From Aberystwyth with Love

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Extract

Chapter 1

FOR A WHILE He just sat there and hovered, taking it one step at a time. He moved upon the face of those waters and made light. That was OK, but He really needed to set it off a bit, so He divided it from the darkness. It gave Him what you might call a framework. That was good, too. Then He tried out a firmament and after that he gathered all the waters in one place to make a thing called land. That was where it started getting tricky. Once you've got land there's always the temptation to make things to put on it. It's like having a toy farmyard with no animals. At first things went OK: seeds and trees and grass; and herb yielding seed after his kind; and no one would begrudge the herb the opportunity to do that. On the fourth day He had a brainwave: lights in the firmament, a big one and a small one. As soon as He saw them He knew that they were good; and there isn't a single soul born since He first switched them on who would disagree with that verdict. They sure are lovely things, those lights, especially the ones down the coast from Aberaeron and Cardigan glimmering across the water at night. Drive through those places during the day and there's nothing there: a scrap of village green, a few dogs and a bus shelter that smells of urine with a tattered rag that details the arrival and departure of buses as rare as comets. But at night, on the Prom at Aberystwyth, they twinkle and sparkle to you from down the coast, over the dark water, in strange agonised beauty. On the fifth day He thought up fishes and whales and birds, and that was enchanting too. When you look at birds, the way they fly, the freedom and ease and grace with which they glide around, it ravishes the soul. That was really where He should have called it a day. The hardest thing in the world is

knowing when to quit. He was just like the guy in the casino who can't leave the table: just one more throw of the dice. We all know what happened on the sixth day: He got out of bed on the wrong side. After breakfast it was kine and creeping things that creepeth over the earth; and after lunch He came up with the creepiest thing of all: man. The creature that was always getting into trouble. Six thousand years later one of them walked into my office.

He was wearing a museum curator's uniform buttoned up to the throat: four solid brass buttons in a row up the front of the Prussian blue serge. He had epaulettes, gold braid at the cuffs, and the general air of a Ruritanian dignitary that you sometimes find in the doormen of a certain class of hotel; and in leaders of banana republics, the ones who get their portrait painted in oils the morning after the *coup d'état*. I could tell his museum wasn't one of those modern affairs where kids are encouraged to press buttons that make things light up. It was strictly Sumerian clay tablets imprinted with cuneiform markings like bird footprints; tablets of no interest to anyone, least of all the Sumerians. Rivulets of sweat ran down the man's cheeks and formed dark lines in the serge collar. We were midway through the great August heatwave at the time and it was already unbearable by 9 a.m., which is the time he walked into my office. I didn't know it then, but the uniform belonged to the Museum Of Our Forefathers' Suffering in Hughesovka. The man had also placed a sock on the desk. Hughesovka is a town on the lower Don River in the Ukraine that was founded by John Hughes from South Wales, a steelworker who left the land of his birth in 1869 to build a town that bore his name. At least until the Bolsheviks renamed it Stalino to commemorate another famous man of steel. That's not the sort of thing you can do any more, found a town that bears your name, and you have to admire the achievement. Louie Knight, Private Detective, is written on my business cards and on the frosted glass in the top panel of the door but that's about as far as it goes. Half the people I give the cards to throw them straight in the bin. He was the first man I had ever met from Hughesovka.

For a while we sat peering at each other across the desk; he wasn't smiling but some people can look amiable without having to smile and he was one. I could tell he was a connoisseur of that most underrated of God's inventions, silence. If you work in a museum a pin-dropping hush is your bread and butter. I like silence too and it's hard not to warm to a man who has the manners to walk in and say nothing. Most people start gushing the moment their backside hits the chair. If I ever meet God I'll tell Him. The best thing you ever came up with, better even than the firmament or the lights in the sky to rule over the darkness, better even than the birds, although I admit the birds are special, the best was the silence. If only there had been more of it. And He'll probably say, 'You know what? That's the one bit I didn't invent. It was already there when I started.'

We waited some more, the only sound the distant gulls, the sleepy traffic drone and two men sweating. Then I said, as the distant clock struck a quarter past, 'It's always nice to meet a quiet type.'

As if grateful for the hint, he told me to call him Uncle Vanya. I told him to call me Louie. I turned the Bakelite fan to a higher setting, stood up and opened the window wider; then sat down again. The heatwave had been going on since June. Each morning we peered through the curtains in the hope of seeing some sort of cloud that might spell the end of it, and each morning all we saw was a malignant glare, a sky bleached out to a sickly pallor. Walking along the Prom was like wading through gelatinised air.

