Chaconne

For Kees

They had told her Orest was alive. She had that, at least. As she scraped ash and half-burned leaves from the belly of the stove she thought about the woman at the army information bureau, the way she had sighed as she lifted the brown manila folder from the stack in the corner. Alena had taken it for a sigh of indifference; she decided later that it had most likely been embarrassment. When suddenly she stopped scanning the lists of names and begun tapping at one of them in particular with the tip of her gnarled forefinger Alena experienced a sudden disorientation accompanied by the blurred vision and dizziness she had been mostly free of since the siege. She leaned against the counter, waiting for the feeling to pass and trying to glimpse the list for herself, but the woman had snapped the file shut before she could do so.

"Top secret," she muttered. "I shouldn't even have let you stand there while I looked."

Alena's hands were numb with cold, her fingers big and clumsy with it. She tried to concentrate on these sensations, to inhabit them fully with her mind as well as her body. She had learned during the siege that an awareness of discomfort was a proof of the desire to go on living. Here as in most places the supply of discomfort seemed ample. It was not just the cold; the place was filthy. The board floors, which had once been the colour of honey, were caked with dirt and stippled with footprints, the ghosts of soldiers' boots, she supposed, though whether the soldiers had been German or Russian she could not tell. The beds, both the large one in the main room and the narrow cot in the strange little windowless back room they called the cupboard, had been stripped of their linen, though she had been lucky enough to find two moth-eaten horse blankets, rolled messily together in the bottom of the real cupboard next to the bathroom. The bathroom stank and she had not yet dared to go in

there, but at least the dacha's roof and windows remained intact. If she could only light a fire she would be all right.

She knelt on the floor by the stove and opened her suitcase, the same suitcase she had brought out of Leningrad and more recently out of Tashkent. In Tashkent she had been billeted with the Shigaevs, he a railway engineer, she a dance choreographer. Martha Shigaeva was beautiful, with long, double-jointed fingers and slanted golden Tatar-looking eyes. She hugely resented the invasion of her home, and once, in the early days of her exile, Alena had overheard Martha referring to her to husband Lyonel as the dumpling. She could not bear to look at anything ugly, and shuddered openly when she first saw what had happened to Alena's hand.

Eventually they had become friends. Once, when Lyonel was away working in Voronezh Martha asked Alena to share her bed.

"I'm afraid to be alone," she said. "I don't know how you stand it, night after night."

Alena stroked her hair, not knowing quite what was expected of her. Martha talked and talked, about her childhood in the Caucasus, about an affair her husband had had once with an industrial chemist visiting from Moscow. Then at the end of what seemed like hours she had turned in Alena's arms and began making love to her, bringing her to a swift, taut, back-arching climax that was so unlike anything she had experienced with Orest that she had never been able to decide whether it counted as a betrayal or not.

It had been Martha who packed her suitcase.

"Please don't go," she said. "There's no need. You can stay here for as long as you like. At least stay until you know you have somewhere to live."

"I have to go," said Alena. "I have to find Orest. I know you'd feel the same if it were Lyonel."

Martha looked away. "Perhaps you're right. It's just that I'm going to miss you so much."

"I'll miss you too." It was true. She felt close to Martha Shigaeva in a way that reminded her of the way she had been close to her sister Sofie, although Sofie and Martha weren't even remotely alike. Martha filled her suitcase with small, pretty luxuries, sweet biscuits and silk scarves, two bars of chocolate, a flacon of French perfume. Somewhere just east of Kiev Alena left her suitcase for five minutes to go to the toilet and when she returned she found the lock had been forced open and all Martha's presents were gone. The theft distressed her, but she was more relieved to find that her travel documents and music case had not been touched. The music case, together with the things inside it, was now her most valued possession. She knew she had been lucky to be evacuated so soon after her injury. Being away from the city, not just from the hardships but from the memories, had given her the chance to recover. In Tashkent there had been plenty to eat. She spent her days teaching musical theory to a class of children at the Conservatory's preparatory school, and her evenings in her room at the Shigaevs, working on what she thought of as her first serious attempts at composition: a violin sonata that she dedicated to Martha Shigaeva, and the short, rather stern *Interlude* for flute and string orchestra that was later performed by some of the students at her school. She had won prizes for her music before, once at the Central Music School in Kiev when she was just seventeen, and then in her first year at the Leningrad Conservatoire. But she had thought of composition then as a sideline, something she practised more for the discipline than out of any attempt at personal

expression. Now it was everything, and the difference that made in her work became apparent almost at once, at least to her.

The journey from Tashkent to Kiev had taken more than a week. She took a tram from the station straight to the street not far from the centre where she had lived with her mother and Sofie before going to live with her Aunt Catherine in Leningrad and taking up her place at the Conservatoire.

When she rang the bell a strange woman opened the door. She took one look at Alena and then fled, disappearing into the main room of the apartment where, Alena knew, tall windows overlooked an odd-shaped patch of sloping garden and a twisted lilac. A moment later a man appeared. He was middle-aged, with long grey moustaches, and spoke with a peculiarly rasping tone as if he had suffered some kind of injury to his throat.

"I can't let you in," he said. "This is our home now. We have the documents to prove it. My parents are here, and our young daughter. I'm sure you understand that I have to put my family first."

"Can I at least come in and sit down, just for five minutes? I promise you I won't try to stay."

