in East Germany. He had started, but never finished, the medical institute. By then perestroika had hit full swing, and somehow life for him had become impossible. He'd come home one day and said, "Mama I don't think I can live here again. Ever."

Her husband had died not long after their son left: a heart attack. "Fate, probably," she said. He was a native Leningrader, like his whole family. After the war he'd worked on the bases, while she worked in the factory. "We girls would make the parts he used to fix the MiGs and the submarines," she said. She allowed herself a soft laugh. "We met at a dance. In those days that's what you did. They were free, they were beautiful, and everyone went." Nowadays, she figured, no one went to dances anymore. Her husband had been blessed by the Americans. They'd given him a visa. But not her. She liked to show me the U.S. visa in his Soviet passport. "He died without ever seeing his son again," she said. "Wouldn't go without me. He was afraid."

Her son was now thirty-five. He lived in California, in Hollywood. Now and then he called. Sometimes he sent letters. But to Dariya Petrovna, he was invisible. She dreamed of seeing him, of meeting his wife and their girl, but knew a reunion was unlikely. "It's too late," she said. "Now he's illegal. He has to hide."

FIVE

"I'M CONVINCED THAT there are many people in St. Petersburg who talk to themselves as they go about," said Svidrigailov to Raskolnikov as they sat in the noisy saloon just off the Haymarket. "This is a town of semi-lunatics. If we had any seats of learning in this place, the medical men, the jurists and the philosophers would be able to conduct the most valuable investigations into St. Petersburg. . . . There aren't many places where there are so many gloomy, harsh and strange influences on the soul of man as there are in St. Petersburg."[17] Petersburg has long weighed on its inhabitants. The climate alone can warp a good mind. The natives forever complain of "the low sky" and the *davlenie*, the pressure. In the limbo that followed the Soviet collapse, and that for many seemed without end, the sense of doubt and despair may have grown more potent than ever.

"So the whole week we're there, here's Hugh and Liz introducing me to his friends, as 'My friend Vladimir, hero Russia, Afghanistan.'" Kumarin loved the story. It was a rare chance to enjoy the flip side of his old nemesis, the lack of context.

Life had indeed changed. He was now taking it slow, doing his part to help restore the city on the eve of its big birthday. He was rebuilding Ivanov's Tower. The Tower, the cupola-topped corner of the apartment house at No. 38 Tauride Street, was a literary landmark. From 1905 to 1912 Vyacheslav Ivanov, wild-eyed poet, critic, and high priest of symbolism, lived there. The building had flowed with culture. On the first floor was the Znamensky Dance Academy; on the second, a public reading room. But Ivanov, who lived in the top-floor flat, had put it on the map. Ivanov's salon, Wednesdays from midnight to dawn, was known as the birthplace of the silver age of Russian poetry. It became a nest for poets like Aleksandr Blok and Gumilyov and Akhmatova. In 1909, Akhmatova, just twenty, recited her first verses there.[43] Now Kumarin lived there. He had bought, communal flat by communal flat, the whole building. He was trying to figure out how to replace the wood roof beams, destroyed by a fire. He'd need a helicopter, he reckoned. He wanted to do it right, make sure the roof was exactly as it had been before the Revolution and would last.

It was a plan for a future. As I'd discussed the success of *Banditsky Peterburg* over black tea with Dariya Petrovna, it had occurred to me that Kumarin had no need to gild his past for my benefit. He needed to for his benefit. He had made a choice, as he put it, "to live a legal life." Each month, he said, brought more order to his life, to everyone's. "The noise," he said, echoing Dariya Petrovna's phrase, had lessened. He could not imagine a life without bodyguards, but things, he predicted, would only get more quiet. And quiet, he said, was good for anyone in business.

Night had descended, but outside, even in August, the sky still held sunlight. The tables to our left and right had cleared. Brezhnev lingered with a crowd of forlorn German businessmen. The jazz singer had long given up her serenade, and our waitress, whose thin hands trembled each time she replenished our mineral water, had disappeared. I could wait no longer. At a lone table nearby two couples, Brits, were finishing their cakes. A baby sat on one of the women's knees. The baby was crying. Its face was bright red.

I asked about Starovoitova. Who did he think killed her? "*Ne znayu*," he said. "I don't know." For a moment he fell silent. He stared off, his gaze fixed on the baby at the far end of the neighboring table. The parents were fretting. The baby bawled ever redder. "*Ne znayu*," Kumarin repeated.

