

Pavel & I

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Published by Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

Extract

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18 December 1946

The boy was always around him then. Time and again he had to shoo him away into his room, only to see him re-emerge a few moments later, chewing at his lip with crooked teeth, and fussing. They did not speak. The boy tried to now and again, in German, or else in that flat-vowelled English he had, but Pavel never answered with more than a gesture until the boy, too, took to this language of signs and trained his face to betray his purpose. It was during this time that the pain in his kidneys grew worst. They sat in him like stones, cold against his skin. He would trace their outlines gingerly, lying face down upon his bed. Every half-hour or so they bid him get up, his kidneys, walked him over to the corner and pushed him to his knees in front of his chamber pot's blood-flecked rim. At first he'd had qualms about exposing himself before the child and had tried to shield his nudity with the flat of his hand. Now it did not matter to him, and he even felt grateful when the boy drew near and stood over him, a hand upon his shoulder, and watched him squeeze crimson drops from his organ. Afterwards he would help him up, unbend those stiffened knees; time and again he had to walk them supple across the hardwood floor. Upon every turn, his image in the looking glass, loathsome to him now with its hollow cheeks and stained overcoat, a woollen hat drawn low into his brow. And behind him, watching, the boy with the crooked

teeth, running grubby fingernails across the window's frost-lined glass and etching his name, always his name, *Anders*.

There was no noise to the night, no means of telling the time. He did not have a watch, had not owned a watch for a long time now. His kidneys were his only timekeepers, that and the interval it took for the frost to eat into the boy's name and obscure it. Pavel longed for liquor but had none. Perhaps in the morning he would send the boy to find him some. He had cigarettes, of course, but dared not smoke them. Cigarettes were the only currency left to the city, would buy him coals tomorrow, could buy him company if he should seek it, six Luckies for a sympathetic lap, and less if all he required were the services of a pair of German lips, cold-chapped and bare of lipstick that cost more than the sex. Once or twice that night he would bend to prise a pack from under the corner of his mattress, and sniff at the tobacco through layers of wrapping for minutes at a time, the boy's eyes upon him, crooked teeth dug deep into his childish lip. Then his kidneys would bid him kneel again before his blood-encrusted idol, his manhood between fingers that had long lost all sensation. 'God,' he cursed once, and meant nothing by it. Behind him, the boy moved his right hand in deliberate provocation, touched chin, belly and both sides of the chest. 'Amen,' he said, hardly a whisper, and for the first time in their month-long acquaintance Pavel had the urge to lash out at him, though truth be told he loved that boy. Then the phone rang, rang shrill in the half-lit room, and before he even had time to wonder that the line was working again, he answered it mechanically, giving his number, one palm against the icy window, melting yet another hole into Anders' frostbitten name.

It was the winter of '46, Berlin, the city trussed up into twenty pieces like a turkey on Thanksgiving dinner, eight to the Russians and word had it not a woman there who had not been raped. A

winter of death, people freezing in their unheated flats, impoverished, hungry, scraping together something less than a living from the crumbs that fell from their occupiers' tables. And yet, amongst the misery, the first stirrings of recovery: a nightclub in Schöneberg, a working man's brothel in Wedding; some bars around Zoogarten and in the December air the reek of the monkey cage. Small-time businesses, American customers, local staff. It was in one of these that Boyd White was standing, one eye out onto the street, where snow was trying to bury his car. He shielded the phone with his girth, his collar turned high over neck and chin, counting off the rings under his breath. Pavel picked up after the third.

'Your kidneys keeping you awake?' Boyd asked and listened to the lie that answered.

'Glad you're feeling better. Listen, Pavel, I need help. Are you alone?'

'The boy? Send him away.'

'What do you mean you can't?'

'I'll be there in ten. Make sure the downstairs door is unlocked. I'll have my hands full.'

'Let's say I'm bringing some laundry.'

'Laundry, Pavel. A man's gotta wash.'

'Ten minutes, Pavel. Just wait in your place. And get rid of the boy.'

He rang off and asked the barkeep what sort of booze they were serving.

'Potato vodka. Chocolate liqueur. French brandy, but it's watered down and costs a fortune.'

'You tell that to all your customers?'

'Why not? My boss is an *Arschloch*.'

Boyd shrugged and bought a half-bottle of vodka. He paid with some food coupons and whatever was left of a pack of cigarettes. They shared one, he and the barkeep, watching the snow through the dirty windows.

'That your car?' the barman asked enviously.

