

The People's Act of Love

James Meek

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– Busy remaking the world, man forgot to remake himself.

Andrei Platonov, Nursery Of The New Man

Samarin

When Kyrill Ivanovich Samarin was twelve, years before he would catch, among the scent of textbooks and cologne in a girl's satchel, the distinct odour of dynamite, he demanded that his uncle let him change his second name. He didn't want to be 'Ivanovich' any more. The Ivan from whom the patronymic came, his father, had died when he was two, soon after his mother, and he had lived with his uncle ever since. His uncle's name was Pavel; why couldn't he be called Kyrill Pavlovich? When his uncle told him he couldn't change it, that this was the way things were done, that dead fathers had rights and required respect, the boy went into angry silence, pressed his lips together and looked away, breathing loudly in and out through his nose. His uncle knew these signs. He would see them every few months, when one of the boy's friends let him down, or when he was told to put his reading lamp out and sleep, or when he tried to stop his uncle punishing a servant.

What the boy did next was not familiar. He looked at his guardian and grinned, and began to laugh. The effect of the boy's deep brown eyes looking up into his uncle's, together with that laugh, not a man's yet – the boy's voice hadn't broken – but not a child's either was unsettling. 'Uncle Pavel,' said the boy. 'Could you call me just "Samarin" from now on, until the time when I can choose my own names?'

THE PEOPLE'S ACT OF LOVE

So the twelve-year-old came to be called, at home at least, by his family name alone, as if he were living in a barracks. The uncle was fond of his nephew. He spoiled him when he could, although Samarin was hard to spoil.

Samarin's uncle had no children of his own, and was so shy in the presence of women that it was difficult to tell whether he liked them or not. He had little rank to speak of, and a large fortune. He was an architect and builder, one of those charmed individuals whose practical usefulness transcends any amount of snobbery, corruption and stupidity in the powers on whose patronage they depend. As Samarin grew up, people in Raduga, the town on the Volga where he and his uncle lived, stopped thinking of him as an unfortunate orphan and began to refer to him as *schastlivchik*, the lucky one.

It didn't harm the good name of Samarin's uncle among the conservative gentry that he took no interest in politics. No circle of chattering liberals met at his town house, he didn't subscribe to St Petersburg periodicals, and he refused to join reform societies. Reformers would keep asking him to sign up, all the same. He hadn't always been aloof from causes. In the mad summer of 1874, long before Samarin was born, his uncle had been one of the students who went like missionaries among the peasants in the villages, urging them to rebellion. The peasants had no idea what the students were talking about, suspected they were being mocked, and asked them, with embarrassed whispers and some jostling, to leave. Samarin's uncle was fortunate to escape exile in Siberia. He never recovered his lost pride. Once a month he would compose a long letter to a woman he had met in those days, who now lived in Finland, and, just before posting it, he would burn it.

Samarin seemed to take after his uncle in politics, though not in his dealings with women. He went through school and

on to the local university, where he enrolled as an engineer, without joining any of the debating societies or discussion clubs or semi-underground Marxist circles populated by the radical students. Nor did he enjoy drill, or mix with the militant anti-semites who would loiter on the university steps, gawking at hooknosed, bloodsucking Jewish caricatures in pedlars' chap-books. He read widely – his uncle would buy him any book he wanted, in any language – went to dances and, in his late teens, took long summer trips to St Petersburg. When a friend asked him about luggage labels in German, French and English on his travelling trunk, he smiled and said that buying the labels was much cheaper than actually travelling abroad. He had a great many friends, or rather a great many students counted him as a friend, even though, had they stopped to think about it, most of them would have been able to count the hours they'd spent with him on the fingers of one hand. Women liked him because he danced well, didn't try to get drunk as quickly as possible when the means were to hand, and listened with sincere interest when they talked. He had a way of devoting attention absolutely to one woman, which not only pleased her during their conversation, but left her with the feeling afterwards that the time they'd spent – no matter how brief, and usually it was brief – was time offered to her from a precious store, time which could and should have been used by Samarin to continue a great task. The fact that nobody knew what this great task was only intensified the feeling. Besides, he dressed well, he stood to inherit a large estate, he was clever, and everything about him, his wit, his strength, even his looks – he was tall, a little gaunt, with thick collar-length brown hair and eyes that shifted between serene remoteness and a sudden sharp focus – suggested a man holding himself back from revealing his full self out of consideration for the less gifted around him.