EIGHT

EVERYWHERE IN Russia the elderly carried history with them. But in Petersburg they carried a separate city that was no more. Nearly a third of the population, one and a half million people, were pensioners. More often than not they accepted the flood of crime without lament. It was a terrible thing, of course, that Starovoitova had fallen. But their city had always suffered, and its heroes had a long tradition of martyrdom. The city was ringed by vast burial grounds of the sacrificed. The Piskaryovskoye Cemetery on the outskirts of town was one enormous expanse of mass graves, the anonymous remains of nearly half a million Leningraders, only half the toll of the nine-hundred-day siege during World War II. For the survivors of the Nazi blockade, the *blokadniki*, the siege remained fixed in the present tense. To them, Petersburg was still Leningrad, and "the sunny side" of the Nevsky remained the side to avoid, the one more vulnerable to Nazi shells. The warning still hung at No. 14: "Citizens! During artillery bombardments, this side of the street is the most dangerous!"

Academician Likhachev and his wife, Zina, kept a notebook of memories from the blockade. They took turns setting to paper the macabre turns of those days. Romanov, the old Leningrad Party boss doomed to spend his final days tallying his losses in Moscow, had also survived the blockade. He'd volunteered at eighteen for the front and fought through the shelling, frostbite, and concussions. When Romanov spoke of those dark years, it was the one time he brightened. For him, the blockade was a usable past. Thanks to it, he had managed an executive takeover at last. He now chaired the Moscow Association of *Blokadniki*. He'd been welcomed. The survivors were getting on and scarcely getting by. They could use a lobbyist, and surviving the blockade was the one feat of Romanov's life that no one disputed.

Nearly everyone in Petersburg knew a *blokadnik*. Dariya Petrovna lived with her husband's memories, Lev Lurie with his parents'. To the survivors and those who loved them, the Nazi siege was not a historic event. It was a tragedy without end, a trail of suffering that lived on beneath the surface of their city, binding them to the victims it had taken, casualties no one else could now see.

IN JUNE 1941, when the Nazis attacked, Leningrad had nearly 3.5 million residents. In the first winter of the siege the city lived under a rain of bombs and shells that rarely paused. In the fall and winter of 1941, wrote the late historian W. Bruce Lincoln, more than a hundred thousand bombs and at least five thousand shells fell each month.[44] The siege, in its duration and devastation, was the worst suffered by any city since Roman times. No comparison suffices. "On a single day during January, February, March or April 1942," said Lincoln, "more people died in Leningrad than in the entire siege of Vicksburg" in the American Civil War.[45] When the siege ended in January 1944, fewer than six hundred thousand residents had survived. Tallies for the death toll vary–as in all mass murders, the true total will never be known–but the historians agree that the blockade took the lives of at least one million Leningraders.[46]

As the siege set in, the city was stripped one by one of the requisites of normal life. First the newspapers disappeared. Next the meat stores closed, and soon the lights went. Then the water and the plumbing and, as the snows came, the heating. A blockade routine took over. For water, Leningraders drilled holes in the frozen Neva. For heat, they built small makeshift iron stoves, *burzhuiki,* and fed them furniture, books, whatever burned. For food, they boiled wallpaper paste, glue, leather belts, whatever lent water a semblance of soup. The darkness came earlier than ever that first winter, as the city covered itself from the bombers' sights. Everyone nailed blankets over windows. Before long the cats and dogs disappeared. By spring even the mice were gone. Likhachev wrote of their death throes in his diary: ". . . in the silence of early morning, when most of us were in bed, we would hear a dying mouse scamper convulsively over by the window and then expire; it hadn't been able to find so much as a crumb in our room."[47] As hunger gave way to starvation, the corpses, sewn into sheets like mummies, piled up everywhere–in courtyards, on bridges, at the university. Many were dragged on children's sleds through the streets. Likhachev took his father's body to a makeshift morgue that way. He tied his daughters' sleds together and carted off the corpse.[48]

The deprivations were total. Cannibalism, the survivors said, was inevitable.[49] Yet among the *blokadniki,* one memory stood out: the hunger for bread. "Some were possessed by bread mania in its purest form. Just bread, our daily bread . . . ," wrote the literary critic Lydia Ginzburg in her moving diary of the siege. "Others elaborated their fantasies about bread. They had an urge . . . to sit in front of a dark loaf, cut thick slice after thick slice and dip it in sunflower oil."[50] The hunger for bread, "blockade bread," ruled all others.