'Sure,' said Boyd. 'If someone asks, I was never here.' He put another half-dozen cigarettes on the counter. 'You hear me?'

'Hear who?'

'Thatta boy.'

Boyd threw the butt of his cigarette onto the floor and made his way out into the cold. He walked over to the car, opened the back. Inside lay a trunk, the kind one uses for overseas travel, brass on the corners and two belts to hold it shut. Boyd ran a hand along its base, testing for wet. Then he got in, turned the ignition, and set off for Pavel's place. A ten-minute drive on ice-slick roads and all the while his lips were moving, rehearsing the words he would have to speak. Trying them on for size.



'I swear to God I never saw him coming. I mean, Jesus Christ, who drives around looking out for a fucking midget? All I know is I was driving through one of the Russian sectors, a quart of rye for company, and then I hit him, hit *something*, and felt it dragging under the car. I get out and it's snowing hard, my breath showing in the air and not a soul out. Some godforsaken alleyway, a handful of bathroom windows sticking out of the ruins, frost-blinkered glass, and not a light to be seen. At first I think it's my tail lights that are tinting the snow, but when I get my flashlight from out of the glove box, I see it for what it is, a path of red starting ten yards back and leading right up to my rear fender. So I grab under, feeling spooked, you know, figuring I hit a dog or something, and what is it I touch? Two hundred dollars' worth of cashmere wool, that's what, warm and soggy with somebody's dying. It takes me a while to drag him out, he's got himself stuck to the axle, and by the time I am done and stand over the body something strange has started to happen. The alley's filled with a half-dozen cats, runty little things with their ribs showing and

their tails worn high like they're pointing to the moon. I stand there, breathing froth into the snowflakes and watch them gather round me, soft kitty paws, and now and then a patrol car rolls past in the distance. The cats are circling us, tails cocked at the moon, their muzzles bloodied by the tail lights' glow. They are vicious bastards, let me tell you: frost on their whiskers, eyes like cut glass, a half-dozen pairs, on me and the dead man. And then they start licking. Licking at the snow I mean, the blood in the snow, they lap it up like mother's milk. And all the while from their throats, from their whole bodies, there issues this sound, you hear it with your skin, it's like an engine running under your palm. That's when I realize they are purring, man, purring as they feed on the midget's death.

'It really gave me the willies.

'Anyway, so I figure, no point sticking around, only I'm worried: that cashmere coat, man, it gives you pause. What if I nailed someone important, you know? So I bend down to have a closer look, and to check the pulse, on the neck, see, right up under the jawbone, only clearly the neck's all broke, and then I see his collar. Midget wears a pair of fucking stars, red stars, wears them through the button holes. I nearly crapped myself I got so scared. So here I am in the middle of the Russian sector, my car's all busted up, a dead midget at my feet, the cats are purring like it's Christmas and Easter all rolled into one, and the stiff is a fucking Russky apparatchik or something. I gotta think of something fast. And then it comes to me – the suitcase. It's been rolling around in my car forever; some clothes are in it, money, papers, a toothbrush, just in case, you know, only it's as big as a fucking tuba case. Plenty big for a midget. There is no time to lose. I upend the case right on the back seat of my car, and then I throw the body inside, it's a bit of a squeeze after all, but hell, he don't mind no more, and two minutes later I'm off, the cats still licking up evidence and enough snow coming down to cover my tracks inside the hour.

'Thank Christ it was a midget. Just imagine he was fully grown.
Doing an ax job out in an alley.
'It doesn't bear thinking about.'

That was his story anyway, Boyd White's, the night he killed the midget, packed him away in a suitcase, and carried him up four floors to Pavel's two-bedroom in a quiet part of Charlottenburg. Boyd was California-born, a crook and grifter by vocation, a hard man grown fat in a city of starvation. For the most part he spoke like a second-rate stooge from a Chandler novel, though he had his moments of eloquence, too, like the present one in which he conjured up cats' tails taking aim at the winter moon.

You have to wonder about those cats, though, emaciated to be sure – how did they ever survive? It was the winter of '46, winter of death, people freezing while taking craps in the outhouse, you heard the spiel. Most cats in the city had long been eaten, their fur turned into gloves and collars, the black market awash with viola strings. Berlin that winter was dog-eat-dog and worse, and that night its vengeful gods had thrown a wrench into Boyd's spokes, if you will pardon my metaphors, and here he came running to the one friend he had left in the city, ran up four floors and barged through the door without so much as a knock, the middle of the night and a dead midget in his fist.