I made no reference to the sock on the desk. Instinct warned me not to go too fast on that one. Clearly whatever the case was, the sock played a pivotal role and some people don't like being rushed when it comes to pivotal things. Without even having to look closely I knew the sock was an item of fundamental importance and in this respect I was more right than I realised: it was my fee.

Calamity Jane, my partner, walked in and introduced herself to Uncle Vanya. She didn't mention the fee on the desk, although she definitely saw it. Calamity was seventeen and, following a brief and ill-fated attempt to set up on her own last Christmas, was now a full-

time partner in the business. Three or four years ago I had rescued her from the dark belly of the bingo hall, that subterranean cavern seamed with veins of fool's gold where she had been one of the many teenage troglodytes with pallor similar to the one in the sky at the moment and a sullen resentment towards just about everything in life. I never ceased to wonder at the speed with which that attitude evaporated after I removed her from the milieu. Within a week it had been replaced by a bubbling silver brook of optimism, the sort that runs dry or gets blocked up in later years, but about which no one would ever dream of disabusing the young. They will find out soon enough.

Calamity drew up a chair to the desk, sat down and opened her notebook.

'For many years,' began Uncle Vanya, 'I was a cartographer. I explored a wild and marvel-filled *terra incognita*, criss-crossed by rivers that scorned the puny attempts of man to navigate them. Though many men had passed before me and tried to fathom its secrets, all had failed and that dark centre remained on the map as a white expanse marked merely with the supposition that there might be dragons living there. It was a crazy realm containing extremes of joy and misery; troughs of despair, and peaks of felicity. I traversed its oceans of longing, I crawled on my slimed belly through the dark caves of its terror . . . I charted it all. You will by now have guessed the continent to which I refer is the human heart.'

We both nodded to signify that this thought had indeed occurred to us a while back.

'I was the first to apprise mankind of the exact boundaries of this landscape. I traversed it all in that train wagon named after a Czarist prime minister, a man whose death was foretold in 1911 by Rasputin but who is now remembered by posterity chiefly for giving his name to a railway carriage. That particular contrivance that was to convey those vast armies of the damned, swept up in the terrible purges of the thirties, to the precinct of their damnation along the banks of the

Kolyma River and other sundry hell holes of the Siberian prison system. I am referring of course to the Stolypin car.'

He turned to Calamity and said, 'S, T, O, L, Y, P, I, N.' I had not yet made up my mind whether he was sane or not. I've learned it doesn't pay to jump to conclusions in this respect, but I admired his grasp of detail. You could tell that in his museum the cards that labelled the artefacts were yellowed round the edges to exactly the same degree; that nothing was written on those cards that couldn't be absolutely verified by the latest scholarship; and he typed them all himself, at home in the dim light of a forty-watt bulb amid the fug given off by socks drying next to the fire, while his loving wife placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and set a dish of cabbage soup down before him. If a man could speak typeface this man spoke Pica at ten characters per inch.

'It may be that I make an error in bringing my story to you. It may be that the vessel of your heart is not sturdy enough to accept the dark wine of my woe. The Russian heart is vast and contains multitudes. Is it really possible to pour out its contents into the puny vessel of your Welsh heart? I see you people selling your toffee apples and renting out deckchairs and I ask myself: where are their parricides, their swindlers, their crazed monks and dark malfeasant convicts? Where is the mother whose love is so great that she strangles her own babe in the crib to save it from the cruel death of hunger?'

'Tell us about the sock,' I said.

'I was just about to.'

'I'll make a cup of tea,' said Calamity.

'The sock is from the Hughesovka Museum Of Our Forefathers' Suffering. I used to be the principal curator. As you know, this museum charts the centuries of tyranny and oppression that caused that great Welsh Moses, John Hughes, to throw off the imperialist yoke and lead his people out of servitude to the promised land.'

'Is there really such a place as Hughesovka?'

'You ask such a thing of me?'

'We learned about it in school; they told us it was the only Welsh-speaking community east of the Greenwich meridian – it always struck me as improbable.'

