

PAT CADIGAN

JOHNNY COME HOME

There was nothing for me to do in Moscow but drink.

Well, that and look for Johnny, and I no longer really had to do that. The Sense told me he was in the city, eventually our paths would cross and I would reel him in. But until that happened, I had to do something and drinking was it. Bars as Westerners know them were still relatively new in Moscow. Most of them little more than empty storefronts with the bare essentials; if you wanted atmosphere, you brought it with you. Or, if you were an especially wealthy tourist, you could go to one of the headjob parlors, where they gave you a happy-hood and a couple of gloves so you could enjoy your Stoli in whatever virtual environment they were running that night--provided, of course, you'd made your reservation the required six to eight months in advance.

I figured it was artificial reality either way and not being an especially wealthy tourist, I opted for the austerity plan. Besides, in Moscow, it was the booze that carried importance, not the place where you drank it, and Stoli seemed to have a deeper understanding of the drinking organism. It certainly understood 'me'--besides being mellow and friendly, it had the salutary effect of enhancing the Sense. The bad news was that sobering up dulled me, but that was easy enough to take care of.

So there I was, boozing and cruising in Moscow. They all envied me back home--my turn to fetch Johnny and I got to go to Russia to do it. First time I'd ever been off the North American continent, too. But here's a little home truth for you (and why not home truth, seeing as how we've had the awful truth, nothing but the truth, and cheap truth, God help us each and every one): One place is pretty much like another, and once I understood what I could do in Moscow, I might have been anywhere, the language difference notwithstanding. Even now--or maybe especially now, in the last weeks before the millennium turned. Well, not a full turn--next year would be the real first year of the new millennium, but everyone in the world seemed to be stuck on the idea that 2000 was the big year. Certain ideas die hard, and others don't die at all. Like Johnny's ideas.

He could live a thousand years himself and never give up on those sweet, mad ideas. Master of my fate, captain of my soul, world full of miracles, tomorrow's another day (or another millennium), anything can happen and it probably will.

Yah. Dream about it, Johnny. He'd be doing that right now, somewhere in Moscow, living in his own brand of artificial reality, dreaming hard enough to kill someone while I held my place at a bar that had once been some kind of counter-kitchen? grocery?--it was hard to tell in this light--in another dingy ex-storefront.

As usual, there were lots of foreigners. Some were tourists and business travelers, but a good many of them were what the government was calling "temporary long-term." No doubt plenty of those were skating along on forged papers, hoping to find some way to establish residency later. Russia had been through a lot of changes in the Nineties right along with the rest of the world, but people themselves never really change, no matter where they are. Nor do situations. That's some more home truth, and you could figure that one out even without the Sense.

So I maintained, anyway. The Sense is not one hundred percent infallible but the group back home believed it was a constant, all-over advantage. I was of two minds, you should pardon the expression, about that, myself, and it sometimes caused more friction among us than Johnny's periodic coop flying. "Loyal opposition" is not an easy concept to put over to organisms like us, but we all understood disloyal opposition. We had Johnny. Or we would when I brought him home again, tired, disillusioned, and hung over from his freedom bender, to play docile prodigal and rejoin. Until all those sweet, mad ideas built up enough to set him off again.

I was on my third Stoli, watching the bartender sort out orders and make change, when the front door opened wide with a blast of frigid winter air. Over the multilingual gabble, someone started calling for papers in six different languages, and the person on my left dropped like a stone.

I looked down. A pretty, heartshaped face framed by dark blond hair looked back up at me, eyes wide.

"Pamageeteh menye," she whispered. Help me.

I was on the verge of telling her I wasn't Russian. Then I moved so that I was standing directly in front of her, my ankle length coat spread to hide her. She had been at the end of the bar next to the wall, so perhaps no one had seen her duck. Even if someone had, this wasn't the type of crowd that would alert the immigration officers now moving through the place and shining flashlights on documents held up for inspection.