THE PEOPLE'S ACT OF LOVE

The voices which spoke of alternative Samarins never gained a patient hearing, not because they were thought to be motivated by envy, but because their slanders were deemed too obscure. They were received like the small paragraphs in newspapers reporting bizarre happenings in other small provincial towns similar to Raduga (though never in Raduga): they were read with interest, but not believed, let alone acted on. There was the story of how somebody had seen Samarin and his uncle walking together when the nephew was fifteen, and how it had been the nephew talking, gesturing as if explaining something, and the grey-haired uncle who was listening, silent, nodding, hands behind his back, almost respectful. In those days there was unrest in the countryside. Manor houses were being burned down by peasants angry at the compensation they still owed landowners for the privilege of being freed from serfdom forty years earlier. Samarin's uncle would be called on to supervise the reconstruction of the manor. He would take Samarin with him to visit the families of the burned-out gentry. What one witness said, and it was only his word against everyone else's, was that he had overheard uncle and nephew together after one such visit, to a family of the most minor nobility, who had lost everything, and that the two of them had been laughing about it. 'I heard the boy laugh first, and then the uncle joined in!' So the witness said.

In 1910, when he was 21, Samarin began spending time with Yekaterina Mikhailovna Orlova – Katya – a student in his class and the daughter of the rector of the university. They went for walks together; they talked in the corner at parties; they danced. One day in early spring, Katya's father ordered that the relationship end. Samarin had humiliated him, he said, during his annual address to final year students. When Orlov had talked about how fortunate the students were to be young

in an era when Russia was becoming a wealthy, enlightened democracy, Samarin had started to laugh. 'Not a snigger, or a chuckle,' said Orlov. 'A great roaring, bellowing laugh, like a savage beast in our academic groves.'

There was a holiday, and Orlov took his daughter to the country house of one of the university's patrons. Samarin found out that another student had arranged to meet Katya in the grounds of the house, to read her his poetry. Samarin persuaded the student that they should go together to the gates of the estate. Samarin warned him that Katya preferred men to be dressed in light-coloured clothes. Not long after the two men set out along the country road to the house, Samarin on a bicycle and the other on a horse, there was an unusual accident. The horse, normally docile, threw the poet, just as they were passing an area of deep, wet mud. The poet's white suit and beige English raincoat were covered in dirt, and he hurt his ankle. Samarin helped him onto his mount again and the poet turned back. Samarin offered to deliver the poems to the house before riding back to chaperone the poet safely home, and the poet agreed. They parted.

A mile short of the house, Samarin dismounted and walked on, wheeling the bicycle with one hand and holding the student's poems in the other. The verses were heavily influenced by the early work of Alexander Blok. The words 'moon', 'darkness', 'love' and 'blood' occurred with great frequency. After reading each one, Samarin stopped, tore the paper into eight neat squares, and dropped it in the ditch running along the side of the road. There was no wind and the paper spread out onto the surface of the meltwater run off the fields.

A watchman stood at the gate of the estate. One student looked much like another to him and, when Samarin introduced himself as the poet, it didn't occur to him that the young

THE PEOPLE'S ACT OF LOVE

man might be lying. Samarin asked if he could meet Katya at the summer house by the pond and the watchman went to fetch her. Samarin wheeled his bicycle over to the summer house, a sagging, rotten structure being claimed by bright green moss, leaned his bicycle against a tree, and sat on a dry patch on the steps. He smoked a couple of cigarettes, watched a snail working round the toe of his boot and ran his hand through a clump of nettles till he was stung. The sun came out. Katya came through the wet, uncut grass, wearing a long brown coat and a broad-brimmed hat. She smiled when she saw it was Samarin. She bent down and pulled something out of the ground. When she sat down next to him she was holding a bunch of snowdrops. Samarin told her what had happened to the poet.