The man seemed apprehensive but in the end he relented and after about five minutes his frightened-looking wife brought her a cup of tea. Alena sipped it slowly, looking out over the strange little garden where the sons of the doctor who lived in the flat below had so often played. She had no love for the place, at least not now. Sofie had died in the flat, a victim of typhoid, and almost immediately afterwards her mother Varvara had volunteered for a resettlement programme and gone to live in a small village on the north shore of Lake Baikal.

"They're short of teachers, and so long as you don't mind the climate it's very good money," her mother said to her over the phone. They had not spoken since because the war meant there had been no long-distance telephone service, although they had exchanged several letters when Alena was in Tashkent. Alena often thought about how it was almost certainly Sofie's death that had saved her mother from being in Kiev when the Germans marched in, although she had never spoken these thoughts aloud.

"Where will you go?" the woman said softly. Alena started. She had forgotten she was there.

"My father's place," Alena said. "Don't worry." She smiled, trying to reassure the woman, who she sensed was vulnerable in ways she could not begin to guess at. She did not add that the place she spoke of, a two-roomed shack in the woods a mile or so beyond the city boundary, had never been weatherproofed. As she walked along the dirt road that led to the dacha she wondered if she would even find it still standing. It was only her relief at the sight of its dark bulk, rearing up at her from the shadow of the trees, that made her realise how deeply anxious she had been.

The lock was broken, but whoever had been there last had thought to secure the door with a loop of rope. It was this single action that had prevented the dacha from becoming a ruin.

Alena reached into her suitcase, moving her clothes and books aside and hunting for the box of matches she had secreted right at the bottom. Carrying matches was a habit she had developed during the siege. She had come to believe that matches were the most valuable commodity of all, more valuable than bread even. You never knew when you might need them, when they might save your life. She also had newspaper, two *Pravdas* that had been given to her by the woman in her flat, together

with an ancient camp light half full of kerosene. She took several sheets of the newspaper and began twisting them into pretzel shapes. She laid them carefully side by side in the base of the stove then looked around for something she could burn. There were some pieces of furniture missing and she assumed they had been burned by the soldiers but there were still plenty in the dacha she could use for firewood.

No, she thought. *You're not going to burn these things*.

She was surprised at the strength of her feelings. She had thought the siege would have made her immune to the loss of possessions, but she found that the idea of destroying these last fragments of her childhood had a fatal sense of finality about it, as if she would not just be burning the things but her memories too.

Outside it was beginning to get dark. The woods appeared to have spread, the massed larches a navy scrawl against the sepia sky. An owl hooted and Alena shivered inside the patched army greatcoat that had been given to her by the stationmaster at Voronezh. There was a place under the house, a narrow crawl space where they used to store wood for the stove, cut logs and smaller kindling which they would bank about with leaves to keep dry. She bent down and peered inside. There wasn't much. She was not surprised to discover that most of the wood and kindling had been burned or carried away long before. But the dozen or so pieces that remained, small oddments of wood that had been overlooked or discarded, were at least enough to see her through the night.

She went on her hands and knees, easing herself into the crawl space. On the inside it seemed larger, like a secret underground room. There was a musty smell, the brown odour of earth and old leaves, and Alena remembered with a sudden jolt of pain how she and Sofie used to hide there sometimes, whispering together in excited voices, waiting to spy on anyone who might come calling. There had been so many

summer picnics, summer nights. She and Sofie had shared the back room then, the cupboard, sleeping top and tail in the narrow bed.

"I wonder what we'll all be doing in ten years' time?" Sofie was fond of whispering into the darkness. Alena thought it was only not knowing the future that made it possible to go on living.

She began to gather the logs together into a pile, setting aside the driest to bring in first. It was inky black inside the crawl space, and when something hissed at her out of the darkness Alena jumped back, knocking her head painfully against one of the wooden support beams. The idea that something was in the hole with her, had been there all along without her realising, filled her with quiet horror. Her mind turned at once to things she had seen during the siege, dead things, the old man she had come upon lying on the pavement outside the bombed-out Church of St Andrew, his whole body frozen solid and his legs sawn off at the knees, presumably so his boots could be recovered once the flesh had thawed. She thought of the soldiers she had seen trying to rescue a comrade from a burning food depot during a bombardment, the burning scraps of their uniforms flying from the upper windows like golden rain.

What if a wounded man had crawled in beneath the dacha? There was no one here to help her if he turned out to be dangerous. The thing made a kind of dull rasping sound, like an ancient door creaking on its hinges. Alena put out her hand, half expecting it to be seized and bitten. The thing recoiled, making the dry leaves rustle as it tried to get away from her. Dimly she could see something moving. It was too small to be a man.

She reached all the way to the back, and in the angle between the dacha's support posts and the damp dirt floor of the crawl space she felt fur, greasy and

matted together like an old travelling blanket. The thing hissed again, and faintly beneath her fingers she felt it shiver.

"Snow," she said. "It's not possible."

Snow was their cat. He had been named by Sofie, who had wanted to call him Snow Maiden, after the princess in the opera by Tchaikovsky. By the time they realised he was male the name had stuck. Snow was a Turkish Van, pure white all over except for his ears and tail which were a fiery red. Although they had been told that Turkish Vans liked water and that in their native Anatolia they were known as the swimming cat they had never seen Snow demonstrate this unusual proclivity. Sofie used to say that Snow was too proud to show his true nature in front of humans. His pride notwithstanding, he had been intelligent and beautiful, and exceptionally loyal to their mother. Varvara Nikitina had not mentioned Snow during that last telephone conversation and Alena did not dare ask what had happened to him. The idea that he could have survived alone in the woods seemed too unlikely to be considered. Alena had never known him catch so much as a wood mouse, though she supposed that if left to himself he would quickly have learned. Cats were natural born killers, after all. It was easy to forget that, but it was true.