'In our schools we found tales of Aberystwyth equally hard to credit. But please!' He pointed to the sock as if to remind me of his true business here. 'After the long arctic winter of suffering I found a short-lived but intense degree of happiness. I met Lara. I was employed for a while as an assassin for the Hughesovka criminal underworld. I first set eyes upon Lara while staring down the telescopic sniper scope of the rifle with which I was commissioned to shoot her. Ah! If I were as richly endowed in gold as I am in woe I would commission a statue to that great man, Carl Zeiss of Jena, who fashioned a lens of such perspicuity that tragedy was averted. Just as I was about to pull the trigger she turned and smiled directly into my cross hairs. A smile like the break in the clouds after forty days of rain in the time of Noah. In short, I forbore to squeeze the trigger and took instead an arrow in the heart.'

He paused and took a sip of tea.

'Our union was blessed with a little daughter, Ninotchka, and for a time my happiness was complete. But then I was arrested and sentenced to penal servitude in the labour camps north of the Kolyma River. This was in 1950 when little Ninotchka was barely two years old. Being torn away from my family by the cruel men of the State Security Apparat caused me suffering beyond the power of words to describe. But also it gave me strength: every day in exile I thought of my little daughter and the day when I would see her again. And then in 1955 I received a strange letter from my wife. There had been an outbreak of diphtheria in Hughesovka and in order to protect our daughter she had kept her at home and prevented her from playing with the other children. Naturally little Ninotchka was cast down and in order to lift her spirits my wife bought her a little Welsh doll from the Museum Of Our Forefathers' Suffering. Whereupon a very strange thing happened. Ninotchka acquired an imaginary friend: a little Welsh girl. This is of course a

familiar and often charming aspect of many childhoods, but Ninotchka's friend was no happy playmate with a funny name and odd ways for whom we were required to lay an extra setting at supper. She was a fiend. Her name was Gethsemane Walters and she claimed to be the spirit of a dead girl who had been murdered in Wales, in a town called Abercuawg. She tormented our poor daughter with shocking and grisly tales of death in a small town in Wales far away. How could she know of such things? My wife pretended for a while it was just a figment of her imagination. Gethsemane is a Biblical name which she could have overheard somewhere, and Walters is a common surname in Hughesovka. This is how she consoled herself. But to tell the truth she didn't really believe it. Imaginary friends are usually called Mr Bumpy or something, not Gethsemane. She called a doctor, she called in priests who baptised and blessed and tried to drive out the evil spirit. She took Ninotchka to a special school for psychic investigation.'

He paused and removed a white handkerchief from inside his tunic and unfolded it with the meticulousness of one who intends refolding it exactly as it was. He dabbed the sweat from his forehead.

'I did not expect Aberystwyth to be quite so warm,' he said.

'It's not normally sunny in August,' said Calamity. She stood up and walked over to the window to open it further. It was already as wide as it could go. Vanya continued with his story.

'Not long after receiving this terrible news, I undertook a daring escape and after many adventures I arrived back in Hughesovka and into the bosom of my family. Ninotchka's first words when we met were to tell me I was not her daddy. And then something happened that caused the imaginary friend to disappear for a while. It was 1957 and a little dog became famous around the world. It was Laika the first dog in space, a supreme achievement for Mother Russia. For a time Ninotchka became entranced with the fate of this little dog and forgot all about her fiendish playmate. And we rejoiced.' He stopped and looked at me wistfully. 'But, as you know, those clever scientists who sent the dog aloft had made no provision for her safe return.

She died after a few hours, from heat exhaustion. Her death fell like a thunderbolt upon the roof of our house and destroyed the happiness that we had built. Even now, more than thirty years later, it is too painful for me to recall in detail what took place. The death of Laika affected Ninotchka terribly. The imaginary friend returned and took over completely. She refused to answer to the name of Ninotchka and insisted she was Gethsemane, and she denounced both her parents as impostors. There was a scene. A terrible scene involving vodka and violence during which, I regret to say, I raised a hand of violence to my wife. I was thrown into prison for murder. And I never saw my daughter again. This was all many years ago. I will not waste your time with the details of where I went or who I saw during those years. It is enough that you understand that there was never a day when I did not think of this terrible story.' He stopped and looked at me, eyes full of agonised appeal, as if my task was clear.

'This is a very strange and tragic story,' I said, not sure of an appropriate response. 'And we are deeply touched by your suffering. But what is it you want us to do?'