What the hell was he thinking?

When the door had opened and Boyd'd come in, Pavel had been down on his knees again, straining before the chamber pot. It had taken him a moment or two to collect himself, struggle up against his kidneys' weight. Then he had stood and studied the bulk of the trunk pulling at Boyd's arm, the crease of worry that

ran through the man's face; had taken in the patch of wet that had collected in one of the suitcase's brass-encrusted corners, threatening to drip.

'What's in the suitcase?' he'd asked, stiff fingers struggling to button his fly.

'You have a look,' Boyd had grunted, letting go of the trunk and shuffling over to the bed to sit down. He'd lit a cigarette, silver Zippo lighter, had inhaled. 'It's not as bad as it looks.'

It certainly didn't look good. The midget was four foot one, maybe four two, Boyd had had to bend him to make him fit. Not that he wasn't bent enough already. As far as Pavel could tell both legs were broken, and one of the arms, at elbow and wrist, and some of the head was missing, too. The body was leaking blood from all ends; it had soaked into his expensive tan suit and gave him a jellyfish slipperiness that sent a wave of nausea through Pavel's guts. Quickly, ashamed of himself, he turned the face over, but, of course, he didn't recognize it. He did not know any midgets. There was a pencil moustache and the teeth were broken. Inside lolled a serrated tongue.

Gently, getting down into a crouch to do it, Pavel closed the lid of the trunk, then limped over to the sink to scrub his hands. He had to hack a piece of ice from out of a bucket and run its jagged edge over fingernails and knuckles. It was as though he was carving away the blood stains, planing his skin like a carpenter.

As Pavel stood there, the ice pick sticking to his palm, hammering away at the ice, Boyd coughed and offered up his tale. 'I swear to God I never saw him coming,' he said. Pavel only half listened, his soul turned inward, tuned in to his breathing, his heart's anxious goose-step marching him back to the war's many corpses. God, how he hated that midget just then. And all the time he stood there, his fingers white against the sink, Boyd talking kittens, he kept wondering whether the

boy could hear him through the bedroom door, and worse yet, understand.

There is no telling people. Take Pavel, for instance. By rights the midget should have broken his back, coming for a visit at a time like this; put him down like a sick dog. You picture him: a slight man, eyes like wet coals. Curved woman's lips and skin so delicate you could trace the veins. The ears almost translucent, black hair worn parted, the teeth rocking from lack of fruit. A weak man in all respects. He had bad kidneys, and that was just the start of it. Pavel suffered from that terminal disease called empathy, forever trying to exchange points of view even with the boot that kicked him. He was a quiet man, intensely sincere, often silent for hours on end though capable of passionate outbursts during which his tongue kept tripping over the edge of words and everything came out as a muddle. He'd backtrack time and again to correct himself, for above all he wished to be *sincere*. A weak man, you see, brought up for the previous century, for a world of calling cards and drawing-room courting; for chessboard gambits and the Novel; for a quiet love of life. By rights he should have been, in his time and place, a sacrificial lamb. As it was, he turned into a bloodhound the minute he took the midget's scent.

You don't believe me? I spent hours and days eye to eye with Pavel, just us in the dark, some bars between us and the scuttle of roaches. I know Pavel like the back of my hand. And yet, time and again, I was surprised by him; he threw me, more than once, and there were moments when it felt like I had to start all over again.

Boyd, by contrast, does not compare. Boyd was twentieth-century through and through: a braggart, a womanizer, a boor. Boyd talked tough and had fists to back him up. Men liked Boyd, as did women; he wore spats as an affectation and thought them a

sign of originality. Forget about Boyd. I only spoke to Boyd once, and even then he had nothing of interest to say.

But we weren't talking about Boyd. We were talking about the boy, Anders, who stood ears pressed against the bedroom door, and tried his hardest to understand. What he was asking himself, in German no doubt, the word sticky in his child-mouth, was this: What the fuck is a *mit-chut*?

Whatever it was, it was dead, and Russian. The death did not bother the boy. He had seen plenty of it, had stolen from the stiff grasp of corpses more than once. Nor did he care that it was a Russian. What was there to care? One stiff was as good as another. He understood, too, why the man Boyd had not left him behind in the snow. The *mit-chut* was important, one way or another, and it was unwise to kill those who were important, even in Berlin. The boy and the crew he ran with had learned the city's rules. You robbed those who looked like they had something, and avoided those who looked like they had too much. Russkies, Tommies, Amis – they were all off limits. You sweated locals, those who had made it through the war with a bag of gold under their pillows but were too stupid or too compromised to have found protection. This the boy had learned and learned well. You didn't break the rules and walk away unbroken.