"Snow," she said again, half to herself. She knelt in the dirt, reaching forward with her hands as far as she could. The creature made a tiny, struggling movement, though whether towards or away from her she could not tell. She slid both her hands underneath it and drew it carefully forward into the light.

The cat's body was so emaciated it appeared to have halved in size. Its skeletal structure was clearly visible, the bars of its ribs standing out like iron railings. The long white strands of its fur had matted together to form a greyish wadding. It tried to raise its head, but fell back at once, too weak, its front limbs twitching. Alena felt sure

the beast recognised her. She realised she had nothing to wrap it in, and she was afraid to hold it too firmly in case she hurt it. Quickly she gathered the ragged bundle against her chest and backed out of the crawl space, then moved at a hunched-over run towards the door. Once inside the dacha she laid the cat on what remained of the newspapers, spread out on the floor in front of the stove.

"Wait here," she said. She hoped the cat might be calmed by the sound of her voice. She felt less tired suddenly, less cold, and she supposed this was because she knew the cat was depending on her. Her Aunt Catherine had depended on her, and she had died. Alena gathered an armful of the logs and stumbled back up the steps. The coming night lowered, deep indigo, between the trees.

The cat was in the same position as she had left it, stretched on its side with its eyes closed. It lay so still that Alena thought for a moment it was dead, that the shock of being moved had killed it, but when she put her hand against its ribs she could feel the weak rise and fall of its chest as it took in air. It seemed not to register her touch, though once again Alena felt certain it knew she was there, that she was trying to care for it.

"Hold on, Snow," she said quietly. "You'll feel better once we have a fire going."

She used one of her matches to light the lamp and then began to make up the stove, laying the smallest, driest pieces of kindling directly over the rolled up newspapers and then criss-crossing larger logs on top. She lit the corner of one of the newspaper pretzels then swung the stove door to, leaving a narrow opening to draw the air. After a couple of minutes the bottom layer of kindling began to burn strongly, setting the largest of the logs on fire. A hesitant warmth began to radiate outwards from the stove, which like all stoves in the Russian winter had begun to take on a

living aspect, the dragon-prince that must stay fed in order for its human subjects to stay alive.

There was a story about that in a book she and Sofie had when they were children, a collection of Russian fairy tales with illustrations by Leonid Pasternak. She later discovered that Orest had owned a copy of the same book when he was a boy. There were many similar shared memories between them, even though Alena had grown up in Kiev and Orest many hundreds of miles away in Tallin, on the Baltic coast. Orest was half German, a flaw he tried to minimise by being one of the first to volunteer for the civilian defence battalions that prevented the Nazi armies from overwhelming the city of Leningrad during the first weeks of the war. Later on he joined up for real. He had been among the troops that made the final onslaught on Berlin.

The woman at the army information bureau said that Orest had lost both his legs in a shell blast.

"They thought they could save the left one, but there was gangrene. In the end they had to amputate or he would have died. He's quite well now."

Quite well now. Alena had heard of cases of mistaken identity, women who had been told their father or son or uncle had been horribly injured and later discovered they were perfectly all right. She supposed it might be like this with Orest, although she knew equally of instances where someone who the records said was alive turned out to be dead. On balance, she hoped the man with the amputated legs was Orest. When she asked about his exact whereabouts the woman refused to say.

"It's a military hospital. You'll have to apply for a special pass if you want to visit."

"Can I fill in the form for that here?"

The woman shook her head. “We’ve run out.”

Alena had turned aside, anxious to get away before she did or said anything she might regret. If she set this woman against her she might be deliberately obstructive later. She knew people in the city that might help her, old friends of her father’s, if they were still alive. She would begin making enquiries the next day.

She bent over the cat, stroking its head very lightly with the tip of one finger. Its skin was stretched tight, the shape of its skull so prominent it was almost like touching bare bone. Snow stirred slightly on his bed of newspapers, responding to the warmth of the stove, perhaps. Alena reached for the small supply of food she had in her suitcase, a string carry bag containing a heel of bread, a canister of water, a few slices of pork sausage that was all that was left of the generous package Martha had thrust into her arms when they said goodbye at the station. She unwrapped a little of the sausage and held it out to Snow, wafting it beneath his nose so he could catch the scent of it. For an instant she saw the tip of his tongue protrude from between his grey lips and then it was gone again. She continued to offer the meat, hoping that the cat might respond again more strongly, but it remained still. Alena dipped the tip of one finger into the water canister then gently rubbed the wetness against the cat’s mouth. Still Snow did not move. Alena could not tell if he was relieved by the water or not.

She knew that if she could not persuade the cat to eat soon it would die. During the last three days of her life her Aunt Catherine had refused to eat anything. On the last day, Alena had gone to stand in line for their bread ration at the feeding station as usual and when after four hours she came to the head of the queue there had been a surprise, a measure of onion soup thickened with oats. Alena had taken the soup in her dented kettle and made her way home to her aunt. By the time she arrived back at the flat she had already eaten her half of the bread but managed to stop herself

from touching the soup. The closer she came to home the more important the soup seemed to be, a magical elixir almost, a substance like blood or plasma that would not just provide her aunt with physical nourishment but that would restore in her the will to fight on.

She kept imagining how she would reheat the soup on the stove, how she would feed it to her aunt, one slow magical spoonful at a time.

"You have it," Aunt Catherine whispered. "I'm honestly not that hungry."

