

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

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Yellow Magic

The air flooding in from the Gulf of Finland is freezing. But nothing chills us more than the unsmiling guard. And her gun.

We are in St Petersburg, one of the world's most spectacular cities. I'm here for a conference; my wife is on her first trip to Russia. A stand-off with an armed soldier in a dark stairwell was not in the plan.

Yesterday evening my wife and I compared notes. We loved the metro, among the deepest in the world, with escalators so long you can barely see the bottom. Some stations resemble ballrooms, with chandeliers, colonnades, and marble walls. Like so much of St Petersburg, the metro is art.

The highlight for us would be a visit to the Hermitage, a vast 360-room museum in a palace.

I asked the conference chairman Lev* when was the best time to visit; the waits are notorious. "There are always long queues" he replied, "but in Russia queues can be jumped." This sounded promising, but he wouldn't explain further.

Today, on Lev's instructions, we ate early and agreed to meet him two hours before opening time. He greets us warmly, then shepherds us away from the queue that's already forming, turning down deserted, slightly shabby side streets.

Doubts spring up. Could Lev have misunderstood our intentions? Perhaps we are being taken to some other, inferior, museum. We may never visit Russia again and do not want to blow our chance to see the museum. We should have settled for the queue.

Worse is to come.

Lev halts at a rust-stained door, pulling it open to reveal a steep staircase. He urges us forward to a landing lit by a single dangling bulb. And then, without a word, he passes through a doorway and is gone.

We are alone.

Almost.

Sharing this dark, cramped space is a woman in army fatigues. Her wrestler's physique, her expression, and her gun, say she doesn't like visitors. With nothing to do she glares at us.

Our timid greetings in English draw no response. We smile; she doesn't. She has possession of the only seat, so we stand uneasily, not knowing why Lev has brought us here, nor why he has deserted us. Even more worryingly, we have no idea where "here" is. Our minder, who surely topped her class in Intimidation 101, continues to glare.

We contemplate a dash down the stairs, trying to ignore thoughts of a bullet in the back. But before we can escape, the door opens and Lev reappears.

He beams. Hope rises.

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Armed with some yellow pages, he begins an animated discussion, and then an argument, with the guard. Bigger and more muscular than Lev, she stands, shakes her head, waves her arms, searches for something in her desk. Lev is untroubled, making elaborate scooping gestures and pointing at us. His actions suggest the digging of a grave, which is ominous. He talks non-stop, tapping the yellow papers. And still digging that grave.

They may be negotiating which hard labour camp will be best.

Gradually, the guard's resistance subsides. She sits and buckles her gun in the safety of its holster. Our host grins in triumph and bows to the guard; he spreads his arms widely, shakes hands and embraces her. Defeated, but mollified, she opens a door behind the desk and we step through.

"Who was that?" we ask. "I only know her slightly," he replies "she's not the important one."

Our relief at escaping the wrestler is brief; four more guards lounge at the end of a dark corridor. They too seem to have no role, chatting idly and puffing on grey cigarettes. But, unlike the wrestler, they recognise our host immediately and inspect his yellow documents with interest. No, interest is the wrong word: they are impressed. Soon each of them is shaking our hands and offering incomprehensible compliments in Russian.

Things are becoming stranger by the minute.

We leave and pass along another corridor, where sunlight struggles through handsome but rarely-washed windows. The broad, shallow stairs ahead must once have been very grand; the treads show evidence of heavy use. One more guard appears, nods familiarly at Lev, swings open a heavy wooden door, and winks as we pass through.

Stepping across the threshold, we are dazzled. We are in an astounding, sparkling room: white, silver and gold. Crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling, gold leaf decorates every available surface, sun floods the ochre floor. And fabulous, wondrous paintings cover the walls. We are inside the Hermitage.

On our own.

The queue has not been jumped, it's been obliterated.

Still to open, this gallery and those that lie beyond are simply deserted. There are no visitors, no guides, no gun-wielding wrestlers. Just Lev, my wife, and me in this staggering, opulent palace.

"I must get to the conference." Lev is apologetic. "You have seventy minutes before the museum opens, and then – I'm sorry – you'll have to share it. For now, the galleries are yours to explore". We are stunned, alone with some of the most remarkable and valuable art in the world.

Brushing aside our thanks, Lev presses the yellow pages into my hands. "You can go anywhere," he says "but keep these. When a guide finds you, as they will once the museum opens, show them these; they prove you are internationally renowned archaeologists."

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It's a huge fib – I'm a University chemist, my wife a primary school teacher – but what a fib. For a never-to-be-forgotten hour we are pre-eminent scientists and owners of the world's largest art collection.

Turning to go, Lev grins broadly. "There are benefits to having a wife who works at the Hermitage." And with that he is gone.

(* not his real name, for reasons which should be clear)