'I'm not supposed to see you,' said Katya.

'He gave me his poems,' said Samarin. 'I lost them. They weren't good. I brought something else to read to you. Would you like a cigarette?'

Katya shook her head. 'Are you writing poetry now?' she said.

'I didn't write this,' said Samarin, taking a folded pamphlet out of his inside jacket pocket. 'And it isn't poetry. I thought you'd be interested. I heard you intend to become a terrorist.'

Katya leaned forward and laughed. 'Kyrill Ivanovich! What stupid things you say.' She had perfectly regular little teeth. 'Joking all the time.'

'Terrorist. How does it sound? Because you need to get used to the word. "Terrorist."'

'Be serious! Be serious. When have I ever said a word about politics to you? You know better than anyone what a light-minded creature I am. Terror, I don't even like to say it. Unless you're talking about when we set off fireworks behind the ice fishermen at New Year. I've grown out of that. I'm ladylike

now. Fashion. Ask me about that! Do you like this coat? Papa bought it for me in Petersburg. It's pretty, isn't it? Enough. So.' Katya put the flowers down on the step between them. The stems were crushed where she had squeezed them in her fist. She folded her hands on her lap. 'No wonder Papa doesn't want you to see me if you're going to make fun of me. Well, read, go on.'

Samarin opened the pamphlet and began to read. He read for a long time. At first, Katya watched him with the kind of wonder that shows on people's faces when somebody says something out loud which corresponds to their most deeply buried thoughts; equally, it could have been what shows when one person makes a lewd proposition to another much earlier than expected in their courtship. After a while, however, Katya's blue eyes narrowed and the last patch of red faded from her smooth white face. She turned away from Samarin, took off her hat, brushed the gleaming blonde wisps from her forehead, took one of his cigarettes and began to smoke, hunched over her forearm.

"The nature of the true revolutionary has no place for any romanticism, any sentimentality, rapture or enthusiasm," read Samarin. "It has no place either for personal hatred or vengeance. The revolutionary passion, which in them becomes a habitual state of mind, must at every moment be combined with cold calculation. Always and everywhere they must be not what the promptings of their personal inclinations would have them be, but what the general interest of the revolution prescribes."

'Listen to this part, Katya: "When a comrade gets into trouble, the revolutionary, in deciding whether they should be rescued or not, must think not in terms of their personal feelings but only of the good of the revolutionary cause. Therefore

THE PEOPLE'S ACT OF LOVE

they must balance, on the one hand, the usefulness of the comrade, and on the other, the amount of revolutionary energy that would necessarily be expended on their deliverance, and must settle for whichever is the weightier consideration.”

‘What does this strange document have to do with me?’ said Katya.

‘There’s a story of a plan to entrust you with a device, and a target.’

‘You should mind your own business,’ said Katya.

‘Don’t take it. I believe the intention is to spend you, and mark you down as a cheap loss.’

Katya gave a short, thin laugh. ‘Read more,’ she said.

Samarin read: “‘The revolutionary enters into the world of the state . . .”

Blowing out smoke and looking into the distance, Katya interrupted him. “‘The revolutionary enters into the world of the state, of class and of so-called culture, and lives in it only because he has faith in its speedy and total destruction,’” she recited. “‘He is not a revolutionary if he feels pity for anything in this world. If he is able to, he must face the annihilation of a situation, of a relationship or of any person who is part of the world – everything and everyone must be equally odious to him. All the worse for him if he has family, friends and loved ones in this world; he is no revolutionary if he can stay his hand.’” There. Now if you’re working for the police you can blow your whistle.’