Which was to say that the man Boyd had made a mistake, and now he was sweating over it, with the thermometer at minus five. The boy had seen him around, driving his car, trading on the black market. He was a whore-man, a *Zuhälter*. He did not know the English word for it.

The conversation carried on. Anders listened, his ear at the keyhole, holding his breath so it wouldn't drown out the voices.

'What do you want to do?' Pavel asked. He sounded cool, composed, only his teeth were chattering. The boy felt a pang of

pride. Pavel wasn't like the fat American. He had backbone, despite the disease.

'How the fuck do I know? If it wasn't so fucking cold, I'd drive him out to the river. Sink the little bastard.'

'You could drop him in the woods.'

'Too many guard patrols. Besides -'

'Besides?'

'He might still be useful. The midget.'

'Did he have papers?'

'Nothing. No wallet, no briefcase, not even a fucking wedding ring.'

'Okay, Boyd, I want him out of my bedroom. Let's carry him into the back room. The boy will give you a hand.'

He called him in then, but the boy had already started opening the door. He made a show of helping the man lift the trunk, but left him with all the weight. They manoeuvred it into the second bedroom and propped it up against the wall next to the window. It was surprisingly small, smaller than Anders, he measured himself out against it.

A mit-chut, thought Anders, *must be some sort of dwarf*.

When they returned to the front room, Pavel was back on his knees, trying to pee. Boyd seemed unembarrassed about the act. He sidled up next to him, frowning a little when he saw the blood. Once Pavel was finished and back on his feet there was a long silence. The boy kept away from them, trying to figure them out, the room so cold he could count his every breath.

'So you're circumcised,' Boyd said after twenty. 'You a fucking kike or something?'

Pavel smiled at that, and Boyd smiled back. The boy didn't understand the joke.

'He needs penicillin,' he said, addressing the man for the first time, and got ready to duck in case he should try to hit him.

'Oh yeah? Says who, pipsqueak?'

They stared at each other like gunslingers from a cowboy film. The boy knew all about cowboy films. He wished he had a gun.

'Boyd,' said Pavel, 'this is Anders. Anders, this is Boyd White. He and I used to be in the army together. He is –'

'I know what he is. He's a *Zuhälter*.'

'Yes,' said Pavel softly, 'he's a pimp.' He smiled at the word and stroked his aching back. It seemed to the boy that there had been reproach in his voice.

Boyd shrugged like it meant little to him. He peeled a pack of cigarettes from out of his shirt pocket, offered one to Pavel and then, grudgingly, one to the boy. Anders pocketed it without a word, thinking he would have it later, when Boyd was not around. The two men stood in the room, smoking, cupping their cigarettes in identical ways. It was Boyd who spoke.

'You could go back, you know, Pavel. The army. Wasn't as bad as all that, and they are desperate for interpreters. Christ, you speak all four languages. You could live like a king.'

Pavel shrugged and blew smoke. 'What are you going to do now?'

'Shove off before one of his friends runs off with my wheels.' Boyd pointed at Anders with his cigarette. 'Make some inquiries about the midget. I'll come back with some drugs, coals and cigarettes.'

'Let's swap overcoats,' he added. 'Mine is warmer and it'll drop to minus twenty over the next few days.'

Pavel accepted the charity. It irked the boy that he would accept it so easily. 'It's a kind of payment,' he said to himself, to soothe his wounded pride. 'Cheap,' he told himself, 'he's getting off cheap,' and searched for a bitter parting word.

At the door, the two men embraced like brothers, Boyd's hands careful not to press upon the kidneys.

'Belle,' he said. 'If something goes wrong, go look for Belle.'

'Who's she?' Anders found himself asking, jealous of the embrace. 'She some sort of whore?'

Boyd disentangled himself.

'You should box his ears,' he said to Pavel, but said it gently. 'She's one of my girls. She's also –'

He broke off and took the time to smile to himself.

'She's something special, Pavel. I mean *real* special.

'One day,' he said, 'I'll make her Mrs White.'

The boy thought that even his smile looked fake.