Chatter became hushed and most movement ceased, except for the sweep of the flashlight beams standing out hard in the smoky air, like light swords in some old science-fiction movie. The bartender moved slowly down the counter, picking up empty glasses, running a rag over the chipped Formica, until he came to where I was standing. Folding his arms, he leaned against the wall and looked around in an aimless, bored way before letting his gaze rest pointedly to my left.

I showed him my passport and shrugged.

He made a fist, wincing. His thoughts were like a bellow in my skull, a mostly incoherent expression of anger, at me with my coat so obviously spread, at the woman hiding behind it, at the immigration officers, at the world in general for interfering with him. He was very young, one of the post-glasnost generation,

with no memory of a different time, when this empty storefront would have been equally empty even with a store in it, when he might have begged the blond's blue jeans from her to sell on the black market and ended up crouching in the dark with her, hiding from KGB, not immigration.

Or perhaps he was a member of a hate group. I could get no clear indication from him. Even with plenty of warm, Sense-enhancing Stoli in me, his tension was an occluder.

The bartender's gaze shifted and I turned to look at the immigration officer now standing on my right. Without moving my elbows from the bar, I showed her my open passport. In the peripheral glow from the flashlight, her face was calm, unworried; she might have been an acquaintance looking at pictures of my family.

She moved the flashlight beam to my face. I stared past it to the two pinpoints of reflected light, all I could see of her eyes now. Everything stopped.

After a while, she said, "Thank you, Maria Tell," her accent making the words musical. She held her head high as she turned around. I could feel the bartender staring hard at me as the woman made her way to the door, where the other officers were waiting. They filed out in another blast of Moscow winter wind that cleared a little of the smoke and briefly overrode the ancient space heaters. I could still Sense her aching feet, her fatigue, her discomfort in the cold, her wish that they could just give this foreigner watering hole a last once-over and leave empty-handed, through for the night; and if by chance there were refuseniks with forged papers among the crowd, then please don't let her have to find them, let it be one of the others who would have to stay up the rest of the night inputting and contacting embassy officials and whatnot. All she wanted was to go home and see what had been downloaded from the International Net.

That made me the genie who had granted her wish. No wonder she'd thanked me so politely.

The blond emerged from under my coat, swiping at her mussed hair and looking dazed, as if she had just awakened with no idea how she'd come to be here. "God, I had no hope that would work, I was just desperate and crazy" She saw the bartender and her expression became wary. But instead of throwing her out, he leaned on the bar and looked directly into my face.

"Do you have a brother?" he asked in heavily accented English.

And then, of course, I knew exactly what Johnny had been doing all this time in Moscow.

"I'm in it for the same reason as anybody else." said the blond, puffing along beside me in the cold. "Artistic freedom."

I made a polite noise. or tried to. My lungs felt frozen. The blond's name was Evie Gray, and she was now my friend for life.

"The Russians understand," she went on. "They know what repression really is. They make movies here where people drink and use drugs, they can make fun of religion, They've got Huckleberry Finn in the libraries-it's pretty weird in Russian, but they've got it in the original English, too. And God. rock music! All kinds of stuff you can't hear in the States anymore, old rap, new rap, heavy fucking metal that tells you to kill yourself, for chrissakes. And in the happy-hood parlors, it's anything goes, hard-core, soft-core, violence, whatever you want, and no goddamn Council for the Prevention of Mind Control to come in and pull the plug on you-hell, you can even get abortions on demand here, did you know that? On demand All you have to do is walk into a clinic and you don't even have to give them a reason-"

"Still can't burn the Russian flag on the steps of the Kremlin," I said. "But I guess nobody's perfect, eh?"

She didn't hear me. She ran on and on about the Constitution being fucked like the air and water and land had been fucked and how it was just going to get worse and worse. Whether she was saying all this for my benefit or her own wasn't clear even to her. Not that it mattered anymore. Her visa had run out three weeks before and she was now officially refusenik, subject to arrest and deportation.