Alena spent ten minutes protesting but in her heart she was secretly glad. She consumed the soup slowly, making it last, feeling its warmth inside her like the life of another. When she awoke the next morning her aunt was stiff and cold in the bed beside her.

Alena folded one of the horse blankets to make a soft pad then lifted Snow on to it. There was still a weight to him, but it was a hollow weight, like the weight of an empty basket or dry leaves. She moved the blanket closer to the stove. Orest used to call Snow Old Hippopotamus, or Behemoth, after the demon in the novel by Mikhail Bulgakov. Orest had met Bulgakov in the mid-thirties, when he was touring the theatres in Moscow trying to persuade them to put on his work. Bulgakov read the play Orest had written about the death of Pushkin, and spoke some encouraging words. After that Orest had tended to regard the writer as something of a hero. He had taken Alena to see *The Days of the Turbins* when it was playing at the Central Theatre in Kiev. Alena liked the play, although she liked it even more that Orest had found someone to inspire him and who he could look up to. Bulgakov's last novel had still not been published, but a number of illegal copies were in circulation. The book was about a disgraced writer known as the Master and his lover, Margarita, and told the story of what happened when the devil turned his attention to the city of Moscow. He

brought a retinue of demons with him: a whey-faced ex-choirmaster named Koroviev, a monster called Azazello with sticking-up red hair and a protruding fang, and Behemoth, who sometimes appeared as a man but more usually took the form of an oversized cat.

"You mustn't call Snow a demon," Alena had protested, laughing. "It's not fair on him. And don't forget that Behemoth was black."

"He also has red ears, which is rather suspicious. All cats are demons, anyway. They always prefer the company of witches to real human beings."

"Are you calling me a witch, then, comrade?"

"Certainly I am. If I didn't love you so much I'd be scared of you. I'm always afraid you're about to tell me off."

"And what would I be telling you off for?"

"For being secretly in love with Sofie, of course."

Alena laughed at his joke, and then they made love, but his words had often come back to her in the years they had been forced to spend apart. Orest loved Bulgakov's novel, insisting it was a masterpiece that would change the course of Russian literature. Alena had loved it too. She loved the book's wit, its dialogue as taut and dangerously spiky as barbed wire. The characters had a life to them, a hot, raw spirit that could only be described as infernal.

Perhaps they really are out there, she remembered thinking. *Perhaps they jumped right out of the book and scurried off down an alleyway into the world.*

She found the idea oddly unsettling. And much as she admired it there had been things about the book that annoyed her. She could not accept the fact, for example, that Margarita had nothing to do, no work or career of her own, that it was

enough for her to love the Master and revere his genius. Alena could not imagine setting aside her own work for anyone.

There was also the matter of Latunsky's piano. Latunsky was the literary critic who destroyed the Master's career, and in an act of revenge Margarita broke into his apartment and destroyed his piano. She destroyed many other things too, but it was the piano Alena remembered, the way it had wept and moaned as Margarita battered it with a hammer. *An innocent Baecker* was how Bulgakov described it. Baecker pianos were made in Russia. Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov and Scriabin had all composed on them. Whatever this Latunsky had done, Alena could see no point in taking it out on the piano, and she couldn't forgive Margarita for having done so. To Alena's mind, anyone who treated a musical instrument this way could have no real love for music, and although Bulgakov's novel was strewn with musical references, with characters named Berlioz and Rimsky and Stravinsky, she remained unconvinced.

Her aunt's piano had been English, a Broadwood. Its tone had been wayward, raindrop-bright but overeager, but in the end she had mastered its ways, coaxing from it powers of subtlety and restraint that made her begin to understand why Beethoven himself had prized his Broadwood piano above all others.

In the end, once they had burned all Aunt Catherine's books and dining room furniture and the mahogany sideboard that stood in the hallway they had been forced to burn the Broadwood. It was either that or freeze to death. Alena asked Oleg Medvedev, one of her aunt's neighbours, to come round and chop it up for them because she could not bear to do the deed herself, even though this meant they had to give him a share of the wood. She could still remember the smell it had given off as it burned, the richly pungent aromas of varnish and wax.

Six weeks later her aunt was dead and Alena was evacuated to Tashkent together with other musicians and teachers from the Conservatoire. The Shigaevs had a piano, a scarred little Rippen, brusque but very nimble and always in tune. It had been some time before she could bring herself to touch it, not only because of her hand but because of the shame and guilt she felt on account of the Broadwood.

It was one of the things she felt she would never get over. Her hand she had already come to terms with. She was surprised at how easy this had been.

She had asked Oleg Medvedev to help her with her aunt's body because she was too weak by then to manage on her own. Alena wrapped her in one of the bedsheets and they dragged her down the stairs and into the street.

"We should leave her here," said Oleg Medvedev. "They'll come by with the truck at the end of the week."

The army had made provision for collecting the bodies. The trucks worked in rotation, visiting each district in turn. The city's citizens had been told not to panic if a corpse could not be picked up immediately; the nights were so cold the dead froze solid, like sides of beef, and there was no significant risk of disease from them. Alena knew all this, yet still she could not bear the thought of her aunt lying out in the gutter. In the end Oleg Medvedev helped her load the body on to one of the low sleds that were normally used for transporting firewood. Aunt Catherine was so light that even in her weakened state Alena had been able to drag her as far as the communal cemetery out by St Peter's Fields. On the way back she tripped over one of the large ruts made by the army trucks and went flying on the icy ground. She was so shaken by the fall that she simply lay there, unmoving, not knowing how to get up. She must have lost consciousness for a time, because the next thing she knew there was an old woman shaking her shoulder and breathing the stink of beetroot into her face.