And that's how he left them, Boyd White, turned on his heel and swanned out, Pavel's thin coat too small for his frame, and a stoop in his shoulders like he was still carting it around, the midget's death, down the stairs and into his limousine that stood cold and lonely before the bomb-chewed kerb. Outside, the snow had stopped falling. It had become too cold for it.

I will say one thing for Boyd. He did a good job. I mean, for a bloody amateur, it had been one hell of a performance.

It was dawn before the boy fell asleep. Pavel waited him out patiently, reading to him from his favourite novel, trying to numb his own pain with his voice's quiet rasp. Once or twice he almost dozed off, and caught the boy trying to sneak into the back room in order to investigate its secrets. Each time Pavel called him back without anger. Somewhat to his surprise, the boy obeyed without argument.

'A *mit-chut* is some sort of dwarf?' Anders asked him once.

Pavel smiled at this.

'Yes. Something like that.'

'A dead Russian dwarf, eh?' the boy sneered. 'That God of yours has a sense of humour.'

Pavel did not rise to the bait. It was part of an ongoing theological debate they were having. He went back to the book

and started reading. Eventually Anders succumbed to sleep. His breath rose above him like a plume. Pavel refrained from kissing him, lest he should wake. Now it was his turn to sneak off to see the midget. He took the bucket of ice along, and the cold shaft of the ice pick.

It took a while to wash the blood off the dead man's face. Pavel had to don gloves to prevent the ice from sticking to his fingers and they made his hands clumsy. He did not bother much with the body, but closed the mouth above the broken teeth and combed the frozen hair with a penny comb that he warmed in one armpit. When he was done, the midget stood peacefully in the leaning trunk, though try as he might Pavel could not get the eyes to close. After some thought he lifted him out once more and struggled to free his overcoat, then inspected it inch by inch. At last he set it aside with approval: the coat was too dark to tell whether it was soiled by blood or something else. There was no point taking the shirt – it was not ripped, but stained a heavy, muddy red, especially at the back. To rob him of his trousers seemed undignified; besides, they would be too short for the boy. Pavel took the boots though, after some struggle, for he did not want to cut the laces; the socks too, for they were warm and new. Once he was done, he placed the midget back in his casket and stood him up against its back. The feet stood yellow and wooden upon the trunk's lining, the nails chipped and dirty, coarse hair upon the toes. Shaken, Pavel wrapped them in an old towel, though some part or other always stuck out accusingly, the midget's feet refusing to be forgotten. At last, Pavel gave up and sat down on a stool, right in front of the corpse. He sat there, for half an hour perhaps, and watched ice crystals spread across the midget's glassy eyes, thinking to himself.

Thinking: 'Winter.'

Thinking: 'God, I hate winter.'

Trying to say a prayer for the midget, the words freezing in his mouth.

The last thing Pavel did was remove the red stars from the midget's shirt collar and place them in his pocket. Then he closed the lid on the dead man, and returned to the front room where he covered the boy with the cashmere coat. He stretched out next to him and smelled his hands. Try as he might he could not smell the blood. He shrugged and told himself it was too cold for smells. As he drifted off, towards sleep and dreams, he mumbled a name.

'Mrs Belle White.'

It sounded ridiculous to him, a thing from a fairy tale, and also beautiful. Beside him the boy, sleeping, blew plumes into the air, while the first rays of the sun began to probe the wall of ice that had grown upon their windows.

Anders woke mid-morning to find his new coat, along with the midget's socks and boots. He put them on and looked at himself in the mirror. He looked good, like he was from money, although the boots pinched a little. Pavel was still asleep, his woollen hat drawn down over his eyes. Anders snuck next door, opened the trunk. The *mit-chut* looked clean and glass-eyed, only the feet were ugly. Anders went through his trouser pockets, but found nothing apart from half a book of matches encrusted with frozen blood. He pocketed them out of habit, then went back to check on Pavel. The fever was still upon his brow, and his body shook with cold. The boy didn't trust Boyd to keep his word and come back with medicine. He tied on two of his scarves, stole a number of leather-bound volumes from the bookshelves, and went out to find some for himself.

Penicillin.

Penicillin was worth much that winter; was worth gold, worth murder in this city of the sick. The boy knew all about penicillin. It's how they had met, Pavel and he: it had brought them together, the boy thought it fate, thought penicillin some sort

of God, the kind you went to war for, or else the kind that got you killed. Pavel had asked for it on the black market at Zoogarten station more than a month ago, when his kidneys had first started playing up. He wasn't in uniform, wore a half-decent coat and spoke the language like a German. He looked game. Schlo' had picked him up, eleven and a half with those clear-water eyes that always put the hook in suckers. Schlo' had asked Pavel to show him how he was going to pay. Pavel had reached into a bag and unwrapped a china tea set, unchipped, along with a gold wedding ring.