I wondered if she was aware of the original meaning of refusenik, but I wasn't curious enough to use the Sense to find out. There were scads of these new refuseniks running around Moscow and elsewhere in the Soviet Union. I couldn't decide whether they were yet another premillennial nut group, the start of a real movement, or just more people living in their own brand of artificial reality. But then, I predated the Berlin Wall, and at my age. sometimes everybody looked like just another nut, Even when the Sense told me they were all quite sane, if not especially wise.

What Evie Gray was more than anything else was especially wealthy. I didn't point out to her that this was the only way she could have managed this dramatic flight to freedom. It's yet another home truth that only the richest and the poorest ever attain freedom, the richest because they can afford it, the poorest because nobody's ever looking for them.

"You don't share a brother-sister resemblance," said the woman with the long, straight hair. "More like mother and son. If you'll pardon my saying so."

I smiled at her; she didn't smile back. Russians were sparing with their smiles. Whoever had taught her English had been from Boston.

"He's adopted."

"Excuse me?" She looked puzzled.

"Nothing. Yuri at the Kropotkin hard currency bar gave me this address."

Her gaze slid to Evie Gray. "Did something happen at the Kropotkin?"

"No. Almost, but it was averted," I said.

"Good answer," Evie murmured.

"I understand," said the woman, stepping to the dark velvet curtain behind her. She sounded friendlier but she still didn't smile. "You realize that this is a very exclusive mesto; foreign visitors who come here must reserve many months in advance and the waiting list is already a year long."

The bundle in Evie's outthrust hand was obscenely thick. "I can pay."

The woman made it disappear almost before my new American friend realized she had taken it.

"Next time, you should be more discreet. Put it in a little sack and pass it. If others saw, you could be marked as worth robbing."

"I wouldn't let that happen," I said, "but we promise we'll be more careful in the future."

"Harashow. This way." She pulled the curtain aside and stepped into the headjob parlor.

I liked the simple descriptiveness of their name for it: mesto-literally, place. Someplace else might have been more like it. The Russians had embraced virtual reality with a religious fervor. Having been through only a few days of a Russian winter and hearing it called unseasonably warm, I could understand.

But virtual reality was just as major in the States and any other country developed enough to maintain the technology. I could understand that, too. It was merely the next logical step after television and video games, really.

The mesto wasn't much like an American arcade. Instead of little single or double booths, there were rows of what looked like old barber chairs, about fifty altogether, all of them occupied by people wearing headpieces and action gloves. Lots of weird hand motions going on, some I could guess at and some I wouldn't have wanted to. There were no individual units—all the cables from the equipment disappeared into the floor. Centralized transmission; no variety, but it would make the mesto's operating costs a lot cheaper, increasing the profit margin to something that even an old Eighties greed-is-good throwback would call more than respectable.

"How long have you been operating?" I asked the woman as I followed her to the end of the last row of chairs.

"Almost a year," she said.

At the end of the row was a vacant chair, the only one in the room, with a

headpiece sitting on it like an abandoned crown.

"Your companion bought you an hour's worth," the woman said, gesturing at it.
"Take your pleasure."

I blew out an irritated breath. "That's not what I'm here for."

"If you want to see your brother, you'll take the hour." She picked up the headpiece and held it out to me.

It didn't make any sense, and I was having a hard time with the Sense as well. The long, cold walk from the Kropotkin had sobered me up and I was dull. But the little flicker that I managed to get from her indicated that, somehow, she was telling the truth. Maybe Johnny wanted me all tangled up with wires and distracted with fancy pictures before he'd talk to me, figuring that would keep me from sussing him out. As if this artificial reality could come between us any better than the one he'd made for himself. Dream on, and on, and on, Johnny.

The woman helped me with the gloves and then started to put the headpiece on me.
"I'd like some Stoli, please," I said.

"This is not a valuta bar," she said. "We don't serve anything. If you wanted drinks, you should have brought your own."