‘I’m not working for the police,’ said Samarin. He folded the pamphlet and tapped it on his knee. ‘I could have lost this, with the poetry, couldn’t I? You memorised the Catechism of a Revolutionary. That was clever.’ He lowered his head a little and turned his mouth in a smile that failed to take. It came out as a grimace. Katya tossed her cigarette stub in the weeds

and leaned forward to catch the expression of doubt in his face, an expression she'd barely seen before. Samarin turned his head away slightly, Katya leaned further forward, Samarin twisted away, Katya twisted after him, Katya's breath was on Samarin's cheek for a moment, then he straightened up and looked around. Katya made a little sound at the back of her mouth, scorn and amusement and discovery all at once. She put a hand on his shoulder and he returned to her, looking into her eyes from almost no distance. It was so close that they could tell whether they were looking into the filaments of the other's iris, or into the black ports of the other's pupils, and wonder what significance either had.

'It's a curious thing,' said Katya, 'but I feel I'm looking at the true you for once.' Her voice was the voice of closeness, not a whisper but a lazy, effortless murmur, a cracked purr. With one finger Samarin traced the almost invisible down on her upper lip.

'Why is it so unbearable?' said Samarin.

'What?' said Katya.

'To look into the looking part of the one who's looking at you.'

'If you find it unbearable,' said Katya, 'don't bear it.'

'I won't,' said Samarin. He put his lips on hers. Their eyes closed and they put their arms around each other. Like a feint, their hands moved decorously across each other's backs the more eagerly they kissed. It was on the edge of violence, on the edge of teeth and blood, when they heard shouting in the distance and Katya pushed him away and they sat watching each other, breathing deeply and sullen, like opium eaters over laudanum they'd spilled squabbling.

'You have to leave,' said Katya. She nodded at the pamphlet. 'There. In there. Do you know Chapter 2, Item 21?'

THE PEOPLE'S ACT OF LOVE

Samarin began leafing through it, but before he could find it, Katya began to recite it, pausing to gulp breaths: “The sixth, and an important category is that of women. They should be divided into three main types: first, those frivolous, thoughtless and vapid women who we may use as we use the third and fourth categories of men; second, women who are ardent, gifted, and devoted, but do not belong to us because they have not yet achieved a real, passionless, and practical revolutionary understanding: these must be used like the men of the fifth category; and, finally there are the women who are with us completely, that is, who have been fully initiated and have accepted our programme in its entirety. We should regard these women as the most valuable of our treasures, whose assistance we cannot do without.”

It was months before Samarin saw Katya again. One morning he waited for her at the station. The university had a poor library and at intervals the authorities would send railway wagons, fitted out with bookshelves and desks, from Penza to give the students access to specialist titles. Samarin had all the books he needed at home but in the hottest days of May, when the railway library came, he was outside. Katya arrived, wearing a white dress and no hat and carrying a large, almost empty satchel. Her pale skin had burned and she was thinner and more anxious. She looked as if she had been sleeping badly. There was a hot wind and the poplars were hissing in their row beyond the station. Samarin called to Katya but she didn't turn round. She went into the library wagon.

Samarin sat on a bench on the station platform, watching the wagon. Something was burning in town, there was black smoke spreading over the roofs. The wind was so strong and hot there was bound to be a storm but the sky was clear, just the smoke spreading. Samarin sat on the bench and watched the students

come and go. The bench was in the shade of the station roof and sheltered from the wind but planks in the roof began to rattle. The students were moving through clouds of dust, their eyes closed, the women bunching their skirts with one hand and holding their hats with the other. Samarin could smell the smoke from the burning. The trees would rustle and then roar like a waterfall. When there were no students still waiting outside in the wind Samarin began counting the ones coming out. He could smell the burning. The clouds were coming. They were thick and they heaved while he watched them. No one else was left on the platform. The air stank of dust and smoke and ozone. It became very dark. The sky was a low roof. The last of the students came running out of the wagon. Samarin got up and called to him. The student ran round the wagon and across the rails and off towards the fields with his collar turned up. He turned round once without stopping and looked at Samarin. It was a message from the future. He'd seen something he didn't want to see again and all he wanted was to look Samarin in the face once more, to be able to say: 'I saw Samarin that day.'