"On your feet, girlie," she said. "You can't give up the ghost here, you're blocking the road."

Beetroot, thought Alena. *Where on earth did she get hold of that*?

The old woman's face was obscured almost entirely by the quilted head covering she wore, but her green eyes gazed out at her with a desperate pity that entirely belied the harshness of her words. Alena could never get free of the idea that those eyes had been her aunt's, that her aunt had come back from the dead to save her. She knew she had been terribly lucky. If she had lain there much longer she would have certainly have died. As it was she suffered minor frostbite, and lost the upper joints of the third and fourth fingers of her left hand. She could still make use of the piano, enough to go through scores at least, but her days of playing in public ended there.

Irina Seshkova, who had been a pupil of Janacek and who was her piano teacher and mentor at the Conservatoire, did not let her waste time on self-pity.

"Maestro Janacek struggled for years trying to decide between composing and performing," she said. "You're lucky. You've had the decision made for you. It's not everyone that has your talent. If this hadn't happened you'd most likely have wasted it."

The brutality of her words brought tears to Alena's eyes. It was only later she realised that Seshkova had been trying to help her and that she was right. She felt something shift within her, something that caused her grief at first because she saw it as a letting-go, a capitulation to circumstance, but that later, throughout the journey to Tashkent and the long, fruitless weeks of trying to find out what had happened to Orest, did more than anything else to help her survive. The vacuum left inside her by her inability to play became gradually filled with something else, a new energy that

was less urgently addictive but more sustaining. To perform a sonata of Beethoven or Scriabin was the most intense expression of the continuing present Alena could imagine. When she played she inhabited the present so entirely and with such insistence the past and the future ceased if not to exist then to matter. The only thing that compared with it was making love with Orest, and even then could she swear there had been no moments when her mind had drifted, preoccupied for whole minutes together not with the sensations of her body but with the left hand fugal passages of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* sonata?

Writing music was something different, less visceral in the moment of attack but more satisfying in the aftermath and without that pressing, ever-present desire for the keyboard, for the instrument itself, and the feeling of incompleteness that sapped her spirit whenever she had to be away from it.

It left the body not so much satisfied as vindicated. She knew now that written notes were live things, round with memory or jagged with grief, that they had a life of their own away from the piano, which she saw now more as a doorway than as a goal.

A written score was no less a poem than any work by Rimbaud or Akhmatova. Sometimes, placing her hand on a score by Medtner or Debussy, she seemed to feel the notes pricking her fingers like pine needles, like the terse, creased-browed couplets of Mayakovsky, similarly insistent on being heard.

It occurred to her suddenly that Bulgakov had done more to fill his novel with music than simply littering its pages with the names of musicians: he had given importance to sounds as well as intentions, and no sound more insistent or more terrible than the shrieks of the Baecker piano as Margarita brought down her hammer.

Alena decided she may have been a little hard on Margarita. The woman had shown courage after all – you only had to look at the way she stood up to that demon

Behemoth - and a refusal to compromise that Alena could only admire. Most marvellous of all, she had persuaded the devil himself to release the Master. Alena thought how good it would be to have a friend like that. She could certainly do with her help in finding Orest.

Alena ate the piece of sausage she had offered to Snow and then another piece, chewing it slowly with some bread. The stove was now exuding a steady, bright heat that seemed to bring new life into even the darkest corners of the dacha. Snow lay motionless on his blanket. When Alena stroked his side he made no response but he was still breathing and Alena hoped he was at least aware of being safe and warm. She felt glad of his presence. She knew the cat was close to death, and yet in spite of his helplessness Alena had the sense that he was watching over her, perhaps precisely because his spirit was already inhabiting a realm that she could access only through music.

She drew a chair up close to the stove, an ancient leather armchair that had once, long ago, been her father's. She had few memories of him, just the smell of his pipe in the evenings and the record he used to play for her, Chaliapin singing *Once at the Evening Hour* from Boris Godunov. His chair had been gutted, slit straight up the back and disembowelled. The person that did this had presumably been looking for valuables, although there had been nothing inside but the horsehair and cotton wadding through which the chair's springs and struts now protruded, obscene somehow, like the entrails of a corpse. When Alena sat in the chair a puff of damp air rose up, filled with the mingled dusty aromas of ashes and leaves. She slipped another log into the stove then wrapped the remaining blanket about her shoulders. She was fiendishly tired but something – the close presence of the woods, perhaps – made her afraid to sleep.

She sat with half-closed eyes, drifting in the warmth from the stove and looking down at Snow where he lay on his blanket. She thought how like a sleeping child he looked, lying on his side with his back arched and his shoulders bunched up, and then she saw she had been mistaken all along. The creature was not a cat at all, but a person, a white-skinned naked man less than two feet in height. In spite of his size he was perfectly proportioned, his smooth limbs long and sinewy, his feet high-arched and graceful, like a dancer's. His face was mostly hidden by a mass of pale hair. As Alena watched the creature stretched out both arms, extending them at right angles to his body just as Snow used to do when waking from an afternoon nap. The ice-white fingers flexed like claws, and the thing's body seemed to flow into them, expanding like a rubber balloon being pumped full of milk. Alena watched, horrified yet fascinated. In less than half a minute the thing was full-sized.

He rolled on his back and yawned, covering his mouth demurely with the back of his hand.

