# Black Fog

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Translated from Russian by Douglas Ashby

A Petersburg Case

I remember perfectly his first arrival in Petersburg from his hot, lazy, sensual south. There emanated from him the very atmosphere of black earth-force, the odour of dry, sunbaked feather-grass, the simple poetry of quiet sunsets, gradually fading away behind the cherry trees of little orchards. He had the inexhaustible health of the steppe and he was so vivid in his fresh naivete.

He came straight from the station into the furnished rooms where I was living. It was winter, eight o'clock in the morning, when, in the Petersburg streets, the lamps are still lit and the tired horses are dragging the sleeping night-cab-men to their homes. He would take no refusal. He wouldn't listen to any of the maid's arguments, and said in his sonorous voice that rang through the corridor:

"What are you talking about? As if I didn't know him! Why, he's more to me than my own brother. What next? Show me in to him."

We had been at school together in the South, where, incidentally, he had not finished his course. I was fond of him, not more than of a real brother—he exaggerated this in his hurry—but, all the same, I was sincerely attached to him. However, though I immediately recognised his voice with its soft and yet guttural southern *g* and its provincial breadth of diapason, I cannot say that in the first minute I was particularly pleased. You know what it is when a man has been gallivanting all over the place through the night, goes to bed with his head not quite clear and, on the top of it all, is faced with serious, timed work for the next day. … In a word, I cursed under my blankets and firmly decided, if he came in, to pretend that I was asleep or dead, like a beetle that has been placed on the palm of a hand.

Easier said than done. He burst in like a hurricane, threw himself at me, dragged me out of bed as if I were a child, shook me and pulled me about. It was impossible to be angry with him. The frost had given him a delightful emanation of apples and something else—healthy and vigorous; his moustache and beard were thawing, his face was burning brightly, his eyes were shining.

"Well, well, how long are you going to wallow in those blankets? Get up," he roared; "get up or I'll smash you into little bits."

“Listen, you poor, benighted provincial”—I was trying to make him feel ashamed—“here in Petersburg no one gets up before eleven. Lie down on the sofa or ask for some tea, or send someone to fetch newspapers and read, but let me doze, if only for half an hour.”

No, nothing had any effect on him. He was bursting with stories of the past and plans for the future, so filled with new impressions that he seemed ready to blow up under their pressure if I hadn’t acted as a sort of safety-valve. First came the greetings: it appears that, up to the present, they all remember me, are quite fond of me and read with pleasure my articles on economics. I was flattered and pretended not to have forgotten a single one of all those extraordinary names, all those Gouzikovs, Liadoushenkos, Tchernysh, and so many other old acquaintances. Secondly, Petersburg had utterly stupefied him.

“Deuce take it, what an enormous town! What do you think? At the station there were nothing but swagger cabs, not a single ordinary one.”

“Swagger cabs?” I repeated doubtfully.

“On my honour, yes. I didn’t grasp it at first and I was in one of them before I saw that it was on tyres. Well, I’ve let myself in, I thought. I wanted to crawl out of it but I was ashamed to do that and a policeman was hurrying them all. I was lucky to get out of it so cheaply—a rouble and a half altogether!”

“At the very most you ought to have paid fifty kopecks,” I put in.

“There you’re talking nonsense. What! give a cab on tyres fifty kopecks, for such a distance! Oh, and what streets you have here! And the people—oh, Lord! it’s worse than the ferryboats at home. They’re all over the place. And on one of the bridges there is a statue of four horses. Have you seen it? It’s a sight. … You live well here, I can see that.”

The whole time he kept saying “at home” and “you people here”—drawing a line between the two as all provincials do. He was greatly struck by the fires lit at cross-streets on account of the severe frost.

“What’s that for?” he asked with naive curiosity.

I answered quite seriously:

“It’s an idea of the town council to heat the streets so as to spend less on fuel in Government offices.”

His eyes grew round, and so did his mouth, from astonishment, and all he could pronounce was:

“Oh!”

The next minute he saw it and burst out laughing—laughed in long, deafening, youthful peals. I had to remind him that all the other lodgers were still asleep, that the partitions were made of papier-mâché and that I didn’t want to get into trouble with my landlady.

Irisha came in with the samovar. She looked sideways at Boris with an expression of distrust and agitation, as though a horse had been received into the room. She was a regular Petersburg maid, sensitive and not without understanding.