Katya was the only one who hadn't come out. Samarin went over to the wagon. The reading room was empty and the desks were clear except for the copy of *Essentials of Steam* Katya had been using and some of her notes. She'd written a poem. 'She loved like suicides love the ground they fall towards,' she'd written,

It stops them, embraces them and ends their pain,
But she was falling over and over, jumping,
Hitting the ground, dying and falling through again.

Samarin closed the book, went to the door of the librarian's office and pressed his ear against the wood. The wagon

THE PEOPLE'S ACT OF LOVE

was creaking in the wind so loudly that he couldn't hear. He couldn't tell if he could hear whispers on the other side of the door or if it was the wind and the roaring of the trees. A gust caught sand and straw and sent them pattering along the wagon chassis like a flood of rats flowing through the wheels. Samarin moved away from the door and heard a woman cry out. It came from outside. He ran out of the wagon into the dust and looked up and down the platform. There was no one. He could hear bells from a fire brigade in the town. He heard the woman cry out again, as if not from fear or pleasure or anger, just for the sake of making a sound, like a wolf or a raven. It was a long way away. A stone hit Samarin in the shoulder, and another on his head, and one on his cheek, drawing blood. He covered his head with his arms and ran under the platform roof. The sound of the wind was drowned out by a sound like cannonballs being poured onto the town from an inexhaustible bunker and the air turned white. The hailstorm lasted two minutes and when it ended the remnants of leaves hung from the trees like rags. The ground was ankle-deep in ice. Samarin saw the door of the wagon open and Katya climb down with a satchel on her back. Something heavy inside it weighed the satchel down. She looked up and saw him. Samarin called her name and she began to run away down the line. He moved after her. She slipped in the hail and fell and he came up to her. She was lying in the ice, half on her back, half on her side. Samarin knelt down and she looked up at him as if he'd come to her in the morning to wake her up after nights and days of sleep. She touched the cut on his cheek and slowly drew back her fingertip with the smudge of blood on. She was beginning to shiver with the cold. She asked Samarin: 'Where to?' Where to. Samarin took her hands and pulled her up out of the softening hail. She was dripping wet

and shivering. She took a few steps away from him, took off the satchel, looked inside it, held it against her chest and laughed. Samarin told her to give it to him. She went on laughing and ran away down the track. Samarin ran after her and caught her round the waist and she fell face forward. She was strong and she tried to cover the satchel with her body. Samarin wrestled with her, trying to turn her over, his shins wet in the ice, his knees against her thighs, his hands delving in under her to where she held the satchel against her belly. He smelled her hair and the wet cotton of her dress, and her soft strong middle twisted in his hands like a fish. He drove his right hand in between her legs and his left hand up to her breast and without crying out she let go of the satchel, squirmed round and tore at his hands with hers, their soft chill palms on his knuckles. He seized the satchel, rolled away from her and stood up.

‘Give it back,’ she said, lying still, looking at him.

Samarin opened the satchel. There was an explosive device in it. He took it out and threw the satchel to her. Katya began to shiver.

‘Better me than you,’ said Samarin.

‘Romantic,’ said Katya in a flat voice. ‘You’ve failed before you’ve begun.’

‘My throwing arm is stronger.’

‘You’ll throw it in the river. You’ll never use it.’

‘Why not?’ said Samarin, smiling, looking at the heavy package weighing down his hand. ‘It’s better than plans.’

Katya stood up, the melted ice leaving dark streaks down the crumpled front of her dress. Fragments of hail hung from the ends of her hair. She looked down, began to brush herself, then stopped and looked at Samarin. A change came across her face. It became warm, hungry and interested. She came up

THE PEOPLE'S ACT OF LOVE

to Samarin, pressed her body against him, wrapped her arms round him and kissed him on the lips.

'Do you really like me so much?' she said.

'Yes,' he said, and leaned his mouth to hers. Katya grabbed the bomb from his distracted hand, hooked his ankle with her toe, snatched him off his footing, and ran away before he could catch her.

Two weeks later, she was arrested and charged with conspiring to commit an act of terrorism.