"It must be getting late," he said. "It feels like I've been asleep for half an age."

He turned to face her. His deep-set eyes under heavy lids were entirely colourless. With his prominent nose and narrow lips he looked like a bird of prey.

Raptors, thought Alena. *Those birds are called raptors*. She glanced down at his body, the narrow chest, smooth as marble except for a fine band of pale hairs running from his navel to his groin, the penis, small but well-formed, a curious bluish-white.

She looked away again, embarrassed. The only man she had ever seen naked was Orest.

"Oh come off it," said the man. "There's no need to come over all blushing virgin on me."

He tugged at the blanket, pulling it from beneath him and tucking it around his waist like a bath towel. "Is that more acceptable in what they choose to call polite society? Personally I don't see anything polite about it. A cage of thieving magpies, more like."

"I'm sorry," Alena said. "You scared me, that's all. I don't even know your name."

"I thought you might call me Snow. A touch prosaic, perhaps, but I must say I prefer it to Snow Maiden."

"That wasn't Sofie's fault, she wasn't to know. It's difficult to tell sometimes with kittens."

"I forgave her a long time ago. Your sister's irresistible, did you know that? In any case, I have many names: Azazel, Satan, Baphoment, Beelzebub – I like that one, don't you? It sounds like a fizzy drink. Leviathan, Voland, Old Nick, Old Scratch – who the hell is Old Scratch? I ask you, the things you people come up with. The only one I'm keen on really is Lucifer. I've always thought it such a beautiful word, like a poem all by itself. It actually comes from the Latin, and means *light-bringer*. Not a lot of people know that."

"Is it because of the light that you are so pale?"

He turned his colourless eyes upon her, chips of glass from which everything but brightness had been removed. Looking at them made Alena's mind fill up with terrible things. She remembered the stories she had been told about the Ladoga Lifeline, the hundreds of supply trucks that were sent from behind the lines to relieve the siege. Some lost their way in the dark, straying on to thin ice and then plunging

straight to the bottom of the lake. The trucks were full of food and evacuee children. The people in the trucks that made it to the other side said the water was so cold that the children would have died almost at once, from shock or from heart failure. Alena had always hoped this was the truth. The thought of drowning while your lungs turned to ice was so terrible she had never talked about it with anyone.

"You foolish woman. I am pale because I am snow, and because snow is hell. I would have thought you of all people would have learned that by now. You are dangerously kind, you know. You have to be careful of kindness or it may kill you. So often it's just another word for foolishness. Do you realise you could have died in the street because of that lump of dead flesh that used to be your aunt? She would have rotted just as well in the gutter, and you wouldn't have lost half your hand." He got to his feet, holding on to the blanket with one hand and resting the other on top of the hot stove. Alena watched, mesmerized, half-expecting the creature's flesh to melt away in front of her. She could see clearly the delicate bone structure of his hand, the long finger joints, the smoothly elongated ovals of his nails. A beautiful hand. She felt herself beginning to blush.

"Why did you come here? Do you want me to change places with Sofie?" She imagined Sofie alive again, her narrow hands and golden freckles, the way she looked down at her feet whenever she smiled. Alena loved her and still grieved for her, and yet in that brief instant she realised an awful truth, that if this creature wanted her to exchange her life for her dead sister's then it would have to take her by force. Lucifer had called her kind, but he had reckoned without her egoism. There were still so many things she wanted to do.

"Don't ask me about Sofie." He flashed her an icy glance and Alena fell silent at once. "I'm not here for you. I was just passing through, that's all. Why should this

be about you? You people have such delusions of grandeur." He took his hand off the stove and began moving about the room. He touched things as he went: the empty bookcase, the iron bedstead, the low table she and Sofie used to play cards on and that now lay propped against one wall with its legs broken. Alena could see his breath in the lamplight, curling up from his lips like smoke.

"I loathe war," Lucifer said. "It makes such a mess."

Alena remained silent, not daring to contradict him. Bizarrely she found herself thinking of the devil in Bulgakov's novel, who used similarly seductive words, who pretended to be a reasonable man when really he was something else entirely. *Perhaps that's who he is*, she thought. *He's jumped right out of the book, just the way I always thought he might. I wish Orest was here to see this*.

"I can see you don't believe me," Lucifer said. "You think this is all my fault, the siege, the children, those disgusting camps everyone is talking about. You think that's the kind of thing that lights my fire. Well I'm telling you you're wrong. The thing I enjoy most is *argument*, the interplay of words and ideas. The best arguments take place in the mind, in the head – ask Alekhine, ask Newton, ask any half-decent chess player or mathematician. Is it my fault if some power-crazed idiot tries to put his half-baked ideas into practice? That's the problem with you lot, you're always looking for someone else to blame. What you see here isn't my doing, it's the residue of bad ideas, the leftover rubbish. It has nothing to do with me."

He waved his hand, at the broken table, the filthy floor, the bleeding armchair and all the desolate countryside beyond. He curled his upper lip, as if the sight of it offended him.

"But what if it was you who put the ideas in their heads in the first place?" said Alena. She was shaking all over, though whether from terror or anger she could

not tell. She would have liked to believe that this was her way of speaking up for the children who had died in the freezing waters of Lake Ladoga, but if she was honest she knew it wasn't so, that she had spoken up only because she could never resist an argument either. Orest had once told her it was lucky she was a musician and not a writer. Now she thought she was beginning to understand what he had meant.

"Ha! If I told you to jump in the fire, would you do it?"

"I don't suppose I'd have much choice."