'Will it do?' he'd asked as he watched the boy bite the ring. Schlo' had nodded.

'I ain't got it here,' he'd told Pavel. 'Come and follow me.'

Anders wasn't there to witness it, but he imagined Pavel noticing the tattoo upon the boy's forearm as they walked away from the station. He had a quick eye for things like that, though he was blind to so much else. Schlo' had led him on a right goose chase, deep into Charlottenburg, signalling to the boys who lingered on street corners, smoking, talking, pretending to play.

'Right over there,' he'd said, and then they had him, a dead end that finished in a pile of war rubble, twelve boys armed with clubs and stones, and Paulchen, their leader, showing off his father's Luger. Anders took position right behind Pavel, gauging his weight, the quality of his shoes, making him for a German civil servant, a little down on his luck.

'He's got china and a wedding band,' Schlo' told them triumphantly, 'and maybe some dough.'

Anders searched his pockets and found some dollars, along with his papers. He passed them over to Paulchen who took one look and started cursing.

'You fucking idiot,' he barked at Schlo'. 'He's a Yank.'

'He speaks German!'

'So what? You moron!' And to Pavel, shoving the papers into his face: 'Are these real?'

'They are real,' Pavel replied calmly.

It made him look up, Anders, the calmness of it and how he spoke without an accent. He found himself studying the man again, the slope of his shoulders, the thick dark hair. There was nothing there that prepared you for the calm.

'You in the army?' Paulchen wanted to know.

'I used to be. Not any more.'

'A civilian?'

'Yes.'

The man took a cigarette from behind his ear and quietly lit it with a match he found in his shirt pocket. The gesture reeked of army; it was there in the way he held the cigarette, in the way he took in its smoke. It was to Anders like the stranger failed to understand the situation, or else he understood it and refused to play along. He turned his attention over to Paulchen, who stood feet spread, gun in fist, the soft outline of a moustache twitching upon his upper lip.

Anders could tell Paulchen wasn't sure what he should do. The stranger didn't conform. Foreigners were off-limits; mugging them could be dangerous. Then again, this one did not look like he had any juice; if he did he wouldn't be buying penicillin on the black market. Paulchen shuffled and thought. The others waited him out. There was respect there. Rumour had it he had killed a man, in '45, with a crowbar and the heels of his boots.

Pavel helped him make up his mind.

'You can keep the tea set,' he told Paulchen. 'I get the wedding ring, the cash and the papers. That way, we both get something.'

They were preposterous terms. After all, they had him, twelve boys armed with clubs and stones, never mind the fucking Luger. He had no leverage other than being American, and Anders thought that if they burned his papers he wouldn't even have that. You had to have papers to be somebody in Berlin, papers and friends. The man did not look like he had too many friends.

But Paulchen bought it. Never thought twice about it. Not a word, not a threat – he just gave back the documents, threw him the ring.

‘Get moving,’ he said to Pavel, and Pavel walked off, smoking, a little limp to his gait from how his kidneys bothered him. Anders followed. No good reason, he just did. Something about the way he had lit up, and the terms he had bought himself. Or perhaps it was because he spoke German like that, like he had been born there, only perhaps a little softer, like he thought it a fragile tongue, one that would shatter in his mouth.

It was child’s play, following him. He never once looked back. Anders gave him a head start up the stairs of his building, but stayed close enough to make sure he knew which apartment he went into. When he crept close to press his ear against the wood there was nothing but silence. Anders sat there for the better part of the afternoon, with his back against the door and enough weight in his legs to make a run for it should he have to. He sat, sucked on caramels, and listened. The only sound he heard was the metallic rattle of a typewriter that started up after perhaps an hour and continued throughout the day. At long last Anders got up and knocked. He wasn’t sure why, but he knocked. The door opened a crack. Behind it, the man’s tired face and a shelf laden with books.

‘What do you want?’ asked the man in his mealy-mouthed German.

‘I can get you penicillin,’ Anders found himself saying.

‘You what?’

‘I can get you penicillin,’ Anders said again, said it in English, best he knew. ‘For a price.’

‘I don’t have enough left to sell.’

‘You have books.’