"Get her some vodka." Evie slipped a hand into her pocket. "You can get me some, too."

The woman hesitated.

"And bring a straw. You know, one of those hollow tube things you can suck liquids through?" I added, in response to her blank look. "Unless you're hiding some dispensers for the headpieces?"

"Yeah, it's the same fuck-the-tourists crap all over," said Evie.

"Shut up," I told her.

"Sometimes there's a bottle back in the office. A straw"-the woman shrugged-"I'll see what I can find." She took something from Evie--discreetly enough, I supposed--and slipped out a nearby door. Evie moved to help me with the headpiece.

"Hold it," I said.

She drew back a little, looking stung.

"I can't go on helping you indefinitely, you know."

"Can't?" She gave me a fast, pained grin. "You mean won't, right?"

"Look, I can fix it so tired cops don't see what they don't want to see. But I don't forge residency papers. And I'm not staying in Russia any longer than I have to."

"But you could make someone forge papers for me, couldn't you?"

I wanted to shake her.

"Is this place really so much better than the U.S.? You think Russia is heaven just because they've got Huckleberry Finn on the shelves and rap music on the radio and abortion on demand? Does the name Stalin mean anything to you? How about Pamyat? They were just another anti-Semitic hate group in the early Nineties, but now even their staunchest sympathizers are afraid of them. And they're not the only haters running around loose, all of them with their own agendas, but two things they all agree on: They hate Jews and they hate refuseniks. You think all of the missing ones are just blending in with their forged papers? Plenty of them are lying on slabs in a Moscow morgue, gutted like cattle, courtesy of Pamyat."

"Pamyat is a bad word around here. Don't use it." The woman reappeared and thrust a bottle that was a little over half full at me. "Scares away our business. Sorry, no straw. And I have no idea what you'll do with it when you're inside."

I took a couple of healthy swigs and stuck the bottle between my thighs. She shrugged and looked at Evie.

"I'll wait right here," Evie said.

"Hurry up and take your hour. There's a long line behind you." She pushed the headpiece all the way down so that my face was covered and the eye-screen lit up immediately.

I joined a standard dolphin's-eye sequence. As soon as artificial reality had become feasible for the mass market, everyone had gone for the dolphin and whale stuff. Out of guilt, maybe: Sorry we killed so many of you, so we'll be you, or pretend we are. I would have been bored except the quality was way beyond anything I'd ever seen before. The Russians must have been cranking away on hardware R&D, boosting definition and whatever else. But the headpiece hadn't looked like it was anything so extraordinary.

The perspective cruised past a formation of opalescent, eyeshaped bodies that turned right and then left as one, lifting themselves out of my path like a curtain. Near a boulder, a fleshy squid ignored me, its tentacles rippling. Seaweed drifted, sank away into the shadows. Nothing new here, nothing in the least, but the quality-my inner ear kept flashing swimming messages to my stomach, where the disloyal Stoli had turned on me with a threat.

Disloyal opposition.

I hung onto the arms of the chair and tried to keep part of my awareness tuned to where I knew my body was, waiting for Johnny's presence to press in on the Sense.

I might have been cruising the ocean for ten minutes, or almost the whole hour; my sense of time had slipped away like one more darting ocean creature. But the novelty was wearing off and I felt bored, impatient, and slightly dizzy.

The perspective made a sudden wide arc to the left and passed through a multicolored rock formation. Something with nasty-looking jaws peered out of a dark hole but never moved as I passed.

Just beyond the rocks was a giant clam, the ridges of the shell perfectly formed. It began to open as I approached--more standard stuff--displaying the giant pearl in the giant clam was usually the climax and indicated a change to the next sequence. So much for my hour and finding Johnny, I thought, watching the clamshell rise. When I got out of the chair, I was going to chug the rest of the Stoli and use the Sense to make the mesto hostess do cartwheels until she dropped.