He took out a copy of *National Geographic* and opened it to a marked page. It was a picture of a lake in Wales. The spire of a sunken church protruded from the water like a witch's hat floating on the surface. The same picture had been on the front of the *Cambrian News* the week before. It was Abercuawg, a town drowned when they built the new reservoir in 1955 and whose ghost had made a reappearance during the recent heatwave.

Out of respect for Vanya I feigned interest in the article, even though like everyone in town I knew all about Abercuawg. Nine hundred people had been evicted and forced to watch their homes demolished. Everything was razed except the church because none of the wreckers' men would raise a sledgehammer against the House of God. They called it the reservoir filled with human tears; some even said the water in Birmingham had tasted salty. Of all the myriad spectacles life has devised to break a heart, that one belongs in the

top five. You don't have to die to lose your life, the folks said. The magazine article recounted the various ways the lost town had made its presence known over the years. Old ha'pennies washed up or fragments of Coronation mugs; tins of boot polish with unfamiliar markings on the lid; and once a slick of eye ointment that made the water shimmer with amber translucence. At times, too, winter storms had churned the water and brought forth the scent of mothballs and corset soap; or left gossamer rags coating the shoreline that the superstitious said were the exfoliations of fairies but which were really integuments of Anaglypta shed by dead living rooms. This year the corpse of the town itself had been washed ashore.

'You see? Abercuawg! This is the very name my daughter's imaginary friend mentioned. Gethsemane claimed to come from this place.' He paused and gave a beseeching look. 'And this is your task. You must find Gethsemane. You must find out what happened to her. You must find her bones so that she may be given a Christian burial. It is my belief that only then will my daughter be released from the thrall of this terrible wandering spirit, and perhaps my beautiful Ninotchka will come back to me and my lost happiness will be restored.'

'What's the sock for?' asked Calamity as she poured out more tea.

'That is your fee.'

There was a slight heightening of tension in the room. As a private detective in Aberystwyth one has to negotiate many formidable hazards but few greater than the question of the fee.

'Is it a valuable sock?' asked Calamity.

Uncle Vanya nodded. 'No sock in the history of the world has been further, gone faster or seen more. Or indeed been engaged on a more noble enterprise. It was worn by Yuri Gagarin during his first space flight, the first man to leave our earth's atmosphere and orbit the earth.'

'Where did you get it?' asked Calamity.

'For many years it was in the collection of the Museum Of Our Forefathers' Suffering and was presented to me as a gift in recognition of my long years' service on my retirement.'

'Normally, we charge fifty pounds a day plus expenses,' I said.

'Then you must be delighted to receive a payment so much over the odds. This is a very valuable collector's item. People would pay very handsomely for such a garment.'

'Not round here they wouldn't.'

'On the contrary, according to my research, there is a firm in this town called Mooncalf & Sons that handles this sort of merchandise.'

'They handle stolen goods.'

Uncle Vanya gave a wan smile. I picked up the sock. It was made of something like asbestos and there were two initials, YG, embroidered inside the hem. In all other respects it didn't seem to differ greatly from an oven-glove with toes.

'Technically, this counts as a missing person job. Despite what they say in the books, private operatives are not the best way to deal with this sort of thing. You really need the help of the police, it takes time and resources—'

'You think if I went to the police they would help me? I know exactly why I am coming to you.'

I made a conciliatory gesture with my hands. I always gave the same spiel; they never listened but I told them anyway. 'I just wanted to let you know. It would be wrong to take the sock without letting you know, that's all.'

'We'll need a description of the imaginary friend,' added Calamity, anxiously trying to skirt over the awkwardness that arises from such disagreements. I was about to laugh when Uncle Vanya took out a photo and laid it down on the desk.

It was a black-and-white shot showing a group of children and adults in what appeared to be the room of a hospital. There was a gap in the row of children and, surprisingly, in the gap there was a dog in mid-air. Uncle Vanya pointed to the empty space and said, 'This is the imaginary friend holding the dog. It was taken at the school for remote viewing and paranormal research. As you may know, such schools were operated by the military who made a systematic study of various psychic phenomena during the fifties. Unfortunately, the

photographer was inept, the shot is badly composed. You can't see Gethsemane – she is standing behind the principal, here. This might be her foot. See? And this man is Premier Nikita Khrushchev who was gracious enough to honour our town with a visit.'

I gave Uncle Vanya a receipt for the sock.