‘They are not for sale,’ said Pavel, also in English now, and closed the door.

Anders went away thinking that the man's English sounded much harsher than his German.

He went back. There was no reason for it, he couldn't afford to give away medicine, and besides, he didn't owe the man a thing, not a thing, but still he went back. Twice he simply sat there, listening to the typewriter through the closed door, counting the letters and typewritten lines that ended in the sounding of a bell. The fourth time he came he brought a bottle of mint liqueur which he had heard was good for when one was ill. He placed it on the step, knocked on the door and ran away. He avoided the flat for a week after that, running with his crew instead, ripping off punters and flogging wares on the market. The weather was gradually growing worse, and Anders bought himself boots and a blanket from his proceeds. The boots were second-hand army issue, three sizes too large and heavy as lead. Anders walked them proudly, and made sure they didn't carry him back to the man's door.

Then, when he almost thought he had kicked the habit, he found himself retracing his steps yet again. For an hour he stood there, one hand spread up on the door, telling himself to leave. But this time he didn't leave. Instead, he knocked, a series of quick hard raps like he had seen the police use, and went over in his mind how he would ask the man for money retrospectively, to pay for the bottle of liqueur. 'You drank it, didn't you?' he'd say without balking, and the man would have to admit that he was in his debt.

The door opened, that is to say, Pavel opened it, opened wide and without hesitation. He saw Anders, saw he was alone, outsize boots on his feet and a blanket thrown over one shoulder. There was no reaction, nothing the boy could read. Pavel simply turned, turned on his heel, and marched back over to an armchair

upon which he had been sitting prior to being interrupted. He sat, threw a coat over his lap and legs, and picked up a book that lay face down by his feet, its pages spread across the wooden floor.

The book was one of hundreds. They lined the apartment's walls, standing on cheap shelves made out of pressed, unvarnished wood. Hundreds of books, bound in leather, linen and cardboard; some as fat as Anders' fist, others so thin they looked like magazines, only the size was wrong. Amongst them, a few books whose pages looked like they were made out of gold, and, in one corner, a stack with books so large they did not fit upon the shelf. Enough books so that you could smell them, the smell of paper. Anders hadn't known that paper smelled.

'Come in or stay out, but either way, please close the door.'

Anders did not react. His eyes remained riveted upon the books. He knew their worth on the market. They would have bought plenty of medicine. He stepped up to them, ran his fingers over the titles that lay embossed upon their spines.

'These are in different languages,' he said at last, impressed despite himself. 'You read all these?'

'Yes,' said Pavel.

'I speak German, English and Russian,' said Anders. And then, unaccountably moved to honesty: 'Only a little Russian. To trade, you see.'

'Do you read?' asked Pavel, and the boy shook his head.

'Reading is for pencil pushers and bureaucrats,' he explained. 'I have no time for it.'

And after some thought, looking at the book that sat in Pavel's hands: 'If you wish to read, you may read aloud, if you like. I don't mind.'

Pavel smiled at this and got up to close the door. He locked it deliberately, the sound of the lock loud in the room, reminding Anders how foolish it had been to come there. Then Pavel turned to peruse his shelves with the same quiet calm with which he had

lit that cigarette in the face of Paulchen's Luger. His hand hovered over a number of books until at last he pulled out a dog-eared hardback, whose back-flap was badly torn. He settled down with it and started reading. He read:

“Among other public buildings in a certain town which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, and to which I will assign no fictitious name, it boasts of one which is common to most towns, great or small, to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born, on a day and date which I need not take upon myself to repeat, inasmuch as it can be of no possible consequence to the reader, in this stage of the business at all events, the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter.”’

Anders puffed up his cheeks and let out air, noisily. ‘Gibberish,’ he complained in German. ‘It makes no sense at all. “I-tem of mor-tility” – it’s all nonsense.’

‘All it’s saying is that a boy was born in a workhouse – something like an orphanage – in some town or other. Only, I forgot to tell you his name. It’s *Oliver Twist*.’

‘Oh yeah? Well it sounds like it was written two hundred years ago,’ the boy said, sour-faced and dismissive. ‘It’s not *modern*,’ he added in order to settle the issue.

‘As a matter of fact it was written just one hundred years ago,’ Pavel started to respond, but then he broke off, shrugged, closed the book and went back to the one he had been reading before the boy arrived.

‘What’s it about anyway?’ Anders asked after a while, his voice feigning boredom, the feigning audible even to himself.

‘Words,’ said Pavel.