<<Sadistic idea. Not like you, Maria.>>

The clamshell was gaping wide and it wasn't a pearl displayed there but a man, curled up in the fetal position. He unfolded slowly and gracefully, the way everything moves underwater, and turned to look at me.

Same old sweet, mad Johnny. His shoulder-length brown hair was floating around his head; his hazel eyes were like stars in his lovely, open face.

<<The Sense couldn't get a good fix on you until you jerked the cop in the valuta bar. I used the Sense on the cops just that same way myself, till I found something better.>> He smiled at me. <<Come for to carry me home, sweet Maria? Sorry, not this time. This time, I beat you. I beat you all.>>

<<You always say that, Johnny. What is it now, a woman, or another man again? Even without the Sense you could make them fall in love with you. Lots of people can do that. But you can't make them love you. That's something very different from falling in love, Johnny, and after the last three times, I'd have thought you'd have known that. You'll end up killing this one with your needs, too. Just like the others. The group forgives your sin because we understand. But nobody else will. At the very least, they'll put you in jail and there you'll be, far from us and us far from you, all of us feeling the Lack. That's bad, Johnny, Remember how bad it is to feel the Lack? After your lover isn't falling in love with you anymore and you're without us?>>

I was working the Sense on him, of course, and he was pushing back just as hard, maintaining the balance of pressure as only those endowed with the Sense could.

It was a balance he couldn't have with someone outside the group, the

give-and-take of the Sense that we all needed, whether Johnny wanted to admit his own need or not.

<<It's different this time, Maria. I let my lover go right after I found this.>>

<<Found what--artificial reality? You can get that anywhere. Come home and we'll buy you your own booth.>>

<<But they don't have centralized transmission back in the States. A multitude all looking at once, invisible to each other but all visible to me. And I can have them all, not just one at a time but together.>> He spread his arms. <<I found this lonely technician, got her to scan my likeness into the simulation. The scanning equipment here is so much better than ours, they've been working so much harder on it. And between me and my likeness-->>

He didn't have to explain. Even without the Sense, I could have felt how it was, I think. Johnny's likeness might as well have been him. It had its own power within the artificial universe, blocking our little exchange from the rest of the clientele. A hundred people looking and none of them saw. I would have said a connection between a living being with the Sense and a likeness was impossible, except obviously none of us had tried it until now.

<<Of course, I have to stay in . . . keep the headpiece on, and the gloves. They're making a whole suit for me, it's almost finished. What I've done for business here--it was great before but now it's taken a real jump. We're going to expand. More of them for me, more and more, wanting to be in some beautiful, otherworldly place, one that I create. They give me their wanting and needing and I feel no Lack, none at all. I don't have to stay locked into the group anymore, Maria. I'm free now. Free.>>

<<Why, Johnny? Why do you have to have them? Why don't you just come home and get the same thing from the ones who really know you and understand you?>>

He looked away from me, dreamily reaching up to run a finger along the belly of a passing shark.

<<Because it is always the same. I want different I want to wake up in the morning knowing that I might see anybody, be with anybody, go anywhere. This way, I can. I don't want to be chained to the group, the way so many of them are chained to lives they never wanted. This way, anything really is possible. It really is a world full of miracles.>>

<<Dream about it, Johnny.>> I worked the Sense harder on him. <<It's still only a dream, and when you wake up, you'll still be what you've always been.>>

The push came so forcefully that I would have sworn he'd found someone else with the Sense and the two of them were ganging up on me. The likeness, I realized; Johnny had invested a great deal in it as the would-be escape hatch from the prison of his life, and wherever Johnny went, the Sense went with him. I had Stoli, but Johnny had this, and it was bigger.

Still, I strained for him, trying to make him--him and his likeness?--acknowledge the connection between us and fortify its existence.

I almost had him. Perhaps I had had him--his miracle world was more wonderful, but I was more familiar.

And then rough hands tore the headpiece away and I heard the mesto hostess say, "Time's up."