Aleksandra Mikhailovna Morozova remembered the bread well. She could recite its recipe from memory and taste its bitter coarseness on her tongue, and whenever the need arose, she could also still bake it. I'd seen her handiwork in the Bread Museum near the rail station to Moscow. I'd gone to the museum on a hunch it would have a blockade room, a precise reconstruction of a typical Leningrad room during the siege. It did. The small window was covered by a black felt blanket. A *burzhuika* stood in the corner and beside the bed a radio, which had announced on any given day, as Ginzburg wrote, that "under enemy shelling, Leningrad carried on with its normal working and business life," just as "any one of us was killed by Hitlerite shrapnel."[51] And here, inside a Plexiglas cube, between a clipped ration card and a tiny handcrafted kerosene lamp, on a white dish with a pink lip, lay a hardened quarter slice–125 grams–of Aleksandra Mikhailovna's blockade bread. She'd baked the fortified loaf a year before, just as she had every day of the siege at Oven No. 6 in the Badaev bread factory.

Aleksandra Mikhailovna listed the ingredients–"barley husks, bran chaff, hydrolyzed cellulose . . ."–in a singsong voice that echoed the chanting of an Orthodox priest. Flour was so scarce, she explained, it had to be supplemented with "rye meal and millet dust"–and, while it lasted, wallpaper paste. A great-grandmother with chalky blue eyes and soft gray curls that fell about ample shoulders, she had a round face and an easy laugh. She wore a yellow floral dress, blue slippers, and tiny earrings painted bright orange. Little could shake her strength now. She had come to Leningrad on her own at sixteen, in 1937, the height of the purges. She had left her village near Yaroslavl to move in with her eldest brother, who welded tanks at a local factory. She'd had eight brothers in all. None had survived. The war had taken them all. Throughout the blockade she had stood by her oven. She had stayed there until she retired, after fifty-two years, a factory record. It was more than a good job, she said softly. It was a duty. The rewards had been more than ample. She'd earned a medal as a Defender of Leningrad and an albumful of certificates as a devoted worker.

Still, at times in her dreams, the years of hunger returned. Visions, she said, came back. How the factory bosses ordered the floorboards raised at the breweries and warehouses and she and her girlfriends scraped the "flour dust" from under the floors. "But by then," she said, "people had already grown inventive." They had started to boil the glue. Women, she now marveled, learned to melt lipstick into grease to fry their 125 grams of bread. She'd never been able to eat the glue. She always thought it was healthier to eat the berries, grass, and weeds.

During the siege Aleksandra Mikhailovna worked twelve-hour shifts in one of seven brigades that baked around the clock. After work, she helped wherever she could. She cut peat from the fields, "for heating and eating." She repaired roofs and dug trenches. She helped bury the dead. In the evenings, whenever she could, she went to the hospitals. She washed the bloodied floors and, whenever time allowed, played her balalaika for the wounded. It was a memory of rare joy. "Raised them all from the cots," she said with a laugh. "The boys called me the *Yaraslavskaya balalaika*." Her cheeks reddened, and her shoulders rose in a half laugh. In those days, she conceded, even with the horror she faced, she'd still been game for revelry.

Now she lived in one of the anonymous apartment blocks at the edge of the city. It had been built during the boom in the 1970s, when Leningrad expanded into the pines and birches. It was far from the center, she said, and the woods were mostly gone. But she liked her district all the same. It was where she used to come to gather grass and berries during the blockade. Like Dariya Petrovna, Aleksandra Mikhailovna longed for her son, her only child. He had died still a young man–food poisoning at a wedding–and she'd raised his kids, adopting them as teenagers. His wife, she said diplomatically, couldn't raise them alone. Now her grandchildren had grown up, and she had great-grandchildren, a pair of toddlers who kept her busy. All the same, when the ladies from the Bread Museum asked her to bake her blockade bread, she could not refuse. But she had encountered a problem. No one in the city baked anymore. The bread these days was all processed. So she had to take a train to an outlying village. Only out there, she said, waving off to a world far beyond the cinder block and concrete, do the babushkas still bake the old way, with ingredients like rye meal and barley chaff. "Out there," she said, "they have to, else they'd have died out long ago."

NINE

THE WEATHER IN Petersburg is prone to sudden shifts. A snowstorm can descend in the middle of a sunny spring afternoon and disappear just as abruptly. "The snow sometimes falls softly," wrote the historian Likhachev in his memoirs, "sometimes it whirls about or is driven into a blizzard. Sometimes it falls as wet flakes, sometimes as dry powder. At times it is cold enough to cut your face and at others it will caress it tenderly."[52] Early one Sunday morning, as a white tempest mysteriously cleared and the new asphalt of the Nevsky gleamed in the sunshine, a cop picked me up.