‘Words?’

‘Words. And a young orphan boy who starts living with an old Jew.’

'Is the Jew good to him?'

'No. He tries his best to squeeze him for every cent he's worth.'

'What's his name again?'

'The Jew? Fagin.'

'No, I mean the boy. Olliver?'

'Oliver. Oliver Twist.'

The boy mouthed it a few times, stretching and contracting the vowels until he chanced upon a version he liked.

'You may read on,' he said magnanimously. 'Olliver Tweest. Mind you, most likely I will fall asleep.'



He left at the end of chapter four. Night had fallen, the flat was freezing. 'Later,' he said, and wondered whether he should tell the other boys about the books. They would want to steal them.

The next day he came back with two tins of sardines and half a kilo of floury potatoes.



Thereafter the boy came time and again; dropped in after breakfast, or on his way home from work. Sometimes, though not always, he would sleep there. Mostly he came to listen to the book, or else to talk. They talked about many things, Pavel and he. It took some time for Anders to get used to this. It was strange talk, talk about thoughts one had late at night before dozing off, or perhaps on the crapper sometimes, when one's bowels made one wait and the mind started to wander. Anders had not known such thoughts were for talking. Pavel spoke of little else. When Anders asked him to tell him about normal things, say the war or his past, he declined. 'Books, beauty, and fear of the dark,' he said. 'These I will talk about. Forget about the war. There was no

war. Only of course there was, but we do better in forgetting.' Whichever way he looked at it, it sounded a little *meschugge* to the boy.

Then the kidneys got worse. Anders tried to buy Pavel some medicine but there was none to be had. He couldn't tell whether Pavel was already pissing blood at that point. This was before the water had frozen in the pipes – before there was any need for the chamber pot, that is. Anders learned to gauge the disease by Pavel's walk; by the shadow that would pass across his face and force his lips into a liar's smile. The kidneys got worse, then better, then worse again. Once they gave occasion for one of those talks. Afterwards, Anders stayed away for a few nights, before he came back, wordlessly, and gestured for Pavel to get on with the book.

It happened like this. They had sat up during the night, Pavel praying in one corner, a little hat in his hair and a piece of cloth stretched taut behind his back. He was speaking foreign words. When he was done he turned, holding his kidneys, his eyes moist now with pain. 'God,' Pavel said and the word stood in the room like a lodger overdue on his rent. It wasn't the first time the subject had come up; it was in the book, here and there, and in the church bells that carried it in during their morning airing; in the prayers Pavel spoke each night and upon the covers of a dozen of his books, stars and crosses, and the slender sickle of a crescent moon. Anders thought it over and decided he should clarify the point.

'I don't believe in God,' he said. 'Don't get me wrong, I have nothing against him. He's useful, you see. Keeps the masses in place.' His hand made a dismissive gesture.

'Who taught you this?'

'Nobody taught me,' Anders said proudly. 'I taught myself. Or else the war taught me.'

He mulled it over for a minute, running his tongue through a gap in his teeth. He found he liked the sound of it.

'Yes, the war taught me. There is no God.'

He looked over to Pavel, making sure he did not look like he was looking. Pavel's face was pale, impassive. *He looks like a girl, the boy thought to himself, and also like a statue.*

'You disapprove?' he asked.

'And what is it to you whether I approve or disapprove?'

Pavel shrugged and picked a book from a pile that sat by his bed. He began reading it in silence, the boy sitting there, gap-toothed upon his stool. They sat like that for perhaps an hour.

'So there is a God?' Anders asked at last, and flushed because his voice sounded childish in his ears.

'I don't know,' said Pavel, upon reflection. 'There may be.'

They went back to their silence, the man reading his book, and rats scrambling in their walls.

Later, after they had shared a tin of sardines for a midnight supper, Pavel crouched to hug the boy. He lay in his arms stiff-backed and hostile.

'I am too old for this,' he said disdainfully.

'On the contrary,' said Pavel. 'You're old enough.'

The boy did not understand this and thought it a lie. Outside, in the cold, he found he was crying and bitterly berated himself for it. He swore that this time he would not go back. But then, two days later, he moved in with Pavel permanently. It was the third of December. On the sixth the cold settled upon the city. A week and a half later, Boyd came to visit. And the next morning, Anders stole four leather-bound volumes from Pavel's private library in order to get his friend some penicillin, and a lemon. He had heard it said that lemons were good when you were ill, even better than mint liqueur.