

BUKHARIN'S FOX

by Michael Hinken

The great leader's daughter drowzes by the aviary. It is a Sunday afternoon in early autumn and visitors wander through the halls dressed in green and gold. Cheers erupt at intervals from the activity room, where the Packers game plays on the big screen television. The birds in the aviary flutter from branch to branch—canaries, parakeets, finches, lovebirds.

To her father, she was his little sparrow. *Malinky vorobrey*. She hears his voice. *Malinky vorobrey*. He lifts her. Cold tunic buttons press her cheek. There is about him an aroma of pipesmoke, the animal scent of leather. She is lighter than air and afraid, so she begs him to stop. He does. What does she know of him? What of his cruelty? What of his guilt? Nothing, she knows nothing, only what every daughter knows of her father, which is to say only what he allows. Bending his face to hers, she is covered with smoky kisses, wet and loud. What if this were her only memory? How happy would she be?

Muffled gunshots report from the north woods, hunters no doubt—but what is in season?—and she is again aware of the aviary and the brightly flapping things behind the glass and of something, no, someone else. A small girl. She asks, “Do those birds miss the sky?” Her eyes are somber gray and flecked with green.

If the great leader's daughter could hold her, gather her in, she would never let her go. “Whatever they see above them is the sky,” she answers.

The girl faces the aviary again, leans sideways in a slow arc so that her long curls nearly brush the floor. “Look,” she says. When she points, bracelets slide along her arm. “Somebody painted clouds for them.”

“Ah,” the great leader's daughter says. “That is a kindness.”

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When the night nurse, Violet, wants to smoke she props the north wing exit door open with a folding chair from the storage closet. And when she isn't smoking, she sits at the front desk singing to the radio—light rock favorites, hits of the sixties and seventies,

even commercials if she's feeling lonely or bored. Her voice echoes through the hallways of the home as the great leader's daughter wanders late at night, pushing her walker.

She cannot sleep. This she inherited from her father. The nation's great leader, the ruminating insomniac, pacer of the Kremlin hallways during small hours, speaking his plans hoarsely to himself and startling night sentries to attention. But she knows him also as a shadow passing by her room, humming a nonsong under his breath. She knows him as a sulfurous smell of matches in the corridor.

His restlessness resides in her and at night draws her into the antiseptic corridors. Violet's voice trails behind, a sound both familiar and lonesome. To hear it makes her remember something told to her by a famous soprano from Leningrad. "The soul is too large," said the soprano, "and so we must each find a way to fill all that empty space. This is why I sing."

For such a long time, the great leader's daughter has been unafraid to die. She fears instead the ever-widening of her soul and its refusal to be filled. She has sensed this fear in even the happiest people she has known, in the people she has loved, in her father.

Passing the activity room on her nightly rounds, she senses the looming presence of the darkened television in the room and the room's emptiness, an emptiness that is more presence than absence. She sees her father inside, sitting in his specially crafted chair, alone, watching films. He prefers Charlie Chaplin, Tarzan, westerns and newsreel footage of himself. He stares at the men and women who hold above their gleeful faces placards with his image; rows of choreographed children dance; a parade passes line by line and high above he waves a gloved hand. He observes himself observing all.

Gray light flickers on his profile, and much to her surprise and relief, when he turns to watch her pass by, his face offers no glint of recognition.

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It is winter. Snow slants by the activity room window in oversized wet flakes, obscuring the trees in the north forest and whatever animal now moves among them. A dog? A feral cat? A fox?

Then she is thinking of Bukharin and the dacha at Zubalovo. How many years since she last thought of him? Yet he is there, as if she had seen him only yesterday, standing in

the forest with shadows of leaves patterning the shoulders of his long summer shirt. He wears white linen trousers and sandals. Along the forest paths he leads her and her playmate, his daughter, Kozya, pointing to spiders in their webs and naming the spiders, naming the trees, the wildflowers. High feathery clouds portend three days of good weather, he says. Water from the brook tastes of stone.

Bukharin filled the dacha with animals: a tame fox to roam the grounds, hedgehogs to chase each other on the balcony, snakes in glass jars. Bukharin, who played games with the children and who was always merry, who wrapped his arms around the slender nurse in the forest clearing as he taught her to shoot an air gun. Bukharin, father of the Soviet constitution, as history remembers him, and Bukharin as she remembers him.

Once as she chased Kozya in game of tag, she ran past the window of her father's study and glimpsed the two men, Bukharin, arms folded and leaning close as if to better hear, serious among her father's books. Her father, hidden in a shadow cast by the late afternoon sun, was only a specter of pipesmoke rising and a gesturing hand in the sunlight. Bukharin, nodding, assenting, framed in the window for an instant and then gone.

In the activity room a dry cough echoes. A paper cup full of pills appears on the table. Years ago, after she immigrated to America, she read of a conversation between her father and Bukharin that had supposedly taken place at Zubalovo. "Do you know why I consider you my friend?" her father is to have asked. "After all you are not capable of intrigue, are you?" To which Bukharin is said to have answered, "No, I am not."

She swallows her pills. The snow is coming faster now. The animal, whatever it was, has disappeared.

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The residents crowding the activity room, when they sing happy birthday to the great leader's daughter, do not call her by her given name, but by the name she has chosen, an American-sounding name. Just as her father renamed himself, a name to armor the young man, she too wants to forget—and therefore be protected from—history. She extinguishes the candles on a yellow-frosted cake. Applause. Balloons drift along the floor. Everyone dressed for a party. Violet is here. Even though her shift doesn't begin for another six hours, she is here. She wears lipstick, a flattering shade of plum.