Valentin was squeezed in behind the wheel of the battered Volvo. He was well over six feet tall, and his forehead nearly touched the cracked glass of the windshield. The sides of his head were shaved, leaving only a thin strip of black hair, and his narrow blue eyes nearly closed when he smiled. A lone gold star adorned the shoulders of his jacket. A major in the police, he picked me up to earn a few rubles but refused any money once I told him I was American. Valentin didn't like that people called his city the Criminal Capital. Petersburg's worst problem, he said, wasn't crime. It was the loss of hope. The despair, he said, was "like a plague."

It was hard to miss the symptoms. One had only to walk down the Nevsky at night. The avenue was crowded, but the addicts–their faces drawn, their hands so deeply scratched they bled–were prominent. Many could not stand. Hunched over, they nodded out in the dark corners. Too many young people, as the psychiatrist Kurpatov said, now saw no way out. They had turned to the needle. Drugs–chiefly heroin–had flooded Petersburg.

ice-fished in the frozen gulf nearby, dismissed the idea of reviving the thousand-room palace to its baroque grandeur as a farfetched dream. But the rumors persisted. The new president, it was said, the local boy who had made good, desired a country estate where he could unwind in style.

One morning in winter, after a regular visit to Linkov to check the status of the Starovoitova case (he no longer called it an investigation), I went to see the palace–Putin's Palace, as Yevgeny, the driver of the Volga, a round-faced engineer recently retired from the navy, called it. We drove out along the gulf's frozen edge on the Peterhof Schosse. The snow was wet. It fell in thick sheets, blanketing the tin roofs and barren streets in silence. We passed the old Soviet warships rusting in the wharves and the children skiing through the woods. Yevgeny had little patience for the Kremlin's latest reconstruction project. He had once made his living calibrating the missile guidance systems of the Northern Fleet. If NATO hadn't blocked Russia's deals to sell rockets to Cyprus and India, he said, he would still have a job. Putin should pay attention to the military, he grumbled, not to some dream of grandeur that was sure to cost more than all the officers of the fleet had earned in their lifetimes.

The palace had been lifeless when in August 2000, three days after the *Kursk* went down, the men from the Kremlin first came. They laced a ribbon of white plastic from oak to oak around the main house and erected a metal fence topped by concertina wire. Then they posted the laser-printed confirmation notices: "SITE IS GUARDED. By Order of the Property Department of the President of the Russian Federation." By then the Kremlin had made it offical. The president, who had taken to showing off his hometown to visiting dignitaries, required the seaside residence to host heads of state and royals. With helipad, drawbridges, and fountains, it would have to be done in a hurry; the city's birthday was fast approaching. The cost? The best estimates started at two hundred million dollars.

German shepherds now prowled the grounds, but it was plain to see the restoration would not be easy. Built in 1720 by Niccolo Michetti and Bartolomeo Rastrelli, it had once been a grand house with an arched grotto out back and sweeping gardens that sloped to the gulf. The estate even had its own arrangement of discreet canals that carried water from the grotto through the topiary to the shore beyond. Little remained of the original elegance. The gardens were iced-over hummocks. The Nazis had camped out in the palace and left it looted and scorched. Once the siege ended, the Soviets had revived it. For years the house had been a dormitory for the cadets from the next-door military academy. For a time it had housed juvenile delinquents. The hooligans had stripped everything, even the wallpaper. Now there was nothing inside, the guard informed me, but frozen empty rooms. No one could live in there. Except the vagrants. But they'd all been kicked out months ago.

In town many refused to believe the state could be so bold. Not Lev Lurie. When he spoke of Putin's Palace, he simply shook his head. It was the fateful allure of Petersburg's lost past. The *skazka,* the fairy tale Likhachev had warned of, was beguiling. We sat again in the Mexican restaurant. April was nearing, but winter had not abandoned its grip. Ice still coated the sidewalks. Lurie was enjoying a pint with a colleague, a gray-bearded poet. They'd been discussing the odds of raising a grassroots Social Democratic movement in Russia. The poet thought maybe the answer lay in the villages. Maybe there, he thought, the people were wiser. Maybe there, doubt, not loyalty, still ruled the day. Lurie wasn't hopeful. "The *skazka* of our great lost past has grown too fashionable," he said from under a cloud of smoke. Not only had politicians seized it as a usable past, but a lot of folks were making money off it. It was only natural, Lurie figured. A heritage industry was a sign of economic rebirth. Still, it could be dangerous, he mused, for "a whole city to remake itself in a false image."

ELEVEN

THE LENINGRAD SYMPHONY, as Shostakovich's Seventh is known, has no words. Yet according to his biographers, Shostakovich had once considering adding them. In an homage to Stravinsky and his *Symphony of Psalms,* he had entertained the idea of a soloist singing two lines from the Ninth Psalm:

> *When He maketh inquisition for blood, He remembereth them: He forgetteth not the cry of the humble.*