"I love artists, they're always so arrogant."

He came and stood before her, then hunkered down in front of her chair. For the first time she became aware of the smell of him, a tarry, not unpleasant odour, the scent of warm pitch. "Do you think you could care for me at all?" He reached towards her face, brushing the tips of his fingers across her cheek. She was surprised at the warmth of his touch. He leaned closer and then rested himself against her, covering her body with his own. She became aware that he had removed the blanket from around his waist, that he was naked again. She struggled beneath him, trying to extricate herself, but instead she found his penis stiffening between her fingers. Somewhere in another universe he was fumbling with her coat buttons. She felt herself sliding downwards in her chair.

It's been a long time, she thought. *That time with Martha Antonovna hardly counted.* She stroked the thing's hard flesh, thinking of the long, comfortless years, closing her eyes and breathing in the aroma of boiling tar. She remembered the first time with Orest, their nervous struggles, and suddenly she found that she could see him. He was sitting up in bed, a metal cot not unlike the one in the small back bedroom of the dacha, the room they had called the cupboard. He was propped up on pillows, the bedclothes oddly humped where his knees should have been, stretched

over a wooden cage-like structure she supposed was meant to keep the blankets from chafing his stumps. The light was dim, the yellowish glow of oil lamps, yet she could see where his head had been shaved, the angry patch of scarring below his right ear. Beside him on the night stand was a tin cup half filled with water, and beside that the folded pages of a letter he had just finished writing. She knew without any doubt it was a letter to her.

She made a soft sound, almost a groan, and felt salt tears filling her eyes.

"Oh hell, I should have known you'd be the type that would regret it in the morning," said Lucifer. "I can't abide that." He drew away from her, covering himself again with his blanket. Alena drew a long deep breath. The air tasted cold and dark, like lake water. She found the way her visitor had snatched at the blanket almost comically prudish. "What would I want you for, anyway?" he was saying. "A great lumpy girl like you, when I can have anyone I want?"

"You don't want me," said Alena. She felt suddenly very drowsy, and it was an effort to speak. "You want my music."

"Your music," said the devil thoughtfully. "That's a new one." His eyes took on a faraway look. "He's all right, that chap of yours, if you want to know. In full working order, if you get my meaning. Only he's terrified you won't want him, now that he has no legs. It's taken him the best part of a week to finish that letter. Strange, wouldn't you say, for somebody who calls himself a writer?"

"What letter?"

Lucifer narrowed his eyes and made a short, dismissive gesture with one hand, as if warning her not to make him lose his patience. "Don't ask stupid questions. If you want to land yourself with a cripple that's up to you, but never insult your own intelligence. Such behaviour is unworthy of you."

He slipped the blanket from around his waist, folding it in four and replacing it on the floor by the stove. Then he crossed the room to the door. “Thank you for bringing me inside,” he said. “It’s a cold night out.”

The next second he was gone, bounding into the darkness, quick as a cat. Alena stirred and came fully awake. She could feel a freezing draught at her back, as if the door had come unfastened, but when she turned to look the loop of string was still firmly tied. The stove had burned down low, and the air seemed suffused with a great quietness. Snow lay on his blanket, unmoving.

Alena put another small log on the stove, watching as it caught alight. She felt uncertain of what had just happened, and already the details were fading, as even her most vivid dreams so often vanished as soon as she woke. And yet she sensed a continuing presence in the room, an aftermath. Perversely, the thought that she was not alone there comforted her. Quite suddenly she felt like working.

She took the manuscript pad from her music case, opening the pages carefully across her knees. In her final weeks in Tashkent she had begun work on a piece for full orchestra, a single symphonic movement in the form of a chaconne. She had taken her inspiration from the final movement of Brahms’s fourth symphony, a stately three-four progression that seemed to hover somewhere between noble endeavour and famished despair. She had heard Mravinsky conduct it once, and the symphony remained with her as an ideal, a perfect expression of both the passion that engendered creation and the discipline that was required to bring it about.

She thought of her chaconne as a requiem, but had been unable to decide who it was for. At first she intended it to be a simple expression of grief for her aunt, but as she got deeper into the work she wondered if she ought not to be writing about the children in the ice, about the things she had seen in Leningrad during the siege. The

thoughts made her feel both guilty and inadequate. What had happened to her aunt was still too present, too awful to be anything to her yet other than the flat, hard recitation of the facts that came to her whenever she tried to think about it. And as for the other deaths, the children in the lake, the soldiers in the burning warehouse, she did not feel she had earned the right to comment.

In the end she decided to dedicate the chaconne to her sister Sofie. Sofie's death had happened far from her and in her absence and in that sense it was still an abstraction. It was the living Sofie she remembered. She found this made her easier to think about. She had scored double basses and low wind for the ground, then a latticework of violins over the top, the lines of music spiralling together like snowflakes in fugal progressions. She had come to think of the piece as her snow-fugue, even in the heady late autumn sunshine of Tashkent she had thought of it that way, and now that she had returned to the mud-splattered highways, the dense yellow fogs and bitter frosts of Ukraine in mid-November it seemed to her that the work as well as she had truly come home.

Just before leaving Tashkent she had decided to rework the piece slightly in order to include a part for solo cello. The cello had been Sofie's favourite instrument. For a while, when Alena first started to do well with the piano, Sofie begged to be allowed to have cello lessons. Their mother had eventually conceded, but Sofie hated to practise and soon gave up.