At five o’clock we dined at the Nevsky in an enormous and bad restaurant. The room, with its colours, the Romanians, the plush furniture, the electric lights, the mirrors, the monumental head waiter, and particularly the spectacle of the heavy, impudent, frock-coated waiters, with their enormous moustaches—all this overwhelmed my country friend. During the whole meal, he sat bewildered, awkward, winding his feet round the front legs of his chair, and it was only when we were having coffee that he said with a sigh, shaking his head slowly:

“Y-e-es, a restaurant! They wouldn’t have believed it at home. It’s a regular temple of Baal with his priests. You’d better take me to a place where it’s simpler. Here I see only the aristocracy. Probably they’re all princes and counts.”

But in the evening, in my rooms, he brightened up again. I asked him for the first time seriously what he intended to do with himself. Up to this, we had only touched on this question in a hurried, rather diffuse way.

He puffed himself out like a young bantam and answered proudly:

“I have come to conquer Petersburg.”

These very words are often uttered by the young heroes of French novelists, who, just arrived in Paris, are looking out at it from the heights of some garret. I smiled sceptically. He noticed it and began with special warmth, the comic side of which was heightened by his southern accent, to convince me of the fact that he represented the gifted, large, provincial South which was going to be victorious over the anaemic, untemperamental, dry, capital-like North. It was the inevitable law of struggle between two temperaments, and its result is always easily guessed. Oh, one can cite any number of names: ministers, writers, painters, barristers. Beware, withered, cold, pale, dull Petersburg. The South is coming!

I wished to believe him, or rather I didn’t wish to disillusion him. We dreamt a little together, lie produced from his basket-trunk a bottle of good old homemade plum liqueur

which we began to drink in friendly fashion.

“Eh, what? Eh, what? Do they make in Petersburg here such old plum liqueur?” he kept asking proudly; and then scornfully: “There you are! And you still discuss …”

Little by little, he settled down. I established him in furnished rooms next my own, for the time being on credit, in anticipation of the trophies to be won in victories over the withered North. It is extraordinary how at once he won the general goodwill of the establishment, pushing into the background the former favourite—a poet with red curly hair who looked like a deacon in a picture. The landlady (everyone knows the Petersburg landlady of furnished rooms: a lady of full figure, forty-five years old, with corkscrew curls on her forehead, always in black and very tightly laced)—the landlady used often to invite him to her apartments in the morning, to have coffee, a high honour to which many, even of the old lodgers, never dared to aspire. In return for this amiability, he would give her the contents of the morning papers, as well as business advice in her innumerable pettifogging transactions (“Everyone wants to get the better of a poor widow”).

Deuce take it! like a true Southern Russian, for all his apparent simplicity, he was a very adroit and practical fellow, with a quick comprehension and a certain benevolent shrewdness. Even Irisha got used to him and regarded him, I believe, with a sort of—well, I don’t want to gossip. All I will say is that in those days he was very good-looking: tall, strong, with dark, melancholy eyes and young laughing red lips under his Ukrainian moustache.

He was nearer the truth than I was, I, the old Petersburg sceptic. The luck was with him; probably because a bold, self-confident man can control destiny though destiny whirls and scatters in different directions perplexed and weak people. Perhaps, too, he was assisted by those original traits of character which he brought with him from the heart of his provincial South: shrewdness, observation, a tranquil and open manner of speech, an innate tendency to humour, strong nerves that refused to be troubled by the chaos of life in the capital. It may have been this or that, but in any case the South, as represented by him, obviously and successfully conquered the North.

My friend, quickly, in three or four days, found work for himself in connection with one of the largest railways and, a month later, had attracted the attention of the authorities. He was entrusted with the revision of some plans of railway traffic, or something of the sort. The whole thing might have been easily finished in a week or two, but, for some reason or other, Boris got particularly interested in it in his stubbornly insistent way. He took it into his head to frequent the public library, dragged home enormous reference books, stuffed with figures, and devoted his evenings to mysterious mathematical calculations. The result of all this was that he presented the authorities with a scheme of passenger and goods trains that combined simplicity and obviousness with many other practical signs of efficiency. He

was praised, and attracted special attention. Six months later, he was already in receipt of a hundred and fifty roubles a month and was employed on independent work.