The cold was what really brought me to, though I was already staggering along Gorky Street. Famous Gorky Street, I remembered; every few years, the Russians would change the name to something else but for some reason, they'd always end up changing it back again. Evie Gray had her shoulder wedged under my armpit and my arm slung across her shoulders. She was chattering away, but my head was too bad to make sense (or Sense) of what she was saying and the traitor Stoli in my gut was like a washing machine on the heavy soil setting.

Somehow, little old Evie knew--I say it's a home truth that in times of stress, everybody's got a tiny spot of the Sense--and got me to an alley where I could throw up in peace. Good-bye, Stoli, and goodnight, Gracie. Or Evie. I was dulled out.

After a while, Evie got me moving again. She was still chattering--Christ, this woman never ran out of breath, I guess--and I caught the word problem.

"The real problem, Evie, old girl," I said, talking loudly over her, "the real problem here--and I think the Russians really do understand this"--I swung my free arm out to gesture at an empty storefront and almost sent us both down on the cold pavement--"the real problem is, people think life is a ladder, and it's really a wheel. That's a real home truth and we ignore it. It's there for us to see, everything is there for us to see, we've got home truth coming out of our ears, we know everything there is to know to get us through the day in one piece, and we ignore it like it doesn't exist. Hell, the earth is round, it turns, you'd think anyone could take a hint that blatant, but even someone with the Sense. who's supposed to know a little more than the average pilgrim, can still look home truth right in the kisser and say, 'No thanks, artificial reality for me, please.' I don't know what to do about that, Evie. Even with the Sense, I just don't know what to do about it."

I heard her clear her throat. "Why don't you just shut up?"

She took a real chance dumping me at Intourist. She could have just left me on the street for the authorities to pick up--probably nothing would have happened, I wasn't refusenik, after all--and the fact that she got me indoors before she disappeared indicated a sweet generosity of spirit within that foolish chatterbox exterior. I liked her retroactively, for all the good that would do her.

I got a plane out the next morning--all I had to do was find an Aeroflot ticket

agent with a xenophobic bent and give a little push. The genie of the bottle grants your wish and leaves your country.

The layover in London was supposed to be just a few hours, but Gatwick shut down indefinitely with a bomb scare-bomb scares were coming more frequently as December 31 approached--so I took the train into London, figuring I might as well be comfortable. Besides, I'd never seen London.

Forgot my own home truth: One place is pretty much like another. There was nothing for me to do in London either but drink. But London really understands the drinking organism the way Moscow was trying to. The pubs were warm and mellow. Guinness was even better on the Sense than Stoli had been, and I almost didn't care when Gatwick stayed shut another day and another, and Heathrow with it.

I didn't call home. They'd all know by now, anyway. I would only be telling them the details, and those could wait.

Those could wait and I could drink, and like anyone in artificial reality, I lost track of the time, which was how I came to be in London on Christmas Eve, looking down a week to the (artificial) dawn of the (artificial) new millennium. Feeling the Lack and filling it with Guinness.

Travel was impossible now. There were riots every day, and not just in London. The Messiah was coming, they said; the Messiah was coming.

Then the transmission from Russia began. But I didn't bother trying to tell any. one that it wasn't really the Messiah. Just Johnny.

Happy-hood parlors all over London filled up, left the pubs empty (more for me, I thought, wavering at times between bitters and Guinness). Centralized transmission. No variety, but the quality ... oh, the quality. Lost nothing bouncing off a satellite, not with Johnny on the job. Johnny on the spot, all the spots. The (artificial) dawn of the (artificial) new millennium. What everyone wanted all along, I guess.

And as to what Johnny wanted ... not to be chained, to be free. He got both, thanks to the Sense, in any reality he chooses.

The Sense is a funny thing, and it can even be a good thing. I worked it pretty hard on him, but as I told Evie Gray, nobody's perfect. We'll get what we wanted, too, me and the rest of the group back in the States, when the transmissions to America begin, when poor, sweet, mad Johnny finally comes home.