Alena wanted the cello to carry the fugue's main subject, to weave its way through the violins in a strong, dark, angular line, like a narrow but well-defined path through a dense tract of snow-bound forest. None of this, she saw now, was very like Sofie. Sofie had been diffident, ambiguous, her sensitive intelligence concealed beneath a cloak of shyness. She hated the rigours of winter almost as much as she had

disliked practising the cello. Tashkent, with its fruit markets, its smiling women in their brightly-woven headscarves, was far more her spiritual home than the wastes of Ukraine.

The chaconne had more to say about Alena herself than it did about Sofie. Perhaps all art, in the end, was at least partly about the artist. Orest once told her that Bulgakov had put all of himself into his portrait of the Master, not just his own beliefs but the despair and frustration he suffered at the hands of the critics. Perhaps Margarita's destruction of Latunsky's piano was a justified literary expression of a righteous anger.

Alena had seen Bulgakov once. Orest had pointed him out to her in the foyer when they went to see *The Days of the Turbins*, a tall figure with gaunt cheeks, wearing a beautiful lavender-grey suit and a blue silk bow tie.

"You wouldn't know it to look at him, but he's actually very ill," Orest had said. "He was badly wounded during the war. The pain would stop him from working if it weren't for the morphine. They say he's addicted to it, that it's slowly eating away at his insides. I suppose that's why he's grown so thin."

The playwright was surrounded by admirers, and Orest had not dared to approach him. Yet to Alena he had seemed like a shy man, withdrawn from the world in spite of the attention he was receiving. Not at all the kind of man who would smash up a piano.

An image came to Alena then of Margarita, not when she was trashing Latunsky's flat but immediately afterwards, riding her broomstick high above the roofs of Moscow, heading out of the city like an arrow shot from a crossbow, caught in the radiant gleam of a million lights. Bulgakov had described Margarita's night flight as a toboggan ride, and Alena understood what he meant, the broomstick

bucking and dipping in the updrafts of air like the runners of a sled over the icy roots of trees as it careered downhill. Margarita's miraculous journey had taken place on a warm spring evening, but Alena found she could imagine it just as well and if not better in the depths of winter, because snow *was* hell, her visitor had been right about that. She had learned that during the siege.

Her mind's eye opened wide, and she seemed to see Margarita in the midst of a snowstorm. Her broomstick had become a war horse, its heaving flanks the colour of ashes. *She was hell-bent*; the words came to her suddenly and clearly. Hell-bent on saving the Master, on living and dying in a way that felt like truth to her. Alena remembered how at the end of the novel the Master and Margarita were granted peace but not light. Perhaps this was because the truth really did have more of hell about it than it did of heaven.

Alena took her pencil and began sketching in the notes that would make up the cello line, a bold, continuous arc of sound, a broad triangular melody that swerved and coasted high above the prickly needle-fine jitters of the violins before swooping out of sight beyond the horizon. She worked on, fighting her tiredness, until she had drafted the part from beginning to end.

Snow-Fugue, she wrote on the title page. *To Margarita*. She was so exhausted by then that all the letters canted to the right, threatening to slide off the paper and into her lap.

The stove was almost out. Alena banked the embers with ash. She thought it best to conserve her supplies until she could be certain of getting more. The cat on his horsehair blanket lay very still. Alena lifted him in her arms and folded him inside her coat. If the little creature had to die that night at least he would not be alone and perished from cold. She leaned over and extinguished the lamp. In the moments

before she slept Alena remembered a scene from *The Days of the Turbins*, in which Elena Talberg lamented over a tea service, its delicate porcelain china figured with gold. Before the war it was brought out only on special occasions but in recent months they had fallen into the habit of using it every day and several of the beautiful cups had been broken or chipped. It felt like that now to Alena, that the ruined armchair and Sofie's death and Orest's injuries were things that they, the people of Russia, had somehow brought on themselves. It seemed to her that Snow, filthy from neglect and grown too weak to be saved even by love, was the last fragment of the life she had known before the war. Tonight it was breathing its last. Tomorrow she must let it go.

She smoothed the scant fur on Snow's head, remembering Lucifer leaping out into the night.

She woke to cold, and a fine rain pattering against the windows. The stove had burned out completely. The light inside the dacha was a listless grey.

Snow lay dead in her arms. His tiny form seemed still further depleted, a collection of bones held together only by the skin that contained them. Alena did up her coat and took him outside, placing his body far back at the rear of the crawl space, where she had found him. She had once read that people in ancient Rus used to bury the body of a cat in the foundations of a house as some kind of good luck charm. Alena did not believe in such things, but it seemed important that Snow should be laid to rest close to his home.

She secured the door of the dacha with the loop of string and then set out to walk the two miles to Four Corners, where she knew there was a telegraph office that also doubled as a grocery store. The woman who ran it, Agafya Simonovna, had been serving behind the counter since Alena was a child.

"My God, it really is you, then," she exclaimed. "The Milyukovs said you were back but I didn't dare hope. We've had some potatoes delivered, would you believe. They're good ones, too. And there's a letter just arrived for you this morning."

She reached under the counter and brought out a square brown envelope. It was covered in date stamps and post marks, and looked as if it might have been opened, but it carried the stamp of Orest's unit across the back.

"That new postman Timofeyka is so careless," said Agafya Simonovna. "This envelope's filthy. He must have dropped it in the mud." She held the letter in her hand, turning it this way and that. "Those marks look just like paw prints, don't they? Anyone would think he'd got that mangy old tomcat of his sorting the post for him. Goodness knows he's lazy enough." The old woman sighed. "Nothing would surprise me these days. Nothing at all."