But apart from this, he gave frequent music lessons—he was an excellent musician—wrote articles for the newspapers and technical articles on railway questions, and sang on Saturdays and Sundays in a well-known church choir as well as sometimes in opera and light opera choruses. He was capable of an amazing amount of work, but without strain, without any effort; it came to him somehow naturally, easily, as though he were wading through it, as though it were all a joke, with that externally lazy manner of his. And always, with his shrewd little smile, he would be observing something, keeping his eye on something, as though, after all, he were only playing with the present, merely testing his untouched force while, at the same time, vigilantly and patiently waiting for his real opening. For some mysterious, remote object, known only to himself, he was studying, through the self-teaching methods of Toussaint, and Langestedt, French, German, and English. I could hear him sometimes at the other side of the partition repeating, with his terrifying pronunciation: *L'abeille bourdonne, la mouche vole*. When I asked him why all this was necessary he would answer with his sly benevolence: "Oh, it's like this—I've nothing to do."

All the same, he knew how to enjoy himself. Somewhere on Vassilief island, he had unearthed some of his fellow-countrymen, Ukrainians from Poltava, who wore embroidered shirts, with little ribbons instead of ties, and enormously wide trousers tucked into their top boots. They used to smoke long pipes, would ostentatiously spit through the corners of their lips on to the floor, and had nothing but contempt for all our town cultivation. I went once or twice to their little evenings. They drank *gorilka*, not our vodka, but a special brand brought from "down there," ate slices of pork and enormous sausages so long that one had to coil them on one's plate in ten or fifteen circles. There was singing, too, wonderful singing, extraordinarily sad and stately. I can still remember, as if it were yesterday, Boris passing his hand nervously over his long, beautiful, wavy hair as he started the couplet of an old Cossack song.

His voice was warm, tender, slightly vibrating, and every time that I listened to him I experienced a tickling and throbbing in my chest and I felt like crying without any reason.

And afterwards one drank *gorilka* again and, at the end, one danced the "gopak," one of the national Ukrainian dances. Boris' jacket would fly away from his immense shoulders to a corner of the room and he himself would soar from end to end, rapping out the time with his heels, whistling in tune and slyly raising and lowering his dark eyebrows.

He became the head of this dear Ukrainian farm village, tucked away among the severe parallel streets of Petersburg. There was something about him attractive, charming, irresistible. And everything seemed to come to him as a joke, as if it were merely by the way.

I believed now definitely in his victory over the North, but something inexplicable, something perturbing, would never leave my soul when I thought of him.

It began in the spring. Soon after Easter, which was late that year, we drove together to the islands. It was a clear, pensive, gentle evening. The quiet waters of the rivers and canals dozed peacefully beside their banks, reflecting the pink and mauve colours of the deadened sky. The young, greyish foliage of the black, century-old lime trees on the banks looked at itself in the water so naively, so joyfully. For a long time we were silent. At last, under the charm of this exquisite evening, I said slowly:

“How delightful! For the sake of an evening like this one can fall in love with Petersburg.”

He didn’t answer. I looked at him stealthily, sideways. His face was gloomy and he had an angry expression.

“Don’t you like it?” I asked.

Boris made a slight gesture of annoyance.

“It’s scenery,” he said with disgust. “It’s the same as at the opera. You call this Nature?”

A strange, dreamy expression had come suddenly into his dark eyes and he began in a low, jerky, troubled voice:

“There now, in Little Russia, there is the real spring. Wild berries, white hazel trees are blossoming. The frogs are croaking in the creeks, the nightingales are singing. When it is night there, it is real night, dark with dread, with mysterious passion. And what days there are there now! What sun, what sky! What is this Finland of yours? A mixture of rain and snow …” He turned away and became silent. But I understood instinctively that there was something wrong, something unhealthy at work in my friend’s heart.

And, in fact, from that very evening, Boris began to fret and seemed to wilt. I could hear no longer behind the partition his melodious purring; he no longer projected himself like a bomb into my room in the mornings; his usual talkativeness had disappeared. Only when conversation turned on Ukrainia would he grow animated, and then his eyes became dreamy, beautiful and pitiful, and he seemed to be looking into the distance, hundreds of miles away.

“I’ll go there for the summer,” he would say decidedly. “Damn it, at all events I’ll get a rest from the cursed Peter.”

But in the end, he didn’t succeed in going “there.” His office kept him. In the middle of the

summer we said goodbye to each other—I had to go abroad on business. I left him sad, irritated, tired out at last by the white nights, which brought him sleeplessness and a distress bordering on despair. He saw me off at the Warsaw station.