Now she is separating from the crowd of residents who are absently finding their places and making preparations for cake, and now she is leaning toward her and now, Violet, with one soft brown hand resting lightly on hers, kisses her beside the ear and says, "You are the best-looking girl in the room."

Today she turns eighty-two years old. She has outlived her father by twelve years. He died with black lips and a swollen face, pointing to a menace on the ceiling that only he could see. No, she is not afraid of dying, but when she thinks of her father gasping and twisted on that narrow bed, she feels afraid for him, even now. Her father dying alone surrounded by men he distrusted but who had survived somehow.

Bukharin was not among them, dead by then fifteen years almost to that very day in March, victim of the Trial of Twenty-one, victim of the great leader's Great Purge. Victim, finally, of the bullet in his brain.

After her father's death, she found among personal papers in his desk a note written in Bukharin's hand, dated two days before his death. *Koba*, the note read. *Koba*, a term of affection. *Koba*, meaning roughly "boss." *Koba*, referring to their revolutionary days together, to that old allegiance of minds, if not hearts. *Koba, why do you need me to die?*

Cake and a plastic fork are placed before her. The cake is light on her tongue and what does she detect in the frosting? A hint of lemon?

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Boots in the hallway, a heavy official tread upon the tiles and the great leader's daughter can only lie still in bed, willing the boots to continue down the corridor. Perhaps they have not come for her at all, but for her neighbor. Let it be her neighbor. Perhaps the footsteps, getting louder now, will continue on past her door, and the knock, when it comes, will sound once, twice, three times on another door. The clipped voice will shout the neighbor's name, and all the while the great leader's daughter will be safe inside her darkened room.

Silence blooms around her. Fear trickles in. She strains her ears. Is someone scuffing outside her door? A murmur of voices. Did someone say her name? Three knocks explode on her door. Her name. How do they know her name? Uniformed men kick in the door. One

approaches and stands over her. He has a soft blond moustache and windburned cheeks and where his eyes should be, black empty sockets.

No, she says. There is some mistake. The soldier raises the rifle butt. No, she says again. Don't you know who I am?

And when the rifle butt descends, a blackness.

She awakens alert, relieved, awash in fear, fumbling for the bedside lamp. She feels distinctly that a figure is leaning over her bed but darkness is all she sees. Hot prickles race along her spine and to her hands and feet. Straining her eyes in the dark, she wills the familiar shapes of her nightstand and bureau to appear. And there is her chair. And there her clothes hang in the closet. Still she cannot shake a feeling of being seen, and her heart will not stop. She whispers, *This is just a dream*. A moment later the blackness whispers back, *This is not a dream*.

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And then it is spring. The crocuses in the dooryard bloom. Near the aviary, the great leader's daughter strokes an orange tabby cat named Alex brought to the home by the county hospital's pet outreach group. They watch the birds together. He is a spot of warmth thrumming in her lap. Every now and then he yawns, exposing white fangs.

When the young man finally comes to take Alex, the cat scratches him and leaps away, streaking through the hallway to the north wing. While the other therapy animals are loaded into the idling van, the young man and several staff search the home and eventually the grounds. They come in half an hour later with muddy shoes and confirm her suspicion: Alex has disappeared. The man places a hand upon her shoulder and assures her Alex will turn up; he then instructs the activities coordinator to leave out bowls of tuna fish and to watch the exits.

The great leader's daughter is troubled. At night, she walks the hallways kissing lightly and calling Alex's name. From her circle of lamplight behind the front desk Violet sighs. "Poor creature's just spooked. He gets hungry enough, he'll come out."

The great leader's daughter twists her hands, continues to search.

For a time after Bukharin's death, many who came to Zubalovo told of glimpsing a fox on the grounds. A caretaker claimed he had fed the animal by hand for a number of

years, the fox was so tame, until one spring when the fox did not come to him. It only stood apart in the western meadow with its ears erect, licking its jaws. She sees Bukharin's fox out among the winter trees, the last memories of his master's kindness fading, too frightened now to come in and finally alone.

At the north exit, a folding chair props the door, and so the great leader's daughter leaves her walker to slip through. The lonesome thread of Violet's voice tapers away. She smells damp earth. How long since she has been outdoors at night? There's the white bone moon, the stars in their ancient figures. So many constellations whose names she can remember but cannot find—Cassiopeia, Leo, Andromeda, Pegasus—and, she supposes, many constellations she sees above her now but cannot name.

She whispers to Alex as she walks through the field toward the north woods under the nameless stars. The wind moves around her. Whose voice? Her own calling for Alex? Her father's? The voice she sometimes hears upon waking, a voice she does not recognize saying, "Little Koba, we all must die."

She is closer to death now, closer every day, and she knows there is a heaven and there is a hell. Because she knows this, she knows she will never see her father again, never hear his voice. *We are forever parted.* This new sadness is something she has always known but failed to name. We can never truly forgive our fathers, at least not in the way we forgive our mothers, from whom we were first separated and to whom we will extend forgiveness as we would to ourselves. To fathers we offer a compromise: We try to understand them apart from ourselves. Her father may be lost to her, but he will not be unclaimed. *He is mine, I am his.*

Alex out in the woods somewhere streaks through the trees. The home is dark in the distance, dark save for a single square of light, someone getting up for a glass of water. Wind murmurs in the trees. Violet's voice calls her name from the doorway. The great leader's daughter is silent, only so that the sound of her friend's voice might find her again.