I returned in the very middle of a nasty, wet, foggy Petersburg autumn. Oh, how well I recall those first dismal, irritating impressions: dirty pavements, thin endless rain, a sort of grey, slimy sky and in the background of the picture rough *dvorniks* with their brooms, hunted-looking cabmen with their rumpled clothes, women with hideous sheepskin goloshes, the hems of their skirts all wet, bilious, angry people with perpetually swollen faces, coughs and spleen. But I was still more struck and saddened by the change that had taken place in Boris.

When I came in, he was lying dressed on his bed, which had not been made. His hands were folded under his head and he didn't rise when he saw me.

"How are you, Boris?" I said, seized already by a feeling of presentiment, and I met with a cold, estranged glance.

Afterwards he apparently decided to greet me, for he rose as if it were a matter of duty, welcomed me and lay down again on the bed. With great difficulty, I managed to persuade him to dine with me that night at a restaurant. On the way he was silent, walked with a stoop, had an air of indifference, as though he were being led on a string, and I had to repeat every question I asked.

"Listen; what in the world is the matter with you? Have they changed you?" I said, touching his shoulder.

He shook my hand off.

"Nothing. ... Only boredom with everything. ..."

For some time we walked on side by side without a word.

I remembered his musty, neglected room, its untidiness, the dry bits of bread on the table, the cigarette ends on the saucers, and I said decidedly and with real anxiety:

"I'll tell you what it is, my dear friend; in my opinion you are quite simply ill. ... No, don't wave your hands, but listen to what I'm going to say. These things can't be neglected. ... Have you got any money?"

A plan for curing my downhearted friend had quickly ripened in my mind. It was truly a rather ancient, rather trivial and, if you like, a rather ignoble plan. I had merely decided to

take him to one of those equivocal places where one sings and dances, where people don't know themselves what they are doing, but are sure that they are enjoying themselves and through this conviction infect other people with the same illusion.

Having dined somewhere or other, we turned towards the Aquarium at about eleven o'clock so as to get the atmosphere of a spree. I took a "swagger cab" which whirled us past the insults of the cabmen, past the pedestrians all slobbered over with mud.

I was supporting the shattered, thinned back of Boris; he was as stubbornly silent as ever, only once asking discontentedly:

"Where are we hurrying off to like this?"

The dense crowd, the smoke, the rattle of the orchestra, the naked shoulders of the women with their made-up eyes, the white splashes of the tables, the red, brutalised faces of the men —all this pandemonium of tipsy gaiety had a quite different effect on Boris from what I was expecting. At my invitation he was drinking, but he was not getting drunk and his expression was becoming more and more distressed. A bulky, powdered woman, with an ostrich boa round her fat, naked neck, sat down for a minute at our table, tried to start a conversation with Boris, then looked at him in dismay and silently hurried off into the crowd, from which once more she glanced back towards us. And at this glance dread came to me, as if I had become stricken by something deadly, as if someone, black and silent, were standing close beside us.

"Let's drink, Boris," I shouted above the noise of the orchestra and the din of the crockery.

With his face puckered up as though from toothache, he formed an unspoken sentence on his lips, which I guessed to be:

"Let's get out of this. ..."

I insisted on driving from the Aquarium to another place from which we emerged at dawn in the cold, dark, blue twilight of Petersburg. The street in which we were walking was long and narrow, like a corridor. From the sleepy five-storied stone blocks there emanated the cold of the night. The sleepy *dvorniks* were plying their brooms while the chilled night-cabmen shivered and swore hoarsely. Stumbling as they strained on the cords round their chests, small boys were dragging their loaded stalls through the middle of the streets. At the doors of the butchers' shops hung the red, open carcasses of repulsive-looking meat. Boris was walking dejectedly, when suddenly he caught me by the arm and, pointing to the end of the street, cried out:

"There it is, there. ..."

“What is it?” I asked in consternation.

“You see … the fog.”

The fifth stories were drowning in the mist which, like the drooping belly of a black serpent, was descending into the corridor-like street, had stopped halfway and, hugging itself, was peering down as if getting ready to spring at someone. …

Boris shook my arm and said, with eyes blazing, in a sudden anger:

“Do you understand what this is? Do you understand? It is the town that is breathing; this is not fog, it is the breath from these stones with holes. There is here the reeking dampness from the laundries, the smoke from the coal; there is here the sin of the people, their anger, their hatred, the emanations from their mattresses, the reek of their sweat and their putrescent mouths. … My curse upon you! anathema, monster, monster—I loathe you!”

Boris’ voice broke and rang alternately, as he shook his bony fists in the air.

“Cool down,” I said, taking him by the shoulders. “Come, cool down; can’t you see that you’re startling people?”

Boris choked and coughed for a long time.

“Look,” he exclaimed, his face contracted by his cough, and he showed me a handkerchief which he had pressed against his lips, on the whiteness of which I saw a large stain of blood.

“It is he who has eaten me up … the fog. …”

We walked back to his lodgings in silence.

In April, before Easter, I looked in at Boris one day. The weather was extraordinarily warm. There was a smell of melted snow, of earth, and the sun was shining bashfully and timidly, as a woman smiles when she is making friends again after tears. He was standing by the opening of the double window, breathing in the spring air. As I entered the room he turned round slowly and on his face there was a kind of tranquil, appeased, childish expression.

“It is nice now at home in the Government of Poltava,” he said, smiling, by way of a greeting.

And suddenly it came home to me that this man would die soon, perhaps even that very

month.

“It is nice,” he went on thoughtfully and, getting suddenly animated, he hurried towards me, seized my hands and said:

“Sachenka, dear, take me down to my home … take me, old man. Won’t you do it?”

“But am I refusing? Of course we’ll go.”

And so just before Easter we started on our journey. When we left Petersburg it was a damp, cold day and over the town a thick black fog was hovering, that same black fog which had poisoned the soul and eaten the body of my poor friend.

But the nearer we came to the South, the more excited and joyful my poor Boris became. The spring seemed rushing to meet us. And when we caught our first glimpse of the white dabbed little huts of Ukraine, it was already in full bloom. Boris could not tear himself from the window. All along the line, large simple flowers, bearing the poetical name of “dreams,” blossomed in blue patches. Boris told me with ecstasy that in Little Russia one dyes Easter eggs with these flowers.

At his home, under the blue caressing sky, under the full but not yet hot rays of the sun, Boris began to revive quickly, as if he were recovering with his soul from some low, clutching, icy nightmare.

But bodily he grew weaker every day. The black fog had killed in him something vital, something that gave life and the desire to live.

A fortnight after his arrival, he was confined to his bed.

All the time he had no doubt that he would soon die, and he died bravely and simply.

I was with him the day before his death. He pressed my hand hard with his dry, hot, emaciated fingers, smiled caressingly and sadly, and said:

“Do you remember our conversation about the North and the South? It’s long ago now; do you remember it? Don’t imagine that I’m eating my words. Well, I admit it, I have not withstood the struggle, I have perished. … But after me others are coming—hundreds, thousands of others. Understand, they must win the victory, they cannot fail to conquer. Because over there the black fog is in the streets, in the hearts and in the heads of the people, and we come from the exulting South with joyous songs, with the dear bright sun in our souls. My friend, people cannot live without the sun.”

I looked at him attentively. He had just washed and had combed his hair flat back over his head after moistening it with water. It was still moist, and this gave his face a pitiable and innocent and festive expression behind which one detected all the more clearly the proximity of death. I remember, too, that he kept looking attentively and in apparent astonishment at his nails and the palms of his hands as though they were strange to him.

The next day I was called hastily to his bedside to find—not my friend, but only his body, which was passing unconsciously in a swift death agony.

Early that morning he had asked to have his window opened and it remained open. Into the room, from the old garden, crept in branches of white lilac with their fresh, elastic, odorous flowers. The sun was shining. The blackbirds sang out their madness of delight.

Boris was becoming quiet. But in the very last minute he suddenly lifted himself up and sat on his bed; an insane awe showed itself in his wide-open eyes. And when he fell again against the pillows and after a deep sigh stretched himself out with all his body, as if he wanted to stretch himself before a long, deep sleep, this expression of awe did not leave his face for a long time.

What had he seen in that last minute? Perhaps to the eyes of his soul there had outlined itself that bottomless, perpetual black fog which, inevitably and pitilessly, absorbs people, and animals, and the grass, and the stars and whole worlds? ...

When they were laying him out I could not bear to see his terrible yellow feet and I left the room. But when I came back he was already lying on the table and the mysterious little smile of death lurked peacefully round his eyes and lips. The window was still open. I broke off a small branch of lilac—wet and heavy under its white clusters—and placed it on Boris' breast.

The sun shone joyfully, at once tender and indifferent ... In the garden the blackbirds were singing. ... On the other side of the river the bells were ringing for the late church service.